### A Hundred Days

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**A Hundred Days**

by [pinkolifant](http://archiveofourown.org/works/3200936)
Summary

A wishful end for ASOIAF. And a sequel to Mummers' Show. Rhaegar and Lyanna are alive after everyone believed them dead for almost twenty years. They travel north to find their son Jon Snow and face winter.

Notes

I would like to thank my beta for the first chapter of this story Dr. Holland. It makes all the difference to have somebody interested in the fandom check my insignificant contribution. I own nothing.
Except for my own mistakes :-))

Any comments on this story are most welcome
The Shadowbinder and the Greenseer

The shadowbinder

The blue glow of uncertain dawn stretched into a horizon wrought of ice farther than a red eye could see. In a bright scarlet gown, Lady Melisandre stood on top of the Wall, peering over the edge of the world.

From above, it didn't look that frightening.

Seven hundred feet underneath where the red woman stood, the men were freezing. A tiny black-clad ant could occasionally be seen running between the decrepit crumbling towers of Castle Black. Most had fallen into disuse over the past three turns of the moon, with the cold winds rising. There would be more human bugs in the wormways, she knew. Those long, low tunnels connected the different parts of the main outpost of the Night's Watch under the ground. It was less cold down there, now, at the end of autumn in the North. Both the men of the Night's Watch and the wildlings agreed that the winter was almost upon them. It was the only thing they agreed about. The chill went deep into the bones, unbearable. It was becoming worse day by day, and the nights had already been unspeakably cold for a while. The black wool and boiled leather kept the men alive, but didn't help them feel any warmer.

Lady Melisandre was not cold.

Since the most unfortunate demise of the Lord Commander Jon Snow several months ago, there has been little and less love lost between the two main factions on the Wall. The men of the Seven Kingdoms, the black brothers and King Stannis's men who stayed behind to guard his lady wife, Queen Selyse, and Princess Shireen, his only child and heir, blamed the wildlings, saying they had put mad ideas in Commander Snow's head. They said he went beyond the Wall with his white direwolf, Ghost, on some strange purpose. To save the known world, they said. The Others must have taken them both, for the Lord Commander never returned. That was most certainly the way of it. As it could have been expected, Tormund Giantsbane, the leader of the wildlings since the departure of Mance Rayder, blamed the black brothers, saying they had murdered Jon, a good man, and true—the leader of the Night's Watch and Tormund's friend.

Only a handful of the black brothers knew the truth, and they kept their mouth well shut about it. It didn't take that many knives in the dark to bring the handsome young man down, Melisandre remembered with regret. I warned him though, she thought. He should have listened to me.

She had made an offering of Jon Snow's blood herself, in the haunted forest, accompanied by his murderers, assuring them no one would know who they were. From her mouth, at least. It was as good an oath as any. Her fires showed that the truth would come out anyhow and cost the perpetrators their little lives. She didn't see any use in telling them that, so she stayed quiet.

Jon was still breathing very faintly when they lay him in the snow, blood oozing timidly over the white blankness of the land. The offering would quench the appetites of the Great Other for a while, she knew. He was not just anyone. Jon had king's blood after all. Even if he was only a bastard of a proud northern lord, descendant of the old Kings of Winter. Melisandre pitied him from the bottom of her heart when they heard the wolves howling in the forest. It must feel queer to be feasted upon by one's own sigil, she thought. Well, Jon would be unconscious and he would not know.

The weirwood leaves were strangely quiet that day, not responding to the wind as they should. A patch of leaves close to the ground shone bright red in the gloom, where the tree dared stare at her
with large weeping eyes. The old gods had no power over her. Melisandre stared back at the tree, and the shine between the foliage was gone.

She prayed that the servants of the Great Other would not linger, or else the wolves would profane the sacrifice meant for them. As if returning her prayers, the sky turned dark grey and green, promising rain. *It might keep the wolves away,* she hoped. The beasts, just like people, preferred to stay dry in the ungodly weather. Even R'hllor was not fond of rain; water quenched the fires...

They left Jon Snow for dead and returned to Castle Black in the dark of the night. When they did, Jon's wolf was gone as she had foreseen. The chains could not stop him. That was very well: she wouldn't have to find someone to put him down. Nearly all men were afraid of Ghost, and most of those who weren't were either secretly not on her side, or they were gone with Stannis.

*It matters little,* she thought back then. Fresh blood of the kings was already sailing back to Westeros over the narrow sea. Many oarsmen would die to see it through. Those who had it would land in the south, the young queen on Dragonstone and the boy king in the Stormlands. All Melisandre needed was a trustworthy herald to lure them north, to the Wall.

As always, the truth was in the flames. Or in the library, when the fires were not that clear. Old Maester Aemon Targaryen, the blood of the dragon kings that Jon had dared send away from her when he was still alive, had left an unfinished book with an account of the Robert's Rebellion and the last years of the power of the House Targaryen. She had read it for inspiration until she could think of a convincing deception, capable of falling on fertile ground. She had read it and then she sent a raven to Mance Rayder in Winterfell, inventing a Targaryen origin for Jon Snow. She didn't even bother to look up the story in her flames, to check if any of it could be true. Ah, the child of poor Prince Rhaegar and Lady Lyanna! The tale of chivalry she weaved could never have happened in the known world. It was too pathetic to be real.

But the best lies had in them a touch of truth. If Jon Snow wanted to protect his little sister so badly that he had sent Mance Rayder and six spearwives to die in Winterfell, it seemed likely that his father, Ned Stark, would also have done anything to protect his younger sister, Lady Lyanna. The former king of the wildlings believed the letter, just as she had hoped, a bard to his core. That much she could see clearly in the tongues of fire. Rayder didn't linger in Winterfell. He immediately headed south, before King Stannis received ill news of Jon...

All men had their uses for the Lord of Light.

It was a shame, in a way. Melisandre had tried so hard to make Jon Snow see the wisdom of believing in R'hllor. He was destined to do great deeds, she had felt it. She had seen it. But now it was all over. At least his wildling friend served the purpose for which Melisandre had spared his life. Mance Rayder would bring north the blood of kings and the fire of dragons she needed to do the will of R'hllor.

The flames never lied.

Alas, the poor, sweet, stubborn man did not know that by the time he would bring the dragons to the Wall to help his wildlings, they would be already forlorn, abandoned to their destiny in the cursed expanse of bough and leaf beyond the Wall. They were to be the fodder for the white walkers, whether they wanted it or not. Mance couldn't know either that Ned Stark's bastard would not be among the living. The life of Jon Snow and the lives of the wildlings were a necessary sacrifice so that R'hllor could protect the Seven Kingdoms. Too many Others had already crossed the Wall, clinging to the shadows of the so called free folk Lord Snow had so imprudently allowed inside. It was going to take *years* for King Stannis, the last hero, Azor Ahai come again, to hunt them all down and re-establish his rightful rule in every corner of the realm, marking the beginning of the new
age. *Everything is well*, Melisandre mused, contemplating the beauty of the landscape of ice.

*Why am I then so afraid?*

The cage to bring men up the Wall clanked in her proximity, interrupting the vivid stream of her thoughts and memories. Lord Pomegranate, Bowen Marsh, approached her with caution, bowing with utmost humility.

"Lady Melisandre, the wildlings are ready to depart," he said.

"You have done well," she praised him, closing her eyes. The ruby was pulsating around her neck and welcome warmth seeped into her body from its steady motion.

"Most of them are more than willing to leave the hospitality of the Castle Black," Lord Pomegranate stated the obvious. "Their hero, Lord Snow, is gone. Only the Thenns will stay."

It was most amusing, Melisandre reflected. Since they had murdered him, all the black brothers who did it now respectfully referred to Jon as Lord Snow.

"We have the marriage of Alys Karstark to the Magnar of Thenn to thank for that," she decided to say something self-evident as well. Small talk made men more at ease in her presence, and she still needed Bowen Marsh for a while. The old man smiled, feeling important and flattered in his scarce wisdom, not corresponding to his advancing age.

There were no guards on top of the Wall during daytime. The Night's Watch has become little and less, even with the new wildling recruits who were about to abandon their posts and return to the no man's land where they came from.

*Guards are no longer necessary*, Melisandre was convinced.

"The flames of R'hllor will watch over the Castle Black as soon as the wildlings go back where they belong," she said. "It will satisfy the hunger of the Great Other. And his terrible pale walking servants will no longer be able to cross it."

Too many had already sneaked in the Seven Kingdoms, like frost on the hair and the garments of the wildlings. They would come to life in the woods beneath the Wall when it was sufficiently cold. Most wandered south, afraid of the wrath of the Lord of Light if they had stayed near the Wall.

"The night is dark and full of terrors," Lord Marsh echoed her unspoken thought. He was the nine hundred and ninety ninth elected Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, and he was shaking with palpable fear. It was not clear what he feared more: the Others, the ghost of Lord Snow, or the Lady Melisandre.

And once the wildlings had left, they would only have to wait. King Stannis would return victorious after taking Winterfell and making it the royal seat for several months. The castle was renewed and fortified against any new enemy that might come from the south. All the northern lords except old Lord Manderly were now sworn to him, and he was going to win the allegiance of the White Harbor soon enough, as the fires had shown.

King Stannis could field enough men to hold the entire north. He was going to vanquish the Great Other, with his flaming sword, Lightbringer, and then he was going to ride south to unite his kingdoms under the fiery banner of R'hllor, Lord of Light.

With an unsure hand, Melisandre rekindled the embers of the fire the night guards had abandoned before dawn. It was still fuming imperceptibly next to the path she walked on, strewn with broken
stones. Behind her, under her warm feet, the ice kept melting and a small stream of water trickled slowly, dripping down the Wall towards the lands belonging to the Great Other. For now. Light broadened in the faraway east. The Wall spread further over the lands than the weak dawn of the new day, shorter than the previous one.

She needed to take another look at the future.

Melisandre tried to forget the times when her faith wavered and when all she could see in the fires was snow. Now she understood that as well. It was in its white depths that poor Jon Snow had found his grave. It had snowed that night. And the wolves were so many. Thinking about the injustice of it all almost made her cry. Almost. Just like when she was a little girl in Asshai, very many years ago, much more than her body would show to ignorant onlookers.

The shadow of the fire she revived danced and turned thicker, casting an image on the ice parapet behind it. The fool of Princess Shireen sang in one of the towers, from the top of his lungs, that had once been drowned under the sea. "The shadows come to dance, my lady..." Patchface would not stop roaring. The merciless wind swirled and took the faint sound all the way towards them. "Under the sea, all shadows are green, I know, I know, oh, I know!"

"We can't stop him, my lady," Lord Marsh excused himself. "I know you have asked for it, but short of killing him, there's nothing we can do. And Princess Shireen is very fond of him."

"She should be in Nightfort, with her mother," Melisandre said.

"They are both eager to see His Grace King Stannis come back," Lord Marsh sometimes had an answer for everything.

"Never mind," Melisandre waved her worries away. She stared attentively deeper into the flames, as they slowly picked up, licking the air in tongues of red, orange, and yellow. In time, she would look at the shadow they were casting. With the certainty of knowledge, she smiled.

"We shall have need of the ice cells," she said. "We will be having guests soon."

"The arrangements will be made, lady," Lord Marsh said immediately, bowing again. The man courtesied far too much in Melisandre's opinion.

Only then did she dare look in the darkness created by the light.

The shade of her small fire took a shape of a beast with jagged teeth and a long snout. Sharp spikes adorned its body. The dragon was angry, and hers to command. Soon, the power of R'hllor shall be revealed to all.

The Age of Fire was about to begin.

The greenseer

Floating on his back, the greenseer took great care to avoid one of the logs pretending to drift gently down the stream. Stale water had its uses but his favourite bathing place was not filled by it. He knew that the impertinent log did not fall from a tree. It rather possessed a scaled green and yellow skin and sharp black teeth of a lizard-lion. Black, like dragon's teeth and bones, he thought. He could still try and catch it. Their meat was delicious. He had seen forty name days but his hunting skills had never gone to rust. His net, knife and spear rarely failed him. Food was scarce in a bog, and all of its dwellers learned how to hunt. He should return for his weapons.

Not on this day, he decided.
He was naked and not in a mood to hunt, nor to enjoy the company of a lizard lion for much longer. Flowers would be much better. Soon, he lost the animal, plunging in a maze of river weeds below the surface, growing from the soft treacherous soil which was neither firm land nor a body of water. Afterwards, he left the shallows to dive once again, this time deep, in the middle of the stream, to see if he could still hold his breath as long as in his youth. Satisfied, he popped out on the other side of the current, right where the white and pink water lilies grew, one larger than the other, blossoming in the autumn sun. They smelled of life and of still water. A welcome sight for his watchful eyes, a soft ointment for his hardened senses.

The green of the water was as he liked it, not too warm, and not too cold either. Soon, it would cool down much more. For now it was more pleasant than the air above it, which turned chilly months ago, smelling strongly of autumn and of winter rains.

His dreams were many and different of late, not making much sense. They showed great hosts moving over all the known lands, towers falling, towers melting, an enemy of ice, and an enemy of …fire.

With even strokes, he avoided a tiny islet on his right. There was a nest of wild ducks in a thicket of loose dry branches under a young tree. They didn't want men around when the mother duck was brooding. The tepid water felt wonderful on bare skin and hard working muscle. His limbs flexed in harmonious movement, taking him back up the stream. His swim was ending. It was time.

He was one with the green of the water and the shore was getting nearer.

_I had never thought to outlive any of my children_, he thought bitterly, remembering the dream he was unfortunate enough to understand. Clear as sunrise, it told that his son would not live to father sons of his own. He would have given anything if it hadn't been green. As always, he knew that it has been.

Grey-green water, colour of his late wife's eyes, bent and rippled under the force of his short wiry arms. His own had always been the colour of moss, like the eyes of their only son. He never told his children before they departed that he had shared more than the eye colour with his boy. And his son was braver than he had ever been. Jojen decided to embrace his gift and go to Winterfell, rather than cower in the marshes, and hide.

The greenseer had done his best to quench his gift, and for about twenty years it was nearly gone. Until an image came unbidden in his sleep, strong as the thunder lightning savaging the bogs, setting the old tree trunks on fire. He saw a young warrior bleeding in the snow, the so-called bastard of his liege and friend, Ned Stark. A red sorceress bent over him, eyes filled with pity. And the greenseer's guts had filled with rebellion, and loathing. It was not fair.

Then, the red eyes of the direwolf shone among the trees. The green shade of a dragon covered the frozen sky and his soul rejoiced. He saw it all, and the red woman did not. Or else, how could she be so calm? Her mistake gave him hope. So when he had woken, he raced over the abandoned courtyards to the heart tree in the middle of the night, and he looked deep. He looked south and he saw two more dragons, one white and one black, one ensnared and one free, flying home over the Narrow Sea. He looked north and he saw a wildling king reading a false letter of the cursed red woman in the godswood of Winterfell... The greenseer whispered to him how, unknowingly, it was all truth what the letter had said, all that, and more... The man donned a dirty white cloak, jumped on a saddle of a heavy brown horse and galloped south. He did not hear the tree with his ears, but he had heard it with his heart.

The greenseer then employed all of his eyes and ears, charging them to watch over the causeway. The men and women of the swamps had patiently waited for the wildling to arrive. They brought
him to the greenseer unharmed through the gods-forsaken quicksands of their domain. There, the wildling king learned the entire truth, or as much of it as the greenseer had known for certain in the world where the grass was growing. For some of his dreams the greenseer always kept to himself. Not willing to dishearten or cheat others by the imperfection of his seeing, he carried the burden of half clear hints and incomplete knowledge all alone.

Once, before his children were born, there were seven against three, and only the greenseer now lived to tell the tale of a high tower in Dorne, of a young woman who died and a child who lived to be the young warrior bleeding in the snow.

He had recently seen that woman again in his dreams; older, alive, returning to the north she came from at the forefront of a large host, and holding a hand of a mournful silver-haired man. A man who looked broken, but was mended on the inside. But those visions were too dream-like to believe in. Only the terrible ones have ever come true.

There were seven against three and only one was left living, to mourn and to remember.

The greenseer paddled arms and legs up and down the stream, reluctant to return. His fear and despair ran much deeper than the water. He strayed a bit from his path, cutting through the unmoving stinky ponds where the flies buzzed, and the dark red irises grew, darker than blood spilled. He swam and he swam some more, until he was tired and dizzy, and the only way to go was back.

He relaxed when the castle came into view, shimmering green with the last light of the season. He'd always liked to go swimming very early in the morning. The land the castle stood on was sailing softly with the current, never quite in the same place, but its people could always find it, knowing what they were looking for. No one else could. Not even the Others, whom his eyes and ears had seen hovering south, through the outskirts of the bogs and down the causeway. There were fortunately not so many who somehow crossed the Wall. His guards were smart enough not to let themselves be seen, but they still grew very frightened in their hearts when they had to count the white walkers. All of them were much too young to remember the Long Night, and none of them had the gift to see the terrible past, the ever changing present, and the never certain future.

He floated on his back again to see the castle better. There was no other sight on earth he would ever love more. Tall and graceful, his home spread all over the length of the island, rising from the waterways like a large wobbly hill saturated with greenery. The chant of frogs could be heard in the shallows bordering the muddy stretches of low land. They sang and sang some more, unaware of their peril to be served as a main dish at the last harvest feast.

Made of bark, and leaf, and the smell of living things, the castle rested quietly on its unsteady ground. They steered the floating island here before the winter, to the part of the bog with faster currents which never froze, so that it would always be on the move.

The first fence surrounding the castle was of reed, higher than the tallest of men, planted carefully over the years where it didn't grow by itself. The second one was higher, a long circle of willows, some weeping, and some not. High water grass, similar to reed yet different, green and broadleaved, overgrew the spaces between the trees. The third fence was a wall, made of unmortared stone on the bottom, and of timber on the upper levels. Hardened clay filled the holes between the stones and beams. The masonry and the wood had been skilfully covered with bark and leaf over the ages, so that the castle would not look as if it had been built by human hand. And perchance it was not. It might have been a marvel of nature just as well. The rotting wood, the crumbling clay and the loose stones were replaced at need. But the foundations of the castle were as old as Winterfell, at least as old as the First Men.

Or older.
The iron for the portcullis was brought from the barrowlands a few hundred years ago. Its bars were forged into a curved plant-like pattern. Real vines crept all over it, so that the tendrils of heavy metal appeared to be thick dark brown stems of the grapevine. The legend said that a hundred men and women worked for a hundred days to finish it. One hundred was a sacred number. Yet the knowledge why that was so had been forgotten after the gates had been made. The greenseer wished to know why, and perhaps, one day before all would be over, he would find out.

Inside, behind the gates, there were three courtyards, twelve rounded wooden towers, and a large stony keep. All the pillars in the spacious halls and vaulted porticos were shaped like human figures, small like children, but endowed with wizened, clever eyes. Half had knives and bows, and the other half instruments; a fiddle, drum or woodharp. On rare occasions that they received guests from the south of the Seven Kingdoms, the greenseer would tell them that the figures likely represented the faces of the Seven. They did not. And all those who may have known the meaning of the faces had been lost to time.

It was amazing how many visitors believed him. The men so often saw what they wanted to see and not what was right in front of them, poking into their eyes.

From without, the island looked deceptively small, but on the inside, the castle could easily receive five hundred people while offering them the comfort due to guests. In case of dire need, and without any regard for courtesy, it could house up to two thousand or more, giving them both shelter and food. Part of the crop was set aside for that purpose in summer, in full knowledge that the castle would be overcrowded every winter.

In the innermost of the three courtyards there was the godswood. Its heart tree was a snow white weirwood with few slender limbs and a modest canopy of leaves. The branches needed to be cut every now and then when the tree threatened to overgrow its place. But its trunk was as large as a house and its roots ran deep. The legend said it were the roots of the heart tree itself that held the castle together. They kept the island from separating into smaller pieces of land and drifting apart. The eyes of the heart tree were grave, the maw gaping open so wide that a small man like him could easily fit inside and become one with the faces of the old gods. That was where he went to take his look on the night that he acknowledged his gift again. Within the weirwood, it was suffocatingly hot. Even now when the water was so much warmer than the air, which had turned sharp and bristle, biting the eyes and the skin, as winter drew nearer.

A nest of kingfishers, by a tunnel in the mud on the edge of the firm land, or what passed for it in the bogs, marked the entrance point on the waterfront. One of the birds cried in the nearest tree, its song ringing like harsh sudden laughter. Most of the birds were now gone, though. Flown away to the Summer Isles or further across the sea. They would return come spring. If spring ever came again.

The reeds bent and separated gently as he swam in through the long narrow passage of water. Still in the distance, he could see the wooden piers. As many as four scores of low longboats were getting ready to depart. They were being manned, cleaned, painted, pushed in or out of water. Two men waited for him there. He could not yet make out their faces from afar. But they held what he had asked for, a set of bright green garments ready at hand, scraped clean like the boats; neither of them used in a very long time. It was the first time in many years he was going to dress in green and admit to his folk what very few among them still remembered, the truth of what he was.

A greenseer like his son after him, a greenseer who refused to look and to see for countless years, ever since he took the hand of his wife in marriage before the heart tree. For the images he had seen before that, just like those he saw now, were too magnificent. In his visions, greatness came mingled
with cruelty and grief.

All he had ever wanted was to live like an ordinary man for the rest of his days. Like most men, he was not to have his wish.

In despair, he dived again, to inhale the familiar smell of his home through the veil of water. He slid forward through it, slithering over the sandy bottom like an eel. His eyes were open and he moved through thick yellow and brown curtain of mud his body had lifted, saturated with life. A fish swam by, brown and slippery.

When he finally dared dive out, he saw the castle in all its majesty. No longer a mere glimpse, it towered over him. The weeds whispered, the reeds swayed, the willows wept. The remaining birds kept laughing. The bark and leaf hiding the stone rustled to him. The boats were being fitted with long poles and oars. The mudmen were going to rise, now, at the end of time. Courage woke in his heart, swelling with the joy of home coming.

It was there, and it would always be, even when he would be gone.

The Greywater Watch.
And now your watch has ended, he thought. On four white furry legs he padded softly toward the corpse of a man wrapped in a black cloak of the Night's Watch. A dead crow. A black stain soiling the pristine whiteness of the land, spilled like dirt under the canopy of red leaves and sullen tree-eyes, always watching.

The wolf hadn't stopped moving since he had sneaked out of Castle Black. The careless, frightened men in black had never seen him. They must have thought he was just another shadow cast by their torches, shifting alongside the inner walls of the ice tunnel under the Wall. He had followed them from a distance, first through the Wall and then across the haunted forest. The snow was crisp and fresh, just fallen, crumbling under his paws like crunchy icing on a cake. He liked it that way. He was never far from the funeral procession, treading after the black brotherhood and the red woman who smelled of danger. Thankfully, none of them lingered for long in the grove of the wooden gods, not having a taste for their silent company.

When all had left, he plodded forward, sniffing. Soon, he would see the dead man's face. He knew the weirwood grove where the man in front of him had been brought to die. It was the place where he had sworn an oath to become the light that brings the dawn. I'm the horn that wakes the sleepers, he remembered. He vowed many other things besides. It has become difficult to remember all of them in his new animal mind. In his throat he felt the urge to howl and melt into the woods. Unattached. Free.

His ears pricked. Why? There hasn't been any game in this part of the woods for months. Only blue soldier pine needles remained under the snow and on the trees. Needles and then the red leaves, redder than blood. The green leaves were rotten and gone. Forgotten until spring. The lifeless creatures he could not eat were nearing the grove, on two or on four paws, but they were not yet close enough to put him so much on edge.

He smelled a leg of the man lying in front of him. The scent was familiar. He sat on his haunches and howled, not advancing any further. There was no moon above the trees, but howling felt tremendously exhilarating and most proper. An animal dirge, for a fallen man. The wolf wailed to the sky. It had turned dark green and bronze above him, where it should have been dark blue or black, criss-crossed by the stars.

He prowled to the man's face and nuzzled it. It can't be, he thought on four defeated paws. It's me, and I'm dead. My watch has ended. I'm trapped like Orell was in his eagle, only that I'm in Ghost. Orell was the wildling he had killed ages ago, when he was still a boy. Before he was elected to the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. Before he killed that boy to let the man be born as Maester Aemon had advised him.
He looked down at his living, lithe, four-legged body, and checked once more that all his paws were white. It was better to be sure he was in Ghost than to see a pair of black hands and to know that his eyes turned blue. He wished there was a lake to see his image in the water and know for certain. But the lakes he had visited in the lands beyond the Wall were all further to the east, deeper in the haunted forest, in the long leagues of white waste between the Castle Black and the Shadow Tower.

He licked his own man-body lying in front of him. It smelled of death. It was not yet completely cold, but it soon would be. Red direwolf’s eyes gazed peacefully at the weirwoods. All the faces were different, just like Sam Tarly of Horn Hill, his fat friend, had noticed when they had said their words. There were nine of them. All the trees were serious, angry, or wearing sad smiles. There wasn’t a single one cheerful, or laughing. They stared at the wolf and the dead man with solemn eyes.

Then, the green and bronze shade grew larger in the sky and the wolf felt warmer amidst desolation of winter, where no warmth had ever been. He tried hard to arch his head backward to contemplate the sky, but a great white direwolf could not stretch his neck as far back as a man could.

Green droplets snowed from the sky, green crystals of strange beauty. He wondered if they would melt on his tongue like snow if he drank them. He wondered if they were demons come from afar, from the sunset sea or from the Shadow Lands he believed existed somewhere in the world he would never see. Although he couldn’t remember where exactly; the lessons of his childhood lost in the haze of his newly gained ferociousness. The green petals landed on the throat, the belly and between the shoulders of his dead man-body, not of the wolf. The last ones touched the man’s chest. They fell slowly, hovering in the cold air, weightless. And where they missed their human target and touched the snow, the white blanket gave way. It was burnt, scoured to the brown soil. A thin layer of bubbles frothed to the surface as if the water were boiling.

The wolf instincts urged him to leave, because the walking dead and their masters were about to arrive. He drew a sharp breath and bared his teeth to the gloom of the forest. The trees lay like heavy burden on a mantle of snow and ice. He could feel the smell of death, smell of rot, and the smell of... nothingness from the masters of the dead, which was the ugliest stench of all. But the man inside the wolf yearned to linger for another look. Just one more look at the miracle. The green crystals landed on the ugly gashes on his dead or was it merely dying? man’s body. They seeped through the furs and leathers and the black wool of his tunic like blazing fire. Wherever they fell, they seared the blood and torn flesh. Blood that was frozen and ruby hard seemed warm and liquid again. The skin started knitting together under the crystals, visibly so, faster than it had any right to do. Both Maester Aemon in Castle Black and Maester Luwin in Winterfell would have told him such a thing was not possible.

The wolf prepared to run away from the cold wind that was rising. The wights would be too many to draw away by tooth and claw, he sensed. His intuition rarely failed him.

The wounds were almost vanished when the wolf dashed forward, away from the enemy marching through the dark. He soon lost sight of the weirwood trees and their unhappy faces.

And then ran straight into a pair of large, unfamiliar claws that had been waiting for him behind the line of trees. All four white legs left the ground, grabbing the empty air like odd furry paddles, twisting, twitching, useless. The wolf howled in terror, forcing the man-spirit in him out of his writhing body.

The moon rose in the night sky, golden yellow as a wheel of ripe cheese.

xxxx
Jon opened his eyes and saw a starry sky above, through the thick red crowns of nine white trees. There was the Ice Dragon and the star the wildlings called the Thief. He could not remember how he called it. How the men of the Seven Kingdoms called it. A wanderer, was it? he thought. You know nothing, Jon Snow, a voice spoke in his memory.

I don't, he couldn't agree more with Ygritte. The woman he had loved and left. And then she left him and went where he could not follow. If he died, could he see her again? He didn't know, but it was a good thing to look forward to.

His chest hurt and he had trouble breathing. He thought he could hear giant wings, flapping. Another eagle, he thought, a green one. Can there be green eagles? he wondered. Dark green like the haunted forest or... bronze like the armour of the Thenns? He was exhausted and dragged a tired hand to his face. The skin felt clammy and cold. The sky above him screeched, faintly, exhaling puffs of timid smoke. No more scars, please. And I'd like to keep both eyes if possible.

Ghost, to me! he tried to call for help, spotting a white tail disappearing behind an even whiter tree. No sound came from his mouth, dried from thirst and the loss of blood. The direwolf did not return. He managed to turn sideways, only a tiny bit. Avidly, he drank his fill of snow. Moving had not been the wisest thing to do. The pain in his chest and belly grew, drowning him like a torrent breaking a dam that lay on its path.

Jon was forced to close his eyes.

If he didn't know any better, he would think that he was flying.

Jon woke with a start and sat up on a bed made of old turf. He pulled a snow bear pelt tightly around him. It was serving him as a blanket and it had seen better days. He rubbed his eyes to chase the dream away. Every night he dreamed the sky of green and bronze and every day he woke with the same questions.

How did we come here?

It must have been three months he had lived in this cave. The mouth gaped in front, with the terrible grey sea and a ruined human settlement lying many feet below from where he dwelled. He shared the stony hall with Ghost, three more men and a scrawny girl child. There must have been at least three hundred caves of many different sizes. They were connected with ropes and primitive woven ladders one of the wildling clans provided. At night, they would be pulled inside.

Hardhome was a difficult place to settle in. Of roughly ten thousand people that Mother Mole had brought there, little more than one third remained. It was hard to tell. The wildlings would not let themselves be counted, and there was no one who would count them anyway.

The rest had become corpses floating in the water, or wights lurking in the darkness of the wood behind the high cliff with its caves. A hundred had been taken by a slaver ship to Braavos across the shivering sea. Many caves were thus dark and empty, their fires put out by the whistling wind. Some of the surviving wildlings believed that the unstoppable noise of the sea, day and night, was the wail of the restless souls of the dead, unable to find peace. Others didn't believe in anything after what they had been through. Not even the old gods had power to protect their people from the evil which had woken behind the Wall. Or if they did, as some still hoped for, they had not shown it yet.

Jon was the last one awake. Routinely, he checked that their rope was already out and that it was not broken. It was in order. Every morning, he would climb down to the settlement. Ghost would return
to him after the night hunt and together they would stare at the stormy, foaming sea, hoping to
glimpse a ship. No ship ever came. There were no sails to be seen on the horizon, either black from
Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, or white, from the Free Cities. Nor a simple long wooden craft with no sails
from Skagos, as the wildlings described the looks of those, uneager to see them appear. Going to
Skagos could mean becoming another man's supper as far as Jon understood. There were members
of the ice river cannibal clans from far north in the caves as well, but they were too few to cause
trouble. So they chose to behave. They ate the same food as anyone else. A few tried eating the
dead, but the bodies were poisonous and they died as well. After that, all men, cannibals or not, stuck
to the provisions they had brought, distributed with iron discipline. The supplies would last long
because their numbers had so severely diminished.

*If you showed the same discipline in battle, good people, Jon thought, Lord Stannis would not have broken you.* Then maybe Jon would not be murdered by his own sworn brothers. But he might have
dusted murdered by the wildlings, so he guessed it was all the same. He didn't think Mance would
have spared him if he had won the battle for the Wall.

"Jon," the girl child called from her small bundle of furs. She was not yet two years old so she had
no name. Or maybe she was old enough, but her parents were both dead, so no one knew for certain.
Dead children could float in the poisoned waters and wells below the caves as good as any man or
woman. Jon thus learned the wisdom of not naming the children too early. One never knew which
would live and which would die.

"I'll make your porridge, don't fret," Jon told the orphan girl. She had thick, dirty black hair, and she
reminded him of his sister Arya when she was barely more than a babe.

It was best not to think of Arya and what she may have endured married to the Bastard of Bolton. At
least she was most likely away from him now if one could believe the bastard's letter. Jon was afraid
that if Stannis lived, he would just marry her off to someone else as soon as he could, but there was
nothing he could do about it from Hardhome. *Arya will not be pleased,* he was certain. *She'll not like
it at all.*

The new day was promising to be much the same as all the previous ones. And a bit shorter than all
the days that preceded it. *Winter is coming. Winter is come.* Be as it may, he tried to have hope, as he
looked for the bag of oats and dried nuts for the girl's porridge. He would go out, do his watch, look
for sails, go hunting for food with Ghost in the few hours of daylight, and go back to the cave to
sleep. Maybe Ghost would climb in with him. The wolf would occasionally accept to be rope bound
so that Old Garth and Jon could pull him up to the cave.

The day lasted only for a few hours, and they didn't keep watch at night. They would withdraw
inside the cursed caves, roll up the ropes and the ladders, and keep the fires burning. When no one
was looking and when he would feel particularly alone, Jon would stare at his wounds for hours and
wonder if he was dead or alive. He would stare at his hands expecting them to turn black at any
moment, but the only injury he could see would be the old burn scars on his sword hand.

The wounds stopped hurting weeks ago, but the treason never did. *Daggers in the dark.* Lady
Melisandre had seen that good enough. If only she had seen other things half as well! Then it would
have been Arya, and not Alys Karstark on the Wall. He wondered if Arya would then one day have
to marry the new Magnar of Thenn as Alys did. Somehow he thought she may have liked that better
than a lordling Stannis or gods forbid his queen or grieving widow, Selyse, were likely to choose for
her. He wondered if Mance Rayder was alive or if he had died in the cage where the Bastard of
Bolton had put him for saving his sister.

*Knives in the dark.* It was his brothers who killed Jon Snow. This hurt more than his wounds ever
did. He remembered Bowen Marsh stabbing him, and all the others... At least Grenn or Pyp were away, and he didn't see Satin. He hoped they wouldn't be able to do it. He hoped that the others wouldn't kill them too for being Jon's friends. Jon didn't count himself a man of the Night's Watch any longer. If you died, your watch ended, it was as simple as that. It was not his fault if he survived the murder. Jon was an orphan of everything and no one cared if he lived or died. He had no mother, he had no father, he had no siblings and no sworn brothers. There was no way he could return from Hardhome to Castle Black to claim his command, and even if he did, they would kill him again and again.

He peeked out of the cave to pick up a handful of clean snow from the craggy ends of the cliff, for the porridge. There was no milk for children in Hardhome.

While he was busy stirring the girl's meal, an old, friendly face showed up against the weak winter sun, above the stony doorstep. Mother Mole had confused, pale grey eyes, large wells of light on a chubby face of many years. She arranged her hair with frost so that it stood up in all directions, in straight thin spikes of white and grey which framed her aged face like sun rays. The icicles on her head gave her eyes a haunted, visionary expression. Jon often wondered how she slept with frozen hair, or if she had to freeze it all over again every morning. She was heavy of body yet she climbed better than his brother Bran ever did when he was still whole and had use of his legs. Mother Mole was a woods witch so maybe some demons of the forest guided her steps. The Starks kept the old gods. But the old gods never saved any of them, neither Jon's brothers, nor his father. The more Jon lived, the more he believed that the old gods were only trees. And it sounded rather stupid to pray to a plant, however majestic it might be.

"Jon," the wildling witch called him with glee, "there is a boat on the rocks below. Skagosi, by the looks of it."

"Is there?" he muttered, incredulous, finishing the porridge.

"Yes," the joy in the old woman's voice could be scooped with the spoon. "Two men in it. Old Garth was down first. He found them. Alive. Barely. But alive."

"Who are they?"

"Come down and see," she said, "one wears the cloak o'ya black brothers."

Jon was not in the mood to see a sworn brother of the Night's Watch at all.

"And the other?" he asked.

"Don't know," Mother Mole said, smiling. She had only one large tooth left in the back of her jaws. She should make wooden ones like old Dywen, the forester, Jon thought. "He's a few fingers short, though," the old woman explained.

"Here, girl," Jon went back into the cave and handed the porridge to the child.

"Thank you, nuncle Jon," she said.

Jon didn't listen. A ship. No, a boat. And most likely a heap of broken wood by now.

Hardhome used to have a deep, safe harbour where even the largest ships could anchor. But it was now semi-frozen, full of mud on the bottom and corpses swimming on the surface. And the rocks under the cliff where they lived, bordering the old harbour on one side, were not a good place to dock. Not good at all.
He still climbed down after Mother Mole, giddy with nervousness and curiosity. It was a welcome change, men on the beach, after three months of being a wet nurse to the unnamed girl. The descent was steep, but it seemed to him they had made it in no time, a young man and an old woman, two grey lizards on the sharply falling mountain. No, the lizard should be green and bronze, an inner voice said and he shushed it into the forbidden place in his soul where he buried his childish hopes of being his father's trueborn son, a Stark of Winterfell.

Down, next to the cold, churning sea, the two men lay together on a flat rock. They were entangled with one another in an obscene way, under thick furs and layers of black wool. Jon knew they did it for warmth during night, yet the sight still surprised him. Satin would not be shocked. His pretty steward at Castle Black had been a man-whore in Oldtown before he became a man of the Night's Watch.

It was Jon's cave mates who found them. Old Garth from the lands of always winter and the twins Arryk and Erryk. The twins were between ten and twelve years old. Their mother had named them after a sad song from the south she heard Mance Rayder playing on his lute. She didn't live to see the end of the journey to Hardhome, but the twins remained.

The boat was no longer seaworthy to say the least. It had broken on the rocks into many pieces. Only one piece remained solid, a large raft of beams drifting in the narrow bay under the cliff; its sail was a black cloak of the Night's Watch, hanging loose on a fragile mast made of two galley oars and some black rope. The cloaked wreck floated at the mercy of tidal waves over eight feet high, which hit the shore under Jon's feet with a powerful splatter of ice cold water and curdled foam.

"This one's a black crow," Old Garth said, poking the man with his big toe. The twins nodded. They mostly did things together.

Jon removed the furs over the man's face. His eyes were small and closed, and they would have been brown if they were open. The widow's peak on his head was sharp.

"Pyke," he breathed out.

How did Cotter Pyke, the commander of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, end up washed out on this gods forsaken shore? He had been here with six ships, but he must have left this place long ago.

Both men slept like logs. Jon guessed he'd also be fast asleep if he ever braved a sea like the one they came from. It didn't look like anyone could sail over it and live.

"I told you, Lord Snow," Mother Mole said with conviction behind his back. "The ships will come."

"This is but a wreck," Jon pointed out, "and I'm a lord no longer."

Pyke was a bastard like Jon, but he was ironborn, from the Iron Islands in the sunset sea. He could probably sail before he could walk. Even so, not even the most seasoned sailor could have survived out in the stormy sea near Hardhome at the beginning of winter for very long. Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and the island of Skagos were too far to make a crossing in a flimsy boat, even in summer. There was only one explanation; there must have been a larger vessel in the high seas in-between Hardhome, Skagos and Eastwatch whence the two men came from. But why? Best ask them, Jon reckoned.

"Tis but a messenger o'them great cogs to come," Mother Mole said, pale eyes brighter than the luminous sea foam crawling to the feet of the two sleeping men. "They will not be the black galleys o'the crows, oh no!" The tide was getting higher as she spoke.
"Let's drag them further up," Jon said and started working on it. Everyone helped him. Against his will in the matter he had become an unspoken Lord of Hardhome. The wildlings firmly believed that it was his arrival what kept the wights and the Others at bay. In the last three turns of the moon no more fresh corpses filled the waters; they were infested enough as they were by the decay of those already dead.

"It's the green doorway," people whispered. Jon had never seen it so he did not know what they meant. Mother Mole had seen it, but he didn't believe her. Those people who did put their faith in the woods witch claimed a large fanciful beast, a kraken of the air, they said, had breathed out an invisible curtain of blessed air to veil over the end of the narrow path that connected the bottom of the cliff with the abandoned settlement and the first trees of the looming forest behind it. The woods burned that night, men told him, and the great salty waves sprayed the cliff all the way to the first caves. They must have been more than fifty feet high.

"You came to us amidst salt and smoke," Mother Mole said, bright eyes winking, as if that explained everything. "I am of a mind to make you a sword if I could only weave iron as I can weave words!"

By weaving words she meant some kind of magic Jon didn't believe in either. He came to Hardhome unarmed and he could only guess about the fate of his bastard sword. Longclaw it was called, made of Valyrian steel. It belonged to the House Mormont, but the old Lord Commander Jeor Mormont gifted it to Jon because his own son and heir had dishonoured him and fled. His former brothers didn't even leave his obsidian dagger with his body when they poked Jon with their knives.

The only thing Jon Snow could see at the spot all his latest wildling companions adored was a patch of scorched black ground that could have been thunder-struck for all he knew. The soil remained warm there, that much was true, and any snow that fell melted instantly. Probably there is a hot spring under ground, just like in Winterfell, Jon would think, and let the wildlings believe whatever they wanted.

The top of the cliff was broad, hanging over the long narrow bay as a large flat hat crowning the mountain of steep rock, which rose high from the angry grey waves. The topmost hundred feet of the side facing the sea had no caves. The ridge was slanted inward, from the outstanding plateau on top to the shrunken underside. The cave dwellers couldn't see exactly what was up there, on the cliff. A glimpse from the settlement, where they ventured only at daytime, told them that it was surely barren for a good league until the green of the forest resumed. No white walker or wight ever came from that direction. The wildlings assumed that the levelled upper side of the cliff must have been as full of crevices and difficult to walk on or ride over as the two craggy sides of their small bay. And that whatever unearthly powers the white walkers and their dead horses may possess, they could still not fly.

Only the crystals on Jon's wounds would make him doubt his own disbelief in the green gateway from time to time. If he didn't know any better, he would have said that his cuts had been dressed in green obsidian. It could not be. Obsidian was black. Stannis spoke of layers of green, red and purple obsidian under the walls of Dragonstone, but the island of the Targaryens was far away from the Wall. And the dragonglass, whatever its colour, was most certainly not used as a poultice for wounds in the Seven Kingdoms. He had to remind himself he had crossed the end of the world and that many truths of the lands he came from did not apply north of the Wall.

They had to rouse the two men to help them up. Somehow. No one could climb the ropes and ladders with that much dead weight on their backs. And they didn't dare remove the wet layer of furs on top of them before the survivors stirred. They seemed to be somewhat dry below, and the cold in Hardhome had become such that venturing out in anything less than furs meant illness and certain death. It was better in the caves, but they were far beneath them now.
Jon shook the man he didn't recognise, the one with shortened fingers on one hand. The tiny stumps were old and neat, cut with precision, he noticed. He could have been as old as his father if Lord Eddard Stark had still been among the living. "You'll have to walk, whoever you are," he murmured.

The older man listened. "Where are we?" he asked with his eyes closed. The hair on his head used to be brown, but now it was thin, soft and gentle, as a hair of a newborn babe. Jon had an impression he knew who he was. Still he could not join the weakened man in front of him with any name and title in his memories.

"Hardhome," Old Garth answered in Jon's stead. "And damn lucky to be here with the charm of the weather we were having if ya know what I mean..."

"I thought I knew a lot," the fingerless man said. "It appears I was mostly wrong."

"Snow!" Cotter Pyke said brusquely. He must have noticed Jon's disapproving stare at the two wretched men embracing. "Would that my lord of onions were a wench, but when we go ranging warm is warm. -My lord!" he added as an afterthought, coming to his senses and remembering his courtesies. *Pyke is alive and well. Good, Jon thought.*

"You led the ranging to over here? Where are the others? Did they all-" Cotter Pyke couldn't finish his outburst.

"It's not that simple," Jon said in a more unfriendly tone than he intended. He was most unwilling to discuss the matter of his murder and mysterious arrival to Hardhome in front of any wildlings. *It is my shame,* he thought. *Not theirs. I was not prudent in my actions and I earned the wrath of my brothers, just or not.*

He didn't believe their anger was just, but it was easier to think that it was. Just like it was sometimes easier to imagine that his mother had died in childbirth rather than to accept that she had most likely abandoned him to his fate. The simple truth was, his father was dead, and he never met his mother.

"Look, Lord Davos, that's Jon Snow!" Pyke's insolent voice brought Jon back to present. The ironborn shook his companion under furs with great enthusiasm. "The Bastard of Winterfell and the Lord Commander of the Watch."

"I have heard much about you, Lord Snow, when I was in Eastwatch," Lord Davos put in, uncertain.

"Doubtless you did," Jon said bitterly. *That I'm a turncloak and a warg for certain. What else did they say?* "You are Stannis's Hand," he finally remembered who the man must be, clear as weak daylight.

"I was," Davos agreed. "Davos Seaworth was my name. Don't know if I'm still anyone's Hand..." He glanced at the uninviting rocks of the bay.

"The boy wasn't with us, was he?" the fingerless lord asked of Erryk and Arryk. The brothers didn't look anything alike, and Jon suspected Arryk was a girl. She only dressed as a boy so that she wouldn't get stolen. Given the splendid choice among the ugly and randy men in the caves, most of them at least twice her age, Jon was not surprised by her behaviour. Many young people did not survive the trip through the wilderness, and many of those who did died in Hardhome or became slaves in Braavos.

"We was found no one," Erryk said. "T'was you two, no more," Arryk clumsily finished the thought.

"Which boy?" Jon asked with mounting apprehension.
"The little lord of Winterfell," Lord Seaworth said. He clutched the furs together and grabbed the skin under his neck for something that wasn't there. "Your half brother. Rickon Stark."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented and left a kudos. Looking forward to your reactions on this chapter :-))
Tyrion

He lived in the rooms of a dead man.

When the tall, handsome, blue bearded Tyroshi sellsword came to fetch him, flashing a golden tooth, Tyrion was doing his best, or his worst, to wrap himself in a vivid green coloured tokar with amethyst fringes all by himself. There were no slaves any longer in the freed city of Meereen. And there have never been squires, he thought, wrestling with the enemy made of fabric and wondering what had become of Pod, his squire. Maybe he found his tongue when he didn't have to serve me anymore.

When he was done, he felt like one of the seventy seven courses on Joffrey's wedding feast. A green slimy one. A dwarf roasted in a crust of peas. Juicy. Wouldn't my sister enjoy that? Like she savoured the boar that had killed her husband... The only advantage of the horrendous outfit he wore, a must in the fashion of the Slaver's Bay, was that its colour fitted at least one of his two mismatched eyes. The other eye, the black one, gazed at the sellsword suspiciously. See, father, I'll never trust anyone again, isn't that what you wanted? He fervently hoped that his late father was enjoying an eternal, unpleasant tour through seven hells.

"Petitioners," Daario Naharis announced with utmost boredom in his voice. So he didn't come to kill me, this time. "From Asshai, this time," the sellsword echoed Tyrion's thought. "Lacquered masks and all." Naharis was familiar. He sounded almost as arrogant as his brother Jaime. He only lacked a pair of mischievous green eyes and an evil twin sister.

Tyrion nodded obediently and waddled toward the stairs. Fabled Asshai by the Shadow. Why can't the masked devils leave our absent queen be? Reconquering Westeros and recapturing stolen dragons won't be done fast. Blessedly, he reached the audience chamber without toppling over his tokar.

A large, simple table stood in the centre of the hall, an invention of Ser Barristan the Bold, to seat the queen's councillors. There were fewer than they were before. When Queen Daenerys sailed for, or rather, flew to Westeros a few weeks ago, three of her commanders followed her. Ser Barristan Selmy, the commander and the only member of her Kingsguard; Grey Worm, the leader of the Unsullied, and an evil creature who went by the name of Brown Ben Plumm, the captain of a sellswords company called the Second Sons. Tyrion had been a second son all his life, but a member of that illustrious company only for a fortnight.

Being born a dwarf sometimes had its advantages. Rarely, but still. And Tyrion was intent to use the few that there were. After all, Meereen had sufficient dogs to sustain the eating habits of the local population. In the first days after the victory, Tyrion found a tame furry stray dog for Penny. It was yellow and spotted. The dwarf girl cried tears of joy. She immediately took to practising her jousting dog act while the paymaster of the Second Sons and a few other members of the company watched
in amazement. Tyrion used the time to sneak in the company coffers, as a twisted little monster of a dwarf he was, and take back all the letters by which he gave money to the sellswords, and lands and lordship to Brown Ben Plumm.

He only left Ben a letter for his bride in Westeros, Sansa Stark, testifying he had been already married, to a crofter's daughter called Tysha, who still lived as far as he knew. He hoped it was enough to secure an annulment of the marriage his father had imposed on them both. Father, I will ruin all your designs, to the very last one. Even if the wife you found for me was a beautiful child I was attracted to before she slew my nephew, Joffrey, and left me to pay for it. Then he scribbled a note for Plumm informing him that he might have his reward back if he took good care of his letter in Westeros.

When he rejoined Penny, the girl was breathless from jousting. She kissed him on his cheek and asked him to find a pig as well so that they could perform the act together. Tyrion didn't think so. He felt ashamed because he did not want the girl, and she seemed to harbour some genuine affection for him. How can anyone love a dwarf if we cannot find love in our hearts for each other? Yet it was so, and lies would not make it any different. Tyrion wanted a big girl, with black hair and blue eyes. Tysha. Where do whores go? Despite being small, stunted and twisted.

Soon, when Tyrion became more acquainted with the local customs, he secured a position for Penny in the Temple of the Graces. It was a good place for her, a huge brick building with its grand domes housing so many women. Although a girl grown, Penny became one of the White Graces, as if she were a child. And Tyrion didn't think she would rise high on a path to grace. The ascension included being a Red Grace, what Westerosi would call simply a whore. A profession Penny was not meant for. Be as it may, she was safe. It was all that Tyrion could have done for her.

Another girl woke Tyrion from the swamp of his thoughts. A young scribe wise beyond her years, Missandei, spoke with the queen's voice in her absence. Daario Naharis, the captain of Stormcrows, Hero of the Unsullied, Skahaz mo Kandaq called the Shavepate, the bald commander of the Brazen Beasts, perfumed seneschal Reznak mo Reznak, one of the Blue Graces who survived the pale mare pestilence during siege and Tyrion himself completed the tableau around Ser Barristan's high table.

Tyrion had become an unofficial Hand of the Queen. Or rather her Foot as he liked to joke in barely a week he served Daenerys Stormborn in person. The office of the Hand was unknown to Meereen and, besides, it brought bad memories. Of his sweet sister and his lord father, both wishing him dead, mostly for a crime of being a dwarf. It brought souvenirs of the spacious set of rooms he used to enjoy in the Tower of the Hand in Red Keep, after two Hands who preceded him, Lord Jon Arryn and Lord Eddard Stark, had been murdered. Tyrion would have been the third one on that count if Jaime did not come and set him free, in payment of a debt that could never be settled. Wherever whores go, his father had said and he had died for it. Jaime was still alive, and Tyrion sometimes wondered how he was faring. I'll never see him again.

Inheriting a set of rooms from another dead man in Meereen was endearing. It made Tyrion feel almost at home.

Almost, but not quite. I have no home. And if I ever had one, it would be in a crofter's cottage. He tried his best not to think about the crofter's daughter. We were thirteen, for the seven heavens sake. It was a lifetime ago and Tysha was most likely dead no matter what he had written in his letter for Sansa.

Tyrion's rooms were on the second level of the pyramid counted from the top. They had once belonged to a dead Dornish prince. A would-be dragontamer. Not the brightest idea, Tyrion thought. He had read all that there was to read about dragons in Westeros and he would never attempt such a
thing. Prince Quentyn's bones were on their way home, on board of one of the captured Volantene ships that had accompanied the queen.

"Your Magnificences," Quaithe, the masked woman leading the Asshai embassy, spoke with conviction, although she flattered the councillors to foster her cause. As far as Tyrion had learned only a ruler should have been accorded a style of magnificence, worship or radiance in Meereen. Radiance was Tyrion's favourite. He found it the most ridiculous of all.

"It is past time that Her Radiance Queen Daenerys travels to Asshai," Quaithe announced as if she had read Tyrion's thoughts. "Or she will surely perish in great pain with all her children in Westeros."

"The queen shall decide on this when she returns," Missandei ruled, with Daenerys's former lover at her right side. Tyrion was seated to her left. The lacquered masks were not a new thing. They were presenting themselves every day in the last week with the same plea. They were two weeks too late. The queen had embarked on a ship before they arrived. Tyrion stifled a yawn. "These ones thank you for your concern for the queen," Missandei said sweetly.

Go away, Tyrion thought. People were sometimes so slow to understand. And he was of a mind to go to Zahrina's and watch naked freedmen and freedwomen slashing at each other with knives. The mortal art of the poor had become his favourite pastime since his arrival to Meereen. Especially because he no longer visited whores. And he still didn't know where the whores went. They could have made him into an eunuch of late for all he cared.

There were two masked women and two men, all clad in red and green. "One for each dragon", they said. There were only three living dragons in the world, Tyrion knew, so their count was as queer as the four of them. The Asshai'i seemed very tenacious and undeterred by the constant polite refusal of their pleas.

"Soon it will be too late," Quaithe said. "Send one among yourselves if you cannot reach the queen. One who has seen the dragons."

This is new. Maybe the petitioners are becoming desperate after all, Tyrion thought with derision.

He had seen the living dragons only very briefly. He was a foot soldier during the great and short battle for Meereen, the smallest and the humblest Second Son. Yet it was his idea how the company should best change sides to be on the winning tide in the end. The Second Sons placed themselves in the vanguard of the Yunkai reckless attack on Meereen. They marched against the ranks of the Unsullied, or it looked that way. Then they joined the queen's army and marched back on her enemies. In the end they walked over the corpses of the Yunkai'i slavers who had been paying their wages until that moment.

The dragons did the rest, flying to the thick of the battle, burning their mother's enemies to ruin. Then, the ironborn sailed into the harbour from out of nowhere, tooting some great horn. Two dragons followed its sound, the white one and the green one, flying in submission after the Iron Fleet, as if they were a couple of scaled kittens with horns and giant wings, and not wild beasts.

I wish I had seen more of the dragons, Tyrion thought. Be as it may, all three were gone now, and there was no way to tell when and if they would be coming back.

"Be gone, woman," Naharis spoke plainly, much to Tyrion's liking. The courtesies of the little scribe, Missandei, did not seem to do the trick, and they had to do something to kick out petitioners.

Naharis was supposed to be a suffering hostage of the Yunkai'i when the battle started. His body
could have been flung at the city walls from the trebuchet, as it had almost happened to one of the Queen's Dothraki bloodriders, Jhogo, who was saved at the last moment by green dragonflame.

Yet when the fighting was done, the Unsullied found brave captain Naharis in bed with one of Yunkai'i slavelords, or rather, slave ladies, called the Girl General. It was slightly better than if he had shared a bed with the noble Yezzan, Tyrion's former owner, who had died of the bloody flux, and who was so fat that he resembled a yellow whale. The Girl General was sweet, and she was a girl as her name said. Men whispered she had bigger teats than Daenerys. Daario's blue hair had been combed in a Ghiscari fashion, as a pair of protruding wings, one wing on each side of his handsome head.

Daenerys had not been pleased when she was told what came to pass, nor when she had seen her captain. Her black dragon hissed. Tyrion remembered shaking in the plaza when they had brought him before her. It looked as if the black dragon was going to burn them all in endless rage. Then the girl-child, Missandei, pleaded for the queen's lover. She said the sellsword captain did what he did to survive and come back to his queen unharmed. And Daenerys heard it all, even what the girl child did not say. As a result, Naharis had to make a solemn promise he would wed Missandei when she flowered and came of age, and not touch any woman until then.

Naharis was left in Meereen, and charged with guarding Missandei with his life while she spoke for the queen. Daario had sworn to do what he was bid, and Daenerys had smiled.

And then, unbeknownst to Daario, she summoned three Unsullied who were more cruel then the rest, led by the eunuch who went by a name of Blue Toad. The queen charged them to watch her treacherous captain, and murder him when he slept, as soon as he would break any of his latest solemn vows.

Unbeknownst to Tyrion, Daario was ordered to murder him, if the Lannister Imp showed any signs of betrayal. But Tyrion found out anyway. Being born and raised a Lannister, he had to be good in uncovering plots. Shavepate and Reznak were likely ordered to watch and murder each other if need be. Tyrion wondered what other precautions the queen had taken to preserve the peace in her city, and concluded that perhaps he was better off not knowing. And it might be amusing to discover the arrangements bit by bit when he would be very bored without his loving family.

Ten thousand Dothraki screamers rode in circles around the city, instead of plundering other cities. Another ten thousand rode all over Essos and foraged for food for the great freed population of Meereen. The khalasar belonged to Khal Jhaqo before Daenerys and her black dragon drowned him in the Dothraki Sea. No one knew what Daenerys had done to Khal Jhaqo and his blood riders, and the Dothraki would not tell. Not even to Ser Jorah Mormont who spoke their language. They would only say that Daenerys was a star descended to ride on earth until the day she would return to ride in the night skies, burning bright. No one else in the history of Essos, dragonlord or not, and especially not a woman, succeeded in bending Dothraki to their will in such an unorthodox way. They partially abandoned their nomadic habits for Daenerys. And many good men wasted a lot of ink to describe how that was not possible in the histories they wrote. Daenerys gave her khalasar a mighty gift: the great bronze harpy which used to be on top of the Great Pyramid of Meereen. The Dothraki took it as a trophy to Vaes Dothrak, the sacred city of all the gods they had defeated, but the gift only partially explained the drastic change in their behaviour.

Tyrion learned to admire the dispositions of the new Targaryen Queen. For the first time in his young life of a dwarf he understood how his father could have been Hand to Aerys II for so many long years. When they were not mad, the Targaryens were a force to be reckoned with in the game of thrones. This feature must have appealed to Lord Tywin once, as it now appealed to his son.
"Noble lords," Quaithe would not relent. "Reconsider. We will not leave Meereen as long as you do not name an envoy to go with us."

Tyrion was of a mind to order the Brazen Beasts, the queen's house guard commanded by Shavepate, to show the petitioners the door. Or rather to the stairs to descend from the pyramid. The guards were standing between the high pillars wearing animal masks of brass, most of them locusts. It was a joke Tyrion did not understand. It wounded him that no one ever bothered to explain to him the meaning of the horrid metal grasshoppers. Even Ser Barristan smiled at the locusts before he left. Tyrion only thought that a lion's mask, or a griffin's, even a wolf's disguise, would have been much better to guard a dragon.

His idle thoughts wandered away once more.

The Great Pyramid of Meereen stood higher than the Wall. Eight hundred feet of many coloured bricks were nothing like the seven hundred feet of ice Tyrion had seen a lifetime ago, in Westeros, when he still loved his brother and when he only moderately hated his father and his sister.

There were no white ravens sent from the Citadel to Meereen to announce the change of the season. There seemed to be no ravens in Slaver's Bay at all. Only carrion crows came to the bodies after the battle and even most of those died of the bloody flux just like the people whose corpses they had consumed. Ravens or not, Tyrion could tell it was autumn. Since the battle for Meereen had started, it hadn't stopped raining. The raindrops were dirty yellow, just like the river Skahazadhan in which they landed. The sea was an enormous smudge of dirty grey foam behind the mouth of the river.

The absence of ravens meant that none of the councillors knew how the queen fared in Westeros. Many men and women who loved her, and called her mother, would go out of the city at night, to stare at the dark sky. They listened for the sound of the dragon wings, returning... In battle, Daenerys and Drogon had returned last, under the cover of darkness. And they were gone for a moment, when the ironborn abducted two dragons.

But that was then.

The sky above Meereen was full of rain clouds, and conspicuously empty of dragons.

Tyrion's mind returned briefly to the audience. It was tedious. He almost wished that the councillors would start poisoning each other. It would make matters more interesting. The ousted nobility of Meereen conspired against Daenerys, but their power was temporarily broken, after the slavers had lost the battle, and the Dothraki and the Unsullied took to guarding the city and provisioning it with food. But Tyrion was born for danger in court, and he almost needed it to be able to breathe. It was pathetic, but it was true.

He nearly fell asleep on his Foot's chair when the Shavepate succeeded in being rude enough to end the audience and usher the Asshai'i out of the pyramid. They left a smell of fire in their wake, although only a few torches had been burning in sconces on the walls.

Tyrion changed in a plain garb of a little boy cupbearer Missandei had graciously provided for him. Happy to wear something resembling breeches, he attacked a thousand stairs descending from the pyramid with zeal. When he was down, his stunted legs and back hurt terribly. It didn't matter. Going up was easier, and even more so if you were drunk on the yellow piss the Ghiscari called wine.

Zahrina's hovel was a decent winesink near one of the smaller pyramids. A lotus was depicted on the door, and there were no petitioners. There were no whores either, only naked pit fighters. The gruff bear, Ser Jorah Mormont, worked as a glorious bodyguard in the place. His life lost sense all over again when the queen would not see him at all, repentant of the treasons against her or not. As if life
Ser Jorah was still mad at Tyrion because Daenerys had demanded to see the Imp. Tyrion almost wetted his badly fitting sellsword breaches when the Unsullied threw him at the feet of their queen.

But Daenerys only asked as a young girl: "Is this the one?"

The Blue Toad nodded, and the queen walked to Tyrion, pulled him up on his short legs and knelt beside him. Gently, she kissed his brow.

"Thank you, Tyrion," she said. He never knew if she didn't learn his house name or if she ignored it on purpose. "You have unwillingly done me a great favour. I shall not forget it."

At the end of the battle, the Second Sons ended up fighting within the walls of the city, next to the Great Pyramid. The scions of the great houses of Meereen marched at the pyramid in the confusion of the battle. "To reinstate the rightful king, Daenerys's consort," they said. A ragged man in his night gown emerged out of some sort of postern door, meant for slaves, no doubt. The slavers turned cheerful. Someone uttered: "Death to Daenerys!" As a former slave, even if for a very short time, Tyrion did not like their joy one bit, so he decided to test the sharpness of the Second Sons company's steel on the man's lean body...

"Thank you, Tyrion," Daenerys had repeated, smiling, "for making me a widow for a second time. I am forever in your debt."

That was how Tyrion learned that the man he stabbed was indeed the consort of the dragon queen. He regretted not having had a crossbow. He would have been deadlier and a more elegant kingslayer with the crossbow. Yes, father, most definitely. But in the absence of a quarrel, a knife did fine for noble Hizdahr zo Loraq, Daanerys's second husband.

I'm a kinslayer, a widowmaker, and a king slayer, now in truth, he thought with satisfaction. I did my best to deserve all the honourable titles.

"Ser Barristan told me you were clever," the queen had finally said, her demeanour cool and distant. "Serve me and I will judge you when I return."

Zahrina put a jar of vinegar smelling like piss in front of Tyrion. Two naked women descended to the pit. Ser Jorah stared at one of them, the golden blond, obviously.

"You have to forget her," Tyrion counselled him, but the hairy knight chose to ignore him. Black hairs grew over his entire body, except on his head, balding.

"You probably never loved anyone, dwarf," Ser Jorah spat, "or you would know some things are impossible to forget."

Tysha. Tyrion knew. But he wasn't going to tell Ser Jorah.

After two jars of poor wine, and two dead women in the pit, Tyrion was sick of everything, of drink, of mortal arts and of Ser Jorah's sullen attitude. He desired to play the game of thrones in Westeros, not in some faraway godforsaken city. He hoped that his depression might be tamed if he ingested some food.

The only snack available in Zahrina's establishment were sticks of unborn puppies. Crunchy. Tyrion bit in one of them when the hovel door opened, and an Asshai'i stormed in. One of the two women. Quaithe. Without asking questions, she sat in front of Tyrion.
"To go west, you must go east," she claimed.

"Want a bite?" he did his best to ignore her words as much as Ser Jorah had ignored Tyrion. It gave him a false sense of power.

"Asshai is not far from here," she observed.

"Pray, what can I find in Asshai that I cannot find anywhere else in the world?" Tyrion agreed to a conversation, hoping to end it soon.

He offered her a perfectly crispy unborn puppy stick from his plate he hadn't chewed on, yet. Quaithe cringed. He could partially understand. Meereenese dog delicacies were not made for every stomach. He found he rather liked them when he didn't think too much about where the meat came from. It was better than the bowl of brown in some taverns in King's Landing which was sometimes called the Singer's Stew...with pieces of a real singer Tyrion had provided for the serving. The singer would have betrayed Shae. And Tyrion wanted to protect her then, at all cost, not knowing she would betray him just the same, and that he would kill her for it on a whim. She was only a whore and he should have known better. She didn't deserve to die for what she was and neither did the singer. Guilt gnawed at Tyrion as a dog at the bone. He had wanted to be better than his father, but in the end he could not.

Quaithe distanced herself from Tyrion's supper as much as the table allowed, but she didn't leave his company.

"What?" he inquired losing his courtesies. "You like my face better than food? Most women would choose any food over me."

"We are leaving on the morrow. Meat us at first light on the plaza of the pyramid," she whispered. "We will provide a mount for you."

*These Asshai'i don't know how take no for an answer,* Tyrion thought. "You haven't answered my question. What can I possibly find in Asshai that I cannot find here, in the wondrous city of Meereen?"

"A light, a shadow of a dragon. A way to victory," Quaithe said.

"All that means little and less to me," Tyrion said, tearing the dog's meat with his teeth. "It's nothing personal, sweetling, but maybe you should waste your last night in this city in another place, to find some fool who will follow you. I won't."

Quaithe sighed deeply like the crone she was.

"There's one other thing you might find out if you come with us to Asshai," she said.


"No," the masked woman shook her head twice.

"Dragon eggs about to hatch," Tyrion offered.

"That too," she admitted. "But that was not what I had in mind for you."

"An elixir to become a giant? Or to grow a new nose?"
The old woman giggled like a young girl. *At least my sense of humour would be appreciated in Asshai, it seems,* Tyrion thought. *Maybe I should go. There's nothing that holds me here, or anywhere else.*

*Dragons. If they come back, and I am not here to serve them, I might end up as a piece of charred meat to pay for my treason.*

Ser Jorah called him from the back door. "Come, dwarf, leave the lady if she's bothering you. There will be another fight soon."

Two lads, no more than thirteen years old, were stripping themselves naked to descend to the pit. Only one would come out. Tyrion felt bile accumulating in his throat. Perhaps he should walk back to the pyramid, get soaked by rain, and sleep for a week. He dropped a half eaten unborn puppy stick on his plate and asked with utmost disdain. "What did you think I'd find in Asshai then?"

Lacquered mask bathed in the glow of the torches, turning into a skull of coloured wood. Most of buildings in Meereen had no windows, as if their owners had been afraid of daylight. No answer came.

"What will I find out in Asshai?" Tyrion insisted, bored, tired and hurting on the inside, as he was every day since Jaime had told him the truth.

"Where the whores go."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all who commented and/or left a kudos. Please let me know what you think of this chapter.
Sansa

Chapter Notes

A huge thanks to TopShelfCrazy for a rather extensive beta work on this chapter :')) It reads so much better now.

This chapter sums up a little bit what happened to the characters in Mummers' Show from Sansa's perspective. It seemed fair to do it now because in this chapter we slowly continue their story. It could also help to any of you who are reading this if you don't want to read the prequel. The characters from the first three chapters never appeared in Mummers' Show.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

In Sansa's dreams the trees were talking of late.

It was like that time when Father was still alive. Lord Eddard had taken his daughters, Arya and Sansa, to pray in the godswood of the Red Keep. Sansa had dreamed of her brother Bran then. He wasn't crippled in her dream. He was walking with the old gods in the black halls under the white, weightless vastness of snow. She couldn't bring herself to talk of that dream to either father or Arya. It would have saddened father and made Arya angry.

And now the trees were talking with Bran's voice.

They also spoke in another voice Sansa did not know, although it resembled the voice of King Rhaegar. It sounded like a man already dead or on the verge of dying, She shivered, afraid of the premonitions her confused dreams might contain. The king will not die, he will not die, he can't die... he almost died once on the Trident. The gods had protected him then, surely they would do it now.

Would they?

A white weirwood tree laughed at her in her dream and its cruel mouth swelled with blood.

Sansa stirred and willed her eyes open. As every morning, she was not alone. Sandor was stretched next to her, bodies touching, sunken together on a bedroll under the thick softness of several black and grey wolf pelts.

"I'm truly sorry," Aunt Lyanna had said when she gifted the furs to Sandor and Sansa when they were all about to depart from King's Landing. "Lord Connington is my good friend, but he is also a man of dubious tastes. It has everything to do with how Ned led the forces which defeated him in battle in the Stony Sept. Be as it may, it's what we have, and it is winter. We should not let the past rule us, although we cannot forget it."

Aunt Lyanna had lived in Essos with Lord Jon Connington of Griffin's Roost, while pretending to be a septa; Septa Lemore. She educated Prince Aegon, Sixth of His Name as if he were her own son. Lord Connington as well as Lord Varys who saved Aegon as a baby in the sack of King's Landing believed him to be Rhaegar's son and heir. Rhaegar loved Aegon. He presented him and he regarded
him as his son, now and then. Even the Mad King died convinced that Aegon was his grandson, a child of Prince Rhaegar and Princess Elia. But his real parents were Lady Ashara and Ser Arthur Dayne, who had both protected Rhaegar's second wife, Aunt Lyanna, by their deaths.

"My lord husband," Sansa whispered softly under the furs, wishing to forget the sad stories from the past if only for a day. She was older now, a woman grown. She knew that where there was joy, there was always a sorrow to match it. She enjoyed addressing him that way, although he mostly snarled at her for it. This morning, he did not seem to mind.

Sandor Clegane was already awake. His grey eyes were clear and calm, absorbing the scarce light from the wagon. It made them shine with life.

They were not dressed.

The intimacy was too much and too little at the same time. She wished they had a home, a place where she could bear him strong sons and beautiful daughters. What they had was a place to sleep without the company of others, and a ride north to uncertain destiny.

They were never completely alone.

The murmurs of an army waking up were sneaking into the wagon through the walls made of thick cloth. And Sansa could very well be the king's niece for all the good that would do to her if his kingdom was not going to survive winter.

They could all die.

Yet in all honour they had no choice but to travel north. Old Nan's stories had come to life beyond the Wall, with all the monsters her tales contained. White walkers herded forward the hosts of the men and beasts they had slain: dead men, dead horses, giant ice spiders and only the gods knew what else. And Sansa's cousin Jon, who was never her half brother but Rhaegar and Lyanna's only child, he was somewhere there among the monsters. He was fighting a lost war if help would not come on time. Mance Rayder had been adamant on that. Jon could die not knowing that both of his real parents had lived where everyone believed they had died in Robert's Rebellion. It was all so very sad, Sansa thought.

Only Sansa's parents had died. The ashes of her lady mother and of her brother Robb's head were sharing the wagon with them, in hope to reach Winterfell. An evil maester had sewn Robb's head to the body of Ser Gregor Clegane, to make him a champion of Queen Cersei at her trial by combat. This way, at least a part of Robb might one day rest in peace: he had been the last Lord of Winterfell and the King in the North, his place was in the crypts. Sansa doubted that the rest of his body, desecrated by the Freys, would ever find its way back home. The deaths of her family were always going to haunt Sansa, despite the wisdom of Aunt Lyanna's counsel about the past. She would always feel guilty for talking to Queen Cersei about her father's plans when she was only a stupid girl.

"My beloved wife," Sandor muttered back with only a slight trace of mocking in his deep voice. "Today we should arrive to the fords of the Trident. If I know Rhaegar, His Grace will turn to melancholy when he faces the ruby ford."

"You know him better than most," Sansa said thoughtfully.

"That's what a life in a male septyr will do to you. You get to know the gnats who share your misery. Guess what, I could not even call my horse by his name. There was no wine, no fighting, no women... "
"Stop it, Sandor Clegane," she admonished him, earning a bone breaking hug and a few clumsy kisses on top of the red tangles on her head. She would soon need help to brush it properly.

Of course he didn't mean most of what he said. He was just being awful on purpose. It made her smile. He loved her. The realization always made her smile. Sometimes she was afraid she had only dreamed their love as she had once dreamed about his kiss.

King Rhaegar had survived the battle at the Trident, but he had lost his memory. He believed himself to be the Elder Brother of the Quiet Isle, a famous healer. He had found Sandor Clegane dying on the Trident and he had saved his life. And he had regarded him as a brother ever since.

"His Grace would have done a good deed if he had left me to die instead of trying to fashion a monk out of me," her husband continued being mean.

"Why do you insist on calling my uncle His Grace?" Sansa asked. It was a question which had bothered her for a long time, but a sensitive one, so she hadn't dared to ask it until now. But this morning her husband was talkative so he might be willing to answer her. "He always calls you brother."

"Dogs are not brothers to kings. Dogs are loyal and they serve. That is the way of it. And I got a juicy bone for my service so you won't hear me complaining."

She supposed she was the bone. Sansa sighed. Some things would not change. It pained her.

"I dreamed about my brother Bran again," Sansa said finally, searching for support in her husband's eyes.

"Maybe you should take it up with your aunt or the falcon brat from the Vale before he heads east to his lands. They dream of being animals when they wish. I'm not a warg, only your d-.

"You forget my sister," she reproached him before he could call himself a dog again. Sansa was born a wolf and a fish, but it had never occurred to her to think of herself as either of the sigils. That's because you've never been strong. You are a pretty talking bird and someone will put you in a cage again, sooner or later. She was not going to speak of herself as a little bird either, but Sandor could call her so whenever it pleased him.

"How could I?" he said with scorn. "The little wolf bitch is rarely forgetting me."

Arya made quips about Sandor and Sansa being together more often than not. The last friendly thing she told him two days ago was that she had never dreamed that Sansa would marry a large monkey. Sandor had left the wagon not wearing a tunic despite the chill, in a hurry to find a privy at some tree. "A monkey who makes water like a proper dog," Arya added and Sansa was sorely tempted to throw a steel vambrace at her sister. It wasn't fair. Arya's friend, Gendry, had grown a beard which was thicker and thus looked blacker than any hair Sansa's husband possessed. If there was anyone who looked like a monkey these days, it was Gendry. She didn't tell that to Arya though, because she was intent on never being mean to her sister again. Even if Arya did her best to pretend she didn't care for Gendry.

Arya returned to Westeros from Braavos as an assassin sent to kill Princess Daenerys. And when she refused to carry out her orders, the cruel god she had served in Braavos condemned her to sleep until she died. But unlike Sansa, Arya had always been the strong one. She rose from her sleep when Sansa needed help and tricked the god of death.

Sansa was determined to love Arya now that she had a second chance. Maybe she could make a lady
out of her, in time. It would please their late mother. Even Aunt Lyanna, who was a warg and who could fight with weapons, could be a great lady, a true queen, when she wanted. So there was no reason that Arya couldn't be one as well.

"These dreams of mine are different," Sansa said gravely to her husband. "It's not at all like when I can sometimes sense the thoughts of the animals."

"-or mine," it pleased him to mock her further, it seemed.

"Or yours," she hastily agreed, eager to press her own concerns further. "I think that Bran is alive. He's trying to tell me something. But that's not possible, isn't it?"

"Well, if it was a lie that Theon Greyjoy burned Winterfell, and our friend Mance is certain of that, it could also be a lie that Theon killed your little brothers. What was the younger one called? Rickard?"

"No, Rickon. Rickard was my grandfather."

The Hound laughed indecently. "Wasn't that the one the Mad King cooked in his armour-"

"Please don't talk like that," she said, sickened.

"Why not?" he complained boyishly, "it's the truth. And you love me for being awful."

Some things did change.

It was the first time he spoke of her love as if he believed he had it. Sansa smiled against her will.

"I love you anyway," she reminded him, lest he forget.

He had the grace to look ugly and abashed at the same time. Seven foot of muscle and ill-concealed rage in her bed. One of the biggest men alive, who could be timid as a little boy. It made her love him even more.

"Come," she said, trying to rise. She only made it halfway. "It's time to don your armour, my love, although I pray for yet another day without seeing an enemy."

"His Grace forced upon me a squire to do that," he frowned.

All Sansa's husbands had the same squire: Podrick Payne. Ofttimes he looked as if he were afraid that the Hound would cut his entrails out and stew them for supper, as Sandor had so eloquently threatened him on one occasion, when Pod could not find his scabbard fast enough. Craven or not, Pod did his chores admirably. Sansa was happy he would be on her husband's side in battle whenever it came to that. Tyrion was a dwarf and yet he had survived on the bridge of ships falling apart during the battle of Blackwater with Pod at his side. Sandor was as fierce as the Warrior, but a precaution could not harm him, Sansa found.

She prayed to all the gods that no battle would come to them soon. Sansa was no fighter. She would never be like her aunt and her sister. A woman's lot was waiting. Selfishly, she wanted to postpone it.

"I like to help you dress," she said. Her cheeks heated slightly when she allowed herself to study her husband. Half-seated, she could see much more than his eyes. Her thoughts turned unladylike. On the contrary, she corrected herself, they're the thoughts of a lady wife. He looked as if dressing was the last thing on his mind.
"No," he denied her. "You come back. They won't miss us for another hour."

The dead wolf hairs came to life under Sansa's fingers, the pelts suddenly as supple and warm to touch as her own skin.

"Only an hour?" she wondered aloud. She would still be very embarrassed if Mance Rayder tried to make her accompany him in singing a Bear and a Maiden Fair, as he did when they made camp on the first night after their departure. But after a few weeks on the kingsroad she found she could now tease her husband in bed...

A little bit.

King Rhaegar's army rode north from King's Landing through the empty land.

There were not as many men as one might have wished for. The king did not stay in the city long enough to call the banners after he had made his claim. Only those lords and ladies who had come to the capital to witness the mummers' show knew that the Seven Kingdoms had a new king. And for every lord who came there were at least two who did not. The War of the Five Kings was followed by winter and travelling was a great risk.

Twenty thousand men were riding north. It was only half the number that Rhaegar had taken to the Trident. And even with forty thousand he had lost to Robert Baratheon, Sansa knew.

At least five thousand of Rhaegar's new men were members of the Golden Company. Prince Aegon had brought them back home to Westeros from across the narrow sea. They carried skulls of their previous commanders dipped in gold, and they frightened Sansa. The king was reticent toward them too, although some of the company members had forsaken the black dragon of the extinct bastard branch of Blackfyres, and started flying the red one of the trueborn Targaryens. "A dragon is a dragon," some Westerosi soldiers said. The others nodded and predicted trouble. The rest of the company had stayed in King's Landing to help Lord Connington and Lord Varys rule the city while the king was gone.

Three thousand Unsullied marched north as well, more disciplined and calm than any other men at arms Sansa had ever seen. They came west with Princess Daenerys, and there were more of them on her ships, sailing slowly up north.

The remaining men were a mixture of unknown knights and petty lords, freeriders, commoners of King's Landing and sons of the smallfolk. Most of them had nothing better to do and no food to eat this winter if they didn't march in some direction. Many were unblooded soldiers. They had at least that in common with the unfortunate host Rhaegar had taken to the Trident.

"It's more than enough men to man the Wall," Mance Rayder had judged in the presence of the king. "Your son Jon defended it with less than a hundred men against me and I had thousands on the other side."

Sansa fervently hoped that twenty thousand men would be able to defend the realm from the Others. The white walkers fed on human blood. They would come and snatch their victims when it was very cold, springing from the mists; invisible at first and invincible in the end. Some of them had already come south from the Wall. No one knew how they did it while the Wall still stood.

Sansa knew that the king and her husband had encountered them one night, when they were all travelling south from the Quiet Isle to King's Landing as a company of mummers. Since that time, as if with magic, a frontier had appeared. It broke the riverlands in two, passing through a place called the High Heart. No wall stood on it. It was a natural divide between the north where the monsters
could roam freely and the protected south. When Rhaegar's army had crossed it, days ago, they no
longer saw people on the road, nor in the villages they passed by.

The rearguard of the king's army was made up of the dead. King Rhaegar was no monster, but he
still led north a host of at least five thousand slain, under the command of Lord Euron Greyjoy, their
maker. Lord Euron was a different kind of wight. He and a few others could talk. The rest hissed or
were entirely mute. All blindly obeyed his lordship, even those missing a head. Deep mistrust ran
between the king and the dead lord. His kraken lordship had lost his natural life trying to master a
sorcerous horn of the dragonlords, which he had found on his many travels over the seas. With it, he
had ensnared two dragons, until Sansa's husband found a way to stop him and set the dragons free.
The dead carried his longship, Silence, black sails and red hull hovering over the kingsroad.

In the part of the riverlands touched by winter Sansa became glad for the escort of the dead. The
woods and the shrubbery rang with terrifying noises at night. Sansa didn't want to know what
awaited there, and thankfully the dead never let anyone through. Or maybe the fires Mance Rayder
lit around the camp every evening kept the terrors of the night at bay.

The baggage train had more food than servants. It could feed at least half of the living people
marching north until they would reach the Wall. There was hope more supplies would be found on
the way, in the Vale of Arryn, in the Neck and in the barrowlands. In those places there had been no
fighting in recent years of turmoil, so the crops may have been stored. Everyone ate winter rations,
but no one complained. For many of those who set forth with the king had previously spent their
days in the decaying parts of the capital not eating anything at all.

The crownlands had been deserted. There were fields where crops were rotting because there was no
one to reap them. King Rhaegar had men collect what they were able to salvage. Most of the
smallfolk who still lingered near the kingsroad started trailing behind the army, taking all their
possessions with them. The number of the mouths to feed grew faster than the supply of food. All
this had stopped when they crossed the divide. There are no people here, Sansa had thought, they all
left or they all died.

The kingsroad was spattered with a hard crust of mud, blown over the stones by the autumn rains
and later frozen by the cold. The first winter snows had melted, but the chill pierced skin and bone,
icing the breath coming from the mouth of the living. It was only a matter of time before it would
snow again. Aunt Lyanna ordered runners and bear-paws to be made for when they would be
needing them, overseeing the labours in person every day. King Rhaegar would sometimes ride with
his queen, or walk next to her on horse, or march with his army. When he walked, he'd do it
barefoot, a habit he gained when he lived a life of service and penitence. He seemed to feel no cold
under his feet.

And then, there were the dragons.

Drogon was the black one. Sansa admired the name, wondering where it came from. Princess
Daenerys named Rhaegal and Viserion for her brothers, but Drogon was not a Targaryen name.
Daenerys was flying back and forth between the army on the march and the fleet of her ships which
sailed north in the direction of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. Aegon and his confidant, Jeyne, were to ride
for Shadow Tower with the Golden Company as soon as they reached Winterfell. Mance Rayder
would be their guide. He knew those lands well enough to find a way through them in winter, or so
it was hoped. King Rhaegar and Queen Lyanna would travel from Winterfell straight to Castle Black
where they would conclude a settlement in which Lord Stannis would bend the knee and they would
all join forces to defend the realm if the Long Night truly came. That was the plan.

"Plans seldom work in war", Sandor had warned her, when they started dressing after almost two
more hours in the wagon.

"Rhaegar's desire to do right by everyone will be his death." Sansa's husband was as ruthless in his judgement as he could be in battle. "His head is full of things that can't be done. He will hesitate and Stannis will use that to kill him. Then he will reclaim the Iron Throne. Since he learned of Cersei's treachery, Stannis has lived for his claim. He will never let go of it. What else would he do? Cook?"

"Stannis will not kill Rhaegar," Sansa argued with conviction.

"And why not? Who will stop him?" the Hound asked as if he was not expecting an answer.

"You will," Sansa said with belief as tall as the mountains. "Rhaegar thinks of you as brother, but you keep acting as his sworn shield."

Sandor snorted and lowered his eyes. "I'll do what I can," he said.

When they emerged out of the wagon to continue their journey, the king was visibly worried.

Another day had passed with no sight of dragons. The white and golden dragon, Viserion, had flown away from the capital with his rider, Ser Jaime Lannister and Ser Jaime's wife, Lady Brienne of Tarth. And the king had sent the green and bronze dragon, Rhaegal, to search for Jon on the Wall. Rhaegal never returned and there was no word, no raven, from his son.

"The lord lizard-lion of the Neck will know what's going on," Mance had told the king. "He knows a great many things. He would be called a wizard, in my north."

Sandor was right as usual. When the camp was gone, it took them only a few hours of riding, or driving a wagon, in Sansa's case, to arrive to the Trident. The view of the river didn't improve the king's sullen mood.

They were fortunate that the fords were still crossable. So far, the gods were with them, it seemed, or at least some of them. The river was a mass of dense water, green like a maester's potion, speeding through its wide bed. The stream ran wild, but it was still shallow enough that the horses could walk through it and the wagons trot over. They would only get a little wet.

Young Robert Arryn would leave east at the crossing, charged to return to his lands and be their lord, although he had been ill most of his life and not yet of age. The king had hoped Ser Jaime would accompany him until the Bloody Gate. The Arryn men had no love for the Lannisters, but it would be safer to go through the mountains and meet the clans with Viserion. And a dragon could go very far in convincing any hesitating lord bannermen about which side they should choose. The Vale of Arryn meant a safe supply of food by the sea. In winter, it meant everything.

"He shouldn't have spared Cersei," Aunt Lyanna ranted when they stopped, as she did almost every day outside her husband's hearing. "Mad or not, she's dangerous and evil, even if Tommen locks her in a dungeon in Casterly Rock." Arya nodded, Nymeria growled, Sansa's husband grunted and Sansa didn't know what to think.

"You are right," Sansa said without thinking further, "Cersei deserves to die, but His Grace wishes to believe she could be different because he is convinced that she is his half-sister." There was no proof that Aerys II ever fathered Cersei and Jaime. Rhaegar had merely used the impression from his youth and the well-spread tale of incest between the siblings to spare Ser Jaime's life. He proclaimed him a Targaryen bastard and thus declared he would not be a kinslayer. Sansa thought that not expecting treason coming from one's own family was a sign of having a healthy head. The road to madness, that Aerys II had followed, lay in the other direction, where kings were afraid of everything and everyone, and most of all of their own kin.
Aunt Lyanna stomped the ground with both feet like a child, Arya scowled and Sandor spat. "Heartless bitch," he said, "that's all Cersei will ever be."

"Rhaegar doubts all his decisions," Lyanna said. "In his heart he's afraid Jaime has already betrayed him by not coming to join us. Where is he? He can find us if he wishes, the dragons sense each other and their riders hear their thoughts."

Sansa didn't know where Ser Jaime was. She wrapped her arm around her aunt. It was easy because Sansa was so much taller than her. Even Arya was taller already, and likely to grow a bit more, although probably not as much as Sansa. Nymeria gave an affectionate lick to the northern queen who patted her head.

"Does... does Jon have a direwolf as well?" Aunt Lyanna asked timidly.

"Yes," Arya explained, "his wolf is white and his name is Ghost."

Lyanna shivered. "It's better than Stranger," Sansa tried to say something to make her aunt feel better.

"The Seven have no power behind the Wall, it is said," Aunt Lyanna whispered. "And a ghost is a spirit of a dead man."

Their aunt never showed fear except when it came to Jon. Sansa and Arya agreed that it was so because she felt guilty. When she had gotten word of Rhaegar's defeat and passing, Lyanna became mad with grief. She faked her own death and left Jon with their father shortly after his birth. She didn't trust herself with her own son. Prince Aegon, Lord Varys and Lord Connington all believed that Septa Lemore came into being to hide Lady Ashara Dayne. No one ever dreamed that she had been Lyanna Stark.

"Ghost is only a name," Arya said.

"A beautiful name," Sansa had to add.

Aunt Lyanna smiled. "You're both right," she said. "And you both remind me of myself at your age. In different ways."

Sansa felt flattered with the comparison and Arya lowered her head, just like Sandor would do when Sansa would unwittingly embarrass him by complimenting his looks. Can it be that my sister does not know how pretty she has become while we were apart? If it weren't for the fact that she was now one of the royal family, many a young knight or comely soldier would have attempted to woo her. And probably ended up meeting Gendry's hammer. Not that Arya needed any protection. She still had the sword Jon had given her as a parting gift.

The army started crossing the river late in the morning. The party which was to go to the Vale moved aside, preparing to march east with Sweetrobin. Sandor and Arya left to train, perhaps to bleed each other, Sansa feared. The king announced he would cross last with his family, and not first as he had done to face Robert Baratheon.

Rhaegar was restless, pacing up and down the riverfront in his wife's company. When the black wings appeared on the sky, signalling Daenerys's return from the east, he took Aunt Lyanna by the shoulders. "I will send her to the Wall to find Jon and bring him here," he said, staring gloomily in her grey eyes. "No," aunt Lyanna disagreed. "She is your sister and she has your love. But I don't trust her with the life of our son. What if she feeds him to her dragon? It wouldn't be the first time in history one Targaryen did that to another."
"I never knew you took those lessons so much to your heart in Winterfell," Rhaegar said, mildly amused.

"I did not! Arthur had a book about the kings of the Seven Kingdoms. And they were all Targaryens until Robert as you well know. I had to do something when you rode off to your war. I could not ride nor joust with a big belly."

The king kissed her hands. "Sweet wife, it is precious to me that you made yourself digest that bloody history."

"I had to know whom I married."

"I never read a thing about the Kings of Winter," Rhaegar said gravely. "I should."

"Most likely because there isn't a good account available south of the Neck. There were books about it in Winterfell, but they were probably lost when Winterfell was burned. If you seek such knowledge you will have to dig deep in the vaults of Castle Black, sweet husband..."

The bickering between the spouses was like gooseprickles rising in Sansa's ears.

"I am sending my sister," Rhaegar repeated.

"Can't you go?" Lyanna begged.

"A king cannot abandon his army," he said. "I've never done it before and I'll not do it now. Ser Jaime is not here and..."

"-you trust him even less, I know. We agree on that."

Daenerys landed several feet away from the royal couple, black wings flapping, red fire puffing out of Drogon's snout.

"Good sister," Lyanna said coldly, "welcome back." Her expression turned as grim as the faces of the kings of winter in the crypts under Winterfell, long and unforgiving. She tied her beautiful hair, dark brown and shiny silver, into an ugly bun on the top of her head. In Sansa's opinion she had never looked more like a true septa than at that moment.

The princess was a year or two older than Sansa and as pretty as she could be dangerous. Sansa still wasn't sure what to think of her. They had walked together as captive slaves of Euron Greyjoy for a day, helping each other to stay on their feet. But when Drogon returned, the humble, stubborn girl Sansa had met immediately turned into a cold-hearted queen. And that same queen listened to Walder Frey's demand for Sansa's hand without any reaction, except, perhaps, a vague, amused condescension of that atrocity. King Rhaegar had assured Sansa it was all a mummer's farce, but she could never bring herself to believe it.

She shared her aunt's concern. There was no way of telling what Daenerys would do if and when she would meet Jon. Hopefully she would not go as far as to feed him to her dragon. Sansa understood that Jon could also become a dragonrider, but taming a dragon seemed far from simple. Ser Jaime looked as if he was about to fall off and die when Viserion took him up to the sky for the first time, against his rider's will. Sansa had asked Daenerys if it had been any easier for her, hoping that it might be easier for Jon. All she had gotten was an enigmatic smile, stretched thin as a closed jaw of her dragon.

Daenerys and Rhaegar could both ride Drogon as they pleased, in an arrangement unusual for dragonlords. Dragons lived much longer than men so they could have several riders one after another.
in their lifetime, but a dragon with two riders concurrently was an oddity in Westeros, and there were
different and confused stories about Valyria. Sansa's eyes would go wide open when King Rhaegar
talked about the greatness of the old freehold, seated next to a campfire. The flames would make his
purple eyes glow red like dragonsbreath, the grass that grew under the heart tree in the godswood of
the Red Keep.

The only thing Aunt Lyanna had to say about all that was that she had sailed to the Smoking Sea,
where Valyria once was, during her exile. If they both lived through the winter, she would take
Rhaegar there, be it on a ship, or on the back of a dragon. When she would speak like that, Rhaegar
would sigh and kiss her chastely, then take up his harp and play. Sansa's aunt would listen and mop
her tears when the music stopped and she thought no one was watching.

Sansa was always watching.

There was entirely too much to see on the march. There was never a moment without a brawl here or
a trouble there. Sansa wondered if her royal uncle would give her high harp lessons if his retinue
ever gave him a moment of peace. She once dreamed of such as a little girl going south to King's
Landing. But the only lessons she received back then were in the cruelty of men. In the end she
lacked the courage to ask the king about the harp.

And she also wanted to spend as much time as possible with her husband before he left her to march
against the snarks and the grumkins.

"Brother," Daenerys smiled, "good-sister," her smile was less sweet. "Sansa," the princess behaved
like Sansa's friend, but Sansa never knew if she should believe her. "I flew far up north ahead of my
fleet, all the way to the place called the Last Hearth. I have seen no sign of Rhaegal or of anyone
who calls himself Jon Snow. The people are all holed up in the castle and a small town around it.
Some say a green shadow hunts in the woods at night. It used to eat sheep but now there are none, so
it eats bears and wolves."

Aunt Lyanna gave the princess a hateful look. Sansa could not understand. *Why would she give wolf
pelts to Sandor and her in cold blood but then object to the eating habits of a dragon?* It was
probably that or starve. They might all eat wolf meat or worse by the end of winter. Sansa wondered
how roasted dragon would taste and she immediately felt sick. She hoped she'd never have to eat
that.

"What of the ships?" the king asked.

"They are approaching Gulltown," Daenerys said and dismounted, sliding down one giant black leg
of her beast. Rhaegar smiled at Drogon and patted one of his horns. The dragon exhaled some smoke
and belched with satisfaction, vomiting black and white feathers. They could have belonged to an
eagle similar to the she-eagle whose skin Queen Lyanna could wear, like Arya wore the skin of her
wolf. Sansa's aunt paled.

"It's not yours," Daenerys hurried to reassure the queen. "It's just a bird Drogon caught in the
Mountains of the Moon."

"We cannot wait for Ser Jaime any longer," Rhaegar concluded. "Lord Arryn has to continue east,
and we north and north-west."

"You could sound the horn," Aunt Lyanna said with hesitation.

"No," Rhaegar said. "If they are too far away I could kill the rider or the dragon by the summoning. I
will only do that in dire need, not before."
Or you could kill Jon if he is learning to ride the dragon, Sansa thought and kept her thoughts to herself. The king chose his words wisely not to upset his wife.

The king stayed in place and waited. He gazed east, south and west, checking the horizon for white and gold wings swaying in the wind until the sun went down. His sister never left his side. Neither did his wife, the two women glaring at each other. Sansa spent the afternoon with the men and women making bear-paws in place of her aunt. Out of curiosity, she stayed close enough to observe the two ladies and the king.

"A dragon!" Mance Rayder bellowed from the other side of Trident as the sun was setting. The King-beyond-the-Wall was among the first ones to cross the great river, eager to return home. "The white one!" There was indeed a dot of fast moving light on the red sky across the river, growing larger with every moment.

King Rhaegar laughed, for the first time in many days.

"See how my faith was not mislaid," he told his wife. "Will you lend a little bit of yours to my young sister? She is our best choice to find our son fast."

Aunt Lyanna nodded, almost against her will. "Send her out on the morrow," she said as if she hoped her husband would change his mind. "We are all weary today."

"I'll never be weary of flying," Daenerys said with pride, climbing back up the front leg of her dragon. Soon, the black wings soared to meet the white ones, approaching the ruby ford from the distant west.

"I will always listen to you, Lyanna," the king's voice was full of love and her aunt looked embarrassed for enforcing her will.

"I know," she murmured.

Sansa felt superfluous. The bear-paw makers were done for the day and the king and the queen clearly needed to be alone. It meant that Sansa could finally go and find Sandor. There would be some food as well by the fires. She strolled up and down in a simple dark blue cloak with a clean wolf pelt over it. No one paid her any attention. There were many men still busy crossing the river before dark. She walked fast, eager to spot her husband. He trained often since the start of their journey. "To stretch these old bones," he'd say.

The only thing old about him were his many scars. His body was a semi-uncharted land Sansa wished to explore for as long as the gods would allow. Every day she welcomed the moment when it was proper to retire. One more night is all I need, she'd tell herself every evening. I will be brave when he has to leave me. She could say that as much as she wanted. It was no less a lie. She wanted many nights in his arms but only the gods could grant her that wish.

Those same gods who had taken her father, her mother and Robb. The gods who had returned her sister and who may yet return her little brothers.

Everything seemed so exciting when she had travelled south to King's Landing years ago, with Father. She was sure her life was going to be worthy of a song. But the only music Sansa had discovered turned out to be the unstoppable sound of her tears.

Now she was finally going back north and her heart was fuller than it had ever been. She had found love and she had found family. She still had to find home. In Winterfell, or elsewhere.

She wondered whom the gods would take away from her this time and prayed for the strength to
withstand it. *Maybe they will take me.* The notion of her own death was nowhere near as frightening as before.

Sansa was a little girl no longer.

She didn't want to cry.

"You have a squire, but I don't have a maid," she objected when she found her husband. "I need help for brushing my hair."

A knight from the Golden Company laughed. The Hound swung his sword and lopped off a mop of hair hanging above the man's forehead. A tiny stream of blood drizzled down the knight's nose. Sandor grinned with satisfaction. "There's a pretty for you," he said.

The campfires were like fireflies scattered on both sides of the great river, calling the army to the night's rest.

Sandor gave Sansa his arm and walked with her back to the wagon.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left a comment and/or a kudos. Please tell me what you think so far :))
Rhaegar

Chapter Notes

This chapter would have been a total chaos without my wonderful beta DrHolland. Thank you so much :'))
The first two verses of a poem in this chapter are a direct quotation from the Storm of Swords

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rhaegar

The Trident would never let him sleep. Not now, and not then.

The murmur of the great river turned into chatter. Chatter streamed into clamour. It became a crushing noise, deafening. Robert's hammer rose and struck his chest. Rubies cut into his soft skin, which had never been made for war. Dragons possessed hard scales, even on their belly. They were not weak like him. His parents would have done better if they had let him forge a maester chain. He tried to breathe, breathe, breathe. He burned. He never was a true dragon.

Rhaegar sat up stiffly, renouncing the useless chase to capture sleep. He seemed to need less and less as he was getting older. One day I will stop sleeping entirely, he mused.

Carefully, he freed himself from his wife, from their bedding, from everything. He was glad Lyanna did not wake. She needed more sleep for the little one she was carrying. On an impulse, he picked up his harp. He staggered out of the tent they were sharing, bewildered, shivering. He had never felt less kingly and less a dragonlord.

The camp was asleep. The fires smouldered, dying out. The guards gambled and cursed their luck for drawing the watch for the night. He wondered if he was the only one awake among those who were allowed to sleep. His feet took him to where the dragons were. The real ones, not the fragile ones like himself. How was he to prevail against an enemy who had woken after thousands of years? Was he going to lose the dragons now that the gods had brought them back to life? What was he going to do? Was he to be called Rhaegar the Undecided?

He was calm during day among his family and soldiers, but doubts besieged him at night. Just like Lyanna, he worried about Jon, their son. Unlike her, he frequently contemplated the possibility that their son would hate them both, for any number of reasons. The official truth Robert Baratheon had spread through the Seven Kingdoms, banishing singers who dared making a different rhyme, was that Rhaegar had kidnapped Lyanna and raped her. That was what his older niece, Sansa, believed when Rhaegar had first met her. Did Eddard Stark tell Jon the truth? Rhaegar doubted it. The truth would not keep the boy safe as Ned had promised to do.

There was also the taint of the Targaryens he worried about, but he was loath to mention that to Lyanna. She had suffered enough from it when his father tortured and slaughtered Lord Rickard and Brandon. And he didn't want to add to his wife's overwhelming guilt concerning Jon's destiny. It could prove fatal in her condition. When he was the Elder Brother, a healer, he had seen too many women die in childbed.
Both spouses were painfully aware that something must have gone awry with Jon when Rhaegal did not return, with or without their son. *Gods, he could be d-* Rhaegar rejected the thought. Jon had to be alive. He comforted himself that the dragons would somehow know if Jon had died. But he still understood too very little about them to be truly confident. Rhaegar shared a connection with the dragons, that much was certain. They would obey him, up to a point. They would come, if he sounded the Valyrian horn. Beyond that, they had a mind of their own. As did Rhaegar or any other man.

He found Drogon and Viserion sprawled on the bank of the river, their long necks intertwined like serpents. It made them look like one giant beast with two heads, two thirds black and red, one third white and gold. Drogon was very much the bigger of the two. When they felt him, they hissed.

"You don't sleep much either, do you?" he asked them, and the sensation of black and gold twisted together invaded his mind. It was not straightforward to talk to a dragon. They would shower him with colours and shapes which sometimes resembled words. "Happy to see each other, are you?" The black and gold scales rattled and twirled in his mind, making Rhaegar so dizzy he had to sit down in the low semi-frozen remnants of grass.

He was not the only guest of the dragons.

There was a shape crouching in darkness several steps away from where he sat. It could very well be his sister. Daenerys spent most of her waking hours with Drogon. She preferred him to the company of men. The head of the other nighttime visitor moved and in the light of very few stars, it was not silver. It was beaten gold and much less straight than his sister's hair.

"Ser Jaime," he said, acknowledging the man as carefully as he could.

Rhaegar knew he should gather the courage to ask his half-brother where he had been, but tonight bravery eluded him. And any such prying would betray his mistrust. It would not be a good way to start renewing his relationship with Jaime after he had told him what he sincerely believed. Aerys II had been Jaime's natural father as much as Rhaegar's.

"Your Grace," the golden head bowed slightly, with just the correct amount of obedience.

It was the first time they spoke after Rhaegar exonerated Jaime of their father's murder. As he had expected, they were not capable of treating each other with anything but cold civility. Rhaegar regretted it, but the armour of courtesy his half-brother had just donned made it difficult for him to remove his own, moulded onto him by his mother and Grandmasteer Pycelle from a very early age. The future king of the Seven Kingdoms had to know his courtesies. In the sight of the river which both ruined and saved the Prince of Dragonstone, Rhaegar forced himself to go past them.

"Call me Rhaegar," he said. "Will you not try?"

Green eyes hit him with a look akin to exasperation. *It is worse than I thought. He loathes to be my half-brother.*

"Why?" Jaime asked, the question a tiny burst of insolence before the courtly monotony returned to his voice. "I am most grateful for what Your Grace has told the people of King’s Landing about me being a royal bastard, but we both know it was only a clever ruse to spare my life. War is coming, not only winter. Your Grace would not want to sacrifice a dragonrider."

Rhaegar put a hand in Drogon's mouth. The dragon allowed it, enjoyed it even. His black teeth were sharp and the king had the impression they were growing day by day. Jaime just had to be stubborn. It was to be expected in a son of a woman who defeated Aerys II by making her own decisions.
against the Mad King's wishes. As far as Rhaegar heard it whispered, Joanna Lannister had defied
the king more than anyone else ever dared. Although, if truth be told, Father hadn't been that mad in
times when she still resided at court. Only cruel. That's how it began...

_How long can he deny the obvious?_ Rhaegar thought about Jaime. His thoughts took flight and were
blown out of his human mouth in place of dragonfire.

"Do you deny that your love for your sister was true?" he asked his half-brother. "Despite all the
teachings of the old gods and the new about how heinous an abomination that was? Do you deny
that you are a dragonrider? Why was your son Joffrey mad and your sister cruel before succumbing
to her own madness? Would any of it be true if you were only a Lannister of Casterly Rock?"

Rhaegar couldn't help colouring the name of Lannister with certain contempt. Lord Tywin was one
of his father's best friends when they were squires. And then he had ordered the death of Rhaegar's
children in cold blood.

Jaime winced. Obviously, Rhaegar's tone had been a mistake. "There existed lowborn dragonriders
in the past who were proven not to have a single drop of Targaryen blood. Why should I have it?
What good is it for?" Jaime said spitefully.

"How do you know about those riders?" Rhaegar's curiosity jumped above all other considerations.
It was a fact little known outside his own family or obscure histories almost no one read in this day.
"What else do you know about dragons?"

The river raged below them. It was fast, rich, beautiful in the darkness.

"Me? Next to nothing," Jaime said carelessly. To his credit, he patted Viserion's horn. Rhaegar
smiled at the gesture, unwillingly. "I heard this and that about them from my little brother. I can't
remember half of it now. Tyrion read all that there was to read about dragons."

"Did he?" Rhaegar wondered aloud. "He was with Daenerys in Meereen, wasn't he?" A notion
crossed the king's mind. A way to preserve at least one of the dragons far away from harm.

"I believe it may be so. Ask her, if it please you, Your Grace," Jaime said, so impeccably polite that
it hurt.

"Will you fly with me, Ser Jaime, if you refuse to call me by my name?" Rhaegar asked bluntly,
every single bone in his body pleading for sleep. He hadn't had a proper rest in days. Ever since they
began approaching the fords, he had been hearing the voices of the river.

His half-brother padded up to Viserion. "As Your Grace commands. Where to?" Jaime only missed
a white cloak to be the perfect knight of the Kingsguard. A practice Aegon the Conqueror introduced
and which Rhaegar was keen on abolishing if he had a chance.

For a start, he had Sandor Clegane following his steps of his own accord; the burned man said no
vows and he was now married to his niece, Sansa. For Rhaegar, Sandor was the younger brother that
Viserys never had the chance to be.

Rhaegar never understood why an honest man and a good fighter, who loved his wife, would defend
his king any less for having her. He found that battling was a worldly profession, from the lowest
soldier to a Sworn Brother of the Kingsguard. And the vows of chastity made sense only for those
who experienced the true calling of the Faith, freed from desire to marry or procreate by the will of
the gods. Forcing people to take such vows for the sake of honour did more harm than good,
Rhaegar believed.
He knew that his ideas were dangerous. Aegon V the Unlikely tried to rectify the laws and the customs of the Seven Kingdoms. As a reward, the gods let him burn in Summerhall. Wildfire, apparently, could kill a dragon. As can dragonfire itself, Rhaegar almost hissed at the thought, fearing Jaime for a brief moment.

The white dragon uncoiled himself from his black brother and blew a thread of stinky smoke in his rider's face. The air smelled putrid. Green eyes filled with tears. "Damnation!" Rhaegar sighed because Jaime even cursed politely, "I'll never get used to this."

"I am not so pleased when Drogon does it to me either," Rhaegar confessed. We do have something in common, you and I, he thought, you may yet see it one day. A thinner spike on Drogon's neck where his head began looked like a safe place to hang the harp. He lodged it between two long strings, hoping the instrument wouldn't break before they reached their destination. Inside his mind, he asked Drogon if it bothered him. Black sadness filled Rhaegar and cleared his concerns. The dragon was sorrowful, but the harp was not the cause of it. The beast couldn't or wouldn't tell him the reason.

"We should head for Oldstones, I think, and fast," Rhaegar decided on a whim. "I should like to return here before Lyanna is awake..." Maybe there is another way to find out where Jaime had been, without being suspicious. Surrupitiously, Rhaegar inquired. "Is Lady Brienne well?"

"Flying makes her sick," Jaime sweetly. It was obvious he admired his wife. "But she's more stubborn than I am and she never gives up. She insisted on coming with me although the very sight of Viserion makes her stomach churn."

"Was it a long flight?" Rhaegar asked of the night in front of him, innocuously, both hoping for an honest answer and dreading it.

"After you told me about Aerys," Jaime started, "we went to see the Ghost of the High Heart. She told me I knew who I was in my heart. Only I didn't know. I still don't. So I went to Riverrun to find my aunt Genna. But she's disappeared. Dead, most likely. Blackfish's work or some of his allies. Or taken by the wights which are occasionally sighted in the riverlands. No one knows. Only that weasel of her Frey husband still holds Riverrun's empty walls with a handful of men. And not for long, I'd say."

Rhaegar was ashamed. He had suspected Jaime of treason, of plotting against him, of stealing Viserion for himself. And all that time his half-brother was looking for the unmistakable proof of his identity.

"Up we go," he said, scrambling up the long, wiry paw covered by thick black skin and scales harder than steel. Jaime obeyed. Up, the air was fresher, and Rhaegar could almost touch the stars. It was an illusion, but they sometimes tasted sweeter than the real. Faster, he made a wish, painting speed inside his mind. The dragon had seen it or heard it. The flapping of wings drummed in his ears. Rhaegar overtook Jaime and soared on dragon's back, for the first time with no fear that he would wake up as someone else and forget his own name. I am Rhaegar, Rhaegar Targaryen and I will be remembered. Yes, but as what?

Rhaegar the Undying sounded perfectly possible at that moment.

Viserion made a loop in the air. For several moments Ser Jaime was hanging from the dragon, head down, legs up. He never fell. He laughed like a little boy. I have to try that, Rhaegar thought, before I get too old. "You are becoming skilled in this," he yelled at his half-brother from Drogon's back. The black dragon suggested it was Viserion who was clever, not Jaime. Rhaegar grinned.
They were almost at Oldstones and their speed was incredible.

The ruins of the first men rose between the moss, gloomy and powerful. It was dark on the hill. The dragons found a craggy patch of ground empty of collapsing structures to land safely, kneeling, folding their wings. Rhaegar slid down Drogon's right paw. As he did that, he felt again the disconcert of his dragon. Well, *his* was not the right word. Drogon had become a companion. He acknowledged Rhaegar as a lord, a father, or simply the oldest member of their family, but all his love was for Daenerys, and Daenerys alone.

Viserion crouched so that Jaime could dismount as if he had ridden a horse. The white dragon could carry two people on his back, no more. Jaime and his wife, both tall and strong, were the most he could handle. Drogon, on the other hand, had grown so much that he could carry more than a dozen men on his shoulders and back, Rhaegar estimated. That is, if the beast would allow it and fly with care, instead of deciding to drop his load high above the ground.

The ruined castle smelled of lichen; musty and damp. Next to the heaps of crumbling stones, the blocks used for the foundations were enormous. They led to a belief that the First Men had building skills which were now lost. After all, they had built the Wall from blocks of ice and the foundations of Winterfell from boulders out of the mountains. *Or was it the giants who did all that when they and the children of the forest still walked this earth? Or was it all lies, plain and simple?*

They left the dragons on the slope of the hill, playing among the stones. Rhaegar carried his harp, venturing forward into the castle. Jaime was as close behind him as his own shadow. *He could cut my throat now and no one would be the wiser.* It was an awful, undeserved thought, but it could not be helped. For as much as Rhaegar understood and did not condemn the murder of their father, he'd always know it was Jaime who did it.

*Sit, play!* The voice of the dead river king was calling him, with the strength of Trident, from his grave of stone. The sensation was peculiar and could not be denied. Rhaegar approached the final resting place of King Tristifer IV Mudd. A carved stone figure slept peacefully on the tomb, its face been eaten by the passing of time. Rhaegar would not offend the dead king by sitting on his likeness. Therefore, he sat among the crumbling stones and played to cheer up. And since he knew no songs about King Tristifer, there was only one person of whom any bard should sing in Oldstones.

*High in the halls of the kings who are gone, Jenny would dance with her ghosts,*

*She'd dance to remember when her love had found her,*

*lost among the stones.*

*xx*

*Spring it was then, the birds had come back*

*from the southern lands,*

*Duncan first saw her when Jenny was weaving*

*flowers in her hair.*

*xx*

*Was she a woods witch, a dream, a vision?*

*Prince Duncan had not known.*
She would sing to the bees and to the birds
To make the flowers grow.

xx

The crown prince had begged her then
to be his lady love
She said no, for she'd only belong
to a Prince of Dragonflies.

xx

Gone is the prince, gone is his father
gone their best knights
Burned and buried, ash and bones
in ruins of Summerhall.

xx

Abandoned and forgotten,
as alone as she is fair,
now lives Jenny of Oldstones
with flowers in her hair...

The tune was sad, sad, sad, and so simple that other verses could be added at will if there were
listeners cheering for more. Lyanna would wipe a tear whenever he sang of Jenny. It was one of her
favourites. Rhaegar had sung it in Harrenhal, at the feast which took place the day before the final
joust; when he had crowned Lyanna the Queen of Love and Beauty.

When Rhaegar stopped playing, he glimpsed a silhouette of a woman farther up the hill, deeper in
the ruins behind the grave of King Tristifer. "Do you see her?" he voiced to Jaime. "Lyanna?" he
called, believing he had somehow conjured his wife out of nothing.

"All I see is darkness," Jaime said from somewhere very near by, yet Rhaegar could not see him. He
was still seeing a woman, a vision, a young maid with long chestnut coloured braid. She was too tall
to be his wife.

And she had flowers in her hair.

The king walked toward the woman, occasionally stumbling on uneven ground in the absence of
light. The stars were too few, as if they were afraid to rise that evening.

"This is not my song," the woman said in a kind, interested voice; young and very old at the same
time. "But it is a song about me. A new one." Rhaegar rubbed his eyes with force, but none of his
gestures would make her disappear. "I took two verses from your song and made up the rest myself," he
confided.
The first two verses were indeed not his own, they belonged to the famous song about Jenny of Oldstones, as widely known in Westeros as the song of Florian and Jonquil. The rest of the story he invented every time anew.

"How shall I pay you for your song, Rhaegar Targaryen, grand-nephew of mine?" the illusion was losing its fullness on the edges when she moved. "What do you want to know?"

The woman glided above the moss and over the stones, dressed in weak starlight.

"How to survive the Long Night," Rhaegar breathed out.

"There are many stories about that," Lady Jenny said thoughtfully. "In one of the stories, the last hero set forth with twelve companions. On the way, all his companions died as did his horse and his dog. But the hero was victorious in the end."

"What does that mean?" Rhaegar asked, impatient.

"Whatever you make of it, of course," Jenny said daintily. "Duncan never listened to me either. Sing again if it pleases you. I want to think of my only love, and dancing alone is so terribly lonesome."

So Rhaegar sang until his voice was hoarse and dawn could be seen on the horizon. He wondered where Jaime had gone.

"Thank you," Jenny said. "And now I will tell you something you didn't ask for, as a reward for your patience. You will not see your son Jon, nor your unborn daughter, before you die. And should you choose not to die, you will never see them, not in this life, nor in the next. Think on it, Rhaegar, when your time comes."

"I am hallucinating," he stated. "I haven't slept in days and now I'm seeing things."

"Are you?" Suddenly, the winter and the darkness were gone from the world. Tiny white and red flowers appeared, scattered between the stones. Jenny picked three of them and wove them in her hair. "The dragon has three heads," she said, sounding like Cersei when she went mad.

"Who is the prince that was promised?" She must know this. It was the witch who came with her to King's Landing that made a prophecy. And forced my mother into an unhappy marriage to my father. "Is it Jon? Is it Daenerys? I used to believe it could be me. I even thought it could be Aegon who is my son out of love I bear him even if he is not of my body. Tell me!" his commanding voice sounded crazed, like father's. Rhaegar was ashamed, but it didn't make his demand any less urgent. In stories, if you met a vision, it helped you.

As always, nothing in life went exactly as in the stories. Jenny of Oldstones vanished, returning to the ghosts of her own. Moss reeked in the darkness, the only thing that still had a scent in winter. The morning light had not yet come.

"I guess I should better die then, when the time comes," he said out loud. One part of him hated it. He hoped beyond hope he would be allowed to live, five, maybe ten more years with his family. Maybe more. Rhaegar was well past his fortieth name day. But Ser Barristan had seen more than sixty name days and he was still strong. It was not unheard of to live long. Well, it was almost unheard of if you were king.

"Have you said something to me, Your Grace?" Ser Jaime's tone was half-mocking and it came as if from a great distance. Rhaegar turned around and saw him right behind his back. It seemed that only a moment had passed and not the entire night. "I saw someone," Rhaegar stuttered, "someone unreal."
Jaime kept silent.

"I don't blame you, you know," Rhaegar spat out the words as jets of dragonflame, setting the darkness on fire. "I truly don't. The laws of the realm be damned. I wasn't going to have your head for something I would have done myself if I was less of a fool, and if I was as successful in conspiring in Harrenhal as I was in falling in love."

"If, if, if... I was one of his Seven," Jaime said gravely. "Nothing can change that."

Drogon screeched loudly as if to cheer the two men up. The beast pushed its head between the ruins next to them. It stretched its right paw far forward and lowered the head alongside it, to make Rhaegar's climb easier. The king imagined the fords of the Trident. It was a very imprecise way to steer a dragon, but for him it worked better than telling him where to go.

They rose high on the wind of the impending dawn. When Rhaegar looked down, the air convulsed below them. Thousands of flowers floated on it, red and gold and white.

"Good-bye, Jenny of Oldstones, with flowers in your hair!" he shrieked, and he would have tossed his helm in the air if he had worn one. Fortunately, Jaime had gone beyond the clouds and could not hear him. Rhaegar must have been turning mad. It was always a distinct possibility. "And should you dwell in seven heavens, tell Aegon the Unlikely and the Prince of Dragonflies that Rhaegar the Unfortunate has no fear of joining them!"

_I have died once_, he tried to comfort himself. Except that he didn't. Fire, river, and the short, old man from the Quiet Isle had saved him. _How hard can it be to die for real?_ He supposed he was going to see sooner than he would have wanted.

"Farewell", the flowers whispered behind him, but the king did not listen.

"Farewell, Rhaegar, the Unafraid..."

Windswept, airborne, King Rhaegar flew back to his army and to his family. When he landed, he saw that Ser Jaime had beat him to it, already squatting at the same place where Rhaegar had found him in the middle of the night. His wife, Lady Brienne, had joined him. On both sides of the river, men were waking. Daenerys was up as well, unmistakable in her white lion pelt, even from under the snow clouds which were trailing Drogon's flight. The lion had come from the warmth of the Dothraki Sea but it adjusted more than well to the Westerosi winter. Rhaegar couldn't see his wife or any of his nieces. Drogon landed, a splash of large, spiked tail over a mass of water. It showered the king's long hair and the dragon's bright black scales. Rhaegar had to wring out the excessive wetness.

He felt more and more like a monster from the songs. _Destined to die. As if I hadn't known that since the day I was born._ It was so utterly foolish to believe that he might have been the prince that was promised. At that moment, Lyanna lifted the flap of their pavilion to come out. The king smiled on the inside. _I will love you with every moment I still have._ And then, just like that, his indecision abandoned him for a short while and he knew exactly what had to be done. He knew the orders that should have been given. He knew.

Lyanna joined him in a hurry. She was wearing a long, grey dress hiding her body. She did not show yet, but they both agreed it was better if she dressed in a way not to show anything at all. They didn't want people to know. As a king, you never knew which enemy might put your unborn child to the sword. _Rhaenys._ Rhaegar blinked away the tears. He had ridden to the Trident and he had left Elia, Rhaenys and Aegon in King's Landing. He thought they would go to Dragonstone with his mother. Except that father would never have let them, of course. Rhaegar deserved to burn in seven hells for
the stupidity of having expected reason from Aerys II in his twilight.

A touch skirted his lower arm, the short figure of his wife closed on him. A support. A lover, a friend and a fellow fighter. She will always be stronger than I am, he thought. "My queen," he told her and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. His hair dripped river water on her cloak. She didn't seem to be bothered by it. "My king," Lyanna nested against him, visibly relieved. "Another sleepless night?" Rhaegar nodded.

"Ser Jaime, Lady Brienne" he said, finding his kingly voice. The easier task first. "I have thought a great deal. We know little as it is about dragons and there will be no time for scholarly work in war. I am asking two things of you as your king and your kin. Take Viserion. Bring young Lord Arryn safely to the Bloody Gate. When this is done, fly to Gulltown and choose two of my sister's ships. Small and swift ones, to help you with the crossing. The narrow sea is perilous in winter. Viserion still has to grow and the Slaver's Bay is much farther than the Free Cities. Fly to Meereen and bring back your brother Tyrion to advise us about dragons."

"The dwarf never mentioned knowing anything," Daenerys said, mildly puzzled.

"Then for once he kept quiet for his own sake," Jaime said. "He was always the smartest of the three of us, but he never knew when to hold his tongue." Lady Brienne frowned at her husband's bluntness, but Daenerys only smiled. Jaime's insolence seemed to sit well with her ever since she decided to ignore that he had killed their father. 

"Tyrion dreamed of riding a dragon when he was a child," Jaime continued more seriously. "He will probably hate me more than he already does when he sees me taking that away from him as well. But I will do as you say, Your Grace. What is more, I rejoice at your command. For the longest time I have wanted the chance to find my brother and ask for his forgiveness."

"You loved him," Lady Brienne objected. "You saved him from death. What is there to forgive?" Jaime made a face. Whatever it was, Rhaegar thought, his half-brother was most unwilling to talk of it in public.

"Let us find something to break our fast, my love," Jaime said to his wife. The trick worked. Lady Brienne would mostly turn taciturn whenever Jaime displayed his affection in public. It would make her appear as gentle as his niece Sansa. Brienne and Jaime had only been married for a few weeks. He tried to remember how long it took to Lyanna not to shy away from him when there were eyes watching them. Weeks? Months? Then again, Lyanna had always been more outspoken than Rhaegar in showing what she wanted. Her outburst against his sister the day before proved it. He wondered what Daenerys had made out of it. She had given Lyanna no cause to hate her. So far.

His wife chose to surprise him. Again.

"Good-sister," she approached Daenerys and took both of her hands. She was half a head shorter than his sister. "I doubted you yesterday. You have to forgive a mother's heart. You are so young that you could be my daughter. When you bear your own children one day, you will understand." Daenerys looked crestfallen. Her eyes darkened imperceptibly and she smoothed her hair to hide her unease. Lyanna could not see that, but Rhaegar had always had the eyes which saw everything. His wife's face softened when she wished Daenerys well. "Fly well and fly fast and bring me my son. If you do, I shall be forever grateful."

His sister didn't know what to say. She was better accustomed to war than to peace. "I am very curious to meet my nephew," she managed. It sounded like a truth, but perhaps not the entire one.

"But if I was wrong to trust you now," Lyanna released the hands she had been holding, "best know
that the north is cruel. The Starks did not prevail over the Boltons, who skin their enemies, by being honourable. Honour came later when we learned how to rule, from so many mistakes." Lyanna paused to gather her strength to threaten Daenerys and Rhaegar, who knew his wife, suppressed a smile.

"The Starks became Kings in the North because the wolves proved more ferocious than the rest. They showed no mercy to their enemies. Don't expect any from me if any harm comes to Jon by your doing. My ancestors may have knelt, but I have no fear of you, dragons," Lyanna finished, studying all three of the dragonriders as an eagle circling its prey. "Never had it, never will."

It was the truth. Rhaegar still remembered Harrenhal and how his future wife, then a maid of six and ten, provoked his father, something he had never dared doing himself so openly. Instead he stupidly confided in the plotting of the high lords to help him ascend to the throne. He would have loved Lyanna at that moment if he hadn't fallen in love with her already.

Daenerys studied his wife. She would have bared her fangs like Drogon if she had them, Rhaegar sensed. Then, she relaxed and appeared at ease with the smaller woman in front of her. "Your concern is noble, but unnecessary," she told Lyanna. "I know what it is to be a mother. Although my children are not human," she added, to make Lyanna understand.

Rhaegar didn't need an explanation. The Mother of Dragons, he thought with pride. I cannot compare to you. I merely survived with my dragon blood. It pleased the gods to determine that my suffering was not done yet. But you, sister, you succeeded where thousands of wise men could not. Your dragon eggs hatched. Who better to teach my son about our part of his inheritance? The Starks have good fifteen years of advantage over us.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice tears great as pebbles rolling down his wife's cheeks. Yet she stood there dignified as beautifully carved stone, making a conscious effort to trust Daenerys against her motherly fears. It moved him so deeply that he decided to say out loud what he wanted to say to his sister in private. Lyanna was strong enough to take it, pregnant or not. She deserved to know all the odds of being married to him.

"There is another reason I am sending my sister to find Jon," he said quietly. His wife and his sister stared at him, waiting.

"Lyanna, you've seen first hand what my father was. Daenerys you have grown with our late brother, Viserys. I understand he was more like our father than I would have wished."

"Oh," Lyanna put her hands on her mouth, nails sinking in her upper lip as the realisation sank in her mind. "I never thought-"

"We are his parents and we will love Jon no matter what," Rhaegar managed to finish, "but we have to know what is in him. I trust that my sister will be able to see this clearly more than either you or I would be able to. She has no attachment to him."

Lyanna chased away her tears and bit a nail. The north was cruel, but it was also strong. "I see," she said, calm as the sky that morning. "But there is a good chance that he'll be all right, isn't it? Sansa, Arya and Mance are very different from one another and yet they have only words of praise for him."

"My father was once only a vain lad in love with songs, feasts and flatterers. Not a great king, but not a monster either," Rhaegar said. "And there is more. According to rumours about our family, some of the babies born to the Targaryens over time were not human. They were dragons. Winged,
scaled, blind monsters in the wombs of women. None of them ever lived and the mothers rarely survived them. The historians attribute this to witchcraft in a few instances that a case was widely known. But I tell you, it is no sorcery. It's just another thing that comes from the blood of the dragon, its glory and its misery. In our family, this was never written down. We were told the story by our mothers. The occurrence was rare, but it happened every now and then in the known history. And it didn't matter if both parents were Targaryens or not."

"You never told me," Lyanna's voice was accusing. Maybe it was more than she could take.

"I was scared," he admitted. "But this time I'm determined to do better."

"And if... if..." his sister was very curious all of a sudden, not shocked at all by his revelation as he would have expected. "If a woman bore such a child, a dragon in her womb, and if it died, but if she lived... Was there ever a woman who carried a living human child afterward?"

"Yes," Rhaegar said, "at least one that I know of. Black Betha, she was a Blackwood, the wife of Aegon V the Unlikely. Her first child was a monster. Her second was Prince Duncan. The Prince of Dragonflies."

Daenerys's violet eyes widened with wonder. "Oh," she said, "how interesting. Thank you, brother, for continuing my education. I am afraid that Viserys never spoke of this."

"Viserys was too young when our mother died. I learned it when I was a man grown. The children are not told, not to burden their young minds. And also that they don't repeat the story to anyone outside the family."

Daenerys regained her composure. "I have heard both of you," she told the king and his queen. "This, I tell you. This, I promise you," she vowed, speaking the Common Tongue with the courtesies of some foreign language Rhaegar did not know.

"I shall find my nephew. I shall find out where he is and what he is. And I shall bring him back if death or madness do not take me first." Daenerys sounded convinced, but Rhaegar was not. Only the gods knew how their destiny would unroll. He should pray to the Crone to lift her lamp and show them the way.

While the king was talking and before the conversation was done, his army had finished crossing the great river. It was Aegon who came for the king when his party assembled to go. He had stood politely on the side waiting for Rhaegar to finish.

"It is time," Aegon said finally. Ser Arthur Dayne's sword, Dawn, was sheathed in a white weirwood scabbard, slanted over his back. Rhaegar raised his eyebrow. "A gift from Mance."

Aegon answered the king's unspoken question about the scabbard. "He says it fits my shiny steel better than his dented one."

It was Mance's way of saying that he expected Valyrian steel to defend his people, the wildlings from behind the Wall. Rhaegar smiled. The wildling would yet help them win this war.

Drogon spread his wings and squawked at his mother. "Not yet," Rhaegar begged, "I have need of you for one more thing."

Rhaegar crossed the Trident on the back of the dragon. High up, the ruin of his chest did not throb. There was still light in the world and his dreams didn't disturb him. Above the snow clouds, he waited. Soon there was no one left on the bank of the river where the kingsroad wound slowly back south to King's Landing.
With purple eyes wide open Rhaegar dreamed of all-consuming fire at the fords. Black and red flames jutted from the black dragon's mouth as Drogon and his rider descended sharply through the clouds. His white brother joined the effort. Rhaegar had passed through snow, but he never felt the cold, focused on his daydream of fire. Dragonfire hit the crossing, deepening the riverbed, broadening the gulf.

The wildness of the waters did the rest.

No one, friend or foe, was going to cross the Trident until spring. And those who dared going north could not turn back.

Shaken by the power of his fire-dream, Rhaegar landed.

"Time to go," Jaime said from mid-air. Brienne perched behind him, her long hair loosened, cheeks flushed from the wind. Young Robert Arryn was already leading his company east. Rhaegar had said his farewell to the boy the day before. He wondered if he was ever going to see any of them again. The king nodded to Jaime. "Until next time we meet," he said as firmly as he could, not believing his own words.

Daenerys gently touched Rhaegar's shoulder and led the black dragon away. "No time to lose," she whispered to the beast. "Drogon, take me to Rhaegal."

As the wings of the two dragons leaving obstructed the view of the grey morning sky, Rhaegar approached Lyanna from the back. He circled her waist with both hands, possessively, holding to her for both warmth and strength. The heat was gone from him and he was suddenly freezing. All of his courage seemed to have drifted to the air with his siblings and their dragons.

"Kingship is a tricky business for a Targaryen," Rhaegar said wistfully when only Lyanna could hear him. "We all start wishing to be Aegon the Conqueror. And then we end up being Maegor the Cruel."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left a comment or a kudos on this story. If things are not clear and if you wish to read this further, give a chance to the prequel. I'm trying to sum up in this story what has happened before, so that it can be read separately, and I do my best to answer any questions in comment, but I'll never be able to repeat everything.

This story is now set on many different stages on which it will continue. Brace yourselves for a very long tale and many POVs. Next up and about will be Daenerys in about two weeks. Meeting Jon :))
Daenerys

Chapter Notes

Huge thanks to TopShelfCrazy for making this so much better.

Warning for some violence and gore, not very graphic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Daenerys

The north was greater than it looked.

Viserys taught her very little about it when they were children; above all that Rhaegar died on the Trident for the woman he loved, and that she had been of the north.

And that one of the brothers of the northern lady had become the Usurper's most faithful dog, doing his bidding and licking his hands. But those were only stories full of either charm or cruelty. They represented no knowledge of the land Daenerys was now determined to cross on the back of her dragon.

When she was married to Khal Drogo, Daenerys came to doubt that Rhaegar had died for love. She had come to love and cherish Drogo with all her heart, yet she still chose not to follow him to the night lands when he lost his life.

The truth of many matters was very different from Viserys' tales. The Usurper's most faithful dog had in reality been the staunchest protector of Rhaegar's son and heir. Eddard Stark raised Jon as his own bastard son, Jon Snow. And both Rhaegar and his northern queen still lived, as if life itself were a song, from time to time.

Whenever she remembered finding her brother, Daenerys would smile.

I'm not the only one any longer, she would think, elated.

It was more than she ever hoped for.

Even the dragons seemed happier for it. While Drogon hadn't become tame and docile since he allowed one more rider to steer his flight, he had certainly grown more orderly for a wild beast. He even scorched his food with more precision, Dany observed.

Drogon adapted to Rhaegar's personality. Deep, melancholy mood swings frequently reached Daenerys from the black dragon of late. He became slow to anger, yet he still possessed an undeniable fierceness, a wrath best left alone. In that too Drogon was like her brother. Dany soon realized Rhaegar did not know how strong he was; he saw himself as weak. The realization made her wonder what Rhaegar had discovered about her that she did not know herself, in the rather short time they had spent together.

I don't have to be the queen of Westeros, she rejoiced as the dragon spread his leathern wings and greeted the morning sun by a shrill, heart-piercing cry. With the burden of duty to her house set aside, only grim thoughts of Meereen ruling itself in her absence would sometimes spoil the immense
joy Daenerys had felt since she had found Rhaegar alive.

Today there were so many novelties to look upon and to consider that it was easy to chase the worries away. One day she would have to fly back to Essos, to make sure that her freedmen and women were not enslaved again. But it was not this day.

The north was like no other land Daenerys had seen.

Gulltown was only the beginning, and it was not even the true north, only an outpost of the Vale of Arryn, a bleary, insignificant town staring mutely at the narrow sea. Dany had joined her ships on the open seas while they were creeping north among high, galloping waves in the proverbially foul weather of the winter season. She commanded two of her swiftest vessels, both of Volantene design, to take anchor and wait for Ser Jaime and Lady Brienne in Gulltown. Ser Barristan was left in charge of the fleet in her absence, with orders to carry on to the Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and defend it from all foes in the name of the king.

Dany was satisfied that her maids had finished weaving her a tunic and trousers of thick white wool, to wear under the pelt of the hrakar, the great white lion killed by Drogo and gifted to her. She had purchased the wool in King's Landing with golden coins from the Slaver's Bay, showing a face of a long dead Ghiscari king with a big nose. Her Dothraki sandals stayed on the ships as well, waiting for Dany to return, or perhaps for spring, who could tell. She donned simple boots of sheepskin, with thick leather soles, hoping they would serve her well. The further north they went, the more she felt as if she could only warm her feet sufficiently on Drogon's harsh belly.

Finally, she tucked her silver hair inside a furry cap with dark grey hairs billowing from it almost as long as her own. A commoner had made a gift of it to Rhaegar, because her brother had helped deliver his son. The man claimed it was made from the skin of a unicorn from Skagos and that it would keep the head warm and steady in any winter. Rhaegar had thanked the man and passed the queer headdress to Daenerys when the newly made-father was gone. "I have no use for it, sister," he had said. "Although I sense it is precious to him, so I give it to you, for you are precious to me." Rhaegar's hair had grown so unnaturally long and thick since the winter began that his silver mane now looked warmer than any unicorn's.

Up north from Gulltown, beyond a much more beautiful city called the White Harbor on the maps, a thick layer of snow enveloped the world.

As she flew, the windswept moors and high plains that were flat and desolate, became covered by forests that loomed tall and untouched, as if human hand had never harvested a single tree from them to build a house or light a fire. The plains dwindled into craggy, dangerous shores in the east with no safe anchor for ships. Drogon flew left and right, up and down, back and forth, uncertain of the path to take.

When the dragon landed to rest, Daenerys stepped in the snow. She was tiny for a woman, yet her feet sank through the white crust in an instant, becoming unpleasantly cold, boots or no boots. The snow reached up to her knees. Drogon rolled in it, as was his way, to lose tension after a long flight. Fire filled him on the inside and he had never felt a chill.

A tender, loose branch of a pine tree begged to be touched. Dany reached for it, but the wood resisted being picked. She shook some snowflakes off it and was shocked to uncover the growing top of a sapling; the small tree was buried entirely under the snow, which must have been at least chest-deep under her feet, promising a slow, cold death if she were all alone and lingered.

Dread coiled in her stomach for the first time since she had set out from the Trident.
This is no place for us, Drogon, she thought so the dragon could hear her.

They hadn't seen a high ground yet, suitable for a dragon to make his lair. The country was all sullen flatness and an excessive number of trees. There was a strange, wild beauty to these lands; Dany chose to compare it to that of Rhaegar's queen and their younger niece, Arya. A girl brimming with anger who had nonetheless chosen to spare Daenerys when she could have murdered her in her sleep.

Why is Rhaegal here? she asked Drogon in her mind, but the black dragon gave no answer, projected no shape, made no sound. He only urged her to take a seat between his spikes. They were flying low now and Drogon was searching the countryside with merciless, burning eyes.

At the northern end of the plains, a flat mountain loomed. It was crystal white and almost as high as the Great Pyramid of Meereen, just much, much longer on both east and west. This must be the Wall, Daenerys realised, this should be my nephew's command.

There were no songs about the Wall. Or if there were Viserys didn't know them, and Mance Rayder wouldn't sing them. And Rhaegar only sang of Jenny of Oldstones of late. It was a beautiful ballad, but it only served to remind Daenerys of the emptiness in her heart. There were holes left in it by men that could not be filled by all the love of the dragons.

Daenerys would do anything for her resurrected brother. She even began to grow fond of his wife in a rather peculiar way. The same could not be said of Lyanna. The wolven queen was kind to Daenerys at first, but became distant and cold as the army moved north. Dany could tolerate her hostility as long as Lyanna reserved no such coldness for Rhaegar. As she decidedly did not; Lyanna would glow like one of those brilliantly blue winter roses whenever she was near her husband, now touching him, now not.

In sum, her good-sister was so fierce that Dany trusted her to care for Rhaegar while she was gone.

The woman and the dragon kept flying as close as possible to the soil and Dany knew they were near. As the Wall rose higher and higher in front of their eyes, the trees gave way and slowly disappeared. In the last grove of oaks before the open stretch of land facing the Wall they found scorched branches, bones and carcasses of wolves and rodents, scattered over the dirtied pall of snow.

Drogon landed quietly on the frozen ground. They still sank in, but only a bit. Rhaegal, Daenerys called, listening for the flapping of scaled wings.

No dragon came.

Her black one twisted his neck and tail. Staring at the Wall, he hissed and roared with frightening enmity. Is Rhaegal a prisoner there? Daenerys asked, guessing wildly. Is Jon?"

She urged Drogon a few times in her mind to fly over the Wall, but try as she might, he would not obey. The dragon padded the grove and the clearing in the middle, cawing like an overgrown raven. Daenerys never left his back, for protection against the cold.

The innermost tree was one that Dany had never seen yet. She had only heard Mance Rayder sing about it. It had to be a weirwood, whiter than snow, its leaves red like blood. It had an angry face carved on its trunk and its bulging eyes seemed to study Daenerys.

A face of the old gods.

Daenerys shivered. She didn't believe in any god, for she had seen them all equally brought to ruin in
Vaes Dothrak, the sacred city of the Dothraki where they brought the statues of the gods they had defeated and burned. No god could stand against the onslaught of determined and well-armed men.

Still no dragon came.

Drogon breathed fire on the smallest oak bordering the clearing, to set it aflame. Then he left Dany under the white tree, with the burning tongues for company, and went for a brief hunt. When he returned, he carried a dead bear cub in his paws. Daenerys flinched, remembering Ser Jorah Mormont, regretting only so slightly that she hadn't forgiven him when he had come back to her in Meereen.

Yet her hunger was such that as soon as Drogon dropped a portion of roast bear at her feet, she didn't think twice of eating it. It was the first time she tasted animal flesh in months. She had lost all appetite for meat since she was told Drogon had killed a child, a little girl. Hazzea. The dragon made short work of half the carcass, she noticed, and wrapped the other half in snow, as if to better preserve it. He paced up and down, restlessly, hitting at snow with giant talons, searching, sniffing, puffing.

The day was very short.

The moon rose pale before dusk before the thick layer of ice and frozen soil gave way under the claws of the dragon. There, Drogon dug frantically, and Daenerys helped him with a broken stick of weirwood as much as she could.

They uncovered an entrance to a tunnel descending underground, winding toward the white tree. Drogon could not pass through, but Dany could and did.

Among the gnarled white roots there was a hollow chamber in which she found Rhaegal, barely fitting in the enclosure he had sneaked in, sprawled like a dead cat in the streets of Meereen. It looked as if he had crept in weeks ago and then just kept growing in one place which had become too small to contain him. Rhaegal was now larger than Viserion, but still much smaller than Drogon.

Drogon cawed. *He's mourning*, Dany finally understood the sound. *But Rhaegal is not dead.* The green dragon moved his head, weakly. A bronze horn buried itself in a fat weirwood root. The dragon was incapable of liberating it.

"*Rhaegal, where is Jon?*" she asked of her green one in her mind, caressing and disentangling the stuck horn. Rhaegal was alive and he could get better. Dragons were not easy to kill.

Drogon let out a cry akin to mewling on the outside. Dany stepped aside to avoid charred bear meat flying in her direction through the tunnel. Fighting disgust, she legged the meal to the proximity of Rhaegal's snout, thankful for the boots she was wearing. The giant jaw opened lazily, sucked in the offering and snapped closed in a too slow motion. Rhaegal turned sideways as much as the cramped space allowed. He appeared unhurt, yet there was no doubt in Dany's mind that he was very, very sick.

"*What is it, Drogon?*" Daenerys chose to speak aloud to the familiar black presence invading her senses. Several days had passed since she had heard her own voice. Drogon breathed tiny puffs of fire at his brother till Rhaegal stirred and lifted the bronze horn again. His head sprang up only to collapse to the ground.

"*Have you found Jon?*" Dany asked of Rhaegal, but the green dragon's presence was too feeble, too far away. Drogon breathed some more smoke at him but none seemed to help. Black dread surged in her mind. She knew that Jon was somewhere behind that white mountain of ice and that he was in grave danger.
"Can you take me to him, Drogon?" Dany breathed. "And return to tend to Rhaegal later on?" The black dragon was behind her, trying to widen the opening of the underground tunnel with tooth and claw, to no avail. Giving up, the beast crawled out where Dany could no longer see him.

In a heartbeat, a powerful streak of dragonflame broke into the weirwood chamber from the outside, narrowly missing Dany and Rhaegal. It was too cold for any wood down here to catch fire. An opening was made so Daenerys and her green one could see the pale moon. Drogon lowered his head to the hollow underground. The black dragon nuzzled his crippled brother, leaving tiny black crystals here and there on his green scales. It was the healing way of the dragons as Dany had discovered, and it never ceased to amaze her.

When he was done, her black one gazed at her with an angry eye, inviting, inviting...

Dany hugged Drogon's head. Her arms were now far too short to reach all the way around. As she did that, the dragon nudged her to look out upon the dancing moonshine... Or rather, at the distant Wall. Her vision blurred. For a second, she was looking at the Wall through the eyes of the dragons.

On top and over the entire visible length of the great Wall of ice, there was a dark black shadow. Unnatural. Sorcerous. Like the darkness she had glimpsed that existed in the House of the Undying in Qarth. The kind that had been after her and after her dragons ever since they had hatched, willing to suck all life out of them and put them to evil uses.

"You can't fly over, can you?" she asked of Drogon.

The black dragon stared at the green one.

"Oh no," Dany thought she understood. "He did try to fly over and now he's ill." Immense black and green sadness filled her mind. "What of Jon?"

Rhaegar had commanded Rhaegal to find Jon and bring him back. The dragon must have tried to obey the order many times until he was too weak to move. She sensed a black trepidation and a green uncertainty. "Jon is behind the Wall, isn't he?" Dany spoke with growing knowledge. "Drogon, is there a way to fly around?"

The blackness in her mind suggested that there was but it didn't deem safe taking her there. "I will be the judge of that," she said in her queenly voice, suddenly eager to be gone, eager to do what her brother wanted done. What harm could possibly befall her when she was with Drogon?

Black anger merged with black melancholy. The dragon obediently backed up through the hole he made, but not before he fondled his brother's belly with reassurance. Mindlessly, Daenerys commanded Drogon. "You will take me to Jon and you will leave me there. You will return and help Rhaegal and come for me only when he's better."

Maybe it wasn't wise. She couldn't help imagining Jon noble and handsome, just like his parents. But maybe Jon was as Lyanna thought Dany might have been. Maybe Jon hurt Rhaegal by intention or by chance. Maybe he was going to murder her on the spot when Drogon was gone. Yet the command had left her lips and they were already flying.

They flew alongside the Wall, all the way east and away from the brief sunset, parallel to the magic floating over the man-made mountain of ice. From close by, the shadow didn't lurk so evil. Perhaps it was not there to protect the Wall from the dragons crossing over as Dany thought.

Maybe it was a spell woven with a sole purpose; to keep out what was on the other side.

The Wall was very long but it still had an end. It gave way to the sea; clouds and storm, raging. The
breakers hit the shore in bursts of salt water that could easily engulf a dragon had he not been clever and flown high enough.

Drogon was the most cunning of her children. He would find a way where Rhaegal could not.

"Is it far?" Dany squeezed out. Rain tore at her face, cutting cold. She felt the dragon's wrath. You wanted to go, he suggested with more detail that he could normally muster. "I did," she agreed, swallowing a mouthful of rainwater. It was warmer than the snow she had drunk after her supper of bear. You still want to go, the dragon insinuated with malice and Dany knew that for the first time since he had hatched, Drogon was angry at his mother. Truly angry.

So angry that when they lost sight of the sea, he lowered his huge body brusquely, to soar over a dark forest. When he dived between the snow ridden canopies of the wintergreen trees, she had to hold on to him for dear life. And when they were close enough to the ground that the fall would not kill her, Drogon shook so violently, in spasms of rage, till Daenerys slid over and landed in crisp, maidenly unspoiled snow.

And just like that, the dragon was gone, the moon was hidden, and all around her were trees.

It was so cold that she could hardly breathe. The air shot daggers down her throat. She drew an edge of the hrakar pelt in front of her mouth and it was a bit better. Knowing she couldn't stay where she was, she moved. But there was nowhere she could go. I told him to bring me to Jon. It would be the first time Drogon did not do as she bid him since they had faced Khal Jhaqo in the vastness of the Dothraki Sea.

Drogon wouldn't betray her to her death. Would he? Lyanna had been right about one thing. The dragons, beast and human, could kill each other. She wouldn't have believed it of her children. Has there ever been a mother who would?

She leaned on the nearest tree, feeling betrayed nonetheless. The trunk was huge and brown, not beautiful and white as the weirwood above the hollow where Rhaegal had been hiding. The canopy was so spacious above Dany that an entire hut of the lamb men from Lhazar could have fitted among the needle infested branches. She had never seen trees like that. Daenerys hit the bark with her fists, helpless, her own cold rage waking. The chill felt less bitter when she was angry as well.

She walked a bit around, looked up and then down. A piece of different tree-bark, red-brown, protruded from the snow. Dany was mesmerised by it. She had to touch it although a sudden instinct counselled her against it. She was in danger anyway, Drogon had said as much. What harm could one touch do? Unkindly, she tugged at it.

The bark turned out to be a garment of sorts on a thin, long hand as black as Drogon's scales. It only had three fingers and a thumb, and long, long claws. The hand gripped Daenerys' arm and used the princess to scramble up from deep snow where it had been buried, just like the sapling Dany had seen earlier.

The creature was much smaller than her, and Dany was not a tall woman. It looked like a little girl with a mane of unkempt auburn hair, huge blue eyes and large, almost pointy ears. When it opened its mouth it had no voice, only sharp yellow teeth. Dany tried to retrieve her hand, but the creature possessed extraordinary force. Like Euron, the dragon-stealer. The teeth snapped. Her dragon blood boiled. Using every ounce of her strength, Dany wrenched her arm free. There was bleeding from her wrist where the jaws had caught up, but the cold was such that it numbed the pain.

Daenerys backed to the tree trunk. A freezing sensation took hold of her back. The dwarf monster was closing on her, baring its fangs to snap at her throat, sharpening its claws to dig out her eyes or
her heart. She had never seen anything like it and she hadn't been that afraid since Viserys' death.

"Help!" she screamed her lungs out, not expecting any.

In a reply, new snow started falling. A flake ended on her head, on her nose, on her chest. The creature jumped. Dany ducked and rolled away, her movement slow and clumsy due to the savage cold. The monster's collision with the tree saved her only for a moment. She stumbled backward, landing in the snow. The hrakar pelt spread under her as a sheet, soon to be soaked with her life blood. The claws were tearing at her new woollen trousers. They would climb higher and higher and then... She could only think how her maids had laboured for nothing, for nothing at all... And the jaws were coming so close, so very close... Too close to her throat.

Dany closed her eyes.

When no pain came, she dared to open them again.

A man loomed over her, a shadow covered in furs with jets of dark, long, unruly hair hanging out of a black scarf wrapped tightly around his head and mouth. Moonshine twinkled in his eyes. They looked young, dark as pitch, shining. Three more men wrestled with the creature that attacked her. One drew a knife to begin hacking it to pieces and...

"No!" Dany said rapidly. "There are four of you. Catch it if you can. Kill it only if you must." She sensed that the creature might be able to talk. Just like Aegon's companion, Lady Jeyne, could do when she had been a walking dead, or the despicable Lord Euron who was a wight still.

"Why pray?" the young man above her said dryly. "It wasn't going to spare you."

"No," Dany had to agree, "but that doesn't mean that I am bound to make the same choice."

The young man chuckled and stepped away. Under the furs his legs were gaunt, and his face had become terribly long when he laughed. Dark hair streamed in the moonlight when he moved, hardened with frost, as widespread wings of a bat. Or a baby dragon, Dany thought.

"You heard the lady," he told his companions in a baffled voice laced with mockery. "She wants us to be gallant knights and catch her a monster." One of the other men, a balding one, climbed up the tree where Dany had fled from her attacker. In a moment he was down again with hempen rope. It took the strength of all four men to bind the creature who was wriggling, and wrestling and resisting, till all fight went out of it and its blue eyes looked quite dead.

Dany remembered a vision of such bleak blue eyes. She had had it in Essos, she knew, but she could not recall where nor what was it all about.

"There, my lady, if it please you, your own monster," the young man said, satisfied, returning his attention on her. He was not very tall or impressive in any way, much shorter than Khal Drogo or the sellsword captain Daario Naharis, and probably a little bit shorter than her brother Rhaegar. He was not older than Dany and looked as if he was still growing. Dark eyes glinted in the moonlight when he joked with her again. "And if it doesn't please you to meet more monsters, I suggest you accept our hospitality and take shelter in a tree with us."

By the time he offered her his hand to stand up, Dany didn't need the young man to tell her his name. Drogon had been true to her, as always.

Unlike Aegon, who looked like her, but who was not her nephew by blood, her real nephew looked very much like a Stark, like his mother. Yet the solemn, observant expression in his dark eyes, a glimmer of something that could be both strength and weakness, belonged solely to his father.
"My horse was frightened by... this...," she pointed at the creature. "It turned crazed and left me."

"There was no horse," a stout, wiry black-haired man with a widow peak contradicted her.

"There had to be, Pyke," the balding one said. "How else could she have gotten here? Flying?"

The third man, who looked older than Ser Barristan, only laughed at the ridiculous proposition that she could have flown. A notion formed in Dany’s mind as she pondered how it was most fortunate that none of them seemed to have seen or recognised the dragon.

If she told them the truth, they'd probably think her a liar. She couldn't sense Drogon; the dragon must have gone back to Rhaegal. He'll come back for me. He'll do just as I asked. She felt guilty for thinking that Drogon could have ever betrayed her.

"We should not be far from the Eastwatch-by-the-Sea," her nephew said. "She could have come from there. Queen Selyse has brought plenty of southron women with her from Dragonstone. This one's probably one of them."

"I've never seen this one," the balding man was not easy to fool either. "Though I admit that the queen has many ladies waiting on her."

Dany said neither yes or no. The notion was now crystal clear in her head. There was only one way to do what Rhaegar had asked of her, to measure her nephew for what he truly was; he had to stay ignorant of her purpose for a while longer.

"My name is Dany," she said bravely. "I am indeed a lady in waiting. And a true knight would tell me his name by now."

"I'm only a bastard," her nephew said, "the name is Jon. Jon Snow. He's a knight," he showed the balding man, "Lord Davos Seaworth of Rainwood. That's somewhere in stormlands. He can tell you where better than I if you don't already know."

"You must have heard about the Onion Knight, my lady, if you indeed waited on the Queen Selyse," Lord Davos said.

"The Queen Selyse has only words of praise for the brave Ser Davos," Dany hoped she didn't exaggerate or wrongly pronounced the name of the unknown queen. His lordship of rainwood was becoming dour the more anyone mentioned Selyse.

Jon continued, "And Cotter Pyke here belongs to the Night's Watch. Before that, he came from the Iron Islands. You probably don't want to know what he did there."

"Nothing that would please the ladies," Pyke agreed. "I lived by the Old Way."

Dany knew from spending a very short time as a prisoner of Euron Greyjoy that the Old Way of the ironborn included reaving, killing and raping, not necessarily in that order.

"But that was before my blood ran black," Pyke put bluntly, as though he were asking her pardons for his past transgressions. Dany could not help but like the man, ironborn or not. He was a bit like Brown Ben Plumm, just younger. And she had forgiven Ben for betraying her.

"I am called Garth," the elderly man introduced himself. "It was some black crow called me that in my youth before I slit his throat. My mother died before she could name me so I had no name until that time."
Her nephew looked horribly startled by that confession of violence. Dany pitied him at once. The arm he had offered her dangled alone in the night air, unused.

She seized it to stand up. Jon's arm was pleasantly warm even through the gloves he wore. Not as warm as Drogon's paw, but it would have to do. He had a look of amazement for her own hands, which were bare and unblemished despite the cold and the fresh scratch on her right wrist. For some reason this northern winter only seriously threatened her feet. It didn't mean it was pleasant for her other parts, not by far. "Well then, Jon," she said, "better show me to that tree of yours."

Jon and Pyke helped her climb. Lord Seaworth and Old Garth dragged their prisoner, and tied the creature to hang in the lower branches of the tree. A bit further up, the men had built a flat of wood planks, branches and ropes. Daenerys soon learned you had to be careful where you sat and where you put your feet on it because the construction was anything but solid. Strangely, it was still holding under their combined weight. Not that she added much to it; Dany was a slight, slender woman.

"It's safer to rest here by night, and we travel by day. We're bound for Eastwatch." Jon explained. "And what brings a lady out on a winter night? Did the queen not warn all of you that there were snarks and grumkins about?"

Dany knew that there were white walkers just like she knew there were weirwoods, but she hadn't seen them yet either. "I guess that there are," she said, "but I've never seen one."

"It was sunny this afternoon," she ventured a wild guess. It had been sunny on the south side of the Wall. "I went for a ride with three other ladies. The day was shorter than we expected it to be. A blizzard came and I lost them." It was as good a lie as any. She wondered how far they were from the Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. If they were not close enough, her new companions would see through her pretence very soon.

"Aye," Jon sounded as if he believed her, oddly enough. "The days are getting shorter." Grimness crept in his voice. Dark eyes focused on the living dead creature hanging below them in the tree. The fingers on his right hand flexed in his glove. She could almost imagine them touching the strings of a high harp. "Never fear, my lady," he said. "We shall bring you back to Eastwatch safely."

New determination removed all friendliness from Jon's eyes. "Maybe we shall find your horse as well," he said in a different tone, and then she knew that despite his kind words he had been suspicious of her.

"I'll be looking as well," she said, purposefully feigning the voice of that young innocent girl she was not any more. She hadn't been that girl for years, maybe she never was.

Sleeping furs were stretched on the flimsy floor of the flat wood, and the night chill did not grow any less from all the talking. Dany decided to stay close to her nephew. If he groped her at night, she would learn another thing about him. She lay down between Jon and Lord Seaworth who curled next to her and immediately started snoring in earnest, indifferent to propriety. It was much warmer that way.

Jon, on the contrary, kept to the edge: he seemed to prefer needles and branches to her company. He maintained a good foot of distance between Dany and himself.

_Here is one who would put a sword between us, as my poor brother Rhaegar had done when he first travelled south to Dorne with his second wife to be. He had only wanted to save Lyanna from our father then. The blade on Jon's hip was dragonglass, black, tapering, and most likely as sharp as Drogon's teeth. Yes, Dany was certain. That's what Jon would do if he wore a sword to start with, although he might not be able to maintain the distance he desires with every woman._
For in the end, Rhaegar could not save Lyanna from himself, when she no longer wanted to be saved. Dany wondered idly what Jon would do if she reached for him now. Not that she had any intention to.

Twice married and twice a widow, Dany was not intimidated by the proximity of men.

"Come closer," she told her nephew, forcing her voice to sound less like a command. She was no queen here. And she could not very well return to her brother and admit that she had let his precious son freeze because he was not comfortable with her lady's charms.

Jon stayed still as a stone.

The woods obeyed her instead of her nephew; silence withdrew and queer noises came closer. The hooting and the howling of the wind on the rise struck them out of nowhere, soon followed by the treadling of many feet sloshing in the snow. The strangers approached the tiny clearing on the ground below Jon and her. The wight they imprisoned rebelled fiercely against the restraints in the gloom, eager to join the newcomers. Dany craned her head to look down.

"Don't!" Jon urged her. "You don't need to see them."

She had to, no matter what he said. She was the blood of the dragon and she would look.

The dead were many. They were uglier than Euron's army; stronger, more determined. She thought she saw a dead bear among them or maybe a giant spider. They were marching to the Wall, if Dany didn't completely misjudge all directions during flight.

Her nephew pulled her into his body on an impulse. Their companions slept peacefully, undisturbed by the nightly commotion, and it seemed to Dany that Jon and her were the only two people awake in the entire world.

"Don't look down, my lady," he told her. "They can smell our blood, the blood of the living. And if you have a gentle heart, you might scream and they will hear us. We have only one obsidian blade and there are too many of them."

Dany felt the steady thud of her nephew's heart under the layers of clothing. It thumped faster when the howling of the gale was replaced by high-pitched, inhuman cries echoing all through the forest. Suddenly, there were no more wights under their tree. There were evil spirits of mist, walking slowly, carrying crystal swords; tremendous, merciless beings with bright blue eyes, changing shapes in the winter wind. She had never missed her dragon quite as much. *Drogon would make short work of these... Others...* Dany hoped.

Her soul began freezing, as though it were no longer her own. Daenerys had never known fear as the one that took hold of her at that moment. Not even when she had woken a dragon in her brother Viserys, earning beatings and threats when her behaviour didn't please him.

Without Drogon's strength, she gave in to her fear. Shrinking, she buried her head in her own gloveless hands, away from both Jon's wool-clad chest and the gentle snoring of the Onion Knight. Her hands were still warm. They would be warm for a day after riding her dragon. She needed all the warmth she could gather. All life force.

"I told you not to look," Jon said, sounding stubborn like his mother.

"It's not your fault," Dany hurried to explain. "I wanted to see." She couldn't tell why it had been so important for her to look upon the face of the enemy.
Mist glided through the woods below them, heading steadily south, and all that time Dany kept shaking with fear. Jon was tense and stiff, gloved hand on his black blade, fingers flexing and unflexing. The Others marched on until the fog that had carried them dissolved and dissipated in the night, like a huge shadow of something that should not exist, cast on the world by the bitter whiteness of the snow.

And whether it was from the accomplishment of finding her nephew, from great tiredness or the aftermath of fear which still lay heavy on her being, Dany's eyelids turned into stone, dropping closed on their own accord. Without seeing, the world reduced itself to Jon's breathing next to her. The distance between them diminished and while they did not touch after his clumsy embrace, he should have now been able to share her body heat under the furs. Dany relived their encounter all over again to be sure of her conclusion.

Her nephew did not seem mad at all.

*I'll tell him everything on the morrow,* she thought, regretting her lack of sincerity for the first time tonight. *Drogon will return and fly us back to the kingsroad. When Jon sees the dragon he'll know that I must be telling the truth.*

Safe and warm on the tree, Daenerys fell asleep. It felt almost like in her childhood home in Braavos, in the house with the red door.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left a kudos and/or commented.

Thank you for reading.

Next POV will be Jon, probably
Chapter Notes

Warning for the tiniest little bit of gore.

Huge thanks to my beta DrHolland without whose observations none of you would be able to see any logic in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon

They were running in circles.

Jon hoped that the blizzard took the Others. Or at least buried the large host of the slain they were driving forward deep under the ice, preventing it from marching on and heading south to the Wall. Before, he had only heard about it from Tormund Giantsbane, how the white walkers could fade into the mist. Now, he had seen it for himself.

This was the first time Jon saw the Others with his own eyes.

His first thought was for the girl, Dany. Highborn girls usually screamed when they were afraid... his sister Arya was the exception. But when he drew the unknown girl into his arms, Jon realized he didn't do it only for her. He did it also to assuage his own fear. A life clinging to life.

That night he understood fully what Mance Rayder had been running from with all his people, and the kind of fear the Others provoked in fellow men. Jon started to suspect that nobody could stay truly brave when facing the white walkers for very long.

Mance and Arya entered his nightmares. When the Wall was still his, Jon often dreamed of the old kings in the North, residing forever in their deep, winding crypts under Winterfell. Now Mance and Arya inhabited them too, as pale, flayed corpses laid on the white shroud that had turned pink from their blood, the colour of the House Bolton.

Bad dreams or not, there had been no sign of the Others since the night Dany cried for help under the tree.

To be sure, there was only one thing that the girl did not lie about, and that was the blizzard.

Sleet and snow had been haunting them for days now. Jon had never seen a snowstorm of such magnitude. It was as if the sky decided to descend upon the earth, to cover and smother the world. In the past five days since they had rescued the girl, Jon began to hate his bastard name for the simple meaning it had: snow.

Will it ever stop falling? he wondered, ravenous and frozen to the core; a man pulling forward a broad cart like one of the oxen, shoulder to shoulder with Old Garth the wildling. Am I a man now? Or still a boy? Have I killed the boy in me for good as Maester Aemon had counseled me to do?

Advancing was merely a figure of speech. They had less and less idea where they were going. There was food left for a fortnight and that only if they ate but once a day. Enough to keep them from
starving for a while.

*At least there is plenty of frozen water,* Jon thought, trying to take heart.

The cart was made of wooden planks. Runners made from bone glided over the deep, semi-frozen snow. Every night, they would disassemble the cart and made the baseboard a platform for camping, as high up in the trees as the thickness of the branches would allow. During the mornings of ever shorter daytimes, they reassembled it to move on.

Fingers stiff within his gloves, the transformation was a painfully meticulous task which rarely turned to Jon's liking: from too much meddling with the materials, both the flat and the cart were slightly different and less firm with every new day. Moreover, they were wasting precious daylight on it.

Yet it was their only safe means of travel through a no man's land in winter. Just like the wights and the Others were not known to swim, they were not known to climb trees. The men pulled the cart in turns, two by two. The girl and the living corpse were being driven on it, together with their meagre, steadily vanishing supplies.

All the roads south were shut, as though a shadow conjured by the Lady Melisandre barred the way. On any path they took, soon there were drifts of snow many times higher than a man grown. The white walls filled the voids left by the dark green canopies of the soldier pines and grew higher every day, choking the land, pushing the bunch of ragged travellers that attempted to cross it back and back and back.

Always back north.

Jon caught himself longing for a sight of a single weirwood either to pray to the old gods for a change of fortune, or merely to alter the scenery. He yearned even more to see Ghost when awake, and not only to look through the eyes of the wolf in his dreams, outrunning the wind in the unrelenting cold. The direwolf had been gone since before the girl appeared.

But the only red patch in the stark whiteness around them was not the eyes of his wolf; it was the auburn hair of the childlike wight they captured. The corpse lay comfortably dead during day, and then twitched all night, fidgety and agitated.

*Cursed,* Jon thought on many occasions, unable to sleep for the fear of entering the crypts of Winterfell, with his hairs on edge as Ghost's when the direwolf smelled foul dead things in the killing coolness of the night.

At least it proved to be a much more interesting corpse to study than those others Jon had ordered kept in the ice cells under Castle Black, and which had never budged. Small comfort it would be if they were all to perish from exhaustion or hunger before they reached their destination.

Jon wondered what Dolorous Edd would have to say about this particular creature. Probably something so awfully morose that it would cheer Jon up. But Edd was in Long Barrow now, a castle on the Wall far from Eastwatch and much farther from Hardhome by the shivering sea.

*I may never see Edd again, or Grenn or Pyp or Halder...*

With the weather raging the way it was, they would never arrive at Eastwatch on time. And once they did, his little brother Rickon could be anywhere.

Before Jon and his latest travelling companions set out from Hardhome, leaving Mother Mole and her folk to live on hope for the great ships to come, Jon had learned how Davos Seaworth and Cotter
Pyke had been given to the sea.

The sworn black brothers on the galleys of the Night's Watch may have been inspired by Stannis's arrival to earn a reward of their own, or just fed up of sailing to Hardhome against the ungodly storms. They had spent months on the sea not getting anywhere.

Whatever the truth, when Pyke's flagship, Talon, met a skiff from Skagos containing a man, a woman, a child and a wolf, Cotter's men opted for a little mutiny on their own. The black brother who listened to Lord Davos' tale about finding the Stark boy for King Stannis never brought the Onion Knight to the captain. Instead, he knocked Davos unconscious.

"The cold water immediately stirred me back to life," Davos had told Jon, performing a useless gesture of groping for something on his empty neck. "I was lucky."

When Davos woke on the skiff, Pyke was unconscious next to him, his brow split. Cotter had been overpowered and forced into the Skagosi boat before he learned of the existence of the Talon's new passengers or their names. He would have a long scar on his forehead to remind him of the occasion. Destiny or mere chance wanted it that both men were seasoned sailors, or they would have never washed ashore at Hardhome with life.

Neither of the two men could tell Jon what happened to Rickon, Shaggydog and a wildling woman called Osha who cared for Rickon as a mother after the sack of Winterfell, according to Lord Davos. Since the half-ruined fleet of the Night's Watch never docked in Hardhome, common sense suggested Jon's brother was most likely being taken back to Eastwatch as a valuable hostage.

You know nothing, Jon Snow, Ygritte laughed madly. Her chuckles hit Jon's mind just like the ruby-hard droplets of ice rain that attacked the dark grey furs he was wearing on the outside. Reason meant little and less to some people, Jon had learned. Red Wedding had been an ample proof of that.

They will dress your kingly brother in silks and you will be cold and wet on the Wall, Lord Commander Mormont had told Jon when Robb was crowned king, for all the good it did to him. Robb was dead now, and Jon was so dreadfully cold and miserable that at least he knew he must be alive. He firmly refuted to dwell on what his sworn brothers had done to him with their knives sharpened in the dark... or if it made him a monster.

Just like the one we have caught, he glanced backward at the girl and the corpse.

Dany observed the wight at times as if she half expected it to talk. Naturally, the thing stayed silent.

A stark cry sounded on the gloomy sky, a dagger in the heart of Jon's musings.

Instead of Ghost, there was the bloody bird, flying behind the cart.

The morning after they saved Dany, they found a white-headed eagle perched on the tree where they had slept, pecking at the blackened hands of the hanging red-haired corpse. A scavenger, Jon thought, averting his eyes. The span of its mighty wings was almost six feet long when the bird spread them in flight. There were white feathers on the eagle's head and tail, somewhat dirty and yellow from age and wear.

That first morning, Dany had shrieked at the eagle with surprise almost as great as when a snowdrift had turned into a wight that attacked her. The bird merely screeched with merriment. Almost chirping, it landed on Dany's shoulder with its great wings carefully folded not to harm the girl. The bird of prey was as docile with Dany as the Lord Commander Mormont's pet raven sometimes was with Jon.
Jon half expected it to say "corn" but it never did.

"It likes you," he told Dany then, wanting to tease her, confused and uncertain about the reason for the urge he experienced.

Dany looked at the bird, then at Jon. She reattached her headdress, which must have partially slid away during sleep in the tree, and proceeded to speak slowly, with exaggerated caution. "What if I told you I believed the eagle was... the spirit of your mother?"

Jon struck back with words at that sudden outrage, his response as immediate as a swift parry of a sword. "My mother was a whore who abandoned me when I was born," he replied bitterly. "Not a bloody eagle." Why didn't Father ever tell me who she was?

"If you say so," Dany replied despondently and glanced at the eagle, almost as if she were about to ask the bird what she should do. The beast shook its head, scattering droplets of iced water from its feathers. It folded its talons around Dany's shoulder and let out a pungent, mighty cry.

At that moment, it looked regal.

*I can't hurt the feelings of a bird, can I?* Jon was full of doubts for a moment.

Be as it may, since then the white-headed eagle flew with them and eyed Jon more than anyone else of his companions. The resurrected Lord Commander caressed the old marks of Orell's eagle claws on his face from time to time, wondering if the two birds of prey had been friends. It was a dumb assumption. There were many eagles north of the Wall. It was all a stupid coincidence.

And, truth be told, he became used to the bird. He would begin to miss her if she suddenly flew away. He couldn't fathom why he frequently thought of the eagle as a 'she' ever since the girl dared compare it to his mother. The ruler of the skies was a strong, wild bird, and his mother must have been a weak, pathetic woman.

As always, part of him whispered that maybe his mother had a reason for abandoning him and that she had most probably died in birth. He shushed the voice of his hopes and pulled the cart on, devoting body and soul to the necessary and painful effort.

Dany had tried to help with pulling on the first day, but her feet turned so cold that she was soon unable to walk. Now she was spending both days and nights wrapped in furs between the men, wiggling her limbs not to lose them to frostbite.

Needless to say, they had never found her horse.

Despite the terrible discomfort Dany must have been in, sitting in a cart with a wight, trying not to freeze during their journey, she never once complained. Sansa would object, Jon thought. *Politely, of course.* Or maybe she wouldn't. He wondered what his older half-sister had become now that she was married to a Lannister. Was she now cold-hearted like the Queen Selyse or stern and unjust like Lady Stark in her treatment of Jon? Or was she still Sansa, sweet and kind, although a bit insipid and boring, concerned about saying the wrong word to anyone?

The girl, Dany, if that was really her name (and Jon doubted very much that it was) stared at the sky every time it cleared briefly between the storms. Whatever she hoped to see in it, never came. There was only the eagle and the clouds charged with snow.

Dany was the strangest girl Jon had ever seen.

Her hands were warm for two days before they finally cooled down and she gratefully accepted a
spare pair of gloves from Old Garth, dwarfing her slim fingers. She didn't speak much, she never fretted about anything, and occasionally she watched Jon as if she wanted to tell him something, something important, and then lacked the strength or the resolve to speak her mind. The cries of the eagle seemed to aggravate her penchant for silence.

Her skin was delicate as a Southron lady's, and her beauty equalled or... surpassed... that of his sister Sansa or Lady Stark in her youth.

She looked like a princess.

Or at least the way Jon had imagined princesses should look when Maester Luwin's history classes about dead kings and queens of Westeros were especially boring in Winterfell, and Robb and he were not allowed to practise swordplay instead.

She must be from the south, he mused.

Yet Jon could scarcely imagine any lady in waiting on Queen Selyse to wear trousers of white wool instead of a dress, and that under a rare and probably expensive white fur that must have come to Westeros on a trading vessel from somewhere across the seas. Maybe she had heard of Val and was inspired by the style of the so-called wildling princess. Queen Selyse was doggedly determined to call the good-sister of Mance Rayder that way.

Yet Val's possible influence did not explain the odd headdress with billowing hairs of some animal, which was as quaint looking as a garment could be. It seemed more typically wildling than anything wildlings themselves would make. More than once Dany caught Jon staring at it. Then she said, unbidden, that a trader from Skagos brought it to Eastwatch. She found it pleasantly warm so she gave him a few coppers for it.

All Jon's considerations about girls, birds and his past came to an abrupt halt when Old Garth and he were forced to stop by yet another boulder of new ice, which seemed far larger than those used to build the Wall.

"It's a vain hope," Jon muttered. "We will arrive at Eastwatch weeks after the ships."

"The seas will be treacherous," the Onion Knight tried to save the day. "Talon was taking water when I boarded it. Not enough to sink, I reckon, but more than sufficient to delay its journey."

Their new predicament soon proved significantly worse than Jon initially thought. There was no way to go around the boulder of ice. They probed the ground left and right. There was no passage through either ice or snow. They could not go further south.

Only if we could fly, Jon's thoughts veered into bitterness and despair. He stopped pulling the cart.

"We cannot go on," he said simply.

It was time to give up. Jon might not have been the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch any longer, but he was still somehow in charge of their small party. And it wasn't the commander's duty to lead his men to death for nothing in exchange. "We have to go back to Hardhome if we wish to survive. Then try again if the weather gets milder. Or build a proper ship. These lands will let us go no further," Jon said.

His companions were too tired to protest. Slowly, Jon and Garth rotated the cart back north where they came from. As soon as they turned, the merciless snowdrifts became lower. Even the wind was lessened and they travelled faster.
And when the evening drew closer, Ghost finally returned.

"To me!" Jon shouted, losing all regard for caution. Relieved, he joined the mass of furs, claws and teeth rolling in the snow. He was both man and wolf for a time. It was the best feeling he had had in days. A warg, half-wildling and a turncloak. And more than a half wolf.

The wolf sensed it first, and Jon only caught the very end of the scent before he found himself pushed back to his own human skin. Dany was smelling strongly of another direwolf in Jon's pack, unbearably so.

Ghost sat on his haunches and howled at the rust-coloured sunset, gleeful. Jon wasn't sure if this reaction was a good one or not. It was peculiar for Ghost to be friendly to strangers.

"This is Ghost," he told Dany, who didn't seem surprised at all to see a giant direwolf.

"He has pretty eyes," Dany commented, "almost like my brother's when he gets angry."

"No man can have red eyes," Jon dismissed the pretence for a second and remembered the priestess of R'hllor as soon as he did that. "Well, except for Lady Melisandre. But I don't think she was born with them."

"Lady Melisandre?" Dany parroted, her attention centred on the wolf.

"You served Queen Selyse," Jon made a reproach. "Why does my mention of the red lady surprise you?"

It was prudent not to call Melisandre the red woman. For all Jon knew, Dany was her spy.

"It doesn't," she said quickly, "I'm sorry if I made you think so."

It sounded like another lie if he ever heard one.

The wolf launched a long, ululating and savage howl at them. Dany descended from the cart, ignoring her frozen feet and walked to Ghost.

Jon jumped in-between.

"Maybe you'd better not," he suggested. She ignored him with a smile and approached Ghost.

"Hello," she said to the animal in a deeper voice that he had ever heard her using. A woman's battle voice. The notion felt queer. Highborn women did no battles. The wolf sniffed Dany, growled a few times as if she were a threat, but didn't bite, jump, scratch or try to harm her in any other way. Dany laughed in that same deep voice that didn't fit her. As one beast talking to another.

The notion was disturbing.

Jon tried consciously to slip into Ghost's skin to feel what the wolf was experiencing, but he could not. He had never mastered the skill. It always came spontaneously to him, to be in his wolf; or maybe Ghost wouldn't let him right now. It felt like a small betrayal on the wolf's part.

Instead of biting Dany, Ghost sprang on Jon and used his fangs to tear away the scarf from his face, revealing a small portion of bare skin on his throat where green crystals were still in evidence.

Dany towered over Jon, sprawled helplessly in the snow. He never felt more thin and gaunt than now at her mercy, like a little boy caught stealing a cake from the kitchens before supper. Gently, she ghosted a pale unblemished hand over the crystals. They detached themselves as old crust from a
wound. Where they hit the snow, the water melted and boiled. On instinct, Jon closed his eyes. Unwillingly, it gave him better focus on the sensation of her fingers on his now fully healed neck.

"Oh, I see," Dany said, admiring the handiwork of his unknown saviour on Jon's throat. Jon had to look at her again. Dany pulled a face Sansa would have made when Septa Mordane approved of the needlework she made, or when she was given a new pretty dress. Arya would imitate the expression until Jon cried from laughing, whenever she was particularly upset with their older sister.

The storm relented. White clouds were sailing on the shyly pale blue sky above them. Dany's hand was warm again. Her eyes, which had appeared dark like Jon's under the gloominess in which they had travelled, looked violet now; unearthly, quaint. She regarded him coolly and he wished that would change.

Jon started to understand.

*I'm learning, Ygritte. You wouldn't believe me but I am.* He had even grown a few inches in size since his sworn brothers had murdered him. Dolorous Edd might have blamed it on too much standing in the snow. Jon smiled at the thought.

Violet eyes were puzzled, and sizzled, believing the smile to be for themselves. And maybe it was, Jon didn't care. Once a man was murdered, his sense for propriety was diminished, he found.

Jon pressed Dany's palm with his own to loosen the remainder of the crystals from his neck, wishing her to help him peel the rest from the more intimate places, his back and his belly. And he knew why he felt the need to tease Dany since they crossed ways.

She was a girl who could set his world of ice on fire.

It was for the best if he didn't let her. Jon didn't want to love again.

Yet had Stannis offered Jon this lying girl instead of Val when he wanted to legitimise him and use him as a new Lord of Winterfell, Jon would have been much more sorely tempted to accept his offer.

Brusquely, Jon Snow the bastard stood up, troubled, and returned to his pulling duties.

Five hundred yards ahead, just before the dark of night, they found an abandoned village of five poor houses which they hadn't passed on their way south. The lodgings were as luxurious as any castle after days of sleeping in the trees. The night promised to be clear and cold like death; the moon was out. They would hear and see any enemy in time to climb on one of the high sentinels behind the hut, where they preventively mounted the flat.

Old Garth drew the first watch. The rest huddled together in the hovel, close like men conspiring over a small fire. The house was a single rounded room, with the walls made of anything that could be found; stones, mud and wood, now frozen together by winter. There was no window, only a cluttered smoke-hole in a thatched roof, covered by a thick layer of snow. Jon had to clean it out before they started the fire, unless the people in it wanted to become strips of smoked fish by the morrow.

They still had a small bottle of mead from Hardhome. The wildlings made it strong and rich in taste. Each man made a pull, and so did Dany.

"Someone should tell a tale, or sing a song," the girl made a wish. "I've recently discovered they go very well with campfires."

Jon recalled Old Nan's stories about the Others with too much clarity. He hummed, enjoying the
warmth. The mead was a pleasant burning on his vocal chords. He couldn't bring himself to tell any such story aloud now, not here. Maybe the Others would know. Maybe they would find them. They were too deep in the snark-and-grumkin territory. "Can't think of any," he lied, "and my brains are freezing." His balls were freezing as well, but he couldn't very well say that in the presence of a lady.

"All this darkness," Lord Davos said seriously in a bout of inspiration, pointing at Dany, or at Jon. Or at winter all around them. "It reminds me of a story I heard from a pirate. He was a friend of mine, called Salladhor Saan, the self-styled Prince of the Narrow Sea."

"Once, on Dragonstone, he told me a tale about a time when darkness lay heavy on the world, like it does now. Then, there lived a hero. His name was Azor Ahai and in order to vanquish the darkness, he needed a hero's sword. So he worked for thirty days and thirty nights in some temple which was sacred to him, I don't know of which god, and I doubt that my friend the pirate knew. He folded and refolded and beat the steel, forging a sword of heroes. Lightbringer it would be called.

But after thirty days, when the sword was finished, and when the hero plunged it in the water to temper it, the steel burst asunder--"

"I think I know where this story goes," Jon said dryly, "this hero killed his wife for a sword of fire."

The bottle of mead made another round in friendly silence.

"Indeed," Lord Davos agreed, his giant shadow on the humble walls dwarfing the firelight. "Imagine only. All I could think of when I heard this story was that I could never do it. Not even to behold the wonder of a true flaming sword. I am not made of the stuff of heroes."

Sailing to Skagos on a small, fragile boat to rescue Rickon sounded very much like a stuff of heroes to Jon, but he didn't want to embarrass Davos so he kept his mouth shut. It was certainly much more than was normally required from the Hand of the King.

Even from the Hand of King Stannis, Azor Ahai reborn...

The foreign name of the hero would always remind Jon of how Lady Melisandre forced the wildlings to burn branches of weirwood before they were admitted to safety behind the Wall. She did it to assert the supremacy of her god, who, to hear Melisandre say it, favoured Stannis as his warrior of light.

Jon's wolf blood boiled with the feeling of injustice and anger when he remembered the large shadows cast on the Wall by King Stannis and his red woman that day. He remembered the false sword, burning without heat.

If Stannis is Azor Ahai reborn, then I am the heir to the Iron Throne, he thought with giddiness and a pinch of malice.

Jon's spirit thawed just like his body, flaring in free, uncensored thoughts, raw as the mind of his wolf.

The bottle of mead was passed around again. When it was Jon's turn, there was very little left, and after he drank it was empty.

The need to rebuke Azor Ahai slowly became Jon's greatest heart desire as the mead ran its happy course through his veins. "This tale of yours, Lord Davos, is as childish and untrue as the stories that our old wet nurse used to tell us in Winterfell about monsters behind the Wall!"

Jon regretted the words as soon as they escaped his mouth.
Dany eyed him with interest. Even Pyke was in a mood to hear a story about monsters, it seemed. Davos nodded with approval. It was Jon's turn for storytelling, just what he wanted to avoid, superstitious as never before.

"There is this one that I liked best," Jon muttered, searching for his eloquence. A dark story would at least fit better in the oppressive darkness all around their tiny shelter than any talk of magical salvation. If there was a way to victory in the coming war, Jon very much doubted it would be found by magic.

"Once, many thousands of years ago," he started, "the Night's King ruled the Wall. He may have been the Stark of Winterfell or a Bolton or a Flint, it depends on who tells the story. He was the thirteenth Lord Commander of the Night's Watch, some say, but our list of the old lord commanders is not very trustworthy for those times."

"This Night's King took a woman with skin white as snow and eyes black as the night to bride. She was a corpse or a mermaid come from the sea, some say. With her help, or with her sorcery, no one knows, he defeated all his enemies and hung their entrails from the weirwoods as a gift to the gods. He was a wicked, cruel king. And he and his wife reigned together for thousands of years, until Joramun blew the Horn of Winter and woke the giants from the earth," Jon couldn't remember Old Nan's story with any more detail. His boy stomach twisted with morbid joy and fear every time he heard it as a child, yet he was able to forget it later on, as a man forgets his meal from the week before.

Lady Melisandre burned the horn Mance said was Joramun's, but Tormund was adamant that it was not.

_I gave Sam a broken aurochs horn which I found buried beyond the Wall. But it can't be! The Horn of Winter would surely look more... heroic._ It was a silly thought. Almost like something his sister Sansa would think when they were all children. Arya would break the horn further in pieces. Bran would sound it and wait. And Rickon wouldn't even notice that there was a horn because he was still a baby when Jon left home.

"My pardons," Jon said, managing a smile on his long face with great difficulty. "Tonight I don't feel like telling stories any more."

He would drink more mead but there was none to be had.

Meanwhile, Dany sneaked so close to the fire between Pyke and him that her feet were almost in it, smouldering with the embers. A _girl of fire, indeed_, Jon thought, fascinated.

Dany was all eyes and ears for Jon. "Perhaps you could sing about this Night's King?" she slightly slurred. Jon wanted to react with scorn, but he stopped himself. She didn't sound as if she were mocking him. She was merely asking.

"I have no voice for that, I'm afraid," he said. A simple answer to a simple question.

"More is the pity," Dany said. "I thought you might have. I can't sing either. Not any more," she seemed very sad about this for unfathomable reasons. Everything about her remained unfathomable. Jon sighed.

"It's just that," she sounded as if she were excusing herself, "I grew accustomed to singers."

Jon couldn't remember Queen Selyse ever having a singer. Only a fool for her daughter with bells on his hat.
"You should have chanced upon Mance Rayder, not me then," he told her.

"And what if I did?" she was defying him.

Jon's ears pricked, a minuscule movement. He was becoming more like his wolf ever since he was murdered by his sworn brothers. "Then I'd ask you if he travelled with a short young girl who looks a bit like me," he was giddy and dared give voice to his secret hopes.

"And if he did?"

"My heart would rejoice, yet I would still know that you're lying," it was the first time he confronted her with the truth.

"Would you?" she said sleepily, "Rejoice then. Your sister Arya is alive and well. Maybe you will make less noises and stop turning at night, so that I can get some rest as well."

Jon whooped and whistled. "How do you know my sister's name?" Have I been talking in my sleep? What else did I tell her?

Dany was drowsing now, sliding onto Pyke's shoulder. Davos had already surrendered to knightly, measured snores. The girl must have had too much mead, and whatever she had said bore no weight. Her headdress slid fully off. It was the first time Jon saw her hair, so light blond that it appeared to be silver. There was no seduction in her gesture of falling on Cotter, only the innocence of sleep.

Pyke, who was normally as gentle as a boulder on their path, seemed similarly ensconced by mead, fire and tales told over it, after many days of hard travel. The ironborn put an arm around Dany's shoulders and as they drifted to sleep together, Jon wished that the arm holding the girl had been his. I must be tired too and hearing things she never said, Jon told himself. There was no way Dany could have been telling the truth about meeting Mance and Arya.

Jon whispered a prayer to the absent old gods for his little sister, for Mance and his spearwives, and also one for Dany, the pretty liar.

Lightly inebriated, he nevertheless stayed awake until Old Garth came in and it was Jon's turn to keep watch. He forgot how tired he was, pondering alternatives of how to return to the Wall. Castle Black was too far and Eastwatch surrounded by snows.

He had sat idle at Hardhome for too long, gnawing at his wounded pride. No matter what Bowen Marsh and the rest of his killers believed, his war, their war, was still coming.

Jon could not afford to oversleep it.

When his watch ended toward the morning hours, he woke Lord Davos and the sleep he missed instantly snatched him away.

In his dream, he was the Night's King and the Mermaid Queen had Dany's face.

xx

The morning dawned grey, and almost warm in comparison to the deadly cold of the night. It was as if the lands were inviting them to go north just as they had forbidden them to turn south. It was a valid course as any other.

The living corpse with the wrong number of fingers continued to twitch, tied to the sentinel trunk.
The movement would stop whenever some semblance of sunlight appeared over the world, Jon knew.

The she-eagle dived down from high above the forest and landed on the wight's head, closing its huge wings. This morning, instead of pecking at the black hands as was the bird's crazy wont, it buried its beak aggressively into one of the dead blue eyes, piercing the frozen flesh until only a black hollow remained.

Jon stared, waiting for something. Dany approached him from behind, silent as only Ghost could be. The wolf was also there, prowling between the trees. Jon could occasionally smell the snow as the wolf did, jumping between his two skins.

The corpse didn't stop twitching and the bird hopped off.

Slowly, the wight rose as much as the ropes allowed, and then it sat down, awake and quiet, not fighting against the restraints.

Dany put a hand to her lips. "Just like Lady Jeyne," she murmured and Jon wondered what she could possibly mean. The only Lady Jeyne he had heard about became Robb's wife and caused his ruin at the hands of Lord Walder Frey.

Jon gave up asking Dany questions, not cherishing lies for answers. Maybe she would talk to him one day of her own accord, preferably without drinking mead first.

The corpse watched them as if it were going to open its mouth and talk.

The eagle screamed, soaring into the sky, satisfied with her doing for the day.

And then, the one-eyed grumkin spoke, sounding like a young girl with a pretty soft voice, who hadn't heard herself speak in a thousand years.

Jon didn't understand her. The dead girl repeated what she was saying. *Losing an eye had surely made her talkative*, Jon pondered. The eagle plunged down again. The bird spat some remnants of dead flesh in the snow and cawed at the morning light.

There was still some brightness left in the world.

"I don't understand her," Dany said after listening very carefully to the dead girl's tirade, "and I have learned more languages besides the Common Tongue."

"This is Old Tongue," Jon said, realizing he had *heard* similar talk before. "The language of the First Men and the giants."

"She doesn't look like a giant to me," Dany pointed out. It was the truth. The creature seemed more like a child. Her pale dead skin was dappled on the back of her neck, like a spotted fur of some dog. "No," Jon agreed, fascinated.

The girl kept ranting.

Jon padded to the tree where Old Garth and Pyke were sorting out the flat planks to turn them into the cart again. "Garth! Come with me, please!"

Most of the wildlings understood Old Tongue. Jon hoped that Garth was one of them.

The stout old man, proud to have gotten his name from the man of the Night's Watch he had killed,
brushed against Jon and faced the dead girl. Her hair was auburn red like Sansa’s; the colour of blood and of the old gods, of the weirwoods and their hungry-looking mouths, not the more orange-red Ygritte had.

The little monster repeated what it said for the third time.

Old Garth scratched his head. "I can't be sure all the way," he said, pondering his words. "It is a different Old Tongue than what we the free folk speak now. Methinks she says she heard a story Davos told. You were all so loud last night. 'Twas a miracle no walkers came." Garth turned to the girl and asked something back in the same melodious gibberish Jon could not comprehend.

The newly talkative wight rattled other sentences, in all appearance eager to speak more now that someone understood her.

"She says... she says..." There was a look of wrinkled concentration on Old Garth's face. "She says she can take you to me old home, the Lands of Always Winter. Now, I wouldn't go there if I were you, can't see why anyone should wish to do so, but 'tis what she says,"

"Far up north, she says," Old Garth spoke and the dead girl pointed north, "farther than the Ice Dragon and the Thief there are other stars..."

The dead girl-child sang on and the wildling finally conveyed an almost uninterrupted string of her words, "Far behind, or under, I'm not certain... Under the halls of the Night's King and his lady wife, you will find your magic sword. It is your magic sword-"

"Jon Snow," the dead girl pronounced Jon's name so clearly that there was no need for Old Garth to translate. She sounded as solemn as Mormont's raven did when he had called out Jon's name on the occasion of his election to the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch.

The eagle screeched fiercely, the wolf howled, the girl sighed.

Jon Snow gaped.

"I'll go," he said, not knowing where the instinct to do so came from.

Old Garth translated his words, and the dead child made a repulsive one-eyed smile.

*I am not made of the stuff of heroes*, the words of Lord Davos echoed in Jon's mind. *What stuff am I made of?* Jon wondered, recalling his childish dreams of being Daeron the Young Dragon who conquered Dorne, albeit for a very short time.

And died so young that he barely had any time to live.

Whatever stuff he was made of, Jon was not going anywhere alone.

The bird carefully landed on his left shoulder, the first time she ever dared do that. Jon found the she-eagle surprisingly light for the span of her long wings. On a reflex, he stretched his arm to give her more place. The talons wrapped around his upper arm, gentle as a mother's touch. Or as Jon had imagined mother's touch could be. The bird croaked.

Dany never left Jon's side.

Lord Davos readied the cart; Pyke and he would have the honour of pulling it first. Jon climbed on it after Dany, possessed by feverishness, regardless of the chill.
Seated, he realized he forgot to liberate their new guide. Before he could get off the cart and untie her, the wight did what Jon considered impossible; she wriggled out of the tight bondages she was wearing and decided to walk.

The cold could do the dead child no more harm.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who reads, comments and likes this story. I hope you liked this part.
Special thanks to those who dared check the prequel because they have an interest in this story. I always feel so happy when the older work gets a kudos now and then as well.
Jaime

Chapter Notes

I am immensely grateful to TopShelfCrazy for beta-reading this chapter, and for making me believe, from time to time, that a story like this one may be worth writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jaime

The Bloody Gate was fortunately only a gate as its name implied, and not a bloody castle. Under the walls sealing the mountain pass into one of the most fertile valleys in the Seven Kingdoms, the Vale of Arryn, there were no dungeons.

So much for the better.

The warm and companionable hospitality of the Tully black cells was the last thing Jaime could ever again abide. Not even for an hour. Certainly not after his forced stay in Riverrun, in a time which now seemed as remote as the Age of Heroes, the time when he still possessed his sword hand and the unwavering arrogance of a freshly knighted squire.

So much has changed since then; I most of all.

Once he fancied himself to love his sister until his dying day. Once he flung a boy out of the window to keep his love a secret, and once he pondered murdering that boy's little sister because she beat his son, Joffrey, who had probably deserved it. Gods were occasionally good though, and Ned Stark's men found little Arya first when she had sensibly run away. They were less good when Joffrey had Stark's head cut off for the heinous treason of speaking the truth, and, much later, when Joff choked on his wedding pie.

Jaime supposed he really didn't make the best of fathers.

He fervently hoped to now be cleverer than in those ancient times that tormented him. Changing who you are does not change what you have done.

Now he had the arrogance of a lad of one and twenty, as his young wife would say when she was mad with him. He preferred not to dwell on how young Brienne was nor on how undeserving he was of her. He hoped the comparison she used meant she was at least one and twenty. He never dared ask. Thinking of Brienne always warmed him on the inside in a way the thought of Cersei never did. He hoped that would never change.

Older, if not wiser, and a hand short, Jaime had never thought he would willingly find himself prisoner of Ser Brynden Tully. Yet he arrived at the Bloody Gate several hours ahead of young Lord Arryn and his retinue, very much with that unique insensible purpose on his mind. Little lord even acquiesced to Jaime's plea not to send a raven to announce his return to the lands which were his by right.

Jaime, the newly-made prisoner, felt forlorn. His white horse, Honor, stood riderless and tame, and the white peace banner under which Jaime had come to the Vale lay in a pond of dirty snow,
absorbing mud. The mountain air he breathed in was prickly and sharp, so damn stark in character.

*I'm away from my wife for the first time since we said our vows in the godswood of the Red Keep.*

Brienne was always foremost on his mind since Rhaegar spared his life; unbelievably innocent, and his, his, his.

No one else's.

Jaime was childishly happy that her beauty was not of the usual kind, so most men were blind to it, just as he had been in the beginning. *The Moon Boy wouldn't want to lie with her and he wouldn't know what he is missing.*

The grin that spread over Jaime's features must have been a particularly stupid one because one of the brave knights treading in Ser Brynden Blackfish's shadow felt invited to spit in his face. Jaime's blood roared or flared, he would never be certain. Not unless he found his aunt.

So he kept calm and hid on the inside, as he had been trying to do when Aerys burned men alive.

*I'm away from my dragon too.* Jaime could still not wrap his mind around the fact of being a dragonrider. He did nothing to deserve it. *A white horse and a white dragon for a man with a pail of shit for honour.* Yet Viserion would get seriously upset whenever the white and golden lizard perceived such thoughts from the rider he had chosen, so it was best to think them when the dragon was not here.

Otherwise Brienne would get even more sick of flying on an angry, fire-panting beast and Jaime wanted to please his wife in everything.

Except in this enterprise he was attempting to do now, that she had been very much against.

The ancient gates of the First Men reinforced by the Andals reminded Jaime of old Lord Arryn, little Robert's father. Jon Arryn had been a prickly, suspicious man and too clever by half. In retrospect, it was a miracle he only discovered about Jaime and Cersei when he did. Jaime had always avoided the now long dead Hand of the equally dead King Robert as much as he could. The man had cold, quiet eyes susceptible to see to the bottom of Jaime's sinful soul prone to illicit fornications and unhealthy devotions. And he had an immaculate sense of honour only Ned Stark could match.

Jon Arryn did at least one act of valour in his life that Jaime knew of; he had called his banners instead of sending his two young wards, Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon, to King's Landing, so that Aerys could enjoy burning them.

And now Jaime stood behind Jon Arryn's front door, at the mercy of Ser Brynden Tully, the Knight of the Gate, just as he had planned. The way the Blackfish and his men looked at him, as though he were vermin, Jaime expected they would gladly build a dungeon specially for him, to hold him prisoner forever and ever, if only they had enough time.

They didn't.

And Jaime had even less time to goad Ser Brynden into telling him the truth about what the Tullys had done with Aunt Genna before Jon Arryn's son arrived and proudly raised his banners.

Putting himself at the mercy of the aged, grizzled knight was perhaps not Jaime's brightest notion. Tyrion would have surely thought of something better. But had Jaime arrived on dragon's back and at the head of the little lord's army, the Blackfish would have most likely become just as obdurate as when Jaime took Riverrun. He would vanish into the mountains, like once he must have swam under
the portcullis of Riverrun, and never tell Jaime what he wanted to know, if only to spite him.

This way, Jaime hoped Brynden Blakckfish might gloat in having the Kingslayer in his power, and more than anything, talk.

He remembered their last parley in Riverrun with well-measured bitterness. Ser Brynden, the knight Jaime once admired as a young squire, had no love for the Kingslayer then, and he seemed to harbour even less affection for him now.

Archers with quivers full of arrows fletched with dark feathers stood up on the high, smooth walls, that sprang toward the sky from the bottom construction of roughly-hewn stones; their bows were tight, all targeting Jaime. Ser Brynden sat ahorse in front of him, in company of five knights afoot wearing the moon and falcon doublets of the House Arryn. Jaime was on his knees, hand and stump bound in front, and both feet behind him, with thick hempen rope.

One of Ser Brynden's knights in waiting was rather handsome and more cocky than the others.

"Times change to be sure," Brynden Blackfish said with an expression of cautious joy on his craggy features, "I've never thought I was going to take you prisoner again, Kingslayer."

"I can see that the ravens from King's Landing didn't make it to the Vale," Jaime said as cockily as he could, "a miserable, faraway land, much like the North." His tongue earned him an armoured slap over his face from a chubby, fat knight, who hurried to do Jaime that honour.

"The ravens from the capital are not welcome here," clarified the young lord-like lad, proudly boasting a more lavish moon and falcon sigil than the others wore. A cloak of cloth-of-silver hung from his shoulders. "We shoot them down to practise our aim for battle."

"How interesting," Jaime said, dripping boredom from his bleeding lips. "And you are?"

"Harrold Hardyng, Lord of the Eyrie. They call me the Young Falcon."

Young Harry must have been freezing to look handsome and every inch a lord, Jaime noticed. Beauty undoubtedly had its price. The cloak he wore was nowhere nearly as warm as the season required. Jaime wore a long-sleeved brown leather jerkin over woollen tunic and breeches, but no armour. Viserion's body was so warm that it was next to impossible to fly him clad in mail, winter or not. He had forgotten his cloak and he began to regret it; it was damn cold.

"I had thought Robert Arryn, son of Jon Arryn was the falcon and the lord of these lands," Jaime duly noted.

Blackfish did start gloating. "Littlefinger took him to the capital as you well know. I guess that between the two of you, you had Sweetrobin killed and now you intend to name another Warden of the East. The candidate for the office might be riding behind you, why not? My scouts have seen and counted your party, Kingslayer. You're not coming alone. But you didn't bring enough men to storm the Bloody Gate."

"Viserion can fly over your damn gate and burn your righteous asses straight to seven hells, Jaime"
thought and smiled prettily through his damaged lips.

Blackfish's scouts were apparently gnats, as the Hound would say, if they didn't recognise their little liege leading the men behind Jaime. Robert, or Robin as he preferred to be called (and Jaime couldn't blame him whenever he remembered King Robert), grew in height since he was away, and he was less sickly since he had gotten lessons in proper warging from Queen Lyanna, but his face was much the same.

And judging from Ser Brynden's stance, and young Harry's behaviour, neither of the two was told that little piece of pertinent information. Jaime wondered what the daring scouts had made of Viserion if they had seen him. An overgrown flying leviathan? A giant falcon?

"I mostly do my own killing," Jaime reminded Ser Brynden dryly. "It's the only thing I had in common with the late Ned Stark."

An arrow swooshed past Jaime's ear. Ser Brynden lifted his arm to halt the hot-blooded archer. Brienne was right, Jaime thought. This is a very bad notion. Maybe he survived Lady Catelyn's firepit only to be feathered to death by some of her distant fish or falcon relatives.

"I'm merely looking for my Aunt Genna," Jaime announced peacefully. "I've been to Riverrun and I made my count. None of the hostages I wanted for the Rock ever crossed the border toward the West. All disappeared before they left the riverlands according to my aunt's husband, Ser Emmon Frey. He also has scouts."

"I'm not stupid, Blackfish. I know who you must be hiding in the Vale now." Speaking hurt, but it was a necessary evil. Jaime went on, "You have Edmure and his Frey wife with little fish in her belly, or more like out of her belly by now."

"You also have Robb Stark's widow and her sweet mother, Lady Sybelle Westerling, born Spicer, although perhaps you should consider placing that gentle elderly lady in a bear pit if you have any such perks of amusement in the Vale." In a pink dress, if you please, it's the colour that goes well with a black bear, if you have one. Jaime remembered Brienne, facing a bear with a blunt tourney sword, before he jumped between her and the beast unarmed, just like he now came to the Vale.

"What, with so many visitors enjoying the sacred guest right and eating the winter stocks of food of the Arryns," Jaime remembered his purpose again, "I should very much hope you have my Aunt Genna as well."

Ser Brynden looked suspicious, not speaking. He fondled a black fish clasping his cloak. Jet and gold. "What do you want?" he finally asked.

"My aunt," Jaime said. "Haven't I just told you? Maybe I discovered I prefer older women and that I'm madly in love with her. Or we have dirty family matters to discuss. There are plenty of those when you're a Lannister, you shouldn't find it so hard to believe that."

Young would-be lord urged forward his armed minions. "Show the Kingslayer the price of insolence!"

Soon there was more blood in Jaime's mouth and he wondered if that was how Sansa Stark felt when Joffrey had his Kingsguard beat her every time Robb Stark won a victory. Fortunately, Jaime was not a girl and he was older than Sansa when Joffrey bestowed such courtesies on his betrothed.

Brienne, you were right, he thought miserably, this is a waste of time. His wife loved him handsome. She would fiercely deny such a thing but he could tell from the way she studied him. From the way
you are touching me, Brienne. And I would want to remain handsome for you, for a while longer, until age finally ruins me and takes it all away.

The strange thing was, he never valued much his golden looks until he fell in love with the former Maid of Tarth. His source of pride had been his sword hand, his battle prowess, and certainly not his hair. And Cersei only loved in him her own image in a mirror, not the man he was.

"Wait," Jaime said. He had to talk them out of beating him very bloody. *Viserion is not far.* He felt the white horned presence hurrying to his rider, angered by the suffering the dragon perceived from afar. "Tommen is no longer king."

That news had a desired effect. All eyes were on him. The beating stopped.

"Should I offer you condolences for the loss of another king you were supposed to guard or for the loss of your bastard son?" Ser Brynden asked with the air of superiority Jaime hated.

"Neither," Jaime said, grinning unstoppably, beating or no beating, "for my son is alive and returning home as we speak. He will be the Warden of the West in place of his mother who is, alas, not in condition to be the Lady of Casterly Rock."

Confusion began its reign among the courageous knights of the Vale, so thick that Jaime could almost taste it. Sun rose higher in a sky on a clear winter day that promised to be far too beautiful to be wasted by being a prisoner. *Flying would be so much better.*

"And who sits the Iron Throne? One of the two Targaryen pretenders?" Ser Brynden asked with mild interest.

"So you didn't shoot down all the ravens if you know that there were two?" Jaime sneered. "Did you pity the birds? I didn't take you for a bird lover."

"The last one brought an invitation to some kind of mummers' show in the capital," Blackfish scratched the gray shock of hair on his scalp, towering above a pair of bushy eyebrows. *His head was auburn once,* Jaime remembered, before the Blackfish continued speaking. "We are far away from King's Landing and even if we were not, I didn't judge it prudent for any of us to go. No road is safe in winter."

"It's funny you dare speak of winter," Jaime whispered, eyeing the mountains forming the natural barrier of the Vale. "You're as much a man of the south as I am." He thought he saw the falcon Robin Arryn could warg into on one of the crags behind the Bloody Gate. That was when another possibility struck him.

There were no dungeons at the Bloody Gate, but there were trees in abundance. And Blackfish was not Ned Stark, he was Lady Catelyn's uncle. He wouldn't pray to a tree.

Jaime looked around, uneasy.

Serving men-at-arms were readying a rope and a noose on a nearby oak-tree. Jaime didn't think they would hang themselves dead so it left only one possibility. He closed his eyes and hoped the dragon was close enough to pre-empt any tragic consequences of his blunder. If he died uselessly, Brienne would never forgive him. If he died, it had to be by some noble death. At least he could give her that much for her firm belief in his capacity to regain honour.

"I ask you one more time, Ser Brynden, please," Jaime pleaded as lowly as he could. "Have you or have you not my aunt? I have been to Riverrun and it is like a castle of ghosts in the middle of winter you just spoke of. There are dead men prowling under its walls, Lannister men and Tully men alike.
Jaime hoped the Blackfish might see reason. The Others and their wights didn’t care about quarrels between the houses. They would simply kill them all. He pressed on, "If Edmure can keep his rampant manhood out of his beloved wife for the duration of a campaign, you should ride out in force and defend it. There are still men in the garrison who used to serve you."

"Why should we help?" the Blackfish asked, merciless as a white walker. "Let the Frey die in peace. One Frey less will do good to the world. Then we will retake our castle."

The agile servants took hold of Jaime and dragged him up on the back of his horse, Honor. He was made to ride sideways like ladies sometimes did. This proved too slow so they forced his legs open and tied him to the saddle. Jaime and his Honor were directed in a very slow pace towards the hanging tree. A nervousness came over Jaime. He desired to offend Blackfish, forgetting that the situation he found himself in was essentially his own fault.

"Well," Jaime started explaining why, "for a start, you the Tullys were the first Westerosi nobles to bend the knee to Aegon the Conqueror in the past, while my ancestors at least tried to fight back in the Field of Fire. You reaped a plentiful reward for that, becoming Lords Paramounts of the riverlands. Some would call you lickspittles. Why not side with the Targaryens now? Offer them the fealty of Riverrun as before? You should hurry up."

"Just hang him, please, will you?" Ser Brynden's voice was as sharp as his steel when he addressed the serving men-at-arms, not blunted by the passing of time. "Lord Hardynge and I have no time to listen to the likes of him."

The lad nodded with enthusiasm. He sees him as the high ideal of chivalry, Jaime thought. Just like I once did.

"Ser Brynden, please, remember Aunt Genna!" Jaime was begging again, drunk on his need to find out the absolute truth about Aerys and his mother, not minding the humiliation as he normally would. "You know, the old plump Lannister woman! It is not her fault that my grandfather married her to a Frey! My fath- Lord Tywin opposed the match. You have Lord Tully, and his heir, and the heir of Robb Stark if his widow's mother's witch potions did not work so well on the poor girl. What is my aunt to you?"

The look Ser Brynden gave him was telling and the noose discovered its way around Jaime's neck. The dragon was almost there, but not quite. Jaime wondered idly if the crystals dragons breathed to heal wounds could bring a man back from the dead. Somehow he thought they could not.

He tried one last thing. Surely if he has her, he would bring her to watch now. Ryman Frey threatened to hang Edmure while all Riverrun was watching. It would be a fitting revenge. "Won't you bring her to witness my passing?" his voice was almost a squeak and the sound shamed him.

Yet Jaime's last words struck true. The hidden look of regret in Blackfish's eyes told him what the man would not. He didn't take my aunt. But where is she then? Maybe she was a wandering wight in the riverlands. If it were so, Jaime would never know for certain who his father had been.

The thought of Aerys II fathering him was unbearable in itself, yet the uncertainty was even less tolerable, making him feel as if both Tywin and Aerys were his sire, and that was a hundred times worse than if only one of them was.

The notion of being Aerys's son scared him on a more profound level than being the chosen heir of Lord Tywin. Although, truth be told, after the Red Wedding, maybe the difference between the two
childhood friends was not that large as it once appeared to Jaime. Lord Tywin didn't even have to be mad to plan that atrocity when it suited his interests. And there was also the murder of Rhaegar's children.

Jaime closed his eyes, ignoring his predicament. His whole being listened for the mighty flapping of the wings. The falcon crowed in the sky, offended, and flew away over the mountains, back to Robin Arryn.

"We should cut your legs under you," Ser Brynden judged, "as your men did under your command to Ned Stark's house guards and their steeds."

Maybe you should, Jaime thought, hoping they wouldn't. One stump was enough for one lifetime.

"You want to know who the king is now?" he asked as casually as he could. The noose pressed in his neck, but they didn't slap the rump of the horse under him. Yet.

Viserion, Jaime called in his mind. Now would be a good time.

"If what you say is true," Ser Brynden said, "and if there's a Targaryen pretender on the throne, he or she will want your head more than the fealty of Riverrun. I have to start being a lickspittle convincingly."

The chubby knight gently tapped Honor's back before he would set the horse into the motion which would abruptly and thoroughly end Jaime's life. His feet would dangle in the air, in a final twitch unworthy of a Lannister. Or a Targaryen. Or any man, if he thought it through. But reflection was never one of Jaime's strong sides.

"Here's the trick," Jaime told the truth, too tired and too simple-minded to invent a suitable lie. "The king is a he. He doesn't look very much like a pretender to me. And against my better judgement in the matter His Grace believes me to be his half-brother. That's why I'm looking for my aunt; she's the only family member alive who remembers my mother, Lady Joanna Lannister."

Ser Brynden laughed in abandon and disbelief. All the other knights and the young cocky lord followed his example. Jaime joined the general merriment, laughing stiffly. "Most amuthing, isn't it? As my old friend Vargo Hoat would say," he joked dryly, waving his stump, which bothered him little and less of late.

Ever since he rode Viserion, he didn't see himself as a cripple. It was extremely hard to feel powerless on the back of the dragon. "I found it funny as well when I was first told," Jaime bobbed his noose-cradled head. "His Grace, however, disagrees strongly and insists I am his father's bastard."

"The Mountain killed Aegon. And this pretender from the Free Cities wearing Aegon's name is much too young to consider you a brother," Blackfish's voice rang cruel. "A father, maybe. But not even you could have fathered all the bastards in this world."

Jaime felt blood gushing to his mouth as he opened it to speak. The cut from the vambrace ran deep. Swallowing blood, he said as arrogantly as he could. "What do you know about fathering anyone? I thought you were a stranger to the company of women. Not that I blame you after bedding some of them. Cersei. Anyhow, the king has a sister who has hatched three dragons."

"And His Grace is older than me," Jaime stated, dead serious. Now at least he had Ser Brynden's full attention.

"Ever heard of Rhaegar, as in Rhaegar Targaryen?" Jaime asked casually, impossibly sweetly.
The time stopped.

Until the fat, cowardly knight slapped the horse. The beast moved only two steps forward, slow as an ox. Honor was never a very spirited horse. Jaime remained half seated, half hanging. He wrestled with the ropes on his arms, eager to pull away the rope from his neck.

"Is this how you treated my aunt as well?" he squeezed venom through his gritting teeth.

"I never kidnapped your aunt," Ser Brynden said coldly, "I swear it on my honour as a knight. Let it not be said I refused you a dying wish."

"Thank you," Jaime said, believing him, "that was the only thing I wanted to know."

He thought of the white and golden scales approaching and of an end to his pain. Clinging to thinning hope, he considered that just maybe, if Aunt Genna wasn't here, she may have gone to Casterly Rock on time, before winter, and he would find her when he returned from Essos. But then her Frey husband would know that.

Jaime's neck and his mouth hurt. Maybe she found a new lover so she didn't tell him. It wouldn't be the first time. Genna gave Emmon heirs, but out of that, she was her own woman.

Viserion! Jaime bellowed in his mind when Honor made another step forward. No-one present was willing to give the animal the final push. Now, please!

"He's a tremendous liar, Ser Brynden," Lord Hardying said all of a sudden with the fire of youth. "Let me butcher him in a single combat! Hanging is too much of a clean death for him."

Jaime snorted, and his eyes cried tears of both pain and laughter. Brienne was going to be so angry with him.

"My lords," he muttered very quietly, not to upset the horse and hang himself fully, "it was a pleasure talking to you. Alas, it is high time I take my leave."

"And how would you do that?" young Harry said, "you are as good as hanged." The boy who thought himself a lord raised a hand and slapped the horse into motion. "Hang if that is your wish! For the Vale!"

Jaime fought like crazy against the restraints on his arms as the air was leaving him and he could not catch the noose to free his neck. The terrible, terrible sensation didn't last longer than a second.

White wings flapped.

Harry was a tad too late.

A sharp claw picked up Jaime with dexterity practised in previous flights. A nail of a second paw released the bond tying him to the saddle. A spiked tail swept away all the brave knights from the Vale as a gust of stormy wind come fresh from the faraway seas. The air above Jaime burned and the pressure around his neck loosened. A piece of charred rope hung limp on his neck like an odd pendant on a golden chain.

"Ah," Jaime said, enjoying the easing of the tension. He scrambled over Viserion and cut the ropes off his arms on one of the spikes on the dragon's back. "This is much better," he rubbed his hand and stump when he succeeded, pulling himself up in a usual rider's place. Noose was off in the next instant, spiralling downwards. Jaime didn't cherish such ornaments.

"My lords," he announced regally, "have the pleasure of meeting Viserion, who has determined for
reasons unknown to me that I am his rider. His Grace King Rhaegar Targaryen, First of His Name, is sending us on an urgent errand across the narrow sea, once we have seen his Warden of the East safely to his home."

Lord Hardyng sat in the mud where the peace banner stewed, and had the grace to shut up and spare everyone any further courtesies. Ser Brynden straightened, expecting death, Jaime made a wild guess.

"Kill us now and be done with it, Kingslayer," the old Tully muttered, challenging the dragon. "We deserve it for failing to hang you." So I guessed right.

"I fear I will disappoint you again," Jaime said, tired of the world of men believing the worst of him. "You told me that yourself in Riverrun, remember. I always disappoint. Both Tywin and Tyrion would agree. Does that make you a Lannister? I merely wanted to know about my aunt."

Blackfish had the nerve to reply, "I must say your face looked better before you came here, Kingslayer. I can't say I'm entirely disappointed about that."

Jaime laughed heartily. Nothing could quench the old knight's spirit. Maybe Ser Brynden could see him as something else than the oathbreaker. One day. The hope was idle, but nourishing nonetheless.

Hovering above the Bloody Gate, glancing up instead of down, he instantly felt better. Where is Brienne? Jaime eagerly searched for his wife among the riders in the arriving column. Dust was on their heels. Lord Arryn didn't waste time. And he had struck down the banners for the final swift ride. Jaime felt proud for the boy.

"Ser Jaime," a very young voice peeped on the ground, just outside the Bloody Gate. Robin Arryn's voice was changing from the voice of a child into a deep rumble belonging to a man. The mixture sounded hilarious. "Wait, please. I would have a word with you before you leave."

The riders flanking Robin unfurled two great standards with the falcon and the moon of the House Arryn, sky blue on white, much more impressive than the doublet poor Harry wore. Robin removed the helm he had on, and rode forward to the door of his lands, wearing his face in place of a banner.

"Great-uncle," Robin called out to the Blackfish, who seemed more shocked by the apparition of the boy in good health than by that of a living dragon. "His Grace King Rhaegar had seen fit to restore the title of the Warden of the East to the House Arryn. Petyr Baelish is dead. He pushed my mother through the Moon Door and frightened Alay... Lady Sansa Stark to witness against my mother's singer, Marillion."

"Cousin Harry," Robin continued in that odd falsetto only boys who are not quite men can have. "I'm truly sorry that I'm not dead yet. You will have to wait a bit to inherit the Vale."

The child was brave as the falcon he could fly with in his dreams.

"And just so that you all know before Ser Jaime leaves us, I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for Ser Jaime's great bravery. Ser Jaime, I will send a raven to King Rhaegar and Queen Lyanna to let them know you fulfilled your duty toward me. And to confirm that the Vale will provide the agreed quantity of food and find ships willing to take it to Eastwatch in this weather, though they may be pirates or mercenaries from the Free Cities."

Jaime was thoroughly sickened from being called Ser Jaime three times in the same speech; it was a
bit much. He felt less noble every time Robin Arryn used the honorific title.

"Shall I stay a few days to help you with the lord bannermen as the king wanted?" Jaime asked the little lord from mid-air and patted the dragon's neck between the two shorter spikes. The beast was fond of that. The armed escort of the Warden of the East descended slowly to the gate down the mountain road. The Bloody Gate was open to them now, as a freshly blossoming black flower.

Sweetrobin shook his head. "It is very kind of you, as my cousin, Lady Sansa, would say. But I am almost a man grown and my father's son. I will deal with my lord bannermen."

Jaime believed that he would.

The dragon veered his head and loosened a puff of golden smoke at Ser Brynden who stood with unease, tilted as a statue of one of the Seven when worms ate the wood they were carved of on the inside. It's hard to admit you might have been wrong, isn't it? I should know. I had been mistaken about so many things. The change of attitude pleased Jaime greatly.

"You were unarmed and under peace banner," Robin Arryn said, "if you want any of them to fly from the Moon Door, even my great-uncle, it shall be done."

Jaime smiled a sad smile.

"On another day I'd love to challenge Ser Brynden to a joust and win," he said, waving his stump, "but my lady wife would never forgive me if I lost."

The expression on the faces of the men from the Vale had been priceless ever since the dragon made his appearance, but Jaime's mention of his wife made them even more satisfyingly shocked. Almost worth a smile bubbling with blood over his face.

"Speaking of which, where is she?" Jaime grew impatient.

He had to wait some more. Brienne rode in with the rearguard, clad as any man. Jaime glided toward her, as low as the dragon could go without touching the ground, and jumped off Viserion's back to land next to her, in a daring movement he was now very proud of. He remembered Rhaegar's look of envy when he showed him how he could fly the dragon hanging upside down.

Then, not soon enough, the face of his wife, dismounting, was the only thing in his field of vision. He invaded it with his pained lips, more swollen than hers were made by the wisdom of nature. He adored Brienne's lips since he first tasted them. Now he was carefully avoiding the scar on her cheek, only because it hurt her when he kissed her there.

"Viserion left me in a hurry," she said, "I think he tried to warn me he needed all his speed."

And you were happy to ride instead of flying if only for a few hours, Jaime understood. He kissed her again, shortly this time.

Viserion waggled and coiled his long tail, sweeping the former Maid of Tarth over his back, which was marginally better than being scooped by the beast's claws as frequently happened to Jaime. Thank you, Jaime told his dragon, climbing back on his back as well. Brienne ended up seated in front of him without a shriek, a true lady, and a much better knight. Good lad, Jaime praised the dragon in his mind again.

From the back of a dragon, the world was never the same again.

And the highlight of it was Brienne's form bumping into Jaime with every peaceful flap of the broad,
scaled wings. They would never be able to comfortably ride a horse together like that, both being too tall and broad.

But dragons were much larger animals than horses, and Viserion was still growing.

Brienne was back where she belonged. Three hours without his wife was as much as Jaime could bear that day.

"Have you found out what you wanted?" she asked, blessedly without commenting on his improved looks. A trace of his blood was plastered on her cheek, a seal, a proof of his kiss. He remembered the time they met; he never missed a chance to belittle her. Jaime sighed. He truly didn't deserve Brienne. But if she thought of it differently, who was he to deny her.

"Ser Brynden doesn't know," he mumbled. "I'm heartsick from it," he hoped no-one heard that. After all he had a reputation of the Kingslayer to maintain. "Let us fly to Gulltown, and away from this damn land."

Jaime wished for a hidden grove or a cave between here and the sea where they could stop to greet each other properly. Viserion was becoming good at making campfires and they were becoming better and better at playing husband and wife.

"Gulltown," Brienne agreed.

She half-turned her head. Sharp blond hairs tickled Jaime's eyes. "You could tell me why you are so afraid of finding Tyrion as we fly. It feels less sickening if you're talking to me."

The dragon dropped in height unasked, very near to Ser Brynden again; it gave him a pungent look from one golden eye. *Don't meddle with my rider,* the young voice of the dragon rumbled in Jaime's head although Blackfish would never be able to hear it.

Viserion snorted and a large puff of hot smoke left his maw, leaving the view of the Bloody Gate enveloped in a dense sulphurous fog. The dragon rose in height once more, abandoning the fortress of the First Man, which looked as delicate in the stinky mist as a beautiful daydream.

Talking about Tyrion was not at all what Jaime had in mind.

"Can I tell you some other day?"

"No," his wife was adamant and stubborn, and he was reminded of how much he loved her.

"Tyrion married when he was three and ten without permission. I did what my father wanted. I told him he married a whore I bought for him so he could be with a woman for the first time. Then my father let his guardsmen rape Tyrion's wife and pay her a silver for every man she serviced. They treated her worse than a common whore," Jaime said, remembering.

"He made Tyrion go last and pay her a golden coin because he was a Lannister," Jaime vocalised. "I caused that years before I started flinging children out of the window."

Brienne was stunned to silence.

The only sound to be heard were the dragon wings, white and gold and beautiful over the vast broadness of the sky.

*There, my innocent dove,* he thought, *I can always surprise you with another vile thing I did.*
"Did you know it beforehand?" she asked, voice quivering with misplaced faith. "What your f- what Lord Tywin was going to do?"

"No," Jaime said, "but what does it matter? I knew our father. I mean, I knew Lord Tywin. I should have known he'd think of something rather convincing to separate Tyrion from the girl he loved. Just because she was lowborn. A crofter's daughter."

"It matters to me," Brienne said very seriously. Viserion projected an image of fields full of fresh grass where sheep were walking on green pastures in blessed peace. Jaime didn't understand what that could possibly apply to. "And I don't care who your father was," his wife hammered down, "just as I don't care for all the gold of Casterly Rock. I have all the sapphires, remember?"

Jaime beamed with hope that one day he would do something to be truly worthy of his wife.

Viserion roared or screeched, stridently. Jaime had never heard Drogon utter such sound. The beast was trying to speak but it had some difficulty to shape his thoughts. His dragon's mind felt so young, vulnerably childlike from time to time. Drogon was different, more serious, older. Jaime hadn't been close to the green dragon to know how he was. Probably different as well, like one man from another.

Jaime willed his mind wide open to listen. What he thought he heard was a strange thing, like a hymn to the Seven sung off key. The dragon spoke of some other god Jaime and all the septons of the realm knew nothing about, a god who swayed with the grass and fed the lambs in winter.

The white dragon suggested calmly, as if he desired to caress his riders in spirit, "The Great Shepherd guards the flock."

_The Great Shepherd won't care much for me, _Jaime told Viserion, _I am no sweet lamb, but a grown, rebellious ram._ He didn't expect understanding or answer.

Viserion dived downward, in a spinning move that almost made Brienne retch. Jaime held her tight, gripping the body of the dragon with his long legs, grateful more than usual for being tall. _Tyrion would not be able to support himself with his stunted legs. He would fall off._ Then again, his brother had two hands so he could clutch a spike properly. _Two hands and no wife to hold onto, and he has me to thank for that._

The dragon breathed a tongue of fire large as the tail of a comet over the grey sky. The greatest and the most powerful one Jaime had ever see him make. Almost as big as Drogon's despite his dragon's much smaller size. They flew through a snow cloud, which dissipated from the force of dragonfire. They never felt cold.

_I am... guarding... you... _Viserion suggested in Jaime's mind in tones of gold, much more sincere and less... learned... than when he spoke of the Great Shepherd. _From everything, _the dragon insisted, breathing more fire over the flames already burning in the sky, and Aerys's last words, _burn them all_, came into Jaime's mind with the fresh smell of brimstone, stronger than ever. It was Jaime's turn to be shocked. Viserion would go as far as to attack Drogon and Rhaegar if Jaime so desired.

_The dance of dragons_, words rang familiar in his mind, and he was certain Tyrion knew all about it. The war of dragons against the dragons. Jaime shivered, and not from cold.

"Please don't burn them all," Jaime finally said, finding that spot on Brienne's leather doublet where he could sneak his only hand under it during flight. "I much love the world where new crops can grow, neither frozen, nor burnt."
Brienne allowed herself a small, content hum when he caressed the small of her back, helping her against dragon-sickness.

The world could indeed be a beautiful place. And the damn winter was for the Starks.

Jaime wished it were spring.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to anyone for reading, leaving a kudos, commenting or bookmarking this story.

Leave a comment if you like, it makes me happy if you do.

Special thanks to anyone checking the prequel - it's the best warning I can give the potential readers of this story against myself.
Chapter Notes

I'd like to thank my beta Dr Holland without whom Arya's voice would never be as clear as I wanted to make it :'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arya

A pale banner with a fiery heart flew proudly above the Twins.

The two towers of the Lords of the Crossing hung slightly below it, the House Frey only half in submission. The heart of fire was not a sigil Arya knew, although she didn't recall Maester Luwin's lessons about the noble houses of Westeros as well as she once did.

Quiet as a shadow. Arya glanced at her companions, thoroughly embarrassed about what she had witnessed much earlier that day. On a clear winter morning, very, very early, Arya had had to be the first one at the stupid wagon that would take the outriders, of sorts, to the Twins.

Gendry should have gone to the wagon first. He would have been so loud that her stupid sister and her cruel husband would have heard him and then, they would have stopped.

"Do you truly have to go?" Sansa had whispered in a voice Arya would never associate with her sister. Sansa's previously soft, measured tone now reminded her of the deep, rich voice of the courtesans in Braavos, who had the power to make men kill each other over their favours every night, in the city of the descendants of the former slaves fled from old Valyria. Except that the courtesans didn't mean what they said to their lovers, Arya had learned. And Sansa was really asking the Hound to stay.

"I want to go," the Hound replied, sounding mildly ashamed of speaking the truth."I sat idle for too long. We're riding to war. Not to a bloody tourney. If it has to start, best that it does so now. Waiting will not make it any prettier. The Freys are just men. They can be killed."

"But there will be only four of you," Sansa was very, very worried.

"What of it? The noble Freys will see a bunch of poxy peasants going in and out of their castle, calling everyone m'lord and m'lady." Clegane made a funny, dumb face. Sansa laughed.

Arya stifled a chuckle. The Hound would at least threaten her or maybe even try to beat her bloody if he knew that she'd been listening. She was five and ten now and far too old to be wrapped in a horse blanket and bound like a sack of grain if she displeased her good-brother. The notion of Sansa's marriage to the Hound was repulsive, but there wasn't much Arya could do about it. Short of murdering him.

But Sansa never called her Arya Horseface or anything remotely similar since Arya woke in Westeros, not even when she was listening through Nymeria's ears to check if her sister did it out of her sight, so she wouldn't kill Sansa's lord husband. If he gives me no reason to. Arya's long face stretched in a dry, non-existent smile. Mute as a gargoyle.
"Sansa, listen to me," he was pleading with her sister now, "it is as I told you. We are to see if old Walder Frey is back to the Twins. He didn't have much of a head start on us when we left the capital. And we are to find out if the Freys still hold prisoner the hostages from the North and from the riverlands. We go in and we go out, in one day if we can. Then, the king decides what is to be done with their precious crossing."

Arya should have left then or cracked a branch to announce her presence but she didn't, expecting them to just get up as she did every morning. To her surprise, the warm wolf furs had slid off them and they didn't mind the cold. They moved slowly, guiding each other, trapped in one another. His hands were on her hips. After, her hands were on his buttocks. What they did was no water dancing, no struggle for power between them. It was the way mother and father must have loved each other when they made Arya and her siblings.

When her initial shock subsided, Arya covered her eyes. Blind as a bat, she thought, not wanting to see. Yes, she knew for a while now what happened between men and women in bed, but catching her own sister at it felt odd beyond measure. They must have made an effort not to be noisy, but Arya could still hear them; a humming of skin, a rustle of hair. Unseemly. The stupid notion was just like something Sansa would have thought of, and Arya willed it out of her mind, getting terribly angry with herself.

She didn't know how long she squatted in one place swallowing her pride. When there was only content silence left, she squinted on one eye and saw the good part of the Hound's face under Sansa's hair. All ferociousness was gone from him; only quiet strength remained. Silent, serene, he looked almost as handsome as Jory Cassel had been before the Lannisters killed him. Maybe a bit more homely. The Hound had a hooked nose, but at least it wasn't missing as one of his ears.

Soon after, Mance Rayder had scampered noisily toward the wagon. He had been tuning a woodharp Arya had seen before, in the hands of Tom of Sevenstreams. The wildling's arrival saved Arya from her predicament. Gendry was obviously the last one, carrying the stupid hammer. She didn't know if it was worse when he wanted to be a Knight of the Hollow Hill and smith for Lord Beric Dondarrion, or now when he fancied himself a bastard of the drunk King Robert who had allowed Sansa's wolf to be killed. Why can't he just be Gendry? There's nothing wrong with that.

And right now, Arya couldn't believe she was again on her way to the Twins with the Hound. Be as it may, the truth of the matter as it stood was that she wanted to go, as much or more than he did. It was not his mother and older brother that the Freys had slaughtered. And Arya was no longer the helpless mouse she had been in Harrenhal.

Arya had been no one. She had learned many new things every day when she was serving the Many-Faced God in the House of Black and White, and she could almost, almost kill with a whisper. A few coins needed to do just that were in her pockets. Yet Needle was on her hip, hidden under a ragged travelling cloak, because whispering would not give her enough joy. I will stick a few Freys with the pointy end and have raven heads sewed on their bodies. There were always ravens following the king, and maybe Sansa would help to make the stitches more even.

Mance Rayder, Jon's self-professed wildling friend, had told the king he'd go because he was a good sword and a better mummer than any of them. Also, he was curious to see as many places as he could, even the bad ones. To be able to sing about them, he had said. Arya didn't fully trust him, though.

Then Gendry offered to go as well, and the king agreed. Arya did not understand why Uncle Rhaegar had done that; sure as sunrise, to scout the Twins they didn't need Gendry as well. Mance and the Hound were already too much of a company, and Gendry had always been strong, but not
sneaky. He could get captured again and Arya would have to help him.

The thunder of the Green Fork thudded more potent than ever, putting all Arya's senses on edge. Briefly, she felt like she was a cat to be caught, and not the former servant of the God of Many Faces, trained in ways of giving his gift to those whose names had been spoken.

Arya recalled, shivering, how the river was already risen that first time she stood in front of the Twins, when the rain washed out the blood of the Northmen as it was being spilled, drowning the slaughter of Robb's men, and the laughter of their former allies, amidst the infernal crescendo of horns and drums, and pipes. In the very end, there was only the hollow beat of one solitary drum.

The pounding had drilled a hole in Arya's heart which could never be filled. Afterwards, she could never decide if the rain had been an evil omen that day, a lamentation for all the dead, or the tears of the gods, old or new... if they had any eyes left to see what the Freys had done.

Now, the torrent was so strong that it was carrying boulders of stone and broken logs from far away as if they were lighter than feathers. A slate roof of a house passed by in pieces, floating down the stream.

The green of the water barely fit in the riverbed, and while the Green Fork was much narrower than the Trident at the fords, it appeared to be at least twice as fast and ferocious. *Ferocious as the Hound.* Her cruel good-brother stared at the tumbling of the stream. *Silent as a stone.* Arya wondered if he still thought about her sister. At least he had a good sense not to wear the blue ribbon Sansa had given him before Arya dared reveal herself.

Seven foot tall poxy peasants did not wear lady's favours.

"Here we go again," Arya mumbled toward him, realising too late she had spoken aloud.

The Hound tilted his head and issued a sympathetic grunt. "Aye, that we do, she-wolf." A touch of the blessed expression he wore that morning still hadn't left his ugly face.

He wore a dirty red scarf over the right half of his head. The rest was splotched with caked reddish-brown mud and soot. As a result Sandor looked as if he suffered from a rare skin disease known in the riverlands, not a contagious one according to Arya's royal uncle, who used to be a healer.

She still had trouble with having King Rhaegar as her uncle. He was so different than any other member of her family. Arya's mother was of the south, and her siblings had her looks, but Rhaegar and his sister, Daenerys, had an otherworldly feel to them; it both fascinated and alienated Arya. *The blood of the dragon, as they would call it,* Arya mused.

What was particularly difficult to believe was that Rhaegar was Jon's father. They seemed to have nothing in common. Then again, Lady Catelyn was Arya's mother and on the surface they couldn't be more different. Nonetheless, at five and ten, Arya understood she may have inherited some features from her mother. When she was the Cat of the Canals she realised she could fit in any society… if she so wanted. And a lifetime of service and duty in a temple was something that might have appealed to Mother.

With Aunt Lyanna it was much better than with Rhaegar. She resembled Jon. Despite being a lady, and not just any lady but the *queen,* she oftentimes practised archery with Arya and Sweetrobin on the way north, and she could *joust.* Arya never learned the lance so it was a skill she admired. But Robin was on his way to the Vale now, and Arya's aunt and uncle were visibly leading their army north, up the kingsroad...
...so that the Frey spies could see them and believe they had been overlooked.

Although the cold could do nothing to temper the rage of the Green Fork, the day was pleasantly chilly. Arya wondered how much colder it should get for the river to freeze. Icy sunlight shone over the land and the wind was steadily blowing down the river. Instead of the stolen pickled pigs' legs that Arya and the Hound once brought to Uncle Edmure's wedding, they were carrying three large casks of Arbor gold, supposedly to trade for fresh meat at the Twins.

The animals one could eat had become scarce in the riverlands. *There is no game, and there are no people,* Arya thought. Arya had yet to see the beings from Old Nan's stories, but their work was visible all over the land. The two castles of the Freys had always looked as if they belonged to those scary tales. Now they fitted perfectly in the newly desolate surroundings.

Yet the twin castles were different than the threatening ones Arya had seen amidst the murderous thrumming of drums, blaring of horns and fiddling of pipes while the Freys were killing Robb and their mother. The drawbridge was down, the portcullis up and the gates were open. In front of the gates and beyond them stretched a camp of piled human misery and suffering. The yard was full of peasants, poxier than any of the four companions on the wagon, which could barely be wheeled forward between them.

The castle looked as though every living human soul in this part of the riverlands had sought shelter at the Crossing. Seeing women and children and old men encamped everywhere, Arya was ashamed of her own murderous thoughts. *These are not Freys,* she realised. *Only people.*

Arya and her companions would see Freys soon enough. A knight with a dark blue blazon on a wooden shield, decorated with some animal whose head had peeled off with a crust of old paint, led them to a darkened great hall with the high, black oaken seat in the middle.

"Wine, you say," a weasel in the prime of his years told Mance Rayder from the high seat when he was showed the casks. He descended and slurped a large gulp of golden liquid from one of them, that Mance had subserviently opened for him, pouring a generous quantity in a goblet wearing the badge of the Twins from one of the trestle tables. *It wouldn't do to serve him from the other two casks,* Arya thought, unsmiling. The smallfolk camped even in here, some snoring at the tables below the salt, Arya noticed.

"The steward will take it over and see that you are paid in kind," the lordling declared. He was too young to be Lord Frey, who was over ninety years old and searching for the ninth Lady Frey as far as Sansa had told Arya.

"The casks are heavy," the wildling mentioned casually. "We could carry them down to the cellars for you."

The weasel lord waved them away but the servants were happy for the offer. The look of relief conquered their faces. *Look with your eyes.* Arya realised they were fearing the cellars, and the roar of the Green Fork that could be heard from within. *And where there are cellars, there should be dungeons as well.* She ended up dragging a cask of Arbor gold with Gendry. Not that he needed any help in that. But a short poxy peasant weak of arms had to do something as well, not to attract the attention of the Freys. Mance and the Hound carried a cask each.

The stair was long, winding down. In the middle of the Crossing and too close to the river, it wound through various levels of the two castles, appearing a bit like the twisted descent to the crypts of Winterfell, only much wetter.

"I will go only part of the way with you," the steward said. The noise of the river could be heard
through the thick stone walls now, as if they were walking on water. The chill of the underground tunnel made Arya feel almost as cold as if she were forced to swim. "It's the last door on the right," the steward informed them before he returned up, walking significantly faster than when he went down.

When they were alone, the Hound suggested, "Let's check the last door on the left first."

The stair was never-ending and the light of the torches disappeared from the ever damper walls. They continued the descent by touch. *Slow as a snail.* They passed the last door on the right without giving it a second look, or more precisely touch. The tunnel continued doorless, the ground dropping steadily. Gendry hesitated several times when making the next step in the utter darkness, but Arya was as sure-footed as when she had been a blind girl in the House of Black and White.

Yet the darkness had an impact on her, bringing memories of her time in the temple. To forget that the Many-Faced God must have his due and that she had betrayed him, Arya decided to ask a question that had been bothering her since King's Landing.

"Mance," she spoke to the dankness of the corridor, "How could Jon send you south to look for his other family if he never knew who they were? Or did he?" Arya couldn't believe that Jon would have withheld that truth from her, if Father had ever told him the truth to start with.

"He sent me south to rescue you. His little sister. Jon was told you were to marry Ramsay Bolton at Winterfell to secure the Boltons' claim to your North."

"I haven't been to Winterfell since I was nine," Arya said, confused.

"Jon didn't know that. He was afraid for you, if what he was told was the truth. He loves you."

"I love him as well," Arya said spontaneously. "If I could ride a dragon, I'd already be at the Wall to see him." Gendry halted brusquely and the cask of wine nearly fell on Arya's feet. "What are you doing?" she rebelled.

Since Arya woke in Westeros, Gendry was extremely taciturn in her proximity and so much taller than her. The stupid bull talked more when they were children, Arya remembered. She had grown in Braavos, but Gendry had grown more. At least he caught the cask before it could land anywhere.

"You want Jon to steal you?" Mance asked and Arya didn't quite understand.

"The boy, the king's son, he's only your cousin now," he rumbled, "not your brother. Stealing for Mance and his savages means both betrothal and marriage. They don't waste time *courting* the panicking ladies."

"I don't love Jon like *that,*" she said, grateful for the darkness, lest her good-brother could read her disgusted face and guess the real reasons for it. The Hound was not as stupid as Gendry.

"No?" the stupid bull asked.
"Of course not," she protested vehemently.

Blackness became illuminated by another mental image in Arya's fierce spirit; of her and Gendry like *that*. Blue-eyed and smooth, without the horrible black beard he had grown, Gendry wore that uniquely serene expression in Arya's mind. She had never wished to see it on a man's face, but she had seen it now nonetheless and learned of its existence while living in Braavos. And then, the blessed look on Gendry's face made Arya happy. It was the most unsettling sensation she had ever felt.

The cask slipped out of her hands and Gendry gasped in sudden pain.

"I'm sorry," she said, "it's getting heavy on me." She wasn't going to tell him the truth, and he believed her all the same, hauling all the weight on himself. *Stupid, pig-headed boy.*

"Mance," she had to return to a safe topic, "how did you find out about Jon's origin then? If he doesn't know..."

"First I believed it was the will of the gods. I always doubted they existed until then," the wildling said. *Serious as a raven,* Arya thought. "And then?" she asked.

"I realised I was right to doubt the existence of the gods. Now I believe that everything that comes to pass happens by the will of the people."

Arya thought a lot about the wildling leader's last words. The longer she thought, the more she agreed with him.

By now, the group had travelled so far down in the vaults under the Twins that they could hear the raging of the river from all sides, sounding as if the torrent would tear down the walls of the tunnel at any moment, and squash them underneath. The wine cellar was left several levels of the winding stair above them. None of the four companions gave a fig about it.

The last door on the left before the abrupt ending of the tunnel was locked; a large chain secured the bolt. A daring surge of water could be clearly heard, springing out of the wall of the corridor opposite the closed entrance. Their feet sloshed in a shallow layer of wetness covering the floor.

"This looks new," the Hound said, aloof, after inspecting the fissure in the wall with his hands.

Mance probed the hole as well. "I reckon the opening will only become bigger, and rather soon at that."

"We cannot leave them here," Arya announced solemnly, gesticulating at the dungeon's door.

She expected the men to counter her suggestion and to say that no, they had to abandon the prisoners, leave the Twins and report to the king as they were commanded to do.

To her great surprise, no one voiced an objection.

The Hound gave a tremendous pull on the lock with the staff which had completed his disguise. Ever since they got off the wagon, he limped, pretending he needed the stick for walking, and thus hid his unnatural height. The wood was carefully hollowed to contain a longsword, in the fashion of the white weirwood scabbard Mance had been using before he made a gift of it to Aegon. The Hound barely succeeded to fit his old greatsword within the staff though, nicked and rusty on a few places despite all the effort he had put in honing it.

*The sword we got in the village where he had been helping the people build a wooden wall around*
their homes. He swapped a longaxe for it, Arya remembered the part of her travels with the Hound when they were not going anywhere and when he appeared almost human. Mance Rayder's sword lay hidden in one of the casks, just like Gendry's hammer.

The lock was huge and protruding. The chain looked rusty, but it wouldn't yield to the Hound shaking it. The rattling sound was going to echo all the way up to the lord's solar through the hollow stone walls, and call all Freys down to the dungeons; sons, grandsons and grand-grandsons of Lord Walder. Maybe even a few daughters, Arya thought.

"Stop it," Arya commanded, annoyed. "Gendry has a hammer."

"Indeed," the Hound muttered. "Give it to me, boy! Might be I'll do it faster than you would."

The hammer descended with force and the dungeon door burst open. They could see many pairs of eyes shining in the darkness, and a light of a single candle on the low wall, the faintest sign of life in the blameless night of the cell. The Hound's scarf had fallen off his face from the effort of breaking in, and his scars looked just as what they were in the vague light, a monstrosity of nature.

"The Lannister dog!" someone said with scorn.

A blue ribbon became visible as well. The Hound had tied his hair with it, under the scarf. My sister's favour, Arya thought. So the Hound can be stupid too.

"And I am the King of the Wildlings who breaks his fast on the warm flesh of children," Mance Rayder warned them from behind the Hound, "Do you want to stay here and become food for the fish or go north with us?"

The King-beyond-the-Wall snatched the candle from the sconce in the wall destined to contain a torch. The Freys were apparently greedy or simply cruel enough to deny their noble hostages the luxury of torchlight. The wildling carried the candle around, counting, considering, measuring. Gendry and the Hound dragged the remains of the casks to a less visible place at the end of the outside corridor, just a few steps after the dungeon door.

"Can all of you walk?" Mance asked. There were more than a hundred men chained to the cold walls, cramped in a space where thirty or forty could sit with some measure of comfort. Water dripped from the ceiling. Most stirred faintly. Some moaned.

"I'll fly if that's what it takes to get me out of here."

Arya recognised the voice, and when Mance took the candle closer to it, she recognised the man as well. Greatjon Umber was significantly skinnier, and his beard was longer, but he was still almost as big as the Hound. The head of the giant on his tunic had fallen off, and the red colour beneath had faded, but the sigil was still obvious.

"Lord Umber," Arya said in the voice of the good girl she had never really been, earning a puzzled look from her father's tallest bannerman.

"Who are you?" someone else said.

"He's a buggering singer," the Hound rasped happily, coming back in, pointing at Mance. "And you, Piper, looked a lot better the last time I saw you in a tourney."

"Don't you dare mention the singing, Hound!" Arya said, flinching at the memory. "Don't you recall? They had drums, horns and pipes! They sang or they paid the singers to sing, and they killed everyone! They must have killed ten thousand of Robb's men in a single day. I never wanted to hear
music again! Never ever!"

"Drums, horns and pipes," Mance said dreamily and Arya was bewildered. *What's wrong with him? How can he find that beautiful?*

The wildling continued, "And giants breaking their chains for a sigil! My giantlike lord, there is a song I've started and I should like to finish it, about brave Donal Noye and the giant Mag the Mighty. I dare say it might please Jon."

"My mother called me Jon when I was a boy in the Last Hearth," Lord Umber bellowed, "but I don't see why any song of yours should please me."

"Noye smithed for the Baratheons," Mance explained as patiently as Arya's septa would have done. "He made Robert's hammer and Stannis' first sword. He lost an arm in the rebellion and became a crow in Castle Black like I was, before I left it all behind and flew down from the Shadow Tower to my side of the Wall."

"Noye died fighting Mag the Mighty, the largest of the living giants until then, for they killed each other under the Wall, the Wall that doesn't belong only to you kneelers... it belongs to us as well. Brandon the Builder found the blocks of ice it is built of *north*, not *south* of the Wall..."

The dungeon sunk into silence as eerie as Arya imagined must reign in the lands behind the Wall. She also pictured the largest of the living giants, always hairy in Old Nan's stories.

The wildling caressed the strings of the woodharp as gently as the Hound had been touching Sansa that morning. Mance had taken it from Tom Sevenstreams by force, complaining that his lute was far more recognisable than his face, a very ordinary one by any reckoning. Lord Frey had been watching the mummeries in King's Landing and he must have seen the lute. Arya enjoyed the offended look on Tom's face when he was coaxed into ceding his instrument. She would never forget how the Brotherhood without Banners had kidnapped her when she was only a little mouse of a girl who never reached Riverrun.

"This sounds a bit like a pipe," Mance commented after he played a few achingly sad notes on the harp, "I need volunteers to be the drum and the horn."

There was only more silence. *What does he want from them?* Arya wondered, silent as the rest.

"He's still the Lannister dog," the man whom the Hound called Piper informed everyone, stubbornly pointing at Sandor Clegane for a while. "The Freys have become Lannister allies. And the Boltons have betrayed us."

"The Boltons are gone," Mance stated, accomplished, "Unless the fat wife of the older one pops a new one out in a few moons turn."

"Fat Walda?" Greatjon asked, "And where have they gone? Hunting?"

"Oh, the Boltons are right here with us, my lords! They are warming my old bones, in a company of six dear friends of mine they dared skin first," Mance tapped his dirty looking white cloak with care. In the light of a single candle, it looked pink like freshly peeled skin. Arya wanted to retch. No one had ever told her. *Look with your eyes!* She had noticed strong men wince from the wildling whenever he wore his cloak, but until now she never knew why. The Hound and Gendry never flinched, and Sansa tried hard not to make a face. *They knew.*

Maybe the wildling is worthy of my trust, Arya pondered, and she did trust him, just a little.
"Pity you came at the wrong time," a boy, maybe as old as Gendry, spoke from the wall nearby the door where he was chained, a bit apart from the others.

"Shut up, Harry," Greatjon dismissed him. "Don't you want to see Karhold again?"

Yet Harry was right. Wrong time meant the moment when the Freys were bringing food. A weasel hand pushed the door open.

"I told you that the lock was rotten!" a voice complained noticing the broken bolt.

"So?" another one answered from farther above. "They're chained, it's not like they can go anywhere."

By the sound of it, a dozen men sauntered down the corridor with the flicker of torches and clanking of steel.

A large kettle of brown porridge was ushered in, smelling worse than Arya's thin weasel soup once did. Gendry hid behind the open door with his hammer, as close as possible to Arya who stood in the middle of the dungeon, visible to the newcomers, separated from them only by the hood of her travelling cloak. Mance and the Hound tried to melt into the walls, with little success. In a moment, the men-at-arms behind the one with the kettle were going to enter to help feed the prisoners and notice something was wrong.

"Are you as clever as your sister?" Mance hissed at Arya. "She would think of something to tell them. We need some time to unchain everyone."

Arya felt offended. Wasn't it obvious that she was cleverer than Sansa? She spoke Braavosi, she could fight, and she had been an acolyte of the Many-Faced God. Only a chosen few had the chance to serve him and Arya was even more special; she had forsaken the life of service. She always wondered about the price she would have to pay for that one day. The long-lasting sleep she had suffered from wasn't a life and it could not pay for a life. And she didn't give Daenerys the gift as she should have done. Look with your eyes now! She stopped her musings. She had no time for them now.

There was a boy of Arya's age trotting after the kettle, with a fancy looking sword on his hip. He didn't look as if he knew how to use it. He was less of a boy and more of a weasel than the last time Arya had seen him cleaning the armour of Roose Bolton in Harrenhal, but she knew him all the same. Elmar. The boy who had been unhappy because he would no longer marry a princess when the Freys became angry with Robb.

"Hey!" Arya cried out. She saw exactly how she was going to learn if Lord Frey was there. "Elmar!" she shouted.

Arya had flowered in her sleep at five and ten. Very late for a highborn girl, Septa Mordane would say, had she not been the feast for carrion crows for years. Maybe it was to be expected – Arya had almost never behaved as a highborn girl should.

In the last weeks of her forced rest on Daenerys' ships, Arya could see through Nymeria's eyes. Daenerys once commanded her handmaidens to change Arya's clothes in her sleep whenever she had her moonblood. To make it worse, Daenerys occasionally changed Arya's bloody cloths herself; a most unusual task for a queen or a princess to perform. Arya imagined Cersei changing her bloody cloths and winced. I would have been able to give the gift to Cersei, she pondered. Why not to Daenerys? A queen is a queen. Yet it was wrong, and she couldn't have done
"I want to see your father," she said in a loud crystal voice to Elmar, so that all could hear she was a girl for the first time that day.

"My father sees no swineherds," the lad, Elmar, said conspicuously.

"I'm no swineherd," Arya said, indignant. "My name is Arya Stark. And I was a princess you were supposed to marry."

The name Stark still worked miracles, just as it did when Arya would get lost catching a tomcat, when she still lived in the Red Keep with Father and Sansa.

The Frey men-at-arms dragged Arya out of the dungeons without sparing the rest of the men a second look. They didn't even close the door behind them. Is this clever enough, Mance?

Back in the solar, the lord in the oaken seat of the Freys was a different one. Pink-headed, bald, spotted, he was the oldest and the ugliest man Arya had ever seen. Walder Frey looked like a vile baby who had grown old without ever having a chance to grow into a man. His hall brimmed with people now. Not all of them had weasel faces. Arya suspected that the smallfolk of the riverlands in need of a shelter invaded the great hall in larger number as the short winter day drew to a close; it must have been much warmer to spend the night here than in the courtyards, dusty halls no one bothered to clean, or behind the murder holes of the Water Tower, which loomed over their damned bridge that had cost Robb and her mother their lives.

"Look, look," the old man said in a mocking tone. His head bobbed. He even squealed as a baby when he spoke, Arya observed with loathing. "A Stark. You have become a rarity these days."

"Have we?" Arya inquired politely, at a loss of what to say. Courtesy was the lady's armour. Or was armour the lady's courtesy? The words rang empty. Sansa would know, but it had always mattered little to Arya.

A septon was marched in from behind, in a white robe with many-coloured belt. A little rainbow for a little man. He doesn't mean to...

"I was looking for a ninth Lady Frey for a while," Lord Frey drooled. Arya was not afraid, not truly. But she didn't feel at ease either. Of course he means it. He's a Frey! she thought as the wizened baby kept blabbering. "You can say your vows freely or we will pretend that you did. King Stannis promised he would think about our request to grant us Winterfell for the service we offered him in taking the castle. He might be more prone to give it to me if I marry a true Stark."

They won't leave me here, Arya thought hopefully about her companions. Gendry might, though. He's done it before. She was more confident that the Hound wouldn't abandon her despite having no love for the man. He had already hit her once with the flat of the axe to save her from the Freys against her will. And that was before he had to be nice to Sansa.

Arya supposed Sansa might be mad with the Hound if he just left her there. And from their childhood squabbles, Arya knew best of all how despite the meek, polite face Sansa was determined to show to the world, her sister could get very, very angry.

Also, Mance had ridden to Winterfell to save Arya because Jon asked him to, so he might want to help her because of her brother. Cousin. Jon's my cousin… The new knowledge didn't sit well with her. Arya was always going to think of Jon as a brother.

The septon started spewing some incongruities about eternal love as Arya played with one of the
coins of the House of the Black and White in her pocket. Some time had certainly passed. She wondered if it had been enough to free the prisoners.

"There, girl," the spotted lord popped the words out, "you have been wed. Do you want me to bed you here or will you accompany me to my chambers? Or do you want my sons and grandsons to carry you there?"

*Maybe it will be easier to kill him and run if I appear docile and follow him to his stupid bedchamber.*

*Look with your eyes.* She measured the distances before answering. If she killed the old Frey right there, she could leap to the back door or to the window on the left side, change her face to look weasel-like and disappear in the commotion that would necessarily follow. Stick some more weasels with the pointy end before she left the castle. The gates were probably open as they were before. There seem to have been too many people in the castle to close them properly. But they were also quite a few men-at-arms among the poor and the infirm. Arya and her companions stood better chance of leaving in one piece if they made the sortie together.

"Come, child," Lord Frey said, "it will be done fast, you have my word. I am too old to last long, huh, but I am still capable."

Arms of a rather strong weasel seized Arya from behind. She wriggled so that they wouldn't feel Needle on her hip. "I am Black Walder, my lady of Stark," a cruel voice murmured, "I help Father with the bedding since his sixth wife. He brags a lot, but he's not as vigorous as he used to be."

She had to make a decision. *Calm as still water.*

Then she heard them, not a second too late.

They were coming.

They sounded like drums, horns and pipes. The Hound's rasp must have been the horn, a deep, threatening, dissonant blare. A couple of unknown voices thudded like drums, wildly. The entire song was off key, mad and savage. *Listen with your ears.* One drum-voice was familiar, somewhat shy but potent. *Gendry.*

*"The Bear and the Maiden Fair," one middle-sized weasel exclaimed from the audience. "How appropriate for the occasion!"

"Hum," Lord Frey said, thoughtful, "I don't recall paying for any singers."

The noise was exhilarating and growing with every moment, increased by the clanking of chains which the former prisoners used to hit the walls. A *broken chain can be a formidable weapon,* Arya realised. A deep melodious voice boomed above the cacophony, summing it up and leading it on.

The song was not about the bear or any maiden, fair or not. It was almost a pity because Arya started to feel as joyful as when the black bear ate Ser Amory Lorch to avenge Yoren, the black brother of the Night's Watch who had helped Arya to leave King's Landing after Joffrey had Father beheaded.

*The Wall, the Wall, the Wall,*

*The Wall lies between us, but not for long!*

*In this tunnel we'll make our stand, my friends!*
Mighty is the foe! Yet we shall kill them all!

Thus spoke the one-armed armourer,

brave Donal Noye...

The horrid song echoed and resounded. The men singing it were climbing steadily up through the bowels of the Twins, and there were indeed not so many walls left between them and the lord's solar. A few more twists of the winding stair and they would emerge on the surface between the castle yard and the door leading to the great hall.

The Wall, the Wall, the Wall,

The Wall's between us, but not for long!

Arya smiled at her lord husband in name only. They didn't leave me. The last accords from underground came on as strong as an earthquake. The noise was deafening. She thought how Walder Frey might have done better if he let himself be beheaded on the king's behest in King's Landing instead of fleeing.

Or not. The old man was not done living, it seemed.

"Flood the dungeons!" Lord Frey yelped, "Do it now! The Green Fork will drown them like rats."

Not for long! Kill you all! the song rolled, promising death.

The man who called himself Black Walder never saw Needle before it was buried deep in his heart.

Highborn brides were supposed to be gentle and blushing.

They should not be wielding swords.

Chapter End Notes

The first cliffhanger in this story. I trust it's not a very mean one. We're heading back north again to Jon and Dany, probably to Dany's POV.

Leave a comment if you wish. They make me happy. Thank you to everyone for reading and liking this story in any way.
Daenerys

Chapter Notes

I am so very grateful to TopShelfCrazy for betaing this chapter.

Thank you all for reading and any attention given to this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys

The dead had caught their scent.

A numerous host of wights had been following Dany and her companions for half a moon's turn already. They never found them, but every night it became more difficult to hide. The land was slowly changing, from more forested to slightly less. Most trees were no longer evergreen or high enough, nor were their boughs sufficiently strong to offer protection when the darkness came.

Fortunately, the dead child guiding them could sense the enemy and outrun it, for the time being. The eagle helped as well. The invisible sentinel of the sky, she would fly in front, showing the safest path away from danger, if not always the easiest one to cross.

Avoiding pursuit, they climbed the icy slopes of the low hills and then slid down, grateful for the runners of the cart; they could all ride on it when the terrain descended and their joined weight increased the speed of the sledge as they navigated it amidst thick groves of evergreen shrubbery and young, bare, leafless trees, half-covered in snow. First they moved north, then west, and then...

South again.

It seemed to Dany that, in the North, one always ended up going the opposite way from where one intended to go.

When they wanted to go south to the Wall, the forces of nature pushed them back north. When Jon chose to go north, after what might have been a fool's errand, or a vague hope for victory, the enemy was pushing them back south.

Dany wished that magic swords grew on trees.

If they had, they would have found one by now instead of horrible pine tree fruits they had been eating.

The cones made an awful porridge, more tasteless and bitter than the acorn paste they lived on in the first days after Drogon had left her. Old Garth revealed himself to be tremendously skilled in making meals of finely cut tree bark, pine needles and semi-frozen pine tree fruits. He boasted seeing four winters come and go, and only the first one could be called winter in his reckoning.

He had survived them all.

"So you will see the end of this one as well," Dany decreed, her voice only slightly higher-pitched than when she would decide about petitions from her comfortably cushioned queen's bench in
Meereen.

"Of course not," Old Garth was offended. "No one will live to see the end of the Long Night."

Dany was flabbergasted. "But then, why...?" She couldn't word her question fully.

"Why am I struggling to make food every day?" the old man asked placidly, hands full of needles for another meal of the same. "Why should knowing I'll die soon stop me? I'm not yet done living."

It was an interesting way to behold one's future and Dany was not at all certain she could share it.

If food was repetitive, drink was even more so. There was no mead after the night in the rounded village hut before they headed north.

They could only get drunk on snow.

Had there been fermented mare's milk that the Dothraki loved so well and Dany always hated, she would have gorged on it and enjoyed the taste. She wondered what her nephew would think of that Dothraki delicacy.

More often than not she caught herself wondering aimlessly what her nephew's kiss would taste like. Before being a princess or a queen, Dany was still a girl, and kissing was what girls often thought about, twice widowed or not. The childlike corpse had never been the most pleasant or talkative companion when Dany shared the sledge with her, and the men hopped on and off, tired and mostly taciturn from the pulling effort.

And now even the corpse was walking while Dany was stuck in one place, as a useless burden that could not be discarded.

I'm getting weaker and colder every day, she thought miserably, stretching her legs up and down, overwhelmed by pointless sorrow. Jon explained to her this meant that the Others were not far behind their host of the slain; it was a wildling wisdom he had learned in Hardhome, he said.

She couldn't very well imagine kissing Old Garth, Lord Davos or Cotter Pyke, could she? Well, Pyke, maybe, if there had been no one else. He wasn't old enough to be her father like Davos, or her grandfather like Garth. But Pyke was ironborn and after meeting Euron Greyjoy, the dragon-stealer, Dany had no love for the krakens, true or bastard born. It would please her greatly to fly to the island of Pyke with Drogon, engulf it in flames, and let it sink like old Valyria.

Dany tried to justify her fancies by telling herself that Jon was simply the most handsome man available. She liked her men pleasing to the eye, albeit taller and stronger. More daring. Jon was sweet, but he didn't appear to be made of the stuff of heroes.

Not at all.

Her nephew was stubborn, sullen and not splendid in any way Dany imagined the famous Targaryens of old Viserys had told her about in her childhood. Yet he is the blood of Aegon the Conqueror, and perhaps of Aemon the Dragonknight, just like I am.

The north went on and on, blanketed in snow.

The cold was such that despite being a widow with woman's desires, Dany couldn't bring herself to imagine anything else than kissing. The mere thought of undressing made her clench her teeth and shiver so hard that it hurt. She would spend the remainder of her days wiggling her toes not to lose them to frostbite. It is known, her Dothraki handmaidens would doubtlessly conclude.
Their search for the magic sword had no magic to it at all, or maybe the child guiding them had seeped all the magic from the world to hold onto its unnatural life.

"A door," Old Garth translated patiently several days ago, "she's looking for the door and so are we. Or we can't cross into my old lands safely. Not even with her and the big bird as help."

The old man always kept his distance from the wight, and Dany knew Jon, Davos and Pyke kept watch over Old Garth at night, afraid that he would burn the dead girl if he could. The wildlings were rather adamant about burning their dead, Dany had learned.

Lord Davos often just stared at the trees. He spoke very little and just like Pyke, he would have been more at home on the deck of a ship than on a speeding sledge. But the iron-islander had been on the Wall for many years so he must have gotten used to all the trees. Davos hadn't. Dany could sympathize with that.

She hadn't been this helpless since crossing the red waste.

If she had to walk, she would have perished. If the men she was with decided to turn against her, she would lose the battle. If the eagle tried to claw her eyes out, there would be nothing she could do but let it happen. Either way, she would die.

Here, more north than north, she was no queen. She was not princess, nor khaleesi, nor the Mother of Dragons. She was just a girl who could not walk because her legs were freezing. Dany felt as weak and insecure as before Viserys sold her to Khal Drogo, expecting a horde of forty thousand Dothraki screamers as a payment. Every day they moved further away from the sea, and Dany's hope to see Drogon again and to fly, dwindled amidst fresh drifts of endless snow.

She stopped looking at the sky.

*Without my dragons, I am nothing,* she thought, irritated.

Amazingly, she was still alive.

Dany wondered if Drogon merely listened to her command but Rhaegal was so sick that the black dragon had to cure his green brother for a very, very long time. The notion did not seem likely. The dragons' power of regeneration was considerable. She had witnessed it with Drogon blowing black crystals over his own wounds after their battle with Khal Jhaqo and his bloodriders, which had won Daenerys the allegiance of forty thousand Dothraki screamers of her own.

With every passing day, Rhaegal's health was much less a good reason for Drogon's continued absence. Maybe the ancient magic she had seen hovering over the Wall lingered also over the vastness of snow she was forced to cross, preventing Drogon from reuniting with her.

*Or maybe he simply does not want to come.*

Her dragon had been angry with her. He may have abandoned her of his own free will.

When she didn't think about her missing dragons, Dany began to despise herself for being a coward. *I failed Rhaegar.* She should have told his son the truth as soon as she was reasonably convinced Jon was no madman and deserved no less.

*Maybe I should kiss him first.* Learning the pillow tricks from a Lyseni handmaiden, Doreah, who had died in the red waste, brought Daenerys the priceless gift of Khal Drogo's love, but it wasn't enough to keep Daario only in her bed. Dany dismissed the idea as a way to gain Jon's confidence. *I might just scare him off.*
With every day of keeping her lips tightly sealed it was becoming more difficult to talk, ever since that first day when the eagle's distress startled Dany into submission and silence. Jon had made a hateful remark about his mother, and Dany had no doubt that she had been flying with her eagle at that moment.

Having Queen Lyanna as a witness was making the choice of what to say to Jon, and in which manner, exceedingly difficult for Dany. As a consequence, revealing his origin to her nephew slowly became a daunting, insurmountable task. To do it now seemed as queer as when mother and sisters of noble Hizdahr zo Loraq wanted to inspect Dany's womanly parts before marriage.

The only difference was that she wasn't marrying Jon Snow...

*Jon Targaryen,* she corrected her thoughts, not willing to give offence.

Yet she kept calling him by his bastard name in her mind because it corresponded to the man she was starting to know. Winter affected him far less than Dany; it somehow fortified his resolve to endure, to whatever end. He made conversation with the other men, as if they were riding on a pleasure barge, and not on the rickety sledge in the middle of nowhere. He also did more than half of the necessary pulling.

If it wasn't for her nephew, they would have stopped going anywhere by now, laid in the snow and waited for their death. Dany started to believe that if anyone was going to survive the Long Night, it was Jon.

Sadly, since that night in the village, he avoided Dany as if she had been the Queen of the White Walkers on a throne of ice, and not his aunt. He never asked about Mance Rayder or Arya as she had half expected him to do.

Jon's measured, cold demeanour reminded Daenerys strongly of his mother, although the princess now suspected that Lyanna's progressive loss of love for her on the kingsroad was merely a show. The queen needed time to recall her eagle back to her whenever Rhaegar decided to send his sister and the dragon they shared to look for his and Lyanna's son.

The bird of prey was frequently hunting far away, or so Lyanna told everyone, when it could very well be that the she-eagle had been searching for Jon, on command of her human mistress. And the black, white-headed eagle could hide easily under the impressively long tail of the black dragon. Dany wondered if her brother knew what his wife had been doing, and believed he did not. *But why would she hide that from him?* The royal couple adored each other, that much was obvious. It made Dany both content and unhappy, content for her brother and unhappy for herself. For Dany, love came and went, it never endured.

*Any love of mine is not meant to last.*

The Mother of Dragons could now fully agree with Lyanna's actions. *That's what I would have done if I were a warg, and if donning eagle-skin was the only way to be with the child that was lost to me.*

All her children were lost to Daenerys now, and she was lost as well, following her nephew through the confines of the world.

For all her inner turmoil, empty stomach and cold feet slowly killing her, she never uttered a word of grievance. Dany was the blood of the dragon and she would show no weakness. Jon sometimes looked at her with frozen curiosity, waiting, as if he wished she would denounce her lack of well-being. She never did.
More days of whiteness passed, days of little food, short winter days of constant fear.

The dead were never far behind.

Until one day the eagle was gone since early morning, the wight appeared worried, and the stench of death was strong in the air, despite the enormous chill that reigned in the world, masking all smells. The evening was drawing closer and the first stars were rising gently in the sky, deaf and mute to trouble in the lands they shined on. The company made almost no progress that day, in any direction, right or wrong.

Everywhere around them was snow.

Always light of body, Dany feared she would melt as a snowflake in the sun. Except that there had been no sun for days, and the sorrow caused by the proximity of the dead lay heavy on her soul.

She closed her eyes and tried hard to think of the humming of water in the garden with the persimmon tree on top of Great Pyramid of Meereen, under different stars, in oppressive heat, as the river Skahazadhan flew lazily in the distance. Dany didn't think she'd ever see that tree bear its sweet orange-red fruits again. Her head was spinning. She realised she had forgotten to eat in almost two days. The taste of pine tree fruits had become repulsive beyond measure. She could not eat them any more.

She could not.

"We are moving strongly to the west now," Pyke judged by the position of one particular constellation in the sky. The Ice Dragon, Dany remembered. An apt name for a star burning over the white waste...

"We could be very close to Castle Black if we headed directly for the Wall," Jon agreed. "So maybe I'll find my little brother after all. And my old sword."

"My king could have returned there by now," Davos added with calm hope.

Old Garth had nothing good to say about the Wall.

Dany had understood by then that Lord Davos worshipped the pretender Stannis Baratheon with the fervour most men reserved for their gods. She hoped no one would ever give her that kind of loyalty in her precarious kingdom on Slaver's Bay if she ever returned to it.

Deities mostly ended up abandoned in Vaes Dothrak, and Dany had never had any wish to go there and join the dosh khaleen, the crone widows of the khals who died ages ago.

They had been frantically searching for a tree to camp at night, almost feeling the foetid breath of the dead on their backs, when they ventured into a grove of nine white trees with carved red faces. The eyes and mouths were like blistering wounds on the white bark, every set different than the previous one; and every single face stern, sullen, angry or sad.

They must have been drunk on snow because there wasn't anything else to be had, and her nephew began hallucinating.

"I died here," he announced with solemnity, looking every inch alive, his dark hair lightened by frost in faint starlight, a brilliant touch of silver on black.

Dany wondered what he meant.
"You don't seem dead to me, Lord Snow," Pyke said with finality. "And we were right. Castle Black is less than a day ride from here."

"This is no way to the Lands of Always Winter, girl!" the ironborn accused the strange child suddenly, without warning. "This is where the Sworn Brothers of the Night's Watch who honour the old gods come to say their words!"

The corpse girl that guided them simply sat under the largest tree and wept. After, she whispered, and the words sounded almost like singing, in a tongue not even Old Garth was able to understand. Then, she turned to more habitual guttural hissing, deep from the back of her tiny throat.

"A tale is needed," Old Garth said, forehead wrinkled as cabbage leaf from trying hard to understand her. The wildling occasionally cursed the girl for speaking the Old Tongue worse than an ill-mannered, angry giant. "A fabulous tale to make men cry. Or to make the gods... weep... To open the gate of the gods..." Garth swiftly deciphered the rest.

Dany's companions started telling all kinds of tales under the first evening stars as the scent of death grew stronger. A broken horn sounded shrilly in the forest, not far. A bear grunted and it was probably not a living one.

Pyke spoke at length of the Drowned God in his watery halls, and Lord Davos of Symeon Star-Eyes and Serwyn of the Mirror Shield. Old Garth said plainly a short story about the last of the giants and then he cried. Jon chose cruel, sad stories from the North Dany had never heard of, like the ones about the Rat Cook and Gendel's children, stories in which everyone perished.

As they listened to Jon's stories, it started to snow.

The dead were closing on them, and the living could imagine their disfigured faces in the shimmering of starlight over snow. _Maybe we should climb up the weirwoods_, Dany thought. But from below they could see clearly that the space between the branches would be too large to mount the platform for sleeping. Besides, the majestic trees started branching too close to the ground, and where a man could climb so easily, a wight or his master might be able to follow. And on a starry night, the dark shapes of Dany and her companions would stand out against the auburn leaves, when the celestial lights brightened fully the white expanse of snow.

_What story could I tell?_ Daenerys wondered. About _Queen Naerys and Prince Aemon the Dragonknight_?

"I know a story, a true story," Dany was suddenly illuminated and fed up with lying. The eagle had not been with them that entire day. She paused to wonder if the bird's absence meant that some trouble had come to Rhaegar and Lyanna on the kingsroad. Maybe Drogon had to help them. _What if they have more need of dragons?_ Drogon left her only once since she became his rider in Meereen, and that was when Rhaegar's queen had been in mortal danger of being burned alive.

_It's now or never_, Dany concluded.

_Rhaegar, I pray that he doesn't hate you or his mother. Or me._ It would irk her if Jon loathed her, for elusive reasons. She was not really attracted to him, was she? The thought of kissing him was born out of monotony and despair, she supposed.

Dany forgot her cold feet, hopped off the cart, and cleared her throat.

"It's a tale about a noble boy born in the same year that I came to the world on Dragonstone amidst salt and smoke," she remembered what she had been told about her birth, and thought she could hear
"On Dragonstone, my lady?" Lord Davos asked with curiosity, "Are you King Stannis' kin?"

"A distant one," Dany reacted. "His grandmother was a Targaryen. And the founder of the House Baratheon may have been a bastard of my house. Or not. No one knows, not truly."

Lord Davos widened his eyes and bowed his head in sudden fear.

He knows, Dany smiled dryly, feeling almost a queen again despite the extreme fragility of her body.

Rhaelle, the daughter of Aegon V the Unlikely married Lord Stannis' grandfather, and Orys, the founder of the House Baratheon, may have been the bastard brother of Aegon the Conqueror, and had been the famous Aegon's best friend.

Jon didn't understand.

"Was the boy a prince?" her nephew mocked her, resentful toward her as usual whenever he directed her a brief word. He knows I have been lying to him. "There are always handsome princes in stories that the ladies like," Jon tried to make a jest, but to Dany it sounded hollow. She was just too tired for quips.

"He would have been," Dany said looking straight in a dark grey, suspicious eye. "But he had been raised a bastard or he would have been a dead prince by now. His father had another son, and that boy's skull had been squashed to a wall. Except that a faithful servant of the boy's father swapped the babies. The crime was made no less by it. An infant still died, and they covered him in a crimson cloak. An innocent little princess and her mother were murdered as well," Dany felt tears swelling in her eyes. Little Rhaenys' death was never something she could think about in earnest and maintain her composure. I would have been put to sword like Rhaegar's daughter if I stayed in Westeros as a child.

She felt gnawing hunger in her stomach. One of her feet turned numb no matter how hard she tried to move it. Her nephew stared avidly at her now, as though he were about to eat her for supper.

White bark cracked, from a tale that could make the gods weep, or merely from inhuman cold, who could tell?

Jon stared at Daenerys with huge black eyes, of a much darker shade than his mother's. "A bastard boy, you say," he muttered, beginning to understand against his will.

"The Usurper's dog- my pardons, the Warden of the North, Lord Eddard Stark, told everyone that the little prince was his bastard. But the child was not of his body, though it shared the same blood. The infant was his sister's son..." speaking was the only thing that kept Dany from falling face forward in the fresh snow. "Lady Lyanna left her child with Lord Eddard, feigning her own death in childbed."

"She feigned death?" her nephew sounded mildly amused.

A fissure opened in the roots of the white tree behind Jon, right under where the wight-child had been seated, blabbering softly in her unknown sing-song language. The girl hissed at Dany and started sinking slowly into the ground. The eagle was mercifully still away. Daenerys took it as an encouragement to go on.

"If it was as you say," Jon proceeded with great caution, never seeing the change behind his back. "If the mother did not die... Why hasn't she ever returned to see the child?" he asked, a mask of
disinterest on his features.

"Lord Eddard saw Lady Lyanna once more before he returned north, thinking she was someone else who knew the truth about the birth of the young prince," Dany hurried to explain. "So he told the unhappy mother that her baby had died, mistaking her for another noble lady of Dorne. He did it to protect the little prince. And his sister, the prince's mother, she despaired and nearly took her own life. You see, she was freshly widowed and she thought she lost a child. In the end she left Westeros. She felt it to be her duty to raise her husband's other baby, the one who would have been smashed to a wall if a faithful servant did not save him..."

Dany was about to cry. She could understand exactly how Lyanna must have felt because Dany was a widow and she did lose a baby.

Lyanna had lived for Aegon and Dany hatched dragons...

Swallowing tears, the princess spoke, "If this is not a story to make the gods weep, I don't know what is."

"My father's sister had a husband? Speak plainly!" Jon was angry now. "Who was the mother and who the father? A she-eagle and a he-eagle?"

The fissure in the roots enlarged. Only the head and shoulders of the dead child were still visible above the frozen soil. Dany wondered how she would have reacted if someone told her now that Aerys and Rhaella were not her parents. Not very well, she decided, I might be tempted to burn the messenger if Drogon was still around.

Maybe it was for the best that the dragons were safely away.

"As I said, the boy's mother was a wolf, not the father as the boy thought," Dany said quietly, finding that once you started it was not so hard to tell the truth. Maybe if she repeated it enough times, he would believe her. "Yet she flew with the eagle in her dreams, instead of running with the wolf as you do."

"Do I?" Jon asked menacingly, his expression gloomy and thunderous, his disquiet growing. Dany noticed how Lord Davos and Pyke now stared at Jon as if he were some beast. Old Garth didn't seem to care. The wildlings and at least some of the northmen knew about the wargs, Dany remembered. The men from the south of the Seven Kingdoms mostly did not.

"And the father? What of him?" Her nephew noticed none of their companions' reactions. His cheeks turned livid green, and his face very long. Their guide disappeared in the hole under the tree. A passage would soon open fully, there was no doubt in Dany's mind. She hoped that the magic sword was not far down the drain. Her strength was leaving her, and only the cold remained. She would not go very far.

"His father is a dragon, like I," Dany said. "My brother Rhaegar. He's the king now and he's on the way to the Wall with such army as he could muster. I was taught he died on the Trident, but he yet lives."

"Why would he do that? Stannis is the only king who ever came. And only because he had nowhere else to go," Jon claimed bitterly.

"My brother sees it as his duty to defend his kingdoms," Dany said, offended. How could it be otherwise? Dany had felt the obligation to protect the slaves she freed. Rhaegar was no different. "But his heart's desire is to see his son."
Jon was muted.

The snow stopped falling when Dany dared present herself.

"I am Daenerys Stormborn, of the House Targaryen," her words were weak, and the dragon voice she could sometimes summon was gone. "And I am the Mother of Dragons, but my children have all left me."

Pyke and Old Garth stared at her now, just like Davos did before, only their eyes did not betray understanding. They think of me as mad, Dany realised. She chuckled. How appropriate. The mad daughter of the Mad King. And she had never felt more reasonable in her life.

Her nephew finally heard the cracking of the wood. He turned around and laughed darkly when he saw the crevice in the tree, more sullen than ever before. Dany realised Jon didn't believe her either. So be it. She shrugged. At least we have a place to hide until he does.

At the edge of oblivion, Dany found Jon's resounding laugh terribly handsome. Would he kiss me back if I kissed him now? It was not as if she could make a single step to reach him, being about to collapse in the snow, but a pleasant daydream might keep her on her feet a while longer, she hoped.

"Princess," at least Lord Davos treated her with respect. "If any of this is true, King Stannis should be told."

"He shall know when he meets Rhaegar," Daenerys said with indifference, to better hide that she could barely stand. "I have no love for Lord Stannis,"

"That is part of the problem," Davos agreed enthusiastically, "no one ever had love for him."

The horn of the enemy sounded again, from different direction.

The Onion Knight sniffed the air. "It might be prudent if we all shelter now, and decide what to do on the morrow," he said. Heeding his own counsel he scrambled to the fissure through the knee-deep snow. Garth and Pyke moved to follow. Dany stood semi-frozen, unable to move.

Jon accused her when the others had stepped away, "My father's sister was kidnapped and raped. If she indeed had a child, he would still be a bastard."

"She was indeed kidnapped, twice, but never raped," Dany protested. "She married my brother in the godswood of Highgarden of her own will. And they met and fell in love in the woods near Winterfell before she was ever betrothed to Robert Baratheon, when Rhaegar travelled North in the year of false spring."

The hole in the tree gaped open behind her nephew, inviting them in. The wind began to howl. Pyke put his head out of the precipice into which he had already lowered himself. "Come on! It's too dark to linger! They are coming!"

"Jon," Dany said tenderly and was unable to continue talking. Her tongue must have frozen as well.

"What is it, pretty liar?" Jon asked, when he saw no more words were forthcoming. Dany felt strangely warm from the name he gave her, though it wasn't flattering.

"Could I have a mouthful of acorn paste, please," she managed to ask politely, starving. She would have eaten the poisoned golden locusts if someone had served them at that moment. She wondered if that was how hungry Drogon felt before he ate the child, Hazzea... "It's awful, but still much better than pine tree fruits..."
She could barely see through her eyelashes any longer, floating between dream and reality, utterly spent. Jon was gone from her field of vision. Strong arms gripped her, and she couldn’t tell to whom they belonged. The shadows twirled under the white trees and she didn’t want to be brought in there. Ser Jorah once carried her into a tent where the dead were dancing and her baby died in her womb.

"No!" she tried to scream but her voice came out weak. "Jon!" she called out, begging. She still didn't tell him about the dragons. *If I look back, I am lost.* "I'll be back," a voice of her nephew whispered. Dany hit the man carrying her with her fists, but her efforts were futile.

An angry tree-face glared at her.

*It would be so easy to just die of cold,* she thought as the world dissolved into nothing.

xxx

The smell of charred meat startled Daenerys awake. A tiny piece of it floated in front of her mouth on a pine-tree stick. *At least it's not the fruit.* She opened her mouth slowly, chewed, took another bite. Old Garth was feeding her like an infant, one little piece of meat after another.

She didn't know how much time had passed since she fainted. The walls of the underground chamber were made of gnarled and twisted weirwood roots, forming intricate, eerie patterns. Red sap dripped from places where roots were broken, forming tiny pools of drying crimson liquid on the ground.

Ghost was back; the wolf must have brought its prey under the weirwoods, a small elk. Jon was slumped between several large white roots a few steps away. Trapped and resting uneasily, he stared forward with unseeing eyes. *Like Rhaegal,* Dany couldn't resist the comparison. He wasn't eating and he seemed as exhausted as she had been before her meal.

She waddled to him gingerly, like a child making its first steps.

"Come and eat," she said.

"I've eaten," his smile was cold, like a wight's. Or Lyanna's, when she pretended to mistrust Dany more than she truly did. "When did you eat?" Dany didn't understand. "Oh!" she exclaimed.

Blood, and not the sap of the weirwood wounds, dripped down from the corner of Jon's mouth, from a tiny cut, or a *bite.* He must have bitten himself in a wolf dream.

"Eating in your dreams won't fill you," she told him, reproachfully, believing that was what he must have done as well. She had heard Queen Lyanna counselling young Robert Arryn not to spend too much time in the body of his falcon, and admonishing him as sternly as a good mother could to always, always consume food as a man when he woke. After recent, more extensive acquaintance with her eagle, Dany wondered if the queen ever followed her own counsel.

"Maybe it won't, but I'm not hungry now," her nephew said, not listening to Dany's borrowed advice. "You eat," he gestured at the rest of the wolf's kill roasting over the fire. Dry weirwood branches cracked cheerfully between the tongues of flame, losing their whiteness to yellow, orange and red.

"It was for you that I went," Jon confessed in a whisper, "you passed out from hunger. I never did it intentionally before. Run with my wolf, I mean."

"Oh," Dany said, astonished. "How long did I sleep?"
"Most of the night," Pyke answered when Jon would not. "We couldn't wake either you or Jon until the wolf came. Lord Davos is gone. He stole the cart when Jon fell asleep. I should have seen it coming! A smuggler cheated on the reaver!" Cotter shook his head in disbelief. "He mounted his ragged cloak on a staff and sailed down the ice in the nightly wind! He will be in Castle Black by now if the Others did not take him, and we haven't moved from this damn corridor!"

Old Garth was relieving himself of his necessities in one of the shadiest corners, and Ghost just growled. Dany was particularly grateful for the cold subduing the smells at that moment. None of them had washed for a long while. Had they been in Meereen, they would have caught the bloody flux by now.

She strolled back to the fire and brought a piece of charred elk meat to Jon's mouth on a weirwood stick.

"Dragons are the only animals who eat their food cooked," she lectured her nephew. "Like men. Did you know that?" His lips parted and she almost, almost kissed him. There were still a few drops of blood on his mouth, red like fire. Jon chewed and downed the food. Dany felt stronger from the sound, as if helping him was nourishing for her as well.

"Maybe you were right not to eat pine needles," he said after a while, well-mannered and sincere, sulking set aside. "They leave a lot to desire."

"Desire," Dany parroted, staring at his lips. She brought another piece of cooked elk to them. This time she touched his lips with her fingers. Under the tree roots it was slightly warmer than on the outside, and the idea of discarding wool and furs was no longer so utterly unimaginable. If none of them was to see the dawn after the Long Night, what difference did it make if they-, Dany stopped her thoughts brusquely. Her nephew didn't look as if he could do anything in bed. Or out of it.

"Dany, you have a gift for storytelling," he said quietly. "Out there, I almost felt like a prince for a moment. Would that I had a dragon to fly us out of here."

The truth struck her then, clear as fresh snow; he has a different kind of courage...

For Drogo, it was normal to kill rival khals, and desert lions. For Daario, it was normal to kill anyone his company was hired to fight against. They were not afraid, the world was simple for them, and they never second-guessed.

Jon's bravery was different, like Ser Barristan's. Violence did not come naturally to him, yet he could do what was necessary. To defend the weak. Her. Dany. A lying girl, not a princess or a queen. He didn't believe she was who she was, that much was plain.

Yet he looked as if he had almost lost himself in his wolf to find her sustenance.

"You still think I'm just some girl," she said, incredulous, part flattered, part offended.

"Yes. Posing to be a handmaiden of Queen Selyse," Jon affirmed stubbornly. "Davos said he never saw you, so you must really be lowborn. A pot-scrubbing kitchen girl."

"He had never seen me because I am Daenerys Targaryen," she said, chin high under the hairs of the unicorn covering her head and her Valyrian colouring. "And I lived in exile all my life."

"Dany," he said and yawned, nearly dozing off, "enough of tales. You opened the door in the trees. Save your fantasies for opening another one."
"Have you ever kissed a girl, Jon Snow?" Dany asked, seized by a terrible suspicion that her nephew had never done it. It was a wrong thing to ask. Jon appeared a hundred times more miserable than before. *And a bit more awake.*

"I did," he said. "And then she died." The admission cost him. His dishevelled black head dropped down to his chest, his hair spilled as a shroud over the black boiled leather and furs he was wearing.

"I won't die if you kiss me," Dany whispered. "I swear." She squatted and leaned into him. Light-headed, she pushed his forehead back up with her own, not caring that they had company. Garth and Pyke were conversing next to the weirwood fire, not paying them any attention.

The kiss was worth the long journey in snow and the anger of her dragon. It felt as if he had been thinking about kissing her as much or more than she did.

Drogo rarely kissed her and Daario would quickly pass from kisses to bold explorations and folly of the senses. Her nephew was part bold, and part shy. He tasted of snow. He took her face in his hands, and for the first time since they met he wore no gloves. The right hand felt different than the other. She snatched it, curious all of a sudden to know why Jon flexed it all the time.

*Burned, it is burned!*

"This can't be," she said, disappointed, staring him down.

Jon Snow frowned. "You started this," he told her. "What's wrong?"

"You are no true dragon," she accused him, petulant. Fire could hurt Jon, like Viserys. *Who is Rhaegal's rider then? Three heads has the dragon... But Rhaegal did heal Jon. Why? None of the dragons with tooth and claw were there to tell her for certain if her nephew could ever ride one or not.*

"I told you when we met, I think," he said, "I'm only a bastard."

Stony acceptance stood written over his face. Dany snapped back to reality and saw it for what it was; he took her last words as a rejection of him as a man. He didn't seem angry about it, only... a bit sad.

"If I am some serving girl, then you are one handsome bastard," she told him, continuing where they stopped. The second kiss tasted of fire, well hidden beyond many layers of ice.

Ghost interrupted them. The enormous wolf stuck his head between them before he lay down at his master's feet, like a good puppy... or a ferocious guardian of his companion's heart.

*Not a dragon, or not entirely.* Dany couldn't stop thinking about Jon. *A wolf... a warg...He said he died here, what could he possibly mean?* There must have been some truth to it, for, unlike Dany, Jon could be considered pretty, but never a liar.

*A monster, like I.*

She realised someone else was missing. Their dead guide was gone. "Where is she?" Dany didn't have to explain to Jon who she meant.

"She scampered away, just like Davos, while I slept," her nephew's bitterness won over his
weariness and any desire for further kissing. "So much for my sword and my stupidity to believe in such a promise. There are several narrow passages leading further underground from where we are, but Garth didn't see which one she took. And the way out to where we came from is closed. We are trapped down here. Ghost barely made it back on time."

*You mean that you barely made it on time,* Dany thought about the stubborn young man who had just kissed her very well, just like Ser Jorah once claimed she should often be kissed. *Would you have been able to return to your body if Ghost stayed out?*

For some reason Dany did not regret being trapped. She felt safer and less cold underground. Her legs were again her own.

"Maybe she'll come back," Dany hoped aloud.

"To be sure" Jon said ironically, "just as I'm the lost prince from your tale."

"You might very well be the prince that was promised," Dany reacted honestly.

"Bastards are never promised," Jon disagreed feebly, "they're born out of mistakes." And as if he had poured all his cares safely out of his soul with that conclusion, he succumbed to peaceful sleep, his handsome dark head landing in his wolf's snow-white fur.

Dany settled next to Jon, in a dark corner of the hollow hill. She scratched the soft fur behind Ghost's ears. The animal whined, almost with satisfaction, allowing her closer to his master.

She stayed awake for long, staring at the shadowy walls of the hollow hill, listening to the wind raging above. The white walkers must have been moving on the outside, or she would not have felt so much fear creeping into her heart.

*We will all die in unspeakable darkness as Old Garth said,* a voice was telling her. She did her best to refute those unpleasant views. *Or were they certainties?*

*We don't know what will be,* she responded firmly in her mind, staring at the last flames of the weirwood fire until they all died out and only unspoiled darkness remained. The fissure between the roots had closed behind them as if it had never existed. They were buried deep under the frozen ground and the solemn white trees watched over them.

The Others told no tales to make the gods cry.

The trees would not let them pass.

Chapter End Notes

What do you think?
The Hound

The Hound was hewing a man in two when he heard the water running; not trickling softly as before, but gushing forward, fast and treacherous as the Green Fork.

The noble Freys had come to meet their runaway prisoners, scurrying like rats down the winding stair of their bloody double castle. The Hound wondered if the same serpentine existed in the second castle of the Twins. He snatched a torch from the first man he killed and thrust it in the arms of one of the weaker prisoners; the stronger ones had to see clearly in order to kill their attackers.

The narrowness of the stairwell worked in favour of the Hound and the rescuing party; they only had to face three or four opponents at once which made the task of cutting through them much easier. They were climbing and slaughtering and singing like bloody wildlings. That's what they all are, these Northmen, aren't they? Though, truth be told, Lord Umber kept his offended distance from Mance Rayder as if the wildling had at least raped his mother, and maybe one of his maiden daughters.

In the middle of exertion the Hound remembered himself as a younger man, a drunk man lurching forward on a similar serpentine stair in a castle far away, catching and frightening a younger Sansa by chance or a particular kind of fate he never quite believed in, that had brought them together, in the end.

Kill them all! the infernal song rolled on and on among crunching of bones and rattling of broken chains wielded like morning stars. In a pleasing cacophony of death, maybe his ears tricked him and there was no danger from water.

An intake of breath later, the river was still running where it shouldn't.

"Grand-grandfather released the Green Fork!" a young lad squeaked from above, roughly two turns of stairs before his time would come to die. "We'll all drown like rats!"

You are rats, the Hound agreed, not feeling like one.

"Frey would kill his own children?" young Piper squealed from below, somewhere behind Mance and his Bolton-made cloak.

"Of course he would," the Hound said with scorn, "He has too many. Haven't you heard?"

"Less mouths to feed in winter," Lord Umber agreed with Lord Frey's views all of a sudden. The Hound laughed his terrible, barking laugh. The blood from his last kill mingled with water on the
slippery floor under his feet as the thunder of the river was approaching. He jumped four stairs at once in a giant stride. The enemy was eager to run away now and he wasn't keen on letting them go.

_Frey had too many wives and has too many children. And I have only one wife and I will see her tonight, no matter what it takes._

Mance pushed himself in front before the Hound could cut down anyone else. The buggering singer and King-beyond-the-Wall obviously had to outrun the water. "Is there another way out?" the wildling delivered his question like a well-aimed blow, after having climbed out of the Hound's immediate line of sight.

"No," the frightened young voice that had already spoken said, panicking, "but there is a way to the second castle, if it's not barred."

The fight and the song stopped.

In fear of drowning both the Freys and their former prisoners moved swiftly upward, following old Walder's great-grandson and the tireless wildling. The Hound was no exception. He swam up fast with the human current though he felt no fear. He'd always doubted he would die in bed of old age. To die with steel in hand would be best, water would be far better than fire, but dead was dead, and Sansa was waiting for him.

_My wife_, he thought and moved with the rest.

The stair ended and the path suddenly forked to the right, on a separation the Hound hadn't noticed when they had been descending to the dungeons.

"They took Lady Arya the other way!" Gendry objected.

"Best if we get up first, and then discuss directions," Mance judged.

The smith's apprentice wouldn't listen, turning the wrong way. _Nor would I_, the Hound approved, _if it was Sansa they took_. He had stopped being prudent when Sansa was in danger long ago. _But I was never daring enough_. The old regret about letting his former master _beat_ her had never quite left him.

Mance gave the Hound a look. Together, they dragged the bull-strong lad in the opposite direction from where he intended to go.

"Dead you're of no use to anyone, boy," the Hound rasped.

They didn't go much further when the torrential flow of water hit them hard in the back from another corridor arching sideways. A wave of stinky, sticky, sweet-tasting water splattered everywhere. The Hound's mouth was full of it and the impact sent him staggering forward. He steadied himself on the wall. A few men fell down, too weak to walk. At least one drowned, calling for his mother. The rest continued scrambling up. The water came almost to the Hound's waist. He didn't much care how shorter men fared but it was certainly not pretty.

The long, winding corridor became faintly grey. The surface was nearing. An opening loomed in front, leading to the inner bailey, the Hound assumed, comparing the Twins with the castles he knew in his head. But as soon as the first Frey man stepped eagerly in the doorway, he fell, feathered with several arrows.

"Such a waste of good arrows," Greatjon Umber observed, and the Hound had to agree as he pushed himself forward through the press. The level of the water was rising, slowly filling up the tunnels under their feet.
"Take cover!" Sandor Clegane bellowed when his unnatural height enabled him to see clearly in front, behind several Freys who stood in first row. "This is no courtyard! It's the bloody bridge, and the tower above it is brimming with archers! And it's either crossing that or heading back to feed the fish."

The Hound regretted they left the empty wine barrels in the dungeon below – they could use them now to shield themselves. Mance began to understand their predicament as well. "Collect all the shields!" the King-beyond-the-Wall commanded.

"Take off your armour!" the Hound shouted at the Freys, "If it comes out to it, you'll swim better without!"

A few cleverer ones listened, others didn't. As usual, Sandor Clegane thought sardonically.

Behind a hastily constructed wall of wooden shields and mismatched armour, Mance, Gendry, Umber and the Hound made a single step through the doorway. The bridge was not short, and the arrows kept falling. The river whirled madly below it, muddy and vociferous.

"How many men are there in the tower?" Mance asked of the lad who brought them there.

"Not so many, a few hundred strong, on various levels. Lots of women and children too. The people are everywhere. And there are archers," the Frey informed, as if they didn't have eyes to figure the last part already. "However, if you pass through the Water Tower, there are no men-at-arms in the second castle."

The Hound thought fast, "We need more cover to break down the tower gates."

There was only one kind of additional cover to be had. Sandor Clegane picked up one, slightly wounded man, wearing the badge of two towers, to use as a living shield. The wildling took a hint and did the same. The Hound's captive started screaming when he was forced onto the bridge, until an arrow grazed his shoulder. Then, he went limp and began to whine meekly. *Splendid,* the Hound thought, hiding his ugly head and chest behind the crying man. *Living human shield is better than a dead one,* he reasoned with himself, *easier to carry.* Greatjon and Gendry remained in the middle, behind painted wooden shields, Mance and the Hound took the flanks with the unfortunate Freys. A few other Northmen joined them from behind, crawling as close as possible to the pavement.

The attack formation exited the castle and arrived to the middle of the bridge, moving through an occasional shower of arrows. The Hound accidentally brushed his bad cheek and realised he was bleeding. *Will Sansa fret about it?* The thought sent his blood up, scalding hot.

_Sansa, would you cry for me if you found me dead or badly wounded on the battlefield?* The thought that she probably would made him both sick and oddly content.

*Best if we don't know.*

The vanguard slid forward as a snake.

"The gates are barred!" Gendry rightfully noticed.

"What did you think?" the Hound rasped, "That they will keep it open and welcome us with flowers?"

The Frey he used as a living shield wept and prayed for Mother's mercy though it was unlikely he
would receive any. Behind them, a Northman tried his luck by jumping into the river, which carried him away as a dead log. *Not a good day for swimming*, the Hound thought as they crossed the remaining span of the bridge andrammed the gates with Gendry's hammer.

The door was strong. *Maybe Lord Umber's head would have a better effect, it seems hard enough.* The man occasionally stared at the former Lannister dog with that righteous expression the Hound hated.

They hit the gates again with full force, but old oak reinforced with soot-coloured steel would not yield. Umber's leg got pierced by an arrow. It only made his lordship angrier. Enraged, he roared wholeheartedly the simplest verse of the wildling's latest worthless composition, "*Kill them all!*" The Hound had a moment to ponder if Mag the Mighty was taller than him and Gregor or not. *He must have been, he was a giant.* The verse rumbled over the roar of the river, and the Hound secretly concurred with the sentiment it contained. Killing had always been something he could understand.

But if they couldn't break through fast enough, the weaker men behind them would drown in the castle or in the river below it, or they would all end up as fodder for archers.

"Move!" the wildling urged them on.

The gate did not budge.

Everything was in vain. The Hound started cursing his luck. *Serves you right for wanting to go.* The peculiar thing about it was, he still wanted to. He hadn't killed enough men yet to call it a day.

"Father, look at this!" a scream came from the Water Tower, calling for Lord Frey or maybe for the Father above, deaf to the pleas of his children.

The Hound stared at the river. The bowmen stopped shooting. Something was coming down the stream of its own free will, not entirely at the mercy of the torrent. On a long, low wooden boat. Or boats. Many boats. All manned. Navigating between the shores with the help of elongated wooden poles, the boats flew over the tumultuous river as if they were possessed by some magic, or rather, moved with some art the Hound had no knowledge of. Sandor Clegane hid his ugly head better behind a whimpering Frey.

"The frogeaters!" a mocking laughter rang from the high rectangular walls of the watchtower. "The mudmen!"

In the foremost boat there stood an unarmed short man with dreamy moss-green eyes, clad in bright green garments. His arms were widespread in a gesture of peace.

"Get down!" the Hound found himself speaking sense to the unknown man on the boat who seemed to have none.

The little green man made no attempt to hide.

"Lord Reed," Mance Rayder rejoiced next to the Hound. "Well met!"

*So that's the lizard-ion...* the Hound took a good look at the strange newcomer from behind his moaning shield.

Several boats pooled under the powerful stony arches of the bridge, thus sheltering themselves from arrows. Others drifted further down the stream. Launching long, sturdy ropes and ladders, they hooked themselves to the castle windows overlooking the river. The mudmen started invading the Twins, armed with blades of bronze and iron.
"Fold back!" Mance ordered his party, stuck in the middle of the first half of the bridge, between one of the castles and the tower. "We'll shield the men boarding! To the boats, everyone! The Freys as well!"

In the end, when the longboats were as full as they could get without sinking, the Hound surmised, there were still many men left at the beginning of the bloody bridge, waiting for more vessels or for what misfortune would bring.

Their cover was growing thinner.

The Hound realised his mistake too late; he had lowered his living shield on a boat as well. "Find a maester," he had told him.

The man Mance had been holding was gone as well, shot dead through a bony neck. Several pieces of armour floated in the water. The Hound squatted behind what was left of their shelter, yet he was almost completely exposed to the bowmen.

"Shoot the green man first!" one of the bastards shouted from the tower, "He's a sorcerer! No one can brave the Green Fork in this season!"

There was temporarily no way out for the survivors. More boats appeared on the northern horizon but it would take some time before they reached the bridge.

Reed addressed the soldiers in the tower, "Leave your posts now! Go to the second castle! If you truly believe in my sorcery, leave! You won't have another chance..." The lord of bogs has a strong voice for such a small man, the Hound had to admit. Or maybe it is sorcery. He dismissed a stupid thought. There was no sorcery. Only tricks he didn't know about.

"Get down!" the Hound heard himself yelling at the green lord who seemed unable to follow his own counsel. All archers aimed for Reed now. There was no way he would stay unharmed.

"This is not the day that I die," the little green man said calmly.

The tower defenders diligently grasped their weapons to prove him otherwise. Some reasonable rats had already started leaving the Water Tower and crawling to the twin castle across the river.

The Hound saw the northern sky go black.

"No..." Sandor Clegane whispered in terror.

A familiar black shadow flapped its leathery wings in cruel splendour, mercilessly closing the distance. Only one animal was that large and advanced that fast.

"Listen to the little bogman! Leave your precious tower now!" the Hound screamed. Or you will burn... You'll see what hell is like, first hand.

The air became so hot that it could almost cook a man alive.

The Frey arrows were about to fly, searching for the heart of the tiny green lord. The sky above the Crossing turned utterly black.

And then it burst into flames of orange, yellow and red. The secular bridge trembled under the Hound's huge feet, wobbly all of a sudden, as if it were made of rickety wood and not of solid stone.

"Seven buggering bleeding hells!" Sandor Clegane cursed.
The grey winter clouds looked like a many-headed monster lit and coloured by dragonfire, and not by the cursed green piss of the alchemists the Imp used to defend King's Landing from Stannis. Yet the terror sowed by the dragon was no less intimidating. *Maybe more.* Starving tongues of bright flames were devouring the Water Tower, which started crumbling down amidst strident cries and wailing people. Everyone was screaming now, friend or foe. The Hound felt cold sweat on his back but all he could do was observe the destruction in morbid fascination.

The little green man still stood on his boat, wearing an infinitely thin, sad smile. "I warned you," he said, as a man used to the truth that people didn't believe him. A few more boats reached the crumbling bridge. "Get on board!" Mance shouted, and the rest of the prisoners and the Freys obeyed, lowering themselves into the safety of wood and water, well under the burning world above. Gendry and Mance were among the last ones. Only the Hound lingered.

He was unable to tear his eyes away from the sight of the melting tower; disabled and appalled. The bridge was cracking under his feet now and the stones were coming loose.

In a moment, there would be no more crossing.

The Freys would no longer be able to exact their toll. The king whose family they slaughtered didn't need their pathetic bridge; Rhaegar could cross any river on his way on the back of the dragon. The Hound's long legs dropped in the empty air, his greatsword hung as a useless appendage in his right arm. He didn't sheathe it in time. He was a good swimmer though and he wasn't wearing armour. He stillled and waited for the shock of the cold, dangerous current.

The fall was slower than it should have been.

A claw was stopping him.

A set of black claws caught him by the waist like a puppet, pulling him up with singular dexterity, considering that each nail was almost as long and sharp as the Hound's sword. Perhaps it was better than swimming in the river gone wild, yet he didn't relish flying a dragon. *Maybe his scales can cause burns as well.*

*There is a first time for everything,* he told himself. *I need to endure.* The beast could have killed him easily so the fact that it did not was an encouraging sign. He almost, almost closed his eyes, but he didn't want Rhaegar to see him turn craven.

Instead, with great care, he sheathed the sword over his broad back. It wouldn't do to cut the dragon by chance. Not that it would hurt him much, but it could anger him. The beast had always looked revengeful and unforgiving to the Hound, as if it could hold long grudges of its own. With as much bravery he could muster in a humiliating situation, he glared insolently into one black, mean eye of the dragon. The beast was still breathing out fire, which streamed loose through its gaping mouth, raining down on what remained of the Freys' once valuable bridge.

The Hound looked away from all the burning. There was a waterfall of silver hair high above the dragon's head, too pretty to belong to a man.

"Brother," the king said, relentless in calling him *that,* "I trust I was on time." The quip was empty and the joy from Rhaegar's normally vivid eyes gone. They were the colour of dark indigo now, neither purple nor black. Sandor saw the burning tower reflected in them while he kept hanging on the dragon's paw.

*You wouldn't pull me all the way up, would you?* he thought. The beast must have heard him because it immediately obeyed and dragged him to sit behind the king. The Hound had no dragon
blood so he could not hear what the dragon was thinking or if he had been thinking at all.

Drogon.

It was a good name. Drogon certainly didn't look as upset by the carnage it was unleashing as the dragonlord riding it.

Rhaegar leaned his face on the dragon's neck and whispered fervently. Sandor could not hear the words, but Drogon closed his jaws like a good dog, inhaling and swallowing the rest of his fire which was still floating on the wind. The two men and the dragon flew in straight line back to the first courtyard of the Twins where the Hound had entered the castle earlier that day. The dragon landed neatly, folding its wings like a giant bird. The smallfolk cowered in fear from it. The king and his shield stepped down one of the enormous black paws.

The castle yielded to fire. The day was over and it belonged to the dragon. The winter wind smelled of sulphur and all seven hells in one place. The Hound's eyes itched from the smoke rising into the air. Tears of irritation ran down the ruin of his face. He wiped them before anyone noticed and took the wrong meaning.

The little bronze-armed men clad in brown and mud-green seemed to be victorious as well, in their well-organised assault on the Twins. There was no single weasel face to be seen walking around freely and the mudmen were everywhere. Not frogeaters, the Hound thought respectfully, little lizard-lions.

The king strode into the Great Hall of the Twins. The Hound padded behind. The queen was already there, holding the king's lance. It was too long for her, but contrary to what most men would expect, she could use it very well. The Hound was not most men and while being confident in his own skills with good reason, he rarely underestimated an opponent. Aegon was guarding Lyanna, his shiny sword, Dawn, bare in his arms, though no one was so much as looking at the queen with the intention to do her harm.

So His Grace left them here before flying out to do his duty and defeat his enemies. Dragon wings were the only way Lyanna and Aegon could have arrived so rapidly to the Twins. The Hound could understand why the king left his wife behind for the nasty piece of business concerning the tower. Drogon surely took his long, sweet time burning it. Even for the Hound it was one thing to kill the Freys, yet it would have been a completely different thing to take Sansa with him and make her watch.

In the middle of the great hall, the rat growing pretty, Sansa's little sister Arya sat gingerly on the high seat of the Freys with her tiny sword laid across her knees. The Hound was pleased and not surprised at all. Nothing could kill that one.

Old Frey sat helplessly at her feet, like a dog kicked out of the kennel. More like than not, he could not walk when tossed out of his litter. The she-wolf held him firmly him by the throat, lovingly plucking the last white hairs from his spotted head and face.

"Meet my lord husband," Lady Arya told the royal couple when they approached, pointing at Lord Frey with the tip of her sword.

Old Lord Walder doesn't do things by half, the Hound thought. How stupid can you be to think that a Stark would just walk into your castle unprepared? Maybe if you have a double castle, you are doubly stupid.

Arya flushed a half smile of recognition and gratitude backward at Gendry, who stood with his
hammer behind the high chair.

*So you were on time to help the she-wolf in bringing old Frey to kneel,* Sandor thought about Gendry. *Good luck, boy, with courting that one!* In the Hound's expert opinion, fortified by the experience of travelling with the incorrigible brat, the boy risked being murdered in his sleep if he couldn't keep his hands and thoughts to himself.

"Not all weddings go as planned," the northern queen said sweetly to old Walder and kissed her niece's cheek in affectionate family greeting. "Wouldn't you agree, Lord Frey?"

Soaked wet from the waist down, the Hound nearly shivered from cold when Lyanna Stark addressed the oldest and the ficklest of the riverlords. His lordship had no answer to give.

"Take him prisoner!" the queen commanded the mudmen in a voice more serious than Eddard Stark's when he had been Hand of the King. "Bring some of his children and grandchildren as well. Let us all go to Greywater Watch. I long to see Lord Reed!"

*The Reeds are the Starks' bannermen, not the Tullys* the Hound forced his underused brain to remember.

"I am here," the little green man said, entering. The queen faced him, forgetting Lord Frey.

"Howland," Lyanna said, and there was everything in that word. Black sadness and unmeasured joy. And sweet music caressing the senses, for as much as the Hound mostly hated music.

"The Knight of the Laughing Tree..." Lord Reed replied with tears in his eyes, unashamed of crying unlike the Hound, who had cried three times as a man grown and he'd rather not remember any of the occasions.

"I had never hoped..." The lizard lion pointed at Mance Rayder who was never far. "When I told him everything about Jon's and Aegon's birth, I had never thought... I had never dreamed of seeing you and your husband alive."

"I know," the queen said simply, "neither did I."

The Hound hoped that a happy song of reunion could be avoided. He meant to listen to a different tune as soon as it could be arranged. His blood was still up and the killing was obviously done for the day.

_Sansa, he breathed out in his head, would you sit on my face?_

Rhaegar's queen let go of the lance, and Aegon was there to catch it. She hugged the green-clad man with honest strength. "Howland..." She sniffed into the long sleeve of her dress and then returned her gaze to her husband. "Rhaegar, meet my dearest friend and the most faithful bannerman of the House Stark, Lord Howland Reed of Greywater Watch."

The king nodded. "It's an honour," he said cautiously. "We met your envoys on the causeway and Lyanna urged me to heed your words and fly to the Twins. How did you know that Lord Frey would almost win this day without a little help from a dragon?"

Lord Reed looked at the queen. His strange visionary eyes begged for help. "He dreamed about it," Lyanna explained, and Rhaegar frowned.

"I thought that such things were possible only in the mummery," His Grace said wisely.
"I know, my love," Lyanna answered in all seriousness, which always made her pretty face look long. "Twenty years ago I didn't believe in the power of dreams just like you're doubting it now."

Rhaegar scratched his silver head. "Was there no other way?" he asked of the lizard-lion.

The little green man shook his head. "My men are searching the Fork. They will help anyone who can still be helped. I gave them a fair warning as well."

Rhaegar looked around the great hall where smallfolk hid in the corners, as far away from the captured weasels-at-arms and the new dangerous intruders. "Were there so many in the Water Tower as well?"

"I do not know," Lord Reed said, "I do not dream of everything that passes. No one does."

The king embraced his wife. From afar, the gesture must have looked proper and restrained, but the Hound stood nearby and noticed how the king was desperate and tight as a bow. His blood must have been boiling too.

"I need to fly now," Rhaegar whispered to Lyanna, his voice intense and demanding. "I know the feeling," she retorted, dark eyes on the ground. "But I fear I cannot follow. I... I have flown too much and too long of late..."

The king gave his wife a very questioning, worried look before she continued, "I loathe rest but I require it now if I don't want to put myself in jeopardy. It is my wish to travel farther with Howland. I would see you soon, in Greywater Watch," she added, almost as shy as a young girl, awaiting her lover's reaction.

Lord Reed had an announcement of his own and it involved pointing at the Hound. "I can't take him with us, Your Grace. Our boats will not carry him. I'm sorry." The look of apprehension and possible disgust spread all over the chief frogeater's face. Sandor Clegane hadn't seen the familiar expression for a while, ever since he openly enjoyed the new king's favour. Quite frankly, he hadn't missed it.

"Take me where? What have I done to you? And how can a bloody boat refuse to transport someone? Or is it my face and my name again? The old anger at the world and its ways was instantly back, simmering under the mask of indifference he wore.

"I will take my brother with me then," the king announced, to the Hound's mild surprise. "I thought you might," Lyanna gave her husband a soft kiss. "Fly safe, the both of you."

Rhaegar whispered a word of farewell to his wife and walked out the hall. The Hound followed, maintaining his usual aloofness with some difficulty. There was stubborn, uneasy silence between the two men until the dragon lifted flight again under the sad, gloomy clouds. The river was a twisting, convulsive snake slithering through the lands below. The king's back slumped in front of the Hound and there was something wrong, a small defeat, in the way he embraced a tall spike on the dragon's thick neck.

"They would have killed all of us gladly if they could," the Hound surprised himself by broaching the issue at hand, "you first of all, Your Grace. I wouldn't even put it past old Lord Frey to wed your wife after murdering you if he could gain some advantage by it. The man is known to be easy to slight and overly ambitious."

"Lyanna?" the king smirked, pinched in his sadness. "She would gut him first."

Thinking on it, the Hound was surprised Arya didn't gut the old man already.
Sandor Clegane couldn't believe he had been the first one to start talking, but what he said was honest and he couldn't leave Rhaegar to his brooding. *This is what you get for unknowingly befriendning a dragonlord. You become all soft and a wet nurse to one.*

"There were women and children in that tower," the king said quietly, his sorrowful mood returning. "I saw some running away."

"Some," Sandor agreed, "and if they didn't die here, they would have died somewhere else. They were warned. It was much more warning than their liege lord gave the Starks. This bridge could not be left standing. You know that as well as I. Not for the Freys after what they had done, nor for the grumkins who could use it to cross freely east and west. That is also why you deepened the fords of the Trident, isn't it? You're dividing the lands to make the advance of the enemy more difficult should it cross the Wall in greater numbers." It was what Tywin Lannister would have done and it sounded like a sensible war strategy. They had no idea how many white walkers they were up against.

The king could not keep the image of the burning tower out of his head, it seemed. His dark eyes remained empty and cold. Then, as though he had reconsidered, he focused on the Hound.

"You finally omitted calling me Your Grace," he said warmly. "When will you call me brother again?"

The Hound did not reply. Somehow, keeping distance from people had always come easier for him. It made his world smaller and simpler, with less chances to be lied to. It had always been that way since he ran away from home and took service with the Lannisters. He realised that a particularly sharp dark red dragon scale was uncomfortably lodged between his legs. Sandor Clegane wriggled into a more bearable position. "You know me," he said lamely.

"I'll never do this again, I swear. I'd rather die," Rhaegar said then, brusquely, and remained silent in turn. The Hound didn't have to ask him what he meant.

"This is what kings do," he ventured again on the uneasy ground of advising his friend. *And best you do it again because Stannis Baratheon may be a better man but he is no less stubborn than old Walder Frey...*

The Hound had recognised the banner flying above the Twins if no one else did. He'd never forgotten the sight of it. Stannis' men unfolded it when the Blackwater burned and the Hound led good men to die in the sea of wildfire.

King Robert had uses for his brother Stannis but he had always thought of him as a large pain in the ass, and for a good reason. The man was so scrupulously righteous that he ended up doing worse things than an average sinful man.

Rhaegar... Rhaegar was different. He could see the shades of right and wrong and make reasonable decisions, although he doubted his own judgement. *Must be that the understanding comes from his own sins...* Stannis never sinned as far as the Hound knew. Sandor Clegane wondered if Rhaegar's son inherited the peculiar sense of justice from his father. Or if he was more like Sansa's father, breaking his fast on honour instead of bread, as Cersei once said with scorn.

"Did this beast of yours find your son?" Sandor blurted.

"I think so," the king stirred to life, "Drogon believes him to be safe. My sister is with him. But Jon either can't or won't come to meet us... I cannot say I blame him... The things he *must* have heard about me..."
Now, Rhaegar looked more morose than before, when only the burning tower was the source of his melancholy, a feat that the Hound thought impossible.

"Well that's all in the past and crying over it won't make it any better," the Hound said rudely, "you just have to live on!"

"That's what I'm doing, am I not?" the king retorted, dark eyes staring north with determination.

_You'd better_, the Hound thought, _for there's no way I'm letting you die_. The long and prosperous reign of King Rhaegar, First of His Name, and later on of his son, was the only reasonable guarantee of Sansa's safety in a world which wasn't going to become less awful overnight.

Nevertheless, it was not only for that reason that the Hound wanted to protect the king. Sandor Clegane had grown to love and respect Rhaegar as a true older brother. But the Hound was well practised in burying his feelings on the inside, until it seemed to the outside world that the only thing he felt was anger.

Or nothing at all.

"Your son, he has the making of quite a swordsman," the Hound decided on a different approach. If you couldn't cut through your opponent, you could fight your way sideways. When he was still a dog set to guard Joffrey, Sandor Clegane observed the Stark children playing at swords in Winterfell as a part of his duties. He had to know the enemy if he was to protect the little shit of the crown prince. The black-haired boy they called a bastard was by far the only one with true gift for swordsmanship. "You give your son a shiny sword as Aegon has, and he will beat him in no time. He might beat me one day too, when I am older."

Rhaegar listened with genuine interest. "Excellent," he said in the end with pride, "we have enough jousters in this family."

After that, the flight north continued uneventful and pleasantly silent. Two men and the beast left the hell brought into the world by dragonfire far behind. The putrid smoke of melting stone and flesh from the Twins ceded place to different evaporations from below; a pungent, threatening scent of a large swamp swerving with life in the middle of bloody winter.

The Hound's muscles started throbbing, the tension of the short battle slowly leaving his body. He had been wet and now he was pleasantly drying on the warm back of the dragon. The warmth stirred other muscles, not used for fighting men, in his case at least. Late Ser Loras may have had a slightly different opinion on the matter.

_How am I to tell my beautiful, sweet wife to sit on my face?_ The mental image was a delight of the senses. His arms would be long enough to cup her breasts while he tasted her inside and out. _Just tell her, dog_, he mused, _you've told her much more awful things before. She might love you for it_.

Drogon landed with his paws in yellowish, muddy water, in front of a large river island. Amidst the oppressive greenery rose the strangest castle the Hound had ever seen. The quiet, wooden giant lay hidden by brown and green walls of pliable reeds and weeping willows. Its majesty almost equalled that of Casterly Rock though it was not made of stone, but of bark and leaf. Uneasiness washed over him. He would find no joy here. The place seemed to _hate_ him for no reason at all, just like those bloody boats did.

Several short men and women rushed forward to meet them.

"Your Grace," an elderly woman said, "the rooms are prepared for you and your retinue. The rest of
your army is camping further north, on a safe site between the bogs, away from the road and its
dangers."

"My wife, where is she?" the Hound inquired spontaneously, realising too late that the woman could
not know about him and Sansa.

"My niece, Lady Sansa, is she here?" the king helped him out.

"Inside with a young boy who has no name that I know of," the woman said.

_Mance's son_, the Hound did know. Sansa occasionally looked after him. Sandor never knew what to
think of that. The notion of becoming a father made him very uneasy, to the point that he was
relieved when Sansa's moonblood came and went. _Any child of mine could be like Gregor, couldn't
it?_ He was old enough to understand that there were evil and not so evil men in every family. But in
his family, the evil had an entirely different dimension.

Once more he thought of Sansa sitting on his face and squinting against the weak sun. The buggering
swamp seemed to be the last warm place in Westeros and he was now sweating in earnest.

"Go, brother," Rhaegar said, "I guess I'll just stare at the water and wait for my own wife. This is
where the boats will dock, am I right?"

The crone nodded. Her face and neck were spotted from old age. _Dappled_, the Hound thought.

"Here, take your scarf," Sandor Clegane handed the red garment he used to disguise his head at the
Twins back to the king. "I did my best not to bloody it." The king laughed. It sounded much better
than his incessant questioning the things he couldn't have done differently. The success of his
discourteous remark pleased the Hound so much that he continued politely. "Please," he told the
short woman, "may I be taken to the Lady Sansa? She is my wife."

The confusion on the woman's face was telling. Be as it may, she stifled it by the habit of what was
probably a lifetime of servitude and showed him the way. They walked through the gates protected
by a grid wrought of iron in the most intricate herbal pattern the Hound had ever seen, and then
overgrown with living vine. _Little bird must love this._

The pillars in the first courtyard were shaped like children standing and holding the flat beam above
their big-eyed heads; long-haired children with jagged teeth. They were only wooden statues, yet it
seemed to the Hound that they studied him with knowing eyes and hissed through their teeth as he
was led past, sharpening the knives some of them were holding. _This castle has no love for me._

In the second courtyard, the feeling of being watched by silent eyes increased. The Hound was
relieved when a spacious chamber opened before him from one of the brownish corridors. The warm
yellow light of a short day bathed the little bird and Mance Rayder's son.

_You love me, Sansa. Just as I love you, with all my wicked heart._

He had to stoop to come in.

"It's you!" Sansa exclaimed as soon as she had seen him. Carefully, she lowered the little boy from
her lap on a pile of fresh rushes on the floor. The boy immediately placed one in his mouth as if it
were a tasty treat from the royal table. "Don't eat that," Sansa said, admonishing him, but the boy
wouldn't relent.

_Damn boy!_ Where was he going to put him until Mance arrived?
Unexpectedly, the old woman gave a helping hand. "I shall take him to the king," she said, "the river is beautiful to see in the evening. The water flowers close their petals and it's the best time to see lizard-lions swimming! Come, boy!"

"Thank you," the Hound almost chirped with merriment, and loaded the boy in the crone's arms before she changed her mind. Then, he put his sword away, lowered himself on the floor, finally got rid of the tunic and loosened his hair from Sansa's blue ribbon, noticing how it was all dirty and ruined. She'll give me another one, he hoped. He had no idea where he had left his cloak. Probably in the dungeons. I'm good at leaving those behind.

Sansa was next to him in an instant, her hands on his face.

"You're bleeding!" she rightfully concluded.

"It's nothing," he muttered.

The water basin seemed to be conjured out of thin air. Soft cloth was cleaning his burns, as gently as he once dabbed blood from his future wife's lip. He would never forget how the girl the entire Lannister household considered stupid thought of pushing Joffrey from the battlements of the Red Keep. "Come closer," she said now.

She is fretting over me.

To his great surprise, he had to suppress the desire to pretend he was worse off than he was.

"It's nothing," he insisted on telling the truth, "we killed some Freys, His Grace burned some more, he's upset about it, but it will pass. It must." A very weak wave of shame hit him as he allowed himself to admire his wife. I am home and others are not. Maybe the king has the right of it and we should not be doing any of it. We are all trained to kill and for what? He wondered if the Frey he had used as a living shield had made it. Maybe he had a wife and a snotty child somewhere waiting for him.

"You are bleeding," Sansa complained weakly, "you're back, gods, you are back... they told me the boats would only be back late at night when I asked..." Of course she would be asking about me. The Hound suddenly felt very, very grateful to Rhaegar and Drogon for the ride.

"The others are not back yet," he said, "only the king, his dragon and me. Everyone is fine though," he added hastily before she'd have to make another question. She must want to know about her sister.

"How was it, coming back?" she asked with great care. You mean to ask me in that cursed, polite way of yours if I was afraid to fly a fire-retching monster. Well, maybe I was, but only a little bit. If truth be told, the uncanny experience went better than expected. The beast was as clever as Stranger and equally mean. The Hound had acquired a new admiration for the black dragon.

"It was fine," he grumbled, unwilling to discuss his reticence toward the big fires, "different than anything else." That was the truth of the matter as far as he could express it. There was nothing that could compare to flying with the dragon.

"I know," she said. She did it once before, he remembered. Sansa had returned to King's Landing from Highgarden with Daenerys and Drogon.

Flying must come naturally to birds.

His hands were free to roam the bodice of her gown. The laces were never as firm as women wanted
them. The chamber was lit with soft light emanating from bowls of some sort of smelly oil or resin burning instead of candles, and he thought he glimpsed a bed in it as well. Probably it was a poor one with the mattress filled with the tree bark half of the bloody castle seemed to be built of, and probably his legs wouldn't fit in it. Yet after weeks on the road, it was a sweet sight. And Sansa's breasts seemed larger than ever before, a landscape of softness he could get lost in and never regret it. *They are still growing.* He filled his mouth with one of them. *That* stopped her from trying to nurse his damn scars.

His earlier fantasies of making her sit on his face disappeared like the excessive smoke swallowed back by the maw of the dragon. *Some other time, we have plenty.* He stilled his mouth on her teat, his mind a blank, waiting for anything she would do to him next. She began cradling his head against her chest as a precious thing.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked, in a rasp deeper than Drogon's growl.

Sansa never answered those questions, she probably wouldn't know how to if she tried. But she always found a way to show him, somehow, and to respond to him, until they both reached their pleasure. *And what pleasure it is...* He had never known anything remotely similar. The Hound wondered if she knew how helpless he was in her presence.

"Kiss me now," she surprised him by talking. "It's been too long."

*It was only a day,* he thought, but he kept his mouth shut.

*She has the right of it,* he realised. *For me as well.*

She was all a man needed.

Sansa was everything he ever needed.

He never thought he'd be this happy in his bloody life.

He'd do anything to make it last.

Chapter End Notes

I am really looking forward to your comments on this :-))

Next chapter will probably be Jon.
A brightly polished sword hung high above the sunken lake, waiting for a hand to draw it.

How to cross the lake was another matter. The water felt ice cold, black and deep when Jon probed it with his burned fingers that had shocked Dany so much. He couldn't stop wondering why and he had never felt less like a true dragon. Was that what she mentioned? At least it wasn't my kiss...

The expanse of the water in front was vast. Jon and his three companions could not jump over and had no way of bridging it. There are four of us, Jon corrected himself. They were five if one counted Ghost, and Jon did consider his wolf to be his friend.

The shoreline descended steeply in utter darkness, vanishing to the left and to the right from where they were now standing. Perhaps the eagle would be strong enough to retrieve the blade if the bird were there, but she was not, not since the weirwoods locked them underground.

Imprisoned by the old gods, Jon thought of their latest forced journey and missed the queen of the skies. Absent-mindedly, he touched the scars left by Orell's bird on his face. The question that came to him was the same, obsessive and unavoidable, posing itself with great frequency ever since he heard Dany's story. What if my mother is truly flying with that eagle? How else could a great bird of prey land so gently on me without causing hurt?

But then, if what he had been told was true, his father would have been a different man, a cruel man without honour.

Maester Luwin did not lie in his lessons, did he? Jon delved hard in his memories for a harsh word from the mouth of his father, Lord Eddard Stark, spoken about Rhaegar Targaryen. But for as much as he searched and looked back, he couldn't find any.

What he could remember were sparse, short stories about his father's sister, Lady Lyanna, scattered throughout his childhood and youth. Lord Eddard would take Jon on his knees and share a memory or two concerning his beloved late sister. In them, Lyanna was a gentle soul and a beautiful girl. Yet she could ride faster than almost anyone Father had ever known, shoot at archery targets with great precision and wield a knife and a lance better than most men.

Jon had no interest in those sad remembrances at the time. He thought his father was exaggerating and telling them only to alleviate his sorrow over his sister's passing.

Besides, Jon's weapon of choice had always been a sword.

As a boy he had so often dreamed that Ice, the ancestral sword of House Stark, would one day be his, knowing it would never, never be.
Ice belongs to Rickon now, he thought, Stannis will reclaim Winterfell in my little brother's name... If Ramsay Snow lied about defeating him, that is. Many months after receiving the letter which had almost cost him his life, Jon was certain that Ramsay lied about many things. He just wanted to provoke me and I took the bait. Rash, that's what I am when those that I love are threatened...

At least we have found a sword, he thought grimly, gazing forward, wondering if the blade was as deadly as it looked. The weapon gleamed like oddly-shaped pale glass in the scant light, suspended as a menace over the black skin of the water.

"Perhaps we could swim," Cotter Pyke said, his ironborn voice laced with doubt. If a man born at sea doubted such enterprise, who was Jon, a northman by birth and upbringing, to find it prudent? The only place where Jon ever swam was a moat surrounding Winterfell.

"Why?" Dany asked. "There are two paths going down." Her lilac eyes continuously spied on Jon since the incident, as Jon started to call their kiss in his mind.

Why have you been acting so reasonable ever since?

Jon expected she would try hard to convince him of the truth of her ridiculous words. He burned from desire to hear her story again, the unreal one where both his parents lived... And loved him... Yet his pride prevented him from asking for it. He couldn't show that weakness. He couldn't possibly admit to anyone how a little bastard boy once wanted to have noble parents who loved him.

Especially his mother.

Deep within his soul Jon knew that his longing for Ice was nothing in comparison to those craven yearnings, buried deep in his soul and seemingly forgotten, until Dany's outrageous story resurrected them.

But then, then... What if Dany's tale were true? And it wasn't, it couldn't be!

It can't be true, Jon told himself a hundredth time, you only wish that your mother were alive and not just some woman who had left you, or a whore.

But, still, still... Were it all true, Dany would have been his dishonourable father's sister and she didn't seem corrupted at all. Moreover, Jon caught himself wishing fervently she would have less honour and kiss him again.

Ygritte certainly never hesitated since the first time she came to Jon under the furs. He realised he expected Dany to act the same way. But she behaved as if nothing of import had happened on that incredible day under the weirwood trees, when Jon felt on the brink of death before being fed and kissed back to life. Thoroughly, marvellously kissed.

I kissed you back and you let me. Why are you now treating me so?

Dany was cordial towards Jon now and nothing else – almost as though she pitied him. And that was not the end. Occasionally, when they stopped, she helped him light a fire or execute any other small task when setting the camp, as if he were some snotty, green boy who needed a mother. And that only after we kissed. She never did the same with Garth or Pyke.

Jon understood her less and less.

Dany was of his age, he could tell that much. Younger than Ygritte... Yet there was something in Dany that made her appear so much older and more experienced, less and more vulnerable at the same time.
Lovely as a summer day.

All Dany's teeth were perfectly shaped. The thought made Jon feel ashamed.

_Ygritte, I did love you_, he spoke to the wildling girl's shade in his mind, _crooked teeth or not. And I wouldn't know anything if it weren't for you._

Standing behind Dany next to the lake now, Jon realised how much taller he was. He looked down. The dirty black woollen trousers he wore were nowhere near as long as when he left Castle Black. _I could kiss her any time and she would not be able to resist._ The thought didn't feel like his own yet it lingered in his head for a fleeting moment.

_I wish it were that easy to become a greater man as it is to grow in height_, Jon mused, returning his attention to the hanging sword. He was now taller than both Old Garth and Pyke, and he remembered seeing Pyke eye to eye when he had been elected Lord Commander.

_Daenerys..._

The name frightened him. She had not only the looks, she also claimed the name of a princess for whose beauty Daemon Blackfyre, a bastard of one Targaryen king, _Aegon or Aemon_, Jon never remembered, started a rebellion against his father's trueborn heir, announcing that the Iron Throne was his by rights.

Much before the rebellion, Daemon's father had gifted Daemon with the renowned Valyrian steel sword of Aegon the Conqueror. The famous Aegon wielded it to conquer the Seven Kingdoms. The blade was called Blackfyre and young Daemon took its name as his own. The Targaryen king unknown to Jon thus honoured his natural son for his bravery and prowess with the sword, bestowing upon Daemon one of the greatest treasures of their house. That limited part of history appealed to a bastard boy raised in the north with the humble last name Snow, who would _never_ be given the ancestral blade of the Starks.

An unwanted memory of Robb and him sparring in Winterfell with wooden swords hit Jon like a punch in the face. They may have been ten years old, it was hard to tell. Robb pretended his sword was Ice so Jon had to invent another name. He named his own stick Blackfyre in memory of a Valyrian blade given to a bastard by his loving father, not caring what else history had to say about Daemon and his followers or if they did more evil than good in the end.

He had defeated Robb shouting... _Blackfyre_ because he couldn't very well shout _Winterfell_ like Robb did, could he, no matter how much he would have wanted it... Jon had always been the better sword, from a very early age.

Father... Lord Eddard came to the yard and overheard the boys. Jon expected a reprimand because his father _hated_ the Targaryens for what they did to his father, elder brother and sister. All he got was a sad smile. "It must have been a great sword," Lord Eddard said, "yet perhaps you should learn the lance."

"_Robb is a better lance,_" Jon replied then and never thought twice about his father's words.

_But now, now..._ Rhaegar won a tourney and crowned Lady Lyanna the Queen of Love and Beauty. _That was before he kidnapped her and raped her._ Jon knew little about tourneys, which were never popular in the North, but you had to be more than just _good_ with a lance to win in one.

Vaguely, wishing to stop the flow of unwanted thoughts about what Rhaegar Targaryen did or did not do, Jon remembered that the first Daenerys married a Dornish prince. Perhaps she had no love
for Daemon Blackfyre at all, fabulous swordsman or not.

Princesses did not fall in love with bastards.

**Why won't she ever kiss me again?**

**Was I not... was it not... good enough?**

Dany seemed to have enjoyed it at the time. And her kisses were more than just good for Jon. Different than Ygritte's healthy, heartfelt touches, they were provoking, life giving and unimaginably sweet. *I'm not the first man she kissed, not by far,* he knew and didn't know how he felt about it. But at the end of the day Dany's kisses only made her latest *helpful* attitude more intolerable with every moment they were forced to spend together.

Their journey since the trees had trapped them continued on leftovers of Ghost's kill, and, most of all, on hope.

It was better to hope to find an exit than to remember the delicious taste of warm, fresh blood in the wolf's mouth. The joy of tearing the elk apart was very strong and yet foreign, perturbing to the bone. After running with his wolf by choice for the very first time, Jon stayed sufficiently away from Ghost, so as to not don his skin by chance.

*What if it's so overwhelming next time that I can't pull myself out of the wolf... What if I attack Cotter? Or Dany...* Somehow he didn't think she would be afraid. Ghost had never been so fond of anyone else except Jon, his siblings and their wolves.

Jon the beastling now glared at the lake below ground. The paths submerging themselves into darkness on both sides were too narrow for a man to pass comfortably and they probably only led to more cold water.

Dark resentment froze Jon's soul into a single piece of aged ice from all his thoughts of late.

The Wall had been his, the only thing that had ever been his by rights.

And what did he do? He wallowed in self-pity because Bowen Marsh and some of his younger followers stabbed him. When some force of magic brought Jon *alive* to Hardhome, he wasted precious time before winter came in full force pondering if he was dead or alive and if his eyes were going to change colour from very dark grey, almost black, to blue.

After seeing the white walkers marching south through the woods, he *chose* to go in the opposite direction of the Wall where he belonged, and now even that choice was taken away from him.

*I am the watcher on the Wall,* he told himself a hundredth time. *I have to go back.*

But there was no way out where they came from and no good way forward. Old Garth thought that the runaway dead child who had guided them to the secret entrance into the tunnels went the way Jon and his companions followed to reach the lake. *Because that was the only way,* Jon reminded himself. Ghost howled in agreement and there was no way to know, not truly.

The eagle was gone, gone, gone...

*It can't fly underground,* Jon excused the bird to himself. *And what Dany told is a story, a fanciful tale she crafted in her womanly mind,* he was convincing himself, trying his best to believe it.

He hardened his resolve not to trust Dany by remembering his sister Sansa and her friend Jeyne
Poole who swooned over stories where a gentle hero would touch the nose of a magical beast to tame it and never do it any harm. Girls were funny sometimes and they imagined too much.

On earth, stiff-jawed Stannis Baratheon let his wife and his red sorceress call him a hero, and wielded a fake hero's sword, burning without heat. And Melisandre might use the blood of the magical beast for her witchcraft; to make her next prisoner change appearance before burning him alive. Jon remembered the Lord of Bones screaming as he burned in a cage, looking like Mance Rayder. He shivered and noticed a worried look on Dany's face.

**What?** he was immediately irritated. *Will you feed me porridge next time, as I fed the little wildling girl in Hardhome with a wooden spoon?*

Jon should have gathered such men in Hardhome as he could have found, ranged south, returned to the Wall and retaken his command. But no, no...! He only decided to abandon the life in caves to chase after his half brother Rickon, not after his duty. And then he abandoned that quest as well for the childish hope of finding the true sword of heroes.

*You are not much of a hero now, that much is certain.*

Jon wondered what Maester Aemon would think of his latest decisions and concluded that more like than not he wouldn't be very proud.

*If... if...* The old maester would have been his *kinsman* if what Dany said were true. Aemon was a Targaryen by birth and he surely had honour, more so than many people Jon had a chance to meet.

*I am a man now,* Jon vowed to himself and to Aemon. *It takes all the mistakes I've made to become one.* He was more and more certain of it with every move forward in the weirwood dungeon surrounding them. The walls of the passages and of the large, spacious cavern embracing the lake were made of solid rock. Entangled tree roots grew all over them; a white twisting maze covering the dark stone. The air felt warmer the further down they went.

Though Jon avoided his wolf's immediate proximity, he felt he would have gone mad if it weren't for Ghost's distant company. The animal offered wordless solace to the Bastard of Winterfell. The direwolf hounded his master's steps as a huge ball of snowy fur plodding through the long, winding tunnels of the old gods. Jon kept telling himself that the caves must have belonged to the gods because the thought that they didn't belong to anyone was too terrible to contemplate.

*There must be a way out and we are going to find it,* Jon swore.

Dany walked fast and steady in the almost bearable cold reigning in the tunnels, in comparison with the inhuman chill in the woods they had crossed before. Jon was unreasonably pleased to see that. *If not, we would have to carry her,* he tried to justify his satisfaction to himself and at the same time regretted that holding her wasn't required. They must have travelled for several days to reach the lake. There was no way to tell for there was no difference between night and day under ground.

*Not that there is much difference left above the ground,* Jon thought, wondering if daylight would still exist when they found the surface again. Because now... now... They had been going steadily north if Jon's sense of orientation was not completely lost. If they continued on that course they would arrive at the Lands of Always Winter and see the court of the Night's King, if it existed. *It doesn't, obviously,* Jon told himself. *Old Nan's stories are not true, just like anyone else's.*

The vaults of the tunnels were full of bats. Jon and his companions discovered that roasted bat was rather tasty, particularly when served with acorn paste. Since Dany's desperate plea against the pine tree fruits, no one could stomach the rest of them. However, their self-proclaimed steward, Old
Garth, still carried them. One could never know when they would run out of any other form of sustenance.

Jon's stomach growled. He hadn't eaten anything for a while. He stifled the memory of elk's blood in his mouth, appalled by himself.

The lake and the sword glowed in soft, eerie light, cast by the burning weirwood torches held by Pyke and Old Garth who flanked Jon and Dany. The old square-faced wildling sniffed the air.

"It smells of me old north," he said quietly, not pleased. Everyone knew Garth wanted to go south. In the north, there was only death.

Jon surmised they couldn't have possibly arrived at the Lands of Always Winter so soon if the maps Sam Tarly found in the vaults of Castle Black were any good. They must have been circling uselessly with the outcome of arriving nowhere, as they had done since the implacable drifts of snow prevented Jon's return to the Wall.

"We are getting near to me land," Old Garth sighed with both longing and fear, contradicting Jon's conclusions, "I can feel it under me ancient skin. Would that we could go back, but there is no back. Only forward."

*Maybe he is right*, Jon thought and dreamed of glory and adventures against his will just like Sansa must have dreamed of all the noble heroes from the songs in Winterfell.

*The stories may be just stories, but the shiny sword is still there,* he realised. The foreign looking blade was hanging in the air over the mass of water and Jon's burned hand itched to grip it.

Dany was the first one to run down one of the sinister looking narrow paths around the lake without waiting any further. To Jon, the way she chose smelled of sudden death. Ghost growled with discontent. The girl soon disappeared where they could not see her, embraced and consumed by the darkness.

"Wait!" Jon called out loudly and his cry was echoed tenfold in the cavern. He wouldn't want his pretty liar to make a misstep and drown. She didn't answer or return despite that she must have heard him.

"Calm down, Lord Snow," Pyke said with a glint of amusement in his small dark eyes. "We didn't hear a splash. She's down there somewhere."

"Dany!" Jon called to her softly, worrying nevertheless. Death might have come to her without a sound.

The three men and the wolf ventured down on the narrow, bumpy path one after another, clinging to the wet sidewalls made of damp roots and harsh stone. Ghost advanced as clever as any man, with four paws near the wall, avoiding the nasty-looking water.

The water in the lake *bubbled*, Jon noticed, when Garth's torch swung left and right as the wildling stomped down in front of him. By rights, the lake should have been *frozen*. Yet it was almost as if invisible beings dwelled under it, waiting to pull the living down into its depths. *Dead things in the water.* Jon recalled the corpses polluting the shallow sea water around the old, abandoned human settlement and harbour in Hardhome, in places best avoided by the new wildling cave dwellers led by Mother Mole.

*This land is entirely cursed,* Jon thought, *no wonder we have built the Wall.*
Ghost howled. The long threatening sound resounded in the ample nothingness hovering over the lake.

"Here!" they heard Dany before they could see her. "Jon!" Jon's guts twiddled whenever she used his name, and yet he stubbornly avoided to use hers since they kissed; saying it made him feel irreparably weak.

"Here! A bridge!" Dany sounded thrilled.

The bridge did not appear to be built by human hand. A single, tremendously long milk-white weirwood branch intertwined with two black twigs of wood Jon didn't recognise, forming a braid. The span was rather long, fifty feet, maybe. The twirling black and white beam looked too thin for a man grown to step on it.

It was made for a child. Or for the children by the children. Was their dead, now lost guide a child of the forest? Jon had started to imagine she was. *I'm no better than Sansa,* he resented himself for dreaming. *It must be the books Sam and Aemon marked for me.*

Reading can harm a man.

Girls were not the only ones listening to the singers. Jon had realised long ago that there were false stories and verses made on purpose for men, of valour and glorious battles, for how else would they willingly follow their lord and ride to war? *Would I ever take the black if I had heard the truth about it before hearing Uncle Benjen's stories?*

All real battles Jon had seen were far from glorious, for one reason or another.

Dany was already barefoot when Jon spotted her. Her feet were almost as small as a child's although she was definitely not of the forest and seemed to cultivate a strong dislike for trees. Her white fur and hairy cap lay discarded on the ground behind her boots.

*Clever,* Jon admired her decision. *Less chance to slide that way.*

She stood at the beginning of the bridge before the men approached. Watching her step, she started forward in the gloom, sure-footed and light of body. Jon had lost some weight in the past weeks, but she still seemed terribly slim in comparison.

"Ebony," Dany tapped the black wood with a toe, "there is plenty of it in the Free Cities."

"I've never seen one growing around here," Jon said honestly.

Jon and Arya wanted to see the Free Cities when they were children. *I will probably never see them now, but it doesn't really matter.*

*I am of the north and I will die here.*

The braided beam bent imperceptibly under Dany's feet. Gently, it creaked. The sound ripped off something in Jon's soul.

The Bastard of Winterfell shed the black headscarf and the furs he wore, bent down, unlaced and kicked off his boots, all in a great hurry. There was no time! Dany could fall if he didn't go to her. He stepped on the bridge after the oblivious, brave girl. The wood was smooth under his feet. *Polished as the sword.*

Yet Jon *was* much taller and stronger than the woman who was driving him mad. He staggered,

"Snow!" Pyke cried.

"Crow!" Old Garth try to yell some sense into Jon's empty mind.

Ghost howled with displeasure.

In a deliberate slow motion, Jon spread his arms just on time, like a she-eagle would unfold her wings, as if he were learning to fly. Like a madman walking on rope for the amusement of the multitude, Jon never stopped going forward, not daring to breathe in order to keep his step even and his arms open to maintain the balance.

Ghost whined behind, mournfully. Jon closed his eyes and saw another bridge he had never seen before, and a burning tower full of innocents crumbling down in its middle. He wondered where the vision came from. The borders of the image of all-consuming fire were green like the crystals still covering his belly. It made him sad and slow. *Good*, he thought, *slow is good now.*

Arms like wings, blinded, he walked further on the rope-like bridge until he almost bumped into Dany. Her scent erased any smell of death the man and his wolf had ever felt. She smelled of life never-ending, this lying girl, from far, far away.

There were people from all of the Seven Kingdoms on the Wall, but Dany didn't speak the Common Tongue like any of them. Jon wondered where Selyse had found her and if Dany arrived in Westeros on some ship that called on Dragonstone from the fabled lands of Yi Ti or from Asshai by the Shadow.

Apparently the bridge had not been that long at all.

When he opened his eyes, Jon was standing with Dany under the hanging sword, on a tiny islet spattered with dark-red earth, coloured as though the blood of those defeated by the blade slowly dripped to the ground over a very long time. When he looked back, the bridge was as long and as immaculately thin as when he had been standing on the other end.

No one had followed them. Old Garth was still very muscled and strong despite his age, Pyke was never weak and Ghost weighed much more than Jon now. The bridge would never support any of them. When Jon thought better about it, it was a miracle it endured Dany and him together.

As if it wished to ruin Jon's feeling of accomplishment, the bridge cracked. Ungently, it broke in two without further ado and sank in the bubbling water. Dany and Jon were alone now and maybe they would have to swim back as Pyke suggested. The notion wasn't appealing in the least.

"I didn't think..." Dany said from the middle of the isle and couldn't quite finish her thought.

*What didn't you think about?* Jon was irritated again. *That I would go after you because I couldn't do any different, just like when I forced myself on Ghost and went hunting with him for you? Or that the wood would break under your feet?*

"I know you didn't," Jon retorted sternly. "Must be my weight." A cold stab pierced his legs from below. Both of his feet were immersed in the icy water. *So I didn't quite cross the lake yet.* He leapt forward, away from the unpleasant sensation, wishing he had Ghost's body. The direwolf had more reach and power. Soon, his mouth was full of auburn dust as he landed face forward. Dany bent over his back. She must have wanted to *help* him again. *Too close. Don't stand so close if you don't want me.*
The faint light of the torches could barely be seen on the opposite shore. It seemed as if the darkness in the cavern had grown thicker. They were cut off from everyone and the shiny sword hung above their heads as a weapon of justice or doom.

Overtaken by an unreasonable, beastly urge, Jon rolled on his back in red dirt, snatched Dany's palm and nuzzled his face in it as a wolf might do. The girl felt the size and the shape of the marks left by the eagle claws.

"She did that to you because you slighted her?" Dany asked in disbelief.

"Who?" he blurted.

"Your mother."

Jon's mother was the last thing on his mind as the blessed warmth from a tiny hand melted his face like fire. He remembered intensely another cave, where he had undressed with Ygritte and began to understand more fully how his father must have felt when he made a bastard.

And he still couldn't help noticing that Dany never made a mistake. She always reacted in accordance with the stupid story she had told him about his origin.

"It was another eagle," he said.

Dany immediately checked the scar again. "They are old," she said, relieved. "I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?" Jon inquired.

"For doubting your mother," Dany said with honesty. "She is extraordinary in many ways. Including her love for you."

What about your love? The unwanted thought pushed itself forward, standing foremost in Jon's mind.

He looked up at the sword. It appeared almost loose, as if it was going to fall down at any moment and execute at least one of them, sharp and deadly. It was too dark to see what it was hanging on, even this close. Jon may have grown taller but not tall enough to draw it.

"Do you have more green scars?" The question shocked him, unexpected.

"I'll show you all my scars if we ever get out of here," he mocked her, trying to sound like Theon Greyjoy. The turncloak always boasted of knowing how a real man should treat a woman. And whatever he did to Winterfell and its people, at least he didn't kill Rickon.

Bran must be alive as well, a completely new discovery hit Jon. Why didn't I think of it before? But where is he? Davos never mentioned him. Where could a crippled boy with no home go to survive winter?

He forced his attention back to the sword, a safer mental occupation than thinking about the fate of his little brothers or the beautiful woman before him.

"You'll have to draw it," he told Dany, very serious. "I will lift you on my shoulders. Together we will be tall enough."

"First you show me," she insisted, not giving up. "The green scars," Dany commanded in that deep voice she sometimes had. The bastard-raised boy forgot the weapon above them and listened, eager
to be loved. And not necessarily by his mother and father at that moment.

Jon didn't know exactly when was the last time he divested himself of the black tunic he wore beneath all the furs. Back in Hardhome he would very occasionally wash it in snow, wearing furs on bare skin. Snow was preferable to cleaning it in the sea and walking in a crust of salt for days after.

Fast, he removed the tunic before either of the two of them would change their mind. Dany stared at his bare body now, and he felt unpleasantly exposed. There were crystals on his belly and chest, but he didn't think she looked at them.

Am I not man enough for you?

He had known Dany for barely a moon's turn, thirty days, maybe less. It was not fair that she affect him so.

"There's some more between my shoulders, here," he started turning his back to her but she wouldn't have it. Her hands landed on his chest like petals of a strange flower and her gaze descended to his belly where the largest green patch lay. That wound must have been mortal and Jon had no idea how he had survived it. More precisely, there was no way he could have survived it. Yet he did. He was grateful for the layers of wool he still wore on the lower part of his body, for protecting his modesty. And that despite being this cold, he thought, wishing to keep his desire a secret.

Don't show weakness! he yelled at himself inwardly and openly stared back at her, unguarded, as he had wanted to do already for a while. Would you undress if I asked nicely?

"It's much more than I thought," she said, touching his stomach and in the end his back... Crystals came loose under her hands and dropped to the ground, sizzling where they fell, burning the auburn dust below their feet.

"What is it?" he blurted. "You seem to know. Why is it green?"

"My child who breathed it is green," Dany said solemnly.

"A green child?" Jon inquired softly. Dany looked too young and fragile to have birthed a babe though many highborn girls flowered as early as twelve and then they could bear children, Jon had been told. But green was another matter.

"Not of my body, but of my blood," Dany said quietly as if she could read his thoughts. "The green dragon. I named him Rhaegal for my brother. Your father. I believe you're his rider, whatever else you may be when you are with your wolf."

Jon's lips curled upward.

"Rhaegal healed you," Dany stated simply, "He probably saved your life, burned hand or not."

Jon hadn't laughed that well since he had sent away his best friends in the Night's Watch to distant castles on the Wall. He had almost forgotten. Dany had called herself the Mother of Dragons as well.

"Did you also hatch a unicorn for the hat you're wearing?" he asked with scorn. Unicorns didn't exist, despite some books in Castle Black claiming they lived on Skagos.

"No," she said, sounding very offended. "The hat was my brother's gift."

There were no more dragons left in the world. Weren't there?
Brave all of a sudden, Jon called her by the name she claimed for herself. She startled so honestly as if it were really her name, true to her unlikely story. Instead of catching her in a lie as he intended, he was tempted to believe every word she said.

"Daenerys," he repeated and saw expectation in her eyes, studying his bare chest and shoulders that may have become broader and stronger from pulling the bloody cart Davos took with him when he decided to abandon them. His action hurt Jon like an unexpected treason though the Onion Knight had no reason to be loyal to the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. He went to rejoin his king.

"Were I a prince that was promised, I would have a grand name like yours," Jon joked with Dany. "What kind of prince is called Jon?"

"Do you like my name?" It was Dany's turn to ask spontaneous questions.

*Your name and you.* "Step on my shoulders, would you?" Jon demanded to avoid answering.

"Won't you dress?" she asked, averting her eyes, wiggling one of her big toes as she had probably done every day in the woods not to loose them to cold.

"It might be safer this way. More grip." Jon knelt to make it easier for her.

Her feet were the smoothest thing he had ever felt when they touched his shoulders. Jon wondered how soft the rest of her was. She caught his head for balance and squatted on him, trying to rise.

"Wait, I'm going to stand up first" Jon warned her. When he was on his feet they were not yet tall enough to reach the sword. He gave her his hands above his head. "Now you."

Dany slowly straightened herself holding Jon's hands. Then she kept only one of them, the left one. "Two more steps to the left," she directed him. He listened.

"Anything I should know before drawing it?" she asked, sounding strangely nervous.

"Please don't touch anything with the pointy end," Jon said, hoping he was being clear enough.

"I need to be just a little bit higher," Dany said. She released his left hand, trying to stand on tiptoes. Jon hugged her calves to steady her.

"Almost there," she announced.

Jon stood petrified, quiet as stone.

Ghost wailed very hard all of a sudden over the expanse of the dead water and Jon knew something must be very wrong. He had learned to trust his wolf.

"Wait," he said, but the Mermaid Queen of his dreams was already grasping the hilt of the weapon he desired. When Dany wrenched the sword free, it was as if she disturbed its profound sleep.

The earth began to tremble, the red island began to shake. They were being sucked underground before the bubbling water would cover them and turn them to red dust for all eternity.

Dany was holding a shiny blade high above her head, extremely careful not to lop Jon's head off with its sharp edge. The sword *glowed* red, illuminating the darkness stronger than the torches ever did.
"It is warm!" Dany exclaimed with a hint of surprise.

The red shine was mirrored in the water around them, pouring unearthly light on the auburn dust and the walls of the cavern. Jon felt as if he were standing in a sea of blood belonging to people who died thousands of years ago, that stretched to the confines of the world.

He was knee-deep and sinking slowly now, still holding Dany's legs. In the red glow, he could not discern what was mud and what was water any longer. The difference became blurred.

Suddenly, he thought of something.

Urgently, he reached up and squeezed Dany's hand.

"Sit down!" he said.

He helped her as he could without collapsing to the mud, until he felt her body at the back of his neck and head. Her white-clad legs were hanging down his shoulders. It would be easier to move that way without dropping her or falling.

"Give it to me now! Easy!" It was past time Jon held the sword. He hoped that what he would do was right. *We'll know soon enough.*

Dany lowered the blade until Jon could take the hilt in his right hand. It was made of black and white wood just like the bridge they crossed to capture it. There were tiny letters carved on it, but it was too dark to read what they said in unnatural red light.

The blade emanated heat. "It's not just warm," Jon said, attentive not to touch the steel, "it's damn hot!"

"I told you," Dany said flatly, "I'm not that sensitive to heat," she seized one of his shoulders. "Nor is your father. The true dragons aren't." Next, she cradled his head, indifferent to the fact that they were sinking, causing Jon to smile against his will. His chest swelled, elated.

Ghost gave a single beastly shriek reminding Jon that it was past time he should do something. He pushed his knees forward through the thick mud engulfing them. He secured Dany with his left arm and held the sword forward in his right one, happy that his grip was still firm. He hadn't had a sword in his hands since Castle Black. The weapon was well-balanced for him, and not too heavy, almost as if he had tried it out before.

*Your sword, Jon Snow,* he recalled the words of the dead child, of the forest or not.

When he felt the sting of ice cold water on his bare feet instead of itching dust, he knew he was in the right place. He plunged the blade in what must have been the water to temper it.

*I have been striving hard to find it for thirty days, haven't I?*

Just like the last hero Azor Ahai had laboured in the unknown temple to forge it.

The blade did not burst asunder when it touched the water; it remained buried in it, burned red and smoked for a long, long time until its fire was finally fully quenched.

Jon's legs felt free and Ghost came scurrying to his feet over what used to be the lake. The direwolf licked his now empty sword hand with appreciation. Pyke and Garth followed the wolf with torches. Jon rubbed his eyes, unbelieving. The bridge, the water and the red islet were gone as if they had never been there. He was standing on firm, stony ground as he was used to seeing it in the tunnels.
Dany was still seated on his shoulders. "Look up," she demanded.

In the timid, quiet, natural light of the burning weirwoods they could see crystal cobwebs hanging from the pale root-infested vault of the great cave above them. Jon didn't have to ask Dany anything. He knew they both remembered the giant ice spiders driven forward by the white walkers on that night in the woods when they first met. *So that is what the sword hung upon.*

Pyke offered Dany a hand to come off Jon's shoulders.

"No need," Jon muttered, offended for some reason. He cautiously lowered Dany on the solid ground, his hands on her upper arms. She faced him squarely, firmly anchored against his gaunt unburdened chest. White wool she was wearing tickled him and he wished she were as little dressed as he was. *Or less. Though it's a bit cold for that.*

Jon didn't feel it was winter when he wrapped his arms around Dany's back. *She won't mind this for just a bit longer,* he hoped.

In the small space left between them, Dany looked up and down his body in silence, with unhidden interest, and swallowed. That was something Ygritte occasionally did as well, in different circumstances...

"I'm sorry," Dany said with polite unease, catching his stare, "You can let go of me now."

And then, Jon finally understood.

She had been wanting him all along and she must have thought by now that *he* didn't want her back. All her different looks and gestures since she had kissed him made sense with one possible explanation.

Daenerys had been waiting for *him* to be the first one to come to her under the furs, considering that their kiss was invitation and permission enough.

"No," Jon refuted her courteous demand, "I won't let go of you." He tightened his hold on her, profoundly enjoying the lilac glance of bewilderment that came his way. She didn't pull away.

"No matter who you are, no matter who I am," he whispered to her perfectly shaped ear, "no matter what this is," he glanced at the sword, cooling down, "I won't let you go."

Chapter End Notes

Looking forward to your comments on this chapter :-))
Thank you to everyone for reading, leaving a kudos, and appreciating this story in any way.
Thank you to anyone checking or liking the prequel.
Next up - Lyanna
Lyanna

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to my beta DrHolland for making many sentences in this chapter so much better.

Warning for gore. Take it seriously.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lyanna

She hadn't seen a weirwood for so long.

The heart tree in Greywater Watch was splendid; a silent watcher in the core of the wooden castle, the first living witness of Lyanna Stark returning home after self-imposed exile of too many years.

I should have returned sooner, or I shouldn't have left at all. I should have known better.

Rhaegar was her life.

But, with or without him, she would always be a Stark of Winterfell.

She took a deep breath and spied in the sheep-sized maw of the majestic white tree. It was just as she thought. Her perspicacity made her smile, only so slightly. The Starks were famous for keeping their long faces even. Here, at the doorstep of her homeland, Lyanna chose to honour her heritage by schooling her features to be nearly emotionless.

"Get out, Howland," Lyanna spoke flatly to the hollow tree, calling her oldest friend. "I know you're in there. You told me about your place of refuge in Harrenhal."

The trunk of the weirwood stirred as she predicted.

Howland Reed scrambled out, clad in leafy green. He was shorter than her, and Lyanna was by no means a tall woman.

A procession of dangerous-looking wooden children carried the arches of the vaulted portico, embracing the innermost courtyard of the castle where the weirwood was growing in peace.

"I commanded my men not to let anyone here," Howland said, "I told the statues, too."

"As if anything could ever hold me back," Lyanna Stark replied with faked disdain, stopping to admire the wooden locks of hair on one of said statues. They were shaped with such precision and detail that they seemed to move in the humid winter breeze blowing into the castle from the river. The figure was armed with an elongated, bronze-coloured knife. Menacing, it glared forward at the queen. Despite the ferociousness exhibited by some of the otherwise gallant, portly figures, the carvings were more beautiful than anything Lyanna had seen in her short stay in King's Landing.

It's one of the most beautiful castles in the realm and yet people call them mudmen and treat them with disrespect. She supposed the crannogmen may have wanted it that way. They were not fond of
foreigners.

Howland didn't look as if he truly minded her presence. On the contrary, she suspected he had been expecting her. They had sailed to Greywater Watch on the same boat, steered skillfully in the right direction by short, soft-talking men and women. The crannogmen spoke as if they were singing. The low, flat longboat glided with the strong wind that had risen against the mad current of the Green Fork, taking the Reed fleet back north, instead of further south.

*As if by magic.*

"Father used to joke only death will hold me back one day," Lyanna added with lightness she was not feeling.

She had never been light of heart and her affection did not come easily. Howland had it since the great tourney of Lord Whent in Harrenhal. He had begged her not to enter the lists as a mystery knight if she wanted to avoid a tragic fate.

But Lyanna Stark had never feared her destiny.

The Knight of the Laughing Tree unhorsed the three squires who had mocked Howland and befriended the then very young Lord Reed for all times. Lyanna's aim was true and her lance didn't waver.

"It brings me joy that you may yet outlive me," the lizard-lion observed dreamily, green eyes at ease. 

If anyone else had told her that, Lyanna Stark would have thought of it as an exaggeration in courtesy. But this was *Howland* and his seeing was uncanny. She wondered what he meant in truth. He wouldn't tell her, she knew, not if he wasn't completely certain about the parts of the other people's lives he *had* seen. He was rarely *that* certain though.

*If ever,* she thought.

Yet a healthy measure of imprecision didn't make his visions any less true. For here she was, married to Rhaegar. And Howland did see her die in the Tower of Joy as he had foretold her in Harrenhal, not knowing that she would be faking her own death. And he had seen that she would be having Rhaegar's child. *Children.* She willed her hand away from her belly not to betray the secret of her being with child again. 

Recalling why she came to see her friend, Lyanna felt her face growing longer than usual. What she had to do would not come easy. *How do I tell him?*

"Are you certain that you want to do this?" Howland asked cautiously, a bannerman questioning his liege with decorum.

*So you know, my friend.*

The question didn't surprise her. He must have dreamed already about what she decided to do. Lyanna never thought less of him, or more, as most people were wont to do because of his gift of seeing the future. Not even after his gloomy prophecy in Harrenhal, of her almost certain death.

*Almost certain is not yet certain,* she had told him then and Howland laughed at her with sad green eyes, shaking his head and his shaggy brown mane. The natural greying had barely touched it in twenty years, just like Lyanna’s exuberant black tresses showed only a few silver stripes.

"My son is not here," *And how I wish he was...* "I'm the oldest living Stark... It has to be me if I don't
want to burden my nieces. And I don't." Sansa would not be able to do it. Arya just might if she knew how. Lyanna's empty stomach twisted painfully. "The others have all died."

"Or they are crippled," Reed said cautiously, "or yet children."

"You dreamed about Ned's young sons!" Lyanna exclaimed. "Where are they?"

"I dreamed about my own children," Reed said with a hint of despair. "They are with the crippled wolf to whom a three-eyed crow promised he would fly."

"Will he? Fly?" Lyanna Stark was very suspicious of that possibility. Ned's children had direwolves. They had no wings.

"If he could choose, he would wish to walk again," Howland was eerily serious. "But our choices are never limitless."

"As I have no choice in this matter," Lyanna said sternly.

"It hasn't been done since the age of First Men," Reed disagreed.

"It shall be done now, again. Before witnesses," Lyanna proclaimed. "Let them carry the tale south... and north. Let everyone think twice before they double cross the Starks again..."

"Tomorrow," Howland finally accepted the inevitability of her decision. "The day is growing late just like the season."


"Your Grace," her oldest friend acknowledged the new title she wore like a new burden, the title she never wanted. Yet she wanted Rhaegar and she would wear any name for him, for as long as it took.

"I'm no queen to you," she protested.

"You are the Queen of Winter," he said with a lop-sided smile, teasing her. "Never forget."

Her face felt plump again, not long, nor stiff. Lyanna had to stifle a grin.

"They will serve lizard-lion stew now down by the river," Howland said and waved both arms in a rarely spirited fashion. "I would feast you and your unlikely husband and I would rejoice before we part ways again. But first... I need you to see something. Well, someone. Two someones."

Lyanna's stomach rumbled, but her curiosity had always been stronger than her hunger. She let Howland lead the way through the sinuous wooden halls where some floors creaked and the others bent; dependent on if they were made of planks or densely knitted reeds.

They reached one of the twelve wooden towers of the castle and descended a long set of stairs. Almost under the water level they arrived at what must have been the crypt of the Reeds, or a dungeon, or both, at need. The room was oblong and dry. In the middle, there was a flat stone slab covered with a grey shroud. A man and the woman sat at the table behind it, supping on wine and old bread.

Prisoners, Lyanna thought. Somehow, she never expected Howland to hold anyone prisoner.

"I know," he said with that thin, sad smile on his lips, "they would have both met their death if I allowed them to continue their journey to Winterfell."
Lyanna immediately recognised the bulky frame of a former maiden who claimed to have taken a bear for a lover. "Lady Mormont?" she said with the icy demeanour of a Stark, afraid she might be wrong. And there was also the former skinny boy, heir to the wooden castle hidden in the depths of the wolfswood, much farther north than the Greywater Watch or Winterfell. Deepwood Motte. "Lord Glover?" she whispered, betraying her feelings just a little.

Both prisoners rose like one and stared at her.

Howland poured some more resin into the lamp burning on the wall, to shed more light in the shadowy chamber. Maege came closer. "Lord Reed," she started, "you gave us your word you would release us when you returned from the Twins... Gods!" She peered in Lyanna's face with brutal interest.

"Maege," Lyanna said quietly, not offended by the intrusion, a mistress of her feelings once more, "it's been a while."

Lord Glover caught her face between his hands and turned it toward the only source of light burning on the bark-inlaid wall.

"Impossible!" he announced.

Lyanna wrenched herself free. Words and stares were wind, but she wouldn't let anyone touch her. "Keep your hands to yourself," she said, "or I will outsail you up the Green Fork on a cursed boat, just like I always left you far behind on horse when you were a smaller child than I was. What would your wife say?"

"I'm unwed," Galbart said. "But... you... you are dead! I've seen your statue in the crypt of Winterfell! The likeness is incredible."

Lyanna's guts turned. Her grave in Winterfell was not empty. Ashara Dayne was buried in it, far away from Starfall where she belonged. The unwilling Queen of Westeros walked to the shroud to avoid Glover and lifted one of its grey borders. The last remains were cleaned and readied for burial. The sigil on the shroud was unmistakable. The direwolf of Stark. There was no smell. The silent sisters' work was impeccable.

"Gods!" it was Lyanna's turn to invoke them in shock, realising who it must be. "Is it...?" she needed to know.

"Yes," Howland said, "the silent sisters brought my lord and my friend here from Riverrun. Lady Catelyn had sent them. I didn't let him further north, just like I kept Lady Mormont and Lord Glover as my honoured guests..."

"We will take him now," Lyanna said, feeling the fresh surge of tears. "Ned once thought he was taking me home and now I shall bring him..." It was too much and her tears almost fell. She remembered... Gods, did she remember! The unhappiest day of her life...

Lyanna was in Starfall barely for a day when a visitor was announced, the first one she would receive as Ashara Dayne. She felt queasy perched on a high seat that had never been hers. The boots she wore were artificially heightened under long layers of skirts, to make her look as tall as Ashara. She didn't need anything to enhance her upright bearing. Both women were equally prideful.

The servants said that a northern lord had come to bring Arthur's sword home. His body remained buried elsewhere, under a stone cairn in front of the tower that no longer stood because Ned pulled it down in his grief. Lyanna could understand him; he was her brother and in his place she would have
done the same.

When the visitor came in, he wasn't just any lord; it was her brother Ned, broken by sorrow. She almost jumped out of her shoes, ran to him barefoot, removed the opaque black veil of mourning from her face and told him to take her home, even if she had to marry Robert.

But she couldn't. Rhaegar, her husband, was dead and she was loath to touch any other man.

Ned bent to the ground, not looking at the lady in the high seat in front of him at all. Or if he looked, he didn't see her. He saw a stranger in black robes.

"My lady," he said, baring the milk-coloured Valyrian blade, beautiful as magic. Carefully, he lay the sword on the lowest step of the stairs in front of the high seat of the Daynes. "Would that I could bring you better news of your brother, but he had died defending his sacred vows. All I can give you is Dawn."

"And the queen and the little prince?" Lyanna asked Ned about herself and Jon.

Her dearest brother, the one she trusted more than the Daynes when Rhaegar died on the Trident, only shook his head. Then, she understood his grief. Ned didn't keep his promise. Jon died because she, his mother, had left him. Some babes did not suck well on a wet nurse, ever. Jon must have been one of them.

"All is lost," she had said then, gripping the armrests of the seat, wishing to die. Why did the gods punish Jon for my weakness?

"The realm has been won," Ned said, looking as if he didn't believe his own words. "And my home is far away. Until we meet again, my lady," he said, and he left, leaving Arthur's sword under Lyanna's feet.

"And now we meet again, sweet brother," Lyanna said, caressing the shroud. She never once thought that Ned would have kept his promise of hiding Jon even when he spoke to Ashara, knowing that Arthur died to protect Lyanna and that both Daynes had known about her son.

"I should have known, Ned," Lyanna said seriously, "you would have kept it a secret from our mother too, if she lived long enough to meet her oldest grandson..."

When she returned back to the chamber from the abyss of her memories, Maege and Galbart Glover were bending the knee. Maege stood up fast as a young girl despite her strong frame and embraced her, "It is you..."

"How is that bear lover of yours?" the wolf-queen asked acidly.

"Which one?" Maege wondered carelessly. "Most of them were good enough for giving me daughters." Her face went grey at the mention of her children.

"Dacey, her eldest daughter and heir, was murdered at the Twins," Howland said with respect due to all the dead.

"My lady, my lord, come to the godswood tomorrow at first light," Lyanna said sternly, fortified in her intentions. It is the only punishment terrible enough, yet short of treating Freys like the Reynes of Castamere. "I cannot bring Lady Dacey back. But I will do what I can."

Lyanna's belly issued a loud moan. She was hungrier than she thought. She was going to be sick if she didn't eat. It had been like that with Jon as well; she had to eat very often. Glover choked a laugh...
when she stared him down.

"Lord Reed," Lyanna said slowly, wishing her voice balanced and her belly quiet. "To the stew now, if it please you. I wish my thoughts to go away."

Her thoughts nevertheless immediately returned to Jon as they did in every free moment she had since she had learned that her son lived.

*I abandoned you with Ned and now you hate me.*

*Ned has educated you well.*

*I'd rather see you carry your own son in your arms one day and hate both your father and me, than visit your grave if you had been killed for loving us during Robert's reign...*

The sickness and the hunger were not caused only by the babe, they followed from excessive flying with her eagle. Lyanna pretended she needed more sleep during their journey up the kingsroad due to her condition. She avoided Rhaegar's company as much as she could without revealing to him what she was up to. Until the day came when she truly had to abandon her eagle to fly to the Twins on dragon's back. Lyanna was not with her bird that entire day... *A day too long...*

*The old gods have taken you...my son.*

The oldest living Stark of Winterfell could not leave the duty of dealing with Lord Walder Frey to others.

As soon as her husband was away from her again, and Lyanna was on board the wooden boat sailing against the stream, she visited the eagle, but it was too late. Jon and his companions were gone where the bird of prey could not follow. Distracted, she flew above ground, more north than north, in the direction of the heart of winter. Lyanna didn't know what that was. Only the eagle decided she felt that way about where Jon was going. Just like the eagle had known she should claw the eye of the dead child to liberate the creature.

*Jon... Will you hate your brother or sister as well? You love your cousins as your siblings...*

She remembered that terrible day in Starfall again as her low boots resounded on the wooden floor.

"Did you really kill Arthur?" she had to check with Howland before they reached the feast. "Ned hinted he was to blame when he visited Ashara."

"I did," Howland said, "I told Mance Rayder all the truth about it for his mummery."

"I did," Howland said, "I told Mance Rayder all the truth about it for his mummery."

Before she could ask anything else, they were at the feast.

The trestle tables and the benches were woven from thin willow branches. At the back of Howland's high seat a large lizard-lion waved its tail, and the stew made of his wild namesake made everyone's mouth drool.

Rhaegar was already there. "There you are," he said.

"Here I am," she agreed and smiled. It was better than mopping tears. She was glad he didn't bring his harp or his dragon. Both would make her unbearably sad until she admitted everything to him.

"Have you determined the punishment of Lord Frey?" Rhaegar inquired.

"Will you let me do as I please?" Lyanna wondered.
"The Starks have always been the Wardens of the North," Rhaegar said. "Lord Frey's crime was against the Starks. You're within your rights. And I've always let you do as you please." Lyanna's cheekbones grew warm from that admission.

"Will you come and watch?" she pleaded.

"I will stand next to you if your arm falters."

"I won't use the sword," Lyanna said weakly. "A small mercy for Lord Frey. If I did, I might need several strikes to behead him the way his head is bobbing. I don't suppose he would enjoy it."

"Then?"

"You'll see," she didn't want to think too much in advance about what had to be done once she had reached her decision. It was winter and the nights were long. They still had plenty of time until first light.

Lyanna took a spoonful of stew; it was on the salty side, but richly spiced with cinnamon and cloves. She looked around. Aegon and Jeyne were seated next to the bonfire at the far edge of the willowy dais. Ever since she had been a walking dead, Jeyne could never get warm enough. She was changed. The army of wights may look at her with hope of becoming fully alive one day, but it was far from clear whether Jeyne herself was well or not.

The queen remembered Aegon, a squealing babe in her arms. He cried for months after Lyanna joined him in Essos. It took him a year to forget whatever he had seen in King's Landing before Varys took him. I thought he would never smile. I thought neither of us would. She prayed Jon never felt that way and that he had smiled often in his childhood in Winterfell. Stark children could laugh. The seriousness would come later.

Sansa's husband sat gingerly on a fragile chair, acting as if the pliable strings of wood cut into his flesh, worse than the Iron Throne would cut an unworthy king with the blades melted into it. Probably the only danger the chair posed was to break down under the man's giant height and corresponding weight. He looked as if he would be more comfortable standing behind Rhaegar's back as a sworn shield. Or behind Sansa who wouldn't let him.

Sansa leaned into her husband like a great lady, within the limits of propriety, yet unmistakably at great ease, rarely seen in freshly married couples. Two bowls of stew steamed in front of them, untouched. Lyanna wondered why Howland's castle hated the man, wolfing down another spoonful of her own meal. It must be his face. The old gods have no love for the new. A woman who pretended to be a septa for twenty years knew very well that a monstrous man with half a face was often drawn by charcoal in village septs. The face of the Stranger.

Arya pointedly talked to Aegon because Robert's bastard talked to Jeyne. She will be more jealous than Rhaegar one day if she doesn't learn. Mance Rayder was conspicuously missing. Putting his son to sleep, more like than not. So was Euron, but then again, the walking dead did not eat, and Rhaegar and Euron still hated the sight of each other. Lyanna could accept that. Had she been forced to travel north with Cersei Lannister, she would have felt a continuous urge to do to her out of joy what she was about to do to Lord Frey out of duty.

"You're enjoying yourself," Rhaegar said quietly.

"I am," she conceded, non-smiling, hoping no one but her husband and maybe Howland could hear her. Lord Reed was deeper in his goblet than she ever remembered seeing him and his merriment was well deserved, for his feast lacked nothing. Loaves of freshly baked bread accompanied the
main course and there was good southern wine; the Greywater Watch had great provisions for winter. She hoped that all those that had sacked Winterfell since Ned left it gathered at least some food. *Certainly not enough.*

One long, snake-like arm sneaked around her back, palms pleasantly rough. *That has changed.* Rhaegar's hands used to be somewhat smoother, with the uncommon marks of harp strings on the fingertips... The new harshness was not unwelcome. *Why is it that calloused hands in men make them appear strong?* Lyanna could fall asleep in Rhaegar's arms and enjoy feeling weak.

Though, truth be told, she could fall asleep anywhere in the first weeks of her pregnancy but in his arms would be the best place of all. *Not yet.* She did not think she could love him tonight or tomorrow, before or after what she had to do, having no father, brothers or sons who could do it in her stead.

Her mother used to say that more often than not everything fell on the back of women.

For the first time in her life, Lyanna understood what she meant. It was not overseeing the chores of the Stark household as the lady of the house, a cumbersome duty Lyanna had despised as a little girl, fleeing from the mundane tasks of women to the training yard of men whenever she could.

But what Lyarra had truly said was that the strength to inspire respect in others and to keep the family together resided in the women of the realm.

"Let us retire," she told Rhaegar, knowing she would not sleep. Or if she did, she would croak loudly with the eagle, flying over white wasteland, unable to reach Jon.

Her husband followed her to the chamber Howland had given them; on the same level with the ground or what passed for it in Greywater Watch, it opened to a small water garden of lilies and irises – sparkling white and blue with petals like eyes on the green shimmer of the river.

"They are not winter roses," Rhaegar said with regret.

"No," Lyanna had to concur. "But their blue is just as wonderful."

Her husband immediately plucked a few irises and sat down close to the water. In very short time, he made a crown of blue flowers, with the skilled hands of the harpist, the healer and the monk. A vague smell of hope reached Lyanna's nostrils when he placed the wreath on her head.

"You... you... you made the crown of winter roses you gave me in Harrenhal yourself!" she realised.

Rhaegar nodded.

"I always thought it was your servants."

"As did everyone," Rhaegar said. "Father hated whenever I did vile, manual things. But I couldn't imagine doing anything more beautiful. I made it the day before final tilts. I had scratches from thorns for days."

Then, she couldn't miss it. There was *that* look of particular brooding in her husband's eyes. She forgot her son, she forgot everything. It was the look he wore before he rode to the Trident to die.

"What is it that are you not telling me?" she asked.

"Nothing," his voice was raised, betraying a lie, and only a little bit of pain, "And when were you going to tell me that you were flying with our son?"
"Damned beast," Lyanna cursed Drogon. That was the only way Rhaegar could know. "Damned dragon," her husband agreed, pulling her in his lap, closing arms protectively over her stomach. They sat on the muddy shore, dirtying their clothes like children, happier than ever.

*Would that it could last.* The Stark words were unfortunately very clear about the usual course of life. *Winter is coming.* Happiness could not endure.

"How is he?" her husband breathed out from behind, warming her neck.

"Wonderful," she replied. "Persistent. Clever. Good at heart. He seems cold and reserved like Ned, but he has my temper and your compassion for people. I am not sure how that combination will serve him."

Rheagar laughed. And stopped. "Does he know?"

*How do I tell him that Jon must hate us both?*

"You sister hasn't told him yet because Jon may have spoken unkindly about me when he first saw the eagle. She recognised me," Lyanna managed to give prudent word to her thoughts, something she had learned only in her later years.

"How considerate of my sister. You were not kind to her before she left."

"No," she admitted, "I wasn't."

*Daenerys, will you forgive me? Did you understand why I was colder than a Stark toward you? The eagle had been looking for Jon all along the Wall and she was unable to find him... She barely returned on time to fly away with Drogon and you..."

"I will do better when I see Daenerys again," Lyanna promised. Her good-sister proved herself valiant suffering the cold and Jon was clearly puzzled about her presence. They looked at each other... Gods, they looked at each other! Lyanna realised she had to be in her human skin long enough to give a proper name to what she had seen as an eagle.

"Others take me," she cursed again.

"They might," Rhaegar teased her. "What have you seen?"

"Daenerys and Jon," she said for there was no point in hiding it. "They may not know it yet, but I fear we could celebrate another wedding in the family before the winter is over."

"Are you shocked?" Rhaegar asked cautiously.

"At least they are not brother and sister," Lyanna hammered Rhaegar down with her answer and immediately felt him stiffen. *Damn me for not thinking before speaking.* "I'm sorry, my love, I know that your parents were brother and sister but for the rest of us this is difficult to imagine. Yet my own parents were cousins and that was normal. I am not opposed to this match... if it presents itself," she muttered.

"Like ours did," Rhaegar muffled his words somewhere in her hair, small tongues of flames searching her company.

*Not tonight.*

"Yes," Lyanna's lips stretched in a broad smile despite all her Stark heritage.
It was the truth. Something about the way Daenerys studied Jon reassured Lyanna. *She could love him.*

*If she lets herself.*

From the very beginning of their acquaintance, Lyanna noticed that Daenerys didn't put much trust in men. Jon would not find it easy to bridge the void surrounding her heart.

Lyanna never wondered about Jon's feelings. She didn't need to. They were clearer than sunrise. Her son kept staring at Daenerys with the look Lyanna knew from the mirror when she dared confess to herself the truth of her growing affection for Rhaegar.

There was no stiff coldness, distance and apprehension between Daenerys and Jon, such as it had always reigned between Rhaegar and both of his parents. Lyanna expected such demeanour from the Targaryens, with the exception of her husband who was... well... warm on the inside. Maybe it had something to do with being a true dragon. Or just with being himself.

Years ago, on the run from Aerys, and keeping her love sickness well hidden behind the long face she was born with, Lyanna Stark had an outburst with her husband-to-be, telling him how fortunate he was not to marry within his own family. Rhaegar laughed himself to death and stunned her to silence by asking her to become his second queen. Several days later, they stood in the godswood of Highgarden and exchanged their marriage vows...

*Highgarden...*

Lyanna wondered if either Jon or Daenerys knew that their wildling companion bore the likeness and the name of Garth Greenhand, the legendary hero and king of the Reach from the Age of Heroes. Old Garth's hair was not green, but for the rest he looked very much like people from Highgarden depicted his mythical namesake. He even wore a canvas bag with food across his back. Lyanna doubted very much that Garth Greenhand had been real, just like Brandon the Builder, but the coincidence was amusing. It was as if an envoy of fertile south followed and protected her son on his way north.

Lyanna stirred and realised Rhaegar had fallen asleep seated, holding her in his arms. *And that without being with child. We're both exhausted by this journey and by our own fears...*

"I can't carry you inside," she whispered to him, shaking him somewhat awake.

They leaned on each other to pass through the swaying reeds and then on the castle walls. Staggering, they entered their chamber as two blind men leading each other to safety over a narrow ledge hanging above a dark chasm.

Rhaegar was asleep as soon as he lay in bed, in the same attire he wore for the feast. Lyanna sprawled on top of him, enjoying the blessed heat of his body. And maybe it was the magic of the castle sensing the true need of its guests, or just tiredness beyond count, but when sleep took her, for the first time since she began looking for Jon, Lyanna didn't open her eagle eyes.

She merely slept.

xxxxx

First light was a pale patch of yellow resting over the green and brown walls of the Greywater Watch, illuminating the heart tree of the castle's godswood in the strangest tones of gold and russet Lyanna had ever seen.
She stepped into the courtyard and looked around. The prisoners were gathered in one corner and guarded by Howland's men. The rest did not need summoning. The entire castle was there.

Lyanna walked to the weirwood with her black knife in hand. The children of the forest shaped and used blades of obsidian. They were also the first ones to adore the old gods so she hoped that her choice would please them.

Lord Walder Frey was spilling out of a stiff reed chair under the cropped, thick branches of the tree. He could not rise because of his infirmity but the look in his muddy, shrewd eyes was defiant and his spotted bald head bobbed. Lyanna looked away from the prisoner to admire the tree in its white and red splendour revealed by the morning light. *Howland has to prune it lest it overgrows his castle.*

"I expected our brave would-be king to behead me," Frey said. "Mind you, he will not call himself king for long. The red woman will defeat you all in the name of King Stannis! She is the real power in this land. She sees it all in her fires and has no fear of dragons..."

Lyanna Stark had never feared anything at all.

*Why should I start now, fearing some red woman?*

"Who said anything about the beheading?" she asked placidly, eyeing the middle of the old man.

"If you don't kill me," he spat, "you are even weaker than I thought. My sons hold Winterfell for Stannis and you will never get behind your own walls. And if you don't find shelter when you travel that far, the winter will kill you before the red woman does..."

"We can agree on killing, no doubt," Lyanna said dispassionately. The old man paused. *You do not know the Starks,* she thought, *not yet.*

As a girl, her escapades included helping the butcher in his labours, and not only wild riding in the wolfswood and the clash of steel on steel in the yard. *The mornings were soft as this one... Will I still remember...?*

She approached the prisoner from a place where the white branches charged with red leaves came almost to the ground. *It won't look dignified, will it? If I have to jump to end this...*

Soon to be butchered Lord Frey eyed her suspiciously. She could also feel Rhaegar's heated look of concern on her back. She didn't have to turn around to see it.

*Let me do this,* she prayed to the old gods, *and make me forget about it later on.*

She seized the old man's tunic and uncovered his middle. Old skin was hanging from it. He wasn't tied, he was merely kept in place by his illness.

"I didn't expect caresses," he taunted her.

Lyanna grasped his belly firmly with her left hand and made the first cut through skin and fabric with her right hand, measured and calm, the way the butcher would open a freshly slaughtered animal to preserve the entrails of a pig or a sheep in their entirety for future usage.

*The loss of blood will kill him soon,* Lyanna knew. *Or the pain will.*

"What?" all colour was abandoning Lord Frey.

"The guest right is sacred in Seven Kingdoms and more so in the North," Lyanna continued cutting
with precision and talking in monotonous, undisturbed voice. "You have spread some stories about the Starks, Lord Frey, after you slaughtered them at a wedding feast by your own will and command... " Blood coloured her hands and the sleeves of her grey dress. Angry stains spread over her skirts... "You let it be said the Starks were wild beasts about to tear apart you and yours... So you slayed them first." She had spoken mainly not to hear, first the obscenities, then the screams, and finally the weak, helpless squeals of a dying animal...

*Look, but don't see, just hang it out to dry.*

She hung Lord Frey's entrails from the lowest branches of the weirwood tree, spreading them as much as she could, still dripping blood. She didn't spare a look for his last remains on the chair. Only when she was satisfied with the cruel display on the tree, she turned to the multitude, unable to discern their faces. Everything looked bleak.

Her gaze wandered to the ferocious, childlike statues of the portico. They seemed to approve if not quite smile. The old justice had been done so maybe the old gods would once again protect their children; Lyanna's ancestors, the First Men, and all those who had come after them.

For, Lyanna thought, *the blood of all races runs mingled. Its purity is just an illusion...* She had come to that conclusion in her exile. There were so many kingdoms in Essos and even more gods than realms.

When the unknown human faces sharpened again in the field of her vision, they were petrified. Lyanna lacked strength to search for the familiar ones.

"Lord Reed," she spoke formally and faced the rest of the Frey prisoners, sons, grandsons and daughters of the man she executed. "Which one of his surviving sons was the staunchest defender of the Twins when we took the castle?"

"Ser Perwyn, I believe," Howland said from afar, running to her aid. Her oldest friend came to her side and relieved her of the knife she had still been holding. "This one," he pointed at the weasel-faced young man, who tried hard not to blink or step back. *He must believe to be the next one to suffer his father's destiny.*

"Lya, you know," Howland called her by her childhood name, "during our raid, we did pay good care to kill all those of Lord Walder's progeny who found joy in Lord Edmure's wedding..."

"More dreams?" she needed to know.

Howland shook his head. "Scouts and spies. I have them as any other lord of the realm."

Lyanna would laugh if she hadn't been sick at heart. Now that the deed was done, she only wanted to leave. She was craven and she couldn't face any member of her extended family, not wishing to see rejection on their faces like she had seen it through the eagle's eyes on the face of her only son.

When Lord Rickard, Lyanna's father, executed a prisoner, he would seek sanctuary in the godswood of Winterfell and polish Ice. But the punishment of old had tainted the godswood and it couldn't protect Winterfell's daughter at that moment. Lyanna wanted to dive into the green murky water surrounding the Greywater Watch to clean herself, fearing that the entire river would not be enough to wash the blood from her hands.

She had killed men in close combat, at a young age. That was easier. And she had just discovered that to butcher pigs and sheep was one thing, but to cut open a man who was not fighting back quite another. She wished she'd never have to do it again.
"Ser Perwyn," she said, surprised that her voice still sounded strong, "you and your siblings will be taken back to the Twins. With the king's permission, I name you the Lord of the Crossing whether you are the first or the seventeenth son of the late Lord Frey. You will swear fealty to the king before you leave."

She walked to the young man. And then, he couldn't help but flinch from her, away from the vision of barbaric cruelty in womanly skin.

*Good,* Lyanna thought, *I am now the North I want you to remember.*

"Fifteenth," the young man whispered. "I am the fifteenth son..."

"Winter is coming," the Stark house words spoke themselves from Lyanna's mouth. Her voice rang deep and ancient, "Be wiser in choosing your allies when you sit in your father's chair."

Lyanna walked past Ser Perwyn, past the crannogmen watching, never turning back to see if anyone followed. Vaguely, she heard the new Lord of the former Crossing swearing an oath of fealty to her husband in a tremulous voice. It seemed to her that the armed child-like statues moved aside to let her pass and that one of them pointed the shortest way out of the castle. Lyanna followed, enthralled. The edges of her vision blurred again.

*I need more dreamless sleep or I will harm myself and my unborn child.* Yet she knew if she closed her eyes that the need to open them as an eagle and search for her grown-up son would be too great to resist.

She walked under the wooden vaults and ceilings of many empty halls and corridors; a sudden doorway led her to the shallow end of the always-present river in the thicket of reeds. There were no flowers growing. It was a blind alley of the castle, a place of seclusion she needed.

The frogs sang loudly when she squatted in the mud, soaking her arms in water all the way to her shoulders. Lyanna watched her skin turn clean, and the blood stains on the fabric of her gown lose colour from red to pale yellow. The yellow markings would have to be scrubbed clean with soap, she knew. *Later,* she thought. It was not yet that cold in the Greywater Watch as it would be in Winterfell, but undressing entirely was not called for.

Sickness took her by surprise. She vomited the stew from last night and then, shortly after, bile. She wondered if her entrails were coming out through her mouth and if they were going to float on water, glistening green, instead of hanging as Lord Walder's, diaphanous stinky snakes on the branches of the immaculately white tree...

When she was done, she just sat on the border of the shallow, thoroughly empty. She wondered if that was how her father felt after dealing justice.

The wooden floor creaked in the castle behind her. *Leave me be,* she thought and wouldn't turn back.

"It's over," Rhaegar said from the castle door. "The crowd is dissipating. You were magnificent. Then again, when are you not?"

Lyanna didn't feel magnificent, but the iron colour of his voice called her back to her senses. Her husband was alive just like their son and the babe to be born. She had so much to live for.

A glance back revealed them all, Lyanna's extended family. Howland stood next to Rhaegar, compassion, mischief and worry fighting for a place of prominence on his wise, tiny features. He was probably the only one able to find Lyanna in his own castle so fast once Rhaegar realised she
was missing.

Her nieces stood a step behind her husband. Arya wore a curious expression of admiration. Sansa was paler than usual, but calm. Aegon clung to a wooden wall far back behind everyone, almost invisible, but present nevertheless. Her foster son was ashamed of asking for her motherly attention ever since he had been tricked to plot against Lyanna's life in King's Landing.

Sansa's giant-like husband was avoiding a childish statue on one of the door-frames, which looked as if it were going to pierce his big heart with a bronze knife for no reason at all. *At least one of us will be more than happy to leave the Greywater Watch.* Lyanna had briefly enjoyed the respite it provided, knowing she couldn't linger.

Jon was travelling to the heart of winter, and they had to follow.

Mance Rayder carried the obsidian knife which ended Lord Frey's worthless life. The blade shone with purity. The King-beyond-the-Wall must have now cleaned it for her just like he had once made it during lonely nights on the Wall, *nights Jon was made to endure as well,* Lyanna thought bitterly. Mance gifted his precious knife to Lyanna on a whim, when she visited the Wall with her lord father, riding all the way to the Shadow Tower. Gendry stood uselessly between Arya and Aegon, looking more than ever like Robert's bastard. Broad-shouldered, he was much stronger than her foster son.

*Every beast shall be needed to survive this winter,* Lyanna thought, *a wolf and a dragon, a stag and a lizard-lion, a dog and a wildling who might be a raven if he had a sigil. Maybe even a lion or two, in the end.*

Lyanna was probably the only person in Westeros who wholeheartedly approved of Ser Jaime Lannister killing the king he was sworn to protect. She only regretted not being in King's Landing when it fell to open Aerys' throat herself. She was nevertheless glad that the king sent Ser Jaime away for a time. She could not easily forget the recent revelation of how the Kingslayer attempted to murder one of Ned's young boys in Winterfell later on, to hide his affair with Cersei.

Yet sometimes, if an attack on your life failed, it would unwillingly set you on a path you were supposed to take. If Aerys hadn't had Lyanna kidnapped with the intention to have her killed, Rhaegar would have never rescued her. She would have married Robert and become the Lady of Storm's End.

Jon would have never been born.

Lyanna wondered what destiny could await a crippled boy who had survived against the odds and who was now lost together with Howland's children as darkness gathered.

*The Long Night had come and gone before,* Lyanna decided. The eagle had seen it coming. Her son was determined to fight it and he resented his mother deeply.

The blood seemed to have vanished from her hands when she contemplated the full extent of her duty as the eldest living Stark, seeing what it was for the first time.

Lyanna was the mother of the pack and the pack was growing.

*The spring will come, it has to,* she tried to convince herself. *And when it does, we will all be here to welcome it.*

*It is alright to hate me for abandoning you, Jon,* she thought. *I left you a babe and I found you a man. The time when I could keep you on my breast is long gone. I have only one duty to you now. I have to live and make certain that your father lives.*
"Lyanna," Rhaegar called to her again, "Where is your spirit roaming?"

"Nowhere in particular," she answered him, "except the barren wasteland of my heart."

Chapter End Notes

If you like Gendry and Arya, read Arya of a Thousand Days by DrHolland. I hope that you are already reading it. Because its awesome in many ways.

Thank you to everyone who left a kudos and/or bookmarked this story. I am humbled by positive comments I have been receiving so far. Please keep it up and tell me what you think about this chapter.

Next one up - Brienne
The white dragon glided peacefully across the sky, flying from the Vale of Arryn to Gulltown, as removed from the image of a bloodthirsty tower-burning monster as a dragon could be. Leathery, golden wings rested flatly on the morning breeze.

Brienne's stomach was miraculously at ease as she held onto a deadly pale-white spike in front of her so as not to fall. *I am no longer new to this*, she tried to convince herself. Yet she could find no love for flying in her heart. *Would that I could ride to Meereen.* But she couldn't, and that was the end of it.

*Oh, mother, if the great salty sea were a demon road, I'd gallop on it day and night...* It was some sort of rhyme from a singer of the Free Cities who once came to Tarth. Brienne wondered if such road existed in Essos. *No,* she dismissed the notion. *Any other way would just not be fast enough. It has to be... this...* A hundred centipedes immediately started crawling in her tummy. Dragonback was more tolerable when she could think of something else.

Therefore, instead of flying, she immensely enjoyed the view of Jaime, who had positioned himself two spikes ahead, *walking* on the dragon while in the air. She had to suppress the memory of how reckless and dangerous that action was to make the centipedes in her belly come to a halt. Now, her husband's shoulders and upper arms flexed with quiet strength. Jaime was bending left and right, anticipating the flowing movement of the dragon. Brienne imagined running her hands down his bare back. *Soon. We will land soon. You just glimpsed the sea.*

Distances meant nothing for the wings of a dragon.

Jaime's soft, wavy hair had grown tremendously since they left King's Landing, cascading half-way down his back. She had always admired it. *A field of golden rye.* Brienne's own prickly mane had also advanced in length.

*He didn't let me cut my hair.*

She had always considered her long hair cumbersome and homely, and she had shortened it as soon as she left home. But Jaime's recent inexplicable infatuation with it softened her heart in that matter and the unruly hay was spared.

*For now.*

Jaime was more handsome than ever when he felt at ease.
His gaze roamed in the broadness of the windswept sky, occasionally stopping on Brienne with feverish intensity. *We are both stealing glances at each other.* The sensation was almost nourishing. Dark-grey clouds sailed steadily on the ocean of sunlight, announcing an imminent storm.

Viserion exhaled lazily. A stream of flames pierced a black cloud in front of them; a shroud hung from the heavens, barring their way. When they passed through it, on the other side, there was only light.

From high above, the narrow sea loomed close. Soon, they would arrive to Gulltown. In just another handful of flaps of mighty wings, shining with the light of the morning, they would reach their destination... *And outfly the storm closing on our heels... or talons...* Brienne hoped, queasiness gaining in force. She didn't relish being sick and soaked at the same time.

The world started spinning. The unsettling softness in her belly worsened. Centipedes became a herd of aurochs, stomping madly in her innards. Her vision was no longer of light, nor of the glimmering sea; it was filled by the dull grey of the rocks approaching, mingled with some brown and green of the earth.

"Seven hells! Get up!" Jaime cursed and commanded the dragon in vain.

Viserion must have decided to dive all of a sudden for no obvious reason. Unbidden, he landed them in front of a lowly hut on a forested slope populated by some tall and evergreen, slender trees, the likes of which never grew in Tarth. *Sentinels? Ironwood?* Brienne did not know. The forest floor was inhospitable and barren, covered with a thin layer of old snow. *At least there is a break from flying.*

"Why did you do that?" Jaime asked the dragon, in utter disbelief.

Viserion was a gallant, well-behaved dragon, who mostly obeyed his rider. *Mostly,* however, did not mean all the time as Brienne had just learned. At present, he elegantly recoiled his scaled, spiked tail and carelessly puffed rings of smoke at the cold air. *Insolent, like Jaime.* Smoothly, he lifted flight again and in a moment he was gone, leaving his rider and his rider's wife to their own devices. It was not exactly the kind of stopping for rest and intimacy Brienne envisaged in the air.

For Brienne it was impossible to tell whether the dragon replied to Jaime. The conversation between the beast and his rider mostly occurred through their minds unless Jaime forgot himself and spoke out loud as he had just done. Brienne could not hear Viserion talk. Yet the dragon could somehow perceive when she called him *brother* in her head.

The words for brother and husband were the same in the language of the dragons. Viserion seemed to have accepted Brienne as *sister* because of her marriage to his rider. That was the utmost extent of their mutual ability to understand each other. Beyond that, Brienne was ignorant and she wondered if the dragon felt the same way about her.

According to Jaime, Viserion exhibited superior intelligence and the cunning of a crone on rare occasions. But at many other times, like right now, the dragon seemed more innocent and unlearned than a swathed babe.

"Today he has a maiden's sensibility," Jaime joked dryly as he did in adverse situations. His wife had known him long enough to see that he was worried.

*Quite a lot worried, at that.*

"Maybe he is a she," Brienne dared voicing what she had been thinking about for days. She had to
set her mind on something to better ignore flying sickness, didn't she? In truth, the gender of the
dragon was not at all visible, and much less recognisable on his growing body. Among so many
scales and spikes, who could tell? The Lady of Tarth could not, and she doubted very much that
Jaime could, his arrogance be damned.

Jaime shook his head. "I don't think so," he rejected her supposition in a tone between mirth and
queer, uncharacteristic embarrassment.

"Why not, pray?" she challenged him to finish. Brienne would never be a meek wife, especially not
when Jaime was being a real ass.

"He has some very untoward thoughts about another dragon. The green one, maybe, or some other
colour that doesn't exist. He doesn't let me see everything. But what I do see would surely shame
most ladies I had the honour of meeting," Jaime smirked.

Brienne was still not convinced about Viserion's sex.

Since she stopped being the Maid of Tarth, Brienne had a very strong suspicion that her thoughts
about Jaime's body would shame most ladies she was acquainted with. Yet she didn't feel less of a
lady for that reason. Maybe more, she thought absurdly.

I'll run my hands down his naked back and press my bare breasts into it. I will not let him turn
around until he yields to me. Soon.

"Let's go inside," she said.

There was precious little in the house. The floor was strewn with old rushes and there was a heap of
cut firewood piled neatly alongside one of the walls. Brienne thanked the Seven for winter and the
related absence of roaches and similar vermin. A small hearth was empty, but there were some old
ashes in it. The door was a flimsy, creaking screen of several boards nailed together that could not
close properly.

"There must be a village nearby," Jaime said, "this is some woodcutter's cabin where he stores the
excess of logs until he needs them."

The dragon returned before they could indulge in any shameful activities, screeching at them to come
out. Tonight, Brienne thought.

Viserion had hunted a deer and a boar, and presented them proudly to Jaime. Brienne had the
strangest impression that the monster winked one of his golden eyes at his rider, or he would have
done it if he had eyelids to begin with.

Jaime stared at the two carcasses and the trees with darkly green eyes, not returning the dragon's
playful sentiment. He is feverish and not from wishing to share a marriage bed. Brienne loved it
when Jaime looked at her that way. But now it set her on edge. Something was dreadfully amiss.

And not only with Jaime, perhaps.

Viserion crawled to the clearing behind the hut, coiling his tail around several young trees as he
went. A giant snake on the move or a ship being tied to a pier. He took good care to fasten himself
before closing his lidless eyes of molten gold. There was no visible hurt on his body.

The dragon fainted as a man passed out from too much wine with an earth-shaking thud.

"What's wrong?" Brienne inquired.
"I wish I could tell you," Jaime muttered, nervously rubbing his stump with his good hand, an unconscious gesture he adopted whenever he felt inadequate, his wife knew.

They both tried to rouse dragon in vain. Viserion was as movable as the harsh soil he collapsed upon. *This can't be true, Brienne thought, the dragons are supposed to be strong and invincible!*

"Perhaps he has to sleep from time to time," Jaime offered. Yet his heart was not in his words, and his complexion was becoming greener, just like his now purposefully frivolous and always beautiful eyes.

Brienne cooked some deer outside of the hut. Making an outdoor fire in the cold helped her keep her wits together, weaving her frightened thoughts in a tight fabric that would not tear and betray her uneasiness. In the end she ate in silence, alone. Jaime had no appetite.

Before nightfall, Jaime found it impossible to stand, sit, or stay awake. With Brienne's help, he crawled inside the hut and lay helplessly on the dead rushes. Brienne hastily placed some logs in the hearth and lit another fire.

*I'm not cold at all," he waved her efforts away with a weak gesture of the stump. "It's just that..." he was uncertain what to say and Brienne's heart was breaking. "This dishonourable knight is in need of sleep, or of saving... I don't know from what... or maybe I am saving someone by this..." he told Brienne, only half in mocking. "I trust you will be here when I wake."* 

She bent over him, very close to him, and was about to swear an oath that she would be there for him, always, but the final conscious movement of the still clumsy fingers on his left hand was to place them gently on her mouth and prevent her from talking.

*I love you too, sweet wife," were the last words before the same imperturbable slumber which took the dragon overwhelmed his rider.

Brienne felt abandoned. She was left to ponder the illnesses of dragons and the strange human sickness called love.

*How am I to care for a sick dragon?*

Neither Ser Goodwin nor Septa Roelle could have trained young Lady Brienne in that art. Or rather, no living soul had any need to be learned about it in the Seven Kingdoms for more than a hundred years.

Lord Selwyn, her father, became interested in dragons in his later years when it became hurtfully clear that he would not be able to sire more children. Some men would drown their disappointment in wine, but he chose to inebriate himself with dragon lore. Little enough of it was available on Tarth. The books and scrolls discussing dragons were forgotten or ruined during King Robert's reign.

Therefore, Father travelled to the ruins of Summerhall to learn about the dragons firsthand. He had found an unburned dragon egg, sheltered under the shield of the legendary Lord Commander of the Kingsguard, Ser Duncan the Tall. He never bothered his daughter with this discovery, and kept his findings in his treasury; a blue stone and an insignificant coat of arms that Brienne later painted on her own wooden shield in the riverlands, innocent of knowing whose sigil it was... Ser Duncan was a hedge knight who chose a blazon of his own before embracing the immaculately white one of the Kingsguard.

*A single elm on the sunset field and a falling star.*

Her shield was now lost, but the egg was with Princess Daenerys, and it had helped Brienne plead
for Jaime's life with the king.

Surely, it was not all for nothing...

Except that maybe it was.

The storm came down in force then, washing over Viserion's brilliant body. The deluge did not stop for days, a cold shower mingled with velvety flakes of snow in the crisp mountain air. Neither dragon nor Jaime woke...

Brienne had let the larger part of the two carcasses freeze. She had been patiently consuming only a small portion of the meat from the dragon's kill every day. We felt powerful and it was wrong. They were going to Meereen with too little food, hung in a saddlebag between the shorter spikes where the dragon's body ended and the tail began. They had little spare clothing, no armor and two castle-forged longswords.

Once, as a consequence of a ruthlessly ingenious idea of the late Lord Tywin Lannister concerning gifts to his family, Jaime and Brienne each carried a shiny half of a famous Valyrian steel blade for a short time. The two halves had now been reforged into Ice, the ancestral sword of the House Stark. The sword of winter was on its way home now. Brienne wondered who was going to wield it. The broad two-handed greatsword was very heavy. Despite being freakishly strong, as so many men disapproving of her existence would put it, Brienne preferred a somewhat lighter blade.

She and Jaime hadn't been sparring properly since they were married... If anyone attacked her now, she would be an almost easy prey. They could be taken or murdered, the dragon could be enslaved again... She thanked the Seven for the storm.

Good luck to anyone who tries to move Viserion from here, in this weather.

Under the flood released from the seven heavens by the gods, the white dragon seemed to be growing every day in his slumber. Just like hair these days, Brienne thought. She would call his sleep fevered if the dragon's body had not been constantly hot and not only from his ailment.

The king was right to send Jaime to find Tyrion. The dragons were supposed to be fierce at all times. Not lay down and hibernate like bears. Or sleep in order to increase their size. If Tyrion had knowledge to help understand what they did and why, it would be invaluable in the coming war against winter. The simple soldiers in King Rhaegar's army whispered that the enemy in the north was not human. Who better to defeat it than the dragons? They were not men. But what if the dragons cannot be relied upon?

Brienne had no answer for her questions, growing in number day by day, just like the body of the sleeping dragon.

Jaime didn't fare much better than his new ferocious steed. Pale and petrified, terribly warm to touch, he persevered in a dragon-sleep during short winter days and cold nights, with green eyes open. Brienne tenderly touched his brow every now and then and smeared his mouth with water. She kissed him and she shook him, she cursed and she prayed, afraid that he would burn out with fever... or die of hunger and thirst.

Her husband was right about one thing before he fainted; there was a village nearby. Did the dragon know? Did he land us here on purpose? Or on a whim?

The village was twenty houses and a tiny sept, whose seven outer walls were built of unmortared, grey mountain stone meeting at irregular angles. All the houses had seven-pointed stars painted on
the doors. Brienne needed food other than meat so one day she ventured in. When they saw her, the people started making signs of the Seven and praying to the Father to judge them justly.

In the sept she realised why. The crude statue of the Father was beardless and tall; he was a young blond man with long hair, resembling Brienne. She realised she could ask the villagers for anything and they would give it gladly. So she did take some food, but avoided blessing anyone.

She could only play a deity for so long. It was Jaime who looked like a god, not Brienne...

Most inhabitants of the tiny settlement were tall and fair of hair, though no one quite as tall as Brienne. One orange-haired man strolled around only in his breeches despite the winter cold. The seven-pointed star was a drying, still raw scar on his chest where he must have cut it in with some sort of knife.

"The Winged Knight will ride to war," he prophesied to anyone willing to listen. "It is time to take the Faith to the confines of this earth."

Brienne wondered if the news was serious. Maybe little Robert Arryn won the legendary name in the short time of his youthful lordship, and decided to sail north to the Wall together with the part of the crops he was supposed to send. Or maybe the half-naked man was merely hallucinating.

She hurried back to the hut where she had left Jaime. Nothing changed in the time of her absence. Why would it? What did you expect? She breathed out in both relief and resignation. The blunt pain was back in her middle, this time not from flying. On time, as always.

_"I am most certainly not the Father,"_ she thought. _I stopped being a maiden, and I am much too young to be a crone. I should probably be... mother... in this part of my life._

Moonblood came and went regularly since she was a woman wed, for as much as Brienne had never tasted moon tea. Lady Lannister's face fell as she fitted a cloth in her male smallclothes once more, disappointed and comforted in equal measure. The duality of the sensation bothered her. _Why can't I feel straight about this?_

_Jaime already has children,_ she tried to tell herself. _He won't mind if I am less of a woman and cannot give him more._ They never talked about it. Surely he would have told her if he wanted more children. Her hips were narrow despite her freakish height and muscled legs, and she had heard many times how those needed to be broad to birth a healthy child.

Her intimate attitude toward having a child of her body was very intricate. That was the ultimate reason why she never, ever discussed children with Jaime. On one hand, she _yearned_ to bear him a child. Brienne may have been perceived to look like a man. She had a man's courage and strength in battle, but she was a woman in the marriage bed. She _was_ curious about feeling a babe growing inside her and holding one in her arms...

At the same time she honestly wanted to fight in the coming war. And no known hero from history or songs vanquished the inhuman enemy with a swollen belly or a babe in their strong arms. Selfishly, Brienne concluded she was glad for her moonblood and suppressed her womanly cravings. _Maybe there will be time later on._

_Or not._

_Jaime does have children,_ she told herself a hundredth times. _Yes, but I still want to have children... His children._

_Just as I still want to be a knight... Protect and defend the weak... Honour the sacred vows..._
She ought to know better after everything she had been through, but the old dreams of valour were engraved too deep to vanish overnight. They could not be easily abandoned. Not by the Lady Brienne of Tarth, wed or not, guardian of the beloved lion and the sleeping dragon.

More days came and went spent tending her husband and his dragon, days of being offered food in the village.

_There must be something I can do_, she thought, _short of leaving them, finding a horse and riding to Gulltown or to the Vale to find a raven and send him. Where? To the king?_ She didn't know where the king was.

And Jaime had begged her to stay. So she stayed and felt useless and loved him more with every new day, determined that she would see him awake and well. _Because... because..._

_Love never fails..._

_Or if it does fail and fade, it is not love, but its poor imitation of courtly wooing; a pitiful, simpering emotion unworthy of that name; a lie invented by the talentless bards, whose tongues a king like Aerys would have had pulled out with hot pincers._

_Where a mere quest for honour could not succeed, love just might._

After all, Brienne thought to herself, she had never found Sansa Stark. It was Sansa who found Brienne and Jaime tied together in the firepit of the Lady Stoneheart, awaiting execution.

And it was the king who changed their fate; the quiet, iron voice of the king, invoking the good will of the Seven.

The voice of a man who had nearly died for love.

xxx

When her moonblood was gone, Brienne scrubbed the last cloth she used clean in the newly fallen snow and hung it out to freeze. Later she would let it dry over the fire. The cloths turned cleaner that way. After labouring in the knee-deep snow, she planted herself in front of the fireplace, waiting to feel warm again.

She lowered the damp breeches she was wearing to her knees and placed her broad, strong hands on her hips. She examined the narrow hipbones, feeling out of place and freakish once again. Ludicrous words to be engraved on her tombstone came to mind, _Brienne of Tarth, invincible on the battlefield and defeated in childbed._

She pressed her hips hard as if a forceful touch could reshape and widen them. A voice spoke from the rushes, startling her.

"Your legs are perfect and you know it."

"Jaime!"

All thoughts forgotten, Brienne almost choked an unresisting Jaime in a crushing embrace. Slowly, she remembered she should check on Viserion as well.

Outside, the white beast stretched its tail and opened only one of his two eyes, staring at the needles of the tree above. Brienne let him be. Soon, she and Jaime were cooking meat over the fire. Supper tasted so much better in his company.
"A boar killed Robert, remember?" Jaime said, swallowing the crispy, cooked bite of the beastly kingslayer's distant cousin. "What a happy day it had been! The city bells tolled so joyfully!" Brienne cringed at the sentiment of rejoicing at someone's death, but the return of Jaime's arrogance was a most welcome occurrence. It meant her husband was well.

"Cersei served the pig at the feast in the her late husband's honour. And on every feast after that and after that, from what the court whispered, whenever she could find a boar... Robert was not entirely without merit though I did want to kill him on occasions when he backhanded my sister, but-" Jaime's words suddenly faltered.

"He was not Rhaegar," Brienne finished the sentence. The prince whose trust you betrayed as a boy knight. Or that is what you believe. She surmised Jaime never discussed the matter with the king.

"No, he wasn't," Jaime shook his golden mane, "Robert would have had my head, dragonrider or not, if I had killed his father. Or if he learned that I..."

That you sired his children on your sister. I know, my love, I know. Could you stop reminding me if it pleases you? And you still shouldn't have pushed Lord Stark's young son through the window. It would have been the boy's word against yours... You should have risked more to regain honour.

I love you dearly.

"...I wasn't trying to justify my known crimes," Jaime objected, as if he could see the whirlwind within her head.

"The tempest killed King Robert's father, Lord Steffon of cherished memory, not you," Brienne heard herself repeating a well known story about Tarth's former liege lord, eager to steer the conversation away from Cersei. "On sea. Right in front of Storm's End. Only a fool survived it. He is now with Stannis' daughter, I think." Brienne's lips thinned because the story she unwittingly brought up suddenly made her remember Stannis. She hadn't thought about him for so long. He did kill Renly, somehow he had done it... A shadow wielding a magic blade...

Brienne knew now that what she had felt for Renly was not love. But what Stannis had done was surprisingly devoid of any emotion. He merely believed the throne was his by rights. By the grace of the Seven, the Lady of Tarth cursed in silence, Renly was his brother and Stannis should have known better...

If my brother had lived, I would have protected him with my life, and with my dying breath as well.

"I think..." Jaime stuttered, "I think... I really think I should sleep now."

Her dread must have been plain beneath her freckles because he immediately reassured her, "Not like that, I swear. Just rest. Come here, wench, don't make me beg."

As always, she believed him, though the idea of Jaime begging did not entirely lack in appeal. Was the beginning of her trust the beginning of her love for him? Love always trusts... Or was that another forgotten song?

Brienne lay quietly in her husband's arms, observing Viserion folding and unfolding his wings through the crack on the door, which resisted closure. Glad that the hibernation time of dragons seemed to be over for the time being, she sank softly into light sleep. The rushes stirred at night, rustling with sad inhuman voices.

The next grey morning she woke in a tight embrace. All Jaime's muscles were taut, and a familiar stump nested somewhere in the small of her back.
He was wide awake.

"There you are," she said sleepily.

"How long have I been asleep before yesterday?" he inquired, sounding and not only feeling awake, unlike the day before.

"Longer than you care to know," she said sheepishly. "How is Viserion?"

"Up and about since first light. Chasing his tail. Burning squirrels from their holes in the trees. Hunting rats. Itchy to leave, I'd say."

With every nonsense Jaime mentioned, Brienne's goodwill grew more intense. "No maidenly sensibility today?"

"No," Jaime laughed, "not at all..."

"What was it?" she blurted. "Were you both ill?" The confused expression came back to Jaime. "Don't tell me now," Brienne decided to interrupt his chain of thoughts, afraid that he could pass out again. Cold sweat popped under her too-long hair. "You'll tell me while flying. The Seven know I will need a distraction."

Brienne rose giddily from their bed of rushes. She packed their belongings and the remaining provisions from the village. Jaime could hardly succeed in that task one-handed.

She hoped that if Viserion needed to succumb to sleep one more time for whatever reason, he'd have the grace not to do it in the middle of the narrow sea.

xxxxxxxxx

The egg was blue with thin veins of bright silver woven into its stone-hard shell, recalling the colour of the new king's and his sister's hair.

Lady Brienne of Tarth was no stranger to ships, though most vessels calling to her island home were not that impressive. There was depth enough for large ships to anchor in the waters of the sapphire island, but there were no riches or gold to foster trade on a large scale.

Now, she stood on board a masterfully constructed galley from some faraway kingdom, and a blue dragon egg was offered back to her.

"My lady," Ser Barristan spoke with calm conviction, "we have had no news from the queen... my pardons, Princess Daenerys, I was so much used to calling her my queen... We haven't heard anything for a moon's turn and that is longer than is her custom since I have been serving her. Viserion is the first dragon we have seen since she's left us. I am sailing for Eastwatch to uncertain destiny, having lost two ships and half of their manning to foul weather. And I would rather that a dragon guards this treasure from avid hands and eyes..."

Daenerys' fleet did not make it far from Gulltown since the princess and her dragon had flown north. A long lasting storm, such as it had never been seen in the small city by the swearing of its citizens, ravished the surroundings. Maybe Viserion just wanted us to weather it when he passed out. The explanation was wishful and probably untrue.

Over her head, Jaime was making loops with Viserion, tearing the fabric of the sky with dragon wings. Brienne could see the shadow of the flying monster through the white tent roof Daenerys had had mounted on the deck, above her private quarters.
The dragon had grown too large in his sleep to land safely on the princess' flagship despite the galley's considerable size. Daenerys had commanded, knowingly, that two of her largest ships of Volantene design were about to accompany them over the narrow sea. They should be able to offer shelter to the dragon in need.

*If he grows a bit slower...*

"Are you certain this is what the princess would wish?" Brienne expressed a mild doubt. Jaime had not been in the mood for talking so Brienne had to revive her shaky courtesies.

"My pardons, my lady, but it was Viserion who found the egg in Tarth, and it was you who brought it to King's Landing. Who better to take care of it?"

It irked Brienne that Ser Barristan purposefully excluded Jaime from the equation. *Jaime* was the dragonrider and the first one whom Viserion brought to Tarth to rescue the egg. Jaime didn't know what it was, but still. *Aerys can rejoice in seven hells*, she thought bitterly, *his shade will truly follow Jaime forever...*

Where perhaps he should have been haunted by the shade of a boy, flung through the window and crippled... Brienne shivered and told herself Jaime still had many years to live and prove to everyone he did have honour. *Will the others see? Or is it only my love for him that makes me see all the truth of him? Of what he is, what he was, and what he could be...?*

"The egg," Ser Barristan continued, breaking her reverie for the better. The ways of the world would not change no matter how much Brienne wanted it. "It loathes to be touched..."

Two copper-coloured warriors in leather garb were holding a thick silky cushion where the egg lay, helpless and seemingly bluer than before. She felt as if it were speaking to her in colour when it could not do so in voice, neither of spirit nor of body.

Brienne would have never thought she would be proclaimed a caretaker of the blue dragon egg her father had stolen from the ruins of Summerhall on an idle quest of a suffering widower. The notion was more outrageous than the most fanciful of songs.

She'd also never dreamed that she would marry the Kingslayer, or ride the white dragon with him and be so sick from it that she could scarcely breathe...

*Jaime. I love you no matter what.*

Brienne stretched her arm. *It is a child as well, of sorts*, she told herself. *It might... it might hatch.* It never did in Tarth in many years, but with three dragons in the skies of the world, who could swear that there wouldn't be a fourth one soon? Brienne had no idea what Daenerys Targaryen had done to bring her children to the world. *Perhaps we should have asked.*

Viserion roared a salutation of orange flames in the russet sky above. The short winter day had not yet fully yielded to dusk. *A falling star on the sunset field.* Jaime's shadow was a thin line on the dragon's neck, hanging upside down, a position he enjoyed tremendously. Ser Barristan craned his head outside the tent. He studied the daring manoeuvre with the look of disapproval from old age to the follies of youth.

*And I am so much younger than my husband and more foolish, good ser. You will see one day.*

She touched the egg. The cool blue stone soothed her large palms moulded on weapon hilts. *Jaime's skin feels better still.* The egg almost turned softer at her thought as if it wanted to appeal to her.
It is blue.

She could think of little else.

When she won a blue cloak in Renly's Rainbow Guard, she was devoted to it. She would protect King Renly, wearing that cloak, until the end of her life. And she had never quite gotten over the loss of her fine blue armour. *The armour of cherished memory, just like dead Lord Steffon Baratheon resting on the bottom of the deep grey sea, may the Seven take kindly to his soul.*

"I will take it," she said, "I will keep it safe. As I would my own child."

"The Targaryens of old used to put dragon eggs in the cradles of their heirs," Ser Barristan duly noted, "so that they would hatch for a newborn child."

"Then I will keep it safe until such time that there is a baby in the family," Brienne said with nearly insolent determination in case the remark was meant as a slight.

She regretted her defensive words as soon as they had left her mouth. *I should have spoken to Randyll Tarly this way, instead of letting him in peace with his thinking of me as a mistake of nature. I wouldn't have changed his views on women who want to fight but I might have at least ruined his day. He deserved it. Not Ser Barristan Selmy.*

Ser Barristan gave her a quizzical look of appreciation and a silent approval. A nod of equals.

"You are valiant as you are fair, my lady," he said. "Ser Jaime is not the only one to see that."

Brienne smiled at the unexpected compliment from an old man, hoping that the unwanted concession to emotion did not make her very homely.

When Jaime confessed to feeling numb pain in his entire body after his winter sleep, and not having his habitual strength for verbal sparring, Brienne had hoped to look serious, not pretty, when she faced Ser Barristan. She donned a clean black tunic and trousers on the outskirts of Gulltown before they flew to meet the ships. Very light blond, prickly hair was falling to her waist. The wind had messed it during flying. As usual, a woman like her never looked quite as she intended.

The dragon's sickness had shown one thing. Brienne needed new armour as soon as they reached Volantis and before they went to Meereen. *Her family* needed her to be able to protect them if illness came again.

*And we truly are dragon-kin if Jaime is Aerys' bastard.* What she had told Ser Barristan was not meant as a lie, whether Aunt Genna was ever found alive to confirm it or not. She wondered briefly if Jaime's last name should be Hill or Waters if the king did not proclaim he should keep his mother's name and remain a Lannister. *I could give him my name if he didn't have one of his own.* The notion was entertaining and she thought her husband might hate it. She clutched the dragon egg tightly to her chest.

Next to her, a copper-coloured youth stared at her as if he had seen a woman for the first time in his life. He was at least half a head shorter than her. One of Daenerys' handmaidens eyed her as well. *What are they now looking at?* Brienne did not understand. Her feet jumped to the fighting stance on their own and she had to make a conscious effort to release her posture. *I am among friends or I should be.*

A sharp look around revealed a mirror in the back of Daenerys' barbaric tent. Brienne looked into it briefly and saw a lean, tall woman, with slightly tanned skin. The fully black attire and her excessive height made her look more slender than she truly was. Her hair hid the hideous scar on her cheek and
her freckles melted into the somewhat amber-pink tan she must have acquired in the air. Her lips had more colour than she had ever seen on them, appearing even larger than the gods had made them.

*Must be from all the kissing...*

She fought the tendency to cringe and hide. The luminously white-blond hair, washed out by sunlight on dragon's back, was in such remarkable contrast with the blackness of the male garments she wore that its unpleasant sharpness could be overlooked. She looked... *intimidating*, but in a different way than she was used to.

She may have looked beautiful and she had no idea how a beautiful woman should act so she just behaved like herself.

"Farewell, Ser Barristan," she said very curtly, unable to withstand further the new looking glass judgement of her person. "Until the next time we meet if the gods are good."

A bendable end of the long spiked tail coiled gently around her waist as it did during the days of sickness grasping the trees. She was being lifted up in the air and the sensation was not that unpleasant, not truly. *Better than waiting for the hovel roof to fall on your head in a tempest.*

*Yes,* she thought, hoping that the dragon could hear her, *I will protect you too, and Jaime, and your unborn brother.*

A white invisible presence she hadn't encountered yet carefully considered her words before it withdrew from her head as if it had never been there. *Viserion?* She shouted inside her mind, but the dragon, if that was him, was gone.

Brienne slowly retook her newly established place on dragon's back, two spikes behind Jaime; the blue dragon egg tucked safely under one of her arms. The space to sit on had become significantly larger and more comfortable since the dragon's latest spurt of growth. She observed the egg, comfortably blue, and then, she knew who the new woman was, the one she nearly failed to recognise in the mirror.

She had never liked to be called Brienne the Beauty even if the name were not only a cruel jape at her expense. And she was not playing a mystery knight in Renly's camp anymore, the fighter who had to hide her face in the melee to make herself acceptable and accepted.

*I will not defer to others from now on, in either thought, word or deed. I am who I am.*

There had been another name she found more fitting, the name she could wear proudly and openly, as the knight she had always been in her heart, and the lady she had become.

A name not quite ladylike, yet not quite manly, just like she was, almost worthy of a new song.

*Brienne the Blue.*
Daenerys

Chapter Notes

For this chapter I have to thank both my betas, DrHolland for showing me everything that was wrong and needed to be rewritten and to TopShelfCrazy for helping with my final doubts and mistakes. THANK YOU. I'll never be able to thank you enough for putting up with the olifant...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys

The air in the dwindling, descending halls of ice was stiff as death.

After the great chamber where Dany and Jon had taken the magic sword for their own, every room that followed was smaller, and the air staler than in the one that preceded it. The ground trembled faintly under Dany's feet and the halls behind her back echoed with the sound of falling, crumbling stone.

An earthquake, Dany realised. *Jon has stayed it by tempering the magicked blade in water, but he didn't stop it, not entirely.* She had never seen an earthquake before. *There is a first time for everything.*

Soon, even the weirwood roots were gone.

"The old gods have abandoned us," Jon remarked lightly, only half-joking. Daenerys wondered at what exact moment she began to take joy in her nephew's subtle mocking of troubles they encountered. Jon acted unconcerned and careless, yet he was attentive to every change.

*As if he has no time left to spare for caring or as if it would hurt him if he did.*

*Maybe both.*

Jon's quip came out in a deep breath... With the earthquake on their heels, they had started running like mad mice eager to abandon a sinking ship.

"The gods don't always let men see them," Old Garth breathed back in an odd, clicking voice, fighting to get some missing air in his ancient lungs. *Or maybe his mouth was frozen and is now thawing.*

Garth was the last man running. Dany didn't think he could endure the forced march much longer. Collapse was imminent for the old wildling who nonetheless persisted in educating her nephew.

"The children carved the faces, they've not been on the trees forever. The gods were here before the trees..."

To be certain, Daenerys didn't miss the trees for as much as she suspected Jon might.

*Since when do I care? Men are inconstant... It is known.*
Three treasons were foretold to the Mother of Dragons in the House of the Undying in Qarth, but Dany often believed she had already been betrayed more than thrice. Viserys, maegi, Drogo's bloodriders, her bear, her second husband, Daario, the sun's sun... All untrue in some form... Even honest Ser Barristan was not immediately truthful when he had found her. Dany just couldn't decide which shocking and unpleasant surprises in her entourage counted as treason and which were merely disappointments.

*Prophecies are wind, more so than words and oaths. They can have any meaning or no meaning at all.* Yet she still considered herself barren, as the maegi Mirri Maz Duur predicted, unable to disregard her foul curse, despite Rhaegar's revelation that monstrous babies had been born to the Targaryens before. Dany drew a small measure of satisfaction from the presumed wise woman's only mistake; the maegi had thought Dany a stupid child.

Her error was her death.

Dany's well-intentioned, misplaced trust in the maegi's healing skills led to Drogo's death. After her sun and stars, she'd had lovers, but she had no true *love*. Daario had jumped into bed with some slaver lady to save his life, and noble Hizdahr zo Loraq would have married the Mother of Dragons had she been blind, ugly and legless...

And Ser Jorah... the man she'd thought of as her bear... She was fond of him, but not like *that*. Dany could not forgive him his treason *for gold*, not openly, mostly because she was unwilling to raise his hopes for what she could not give him. It would be most unfair.

Daenerys had been called the most beautiful woman in the world. The significance of beauty was clearly exaggerated. It could not feed her children and it did not bring her happiness...

*But you've cared for him since the lake, have you not?*

*At least since then.*

Dany snapped out of her recollections and musings, returning to the march at hand. The halls of ice became narrowing tunnels, long and twisting like entrails of an aurochs readied for boiling. She couldn't determine if they were still going north, but they were surely going down, into the earth's core.

Viserys told her scary stories about wyrms haunting the ancient mines of Old Valyria. The air in the dark, ice-inlaid tunnels felt so warm and stifling now, as if one of them were to burst through the hard walls of a steeply sinking passage, bore through naked dead stone with its sharp, black teeth, melt the rocks, and cleanse the dull black and white underground with bright colours of blazing fire.

Wyrms were like dragons in everything except that they had no wings. No one had seen one since the Doom. Then again, no one had seen a dragon either until very recently...

*Fire cleanses.*

Daenerys remembered stepping into the fire when her dragons were born; the certainty and the freedom of the gesture; the profound concern of Ser Jorah when he had let her go. Yet a dragon *needed* wings. She was a dragon, not a firewyrm. It was time she came *out* of the underground hells they were trapped in, and back to everyone awaiting them.

The ground began to shake in earnest and they had to keep their pace. This necessity did little to solve a dilemma Dany was facing since the lake, whether to talk to her nephew or kiss him.

The latter option was constantly in the forefront of her mind, just like his wolf was the frontrunner on
their march. Ghost was a huge patch of cruelly white shine in the ineffable darkness. Fangs bared, he howled many times. *He wants us to hurry*, Dany thought.

The direwolf was tireless, the only one among the party about whom that could be said. *This is his world*, Daenerys thought, *cold and wicked*. She and the three men stumbled diligently after the animal, as fast as their wool and fur clad legs would take them. They knew better than to pause, halt, stop or look back.

The tunnel leading back to the great hall where the lake used to be rumbled loudly in their wake, with the tumultuous, roaring sound of crashing doom. The weirwood-infested chamber they had left behind must have been imploding, collapsing in on itself, falling into ruin and despair. They were all panting from the speed of their flight, every thought of cold forgotten. Dany was as sweaty as after a day's ride through the Dothraki Sea and her heart beat steadily as a drum.

*Thump.*

True to his word, her nephew never let go of her hand.

*Thump, thump, thump, thump.* Her heart, beating faster, whenever she thought of him freely.

*Jon. His name is Jon. He'd say his name's Jon Snow.* Daenerys smiled. Names mattered little in moments like this. Her name didn't take her through the Red Waste, her courage and stubbornness did. She had many names, yet she was growing fond of Jon's more and more. Snow was better than trees.

*This is not quite what Rhaegar had in mind when he asked me to find his son, not by far.*

*And?*

*It's not as if my older brother was blessed with the virtue of prudence when he met Jon's mother…*

The thought was ugly. Dany knew that Rhaegar had regretted his recklessness, which had brought the misery of war to the Seven Kingdoms and cruel, lonely deaths to his first wife and their daughter.

Although her brother never gave voice to his sorrows in so many words, she had sensed the powerful reverberation of Rhaegar's regret and the reasons for it through Drogon's enormous and savage, continuously expanding mind. And now, for the first time, Daenerys began to understand in her guts how Rhaegar might have felt when he had made the ominous decision to follow his heart.

She felt savage, more so than when she first tamed Drogon amidst the havoc caused by her enemies and spectators gone mad in the fighting pit of Meereen… *Fire and blood…* Most of the time, someone wanted to murder her or kill or steal her dragons. So she wasn't afraid of the Others simply because they wanted her dead, no… Well, maybe, but only a little, now that she couldn't face them from Drogon's back where she always felt protected and invincible.

She felt wild because Jon's disinterest in her after their first kiss hurt. He had played her for a fool, or so she thought. Or maybe he was just honest in refusing her, rather than taking what she was offering only to abandon her later on when they returned to the world. But all that was before he faced her on the lake and looked at her with mute challenge in his eyes. She felt wicked then, like the cold.

For a start, they were going to return. It was against Daenerys' nature to accept defeat. *The gods will provide if they want us to conquer. And they must mean us to or they wouldn't have carried us this far. We could have already died if that was their wish. Many times.*

Her heartbeat increased in speed as she did her best to run faster, a thump becoming a thud,
becoming everything…

She couldn't forget the vision of Jon when he disrobed under the hollow hill, painfully exposed and confidently calm at the same time; his bare body a precious mosaic of pale skin and green glimmer of the dragon-crystals, high above the auburn dust under their feet. He stared her down as if she was the only woman in the world.

Before, Dany had been cursing the damn honour of the Starks every day if that had been the reason Jon didn't seek her out after their kiss. Daario never needed much encouragement, and both her sun and stars and noble Hizdahr zo Loraq never shied from claiming their husband rights.

*Remember, they don't have girls on the Wall,* she would tell herself and she would wait. Mance Rayder once sang about a girl though, who joined the Night's Watch, brave Danny Flint. A good life and a sad ending. She was murdered. *Danny… Dany.* It couldn't be more similar. Not wishing to ponder the end she might meet one day, Dany allowed her new cherished memories to overwhelm her.

She wished Jon to look at her again as he did at the lake. And she could not lie to herself any more how she only looked at him because there was no one else. She would have looked at the black-haired man and his wolf even if they had been hiding in the last row of petitioners in the faraway city of Meereen, when she was still the queen in yellow silks on a mountain of cushions, saturated by too many troubles in her city she could never hope to set to rights. She would perfume herself with the orange-blossom water and ask her maids to let the mysterious young man into her chambers... Not that she would ever reveal that secret to Jon.

So she grasped his sword hand and ran on, enjoying the brush of the tiny ridged tissue of his burn scars. The proof of him not being enough dragon had at some moment become a proof of him being… him. Jon was just different, as Ghost was vastly different from Nymeria, the only other direwolf Dany had seen. Where Nymeria was ferocious and convinced of her strength, Ghost was often padding softly, quiet and wary like his master, the wolf who might have been a dragon if the wolves had not taken him as their own cub.

Or the dragon who would have remained a wolf even if the dragons had had the upper hand in the past, and all the wolves were thought to be dead…

*An outcast.*

Somehow she realised Jon must have been conspicuous in any group of men, never quite fitting in. Daenerys at least knew who she was in the beginning. Even as a highborn child beggar living at the mercy of the rich in Essos, she was still a princess. The blood of Old Valyria was not to be denied. Viserys could sell her like chattel, but the value of the merchandise was known, visible to the highest bidder; the correct fall of silky silver hair, the expected lilac colour of the eyes. Jon must have been different from the start, all his life, first in his family and then on the Wall. Never quite this and never quite that. A bastard, he'd say.

*Exceptional,* Dany had come to think.

Jon must have been shunned or feared at times for standing out among average men, instead of admired as Drogo was, for being the strongest among the Dothraki.

*Would you let me ease your pain?*

The notion was queer and Daenerys hadn't felt it before toward any man. Yes, she had tended Drogo, washing him gently when his spirit left his body, but she had never bothered about the
troubles of his mind if he had any to begin with. Dany doubted he did. Drogo's life had been one long ride of victories and he would continue it galloping among the stars as the Dothraki believed… Her eyes pricked with tears.

The running effort came to an abrupt halt just like Dany's thoughts. And not too soon. Her throat hurt from exertion as if the sharpest of blades was lodged inside it. Old Garth landed on the floor with a thud, a few steps behind, the last one to have made it. The wolf howled in excitement and terror. Dany had never seen Ghost so nervous. Judging by the flashing of her nephew's night-coloured eyes, neither had Jon. There were three openings in front of them, so narrow and low that they would have to bend and walk forward on all fours, maybe crawl. Ghost would have trouble squeezing himself in. Daenerys recalled the many doorways in the House of the Undying and the advice on where she should go.

"Always climb and always take the last door to the right," she said, unaware that her memories escaped through her mouth. Pyke listened to her, imprudently. Daring, he bent and dived heads on into the rightmost passage. The opening widened instantly and its walls somehow softened and shifted as soon as he was half-through.

All we see is a lie, Dany understood, fascinated, we don't know what this place truly looks like…

"Ghost, help him!" Jon reacted faster than a practised archer shooting his bow in battle. The white wolf was closest to the unfortunate ironislander. The animal lurched forward and caught a bit of disappearing black fur in his jaws, sinking into the shape-changing passage after Pyke, until both man and wolf disappeared. Her nephew's gaze immediately wandered after Ghost. His eyes turned glassy and his sword hand limp. Jon was obviously gone wherever the wargs went when they ran or flew with their animal. Before he would fall, Dany wished her slender body strong as Drogon's. She took hold of both Jon's arms and shook him with all her might.

"Wake up! You promised!"

She didn't know what frightened her more, to lose Jon to whatever evil force took Ghost and Pyke or to be left alone where she was. Old Garth did not count as company, somehow.

Black eyes opened slowly. They didn't fall, leaning on each other for balance. "They are gone," he whispered, "they are alive, I think…” he sounded very uncertain. "But I don't know where they have gone. The wolf is beyond my reach."

Daenerys suddenly felt an unnatural wave of heat hitting her back. Given her preference for scalding hot baths, the ugliness of the sensation was most disturbing. They seemed to face more imminent problems than to find out where the wolf had gone. Jon must have felt the same for he pulled her in a very tight embrace, which would have been quite pleasing some place else, in peace and quiet of a home. Her heart had a moment to dance, gratified, that heart of the young girl who fancied herself pretty and not really a liar. The brief beauty of the gesture was ruined when Jon shoved her to the floor and rolled with her sideways. They ended up inches away from the two dark doorways still in evidence, a bundle of fur, human and unicorn hair, and soft flesh. Only then, they dared look back, necks craned in unison. Had they been dragons with tooth and claw, they might have intertwined their heads into one.

Behind them, there was hell. Or seven hells, depending which gods one chose to keep. Rhaegar had taken the Faith of the Seven to his heart and somehow, it fitted him. Not so his son. Daenerys sometimes prayed to the Warrior or to the horse god of the Dothraki, but what she saw now made her doubt the existence of gods.

Old Garth whined pitifully. The fire had caught up with him. He was too slow and exhausted from
the effort. He could never make it. Dany's lilac eyes filled with huge, crystal tears, clouding her vision. Her eyelids itched and burned from them as the wildling's battered body was being slowly licked by flames. She blinked away the tears the best she could. *Maybe I can still pull him out, I went into fire before.* She tried to escape Jon's hold and go back, but he wouldn't let her.

"It's too late," he said, "I'm sorry."

The look on his face said it was not the first time he had lost a fellow soldier. He was leading men and some of them had died. Someone always died. Daenerys was not a stranger to that.

Garth screamed like a pig at slaughter. He was turning into a bright burning flower of red, yellow and orange petals between Dany and Jon and the hell pursuing them; a field of willowy red wheat, a border made of human sacrifice and pain.

*It would look so beautiful,* Daenerys thought, if only she could ignore the wails of inhuman suffering from the man who had become her companion. She couldn't. Instead, she despised her own sigil and house words and cried as Old Garth was being devoured by the flames.

*Fire consumes.*

Through her tears, she still felt mildly warm. The fire besieging them was not ordinary. *Maybe* she could cross back through the flames to wherever back was, find the exit in the trees somewhere, but Jon, Jon could not. Her nephew's stare was dark, mesmerised, lost in some memory Dany did not share. After a while, he *glared* at the poor, burning wildling.

"I've seen this before and I hated it," he finally said. "The red woman, Lady Melisandre, she enjoys burning people. I thought you knew her, but now I doubt."

"I have no idea who the red woman is," Dany said in all honesty. "And neither I nor your father enjoy burning people. In war... War is war. But I'd never do it to gloat over my enemies or for my pleasure, never." She looked Jon in the eye so that he could see without a shade of doubt how her face was still wet with tears. "And yes, it sometimes pleases me to watch fire, but not like this."

*Drogon, breathing a tail of dragonflame across the empty sky over the Dothraki Sea... His name was Old Garth. And he will be remembered. Like Stalwart Shield, like the innocent lamb girl, Eroeh...* Daenerys rarely forgot her dead. Khal Jhaqo and his bloodriders could bear witness to it if they were still alive.

Her nephew hid his gaze behind long eyelashes. Dany forced herself to look away from both Jon and the burning into the two possible ways out that remained to them. "In peace I let Drogon cook his food, is all," Dany murmured, more to herself than to Jon, a long forgotten thought.

"Drogon?" Jon asked, bemused. "Is that your dragon? Is he green, like mine?"

"I don't know if he's my dragon. The dragons are not owned like horses. They are with you or they are not. But I am one of his riders," she said and thought ahead. "Drogon is black," she added curtly. Now was not the time to talk.

*The rightmost passage may not be the right one,* she thought. All she could see in there was darkness, and a vague reflection of death by fire approaching from the other side. Somehow, she knew that soon, when Garth burned to dust, a hundred flames would come after them and she might not be strong enough to withstand them, coming from the earth's core, blood of the dragon or not. After all, the doom did ruin Valyria, its dragons and its dragonlords... Those few adventurers who sailed close enough wrote that the ruins of the old freehold were still bathing in sulphurous fumes,
four hundred years after the worst had come to pass... *The Smoking Sea.*

She accidentally touched the magic sword on Jon's left hip. In the absence of a proper scabbard, the weapon was wrapped tight in the thickly knitted, black woollen scarf that used to hide her nephew's wild black hair. They had no means to pluck the spider-web made of ice from the high weirwood ceiling where the sword had been hanging to use it as a sheath. The blade ceased being hot after Jon immersed it in water so he had been able to carry it, but now, now...

"It shows a weak red glow," she said, worried. The weapon seemed to be mirroring the flames, or heating up again, maybe.

"It feels heavier too," Jon answered. "Maybe if we leave it here, we'll see which way to go. Or maybe I should cut our way out. If it is *my* sword..."

The bitterness in his voice hurt. *He must feel so guilty for bringing us here.* Yet the image of Jon swinging the sword wildly left and right was unsettling. *It would please me to see you do that, some day. Some other time.* She sensed it was not prudent to use the sword now and decided to trust herself on that.

"Do you see anything in any of the passages?" Dany asked, wishing Drogon was with them. He would *know* the right way to take. Dragons' magic was stronger than many other sorts of magic she had encountered in the world. *But not all.* Her brother Rhaegar now had the horn of dragons brought by the mad Greyjoys from the Smoking Sea, and in wrong hands it could be used to *enslave* dragons and take them away from the riders they had chosen...

And there was also the burning black glass candle, which they had left on the Iron Throne in custody of Lord Connington and Varys. The candle could harm dragons, if its magic flame was put out by force... Ser Jaime had found it already burning in the dungeons of the Red Keep, when his sister had him imprisoned for speaking out loud that Tommen was their son.

But Rhaegar said that the candle must have come from the Citadel where the Order of the Maesters had more of them, as objects of study. Not a single one had ever been burning, as far as her brother had known... when he had visited there as a monk eager to learn the art of a healer.

*Not a single one burned until dragons hatched,* Dany suspected, if the black and purple flame somehow meant dragons coming to life. Since she heard the story, Dany could never stop wondering why the Citadel, a place of utmost learning in Westeros according to her childhood lessons, harboured treasures that could be linked with the life and *death* of dragons...

*Wisdom can be evil, like Mirri Maz Duur.*

Drogon would be able to tell the illusion from the truth and he would save her, like he did in the House of the Undying when he was barely more than a hatchling. But her dragon was gone... The familiar black dread had been absent from her fragile mind for so long that it seemed like forever. She longed for him, terribly so.

*Are you with Rhaegar?* she reached out with her mind and called to him, as she had been doing in vain for weeks now. *Is he alright?*

There was no answer.

She realised that Jon had stopped examining his sword and was now staring at the remaining right hand exit.

"Here," he said, smiling like a little boy. "We should go in here." He almost made a step forward into
the gloom.

*Gods,* Dany cursed silently, waking from her reverie about magic and dragons. *I've been thinking too much.* She held her nephew back very, very firmly, not trusting his sudden confidence at all. "Talk to me about what you see," she insisted.

"A castle made of ice," Jon said, sounding *ensnared.* "Home. Winterfell!" He traced two more steps forward, dragging her alongside. One of his feet nearly slipped in the door.

Dany yanked him back with as much force she could muster in a single pull, not seeing anything at all in the direction of Jon's unnaturally joyful gaze. *The halls of the Night's King and his lady wife,* their disappeared dead-child-guide had said. Everything seemed to be vanishing from the caves they had ventured in, one way or another, all except Dany and Jon. "How can you be certain?" she said, hoping to make him talk and stay by her side. She was not strong enough to keep him by force if he chose to leave her, now or *after...* No woman could keep a man by force though she be the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Have you ever seen Winterfell?" Jon's voice ran deep under her skin.

"No," Dany shook her head. "Tell me how it looks. Is it magnificent?"

Jon obliged, dreamily. "It's one of the greatest castles in the realm. It is raised on hot springs so its walls are warm even in the middle of winter. There are no such springs elsewhere in Westeros as far as I know… Look inside! Everything is here; the inner and the outer wall, the moat between them, the drawbridge and the portcullis, even the rounded First Keep with its irregular stones and gargoyles, where my little brother Bran fell… or was pushed… The glass gardens are bearing fruit in the middle of winter!"

Dany recalled that Winterfell had been sacked more than once in the past five years, from the stories of Mance Rayder. So it couldn't be as pristine and *whole* as Jon appeared to be seeing it, it had to be *changed.* Ruined. Weakened. She had *sacked* cities herself and she knew what that meant. There couldn't be fruit in the gardens or not very likely.

"I would love to see Winterfell," she said. "With you if I could" she added, surprising herself. Heat infused her cheekbones, invading their ever smaller sanctuary from where Old Garth was turning from ashes into soulless puffs of inanimate smoke. "But this place is made of ice you say, and I would look upon the castle made of stone… Maybe whatever brought us here wants you to go in to take back the sword we've stolen… Maybe it doesn't want you to have it." Her assumptions were wind as well, but she didn't care if they kept Jon occupied.

Jon listened as he always did before bursting into speech again. "There are guards wearing grey on the walls, grey for the House Stark!" He opened and closed his eyes, and looked again, this time with doubt. "But how? Stannis must hold it now… Or the Boltons. There should be a fiery heart or the flayed man!"

Dany occasionally hated the constant cloud of lingering suspicion in the shiniest pair of black eyes she had ever seen, but now she was thrilled to see it return. "What do you see behind the doorway on the left hand side?" she pushed him further.

Jon recoiled with dread she hadn't seen in him yet, not even when they had been watching the Others from the canopy of the tree. He bumped into her, almost pushing both of them back into the approaching line of searing fire. The rumble of the earthquake was nearing as well. Her nephew seized her by the waist, too tightly, almost to the point where it hurt. *Strong arms,* she was bound to notice, *much stronger than they appear despite that he turned gaunt like a ghost.*
Strong enough to pick me and carry me through the door. The silly notion intrigued her. But which one, that is the question?

"Emerald fire burns to the left," Jon stuttered, releasing Dany from his grip. "I think the alchemists call it wildfire. It's not safe… not by far. We have to go to Winterfell!" The expression on his face turned sheepish when he allowed himself to behold the place which he obviously loved and missed as much as Dany dreamed about the house in Braavos with the red door.

Emerald? Daenerys temporarily lost all interest in her nephew’s obvious lack of well-being. *It's a gem, Illyrio had them, like he had everything.*

Emeralds were green.

She shook Jon as a dry weirwood branch she would gather to start a fire in the last days of their journey underground. She was as harsh as she could be, standing on her toes to better grasp his shoulders. *Broad and bony,* she thought, *and firm. This is madness,* she thought, fighting distraction. She had to keep shaking him, forcing him to look at her, weak and slender without her dragon. And she had to force herself not to remember the softness of his skin under the green crystals, which peeled and fell off under the touch of her hands. He had delicate, young skin which had never seen proper sunlight of the southern skies, so much smoother than any of her former lovers. *We are born in the same year,* she remembered. *We are both young still, no matter what we have seen…*

*He's not my lover,* she reproached herself. *Not yet,* a treasonous voice said.

"Open your mind and think about this emerald fire," she spoke very loud and earned an incredulous laugh. *I'm not talking about trees with seeing eyes, so it must be difficult for you to believe me,* she thought bitterly. Well, the story about Jon's parentage was not an easy one to accept at best, and Drogon decided not to be there to back it for reasons unbeknownst to Daenerys. *At least you are looking at me now once more, and not at the cursed door.*

"You don't understand," Jon said with that new expression of both awe and defiance, that was for her alone since the lake and the sword, ignoring the elements raging around them. "There is an emerald presence down there… it's dangerous, more dangerous than Ghost. And Ghost is dangerous no matter what you think. I can't take us there. I can't take you in there… I've now lost everyone else."

"I understand better than you think." Dany's certainty grew with every word from her nephew's lips. *Presence, that is good.* She would call it dread, but presence could describe what it was just the same, the only salvation they could hope for. Besides, there was nothing better they could choose to do. She could not bring herself to trust the vision of the castle made of ice. She would have trusted Ghost's choice if the direwolf was there, but Ghost was gone.

*I am the dragon now and I will save you from here as Drogon had saved me from the Undying.*

"Please, Jon," she said, "believe in me only this once, green is good."

"Why should I?" Jon said mournfully, "if I have to die, I'd rather die in Winterfell." His eyes were getting glassy and the left hip where the magic sword hung *cold. What if the blade is causing him to be sick?* She could not allow it. She pulled his arms around her waist hoping he could feel some of her body warmth through the white woollen tunic she was wearing.

"We will take the door to our left, together," she said, rising on tiptoes. As tall as she could be, she kissed him deeply. He must have forgotten about Winterfell by the way he returned the favour. It took all force she still had in her so as not to give in fully to his kiss, and use her hands to untie the
sword from his hip.

As soon as she was holding the weapon, she could glimpse a handsome Targaryen-looking prince waiting for her in the right-hand passage, prettier than either of her brothers, with long silver hair and... Jon's black eyes.

The eyes from her vision startled her back to the real world, or whatever passed for it at that moment. She woke to the betrayed expression on her nephew's face.

"What do you want from me?" he exclaimed.

"I want you to share my bed every night," she muttered without thinking, needing to erase the hurt from his face before it would win any more ground. "I want you to look at me as if you loved me."

"Do you want me or not?" she wondered, the bluntness of her inquiry causing Jon's features to soften again. She may have started this again, but he had most decidedly continued it with a stubborn, sulking, honest kiss like a man giving it.

"Please," she said with urgency, "let go of the sword and then look at your Winterfell..."

Miraculously, he obeyed. Had it been Drogo, or Daario they wouldn't have, most likely. For Drogo to listen to her, she had to pretend she was bowing to his superior strength, and the result was his death... For Daario she had to be very womanly all the time yet he still took another to love when the Mother of Dragons was battling Khal Jhaqo...

"There's nothing," Jon said, visibly disappointed. He reached for the sword again, eager to hold onto his illusions, she supposed.

"I told you so," Dany said, kissing him again, taking the blade as far out of his reach as she could. She didn't even think of looking at the vision of the silver Targaryen prince one more time. The prince I need is here. She just had to pay attention not to call him that. He would doubtlessly hate it. "We go left."

Jon looked down, wincing in pain. The fire had crossed the barrier made by Old Garth's body. Soil was burning under their feet. Jon stomped on it, making a little dance with his feet.

Dany rushed toward the left opening, dragging her nephew and his cursed magic sword with her, away from the fires of the earth. The distance was very short but her legs were suddenly not her own. They felt laden, as boulders of stone. This cave wishes to bury me alive if I let it and I just won't. I will not! None of this is real! She ignored her mounting fear and stiffening limbs, and stumbled forward with the sheer force of her will, though she sensed nothing within the doorway she aimed for except her own half-feigned confidence in what a green dread should mean. I could be so wrong!

They crossed through a thin veil of soft rain hugging their sweat-drenched bodies like a balm, and back into the unearthly cold north of the Wall. In the open, the drizzle was little balls of ice, landing on their bare faces and hands like tiny daggers falling from the dark sky. Gloves they used to have were irreparably lost, discarded during the run for their lives.

Outside, it was night. And the colour of the night was deeply black, as if it had never given way to daylight.

Dany and Jon were standing on a very narrow path, a ledge of sorts, bordering and skirting a high cliff to their left. To their right, the world was hollow and empty. Very deep below, they could hear the raging sea, but they could not see it. The waves were breaking on dead rocks somewhere far
down in bottomless void.

*We do not wish to fall in there,* Dany concluded and glanced back.

Behind them, there was a thick forest of sentinel. Dead men and women were coming out. The glitter of many blue eyes spread out like sorcerous fireflies in the gloom. The wights were dressed in rags and many of them missed parts of their bodies. Soon they would fall upon them, with ruined arms stretched forward, hissing like Aegon's Lady Jeyne and Lady Catelyn once did.

Jon never looked back, only in front. He seemed wide awake and confused. The way forward was leading to the end of the cliff. If they didn't fall sideways to the abyss while walking to it, there wasn't anything waiting for them at that end, except more hollow darkness and perhaps, the sea.

"Jon," she said nervously, "the green presence. I can't feel it. But you can. Where is it? We have to go towards it and not away from it."

"In front, I think," Jon murmured, uncertain.

So they trod forward very carefully, finding holds in the irregular rocky side of the icy mountain so as not to fall. The dead were behind them. Some among the wights were braver, about to venture on the ledge. The cold was biting. Dany could feel old sweat turning into a thin layer of ice on her skin. She needed to stop walking, but she must continue.

"I think it's approaching," Jon said, a little more confident, "it feels a bit like Ghost now," he continued, "only bigger."

"Let's hurry," Dany said, forcing herself to follow her own advice. They gained nothing by lingering and they could lose everything. *Just a few steps more.* She was the first one now, her nephew followed behind. The end of the cliff loomed near. *Not near enough.* Dany made a few more steps, and a few more, but there were always a few more she should still make, and she felt so very, very cold.

"One day," she told Jon to take heart, "you will kiss me in Winterfell. In the moat if you wish."

"Winterfell must be a burned ruin now and I'd rather kiss you in the hot springs," Jon said with a calm head, "but I could also kiss you in the wormways under the Wall. Somewhere warm... where fire burns only in the fireplace..." The image of burning sent fresh shivers through Dany, but not from fear. *It's been a long time.* She had been a widow for what seemed an eternity and slept alone between crumpled silky sheets. Drogon could not help her with that.

In the distance, the high stormy sea touched a mass of clouds on the angry black horizon lit by faint starlight. Dany wondered which stars they were. She had probably never seen them. The sea roared potently under the world of ice, a prancing beast of foam and salty water.

They arrived at the edge, facing the void.

Daenerys turned back, briefly. The dead were *unable* to walk on the ledge. *Good,* she thought. And far, far back, behind the dead and the forest, she thought she saw a rounded tower with gargoyles, tall, looming behind the double ring of walls... the inner one higher and the outer lower. The unknown fort glowed blue. *A castle made of ice.*

There was no fire left in the world, and the cold was becoming the worst one Dany had experienced so far during her journey north. *The Lands of Always Winter, could it be? Poor Garth!* Dany's inside melted and twisted, and she was on the verge of crying again. *He never wanted to go back and for good reason.*
They were waiting in the darkness, unable to go back and with no way to go forward.

"See," Jon said flatly after a while when she didn't speak, "we should have gone to Winterfell." His face was indescribably long, resigned.

_Could I have been wrong?_ cold fingers of doubt gripped Dany's soul, as she stole another look at the ice castle behind the forest. Before she could confess to Jon that maybe his vision was not entirely wrong and that there _was_ some kind of castle here, though perhaps _not_ Winterfell, the sky screeched. The dead recoiled to safety underneath the trees, even the brave ones who were trying to pursue Dany and Jon on their path to nothingness.

Then, finally, the green dragon rose on the horizon. Fire from his maw illuminated the night that had never seen the day. Green and bronze scales covered the sky. He had grown and he looked healthier than ever. And Daenerys Targaryen was never going to forget the look of shock on Jon's face.

"It is true then," Jon said stiffly, not managing another word.

Dany swelled with pride for her returning child.

"So," the Mother of Dragons wondered, not expecting an answer, triumphant over the cold, "do you still find me pretty? Now that I'm not a liar..."

Rhaegal had come for his rider.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who left a comment, a kudos, subscribed to or bookmarked this story.

You are a much bigger reason I keep updating than my personal obsession with _ASOIAF_ and a rather particular way of waiting eagerly for what the _Winds of Winter_ might truly bring...
Davos

Chapter Notes

A heartfelt thanks TopShellCrazy for making this chapter so much more Stannisy :-) and for putting up with the ever growing amount of words. A big thanks to DrHolland for fine-tuning the result )))

Warning for gore.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Davos

He wondered how far the Nightfort was and if there were any onions stored for winter in its cellars. He heard it was the largest of the empty castles on the largely unmanned Wall. Davos imagined there must be room enough for anything if the castle's dusty halls hadn't turned into blocks of ice with the passage of time. Merciless, Davos thought, as only time can be.

Weeks before Stannis' Onion Knight ever reached Castle Black, through the winter desolation north of the Wall, Queen Selyse and Princess Shireen had returned from Nightfort to the main outpost of the Night's Watch, anxious to see the glorious return of King Stannis, First of His Name, triumphant over the Boltons in Winterfell.

Davos was unpleasantly surprised that his son Devan had been made to stay in the Nightfort. He hadn't been invited to accompany the queen, despite being appointed the king's squire years ago, and following maester's lessons with his daughter.

Azor Ahai reborn has no need for boys to fasten or remove his armor, Davos concluded, hindered in his desire to travel to Nightfort, to see the oldest of his three surviving sons. My duty is to my king first.

The queen walked victorious and her daughter silent. Only Shireen's fool Patchface rang the little bells on his hat, disturbing Melisandre's efforts to see the future in the fires of her god with the soft tinkles he made. Clinking sounds were the only thing that seemed to bother the red woman.

Lady Melisandre was glowing.

She became more and more radiant as Stannis approached; powerful and splendid. Davos was trying to guess if she had seen the news he was bringing in her fires. No raven had yet flown to the Wall from King's Landing, no tidings had come from or about the new old Targaryen king. Whatever she may have seen, Melisandre appeared unconcerned. Davos, for his part, could not bring himself to share with her the knowledge about the unlikely royal couple and their son. He could not confide in Selyse either, Stannis' lawful wife and queen, may the Seven forgive him. The queen talked much and accomplished little.

I am the King's Hand and Stannis is king...

Aye...

But for how long?
He wished fervently Devan were with him, in case that... In case...

*Rhaegar Targaryen lives and he and his sister must have dragons. There is no other way Daenerys could have come to us. We never found her horse, dead or alive, so it must have been a winged one. Dragons breathe fire...*

Davos would never forget the night when the sky and the water burned green. On the Imp's orders, the alchemists' piss was released on the fleets of both friend and foe under the walls of King's Landing. *Dragonflame will be no different than wildfire... Maybe it'll be a worse, more painful way to die.* He wished with all his heart Devan had stayed home with Marya. The precious appointment with the king never seemed more precarious and deadly. Down south, in Cape Wrath, maybe he would have lived to be a man grown and hold a son of his own.

*Or a daughter. I never had a daughter. A little girl called... Jenny... Why not?*

There were more Jennys in the realm and hardly ever a Jonquil.

The Lord of Rainwood learned how to read very recently. Nonetheless, literacy was not required to figure that King Rhaegar might not be pleased once he learned that the sworn brothers of the Night's Watch attempted to murder his son. Targaryens were not merciful. Not even Baelor the Blessed who imprisoned his sisters in the ugly room called Maidenvault in the Red Keep, so as not to suffer the temptation of the flesh.

The burden of knowledge made it very hard for Davos to sit still, to pretend that fate favoured Stannis and that the winter was over before it truly began. The cold had miraculously lessened on the day the few remaining black brothers on guard spotted the billowing banners with a fiery heart, returning from the south, still several leagues away.

Men in black furs could now walk above the ground again, just as at the end of the long summer, rather than only within the wormways connecting the decaying structures of Castle Black underground. Some rangers even practised swordplay at first light. The great horns of the Night's Watch, announcing rangers returning, wildlings or... *Others* attacking, were not sounded for months, not one time, nor two, and decidedly not three times.

"Spring is coming by sorcery," a very young black brother declared with worry. He had been tailing Davos like a shadow ever since his arrival at the semi-frozen gates, faring through the mounting sea of snow on the sledge made into a black-sailed ship.

The boy looked more a girl. His name was Satin. He had the watch when Davos came and helped open the gates. And not a day too soon. When Stannis returned, a special festivity would take place. *The wildlings are finally going to leave the Wall of their own free will, and the gates will be sealed forever,* whispered those loyal to the new Lord Commander, Bowen Marsh.

*Only that their old lord commander is still alive,* Davos thought in a guise of an answer, silent as a tomb for the outside world, *And he may be much more than his humble bastard name says, much more than just the Lord of the giant Wall of ice...*

Satin never agreed with Lord Marsh. Moreover, he seemed to hate him and a few younger crows with great intensity.

*That would be the killers,* Davos concluded. *If only they had known...* He wondered if Melisandre knew that Jon lived. And more than anything he wondered whom she was sheltering from common knowledge in the ice cells under the Wall and what kind of *festivity* she prepared for Stannis. He hoped he was not the one destined to feed the fires after the merrily burning weirwood branches she
graciously accepted as a sacrifice to her god, when she and Stannis allowed the wildlings behind the Wall. No. They didn't do that alone.

It had been Lord Snow's idea to make allies out of the wildlings, Satin told Davos. He had been Jon's steward and took pride in that, as much or more than Devan did for being the king's squire.

*And now Melisandre is sending the lost people out again, into the bitter cold.*

Whenever he closed his eyes, Davos could still feel the cold beyond the Wall. Dead fingers tried to grasp him, with nails sharp as shards of hard ice, as he sailed ferociously over the ocean of snow. The feeling had entered his bones and he suspected it would stay with him forever, even if he never set a foot behind the Wall again. Now, a bird chirped softly in the rafters of a crumbling tower. *This peace and this sunshine in the middle of winter cannot be of this world.*

The Onion Knight wiped the sweat from his brow, under a woollen scarf. On an impulse, he swiftly bared his smooth, nearly hairless head. *It is too warm.* Determined to reach the ice cages and see what or who was inhabiting them, Davos hurried his step, leaving Satin behind. He had been trying since he arrived; since he understood that just like he was unwilling to reveal tidings about the Targaryens and their dragons, no one was going to tell him where young Rickon was.

The granaries and the ice cells were the only part of the castle where the Hand of the King could not look freely, residing under the sole authority of the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. There were five black brothers guarding the way down at all times. *Where could an old smuggler pass?* He hoped an unguarded passage may have opened by a thawing of some part of the castle in this ungodly weather.

*Seasons have to change,* Davos thought, *there is no such thing as an eternal summer.* For nature to grow and prosper the spring had to follow winter. And if there was no winter maybe there would be no spring... A swish of red satin and velvet swept by him at that moment, as if to warn him that his thoughts were dangerous. Melisandre stood to exchange a few words with the same guards he'd been so interested in.

*Rickon is Stannis' most important hostage. The male line prevails over the sister of Lord Eddard, even if she lives. Even if she truly is the Queen of the Seven Kingdoms...* Davos hoped Rhaegar Targaryen would not burn his wife's nephew, no matter what treason the Night's Watch committed against his son. *The prince was noble,* he remembered the songs whispered against King Robert's will. *He preferred the harp to the sword.*

*Aye. But he was still the best jouster of his day and he had learned the sword, willingly or not. And if he had forced his wife into marriage as the other bards say, he will not care about her nephew...* Davos head was about to burst from contradicting thoughts as he gazed suspiciously at the trodden ice path, strewn with cobblestone against sliding. The way led into places deep under the Wall, where the winter stocks of Lord Marsh were neatly piled up and well-hidden. He had onions and more, no doubt. He would need no smuggler bringing him dried fish to endure the horror of the winter after this false, sorcerous spring.

*They wouldn't keep a boy down there, no matter how strong or savage young Rickon may be.*

*They might. They murdered their last two lord commanders. They'd do anything to survive. As would most people. As you did when you didn't give yourself to the sea after your sons died...*  

"I trust you're enjoying the view," Melisandre said behind his back, catching him by surprise, voice mellow and deceiving as herself.
"I am," the Onion Knight replied in earnest. "The Wall is much more impressive when you look at it from this side." And from the other side it doesn't look high enough to stop what is out there.

"You are the King's Hand," the Asshai'i sorceress said, "and you have been most loyal. The king shall be here before dusk. Then, all shall be revealed." She pierced him with a red look, as though she were well aware of the news Davos had been keeping to himself.

Have you been loyal, my lady? Melisandre's trust in Stannis being Azor Ahai reborn had always seemed true enough. Yet Davos was never quite able to determine if she served his king or merely an unknown purpose of her own. Too late to tell her now, about the dragons coming back to life or about the true heir to the Iron Throne, dragon and wolf both... he thought. So be it.

He had only one short afternoon to find out where Rickon was. The sorcerous spring did nothing to lengthen the days, growing ever shorter.

One day, soon, only night will remain. All this darkness, gathering...

Davos remembered the nights beyond the Wall and nearly gritted his teeth. Maybe, when the wildlings line up to depart, the watchmen will drop guard... Maybe not.

The order of the builders of the Night's Watch already stood ready to seal the gates as soon as the last wildling soul astray on the wrong side of the Wall abandoned Castle Black. Unemployed and lazy, some of Selyse's surviving knights also flanked the road out north, lying empty under shy, misplaced sunlight.

The road into death, Davos knew. Why would anybody go there of their own free will was beyond him. Think! He urged himself. If there was one thing he learned as a lad in Flea Bottom it was to think with his own head. There had to be something simple he could do to at least see if Rickon was imprisoned. Something undemanding that would not draw any attention to him and would be shunned by the red woman... Like when you released Edric Storm to the Free Cities before she knew because it was not foremost on her mind.

Suddenly, Davos knew. The fool! Patchface walked everywhere unhindered. The soldiers thought of him as nothing and the red woman ignored him with a look of contempt on her delicate, predator features. Davos veered back towards the little princess' chambers, that were now behind the forge.

Shireen had stopped being little though. She had bled and was now considered a woman, though she remained short of stature. Davos wondered if Stannis had a moment on his Winterfell campaign to think of a worthy match for his only child and heir. Not that it matters if the dragons are back. She could burn just like Devan.

Davos was determined to advise his king in such a way that no one burned. For that was the duty of the Hand, to give wise counsel to his king, and strive for the good of the realm.

"My princess," he addressed Shireen warmly when entering her chambers. The fool was with her. She was reading a book, probably from the vaults of the Night's Watch, her mind lost in the content she was examining. There was not much else to do to spend the days until her father's return.

"Lord Davos, it pleases me to see you," she acknowledged him and gave a furtive look around.
Satisfied that they were alone, she closed the volume on the table, right over the marked passage on one of the pages. Fine dust sprinkled Davos from the cover of the book. Jade Compendium, the title read, if Davos could still rely on his reading skills. After his journey north, he didn't have many certainties.

It was the first time he was with the princess in private in a very long while. Her eyes were still blue
and guileless. Yet a steely look of her father when he needed to hear the truth from Davos crept into them now. The question she was about to form must have been laying heavy on her soul.

"Why is my father's sword not warm if it is indeed Lightbringer as the Lady Melisandre says?" She gestured at the tome. "Here it says that the Azor Ahai's sword was blazing hot when it was on fire. And my father's sword does burn but it emits no heat. And the fire it burns with has been green. Why is it then called the Red Sword of Heroes?"

Why indeed? Davos kept his own doubts to himself. They would bring her no solace. The truth was he knew little and less about magic.

"The books are not always entirely correct," he said prudently. "In Maester Pycelle's history of Westeros, King Robert Baratheon, your uncle, was depicted as much more noble than he truly was. The learned writers are also servants of some lord in this world."

"Oh," Shireen sighed, disappointed, as if she had discovered something important and then was robbed of the truth of it. "Of course. My mother and Lady Melisandre would not lie to father about something important like that."

She believes in books more than she believes in people. And it is not surprising. Jon Snow the bastard must have felt more loved in the Stark household than Shireen ever had with her parents, and not through any fault of her own.

"My princess," Davos said carefully, "may I borrow your fool for a short walk on this mild winter day?" The dusk was almost upon them and he had to hurry. "I heard he knows places on the Wall no one else does and many funny songs about them. One of the duties of the Hand of the King is to learn, before giving counsel."

"But of course," Shireen said graciously, shiny black hair hiding her long ears. If it weren't for the greyscale scars covering half of her face, she would be growing lovelier day by day. "He is bored here when I am reading. Are you not, Patches?" She opened the Jade Compendium again, Davos' words about the uncertain worth of books having but a short effect on a young mind avid for knowledge and distraction.

"Under the sea the books are weed," the fool sang merrily, "oh, I know, oh, oh oh..."

Davos stifled a chuckle. Patchface sometimes hit the middle of the moving archery target with his silly rhymes. The gods have blessed the fools, he thought, and little children. He hoped both Devan and Shireen were young enough to enjoy this special protection from the gods for a little while longer. Until the spring, the real one, Davos prayed, doubting that the gods heard him. The Seven had spared his life on Blackwater but that didn't mean that they would grant his prayers. I have to do something to ensure Devan's and Shireen's safety myself. That's what a man should do.

"And, under the sea, where is the long tunnel of ice where the grains and onions lay?" Davos asked with hope in his unremarkable eyes and short ears. Not as cropped as my fingers, but not Florent ears in any case. Maybe they will allow me to last longer as Hand than the late Lord Alaster, may the Seven have mercy on his soul. The fool just looked at him, stupidly. There are, obviously, limits to their understanding.

Davos sighed tiredly and took Patchface by the hand. "Come on" he said. "I'll show you where I think it starts."

"Go, Patches," Shireen helped, "bring fresh firewood when you return."
Melisandre was seemingly trying to kill either the princess or her fool with the lack of wood and slow starting up of the fire. The false spring had not touched Shireen's new quarters.

"From under the sea, the sky is not up, but deep under the ground," the fool continued humming, lost in the world of his own, "oh, I know, I know..."

The singing continued incoherent and strident, amidst clinging of the bells, when Davos reached the entrance to the wormways of Castle Black. He scrambled into it and then waited for the fool to choose their path toward what had to be the ice cells, he hoped. They walked quietly for a while until in the far left corner of his vision Davos noticed the fire of the guards. They are warmer than Stannis' daughter. The notion made him angry. Well at least the king will order her rooms heated properly when he returns. Stannis always provided for his family. Loving them was another matter.

The fool rubbed his hands together against the cold and collapsed in front of a frozen-looking wall. Davos knocked on it. It was made of some thin masonry under the melting ice. I have to find something to break in. A hammer. Maybe there's one left in the forge. Then, a lady spoke. Davos put his ear on the wall to hear better.

"I've heard it said, I did, that the Starks were wild beasts, who butchered poor Stafford at Oxcross," a no-nonsense womanly voice provoked behind the thin barrier, which imprisoned the bodies, but let through the sounds. "You, boy, truly look as if you could eat me up alive."

"And I've heard that all the Lannisters were good-looking, not fat, old and ugly," the boy replied in kind.

The woman laughed. "Well, you have your wits with you, boy, I'll give you that. What's your name again? Rickard?"

"Rickon," the boy Davos had found tanning skin in a cave-dwelling on Skagos replied in earnest, "Rickard was my grandfather."

The creak of a door cut through the conversation as a headsman's axe. The iced doorway slid open with a screeching rasp.

"My lady of Lannister," the familiar, sneaky voice of the long-eared Florent who still lived said. Axel, old keg, Davos thought, what are you doing in there?

"It is the first time in many years I am called that," the woman said with the contempt of a daughter of a great house for the lesser lord, once a mere castellan on Dragonstone. "I have been addressed as Lady Frey most of the time. Though it takes more than losing a maiden's cloak for a lioness to lose her claws. What would you have of me?"

"I, naught," Axell said with ravenous devotion, "the Lord of Light has need of you!"

"Of light you say," the woman said shrewdly. "Yet all I see is shadows." Manacles clicked closed before she continued. "Farewell then, young Rickon Stark, I fear that our further acquaintance will have to wait. And I so wanted to teach you a few things about true lions. They do have four paws like the wolves, not scales like stinky fish your father loved so well."

"Have you known my father?" There was despair in the boy's voice Davos had never known and then, there was silence. The moment was gone. Davos knew he wasted the time he may have had to help the unknown lady out of the cell, and with that lose the chance to help Rickon if he got caught in the act. Rickon is still a child. This lion lady is a woman grown and shall fend for herself.

Soft sound of footsteps hurried in Davos' and the fool's direction, out of the dungeons of ice. The
Onion Knight prudently retreated back to the open of Castle Black. So Rickon is unharmed. But where is Osha and his wolf? Set even deeper in ice? Are they warming the cells? They have to, Melisandre has her ways to warm up places, how else would a boy live... He has been in there for weeks... It must have taken less time to transport the boy from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, than for Davos to cross the no man's land between Hardhome and Castle Black.

There are always more questions than answers in life.

A wave of cheering conquered the castle, unheard in months, if it had ever been heard at all. The boy, Satin, immediately found Davos again, and whispered. "Last time they cheered for Jon like this, the wildlings and some of the brothers. It meant his murder." Davos straightened his spine and walked in the direction of the greatest clamour, ignoring Satin. Stannis needed his help. He always did. The Hand of the King abandoned his spying exploits and returned to do his duty.

Stannis arrived at the unguarded southern entrance of Castle Black, riding in front of a now twice-bloodied army. It had grown considerably in numbers from the modest force that had once marched from Eastwatch to the defence of the Wall from the wildling invasion led by Mance Rayder. Davos could not recognise all the sigils in the fluttering sea of banners. A moose... A battle-axe... A merman for House Manderly...

Queen Selyse and Lady Melisandre stood side by side in melting snow, waiting for the king to dismount.

When Davos had his king fully in sight, he noticed that his closely cropped blue-black beard was half an inch longer than usual. Yet the sparse movements of the singularly simple man were those Davos knew and admired. But then, then...

His Grace fell to his knees before the two women, surprising Davos greatly. It was very much unlike Stannis to do so.

"My lord husband," Selyse croaked with pride and mirth, softening her unpleasing features for once. Her hand reached gently for her husband's head in a futile gesture of endearment. Davos suspected Stannis would never appreciate it or return it. "The Lord of Light granted you strength and victory. I prayed for it every day at nightfires," she uttered the words like an empty-sounding, parroted prayer.

Stannis rose to his feet, shaking off his wife's attention with a measured shrug. Slowly, he drew forth Lightbringer. The blade glowed scarlet.

"The Red Sword of Heroes," Melisandre said softly. This day is full of wonders, Davos thought. The red woman was normally never shy nor quiet in proclaiming her beliefs. Has Jon Snow already found a sword like this one behind the Wall? Davos hoped he would never know and yet feared his hope would be in vain.

The gods have to smile on Stannis, his claim is just, he tried to take heart. Aerys II was mad. He turned the kingdoms into ruin and the lords were right to rebel. His son Rhaegar lost the battle on the Trident. Robert won and Stannis is his heir.

Or rather, Robert murdered the rightful heir of the lawful king over the festering grievance of his heart...

Davos was spared that kind of chagrin. He married a good woman who was nothing but loyal to him, and he to her. If that was love the singers sang about, and for Davos it was the only one, then love was a wonderful emotion; a driving force; a favourable, strong wind blowing into the sails of his little black ship.
Love could take a man wherever he wanted to go.

But by law and by the gods, who is to sit the Iron Throne? The stag or the dragon? The Onion Knight felt he was not wise enough to tell. He stared at his king, wavering in his conviction of what was right and what wrong.

"Long have I prayed and long have I fasted, my lady," Stannis said in his unyielding voice, brittle like iron resisting the work of the smith. And though he may have spoken to Selyse as a dutiful husband ought to, the king only had eyes for Melisandre, more so than ever. As if he had beheld her for the very first time and truly believed in her, and not only that she was a powerful, foreign hawk he could use for his ends. The few hairs Davos still had on his scalp all stood on edge from the intensity of the determined look in Stannis’ eyes, darker blue than the night that was about to fall.

"My faith has been sorely tested if I ever had one before," the king announced. A new fervour coloured his habitual demeanour of steel.

"My army nearly starved to death under the walls of Winterfell." Stannis clenched his teeth from the unpleasant memory.

"And then, my lady, just as you bid me do when my need was great," he stated with conviction of a man who had long searched for the truth and discovered it, in either the face of some god or the bottom of the wineskin, "I prayed and I fasted for thirty days. When I was done with my labours, I tempered the sword in the waters of the frozen lake, covered in snow, near the great seat of the Starks. I did that and I became strong. I became fortunate. I conquered Winterfell..."

Castle Black waited in silence for the king to finish his speech.

"No doubt remains in my heart now: the Lord of Light has granted me victory," Stannis said after a while. The crushing cheering of his army and welcoming household rose seven hundred feet tall, to the top of the Wall and beyond it.

"All the northern lords recognise me as their king now, as do the Freys and many riverlords," Stannis raised both arms in the air. His gesture increased the cheering tenfold.

"All northern lords, Your Grace?" Davos whispered, the first voice of doubt in the sea of approval. Mother help me if I spoke out of turn.

Stannis frowned, taken aback, more akin to the loveless and just man Davos served and cherished, than to this new kingly man with glowing sword. "Well, that fat walrus, Lord Manderly, still demands to see that boy to bend the knee. Where is he, Davos?"

Lightbringer glowed in the king’s right hand with an angry red glare, frightening Davos. The sword of heroes doesn’t come cheap. There is a price to pay… Maybe the reason for it was that Melisandre turned her gaze away from Lightbringer to Patchface and Satin, who were both tailing Davos’ like a singular guard of honour: a procession of two ducklings behind the mother duck. Or maybe it was only an illusion of the fading daylight. Davos cleared his throat and faced his king. It was time to speak up. Do it now. Now or never.

"Your Grace," Davos fell on his knees to make his own gesture more splendid and eye-catching for everyone. They have to hear me or we may all burn before the Others take us. "I have been to White Harbor and I have been to Skagos, to bring you the Stark heir who will rally the entire north to your cause. It was a condition set by Lord Manderly. I was not able to consult you before I sailed out. Yet I hope that Your Grace may deem my actions appropriate."
"Alas," Davos paused to draw even more attention, "the Night's Watch has taken young Rickon Stark away from me as their own prisoner, and then left both me and one of their commanding officers on a skiff to die."

Stannis' frown deepened to a dangerous level. "Who has harmed my Hand?"

"All is well, my king," the red woman said with calm poise, but without flattery. Any other tone would have angered Stannis tremendously at that moment, Davos knew. This manner of speaking, however, was susceptible to do the exact impossible and appeal to him. The Onion Knight sighed. *I have been fighting a losing battle and the Seven have spared me for nothing.*

*Not true. You did save Edric and sent him to Essos... She didn't know what you did before it was too late.*

Yet the red woman's magic had now grown out of all proportions. Never before had she been able to change the weather of the world into one she and her Lord of Light desired. The warmth and sun was of her making, Davos had no doubt. He only wondered how long it would last before the winds of winter blew in earnest over the pitiful fortress of the Night's Watch.

Melisandre continued in a smooth, warm voice, coloured almost as red as her bright satin gown, unsuitable for winter. "Lord Marsh had Lord Rickon brought here from Eastwatch-by-the-Sea and then kept him safe until Your Grace returned crowned with victory. He corrected those of his officers who may have been imprudent toward Lord Davos. You must understand, Your Grace, when he was found with the Stark heir, Lord Davos looked more like a smuggler than the Hand of the King."

"Lord Marsh?" Stannis' reacted to the most important new information in Melisandre's speech with the infallible instinct of a seasoned battle commander.

*Selyse approached her husband and tenderly squeezed his right arm, standing closer to Stannis than Melisandre, in a mockery of marital affection. The temporary beauty of rejoicing was gone from her face and the now comforting expression on her features made her look uglier than ever.*

*Some ladies are unfortunate,* Davos thought about the fate of ugly women, who fared like men unable to fight, mocked and despised. His heart went to the not-so-little princess most of all.

*Ears or scars should not determine the worth of a person. Or moustache.* Yet Selyse was as she looked; coarse.

"Lord Snow has met with a most untimely end," the red-faced former steward confessed from one of the Night's Watch garrons. Marsh was as contrite as Davos had ever seen him. "Septon Cellador ensured us it was ungodly to burn him for he was a man of the seven kingdoms. We stopped following the wildling ways of burial."

*Was the septon drunk or sober when he made that recommendation?* Davos would bet on drunk. Septon Cellador's proclivities were no secret.

"Besides, Lord Snow was reputedly a beastling and certainly a believer in the false old gods, may the Lord of Light be kind to him in afterlife." Lord Marsh swallowed and pulled a tortured face as though he were forced to ingest a living leech. "We honoured his faith in life, by taking him to rest in peace behind the Wall, in the weirwood grove where he had sworn his oath."

Davos mouth burst open in a hundred words, offended by the old pomegranate who must have been lying to save his skin. He must have heard Stannis would never take murder lightly.

"Your Grace, hear me out now, for my tidings are grave," Davos pronounced, "you may hold
Winterfell now, but an army is riding north as we speak, led by the new king in King's Landing, no less than Rhaegar Targaryen, the Prince of Dragonstone whom your late brother, King Robert, didn't quite kill on the Trident. And he has at least one or more dragons..."

"Rhaegar Targaryen," Stannis said, his features unmoving, "an interesting notion. A criminal and a rapist. By the laws, he may be allowed to take the black, and not the Iron Throne." A scowl of deep thought conquered his square, non-surrendering features. "My brother rose against his father, King Aerys II, for legitimate reasons and won, taking the throne. I am Robert's heir. I and no other. The Iron Throne is still mine by rights."

"You speak justly, Your Grace," Davos said tiredly. "Yet as your Hand I am sworn to tell you all the truth. It would seem that Rhaegar married Lyanna Stark and that she is now his queen of her own free will, riding north with her husband. Riding home, Your Grace."

The unspoken words that Lyanna's home was in Winterfell lingered over Castle Black. Davos spied on Melisandre for reaction and there was none. So you know. This was important enough to see in your fires. He waited for Stannis to look at his red woman for confirmation.

"Your Hand speaks with honesty," the sorceress said, "I have seen it in the flames. Yet Your Grace speaks truly as well. The Iron Throne shall be yours by rights."

The discussion was stifled by the arrival of the order of the builders, leading a long line of wildlings, who poured out from all parts of Castle Black above and under the ground. They came back from the nearby castles on the Wall and from the settlement called Mole Town not far away. They were leaving the safety of the Wall where they were no longer welcome, in order to return to the only home they had ever known, the wilderness behind it. Most were taking with them only what they had brought in from there; bare skin on their back. They had so little possessions, even less than Davos the smuggler. The wildlings made noise and walked in careless, undisciplined ways, eager to be gone.

Stannis and Selyse looked displeased.

"They have refused your hospitality, Lord Marsh," the king said roughly. It was not a question.

"Your Grace, they are not used to the life of serving. I dwelled long on the matter and now I decided to grant them their wish. We have too many mouths to feed as it is and we cannot keep them by force."

"Liar!" Whistles and cries broke out from the wildling troop.

"Fat crow! Murderer!"

Truth be told, Marsh was not fat, only red in face, but the wildling accusing him was scrawny as a corpse.

"Where is Lord Snow?"

"If it is indeed their wish, let us show them the way," Stannis proclaimed. The king didn't spare another look for the wildlings nor lend his ear to their pleas. Stannis Baratheon could not stand ungratefulness. He had let wildlings into his kingdoms and they decided to abandon them. Where it concerned him, it was the same as if they had died.

The king walked to the gates at the bottom of the Wall, followed by his wife and his red woman, in that order. Davos hurried behind. At the beginning of the ice tunnel leading out, they mounted small
garrons of the Night's Watch to cross to the other side. Lord Marsh spared no courtesy to end up on the king’s good side, it seemed. In saddle or not, the crossing went at the same speed as if they had all walked.

All this darkness, and more darkness, gathering... Davos thought again, mournfully, before he finally emerged on the side of the Wall he would have wished to leave behind forever.

The dusk coloured the Wall a gloomy grey and green. Under the long ashén clouds stretching far and wide over the desolate sky, the Wall wept, though it was colder on this side. Lady Melisandre's magic ends or weakens here, Davos thought, unsurprised, studying the small crowd that gathered to watch the exodus of the free folk.

A younger wildling, balding despite his young age, drew his attention. Clad in oddly crafted bronze armour, the man stood defiantly next to a pretty lady with black hair loose on her back in northern style, wearing snowflakes on her face and hair. Not flowers, like in the song of Jenny of Oldstones, but these crystals are equally beautiful. Fragile. The lady held firmly onto the man's upper arm as if to prevent him joining the march of thoughtless men and women on the leave.

The wildlings cursed and talked loudly as they went. They were led by a very broad, white-bearded, sturdy man somewhat younger than Davos and the beautiful, tall, blond-haired lady, all dressed in white like a princess from the tales. She almost resembles Daenerys, Davos thought. But where Dany's head was silver and loose the wildling woman's was gold and braided. She wore a long knife on her hip, and there was cruel courage in her blue eyes where Dany's eyes were lilac and harboured hidden sorrows.

The glances of the man armoured in bronze stole after his companions of yesterday with unmistakable longing. Only the firm grip of the winter lady held him back. He wishes to go with them yet he knows he should stay. Davos pitied the wildlings. They had no idea what was waiting for them. Or did they? Another look at their two mismatched leaders told him otherwise. They know and they don't care. For there is nothing for them on this side.

"It was that stinky, hairy giant who did for Lord Snow," Selyse pointed an accusatory finger at the long-haired figure, more beast than man, marching alone in the middle of the wildling horde. "No one has told me, to spare my gentle woman's heart, but I know, oh I know," Selyse continued her rant, sounding less clever than Patchface. Stannis, however, seemed to listen and weigh the value her words. "First he did for Ser Patrek and then for the lord commander when the young man tried to stop the beast, before Lord Marsh and his faithful stewards managed to draw him away with their knives. It took four brave brothers of the Watch to frighten the giant!"

"What of the other giants?" Stannis asked as a commander counting his host.

"They share the ice cells under Eastwatch, Your Grace. And the mammoths are stabled with the few remaining horses," Lord Marsh hurried to answer, after he first looked at Melisandre with palpable fear.

The red woman kept quiet.

What are you hiding? Davos regretted wholeheartedly never asking Jon Snow how he ended up in Hardhome. He did say he died in the weirwood grove where we parted ways. They say they buried him there. But how could he know where he had died if he were already dead? The young affable man was more taciturn than Stannis when it came to those matters and he never supplied any information himself. The wildlings in Hardhome called him lord, and he is the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms by birth...
"If that is so", Stannis told his wife with finality, concerning the giant, "than being banished behind the Wall is the just punishment. This giant is never to set foot in the Seven Kingdoms. Someone tell him that."

The bearded wildling leader shouted something in guttural tones Davos could not understand, though it sounded a lot like the language Old Garth had spoken to their dead child guide. The giant snorted in reply, more animal than human. Yet he does speak and understands language. Beast or not. The animals that speak… The image of a white-headed eagle and white wolf with red eyes invaded Davos' simple mind.

All this is too much for me. I have to see reason and I do not.

The wildling leader laughed loud and well. "Har! Wun Wun is happy to leave you, kneelers, and never come back. As am I, Tormund Giantsbane. I swear it on me member."

The rude words lacked conviction and Davos wondered why Tormund was truly leaving. The man seemed clever and brave.

"Go then," Lord Marsh said flatly, "why waste your precious time and ours?" Stannis looked through the wildlings, not seeing them. The long line of people slowly unfolded on their way out. Three thousand men or more, women, children, beasts... They had rattling bone carriages, and carved white masks. One man walked next to a giant boar. When the last among them left, the king sought his Hand's opinion. "What say you, Davos? If Rhaegar yet lives, which one of us has more rights to the Iron Throne? He, merely because he did not die, or I, whose brother waged a war to win it and won?"

"The one that has dragons," Davos answered honestly as always. "For only he shall be able to protect the kingdoms from what is out there." He gesticulated north. "It will take more than fire from one blade, no matter how strong, to defeat what is coming. I have seen it."

"To protect the kingdoms is surely the most sacred duty of the king," Stannis said, pensieve.

"But Azor Ahai reborn may yet win the dragons, just like King Robert won the Iron Throne," Melisandre murmured. "The fires show great changes in which many will perish, starting with the fleet of the self-styled King Rhaegar and his sister who calls herself Mother of Dragons. Their ships have reached the shivering sea yet they have never arrived to Eastwatch, and they should have done so by now. They are all lost."

And you must be happy about it, Davos thought, saying a prayer to the Smith to guard the unknown ships. One sailor has to wish well to another.

"Much more will be lost in the coming days," The red woman sounded reasonable as a septon, making Davos' skin crawl. "But the Lord of Light will guide your steps as He did in Winterfell, Your Grace. You will prevail."

"Lightbringer is still warm, but its glow is fading again," Stannis admitted. "It has to be tempered one more time. Where shall I find another lake? I have been praying and fasting for fifty days now, on my return to Castle Black."

"I fear it is not water that shall help the hero now," Melisandre said with false sadness, "Great deeds require hard choices. The loyal Freys have sent you a prisoner, in sign of fealty."

Stannis scowled. A hard choice indeed, Davos thought, certain that His Grace's ideas of justice would have included the execution of half a dozen Freys for what they did at the Red Wedding,
although Robb Stark was no friend of his. But the Twins had strategic importance the king could not afford to lose if he wanted to assert his claim.

"A lioness, Your Grace," the R'hllor priestess's voice was a surreptitious whisper, sorrowful and cruel as the look in the eyes of the wildling princess who had just left the Wall. "The red heart of the lion is needed to continue forging the sword…"

Then, Davos remembered one more time the tale of Salladhor Saan, and his blood froze in one place as it had never done before, when the Others were behind him in the woods. *The hero worked in the temple for fifty days. And after that time he hunted a lion..."

"No, Your Grace," he tried to say, "that was a real lion, an animal."

It was too late. The serpent of wildlings had already been swallowed by the haunted forest before the Wall, and four black brothers led forward a short, thickset woman with mops of once golden and now greying hair over a once fair forehead. She had the largest bosom Davos had ever seen.

"A true lioness, Your Grace," Lady Melisandre observed, "there are few left alive of that line now, that have not been contaminated by the blood of the dragons..."

Stannis hesitated, but only for the moment. Davos wished he had been with him in Winterfell to see what had turned him into a religious man. Perhaps it was best not to know.

"Lady Genna Lannister," the king said. *So he knows her,* Davos thought, hoping, hoping, hoping…

"Lord Stannis Baratheon," the lady replied curtly after a short moment. "It has been a very long time since I've last seen you in court. Where am I?" The Wall was behind her back and she couldn't see it.

"I do not do this lightly," Stannis confessed to the lady, who showed no understanding on her features. She stared at the dark clouds in the sky as though trying to understand where she was, clinking with the manacles she was made to wear. She wore a simple crimson gown of thick wool.

"Forgive me, my lord," she said, "for not being presentable. My husband's cousins, the Freys, dressed me up in a winter gown belonging to one of their just married sisters, Fat Walda she is called. It had been pink but the maids dyed it crimson to have a more Lannister colour."

"Forgive me, my lady," Stannis told her, "but the life of the many has to come before the life of only one woman to a true king."

The lady still showed no understanding when Stannis slowly drew forth Lightbringer once more, and thrust it swiftly through her unknowing heart. Large bosom did not make his aim any less true. She didn't even have time to cry out before she died.

Davos' heart was in his throat. *I could have saved her and I failed. I should have saved her. A meaningless death...*

*If an onion needed to be sliced to forge Lightbringer, would the task be accomplished by slicing me? I'm not onion, only the Onion Knight...*

Through eyes clouded with tears he saw the winter lady and her wildling. The couple showed no reaction, only the hold of the lady on her man might have hardened. *I have to talk to these two about young Rickon. They have no more love for this than I do. Wait. What was the next way to temper the accursed blade?*
Davos' heart nearly stopped beating when he spotted Selyse's beatifically ugly, equally unknowing face, full of trust in her husband's infallibility, if not love for him. No one had ever loved Stannis. Davos often asked himself if the man would have been different if someone did. Azor Ahai had a wife too. Her name was Nissa Nissa. The cry of ecstasy and anguish of Nissa Nissa pierced the sky and reached the moon...

There was no moon visible in the sky above the Wall. Only the sharp winter wind started to howl, announcing the imminent arrival of the night.

"No!" Davos cried out with outrage, and realised his mistake too late. The wind carried his shout of rebellion to Lord Marsh, standing behind the dead Lady Lannister with four of his men.

"Are you questioning my decisions, Lord Hand?" Stannis asked, all expression of friendship and closeness to Davos gone from his royal person.

"Never, Your Grace," Davos answered truly, wondering if Lady Melisandre had already told his king about the final way to temper the Red Sword of Heroes. He thought that she did not but had no doubt she would do so at the most opportune moment.

"Then what did you want to tell His Grace?" Queen Selyse demanded explanations. Lady Melisandre studied the imprudent smuggler with amused red eyes, as if she enjoyed his confusion.

Davos scratched his empty neck and wiped his eyes. No luck any more, not for me. He breathed in, wishing to appease his heart. You didn't know. You couldn't have known. You will do better next time. He stared at Selyse with a knowing look, pitying the ugly, mean woman for the first time in his life.

"Your Grace," he told Stannis with calm, avoiding to look at the crimson-clad corpse of a woman in knee-deep snow. "My pardons. I was lost in thoughts of a different nature while awaiting your prudent decision in the matter before us."

"Do share them with us," Stannis said, unsatisfied. "Or be silent forever." The blood of Lady Genna sank into the blade which was heating up in his hands. Unnatural fire burned in his eyes.

"Your Grace, I feared for the fate of honourable Lord Bowen Marsh, who has shown us so much kindness and hospitality today."

The heathen look in Stannis' eyes turned to more common incomprehension.

"I assume he may have to tell Rhaegar Targaryen in person what had befallen his trueborn son and heir. You all know him as Jon Snow..." Davos took good care to pronounce the young man's name very, very slowly. I realised I was so excited waiting for your return, Your Grace, that I failed to inform Lord Marsh without hesitation how I had the honour of meeting Lord Snow weeks ago. He is alive and well behind the Wall. I am sure that this news will gladden the lord commander's heart. He will be able to set the burden of command aside when Lord Snow returns..."

"Great tidings, to be sure..." Lord Marsh stuttered, siderated.

"Indeed, lord commander," Stannis said, satisfied with the explanation and uninterested in Jon Snow or Rhaegar Targaryen for the time being. "Lord Snow informed me many times that the Night's Watch served no king. You are free as he was to make any and all decisions pertaining to your order." Done with the day, the king sheathed the burning sword and walked back to the Wall, which turned into a grey looming shadow under the first stars. The blocks of ice stopped weeping, saving their tears for another occasion. Selyse followed Stannis, but Melisandre did not. Davos looked at her...
with curiosity.

The expression of raw surprise on the red woman's face was almost worth the agony in Davos' soul, soothing the pain over the death of another woman, who had most certainly not deserved it.

"I told you so, Leathers," the boy, Satin, beamed at another, weather-worn brother of the Night's Watch, as soon as Stannis was no longer in sight. "I told you that he must have seen Jon. Lord Hand smells of direwolf. And if that weren't enough, he wears the headscarf Jon used to have. It is one of ours just the same, black wool, but I was Jon's steward and I still know every fold of his garments."

*We must have exchanged it by chance during travel*, Davos thought. He had worn Pyke's scarf since the ironborn found himself a fur headdress in Hardhome, and he had noticed Jon wearing the same… Only with much more hair to cover. A thought came unbidden, silly and memorable; Daenerys and Jon matched each other hair for hair, one raven for one silver-coloured... Black on white.

*Would Jon Snow choose to kill his wife to save the world from ruin?*

Davos the smuggler most certainly would not. His steadfast decision about that had not changed since Salladhor Saan first told him how Lightbringer was made. The world would be doomed if he had to make that choice. *It is perhaps well that the black brothers do not marry... Lord Snow has no wife.*

*Thank the gods I'm not king*, Davos thought as he followed Stannis. *I do not have to make hard choices.* Relief swept over him.

"We should send a message with Mormont's raven, to Eastwatch," the man called Leathers told Satin behind Davos' back, "to, what's his name, Grenn?"

"Not to Grenn, better to Pyp," Satin objected. "Grenn can't read."

The vivacious conversation between friends made Davos realise something very important. *Merciful Mother above!*

In the tale of the forging of Lightbringer, Azor Ahai did not have a daughter.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented, followed, bookmarked or left a kudos on this story. I am overwhelmed by the amount and the diversity of attention you are giving to this story on AO3. Thank you for motivating me to continue. What do you think of Davos?

Next up: Tyrion
Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to my beta DrHolland for valuable feedback and comments on this chapter.

Warning for Tyrion remembering what he did to Tysha in case you don't want to read about this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tyrion

On a bright sunny morning, Tyrion Lannister and Ser Jorah Mormont left Meereen with the four from Asshai and a maester from the Citadel.

Never to return, Tyrion thought with a morbid fascination he normally reserved only for the dragons.

Although the sun had barely shown its fiery face in the east, the air was warmer here in autumn than on any day in Westeros, even in sunny Dorne. Winter was but a tale from distant lands, far away from the slow-flowing, brown Skahazadhan.

Yet in the wee hours of the night before departure, the winter's breath had haunted Tyrion in his sleep, filling the very last moments he had spent in the Great Pyramid of Meereen with sweating and restlessness. In his dream, a lonely man roamed in the barren, frozen wasteland. Bereft of direction, the man screamed, unable to find his way, as the wind howled, and howled and howled. The man… or is it a boy?

Tyrion could not see the man's face, but he had once seen that lost, white land from high above, and didn't know any better than to piss on it. What else was a twisted little monkey demon to do on top of the Wall? When he woke, he urinated from the pyramid to honour that unique memory, before hurrying to meet up with his new shadowy bosom friends on the plaza below.

There were two Asshai women and two men, but only Quaithe spoke to Tyrion. Effectively, now that he thought about it, only Quaithe ever spoke. He wondered if the three others had a voice and what it sounded like, as he had once wondered if his quiet squire, Podrick Payne, had a tongue.

The maester introduced himself as Archmaester Marwyn. Just like the Asshai embassy, he arrived to Meereen too late to find Daenerys. He was short and square, but nonetheless considerably taller than Tyrion. He held the reins of his horse in huge hands and urged the animal forward with singular determination of the man who, by his own saying, did not believe in half measures.

"Queen Daenerys has to be taught and helped," he proclaimed many times that day since they rode off. The Asshai'i nodded in solemn approval, as did Ser Jorah, eager to earn his queen's forgiveness, and, if he could, her love.

He'd go to the end of the world for her. Pity she doesn't seem to be the forgiving type, Tyrion thought. He asked himself over and over again how their going east could help the queen at all, much less teach her anything she might need to know.
Daenerys has gone west. The time to influence her is over.

Marwyn could have worn a mask of polished wood as well where Tyrion was concerned. His nose looked as if it had been broken many times and was therefore not much prettier than the little remnant of Tyrion’s nose. Yet the learned archmaester still appeared to be as taciturn and dismissive of the dwarf in his company as the three mute shadowbinders who ignored Tyrion whenever he attempted to launch a conversation.

The queer notion of what the masked people were did not sit easy with the Lannister imp. He wondered what else a shadowbinder could do except hide his or her face. Quaithe's mask was red, and the other three black, green and blue. All dark colours. Why? There were not many volumes treating the subject matter before his eyes, not even in the well-provisioned library of Casterly Rock.

The Asshai'i seemed willing to remain mysterious as their city, or they simply lived too far away. Very few Westerosi travelled there and back again. And among those who did, the number of literate ones who conveyed their discoveries to the parchment for future memory was extremely small. The Ironborn sailed there as they sailed anywhere else, but their contempt for written word was widely known, and no account ever came from their bravely insane explorations. Not even a song.

Tyrion regretted not reading as much about Asshai as he had read about dragons.

There are too many interesting books and only one lifetime to read them all.

One twisted little monkey demon lifetime...

Once you betrayed your entire family, Tyrion found it was easier to commit other, smaller treasons or adopt a peculiar understanding of honour which fostered one’s own goals. And his goal was to find where whores went, which meant that he was going to roam around the world until the Stranger finally took him. There was little else he could do.

Daenerys will have my head for this if I ever see her again and she will have the right of it. My brother murdered her father and yet she entrusted me to be her loyal councillor.

Tyrion inhaled the dry, dusty air of the bright sunny day enveloping his stunted body like a cocoon of warmth, helping him to set aside his troubles, as well as his haunting dream of winter.

After only a few hours ride, they arrived at the shy beginnings of the grassy plains of the Dothraki Sea behind Meereen. We're going too fast. How is this possible? He clutched tightly the reins of his mount, promised to him by Quaithe when she had talked him into leaving. And what marvellous steed it was! All of his new travelling companions rode spirited and fast Dothraki horses. All except Tyrion the Imp, an abomination by the old gods and the new…

The Asshai'i gave him a striped zorse.

A humiliation, if there ever was one. Or maybe a practical solution - the zorse in question was smaller than Dothraki horses. Moreover, it was smaller than some ponies, but, thankfully, larger than a pig or a dog, so at least the circumstance didn't make Tyrion feel as if he were part of Penny's grotesque mummer act again, be it on a fair or at the court of some merciful tyrant.

Some of his father's cruelest mercenaries, called the Brave Companions or, more suitably, Bloody Mummers, depending on who did the talking, rode zorses, but those were at least of normal, not dwarf size. The stupid thought shamed him. What I let my father do with Tysha... What I did to Tysha... It was more than worthy of the Bloody Mummers.

And I was a dwarf before I was anything else.
The little zorse had black and white stripes and a shiny, snow-white mane. He was the foulest-tempered beast Tyrion had ever seen. He trotted swiftly and enthusiastically, seeking bushes, bumps, holes and ponds of water and mud, rather than smooth pathways, as if he enjoyed to jump over obstacles and stick his curious hooves in every crevice on the ground. His new rider was oftentimes thrown off his back. With every fall, Tyrion sorely missed the special saddle and a real horse he enjoyed as the little monstrous lordling of Casterly Rock.

The animal whinnied pitifully every time Tyrion hit the ground, yet did nothing to adjust his pace. Reins seemed to have no effect on it. They were only a grip Tyrion could hold onto if he wished to stay in saddle. Or try to stay up, in any case. After a few hours ride, he called the zorse Arrow, flying mindlessly to a destination set by a skilled, devious archer. Tyrion didn't know who held the bow that loosened the arrow except that it was not him. He seethed inwardly, but the choice was zorse or waddle on stunted feet so he… zordsed… to wherever he was going, with hidden hope that the whores might have gone to that same place.

Arrow did not lack speed at any rate. Despite all the discomfort he suffered on his striped back, Tyrion advanced as fast as any of the horse riders. "The road to Asshai by the Shadow…” He rolled the syllables of the foreign name on his tongue, letting the s-es hiss and hum ominously, as water boiling over the rim of a large kettle.

Tyrion had always believed that the way to the mysterious city lay across the water, and not on any land.

"And in the end it does," Quaithe said from behind, seated astride a large black horse with utmost dignity. "But not yet. First we ride."

Tyrion frowned. "Can you read all my thoughts?"

"Only those which are written plain on your deformed face," she measured him from tip to toe, a short gesture, halting her eyes at the remaining portion of his nose. "For those who know how to read," she added as a dispassionate afterthought. Less than half of a nose for less than half of a man, Tyrion thought bitterly. A real man would know better. Regrets always made him feel even smaller than usual.

The allusion to his deformities never stopped bothering him entirely, for as much as he knew it to be the simple truth. He could almost taste the smirk of supremacy Quaithe must have been wearing behind lacquered wood. For some reason it reminded him of the Hound and his crude pleasantries behind his snarling dog’s helm. He always repaid the big man's insolence by calling him ugly mongrel, Joffrey's cur and worse, thoroughly enjoying how Sandor Clegane hated and despised him in return.

The unquestionable arrogance of the masked crone irked Tyrion tremendously because he did not know how to respond properly in order to wound her. But I will discover it, my dear lady, he thought, just give me some time. I'll know if it's half a face missing you are so carefully hiding or if you are merely old and ugly as your voice suggests you might be.

The urge to remove Quaithe's mask was very strong from time to time. Yet he wisely managed to keep his hands to himself, greatly helped in that prudent decision by the fact that she was quite a bit taller. He could not reach her face unless she knelt for him.

After only a few more nasty falls from Arrow's back, the arrival of the evening graciously relieved Tyrion from further misery. When they stopped to make camp, the shadowbinders met on a clearing
facing the sunset, all four of them. Recklessly, they waved their cloaked arms in the air, welcoming the grey dusk. As they gestured upward, their feet danced, stomping on the ground. Their mouths hung open, but whatever it was they invoked or said, Tyrion could not hear it. Suddenly, it seemed to him that they were changing appearances during the odd ritual. The masks stayed the same, but the hooded men and women behind them grew taller or shorter, younger or older. Every change lasted only for a moment.

"Do you see what I see?" he motioned to Ser Jorah, pointing at one of the masked men. "He is bigger now."

"You are dreaming, Imp," Mormont said and yawned.

"It is magic, but the shape-shifting is only an illusion," Marwyn said studiously. "They are binding the shadows of the evening, weaving them into a spell to make us travel faster. You will see on the morrow."

Ser Jorah scowled, unconvinced.

Tyrion waited patiently for the little shady dance to end before approaching Quaithe. Unable as usual to keep his big mouth shut, he wondered if any harm would come to him from asking questions. Perhaps on the morrow he would wake as a frog, or worse, some ugly bug the others would squash before riding on. "What was this... gathering of yours?" he asked nevertheless.

"We contemplated the truth of all things," she instructed him as if he were a child unable to grasp her higher meaning.

"Which is?"

"To go west you must go east." She looked at him, expectantly.

*Always the same damnable saying.*

Tyrion had never met anyone so convinced of knowing the truth of all things, naturally, with the exception of his late lord father and himself.

"As you say," he muttered, defeated and aching in every pore of his body from unpleasant daily bouncing on and off the zorse.

Tired and unsatisfied, he decided not to waste valuable resting time in pointless talk. He left Quaithe, and trod away to find a place to sleep, without uttering another word.

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On the next day, the archmaester's knowledge about weaving spells became easier to believe. The landscape around them changed rapidly from one day to another, much, much faster than it should have been possible with their riding speed, according to the maps of Essos Tyrion remembered.

The tall grass was gone. They woke in the red-coloured desert. After another long day of rough travel in *suffocating* heat, Tyrion caught himself wishing to remember his winter dream from the pyramid, clinging to the faint memory of ungodly cold as something precious. *What sort of beast is man? One who always yearns for exactly the opposite of what he has in hands...*

When the evening drew closer on that second day of travel, and with it the much needed zorsing halt for Tyrion, the red, dusty soil slowly turned more solid and grey. Grass grew here and there, first yellow, than green again, in short, scattered patches between the low, irregular rocks. Soon they
approached a maze of stony passes, some wider and some narrower, running up and down the shoulders of the first hills belonging to a high mountain range looming in front.

*These must be the Bone Mountains, separating the legendary lands of Yi Ti from the rest of the continent,* Tyrion realised, forgetting the growing collection of bruises inflicted by reckless attitude of his sweet striped friend. His tiny, adventure-thirsty heart beat faster from excitement. For a second, he almost forgot to ask himself where the whores went.

"The hero came down from these mountains," Archmaester Marwyn nearly sang in admiration, "Azor Ahai rode west after saving the world. Men and women bowed to his wisdom and virtue. They adored him in every city and in every village he visited, in the king's court and in the crofter's house! Queen Daenerys will follow in his steps, born amidst smoke and salt… If only she had gone east first! But we will pass beneath the shadow in her stead and help her touch the light after her battle against the darkness unstoppable..."

The eyes of the otherwise shrewd, square man shone with belief in higher causes.

Tyrion laughed madly at the enormity of the nonsense he was presented with. The uncontrollable shaking of his belly may have set Arrow into gallop, or maybe it was just the latest attack of the zorse's fierce temper, who knew. Be as it may, Tyrion was cruelly jerked from the saddle and, briefly, he was flying. He wanted to grab the reins, but his hands only grasped fresh, mountain air. Soon he landed on his butt and back in a most painful way. His ribcage cracked. The pain was excruciating. He yearned for the milk of the poppy and the oblivion it brought for the first time in his life. *Cersei is not here to have me murdered if I pass out for a little while...*

Ser Jorah and the shadowbinders did not even stop riding to give him a hand, and Marwyn only had eyes for his magic mountains; heaps of dead stones where no hero now walked. *The bones of the dead race of giants,* an absurd reading memory squeezed itself forward through all the pain in Tyrion's mind. A squirrel gave him a curious look from a modest-sized tree to the right of where his unassisted flight took him; one of the first large specimens of plant life they encountered after the end of the desert.

All of a sudden, Tyrion was overcome with righteous rage. He had had enough of everyone's blind faith; Ser Jorah's into winning back Daenerys' trust, Marwyn's into teaching and helping the queen, the Asshai'i's into going east… Yes, he was a fool to seek where the whores went, but they, they were bigger fools and he was going to show them that.

Tyrion Lannister drew himself to his full height, with the help of the meagre tree trunk next to him. He ignored the throbbing in his chest and yelled as only an angry, humiliated dwarf could.

"The dragons… the dragons, my friends! You all think you know something about the dragons, don't you?"

The words soon earned him the undivided attention of all four Asshai'i *and* Archmaester Marwyn. Ser Jorah lifted a bushy eyebrow. *Not bad for a beginning.*

Tyrion had more brains than most other men, in his own immodest opinion of himself. Possessed by desire to earn some *respect* after two days of utter denial of it, he spilled his wits in front of everyone. As always, it was the only thing he had.

"Well, I know some things about the dragons too. They decidedly do *not* originate in the Shadow Lands beyond Asshai. Did any of you know that for certain? No? I didn't think so!* He greatly enjoyed the puzzled look on Marwyn's face and wished he could see under the shadowbinders' masks to judge their reaction. Four pairs of shiny eyes studied him mutely and carefully, through the
holes in lacquered wood. He felt naked under their gaze.

Happier for the attention, he continued, "You can have all the dragon eggs you want in Asshai. I don't care if you stole them or called them into existence by magic, though the former is most likely. But the dragons truly are creatures of Valyria. *The Signs and Portents* offer clear clues about that. You've never seen the book? I wouldn't expect you to because it was reputedly lost... And you, archmaester," he fixated Marwyn with his mismatched eyes, "you boasted finding *three* pages out of it in a work of your own, *The Book of Lost Books*, but trust me, there is nothing the Lannister gold can't buy!" Tyrion croaked and giggled nervously.

"I owned a copy of *The Signs and Portents* and I can tell you it is the best preserved and most authentic source concerning the origin of dragons and many other matters! What can I say? My father used to be generous in paying for the readings of his monstrous son, in great fear that I'd marry a whore again if I had nothing better to fill my hours with, I reckon..."

His voice broke down, and his thoughts trailed mournfully to wherever whores went. His malformed chest contracted and heaved, but not from bodily pain. Tyrion gulped for air to prevent himself from crying. Emptied of rage, he glanced at his companions.

All stared at him with awe now. Even Ser Jorah finally understood that he was saying something important. The knight dismounted and led his horse back to where Tyrion had been yelling and clinging to the tree for balance.

"You are injured," Mormont said, "you should lay down."

Rest was far from Tyrion's mind for he was not yet done lecturing them. He continued in an assured, scholarly voice, eager to make a lasting impression.

"And there are at least *five* equally authentic historic accounts about your Azor Ahai. He has five different names in different civilisations. He can be called Hyrkoon the Hero, Azor Ahai, Yin Tar, Neferion or Eldric Shadowchaser. Does any of it sound familiar? And every single one of these heroes saved the world from darkness in many different ways... In Asshai you prefer the story where the poor hero had to kill his beloved wife in order to win the day. But this is not the only version of what he did, not by far!

"I personally much prefer the saviour to be the valiant woman with monkey's tail, whose brave deeds brought the sun back to the earth, after it had hidden its golden face from the world for a lifetime. I read about her in the tales from Yi Ti if I still remember correctly and forgot her name. What can I say, my deluded friends, *women* have always caught my interest..."

*Until lately*, he thought darkly and finished what he wanted to say.

"So yes, I say, I do agree with all of you; Daenerys Stormborn may be the last hero of our time for she has brought *dragons* back to the world. But what she should do or the path she should take is far from clear! And I have yet to hear a solid, intelligible argument as to why she or anyone should go east to go west.. Other than religious gibberish..."

He pointed an accusatory finger at Quaithe. "You should have just left me in Meereen," he told her. "There has been no need to give hope to a dwarf who will never find what he truly seeks, though he may travel to the confines of the world."

"And what is it you seek, if I may ask?" Quaithe inquired with strange mixture of curiosity and indifference.
"Forgiveness," he muttered through his teeth and thought that she shrank away and shrivelled as a blossom ruined by frost. Shadowbinders were cowed by emotions, it seemed. Or perhaps Quaithe's distress was just an error of his imperfect vision because the damn woman continued speaking in a victorious tone, her voice a rasp of whetstone on bare steel.

"You do see now," the crone said to her masked friends and Marwyn, "that I was right to take Tyrion on our journey. Though it took the hardships of travel for him to share his thoughts freely with us."

Tyrion couldn't believe his ears. So you humiliated me to provoke me into talking. Clever. Good that I didn't tell you more about dragons. He had purposefully avoided even to think about the more rare parts of dragonlore he'd been studying in case the Asshai'i could truly read his thoughts. He suspected Quaithe would get along wonderfully with Varys if they ever met by chance.

Tyrion cleared his throat which ached from having spoken too much without a sip of water after riding through the desert. "You could have just, I don't know, asked about my views concerning dragons and Azor Ahai if they are of any interest to you."

"Oh, they most assuredly are," Quaithe was all love and devotion. "And I look forward to continuing this discussion after you rest. But you must agree that your dramatic performance went a long way to give credit to your arguments in the eyes of my faithful companions who didn't share my views when I chose you as the envoy of the queen."

"We can talk later if you wish," he deferred once more to Quaithe's judgement, feeling strangely deflated, with the advantage that when his shoulders slumped, his chest hurt less. I might be lucky after all. He felt his ribs with his fingers and found them painful to touch but hopefully not broken. The bottom of his spine hurt like seven hells, but if he had damaged that, he wouldn't be able to walk, and he was standing.

The zorse neighed cheerfully. He always did that before Tyrion would climb back into saddle.

"No, thank you," Tyrion said as a soul of courtesy. Sansa would approve if she could see me. "I'll walk a bit now. Very slowly."

They made camp around the tree with the squirrel, at the beginning of the largest of the cragged paths leading into the Bone Mountains. The shadowbinders did not dance again that evening, so Tyrion fully expected to wake at the same place when Marwyn came to speak to him. "Not even Archmaester Pycelle would know as much about the last hero. Why haven't you forged a chain?"

"My father would never allow it so it was not a serious consideration for me." Liar! Lord Tywin thundered in his head. You wanted Casterly Rock! Seeing Marwyn and his fervent beliefs, maybe not forging a chain was one of the sensible decisions Tyrion made.

"My father would never allow it so it was not a serious consideration for me." Liar! Lord Tywin thundered in his head. You wanted Casterly Rock!

Thank you, father. Seeing Marwyn and his fervent beliefs, maybe not forging a chain was one of the sensible decisions Tyrion made.

"Do you know how the last dragons died?"

You allude in your Book of Lost Books that the archmaesters of the Citadel had them killed. You call your colleagues, the archmaesters, the grey sheep. But for all I know you may be a murderous grey sheep just the same.

"There are several theories about that," Tyrion said tiredly, taking a more prudent stance, which was probably also closer to reality, rather than offending Marwyn with his suspicions. "But no one knows the whole truth."
"I might share a very good explanation with you if you help me and the cause of the Queen Daenerys."

"Helping the queen is why I went on this errand," Tyrion reminded him, not trusting him in the least. "I was her Hand of sorts in Meereen."

"Of course," the archmaester said cautiously. "Let us discuss how we can help each other tomorrow on the way."

*Very well, archmaester. Stay sharp and keep your misgivings toward me. It fits you better than the religious zeal.*

"What was that all about?" Ser Jorah came to ask nonchalantly when Marwyn left. *You want me to tell you something to impress your queen, yet you would probably find the texts I spoke of too difficult to interpret. Not even I could understand fully the poetic language of the maiden daughter of Aenar Targaryen... Daenys... A name similar to Daenerys.*

*I'm so sorry, my friend. I can't help you as I can't help myself.*

"Marwyn just wished me good night," Tyrion said. "I need wine," he sighed.

"As do I," Ser Jorah agreed and gave up on his effort for questioning. Tyrion was immensely grateful to be left in peace. *Perhaps being ignored was preferable to being questioned.*

There was not a drop of alcohol to be had since they left Meereen. Tyrion wished Bronn were here. *He would find wine.*

_Better not. Bronn wasn't my friend. He was just a ruthless sellsword I hired for coin._

Ser Jorah resented Tyrion, but he became more of a friend over time. The friend who was now gallantly snoring as Tyrion counted and recounted his bruised ribs. *All here and all in one piece. How splendid.*

Tyrion remembered how he almost succeeded to drink himself to death during his crossing of the narrow sea, just after he learned the truth about Tysha.

His cock had only been good for urinating ever since.

He could no longer attribute his condition to the inebriated state he was mostly in as a free dwarf on the run from Cersei, or to the famine and exhaustion of his body during the short period when he was enslaved.

The only fully non-deformed part of his anatomy apart from, maybe, his stomach, was now limp all the time. And Tyrion was as uninterested in women's charms as if he had been a eunuch, a catamite or an eleven year old. Truth be told, he didn't become interested in men's charms overnight either. He simply wasn't interested. Doubtlessly, it was all because of the question of where the whores went.

Tyrion doubted from the beginning that Quaithe could ever answer it. In his heart he knew her promise to be merely a ruse the Asshai'i used to get him on the road to their city, for whatever reason they had and he yet had to uncover. Deep under, he couldn't care less about what it was.

The whores did not go to Meereen. He had been there long enough to ascertain that much. So he should travel and search further, knowing he would never find Tysha.

_And if I did? You would never touch my face again and say you liked it, would you? You'd never_
sing to me again... And not because I have less than half of a nose now but because I raped you after all the guards did...

I loved a maid as fair as summer with sunlight in her hair...

I loved her and I ruined her.

Another thought haunted him. What if he did find Tysha by some miracle and she was an old, bitter woman, and if he had for her about as much affection as he had for Penny, the dwarf girl?

The lacquered mask filled his vision in the growing shadows of the twilight. Quaithe. Will everyone visit me this evening? The wood changed shapes, showed a skull with living, blazing eyes, flickered black, and then red again. For a time he thought it was the second masked woman or one of the two men calling on him before Quaithe spoke in her familiar, aged voice, a rasp of stone on metal.

"Forgiveness is a strange thing to look for beneath the shadow."

"It's even worse," he stuttered, his self-control and self-respect at the end, his guilt over what he did and terrible weakness of his heart on a rise, "I look for more than that."

"For what?" the night said back.

"Love."

A tear escaped his black eye.

"I dream of her loving me again. Of her being alive and loving the twisted little monkey demon who still managed to force himself on her as she lay motionless and unresisting…"

More tears trickled from his green eye.

"But she can't, you see. She can't! How could she?" Tyrion sobbed profusely, unashamed of his confession. "She can't ever forgive me, much less love me… My father and my brother lied to me that my sweet lady wife was a whore. But you see, even if she was one… and she wasn't… I know that now…" he wiped his eyes dry with thick, short fingers, devoid of rings he used to wear. "She was still my wife and I should have treated her with respect. Instead of letting my disappointment rule over me and treating her worse than the mindless guards, or my lord father."

"For some sins there can be no forgiveness," Tyrion said with dry finality, every inch a lord. "I fear this may be the only point in common between you and I, my lady of the shadows. We both seem to be looking for the impossible."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading.
Thank you to all who commented, left a kudos, bookmarked or followed this story.
All comments are welcome.
Next up - Sansa.
Sansa

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to TopShelfCrazy for beta work on this chapter. You are the best. And to Dr.Holland for encouraging me to post it after reading it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

She dreaded the next sharp twist of the kingsroad.

The landscape was already encircling a serpent of brown slosh and semi-frozen mud that the road had become. *We are not the first army on it in the past days,* she realised. *Not by far.*

The little girl of eleven had gotten to know every acre of these lands, in timid riding exercises expected from a lady of a great house, which only made young Sansa uneasy and sullied her gowns. She tried hard to make her skill passable, to please her parents, and exhaled with relief whenever she could return to her sewing and exchanging stories with Jeyne... Now she could ride much better, though she still did not love it, and her heart constricted in both expectation and fear.

She had wanted to go home for so long that now she was almost here she could not tell how she felt. She feared that her home had changed and become unrecognisable. *Just like myself.*

On an impulse, Sansa halted the wagon she had been driving more by talking to the horses than by holding the reins since the beginning of her return journey to the North from King's Landing.

She could not miss being among the first ones to see it!

*To see Winterfell...*

*The real one, and not just a toy castle made of snow by a coward girl who had nearly forgotten her name.*

Next to her rode her husband's squire, Podrick Payne. The lad stopped as well, confused by Sansa's brusque action he just witnessed. *You don't know me like this, do you?* In the past, Sansa had been impetuous and rude only toward her father and her irritable siblings, who could not understand how hard it was to be a lady, only to cry bitter tears when they were all gone. *And toward Sandor, later on, when he was hateful.*

"My lady?" Pod muttered. "Is everything alright?"

"May I borrow your horse?" she asked, remembering her courtesies.

Podrick dutifully ceded his mount to her, before taking Sansa's place on the wagon, without her having to ask for it.

*It would not do to let Father, Mother and Robb unattended.*

Their last remains were harboured in the wagon, waiting to reach their final resting place.
Sansa cantered forward on a chestnut courser, very similar to the one she had been riding on the day of the bread riot in King's Landing when her husband had saved her from certain death or worse.

The Hound might scowl or bark if he guessed the reasons for her choice of horse for his squire among those available. Yet remembering every little thing in their past that could be connected with their love, and how it came to be, had a special meaning for Sansa. She would not begrudge herself that secret pleasure.

She rode daintily and yet with great determination between the few shaggy Northmen freed from the Twins, past the loud sellswords of the Golden Company and tired lordlings from the south, until she arrived at the head of the column where her husband mutely followed the king and the queen.

Arya was obviously already there, grey eyes avidly looking forward, devouring the yards that still separated them from home. Yet she glanced occasionally over her shoulder, as though she were missing something. Or someone. And it was most definitely not Sansa, who just appeared in her field of vision. Her younger sister made that same odd, long face every time she saw Sansa since they were reunited in Greywater Watch, after Arya's scouting incursion into the Twins.

"I left when I was not yet five and ten," Aunt Lyanna said quietly to both of her nieces, acknowledging their presence with a stern nod. It was one of those days when she chose to be the queen rather than their aunt, and a Stark above all.

The oldest living Stark of Winterfell… Sansa had understood in Greywater Watch. The burden of duty is heavy on her yet she bears it lightly. Sansa knew what it was to carry the same claim on her shoulders and was relieved to shed it off for the time being, knowing there could always come a time when she would bear it again. The wolves are returning now, but who is to say for how long?

"I was eleven," Sansa remembered loudly, wishing to lighten her mood and that of her family by conversation.

"And I not yet ten," Arya added almost against her will, always wishful to appear older and braver, making Sansa smile. She would always smile when her little sister made an effort to talk.

Arya was oddly quiet since Greywater Watch. Not even when Sansa brought her a handful of bright-coloured water flowers from the marshes did her sister talk to her more than strictly necessary. Arya once picked those beautiful wild blossoms for Father in the Neck when they had all been riding south with King Robert, and Sansa was petulant and angry because Father loved the flowers and thanked Arya instead of scolding her for her inappropriate behaviour. On the last day in the castle of Howland Reed, Sansa and Arya had filled their laps with the lilies and the irises, remembering Father, not needing any words to know how they felt.

"I had never thought it would take this long to come back," Aunt Lyanna said with veiled emotion in her smooth, determined voice. "We should see it any moment now."

Sansa hid her surprise. In her memories, they still had to ride for an hour or so, before they would see the walls and the towers of Winterfell, rising tall on the clear blue and white horizon of winter.

King Rhaegar and Sandor kept very quiet as well, as if they had no place in the conversation of the ladies. Sansa offered her husband a private, sweet smile, and was glad to note the burned corner of his mouth twitched in response. His eyes bore into her as was his wont, leaving a trail of non-existent warmth on her cloaked back. It was both reassuring and unnerving, causing sensations improper for daytime and the company they kept. When was it when you scared me so, my love? She couldn't remember clearly. A lifetime ago…
Their time together was so short; weeks, months, maybe, and most of it spent on this or that road. Sansa heard that passion melted over time. **Will you stop looking at me like that one day?** She hoped he would not.

The young woman returning to Winterfell was not the same, innocent Sansa who left. Yet the kind-hearted Sansa endured on the inside, and maybe, maybe, it was that Sansa who was able to survive it all; the beatings, the humiliations, the forced first marriage and all latter proposals of marriage alliances, each one worse than the other. She hoped that the beauty-seeking and story-weaving Sansa might survive winter as well. **But not alone, please, gods be good, not alone.** There would be no beauty left in the world if she was to be the last living member of her family in truth. **You can only lose all your family once and live to tell the tale.** Or so she hoped.

The scouts chose that moment to return. Mance, and Gendry.

Beyond Winterfell, the kingsroad continued north, all the way to the Castle Black and the Wall.

"The garrison in the castle is not very big, according to rumours, but all gates are rebuilt, closed and barred. The banner is the same as at the Twins," Gendry spoke first. "A huge fiery heart. With the small direwolf of Stark flying under it, followed by a giant in chains, a mermaid, another banner, yellow, too pale to see for what it is, and the twin towers of the Freys," he added darkly.

"Merman," Aunt Lyanna corrected him. "So there are Umber and Manderly forces in the castle, at least. Good. And the people?" she asked.

"Many and more as you predicted," Mance smiled ruefully. "It would seem that the winter has attracted to Winterfell every living soul in the North who had the means to travel here. Even a few who didn't."

"Very well," the queen almost managed an ice-cold smile. "And the road?"

"Here the news I bring are grim, I fear," Mance frowned, "I crept all the way north beyond the castle, as far as I could in a day. The road to Castle Black is closed. Heavy snow and ice lies on it. It can't be travelled on safely. I might be able to lead a smaller party of horsemen than originally intended north and west through the wolfswood, until the mountain paths leading to the Shadow Tower."

"Then it is here where we part, I hope only for a while, Mance Rayder," the king said, who was silent until that moment.

"Aegon!" Rhaegar called his stepson forth in an iron voice, which could be used both for singing and for commanding men. "Assemble the horse of the Golden Company. Call for more among the lordlings and hedge knights, and see who comes forth as adventurous enough to ride willingly through the mountains. Take those you trust, five hundred if you can, and hope it is enough. The time we have is almost at an end. Our presence should be known on the Wall. The main part of foot will stay and guard Winterfell, they were fortunate to make it to here."

The foot of the army were unbloodied peasants, but also the Unsullied; the terrible, disciplined eunuch soldiers Daenerys had brought from across the sea.

"The dead?" Aegon asked briefly.

"Take them too," Rhaegar approved. "Watch Euron closely. He is not to be trusted."

"I will. And so will Jeyne."
"Shouldn't the lady stay?" the king dared ask, a vain endeavour of politeness and worry for the supposedly weak, Sansa knew.

"Why? Your Grace… Father. There's nothing on the other side of the Wall she had not seen already."

No one had an argument to offer against that, seeing as Jeyne had been a living corpse herself. She didn't fear the wights nor their masters.

The cavalry was fast to assemble and even faster ready to go. Aegon moved to the rear of the column with his new command. They would continue north when the main body of the army turned to the East Gate of Winterfell…

Mance Rayder stayed in front for a while, and tentatively addressed the queen, seeking her opinion in a personal matter.

"My cloak," he said, "I vowed to bury it in Winterfell once I brought help to my people from the south."

Aunt Lyanna patted affectionately the cloak of human skin covering his broad back, made of the six spearwives the Boltons tortured and killed. Mance finished his cloak using the skin of Lord Bolton and his bastard son in retribution for their crime.

"Understand it this way," Lyanna argued, "you are still to reach your people beyond the Wall with help so your calling is not yet done. I will be more than glad to have you as a guest in Winterfell in spring so that you can honour your sacred vow. And I would say it is only right that my honourable bannerman, Lord Bolton, and his natural son, do their part in the War of Winter which is upon us, wouldn't you say? Though not in the role they imagined, or desired…"

"The spearwives wouldn't mind defending their home, for a while, I suppose" Mance muttered, scratching his brown-grey head, "though I should like to lay them to rest in peace with the old gods before I die myself. It is what they deserved for their suffering."

Sansa flinched inwardly whenever war was mentioned. Her husband would be among the first ones to go. And since she hadn't been dead like Jeyne nor could she offer any real help in battle to justify following him, it meant she would stay behind and wait. Maybe if I pretended to be a camp follower… Not even that would work. The king had made it abundantly clear that he only wanted able-bodied and willing men when it came to fighting the Others… not the usual baggage train which included women of ill repute and servants.

Maybe if I were a boy… but then Sandor wouldn't like me. Maybe if I disguise myself as a boy… She sighed. That would never work for her. She suddenly envied Arya, much to her dislike. It was not ladylike at all, and it was wonderful to have her sister back. Sansa looked at Arya with hidden guilt, and fought the stupid impulse with all her heart.

Sansa's figure began turning womanly very early in her life. She would never fit in the boy's clothes Arya was now wearing with unmatched grace. Not that she looks like a boy in them, not in the least. Arya looked like a noble, beautiful girl in grey tunic and simple, clean breeches, but Sansa would appear exposed and indecent, just like she looked in those horrible, too small dresses Cersei had let her wear to humiliate the traitor’s daughter, or simply because she had at one moment forgotten that Sansa existed.

Sansa wondered how the king was going to ride forth to his war if the road was blocked. She listened for the black wings, but they must have been flapping so high up in the sky above them that
they could not be seen or heard. But the dragon is here. Sansa could feel the distant black presence in her mind, just like she felt Sandor's or that of the animals around her.

_Ever since Lady died but I was not the wiser for it until much later._

_I was not wiser for so many things until it was too late._

Yet she couldn’t speak with the dragon and rumours said that the king could. His men whispered that he consulted with his black, dreary companion every night, learning the secrets of life and death. The fanciful talk put both courage and fear in the hearts of soldiers following Rhaegar.

_He won't ride. He'll fly. And Sandor might fly with him._

_At least it is now only Mance and Aegon who are leaving…_

"Stay well," she told Mance, and she meant it, overwhelmed by the too familiar sadness of parting. If it wasn't for his songs, who knows how many husbands I would have had by now. _And not a single one who loved me._

"I have all intention to, Sansa," the singer always found his words with ease. "My heart aches to go home, to the lands behind the Shadow Tower destroyed as they may be. I wish my son to see them, while they still exist. I've lingered too long in the south! And I fear for what has become of those of my people Jon let into Castle Black."

"I shall go to Castle Black shortly and see to that," Rhaegar announced vehemently, "for I also wish to know what they have done to my son. Drogon hints at the grimness of his destiny of late and the dragons have a way of knowing things."

"Good," Mance said simply. "I will see you in Shadow Tower then. When you fly there."

"Singer," Sandor said, dismounting rapidly. He hit the wildling king roughly on his back, and Mance returned the gesture in that strange violent way men used to greet each other to show friendship and respect, unlike women who mostly embraced.

"Watch yourself and watch after your boy," the Hound said. "He's a strong lad."

Sansa’s heart soared. _He loves children._ It had proven impossible to coerce any statement from Sandor by any means Sansa could think of, regarding if he wanted children as much as she did. Or only a little, for a start. _But if he is fond of Mance Rayder's son how could he not love a child of his own?_

When Mance left, those few Northmen within the army, freed from the Twins, as well as Lord Glover and Lady Mormont who had sat imprisoned for their own good in Greywater Watch, cornered the king and the queen.

"How are we to take the castle, Your Grace?" Lord Umber bellowed. It was uncertain from his passionate manner of speaking whether he addressed the king, the queen or both, nor if in his mind he saw the King and Queen of the Seven Kingdoms or rather the Queen in the North and her king consort. "Let me lead the vanguard and storm the walls! Let the enemy burn!"

Other military theories followed, one wilder than the other in Sansa's modest opinion, croaked in incessant chatter of deafening northern voices. _To listen to them, they are all bolder than men were in the Age of Heroes…_ Sansa absented herself from the cacophony, withdrawing into the pleasant enclosure of her mind.
She remembered Sandor's confessions in Greywater Watch, whispered in the dark of the night on their pillow, after he returned to her from unexpected battle with King Rhaegar, bleeding from his poor, mangled cheek. Between touches and caresses he told her that the king was loath to take any castle by force and by burning, ever again, for he had been forced to unleash Drogon and burn the bridge and the Water Tower above it full of people at the Twins.

The king's noble, pale face was whiter than a weirwood now, giving credit to Sandor's words, but it was the queen who spoke.

"Lord Umber," she said, "Be patient. Assemble all the Northmen behind me, and do not fly your own banner. Not yet." And to Arya she said, "Where is your wolf?"

Arya only had to close her eyes and Nymeria's grey fur showed up, not far away on the side of the road. She preferred walking on the maidenly white snow to brown, horrendous mud, and Sansa could not blame her. *A lady direwolf has to mind where she sets her paws.*

Rhaegar turned his horse back. Impassive, Sandor followed. *It is not fair, my love,* Sansa thought, *you should ride by my side.* However, the king seemed decided to ride behind his wife this once, and Sansa would let Sandor do his duty as a sworn shield should. *Better that than killing people because you find it sweet.*

"Should my father see this…" Rhaegar chuckled and freed a folded standard out of his elaborate saddle, enlarged to contain safely the great, glimmering horn of dragonlords. "I do have some hope he'll be turning in his grave," he said very seriously. "But I myself am honoured to bear my wife's standard for a while. I find it not less noble than my own."

The statement made Lady Mormont grunt in approval and brought an incredulous stare to Lord Glover's manly face. *Because it is unheard of, isn't it, my lord?* Sansa thought bitterly, delving in her memories of being beaten on Joffrey's command for doing nothing at all, and of King Robert slapping Queen Cersei when her complaining displeased him. *Imagine only, the king who loves and respects his wife, and who never hits his queen, isn't that something that exists only in the songs?*

Peacefully, the king unfurled the great banner, *the direwolf of Stark on a white field, newly embroidered,* Sansa immediately noticed. She had not made the stitches, so there was only one person who could have done it on the road…

*So Aunt Lyanna can ride, and fight, like Arya, dress beautifully, and even sew at need.* Sansa felt terribly inadequate in comparison. She could not wield any weapon, though she could resist in her own way, with words, and omissions and ruses… She could spy on people and deceive them, and recognise the desires that moved them. And listen to wild animals… But none of it was needed in the open war against the ancient enemy. *The Others have no court, and they don't care for coin, lands and titles, or desires of the flesh. They just want to kill us all.*

The winter wind took the banner from king's hands and made it fly, unmistakable for what it was, even at great distance.

The three Stark women and a lonely direwolf went forth in front of the army. Lyanna and Arya were both wearing grey. *I will never look beautiful in our house colours as they do.*

Sansa had allowed herself a very dark blue gown and a matching cloak, after fretting over her travelling dresses for an hour. The Tully features she inherited on her face and in her hair required at least a small touch of colour or glitter in her attire to look pleasing.

In plain grey, Sansa risked looking tired or unhealthy, especially in the dim light of winter. There
was no proper sunshine to endow her auburn tresses with natural glow. It was different with her aunt and her sister. They looked sculpted in grey, dark hair, dark eyes, lips of darker red. Two grim pretty faces, one knowledgeable and softened by experience, and the other stern and unyielding from the stubbornness of youth.

Why are they letting me ride in front? I betrayed my father and I look a fish, not a wolf.

Yet whatever animal she was in truth beneath her skin, Winterfell was Sansa's home and she rode forward with her heart in her palm. The wind took her long, loose, auburn hair and twisted it as it did with her father's banner.

When the road turned, Sansa understood her aunt's meaning.

Stretching a good league before the walls of Winterfell, and completely obstructing the clear view to the castle, a new town was born.

Wintertown.

Sansa was born in spring of the long summer. She had never seen Wintertown in winter, never knew truly what it could become and what it meant in cold season for the people of the North… The houses were knitted in a dense city tissue. The new dwellers used the existing walls of the houses at the edge of the settlement to add a few more walls and build a solid place to stay of their own. Stones were mixed with brick and mud in every construction, and there were even some blocks of ice abused as building material.

Several families laboured on their future homes when the army arrived from the south, staring with awe at the newcomers. Smoke was coming from all chimneys, and despite great cold there were people in the streets and in the market square. Wrapped and bundled, they traded on wooden stalls, bones to make tools for furs, and furs for grain. Food was an expensive commodity and water the cheap one.

There is more than enough snow.

The army column had to narrow down considerably. Only two or three horsemen could pass abreast through the narrow main street of the settlement, cobbled with irregular stones and wood planks, with pieces useless for building, and yet useful as a pavement. The sides of this street were frozen and it was wise to keep the horses to the middle.

They were stopped every now and then in their passage through the settlement by curious people, or the old and the weak crossing the street. Murmurs were carried by the cold air.

"The direwolf of Stark!" they said, "The wolves have returned."

"Good King Stannis has brought the Stark boy from the south then!"

"This is no boy," others said, "these are ladies…"

Some whispered of the Tully looks of the late Lord Stark's children and pointed at Sansa who felt like a mummer's monkey or a caged bear all of a sudden; just another good on display on the market. But that was before they ran into a man who looked as old as Old Nan. He recognised Lyanna and swore he always knew she was alive.

When they passed him, her aunt whispered to Sansa, "More like than not he has never seen me and always thought me dead, but his fancy has not been killed by the old age and he imagined me to be, well, me."
Sansa laughed and felt more at ease when other people stared and pointed at her. To her relief no one averted their eyes from Sandor, not really, not as people used to do in King's Landing or at the Twins, even in the Greywater Watch.

A good look at the smallfolk revealed the reason for it. The number of maimed and infirm was as large as that of healthy people. Many wore marks of sickness, red splotchy stains and other deformities. It was a miracle how they all arrived to Winterfell to seek life no matter the condition their body was in. The ugliness of Sandor's scars did not stand out all that much in the sea of human misery, and Greatjon who rode close to him was almost as tall as Sansa's husband.

It took them two good hours to arrive at the gates. When they did, the gates that had been shut gaped open, the portcullis was up and the drawbridge lowered.

The large banner with the fiery heart lay forgotten in snow, fallen over what used to be the moat, and the little direwolf of Stark was risen higher on top of the battlements, well on top of the banners of the other northern houses. Two very ugly, tall men and an elegant woman clad in black stood at the drawbridge as a welcoming party. They were too curious to wait for us in the yard, as is custom.

On a clearing in front of the gates, a small group of weasel-faced knights and men-at-arms was chained apart, the banner of the Twins cut to shreds under their feet.

"My brothers were most diligent, it seems, to return the castle to the Starks," Jon Umber rejoiced as the face of the two ugly lords sank. They are not happy about seeing him alive, Sansa realised. Umber's son, Smalljon, was killed at the Twins, and if Greatjon had been killed as well, his brothers would have been his heirs.

Would Rickon and Bran rejoice if I were dead? Would Arya? Sansa thought not.

The lady in black eyed Arya first, and Sansa next.

"Ned's daughters," she said, "I've always thought the bastard had the wrong one. Still it's not enough. The raven came yesterday from King Stannis. He has one of Ned's younger sons."

"And here I thought you would be among the few to remember me in earnest, old friend," Aunt Lyanna said cheerfully, dismounting in the snow. The king was at her side to help her, but she waved him away. "Barbrey. Lady Dustin, I should say."

"I have been loyal," the lady mumbled.

"To the Boltons, no doubt," Lyanna continued, undeterred. "Was it sweet to warm Roose's bed? I looked for you in Barrowtown and I was told I'd find you in Winterfell. The smallfolk did not lie. I would have you know that I did take part of your crops in your absence, only those which are due to Winterfell."

The face of the other woman turned to ash, duller than the grey colour of granite walls in front of which she stood.

"Let me pass, my lady," the queen finished, "I have no quarrel with you today."

Colder than frost on a summer morning, Aunt Lyanna made her first steps into Winterfell after almost twenty years of exile. She took in her surroundings and turned to Arya and Sansa. There were shiny crystals in her eyes which could have been unshed tears. Her voice never betrayed any weakness.

"We shall go to the crypts first," Lyanna Stark announced solemnly. "Someone find a lantern." Sansa wondered if she knew King Robert did the same when he visited Winterfell, wishing to see
where Lyanna herself was supposedly buried.

The wagon with Podrick Payne was in by that time and with it the last remains of Father, Mother, and Robb.

The way to the crypts was shut and the great wooden door semi-frozen. Sandor helped open it with Greaton and a few others. Even Gendry had a chance to strike at it with his hammer. Once inside, Sansa, Arya and Lyanna descended the narrow spiral stairs, deep into the gloom which slowly erased all castle sounds and the chill from above the ground. Quietly, those men who dared followed them inside, carrying the dead Starks in utter, honourable silence. Gendry was the last one to enter, holding a lantern.

Down here nothing moved. The time stood still, and there was neither cold nor warmth. The crypts just were, they didn't live, they didn't long for light. Sansa felt as if she were sleepwalking, holding onto a wall so as not to slip in the abyss. At the end of the stairs, the vault was long and narrow. They walked between the lords of Winterfell, the new and the old ones who styled themselves the Kings of Winter, with their rusty swords turned to dust.

At the end, Lord Rickard sat in peace with the stone direwolf curled around his leg, flanked by statues of Brandon and Lyanna. The queen stopped next to her own likeness.

"Ashara," she said, "One day I will lay to rest where you are lying now. But before that, if the gods are good, I shall have you carried south, and buried in the cairn Ned built for Arthur where the Tower of Joy once stood."

Sansa noticed that swords were missing from the knees of Lord Rickard and Uncle Brandon. And several steps further there was the empty, open grave Sansa dreaded most of all. The almost finished statue showed her father's likeness well. A few more touches of the chisel and he would sit there with his own direwolf of stone, knees swordless and empty. In another vacant niche next to him, a place should be now made for Robb, a new statue carved and shaped from dead stone, dead like her older brother… She half expected her family ghosts to come out of the open tombs. Or Jon, covered in flour. Robb and Jon frightened Sansa once that way, in a childish game.

"We shall put poor Catelyn between her husband and her son," Lyanna whispered, "it's the least we can do. She was not supposed to marry my quiet brother. Yet she did and she loved him. She tolerated my son in her castle. Some women would do worse by their husband's bastard."

When at long last Father's bones were laid to rest in his tomb and the ashes of Mother and Robb deposited into the empty alcove beside him, Sansa was eager to see the dim light of the day. In the last leagues of their journey north, the days consisted of grey dusk and nighttime, no more.

*Forgive me,* she begged of her ancestors while walking back up, certain more than ever that the ghosts of those whose swords had turned into dust wandered in those vaults. *I only wished to excel in everything I was taught a lady should do, to honour her house, and you. Yet by doing so I have erred tremendously and I have wronged you. And I nearly lost myself.*

With sick feeling in stomach she remembered her time in the Vale when she occasionally believed herself to be Littlefinger's daughter, Alayne Stone, losing Sansa, forgetting Sansa, losing herself. Some lies are easier to tell if you believe in them and Sansa had developed this self-deception to perfection.

But now the winter was here and the time for lies was over.

*And not any winter. The one which is supposed to last for a generation.*
When she exited the crypts it was night; her wish to see the day ruthlessly denied. A starry sky hung above Winterfell and over the inexorable snow. She had no need for a lantern to see the castle. Instead of heading to the Great Keep or to the table in the Great Hall as one of the Starks of Winterfell, Sansa walked mindlessly around, alone and unfollowed, needing to see how it all changed.

The snow was everywhere between the narrow paths beaten by the passing of men and beasts. Here and there, small ponds of smoking water of the many springs Winterfell was built on interrupted the white blanket choking the grounds.

Particularly thick fumes came from the library tower, which now seemed more a ruin than a building, harbouring a new hot spring on the ground floor. The maester's tower and the rookery were gone. Burnt. As was one of the walls of the First Keep where a wooden structure was being hastily erected to replace it, exhaling a smell of fresh ironwood logs and beams.

The new replaces the old. Sansa didn't know whether to cry or laugh at the sight of that newest addition to the Winterfell's millennial walls, as ugly and as makeshift as any hut of the poor in Wintertown.

Yet, the flimsy wooden structure bore witness to life, to the return of people despite all the sacking and burning. For what would the Starks of Winterfell do alone in their castle if there were no people on their lands? Brood and die with honour, Sansa surmised.

Her steps carried her to the glass gardens. The glass was gone. Broken. Yet here, just like in the First Keep, the restless spirit of men, and hands eager to survive, stretched many long, thin canvases made of dried animal intestines as barriers to the cold. Behind, small brown sprouts were visible in freshly tilled earth. The gardens are coming to life. Maybe the crops will not be as plentiful as with glass, but some things may still grow here in the middle of winter...

Wishing herself not to cry, for the tears have never done her any good, she entered the passage leading to the doorway of the godswood. The door that used to be there was gone as well. She was surprised to discover a familiar black scaled body lying behind, sprawled and folded between the trees of the ancient grove of the old gods. The dragon looked asleep.

Sansa was not afraid of Drogon. She only thought he chose a peculiar place to land, and rest. Dragons cared not for the old gods. In the Red Keep, Drogon would squeeze himself into the palace so that he could sleep on the floor between the doors of Rhaegar's and Daenerys' rooms, guarding both of his riders. But the black beast had grown a lot. Maybe he did not fit in the corridors of any castle now, not even coiled, so he had to satisfy himself with staying in the open, among trees.

Sansa walked around the dragon, careful not to step on his body, emanating warmth, until she reached the black pool of cold water in front of the heart tree. The face of the old gods looked at her with its deep, red eyes, questioning. Who are you? What are you?

The dragon's head was there as well. Or rather, almost the entire front half of his body was plunged into the depths of the pool, unmoving. Sansa hoped he could breathe that way. She supposed he could because his tail occasionally twitched on the woods floor. Sansa imagined that the beast had dived underground, curious to see the lower levels of the crypts below, those where no living soul ever entered and where the thousands of years old and dead Kings of Winter slept forever on their grey thrones.

Sansa knelt. She realised years had passed since she was so sincere and open-hearted in a prayer.

You must have heard me in King's Landing. I prayed for a true knight to save me and you have not
granted me that wish. Yet you have given me more than I asked for; the man who loves me. And you have saved more members of my family than I ever thought possible.

If that last thing was not the proof of the existence of gods, Sansa did not know what was.

The red leaves rustled and the fresh snow crunched, startling her.

She was not alone and she was afraid. Someone dared pass Drogon. Her heart raced.

What if someone meant her harm in the heart of her home? What if she was still the sweet, innocent Sansa, running around unguarded, trusting that gods would protect her when she should better have either strength or guards to protect herself?

Until she sensed who it was and clapped hands in pure joy, turning to face her husband. Not so alone, am I? Not any more. I was lost in my thoughts of homecoming and you followed me as soon as your duty allowed. And I didn't even notice you or look at you… How many times have I averted my eyes or looked through you in King Robert's court?

Presently she stood on her toes to give her husband a proper kiss. It never ceased to amaze her how silent he could be in approaching her, nor how good it felt to kiss him.

"Do you see it?" she gestured at the dragon's head when she could speak again. "The pool is not deep, yet he is totally immersed. As if he has a lair under the bottom."

"It is odd," Sandor admitted, and Sansa was relieved. It was not a lie if her husband could see it as well; the dragon was truly up to something Sansa did not fully understand, but she could feel it in her capacity as a crippled warg after the death of Lady. She felt a malicious, tenacious intent, under the black beast's sleep… And she recognised something else, something sad beyond measure in the enormous mind of the dragon… A broken heart?

Do dragons have a heart? Sansa wondered. The human ones had one to be sure, but what of the scaled ones?

"Why is he doing this, what do you think?" she asked Sandor.

Sandor shrugged. In Winterfell, as in Greywater Watch, he looked to Sansa out of place; a giant, lost. "For a reason, no doubt," he said. "Maybe it's his way of pissing on your gods. I learned one thing from my time with Rhaegar. The beasts do have their reasons. But they don't always share them with their riders."

Giddy from being home, Sansa forgot about the dragons, and blurted a question she always wanted to ask the Hound, about his reasons to do things in their common past. "Did you follow me on purpose at night in the Red Keep as you did right now? That first time when you stumbled from the shadows and caught me on the serpentine stairs, and later?"

They mostly avoided mentioning the past. Theirs was the present. Now, he kept silent. Sansa didn't expect a very wordy answer, a yes or no at most. What came surprised her greatly.

"That first time, no. I was merely drunk and with little will to return to my room when you flew down that damn stair. I thought you'd stumble and kill yourself if I didn't catch you. And I was too drunk to care if I fell with you by chance. It wouldn't be a bad way to die. Later… yes. I turned to drinking in the castle on purpose, rather than anywhere else, hoping I'd run into you. But I never did until the night I went to drink up on the roof..."

It was more than he normally offered, and Sansa cherished every word, eager to replay in her head
the story of their love.

"You saved me on the roof as well," she said with faith, "I was about to faint and fall down from sudden sharp pain in my belly when you stopped me. I must have gotten my first moonblood at that moment, but I didn't know what it was until the next day in the morning."

"I never saved you on those nights," her husband said briefly. "I laughed at your fear. I thought myself strong. I was wrong. I was still the same weakling Gregor made out of me."

_No, Sansa thought, you did something better than saving me. You started loving me. And that helped me save myself._ Yet she did not tell him that. One day I will.

The leaves rustled in starry silence before Sandor dared ask a question of his own.

"Did you truly pray in the godswood every time you went there at night?"

"Not every time," she said. "Sometimes. Other times I felt like I was going to suffocate if I stayed in my room. So I went to the only places that offered some air, the godswood, the roof..."

"And I was meeting Ser Dontos in the godswood. Littlefinger paid him to spirit me away from the capital. Except that I didn't know it until it was too late."

"I see," he answered with dangerous calm in his voice, "so there has always been someone better than me."

"I haven't trusted anyone then. Not after they killed my father," she said, "Not you, not him. Anyone's kindness could be faked. Dontos may have frightened me less, and that was all. Yet I wished he had a little bit of your... ferociousness. Littlefinger had him killed when he had no more use for him."

He heard the truth in her words and relaxed, as if one of the granite pillars in the crypts of her forefathers suddenly lost the reason to stay stiff.

"Ser Dontos did one good thing, may he burn in seven hells," Sandor observed calmly, "the fool stormed in and whacked you with the melon the one and only time Joffrey commanded me to hit you. The little shit forgot his order after that little performance and had Meryn and Boros beat you instead. I said it was enough. And it was! I could barely keep myself in check when he ordered them to make you naked, and then the bloody Imp waddled in. Never thought I'd be pleased to see him."

"But if Dontos didn't turn up when he did, maybe there would be no time for the dwarf to play the role of your gallant saviour. Had I lost my temper that day, there would have been Joff's body in the sept before he ever married the rose with thorns, and my pretty head would adorn the spike where they used to have your father's."

Sansa's soul turned warmer than the heated walls of Winterfell from his admission. It was the first time he talked freely of the times he went out of his line of duty to help her. She wondered if he already loved her then and if he had known it, being older.

She looked into the open red eyes of the gods. She took in the sleeping dragon, suffering in his black dreams. An idea came to her, but no, it was too unseemly. Mother would never do such a thing in Father's presence, Sansa was certain.

_I am not Mother... Though I may one day have a child of my own._

One day soon, she hoped.
No one will come and see with Drogon on guard. Only the king or the queen or Arya would dare enter. But Rhaegar and Lyanna had lingered in the crypts; Sansa had noticed that much, before starting her tour of the castle. Besides, there was always something the king and queen should do, and never enough time for things to be done. And though she had faith in the old gods, Arya was not one to seek their presence.

Sansa gazed timidly at the face of the heart tree, wondering if it thought anything of her latest silly wish. The mouth of the tree, stern and serious, suddenly seemed wider than before. The eyes were bright, bright red. And then, or maybe it was her imagination, the eyes closed, one after another.

On the other side of the godswood, under the walls of the Guest House, away from the watchful weirwood and the dragon, there were three small pools. She walked swiftly to them and touched the water in one pond. It was incredibly warm. Sandor was her shadow, sword over his back.

She let her cloak slip and hurried to disrobe from her gown, socks, and smallclothes, careful to pile all her garments on the inside of her heavy travelling cloak, so that they wouldn’t get wet from snow. She had never undressed that fast in her life.

"Sansa! What-" The water muted his voice.

He must have understood what she intended only when she was already floating. Sansa must have been eight or nine the last time her mother let her bathe outside. Later on it was not done. It was not what ladies did. Boys could learn how to swim in the moat of Winterfell, but girls could not. So it was only good she was an obedient girl and learned how to swim before that time.

She heard a dull splash in the snow, the sound of the swordbelt being dropped. It was a gesture she appreciated greatly in her lord husband and she wondered whether he did it on purpose or without thinking ever since they were married. Either way she liked it. Whenever he entered their quarters, be it in the castle or on the wagon, the first thing he’d do was to drop his weapons at the farthest possible corner of the space they shared and where they loved each other.

Would that be possible in water?

Her wishes suddenly extended beyond swimming.

"You'll catch a cold," he said, squatting on the ground next to the pool. He was out of his own clothing, and shivering like a dog he so often said he was. “Didn’t your septa warn you against it?” Faster than she would think possible, he dived forward into the pool.

"Silly bird," he repeated with affection when his head resurfaced next to hers, hair plastered to scars under wicked starlight, mouth stretched in that ugly grin Sansa adored. "Then again, you’ve never been silly, have you? Just played your part, with me and with everyone else so you could fly away. Good for you, I’ve always said. Tell me, what is this damn water?"

"The hot springs Winterfell is built upon," she said dutifully, thoroughly calm, a sailing white shadow with hair spilling freely; a bright, bright red water flower.

"Haven’t you noticed the pools when you came here with King Robert?"

"I've seen the fumes, aye," he admitted. "But I never felt like swimming."

Of course you did not. Fumes.

“I want my bath almost cold, not scalding.”
Of course you do.

She swam to him, into his arms.

"Have you ever done this before?" she asked and didn't need an answer. The open, cautious, curious expression in his eyes told her this was as new for him as it was for her. A shared discovery.

"And where would I do this?" he nonetheless said, defensively, too much used to hiding his weakness. "There are no bloody hot springs I know of outside Winterfell in all of the Seven Kingdoms. Only Dragonstone is built over furnaces spitting boiling water and fire from the earth's core. No one bathes there, I reckon. Unless he is a dragon. Not that I would know the place. King Robert never wanted to travel there. He couldn’t stomach his righteous brother. I could understand that."

"Why? Lord Stannis is not… is not like Gregor was?"

“No, Sansa,” Sandor said, “no one is as Gregor was. Stannis is like those countless people who looked at me and judged me for my name and my face, before I ever opened my mouth or drew my sword. Stannis judged Robert for whoring and drinking, and Robert would take no judge in that.”

As you would not, my love, I know, I know:

He held her close under the water, only their heads sticking out in the cold air. And she reached for him, scalp, chest, waist and thighs, steady and firm against her palms.

It was all too much, the warmth of the water and the warmth of their bodies and the warmth between them. They were gliding and falling out of balance, slick and slippery. Drops of water were in their eyes and in their mouths, and in their ears, but in the end it did not matter. For now it seemed not only possible to do it in water, it promised to be wonderful to do just that. How could they think of doing anything else?

He must have found a way to secure himself, a shallow where he could stand or lean, or maybe it was merely his inhuman strength that allowed him to place her above him with so much ease, never abandoning the shelter of the pool.

"This is… this is…" she tried to say, but her words failed her, melted in pleasure of belonging when he finally claimed her as his.

"It is," he agreed, moving with her for a long, long time, shuddering with her, and not from cold.

"I am… a spirit… weightless…" he said after their lovemaking, in a voice she never heard him use before. Frank and yet deep as the crypts beneath them. They floated side by side, on the surface of the pool, hips or shoulders touching at times, tangles of hair caressing each other.

She was thrilled that she could make him lift his spirit so, perhaps a step closer to the heavens he did not believe in. It was only fair to return the favour because he… he… he made her feel anchored to the ground in a good sense, attached to that solid base of truth that did exist in the world, devoid of all lies, dreams and treachery.

"You know," he observed then, "You don't have the Tully colours as everyone says."

"No?" Sansa asked, confused. Having inherited her mother's looks was one of the rare things she had never questioned in life, not for all deceptions she'd suffered.

"No," he shook his head, spattered, choked on excessive water, composed himself. A shiny grey eye
looked in the direction of the invisible white tree far behind them on the other end of the godswood, and then back at her.

"Look at you," he said with admiration he rarely let show, "you have the colours of your gods…"

"Oh," Sansa said. It was a beautiful thing to say to a lady wife. "I've never thought of it that way," she confessed.

"Maybe they did when you were born," Sandor waved at the trees around them, uncertain, his raspy voice warm as the pool they were in. His mental guard was fully down now, discarded like his weapons. Sansa never felt more for him than in these rare moments when he let her see a glimpse of weakness in him; the man who wished himself stronger than anyone else, so that no one could burn him again. This is how I started loving you, she remembered, just that I didn't know it at that time. Because when I feared you'd hurt me, you didn't, and instead of hurting me you cried...

"And maybe you have the colour of your gods for a reason," was the last thing he said in that heart and mind turning rasp, better than a song.

"Or maybe my mind has turn into a heap of sheep dung from watching the back of the king who is older than me yet still believes that the Father above will judge us justly." Sansa would have laughed if she wasn't still mesmerized by the compliment he gave her. The Hound was never far away from Sandor Clegane. But they were both her husband and Sansa loved him.

They fumbled with their clothes while trying to dress, nervous like children who stayed to play out after sunset, disobeying their elders. Sandor handed her the inside of his cloak to dry, before drying himself.

When they returned to the heart tree in silence, Drogon was gone from the grove. He must have found a cosier place to sleep and so should we. A place to dry hair together next to a hearth… Gods forbid that Septa Mordane was right and that we catch a cold before Others can take us…

One red eye on the tree snapped open when Sansa desired to offer another prayer, for the fast arrival of spring. And the maw that used to be so thin in Sansa's memories gaped larger than ever, big like the mouth of the heart tree in Greywater Watch, inviting, calling, maybe answering a plea of its people yet unknown and unspoken.

One red eye snapped open, and then the other…

The old gods are opening their eyes to see, she thought, humbled. What destiny will they bring us this time?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to anyone reading and liking this ))

Next up - Jon
This story would never be what it is without my wonderful beta DrHolland :-) Thank you so much :-)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.


The black sky hid the dragon, and its wings hid the stars. It was too dark to see if it was green as Dany claimed it was. Or maybe the dragon was that kind of green akin to black, the colour of rot and death; a huge, twisted shadow in the biting chill. Jon felt that, if he opened his mouth, the air would crunch in it like skin of a roasted pig from how cold it was.

*How do you call a dragon?*

To say, *Dragon, to me!* as he would call Ghost sounded vastly inappropriate, and Jon forgot the beast's name. Dany mentioned it but he had struggled so hard to ignore most of what she'd been saying about his mother and father, and especially about the dragons, that now when he was so cold he could not bring himself to recall it.

He could still not remember when the vision of the beast began slipping through his tired eyes which were about to close. Soon it would be too late for him. *Too late for anything.*

The only thing he was never able to ignore about Dany was her presence, no matter how hard he tried. She could carry herself with confidence and disdain in any circumstance, even when starving, yet at times she was sweeter that any girl he had ever known.

*Not that I have known so many.*

Presently she stood in front of him, shivering on the edge of the precipice. They had no gloves. Jon surrendered his black headscarf of a sworn brother of the Watch to serve as wrapping for his new sword and somewhere he had lost his cloak as well. Dany still had that ridiculous headdress with long, dark grey, animal hairs covering her silver ones, and the exotic white fur she wore over her tunic in place of a cloak.

The living dead were behind them. There were too many too cut in slices with one blade, no matter how powerful it promised to be. Their only way of escape passed through the thick mass of black, nearly starless sky.

The beast was hovering where it first appeared, the distance between Jon and Dany and their salvation too great to jump over.

"If it came for us, why won't it land here so that we can mount it? We cannot fly!" he asked Dany impatiently, not daring to presume aloud that the beast had come for him. The girl just remained silent and trembled, gritting her teeth as if she had temporarily lost the gift of speech, after challenging Jon about being truthful in everything she had said. Her eyes were wide open and she seemed happy to see the animal, yet entirely incapacitated to act decisively as Jon would expect from
the now fully revealed dragonrider who styled herself Mother of Dragons.

"What do we have to do?" he insisted, grasping her shoulders gently from behind. "You have to help me!"

*It is all in vain. We have to surrender.* The thought was not his own, and he resisted it, but he could nevertheless feel his desperation growing. Jon ran away from it in his mind and delved rather into that previously unknown corner of his being where the terrifying emerald presence had been lurking. He found it did no longer frighten him.

*It is frightened itself.*

"Are you afraid of coming closer?" he asked of the dragon aloud, incredulous. The beast looked so powerful that it was hard to imagine it could fear anything at all. Yet the green presence recoiled in Jon's head, as a dog going away with tail between his legs.

"Don't leave!" Jon said abruptly.

One wing flapped, the tail swished and swooshed, whipping the stars left and right as they fought to appear in the sky. The dragon stood his ground, or rather, his air, unmoving. One of his shiny eyes fixated Jon; a faint bronze glimmer in the black of the night.

Dany chose that moment to act as was expected from ladies in the hour of peril; elegantly, she fainted. It was good Jon already had her by the shoulders for she went from petrified state to a completely limp one in his arms in a blink of an eye. When he lifted her from the frozen ground, she was lighter than a feather. *She must have lost so much weight. More than I.* She seemed skinnier than when she passed out for the first time, when he carried her under the weirwood trees before he donned his wolf skin and went hunting. Her slim legs dangled as two shattered sticks of ice despite the thick trousers of white wool she wore.

*Frostbite. No! Not now, not after everything we've been through.*

Jon's heart thumped and constricted knowing she might die or lose a limb if they did not find shelter soon. The dragon screeched at the distress of his mother, but made no attempt to come closer.

The path behind Jon shook with the rumble of the earthquake pursuing them from the caves, but he never looked back. He knew what was behind him and had no wish to meet it now, nor to try out his new shiny sword, which he and Dany must have stolen from the old gods, be they his gods or not. Why else would the earth tremble so? He could not bear to think that the Others had such power, for if they did, how could they ever be defeated? *There will be plenty of time to see the worth of this bloody blade before the end of winter.*

*I am the last one,* he thought, his own exhaustion forgotten with that realisation, replaced by cold and cruel determination. *I am the last one now and everything depends on me.*

"Will you catch us if we walk off this cliff?" he asked with unearthly calm, quieting himself, the earthquake and the dragon with his voice, speaking as if he were in command of all things and had all the time in the world.

The dragon just stared squarely back at him, not giving any reassurance as to its possible life-saving actions. Jon suddenly felt quite deranged for talking to it in the first place. *Animals can't talk. Not even Ghost.* He felt a green sting in his consciousness as he thought of that.

"I meant no offence," he said rapidly and the uneasy sensation lessened.
"Well as it would seem that you will not come to us," he reasoned aloud, "and we are a bit pressured, I say we'll just go to you," he chatted to shake off the queer sensation of despair crawling under his skin. The new mood threatened to choke him and ground him in place until his and Dany's death would inevitably catch up on the path behind their backs, following them closely alongside the unknown, lonely mountain.

How difficult can it be? he told himself inwardly to boost his courage. It can't be that different than riding a horse. At that, the dragon emitted a tiny, baby-like jet of fire, yellow on black. No horse would do that. He didn't know whether to take modest fire-spitting as an invitation or as a threat. At least it was smaller than the cloud of bright flames the beast had breathed out to announce its arrival.

Jon remembered Maester Luwin's lesson about some mad Targaryen who drank wildfire thinking he would grow wings and fly, only to die in great pain. I am no less mad, he thought, I saw a dragon and I believed myself a lost prince, while there must be another reason for the beast being here. Dany. Maybe it returned for her.

It was a reasonable explanation for the sudden arrival of a Southron lady north of the Wall, well-fed and unharmed. A dragon could have brought her.

Maybe she is truly Daenerys Targaryen and I am still Jon Snow.

Maybe the living dragons are just roaming the Lands of Always Winter forever. It's not as anyone has been here. Anyone except for me. Us, he corrected himself. He didn't think he would have come as far without his companions.

The dragon screeched again, sounding as impatient as Jon was before Dany fainted in his arms. The despair, the command in Jon's mind to surrender had grown so strong now that, just as he had warned the dragon, there was only one thing left to do, sensible or not; a sheer leap of faith.

If I am its rider, I suppose it will pick me. Or her, if it came for her. We're done here either way.

Jon made a step into black nothing with Daenerys in his arms and one more and one more. The wind whirled and whistled. Jon and Dany began falling, inexorably so, gaining speed in their fall with every step Jon stubbornly tried to make, paddling in the air like a madman and wrestling with the wind. He willed himself to walk as though he were running on dry land, but he still had no wings.

Flying seemed like a pretty way to die, yet it was death all the same. Jon was oddly happy that Daenerys would not know how he failed her, losing life in her sleep. At least I kept one vow; I have not let go of you. On my honour, as a Stark.

Stark, on my mother's side...

His felt a stab of raw pain from merely thinking of his mother, and then he was just cold again, helpless as when Bowen Marsh and his other brothers stabbed him; frozen, betrayed, and colder still...

It was only when the feeling of loss and defeat threatened to overwhelm him to the point that he would have gladly screamed or cried, that the dragon somehow understood he needed help.

A warm snake coiled around his belly, pulling him up, up and always up. In the darkness, he glimpsed a large irregular slope covered in scales. He brushed them with the back of his burned hand, which was otherwise holding Daenerys firmly; the dragon's armour was steel-hard and hot to touch. On top, the slanted mass ended in a large hollow between two particularly tall spikes. The malleable snake which was wrapped around Jon's waist slammed Jon and Dany into the boulder of
scales when it attempted to lift them further, fighting off the whirlwind just like Jon had tried to do earlier with his human feet. Jon blinked, dizzy from the collision, and then focused his gaze up.

*Up we go.*

In the next attempt of being thrown upward, Jon managed to grasp one of the spikes with his left hand, and the snake, the tail, he realised, pulled him a little bit further on until he could lower his behind to sit in the hollow between the spike he grabbed and the one after it. It wasn't comfortable, but he felt much safer than before.

Carefully, he straddled the most unusual seat as if he was riding a horse and placed Dany in front, between his legs. She murmured something unintelligible and tossed her head violently against Jon's chest as though she was having a bad dream from which she could not wake. Her previously frozen body immediately felt warmer when they landed, just as the hard surface under Jon.

_Hot as the body of the dragon._

Jon's own skin still felt as cold as ever and he found himself clinging to the unconscious girl and the savage beast which was oozing life returning warmth. The green presence danced in his mind, less dark than before. It stopped, and then it danced again. *Happy. Or not?* Jon didn't know.

"Are you asking something of me?" Jon wondered, marvelled, and only a little bit pleased for being on the back of the dragon. The presence steadied, basked in silence. *Happy,* Jon concluded.

_Soon, I will wake up in my room in Castle Black and this will all have been a childish dream.* The thought left him unsatisfied and empty, and he held harder onto the unconscious woman in his arms than he had ever done when they kissed during their short acquaintance. *We have been together for too short a time...* He patted a scale on the spike in front with mild, dour affection a true Stark could muster. *Emerald green.*

His vision still clouded by the darkness all around him, Jon nevertheless thought that in daylight, the dragon would indeed have that same shade of green he wore on his chest in Hardhome for months. He had inspected the crystals on his wounds in the firelight for hours, in long, sleepless winter nights in the cave he had shared with the wildlings. Night made all colours look dull and grey, yet he didn't think he'd ever forget that particular shade of green, subdued or not.

_So the dragon came for me when they left me for dead or dying, it healed my wounds and brought me to Hardhome. Why?*_

It most certainly was a reasonable explanation of how he had arrived to Hardhome from Castle Black in the middle of winter. Alive.

No answer came from the dragon, not in words. A pang of fear, maybe. Fear… or great pain it had experienced in the past, a sensation of misery and incurable illness, entangled in the roots of giant weirwoods, thousands of years old...

Jon was pleased to be in the open and outside the weirwood infested maze underground, for as much as it belonged to his gods. He was growing more and more certain that he had angered them by taking the sword which belonged to them, and not to any human hand. They might no longer help him, if they ever did.

"I know how you feel," he told the dragon. It was the wrong thing to say. The beast snorted aggressively. "Alright," Jon said, uncertain how to treat the dragon, his dragon. "As you say. Whatever it is you say." *Just go easy, will you? Don't burn us, or drop us, pretty please.*
Jon looked away from the angry dragon and back at the cliff he jumped from, his own fear and despair replaced by meticulous curiosity to establish what and where here was.

A silvery warrior surrounded by mist rode a huge many-legged ice spider at the edge of the abyss where Jon and Dany were standing before Jon's leap of faith. The rider's hair was fully white and falling to his waist; his face was blurred by fog. With a crystal clang, he drew forth in the air a sword of polished glass and brandished it in unmistakable challenge. Jon was tempted to command the dragon, if he only knew how, to turn back and let him defeat the warrior and his steed, by sword or by… dragonfire. The last desire felt quaint, and unlike himself.

Yet Dany was still a bundle of warm softness in his arms. She needed help. And something did frighten the dragon so much that he wouldn't approach the cliff. Perhaps it was best to be cautious. Boring prudence won over the desire for victory, and Jon squeezed firmly the spike in front of him, hoping the beast would somehow understand his wishes if it wouldn't heed his words.

He wished there was a place where someone would help Dany, where people cared for her. And he fervently wished for the dragon to take them both there as fast as it could be done.

The mighty wings spread wide open behind Jon's back, and flapped like mad in powerful, grandiose strokes. Looking back and forth at the dragon in movement now, comparing lengths of limb and body he could see, Jon confirmed they were seated on the dragon's neck, just at the beginning of its wiry, winged back. The beast must have been big as five or six horses. Or bigger.

The beginning of the flight was easy. The dragon followed the land mass from some distance, gliding south. Jon studied the sinister landscape they were passing by as it slowly changed shape. The mountains were becoming higher, and the valleys between them deeper. The dragon veered to the right from the open sea, and aligned himself closer to the dark barren ice-land, which curved sharply inwards at that point. The sea entered it in several deep, narrow bays buried between tall cliffs similar to the northernmost one Jon and Dany had left behind.

It was at that moment that Jon had the damnable hallucination again.

There, high up behind the rocky seashore of the Lands of Always Winter, on a plump hill towering over a stretch of unremarkably granite-grey coast, washed by breaking waves a hundred feet high, there, in this nowhere, there was Winterfell.

A castle made of ice… And snow.

Water gushed into Jon's eyes all of a sudden, so he wiped them with his free hand. The vision was just like the beloved castle of his childhood. A better look revealed a few familiar details were missing. The construction lacked some towers and turrets, even the outer wall here and there. He wished to come closer to see if the image had substance. The dragon started in that direction as though he could hear his thoughts, until they hit a thick curtain of sleet and snow, a storm raging over the sea between them and the hill with the castle of his dreams.

And then, by some grace, Jon understood. I have an intelligence of a rainworm, and this is a foolish try. Whatever wanted them to surrender earlier was now luring him in with the image of Winterfell.

Jon willed his mind away from the temptation and imagined a soft, warm bed for Dany, something with silks. Yellow silks, he decided. The dragon changed his flight, obediently.

So it works better if I don't talk. Just like the horse was guided with reins and movements of the body, and not by the rider's spoken command.
Hours later, Jon resented his choice. *Will I live to regret every choice I have ever made?* Any semblance of land seemed gone for good. His hair was soaked and the rain was cutting deep into his bare face and hands. At least the rest of him was not that wet for he was constantly being dried by the heat emanating from the dragon.

Dany was becoming heavier and heavier to support in her sleep as they flew through what almost seemed the bottom of the ocean judging by the quantity of water. *Just a little bit longer,* he told himself, or maybe it was the dragon who told him to endure, as if the beast had grown from the baby to a toddler in the few hours of their joint flight, at least where it concerned the ability to express itself.

Jon was almost falling asleep and the sky was less black when he finally saw the ships, deep under. Galleys, cogs, carracks, dromonds! He couldn't name them all. There were so many different ships, the shapes of which he had only seen depicted, a fleet much larger than the now decimated one commanded by the Night's Watch…

The dragon descended as much as he could above one of them, a galley of peculiar design, long and slender with high hull. There it hovered above the open space on the deck, undeterred by rain. The beast screeched and breathed fire in sign of arrival, until men came running up from below the deck. A strong, grey-haired man with noble bearing was the first one to come under the dragon in the ungodly weather.

"Rhaegal!" he said, "What-"

The rest of the question was swallowed by the dragon's cry and the howling of the wind.

*So that is your name,* Jon remembered, wishing to faint as well.

No, the already somewhat familiar dragon-mind urged him not to. *Get off,* or maybe, *Get her down,* it suggested in flimsy and almost friendly shades of green.

*Rhaegal.* Jon thought with unnamed sadness. *Named for my true father who is a complete stranger to me. And perhaps a villain like his father, the Mad King. No wonder that the old Kings of Winter never wanted me in their crypts under Winterfell. No wonder I have nightmares about them. Lord Rickard sits there with his son Brandon… The dead must know who I am and remember the injustice done forever…* Somehow the part of the truth about his father felt worse than if his mother had indeed been some whore. He realised Daenerys never told him how Rhaegar survived. *Did he father new boys thinking me dead?* He needed to ask her when she woke. He needed so many things from her, things he could not all name.

Rhaegal was too big to land entirely on the ship, but he managed to awkwardly step on the deck with one clawed leg, keeping the other one and both wings in the air.

"Gods be good!" the old man who greeted the dragon exclaimed with great joy, "The princess is back!"

"The queen is back!" more men shouted, gathering around, copper faces with almond-shaped eyes. There were men on the Wall from all the Seven Kingdoms, but Jon had never seen their likes.

*So you are queen as well,* he thought stubbornly, wishing to deny the obvious again, trying to fathom the reasons Dany might have had to spin a sad and beautiful fairy-tale about a bastard boy like himself.

He started down from his scaly seat, down the winged shoulder, and the landed foot of the dragon,
never letting Daenerys go. He promised her.

As soon as he reached the deck, Jon's head started to hurt. It felt bigger than Grenn's whose head in most people's opinion resembled an aurochs'. The boards cracked and moved under his feet. Weakened from hunger and flying, thrown off balance by the restless sea rolling the ship and its crew, Jon lurched forward unsteadily with Daenerys in his arms.

The old man eyed him with reproach and distrust. From nearby, Jon realised he was dressed as a knight.

"She is not hurt," he told him, "just tired and hungry, I think. Could you help her?"

At that, a few strong lads and lithe ladies clad in brown leather took Daenerys out of his arms. Jon could not resist the insistence and pressure of their many hands. They carried her toward the tent-like structure in the middle of the ship, well-secured from the elements. Jon stared after her, missing the warmth. Missing her as soon as she is gone.

I have to follow her. I promised.

"You must be the king's son," the old man suddenly said, and went to one knee. "My prince."

Jon's face fell with surprise and displeasure, long and horse-like as Arya's. I will wake up and this will all have been a bad dream.

No sleep, the green presence suggested from the blur of grey clouds criss-crossed by lightning where it had risen again, invisible above the ship. Walk.

"Lord Stark did well in hiding you in Winterfell," the old man continued. "You do take after your mother. It's a miracle King Robert didn't see it when he paid him a visit."

No, he did not, because the bastard was not deemed good enough to cross wooden swords with little princes, and they put him to sit far below the salt by the order of Lady Catelyn…. Or did they?

Maybe it was his father who gave the orders to hide the bastard so very well from the king's entire party and his children, to protect his sister's son... Not my father. Lord Stark. Jon shivered.

"My name is Jon Snow," he said slowly.

"I'm Barristan Selmy," the old man said. "I serve Princess Daenerys now. I have known Lord Eddard well and regretted deeply his vile murder done under the pretence of justice. And I have had the honour to meet our gracious queen, Lady Lyanna Stark, when she was a young maid at the tourney in Harrenhal."

Jon knew who Barristan Selmy was. The legendary knight of the Kingsguard pardoned by King Robert on the Trident for his great valour. The Lord Commander of the Kingsguard who had the courage to publicly challenge the bastard king Joffrey as a stupid boy, and who then cut through Joffrey's gold cloaks and left… The man known for his honour as much as Father was… as much as Lord Eddard was…

The truth hit him again, and hit him hard. There was no way he could deny it.

I am a Stark, not Snow..

Not on my father's, but on my mother's side…
He could not bear to think what other house name might be his, not now, but he knew there was no other likely explanation for him being able to ride a dragon. As if being a warg wasn't enough.

*A bastard, a turncloak, a warg and a dragonrider...* How different could he possibly be from everyone else he knew? And yet how unremarkable he felt on most days in his own skin. Except that he wasn't. He had always known he was different, somehow, bastard or not, ever since he remembered himself. Even his wolf was different than the others despite being born from the same litter.

Now he mastered talents others did not have and some of them he did not know how to use, not fully. A man others would fear for that reason. *And murder him to appease their fears...* He experienced a minimum of sympathy for Bowen Marsh for a very brief moment. With the imminent danger gone, Jon was needful of solitude to gather his thoughts. And he terribly missed his wolf. He searched the sky and his mind for his new green companion...

*But you can't just go away. You promised her.*

"May I stay with the princess?" Jon asked meekly, suffering from a constant change of heart, not knowing what to call Dany in public, repeating the first title he heard her people use.

"As you say, my prince."

Jon closed his eyes, avoiding the honorific title, and howled in the snow-covered woods, reassuring himself that Ghost lived, wondering where he was, wondering if Pyke survived the tumble through the ice tunnel with the direwolf. *We did, so why wouldn't they?*

*No, he corrected himself, you survived because Dany stopped you from being a fool that first time you thought you saw Winterfell...*

He followed Ser Barristan to that strange tent, feeling steadier on his two feet as he paced the deck. *Two feet, not four, and no wings, thank the gods.* The dragon was right. Walking did him good; he was now awake and lord of his legs again. The wet air smelled on salt, and somehow this made it feel less cold. Many curious eyes were on him as he moved forward. Whispers spread rapidly from one mouth to another about the king's son, who braved the dragon and brought the princess with him.

Who brought their queen home...

Inside, Daenerys was awake, semi-reclined on cushions of yellow silk, resting. Fire burned in a brazier. Jon imagined lying next to her. She would pull his tunic open to touch his chest, and he would cover her in kisses. And not only on her mouth.

"Ser Barristan," she said in a warm voice, "I see that you have met my nephew."

"He wears his name on his sleeve," Ser Barristan said, "for anyone who knows his mother."

Daenerys smiled. "Where are we?" she asked.

"We don't rightfully know," Ser Barristan admitted. "We were supposed to reach Eastwatch-by-the-Sea weeks ago, but all we have seen is storms. The sailors we have don't know these seas. I took some on board in Gulltown who claimed to have sailed north, at least to the Wall or to Skagos, but it appears they were lying to find a place to eat. Maybe one or two have proven useful and the rest are hungry frauds."

Daenerys' smile broadened. "But there is more."
"Yes," Ser Barristan said cautiously, struggling to control the glimmer of hope in his eyes. "It is daybreak now and we have sighted land. We don't know what land it is, but we will go there and try to dock before another storm takes us only the gods know where. More ships are drifting behind. We need a place to reassemble the fleet before heading for the Wall again. And here is as good as anywhere else."

"Very well," Dany said with the air of one used to command. "And until we come to that land, my nephew and I wish to break our fast on something light and be left alone."

Jon found himself standing in the strange tent, alone with the most beautiful woman in his world. Dany exchanged her white wools for a foreign gown of yellow silk without any visible laces she was somehow wrapped in. Only the white fur she wore as a cloak still lay on her shoulders, reminding Jon of the girl he travelled with and not of this unfamiliar, pretty queen. In her new dress Daenerys looked almost thinner than his sister Arya when she was nine and when both Jon and Arya left Winterfell. Jon supposed he didn't fare much better under stinky blacks he had on.

"Do you not want to be alone?" he asked.

Seeing an unhappy expression curdling her face, he was fast to explain, "I meant to say, do you not wish to take a bath or do whatever the ladies all do when they have their servants back after starving and passing out?"

"I can do all that later," she dismissed his concern. "One of the last things I remember clearly from our journey is you saying how everything that I have said to you was true. Do you believe me still?"

For a lady, Dany surely did not lose time on pleasantries. Her question was immediate and unforgiving. He had to answer.

"I do," he admitted, "but the truth pains me instead of bringing me joy. Can you understand that?"

"I suppose the truth changes things," she said very carefully, distant and polite, as Sansa was years ago when she would call him my half-brother, eager to treat him properly and courteously, and yet offending his feelings worse than if she had just called him a bastard.

You loved me well enough in the wild, but not now, is that what you are trying to tell me? Jon's mood darkened. "Tell me about it, how the truth changed everything," he muttered.

"Perhaps you should tell me," she beckoned him to approach. Her gesture was uncertain and pleading, not commanding as she was before.

He dared sit at the edge of her cushions, unwilling or incapable to refuse her invitation, yet utterly unable to talk.

Jon could not talk to anyone about it. The hurt was too intense and too personal to discuss. Maybe he would have talked to Sam Tarly whose own father threatened to slaughter him as a pig if he didn't take the black. Sam might understand how family matters can tear you apart but Sam was in Oldtown now or feeding the fish under the sea.

What of Maester Aemon? My brother and my kinsman....

It was all too much to even think about.

Jon was Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. And he may have been the poorest of the great lords in the Seven Kingdoms yet even as such he learned that ravens and ships could go almost anywhere in the known world.
His mother could have known, even in Essos, or she could have found out if she so wished that her brother was hiding a bastard in Winterfell. She could have returned, in disguise, to see the boy for herself and learn the truth, if she had mourned all that much for the loss of her baby…

But instead it seemed she found another baby boy and was a tender mother to him while Jon was left at the mercy of Lady Catelyn's infallibly loveless courtesies when it came to his person.

He was shocked by the fervent, vehement ugliness of his thoughts and he couldn't bring the darkness of his heart out to Daenerys. Not yet. Not until he would know her a little bit better, if she would let him. What would you think of me if I confessed all this?

And how was your life before a dragon carried you north to meet me?

Besides, she now looked at him with worry, not with love.

A boy servant brought in food and refreshments. "Mhysa," he addressed Daenerys, bowing to the ground. Jon resented how even in the middle of storms, in the middle of nowhere, the princess or the queen lacked for nothing while so many were starving. There were some strange, sweet-looking fruits on a fancy tray, two glasses and a jar of water.

"Dates," Dany said, biting into one. "Still good after all this travel."

"And lemon water," she added, sounding young, sad and lost.

Jon's equally young heart immediately went to her, wishing she would feed him a date as she had done with elk-meat in the caves, but that was before he studied the serving boy on his way out. He had collar marks on his neck.

"You have slaves!" he exhaled with outrage.

"Former slaves," Daenerys hissed. It appeared he managed to slight her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I presumed-"

"Don't presume what you don't know anything about," she said, "Jon Snow." She was so much more beautiful when she wanted to offend him in return so he had to laugh, wholeheartedly.

"I'm overjoyed that you are so in love with my name," he said and it made her laugh in return. Do you love me, Daenerys Targaryen? Did you mean it when you said you wanted me to share your bed every night?

He may have forgotten Rhaegal's name, but he remembered that offer clear as sunrise.

She stared through him with lilac eyes as if she could have heard his unspoken questions, just like Rhaegal heard his thoughts. She made a bold move toward him and sat so close that her presence hurt. She gathered the wet mass of his hair in her hands and wrung it, caressing his scalp as she went on. The water dropped on the deck and on her silks, but she didn't seem to mind; and Jon's body ached for her to come much closer.

"There," she said, pleased with herself. "Much better."

And then, then she said, unexpectedly, "I think I may be so in love with you."

There was no trace of mocking or haughtiness in her voice. It was both devastating and most fortunate that Ser Barristan Selmy announced his presence at that moment, saving Jon from the
unmanly act of blushing all over his pale, long face.

"Land is in sight," the old knight said gravely, frowning. "If it please you, I believe that you should take a look for yourselves."

When Jon and Dany re-emerged on the deck after Ser Barristan, the reasons for his seriousness and interruption were in plain sight. Jon thought he would never see that place again but he was nonetheless looking at it now, and it was not Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.

*Hardhome, where poor Mother Mole led her people dreaming of salvation... Only to bring them to famine and carnage, and destiny worse than death.*

Hundreds, thousands of scrawny wildlings, pressed themselves on the too small, rocky, inhospitable beach, where, months ago, Jon found a shipwreck with Lord Davos and Cotter Pyke. More were hanging on the ropes and ladders attempting to abandon the caves which no longer offered any shelter.

The largest army of wights Jon had ever seen was approaching them from all possible sides, as quick as the craggy terrain allowed it. They had ropes too, and they were clumsily trying to attach them to bigger stones on the cliff above the caves, to go after the wildlings in their descent.

And on the flat top of the cliff, a lonely figure rode an ice spider, crystal blade slicing the morning air. He looked exactly the same as the warrior Jon had seen many, many leagues further north… Only now he could also see the enemy's face, a fear-inspiring twisted mass of blue ridges and crevices made of solid ice. *The face of the Other...*

Impossible! Jon thought. It could not be the same white walker. *Maybe there are more of them who look exactly the same.* The dragon had flown hard and far to bring them to Dany's ships, and an ice spider, no matter how big, could not hope to match his speed. *Not without magic.*

Whatever was holding the Others and their servants back from the humane enclave in Hardhome when Jon was still living there was gone now, and the people were in great danger. The doom would soon reach them, defenceless and alone.

*Soon, but not soon enough.*

The last traces of Jon's exhaustion were wiped out by blood rushing through his body; a promise of a taste of battle. He was glad he hadn't eaten; it was easier to fight on empty stomach and he was used to go with little food since he left Winterfell. And what rest he got drowsing on Rhaegal's back would have to be enough.

"How far?" Jon asked very seriously, weighing his options.

"Another half an hour of sailing until we can row boats to the shore if the wind doesn't change," a dark-skinned seaman said after licking his finger and putting it in the air.

"You have some fighting men here?"

Ser Barristan nodded. "At least two thousand foot that will stand their ground against anything. If we can bring them there."

"Then do it," Jon said, "Row a landing party to one side of the bay and have someone you trust defend the other. Have one part of you men cut through the wights with steel, and the other part burn them with torches. Row a group of wildlings to the ships whenever the boats return for more fighters."

"But..." the dark-skinned seaman interrupted. "We can't bring all of our fighting men, there are too many. Only five hundred."

"That's enough," Ser Barristan said, "We don't need all of them, but we need everyone you can muster!"

"But..."

"Row your men to the shore!" Ser Barristan shouted. "We'll coordinate with Dany from there."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

With a final word of advice from Ser Barristan, Jon turned to the man he trusted most in the world. "Dany, we're going to die here. Don't let anyone get hurt."

Dany looked at him for a long moment, her golden eyes narrowing with determination. "I will save as many as I can, Jon."

"Thank you, Dany."
"And I," he gestured toward the Other, "I shall be going up there, if… Rhaegal is willing to give me another ride. I shall see you when we are done."

He did his best not to notice the bows, the curtsies and the muttered responses my prince as men which were never his to command nevertheless obeyed him, faster than his sworn brothers ever did. He stopped paying any attention to Dany. He deemed her safe and sound on her ships as long as she didn't set her foot on land, and any lady would be a fool to do so, Jon believed.

*The Others cannot swim or else the Wall would be useless.*

*I am free to go.*

His soul was in one thing only. He patted the black and white hilt of the glowing sword on his hip, under the dark fabric of his former headscarf. The blade was becoming warmer again. Rhaegal harrumphed in the sky above, hopefully in agreement with his new rider.

It was past time to try out the magic sword.

Chapter End Notes

Comments really feed the author. Special thanks to everyone who left a comment so far, looking forward to your opinions on this one )))

Thank you to all who left a kudos, followed or bookmarked this story.

At the end of this I wish to say that I made up the entire part of the story where Jon actually faces the Other in a fight for the first time in Hardhome around Christmas last year, so before the show, purely on the basis of the books and imagining what could happen to Jon after his "murder". Any resemblance between this story and the last season of the show is purely coincidental.

Next chapter: Rhaegar
Rhaegar

Chapter Notes

A huge thanks to my beta TopShelfCrazy for making sense out of this chapter, and to DrHolland for final tips.

Parts of this were written with the Cuban song "Silencio" as performed by Omara Portuondo and Ibrahim Ferrer in mind. Because it reminds me of Rhaegar and Lyanna. A love story where death is never far away and the heartbreak is kept well within one's own heart.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rhaegar

He had been patient for too long and the dragon was a beast with three heads.

There were days when all three were screaming in Rhaegar's chest, as on the day when he had ridden to the Trident. That day haunted him ever since he remembered his name. He had doubted Lyanna's devotion, gave away the kingdoms that were to be his by birth in unnecessary bloodshed of thousands, and brought death to Elia and Rhaenys by allowing his jealousy to best him. His folly had been unforgivable, but the gods had seen fit he lived so he could serve them; he would serve them still.

He had never been a warrior by nature. Rhaegar applied himself to become one by choice. Because such befitted the story of a prince that was promised, the vain hope of a young princeling with scholarly desires, who held prophecies in great regard. Born as he was on the day when Summerhall burned, killing a good part of his family and all hopes to restore dragons to life; the belief that his existence would one day have some noble meaning was the only thing left to him.

Yet he had never been a coward. He simply didn't believe in war as a means to achieve a decisive victory, and much less a lasting peace. He was well past his ten and forty name days now, and he didn't believe in it still. War only bred more war, and it was war that killed all the dragons in the past.

But now the three-headed dragon roared insatiably in his chest. Against his convictions as a man of peace, he was consumed by desire to make war against an enemy which was not entirely known and not entirely human... once he found out what cousin Stannis had done or let be done to his son.

Just before Rhaegar reached Winterfell, Drogon planted a seed of doubt in his mind about Jon having been seriously harmed on the Wall in the past, following Stannis' arrival.

Despite the dragon's staunch reassurance that his son lived and because of an equally steadfast refusal on his part to provide any hints on Jon's and Daenerys' whereabouts, Rhaegar could not find peace. Doubts had always been worse than certainties for the temper of the dragonlord, gnawing him from the inside. He had to know.

The dragon was a beast with three heads. Red or black, it mattered little. To Rhaegar, at least. His father had held a different opinion, and in his youth Aerys had employed considerable energy, and that of his servants to that end. Varys was directed to help in efforts to fight treason, and the last
Blackfyre pretender, Maelys the Monstrous, had been only a pair of deformed skulls for years.

*My father had a different opinion than me about every single thing.*

How a frivolous, yet not so evil-hearted young man in love with artists, flatterers, and a good time become a king more monstrous than Maelys over the years was still a mystery to Rhaegar, Targaryen madness be damned.

*He gave me my first harp.*

*And yet I should have killed him myself the first time he hit Mother.*

But Rhaegar was nine or ten when he first noticed the beatings, and not yet capable of killing anyone. So he learned hiding and pretence as a princely child left to his own devices within the pink-coloured walls of the Red Keep. The first family rule was to do nothing that could disturb Father in his moods.

"A kinslayer is cursed by the gods," his mother had told him. "And possibly killed by the king's servants before his time," Rhaella added. "Listen to me, son, and listen well. He is not the worst husband. And even if he were, he won't live forever. It is said that the cursed ones in our family do not last for long."

After Duskendale, his father had started torturing his enemies in addition to abusing his mother. Depending upon the day, he could very well perceive a boy from Flea Bottom who stole bread to survive as his most dangerous foe.

*I shall never be mad like my father,* Rhaegar swore then and he did it again now, in full knowledge that the outcome of his wishes was beyond his power. Yet he desired it with all his heart. *Others take me, but I would much rather become a wight if I had to choose between two evils…* He hoped he would be spared both.

The curse he used unwittingly in his mind drew a smile to his lips. *My wife would say that, wouldn't she? Others take me…*

*Just as she would choose to reside right here after her passing, in this cold stone, as much as I long for a funeral pyre over my truly dead body one day, not half-alive as Robert ordered it in his never quenched anger.*

The sculpted face of Torrhen Stark in front of Rhaegar's nose looked with disdain at the latest King of Seven Kingdoms from its granite throne. Ageless, it mocked all his wishes from the immutability of death. The old king's judging gaze was strengthened by the heritage of cold and grim determination to endure winter, thousands of years old. House Stark was more like than not older than Valyria, older than dragons and the dragonlords. No one had yet counted the statues of the kings in the lower level of the crypts, nor calculated how far they went in time. *To the Dawn Age, likely, Rhaegar thought. To the Age of Heroes for certain.* A stone direwolf curled protectively around Torrhen's stiff legs. The once rusty sword in his lap was now replaced by a new blade, more powerful one, which had lost its rightful owner.

Rhaegar was not cowed. "Don't stare at me that way," he said reproachfully in the gloom of the crypts of Winterfell. "If you please, accept the courtesy of a dragon for what it is worth. This blade is too heavy for my queen to carry so you will have to tolerate that it was I who brought it in her stead. It belongs to you and it shall stay here until one of your heirs who can wield it is found. It is just and honourable, even you will have to admit that."
His wife was still contemplating the graves of her closest family, those which were still fresh in her heart and her soul. In prayer or in mourning, he did not know. Rhaegar felt inadequate when it came to helping her with that. There was nothing he could say or do to lessen her grief or embellish her memories.

Together they concluded they would leave Ice in the crypts. Torrhen's grave seemed like the safest place, in an alcove somewhat apart from the main hall where carvers and visitors would pass to do their work or honour the most recent dead. It was a safer and a better course of action than when his father had Blackfyre melted into the Iron Throne years after Ser Barristan defeated Maelys in Stepstones and brought the blade of Aegon the Conqueror back to King's Landing. Few people knew of this. Rhaegar wondered if he was the only one alive to be aware of it. The Valyrian steel was damaged in the process because the task was given to pyromancers and not to smiths, to the point that the famous sword of the Targaryens had become just another useless barb in his father's useless throne. Varys must know. The black dragon knows everything.

_Vis me, if you would, the black dragon_... Rhaegar wondered if Varys knew that, but in the few short days he spent in King's Landing before riding north he had found no time to confront him. When I return. Until then he had to hope that Varys and Connington were going to keep each other in check and not burn the city to dust.

Rhaegar was now alone with Torrhen Stark and he gave in to foolish urge to ask the dead king a question of his own, not knowing if he would ever have another opportunity.

"Why did you kneel to us?" he asked of the likeness of Torrhen Stark, impassive and brooding with grey, granite eyes.

There would be no answer, obviously. The statues talked even less than the dragons, who could plant hints and images of words and notions in their riders' heads, in vague and fluid contours and colours... There was no way to tell where the rider's thoughts ended and those of his dragon began and Rhaegar was utterly fascinated by the experience. Now, he had more to say out loud.

"I was taught you knelt to the dragons, and I believed it, before I ever loved a wolf or saw a living, winged dragon with my own eyes," he insisted in speaking to dead Torrhen on his stony throne, "Now I doubt that was your only reason to kneel, or the only reason for the dragons to bring no fire and blood to your lands, despite all your talk of independence and treason since the time of Aegon the Conqueror... My mad father was right that you always wanted to go free of the south. You could have withdrawn into your mountains and resisted us longer than Dorne. Why kneel, I am asking you? Why? What did you ask for and what did Aegon promise?"

When Daenerys sailed back home to Westeros over the narrow sea, the warlocks followed her from Qarth, wishing to take her dragons. But a large pack of wolves and other animals, led by Arya's wolf, Nymeria, descended upon them and feasted on their flesh, blue from the essence of nightshade, before they could weave a spell to harm the dragons.

The statue winked. After a moment it shrugged and smiled mildly at Rhaegar as if it was telling him politely he should discover the reasons Torrhen may have had to kneel on his own. Rhaegar waved the lantern he was carrying. Nothing moved.

_Just as I thought. The trick of the light._

_I am seeing things in my weariness..._

Rhaegar made a step back, wishing to rejoin Lyanna. As he did that, he almost toppled over the snout of the dragon, who was lying behind him, dead still. So still that he could not even sense his
"Drogon!" he yelled in amused displeasure, projecting his feelings to the dragon. "How have you entered? I didn't take you for an earth-drilling wyrm!"

Drogon had somehow crept in from the lower levels of the crypts, his long body thinned and snakelike in order to succeed. The only unbendable part of him appeared to be the long, sharp black teeth in his maw. The place where he had entered the tombs of the Starks was lost deep down in the darkness he had crawled out from, not visible to Rhaegar.

"You didn't tear down the walls of this place of sacred rest, did you?" Rhaegar was worried. The Kings of Winter had no love for him and they might lay a curse on Drogon or both of them if sacrilege was committed. *I have heard enough curses and prophecies for one lifetime.* In his later years, the king was not prone to believe in them as he was in his youth. He believed in his own strength to do good, and that of his fellow men, but some divinations about the future were difficult to ignore. Lady Jenny… *I am pleased to have met you, real or not, and I will not fear your words for all men must die.*

The blackness of Drogon's mind oozed into Rhaegar's. Sad and grieving for a loss he would not share with the king, the dragon let his rider know that their sister-wife's dead were left to rest in peace. The dragons, the scaled ones, the beasts, regarded themselves as brothers and sisters, and they extended the same courtesy to their human riders and their close kin, no matter their blood, Rhaegar had learned. Sister-wife was Drogon's new notion. The dragon had been clever enough to learn that Lyanna was a very different sister to Rhaegar than Daenerys.

"Then what are you up to, dragon?" Rhaegar asked. *Why have you crawled in here? We shall be flying out soon. You are not made for closed spaces and neither am I. For twenty years I walked on open roads and on the Path of Faith. No dragonpit for us... What of my letter, dragon? Have you delivered it? The one I could not entrust to a mere raven? For I also have the dead that need be honoured..."

The dragon yawned and stifled a gasp of fire. Drogon had yet to fail to do Rhaegar's bidding since he accepted him as his second rider, so the king rightfully took his silence as a confirmation of accomplishment.

Solemnly, Drogon exhaled a tiny puff of black fire into Torrhen, landing crumbs of black crystalline dust on the shoulders of the dead king, as a dragon-cloak of sorts. *Honour the dead,* he echoed Rhaegar's thoughts without elaborating which dead it had on its own vast mind, young by the years of the world, yet ancient by the memories of his race he somehow inherited and carried. In the flicker of the lantern it seemed to Rhaegar that the dead king recoiled before mustering his fear and nodding, approvingly, to the dragon, whose head and maw were now greater than his rider.

"See," Rhaegar said, "the beast can be reverent as well when it wishes."

"Rhaegar?" His wife's normally strong and stern voice sounded weak from the far end of her crypt. "Come back with the lantern, would you? I do not mind sitting in the dark, but now I should walk back. There will be castle business to attend before supper."

Swiftly, he was away, the light in his hands about to follow the light of his life, forgetting the dead kings and leaving Drogon to let himself out the way he came.

"I'm here," he called to Lyanna half the way down the crypt. He felt whole when she intertwined her arm around his own, so much smaller and yet so much stronger than him in many aspects. She survived with the grief of thinking both him and Jon dead while he was blessed with the loss of
memory. It was a mercy he didn't deserve.

Together they stumbled into the cold, snow-covered yard of Winterfell where no one was waiting for them. It felt liberating in comparison to the constant escort Rhaegar was used to in the Red Keep or even now, on the road north. And despite that he did not feel loved in the crypts, not at all, Rhaegar didn't fear for his life, or for the life of his wife and unborn child, for the first time since they were reunited.

"You will be safe here," he said, "safer than Elia ever was with my father."

"You are leaving now," she said with surprise and unease.

"Yes," he never bothered to lie to her. "Will you be alright or am I deceiving myself again?"

"The southron lordlings and the Stark bannermen will go into inevitable fights over everything, but I think I can handle it," his wife said. "In a few more weeks I will no longer be sick and my usual forces will return."

And you will grow heavy with child, Rhaegar thought, remembering those few happy months in Dorne two decades ago when Lyanna started showing with Jon, when he still thought war could be avoided and was the happiest man on earth.

"Who is taking care of the castle?" he asked.

"I am, I suppose," she said curtly. "I was bred to take care of someone's castle. I will see to the necessary appointments."

Rhaegar embraced his wife as tightly as he dared. "You have me there," he admitted.

"You can hold me," she said, "I won't fall apart just because I'm pregnant."

After several hours of hassle and prattle over accommodations and food, he found himself fed and in a room with his wife, realising he had never entered Winterfell's Great Keep before, the citadel, the heart of the castle, the city within the city. It was granite-built like the crypts, and the view from its high windows was magnificent.

"Do you still remember where we first met?" he asked.

"It was in those woods, just there," she pointed through their window at the dark spot in an even darker forest. "I will show you in spring. Now all woods look the same."

After Rhaenys' birth, when Elia feigned to be pregnant with Aegon, Aerys allowed, or rather, forced Rhaegar to travel through all of his kingdoms, on an errand to know his friends and even more so his enemies. He bid him see the rebel North for himself and hear the talk of secession in disguise. Rhaegar remembered losing a good part of the year on the road. As a dutiful son he avoided Winterfell and lingered in Wintertown with his escort, all dressed as hedge knights. And he met a girl learning the lance in the woods, despite the deep snows at the end of winter. The girl stood up to him and challenged him. He imagined she would be exactly the same, indomitable, had she known who he was. Unknowingly, he had met his queen. It was not exactly what Father intended.

"When will you be going?" his queen asked.

"At first light," he admitted. "The night is not a good time to travel. The woods are shrieking and the smallfolk are afraid with good reason. I don't want to add the cry of the flying dragon to their fears."
"Alone?"

"No," he said, "I'm taking my brother with me."

Strangely, it was Drogon who suggested Sandor Clegane be present for the parley with Stannis, before Rhaegar would inevitably think of the same.

"Shouldn't you take more men?" she remarked. "Stannis won't be alone."

"I thought about it the entire last day of riding," he said, "and decided against it. I do not want to burden Drogon during flight through the storm we saw raging on the way to Castle Black. I only want to know what they did to our son."

"Will you at least be wearing armour, my love?" she asked in cold blood, never once asking him to stay, nor showing any woman's weakness. "There were archers in the Twins. We have little time until your departure."

"I guess so," he said, more to humour her than for wanting one, "I suppose that in the place where I am going now, black armour will be more than appropriate."

"I'll have someone inform my niece and her husband."

The precious hours they had left together were not lost only in adjusting pieces of mail to his aging body. They never called for a servant or a squire, savouring every last moment of privacy. As it turned, armouring could prove as interesting as undressing, in the right company.

"I wish I still had time to play for you," Rhaegar whispered before putting on the helm. But the harp was already on Drogon's back, as was his sword and his bastard lance, and the saddlebag with the horn of dragonlords.

It had been years since Rhaegar wore full body armour, complete with some horrible red plumage on his helm, favoured by some of his ancestors, and the breastplate with rubies which the Trident took and brought back, as it had taken and brought back his life. A thick red cape fell from his shoulders, and he knew that the wool used to be grey before Lyanna had it dyed for him. A wolf cloak to fit on the dragon. He smiled at her and was further speechless. Last time they parted, it had nearly been forever.

"I will not say farewell this time," Lyanna said, squeezing his left arm fiercely, "for I expect you to be back." Yet she didn't follow him out of their chamber and he knew, growing weary in his heart, that she was either too sick with the new babe or was going to cry when he didn't see her.

With memories of such farewell as he had gotten from his wonderful, grumpy, pregnant wife, Rhaegar started his descent to the yard. Nervous, he flexed and unflexed his left arm, his sword arm, his lance arm, feeling the ghost of his wife's touch through mail and boiled leather. He could wield any weapon passably with his right arm, but when he stood at the end of the lists with a lance in his left arm, there were few opponents who would remain in saddle. That was probably true even now, twenty years after the last tourney he rode in.

_I'm on my way to find my horse and my dog_, he quipped inwardly as he clinked down the stair of the Winterfell's Great Keep. He would never even think such a thing in their presence, for he held both of them in great esteem, but the comparison helped lighten his invariably somber mood.

The Hound was already out in the yard, in his own mail with dog's helm and ready to go. Rhaegar wondered where he had left his wife and how their parting was, but knew better than to ask for it. His brother had his own sense of honour, but he also had a temper.
"I'm sorry," Rhaegar told him through the slit of the fancy old helm he donned, "I know it's too soon."

The Hound shrugged. "You don't hear me asking to stay," he said. "The sooner we go, the sooner we are back."

Rhaegar wished he could share this somewhat brutal optimism, but since he had the rare pleasure of meeting Jenny of Oldstones, he always wondered when his hour would come and if he would be able to recognise it. A time to die wisely.

Drogon shrieked, plummeting from the night sky, informing the two men in his own way it was time to go.

Flying north was not pleasant at all.

The storm on the way to Castle Black never ceased as if some magic did not want Rhaegar to go there, yet it only succeeded in making the king more determined to arrive, and, unwisely, more irascible.

His dragon didn't fare any better. Drogon was wild, thrashing with his tail left and right, breaking in and out of the clouds and swatting away the gusts of rain as a cow would a fly. The animal hated the storm and its maker if there was one. Yet for all his moodiness and sadness, he didn't want to fly to Daenerys, that much was obvious. The beast seemed stuck with Rhaegar for better or for worse, for reasons which remained entirely obscure and his own.

Suit yourself if you don't want to talk, Rhaegar launched an onslaught of thoughts at the annoyed dragon, gods know that humans sometimes don't. Maybe it is not so different for you.

There was only one good thing about the dragon's erratic flight pattern; miraculously, it kept them almost dry. They would not drown, nor cook in the armour.

When they approached the Wall, the dragon engulfed him in a new feeling that Rhaegar would never have expected from him.

Drogon was afraid.

"Of what?" Rhaegar said, earning a bemused look from Sandor Clegane who ignored both the flying endeavour and the ungodly weather by sharpening his sword on dragonback. Straddling the dragon behind Rhaegar, he leaned on the spike before him for support, and not on the one behind, as if he were suffering from some strange hurt in his giant back.

"Your beast is restless," the Hound said. It was not a question.

"You can tell?"

"I know when I'm riding a wild horse," Sandor Clegane remarked flatly and Rhaegar almost laughed, remembering the Hound's horse, Stranger, knowing his brother was most likely not at ease with riding a dragon, who was for his part not at ease with arriving to the Wall. He, Rhaegar Targaryen, wasn't afraid, and for a change he was not besieged by doubts. He knew exactly what he needed to ask cousin Stannis.

Mongrel-brother, Drogon suggested a new name for the Hound, showing the image of feral dogs running after and not before a herd of wild horses.

"My dearest beast doesn't appreciate being compared to a horse," Rhaegar informed the Hound.
Horse. Rhaegal. Drogon thought absurdly, landing them brusquely and on his own accord in a pitiful village within the sight of the Wall, from the sky, at least. The dragon coiled the rear part of his great body, well behind Rhaegar and the Hound, with shame.

Rhaegar looked around, searching for the reason of his dragon's odd behaviour. The settlement was abandoned, but not long ago. Many doors gaped open, leading into dwellings which were more under than above the ground. There was no smoke rising from the hearths, but the firewood was still there, as were some dishes and other possessions of the people.

"Where have they all gone?" Rhaegar wondered, hating the desolation.

Drogon suggested very strongly there were safe mole ways to reach the dragonpit made of ice.

*I will not crawl to my cousin Stannis,* Rhaegar told Drogon, *or he will think me weaker than I am.*

The blackness in his mind conceded, terrified, genuinely and truly so.

*I am not afraid,* he told the dragon, never leaving his back.

*You should be,* Drogon was of the opinion as he rose again in flight, fearing what was ahead. In a blink of an eye, they landed in Castle Black. The fortress was unprotected from the south and some of its towers were leaning on the blue-looking Wall of ice.

*My son's command.*

*Blue as the winter roses his mother loves so well.*

The closer look at the towers revealed them to be rough as the North and in need of repairs. Yet there was an undeniable beauty to the place just like Lyanna, his lovely Northwoman, was unmatched in fairness in her husband's eyes.

All fortress was lined up to meet them despite the very early hour of the day so the dragon must have been seen approaching. Five figures stood foremost in the courtyard, two women and three men, planted in front of dense ranks of mounted knights and well-armed footmen, mingled with the black brothers of the Watch. Rhaegar's gaze wondered idly to one of the two women; in red silks she looked like a screaming stain of fresh blood sullying the paleness of the earth. The smoke from the towers betrayed they were manned as well.

Drogon recoiled again, imperceptibly, but Rhaegar wished him to stand his ground, so the dragon did, folding his wings behind his rider's back. The snow melted, boiled and fumed under his clawed legs, while the beast's attention was divided between the red woman and the Wall behind her. Rhaegar wondered which of the two was provoking his fear. *Him, close,* the dragon admonished his rider about the Hound. Rhaegar wanted to inquire why or close to whom, to Drogon or to himself but an annoying sensation that his own thoughts were being watched stopped him from thinking them.

*The red woman,* Rhaegar had heard about her, he realised. Lord Frey mentioned her. He took a better look at the lady in her silks and satins. She caused him no lasting impression, neither of beauty nor of fear.

"Cousin," he addressed Stannis. The tall young man he remembered became hollow and gaunt over the years. Yet his tall, stiff spine was unbent, and his dark blue eyes shone more determined than ever.

Stannis gave him no acknowledgement. He was of Lyanna's age and more stubborn than her, a rare
achievement in Rhaegar's opinion.

"Your courtesy is less of late," Rhaegar estimated. "Is this a way to greet a kinsman you have believed dead?"

"Have you come to face judgement for your crimes?" his cousin was apt in dispensing justice, it seemed.

"What crimes?" Rhaegar reacted, wondering what Stannis had in mind. Leaving Elia and children in good faith with his father, believing he had enough reason left to send them to Dragonstone with mother and Viserys as they agreed? Falling in love and taking the second queen in the old Targaryen way and against the usage of the Seven? Being blinded by jealousy and unable to parley with Robert on the Trident to avoid bloodshed?

Stannis hurried up to enlighten him.

"The Mad King's son and the Mad Dog of Saltpans. One rapist goes well with another," he said, tight-lipped, spying on Rhaegar and his shield for reaction. Rhaegar's blood boiled at the infamy. If only you knew, cousin.

The Hound remained as impassive as ever, completely untouched by the allusion to Saltpans, whose burning he had spent digging graves behind Rhaegar's monk cottage on the Quiet Isle. The only change in his shield's demeanour was a subtle shift of position; he made a tiny step forward to better stand between Rhaegar and possible harm in the case of need.

They are expecting me to do something, Rhaegar thought. Yet this is not the Trident and I will not be vain nor goaded into making another mistake. Drogon's fear reached its peak. The dragon fought a heroic battle with himself to stay lying lazily behind them where he would have wanted to fly somewhere thousands leagues away from Castle Black. The dragon rolled as close as he could to Rhaegar and his shield, as if the animal soul had need of human protection at that moment, from a curse or a power that would predate on his strength. Sorcery, Rhaegar thought. Sorcery, Drogon considered the word and its implications. By his reaction, it was a new concept for the dragon.

Sorcery, Drogon reverberated thinking of the Wall and its top, shining vaguely in weak daylight. And then he oozed another wordless sensation which was the cause of his fear and distraction, from the beginning.

Evil, Rhaegar finally understood, there is evil at work here, but where exactly and why am I untouched by it if the dragon is?

The silence of Castle Black seemed deafening.

"I'm not here to talk about the past," Rhaegar said, wishing to reconcile with Stannis, if that was possible. "I'm here to talk about my son. You know him as Jon Snow. His mother named him Jon after one of the old Kings of Winter. Where is he? Ravens brought news to the south he was elected Lord Commander here. Has he gone ranging?"

Stannis had no answer to that. "I am the King of the Seven Kingdoms," he stated, "not a black crow to know the fate of one of them, be it the last of the new recruits or the Lord Commander."

A once fat man with red cheeks moved forward and stuttered unconvincingly. "L...l...l...ord Snow is lost."

"Lost how?" the dragon was almost having seven heads in Rhaegar's ruined chest now and they were all spitting fire. He was coming dangerously close to wishing the flames swallow all Castle
Black and men who lied to him about his son. And that wish may have been the dragon's command had Rhaegar not remembered with self-loathing the burning tower at the Twins. He could not desire the flames, not ever, not in that way.

There was something else wrong. All around them were soldiers, in armour, furs or blacks. By the looks of it, Stannis gathered his own men, some Northmen and the Watch behind his new banner with the fiery heart. His red woman wore a content expression. Rhaegar swallowed his anger and believed that her satisfaction lessened. *What is it to you if I lose my temper?* He was all of a sudden certain she could hear his thoughts without a single drop of dragon-blood in her veins. Or, strangely, if he leaned closer to Sandor Clegane, it felt as if she could not. His shield was not only protecting his body, but also the inviolability of his mind.

The red-faced man wanted to say something again. *Murderer!* Drogon's consciousness thundered inside Rhaegar's with that face and three more faces, gathered above his own face as he lay sprawled in the snow, dying, blood seeping from his body and into the white mantle covering the earth. He searched the ranks of the Watch for the remaining three men he had seen in the memory that was not his. *It must be Jon's memories…*

"You, you, and you," he said in a commanding voice, pointing at them. "Step forward. You as well," he beckoned to the red-faced black brother who spoke.

"Lord Marsh," cousin Stannis said, "you do not have to abide the orders of this pretender. He lost any right to the Seven Kingdoms the day my brother Robert cast him into the Trident."

At that, Drogon exhaled a jet of black smoke of sulphurous stinky flames at their impolite hosts. The ugly, long-eared woman next to Stannis coughed. At his cousin's reprimanding look, she immediately recomposed herself, trying to look regal. *Florent, you married a Florent, cousin.*

"Are you such cowards?" Rhaegar asked the black brothers with renewed arrogance, that which he was born with before the life on the Quiet Isle thoroughly wiped it out, spurred on by rage. "The Watch serves no king. The quarrel my cousin has with me is not yours. I merely want to see your faces." He felt murderous when they obeyed. *They murdered my son in cold blood because he didn't run his command as it pleased them.* If it weren't for the dragons and something else... another intervention Drogon could not explain to Rhaegar in any way the beast tried, Jon would be well and truly dead, and they had all the intent to make it so.

The four men unwillingly did as they were bid.

"What is the punishment of your order for murdering your commander?" Rhaegar asked.

"We have done no such thing," Marsh tried to lie with more courage, Rhaegar had to give him that. "Lord Snow insisted to lead a ranging to Hardhome. He was lost. It is winter. He should never have let in the wildlings…"

The word wildlings finally brought a stark, unembellished clarity into Rhaegar's convulsive mind. The wildlings, they were missing, that was wrong. The castle should be buzzing with families, not merely filled up with men-at-arms. That village should have been full like Wintertown.

"Speaking of which, where are the wildlings?" Rhaegar wondered.

"They left," Lord Marsh said in a more assured voice of one believing to have the right in that, at least, "they didn't want our hospitality."

"And you let them?" Rhaegar asked, incredulous. "What kind of fools are you? Do you know what
is out there? Some of those Others have already crossed into the Seven Kingdoms. I wish I knew how and why if the Wall still stands as I see that it does."

"I may know why," the red woman said, smooth and treacherous. It was the first time she spoke. "When Lord Snow erroneously allowed the second wave of wildlings in, they each brought a thread of mist on them. And the mist went south and took form. It is well that they left and the mists with them. Or there would be more Others roaming the realm of His Grace King Stannis. The wildlings belong out there with the servants of the Great Other. They cannot be helped."

"Oh, can't they?" Rhaegar exclaimed, "And I shall take your word for it? You said it yourself, you might know. But you do not know for certain, do you? Where did they go?"

It was a vain question, he knew even before he finished speaking. No one present knew or cared where the wildlings went. They were happy to see good riddance of them.

"We swore a vow to protect the realm," Bowen Marsh said. "We sealed the gates. No one goes in and out in Castle Black."

"In that case," Rhaegar muttered, "we'll have to find a place where you can go in and out."

Rhaegar had seen a white walker in the riverlands when he still thought himself a monk. The creature was bending over him of all other people it could have taken, looking every bit as if it was after his blood. The king's blood. And it turned into mist only after the Hound unwittingly pierced it with a talisman made of dragonglass. Rhaegar didn't think anyone would believe him here if he told them the story. Sometimes he didn't believe it himself.

"Cousin," he had to ask one last thing, "my wife believes you have rescued her nephew, a red-haired boy of nine, called Rickon, who goes around with the black direwolf."

Stannis unsheathed a burning sword. The flames were red and the sword glew with blazing heat, yet it was not nearly as hot as dragonfire, of that, Rhaegar was certain.

"Your fire burns less hot than mine," a purely scholarly observation was out of his mouth before he thought twice about it, and it angered Stannis further.

"Lord Stark is my honoured guest," Stannis said, gritting his teeth. The almost bald, reasonable looking man next to him spared a quick glance for the lower levels of the Wall.

"An honoured guest of your dungeons, you mean," Rhaegar chanced a guess. The dragonpit of ice, he realised where the dragon wanted to take them from the empty village where they first landed. Drogon could sneak in, just like he entered the crypts of Winterfell, but now it was too late.

Stannis didn't deny the dungeon assumption, bellowing with a righteous rage. "You will have to burn us all to steal the poor boy for your unjust cause. He is held with other hostages as befits his station. Their blood will be on you if any of them perish when you cowardly unleash the dragon."

"Where is the cowardice in taking after my forefathers?" Rhaegar couldn't help but wonder. "I am a dragonrider and a dragonlord. It is my birthright. What is yours?" he asked foolishly, knowing the answer he was likely to get before he ever asked.

"I am the lawful King of Seven Kingdoms, and you lost your birthright on the Trident," Stannis said, readjusting a circlet with little tongues of fire he wore on his square head, with short cut remnants of black-blue hair under it. Perfectly cropped beard hid the tightness of his jaw. "Bend the knee!"

Rhaegar removed his helm and let his mane of silver hair spill freely. It had grown thicker than ever
this winter. Let them remember my face clearly.

"I deferred to my father in the past," he told Stannis in the iron voice of reason. "I shall not bow to you. How can I? Your brother welcomed the murder of my wife and children, commanded by one of my father's best friends from his youth. No, Stannis... I will not chance that you do the same. Cousin, be reasonable. Let us work together in winter and discuss the intricacies of lawfulness in succession in spring in King's Landing. I bear no ill will to you or the House Baratheon. We have ties of blood."

A long sigh of relief escaped Bowen Marsh. Murderer, Drogon thundered, thirsty for fire and blood. Rhaegar was an inch away from allowing the suggestion that Drogon burn Jon's killers to consume his own mind, but he was instantly held back by a moment of compassion, not only his, and certainly not Drogon's. Green. Rhaegal's. My son's dragon? Drogon neither agreed nor disagreed. Jon wouldn't want them to burn, or die. He only wished that they were loyal to him, as sworn brothers should be.

"Lord Marsh," he said, "believe me when I say that I do know what you did and that next time you defy a dragonlord he may not be as patient as I am now."

"Enough!" cousin Stannis was becoming impatient. "Leave now or I shall strike you with Lightbringer and finish what Robert started!"

"Would you be called kinslayer?" Rhaegar retorted, and was surprised to see Stannis wince. "I have done you no harm." Or are you already one, cousin? What is one murder more in that case?

"The stag is rearing when he should run like a hare," the Hound observed, "I could cut him down for you. It wouldn't be the first time I cut in two a lord with a burning sword. Though I reckon that you are more than able to do it yourself, Your Grace. Lord Stannis is famous for surviving on rats and onions, not for brandishing a sword."

"No one will cut anyone today," Rhaegar said, tired of foolishness and stubbornness, feeling every one of his four and forty name days many times over. "We have more pressing matters than sparring."

He couldn't help adding one thing before he turned his back on Stannis, black armour clinking, cape waving in the wind.

"Cousin, Lord Marsh, do me this kindness and give my love to my son if you see him before I do. I trust he won't be long in returning to his command."

With that, he stormed away, on his human feet, seething. His mind had always worked better on the move. Where did the people go from Castle Black? East or west or north? Drogon could not fly over the Wall to scout, the dragon let him know that much during the unsuccessful parley, or he would seriously harm himself. He could perish or be ill and weak for months. There was old magic or sorcery imbibed in the Wall so that monsters could not cross it either way. Whoever had weaved the spell in the past had clearly been wise to include dragons in the list of monsters. It was not only the height of the Wall which protected the Seven Kingdoms; it was the magic keeping the blocks of ice together. But you can fly around it and go north from either eastern or western shore?

Yes, but not too far into the lands. Dragon's thoughts incessantly merged with Rhaegar's, in search of a way to save the people lost in the cold.

What's a realm without men and what kind of king would take the lands, and abandon the people to their death?
The last thought was again neither his nor Drogon's. Rhaegar shook his head in a vain attempt to empty it, but the queer image of the Night's King remained.

The king made another few long strides forward before he felt almost calm.

The Hound was right behind him. "Do you think Stannis ever fucked anyone except his wife?" he asked.

"I suppose so," Rhaegar said, trying to sound indifferent though he was unsettled by his brother's choice of conversation. "Most men did."

"I suppose you're right," Sandor Clegane said, "in my case, now I wish I didn't. All that was before was a waste of time."

Rhaegar had nothing to say to that.

"Maybe it was a mistake to leave Stannis and his men be," the Hound fortunately changed the topic, "but at least he seems decided to defend Castle Black against anything if he stood up to the dragon. You couldn't have left a better commander there."

The clatter of hooves interrupted all talk, and the Hound's right arm was on his greatsword. A rider in bronze armour approached them shyly from behind. He wore a strange emblem on his chest, a bronze disk in flames... Lyanna might have recognised it. Rhaegar didn't.

"Tormund and the people," the rider said, waving north, beyond the Wall. "Sigorn knows. Do you wish to know, Magnar, king, father of Jon?"

"Yes," Rhaegar said, interested. They could use a guide, provided he was not a spy. He didn't look like one. Father above, when I am to judge a man, let me do it justly.

"They go west," the man waved again. "Behind Shadow Tower there are mountains. Maybe people live there for winter. Or fight the Bridge of Skulls and go back in. Magnar knows not Tormund's will."

"Come with us," Rhaegar said, magnanimous, taking the risk of believing... Sigorn.

"With him?" Magnar objected, averting his eyes from the Hound.

"Yes, why not?" Rhaegar reacted. "He's a man as you and me."


"I am merely stronger than you," the Hound rasped sweetly, "but I kill for my king now and he has not yet wished for you to die."

"How far could they have gone?" Rhaegar inquired.

"Near the Shadow Tower, not in Tower," Magnar judged. "The Thennis walk on Wall all night, every night. The Thennis burn fires on the Wall when the red witch is not looking. The free folk torches move west over the plains and the fires on the Wall keep the cold winds away, the cold winds blowing from the northeast. But soon the torches must go north into the mountains, away from the fires. And then, soon no torches."

Rhagar climbed on Drogon's back again. Faster than the king and his shield in leaving Castle Black,
the dragon was waiting for them under a large, lonely oak, with a gaping, threatening face carved into it. The face looked unnatural to the king, on a tree that wasn't white. The Hound followed his example, but their new informant did not.

"Are you coming, wildling?" the Hound asked. "Or are you afraid I will eat you in your sleep?"

"I… I…" the wildling lacked words to express his reticence. "Sigorn no goodbye to wife."

"No time for that, Sigorn" the Hound retorted, "We haven't said goodbye to our wives either."

"We save Tormund and go back?"

"Save Tormund and go back," Rhaegar agreed. Somehow he thought that his son would never forgive him if he left those wildlings to their fate, not if he could have done anything to help them. Moreover, he didn't think he would forgive himself.

_Drogon, Rhaegar thought, take us back south to where Mance Rayder and Aegon are also travelling to the Shadow Tower, just like the free folk._

_So it has come to this, sooner than I thought._

Rhaegar knew there was only one army he could hope to bring that far northwest on time, before the cold winds caught up with this Tormund and his people, an army whose soldiers didn't care so much for either the roughness of transport nor its speed. And it was the army he didn't trust and he never meant to use in battle, not truly.

_Euron Greyjoy and his dead._

Chapter End Notes

As always thank you so much to all of you who commented and keep commenting and to all those who left a kudos, followed or bookmarked this story. Thank you for reading. Next one up - Daenerys.
Daenerys

Chapter Notes

New chapter, new olifant.

Huge thanks to DrHolland for selfless beta work on this chapter in a busy period of real life. Thanks to TopShellCrazy from preventing me from deleting my profile and my presence from this site. Thank you to everyone who commented, bookmarked or followed the story.

Comments especially feed the author)

Parts of this were most definitely inspired by the song "Cold Arms" by Mumford And Sons

Daenerys

She had never undone her tokar faster, and that without any help from her maids.

The truth be told, she shouldn't have put it on at all. But somehow the girl in her imagined Jon would love to see her pretty and then call her the most beautiful woman in the world.

Swifter than lightning in the stormy sky above her ship, Daenerys was back in her dirty white wools from travel, spending only one precious moment to feel the faint odour of sweat, hers and… his.

From being dragon-flown home by my handsome nephew...

She reemerged on the deck after the forceful effort of changing. Her ship was swerving with the motion of men readying for battle. Ser Barristan and Grey Worm were choosing the first companies to land in Hardhome. She nodded at them with encouragement, for they didn't seem to require her approval. They are following Rhaegar's son, she realised, and she found it pleasing that her people took Jon immediately for who he was.

The dragons have returned, she thought with satisfaction. As did the wolves, she added for good measure of justice. Jon had a wolf in him, no one could deny it.

In the deep, narrow bay near the old ruined human settlement of Hardhome, on the craggy beach under the high, cavernous cliff, hundreds, no, thousands of wildlings were now being attacked by the great army of wights, driven forward in frenzy by one of their cold masters. The Other rode a giant ice spider on top of the cliff, just above the caves hollowed in its stony entrails. The scene appeared unreal; a tale of terror come to life.

Dany looked for Jon. Her nephew paced the deck alone, always looking up. She pushed herself forward through the crowd of people to go to him. Before she could reach him, he ran to the prow of the ship, and gazed further up, now much closer to the mass of clouds in the dark-grey sky above.

The sea and the sky had the same colour this far north and Daenerys suddenly found it beautiful. When have I ever loved grey?
Jon must have been trying to call Rhaegal to him, which was by no means an easy task in the first days of riding a dragon. Dany had learned that lesson very well when she was alone with Drogon in the hills behind Meereen. Back then, she had paced in the wilderness, fasting and drinking water from the streams, followed from afar by a dazed dragon who wouldn't let her ride him again, nor abandon her to her fate.

Now she sometimes thought she would have never become Drogon's rider if he hadn't flown to her aid when her life was in peril in the fighting pit of Meereen. There at least was a pattern one could trust the living dragon with, when all knowledge and experience failed.

Dragons would not let their chosen riders perish and they could and would cross great distances in order to do so, whenever they sensed their rider was in great trouble and danger for his life.

Drogon had done just this for Dany and for Rhaegar, Viserion for Ser Jaime, and Rhaegal had nearly died to save Jon. How the dragons knew when to act was a different question, one that not even Daenerys, their mother, could answer with authority.

Or maybe her trust was misplaced and the dragons did not always come to rescue their riders. Dany had just had a close brush with death in the Lands of Always Winter. She had known this to be truth in her bones, and yet Drogon did not return to her… unless he somehow knew Rhaegal and Jon were up to the task. But that would mean attributing too much cleverness to a beast, and though the dragons were rather special animals, Dany didn't dare hope they were that reliable…

But Jon, Jon… He not only picked her up when she felt her body turn into jelly, he somehow mastered his disbelief and perhaps even anger about having the blood of the dragon, and brought them both safely to her flagship. As a result, her young girl's heart had been stuck in her throat ever since she was stirred back to the waking state on her silks, alone among her trusted Dothraki maids and blood riders.

*Rhaenys*, the ship was called, for Rhaegar's dead girl. Since the first three vessels she sacrificed to conquer Meereen, Daenerys never named another ship for the dead dragons. *The living dragons will frighten my enemies now, and not the names of the ones long gone.*

A drum started rumbling lazily under her feet. The beat was slow at first, and then it increased in speed. *The fighting men won't go anywhere without oarsmen.* Dany realised there was one more thing she could and *should* do before following Jon. She hurried below deck and climbed on a barrel next to the drummer to look taller.

"These people, these *creatures* riding ice spiders in this land," she proclaimed with passion to the former slaves who called her mother and rowed willingly for her, in both the bastard Valyrian of the Free Cities and that of the Slaver's Bay. "They *enslave* those they kill, in a twice evil fate. You have it in your hands to spare thousands from it."

She started backward as soon as she finished speaking. *It won't do if I let Jon fly away by himself.*

The *Rhaenys* rolled steadily forward. The oars sliced the waves faster than the beat of the drum could follow; the joint human intent to conquer proving itself stronger than the sea and the adverse winds. Dany felt a knot in her tummy from the devotion of her people. *I hope and I pray to all the gods who listen that I didn't lead you to a destiny worse than what awaited you as slaves.*

She was behind Jon in almost no time. All his attention was still on the skies and he didn't see her. Which was alright, because she suspected he might disapprove of what she intended to do.

*The Mother of Dragons will not be left behind to wait for her husband. I am no longer Khaleesi of*
the Great Grass Sea who has worth only as long as her khal lives and has to join the widows of dosh khaleen when he dies to live like a shadow until her own death.

It struck her that she just thought of Jon as her husband, which was uncalled for. Nothing was ever spoken between them; there was only the current of unmistakable desire and her sudden confession of love.

Daenerys bit her tongue and bit her soul and waited, more quiet and withdrawn than was her wont. Jon had reacted to her admission with shame.

When Rhaegal finally reappeared from the clouds, Rhaenys came as close to land as she could without becoming stranded. The boats were being lowered to the water. Ser Barristan and Grey Worm were the first ones to board them, each commanding twenty of the best fighters in a separate boat. The tiny vessels could not hold more armed men. And there were about thirty such boats on various ships of Dany's fleet scattered over the wild seas, calling to Hardhome behind Rhaenys with uneven speed. It would take time before sufficient numbers of fighting men could reach the shore, and this could be the undoing of those who went first.

Jon looked into Rhaegal's bronze eye, his brow wrinkled from the effort to convince him into something. But if he thought he would be going up there all alone, with that strange, unreliable sword as a weapon, he couldn't be more wrong. Daenerys could not hold a sword straight in a fight, but she had seen her share of bloodshed and was more acquainted with dragons. This has to count for something.

Rhaegal lowered one leg to the deck, allowing Jon up. As soon as he began climbing, before Dany could follow, much faster than she expected, the dragon lifted its talon and flapped the wings, once, twice, about to leave. She was too late!

Looking desperately around she noticed for the first time that the tokar was trailing on the floor behind her. The edge of the baby pearl fringes adorning the garment became stuck into the laces of the white wool trousers she wore and she never saw it in her hurry.

Dany grabbed the yellow rope of silk and rushed forward. She barely got hold of Rhaegal's tail, still hitting the deck in irregular strokes as the dragon was taking flight. Faster than she ever thought possible, she tied one end of the tokar around it and tightened the other around herself. Then she grasped the warm, spiked, green and bronze snake and feared for dear life. The dragon almost hit a mast with his tail before clearing the ship, but Dany was able to rock forward with it and avoid it.

She wished she could talk to Rhaegal as she could to Drogon, but she only vaguely sensed the presence of the dragon's enormous, green being. He will reveal himself more freely only to Jon.

_Drogon, where are you? Will you ever come back to me?_ Now, in the sky, out of the cursed northern lands and above the open sea, Daenerys thought she could feel the enormous black sadness of her dragon reverberate leagues and leagues away from her. That she could feel anything at all about him gave her hope. _Just look after my brother, will you?_ she asked of Drogon. _Until we all meet one day._

Flying on a dragon's tail would have been a dizzying experience if she hadn't been riding one so often in the past. This way, it was formidable, but she was able to handle it. The dates and lemon water she ingested threatened to leave her body through her mouth. She allowed her muscles to relax, no matter what the dragon did with his tail. Giving into the bouncing and slashing movement in the air made her feel much better.

Rhaegal was facing the top of the cliff in no time, before the first boats were even halfway to the
shore. Daenerys expected him to land, but he didn't. Instead, he kept his distance. She craned her neck to see what Jon was doing. To her utmost surprise, her nephew slid down the dragon's neck and horned head, past the puffing nostrils, and crept straight into the dragon's maw, crouching between his sharp, black teeth. Rhaegal moved his snout closer to the rocks. The dragon's entire body spasmed as he did that, as if in tremendous pain.

*Don't be ill again, please,* she thought. *Viserion is not back yet, and Drogon is with Rhaegar. We have need of you.* Her pleading was in vain. Rhaegal could never hear her the way Drogon could, be he her child or not.

And then, just like that, Rhaegal spat Jon out on the cliff, without adding any smoke or fire to his effort. *This is one way to arrive and surprise your enemy,* Dany thought, amazed with her nephew's thinking. Jon scrambled to his feet as soon as he touched the ground and freed the magic sword from the scarf which held it, in place of a proper scabbard. Then, he ripped a piece of it to wrap it around the hilt. *To be able to hold it,* Dany realised. The blade was glowing red.

Rhaegal immediately distanced himself from the shore. *So you can't land,* Dany understood. *Or you will harm yourself again.*

The vast lands beyond the Wall must have been cursed to dragons, just like the Wall itself, protected by old magic which did not allow them to pass. She felt guilty realising Drogon might have suffered as well for his short incursion into the northern territories when he had brought her to Jon, obeying her command.

She was now hanging almost on the tip of Rhaegal's tail, enjoying a perfect view of Jon and the Other and of the bay below where the wights were killing the wildlings who dared resist them, while the weakest among them crowded in the middle of the beach.

A mother with child wanted to walk into water to drown, but another *old* woman with long, grey hair shaped into ice spikes framing her head like sun rays pulled her back.

"They are coming," the woman announced in a visionary tone, "the great ships!"

The boats did not look great at all. Those carrying Ser Barristan and Grey Worm just sailed into the bay, followed by two more.

If she said *Dracaerys,* maybe Rhaegal would listen to his mother's voice and burn the wights, if spitting fire to the shore was not harmful to him. *Or maybe even if it were.*

Be that as it may, the wights were too many. The risk was not all of them would burn, and many wildlings would perish in the same jet of dragonflame. In a close fight of friend and foe, dragonfire was a very volatile and imprecise weapon and Dany did not wish to be the judge of who lived and who died. She pondered what else she could do to help when the coldest voice she had ever heard thundered from the cliff.

"You have taken something that belongs to me," the enemy of ice accused Jon from his spider steed in an unnatural deep voice, slowing the blood flow in Dany's veins. She could repeat to herself all she wanted how she was the blood of the dragon and would not be afraid.

She *was* afraid.

Just as Rhaegal was, she realised, shocked, albeit not of the same. The dragon feared the land cursed against him and his kind, and she the white walker. She wanted to cower, scream and surrender. Ashamed, Dany closed her eyes and thought only about breathing.
When Euron Greyjoy, himself a wight, enslaved Viserion and Rhaegal by abusing the sorcerous horn of dragonlords which was not his to take, he had also attempted to take Daenerys to wife by force. Then all dragons, human and animal, felt loathing, but never fear.

The dragon's tail shook nervously, left and right, with Dany hanging from it as a doll of rags. She was slow to open her eyes. Baby pearls from the tokar glittered in the heavy, dark-grey air, appearing completely out of place. She looked at their play in the wind to better ignore being frightened. The dragon felt powerless as well, and was angry about it.

Unlike Rhaegal, Daenerys did not feel helpless. Only mortally afraid, for her life, and for Jon's… selfishly disregarding in that moment the wildlings fighting for survival below and her people risking their lives to save them…

The spider stomped with four of its eight ice legs, covering Jon with snowflakes from the tips of the hair to toe.

Jon stood his ground, unflinching. Minuscule shards of ice and snow were on him now, and he must have been cold without a cloak. In black wools of the Night's Watch, he held the magic blade forward in his right hand, his burned hand.

"What did I take from you? A mermaid wife?" Jon mocked his opponent, standing attentively in a fighting stance, observing the enemy and not making the first move.

His voice echoed from the stone surface of the cliff, so sharp and jagged and full of tiny crevices that snow and ice did not catch on it very well. Dany hoped this was good. Slippery ground would be more difficult to fight on, wouldn't it? She didn't know, not truly, but she found herself desperately searching for any point of advantage Jon might have.

The rider and his spider dwarfed him. They were smaller than Rhaegal, but together they were at least three times larger than her beloved nephew and his glowing sword. And somehow, Dany did not trust that blade, not fully. She was the first one to have it in her hands, and it seemed to her that the magic sword had a life and a will of its own.

Jon, come back, please, you can fight him some other time, Dany thought. We have the Unsullied. We can rescue the wildlings and leave. The image of Khal Drogo cut lightly in a fight he had won and dying from wound poisoning afterwards flashed in her mind. The crystal blade in the spider rider's hand looked sharp and as deadly as Jon's.

Yet even as she wallowed in cowardly thoughts of a woman unwilling to lose a man she had just fallen in love it, Dany was consumed by certainty that Jon would not back down on the challenge in his hopelessly stubborn nature.

Kill the spider first, then you might have a chance, she thought, wishing he could hear her, but she was just too far in the air. While she could listen to Jon and the Other speaking, they would not be able to hear her tiny voice through the whistle of the northern wind and the insistent, nervous flapping of Rhaegal's wings.

Daenerys had a dragon voice as well, a monster voice, ever since she purposefully swallowed a jet of dragonfire, but it seemed to be gone for good with Drogon's prolonged absence.

"How do you know about my wife?" the rider appeared perplexed by Jon's taunting, or maybe he just feigned his bewilderment.

He has a wife? Daenerys wondered absurdly.
To Dany's knowing, loving eye, Jon appeared even more confused by the Other's answer, but, unlike his opponent, he did his best to hide it and stay utterly calm, as a sea devoid of breeze.

*Calm and cold as ice...* Dany thought, enthralled. *He is everything that I am not, and maybe some things that I am and that he doesn't know himself.*

"You are the Night's King," Jon stated firmly and when he said that, Dany thought she saw a glimpse of a crystal crown glimmering on the monster's forehead, on top of the mass of ice scars he called face, between strands of long, white, straight hair falling to his waist.

"And you are just a bastard," the Night's King said with disdain.

Clearly provoked, Jon launched an attack. Red blade sliced at the spider's head and was blocked by the crystal one. The swords kissed and went apart again. The Other wore tatters of cloth, just like most of his soldiers. Hanging loose, they hid the real shape of his large sinewy body when he moved.

Jon made a step back. Dany could not say whether he did it from the force of his enemy counterattack or from the sudden return of prudence. They began circling each other as two men duelling.

"Well done, bastard," the Night's King tried with goading her nephew again, but to no avail. The same trick would not work twice.

"If your wife is as pretty as yourself," Jon retorted in kind, "I don't see why anyone would want her. You can keep her for yourself."

"I see," the Other said, "so you found a prettier one? How clever! Where is she?"

His cold, dead eyes, buried deep in the crevices of his face, examined the surroundings. Soon they found Rhaegal and Daenerys in the air. She kicked and thrashed, attempting to make the bony, spiked tail bend away. If she could only hide behind Rhaegal's body, then they wouldn't notice her! Her effort proved fruitless. They did see her and they both stared at her now. The gaze of the Night's King filled her soul with dread surpassing any fear she had ever felt before. Her heart was pounding in her chest; a caged, roaring, three-headed dragon. She felt stupid and useless. *I should have never come here.*

Jon waved the idea away. "You don't mean her? She's just some lost Southron princess who thinks she can fly a dragon," he said carelessly. "See how she can't do it properly."

As he said that, the monster returned all his attention and malice to Jon. Dany felt relieved and the lump of fear which had risen to her throat when the Other looked at her sank back to the pit of her stomach where it was nested from the beginning.

*Just some princess?* She replayed Jon's unkind words in her head. *After our walk under the ground?* Her temper flared. She felt betrayed until her reason struck back. *It could be a ruse. It has to.* She hoped she was right.

The Other waved as well, not to dismiss Dany, but to urge on the hosts of the dead he had brought to Hardhome.

Dany looked down. Four boats bursting with wildlings were rowing haphazardly back to the ships. Ser Barristan was firmly holding his ground on one front, hacking and sending the corpses to the side where other men would burn them.
Grey Worm rose from the ground as a wight and started attacking his fellow Unsullied with unnatural force... They were trying to strike back at him, but he was too fast, and the torch bearers could not quite catch up with him either. Ser Barristan noticed the development and ran from one side of the bay to another to fend him off himself, leaving the command where he had been previously fighting to Brown Ben Plum. Ben acquitted himself admirably on that place despite his treacherous nature. The Second Sons had changed sides one too many time for Daenerys to ever trust them fully. But on their side, Dany saw no known wight faces. Yet.

Steel clashed with crystal again, and Daenerys only had eyes for Jon once more. How could I ever look away? The Other was trying out an attacking manoeuvre of his own. He ran at her nephew astride his ice spider as if Jon were a quintain Ser Barristan used to train knights in Meereen.

The Night's Knight bore down a strike made to kill. Jon was quick enough to block it and pivot to the other side so that the spider just ran past him, almost carrying both itself and its master over the edge of the cliff and into Rhaegal's waiting maw. The dragon eagerly exhaled a jet of flame which never quite reached the shore he was so afraid of.

The white walker wheeled to make another pass at Jon, as a cursed knight in a cursed tourney, determined to use the advantage of being mounted and ride down his opponent. Jon stood calm and composed. Only his pale cheeks were slightly flushed from the cold or the excitement of the fight.

More handsome than ever.

When the ice spider broke into a run, Dany hoped that Jon would deflect the attack. But instead of defending himself, at the last moment he ducked, cut off two legs of the spider from underneath and swiftly moved away. The animal stumbled and uttered a strident ear-piercing shriek. The white walker was thrown forward and off his steed. The spider strived to get up on the remaining six legs, but it could not achieve balance, sinking again every time as soon as it managed to stand.

Its rider rose from the jagged rocks where he had been thrown, tall and imposing. Had he not been the image of death itself and cold beyond measure, Dany imagined he would be seething with anger. Under the tatters, his body was armoured; in mail and plate not of Westerosi design. It seemed as if foreign metalwork had turned into the second skin of the Other by some magic or unknown smith's skill.

An armour wrought of ice...

The Night's King advanced and aimed a savage right-hand slash toward Jon's unprotected head. Jon, who had been waiting again, parried and struck back, cutting a few strands of the long white hair of the Other. The cut hair melted and turned into mist, into pretty snow petals falling slowly to the rocky ground.

The man and the Other danced around one another, each of them unable to land a decisive blow or find an opening to achieve advantage. Jon seemed quicker and the Other stronger.

Daenerys watched in awe. She had seen Ser Barristan fight with art and the old man was very fast. She had seen Drogo swinging his arakh back and forth. But this was beyond magnificent; Jon's magic blade swung up and down, and left and right, and up again, effortlessly, drawing beautiful patterns in the air, more perfect than printed silk.

Please don't become tired. She remembered they were exhausted and she wasn't sure if her nephew regained enough body heat from flying with Rhaegal or if he was at all able to predate on dragon's
warmth as she was, given his burned hand and stronger sensitivity to fire than was to be expected in Rhaegar's son.

And then, suddenly, it was as if this Night's King could read Dany's thoughts. When Jon almost hit the shoulder of his sword arm, the Other swatted the magic blade away with much more force than necessary and moved in the direction of the forest, just outside Jon's reach, in order to gain time and to launch another onslaught of words.

Words cut my nephew deeper than swords, Dany realised, instantly more afraid of poison the Night's King would spit through his repulsive mouth than of his crystal blade.

"So the bastard thinks himself a dragon now," he said mockingly, "and yet your sword arm is turning into a living blister under that black rag. You are not a true dragon and you are not meant to hold this blade or your hand would not suffer. It is mine! You stole it from me. Give it back and I will let you be!"

"I wouldn't give it to you even if I believed you and I see no reasons why I should do that," Jon said, closing on the enemy, determined to continue talking with his sword.

He is more confident that way and few men must be his match. Dany was conflicted. She prayed for the combat to stop, and yet she also wanted to continue watching.

The spider whinnied in pain near the two men duelling. His cries of pain were so high-pitched that even some wights from below looked up and earned themselves a kiss of a burning torch. The spider then started spinning a thread around two stumps where his legs used to be. Spider web had been holding the cursed sword in place, Dany remembered. Could it have been his?

"If you want it, come and take it!" Jon bellowed and attacked again, in unbound fury. Snow crystals sparkled white in his long black hair and in that moment with his red sword held high he was king. The King of Winter...

The creature who styled himself the Night's King accepted the challenge and nearly kicked the sword out of her nephew's arms. Jon somehow avoided this and then pressed his enemy toward the first line of trees behind the cliff in a storm of slash and parry. Dany could almost not see the blades anymore, only the swirl of red and blue sparks in the thickening fog. She had never seen anyone fight that fast. It seemed… impossible.

The day was running short. Soon only night will remain.

With a savage cry, Jon landed a blow on his enemy's sword hand and severed it from the body. The crystal blade was dropped and as soon as it touched the ground it melted into the mist just like the Other's hair. The cut hand on the contrary twitched, hopped and rejoined its master's body. The Night's King sat down, leaned on a tree and laughed, accomplished.

Daenerys felt ill. How can one vanquish what cannot be killed? What is this thing? If Jon cuts his head off, will it grow again?

"You have spent the power of your blade without killing me, bastard," the Other announced with joy. "Do you have the strength it takes to reforge it before you face me for the second time?"

Jon struck squarely on the Other's head, but the cursed steel bounced, forcing him to make several steps backward. The enemy was not hurt. The magic sword had no effect on him any longer, losing its glow and cooling down. Her nephew tossed it away, undeterred by the loss of his weapon.
Frantically, Jon searched his other hip for the wildling obsidian knife he had since Dany first met him, when they were sleeping on the platform made in the trees with Davos and Pyke, with Old Garth and Ghost… The enemy was helpless, and Jon would reach him and slay him if that was at all possible.

But the tree behind the defeated Other was a white weirwood. A sad face was carved on it, with a blood-red mouth that had never smiled.

And in place of showing any fear from dragonglass which was supposed to kill the white walkers, the enemy laughed raucously. His laughter echoed all over Hardhome and gave new force to the hordes of the dead he mastered. Dany looked down and saw Ser Barristan barely avoiding the corpse which tried to pluck his head off his shoulders. The wight was biting his ear instead…

Brown Ben Plumm was buried under two corpses and he struggled to get up while the corpses strived to quarter him. From the air, Dany could not discern the likelihood of success of either effort.

Grey Worm led a charge of dead Unsullied he used to command as a living man against his and their former brothers. Those being slain screamed and wailed, and the northern wind carried their cries to the dark-grey sky…

Dany felt hot tears burning her eyes.

The Other finished laughing and spoke with mirth. "Only a living man can kill me. And you, bastard, you are as dead as the soldiers in my army."

Jon froze in his steps, listening.

"In the deep of the night you know it as well as I do," the Night's King continued without mercy. "Or elsewise your hand would not burn from the blade you stole from me. They sacrificed you to me! I drank your blood and you were to be my slave. And then the dragon came and stole you away before I could take you as my own. You dragons are all thieves! But the beast couldn't give you back the human blood you lost, could he? He merely patched your injuries so that you can walk and talk and seem alive. Heed my words! The next time we meet I will be your lord and you my most cherished bannerman."

The Other fell back on the trunk of the weirwood tree and whispered softly to it. The roots began to open. Jon came to his senses when he saw that. He leapt at the enemy to finish him off with dragonglass faster than Ghost would. Dany thought she could glimpse the red colour of weirwood leaves reflected in Jon's dark pupils before his eyes turned black again, and dull, and lifeless, and flickered blue.

Jon crashed into the smooth white bark which closed over his enemy, and furiously stabbed at it with dragonglass, unable to follow. Red sap started running from the wounded tree.

Daenerys looked down.

The wights suddenly lost direction. Grey Worm led a company of the dead Unsullied away from the wildlings in a most disciplined fashion; they left the beach and climbed into the wood. Corpses walked aimlessly here and there and stopped attacking anyone. Brown Ben Plumm wrenched free and nursed several cuts and bites on his body, but all his limbs seemed to be accounted for. The giant spider limped on six legs, with two stumps bandaged with spiderweb soft as bird feathers. Without any grace to its movements, the monster sauntered forward and disappeared among the trees.

It was over. Rhaegal roared and screeched in sign of victory.
Yet Jon, who had won the day with both his strategy and swordplay, looked as reserved as ever. He meticulously collected the sword he had thrown away and tied it back to his hip, walked to the edge of the cliff and... jumped off it in cold blood, as if it was only one more step to make.

Daenerys screamed, but Rhaegal instantly stuck out his tail in a move that seemed practised, coiling it around her unthoughtful nephew. And as Dany was already attached to it, they ended up in a tangle of human limbs; just as Drogon and Viserion once twisted their heads and necks together on the river banks of the Trident. Two heads of the dragon.

"It's alright," he said, staring attentively into her eyes, "the dragon has caught me before. I mean, us."

So that's how we ran away from the Lands of Always Winter; by jumping off the mountain.

Both her nephew and the magic blade on his hip felt freezing cold, almost corpse-like, but not quite. It must be because he didn't wear a cloak. Yet she remembered vaguely how even Drogo had been warmer before Dany smothered him, so as not to shame the horselord with the life of a flower.

And she read in Jon's eyes that he believed he might not be alive after all; just another monster as the ones he was fighting...

Dany disregarded the cold feeling and all reason. She recalled her memories of Euron Greyjoy and his dead, and of Aegon's lady love who had been a wight before she miraculously returned to life. There was one thing none of the living dead had ever been able to show and Jon had clearly been capable of it in the caves, so the horrible thing this Night's King said could not be true. Could it?

And even if it were true, for her it did not matter. At that moment, Daenerys knew her heart to be well and truly lost, to a man or monster it mattered little.

"Tell him to put us down on one of the boats," she told Jon, brushing the frozen snowflakes from his face and hair with her fingers.

Her voice and touch woke some semblance of life in him. "You can't?"

Dany shook her head. "My dragon is away and yours is not talking to me."

"Have you heard?" he asked.

She nodded, not having the strength to lie to him that she did not. Though perhaps she should have denied it because Jon's handsome face turned impossibly long again. "Land us, will you?" she encouraged him. "We need to get down."

Jon frowned in concentration. Rhaegal let his tail drop in the direction of the sea, careful never to approach his body mass more to the northern lands than was safe for him.

"Up here!" Dany shouted to those in the boat. "Make room!" The boat carried twenty delayed Second Sons who didn't even make it to the beach before the battle ended. The dragon's tail uncoiled. Almost touching the small vessel, Rhaegal unrolled his tail completely, allowing his two charges to go on board.

Dany untied the tokar from her waist and left the entire garment to the dragon who immediately took off again. The yellow, pearlescent ribbon stretched over the vast grey sky and made Dany recall the customs and the tales of chivalry.

"See, I have given you my favour," she told Jon, immensely pleased with the notion. "And you accepted it and let your mount wear it. That makes me your lady love."
I have given you my floppy ears. Dany always remembered fondly Brown Ben Plumm's quip about what the proper queen of rabbits in Meereen should wear. Immediately, she realised something else. White tokar with baby pearls on the fringes was the wedding gown of the nobility in Meereen. And yellow was not that far from white.

Embarrassed for thinking of Jon as her husband for the second time that day Daenerys did something she had not done at least since they married her to Khal Drogo, or maybe since she was a child, the beggar princess. She blushed. Seeing her embarrassment, Jon's lips finally curved into a slightest beginning of a future smile, and to Dany, this felt like true victory.

"If you're my lady love, will I be your lord?" he provoked her, leaving her speechless.

Have you been thinking the same? Would you have us wed?

"I just thought we should witness the aftermath on land," she told him, very seriously. "Wouldn't you agree that it is expected of us?"

Jon acquiesced with a nod, and gazed forward as the boat was rowed to the shore. On the beach, that old woman with strange frozen hair, who had stopped a mother with her child from drowning, beamed when she saw him.

"Welcome back, son," she said, "What have I told you? Wasn't I right to bring my people here? The great ships have come! I've never had a vision of you on them, but I am no less happy to see you."

"Mother Mole," Jon acknowledged her before an unfamiliar little girl ran from behind into Jon's cold arms.

"How have you been?" he asked her in a friendly voice. "Who was feeding you oats porridge while I was gone?"

"Old Garth did," the girl answered, unconcerned. Daenerys and Jon both gaped as fish, mouths going wide.

The man who died in pain, writhing in flames, climbed down the leather leading from the lowest level of the caves to the sea shore, carrying a very familiar bag with food over his shoulder.

"The girl's lying," he said, winking at the child. "In the last days we had only acorn paste."

"But you can't be here, you went to the Wall with me!" Jon blurted out the least uncomfortable part of the truth.

You died, Dany thought, and Jon must have thought the same but none of them dared say it.

"Aye, and I went back after the first day of walking, lad, me old legs would never carry me further with life… I'm so old and you're so young and yet you forget what I can still remember."

"I am pleased to see you then," her nephew muttered, taking his distance from the old man.

"As am I," Garth said.

Dany though she saw a faint glimmer of approval in his ageless eyes when Jon treated him with suspicion. And for as much as it was impossible she thought this Garth might have been the same man who let himself burn so that she and Jon could run away from the woken flames of the earth.

"We are here to take you all to the ships," Daenerys addressed the remaining wildlings.
"The free folk go where it pleases them," Garth observed, "as the gods do." Yet he sloshed through the shallow water to another boat eagerly enough, dragging the little girl who hugged Jon with him, so apparently the ships did please him some.

Dany was disoriented. *How much more mystery shall we encounter?*

Dragons could do no magic. They could only fly and spit fire and crystals, which were probably only another form of dragonflame, a solid one, the point of origin of dragonglass. And they could slay their enemies with tooth and claw.

Yet somehow all magic existing in the world was drawn to them, gathered around them and became stronger in their presence. With her head full of questions stored away for later, the Mother of Dragons returned her eyes to her people, the survivors. Brown Ben Plumm limped to her encounter.

"How many lost?" she asked.

"Thirty or forty," he said, "maybe more. There would be more if the monster was not defeated," he finished, bowing slightly to Jon who stood next to Dany calm as a stone. Dany realised they were holding hands without knowing if it was she who took his or he who had taken hers.

Ser Barristan approached with his damaged ear. The top was missing but the bleeding stopped. Maybe the unearthly cold helped. "The balance was worse on my side," he said, "I must be too old for this. At least a hundred new wights are now following the Grey Worm."

"No," Daenerys refuted him, "I've seen you fight. If it weren't for you it would be much more of them."

Jon didn't speak or let go of her hand.

"The day is won," he announced in the end, doing his best to ignore gazes of admiration and fear coming his way. Daenerys was not the only one who had seen him fight. "There is nothing left for anyone here. It is time to go," he finished, managing to find that decisive voice people would listen to and follow.

The short day was gone in duties before she could rest. She never managed to take that bath Jon spoke of before they arrived to Hardhome, scalding hot as she would have liked it.

When the pale moon rose in the sky, she was again alone in her tent. Jon was out, talking in his mind to Rhaegal who glided over the ship, which was now heading south on a surprisingly calm sea. When the Night's King ran away, he seemed to have taken the storm with him. *Small mercies,* Dany thought and walked diligently to the prow, refusing to sleep by herself, now that she was finally done with everything a princess *should* do.

"Won't you come?" she told her nephew.

"Why would you want me to?" he asked dryly.

Dany would not take no for an answer. *Not tonight. Maybe some other night, Jon Snow.* She squatted behind him and wrapped her slender arms around his broad shoulders.

"You have seen the extent of my injuries," Jon murmured quietly. "Could even a dragon truly have cured them all before it was too late and I lost too much blood? I tried to ask, but Rhaegal doesn't answer. Maybe he can't or I don't understand him. You know that it may be true. I may be a wight as he said, no matter how hard I wish not to be, no matter how much I want…" He cut his speech in half, unable to continue.
"You want me?" she whispered into his ear, almost kissing it. She wouldn't dare approach Drogo so very forwardly, mindful of his role as khal, and with Daario it was mostly never necessary because his appetite for love was stronger than hers. Or bigger than hers with him after a time, she had just never realised it before now.

Jon nodded, wordlessly, with eyes manse and dark at the same time.

"Come," she said and took his hand. This has worked before. Jon followed, not blindly as a wight would obey his master, but as a man might his wife. Some warmth returned to his body though it was still so much colder to touch than hers.

Her tent on the Rhaenys gaped empty. Her maids already whispered that Dany and Jon were lovers and took good care to leave them alone, knowing their queen. Fresh coals were put into two burning braziers and two bowls of leviathan stew were left next to the jar of lemon water on the floor. It wasn't much, but it smelled good, on fish, salt and spices.

Dany had recently learned, while performing her duties, that the food they had would have to be rationed before they anchored at some place which still had provisions in winter. At least the port scum Ser Barristan took on board in Gulltown proved they can fish in the Shivering Sea if they can't navigate it... It was, curiously, some of the wildlings who had set the fleet on course for Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.

The stew tasted even better than it smelled. And some of the false sailors can cook.

There were no proper doors on the ship. Anyone could walk in on them though Daenerys was confident that no one ever would. The incessant sounds of the sea, the chattering and the goings of the passengers and the crew were always there, muffled and diverse, as a queer sort of company.

When they finished eating, Jon sat gingerly on the edge of her silk cushions as he had done before. Only this time he watched her every move. As an afterthought, he removed the spent magic blade and the dragonglass dagger from his belt, leaving them on the wooden ship floor, away from the fabric and the smouldering ashes.

The magic sword looked like battered, ordinary steel. Not at all like the beautiful Valyrian steel sword Aegon got from his real father Arthur Dayne. That should be the true sword of heroes! Even the heavy two-handed one, Ice, which rightfully belongs to the Starks, looks better than this one.

"For all his bleating, you did defeat him today, you know," she observed. It was the truth as Dany saw it, and as she had experienced it when she burned Mirri Maz Duur on a stake, despite all her foul threats and curses.

"And for a man who is so incredulous," she said, part hurt by her memories of Jon refusing to believe her, and part joking, "you are suddenly so eager to believe him. Why didn't you call him a liar?"

Jon chuckled darkly. "It's just that what he said is what I've been thinking, he was right about that. I know that it doesn't make any sense to you, but that's why I believe him... no, I know that what he said is true. My sworn brothers killed me and the dragon... he made me live as something else entirely. I am myself and I am not myself any more."

"Death has not been so final of late in many places," Dany affirmed with conviction. "Especially in our family. Who is to say what has happened to you?"

And she spilled it all out, fast and with more words than she had ever intended to use.
"One day I walked into the fire and I was completely swallowed by it," she said, "and I came out of it alive with three newly-hatched dragons. Only my hair was burned. And my scaled children fed from my bare breasts, from the milk which should have been for the babe… for my unborn son who had just died in my womb before I could ever nurse him. And I might never be able to bear a living child again."

Jon listened attentively, never interrupting.

"And Rhaegar, your father," she lacked strength to continue, but she still did. She still owed him that part of the truth. "They made him believe your mother betrayed him just before the battle. Jealousy made him weak so he rode to the Trident with the mind to lose. Robert Baratheon crushed his chest with a warhammer and ordered his men to burn him. So first they robbed him and then they set him aflame. They didn't linger to see the fire burn to ashes. The flooded river swallowed my brother's body and his funeral pyre. He woke in a septry without any memory of his former life and self and lived a solitary life in the service of the poor for twenty years. He has a bigger scar on his chest than you ever had."

"Did she?" Jon asked, timidly.

"What?" Dany was a bit lost.

"Betray him?"

"Of course she didn't," Dany dismissed the ridiculous idea straight away. "She loves him. And even if she didn't, she's a Stark. You should know better than I how the Starks are."

The rumours of the ship were the only sound left for a very long while.

"And yet, yet," Dany finally thought of a good way to convey what she was trying to say from the beginning, "the Targaryens always burned their dead and no one had ever come back to life despite the old saying that fire could not kill the dragon. It surely did kill my other trueborn brother, Viserys. So it's perhaps a miracle that Rhaegar and I survived. Why can't it be the same with you?"

Jon looked as a man who didn't dare hope, but was nevertheless applying his reason to process everything he had heard that day. It was not what she wanted. Cold reason was the last thing she needed from him at that moment.

"I forgot to say that I also had a dead suitor, a wight suitor, I mean," she steered the conversation into different waters and smiled wickedly. "Trust me, he wasn't as you, not at all."

"How not?"

*He didn't make my blood simmer and boil,* she thought. But aloud she said, "Well, his shoulders were not as broad."

Bold, she pulled Jon's black wools over his head and placed a kiss on his chest above his heart where the most grievous wound healed by Rhaegal used to be.

"And his heart did not beat in his chest," she said, content to hear the sound she was waiting for.

"And I never let him touch me," she added for good measure in case Jon was jealous, like Rhaegar. Somehow, they were kissing again at will, not pressured to go anywhere. He tasted like danger, like loss, like home. And for the first time since she arrived North, Daenerys was looking forward to short days and long nights.
"The wights do not feel desire," she stated with confidence, unlacing and removing his breeches. The gesture caught him by surprise but he neither resisted, nor helped. He just let her do. They both ended up staring at his smallclothes with evidence of life in them.

The ship became alive at that moment as well, and not only noisy. The passengers and the crew burst into song. The wildling voices rose coarse and melodious to the salty air, mingling with drunk chants of former slaves from Volantis who rested after their shift at the oars… Dany's understanding of Old Tongue was very limited, and the Volantene dialect of bastard Valyrian was the variety she understood the least, being more fluent in Pentoshi and Braavosi… Yet they all seemed to sing about life.

"I don't want to hide under the furs," Jon whispered, searching her face for some sort of confirmation. His hands finally went up to her white, dirty tunic, and she sighed with pleasure as she stretched to let him guide it over her head. Cold palms caressed her sides with feverishly insistent touch, setting her on edge in a most pleasing way.

She backed from where they had supped to the higher part of her bed of silks, not feeling cold at all despite the freshness of the night, which the braziers could not take away entirely. One more night in the North… She could get used to them.

"There are no furs here," she said, looking suspiciously around, not quite understanding what he wanted to say. She had purposefully put away the hrakar's pelt, Drogo's gift, before she went to Jon. It was part of her past now. "And I want to see you as well if that is what you were saying."

"This is what I want," he said and was with her in a moment. The uncertainty was gone from him. He went after her as assuredly as a wolf goes after his prey. Unburdening her from everything she still wore, he kissed his way up and between her thighs to her sex, occasionally inhaling her smell. It was the last thing she expected him to do first. She couldn't tell what she did expect, but it was not that.

His mouth was not cold like his body; it was hot as Drogon's maw and the way he kissed her there was better than anything. She pulled his hair, not to guide him because he didn't need it, but to keep herself in place, to hold herself from screaming too loud in pleasure, which came to her sudden and strong after so much talk of death.

She burned, and wanted to continue burning.

"No dead man could do that", Dany said when she came down from the cloud of her bliss and her memories, and hoped Jon would believe her, wondering how she tasted to him and if she was to his liking.

He left her shaking as he withdrew from her and lay next to her on the silks, eyes black and more clouded than the northern skies. She never had a lover with such a warm, dark gaze. He didn't make another move to have her or to help himself in any way, just caressed her naked form from her chin and neck, across her breasts, and to the curve of her hip, over and over again. Only then did she notice a fresh crust of green crystals on his sword hand. The burns must have been very large and painful before Rhaegal breathed on them.

Daenerys turned on her side and rolled to nest against him, to feel his body as much as she could with her own, before disposing of the now offensive presence of his smallclothes.

"Don't you feel alive?" she asked in all innocence, never losing his eyes out of sight as they finally faced each other not as strangers or long lost relatives, but as lost lovers…
"More than just alive," he confessed, "I feel like I could live forever." He gave her a mesmerized look and a genuine smile as their bodies joined in a very different dance of dragons than the famous war between their ancestors in the past.

She could hear vaguely how the wildlings started singing about someone called Bael the Bard in common tongue. The Volantene sailors responded launching a lament for the slaves wasting their lives in the mines of Valyria, a very old song calling for the end of their suffering. The two songs met at odd intervals and harmonies just like Dany's and Jon's body met and went apart only to meet again.

"Daenerys," Jon begged of her, his voice deep and sorrowful once more, "Say that you'll have me even if I am as he said. Say that you won't have anyone else. Say it, please."

She didn't have to think twice of what to say, remembering the wonderful promise he had made to her in the caves and kept it. You are not like the others, Jon, she thought, filled with blind trust, you will not betray me.

"No matter what you are," she said, drowning in the pleading look of his vivid, black eyes, "no matter what I am," she had to add, in case they were both monsters. "I'll never let you go…"

Her words drove him over all his limits, into frantic motion. When he was well and truly lost in her, she nearly found her pleasure for the second time herself, remaining in a state of euphoric yearning, trembling dangerously at the beginning of something completely new and maddening. She longed for more days together, for more nights together, the war and the winter be damned.

Yet she never stopped being a mother to her people from across the narrow sea, and she now knew Jon well enough to believe he'd always put his duty before himself and their bedchamber. There was only one way to keep him there, alive, for she, Daenerys Targaryen, refused to believe a single word of what the Other had said.

The Night's King is a lying bastard.

He can't prevail.
Jaime II

Chapter Notes

As always I have to thank my beta for this chapter TopShellCrazy for reassuring me that the chapter was good enough to be posted. And to DrHolland for supporting this as well )))

Thank you to all who commented, followed or bookmarked this story.

Thank you for reading.

On we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jaime

"Three tigers, three tigers, my friends! And not a single elephant..."

The man who made this exclamation from the open tavern door appeared mildly astonished by the fact. The innkeep was with him in a blink of the eye. With the practised ease of a man of his trade, he closed the door, and made his new guest sit at one of the tables. The innkeep's girl instantly served him a smoking goblet of mulled wine. The man's small black-haired head bobbed as he devotedly sniffed the odour of cinnamon and cloves, immediately losing all desire for talking.

The rest of the busy inn put a lot of effort into ignoring the election result announcement as noisily as possible, Jaime noticed. Drunk sailors sang louder than usual, nursing women of ill repute in their lap, who for their part moaned and squealed much stronger than they were paid to do. A group of merchants slurped their fish stew so wholeheartedly from the bowls that they could wake the dead, and the rest of the clients chattered and clamoured the best way they knew how.

Fires burned in two open hearths with uncharacteristic merriment. Yet despite the fire and all the uproar, the clients shivered and gritted their teeth, clad scantily in simple cottons and summer silks, according to the local fashion. The innkeep and his serving girl continued carrying steaming wine alongside the oblong, wooden tables, adding a log or two to the fires whenever they passed them by.

Jaime rubbed his hand against his stump. It was cold. There should have been no true winter in Volantis, he realised. But this winter is like no winter that has ever come before. The thought felt like something Viserion knew, and Jaime only surmised. Not again. He chased his dragon from his head, wishing to have a clear mind.

And bloody cold it was.

Since he'd become a dragonrider, Jaime felt the chill like anyone else, but it did not really bother him. His steed's inner heat warmed his belly and his bowels, and his very soul. He suspected that his skin's insensitivity to fire might have grown as well, since the first time he'd discovered possessing some of it in the riverlands. Not as much as Rhaegar, that is for certain. He wondered idly if his remaining hand would get burned or not if he now put it into the fire. The flames licked the hearth, pretty and inviting.
After a moment of indecision, Jaime left the table where he had been seated, deciding against the trial of his changing abilities. With empty goblet in hand, he sank imperceptibly onto the bench next to the man who denounced the absence of the elephants. Careful not to lower the brown hood covering his face and hair, in case someone here recognised the Kingslayer and hindered his sending to find Tyrion, Jaime slowly positioned his stump on the table. A cripple was a harmless conversation partner and one likely to be answered.

"The triarchs have just been elected according to the law and custom of Volantis. Is it not the same who they are? " Jaime asked quietly. "A ruler is a ruler, be he a tiger or an elephant."

"Not since the Dragon Queen stole half of the fleet," the little black-haired man answered mechanically, sipping his wine. "The tigers want her blood."

"Stole?" A green-haired man with hair shaped like wings, in an impressive mixture of Tyroshi and Ghiscari styles, thundered from the other end of the table, and over all the buzz. "The triarchs sent the ships to sail against the Mother of Dragons, siding with her enemies. She merely defeated them. Victor takes the spoils!"

_It's the wrong thing to say_, Jaime thought and was immediately proved right. The tavern door burst open. Guards oozed in amidst the fresh sea breeze from the nearby harbour, five, ten, twelve, wearing tiger masks and lavish cloaks.

_If you hear me roar, will you meow back at me?_ The lion in Jaime rebelled, and Jaime the husband regretted not lingering in the market place with his wife. _I only wanted a small cup of wine so that she can examine the wares offered in peace, and this fine establishment was nearby._

The green-haired man melted into the walls, and the short black-haired one next to Jaime slipped under the table silent as a ghost.

"Who dares speak against the blessed rule of the City of Volantis, first and oldest daughter of Valyria?" the leader of the tiger cloaks asked with stiff menace in his creaking voice.

"No one," the innkeep tried saying, "all that speaks here is wine."

The soldiers were not happy with the explanation, Jaime took it, because their leader impaled the innkeep's middle on his spear. The unfortunate man gurgled and bent over, dying in silence, too surprised to offer a meaningful sound. The profession apparently carried the same risks on both sides of the narrow sea; in Westeros the tavern holders had commonly adorned the gallows in the War of the Five Kings.

"Hear us, scum," the tiger proclaimed, placing his boot on the innkeep's chest. Bones cracked, blood bubbled through the dead man's mouth, and Jaime had little and less liking for the soldier with every word.

_I might have been like you once. Not anymore._

"This ungodly winter has given us means to catch the Dragon Queen unawares," the Volantene declared with insolence, undiminished by the green stripes tattooed on his face which marked him as a slave.

"The Broken Arm of Dorne is healing," he announced proudly. "All able bodied men will be called to arms! Sellsword companies will be hired and paid in solid gold! And if we cannot have her blood, we'll take back what she stole from us. We will _march_ on Westeros and take her people as slaves!"
Make a slave lead the other slaves and you will have in him the staunchest defender of slavery...
Jaime was saddened by the predictability of people.

"Ravens have come from King's Landing!" the tiger continued. "All the dragons have flown north! And the flames of R'hllor have confirmed it to our priests; the dragons might all perish fighting the Great Other!"

_Might, Jaime thought, _that is the key word. And they also might not._

The tiger had apparently already taken Jaime's objection into consideration.

"And if they don't and if the Dragon Whore returns south," he said, "she will find her kingdoms empty of people, and the Free Cities stronger than ever! All except Braavos shall now unite against this foreign queen threatening our way of life!"

Jaime was left to ponder the new alliance forming in Essos, the offence given to Daenerys simply for being a woman, and the subtle differences between queens and whores. _And in some cases there is none. Sweet sister, you should know best, plucking daisies in your madness, if any still grow in winter on the once blossoming meadows around the Rock._

The big mouthed tiger was not done.

"Our smiths have been studying the secrets of Old Valyria! They will enhance the city walls and the weapons of our best warriors against dragonfire, and no one will be able to withstand blessed Malaquo Maegyr, the first of the triarchs, the tiger of tigers…"

Jaime began to understand why some of the rulers should be elephants. _Less belligerent, I wager._

His wits rolled slowly as usual, so much more difficult to set in motion than Tyrion's had ever been. Yet he did possess them, and a man blessed with reason can never quite ignore that gift of the gods.

_Or perhaps it was Cersei who was fortunate, with her inborn short-sightedness…_ His sister was not dumb, but she'd always been less clever than she would believe it about herself.

_Dorne. Volantis will march on Dorne over the frozen narrow sea. Mircella is in Dorne if Prince Doran hasn't murdered her already. That's what I might have done in his place not so long ago._

_Not anymore._

Rhaegar promised Jaime he would write to Doran for Myrcella's sake, and the ruling Prince of Dorne always seemed timid and prudent, unlike his late brother Oberyn, the Red Viper, but…

What if Doran's calmness was a ruse and if he loathed Rhaegar as much as he hated the Lannisters, holding him responsible for not protecting Elia as a husband should, even in war? The more he applied himself to think, Jaime's brain could not find a single argument Rhaegar could use about his first marriage that could _appease_ Doran if his calm, cowardly façade was just that, a polished front hiding an inferno behind it.

Instead of another gust of cold sea wind, a silhouette of a tall womanly figure filled the tavern door the soldiers had left open.

_Not now, love_, Jaime thought with adoration. _I was just about to take my leave of these gentlemen in peace while I still can._

Brienne looked lovingly intriguing, and had the infallible sense to appear in the wrong place in the
wrongest possible of times.

Her white-blond hair fell to her waist in unruly straight jets. Over the tight black tunic and breeches she wore for flying there was a new blue chainmail shirt, brighter and prettier than any armour Jaime had ever seen, except maybe for the white enameled steel of the Kingsguard... And it looks sturdy as well. You made some interesting choices, my lady, where another woman would only have eyes for silks.

"Foreigners are no longer welcome in Volantis," the leader of the soldiers said with foreboding, "though Great Malaquo could allow an exception for you. You'd make a fine concubine once your cheeks are properly tattooed as befits a bed slave. The young tigers are fond of women which are hard to break. It tastes all the sweeter when they do."

Brienne drew forth a longsword, well suited to her hand. Almost as shiny as Oathkeeper, Jaime thought, wondering where she had acquired such a decent blade in very short time.

"I seek no trouble," his wife warned them nicely, "only my husband. We shall be leaving your city shortly."

The soldiers laughed.

The truth was, Jaime noticed, half of the men in the inn looked at Brienne with genuine interest.

She was becoming more stunning day by day since they shared a dragonback. The change occurred within her, almost as swift as her hair was growing on the outside. His wife's once homely face became illuminated from the depths of her being, and that new expression changed how others saw her features.

She had been beautiful to Jaime for a much longer time, but it was as if her true self was now somehow revealed to the rest of the world in full splendour.

Brienne was glowing, and Jaime was both terribly proud and jealous.

Will there be someone pretty like Renly and younger than me who will come your way now that you know how to keep a man in your bed?

His wife was the most honourable wench in existence, she would never act upon it, of that much he was certain. But would you be tempted when I am older? He hated himself for that thought, yet it was there just the same.

"Can I be your husband for a night, sweet lady?" a rather short tiger cloak asked amidst general amusement, and the proposal did not sound like a jest at all. "My member is larger than the rest of me, I can assure you. I should be able to service even a woman as broad as you."

"The lady already has a husband, and there is nothing wrong with his cock," Jaime said brusquely, standing up, almost turning the table upside down as he did so.

The soldiers laughed at the cripple in the brown roughspun of the Faith. Jaime wore it on occasions, not only because it made him inconspicuous, but most of all because whoever his father was, either Tywin or Aerys, they would have deplored it.

The attire used to be the Hound's before he had borrowed it to Brienne in the riverlands, after the occasion when Jaime and Brienne had been stripped and nearly burned alive by the Lady Stoneheart.

Jaime now cherished the memory of that very special day.
For it was due to the force of his suffering over Brienne's supposed betrayal that he realised he loved her, before he found out she had delivered him to the shade of Lady Catelyn only to save Podrick Payne and Ser Hyle Hunt. Or it would take me another ten years to understand myself and claim her, and by that time she would marry that arse of Ser Hyle and have his babies.

The brown tunic sleeves were too long for Jaime, but his stump could still be seen when he moved. He used it to conceal his left hand, in which he held a knife.

A white sting pierced his mind. No, Viserion, this is my wife's honour. And the door is near. I can do this. I have to. I can't have her think any less of me. The twinkling golden presence conceded his rider's wish, unwillingly so.

Jaime rose to his full height, shook the hood off and gave everyone his most insolent look under his own golden lion mane, which had turned bushy and thicker than usual in ungodly winter.

"There's a pretty cripple," the big-cocked soldier allowed and his friends laughed again.

"Save your tongue," Jaime said with the arrogance of the nobility thousands of years old, "you will need it to please camp followers if you ever march to Dorne when I'm done with your manhood.

When are you people leaving? Can my wife and I enlist? Where she comes from, she's a warrior."

"Than you must be from the mountain passes in the east, leading to the fabled lands of Yi Ti," the serving girl dared say, shielding her body from harm behind the enormous kettle with boiling wine.

"The warrior women guard them." A fading green tattoo could be seen on one of the girl's cheeks.

As you must be a slave come from those passes, my lady, Jaime thought bitterly. Westeros had at least been spared that evil of the civilisation. Not that the smallfolk were much better off in most cases, but at least they could do as they pleased with their body and they were not branded like cattle for being poor.

The tiger leader eyed Jaime's improved looks and stature with suspicion, deciding to impart some information that could not harm his great cause. "The blessed triarch will ride forth on his elephant in five days. The Broken Arm should be mended by then if the sea continues freezing from the west."

A tiger riding an elephant! Jaime stifled a choking attack of laughter.

Five days. It could be just too short a time to return with Tyrion from Meereen even as a dragon flies… I can send a raven myself, to Tommen in Casterly Rock, but any army from the West will not be able to reach Sunspear for weeks… Dorne will stand alone… How many days will it last, this mad walk of the Volantenes across the narrow sea?

Such enterprise hadn't been attempted in ages because it could not be done, not since the First Men crossed the sea to invade Westeros, and Jaime didn't have the faintest notion about how long it took back then. Probably no one knows.

He walked over to Brienne with his head held high. Soldiers moved and let him pass, obviously used to people who were frightened of them, and not to those advancing among them with courage, unarmed. And it's only good that they can't see the dagger.

He was almost within Brienne's reach when the cocky soldier had to ruin it all.

"I'm younger than him, you know!" he screamed. "And if you don't like it when I'm finished, I'll give you back to him, I promise! I won't even bite your pretty face off as he must have done."

Jaime turned around and threw the dagger into the man's cheek, his aim infallible. Blood gushed
forth as spring water, blinding the victim who screamed in shock.

"Jaime!" his wife scorned him, never lowering her blade. "There was no need for that."

All soldiers advanced upon them. Brienne wounded two of them by the time Jaime managed to wrestle another and snatch his sword. The blade was not deadly enough in his left hand, but he handled it a tad better than before.

The leader approached the brawl at his leisure. With his spear still bloody from the innkeep's guts, he called his men to a halt and they reluctantly obeyed.

"Take this as a demonstration of our abilities and tell us where to get listed," Jaime shouted at the tiger when the song of steel stopped.

"And be grateful that your man still has both eyes," he gestured toward the Brienne's would-be lover who managed to stop the bleeding on his face. "He can use them to spot a good woman for himself. But no one will belittle my lady wife in my presence and remain unharmed."

"The army will assemble tomorrow at dawn, under the Black Wall," the leader of the tiger pack informed dryly.

Brienne sheathed her sword. And had Viserion been just a little bit more patient, the squabble would have ended then and there.

But patience was no virtue of the dragons.

The inn was on the seafront and the dragon chose to hide himself immersed in water between the berthed ships. The Volantenes boasted that the entire city of Braavos could fit in their harbour and maybe they were not entirely wrong since a growing dragon could.

Dusk bathed Volantis in shades of pink and grey, disguising the top of Viserion's pale scaled head as just another piece of debris of which the port was full.

But now a pair of rigid horns rose sharply from the sea, and the eyes of molten gold were staring through the inn door with anger. The dragon roared in tardy defence of his rider. Stepping out of the sea, he swatted away the few innocent men passing with his talons and wings, not hurting them...

"They are spies, they belong to the Dragon Queen!" someone yelled.

All soldiers and the braver among the inn guests now turned against Jaime and Brienne, who were barely able to fend off their joint onslaught and back toward Viserion. Some arrows and blades were launched toward the dragon, but without reaching his eyes, the only part of his body truly vulnerable to such trifles.

Yet when the first jet of dragonfire set the inn's roof aflame, all fight was abruptly gone from the courageous Volantenes. Soldiers, guests, and even the serving wench leapt to the door and to the windows, getting out of the harm's way as rapidly as they could. Many jumped into the harbour, eager for the comfort water would bring.

From Viserion's back Jaime saw the leader of the tiger cloaks sprawled indecently over the body of the innkeep he had murdered, the victim and the murderer equalled in death.

A burning beam had been the fallen tiger's doom.
The two dead men and the burning wood together looked like a scrawling of Valyrian glyphs Jaime was forced to learn as a boy and whose meaning he had forgotten. One sign read Azor, maybe.

"You must be Azor Ahai," one of the fleeing local men read the rest of the peculiar inscription drawn by corpses, and bowed to Jaime on his dragon. "The saviour reborn!"

Jaime cared not about Azor, nor about Ahai. He cared about finding Tyrion in a day and going back to Westeros with him in less than five days.

"You wanted to have us listed for what exactly?" Brienne asked.

"I just wanted to gather information about some new war the Free Cities are about to start."

"You weren't contemplating leaving me behind, were you?" Brienne inquired with guileless blue eyes, full of trust and devoid of true suspicion. There was only the faintest hint of possible hurt in her voice.

"Of course I wasn't!" Jaime denied the accusation vehemently, but her words hit the target nonetheless. Or was I? Would I leave you if it was too dangerous for you to follow? Deep down he knew he'd rather see Brienne somewhere safe than take her with him to the coming war of winter, for as much as she was a better knight than him. He found it was in a man's nature to protect his family, even from themselves.

But that was exactly what Jaime thought he was doing when he helped father... Lord Tywin... and lied to Tyrion that his wife was a whore, not believing any girl could sincerely love a dwarf, and wishing to spare his little brother the unavoidable disappointment.

If I was in Tysha's place and still alive, I would kill both Tyrion and myself.

But Tysha was most likely long dead and perhaps it was for the best if Jamie was a bit less protective in the future.

Yet if he now told Brienne everything about the upcoming march of the Volantenes on Dorne, and if her longing for deeds of valour matched his to see Myrcella safe with Tommen in Casterly Rock, they would end up not doing Rhaegar's bidding.

For once, Jaime was determined to do his duty to his king first. I failed you once when I didn't protect Elia. Had I stood in front of her door instead of behind Aerys' back during the sack of King's Landing, even Ser Gregor Clegane would think twice before cutting through Tywin's precious son and heir... And back then I had two hands...

I have to find Tyrion now and I have to find him fast.

Tyrion, Tyrion, Tyrion... Jaime replayed his little brother's name in his mind, unwillingly provoking a reaction in his dragon.

Brother-little-man. Was with... Mother? Viserion asked, trying to be helpful, Jaime supposed.

He was with Daenerys for a short while, his rider answered.

Daenerys... Mother... outrage... the Great Shepherd... Mother, mother, mother... the dragon repeated with yearning, punching every word.

Jaime's head was about to burst. He wished for strongwine; maybe the dragon's continuous, incoherent incursion into his human mind would cease if he were drunk. Viserion's company was
amusing and special, but it could also be a great burden at times, when the dragon was moody like now, and his meaning unclear.

What is bothering you so, Viserion? Jaime's only answer were white and golden flashes in his mind, rearing in foaming turmoil like the waves of the narrow sea in winter, at least before it started to freeze.

Tyrion, do you truly know more about the dragons than I do? Can you help me? Can you help the rest of us?

Tyrion… Mother, brother-little-man. The dragon screeched and shrieked. And veered southward in a soaring flight if Jaime's sense of orientation was not completely lost on him. His wife seemed to agree that the dragon was set on the wrong course.

"I do not think he is taking us toward Slaver's Bay," Brienne observed seriously. She was much more comfortable with flying now, or she learned to pretend for Jaime's sake. For whenever she was miserable, he felt guilty beyond measure. And it was so easy for her to read his feelings; Jaime had never learned how to hide them very well.

They kept flying above the open sea, with no land in sight. They must have crossed a thousand leagues in less than a day without a single halt.

Jaime had never flown so far and so fast.

Until, at one moment, he believed he saw vapours floating over the bluish surface of the sea just under the huge belly of the dragon.

Here, Viserion suggested. Wait. Water not. Not water, hear? The dragon was trying to instruct his rider, but he lacked proper words to make conversation.

We'll wait for you here and we'll stay clear from the water, yes I've heard you, at least I think I did, Jaime had developed an aptitude for divination concerning dragon talk, in some cases, at least. His one time success was rewarded by a loud snort and a puff of approval.

And just like that Viserion dropped them onto a pretty islet in the middle of the evaporating ocean. The innermost region of the isle was protected from the waves with high sand dunes; tall, slender grass grew on their soft breast-like shapes. The air was tepid, almost warm, a rarity in winter conquering the world.

"Why do the men measure their worth by the length of their manhood?" Brienne blurted when they were left alone. Judging by the force of the question, the issue had been tormenting her for a while.

Jaime pondered the question seriously for the first time.

"Maybe," he started with caution, scratching his head. "maybe because the worth inside them cannot be seen nor readily taken in hand."

Brienne laughed. "It almost makes me glad that the woman's value is measured by the number of heirs she can give to her lord husband and not by the shape of her woman's place," she remarked.

"That's one pretty shiny armour you are wearing," Jaime complimented his wife to tread around the mention of children.

"It's of Valyrian design, I've been told," first she responded brightly as Jaime intended, but then she frowned, sounding worried. "Did it prompt Viserion to bring us here?"
"Where is here?" Jaime asked, uncertain.

"Where Valyria once was…" Brienne spoke with unease. "My maester taught me it was an accursed place."

The sea was smouldering and Jaime suddenly understood. It was not just any fuming sea, it was the Smo\n\k\n\nging Sea, whose waters bathed the vast region of the world south of Essos where the old freehold once stood, before the doom.

"We should be alright as long as we don't touch the water," he conveyed Viserion's words with authority he didn't feel. If you can trust that much to the dragon.

"It is pleasantly warm here," Brienne stated carefully, allowing herself to stretch her long, muscled arms. Jaime sat in the sand, thoroughly enjoying the sight of his wife. Her posture softened a little, yet she remained quite tense. "What do you think the ships will do with us gone?"

Two of Daenerys' ships had accompanied Jaime and Brienne across the narrow sea.

"The crew is mostly Volantene," Jaime pointed out, "if they don't know how to navigate in the game of thrones of their own home city, how in seven hells should we be able to help them?"

That only assuaged Brienne a little so Jaime tried better.

"I think Viserion is gone to find Tyrion. Maybe he will bring him here and then we can all go back."

She kept watching the island, the dunes and the sea with growing apprehension, and Jaime was more and more tempted to use unfair means to calm her down. It had been so very long since he properly touched his wife, and, besides, that battle strategy almost always worked.

He had been too weak to do anything following his most unusual illness in the Vale. And after departing from Ser Barristan in Gulltown all they did was flying and occasionally landing on a rickety dromond to swallow some broth.

The memories of his ailment haunted Jaime in every idle moment. He'd been asleep and awake at the same time, and in his dreams he was one being, one consciousness, with more human and animal dragons, some of them unknown.

He could tell when the mind he felt was Rhaegar's, morose and generous, stronger than the king believed himself to be. And maybe, sometimes, he could recognise Drogon, the most dangerous dragon of all, at least to his enemies. But the other three (or was it four or five?) eluded him; he could not tell which one was male, which female, which human and which animal. And they were all predating on his life force and on Viserion's in order to survive.

Sometimes, when his mind cleared briefly during his sickness, all Jaime could do was stare at Brienne and think of her, think of her, think of her...

Just think of her and forget about the dragons.

Jaime was certain that Brienne's presence and care was the only thing that kept him from dying or succumbing to true madness. Not that he would tell her that; it would worry her senseless, and there was no guarantee that the condition would not reoccur. It was linked to the dragons and he had no plans to abandon Viserion any time soon.

Thinking of it, he couldn't leave his dragon any more if he wanted to; they had become inseparably linked.
He offered an incongruous prayer to the Warrior to help him find his little brother. And when they
met again, Jaime was going to beg Tyrion to share with him all his knowledge concerning dragons.

What's good about being the dragonrider if I have no idea what to expect or how to react to it half of
the time?

"Stop it, please!" he blurted at Brienne who began scouting the dunes while Jaime was lost in
thought. "We've seen this damn place very clearly from the air and there's nothing here except sand
and grass. It's safe."

The spontaneous attack of arrogance only made her angry.

"We have to leave," Brienne said stubbornly. "Call him back," she commanded, "if he carried us this
far we must be close to Meereen."

Jaime closed his eyes. Wherever Viserion was, it must have been very far away. His presence was so
vague that his rider could barely touch it, wings gliding in the blackened air, alongside the cold, dark,
glistening walls of some frightening, foreign city.

"Would that I could", he said sincerely, shrugged and looked as he felt, bloody tired. "He left us for
the time being, is all. Gone hunting, I guess. He has to eat from time to time."

Plain honesty earned him a bone-tight embrace and a deep kiss. You want your tired, old husband,
and not the golden-haired big-mouthed bastard? Well, you have them both.

"Good work of a smith," he said, searching attentively for a way to remove her new mail shirt,
without causing any damage to the perfect blue-grey rings interwoven with each other.

"It's supposed to be Valyrian light armour," she explained further, "not as hard as their steel, but
better than the ordinary one. It's also more comfortable to wear and it has some ancient glyphs
engraved on the surface. Or maybe the seller just cheated on me. He had tears tattooed on his cheeks
and took only a hundred golden dragons for the shirt and a sword to match it. A true Valyrian work
must be worth at least a thousand. Gendry might know, he learned his art from one of the best master
smiths in King's Landing."

Robert's bastard was far away in Westeros, with the king and queen and there was no way he would
examine Brienne's new weaponry any time soon. Somehow, the notion made Jaime unhappy. The
lad has grown. Gendry was now probably half an inch taller than Jaime and another half shorter than
Brienne.

"Or maybe the honourable seller is a slave who stole it from his master and you paid him a worthy
price for his dangerous efforts", he pointed out to banish the unwanted thoughts of Brienne and
Gendry discussing armour from his head.

"Either way", she conceded, "it served me well today".

Jaime didn't care about glyphs, stealing slaves or tavern brawls by the time the smooth, rosy planes of
his wife's body were revealed to his hungry green eyes. He kissed her bare back on her shoulder
blades, teasing it once, twice, many times. The spot was a sweet one for her. She leaned into him,
humming softly with encouragement, allowing his left hand to visit a much sweeter place between
her legs. His stump ended up on her breasts, useless. Nipples stiffened at the casual touch, and his
wife pressed her behind on his smallclothes, bent on reaching his manhood.
"Not yet," he pleaded. There was something wild about making her have her pleasure at his only hand and watch her all the time in the pale yellow sunlight of the abandoned, grassy island. She returned the favour by making him yield. Obliged to lay down, he stared at her intently as she towered above his willing body and directed their joint movement, rising and falling beautifully against the sun.

He didn't think any of their lovemaking lasted quite that long and he didn't think he could repeat the effort any time soon. Fortunately, his wife curled into him and contented herself with smiling at him with quiet joy, accursed island or not.

"There is no winter here," she said pointlessly when he allowed himself to wipe a bead of sweat from her forehead, happy like a lazy cat, or a sated dragon.

And as soon as he thought again about the the dragons and their mysteries, the egg which was left in their care drew his attention.

"Look!" Jaime was bound to say, though he hated spoiling the moment. Brienne's eyes immediately changed focus, following his gaze.

Here, in the land where the dragons once came from, was that what Tyrion always claimed?, the blue colour of the egg lightened into grey and pearl. The shell was sweating as the two of them. In two steps, Jaime squatted next to it. The egg was very warm and damp to touch, the blue and silver veins pulsating within.

"What if it hatches?" he wondered.

"The hatchling will fly with us, I should hope," his wife said quietly, unperturbed by the strange sight, never moving from where he had left her.

The good side of love making was that it made both of them resigned with waiting and the queer ways of the dragons.

Jaime left the egg and returned to lay next to his wife, determined to enjoy his good fortune while it lasted.

"Damn it, Jaime," she cursed, becoming flustered. He realised the mood came upon her from studying his naked form freely. "Being that handsome should be forbidden."

"No," he disagreed, "how else am I to keep my beautiful wench all to myself?"

"I've changed, haven't I?" she asked, becoming more rosy in all places if that was possible at all, an impressive feat after everything they had already shared together. Jaime rightfully concluded that she must have been about to say, and not only do, something very, very intimate.

"And I haven't changed the way I look, but the way I am."

You are wonderful, Jaime thought sincerely.

"It must be love," Brienne announced with unbreakable conviction. "I love now as I am loved and it shows to the outer world as beauty."

Her words struck him, catching him unprepared, shocking him with the brutal strength of her devotion. He knew he had her love but faced with how great it was when she spoke of it made him hurting and humbled. He would never take it for granted.
Jaime's cheeks burned as they had not in his entire lifetime. Her heartfelt outburst stirred the pit of raw emotions in the bottom of his soul, rekindling soft tongues of fire that often danced behind his heavy eyelids of late, due to his new affinity with dragons.

"Gods, wench," he barely found strength to react habitually, choking down the previously completely unknown urge to cry. "You finally discovered the secret of how I keep my golden looks," he murmured gently before the loveliest, fullest lips devoured his in the longest possible of kisses.

As it soon turned, he could do it again, and he was able to make her surrender to him willingly, if only for a while.

*I am still strong enough.*

The dragon found them naked as twin babes on their name day. Viserion sat down on the islet and lowered his majestic head to the ground.

There, it groaned deeply, lamenting.

Jaime frowned, trying to discern his meaning.

The dragon... *meowed.*

"He... he is crying!" Jaime said incredulously, conveniently forgetting his own desire to do just that moments ago.

"Why?" Brienne had trouble believing it as well, as Jaime's scowl deepened with growing knowledge.

*Knowledge can be pain. Wouldn't you agree, Tyrion?*

"He's crying for the dead dragons," Jaime understood. "This place, these fumes over the sunken ruins of a civilisation... it's a graveyard."

Joy went out of them faster than it came, Jaime felt as if they had desecrated the place by their loving. *How fitting for me, to commit yet another sacrilege.*

But the dragon immediately understood his rider and shook his head left and right, just as a man might, the first time he had ever done so. Jaime was immensely proud of Viserion. *You are learning.*

*As are you,* the dragon may have thought, or not, it was impossible to say with precision.

*No shame,* Viserion thundered inwardly, his purpose becoming more palpable in Jaime's mind as the beast grew more excited. *Honour... honour... the sleepers. Show life...*

*Life returns.*

By sleepers he meant the dead dragons and dragonlords, Jaime guessed, when his poor head suddenly became invaded by odd images of dragons twisting their heads together, of tearing and sniffing at each other's scales, of touching with horns, all activities which somehow preceded to laying eggs.

"Alright, stop it!" Jaime protested. *I've seen enough.* Somehow he didn't want to be an intruder anymore into the world of peculiar intimacy of the dragons. It seemed most untoward and confusing, and that was to say something. After almost five and twenty years at court, Jaime thought nothing
could surprise him any more, but dragons, dragons still could.

No, I don't want you to look at us when we are trying to lay eggs either. I've already told you so. Viserion seemed sad about the repeated admonishment as a young boy caught stealing a loaf of bread from the kitchens.

Possessively, Jaime laid both hand and stump on Brienne's flat and muscled belly, imagining it swelling softly with child. She was not drinking moon tea as far as he knew and he didn't pay any attention to where he spent his seed. It would be so visible in the tight manly garments you are wearing, not hidden under carefully adjusted bodices and layers of skirts…. I would be able to see it and touch it and feel our child move.

I could be his father for all the world to see from the beginning.

Brienne coughed and nested restlessly in his embrace.

"Maybe I can't bear children," she said as if she could read his thoughts, "maybe in that I am well… mannish… not only in length."

"Or maybe my seed is not as strong as it was," Jaime retorted in kind.

Does it mean that you wish to have my child as much as I do? He didn't dare ask plainly in case she only thought of it as her duty, and if what she truly wanted was to be free to fight.

Tyrion, Viserion tooted proudly in his mind.

"Has he found your brother?" Brienne wondered. It was her turn to change the topic.

"Now he speaks to you as well?" Jaime say, feigning annoyance.

Tyrion, Viserys insisted, now.

The series of images suggested Tyrion was with someone Viserion knew or someone Viserion's soul knew and not Viserion himself. It was the most confusing thing that the dragon had ever attempted to say.

"Wait," Jaime said, holding his hurting head, "forget this." If you know where Tyrion is, please just take us there, there's no need to explain how you know it or why.

Jaime and Brienne left behind the fumes, the dead dragons and the dragonlords, and their stolen moment of peace. The dragon flew east for the rest of the day, until well into the evening, and the pale light from over the Smoking Sea went with them until the end of the world.

"Meereen didn't look that far on the maps," Brienne told him from behind, clutching the blue dragon egg to that part of the belly Jaime imagined growing big with their child.

Jaime had no idea where exactly Meereen was except that it was on the far side of Essos. "Maybe he's taking a shortcut."

Brienne was unconvinced. "You wish," she mumbled. And Jaime did wish for the dragon to take them to his little brother.

In any way it takes.

As the night came, they flew low over a stretch of sea with forested islands scattered amidst the waves, that the dragon deemed unsafe to land on. And at the dawn of the next day, they approached
the largest city in the world as far as Jaime could tell, much bigger than King’s Landing or Oldtown, many times greater than Volantis, the proud first daughter of Valyria. It was also the strangest city Jaime had ever seen, the one the dragon had been scouting earlier in his rider's mind.

The city walls and the buildings were dark, built of large blocks of some obscure stone akin to granite, like Winterfell, Jaime remembered, but of a darker, slippery, lifeless hue, almost black where the seat of the Starks had been grey. The port was thriving; there seemed to be no place left to anchor a ship.

Yet beyond the harbour there were few people walking down the desolate black-paved streets inside its walls, and all who did covered their faces, or maybe Jaime could just not see them very well from dragonback.

"Is this Meereen?" Jaime asked.

"I wouldn't know," Brienne replied instinctively, and Viserion gave no answer.

The dragon didn't fly them to the city gates as Jaime would expect, but maybe half a league further, to a distance a man could walk back easy and fast. Smoothly and in an effort resembling stealth, the beast dived into a field of strangest grass Jaime had ever seen in utmost silence. No sound, no trace of smoke left the dragon's maw since they but glimpsed the unknown town.

The grass was as tall as Viserion, much taller than either Brienne or Jaime. Its stalks were pale like the dragon's scales, but with no shine to them, no shimmer of gold to make them look lovely as the dragon could appear in sunlight. Dull and white, they would look dead if the entire grass field did not sway slowly back and forth in the barely perceptible wind. Jaime inhaled and wished he didn't; the very air smelled of rot and decay.

*Ghost grass*, Viserion suggested. *Over. All Over.*

*All over the world*, Jaime deciphered. "He says that this grass will one day cover the world."

Viserion agreed mutely in his rider's head, faithful to his new strategy of not making noise. Jaime tortured his brain to remember the land where such grass grew in the long gone maester lessons from his childhood, unable to think of any.

He stared up at the darkened sky, gloomy as if it had never seen the clear light of day. Yet it was not nighttime, not at all.

They were standing under a great shadow, hovering over the world.

*Tyrion?* Jaime probed Viserion's consciousness, but the dragon's only response was a miniature spiritual nod, followed by pig-headed, or rather, *dragon-headed* silence and something about his soul not wishing to pass those gates, not ever, not even if the Great Shepherd himself demanded of him that sacrifice. The dragon's thoughts turned increasingly unclear and erratic the more east they went, it would seem, and his rider chose to ignore them for a moment.

"He believes my little brother is in the city," Jaime summed up the dragon's befuddlement, "but he doesn't know where. And he's not fond of entering the place, he'd rather wait for us here."

"It's only a city," Brienne said with that curiosity and lack of fear before the unknown only the very young could have, and Jaime was glad she had never lost her confidence, despite that she was now a bloodied fighter, and no longer a lady knight of summer. *My beloved, determined wife.*

A bell tolled, distant, mourning. One, and then another.

"Or a festivity we are not accustomed to," Brienne said, undeterred, observing what she could from the distance that separated them from the insistent chime, and the many tall towers of the city.

"Let us take a closer look," she bid him. The piercing gaze of her blue eyes was already exploring the high, black walls, and the roofs and the turrets beyond them.

Jaime eagerly obeyed his wife. Together, they started in the direction of the city of the shadows, leaving behind them a dazed white dragon, hiding in the field of ghost grass.

Chapter End Notes

As always, tell me what you think if you feel like it.

Next up: Gendry
Gendry

Chapter Notes

This has been written very much for DrHolland because I will never be able to offer enough thanks for the beta read of this chapter and of all the others.

And a special thank you to TopShelfCrazy for the final improvements )))

Thank you to all who commented, bookmarked or followed this story.

Thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gendry

Accompanied by two guards, Queen Lyanna came to his chamber in the hour of ghosts, all cloaked in grey.

The queen's face was pale like Jeyne's when she was still dead, and her dark hair cascaded down her shoulders and back, hanging loose, in northern style. In the seconds he needed to blink away the last traces of sleep, before he knew with no shade of doubt where he was, who he was, and who she was, Gendry suffered from an illusion it had been Arya, coming to his room at night… They looked so alike, at times.

But Arya now always braided her hair. At least she doesn't cut it short. Besides, everyone's hair was growing unstoppably this winter. Or in Gendry's case, his beard. He tugged at it almost unconsciously and murmured with quiet acceptance, "Yes, Your Grace?"

His initial unease kept growing. It was highly unusual for the queen to seek him out at all, and much less in the middle of the night.

Lyanna was shorter and kinder than Arya for as much as she could be stern and cruel at need. She often spoke with poised ease and a female grace acquired over time, where Arya remained unyielding, brittle as iron before steel was made from it, and completely closed off to Gendry… since the Twins.

Before the Twins, Gendry believed they were friends again. Pack, as she might say. Arya knew very well it had been Gendry who was looking after her during the last days of the enchanted sleep that overtook her when she returned from Braavos and refused to serve the Many-Faced God. He dared hope she might have forgiven him for his decision to smith for Lord Beric Dondarrion and let the Brotherhood without Banners ransom her to her mother all those years ago. It appeared he had been wrong. Any old grudges Arya might have held against him in the past came back tenfold. She avoided him as if he had greyscale, or worse, some unknown flux that would kill her on the instant if she ever directed him a word.

I couldn't have known you'd run away, board a ship and leave Westeros, could I? Back then, I thought you'd go to your mother and I would still be able to see you from afar… if you so wished.

Yet he'd never told her any of it when she was awake because first he believed he didn't have to, that
she must have understood… what he'd always felt for her, although she didn't have it in her heart to correspond him. And now she would not talk to him at all.

"There is a task at hand, a rather urgent one" the queen informed him. "My sweet niece prefers not to take part, but in this case I agree with my husband; she's our best and fastest option. I believe that I have made her understand."

"Lady Sansa, Your Grace?" Gendry asked cautiously, not trusting a hope he would be commanded to do something together with Arya.

It was the wrong thing to say. A set of slim, boot-clad legs scurried away from behind his semi-open door and vanished down the corridor. Arya must have been standing there, just behind the guards. And anything Gendry did or didn't do of late seemed to displease her anyway.

She had never acted so capriciously before, as a proper… lady… Arya treated him with the same coldness as those highborn ladies he remembered from his young years. Prideful and vain, they either saw the smith's apprentice so much below them or didn't see him at all. Her sister Sansa was not like that since Gendry had met her, and the queen was an entirely different sort of lady. Gendry had never quite met a woman like Lyanna Stark and he doubted many men did. A true Queen of Winter...

The Arya he thought he knew could be angry with him if she considered he did something particularly stupid. She might even try and hit him, but she would never treat him as if he were invisible as thin air. The attitude… hurt. As simple as that.

"Sansa is adorable and braver than she believes herself to be," the queen continued, waking Gendry fully from his reverie, "but the task may require the use of arms. I hope that it will not come to that, but I cannot know for certain. Arya will have to oblige me and go. You are the best choice to help her. I beg your pardon for stating this bluntly, but we have only one of Robert's bastards with us here in Winterfell."

Gendry was wide awake and suddenly conscious that he didn't put his tunic on for sleeping. "May I have a moment to dress, Your Grace?" he asked, remembering the courtesies he was still learning.

"Certainly," Lyanna said coldly, accomplished and distant, or perhaps lost in a heartache of her own. "Come to the solar as soon as you are ready. I shall see to it that Arya rejoins us as well."

The rest of the night went by as in a dream. The haze included flying on dragonback with Arya and her aunt, to the frozen land of ice he had never seen. There was snow around Winterfell, but not nearly as much as on the place where the dragon landed them, in an abandoned village where only a small part of the houses were built above, and a much larger portion under the ground.

"Mole's Town," the queen announced. "Last time I was here, my father was still alive. It looks much the same, just empty. Come here," she told Gendry and Arya. "Do we have an understanding? You will both do what I ask?"

Arya nodded, examining her boots.

_We are going somewhere with great haste, but we have yet to hear where and why_, Gendry thought as he nodded just the same. The queen wouldn't take no for an answer. _Just like Arya… at times…_

They stood in front of a shabby hut. The dragon pushed his head and snout deep into it as soon as his burden was off his back. Puffs of smoke and tongues of fire were spreading out of the house he invaded. To Gendry, it looked like a miracle that the wooden structure did not catch flame.

"What is he doing?" Arya asked with suspicion. Gendry found she was not that fond of dragons.
"Boring a shaft through the ground," Lyanna explained dryly. "As if he were a firewyrm. Rhaegar warned about this in his letter. It shouldn't take him long."

"What's a firewyrm?" Gendry asked, shocked by the rough sound of his own voice, which came out surprisingly hollow through the thick black beard. Arya gave him an unreadable stare and the queen did not react. The fact was, he didn't speak to almost anyone since the Twins if he didn't have to. He just did as he was bid during the journey, busied himself with small smith work that could be done on the road and went scouting when necessary.

"A firewyrm is another kind of dragon, or an animal ancestor of dragons," Lyanna explained. "They could not fly, they could only bore tunnels in the ground by their flaming breath. They made the mines of Old Valyria where the ore for the Valyrian steel was obtained. Or maybe they made that ore. The knowledge has died with the Freehold."

"Why do we need a fire worm?" Arya asked.

"Wyrm," Lyanna corrected her niece ever so gently. "And I can assure you Drogon is very much a dragon, and not some witless worm." The queen became very nervous as she said that, readjusting restlessly the folds of a very wide thick grey dress she was wearing under an equally grey furry cloak.

Arya, for her part, wore black, and never looked more like a servant of the foreign god of death. Gendry wished she'd add a touch of white to her attire, always afraid that some day she could fall asleep again and that he would not be able to wake her.

"You will descend here when he is done and follow the path Drogon opened for you," the queen said. "On the other side, you should exit in the dungeons made under the Wall, in the cells dug into the ice. Rhaegar and Drogon believe Stannis has our nephew Rickon imprisoned in one of them."

"Rickon?" Arya suddenly seemed much more interested to be there. Immediately, she turned against Gendry. "Why does he have to go? I can go on my own, or take some guards. We have guards again in Winterfell, don't we?"

"Gendry is as strong as any guard," Lyanna remarked, "I'm certain you've noticed that. " The queen's gaze was piercing, but Arya's stayed flat, as if she had never noticed Gendry's existence at all.

"Two is safer than one," Lyanna continued in a milder tone, "and more than two would be a much greater risk to be seen, stopped or caught. And it's not only that, surely you must understand that it is not."

"Arya," the queen was pleading now. "I've never seen my smallest nephew, but you should be able to recognise your baby brother no matter how much he has changed in six years. And Rhaegar alerted me strongly to another thing, and that is the reason why Gendry is going with you."

Arya stared incredulously at her aunt.

"You have to avoid Robert's brother Stannis at all cost. You've never seen him, but he's nowadays gaunt as death and looks a lot like Gendry here," the queen said. "With him at your side you should both recognise Stannis immediately if you run into him, and then turn the other way. You should also avoid a woman in red robes wearing no cloak in winter who is normally trailing after Stannis as an ugly bird of ill omen. You do that, and you should be back to Mole Town with Rickon in no time and Drogon will take you back to Winterfell. If you run into trouble and cannot go back the way you came, just leave Castle Black. Go far enough from it and Drogon will find you."
And if he doesn’t? Gendry couldn’t help wondering. Maybe he shared Arya's concerns about the dragons after all.

"Be careful," the queen said after them with that tender touch of concern and… affection she would sometimes show to her closest family. Gendry wondered if she somehow included him, though he was in no way related to her. "There is both ungodly cold and burning in Castle Black now. Do not stray from your path, and do not linger."

"Aunt," Arya asked, sounding like a helpless child for the briefest moment, "won't you come?"

"It's not safe for me," Lyanna said from her condition of utmost palour, and Gendry wondered if the queen suffered from some terrible illness. "I will see Rhaegar while you are away. I fear he has been up to something foolish again instead of looking for his sister and our son. Men can be greater fools in life than they are in the songs, Arya. You would do well to remember that."

To Gendry it didn't seem that Arya would remember any such thing. She thought of all men as stupid anyway.

The queen left with Drogon without another word. Only the wind was still charged with the sound of flapping of dragon wings, disappearing in the distance.

"Are you coming or not?" Arya was already at the entrance of the house where Drogon had busied himself with digging. Milady was never one for half-measures, Gendry remembered with fondness and followed fast. At least we are alone. At last. They had never been alone since the Twins. Maybe she will talk to me now.

The crawl proved to be long and arduous and Arya as silent as ever. Truth be told, she could walk straight and Gendry could choose between walking on all fours or on his knees. It was hard to say what was more uncomfortable, and there was the small matter of carrying the hammer. They advanced in darkness, deprived of any source of light. Long thin branches of some wood covered the sides of the passage, stretching horizontally alongside the corridor. Gendry could feel them by touch. He wondered if they were weirwoods like in the caves the Brotherhood was using in the riverlands.

"How far away is it, do you think?" he couldn't help asking, for as much as he had sworn, in the long, lonely winter nights on the kingsroad that he wouldn't be the first one to begin casual conversation. It's not my fault this time, he thought with determination. I haven't done anything wrong.

"I would say a day," Arya judged, "the way should be shorter down here because it goes straight and the road is winding. But my aunt told me that the men of the Night's Watch mostly rode rather than walked from Castle Black to Mole's Town so it won't be very close."

She sounded friendly and businesslike, as if it was easier for her to speak to him in the dark when she couldn't look at his stupid face. Gendry was embittered by it, especially since his knees were going to be all scratched and bleeding.

"The dragon couldn't have hollowed all this now, could he?" he inquired quietly, wishing nonetheless to hear more of her voice after not listening to it for so long.

"No," Arya agreed. "He must have only opened the way to the older passage. I understood from my aunt, though she wouldn't say it so directly, that the brothers of the Night's Watch normally came to Mole's Town so that the tavern girls could ring their bells."

There was accusation in her voice now and Gendry felt exceedingly tired from it. Can't you see that I
"Let's just go on," he said, wishing to think of something he could say in his defence, but nothing came... After all, he did kiss Jeyne Heddle after Arya left, so perhaps he should shut up, in case she could somehow see that he did. Once, he had heard the Hound pleading with Lady Sansa to stop messing with his ugly head. Arya's sister lost her wolf with the consequence that she could now sometimes see through the eyes of animals or of her husband. Arya hadn't lost hers, so she should not be able to invade his being, but maybe she somehow did, and was appalled by knowing that he...

That he loved her.

Just when they almost thought that turning back was in order, though Arya would probably never admit it, the walls of the passage started showing a faint blue shine. Gendry reached forward with his fingers and felt ice.

"We're getting nearer," he said. Arya agreed mutely, making a sign for him not to talk. He had already noticed she could move with impressive grace and stealth, even more quietly than when she was a scrawny little girl. The corridor they were in was about to end, or rather, bifurcate. On one side there was a way out, leading above the ground, from where the clash of steel on steel could be heard.

Battle, Gendry knew, and so did Arya. They both tensed.

And instead of walking away from trouble as they probably should have done, they both spontaneously sneaked to the opening to check who fought and why, as well as to establish where they were. Peering to the outside, Gendry saw shabby wooden castle structures half-buried in snow. Battle raged in the courtyard before their eyes.

A tall, gaunt, square-jawed man with a closely cropped black and blue beard lashed out with a flaming sword against a sharp looking crystal blade, carried by the eight foot tall monster of ice.

How is that forged? Gendry thought with burning curiosity, staring at the white enemy's weapon until all his body began shivering. He looked away and felt like himself again.

It was one of them Others, the monsters from the north. He realised he should avoid looking at the creature in order to keep his fear down. There had been some sightings of the white walkers in the riverlands. Rumour had it King Rhaegar killed one by chance with Valyrian steel when he thought himself the Elder Brother, but Gendry had never seen one yet from close by. He glanced at Arya with worry. But if she experienced any fear, she was not showing it, absentmindedly caressing the tiny handle of her small sword.

He tried to caress his hammer and look at the white walker, but that didn't work; the fear was immediately back. So he chose to look at Arya instead, and when he did, he feared nothing.

She received Needle as a gift from her brother who is her cousin now, Gendry thought, hating the fact. He could make her a finer sword, but he was afraid she would again take it all wrong if he made her such a gift.

I've made King Rhaegar's lance, he remembered with pride.

Gendry had learned how to work the Valyrian steel from Tobho Mott, though like any other smith in Westeros he knew not how to obtain the precious material anew. But in the king's lance he outdid himself and everything he had ever learned, hammering together the Valyrian steel and dragonglass on the tip. That lance might very well kill the Others, Gendry believed, but it was not yet tried against them.
More men fought walking corpses further ahead, some armoured and some clad in furs, with lesser or greater success. On the last level of a blackened wooden tower, the red woman stood, clad in willowy satin robes. She lifted her arms and sang over a burning brazier. The wind was carrying her ululating voice down, descending on the fighters as the announcement of doom. Thoros had such robes once, before their colour faded, Gendry realised. She must be a priestess of... R'hllor.

"I wouldn't smith for her," Gendry admitted all of a sudden, possessed by a notion of what he could say to Arya to make her understand.

"Maybe you would," she replied, cold and unjust.

"I wouldn't have smithed for Beric either had I known you would run away." There. He felt much easier for saying it.

Arya showed no reaction.

"And I think this is Stannis, so we should head the other way. He does look a bit like me."

"You?" she scorned him, "You look like an ugly bearded man."

A man? The thought that Arya saw him as one pierced his soul with a deadly force of a firewyrm.

"I still remember seeing my face in the mirror, milady," The last word was out of his mouth without thinking. She smacked him in the chest with the hilt of her tiny sword. The blow hurt but it was nevertheless dealt with utmost stillness, not to reveal them to anyone.

But then, to her credit, she did look into Gendry's eyes, and at the man whose sword was on fire. "Maybe you are right. They are of the same dark blue. But yours have more steel in them. They are... different."

In which way, milady? Gendry knew better than to ask.

Arya almost smiled at him. Gendry's lips stretched as he grinned widely back, without any restraint. It was apparently again something wrong he just did, because it made her crawl away from him as much as possible without letting her head be visible on the outside.

To be sure, Stannis' eyes did have a hollow shine. His gaze was so stiff and focused on the task at hand that the bright blue, merciless eyes of the Other seemed more... alive in comparison.

My... uncle. To think he was looking at a kinsman made Gendry feel queasy. Here is one who looks like me, yet he is less family of mine than Lord Beric ever was.

A girl's voice spoke softly behind them, followed by gentle tingling of the bells.

"You should not go out there," she counseled them. "It's not safe."

Arya and Gendry both froze, turning back, and Gendry instinctively stood in front of Arya. Behind them, in the ice passage leading down, stood a rather tall girl. Her face was in the shadows, and her hair long and completely black as Jeyne's. She made a step forward when they didn't reply. Gendry could see that her eyes were as blue as his, and her jaw equally square. Her ears protruded from her hair, longer than necessary.

"We can see the danger..." Arya started almost politely, at a loss of her usual bluntness. "We know what Stannis is fighting..."
"Father will defeat the Great Other," the girl said with conviction, "he is Azor Ahai reborn. But that's not the reason why you should not go out there."

She seemed to mean exclusively Gendry. The girl was staring at him squarely.

Arya sounded angry now. "Why shouldn't he go?" she demanded.

"He must be another natural-born cousin of mine, my lady," the girl answered Arya with courtesy before her attention returned to Gendry again. "You look a bit like Edric... Edric Storm. If Father and Lady Melisandre find you when the battle is done, they might want to capture you for having king's blood. They imprisoned Edric before Lord Davos found a way to let him go. And we already have so many prisoners."

Gendry had no idea who this Edric was, but what the girl said corresponded to what the queen demanded; to stay away from Stannis and his red lady. *She didn't tell us to avoid a girl who looks like me.*

*Except for the ears.*

It was most unsettling to meet in one day not only one person but two who looked like him. Gendry wished he was born blond like his mother. What was he going to do with those foreigners whose face he shared? The man above fought bravely though, he had to admit that, and the girl was also not a coward to seek out two strangers standing so close to the battle.

"What is the little bell sound?" Gendry asked.

"Oh, it's just Patches, my fool. When he's with me, I'm less afraid. And he can sing prettily, can't you, Patches?"

Some tune with verse about the shadows dancing under the sea sprang forth from the darkness, mingled with the soft jingling of bells.

The girl reached out and touched Gendry's head. "So much like Edric's," she whispered with care.

To Gendry's great surprise, Arya stepped in between them now, causing the girl to withdraw.

"Have you been betrothed to this... Edric?" she asked, "My lady," she added, trying to be... as courteous as Arya could be.

"No," the girl said with sadness, "And though I've flowered, I'll probably never be betrothed to anyone unless my father receives the High Septon's blessing and truly becomes King of the Seven Kingdoms. Then I will be his only heir, and some lord will marry me for my claim."

With that she stepped fully into the scarce blue light dripping into the ice passage from the outside and showed her face. *She did have greyscale,* Gendry realised. Half of her face looked like dull, dark-grey bark of the tree, and not like human skin.

"My pardons, my lady," Arya muttered, appearing contrite. "I have not known you were like... like my good-brother!"

"Who is he?" the girl asked. "I've never known anyone like myself."

"Never mind now," Arya said, "but I am Arya and he is Gendry. What's your name?"

"Shireen," the girl whispered.
"Lady Shireen," Gendry decided to try his own courtesies with this girl who could have been his true cousin if the fate was different. "We are looking for Lady Arya's brother, a boy of nine with auburn hair. Have you seen him?"

"He may have a large black wolf with him," Arya added for good measure, which was good. Gendry would have forgotten about the animal.

"Yes," Stannis' daughter said, eyeing both of them with eyes full of trust, despite that she had never seen them in her life.

*That is missing from my eyes, Gendry thought. I stopped being this innocent when my mother died.*

*If I ever was.*

Shireen led them back and further on the way they came from Mole's Town before they had become distracted by the battle. The ice-tunnel wound down and the chill became oppressive and fearsome, almost as terrible as the creature Stannis was fighting. Patches carried a torch and sang all the way.

"*Under the sea the mermaids live free, I know, I know, oh how well do I know...*"

A vertical barrier of polished ice rose in front. They could go no further.

"He's in here," Shireen announced with apprehension, "but the Lady Melisandre ensorcelled the door to look smooth when the son of the Mad King came here to usurp my father's throne. There is a handle to open it, but you can't see it."

Gendry remembered the Hound's treatment of dungeon doors at the Twins. *I have grown almost as tall,* he told himself as an encouragement. He didn't think he would like Arya to laugh at him if he failed, but he couldn't think of a better thing to try. In truth he was now taller than Rhaegar, but still shorter than the Hound.

"Step away," he told Shireen and her fool. Arya fortunately did the same of her own free will, which was just as good. Gendry didn't think she would take it kindly if he told her what to do.

*Yet she thinks she can command me...*

Two instincts fought inside Gendry whenever Arya sought to impose her will; the impulse to obey blindly and see if she would one day kiss him, and the one to rebel, become a man in his own right, declare his undying love for her and ask her to take him or leave him once and for all.

Neither prevailed, for the time being.

*Best not think about it here,* he thought and swung the hammer.

The frozen door didn't yield at first, nor at the second stroke. But in the third attempt he chipped a shard of ice from the middle of it. He took two steps back and swung with all his might, hitting the weakened point. A tiny hole in ice emerged, but the barrier still stood. Yet the spell was gone and a hollow to put a hand in appeared on it. Pulling the door open proved surprisingly easy from there, and in a second they saw the boy.

He sat on the floor and shivered, dressed in some strange fur with long, white and gray hairs protruding from it all over his body, and on his head he wore a similar cap. His auburn mane was falling to his waist, much brighter and wilder in colour than Lady Sansa's.

"Rickon," Arya said with womanly softness Gendry had never heard her use before, immediately
rejoining her brother.

The boy rubbed his eyes. "Sansa?" he asked with surprise. Scarce torchlight was hurting his eyes and he decided to keep them closed.

"No," Arya said, sadly. The boy reached for her hair. "Arya," he said decisively. "I can almost see you if I squint. I thought you were all dead. All of you who went south."

"No," Arya said, choking on the word. "No."

Rickon caressed his sister's face with two thick, rough palms, rather large for a boy, and Arya smiled so prettily now that Gendry's heart both hurt and swelled to the point of bursting. *Would that you offered that smile to me, milady, one time, at least.*

"All is well," the boy continued. "Your voice has become a bit like Sansa's… Like Mother's… I thought that… The red lady told me all my siblings were dead and I should be Lord of Winterfell by the grace of King Stannis. But I can't," he said with stubborn conviction, "I am a free man of Skagos now. We hate lords. Osha would tell you, if she were here."


"Osha is the wildling lady who was brought in with Rickon from Skagos. She and his wolf ran away when the Mad King's son came. This was another reason why they closed Rickon so thoroughly in ice."

Arya pulled her brother on his feet. He was still a bit shorter than her, but very tall for a boy of nine.

"We have to go," she said.

But when they headed back, the path to Mole's Town was closed off to them. The passage they came through and where they met Shireen was appropriated by the fight and burst open. The ice walls were melting slowly from sudden heat.

Stannis was still battling the Other in the exact spot Gendry and Arya were standing moments ago. A bronze circlet adorned his head, with edges shaped like little flames, and his hollow crowned face reminded Gendry of how he imagined the demons from seven hells as a boy.

Gendry and his companions stayed silent and squatted close to the ground. Even the fool stopped moving his head and the little bells on his hat.

Paralyzing fear started seeping into Gendry's soul and he wondered if the rest of his party felt the same way. He lifted his hammer and forced himself to make a step forward. *Maybe I can help my… uncle.*

But before he could move, two sinewy lady's arms stayed his own, one of each side.

"My father has a magic sword, Lightbringer," Shireen whispered, "if he can't bring it down, nothing can."

Gendry thought that maybe a firewyrm could as well, or a dragon, or the lance he'd made for the king, but none of those were here, only Gendry, two ladies, a boy and a fool.

The waited some more as the battle continued without issue. The monster was stronger, but the man fighting it more tenacious and unwilling to surrender.
"We need to distract the thing," Gendry whispered, possessed by the vision of battles and strategies, of forged swords and armours and warhammers, a world where he commanded an army of his own, and when he returned, victorious, Lady Arya gave him her hand in marriage…

But the real Arya next to him was flipping an odd coin in her hand and staring forward as he had done beforehand, wishing to do something more stupid than he'd ever think of doing, Gendry assumed.

An insignificant detail came to mind, which could maybe, hopefully help them. When the sound of the bells came tingling from under the Wall for the first time, the monster fighting Stannis had made several steps back. It were the only steps back it made.

"Shireen," he whispered, forgetting to my-lady his cousin, "tell Patches to move his hat. Please."

Patches was weeping silently from fear and his head was hidden in Shireen's skirts. The girl reached for his hat and shook it gently by herself.

The monster turned his head.

And Stannis lodged Lightbringer into his neck in that second. A shrill sound cut the world in two. The magic sword burned bright red, and yellow, and stopped burning and became dull. A burned sword, not the burning one any longer, the smith in Gendry noticed with precision. Just like Thoros used to have before the Lord of Light truly blessed him with his wisdom, and then he needed a new one for every tourney and every new melee...

The monster's blade was no more. It fumed and slowly disappeared into ashes, as the creature who wielded it twitched, twisted and changed... Blue crystals remained drifting in the air like petals of snow over the fallen enemy.

And when all the crystals dropped to the melting snow, the body of the fallen was not a monster any longer, not the Other, but merely… a man. A not so tall man dressed in black wool and furs.

The red lady came to Stannis swiftly, as if she had flown down the tower by some magic Gendry did not understand, nor see Thoros use. He wished Thoros and Tom were here so he could ask them about the tricks of the priests of R'hllor, but they never followed the king to Winterfell. Lord Reed kept Thoros in the Greywater Watch, claiming he could use his help, and the red priest obeyed.

The other corpses lost direction when the monster fell. Cries of victory echoed all around. Soon a hundred men celebrating stood between Gendry and his companions and their way to freedom…

The human corpse that formed itself from crystals opened his eyes for a moment, breathed deeply with his ruined lungs, and closed them again. It appeared to Gendry as if the poor man had exhaled his last breath in peace.

"It's Kedge Whit-eye" a soft-looking young man dressed in the same black wools as the dead one said with surprise. "Lord Snow sent him to lead a ranging at the same time he sent out Dywen and Alliser Thorne!"

Stannis pushed the man he killed with the tip of his boot and asked of his red lady with firmness bordering on contempt.

"Was this the Great Other?"

"No, Your Grace," she answered melodiously. "It was yet another of his servants. He seeks to fool you, knowing you are bringing him his death."
"As you say," Stannis said, but he didn't look very convinced to Gendry.

Patches was himself again. Singsonging about shadows and mermaids he ran away from all the commotion, toward the ice cells.

"Patches!" Shireen called after him. The red woman looked in their direction as soon as the fool left, as if without Patches' presence she could feel *theirs* or know something was not as she wanted it to be.

"Arya, please, believe me," Gendry said quietly, "we should follow the fool now. The lady there, she is like Thoros, like Lord Beric. She has powers… She sees things… And maybe not all for the good. You never liked the Brotherhood. Trust me that she's worse."

Arya nodded and pulled Rickon with her.

"Who is he?" Rickon asked about Gendry.

"Gendry is my cousin," Shireen said because Arya kept silent, as they all headed back, following in the fool's footsteps. "Cousin, pray tell, from which house was your mother?"

"The only house my mother knew was an ale house," Gendry muttered.

"It makes no matter, Rickon," Arya proclaimed, "he's now living with us in Winterfell. Sansa is also there."

"And who are you?" Rickon asked the long-eared girl.

"I'm Shireen Baratheon, King Stannis' daughter."

Rickon touched both sides of her face, much as he did with Arya's.

"The grey death has come for you," he said with dismay.

"The name's greyscale," Shireen said coldly.

"You should be dead," Rickon pointed out.

"Well I'm not," the girl said stubbornly.

"No you are not," Rickon agreed. "Not all die. There is a tale in Skagos that those who live can cure others from the curse. But it has been so long since anyone did live that old women say it is only a children's story."

Shireen pulled Rickon's palms off her face and stormed forward after her fool.

The conversation died out completely by the time Patches brought them out of the icy wyrmways and back to the frozen surface of the earth. They were so breathless and exhausted that they didn't feel the biting chill. A look around revealed they were as far as possible from the tunnel leading back to Mole's Town, well outside Castle Black and at the bottom of the Wall.

It was the most impressive structure built by human hand Gendry had ever seen. He glanced up with admiration and unease. *The end of the world...* Arya suddenly stood next to him, sharing the sentiment, judging by the width of her eyes.

"When I ran away from the Brotherhood, I wanted to come here to see my brother Jon," Arya said, "I never thought the Wall was quite this big."
"Your cousin," Gendry murmured.

"My brother," Arya insisted. "I'll never see him as anything else." She seemed willing to genuinely tell him something now, but he was unable to grasp her meaning.

The sun was setting behind them and the horizon in front of them was already dark. They were facing east.

"If you follow the Wall this way," Shireen said in a motherly tone, "you should come to another castle. It is now under the command of the black brother called Dolorous Edd, ever since the wildling women left the Long Barrow. He was fond of Lord Snow and he can give you garrons to leave."

"Won't you come with us?" Gendry heard himself asking. "I don't mean to offend, but if the red lady wants the king's blood and if your father styles himself king," he continued, "you have it as well. What if she wants your blood one day if there isn't any other she can take?"

"Father would never allow it," the girl shook her head, and her dark blue eyes were filled with unbreakable trust. "I have to stay for him. I can't leave him in her hands. Poor mother does not understand. Her god… her god is coming from the seven hells. Lord Davos is staying for the same reason. Father needs us."

Gendry still believed R'hllor was deity of life and light and could not very well agree, but the lady he had seen now did not look honest at all like Thoros or Lord Beric, she only knew the same tricks. But he doubted she used them to protect the poor in any land. Gendry would never trust her.

"Farewell, Lady of the Grey Death," Rickon said, bowing with as much respect a boy of nine could muster. "Save your father if you can. I was a baby when they killed mine and the raven brought news of his death. I couldn't have helped him, but you can. Just as you've helped a free man of Skagos today. I shall never forget it."

Shireen stood silent as a fish, fidgeting with her fingers. It would seem she was unused to such tale-like praise. "Farewell, my lord" she said curtly, wheeled in place and scurried back. Patches followed his mistress or his friend, Gendry was not certain.

"Arya, I smell wolf," Rickon said when Shireen was gone, "don't you?"

"Shaggy?" Arya asked with hope, inhaling the night air.

"Maybe," Rickon closed his eyes. "Not far away."

Rickon advanced faster through the snow than Arya and Gendry ever could. Agile and quick, he ran on it as if frozen ground were no different for him than the field of fresh grass.

They followed as fast as they could, but the boy was always far in front, stopping only occasionally so that his sister and Gendry could catch up.

"Your brother is peculiar," Gendry had to note about the little lord of Winterfell.

"Good for him," Arya said, "he would have died a long time ago if he weren't."

As would you if you were not as stubborn as you are.

As would I, for the same reason, maybe.
They ran after Rickon, losing breath, as the day surrendered fully to the night. It slowly stopped being unbearably cold, as if the winter was temporarily defeated with the burning out of Lightbringer and the transformation of the ice monster into a mere human being.

At some point Gendry was... happy to be in the middle of nowhere with Arya, pleased they were alone and even the dragon was yet to find them. Rickon ran off again and could not be seen.

"Just like in the old days," he heard himself chattering, "we're only missing Hot Pie," he added, "although that one is still baking bread in the riverlands. And Weasel. Do you think she's still alive?"

"Knowing Weasel, she just might be," Arya said thoughtfully, "I sometimes miss Sweetrobin now that I know him, can you believe that? And Ned Dayne as well. He's still so lost away from his precious Starfall. And even before he seemed more honourable than your Lord Beric."

Ned Dayne was on his way to the Shadow Tower with Aegon and Jeyne. Ned and Aegon were cousins now if Gendry's lowborn mind was still able to keep up with the changing genealogies of people he met since he had joined Mance Rayder and his false mummers' troupe. At least Tom Sevenstreams was still a lowly singer and not some lost lord.

"I guess you wanted to go with Dayne as well, but your aunt didn't let you," Gendry spat out, unable to contain himself.

"What's wrong with you?" Arya stopped flat and began yelling at him. "You killed three men at the Twins who wanted to harm me. Not that it was needed, mind you. I thank you, but I could have done it all by myself. Then you looked at me with puppy eyes, just as all those old men in Braavos and the awful Freys who wanted to kiss me or worse. And then you never said a word to me!"

"You never said another word to me!"

"What was I supposed to do? Come to your bed and ring your bells? I stayed on the same boat with you to go to the Neck."

"And stared at the green of the water all the time! You weren't even angry at me..."

"Because I was embarrassed, stupid!" It had cost her to say that, Gendry could see. So it must be true. His brains slowed down, almost to a full halt. He could not understand.

Arya continued speaking and her voice dwindled to a bitter whisper.

"And to think that between the two of us you were always the one so concerned about me being born a lady. Haven't you heard about maidenly modesty?"

Arya, embarrassed? Maidenly modesty?

The shadows danced in front of Gendry's eyes. Under the sea they danced and the little bells tinkled with defiance calling mermaids to rest.

He didn't understand a thing about Arya except that she was blaming him now for not... for not...

"Come over here," he said, serious as one possessed by all the demons from seven hells.

She obviously never moved.

He dropped his hammer in the snow and put his right hand on her cheek. The skin felt frozen and looked red. She stood painfully still.
It was not a proper way to treat a lady, not even a pretty way to court an innkeep's daughter or a tavern wench. Gendry bent down and kissed Arya Stark as avidly as he knew how. He grabbed her tiny waist, dragging her firmly towards him with both arms. Her body almost disappeared in his improper embrace from being so much smaller. Yet he could feel her presence in every pore of his being as if she was so much greater than him, conquering every inch of him... He lifted her and ran one of his arms up and down her back, to be sure she was still there, never breaking the kiss.

When he pulled away and put her slowly down, the cold had entirely disappeared from the world, and he honestly expected her to slap him.

But her eyes just glowed black and watery in the darkness, illuminated by starlight, deep like two black lakes on the white mantle of snow.

"I wanted to kiss you since you were eleven," he confessed since she didn't seem to know it, just to be sure that now she did.

"I have been five and ten for a while," she replied to that, as if he hadn't noticed it before.

"I know," he whispered through his beard. "I've been seeing it every day. Now it feels less shameful to want your kisses."

Arya's eyes danced at that, just like the shadows in Gendry's soul did a moment before, ringing little bells.

"Arya, Gendry, come!" Rickon stood in front of them out of the blue. Or out of the black, as the night was.

"It's not just Shaggy," he said with childlike enthusiasm of receiving more toys for his name day than only one. "The pack is coming together."

There was no choice, they had to follow suit. Gendry's lips pricked, from being slightly… bitten?

Rickon led them to a deep hollow in the ground overgrown with some evergreen, prickly bushes from which the snow had been… scorched… as if a dragon had just passed by. Or a firewyrm. Small fires were burning in the middle, smelling of life and of goodness in the world, of things that not even the Long Night could cause to vanish forever.

A very tall woman with unkempt brown-grey hair was trying to revive a fainted dark-haired man with a widow's peak. Next to her sat a black wolf with green eyes, growling with menace.

A huge white shadow jumped on Gendry. The wolf dwarfed the former smith's apprentice. Gendry fell backward and heard Arya screaming "Ghost, no!" as his head hit the ground.

Sharp teeth tore into his shoulder. At least it can't breathe fire, Gendry thought with a measure of relief. The last thing he remembered before passing out were the wolf's eyes.

They gleamed red in the starlight and showed no mercy, promising death to the humble believer in the Lord of Light.

Snow, the stars seemed to be calling quietly, but the snow didn't hear them, white and implacable, covering the ground.

Chapter End Notes
As always, tell me what you think, if anything )))

Next up: Jon, but not only
Jon

The Wall gleamed like an endless cloth-of-silver in scarce, shadowy daylight. Quietly, it melted into the sea, grey kissing grey. Behind it, a set of stocky towers rose slowly from the foaming waves, as black dwarves running and stopping to lean against the impassive flatness of the boulders of ice. This fort was less rickety and more solid than its distant cousin, Castle Black. Queen Selyse used it to feast her bannermen, before she travelled west with them to meet Stannis and cause headaches to Jon.

Yet Eastwatch-by-the-Sea was a much greater port than it ever was a castle. When the Rhaenys glided into the harbour with a rhythmic beat of the oars, Jon noticed several large ships Stannis must have arrived with. Empty, with their sails down, they docked next to the black vessels of the Night's Watch, some of which survived their most recent journey to Hardhome, and others many years of catching smugglers in the Bay of Seals. Accommodating the fleet he and Dany were bringing now would prove demanding, but not entirely impossible, or so Jon hoped.

The new day was only several shades of grey lighter than the moonlit night which preceded it. At least there is still some difference between the two, Jon mused, staring mutely at the Wall. It is as if I've never left it.

The Wall had become his home in a different sense than Winterfell had ever been, a place he never truly loved but where he was needed; the place where he could be himself.

Jon ventured gingerly from the deck of the Rhaenys into the boat which would take them to land; him, Dany, Ser Barristan and fifteen sellswords turned into oarsmen, the least conspicuous men-at-arms that could be found among the motley crew on board the ships. The boat advanced slowly, giving Jon time to dread the kind of welcome he was about to receive.

He didn't want to shed a single drop of blood to retake his command; to do so seemed like an unforgivable sin as the nights grew longer.

A sad, black presence concurred with him each time he thought so, lodged firmly inside his beastling mind. Dany's dragon who is hiding from her... he tried to puzzle it out, breaking his head every time.
he attempted it. Or… Rhaegar…

He could not call Rhaegar Targaryen his father, not even inwardly. Occasionally he chewed on the fact that Daenerys was his aunt, a nagging truth he never dared discuss with her, though she frequently called him her nephew in front of others, but never when they were alone. Then she only called him Jon Snow…

Jon stubbornly refused to admit that their blood ties might have been a tad too close for the intimacy they were now sharing. Dany was nothing like his family, to be sure. Family was Arya, and Bran and Rickon, and Sansa who called him her half-brother. Family was Robb, dead before his time. Even Theon, the traitor, used to be family because they had grown up together.

I'm in love with the aunt I never knew I had. So be it.

Jon had been murdered and the Lord of the White Walkers claimed he had drunk of his blood. In comparison it mattered little and less what the world thought of him.

I'll always stand out, no matter what I do.

Since his duel with the Night's King he could not escape the notion that the ordinary concerns of men had somehow stopped applying to him. His conscience troubled him less than ever before and the only thing he worried about now was how to achieve victory with as little loss of life as possible.

There has to be a way.

The boat docked on a wooden pier. Ropes were being uncoiled and tied. His sea journey was over, to Jon's dismay. He couldn't help feeling as though he had come back to the start.

The Long Night is about to fall and I am none the wiser as to how to end it.

A horn blew shrilly from the Wall.

Uuuuuuuuuuhoooooootttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt
"Where is Ser Glendon?" Jon asked, worried. He had no love for the man, but he could not sanction the killing of officers in good faith.

Pyp hurried to explain that it hadn't quite come to that. Yet. "One day the Old Bear's raven came from Castle Black with news that you lived and that the red Lady Melisandre saw a large fleet lost in the shivering sea. You see, Grenn here, he's too much of an Aurochs to understand the word lost, and since our ships were already back, we figured some others were coming and you might be on them... So we mutinied and imprisoned Ser Glendon to await your judgement... As we should have done when he rejoiced because his friends had given Cotter to the sea, in order to win favours from King Stannis with hostages... Pyke was our rightful commander."

Jon remembered how Cotter Pyke nearly died at sea, where his brothers had left him on a barely seaworthy craft together with Lord Davos. It is not only me they wanted to murder. Lord Commander Jeor Mormont, the Old Bear, had fallen victim to the treason of his own men just as well, and the gods knew how many good commanders before him.

Hostages were an even more painful matter. "What did Stannis do with my little brother?" Jon inquired, swallowing rage. Not now. You have duties.

"Satin says he has him in ice cells, but paying utmost attention that the little lord lives. And the red woman is the guard dog; only she can open the door," Pyp looked powerless and as if he were truly sorry.

Jon was part terrified, and part relieved. It could be worse, he consoled himself.

"What's out there now?" Grenn asked, gesturing north, and toward the high seas which were still treacherously calm for the winter season, ever since the Night's King suffered a defeat at Jon's hands. "Have you seen the Others? Are they coming?"

Jon had no easy answer to those questions. A great army of the Others and wights marching south towards Eastwatch had simply disappeared. Or rather, it went somewhere else, and Jon wished he would have known where.

Blind, I am blind. I need to go scouting.

We saw them the night I met Dany... More than a moon turn ago. He stole a glance at her. Daenerys was eerily quiet, studying the new surroundings, possibly enjoying herself. Seeing her at ease and so close to him always burrowed a hole in Jon's heart, stirring cravings of flesh.

She wore black for a change, and her silver mane was hidden in the hairy Skagosi headdress; a gift from Rhaegar.

My father, he forced himself to think it through.

Black enhanced the unnaturally violet colour of Dany's eyes and she purposefully hid their curious gaze behind Jon's broad shoulders.

"For a start, I'm bringing company," Jon announced to Pyp, forcefully returning his entire attention to the matters of command. "All ships are to enter the harbour. I don't care if some need to be pulled out. I have wildlings, sailors and foreigners. They will all help. There is some food as well, but not much."

The rest of the grey day was spent in chores. Jon walked as if in a dream, ordering, counting provisions, talking, greeting, discussing accommodations and berths. The surplus of people was partially solved by charging the captains of the ten swiftest, least damaged ships, to use the unearthly
calm, cross the narrow sea to Braavos and return with fewer mouths to feed and more provisions. The manning was picked among the most adventurous seamen of various origins that could be found, and from those among the wildlings wishing to leave the Wall as far behind as possible. Jon could only hope that most of them would survive the crossing.

Ser Glendon and a few of his bosom friends were found confined in a stable with mammoths that hadn't been mucked in a while. There was fear in their eyes when they saw Jon, who, for his part, chose to disregard it, just as he strived to ignore the stench.

"We waste less firewood this way," Pyp explained the peculiar arrangement, "them northern elephants are warm animals."

"Especially when they fart," Grenn added, grinning.

"And the giants?" Jon asked, realising what he had been missing. He hadn't seen a single being from beyond the Wall until the mammoths.

"They were nice enough fellows, but one day they just left on foot, at the same time as the wildlings," Pyp said with a trace of sadness. "They all went north… They said they were no longer welcome here. It's been weeks since they are gone."

"It's only us again, just like in the beginning, the men of the Night's Watch. A bit less than two hundred left." Grenn could count, to Jon's surprise.

Except that there were many more by the time all passengers from the ships disembarked to the shore. To Jon's great relief, no serious fight broke between different groups of men who were suddenly housed together in cramped spaces. It was either that, or suffer the excruciating cold.

Ser Barristan waited for Jon at sunset in the frozen courtyard of the castle. Sparring became a habit of theirs since the battle in Hardhome, morning or evening, whenever there was time.

"I never hoped to say this," Jon murmured, "but it's good to have snow crunching under my boots, and not a deck which moves with the rolling of waves."

"And it's also very opportune, because you will more like than not face the enemy for the second time on ground just like this one," Ser Barristan estimated, taking a duelling stance. "Attack me as if I were him."

Jon obeyed, having learned on Rhaenys never to underestimate Ser Barristan because of his age. The younger man would most likely be able to win in a true fight, but there were so many passes that the old knight was able to show him, techniques he had never seen from the master-at-arms in Winterfell, and much less on the Wall.

Ser Barristan was simply the best swordplay teacher Jon had ever had. So far, Jon's greatest victory over him consisted in convincing the legendary Lord Commander of the Kingsguard to stop calling him my prince, or, worse, Your Grace.

"The enemy," Ser Barristan spoke with caution when their song of steel ended for the day, sounding as if he pondered the question for a long time before he dared put it forward, "did he give everything in that fight?"

"I thought he did at first," Jon confessed, amazed at the old knight's perception, "but half way through it, I realised he was holding back… As if he was waiting for me to do something … to make a mistake…"
"How did you respond?"

"I started holding back as well," Jon answered immediately, "but I tried not to let him see it."

"Deceit does not become a knight," Ser Barristan commented with conviction.

"I guess not," Jon could agree about that much, "but I'm not fighting knights."

"I wonder..." Ser Barristan sheathed his sword, appearing puzzled. "Your enemy, he was skilled with the blade, wasn't he?"

Jon would sometimes rather not remember, but it would not do to deny the truth. There were moments in his stand against the Night's King when he feared losing. "Yes, very much so," he acknowledged it.

"I couldn't see very well from below, of course, and being engaged myself," Ser Barristan said, touching the ear he almost lost that day, "but his style of swordsmanship, once he was off the spider and on his feet, I must stress that it didn't resemble the Southron style at all."

"There was something of the untamed force of the north in the way he pushed his onslaught," Jon shared his views on the matter. "But there was more than that. He performed several almost elegant forms of attack and defence I've never seen."

"A Northman, then, or perhaps originally a foreigner. From Essos, why not," Ser Barristan concluded with a measure of pride for making the right assumption.

"Do monsters have a home?" Jon countered. "He was the Other. He was no man."

"Do monsters talk?" Daenerys suddenly asked. While she always made herself inconspicuous, Jon knew she was watching him train every day.

"He said the sword was his," Jon handed the little bit of information and the cold magic sword to Ser Barristan, hilt forward. "There are letters carved in the wood. Maybe they explain something."

"Valyrian glyphs of some form that I can't read," the old knight said after examining the artefact for a while, "and not because of faltering vision. They are most unusual."

"Let me," Dany said, grasping the weapon. "Why haven't you asked before?" Lilac eyes accused Jon of negligence, mildly amused.

"I didn't think it important," Jon muttered. "I thought he was just lying to trick me." The truth of the matter was, he did think about asking her, but other considerations somehow always took priority, whenever he was blissfully alone with Daenerys.

"Some of them I don't know myself, and others are almost erased, by the decay from old age, I would say," she frowned, "but the two glyphs here read... Yin Tar... I am certain. I just don't know the meaning of those words... They are quite melodious, aren't they?"

Jon fought the disappointment of never arriving at the meaning of any important secret matter he was confronted with, engraving some more useless words in his memory nonetheless. For later.

At that, Pyp and Grenn were back. The work of the day would never be done, it seemed.

Mormont's raven was sitting on Grenn's large shaggy head. Mightily, he croaked, wide awake as a night owl of ill omen.
"Corn!" he screamed, flapping black wings.

Pyp was breathless, spitting out the news. "Bowen Marsh sealed the gates in Castle Black as he'd always wanted, yet a company of wights led by one white walker attacked them... Stannis prevailed but it was a close call. His magic sword had burned out…"

Burned out?... Much like mine.

"I see," Jon said, keeping his face as impassive as possible, and his surprise at bay. "Maybe they scaled the Wall. If the wildlings can do it all the time, why not the enemy?"

"I don't know," Grenn whispered hoarsely, "Satin speaks of devilry, of the host conjured out of thin air…"

Jon didn't give much credit to air. The attackers of the Night's Watch had surely come from somewhere. Another riddle we need to solve. "Has there been any attack here?" he asked.

"The horns have been silent since you left," Pyp said, "we were lucky… But there is more, Jon… Lord Commander, the white walker whom Stannis defeated, when he was slain, he changed… He was no longer a monster, he was one of our own..."

"Who was it?" Jon asked sharply, hoping on an impulse it was Ser Alliser Thorne, one of the nine men he had sent ranging beyond the Wall just before his murder. It would be one thorn less in my side.

"Kedge Whit-eye," Grenn said roughly, "and Satin writes he died happy when he was himself again."

Another man whom I have sent to his death. Jon was sick, unable to rejoice because his initial guess was not that far off the target. He wished he could have been in Castle Black in person and done something differently. What? If I saw a white walker there, I would have slain it myself… I would do no better than Stannis.

Aimlessly, Jon wondered if the Night's King would have become someone else and who, had he managed to kill him in Hardhome.

Mormont's raven took flight, abandoned Grenn and landed on Jon's shoulder. I wish you were a white-headed eagle… The yearning was unreasonable and strong… Mother… Can you see me now?

"Jon… Jon Snow… King!" the raven crowed proudly as he did once before when his brothers elected him to lead them. Back then Jon found the bird's cry ridiculous. Now it launched him further down into the black pit of his convoluted emotions concerning his living parents, the choices they had made in their past and the reasons they might have had for making them.

Dany saved him with a sensible suggestion. "Lord Commander wishes to retire for the night," she said in a queenly tone.

As usual, she was right. The night turned black as pitch after all the talking. Ser Barristan bowed and obeyed her, but Pyp and Grenn stood flat… staring at Dany who showed no sign of leaving Jon. On the contrary, she sneaked her pretty hand steadily into his cold, previously burned one.

Grenn blushed and Pyp found his tongue. "It's alright, Jon," he stuttered, "we just didn't think you were one to well… like boys. Mind you, there's nothing wrong, I just-"

Daenerys smiled at Pyp and asked sweetly. "Have you ever heard the song about the brave Danny
Flint?"

"D...anny F...flint?" Pyp was flustered and forgetting all the songs by the looks of him. Jon examined Dany, realising for the first time that day she could pass for his sworn brother in the blacks she was wearing and with her hair invisible. *If you squint a lot.* He still saw a woman like no other both in the Seven Kingdoms and beyond the Wall. Sometimes he couldn't help but wonder what she saw in him, and yet he remained grateful to the gods that she manifestly kept seeing it, no matter what it was.

"Danny Flint was a girl, you dumb ass," Grenn exclaimed, "a girl who dressed as a boy to take the black. She ended up dead." Yet while Grenn remembered the sad song correctly, he entirely missed Dany's clear hint, eyeing both Jon and Dany with that same expression of disapproval many brothers would show when facing Satin in Castle Black, because of his past as a man whore in Oldtown.

"And you are the stinky ass of the aurochs, Grenn," Pyp said dryly, finding his brains, "*she* is a girl," he pointed at Dany, "just like Danny Flint was."

"And I'm called Dany as well," Daenerys loosened her headdress. Hair spilled all over; a mass of silver sparks in twilight.

Grenn gaped. "My pardons," he said, "lady, I…"

"You were about to show the Lord Commander to his rooms," Dany offered her counsel.

Jon's room turned out to be a warm, well-lit chamber on the second floor of one of the towers. Daenerys all but pushed his friends out. She even scared the Old Bear's raven away from Jon's shoulder until he found a more bird-suited place to sleep in the rafters.

"I don't see why..." he began saying, belatedly coming to the understanding that Dany's black attire chosen for the day was entirely intentional.

"Lord Commander," she protested calmly, "I gathered from our nightly conversations that you are in a need of a new steward because your old one remains in Castle Black. I'll act a wildling boy who took the black on your many travels."

"I said I would hide no more," Jon objected strongly. "Let us be as we are and let my brothers believe what they want. They won't think any better of me or you if you are in disguise."

Ever since Ygritte was gone, every time he remembered her, now and back then, Jon had come to regret most of all never loving her as he should have done, for all to see. He resented himself for feeling *shame* over breaking his vows instead of proclaiming they were together to the entire world. His affection for Ygritte had been real and pure, he had no doubts about it now.

And it was not as if his other *brothers* had ever been shy about going to Mole's Town or keeping the company of the wildling women when they could. By the old gods, there were even rumours Jon refused to listen to, of rangers resorting to laying with animals when they were in the wilderness for too long.

The true vow, the serious one Jon would *never* break, was to be the shield that guards the realms of men…

"Maybe they won't like you any better, that much is true," Dany reasoned aloud, "but it could prove easier to deal with your people until you can trust there is peace under your command. The times are difficult as they are. Or do you want to waste time in skirmishes and fights? And why did you send Rhaegal out to hunt this morning if you are not sharing my concerns about appearances?"
She had him there, Jon had to unwillingly admit.

"Have it your way, boy," he said jovially. "But my new steward will still sleep in my bed every night."

"As you say, m'lord of kneelers," Dany made a wildling face the best way she knew how and spoke as Old Garth or Mother Mole might. "Or should I call you black crow?"

They both laughed.

"Kiss me," she pleaded, abandoning all pretence, in that tender, warm, flaming voice of hers that melted all his doubts as a sudden arrival of spring. Jon thawed in her welcoming arms, uncaring, untroubled, unconcerned, so open and exposed in his spirit as he had never thought possible. He had no past and no future when he plunged into her, surrounded by her sweetness and warmth.

Later, blessedly content, he was unable to tell the exact moment when he fell asleep.

xxxx

Joramun…

The voice of his brother Bran whispered in his dreamy, tousled head. *He doesn't sound so little any more.* Drifting back to sleep, Jon drowsily admired the rougher, deeper tone Bran now used. *He is almost a man grown.*

Jon blinked and opened his eyes again on a dark, moonlit night.

He had four paws and sharp teeth. He was the bundle of thick white fur prodding in the snow, advancing in the direction of a very familiar scent he hadn't smelled for so long… His sister… His little sister! A tall man stinking of *stag* was intent on *hurting* her… The stag, the cursed, treacherous animal whose antlers ended their mother's life when the direwolves were no more than pups bent over her still-warm body! But then their little red-haired human brother came as a surprise and the stag withdrew from their sister.

The white wolf followed the humans until the clearing where he had a good view of his prey. Desire to kill took over. This man was no match for him… Blood tasted like mead in the direwolf's mouth and he would have more of it.

"*Ghost, no!"* his sister screamed desperately.

"*Snow,*" the moon always whispered in his dreams.

Jon opened his black human eyes wide, at loss of where he was. He was laying in the dark and the scent in his nostrils changed, to that of the sea… and of a painfully sweet-smelling body of a woman. Dany stirred in his cold arms, sleeping peacefully. He wondered if she ever had dragon dreams. A thread of silvery hair teased Jon's face, tickling his chin, from where her precious head rested on his shoulder.

It baffled him that she should trust in him so much where she knew him so little. Her belief that he was still a warm-blooded creature remained steadily greater than his own, and served as a token of faith which kept all his terrible suspicions at bay.

To be sure, he could still feel the *warm* rush of man-blood in Ghost's mouth and hear Arya's scream of outrage… He forced himself to close his eyes again. It would not do to stop the wolf dream at that point. He had to know.
His red wolven eyes snapped open.

The white wolf's neck was encircled by slender, sinewy hands. It was truly his little sister Arya, and she was pulling him away from the tall young man sprawled in snow. The stag's face was pale. He was not older than Jon, and his shoulder was bleeding profusely. Jon felt slightly embarrassed for biting him. *Maybe it is not as I thought if she's defending him.*

"Ghost, to me," Arya fearlessly hugged the giant direwolf, holding him to herself and down into the snow.

Jon opened his mouth to greet his sister, but the only sound that came out was a howl, long and sad.

"It's alright, Ghost," Arya did her best to comfort him, "this is just Gendry. Nymeria is already used to him, she even *likes* him. You will get used to him too, won't you?"

Arya was older, taller, prettier and… flushed. No one would call her Horseface anymore. Jon laughed inwardly, beginning to understand what the wolf might have seen in truth. *Not a child any more either, are you, little sister?* He wondered if she had already done more than kissing, and his laughter turned bitter, coming out as a menacing *growl*, unsettling both the wolf and his unwitting sleeping master.

A tall dark-haired woman came from behind and tended to… *Gendry*… bandaging the shoulder bite as fast as only a wildling could.

"He'll be alright," she said calmly to Arya in that straightforward tone Mance Rayder could use. "The wolf just grazed him." Further behind the wildling, *Cotter Pyke* sat upright under a tree, blinking his eyes, coming to his senses…

Jon's heart danced with joy, and his red, wolven eyes scouted the surroundings, trying to recognise the place so that he could find it again when fully awake. *The Wall.* The variety and the abundance of vegetation protruding from the snow spoke for the southern side of it. The wood had crept close to the Wall on the northern side as well in many places but never so profusely and with such diversified plant life as on the southern side… Ghost's vision was exceedingly sharp and when he stared into the night he recognised the shape of some lands that could only be very close to Castle Black.

Then, suddenly, the strong, red-haired boy dragged Jon's white paws up on his child shoulders without further ado, and a black, green-eyed wolf *nuzzled* Ghost. All three rolled on the ground, oblivious to freezing.

*Rickon. Shaggydog.*

Jon's heart grew wide, and wild, and happy. *This is no mere dream.*

For the first time, Jon could tell almost consciously that the wolf dream had been real while it was lasting, wishing that the wolf could speak to his siblings with his human voice. However, it could not, no more than a dragon could…

And staying in his pretty vision became more and more difficult because Bran's deepened voice mumbled again in his head, taking him away from his other siblings and the wolves.

*Joramun blew the Horn of Winter and woke giants from the earth…*

The same words came from the Old Bear, Ygritte, Mance Rayder and Old Nan. And now Bran was insisting on them, in Jon's sleep…
Yet the story about Joramun was told differently every single time. In one of the versions the Stark of Winterfell and Joramun of the wildlings rode forth to bring down the Night's King.

*The Long Night has come and gone before*, Bran said, or Jon thought, it was hard to be certain of anything in a dream.

What if Joramun blew his horn and instead of bringing down the Wall brought forth the dawn? What if it was not at all Azor Ahai and his sword who saved the world from the Long Night as Lady Melisandre claimed, but the Stark of Winterfell and Joramun of the wildlings… Then again, it was not only the red lady who spoke of the saviour reborn; *Jade Compendium*, a respectable book recommended by the learned Maester Aemon told the tale of Azor Ahai in no unclear terms… Jon did read the entire passage marked for him, as well as the entire unlikely story about the hero, several times.

*I may now have to labour for fifty days and reforge the magic sword by piercing a lion's heart with it… And where shall I ever find a lion in these lands?*

White bears and mammoths, shadowcats and direwolves, eagles and boars all lived in the north, but there were no lions, no lions at all.

He should send a raven to Sam in Oldtown and write to him about everything. Tarly was as clever as he was fat; he might know which story to believe. Moreover, Jon could now fly to Oldtown and talk to Sam. The new realm of possibilities of a dragonrider frightened him at times. A green harrumph caressed his sleeping mind, savage and sated. Rhaegal must have finished his hunt.

*I made a present to Sam of a cracked warhorn, made of an aurochs' horn and banded with bronze, which Ghost had found hidden on the Fist of the First Men.*

What if it is…

What if it is…

*The Horn of Winter?*

The notion to lift flight and find out was more and more tempting. *How fast can a dragon fly to Oldtown and back? What would Sam say if he could see me now?*

*Joramun*, Bran whispered.

*The Long Night has come and gone before…* Jon couldn't stop thinking in those terms.

Even so, he couldn't just leave. Not yet. He had to fortify Eastwatch and ensure he left it in good hands. *I will gain nothing by being rash.* He had learned his lesson well in the Shieldhall of Castle Black where at one moment he was in command of a thousand men, about to ride south to Winterfell, defeat the Bastard of Bolton and rescue Arya, and at the next he was a miserable bastard stabbed to his death…

The Night's Watch would have to work not only with wildlings now, but also with eunuchs and freed slaves from across the sea… The number of women on the ships was considerable, a source of certain clashes.

And the most beautiful one was with him, naked under the furs…

More like than not there had been many Long Nights and they had all come and gone… Somehow… Just like summers and winters and other seasons of the world. As the Lord Commander
of the Night's Watch, it was his task to find out how to chase this night away. Everything else would have to wait.

Everything included… his parents… Jon supposed he would have to see them now, but he nevertheless wanted to postpone the inevitable, fearing his own reaction once he faced them. Will I want to strike them? Or will I cry… Or be indifferent and not care?

Most of all, everything included the princess asleep in his arms, who presently stretched and nested against him with frightening poise, grace and ease.

Daenerys… Her name felt like beauty on his lips and in his head, like something unreal and undeserved. He still feared that one day he would wake alone in his bed in Castle Black and she would be gone, or worse, she would have never been in his life.

He felt himself stiffening again, just as her lovely head descended with purpose from his shoulder and took him in her mouth… the first time she attempted such a thing… and Ygritte had never done it...

Jon could feel blood running through all his veins. Alive, am I? I must be… He tried to push her away in case she was asleep and knew not what she was doing. Dany just gazed up at him and smiled, eyes sparkling violet in the candlelight, awakened, conscious, wanting… Her mouth on him felt like depravity and bliss combined, a favour… generously returned. Afterwards he wondered if he should beg her for it next time, as he slowly found back his wits and his way to all the places where she enjoyed his touch.

Soon they were both sticky and sweaty, and in the end they cleaned each other with a damp cloth of black wool. The innocent act seemed even more affectionate to Jon than the bold exploration of the flesh which had come before. I have no secrets from you. He wondered if it was the same for her and if her previous lovers enjoyed to be with her after… I'll ask her about it next time.

"I am so sorry that our sailing time is over," he said, meaning it. Almost a fortnight of peace they had shared was not likely to repeat itself any time soon. "But now I have to ask you to…"

It still felt unmeasurably strange to be able to propose such a thing to anyone.

"Fly with me," he said, with growing certainty of the course he needed to take. Arya and Rickon, Shaggydog and Ghost were nearby. It wasn't a dream.

They dressed as warmly as they could and walked south of the Wall, into the wilderness, to wait for Rhaegal. Jon didn't require so many garments; he had put them on only to humour Dany.

He hadn't been feeling cold for days, not properly. Dany tried to dismiss it by saying she hadn't felt the chill either when she flew frequently with Drogon, but Jon could not accept his dragon was the only reason.

Rhaegal didn't tardy. He took them west, following the Wall, flying as slow as a dragon could, yet ten times faster than any horse would go. Very soon Jon and Dany saw them, a procession of black ants through the snow, huddled around the fire in a grove of trees with a slender weirwood at its centre. The face on the tree was solemn and serious, yet almost kind in its fixed expression. It stared at footprints in the maidenly snow, which came out from under its craggy roots; one pair belonged to a man, and two to a huge direwolf.

Rhaegal landed with a thud and screeched. Dany lifted her head with… hope?

"Drogon is nearby," she said. "Maybe Rhaegar is as well."
"So be it," Jon said, not nearly as eager as she was to meet his father and his dragon. Swiftly, he stepped off Rhaegal and hurried to the ants which became *people and wolves*.

"Arya!" he exclaimed, and having human voice to call out to them gave him immense joy. "Rickon!" "Ghost! Shaggy!"

Ghost was the first one to reach Jon, but Shaggy and his siblings did not linger.

"Jon!" Arya's enthusiastic scream met his own in the wind.

But when he finally embraced his little sister, she felt colder than he was and his mirth was replaced by worry.

Rhaegal fortunately accepted to take all of them back to Eastwatch. Angrily puffing jets of smoke, the dragon was forced to fly almost level with the ground, slow and clumsy as an overburdened, winged plough horse. All the while it refused to speak to Jon. *I'm sorry, Rhaegal. We just couldn't leave them there for the night.* The Lord Commander's room soon became crowded with men and wolves, and some who were both.

Dany… Dany always did things Jon would not expect. This time she found and brought food for all from the kitchens, as if she were a true steward and not a gently-bred princess. She even employed… *Gendry* to help her by bringing in *pallets* for sleeping. That was a splendid idea because the young man just stared darkly at Jon when he was idle, and Jon continuously suffered from the irrational urge to hit him. He suspected Arya would not like it if he did.

Jon never touched the food while the others ate. Just like with the cold, he didn't really need that much sustenance to continue existing… Perhaps he didn't have to eat at all.

The rest of the winter night belonged to stories, if not to songs. To true tales, those that did come to pass.

Arya told Jon how she'd run away from King's Landing all the way to Braavos, and how Yoren, the recruiter of the Night's Watch, *helped* her and Gendry escape the capital. In return, Jon spoke of his life on the Wall and beyond it, he even mentioned the horn he had given Sam, which he now believed to be the Horn of Winter…

Rickon had less to share, apart from certainty that Bran lived and went with Jojen and Meera Reed, and Hodor, in search of a three-eyed crow behind the Wall. For the rest, the life of a baby boy, or, as he would say, a free man of Skagos turned around collecting food, raising unicorns and learning how to fight. Contrary to everyone's opinion they didn't eat people there, though Rickon was less certain what would happen now, in winter. *People are growing hungry and desperate,* he whispered. *That's the only reason why we followed Davos when he found us.*

The wildling woman, *Osha*, who guarded Rickon for six years, now nursed Pyke and a flagon of ale as two long lost friends. It seemed to Jon that no vow mattered that night, everyone was free to do as they pleased…

The talk slowly died when Arya's story came to the point of her return to Westeros as a servant of the Many-Faced God who pressed *Needle* against the throat of the Mother of Dragons.

"Still sharp, isn't it?" Jon asked quietly about the sword he had given his sister, gesturing at the scabbard on her hip. He had tested the blade after Mikken forged it for her by cutting one of his fingers. The blood had flown red and bright over the blade… He wondered if he cut himself now if the blood would be black like that from a corpse.
Daenerys saved Jon from his thoughts once more, and Arya from the embarrassment of finishing her story, by speaking for the first time since they all returned.

"Lady Arya could have done it, Jon, but she chose not to. Despite that she must have known she would suffer a punishment from her god. Yet Lady Arya didn't find it in herself to end my life."

"Why?" Jon asked, bewildered. "You didn't know her…"

"No," Arya shook her head, "I just felt it would be a sin. Her life was not due to the Many-Faced God. It was a mistake. A false prayer."

"I'm glad you didn't do it, little sister," Jon said in earnest, dragging Daenerys into his arms in no uncertain terms, for all to see they were lovers.

"Oh," Arya said and burst into crystal-clear laughter. "I wonder what my aunt will say to this…"

Jon froze and Dany stiffened in his arms. "So you have met my mother," he said quietly.

Arya nodded. "Aunt Lyanna is…” she gave it a moment of thought. "She is a lady and she is not a simpering lady as Sansa used to be. She can joust. But she can also sew and run a castle. She is a great lady. She can't sing though. Singing is for Rhaegar."

Jon noticed she didn't call his father uncle. "You've seen him as well…"

"He is," Arya found it exceedingly difficult to shape her opinion in words, "he's not what you think," she ended up saying with honest determination. "He's both better and worse than all the stories about him." At that, she looked at Dany, as if she wanted to say something more but could not in her presence.

Eventually, his little sister yawned and it was time to use the pallets for the remainder of the night.

Jon lay awake for hours, pondering what he should do first, from so many things that had to be done. Dany was sprawled next to him and he knew beyond doubt she was only pretending to be sleeping.

Joramun, Bran's deep voice was now only an echo of a dream, and Jon wondered if his crippled brother was awake or asleep, and if he lived still.

In the hour of the bat he thought he had his answers. He grasped Dany's hands and she immediately opened her eyes.

"You will not go and see them now, will you?" she asked. There was no doubt whom she meant. His real mother and real father. Lyanna and Rhaegar. Somehow, since his beloved sister Arya confirmed it as well, the truth was… less choking, and more of a simple knowledge in that matter.

"Not yet," he said, "but I'm going to see them, soon. I... I... the anger and the disillusion I felt when I first found out are gone… I neither love them, nor resent them now and since they are alive, it is my duty is to see my parents, such as they are.. Yet…"

What he had to say next was very difficult.

"My real mother and real father would understand," he affirmed, "if they are truly my parents, they have to understand. I have to stop being blind first. I have to go and see who this Night's King is and what numbers he has on his side." Dany's nails sank into his hands, drawing droplets of red blood from under his skin, to Jon's utmost relief. Small mercies.
"Stop," he pleaded. "Don't deny it. You know as well as I do by now that I shall not die of either cold or hunger if I go... scouting. I won't be gone for long. And Cotter is better suited than I to take care of the command matters here."

"I wasn't going to deny it," Dany said coldly and Jon was ashamed for questioning her bravery. "I was just wondering, how will you go? Rhaegal cannot fly to that other Winterfell in the Lands of Always Winter without risking his life again. For it is there that you wish to return, isn't it?"

"It is. He'll not expect that, the Night's King. I sense that he won't. Not before I reforged the sword... And there is one other who knows the way. Ghost. He's just returned from those lands through the tunnels of the old gods almost as fast as the dragon flies. I don't care whether there is magic or evil sorcery down there or not, as long as they can be travelled fast. And I can see clearly through my wolf's eyes now if I so wish. It's our best chance to find out what we are up against. Maybe it's our only chance. We have to know, and we won't find this knowledge written in a book."

"Then," Dany said softly. "If you are leaving Rhaegal here, you might ask him to take me to the Winterfell of your childhood, and back with your siblings... They... my brother and his wife will be happy to know you are all right. And for me the wait will be more bearable if I have something to do."

There would be no farewell kisses, Jon decided on a whim, unwilling to test his resolve. But there was one last thing he wanted to ask Daenerys before he left.

"If they are truly my mother and my father," he whispered, "they will understand, won't they? They won't... judge me for my decision."

"They are as much your parents as you are their son," Daenerys blurted out.

She let out a hoarse, stifled laugh, before schooling her face into a bloodless, deadly pale mask, making it look almost as long as Jon's.

"For what it is worth, I think that if either of them was in your place right now, both your mother and your father would have gone and done exactly the same."

Chapter End Notes

From here the things take a turn for the worse in this story.

As always, I'm looking forward to your feedback :-()

Next one up, Greenseer&Shadowbinder, as a Chapter 25 and roughly one quarter of the story.
The Greenseer and the Shadowbinder

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to DrHolland for beta reading this and pointing out the unclear details of the plot. Thank you to TopShelfCrazy for offering her support and checking this chapter.

Thank you for reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Greenseer

Joramun...

The name came from a past so ancient that none among the living could remember it.

Yet the heart tree now whispered that name faintly as the greenseer readied his pack, labouring under the alert gazes of the child-like sculptures, in the innermost courtyard of his beloved castle. The wind was sweet and quiet, murmuring together with the red leaves, humming a song too old to be recalled in its entirety.

Joramun woke giants from the earth...

The greenseer was about to leave his home with the aging singer from the riverlands and the late Lady Catelyn's red priest. He would have preferred the sharp-witted company of the northern bard, Mance Rayder, to the sweet-tongued Tom of Sevenstreams. But the path of the last King-beyond-the-Wall, who was his own singer and his own fool, now lay north and northwest, and even farther west, in search of a lost truth.

If the way to go west was not found, many lives would be lost; the young, the old, and those not yet born. And with every single loss, the days would grow shorter, and the nights darker still... Every life had to be preserved now, that of the innocent and the criminal alike.

The greenseer's own path led in a different direction. His destiny would first take him south, though never as far as the red mountains of Dorne, and the cairns under the fallen tower, where he never wished to return.

He would walk for thirty, he would walk for fifty, he would walk for a hundred days until he did what needed be done. In penance there might be accomplishment. In humiliation there could be victory. Or the realm of men would suffer a thunderous defeat; a new doom in which the pain he endured until the end of everything would lose all meaning and importance.

No road was safe any more. The bridge at the Twins was broken, the fords of the Trident a ruin, and the Green Fork too short; the boats of his people would not take him to his destination. Cold winds blew over Westeros. The minor servants of the Night's King were able to cross the Wall in small numbers, due to careless spoiling of magic, thousands of years old, that should have been left in peace, undisturbed.

The red god, the god of fire, the new enemy of the old gods, was more greedy than the Seven-who-
are-one had ever been, when they arrived to conquer Westeros. His lady servant forced the free folk of the far north to sacrifice twigs of the weirwoods to him… Little did she know how angry the old gods could become, just as angry as their people. They mourned for being betrayed and burned by their own, and they allowed the cold, dead shadows of the night to cling to the robes of the poor who had been forced to cast the tree-branch fingers into the flames.

Invisible, the monsters fooled the ancient magic of the Wall. The people unknowingly carried them through the ice, believing they were running away from them. Yet the magic was still too strong for the white shadows to stay near Castle Black. So they wandered south as mists, only to take form and shape whenever and wherever the cold became unendurable in the night…

And the priestess of the hungry god did not see, or rather, refused to see how it was she who disturbed the old magical protection. The woman pursued a daring goal of her own, despite that her mortal soul was filled with fear. The greenseer sensed it over the long leagues between the Greywater Watch and the Wall, as though she were standing in front of him like an open scroll.

*My lady*, he thought, *what is it you want?*

He knew beyond doubt it must have been a great heart's desire which brought the skilled Asshai'i shadowbinder to Westeros and made her stay there, pretending to be a faithful servant of Lord Stannis. Yet, as always, the greenseer could see many things, but not all; and the deepest secrets of the sorceress remained her own.

Danger lurked on all roads South. It came from the fearful noblemen, the hungry smallfolk, the wild animals and the blue mists… There was only one possibility left.

The greenseer had always belonged to the old gods. He had never betrayed them, and they possessed ways of travel which were barred to ordinary men. Not even the Asshai'i with their forward-galloping poisonous powders could match their speed. If the gods took him where he needed to go, the white walkers would never catch up with him, or not until he chose to face them, one day; as his only son might have done by now and perished in his endeavour.

Howland could never see the exact moment of Jojen's death. No matter how hard he tried, he could not glimpse it. But he knew beyond doubt that he might have passed away… or would do so soon enough… in order to never father children of his own. His heart begged him to head north and use his gift to save his son if there was still time.

Yet he could never forget the simple truth; only one greenseer was born among thousands of men… Howland could never bring himself to heed only the wishes of his own heart; he needed to act upon what sight was given him for the good of all; as far as he could interpret what the gods allowed him to see. He would never know the entire future, but the others saw even less and were forced to exist in uncertainty and darkness. He could not abandon them to such fate.

A duty to that one possible future, which still held some light, was now his, and his alone. He would mourn for his son and head south.

He prayed to his gods whose weeping, bleeding eyes had been closed for so very long. *Open your eyes and see, I beg you. Allow me to take my companions with me, unscathed and unharmed. The old song will have to be sung again very soon, if we can still remember the words.*

*Joramun blew the Horn of Winter and woke giants from the earth…*

Today, the greenseer wished he could view the past and not only the uncertain future. He longed to contemplate exactly what Joramun had done and why…
He pushed his head inside the maw of the tree to better hear its rough, hollow voice.

Joramun…

He tensed, struggling to understand. He listened attentively to the great weirwood, whose giant roots had kept his home from drifting apart and being swallowed by the bogs for hundreds, maybe thousands of years.

The answers he sought were buried in history… The Long Night has come and gone before… What he would have given to be able to look that far back and see! But he could not. The old gods were purposefully closing their eyes every time he tried, perhaps in fear of remembering.

"Lord Reed." Thoros, the red priest, addressed him from behind with quaint respect, sounding baffled.

The greenseer supposed that being caught with his head inside a tree appeared as an inadequate method of seeing the future, if one was used to gazing into fires… He instantly re-emerged, determined to think about Joramun later. Tom accompanied Thoros and they both seemed ready to depart. Or as ready as they can be.

There was one last thing the greenseer needed to check before risking the journey.

"Thoros, once of Myr, now of nowhere," Howland asked very seriously, "have you ever been to Asshai?"

"No," Thoros said what the greenseer needed to hear.

Tom shook his head though the question was not directed to him. "Why?" he asked, with an insatiable curiosity of a song-maker.

"The red woman on the Wall has been," Reed said. "She bows to the same god as you, but her use of magic and the many powders hidden in her robes do not sit very well with the trees. That kind of magic bothers their roots, which are always resting. I wouldn't wish us to end up in the fabled Yi Ti because you had some such fickle substance in your pockets."

Thoros turned his pockets inside out as did Tom o' Sevens. They were empty and had holes in them.

"Why should we trust you?" Tom asked, holding his harp in front of his body, as another man would hold a sword, in sign of both defence and defiance.

"Either you do or you don't," the greenseer would not waste time on their lack of faith. "Or you can take it up with my ancestors when I am gone."

The portico statues of the children opened their mouths, showing sharp teeth. They hissed at Thoros and Tom, gripping scythes, sounding drums.

"This is devilry," Tom proclaimed.

"No less a devilry than bringing dead to life," Howland Reed protested in a flat, cold tone of extreme honour his late friend Ned Stark would be proud to hear him use. You wanted me to act a lord, my friend. Here I am, doing my best. Though I fear I will always be a different lord than you were...

"If there is to be life, there has to be death," he tried to explain to them, but their faces remained shadowed in grey, unaccepting of the simple truth. "Everlasting life is the same as never-ending death. It is no life. My ancestors will gladly teach you when I am gone."
Tom scratched his head in disbelief and ignorance, but the flame of understanding was lit in Thoros' eyes. It was ungodly what he did with Lord Beric Dondarrion and later with Lady Catelyn Stark… Yet the gods allowed it where they could have prevented it. The greenseer frequently wondered why.

"I am with you, lord," Thoros said. "For as long as the light of R’hllor burns inside me."

The greenseer helped the red priest into the tree, and between them they pushed the singer inside as well.

"Farewell," the greenseer saluted the statues, "I now know for certain who you are and who we are. You haven't completely disappeared in the bogs and the woods, not in the Neck at the very least, have you? You must have formed bonds of love and families with the First Men in the past ages of this world… And this castle had to reject not one, but two unknowing descendants of giants for me to realise what I should have always known about my blood."

Rejection was a matter of speech and it could amount to serious bodily injury. The castle palpably hated Sandor Clegane, but as long as he was with his wife, it never harmed him for some reason; and he was with her all the time since he landed in the Greywater Watch with the king and his dragon. A sensible man.

Would that I could do the same.

The Greatjon Umber had no wife and had been less fortunate. A boat accepted him well enough at the Twins. But during the welcome feast in the castle, he became so sick of a simple meal that he spent the remainder of his stay retching in his bed. No one else was ill from the food. And every night, the tall northern lord screamed with nightmares, unsheathed his sword and advanced on invisible creatures wielding bronze knives and scythes. As a consequence of his suffering, one night he ran his head through a wooden castle wall, and left Greywater with a bandage over his left eye.

"We, the crannogmen and women are the astrayed descendants of the children the forest!" Reed proclaimed the truth to the statues. "More is the pity that the ancient hatred between the two elder races had to resurface before I could see it without a shade of doubt…"

"I thank you for not breaking the sacred guest right by murdering any of our guests, despite your misgivings… I would hate the House Reed to treat visitors like the House Frey, merely for remembering the blood spilled between the children and the giants in their wars in Dawn Age…"

"Keep your scythes sharp and your woodharps tuned, oh you forefathers and foremothers of mine!"

Many of the children statues represented ladies, looking as dangerous as their men. Howland remembered his wife with longing. Our gods remain silent about what comes next. Are you seeing me now, my love? Is our son already with you? Did he die to save Meera, his sister?

The children of the Andals speak of seven heavens… Is there a heaven for us who offer our prayers to the trees?

Or is there nothing at all?

The winter day was too beautiful by far to give in to sadness. Instead, he finished his farewells.

"I shall return here to sing one last song of the earth," he told the statues in their ancient, marvelously carved porticos. "Keep the watch for me until then."

He knew that they would. The children never betrayed their own as men did, and he wondered idly
if the giants were the same in that regard. *The elder races*…

Lord Howland Reed entered the maw of the weirwood tree, and its cruel red lips closed around the little crannogman, swallowing him. The tumble that followed was long and painful. The only thing he could do was breathe and keep faith, as the foggy images of the world stumbled by him; past, present and future pressed together.

*Joramun.*

_The first new child_, the gods may have whispered, before they were silent.

The lord of the crannogs kept falling, fearing to miss his destination. Yet for as much as he wondered if his journey had been a mistake, he remained hopelessly eager to reach the other side. He could not hear Thoros nor Tom scream so they must have been safely on their way, maybe they had reached the place already and were waiting for him.

_I will walk for a hundred days_, the greenseer vowed stubbornly. _And in the end, there shall be light._

**The Shadowbinder**

*Joramun…*

The name came from the past, but the future king of the Seven Kingdoms would wear it proudly. The fire told it true this time, more than ever. More so than when it erroneously predicted the gory death of Bowen Marsh and the other would-be murderers of Jon Snow in the abysmally hot, black-toothed jaws of the dragon.

Jon's father, a foul _raper_ in stories Stannis believed in, and a proud, troubled man in truth, spared them… reining in his beast. Rhaegar had _known_ exactly who harmed his son and no one had ever told him. _How? Why didn't he kill them as he well should have done?_

Moreover, the presence of a being from an elder race _countered_ Melisandre's sorcery and rendered it useless, when she tried to subdue the dragon to her will. She had whispered the required incantation with urgent secrecy, in the old dragon-binding speech preserved through time in the far-reaching memory of Asshai. Yet there was someone present who shielded the dragon from it by having a different nature, impassive and unaffected by magic. The occurrence could not be easily explained. There were only _people_ left in Castle Black. There were no wildlings, no giants, nor their mammoths.

No horrible white trees were allowed to grow very near the main outpost of the Night's Watch either. Melisandre had seen to that, sending queen's men to finish the burnings the wildlings were forced to start. She'd only allowed them to hide behind the Wall when they sacrificed a branch of their false gods to the Lord of Light. There was still one or another oak or elm left, with a sneering face carved on it, but she wasn't afraid of those.

A face cut in the tree bark was nothing. But a face shaped in blood could only be the work of the Great Other and his insatiable, blood-thirsty servants. For as much as the red dye was merely tree sap, Melisandre could never shake the notion it _was_ blood from her fervent mind.

Jon's father brought only one man with him, a lowly retainer, despised and mocked by Stannis and his loyal knights, though rather _large_ and imposing of stature, now that she thought back on it… _Could it be? Could he have the blood of the giants?_ The ancient scrolls declared that giants and the sharp-toothed, extinguished children of the white trees could not breed with men. Yet if those writings were wrong, the solution to her problem was almost too simple… The dragon and his rider
were merely fortunate to have brought one such abomination with them.

*Next time it won't avail them.*

She could sense the dragon's fear of her, and her heart rejoiced… The shadows Melisandre could bring to life on the Wall were stronger than the black dragon; the largest one alive, and still growing as rapidly as hair did this winter...

She had studied for long years in order to achieve perfection, believing she would need her powers to wake the dragon from the cold stone. And now she'd come so close to dominating the beast in which the blessed fire was made flesh.

*It doesn't matter,* she told herself, fed up with useless, secondary questions about what exactly thwarted her in the past. She had to be certain about the future where it concerned the matters closest to her most intimate plans and wishes.

The future altered slightly with every deed of men, just as the life-giving fire constantly flickered and shifted shapes and colours in the wind. Only R'hllor knew every change before it occurred, but she, his servant, she had to look.

She possessed one certainty; the great chain of important events in time would unfold as the one true God intended, and the greatest one of all was to be a song…

A song of ice and fire….

This chant *would* bring into Melisandre's capable hands the greatest desire of her heart; Balerion the Black Dread reborn, a dragon destined to be even greater than his famous ancestor... *The new world order*… There could be no doubt about that. *The Age of Fire*…

*Joramun*…

*Joramun*…

*Joramun*…

The name was vested with some importance which escaped her. *Stannis will have a male heir after all… That much is clear as spring water.* Thinking of it with a cold, impartial head, it was almost better than the dour king deserved after everything he agreed to do at her behest. *He could have said no when we did for his younger brother Renly. He must have known. And he never said a word. He only kept complaining for days about Renly offering him a peach.*

And the falsely modest, suspicious young man, who thought he could become a true leader without her aid, he'd be remembered as no more than the over-zealous Lord Commander of the Watch, never more than… *Jon Snow*…

Melisandre snorted with subtle derision. It was such an *ordinary* destiny.

The fires had *changed* completely from those showing a grand fate in which Jon would be one of the heroes in the fight against the Great Other. Now he stood in a shadow not of one, but of two *ladies*. One had thunder in her voice, and another a thin sword at her hip. And Jon remained a tacit, humble bastard in his heart, for as much as he was son of kings and now well aware of his dual heritage. Quaintly, he appeared to have almost no king's blood left in his veins…

Lady Melisandre was done thinking for the day. Jon Snow was no longer her concern, and the correct destiny often needed to be helped.
She strolled with purpose out of her chambers in the King's Tower of Castle Black. Soft, red satins and heavy velvets swayed behind her on the icy floor. She touched the ruby on her neck for reassurance; the cold could still not reach her body. *But it will*, the small voice said in her, *when the Long Night falls*. She would not dwell on that, not today.

Her ears were wide open, in order to avoid the tinkling fool, Patchface, the carrier of ill luck. Death was on him, and he should have stayed under the sea with his stupid songs. No wonder he drooled over Princess Shireen, equally stained by death's agile fingers, which marked their prey before taking it.

Melisandre intended to avoid tainted beings and live for a very, very long time. Her vengeance was nigh. She just needed to be patient a little bit longer.

*Melony,* a painful voice rang from her past. She would not heed it. And not only today; not ever.

Stannis first needed to *retake* what was his by rights if she was to fulfil her destiny.

Melisandre banged on a heavy wooden door strengthened with iron studs. Lord Marsh opened it instantly, bowing to her in fear. The brave men of the Night's Watch were so afraid of her by now that she could leave behind the useless guards Stannis had given her in the past. *I have no more need for those trappings of power...* The great unease she caused was very good; fewer people would dare murder her, as they did with Jon.

"My lady," Marsh squeaked with subservience, "anything you wish for shall be done."

"Bring me the rebel princess."

Old Pomegranate made such a confused face that she felt obliged to clarify. "Not the wildling one who left us, my lord, the one from the Iron Islands. And the young man, Botley, who is in love with her, and who has never taken another woman to his bed. Leave Qarl, the lady's lover, and Theon, her half-dead younger brother *deep* under the ice, and make sure she *sees* them there."

"Yes, my lady, at once, my lady."

Lady Melisandre rekindled the fire in the Lord Commander's hearth while she was waiting, and soon became ensconced in the flames.

*Stannis,* she thought, *you owe me more than just gratitude. You owe me everything.* Her king's destiny looked better with every wisp of new smoke rising to the air.

A lean, long-legged, fearless woman with shortly cropped black hair was walked in, with her handsome, tall, dishevelled suitor in tow. Both wore fetters on their wrists.

"Unchain them," she commanded Marsh and two of his minions at the door. "Leave us alone when it is done."

"But-"

"The Lord of Light will keep me safe, as you well know... As he had kept *you* safe from dragonfire." The last part was an outright lie, but Marsh didn't need to know it. At least he left, instantly, spurred on by the inconvenient truths he'd rather forget.

"I have need of you, Lady Greyjoy," Melisandre said simply when she was alone with Stannis' prized prisoners. Well, the young man had a choice. He could have left with the emissary of the Iron Bank, Tycho Nestoris, instead of lingering around as an unofficial hostage because of the woman he
desired. "You will return to Winterfell and deliver a present to the commander of the guard of honour from across the narrow sea. They are called the Unsullied. Can you do that for me?"

"I could, to be sure," the lady said mockingly. "But why I would I?" she asked rudely, as if she hadn't been a hostage, at the mercy of R'hllor.

"To save yourself from feeding the nightfires tonight," Melisandre said with quiet menace in her voice.

Asha Greyjoy first blew out some air, masking a sigh to look as a snort, and then shrugged. "It seems I am destined to burn. If I burn sooner, the waiting will be less painful. I've been living with this prospect in mind since Stannis captured me."

The priestess of R'hllor sighed in return, sinking daintily into Lord Marsh's armchair, with armrests shaped like bear's heads. Lady Asha was afraid of being burned alive, that much was certain, but the threat to her person was not enough to make her bend, just as Melisandre expected.

"Then I shall not harm you," she promised the ironborn lady, "I shall flay alive and then burn your little brother Theon, who already has the appearance of a tortured old man. And you will be my honoured guest the entire time. Why, you might even start the fire."

Lady Greyjoy hesitated, and the red priestess felt victorious. How easy it is to manipulate people with some trappings of power at your disposal.

"Winterfell is far," Asha said flatly. "How am I to travel there in winter? Fly?"

That would be a very good way, Melisandre thought, but I don't think any dragon would accept to carry you.

She reached deep into one of the many inner pockets of her long red robes, and retrieved a bag of sweet-smelling pink powder with smooth elegance. She sniffed it. The blossom of nightshade, devoid of its essence. Not a poison, but equally potent for different uses.

"You'll go with the help of this," she said curtly. "But first things first."

Melisandre handed Lady Asha a simple whip, wildling-made, with three threadbare, elastic twigs hung from a handle made of shadowcat bone. Lord Marsh found it among the treasures poor wildlings ceded to the Night's Watch in payment of their passage through the Wall. Somehow, the valuables were never returned to them when they departed back where they came from. Good riddance to you and to the shadows you were carrying. I let you in and you cheated me.

The rustic tool was probably used to coerce sheep or goats to follow a good direction in the empty pastures behind the Wall. In Astapor, the Good Masters would use an ornate whip of dragonbone and leather, adorned with gold, but a well-placed enchantment made this whip invaluable. "This is the present for the commander of the Unsullied in Winterfell."

"That's all?" Lady Asha was suspicious, rightfully so. "I just have to give this twig to chase cattle to the commander of some foreign army, and you will spare Theon?"

"Yes," Melisandre said sweetly. Of course not. But why should I tell you everything?"

"What's in it for me?" the iron lady was not quite done. "Will I be free to go?"

"You will be a hostage again, but your situation may improve." How to sway her further? "I may… I may speak to King Stannis against his wishes to marry you to one of his knights."
"Oh, but he can't," Asha said, matching Melisandre's sweetness word by word. "His Grace is most respectful of laws. And my uncle Euron already married me to a hundred years old man. I am not widowed yet. May I give you my answer on the morrow?"

_No, Mel thought. It has to be done before Rhaegar's queen returns to Winterfell. She has to walk into a trap._

"You can tell me as you watch the kindling of the nightfires," she offered, feigning indifference. "Before we flay Theon and tie him to the stake."

Lady Asha stormed out of the door, and her unfortunate suitor followed. However, she did take the whip with her. Melisandre yawned and waited for Lord Marsh to return.

"She won't run far," March observed. "My and the king's men are everywhere."

"She'll come around," Melisandre agreed. Some promises could keep people on a chain better than fetters.

"Err… My lady, we all ought to thank you for not telling the king… I mean Usurper Rhaegar about how we rightfully attacked his son, when he betrayed his sacred vows and wanted to ride to Winterfell commanding a horde of godless wildlings…"

"It was a pleasure," Melisandre took his gratitude and credit for something that was not of her doing. Rhaegar spared them, and it still eluded her why he did so. It even angered her. Had the dragon been unleashed, he would have become more vulnerable, and she would have already enslaved him. No disturbance of magic would have helped.

But it pleased R'hllor in his wisdom to make his triumph even greater… Asha had to leave tonight, before Stannis reforged the sword and defeated the Night's King.

Melisandre wouldn't be in Westeros to see her king's final victory, or so she hoped. _He can't say I didn't do as he asked. He is Azor Ahai reborn, and he will be the Lord of the Seven Kingdoms thanks to me._

On her way out of the Lord Marsh's quarters, Melisandre thought she heard the jingling of little bells behind the heavy door, but when she looked closer, she was alone.

She hurried to the courtyard. On the spiral stairs she ran into His Grace, who looked perfectly charming this morning with his cropped black-blue beard. _Most untimely._ She could not stomach Stannis every day, just like she was sometimes really angry with Jon Snow, and the two men were so much alike in her opinion.

"Your Grace," she bowed and almost smiled.

"How long shall I fast now?"

"Why, for a hundred days, that is what Azor Ahai did. In my great love and admiration for you, I thought you a greater hero than him. The fires suggested that the true hero of this time might be victorious in lesser number of attempts in forging his sword. But the destiny is sometimes harsh, and it cannot be hurried. This is the final step."

"I hope for both of our sakes you are right" he said crassly and walked away, on some urgent king's business, no doubt.

Stannis could be so rude at times. It was a pity they couldn't engage in making little shadows; his
bluntness and coarseness in bed had always brought her great joy. It would save her king the fasting and the prayers if they could. He was never one for expressions of faith. But he had aged so much every time that Melisandre did not want to tempt fate. She still needed Stannis.

A large shadow could most definitely defeat the Great Other, but no man had so much virility in him to engender one of sufficient magnitude... Well... The truth was, since she saw Rhaegar Targaryen in his righteous anger, she kept wondering how he was in bed and how strong a shadow they could birth together... *His eyes were molten fire*...

Maybe Jon's father would visit again before walking into his death. The prospect was oddly appealing. The fires were very unclear about the manner and the meaning of Rhaegar's passing. He hadn't been afraid of her... But he must have noticed her beauty. All men did.

The short day kept being eventful. She would never make it to that funeral. Davos Seaworth waited for her at the door leading to the courtyard. She wondered if he was stalking her for hours, or perhaps ever since Lightbringer had burned out again.

"Will you make him kill his queen?" Davos was even more discourteous than Stannis today. Seaworth was more loyal than a dog, but uniquely unpleasant in his honesty. Melisandre was wounded. Truly, she deserved a bit more respect after she kept his son Devan away from any harm, honouring his father's unwavering faith with the king. Even now, Devan remained in Nightfort, safe from any followers of the Great Other.

"I mean," Davos stuttered, recognising the outrage on her heart-shaped face, finding his hard-learned courtesies. "Azor Ahai defeated the enemy only after he tempered his sword in the heart of his wife, Nissa Nissa, did he not?"

"Yes, he did," the wise woman in Melisandre answered truthfully, "but that would not help His Grace to forge his sword."

"Then?" Davos insisted.

_Selyse would never make the required cry of anguish and ecstasy as Nissa Nissa did._ Truth be told, Melisandre had not yet thought about the final sacrifice required, but she was bound to find one in time. She still had a hundred days to think and gaze into her fires to decide what was best. And she had more than two hundred days before the Night's King returned to Castle Black. She hoped to be far, far away by that time.

She escaped from Davos' clutches without a second reply. Her feet scurried like mad under her vividly red robes, until she finally emerged at the site in the middle of the Castle Black's yard destined for fires, conveniently away from all wooden structures. _As if any would catch flame in this weather without my help..._

The day had become so short that the nightfires could be started two or three hours after each dawn, to breathe semblance of life into the grey sunset and the cold night belonging to the Great Other.

This evening, a special pyre was being built for the fallen monster; the once faithful brother of the Night's Watch who somehow ended up serving his sworn enemy.

The body of a ranger who became the Other lay peacefully on the bed of dry wood soaked with resin. _This is not as in the books. They should rise as wights, not as his servants._ She should think on how that was happening.

Selyse ran into Melisandre with hot tears on her face, wetting the homely furs she wore over her
shoulders. The true taste of the war of winter was too much for her. She should have stayed in Nightfort with her daughter.

"Lord of Light, help us," she implored, eyeing the dead ranger with distrust as if he was going to stand up at any moment. "The night is dark and full of terrors."

Melisandre fervently returned and repeated the queen's prayer. The former child slave left in the red temple would be nothing without R'hllor. She was, and she would remain her God's preferred instrument of revenge.

Lady Asha was not to be seen.

Loudly, the red priestess commanded "Bring the turncloak, Theon Greyjoy, and lay him next to the dead ranger."

Some black brothers hurried to obey, and the ironborn lady immediately stepped out of the shadow of a crumbling wooden tower. Her would-be lover was not far, hair more bushy than before. A lovers' quarrel in the snow... How dreadful.

"I'll go," Asha announced. The whip was attached to her belt, on the place where she might normally carry an axe.

Melisandre was not surprised.

"On one condition."

That was surprising.

"Tris is not going with me."

It took her a while to understand Botley's given name could be shortened into Tris.

"Good," Mel said, suppressing the urge to laugh. "Tris... come stand next to me."

The young man unwillingly did as he was told, giving a hurt look to his lady. Asha must have pitied him. Melisandre would do the same. A real man would not conform himself, or not so meekly.

The pyre started burning merrily with its dead human fuel. Sparks exploded from oiled wood, echoing the steady sound of Selyse's crying. Asha stood gingerly in front of it, trying her best not to appear nervous when Melisandre showered her face and shoulders, first with ashes, and then with blossom of nightshade from her robes.

"Don't be afraid," the sorceress counselled her victim when she was done. The kraken woman would travel faster if she stayed moderately calm while Melisandre performed her trick.

Asha's eyes became white from fear when Melisandre made the ashes go ablaze in orange tongues of fire and spoke the words in the ululating drawl of Asshai. The light of the Lord would further speed up the travel. Tristifer Botley changed his mind, just as the fires said he would. He ran forward and gallantly embraced his unwilling lady, uncaring that the flames caught him as well.

In a whirling blaze, they were gone.

Ah, young lovers, Melisandre thought with a sudden surge of longing in her body.

Maybe she should seek out Stannis that night and not make it too tiresome for him. There need be no fruit of our union. It had been a while since she allowed herself the pleasure of flesh, the most potent
and palpable manifestation of the life and warmth given by the Lord, who was the heat in the loins of men.

A hundred days was a long time to wait, but it was still nothing in comparison with the long years of her life which had passed until now. She needed to feel alive, to quench the strange fear growing in her soul. Yes, there was powerful, ancient magic on the Wall, but hers was proven stronger. Stannis defeated the servant of the Great Other with the help of her singing, and she had almost taken the black dragon as her own.

At the dwindling nightfire, Selyse continued beseeching the mercy of the Lord of Light, thanking him for her husband's victory, praying for another one. The more time passed, Melisandre found it more and more difficult to tolerate the horrendous woman she befriended to better establish herself in the king's household.

"I see it," Selyse spoke out of turn, with wide, homely eyes, filled with tremulous revelation and blind devotion, "I will give my husband an heir, I see it now."

Melisandre looked as well. Joramun, the fire whispered. It could even be as Selyse said. She would think about it later.

Then, one of the frightened crows came running and spoiled everything.

"Forgive me, Your Grace, my lady, but my lads are builders, not rangers," the first builder, Othell Yarwick complained as if Melisandre hadn't learned what builders were in all her time on the Wall, and that he was the head of that ancient and most insignificant order. Selyse stared forward, ignoring the tidings.

"I understand," Melisandre said placidly, but she was wrong. Yarwick brought news beyond her comprehension and what the fires showed.

"The prisoner is gone," the crow stuttered. "The lad who looks like an old man. And the Lady Arya Stark, the one he saved from Winterfell."

"Gone where?" the words escaped Melisandre, and she couldn't help notice how Selyse stared her down, woken from her reverie about heirs, surprised to catch the infallible priestess with faulty knowledge.

"It seems that... They climbed on the Wall and ran west... I sent a man after them, but the footsteps end on the place where the wood is almost touching the Wall... If I didn't know better, I would say they jumped... But their bodies are nowhere to be seen."

Melisandre supposed the corpses must have simply walked away. It wouldn't be unheard of in the times as they were. And for as much as the haunted forest crept to the Wall in many places, the jump was still too high for anyone to survive it. The trick the boy pulled in Winterfell to save false Arya Stark wouldn't save him here. The inconvenience reminded her she had yet to tell Stannis that the lady Theon Greyjoy saved was not Arya Stark.

Little Lord Rickon had looked at her, squinted, and offered a good day to Jeyne, when Melisandre took the frail ghost-like girl with her to his ice cell on purpose.

Stupid kraken. Let him be the fodder for the Great Other if he so wishes... It made no matter. The gates were closed, the wildlings and the mists inhabiting their tatters were gone, the only servant of the Great Other who dared materialise in Castle Black was defeated. She tried hard to ignore the fact...
she had no idea why the monster turned into a black brother after his death, and into one whose last known whereabouts were beyond the Wall, so he couldn't have come in as fog clinging to the poor wildlings..

Melisandre was immensely relieved. If I didn't send Asha away now, she would know I have no advantage over her… Somehow she didn't think the iron lady would accept to be her puppet for the life of her lover or Botley. But she did have a weakness for her little wizened brother who had suffered horrendously for his unspeakable crimes…

Melisandre sighed with satisfaction. Women, sisters, mothers… They were all the same. Even when they pretended to defy men in their own realm as Lady Greyjoy.

"There is more." Yarwick now positively looked as if he were going to fall into the ground, or through ice for that matter.

What? Stannis fled the field? That would be something to see… Perhaps one day he will flee… from his wife.

"L… young l…. Lord Stark. He is gone as well, into thin air, without a trace. There is only maidenly ice around his cell. The door is open and the princess's fool is in it, singing and standing on his arms… something about shadows gone awry or away…"

Melisandre's fear returned in earnest. Have I been wrong again? I have to check the flames immediately. I must not misread them this time… I must not… Lord of Light, give me strength! Open my eyes! I only ever wished to serve you in your eternal struggle against the Great Other in which you shall always prevail. Every time in history it comes to pass.

It was only half a lie. She served R'hllor as honestly as she had served herself. No more and no less. A mortal could only do as much. She deserved a dragon for her efforts. She would never have such opportunity again.

"See that as little people as possible know about this," she instructed Yarwick in a prudent tone.
"And inform the king."

"His Grace is above us all," she said with faked subservience as she turned and bowed gently to his nagging wife. Nothing like a little flattering to make the shrew forget my lapse in knowledge. "King Stannis is the chosen warrior of light. He will know what to do."

Chapter End Notes

If things are becoming unclear plot wise, ask. I will answer.
Any feedback is most welcome.
Euron

Chapter Notes

Thank you to DrHolland for a selfless beta read in busy times ))) And to TopShelfCrazy for some serious improvements on the text and great support for all the troubles of the silly author.

Thank you all for reading and any attention given to this story.

On we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Euron

The Silence flew in silence.

Awaiting for the ship's airborne journey to end, its dead captain, Euron Greyjoy, indulged in a solitary finger dance, throwing a short obsidian axe in his cabin. With great precision, he made the sharp blade land between his widespread fingers, black as dragonglass from the cursed blood and life in his body. The axe would stick into the equally black ebony table every single time, as easily as a knife. He ignored as best he could the incessant chatter of a congress of ravens, flying cheerfully alongside his vessel.

Since his ninth name day, Euron had never accidentally hurt himself with his axe. He conserved all of his fingers despite losing an eye. Three decades later, he suspected he was still one of the best in any kind of finger dancing.

Except one.

Asha, my niece, he remembered vaguely, she might be better. The memory inspired no feeling. He recalled marrying her off, but couldn't tell to whom, except that she was not happy about it, so she ran. She'll be dead now, more like that not.

It matters not, he thought with muted hatred, as he did daily after his routine of axe throwing, ever since he had become aware of his... condition.

Nothing matters.

I am dead. I can chop off all of my fingers and yet I will still continue to exist.

Unless I walk into the flaming maw of a dragon or throw myself upon a Valyrian blade.

He hated his existence more than he hated Rhaegar and his dog who had defeated him.

Obsidian and ordinary steel could hurt his soldiers, but not him. Once, in an hour of despair, he had tried to kill himself with his new axe; to no avail.

A raven flew in and shitted on his head. It was humiliating. His resentment plummeted through the skies like the black dragon with a ship hanging on his tail.
Bloody ravens following the king.

Two kings...

Mance Rayder had never been forced to bend the knee to Rhaegar, as he had. Euron Greyjoy, the most short-lasted King of the Iron Islands! His dead gaze wandered to the driftwood crown attached firmly to one of the walls, in order to survive the flight.

He should dispose of it, but he didn't, not fully knowing why; just like the ironborn had crowned him, a dead man, their king, next to the sacred bones of Nagga, not knowing what he was. Truth be told, he wasn't aware of it himself at the time. He had been vain, and he'd not yet used the horn long enough, but his slow dying had already started.

Now they know.

As I do...

All the living ironborn abandoned his command and returned to the Iron Islands after his defeat in King's Landing, as soon as his true condition of a wight was revealed. Euron was left to lead the walking corpses he created, most of them enslaved peasants from the Reach. And he was forced to obey King Rhaegar, lest he and his army be roasted into nothingness by his black dragon.

Now that same dragon carried Euron's ship and his sworn deadmen far, far north.

The Silence was drawn mercilessly over the sky, on a spree of haste to reach a herd of wildling thralls in need of help. The dragon's tail was coiled around a mast. Most members of Euron's dead crew were tied to some part of the ship with thick, hempen rope. Or they would fall to the watery halls of the Drowned God, thousands of feet below them, under the shimmering, foaming surface of the Sunset Sea.

A day had passed since the king, his dog, and a wildling named Sigorn, clad in bronze, called upon Euron to raise his banner, and honour an oath of fealty he had been forced to swear.

And there he was, flying north. The sky was a dark grey kraken defeated by the dragon, just like Euron was subdued by the king.

Drogon always reminded Euron of an oversized bat. The thought was blasphemous and he didn't dare think it when the beast looked him in the eye. The gaze of the large, black lizard was uncanny, as though it could see to the bottom of Euron's tainted soul. His wings spread wide over the granite-coloured sky, hanging like a menace over the remote north-western seas.

Rhaegar was looking for a large horde of wildlings lost beyond the Wall. The king wanted to shelter them in the Shadow Tower to please his only son. Euron could almost understand that.

Euron had once sailed over that sea, which now roared alone, deep under the Silence. He had braved almost all seas charted in the maps of the world. He wished he were sailing now, not flying. Once he died forever, and returned to void, he wished it were at sea.

Not here. Never in the air.

The grey winter sky stretched wide and airy in front of the cabin window, darkened only by the powerful body of the dragon. The noble, the good, the privileged, they were on the dragon's back, while the slaves, the wights, remained on the ship he captained.

He blocked the thought, which sombered his soul even in death. It was his own aurochs' brain, his
own responsibility that he and his men had become wights. Two of them were his own bastards whom he loved better than himself.

_Why are my sons paying for my sins?_ he oftentimes tried to ask the Drowned God since he died. _I renounced you and despised you, not them._

He had never felt the same consideration for his two younger brothers, Aeron and Victarion, who also now shared his fate.

_Not entirely_, he thought with grimness. _I am the only one who can talk._

He often wondered if he was also the only one with conscious thought left. But as the other wights could not speak, there was no way to check.

One thing _was_ certain; all wights he created by using the cursed horn of dragonlords still infallibly followed his command, despite that he had lost the horn to Rhaegar months ago.

_Why am I different? Why can't I be a mindless wight? Because I fancied myself the master of the horn?_

Doubts besieged him, like the desire to sail to the unknown east once had, until he had reached the Smoking Sea and the evil black walls of Asshai-by-the-Shadow. After the experience, he had only one eye left and he had never been the same.

His bastards were the only reason Euron didn't fight Rhaegar until the bitter end under of the walls of King's Landing, and let the buggering king burn _him_ and all the wights he created.

_I should have known better._ Any boy from the Iron Islands could loot and claim titles, but he could never be truly rich, nor truly loved and accepted as noble on the great Westerosi continent. _No matter what we do._

It was an illusion to believe otherwise and it had brought him to ruin. He trusted a sorcerer to make him king, but the sorcerer only wanted the dragons. _I killed him, though._ That was satisfactory and almost... _just._

_When have I ever considered justice?_

There was a new part of him he could not understand since the _Silence_ had taken flight. Almost... _ladylike._ The notion was disturbing. His musings were interrupted when the ship was dropped from a great height into a desert of snow. Cabin walls collapsed on top of him. It took him some time to dig himself out using the superhuman strength death had breathed into his cursed limbs. Stepping out of the ruin of his cabin, he took in the destruction of his ship.

The _Silence_ was gone. But the dead soldiers it carried survived. Euron jumped into the snow from what was once the muted statue of a maid with perfect small teats on the prow of his ship. The moon was out. Many little fires twinkled in the distance. The wind wailed endlessly among the dark-green needles of the trees..

_We are here to fight others like ourselves_, Euron thought, wondering if his army would now betray him and pass on to the enemy. He had not yet seen the other _wights_, those originating from the North, nor their cold masters; he had only heard about them.

Sometimes, when Rhaegar's army was crossing Westeros to go north, he could feel them in the woods, with his increased sensitivity of a wight who could _tell_ the presence of his kind, but they never approached.
But now the dragon had just dropped them off in the middle of nowhere and left them. The woods were closing on them, threatening and obscurely green. Euron regrouped his lieutenants around himself, fearing the new silence, that of the trees.

They hate us, he realised, the trees hate us as much as I hate Rhaegar and his dog.

For the first time since he discovered he was dead, Euron felt dread mounting in his soul. He hoped his army did not feel it, nor see it in him, or they would all be torn to pieces this day. The other dead army was larger than his, he could sense that too.

There was only a handful of red-blooded humans who allowed themselves to be thrown into these haunted woods, together with the few hundred wights on board the Silence; Rhaegar, his dog, Mance Rayder, Sigorn, the newcomer in bronze armour, Aegon, the bastard, with his shiny sword, and his Lady Jeyne. The latter used to be a wight herself. The sight of her regularly strengthened Euron’s rational resolve to live.

Jeyne Heddle, a former dirty innkeep from the riverlands had became human again, and a lady. If she did, maybe he could… Most of all, maybe his sons could live again as well. Euron just had to understand how she did it.

The dread he now felt made his secret wishes become great and wild as the sea. As he could talk and think, Euron always secretly hoped that once he was away from the influence of the horn long enough, he would somehow return to life… That his blood would run red, and not black, and that he would again be able to desire a woman…

He tried to remember the couplings he had enjoyed over the years and he could not. He had empty memories of many things, but every single sensation from his life was gone; forgotten and lost as if it had never existed…. As if he had never lived, never sailed around the world, never loved, nor fathered sons…

Daenerys… He had coveted her as a beautiful image, a true princess, a woman forever beyond the reach of a man who had always remained the hungry ironborn boy in his heart; deprived and desirous of luxury others possessed. But not even she could stir what he had lost.

He wasn't a man any more. He was… something. The suffering his condition brought him was unbearable. He would have laughed if anyone had ever told him such torture of the spirit was possible without the presence of physical pain.

Euron Greyjoy mocked suffering and torture. He had laughed when he had lost an eye. As a captain, he enjoyed ripping out the tongues of the thralls who were to serve him on the Silence. He would tell them they would stop offending him with their voices once the inevitable had been done.

Now all his men were silent, no matter if they had a tongue or not before they died, and he was the only one left alone, in a place where sound still existed. He could almost hear a sad song of a high harp in his head, a ballad of Florian and Jonquil, sung in a ladylike voice, mocking his pitiful existence.

All he had left was cold, emotionless, immense hatred.

Euron screamed savagely. And his dread from the other dead things coming from the wood mounted.

The king and his dog looked at him with contempt. To them he was a vile dragonstealer, less than
vermin. His being constricted, but the rebellion lacked any taste of it.

He was dead. He would never feel anything again, and he would have traded all his discoveries and treasures a hundred times over to feel something again. Anything. A hunger, a thirst, a pressure in his loins from growing lust... A wish to cry... Even that...

"Your lordship," the Hound scorned him, "best get your dead squids in line. It's getting cold." The damn giant dog shivered visibly in his armour.

Or maybe I should set my squids on you.

Euron seethed with empty hatred, not feeling the cold. Drogon was gone and his wights were in a larger number... The appeal of treason was growing.

But then Lady Jeyne would also be gone, and with her any possibility of ever changing his condition. Euron stubbornly believed that, if he followed her long enough, he would learn what to do to help his sons, at least. He also sensed beyond any doubt she would never help him if he harmed the king or any of his chosen few, especially not Aegon, her pretty bastard princeling.

And Aegon, the idiot, would die for Rhaegar rather than conspire against him, as he well could and should with his High Valyrian looks. Euron had had whores with that colour in the Free City of Lys.... No one would care Aegon was a bastard from Dorne if he dared claim the Iron Throne. His eyes were grey, not purple, but that was the only prominent difference between young Dayne and the Targaryens.

The tempting notion of betrayal had other downsides. Even if his wights prevailed and murdered the living, the dog would surely do for him before dying himself. Sandor Clegane always watched Euron closely, and never lowered his guard for the king. And who would then help my sons?

No one.

In silence, Euron cursed his cold reason, the only remnant of his human life, and obeyed the command of the man he hated. His army abandoned the wreck of the Silence.

Faint fires burned in the distance, marking the campsite of the wildlings. No command was spoken, yet all shipwreckers, dead or alive, prowled together through the woods as predators on loose, advancing in the direction of the fires. Mist filled the air. The enemy must have been coming to the same place from the other side. Euron suddenly found the moonlight beautiful and feared his own incoherent thought. He had never been one to admire the gracefulness of nature.

The king walked in front with his dog and his chosen companions, in his black armour with red plumage on the helm. He carried no sword; only lance, and a harp, as if the instrument could help him in what was to come.

"You should go in the middle," the Hound said brusquely, ordering around the king himself. "I don't trust those fires. We don't know what's over there. Send the wights as vanguard. Or ask Mance to go with them. He knows this place. He has best chance of not being killed by whatever is there. It won't do good to anyone if you are dead."

The wildling king looked forward with sharp brown eyes, apprehensive. "We should hurry," he said cautiously. "The enemy is near my people. My bones are freezing."

"Your bones and my balls," the Hound rasped, unimpressed.

Rhaegar laughed plainly, as a thrall would. And they call him the Lord of Seven Kingdoms? Euron
arrogantly believed he would have been more lordly than Rhaegar had the fate been different.

The king then shook his helmed head, refusing to hide.

"If we can't prevail, it will matter little where I am. I shall go first. I have to, I've given it much thought," the king lifted up his visor and spoke pensively. His purple gaze fixated the dog's grey one, with the colour of a darkening, winter sky before the tempest. Euron found it quaint, but he was compelled to stare at the dog.

"I shall not flee death," Rhaegar finished. "The gods will let me live if they so wish."

The king's eyes shone with confidence and kindness.

Euron hated Rhaegar and his nobility with every ounce of his being. That was the only feeling left to him, immense, dulled hatred, present only in his reason, never in his guts. His guts were empty.

Dead.

And he would trade this hatred for any other feeling if he could, even for sadness and misery, but he could not. Mercy was not given to him. The Drowned God was punishing him severely for his loss of faith.

His little priest brother, Aeron Damphair would undoubtedly laugh at him and try to drown him in the nearby sea, if only he could laugh or talk. Instead, Damphair was forced to stand behind Euron's back as a wight, next to Victarion, and the dead Tyrell boy, the pretty burned one in love with men.

Euron wished he could be angry at his brothers. He even wished to feel remorse for what he did to them, now when he killed them both and turned them into wights, and before, for what he had done to Victarion… Yet he could not experience guilt.

He was dead. He could not feel.

He could only hate all of them coldly as he hated himself. And the king and his dog most of all, for they had defeated him.

"I told you before, your endless faith will kill you," the Hound growled savagely at the buggering true king, who wished to lead in battle.

"As the lack of it will kill you, brother," Rhaegar answered seriously. His purple eyes turned red, catching fire. He placed his arms on the taller man's shoulders. "Listen to me on this day. Don't let that happen."

"Dead is dead," the Hound said stubbornly.

"So it is," Rhaegar agreed. His lips thinned with stubborn expression. His eyes burned.

Euron's dread mounted. Something was coming, though it seemed they were alone in the forest. They could only see the moon and the trees. He looked sideways and to the back. His two dead sons were at a good place. Well behind, as he'd ordered them, not in front as the stupid king. His other soldiers looked as mute and obedient as ever.

Soon he would see if he was the only one afraid, just like he was the only one with the gift of speech.

An inhuman screech ripped the sky open, tearing it into shards of dark blue.
The phantasmagorical thought appealed to the boy with prickly black hair who had sailed out of Pyke one day to explore the world, eager for riches and discoveries. He sometimes wished he could be that boy again and do everything all over. He would be different... He wouldn't.... He would never... He could feel no sorrow, but the thought of his saddest real memory was unsupportable to him, even in a form of pure, unfeeling reason. He decided very firmly not to remember.

Suddenly Jeyne was in front of him, her long black hair falling to under her knees. Her mane was blacker than his own, darker than the broken night sky that screamed above them.

As far as Euron knew, the only remnant of the lady's former condition of a wight was that she ate less and could better stand the cold. He could sign up for that. For Jeyne had the glowing face of a woman well fucked by her princeling, warm and radiant. Only her hands were still that of an innkeep, hard and calloused. Euron sometimes looked at her and at Aegon and wondered if he fancied those hands and how many times they did it every night.

He would never be able to fuck again. Or maybe he would, if the lady here chose to help him.

He bowed his head in submission.

The fear descended on them all, dead or alive. Euron could almost cut it with his axe. The dog and the wildling king searched the night for the unknown enemy. The king himself stood immobile, his bastard lance stuck deep into snow.

"Jeyne," Aegon called his lady to himself. "Stay away from him. His lordship is rabid in his death."

The boy's sword was out. The milk-coloured Valyrian blade rippled in pale colours; a source of shimmering light in thick dusk. Night was about to surround them, and seep the scarce daylight fully into itself.

*If I lurch forward, I can steal Dawn and murder all of them.*

Jeyne didn't listen to Aegon's counsel.

"Deadman," she told him in her deepened voice, as if she could read his treasonous thoughts. "Here's your chance. Fight for us and I swear this to you: you might live one day again. Betray us, and turn into nothingness with all your kin."

His dread and unease deepened at her words. The peace of death was tempting, but he could not erase from his head the faces of his sons.

The sky hummed deeply above the clouds.

With the warning still lingering on her lips, Jeyne left Euron, not offering any more clues, or promises.

The crystal white clouds formed a strange shape in the sky. Suddenly, they cried out, uttering a sharp and pungent wail; as a beast of ice, weeping.

"Let us move on," the king said in his mournful, iron voice.

Euron's hatred always flooded his soul at the sound of his speech, covering his fears, exploding to the noisy, dark blue vault above.

The dead and the living sneaked toward a very large clearing where they had seen the fires burning
upon their arrival. Cautiously, they advanced through the quiet, thick forest. Euron's ruined ship was left stranded behind. The *Silence* would never set sail again. Euron wished he could be sad about it. He could not.

But, as they all walked, the lights they had seen dwindled, as if the campfires were only an illusion. *As if they had never been there before.*

The cry was not heard again. Yet Euron's dread returned, oppressing his dead heart. He cherished it.

Anything was better than cold emotionless hatred.

"Your people are not here, singer," the dog observed with scorn.

"No, and not only that," Mance Rayder answered sharply. "We are lost. We've been heading north. Rather than south-east. We should retreat toward the sea."

Euron realised what the wildling meant. They had walked for hours. *Too long.*

It was too late for withdrawal. They reached the large clearing in the woods which gaped empty. As soon as they were vulnerable and in the open, the skies burst apart. A monster of ice roared and pushed its head through the hollow in the clouds, plunging down. It had snowy white spikes and scales, wings, two legs and a snout... It flew directly at Rhaegar, and when it opened its jaws to kill, no fire came through them, but a long jet of crystals, more pristine white than its scales. The king bent sharply and avoided the impact of the ice avalanche.

"The Ice Dragon!" Mance Rayder shouted in awe.

Rhaegar seemed fascinated by its appearance as well, to the extent that he would have let the beast crush him or eat him alive, if his dog didn't jump on him, moving him out of harm's way.

"Have you lost your mind again?" the dog shouted. "This is not the beast from your sigil, Your Grace. That one is red as far as I recall."

"On the contrary, this is the animal from my sigil," Rhaegar said sadly. "Just that this dragon is dead. I wonder who his rider was. It must have been one of my ancestors."

The ice dragon landed with a thud. At the same time, as if by command of some invisible hand, an army of wights poured out from the forest which surrounded the king and his party, from all sides. Soon, Euron was caught up in fighting his *kind...*

They were different than the wights he unwittingly created. They were more, but they were feeble. They wore tatters and they lacked limbs and body parts. They looked as if they had *existed* with the curse he had for thousands and thousands of years. They looked as if they wished to be killed and burned; as if to cease to exist would be a blessing to them. In his cold head, Euron could understand it perfectly.

He lifted his arm, and all his wights except his sons and himself lit torches, in a move he had made them practise since King's Landing. He wondered how many of his own men would burn by accident. He felt no remorse, he never had, not even before when he *could* feel; but he still wanted to keep as many walking dead as possible. It was the only army that would obey him now. Single-handed, he cut an armless wight in two. Victarion, standing behind him, burned his kill obediently.

Euron stayed at the head of his own army, much like the buggering *noble* king; his weapon an axe of
dragonglass, hewing limb and head.

*Shall I exist for as long as they did?*

Suddenly, he could not *stand* the thought. On a whim, he commanded Victarion and the Tyrell boy, Loras, to hold the wights off, and returned all his attention to the ice dragon and the fight of *true men* against it.

The frozen animal came after the king again. It was larger and probably stronger than Drogon, but much clumsier in movement, especially on the ground. *Just like me in comparison to the living,* Euron thought bitterly.

Rhaegar, gallant and merciful, hesitated in using his lance against the beast he admired, as he well should have done. Instead, he danced around it with his dog. The dragon always galloped straight back at the king. It wanted the king. It wanted his *blood.* It didn't want the poor wights. Euron sensed it. Euron knew it. Maybe he should have told them, but he didn't.

He *hated* them.

Mance Rayder battled three wights at once with his longsword, and Aegon hurried to help him out after he did for a very tall red-haired corpse on his own. None of the northern wights touched Jeyne. She remained unarmed and followed her princeling with human fear in her eyes. Euron was marvelled. *As if she doesn't exist or as if they don't see her.*

Rhaegar's dog yelled at His Grace, "You'll have to kill it! My steel is not shiny enough!"

The stupid mutt refused to arm himself better for as much as the king would have given him any weapon he asked for. The Hound stubbornly wielded a dented greatsword of ordinary steel, one of the largest blades Euron had seen. The only concession to winter was the obsidian knife on his hip he now carried, but never used, to Euron's knowledge.

*Know thy friend, and know thy enemy better,* the dead kraken thought.

With a wild grunt, the Hound struck the dragon on its neck, but his sword hit the hard ice scales and was deflected by them. The beast temporarily followed the distraction, forgetting the king. The dog hid himself behind the trees. The beast screeched after him, but had no intention to continue its pursuit.

It wanted the king.

His dog's words and deeds seemed to have shaken Rhaegar out of the trance. He stopped observing the wonder of nature which resembled his sigil, but who for all purposes wanted to kill him.

The lance Rhaegar carried was a work of art; made of Valyrian steel and dragonglass blended on its sharp tip. Euron never had a weapon as precious. For a short time, he had a Valyrian blade, sent to him by the now dead High Septon, who wanted to crown Euron King of the Seven Kingdoms. But the old Blade of Winter was taken away from him by the Hound, and it was now abandoned to the dead Starks in the crypts of Winterfell.

*A fool's decision,* Euron thought, *they should have brought it. Where will the sword called Ice be needed if not here?* He hated Rhaegar some more.

The dead kraken could afford to wield only a poor-man's axe of black stone, against all the evils of this world.
The king steadied his left arm for the next time the beast would pass him. He widened his legs slightly, as though he were astride a horse, so as to stand firmly on the frozen ground.

But his lance missed, and the ice dragon was victorious.

It would have unhorsed Rhaegar, or rather, on that horseless occasion, it brought the king down into snow and opened its maw. Sharp teeth wanted to close around Rhaegar's left arm, his lance arm, when the dog was back once more. He passed through the woods and stood next to the king, hammering with his dented steel on the ice-snout from above, in unmeasured, savage strokes. The jaws snapped and closed empty; the beast withdrew for a few steps. The two men stood up together, and there was no way to tell who held whose back, the older man or the younger one, the king or his dog.

*His brother.* Euron wished he had been half as close to any of his *real* brothers as those two had become, against all odds. But the dead kraken's family was different, cruel and unyielding like himself, filled with envy and pride.

*We do not sow,* he thought. *The house words mean treason. Take what you can take. We are treasonous by nature.*

Near Euron, Victarion kept burning wights, his face a broken expression of sorrow and hatred. On the contrary, Aeron Damphair had never lost the petrified, righteous gaze, not even in his untimely death. Every time his eyes landed on Euron, they told him unmistakably what ungodly scum he was.

For as much as he *hated* his brothers, Euron wished none of them had kept the use of reason behind the expressionless muteness of their wight faces. He now knew what it was to be caged in an eternal existence of resentment, and he wouldn't wish it on anyone. Not even on Victarion whom he loathed most of all.

*It's not Victarion's fault, you fool,* the voice of his lost conscience said, but Euron refused to remember.

The pungent cry of the ice dragon woke him from his miserable thoughts. The snow beast was frustrated. It could not reach the king and *bite* him as it seemed to desire.

Rhaegar and his dog were almost pushed into the forest by the advances of the dragon. The trees and the shrubs were thick on that place, frozen together as a palisade of sorts. The monster had them cornered where it wanted them. It lifted his large, clawed paw and it would have squashed both of them at once… They had one good chance to strike at it with any weapon.

"Let me," the Hound bellowed.

"No," the king refused, "Together. A pass to each side. Now!"

Euron unwillingly commended Rhaegar's judgement in his mind. He wouldn't have thought of it, but the king had a point. In an incredibly coordinate way the two men split, and ran to the different sides of the ice dragon. For a second, the beast did not know whom to follow, before it inexorably turned to the king.

By that time it was too late. The Hounds greatsword lodged itself between the ice crystals on its neck, and the king's bastard lance found one of the eyes. The ice dragon screamed worse than when it arrived, from under the crescent moon. All wights cringed in fear, Euron's and those of the north.

*Well done,* Euron thought, oddly. He had never complimented *men* before for successes in any kind of jousting. *What is wrong with me?*
The ice dragon lurched forward, dead or dying. The king and his dog remained too close to it, fighting to liberate their weapons, which remained stuck in the animal. Mance Rayder rushed over to help, but he could only get to one of them on time. Wisely, he chose the king, and pulled him out of harm's way. As the dog would have done, Euron realised.

Euron saw himself sprinting forward against his will. Something controlled him and forced him to save the man he hated with all his dead being.

Something kind and orderly, respectful of laws and the king's peace, yet merciless in its power of suggestion. Euron felt a foreign, selfish desire to fight for his happiness and never be alone again. His invisible assailant tolerated no opposition, nor mocking of his heart's wishes. With the superhuman strength stemming from his cursed condition, Euron held up one cold leg of the ice dragon until the Hound scrambled out from under the beast, sword in hand.

Euron let go of the paw immediately and retreated. The beast twitched while dying, white as the maidenly snow into which it had fallen. Black blood was everywhere under the dragon, and the king was nursing a cut on his left elbow.

So the beast was not entirely defeated, Euron realised. It still bit or scratched his lance arm with its dying breath.

"It was after your blood," Mance Rayder announced grimly what Euron had already sensed, when he saw the king's injury. "Their masters drink it, maybe their steeds do as well. Or it would carry you to its master…. I have never seen an ice dragon yet. Only an ice spider, a dead white bear, and quite a few dead shadowcats and horses."

"King's blood," Rhaegar said bitterly. "When I was younger I wished I was born without. All it brought me is pain."

"But now I know I was wrong," the dragon king changed his mind, but not his mood. His ragged breathing calmed down slowly. "I was a coward then. I haven't yet accepted my destiny."

"Blood is blood," the Hound said matter-of-factly. He took off his helm and tossed it into the snow, shaking his black lank mane over his burns. Warm-looking sweat from exertion dripped over them despite the cold.

Euron envied him for suffering that natural, and normally unpleasant sensation after battle. He had not a drop of sweat on his dead brow.

"What say you, kraken? All blood is the same, isn't it?" the dog repeated with a terrible sneer on his ugly face. Euron supposed it was a compliment to be called kraken, and not a squid for a change. The giant man suddenly dragged him forward and hit him on his back with quaint gratitude, but he did it so strongly that the ironborn staggered, and nearly tumbled down into the snow.

"I should thank you," the Hound barked. "I wouldn't want to make my pretty wife a widow so soon."

No, dog, Euron thought, smirking evilly, you should thank whoever forced me to help you. He also remembered the Hound's wife, Sansa, very clearly. She had mercy even for the wights. In her misplaced kindness, she had let Euron out of a cage Daenerys locked him in, so that he could go and fulfill the last desire of his dead heart; to kill the warlock who promised him the Seven Kingdoms only to betray him. Yet it had never occurred to Euron to be grateful to her. Maybe I should have been… Maybe...
The presence that forced him to help the dog was... kind... No, Euron denied it. The Starks were unnatural but they only kept animals as pets. Sansa had no wolf, nor bird following her. And the beast had to be nearby to be possessed... Or not. He remembered Lyanna's eagle... And the Hound's angry black horse who nevertheless obeyed his wife. *Maybe she possesses it at times.* He had seen the queen's bird in Highgarden when Lyanna herself was held prisoner in King’s Landing... So it was possible from the distance just the same.

Euron shivered. The idea of intrusion in his consciousness did not please him at all. He searched within his mind for *Lady* Sansa, hoping she would let him conserve his dignity in death if he was a bit courteous towards her. Everything seemed normal. Dead. He still hated everyone. He cared not for laws and order. Yet he didn't think she left. She was still somewhere and he wanted to get rid of her.

Absurdly he... missed... the lady's presence. It brought feelings he had lost... It would bring him joy to *feel* just a bit longer, even if sensations were not his own, and not even those of a man.

"I'll let you die next time," he said with insolence to the Hound.

The Hound uttered a sizzling, burnt laugh through his damaged mouth.

*You want to kiss him?* he spoke rudely to the lady lurking in the far corners of his mind, if it was her making him look at another man's mouth. *Well, for that you'd have to come over here.*

Insolence chased the intruder away and left only traces of mortification in Euron's dead self.

Another forgotten notion surged in Euron's mortal soul. What he was forced to do was *daring*. Courage was valued on Pyke. He suddenly wished he had braved the dragon of his own accord and hated the Hound later.

An odd realisation struck him. *The dog has grown stronger even than me with my unnatural strength.* Months ago, when they duelled in Highgarden for the horn of dragonlords, they were equally matched. But now the dog was alive and breathing, yet his large strength had grown almost... *inhuman...* this far north.

*Just like everyone's hair is growing. Just like the night is deepening. We shall all be monsters before the end.*

Euron struggled not to show he was weaker. *I don't want to let the dog know what he doesn't yet know himself.*

"We should burn it," Mance Rayder gestured at the craved ice dragon.

But there was no time for burning, just like beforehand there was none left for retreat. Another host of wights marched at them from among the trees, much larger than the *vanguard* they had defeated.

"We should go," Aegon the princeling said cravenly. "This is a trap," Jeyne added wisely, supporting her lover's cowardice.

*We should fight and die,* Euron thought as a good kraken.

"Perhaps," the king nodded. "But where?" His burning eyes looked for a way out from the circle of the northern wights, approaching.

In his cursed state Euron sensed how it would pain Rhaegar if any of his companions died that day. Even he, the dragonstealer. He *loathed* him for that, and yet he loathed himself much more for
everything he had done and become.

"Here, come over here!" a high-pitched voice screamed from very far in the dark-green wood of sentinel and pine, well behind the ranks of the enemy.

To Euron it seemed as good idea as any. Mance Rayder smiled. "I know that voice," he said gently. "Follow me! Trust me on this. This is not only my land. These are my people." The wildling, Sigorn, was the first to obey.

The King-beyond-the-Wall led the way, unstoppable. They all cut their way through the new troupe of wights. The dread was gone from them with the passing of the ice dragon. Fighting, they soon reached the end of the clearing which fooled them with the light of the false campfires, and reentered into the woods. Euron fought next to the the princeling, the king and his dog. His axe never stopped working. He might have been dead but he was still Lord of the Iron Islands and he would pay the iron price of any victory. Obsidian price in any case, he thought stupidly between the two kills.

Behind the first rows of trees, the land slowly began to rise, climbing up into hills and great, looming mountains far behind them, framed by the dark blue sunset.

Night had almost fallen.

Euron's army swerved among the hills the best they could. The ascent was difficult. To his amazement the northern wights did not follow, seemingly dismayed by the sharpness of stones protruding from the snow, and the acute lack of trodden paths.

"Here!" the same high voice screamed, and soon they could see real smoke behind a rounded promontory to their left. The shape of it resembled woman's buttocks and it guarded an entrance to a hidden valley at the foot of the mountains.

"The guards," Sigorn rejoiced. "We found them, Mance. All is well! They have made it from Castle Black almost to the Shadow Tower and so did we."

"I wish I was certain," Mance was less thrilled. "The very air here smells like death. And the land surely looks like the mountains of my childhood, leading to the Shadow Tower over the Bridge of Skulls. But is it so? I wonder… Or is it only what the enemy wants us to see. It wouldn't be the first time that the winter night is playing tricks on us…"

No one spoke for a long time. The king brooded in silence next to his dog. All movement stopped.

"Best if I go and see," Mance Rayder offered. "Someone has to."

Rhaegar acquiesced mutely, nursing his wounded arm with the skilled attention of a healer. The bite look nasty. He would not be able to have a steady grip on his lance for days. The flock of ravens perched on the sentinel above him, pleasantly quiet.

Why is it that they don't shit on his head? Euron thought with envy.

The King-beyond-the-Wall went forward all by himself. Euron followed him on an impulse, curious to see what was ahead, always hanging a few steps back. Even in death, the sight of new lands was pleasing and interesting to observe.

I've never been here, he thought, you cannot sail the mountains…

Night fell slowly over the lands, conquering the hills and the rocky passes between them, as well as the solitary, evil woods they had left behind.
"Who goes there?" a voice asked, deep this time

"It is me, Mance," the singer said when they approached the promontory, baring his hands in sign of peace. "Call Tormund and say I have come back. He knows I yet live."

It appeared wildlings forgot or didn't trust their king. They didn't call this Tormund. Instead, three of them jumped from behind a low rock where they had lay hidden, and attacked Euron fiercely. He had to fight them off without killing them, suspecting Lady Jeyne wouldn't appreciate if he murdered any living being or stepped on a flower. Fortunately, no flowers grew in winter.

He instantly incapacitated two scrawny, wildling boys. They were writhing in pain on the ground, but they would live. The third attacker, clad in white furs so that only a pair of blue eyes was visible, fought him wildly. He grabbed his waist and the ass to bring him down without mortal injury. The purely practical gesture for some reason provoked the boy's unbound fury.

Euron was kicked savagely in his balls and brought to his knees by the unknown opponent. A torch was almost brought into his face, when a familiar brown clad arm stopped the slender one, which held the tempting promise of the fire blessing for the dead kraken.

The end. Finally. No more thoughts.

He was to be denied that promise, one more time.

"Val, don't," Mance Rayder said calmly. "This one belongs to us now. I'll explain."

Euron opened his black eyes, wishing to be blind in one eye as he had been in life.

But he remained dead, and both of his eyes were wide open.

Moqorro, the warlock disguised as the red priest, who had made Euron lose his natural life by letting him use the horn of dragonlords, had lied to him about everything.

Maybe he didn't know, Euron realised, maybe the fire doesn't tell it true. Maybe the priests and the warlocks can read it as much as I can, a boy born in poverty amidst salt and stone...

Moqorro had promised Euron the most beautiful woman in the world for his queen, and said she was Daenerys Targaryen... Rhaegar's sister was beautiful, terribly so, and certainly prettier than this wildling woman in the eyes of most men Euron knew.

Val's face was angular and angry. A long golden-blond braid waved over the white furs and leather, coiled and thick as an exotic snake. She held a burning torch in one hand, and a sharp stone knife in the other.

She was the most beautiful woman in the world the man from the Iron Islands had ever seen, in any part of the world he had sailed to.

And he met her only now when his cock was hanging limp like a dead squid in his breeches.

"This bastard groped me, your monster or not," this Val told Mance Rayder with contempt. "I've killed men for less."

Mance chuckled. "I am glad to see you well, good-sister. Where are the others?"

"Camped not a day from here," she said bitterly. "Weeper is leading them. He bested Tormund in a fight. A few have been taken every night since we left Castle Black and the curse laying on it.... But
most of us have arrived here."

"Weeper would be the reason why you are here in the vanguard," Mance assumed with quiet determination.

"Aye," she nodded. "I rather went scouting, not to see… I never cared much for ripping out the eyes… How? Why?" she touched Mance's cheeks, and tears began running down her smooth face. She pressed her hand over her pretty mouth, trying to regain composure.

"I thought the red witch had burned you," Val stuttered.

"Long story, good-sister, and I shall tell it to you in time." the wildling king said. "Suffice to say for now that it is me, and I am alive, unlike him." He pointed at Euron with scorn, as if the kraken were some noxious weed.

Euron reasoned with himself he was only a dead squid. His companions hated him as he hated them. Nonetheless, he saw no need to point out the obvious all the time.

Val's eyes narrowed with peculiar loathing. Of my kind, Euron realised. Of the dead. They must have taken a lot from her.

"Have your way with him if you wish. You know how I feel about the wights and their masters," Mance counselled. "Yet I have to beg you, good-sister, don't burn him, not for now. I brought others with me, others like him, and they are only listening to this particular monster. And I have come to believe we may yet need everyone who is on our side in this war, dead or alive."

Euron wished he could feel the need to truly grope this woman, pin her down and take her in the snow until they were both sweaty despite the cold, but his body remained dead to the wishes of his brains. Only his eyes were dazed and blinded. His condition became unbearable at the sight of her great beauty.

He would burn himself alive, he would do it now, he could not stand this damned existence any more. His army and his own sons could all go to hell or join the Drowned God in his watery halls for all he cared.

Euron had had enough.

He was about to snatch the torch from Val's gloved hands, when a great lady hiding inside him suggested he should not do it. There is always something worth living for, she argued wordlessly and she was grateful to him, for saving her husband. Euron hesitated, caught by surprise. A moment of doubt was enough.

Val smacked him square in the face with the wooden end of the torch she carried. Torment ceased. Euron's world, built of cold hatred, began peacefully turning black.

Maybe I have one thing in common with the ladies, he mocked himself.

I can faint.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I'm looking forward to hear what you think.
**Daenerys**

Daenerys woke alone.

"Jon?" she murmured and stirred among the warm furs, still bearing the scent of her lover. "Jon Snow?"

Silence was the only greeting to her weak plea. Fire had been rekindled for her in the hearth. It was a sweet afterthought of desperate love making, but she would have preferred Jon to keep her company. *My silent wolf.*

*My love.*

In a bit more than two moon turns, her seemingly dour and irreparably righteous nephew had set alight the fire *within* Daenerys no one had ever kindled before. Not even her many enemies over time had ever perturbed her this much when they woke the fury of her dragon. The unfamiliar enormity of her own emotional state made her giddy and restless, and it was a lot to say about the Mother of Dragons.

In the past, she could always rein in her desires at need; the mastery of her wishes of the young girl was key to winning battles, restoring the race of dragons, and leading the people which gathered around her and looked up to her for protection, even as she herself struggled for survival. If she could not trust herself to guide her own actions, she was bereft, and in grave danger.

She winced at her own galloping thoughts. *I cared deeply for my sun and stars, but my admiration for him was never as strong as life itself.* Ser Jorah had seen through her better than she did at the time, being very young and sold to Drogo for all purposes; as yet another horse he owned. Her bear had told Dany with scathing honesty that she only *believed* herself in love with Drogo and he had been right.
Somehow, the newly acquired knowledge hurt and made her sad. She should have loved her first husband. He deserved it. She should have known how. Perhaps she was just too young. Are we not born with the ability to love? Or does it grow with time? As our body and our soul...

Daenerys puts her blacks back on with eyes half-closed, forgetting her questions and former life in an instant. I am here, now, and Jon is not as he well should be. This is all that matters.

A pang of concern suddenly became stuck between her ribs like one of those uncomfortable, foreign garments she was so often forced to don. He wouldn't leave without a farewell, would he? She had tried hard to stay awake the night before, fearing this outcome of Jon's too fervent, wild embraces.

The wolves were peculiar animals. The serious Stark expression Jon inherited and often donned was sometimes only a well crafted shield, hiding raging passions worthy of a dragon.

Sleep tricked Daenerys against her best intentions. As a consequence, in her solitude after waking up, both her body and her soul now ached for Jon, matching his feverishness from the night they shared.

All Starks apparently kept the nightly vigil with far more ease than Dany, just like their wolves. Young Rickon and Lady Arya, who had both slept in Jon's antechamber, were nowhere to be seen. Their pallets gaped empty. Dany briefly wondered where Gendry spent the night and if he had gotten any rest at all. It didn't seem as if either of the two wolves with tooth and claw would have let him lay down anywhere near Arya Stark.

Only Pyke and the wildling woman, Osha, snored happily in each other's arms. Daenerys smiled knowingly, wishing for them to make good use of their time together when they woke. What better way to mock winter in its cold face? What better way to celebrate life?

The two had clung to each other since the weirwoods threw Cotter and Jon's wolf out of their subterranean realm just south of the Wall, despite that the woman was at least half a head taller than the ironborn black brother. Yet the unlikely couple succumbed to sleep with their furs on, reluctant to take their manifest mutual attraction any further in presence of Pyke's Lord Commander and his innocent younger siblings.

The Wall, Dany thought with amazement, the place where a wildling and a condemned criminal care for the propriety of the young. Dany and Jon failed miserably at that. At least we were not in the same room.

Feeling as if she were balancing on the edge of some unknown, menacing doom, Dany descended the rickety stair of the tower where Jon's chambers were located. The black wood creaked under her dainty, boot-clad feet. The ice-cold wind fluted a hollow tune through the imperceptible holes burrowed in the stairwell by the decay of time. Cold dread coiled in her courageous, fiery heart of the dragon, uninvited and unwelcome.

The brave Danny Flint. Daenerys whistled daringly with the wind, changing the empty melody of winter into the sad, familiar one where the tragic heroine wore her name, wishing to draw strength from the memory and the sweetness of music. The notes came out ugly and yet familiar enough.

She could not sing beautifully like Rhaegar or passionately like Mance to fit her life into a verse or to ease her troubles. Not any more. Not since she had spoken with Drogon's voice to Khal Jhaqo in the Dothraki Sea. The lack, or in her case the loss of musical prowess, was the only personal feature she shared with Jon. In all other things, same blood or not, they remained as different as the sky and the earth in both looks and nature. Ice and fire. Fire and ice. So far, the differences only served to bring them closer together.
Outside, the world was only ice. Darkness reigned merciless; the mockery of a short winter day had not yet begun.

A dragon was not a night animal by choice, though he could become one at need. The same could not be said about the wolves.

Dany followed the gritting sound of the rasp of steel on steel. The men were at it already. But it was not Ser Barristan sparring with Jon this time as she had grown to expect. It was Gendry with his warhammer. Both men appeared to take joy in the action of hammering at each other.

Dany sensed her dragon waking, tremendously so.

"Stop acting like boys," she admonished them firmly. Twice a widow, she felt like a mother to both of them at that moment, despite being so much smaller of stature. Obviously, they wouldn't listen, much like Viserys never would. Jon's sword skirted Gendry's ear, drawing forth a few drops of blood, and the smith's hammer kissed the ground in a great swing, passing far too close to one of Jon's knees for Dany's liking.

Scouting the stronghold of the Night's King might not be entirely successful with squashed joints, she reasoned. Or without a reliable magic sword, she realised, blessing the morning chill for shedding some much needed clarity into her burning thoughts. I should have spoken to Jon about his maunderings last night.

"Ser Barristan," she nodded to the knight who had emerged tacitly from the tower behind her, and stopped to watched the unfolding spectacle with a fighter's interest; as if the effort of Jon and Gendry wholeheartedly trying to kill each other before breaking their fast could qualify as training.

The Mother of Dragons grew more impatient.

"For a swordsman it can prove to be very useful to exercise his skill against an opponent who wields a different weapon," Ser Barristan attempted to reassure her, observing the duel attentively. "They won't murder each other." he added.

"Won't they now?" Dany muttered darkly, wishing to share his certainty, and not finding it in her heart to do so. "How comforting."

She tried to watch and wait as if she were an ordinary woman. But she wasn't one. She was born a princess. She became a khaleesi, a queen, and the Mother of Dragons. What should she tell them in order to stay their madness?

"Lady Arya is not here?" she thought of one possible remedy. Both men were likely to listen to Arya.

"The lady has gone to the top of the Wall with young lord Rickon in the hour of the eel, to share the fire and trade stories with the guards. The children could not catch sleep from the excitement of meeting each other after so much time. The wolves went with them, the white and the black one, both. She asked me to give a message to all of you when you woke. In my age, sleep is a rare blessing and the nights have become far too long."

Dany hoped it was the excitement and not any distraction her and Jon might have provided by accident that kept the children awake. Besides, Arya was no child. She had flowered and was now older than Dany had been when she was sold in marriage. It followed from Ser Barristan's tone that Jon and Gendry had already been given the message.

Daenerys found herself admiring the cruel cleverness of the men, who obviously sought the precise
moment when the lady they both loved greatly would not see them beating each other bloody. Help was not forthcoming at times. Just like when Dany married Hizdahr zo Loraq, in false hope she would have peace as her wedding gift.

Hammer flew toward Jon's chest, grazing it. Jon's sword landed on the harsh, fortunately helmed head of the Usurper's natural son. Instead of having the good sense to yield, Gendry swung the hammer again, in a deadly blow aimed at Jon's wool-clad chest. That image was too much for Dany. Only the great antlered helm was missing from Gendry's head and the red, three headed dragon from Jon's black tunic, for her to see again, unfolding before her lilac eyes, the tragedy she had imagined so many times in her head in great detail as a little girl. She cried back then. She almost screamed now that she knew better.

Rhaegar should have spoken to Robert instead of believing in lies told about his wife, goading the storm lord into a fight, and walking blindly into his death. Thousands of innocent men died that day, only for the heinous crime of being somebody's bannermen.

If we keep doing this, the Night's King has won before he marches his full force on us, she realised.

"Look at you!" she exclaimed and was so angry that she almost had her booming dragon voice back without Drogon's presence. "This is not the Trident and you are not your fathers! What would Lady Arya say? What think you Lady Lyanna would have said in the past, if any of the men asked for her opinion? This folly serves no one."

Ser Barristan scratched his grey hair in wonder, as if he had never thought about the poor attempt at sparring quite that way. Jon was the first one to look mildly ashamed, though not repentant. The change of heart almost earned him a late hammer blow on one of his shoulders. He moved out of harm's way with unexpected speed, and rapidly butted Gendry in the stomach with his head while the mace was still down. Both men ended up seated in snow. The fight was gone from them.

"Might I speak with Prince Jon alone for the moment?" Dany insisted, feeling murderous. She would gladly breathe fire at both duel participants if she could.

"I will show Gendry to the stairs leading up to the Wall," Ser Barristan finally had a sensible suggestion.

"I might like the view," the smith said carelessly, sounding more like Viserys in his folly, than like an extremely serious and honest lad whom Daenerys had met in King's Landing, whose only purpose in life was to take care of Arya Stark in her enchanted sleep. "We can continue this some other time. It was a most interesting… training session, Your Grace."

"The name is Snow," Jon said in a deadly tone. It was beyond Dany how he could be so slighted by the title which would belong to him one day, if the gods were good. "Just as yours is Waters. You would do well to remember that."

Starks didn't mingle with Waters, Jon's tone said. Danerys suspected his beloved sister Arya might disagree very strongly, regardless of her willingness or ability to admit the nature of her painfully obvious feelings for Gendry to anyone else.

After exchanging this particular set of offences disguised as pleasantries, Jon and Gendry kept glaring at each other as sworn enemies while the smith was leaving. Dany seethed in silence, feeling powerless. At least the brother's war was stopped for now.
"What?" her nephew asked nervously when they were left alone, jittery as a servant caught stealing in the kitchen. "I was just readying myself to go. We spoke of it last night and you accepted it."

"And then you spoke in your sleep for hours about having to kill a lion in fifty days time," Daenerys reproached him. "I could barely rest. No wonder I overslept once you left."

"My pardons," Jon's face fell as if she had stumbled upon an embarrassing secret of his.

Dany walked into his arms on purpose, and took his face in her hands, forcing him to look down into her eyes. "Don't hide yourself from me," she begged with abandon, and was rewarded by a look of absolute, stone-hard devotion from a pair of black eyes above her. "We made a promise to each other. No matter what we are." She finally had all his attention.

"The thing with the lion, it's just a story, the one Davos tried to tell us, remember," Jon offered quietly. "It's not real."

Dany remembered being drunk on mead and little else from the night of storytelling in an abandoned, rounded wildling hut during their journey beyond the Wall. She also recalled enjoying Jon's scent for the first time, shamelessly so, in her inebriated state.

Dragon was not an animal given to smells. Her children sensed their surroundings with their entire body and their vision was exceedingly sharp. With Drogon, Dany had always felt as if he could grasp the entire world with his mind if he so wished; so huge was the dragon's consciousness.

Enjoying Jon's smell had always felt like a betrayal of her kind to Daenerys; a rare, forbidden pleasure, right and wrong at the same time. The first time Jon openly nuzzled her, the first time he kissed her, shortly after running with his wolf to hunt for food, she was upset by it. Now she loved it, but was still unable to return that particular favour.

Fortunately, as she breathed him in from a safe, short distance, Jon applied himself to tell her the story she had missed so that she didn't have to appear uncaring or ignorant. "It's about Azor Ahai's sword. He... Azor Ahai brought back the dawn thousands of years ago. And to defeat the Long Night, he forged a special sword. He strived for very long to get it right. After thirty days of hard labour he tempered it in water, but the blade burst asunder. After fifty days... he plunged it into a lion's heart. I must have dreamt that I should do the same. Maybe the blade we found would regain its magic if I hunted a lion with it. Or maybe I'm delusional and plain wrong."

"It might be prudent to pay a visit to the Night's King with a honed weapon," Dany insisted on her own early morning thoughts. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"It might be," Jon readily agreed. With Gendry out of sight, he was himself again, calm and reasonable. "But there are no lions here in the North. Maybe in the West, but I've never been to the westerlands. I don't know how to find one fast enough."

"Rhaegal can help," Dany knew. "Tell him you need a hrakar, a great desert lion. Your dragon will know. All children of mine have seen them and feasted on them or their cubs. Don't attempt this bare-handed, please."

"Or what?" Jon asked with mischief, pulling her much closer, into a very tight embrace. "What will you do if I don't listen to you?"

"I will miss you either way when you go," she whispered. "I will count the moments until you return to me."

It was the naked truth. The longing she began to feel since she realised he would leave was
overwhelming, and her lover wasn't even gone yet. She would not stop him. Jon was a warrior in his own right, she had seen it clearly enough. As she had been for a short time when she rode Drogon in the battle for Meereen. Now she was fragile again. Dragonless. Stranded on her two legs and in a weak body of a woman.

She would never stop him, but she would suffer in his absence, terribly so. Dany's affection for Jon brought her both pleasure and pain. Yet the anguish it caused was as dear to her as the joy of their coupling. The sensation was unthinkable. She had never thought love could be this way. She wondered if it was the same for Jon, hoped it might be, hoped it wasn't. There were more chances for him to stay alive and well if his head was not as full of her, as hers was of him. He could be madly in love with her later, when the war was over.

Dark eyes stared at her in adoration, assessing the turmoil in hers.

"How fast can they fly?" he asked in a voice of a boy, eager for knowledge.

"Very fast," Dany said, grinning. "You haven't seen a dragon in his full splendour yet. Rhaegal is not ill now. If your aim in a hunt is true, we shall be back before sunset of this short day."

"You are a dragonrider but you still don't know what it is to be a dragon," she blurted as an afterthought of her own; a short burst of word-fire born out of remembering the ugliness of his stupid duel with Gendry.

Her lover appeared abashed. "I thought I was doing fine," he murmured with both arrogance and insecurity.

"You are," she wished to reassure him, and to… teach him, now before he left her. For a while, she needed to reassure herself most of all. He will be back. He will be. He is almost a Stark, he will not betray me, nor get himself killed by Dothraki-style bravery.

But he might by his honour.

"Come," she gestured at him to follow and walked away from the fortress through the snow. Her feet were freezing once more, but not for long, she hoped. Jon followed suit. The dragon was with them as soon as they were out of sight of the Wall. Green and bronze, Rhaegal swept regally over the vastness of snow as an unreal being from a legend. His paws and tail left large, monstrous, jagged footprints in his wake, as well as an occasional glittery scale.

He is changing his armour. He is growing.

Both Rhaegal and Drogon were frightened of the old magic built into the Wall. It was harmful to them, just like it was harmful to the Night's King and his dead soldiers. Worse, the dragons could not fly over it or venture far into the territories beyond the Wall without putting their life in jeopardy.

But in Essos, the dragons were kings… They could fly from Volantis to Asshai in a day and nothing could stop them. Drogon once suggested it to Dany, but she was reluctant to take her biggest child on his offer, no matter how intriguing.

She was asked to go to Asshai twice by a mysterious woman, Quaithe, and the manner of the request led her to believe it might be for the best if she never went there at all. The Asshai'i ranked high on her list of peoples who only desired her dragons for their own sinister ends. Yet sometimes she wondered what light she would have found, had she ever dared pass beneath the shadow.

Dragons needed freedom as much as the people did. Maybe even more so. Slavery was the worst evil to them.
Jon had to see this for himself. He needed to know the treasure he had and the value of it. He had to be made aware why everyone wanted to steal her children.

Her children who had abandoned her, one by one.

All three dragons had chosen male riders over their Mother. The truth hurt Daenerys from time to time, but perhaps it was only normal. *Children grow and children learn. And when they are big enough, they leave home to make their own nests.*

Jon frowned from the concentration required to talk to a true, fire-spitting dragon.

"I am not entirely certain he understands me," he said, "but he seemed enthusiastic about *cooking* a lion. Ghost and I can almost share that feeling."

Rhaegal laid his head and neck flat on the snow. Jon and Dany clambered carefully up over his widening snout, passing above his eyelids and between the horns, to the best place for the rider on his broadening back.

"I tried to tell him to go as fast and as wild as he can. To show me the flight he likes," Jon said with respect. "As long as he can find us a lion fast."

To Dany's surprise, Rhaegal flew almost more rapidly and certainly wilder than Drogon. *As a savage animal.* He compensated in speed for what he lacked in strength and body size. And his scales were *warmer* than Drogon's as if he could sense that his rider needed a source of heat much more than Dany ever did, carrying the fire on the inside. Her heart soared with the dragon, fluttering free and weightless over the expanse of the world.

*You are a wonderful creature, Rhaegal, do you not know it?* No answer would be forthcoming, she knew. Rhaegal was Jon's now. He could not hear her thoughts.

The dragon took them high up through the clouds. The earth was left so far behind them as if it had never been real. The sky was everything.

The dragon twisted and twirled in his flight. Spinning, he was even swifter than when he glided with widespread wings. Finally, he folded them to be almost parallel to his body, taking the shape of a large green and bronze arrow, piercing the sky at a speed close to madness.

Wind buzzed in Dany's and Jon's ears. They could only watch in amazement, hold tight onto a spike each, and wait for their airborne journey to end.

Instead of landing them into the familiar grass of the Dothraki sea as Dany expected, Rhaegal descended into a land she had never seen.

The heat was suffocating. They stood on the edge between a grassy plain and a thick rain forest. Vegetation exhaled fumes of moisture from too much warmth. The woods were thick and green, full of exuberant foliage, large, colorful flowers, snakes and bugs of all sorts and sizes. Dany and Jon stripped to tunic and breeches. She kicked her boots out and walked barefoot, enjoying the sensation. Jon reluctantly followed her example.

"Some land he brought us into," he commented dryly. "From freezing to cooking."

*Are you too warm as well? Splendid. I told you Jon. Your blood runs as hot as mine, just buried under layers of ice.*

"I know we must be in Essos, and nothing else," she countered. "We flew east."
The dragon obediently picked their wools, furs and boots as if he were a well-trained horse equipped with the gift of reason on top of its towing skills. Restless, he exhaled a puff of both flames and green and bronze crystals, into the damp, hot air.

"He wants us to follow, I think," Jon said with a scowl.

"No," Dany hated to disappoint him. "He wants to show you something else he can do. He finds joy in it"

Jon was baffled, not understanding.

"I will help this time," she said carefully, studying her nephew for his reaction. It wasn't easy to witness the destruction a dragon could cause for the first time. "The word is… There is a Valyrian word which commands it... I will pronounce it shortly. But you will find forms to conjure this from within your mind, should you so wish."

Eyes glued on Jon, she spoke very slowly. "Dracaerys."

Rhaegal's maw dropped wide open, showing black teeth. The heat came first. Soon, the flames followed, red, orange and yellow. Swiftly, they reached the plain before them, turning a sea of grass for a mile ahead or more into a sea of fire. Birds lifted flight, frightened. Animals whinnied and died in the grass, scorched.

Jon was petrified.

"Now you see exactly what power you have at your disposal," Dany said calmly, "Other men will want it too. They may try to take it from you by force. Remember, Rhaegal obeys you of his own free will, not only because you are Rhaegar's son. He has chosen you where he could have chosen someone else. With or without Targaryen blood. There had been riders in the past who had not a single drop of the blood of the dragon."

"You once blamed me for having slaves. I could never. A dragon is no slave. Never let him become one."

"There are… three of them that hatched for you?" Jon asked, in need to reconfirm what he already knew.

Dany nodded.

"They could… Between them they could destroy the Lands of Always Winter and turn them into a muddy lake, if there was a way for them to fly there safely. We ought to… we might have to bring down the Wall… or rather, stop the work of magic that holds it together…” The words sounded like sacrilege mingled with odd enthusiasm, coming from the mouth of a sworn black brother.

"Others take me," Jon cursed softly, "I should have never said this… The Wall has stood forever. It would be a crime to ruin it."

"The dragons might be able to help win this war," Dany agreed with that much, "but as you said yourself, we do not know what we are up against. We should know all we can before making any rash decisions."

"In that case," Jon decisively turned his back to the burning plain and reverted to his usual cool demeanour, "let's get back to the bit of business with the lion."

Dany and Jon walked after the dragon, who began flying very low and slowly above the border
between the forest and the plains, until they smelled it. The stench of rotting.

The animal Rhaegal found for them was dying at the end of the plain. It didn't look like a hrakar at all; its fur was golden, not white.

"A lioness, of the kind that also lives in Westeros," Jon announced, "I only saw them in books. Rhaegal must have seen the image in my head."

The beast's side was open, pierced with several arrows. She must have wandered far away from the unsuccessful hunters, and now she was too weak to walk, but still too strong to die. Yet die she would, in a matter of days, of either her wounds or hunger and thirst.

"I don't think this will count," Jon estimated. "It's so different than in the story. I believe that Azor Ahai hunted down a lion, not a lioness. And he pierced his living heart."

"Aren't men and women one and the same race?" Dany objectied. "Lion or lioness, it should matter little. She also has a living heart."

Jon always seemed to have more doubts. "Less than fifty days have passed since the fire of the sword was quenched when I fought the Night's King," he said, frowning. "Though perhaps it may be exactly fifty days now since I tempered the blade in the subterranean lake of the old gods."

"You lose nothing by trying," Dany judged. "What do we know? The tales are... they are beautifully crafted images made of words. They cannot tell us exactly what we should do and when. They may provide hints and clues at best."

"I wish Maester Aemon could listen to you now," Jon said thoughtfully. "He might hear wisdom in what you are saying. But I took great interest in training myself at arms, and very little in the ways of learning. I find it very difficult to judge what the books intend to tell us, beyond what is plainly stated."

"Maester Aemon Targaryen?" Dany asked in awe. "He was still alive when you came to the Wall? I'm glad he was the first dragon you met. He was truly wise from what I heard. As you must know, the faculty has not been very common among the Targaryens. Yet you also sound learned enough to me," she concluded.

Jon was not half as simple as he may have wished to believe, but she would rather not push her views too hard. Best if he comes to terms with himself on his own. Cruel as it was, Dany knew from experience it was the only way. But she would make him end the lioness' suffering. Dany would only butcher her if she tried to use any blade, and Jon's gesture could in all logic rekindle the fire of the magic sword.

"Come on, Jon. It's a mercy in this case. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Maybe it is the honest intention to finish forging the sword that counts, not the deed itself."

Jon drew forth the dead magic blade from his hip; it had remained a piece of dull and lifeless steel during his duel with Gendry.

"My pardons," he told the lioness, whose yellow eyes were closing. The wild animal barely breathed.

Slowly, Jon pushed the tip of the blade through her furs where her heart must have been. The lioness died in silence, without a single roar. And when the blade came out of her skin, it was tinged with her still warm blood. The magic sword glowed red once, brightly so. Then, it shone pink like the beginning of early sunset over the unknown lands to the east of Westeros. Finally, it lost all colour
and appeared ordinary again.

Rhaegal roasted the carcass of the lioness in three well-aimed jets of fire and swallowed it whole. Dany hoped he would not become poisoned by it. At any rate, dragons could stomach almost anything. They even ate each other during the dance of dragons.

Carried by a singular temptation, Dany touched the blade. It was becoming warm. Warmer than Jon's cold, skilled hands. She pushed back the terrible thought. There was nothing wrong with Jon. He was alive. Rhaegal saved him from certain death at the hands of his sworn brothers, and the Night's King lied about drinking his blood. It couldn't be otherwise. Could it?

Jon's eyes widened with appreciation at his unexpected success. He carefully wrapped the sword in his headscarf, avoiding touching the steel himself, and reattached it safely to his hip. How the blade never burned the black wool of the Night's Watch was anybody's guess. Be that as it may, Daenerys was glad that her nephew's precious skin was safe from it.

"You were right," he said humbly. "The act of mercy worked magic."

"Thank you," he said with that disarming sincerity of the northmen Dany had first witnessed with Mance Rayder, "I would head back to the enemy as an unarmed, hot-blooded fool if it weren't for you. This way I can take on this Night's King, if I chance to meet him again. I should very much like to pierce his heart with this sword."

Daenerys' dragon heart grew hotter than the magic blade from his admission. She wrapped both her arms around her lover as hard as she could.

"Let us say our farewell here, and not in that winter land of yours," she said.

Jon obediently trailed kisses down her neck, with all the intention to pleasure her, but she wouldn't let him, the demands of her body be damned. It was not what she had in mind. Dragons could show restraint when necessary, just like the wolves. It was best if Jon faced danger rested, and in cold blood.

"When you come back," she said. "Now I want you to look at me and to remember me. As I will think of you, always."

He returned his lips to hers and almost smiled against them, that handsome, long, guarded smile of his.

"Just a kiss then," he said, challenging her. "Another lady's favour."

She couldn't refuse him that. The insistent touch of their lips felt better at that moment than the act of possession, or maybe it was possession itself, condensed and multiplied many times over.

"I am looking at you," he said with determination, gazing down, staring in her eyes, holding her face in his hands. The burns on his right hand gently scratched her left cheek. She would know his touch blindfolded, among a thousand other men. "And if you think I could ever forget you or would not come back for you if it depended on me, you are dead wrong, Daenerys Targaryen."

Mother of Dragons and twice a widow, Dany blushed profusely, and was rewarded by another ghost of Jon's smile she had come to love so well.

Rhaegal brought them back to Westeros before sunset, just as she promised Jon. The flight back was a quiet, uneventful occasion. Dany's morning unease had returned with the Westerosi continent. She wondered if they were ever going to find out what land they visited that day. She might like to see it
once more, come spring.

Ghost was waiting for them under the great weirwood tree. The wolf gave his master's sword hand a knowledgeable whiff of appraisal. Jon's head remained bare despite the cold. His unruly black hair appeared dishevelled and wild after the flight, sticking out in all directions; neither curly like his mother's, nor silky and straight like his father's or Dany's own.

_The King of Winter_, Dany thought with pride, as she did when he had fought the Night's King. _The cold cannot hurt him. He is the King of Winter without a crown, with ice on his brow._ She should not tell him that. She didn't want to open the pit of resentment in his soul, whenever the royalty he possessed by birth was brought to his attention.

Jon embraced Rhaegal's neck and scowled with the concentration required to talk to him.

"He will take you, Arya, Rickon and Waters to Winterfell, to my parents, if they are there as Arya says they should be," Jon declared after a while. "And then he will bring you back here to Eastwatch to wait for me, should you so wish. I hope I have an agreement with _Rhaegal_. It's just that…" Jon struggled to put into words some important information he needed to impart on her. "Sometimes he appears so clever, wiser than many men I know, and the other times he is no more than a spirited horse! I'm so sorry, Dany, I know this must not make any sense to you…"

Jon was right. It didn't make much sense to compare a dragon to a horse.

"Won't you say farewell to your siblings?" she wondered.

"My cousins, you mean," he corrected her bitterly. At least he didn't call her Aunt Dany. She almost cried. _Will you ever be glad for being who you are?_

"We spoke last night at length after you slept," Jon explained in a more gentle tone, sensing her sorrow. "They trust me on this.

Or rather, they are both young enough to think of your mad quest as an interesting adventure. Dany's heart beat faster, haunted by fear for him.

"I have put all my trust in you when I took you into my bed on the ship," she forced the words out, in case he thought any different. "I don't make a custom of either trusting or bedding men."

The inevitable was here. She strived not to speak further, not wishing to make their parting more difficult than it was. Her heart was a wild dragon in her chest, one that had never known a rider.

The tunnel under the weirwood tree gaped empty and ominous. The wolf went first and the man after him, very close, in absolute silence.

The two dragons were left alone, the woman and the beast. Rhaegal roared miserably, and Dany sniffed, stifling a sob. She dried a non-existing tear and refused to shed it.

When she returned to Eastwatch, to her great surprise, Rickon, Arya and Gendry were _gone_. Only Ser Barristan was left waiting for her. _At least I keep this one loyal councillor of mine, for better or worse._

"My princess," he said, almost embarrassed, when she inquired about the Starks. "I thought you knew."

"What should I know?"
"It was your dragon. I thought you must have sent him."

"Drogon?"

Ser Barristan nodded. "He took all three of them and young Rickon's wolf."

Daenerys widened her conscious mind to the limits of possibility, but the only dragon's presence she could sense was Rhaegal's, mute and green, obediently waiting for her, on his rider's request. Drogon was still hiding from her. *Maybe he did it for Rhaegar.* It was clear from Lady Arya's story that Drogon brought her and Gendry to the Wall in order to save Rickon from Stannis on Rhaegar's orders.

She climbed on Rhaegal, restless, abandoned, alone.

*What if something is very wrong?* She sensed Jon might hold a grudge against her forever if anything happened to Arya and Rickon. *No. It was Drogon. Drogon would not hurt any member of the family. He has grown in his mind, not only in his body, since he had eaten the girl child. Hazzea.*

Rhaegal kept whinnying like a horse during the very short flight to Winterfell, likely in sign of discontent over being separated from his rider. The fortress of the Starks came into view sooner than Daenerys would have liked, before she could collect her meandering thoughts and act a perfect princess, or a foreign, heretic queen.

A peaceful, dark-grey giant, stern and unsmiling as the lords who had built it and held it, Winterfell occupied the clearing in the middle of the wolfswood. The castle was quiet, so very different in colour and nature than the exuberant Red Keep of Dany's ancestors in King's Landing, begun by Aegon the Conqueror and finished by Maegor the Cruel. Winterfell was much older and maybe crueler than Maegor himself. *Jon's home,* she realised. The proud grey stone challenged every visitor, as if it were saying, *I have been here forever. Can any of you say the same?*

And while the castle appeared orderly, there were no guards on its walls. Daenerys didn't like it; not in the least. Rhaegal added to her suspicions, snorting impatiently. Perhaps the dragon only wished to be gone, and to complete his rider's bidding of bringing her back. Be as it may, Dany found she could not just leave. Not before doing some scouting of her own.

"Just let me into the castle for a while, will you? Please, Rhaegal?" she said. She knew from her time with Drogon that he could understand people who spoke to him if he so wished, at least to a degree. She hoped that by now, Rhaegal was grown enough in order to do the same. Whether the dragons would listen to what they were able to understand, was an entirely different matter. She was not Rhaegal's rider.

"Rhaegar should be here," she insisted. Another certainty she possessed was that all three of her children were fond of her older brother. Rhaegar's personality had a calming, soothing effect on them. "I have to know what's going on," she pleaded.

Rhaegal *hid* behind a great cloud and used its dark grey shape to slowly lower Daenerys in an almost empty part of the castle, overgrown with dark forest.

*The godswood.* Dany shivered from the realisation. The last thing she needed to see after Jon's departure were more trees, and she was beginning to develop a special breed of hatred for the cursed white ones. The old gods may have saved Dany and Jon in the north, but that didn't mean she had to love them.

Rhaegal let her slide down his tail, paying good attention to turn his green and bronze scales in such
a way that a casual observer could never say he saw a dragon landing in Winterfell, but merely a
patch of green leaf and bronze bark, merged together with the sky in grey twilight.

Once she was safely down, Dany took a few steps among the trees, and instantly found herself in
front of the white heart tree with staring eyes and accusing mouth.

*You haven't done your duty,* the tree suggested cruelly.

*I did,* Dany rebelled, offended. *I found my nephew and told him the truth.*

The weirwood grew next to a black pool. Red-leaved branches spread out wide and rich in foliage.
Looming high over the pond, the tree cast a lavish mirror image onto the flatness of the water.

"Princess Daenerys," a familiar courteous voice startled her, melodious, yet somewhat strained. "It
gladdens my heart to see you back safely."

Unshed tears pricked her eyes as she did so. *How far have you gone by now, my love?*

Seeing Sansa made Dany feel as if an opaque veil obscuring her view was suddenly removed from
her violet eyes. She understood what the tree, or some unknown force of the earth, was telling her.
She had committed a terrible omission. The night before, when Jon rejoiced in his meeting with Arya
and Rickon, and when they exchanged stories about their time apart, no one had ever bothered to tell
him about Sansa, and her marriage out of love to Sandor Clegane, whom Rhaegar found dying in the
riverlands by a whim of fate and saved his life, and who had become a true dragon friend in time.

Recalling her knowledge of the great houses, Daenerys realised Jon must think of the younger
Clegane as a vile servant of the Lannisters, and a sworn *enemy* of the Starks. And considering how
Jon treated Gendry, who gave no true offence to his family at all, he had no unnecessary kindness in
his heart for his enemies, perceived or real.

Dany might be the same if she hadn't known *better* by now. No one in Westeros was quite what she
expected them to be from the stories of her childhood. From now on, she would never accept any
talk of someone's nature without question; no matter how much she trusted the source.

More importantly, she should have told Jon from the very beginning who the third dragonrider
was… Jaime Lannister was one of the greatest enemies of the House Stark in the War of the Five
Kings. His bastard sentenced Lord Eddard to death for the crime of honesty. And Jaime himself
flung little Brandon Stark through the window of Winterfell, crippling him for life. There wasn't
much any man could do to atone for a sin of that magnitude.

Dany never told anyone why she was able to forgive Jaime. She had met him not knowing who he
was at the lake of Harrenhal, immediately after her return to Westeros with Drogon. Lannister had
used a saying to talk about his past; *her* saying, reminding Daenerys of her own regrets. *If I look
back, I am lost.* He had sounded painfully sincere, and as a man utterly unable to plot treason at
court. Later, the memory from Harrenhal led her to believe Jaime was determined to set his past aside
and do better.

*Viserion's unexpected choice of Jaime as his rider helped Dany further to overlook his sins. At the
time, her happiness about not being the only one whom her dragons would accept on their back,
outweighed her dreams of vengeance. Sometimes it shamed her, but, truth be told, it was almost too
easy to forgive him for the murder of her poor, mad father. Especially when she discovered Jaime
was Aerys' natural son in all evidence.*
I have never known my father. And all agree he became a bigger monster in his later years than Viserys had ever been. If I didn't oppose Drogo when he put Viserys to death, after my brother threatened our unborn child in his selfish rage, how can I blame Jaime for preventing our father from burning the entire city to dust?

Yet perhaps, had little, crippled Brandon been her brother... An image of Viserys as an eight year old, innocent, silver-haired boy, prone to climbing, assaulted her mind. Yes, forgiveness would be more difficult then, if not impossible. It was as simple as that.

And Jon… Jon…. He could find no seed of love in his heart for his own father, not even the curiosity to meet him from what it seemed; only the cold call of duty. Daenerys could understand his attitude to a point. If someone had told her Eddard Stark had been her true father at the time she believed him to be a faithful Usurper's dog, she would have been appalled.

Yet she might have softened after a while if the events spoke differently of her father, and Jon did not. With such cumulated resentment toward Rhaegar, whose only personal crime against the Starks was falling in love with Jon's mother, Dany surmised Jon reserved only the coldest of hatreds for Jaime Lannister, especially without proper introduction to the matter.

Last but not least, Rhaegar forgave Ser Jaime for Aerys, much like she did. Moreover, he loved Sandor Clegane as a younger brother and trusted him with his life.

Others take me, but Jon will hate Rhaegar for all this, Dany realised, cursing herself and her heart of a young girl in love. She should have told him everything, every little detail, and she missed her chance. In the new age of dragons, distances mattered little. She could only hope Jon would not meet any of the three men by chance before she could remedy her mistake.

The dragon has three heads. I used to be one, but now I am not. The riders will have to find an understanding between them if we are to prevail and have peace.

She could almost hear the Night's King laughing at her with merriment, before piercing Jon's frozen heart with his evil, crystal sword, wrought of of old ice.

Dany sank to her knees in front of a heart tree, at a loss of what to do. She had monumentally failed Rhaegar.

"Do they hear your prayers?" she asked of Sansa, eager to mask her distress.

"The trees do," Jon's sister said slowly. "I used to believe the old gods did as well, but now I am less certain."

From the kneeling position, Dany noticed Sansa wore a very peculiar dress under a fur-trimmed, dark-grey cloak and cap. The gown was made of the finest and thickest white wool Dany had ever seen. Unnecessarily long, the skirt trailed after Sansa on the ground for many feet, sweeping the crisp, topmost layer of fresh snow when she walked.

"It is beautiful," Dany said sincerely, fingering the hem. The fabric was a little coarse on the outside and soft as velvet underneath.

"Thank you, princess," Sansa said, "I have been alone for days and I made it myself to occupy the time"

"Rhaegar?" Dany stood up and asked compulsively about her brother's fate.

"His Grace has been gone for more than a week now," Sansa said with sadness.
"As is your husband," Dany rightfully assumed.

"My lord husband's duty is to be by His Grace's side."

"And by yours. Is there any news?"

"There were no ravens," Sansa shook her pretty head, "but they are both fine now, I think. I do not know for how long."

"And… the queen?" Dany could not bring herself to call Jon's mother by her name, and she would like to postpone seeing Rhaegar's queen again in her human form for as long as she could. Yet she hoped Lyanna would ultimately be more reasonable about her love for Jon than Hizdahr's mother had been about her loveless marriage. At the very least, it was not customary in Westeros for the mother of the husband-to-be to check the lady's parts of his future wife.

Stop it. He never asked for your hand. For all you know your love will not last the winter.

"The queen went after the king, on dragon's back. Arya and Gendry accompanied her. None have returned yet."

Dany didn't have to ask which dragon. Drogon. Why would you carry all them and not me? Never again? Not ever? And where have you taken everyone if not here?

Sansa stared at the red mouth of the tree with the same unseeing expression Jon had before he entered the tunnel under it, in an attempt to travel back to the Lands of Always Winter with Ghost.

"The gods..." Sansa began saying, "no, not the gods. Their greenseer told me to make a finest light-coloured winter gown I could and wait for a day before I should follow his lead... The trees are not gods... The gods have been here before the trees... that's what the greenseer in the tree is saying and it doesn't make any sense."

"That's what Old Garth said," Dany remembered.

"Who is Old Garth?"

"Just a friend I met north of the Wall," she offered only a bit of the truth, to avoid explaining herself.

Who was Old Garth indeed? Daenerys thought less and less that the wildling from the Lands of Always Winter was a man at all. Maybe he was the living spirit of the trees or some strange northern warlock.

Will the gods walk among the living this winter, together with the demons they had let into the world?

She didn't share her ramblings with Jon. The only gods he cared for, the only ones whose wrath he feared, were the old ones. And while Dany had seen too many gods in Essos to be able to limit her worship to only one kind in particular, her conclusion about Old Garth was far-fetched, even by her own standards. Jon would think me mad and he would be right.

Sansa wrung her hands. "You should leave now as you came," she said wryly.

"Why?"

"The trees have told me. There will be mutiny here soon," Sansa's words explained the absence of the guards on the walls and the eerie silence of the castle. "The winning faction will want to kill the
dragons if any are here at that moment."

"By whose orders?"

"I don't know," Sansa whispered. "I've been only told so much. I'm stupid, haven't you heard? Stupid, innocent Sansa."

"I know why you are reluctant to tell me everything," Dany said sincerely. "And why you doubt me, now and always."

"Do you?" Sansa asked with cold courtesy. "I think not. You would have to live as I have at court, in order to understand."

Sansa's impeccably polite reserve toward Dany went back to the unfortunate occasion when Daenerys had not yet known Rhaegar lived. As a short-lived queen of the Seven Kingdoms, Dany had heard the proposal of old Walder Frey for Sansa's hand with courtesy. She would have never accepted it, but Sansa seemed to be exactly like Jon when it came to holding grudges. She did not show her feelings. Being kind by nature, she might forgive them. But her attitude toward the person who betrayed her trust stayed changed forever.

From Dany's experience Jon would turn that reserved when he spoke of his sworn brothers who had stabbed him.

"When I was a child, I lived as a beggar," Dany said firmly. It was a good time as any to make peace. Or she was no better than Jon and Gendry in their pointless anger. "There was a nobleman who protected my brother Viserys and me, who took us to Essos when everyone else died, or so we thought. But our benefactor was ill and soon he died as well. After, Viserys took care of me. He carried me from door to door on his back. We had an invisible beggar's bowl in our hands. We may have been princes but we were not more than unpaying guests, and from there, it's not so far to being a prisoner."

"In a Targaryen way, I was supposed to marry my brother and he was to be the only man in my life. But instead of marrying me, despite that he did want me, do you know what Viserys did, my lady? He sold me to the highest bidder when I was barely three and ten, to a barbarian three times my size and many years older than me. Viserys did not care how I fared or if I was hurt in my marriage. He did it in hope to win back the Seven Kingdoms with my husband's army. Fortunately for me, my husband had been a better man than any of us expected."

"I see," Sansa said cautiously. "So you have been married."

"And widowed. Twice."

Dany gulped a breath of freezing, fresh air before continuing. "Please, my lady, never tell me that I, Daenerys Targaryen, do not know what it is to be a prisoner, or worse, a slave. I would never forge a marriage alliance at your cost without your agreement to it."

"I am sorry," Sansa said thoughtfully. "I did not know."

"And now that you do?"

"I am sorry for doubting your intentions toward my person, Daenerys," Sansa said. "It is just that… forgive me, but you seemed colder than Cersei at times… You only wanted your dragons back. And you would let my love die for it. You would do anything for your dragons."

"For what is worth, your husband was only willing to die for you, and not for any noble cause,"
Dany observed. "You must know that better than I. I merely used this… determination of his I
recognised, in hope he might help with freeing my dragons, I won't deny it… And not out of any
coldness of the heart you mentioned, but out of desperation. Drogon and I, we could not have done it
alone or we would have, I can assure you."

"All that came to pass led me to a discovery. Your sun and stars, that is, your husband, he does have
a weak spot for the wild animals in his own heart, be they wolves or dragons. He may not know it
himself, but he believes they should go free. We," she specified, "Rhaegar and I, can love him for
this. There are few enough men as it is who share this rare attitude."

"Sandor can be more noble than he believes it himself," Sansa conceded, "but that is not by far the
only reason why I have come to love him."

"What other reasons did you have?" Dany's curiosity had always been strong.

"I have as many as there are stars in the sky," Sansa said with quiet devotion. "I love Sandor for both
his pain and his strength. I love him when he's awful as only he can be. Without him, I would have
become lost in a web of lies. When you are a prisoner, at least you can be angry with your captor
deep in your heart and dream of freedom or of home. But what if you start believing that the lies your
captor has told you are true and that your worst enemy is the only one who can keep you safe?
Without Sandor, I might have ended up worse than a slave. I might not be Sansa any more. Just
some woman who looked and talked like my late lady mother."

"I shall be going to my husband shortly," Sansa continued in a changed tone, brimming with stark
resolve, glancing at the mouth of the heart tree. "And I expect him to be so angry at me. Yet I need to
keep him out of harm's way as much as he had always wanted the same for me."

"You can't," Dany said sincerely, "you don't have your wolf. The secret ways only open to some, to
those your gods let in. I've seen them. I've entered them."

"I don't need a wolf," Sansa shook her head vehemently, letting her red tresses fly like wings of a red
dragon. Red wolf, Dany thought with amazement. Jon's older cousin had become more beautiful in
her loneliness, if that was at all possible. Will suffering make me prettier as well?

"I am my own wolf now," Sansa affirmed with stubbornness and anger she almost never let show,
but Daenerys had sensed she possessed them since the beginning of troubles in their acquaintance in
King's Landing. The only other lady Dany knew who was as unyielding in her poised attitude and
apparent submission was Daenerys herself.

"Sandor has made me see this possibility, as he had opened my eyes for so many things in the past. I
don't have the Tully look as everyone always said. White and red are the colours of the old gods. I
must have this look for another reason."

Dany remembered the dead child of the forest who had first opened the door to the underground
realm of the old gods to her and Jon, with bright blue eyes, pale white skin and hair as vivaciously
auburn as the weirwood leaves.

"Wait, Sansa" she said on an impulse. "I wish to tell you more before you go. Please. Winter is
coming, as you Starks are fond of saying. I may not have another chance soon. Please. You were
right about me. I was cruel to you when I flirted with Lord Frey's proposal for your hand in front of
your eyes, especially when you did nothing but help my cause and myself in person, for the short
time when Euron the Dragonstealer had us both captured. And it was only thanks to you that he
never realised he had me. You have helped me, Sansa, as did your husband, and I would have
honoured it."
"I would have never agreed to any of the proposals for your hand unless you wished it, had I remained queen. But to let Frey and your other would-be suitors speak at all was ill done on my part. I did it then because… I didn't know what it was to love someone more than you love yourself. Now I know. I would never even toy with the possibility to marry a woman in love to someone else, not by far. Please, find it in your heart to forgive me. I never had a sister. I don't know how to treat one. I would love you as one from now on, if I could."

"Now you know?" Sansa understood more than Dany wished to let show. "Who is it?" She stared into Dany's eyes as though she were a witch. For a moment, her bright blue eyes had a cursed look. They flickered black, like Jon's.

"Oh," Sansa sighed, pleadingly, "please forgive me the intrusion. It was stronger than me. I needed to see if you spoke truly. I should learn how to deal with this better. Forgive me, princess. Unlike my aunt and Arya I master no other weapon but myself."

Dany felt no intrusion, or maybe the smallest caress over her conscious mind, gentler than a bird's touch. "What do you mean?"

"I can… I think I can scale and take over a person's mind… It's like a mental siege and a sack… I know it makes no sense to you… In the beginning, I could only sense the thoughts of animals, and of my husband; I thought it was because of the love I bear him… but now…. Now I can see through anyone's eyes if I apply myself to do so. You… you love my brother. I mean… my cousin… I mean… Jon. You love him dearly." Sansa appeared mortified, as if she had chanced upon some distinctly embarrassing images in Dany's head, in the fleeting second when she dared touch it. "I should mind my own business. Forgive me, princess. What I did was most discourteous."

"There is nothing to forgive for my part," Dany insisted. She felt relieved that another member of the family knew. And not just anyone, but a lady who was not a stranger to the enormity of feelings, judging by how Sansa's entire expression changed whenever she spoke of her own husband.

"I…. it just happened between us. It was…" It was Dany's turn to stutter.

"A sea washing over, as his mother might say," Sansa smiled knowingly at the memory. "Aunt Lyanna said so once to me and her Dornish friend, Tyene. She must have spoken of herself and Rhaegar. Her words helped me see clearer in my own heart. I have loved Sandor for years without being the wiser for it. Probably ever since I was barely more than a little girl."

Sansa continued with caution. "This news is beyond wonderful to me, princess. I…. I should have loved Jon better as my brother. He deserved it. He was naught but affectionate towards me despite my haughty manners of a silly highborn girl."

"Dany! Listen to me, please." Daenerys' short name sounded as a blessing from Sansa's mouth. It was the first time she used it. "Don't act a queen with Jon, ever. Your sigil is living fire. Don't be cold to him. He may have discovered he is half-dragon now, but he has seen enough cold dutifulness in his life. He must be hungry for love."

Dany's guilt over not telling Jon about Sansa's own choices in life grew exponentially with her kind words. "Thank you," she exhaled. "If I may ask… is… was your husband… hungry for love?" Daenerys could master her feelings in the past, but never her curiosity.

"Starving would be a better word for Sandor," Sansa observed. "And I thought... I thought men only took our maiden's gifts and what is theirs by rights... Even what is not theirs, in troubled times... I never knew how much men can give..."
"Sandor has given me more than I thought possible. Maybe more than I was able to return. I truly am a Stark in one thing, if nothing else. Sometimes I cannot voice what lies deepest in my heart. The words I could say all ring empty and insufficient."

"Let him be the judge of that," Dany rebelled. "Don't speak for him as others have done for you."

"You are right," Sansa smiled before she turned very, very serious again. "Please, Dany, go now. It will be your army, the mutineers in Winterfell. The Unsullied. They will be enchanted... by some evil magic. They will not be themselves and they might harm you and the dragon that has brought you."

Magic. Daenerys hated it. So far it had never worked in her favour.

"I hope, I hope," Sansa wrung her hands again, devoting all her attention to the grey, granite walls of Winterfell. "I hope Aunt Lyanna will forgive me when she returns. I am a Stark by birth. I should have stayed in the castle until a more capable member of the family returned. But my home is with my husband now. I cannot wait. I shan't wait. It would be wrong to do so, I can feel it in every bone of my body."

"Winter is coming. The leaves are whispering I should go now, while I still can... I prayed a lot to the old gods in the past, be they in the trees or not. And after long years, when I thought myself lost and owned by Lord Baelish, who had betrayed my father and caused the War of the Five Kings, it must have been the gods made me see the way to a different life if I was brave enough to take it."

"I will listen to them now. Or maybe I'm just fooling myself that I'm obeying the gods. Maybe I'm just closing my eyes to duty and following blindly the wishes of my heart. I shall not turn back either way."

Daenerys wished her faith in anything was as strong as Sansa's at that moment. But where will you go? There are no tunnels here. No maze underground. No labyrinth that resembles blood lines running through our bodies... No veins of the earth.

The heart tree answered Dany's unspoken doubts in Sansa's place. The mouth of the tree opened. Wider and wider it grew, until it became a large, gaping maw, big enough to swallow a man.

"Sansa, no!" Daenerys protested violently, but it was too late.

Sansa stepped into the tree with confidence, and disappeared without a sound. When she was gone, the mouth diminished again, but not before it stretched into that almost smile the damn Starks made with their long faces, when they were particularly happy about something. The lips of the tree returned to their accusing, petrified look. They appeared unmovable.

Daenerys offered a prayer to the Crone that Sansa was right in her new wisdom. Then she prayed to the Mother that Sansa should not hate her for any of her omissions if she met Jon by chance in the tunnels of the old gods; or worse, if Jon tried to murder her husband as he did with Gendry. That would be a sword fight worth seeing.

Sandor Clegane's confrontation with Euron Greyjoy for the horn if dragonlords was the most memorable fight Dany had ever seen, before witnessing Jon's stubborn, magnificently skilled stand against the Night's King. Her eyes itched again from the urge to cry if she let herself think too deeply about her lover.

Dany prayed to the Warrior to allow only true enemies to cross swords with Jon. One brother's fight was more than she ever cared to witness in any season, be it this winter or come spring.

Rhaegal swished his tail between the trees. The now familiar dread returned to Dany's soul. Foul
magic was at work in Winterfell too, and not only on the Wall. The dragon should not be near it, not by far.

Dany hated all magic. Well, almost all. She wished to believe in tree magic a little bit now, because she depended on it to bring Jon back to her, safely.

One day, she swore, the dragons will be strong enough to withstand it.

Rhaegal reared his paws in the air, urging her to leave, acting as a bad-tempered horse, just like Jon said he sometimes was.

A horse…

No, please no.

Dany covered her mouth and wept without a sound, stifling her own sobs. The riddle of why Drogon had abandoned her, ever since she insisted he should carry her to her nephew, stopped being a mystery at that very moment.

She had burned three souls on a pyre from which her dragons had hatched. It was not the life of her unborn monstrous child that called them to life and gave them sustenance, nor her blind faith in the strength of her dragon blood, or maybe it was a bit of both, but not only…

Inadvertently, Daenerys had burned three souls on the pyre from which her dragons hatched… Three very different ones…

She must have worked blood magic, without knowing it. As a consequence, each of her dragons must have inherited the awareness of one the sacrificed souls. The burned soul then merged with their immense, animal being, which was able to remember the past and the dawn of their race. Well, at least Drogon had such personality; of that Dany was certain. She was less learned about Viserion and Rhaegal; she just always assumed they shared Drogon's mental abilities, albeit in a lesser degree.

And now the terrible possibility of blood magic explained Drogon's abandon of Dany with merciless logic, clearer than sunrise.

Rhaegal's nature, wild and playful, was most akin to the horse sacrificed for Drogo; the stallion slaughtered so that he could ride in the night lands, prancing through the dark blue sky as one of the newest stars.

Drogon, enormous and cunning, the oldest and greatest of her children, must have inherited Drogo's soul… And her dragon had left her when the remnant of Drogo must have somehow realised, even before she did, that Daenerys was going to betray his memory with a younger man… a better man for her... That is why he now clings to Rhaegar and avoids me…. He wants to forget all about me… As he well should….

I am so sorry, I am so sorry, Drogon… Drogo… I did not know… I could not know… she implored in emptiness. Her former dragon could not hear her. He had closed his consciousness to her long ago.

The pain was sharp, the loss acute; the sacrifice greater than she was ever willing to make. Yet she could still not deny it; she belonged with Jon now.

I shall be like Rhaegar in this, she realised. She never thought she would be or could be as exclusive in her affections as a woman grown, as her older brother had become ever since he met Lyanna. But now she would sooner deny she was breathing than let go of Jon. Even if it meant she would never
ride a dragon in her own right again and if she had to renounce the greatest part of her personal heritage.

And that was not the worst, though it hurt the most….

The third soul's imprint was frightening, the most terrifying one of all…

Viserion, who had always seemed such a sweet-tempered, lamb-like dragon to his mother, carried within himself a portion of the life-hardened, calloused soul of the maegi Mirri Mazh Duur, capable of great cruelty, evil and betrayal. And precisely that dragon had chosen a headstrong, potentially unstable rider, a man who already had a past of turning, albeit unwittingly, against his own.

*What do I truly know about Jaime Lannister? What does Rhaegar? Only what we want to believe... Kingslayer. Kinslayer...*

*What will he do if the maegi whispers sweetly to him through Viserion? If she feeds him visions of greatness and offers her knowledge and help?*

Daenerys was dragonless. She could not command Rhaegal beyond what Jon already did. She could not go and look for Viserion and his rider and warn them of what she had done. She could only return to Eastwatch and wait for Jon. She hadn't been left with less choice in life since she was three and ten.

*Gods be good and save us from the new dance of dragons, Daenerys thought, praying to any gods who listened, old or new or foreign, to the horse-god of the Dothraki and the Great Shepherd of the maegi. She even prayed to the Old Garth if he was one of them. She begged to be spared the sight of dragons killing and devouring each other.*

And as she prayed, she feared at the same time there were no gods left in the world.

Because the destiny of dragons did not depend on them any longer. Just like the rebirth of the race was an achievement of a grieving young woman, its future prosperity or bloody strife depended on the upcoming deeds of a not so young man. On the hopefully free, proper and prudent choices of the charming, brave, hot-headed, arrogant, unpredictable and potentially treasonous…

Jaime Lannister.
Tyrion

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to DrHolland and TopShelfCrazy for their great help in beta reading this chapter )))

On we go )))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tyrion

The four shadowbinders became gloomier than usual when the fortress protecting the mountain pass finally came into view. The lacquer-masked Asshai'i had seemed overly confident about every detail of the journey until that moment, and Tyrion did not appreciate their sudden change of heart in the very least.

It didn't bode well.

Tyrion gripped harder the reins of his dwarf zorse, growing extremely worried by this change of attitude.

He hadn't fallen from Arrow, his pig-headed, uncommon, striped mount, since they began the long ride from the edge of the Red Waste, up the Sand Road and deep into the Bone Mountains. He had found, to his immense relief and satisfaction, how a small pet on the little zorse's head and shiny white mane did miracles for his foul temper. The animal turned as docile for his rider as if he were a gentle mare some lady would ride gladly. With the difference that Arrow remained strong, tenacious and spirited, every inch the zorse who made Tyrion's life into seven hells since his departure from Meereen. Arrow was equally fast if not faster than any of the Dothraki horses ridden by his companions, and he could easily surpass them in endurance.

The fort was very well hidden by the curious, varied shapes of the stony mountains, resembling limbs, body and head of some huge creature. The bones of the race of giants who have long since disappeared from the world, Tyrion remembered the scrolls he studied in Casterly Rock, unsure if it was Lomas Longstrider or another world-famous traveller who had left the account about the Bones, and the three holds which defended the passes through them, from the west to the fabled east. Too much reading, he thought, frowning, trying to recall his theoretical knowledge about his real surroundings.

Many ways lead into the mountains, but only three lead out, Tyrion remembered.

The grey and yellow of the outpost walls blended with the colours of inanimate rock under the still burning, setting sun. Bayasabhad, the City of Serpents, at the end of the Sand Road, on the southernmost path, if the hot weather is any indication, Tyrion concluded.

His mismatched eyes could distinguish the imposing frame of the city with careful observation. The towers and the crenellations. The walls and the murder holes. The citadel was almost in line with the clouds. Yet it was not white and pristine like the Eyrie, the only other castle so high up Tyrion had known from experience, but either warmly yellowish like earth in a desert or dirty grey like mud in a
Both colours were slightly darker in hue than the exuberant pink walls of the Red Keep in King's Landing.

*Almost as powerful as the walls of Casterly Rock. Only smaller, like I; a small heir of a great house whose head I have disemboweled.*

Bayasabhad rose threatening from the flattened ridge of the Bones, obstructing the only way across for long leagues.

"The warrior women who hold the mountain passes are not fond of foreigners," Ser Jorah observed knowingly, trotting next to Tyrion.

*Had you bedded one of them before you stumbled upon your silver queen?* Tyrion wondered with interest. He would remain curious until the day he died.

Archmaester Marwyn snorted with contempt. "They are not fond of *men,*" he lectured. "Men are gelded here and lead a life of servitude. Only a few are allowed to procreate."

Tyrion was instantly sickened, both by his assumptions about Mormont's bedding quests and the learned explanation concerning the habits of the local ladies he could very well live without.

He looked at the four shadowbinders with expectation. *They must know a way out of this.* As if on command, the Asshai'i began singing in thick, melodious, *ululating* voices.

Yet for all their singing, Quaithe and her masked friends did not *dance* at all. This frightened Tyrion more than anything. If they danced, it would mean that the company on the road to Asshai could travel swiftly by the obscure magic of the shadows and come across the Bone Mountains intact, as they had come from Meereen to the far eastern edge of the Red Waste in a very short time. *Impossibly fast.*

Despite his inner agony since he began searching for where whores went, Tyrion harboured no secret desire to die. Death remained too final for his liking. Life was only… unpredictable and frequently unpleasant, but as long as it lasted it held ample possibilities. Who knew, the fact that Tyrion had no idea what to do with his pitiful existence might change in the future.

The company rode further up the tortuous, climbing path, and glimpsed the entrance to the citadel, still from afar. The great gates of oak banded with iron were shut.

Arrow neighed enthusiastically when a volley of true arrows greeted them from the city walls, landing a hundred yards in front of the seven travellers.

*We are out of reach, but not for long,* Tyrion rightfully concluded. "Be quiet," he told his steed as if the impish zorse had any fault in the matter of the company being assaulted.

"We have to press on," Quaithe commanded from behind in a centuries old, ugly voice.

Tyrion spurred his zorse with the rest of their party, not certain this was the best course of action, but most unwilling to be left behind. A single target could prove easy to hit, even a dwarf one.

They were almost at the gates when the second charge of arrows was released.

"Take cover!" Ser Jorah yelled, but there was none to be taken; it was either ride on or rush back. And leave the backs and the rumps vulnerable to the warrior women archers.

The large black horse Quaithe rode screamed, mortally wounded. The rest of the party; men, women,
dwarf, horse and zorse were miraculously intact.

For now, Tyrion thought, cantering to his new best lady friend, who dismounted from her dying steed.

"How do you propose we enter here?" he wondered aloud, half-protesting. "Shouldn't the four of you dance that little dance of yours and make us go over this little hurdle with magic?"

Archmaester Marwyn had an answer for every scholarly puzzle. "In some places in the world there is only light. There are no shadows to be bound."

The four masked people nodded at this great wisdom. The day's ride had already been strenuous. Tyrion had a painful bruise on his ribcage from his last fall from the zorse, and now this. It was decidedly his turn to snort at his companions with contempt.

"You mean to say we can only pass through on our own legs," he said, severely disappointed. He had grown to expect more from his shady associates.

The next volley of arrows would not tardy. The gates began opening. Tyrion had a suspicion that a party of armed women holding the pass would soon ride out to meet them, steel in hand.

"We only need to be one step behind the gates and we will be safe," Quaithe stated with finality. "We ride now. It's the only way."

It was suicide. The distance was very short for cavalry but the ultimate success of the desperate endeavour depended on the sloppiness of the archers, the slow forming of any sortie by the city defenders, and ultimately on the mercy of the gods.

And the gods were never that merciful, in Tyrion's humble opinion of a small man.

Ser Jorah and Archmaester Marwyn were obviously of a different mind than he, following the directive of one of the Asshai'i men in sprinkling their foreheads with an ash-like powder."

Quaithe had some for Tyrion and the other masked woman in the deep pockets of her wide robes. The stuff was dark red and black, just like her garments. *The Targaryen colours*, Tyrion thought, shivering. *Red and gold would be much friendlier. Yes, father. Even with you alive. Yes, I am still your son. And your proud slayer.*

"How will you go, my lady?" he asked Quaithe, repeating her gesture of putting some ash-smelling-stuff on his brow.

"As you suggested, on my own legs," the crone answered with disdain. "They are longer than yours."

The slight made Tyrion forget his fear. There was surely no such dire need to remind him he was a dwarf at every possible occasion. He placed some powder on Arrow as well and urged the zorse forward as fast as he knew how. The animal stomped and shook his mane. Tyrion's brows itched from the unknown substance and his very breath tasted like ash. He felt unnaturally cold. *Will I feel so in death?*

*What will happen to me when I cross the gates?*

Perhaps it was best not to know. The time for questioning was over. The door of the citadel was almost fully open. The stocky Archmaester Marwyn was the first one in the column of riders trying to break through, followed closely by Ser Jorah. The three mounted Asshai'i came next and Tyrion
An arrow hit Marwyn squarely in the chest. He still managed to ride on. As soon as the front hooves of his horse crossed the gate he burst into flames and disappeared. His horse did not follow. Crazed from his back catching fire, the animal ran riderless into the city on its own.

Tyrion reined Arrow in at the frightening sight of the archmaester taking his leave. Or is it his demise? He dodged a real arrow directed at his head by bending sharply. He blessed himself for being a small man or he would have been a dead big man. His nervousness exploded. Ser Jorah managed to cross the threshold of the city uninjured and burst into flames as well. His fire burned more yellow than the archmaester's. Instead of following the example of the other two Westerosi, Tyrion halted, paralysed. The three horded Asshai'i galloped on. Soon there were more flames of all colours, and more riderless horses rearing in the streets of Bayasabhad. A small company of ten armed women began gathering behind the gates; the maddened horses would hamper their advance.

Tyrion glanced back. Quaithe was significantly lagging behind. She would never make it on foot to the gates before the brave women attacked them, despite the welcome distraction of the crazed horses between the two of them and any attempt at sortie.

She tricked me to come along, he thought. I should leave her for the friendly warrior ladies. She can't be gelded, it wouldn't be so bad. But he couldn't bring himself to embrace this very reasonable, skin-saving action.

Tyrion Lannister cursed his curiosity and the desire he had never lost to do justice from time to time. And I thought that having been Hand of the King would have cured me permanently of that dangerous folly.

He spurred the zorse back, thankful for the animal's dwarf size for the first time since he began riding it. He would have never been able to direct a horse back fast and handy enough, not even in the special saddle he had in Casterly Rock. As he galloped back, looking every inch as a dog-riding dwarf in a mummer's tourney, he could swear that the old eyes of the crone behind the red mask became as bewildered as those of the flaming horses, while she strived to run forward and meet him halfway.

"Behind me, my lady of the shadows!" he urged her with fear mounting in this heart. What he did was unbelievably stupid and chance was he might die uselessly for it.

Even more incredibly, she obeyed mutely, without a clever retort of her own, mounting the small animal without difficulty. Arrow flew back to the gates effortlessly, galloping forward as though the zorse yearned to meet face-on the formation of warrior women who lifted their swords high. Rubies glittered on their cheeks and Tyrion wondered if they also wore iron rings in their nipples as the books told.

Quaithe was behind Tyrion, much taller than him, and yet she clung to him. The sensation was extremely queer. He had been many things, but never a strong saviour of ladies.

A masked crone shouldn't count as a lady.

At least she most certainly isn't a whore. No mistake in that.

Yet his body reacted to the sensation of being embraced from behind in a way he thought it never would again, with the familiar pressure in his loins. Quaithe's long black hair spilled down his small shoulders, waking an illusion best forgotten and buried. Tysha. His arousal chose to follow up on his illusion at the worst possible moment. Lustful little monkey demon. He reminded himself that he liked
tall girls, and not tall crones. Quaithe could have been his great-grandmother and her hair was not silky. Not like Tysha's at all. The truth conveniently made him go limp in an instant.

He noticed that the crone, who was almost always seated due to her extreme old age, must have been taller than even Sansa, Tyrion's child-wife whom he had released from the vows given under force. He was still married to Tysha for all he knew, until he was proven a widower. Where do whores go?

Most certainly not zorsing, he thought cynically.

The distance between Tyrion and Quaithe, the gates and the warrior women had almost disappeared. He realised he had embarked on a journey to Asshai unarmed, and even if he had an axe, it would not save him.

"Now, Arrow, fly!" Tyrion begged the zorse hoarsely and yanked the reins like a man pursued by demons from seven hells. A dwarf could not be brave forever.

He couldn't look in front any longer. The sensation of riding into his own death became too much to bear. On the contrary, Arrow obediently increased his speed, unafraid, despite the double weight he was now carrying.

They can indeed endure more than normal horses, Tyrion marvelled absent-mindedly, staring at the tips of his stunted, thick fingers which began to tingle oddly and turn into the tongues of flames. He could feel no pain as his body dissolved into nothingness. His awareness was gone, spared from all torment of the body and spirit by the blissful ignorance of non-existence.

When Tyrion regained consciousness, the air smelled of sea. The ground under his prostrated back and bruised ribs moved. The unsafe sensation was familiar and sickening. He only missed a few flagons of wine in his belly to recognise it fully. Not so long ago, he had done his best to drink himself to death while using that form of transport to run away from Westeros.

Ship, we are on a ship. We must be.

"We have to undress him," Ser Jorah suggested above his head. "There might be a wound we don't see."

"That won't be necessary, thank you," Tyrion rebelled, opening his black eye. "I feel better dressed in the company of the ladies."

He would not needlessly embarrass himself further.

He sat up. The ship was a longship with sails. There were no oarsmen. The sparse crew manned the masts and the deck. One of the masked Asshai'i man held the tiller. The two women talked quietly. The second man was nowhere to be seen and neither was Archmaester Marwyn.

"Are they…?" Tyrion asked, waving his hand.

"They didn't make it," Ser Jorah shook his head.

"Or they have gone directly to Asshai," the other masked woman countered, speaking for the first time. Her voice was stern and unyielding, but somewhat younger than Quaithe's. It sounded vaguely familiar to Tyrion but he did not know where to place it. "Our missing brother is one of the most powerful of our kind. He could have taken the archmaester with him. Such wound as the wizard from the Citadel sustained can only be treated under the Shadow. He can be brought back… Or his
supreme knowledge about the dragons will die with him."

Tyrion wished Archmaester Marwyn a speedy recovery in his heart and forgot about him in an instant. He wouldn't miss the erudite from the Citadel and his arrogance disguised as knowledge. Tyrion was guilty of the same sin at occasions, but to a lesser degree. He knew the limits of all his wisdom, painfully so. It would never serve to make him anything more than a dwarf.

Quaithe approached Tyrion. "Why did you do that?" she asked with suspicion. "What favour do you expect to obtain by saving my life?"

"Why, for you to be my lady love," Tyrion quipped. To his surprise, the sorceress cringed from him as if his presence caused her bodily distress, much as she did when he had offered her the unborn puppies delicacy in Meereen in good will. To his even greater amazement, her reaction of revulsion caused his deformed body to react with lust again. He became thoroughly disgusted with himself. What's wrong with me? A simple explanation came to mind. And a very logical one for the company he kept.

"What was in that powder of yours?" he asked with mounting suspicion. "Did you bewitch us?"

"A little," she said, "or the three of you Westerosi would not be welcome to the city of the shadows, and they would devour you. Do you wish to be devoured?"

The question made Tyrion think about a young mouth of an innocent crofter's daughter on his cock. Gods be good, we were thirteen. Where did all the time go?

He instantly guarded his thoughts, afraid that Quaithe could somehow read them since the beginning of their acquaintance.

"The origin of dragons," he said, needing to drive the topic of the conversation away from himself being taken into the mouth of any mysterious or less mysterious entity. "The Valyrian origin of dragons, my friends!"

His entire diminished company gathered around him. The remaining masked man left the tiller, yet the ship sailed on, as if it could steer itself; or as though it glided over the water on the wings of dark magic and not those of the wind.

"It's a long tale," Tyrion said. "How much time do we have?"

"Very little," the masked man answered. "We needs must go fast."

"A shorter version, then," Tyrion said. He was tired. The sky was becoming dark indigo above his head at the end of a long, warm day. The air smelled like oranges and cherry trees in blossom. It's the wood from the lacquered masks that still has a scent, Tyrion realised with awe. In his opinion, the polished masks would have been a work of art if they didn't serve some arcane purpose of dark magic.

The ship navigated alongside and between several small islands covered with leafy greenery. Tyrion feared arrows would fly at them from there, but they never did. The Jade Sea. The last sea before the Shadow.

The remaining Asshai man and nameless woman began dancing around Tyrion, close as two lovers, without need for any music. Quaithe sat quietly with Ser Jorah in front of the Imp, much like two highborn children would sit and wait for a lesson, Tyrion being the maester.

"The origin of dragons," he said, always careful as to what to reveal, eager to satisfy his audience and forget his troubles for a while. Here, he felt, his knowledge had power. He was equally tall as any of them, maybe taller. It was a good feeling. A rare feeling. It wouldn't last but he could bask in
"Thousands of years ago, the fires of the earth burned high under the bottom of the sea in what is now the Smoking Sea. Until, one day, the earth could not contain them. So the flames exploded and conquered the skies. Some of them petrified, forming fourteen volcanic mountains. Some warmed the sea, turning it into a heated pool, like those existing in Westeros, especially on Dragonstone, and to a lesser degree in Winterfell."

"Nothing similar ever existed under the Shadow. Am I not right? My lords, my ladies…"

He had their full attention.

"Some fires roamed the mountains, having a life of their own. One day, they took shape of great beasts, but they could not become flesh and they could not understand each other. So they flamed and fluttered and were unhappy. Until one of those large beings made of fire drifted south, to what is now Sothoryos, and returned with a raft where a small group of people was dying from thirst."

"These people… they did not die. They, or some of them, mated with fire, merging with the great flaming beings, though the knowledge of how they did it is now completely lost."

"And thus the incorporeal flames became flesh, beasts with wings and scales, and black teeth; conscious beings with great intelligence, both human and that of the earth, which is many times greater than ours. Those among the shipwrecked who hadn't coupled with fires rode the beasts and they could speak to them in their minds. This art was forgotten in the later days of the dragonlords."

Quaithe's eyes looked avid under the mask and Ser Jorah frowned with concentration needed to remember every word, should he one day repeat the story to Daenerys. The masked couple kissed, and stopped listening. It was the last thing Tyrion would expect from shadowbinders as a consequence of listening to a tale. He cleared his throat and continued.

"This is how the Fourteen Flames of Valyria rose from the depths of the sea and how they were slowly made into the most beautiful realm of the known world, with arts that had no equal in any other land, with wondrously built towers and houses full of fresh water. Men and women were all beautiful, with silver hair and eyes in all shades of purple, violet, and lilac. Their beasts, the dragons, took them wherever they wanted, and secured for them any riches they needed…"

"There was no king among them and they were all free. But the freehold had always stood on a place where eternal fire burned deep underground… And fire is insatiiable… Fire consumes… As Valyria discovered when its doom came."

"Free, my arse," Ser Jorah said brusquely. "The Valyrians had slaves."

"What of the doom?" Quaithe asked with misty eyes. Her ancient, gnarled voice quivered.

"I haven't read much about that. The doom was so cruel. It wouldn't make for a pleasant read," Tyrion lied as smoothly as he could, imagining he was talking to his late lord father. He forced his mind into blankness. There was no knowledge in it. He would not remember anything, not here, only as much as he had chosen to tell them.

A busy harbour came into view, bursting with ships of all origins that had sailed to Asshai to trade food and other simple life necessities for the gold and gems the city was famous for. Inanimate, dead things, all those riches, Tyrion realised.

He dreaded instantly the view behind the port, of a city with tall black walls and towers, with small windows and cold breath. The sky was dark grey. By the colour of it, it was impossible to tell with
certainty if it was day or night. The bells tolled ominously.

Quaithe stood up and listened very carefully to the sound of the bells.

"They have a dragonrider," she announced to her two masked friends and clapped her hands. "They only need to find where he has left his dragon."

Then she returned to Ser Jorah and Tyrion. "My friends," she said, sounding almost sorry. "I regret to inform you that your presence is no longer required. This ship will take you back to any place where you wish to go." She stared Tyrion down with resentment. "In payment of the new debt owed."

The shadowbinders reached into the endless pockets of their wide, richly coloured dark robes. Every one of them tossed a fistful of ash powder high up in the air. They howled, sang, danced, took the hands of each other and were gone with a whisper.

"Wait!" Tyrion screamed after them, grasping thin air.

"Have you ever been to Asshai?" he asked Ser Jorah when they were left alone, his quick mind pondering the options at hand.

"No," the bear knight shook his head.

"I didn't think so," Tyrion muttered.

An animal neighed under the deck. The sound was endearing and entirely familiar.

"He didn't stay in the mountains?" Tyrion asked. *I sprinkled Arrow with the ash powder of the shadowbinders,* he realised. *The others didn't do it with their horses. A mistake. Or not?*

The sailors generously left to them by Quaithe and her friends began unloading the cargo from the belly of the ship, and Tyrion was soon united with his zorse. Gingerly, he led him to the plank to leave.

"I am of a mind to visit this city," he told Ser Jorah. "It is once in a lifetime that a man comes to Asshai, is it not?"

"This is not a good idea," Ser Jorah had the good sense to disagree. "This place is evil. We can go anywhere on this vessel, you've heard the shadowbinder. We can return to Daenerys! If they indeed captured another rider of her dragons she can return and save him. We have to go to her!"

"You are free to go wherever you want," Tyrion said, mounting. "I have come here to find out whether the whores go to Asshai or not."

Riding through the harbour towards the city gates, Tyrion regretted his bravery and acting out of spite. In contrast with the bustling of the port, the road was almost empty, running alongside a black river which flowed west, from the heart of the Shadow Lands to the east of the city and into the sea. The town was built on both sides of the river Ash, and it appeared almost deserted, as if the number of its inhabitants was five times less than the number of morose buildings of dark, moisture-dripping stone. The air smelled like burning incense or some other exotic, mystic substance unknown in Westeros. The sky was more and more opaque and the bells kept tolling.

The zorse drank from the river and neighed gently. Tyrion was thirsty as well, but he didn't dare follow his example. The water seemed… foul. He rode on. Before the gates, Arrow stopped, unwilling to move; stubborn as a mule.
The gates were open. There were no guards nor anyone defending it.

*They are not needed*, he realised. *The Shadow defends this city.*

The Shadow was in front of him, at the very end of town. The river Ash was flowing from it; a powerful stream of dark, rippling water. He could see the Shadow and sense it better as soon as he urged the zorse through the gates. It lay behind the city, beyond all the houses, the towers and the bells; a vast expanse of blackness, darker than any night sky Tyrion had ever seen. Perhaps the city had grown from it, black as it was, stretching from its mysterious point of origin to the seafront which connected it to the rest of the world.

Tyrion wondered if there was anything further behind or beneath the shadow. From his viewpoint, it seemed impregnable.

*The end of the world,* he thought. *Just like the Wall in Westeros. What is wrong with me that I am keen on visiting such places?*

"Take me just a bit farther, will you?" he asked of his more and more indolent steed.

*I wish I could discover who it is they caught as a dragonrider. Wouldn't Daenerys take it as a great favour if Arrow and I could free that person from these masked warlocks?*

Tyrion's mind jumped forward. If he was successful in his new endeavour, he and Jorah could return to Daenerys on the back of one of her dragons and not by a ship sailing on sorcery they didn't understand, and which could sink at any moment, as far as Tyrion was concerned. Quaithe was not to be trusted on any count.

The zorse seemed more and more reluctant to do his rider's will… Arrow sighed, gasped, whinnied and cantered on with difficulty.

Tyrion and his impish steed climbed a narrow street cobbled with dark stone, amidst the insistent, thick, metallic chime of the bells. There were only a few passers-by in the streets, all masked or veiled. The masked ones were hurrying up a hill, in direction of a large structure which could be a temple of some local deity. The zorse decided to follow them, more and more breathless with every step. Yet he honoured his rider's bidding to go on, and Tyrion thought the direction as good as any.

The temple was an imposing structure; large, smooth, rounded and black. The torches on the inside burned green in queerly moulded sconces, resembling ghostly, crippled black dragons; wingless, tailless or otherwise deformed. The light they shed was vague and repulsive, illuminating a home of utmost darkness. A huge gateway led to a central open space. In the middle of it, under an enormous dome, a naked man was laid on a flat black stone. He was beautiful as a god, just as…

*Jaime.*

"No!" Tyrion yelled loudly from the temple door. A few masked people turned to look at him and *flinched* as if he were terrifying to look at. *Must be for having less than half a nose.*

He rode the zorse on, straight into the temple, not caring if he just committed a horrendous offence against the local customs and faith.

His only brother lay unconscious on the black stone. There were cuts on his chest, arms and legs, appearing as if an incompetent maester tried to draw blood or apply leeches.

The wounds looked as if they had barely closed.
"Jaime," Tyrion whispered, never dismounting. His voice came out hoarse, almost inaudible.

He had thought he hated his brother for what he had done to him and Tysha, until seeing Jaime so vulnerable and abandoned in this strange place.

The temple was two-thirds empty, just like the city. Several groups of shadowy, masked men and women surrounded the solitary stone with his brother from a distance, making conversation in low voices. No one stood in close proximity to Jaime.

The shadowbinders in the circle closest to Tyrion suddenly fell to their knees. Are they fearing me? At least my cock is not reacting to their plight as it did to Quaithe's revulsion.

Arrow whinnied weakly. Tyrion Lannister searched for the real reason causing the fear and the reverence of the Asshai'i, because after the first group, all the masked men and women either bowed or knelt and ululated in unison. The Imp could almost repeat the tune, but he decided not to. He never had much affinity for music.

On his right hand side, a tall blond woman with sun-coloured face tried to bolt in Jaime's direction. Tyrion could not place her anywhere, though he felt he ought to. As many as five shadowbinders held her firmly in place. Tyrion thought one of them was Quaithe but he couldn't be certain. In the green and grey shadows of their temple all masked sorcerers looked the same. Their wide robes showed a familiar melange of darkened colours of the rainbow in heavy velvets and smooth silks, with many superposed layers and deep pockets.

"Gag her," a masked man said about the struggling woman. He could have been precisely Tyrion's shady companion who had never made it to the ship, so perhaps he did take Archmaester Marwyn to Asshai as the others claimed.

"Silence her," the man commanded again. "Or a new life will never be born under the Shadow. All we have laboured for shall be in vain."

"Jaime!" the tall lady cried out with unfeigned misery and the aggression of youth. She must have been at least a few years younger than Tyrion. "Don't harm him or I will revenge him! I swear! And you will never find the drag..." she squeezed out before her shouts and threats were muted and a bright blue lacquered mask forced upon her face. The disturbed woman quieted as soon as she was masked like the rest.

So she is one of the shadowbinders, Tyrion thought, oddly disappointed. A frighteningly pretty Asshai'i who was perhaps taller than his handsome brother. Probably she fell for Jaime when he came visiting, and now her tender heart made her rebel against some stupid local rite. Save your breath for someone else, blue lady. Jaime won't love you. He can't.

Jaime. Have you developed a taste for bigger girls as I've always had in the time since we've seen each other? The thought was absurd, but it couldn't be helped.

Besides, no one would ever replace Cersei in Jaime's heart, Tyrion was certain. For as much as she had bedded Osney and Osmund and Lancel and the Moon Boy. The only man in court for whom the Imp could swear that Cersei did not bed him was Tyrion himself.

The ululating chant increased in volume, intensity and shrillness when Tyrion finally understood the poor woman's heartfelt plea.

Jaime... the stone... the temple... the altar! They must be sacrificing him to the Shadow!

Varys' story about how he was cut surged in Tyrion's mind; the tale about a sorcerer murmuring his
incantations and burning the little boy's manhood which shrivelled in flames. A dark force answered
the sorcerer and the boy, the victim, heard it all.

*Jaime, be unconscious, please. Just in case that I fail.*

Almost as an echo of Tyrion's thoughts, a large black shadow came to life in the back of the temple,
-facing Tyrion. Slowly, it advanced toward Jaime on legs large as boulders made of the nightly sky.
Growing in size and shape it went, almost dancing in its gloomy progress. *The shadows dance under
the sea,* the Imp remembered a silly song, but couldn't recall whose fool sang it at Robert's court and
for whose coin.

Well, this shadow was dangerous and it was dancing above ground. The Imp immediately knew
where it came from; from the impenetrable darkness in the east, the blackness from which the city
spread forth and from which it had perhaps been born.

The shadow glided closer.

Tyrion finished his own ride to Jaime, ignoring the mounting discomfort of his steed and his own. He
lowered his eyes. Unable to look at the shadow, he found himself staring at his brother's body. *So
weakened.*

Only his face looked healthy and *sun-tanned* like the cheeks of the woman who had cried for him.

From nearby, Tyrion immediately noted Jaime's head was laid on another, smaller, oval black stone,
as on a pillow of sorts.

Tyrion came as close to his brother as possible, short of riding over him. He reined in Arrow to stand
in parallel to the altar. He moved his dwarf arse toward the rump and tail of the zorse and pressed it
down, until the animal understood what he wanted and sat, first on his hind legs and then on all four.
Tyrion had to use all his force twice over to pull Jaime by the shoulders and slowly drag his brother
over the front part of the zorse's back. *Limp as a sack of flour.* The thought hurt. The egg-like pillow
rolled away amidst the cacophony of shadowy chanting that never stopped. *At least Quaithe and her
friends couldn't care less about Arrow and me. Might be they don't see us. We are just another small
shadow which helps the big one to devour the sacrifice they brought and it is very dark in here.*

Jaime was *emaciated,* as if from long imprisonment. Truth be told, his brother hadn't been much
fatter when he had come to free Tyrion from the dungeons in King's Landing, crawling through the
narrow secret passages of the royal palace with Lord Varys.

The shadow was almost at the flat altar stone. Silently, it *swallowed* Jaime's egg-shaped rocky
pillow. The hard stone made a crunching sound, breaking into pieces.

*Come on, Arrow. get up now.* Tyrion thought insistently, gently spurring the zorse. *We can't be
heavier than Quaithe and I.* She had seemed as tall as Jaime when she rode double with Tyrion, a
hard feat for a crone shrunken from age, and probably merely a wishful imagination of his mind,
now that he thought of it.

*Come on, Arrow.*

The shadow was coming too close for his liking. One edge of it touched the flat stone where Jaime
had been laying moments ago. Tyrion realised that Quaithe's speech about shadows devouring the
visitors might not be an entirely empty threat. He felt smaller than usual and very, very cold.

*Come on Arrow.*
Please, Arrow. Please.

Slow as a snail, the zorse slowly stood up and cantered back where they came from, towards the temple door, and the clean-swept cobbled streets of Asshai.

Tyrion suddenly realised what he missed on those streets. There were no excrements. There were no… animals alive in the city… He hadn’t seen a single stray cat or dog since he entered, or a horse… There wasn’t a single child playing in the streets.

The city that sucks the life away… or the Shadow does… and no children are born...

He looked at his zorse with new worry. Yet it seemed that as long as the animal was walking and Tyrion's mind was firmly bent on leaving and not turning back, the shadow could not catch up with them, not quite. It was always one or two steps behind, despite all its gaining in size, thickness and strength. Tyrion never looked back.

He rode out of the temple and gazed forward, down the streets and through the open gates, and all the way to the starlit harbour, as the bells tolled, and tolled and tolled, mourning… for all the lost people of the Shadow.

Asshai… a city where nothing is forbidden… That is how it was described in the books, Tyrion remembered. In other words, the place where everything is allowed… Every crime and ignominy under the sun… Father, you and your cherished bannermen would have loved it here, late Ser Gregor and also dear Ser Amory, eaten by the bear… Even my sweet sister might find herself at home…

It was not a place for Tyrion. Nor for Jaime, he had to admit, as much as he still resented his brother. Tyrion should have never come here and he wanted to be gone.

In the world there are places where shadows can't be bound... Where there is only light... He remembered Archmaester Marwyn's wisdom and took strength from it. It seemed very true now, like a straw he could and should grasp against the slow drowning in the sea of darkness, which was rising in tide all around him.

There is only light. A place where there is only light.

He wished to take his brother to such a place. The zorse limped forward with determination. They stepped out of the city. The great shadow stopped following, powerless outside its walls. None of the masked people had ever followed suit or tried to harm Tyrion and Jaime. Tyrion could not understand why, but he refused to dwell for long on the reasons for his good fortune. Maybe they were all devoured. Suits them well.

Tyrion felt as if he had won a battle over a much stronger enemy purely with the strength of his mind. Here you have me father. Saving your heir. Are you proud of me in your grave of stone? The imaginary stone likeness of Lord Tywin Lannister almost smiled joyfully in Tyrion's mind. His father had never done so in his life.

But how in seven hells have you come here, sweet brother?

He asked himself that for the first time now that the imminent danger for both him and Jaime was gone. Tyrion stopped paying any attention to where his steed was going. Cold sweat cooled down on his back under the only Westerosi tunic he still owed and wore. Red and yellow, for sentimental reasons. He had paid for it in the market in Meereen by the persimmon fruits he’d stolen from Daenerys’ garden on the Great Pyramid. The queen won't mind. There were too many for anyone to
eat.

I have tricked death one more time.

Only after a while, he realised the zorse did not mean to return to the harbour. Instead, he headed out of the city and into the fields of tall, pale grass, easily three or more times Tyrion's length; a threatening forest of soft, swaying vegetation.

Have I escaped the Shadow only to be devoured by ghost grass?

The zorse and two men became lost between its wavy stems and the city was no longer visible.

Suddenly, Arrow's legs failed. The zorse crumpled in a sleeping position on the ground, this time against his rider's will. Arrow whinnied, neighed, and whinnied weakly again. Tyrion was frightened to death. He hauled Jaime down into the grass to relieve the animal's burden and hugged the zorse's neck and snow-white mane.

"You are a good horse, well, zorse, and my friend," he said. "You haven't thrown me down since we rode into the Bone Mountains. Don't be moody now."

Arrow almost cried. Tyrion realised Quaithe's large black horse had made similar sounds in the high mountain pass when dying… or just before he had exhaled his last breath, having no more force left to scream.

"No, Arrow, please," he said in horror.

Tears were in his mismatched eyes, hot and insistent, but they would not come out. They could not fall. The grief was too great. For his dwarf zorse, for his dwarf life, for every wrong he had done and every meaningless evil he had to endure.

He and Jaime would be at the mercy of the Shadow and Tyrion's mind alone would not be enough without the little striped body of his friend, who had spent his life force to do his rider's will. Obedient until the end and well trained by the Jogos Nhai… The tribes that ride and breed the zorses in the north of Essos. That had to be a people worth visiting.

The only four-legged animal who stayed alive in Asshai…

But not for long.

Tyrion remembered Quaithe's powder he had sprinkled on himself and on Arrow and wondered if it had truly helped them to survive in Asshai and not only to arrive there.

Jaime stirred lightly and tossed his handsome tousled head left and right.

"Brienne!" he rambled.

Did that blond woman bewitch you with her powder as well?

One of Jaime's chest cuts wounds began slightly bleeding.

His brother was shaking and his zorse was dying. Only Tyrion was in good health, alone in the middle of nowhere, if he didn't count the bruise on his ribs which suddenly seemed like a minor injury in comparison. This twisted little demon will survive most anything, he thought, petting the zorse's head and mane as Arrow liked.

Arrow first thrashed with his legs. Then they twitched for what felt like hours until he finally lost his
stand against death. Tyrion forced himself away from the animal's corpse. There was nothing more he could do. He sat down, next to his brother's immobile living body. Grass was everywhere. The darkness was total and there were almost no stars to be seen. He could barely see Jaime and dead Arrow.

*It feels…. like… like the Long Night. So far away from home.*

*I have to wait*, he decided. When grey daytime came, and it *had* to, he would crawl back to the harbour and find Ser Jorah. Mormont would help him bring Jaime to the ship. Tyrion knew the bear knight long enough by now to assume that he was probably still waiting for him, for as much as he almost always verbally proclaimed his strong dislike for the Imp and his plans.

But before he finished thinking about that solution, the dark grass on his left hand side moved and *roared*, smelling like unquenched fire.

A lion was not the only animal that roared.

Cold sweat washed over Tyrion in waves, and his heart nearly failed him. It was too much. He risked being killed one too many times in this same day.

*Give me intrigue!* he begged the gods. *I've had my share of adventure.*

*Please.*

Yet the latest adventure kept advancing on him without mercy, from amidst the grass, bulging and enormous. Its colour could not be distinguished in total darkness. *At least its shape is different than that of the formless, growing shadow. More… muscular.* The shade had been *soft.*

Suddenly, there was a flash of shiny *white* in a living eye staring at Tyrion, illuminating a large maw darker than the night, exhaling… fire…. with traces of white and gold in the flames.

Tyrion jumped away from the jet streaming out of the monster's mouth, faster than he thought possible.

"No," Tyrion gasped when the monster in the grass stretched its snout toward Jaime. It didn't smell him as a dog or another four-pawed predator might have done before eating its prey. The creature only touched his brother, almost tenderly, and withdrew to a short distance, opening its maw again.

Tyrion moved protectively in front of Jaime, waiting to be devoured, for that seemed to be indeed his destiny. Quaithe guessed that part well enough.

The beast's back moved and spread.

*Wings,* Tyrion realised in utter disbelief. *Bloody wings.*

*They have a dragonrider,* Quaithe's words rang in his head.

*Do they?* he asked himself, looking at the immobile naked body of his brother in a different light.

He had only seen the queen's black dragon from close by, but there was also the green one… and the white one, stolen by the ironborn in the battle for Meereen. Tyrion remembered their names, the names of her lost, enslaved children, which had caused Daenerys to fly to Westeros in haste.

"Viserion," he said, losing all fear. In its place, only endless curiosity remained. "Hello. I mean you no harm. And I am too small to cause you any even if I did." He stepped aside.
Viserion immediately exhaled a breath of white crystals over Jaime's wounds, covering them and closing them completely, leaving Tyrion speechless.

He felt ashamed for thinking that the dragon would eat Jaime. The cure was… miraculous…

Then, the beast buried its head in the bed of grass next to Jaime's head, opening a path upward to his back even a dwarf could follow, but an unconscious man could not.

"You are clever, I know," Tyrion said. "I hope you have understanding as the books I read tell you do. If you want him, you have to find a way to pick him up. I can't load him on your back. You are too big for me."

The dragon waited. His white and golden gaze sparkled with ire.

"It is the truth," Tyrion stated calmly, making a few steps left and right, so that the dragon could see his deformed body. He was trying to appeal to that part of the dragon, which, if it existed, still possessed the intelligence of the earth. And the earth, in Tyrion's opinion, should be calm and true, not prone to madness and passions of men.

The dragon exhaled several angry puffs of white and golden smoke before burying his head deep into the grassy soil. He burrowed, as a firewyrm, until his neck was underground and under Jaime. His snout came out on the other side with a jet of scorching fire. Fortunately, thus far the ghost grass was his only victim. With a powerful shake, Viserion lifted up both his head and Jaime, together with a large heap of earth, until the unconscious man lay safely on his bed of grass, lodged between two spikes on the dragon's back.

Viserion spread his wings.

"Don't forget me," Tyrion said, remembering another important part of dragon lore. They all considered each other as brothers or sisters. One big happy family, he thought with pain, remembering his own unhappy one. "I'm his brother. Your brother."

Miraculously, the admonishing worked. A paw was placed next to Tyrion and one of the shoulders bent just so much that the dwarf could waddle up slowly and painfully, occasionally cutting himself on scales as he went, while the dragon would still not drop his precious sleeping burden.

His rider.

When Tyrion found a place next to a large spike for himself, the dragon turned his attention to the little striped corpse left alone in the field of ghost grass.

Almost gently, Viserion roasted Arrow and swallowed him whole.

He is right, Tyrion thought, it makes no sense to waste good meat.

Yet he wouldn't have eaten from it if it meant the difference between staying alive and starvation. Tyrion's tears were back, his throat hurt, and he caught himself hoping fervently that there were seven heavens meant for zorses.

When the earth was left behind and the night sky approached, Tyrion's grief for Arrow lessened and was slowly replaced by a dark pang of envy in his dwarf's heart, which must have been just as stunted as the parts of his body.

Jaime has become a dragonrider.
Jaime, always Jaime. Jaime could have anything he wanted.

And Tyrion nothing at all.

He wished he could take something precious away from his brother. Just once. To make him see how he had felt for most of his life.

_I wish I had killed Joffrey as I'd told him. Then we would be even._

Tyrion swallowed. He had no desire to feel that way. The ugliness of it burdened his soul. _Then why can't I just get rid of it?_

Jaime was the only one in his family who had ever loved him. Tyrion suspected he might love him still, even believing Tyrion to be Joffrey's murderer and suffering for it.

Tyrion Lannister closed his mismatched eyes and opened them again, inhaling the night's air, pleasantly fresh. Any discomfort caused by the unnatural cold of Asshai was erased by the stream of warmth seeping through the body of the dragon. _Fire made flesh._

_And speaking of intrigue… Does Daenerys know, sweet brother? And why are you alive if she does?_

_You didn't kill her, did you?_

Tyrion wished he knew how to direct the dragon's flight to Westeros. It was obvious many things changed there since he was gone. But the books he read could never give him this power; the dragons had no reins and he was not Viserion's rider. He wondered where the beast was taking Jaime, and Tyrion as his appendix.

_Ser Jorah Mormont will have to sail back to Westeros on his own._

He was not a dragonrider as he had dreamed of, being a malformed, rejected child.

Yet Tyrion Lannister now soared between the clouds, lost above the far eastern end of Essos; free, and not devoured by any shadow.

_I am flying, he thought._

_Tyrion Shortstrider, the famous world traveler._

He gulped giddily, and giggled as a boy.

Chapter End Notes

As always, any feedback is most welcome }})
Lyanna II

Chapter Summary

Betaed as much as possible by the wonderful, unique TopShelfCrazy

It there are any mistakes left, they are my own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lyanna

Queensgate looked much more like a ruin now than when Lyanna was a little girl. One fortress of
the nineteen defending the hundred leagues of the Wall, situated between Nightfort and Deep Lake,
the castle had never been manned by the Night's Watch in her lifetime. With the arrival of winter, it
became a shadow of its former self, wrought of dark wood and crumbling stone; buried deeply under
the heavy burden of freshly fallen snow.

Snowgate, as its old name said, before the visit of the Good Queen Alysanne and her dragon,
Silverwing, who have changed the name forever.

A place for a wolf to meet a dragon and bring ruin to the Seven Kingdoms by sealing the beginning
of a love that should not have been.

A ghost of a ghost castle. Ghost. My son's wolf. White with the red eyes of the weirwoods. Red or
green eyes of the greenseers of old.

Howland had leaf-green eyes and he was never shy about what he was. At least not with Lyanna.
Unexpectedly, her best friend had mourned for her as much as Ned did. Why haven't the trees told
him the truth? She regretted they had not; Howland would have told Ned. Ned would have found
her in Essos and admitted what he would not say to Ashara Dayne; that Jon lived. Lyanna would be
back with her son as a mother should.

And married within a year.

At best she could hope to foster Jon as Ned's bastard in her new household. Because we would never
be able to say who Jon's father was, would we? Not as long as Robert lived.

She shivered from the thought. The lie would be untenable and unbearable for her.

The Wall behind Queensgate gleamed vaguely in the faint daylight, majestic and cold as ever; it
would never melt. After Winterfell, the Wall was the place Lyanna loved most in her homeland.
Would Ned have told this to Jon?

She suspected he wouldn't have, honouring his promise to her to protect her son until the end. He
kept it so well that he had never told Jon about his mother. But he had let him take the black.

So much for my memory.
How I wish to tell you all about myself, son. If you would only let me speak to you.

Drogon left Lyanna in the snowy courtyard and instantly flew away. By the number of errands the dragon recently fulfilled, he had almost become an ordinary raven and not the most dangerous beast in existence.

In front of the wolf queen there was the entrance to a stone tower, probably built in the times of Queen Alysanne, some two hundred years ago. There was light and smoke coming from inside. Lyanna lowered the hood of her cloak in the doorway, shook the snow that still clung to her clothes and hair and climbed a single flight of steps to a small solar, which must have once belonged to the castle's commander.

"Rhaegar?" she called out cautiously. In her heart, she wanted to run to him, wrap her legs around his waist and stay like that forever. She was not yet so heavy with child that the action would be impossible or harmful.

But Lyanna was born a Stark of Winterfell, so instead of running she walked, smiling, smiling, smiling. To see her husband again so soon brought her unmeasured, expanding joy. She had already resigned herself she would see him only much later, when either his latest war or winter were over. Maybe for the birth of their second child if that came first.

"Rhaegar," she said sternly, seeing him busy with cooking. "You're acting a boy again. You shouldn't be here. You should be where your fight is."

She wanted to say he ought to be with his men, but the word men did not sit well with Euron and his dead so she corrected herself just in time. Her words suddenly sounded to Lyanna as a piece of advice her father would have given her and not as her own thoughts. Commanders did not take breaks in war, Lord Rickard would say. There was no honour in that. I must be so old to think like him.

"Kill me for it, will you?" her husband retorted carelessly. "You have tried before."

"Twice," she recalled, grinning widely.

"At least," he mocked her. "I am fortunate that my sleep is light," he added hastily. "I needed to be alert at my father's court. It was a bit better in Dragonstone." He stirred the stew too fast and rekindled the fire brusquely.

His uncommon recklessness, bordering on impatience, frightened Lyanna. What are you up to, my love?

Two decades ago, Aerys' men kidnapped Lyanna after the great tourney in Harrenhal, claiming they had done it on Rhaegar's behalf, and for the crown prince's future amusement. Yet their actions toward her person denoted it was rather their own illicit pleasure they had in mind. Another man soon joined them, a high lord by his posture, wearing Rhaegar's armour. Much later, she learned he was Lord Hightower, brother of the legendary White Bull, Ser Gerold Hightower, Lord Commander of the Kingsguard.

When an unknown, helmed saviour rescued Lyanna before any true harm had come to pass, Lyanna had assumed the worst of her mystery knight. In her nervousness, she had very nearly stabbed the real Rhaegar to death in his sleep with the obsidian knife she always carried.

A gift from the crow on the Wall. Mance Rayder. Who would know that we would all see each other again? Who could tell that the little wildling crow would become a brave man, fly away from the
Shadow Tower and be elected King-beyond-the-Wall? Or that I would ever love and be Rhaegar's wife?

Fortunately for all, Rhaegar woke when she was about to strike him with her knife. He disarmed her, never showing his face, in what she later knew to be shame and fear of rejection. For the longest time, he hid his face from her and kept his sword between them as a true knight, whenever they shared a bed on the run from Aerys.

*Until I removed it myself, the helm and the sword both.*

As if any woman would reject Rhaegar Targaryen with that sad look in his eyes.

*What is wrong with us women? Why do we have it in us, the desire to ease the pain of the man we love? Why do we even start to love a man for the pain he carries? And yet we can be as cruel as any man, if not more, to those who have wronged us... even so slightly.*

Now, in the small solar Lyanna and Rhaegar shared, there was fire, a warm meal and a bed of sorts. Years of life in a septry certainly improved the household abilities of men.

Although Rhaegar had always been different, with his love for ignoble, labouring tasks. He could muck the stables as clean as any serving boy. *To keep my mind clear and hands nimble,* he told Lyanna when she caught him at it one sunny morning in Dorne, in the too short time they spent together after their secret marriage in haste.

In the end, he was nothing like Lyanna expected a prince should be. *Except handsome, more handsome than any man has any right to be.* Age and the ruined chest Robert gifted him took nothing away. On the contrary, the pleasure Lyanna and Rhaegar had always found in each other became sweeter with the passing of time, deepened by the years of loneliness.

*Be that as it may, the household skills of men always had their limit.*

"I still hate preparing meals and this wildling food is harder to cook than any other I have seen," Rhaegar said pointedly, unsatisfied, about the stew he was trying to make, which smelled of dried seal meat. "I suspect this is why I was elected Elder Brother so fast. No one could stand my porridges."

Lyanna doubted very much that was the only reason. The poor people in the riverlands were as sick as they were hungry; the cooks were many and the healers few. Even the monks must have seen that the talents of their new brother were wasted in the kitchens. He was allowed to learn more and do what he knew best; heal others. To be left in peace was a condition unheard of for a crown prince.

*Twenty years of freedom. Do you regret being back, being yourself?* The loving look in his purple, quiet eyes told her differently. She would never tire from the way he was studying her, as a rare book only he possessed and treasured.

Lyanna laughed noisily, her Stark reserve fully left on the outside, buried with the snows. "Why, if there is one reason I've always been happy for being highborn, it is that the duties of a lady don't include cooking. Even stitching is better. Let us have some of that stew. It smells good. Besides, I am starving. It is the little one's doing."

Her husband's hands never moved to serve her food. Instead, they offered her love, wandering deftly under the layers of clothing she wore, over her belly and swollen, sensitive breasts. Her cloak was abandoned. Her heavy gown and shift followed suit. She kissed him, lest he forgot to do so, in an urgency they both felt. She felt the false spring on his lips; the time past and a new hope.
She had just stopped being sick from expecting a babe and her belly now gently curved. *In five or six turns of the moon this child will be with us.* Not wanting to dwell on the inevitable changes in her body, Lyanna took to undressing Rhaegar in return.

"Please," he said, pulling her towards him a bit harsher than was his wont, and she realised that a quaint battle fever must have been upon him. His eyes narrowed and turned dark purple as old wine, from contemplating her curves in their field of vision. That, too, was the same as all those years ago, she realised. There was something in her swelling body he craved, and growing heavier with child unexpectedly made their coupling excruciatingly joyful for Lyanna. All her senses were heightened. Her entire body prickled with anticipation. The ancient womanly wisdom counselling avoidance of marriage bed in her state was completely wasted on her. She never wanted her husband more. His intent matched hers.

*What have you been warring against? Wights, their masters or something else? Yourself, more like than not.*

He pulled her hair up above her head and lay behind her on his side. She leaned into him, their bodies ending up flushed in parallel. His hands were on her breasts and woman's place; his lips on top of her back and shoulders. The onslaught of sensations was maddening. She could not wait any longer, using one of her hands to guide him inside her.

"Easy," she said, spreading for him, exhaling with singular pleasure.

Together, they burned with non-consuming fire. He slowly took her to a place where all her inner walls melted; where there was no winter.

When they were done, she was stuck comfortably in his long, bony arms. They never bothered to dress after bedding, now or before. The less there was between them, the better they both felt.

With passion clearing out of her mind, Lyanna realised there must have been a good reason Rhaegar changed his mind about seeing her in the middle of his war. In a moment of her own weakness, after leaving Arya and Gendry in Mole's Town, Lyanna begged Drogon to take her to Rhaegar, wherever he was, if only for an hour, but the dragon remained deaf to her pleas, more like than not following the express orders of the dragonlord in the matter of his willful wife.

To her great surprise, next morning, Drogon returned to Winterfell, with another note from her husband, hastily scribbled on damaged parchment, much like the one in which he had suggested Arya and Gendry might try to free Rickon. In it, Rhaegar asked Lyanna to meet him, ensuring her that Arya was successful and safe.

He didn't act a boy as she had first thought and hoped for. He hadn't been a boy for long, if he ever was one. His harp and weapons were missing so he must have flown back in great haste, unarmed and unarmoured, counting on Drogon's warmth to survive the cold. *Are you saying farewell? What will you do this time? To what Trident will you ride?*

Rhaegar didn't speak after their love making. He kissed her from time to time, here and there, on a whim, causing pleasant tingling and disturbing her sweet exhaustion. Fingers with harp string marks lovingly touched her body as she wistfully traced the tissue of the ruinous scar on his chest. They kept each other awake, both unable to sleep.

"The dragon hides from the wolf again?" she couldn't help asking after a while. She needed to know what he planned to do.

"I doubted I was a dragon before I met you," her husband replied very seriously. "I thought myself a
tame hatchling at best; with my wings cut short, chained in the dragonpit. I had thought my blood diluted."

*Others take me, my love, and you with your love for me,* Lyanna thought. *Why do you always find a way to make me cry?*

She had wolfblood, never watered down, never condescending. When Aerys had Father and Brandon killed, she nearly rode back from Dorne to King's Landing and to her own death. Rhaegar restrained her in her outburst and she attacked him in return, wounding him. Then, just like now, she was with child and the concern for the well-being of her unborn babe made her stay in the place attributed to women, in the end.

*They teach us to sing and dance, but the role of women is to cry.*

*Will it ever be any different?*

She remembered Ned, murdered for his honour, and little Benjen, killed by Mance Rayder for doing his duty as a man of the Night's Watch. Yet Mance never *burned* Benjen, contrary to the wildling's firm beliefs in the matter, so maybe her little brother still ranged beyond the Wall as... *undead.* And not being killed by the white walkers, chance was he was free of them like Lady Jeyne used to be. The possibility frightened her, though she surmised that Ben might have *wanted* it for himself if he could choose, in order to guard the realm of men even after his death.

Lyanna wished to take the black as a young girl, in full knowledge she would marry and breed instead. She counted herself fortunate for not dreaming about any boy she met like other girls of her age. What for? She would never choose her husband. Best if she didn't care who he was. The young men who visited Winterfell with their noble fathers mocked her for being beautiful and cold as the Wall; she took their cruelty as the only true compliment she was ever given.

*Until the ice melted and there was none left. I thought myself above love and the gods have laughed at me.*

*At the poor would-be Knight of the Laughing Tree.*

"And what did you think when we met here in Queensgate all those years ago?" she asked, keeping her spirits up. This was not the occasion for crying. "I went on a riding escapade from my father's men only to run into you. That was our second chance meeting, after the woods of Winterfell."

"You know very well," he said quietly. "Or if you don't, you can guess. I wished I was king and not my father's son. I wished I could take a second wife in the old Targaryen way. In Winterfell I could still fool myself. But here I knew. I met my queen in Queensgate. I'm afraid it did little good to either you or the realm. And for all I knew my queen was a pretty peasant, pretending to be a lady of some castle that did not exist. Except in her head and mine."

She had never suspected he loved her then already.

"Shut up, will you?" she told him vividly. "I am as guilty of everything as you are. I thought you were some... *Villain. Liar.* Some silly southron knight who was after my maidenhead! Don't tell me that you regret this... regret us..."

They had... *joust*ed in Queensgate, defeating each other in two tilts. Lyanna challenged him and won the first one, taking Rhaegar by surprise. He made her promise she would listen to a song if he was victorious the second time.

He played for her... *Jenny of Oldstones.*
He never touched her in any improper way and for the first time in her life Lyanna wished a young man had done so, not knowing who he was, nor how she wanted to be touched. She wondered if things would have developed differently if they had been properly acquainted. She suspected they would not.

"The only thing I regret is not stealing you sooner," he replied ardently, "This has been on my mind since I learned in more detail about the wildling wedding customs from our friend Mance Rayder."

"I would have most certainly killed you if you had stolen me from Winterfell," she argued heatedly and stared down the obnoxious dragon. "Later, I wanted… I wanted my unknown saviour to be you."

She'd never confessed to that before. She could just as well swallow her pride and tell him the rest.

"Few men would have been victorious with a lance in a close fight against Lord Hightower. You were the tourney champion for a reason. So I stared at the lance my mystery knight carried and imagined it was you. I tried to say to myself that any knight on the way home from Harrenhal would have a lance but I still hoped it was you."

His silence was thick with wonder.

"I thought… I thought…" Rhaegar could not finish.

"You thought I didn't mean anything when I gave you a chaste parting kiss in Harrenhal? Despite and against my Stark upbringing and all the customs in the realm? You would have never seen me again if your father did not have me kidnapped?"

Rhaegar's face sank. "Yes," he said. "Do you hate me for it?"

"I don't blame you. I had made the same decision as you; I was going to forget you. That was honourable. Yet I dreamed as a stupid girl that you would go to my father and ask that I become your second queen, so he would break my betrothal to Robert."

"I thought you just came to offer a courteous farewell to a mad prince. That is what a souther lady would do. And you were so serious when I returned that kiss!" The accusation was unbelievable coming for Rhaegar, known for the extreme gravity of his nature.

"Me? I have never so much as smiled at another man. Not even at Robert, my betrothed, when they presented us. How could you think I would kiss anyone lightly?"

"Kiss me now," he demanded. "And please, not lightly."

She obliged. Lyanna could be a most dutiful wife if she wanted. And she was never able to forget Rhaegar's kisses, long and curious. **Insistent. Mindtaking.** A wolf's true kiss was different, powerful and bold. **Passionate.**

"So you did love me before." He was beaming now. "I thought… I feared it was gratitude at first. Had I known…"

He frowned and looked his age. "It matters not. My father would still be difficult to defeat without kinslaying and bloodshed. I didn't enjoy enough support for any serious attempt at conspiracy. The nobles of the realm have always been inconstant."

There was nothing reasonable she could possibly say to that. They would both carry the dead on both sides in Robert's Rebellion on their conscience until they died, and maybe after, in seven hells,
if the Faith was right in its teachings. So she waited patiently for Rhaegar to reveal the main reason he was here.

Waiting, she replayed their intimacy in her head and wondered, as she often did, how many women Rhaegar must have been with in the capital, before his first marriage to Princess Elia, in order to learn everything he had showed her in their marriage bed. She had never heard about half of the things they did together in any ladies' gossip in any place she lived later on. Lyanna never doubted Rhaegar kept his faith with her after they were married. Just like he did with Elia of Dorne, until the maester announced they should avoid lying together unless the princess wanted to die in childbed. Moon tea did not always prevent the quickening of the womb.

Yet he was a man grown when he married, of an age when many men had already fathered bastards. Lyanna couldn't help but wonder... about before... about his early years, if there were many women in his company and if they were blond and pretty like Cersei Lannister; more elegant than her, the wilful northern maid who purposefully stole their handsome southron prince, his voice and his harp, only for herself.

Lyanna retained well only one lesson about the marriage bed from her childhood. She never believed she would need it in life yet it had never left her mind; and it was not the lecture her mother and her septa had intentionally given her about obedience and duty.

Hidden in an old suit of mail, because she was obviously not supposed to be in the armoury but learning how to sing with her septa, an eleven year old Lyanna overheard Brandon talking to Father. Lord Rickard scolded Brandon for ruining girls and chasing after them, and told him to find one good woman who would keep him in his place.

"There is no such woman," Brandon protested.

"That is what you think," father insisted, very annoyed. "Why haven't you ever seen me wenching or molesting the wives and daughters of my bannermen?"

Brandon was mute for a while.

"Father, you are the Lord of Winterfell. You act with honour."

"Also true. But it is much easier to act honourably when you know you will not find anywhere else the marvel you already have in your own bed. Women can be as passionate as any man. Find the one who will be that for you, ask her to marry you, and your honour will come naturally."

Lyanna's septa provided an unwilling explanation of the word passionate and how unseemly it was to even think of it for a highborn maid who should set an example of propriety. Young Lyanna thanked her septa demurely and kept her knowledge for herself, determined not to use it. She didn't care about the honour of any man she would be forced to marry.

But, years later, when she unexpectedly said her marriage vows out of love instead of duty, she remembered her father's words. She matched and returned with force any action her husband began in bed, and she took great pleasure in making him weak from abandon, as he had made her.

So we both kept our honour.

"Lyanna, you will never believe this..." Rhaegar finally spoke, accomplished.

There. The reason you are here, other than your love for me.

"Jon is in Eastwatch with my sister. He is riding the green dragon, Rhaegal, the one Daenerys named
for me. I saw them last night. They are… they are good together as you said they might be. More than good I'd say. They are in love." Uncharacteristic, giddy happiness poured out of the normally morose corners of Rhaegar's being with every new word.

"Did you speak to him?" she inquired, realising she would not be pleased if he did, without her. Somehow she had always imagined that, when they finally saw Jon through their human eyes, they would do it together.

"No," Rhaegar shook his silver mane and illustrated that uncanny ability he'd always had to appease her inner fears, "I wouldn't, not if you were not there. And it wasn't a good time. He found Arya and Rickon. He was overwhelmed with their reunion. Seeing me was the last thing he wanted."

"How can you be certain?"

"I…" his thought did not bear saying.

Lyanna suddenly understood. "You saw him through the dragon's mind. That is how they trace people, especially their riders and family. They sense them."

"And I believe that Jon sensed me," Rhaegar finished his thought, "and wished I was not there. Though I am not certain. We are both new to… to this thing with the mind of the dragons. For as much as I was born to it. The written knowledge is insufficient and wrong."

Lyanna remembered the first time she warged into her eagle.

"Some things cannot be written down," she said simply. "Words don't suffice to describe them."

"He is all you, you know," Rhaegar blurted with pride. The giddiness returned to him, the short unease forgotten.

_He is happy_, Lyanna realised. _He is recklessly happy for having a glimpse of his son being happy even if Jon doesn't want him near._

"But he has something of me as well," Rheagar stated with amazement. "Perhaps not the best of me, but a part of me nonetheless. It's incredible."

Lyanna embraced her husband tightly. "It is, isn't it? He is both you and me and most of all himself. It is beyond wonderful! That he has grown so… That we could have made him at all in the beginning…"

Rhaegar fell silent again, with odd smile gracing his lips.

After a while he spoke in his iron voice, the one he had for sad songs and battle command.

"Do you know any stories about ice dragons in the North?" he inquired very, very timidly.

"Ice Dragon is a star," Lyanna said. "From Winterfell, it points the way north, to the Wall, on the nightly sky."

"And when you are north of the Wall, Mance tells me, it points the way south, to the safety from the white walkers inside the Seven Kingdoms. But aren't there any stories about ice dragons as creatures, as you have stories about ice spiders and giants?"

Lyanna tried hard to remember every horror story Old Nan had ever told her, Ned, Brandon and Benjen when they were all children. There was one, but it didn't mean much, and she couldn't
"The ice dragons, our old wet nurse told us, they lived in the northern skies above Essos," Lyanna said, "not Westeros. They were not slaves of the Others like ice spiders. They roamed the sky and chased the stars. Their fire and thirst for blood was quenched. They were beautiful to look at, silver and white."

"Silver and white," Rhaegar tossed backward his impossibly long hair. "But if the Others murdered such a creature, couldn't they enslave it and turn it into a wight serving them as they do with people and beasts, especially horses?"

"Here the stories are clear, all living beings slain by the Others rise as wights and their slaves. Except that we all thought them just that, stories, until this winter came."

"Well… your stories forget one particular case of living creatures," Rhaegar said bitterly, "and those are the fire-breathing dragons, who came to Westeros only three hundred years ago and who were perhaps not even in existence the last time the Long Night came… The beings that the fire cannot kill..."

Lyanna wondered where he was heading. "Others can surely kill dragons just like they can kill anyone else," she said, just to remind him, if he had some silly rescue on his mind.

"That they can," Rhaegar agreed, "we encountered a dead, enslaved dragon. We killed him. And ever since I couldn't stop wondering about one thing."

This is it, Lyanna knew. What is truly wrecking his mind.

"Say it, my love, maybe it will be easier if you do," she irreverently tousled his hair.

"Daenerys and I," he said roughly, hammering every word in his distress. "We were burned alive and the fire could not kill us. If anything, it has made us stronger. What would happen if a white walker turns one of us into a wight? Wights may be the living dead, but they walk and they fight. Euron even talks. Their life is foul and cursed but it is still life! What if Daenerys or I are burned as wights? I suspect we would rise again, but as what? Whom would we serve? What would we become? What kind of monsters? Perhaps worse than those that had created us, killing and enslaving for our own gain," Rhaegar sounded empty after his outburst.

"There is a very simple way to avoid this problem," Lyanna reacted firmly, every inch a wolf. "You never let them kill you. Never, Rhaegar, have you heard me? Never. Promise me."

"Would that I could," he said.

"Then promise you will return to deliver our child. I lied once about dying in childbed. The gods can punish such mummery. Don't make it come true."

Rhaegar promised, clenching his teeth, almost strangling her in his embrace. And when he reluctantly released her, Lyanna understood it was time to go.

"You have to be back before night time, that's when they attack," Lyanna suddenly understood and gestured north of the Wall. "Where exactly?"

"Western coast. Near the Shadow Tower or so Mance and his people tell me, for we haven't yet seen the Wall, nor the Bridge of Skulls leading to it. Only mountains. If Mance is right I should be back in three or four more days when the wildlings are safely behind the Wall. Then we will go and speak to our son." Rhaegar appeared determined, and for the first time that day, calm.
The couple dressed and ate in well-practised silence, as two fellow soldiers who have known each other for long, each going to a different battle; he with arms and monsters, she with ledgers and daily goings of the castle. Sometimes she envied his part of the ordeal. She rubbed her belly to remind herself of her duty.

Outside, they waited for the dragon. Rhaegar looked at the grey sky and closed his eyes with concentration.

"You first," he said firmly when Drogon's wings darkened the evening sky. "I am not risking you being this far north at any time after sunset." His jaw was firm and she understood she should do him this kindness, but in Lyanna's nature woman's wisdom was often replaced with mule stubbornness.

"No," she denied him. "I would go with you as far as I can."

Rhaegar sighed. "Drogon can take me safely only to the western shore," he explained. "From there, I'll have to go on foot."

The dragons had their limitations as anyone else.

"Very well," she said. "Then I'll go with you until that point."

Rhaegar stopped arguing, lost in thought. He was still with her in body but his mind was not. His brooding continued during the very short flight west alongside the Wall and then north, above the Sunset Sea.

Lyanna's uneasiness grew as she carefully took note of the layout and shape of the mountainous bay and the tiny beach where Drogon brought them. She had been to Shadow Tower before, but this place did not look like it was close to the westernmost outpost of the Night's Watch, not at all. Yet Mance knew his native land better than anyone alive and he told Rhaegar they were nearing it. Perplexed, Lyanna committed the surroundings to her memory.

*If you are not back in a few days, the eagle will come after you.*

*If I can find her first.*

After she had lost trace of Jon through her eagle eyes, Lyanna kept flying north when she slept, hoping to see her son again. Days later, she stopped being able to open them in her sleep, or rather, if she did so, all she saw was darkness. Yet the bird was alive and fed at times for she could not feel her hunger. Trapped perhaps, but Lyanna couldn't fathom who would capture her there. No men lived that far north. *Maybe giants have pets. They would be able to catch the eagle. They dare go farther north than men if the stories are true, even in winter.*

*And so many tales have come to life of late.*

Rhaegar slid down the dragon's paw and into the shallow, ice-cold water. Knee-deep, he gallantly bowed to Lyanna as he did long ago when he had crowned her his Queen of Love and Beauty. Then she was on a high dais and now on Drogon's back. She decided she liked the dragon better.

"Don't cry," he said, knowing her well. "This time I will return."

Rhaegar waddled to the shore. His forehead wrinkled when he reached it, giving her one last look. The dragon obeyed the dragonlord's unspoken word and took flight. The great sea glimmered and shivered under his paws as Lyanna was lifted up again. Up between the clouds she slept. When she woke, Drogon landed in the godswood of Winterfell very silently. As soon as she was down, he dived sneakily into the black pool in front of the heart tree, in a habit he established inside the castle.
Lyanna knew the dragon's head was buried in the crypt of her ancestors yet they had never risen to
denounce the sacrilege.

*How can they? They are dead,* she repeated that truth to herself many times. Yet in her childhood the
old Kings of Winter looked very much alive on their thrones, and all Stark children were in awe of
them in their tombs. Lyanna had always felt they *would* rise had they been truly, genuinely offended.

The godswood was populated that evening. At the other end of the pool, her younger niece, Arya,
slashed savagely at a large weirwood root with her thin Braavosi sword. A boy with shiny auburn
hair like Sansa's, and the stubborn, rebellious face of Lyanna's older brother Brandon, only with blue
eyes, caressed the white bark of the tree.

_Rickon,* Lyanna realised.

"Maybe I can go to Bran and Sansa and see if they are well," the boy said to the weirwood, "I also
look like them."

But the tree remained mute despite that Arya kept cutting it.

"Arry," Gendry said gently, grabbing her sword hand just hard enough that she was forced to drop
her weapon. "You've seen the heart tree in Greywater Watch and the long weirwood caves of the
Brotherhood in the riverlands. She isn't gone. There must be a way of the old gods under here for
those who know how to open it."

Arya's face darkened. She wrenched her arm free, but didn't pick up her sword. Her anger became
muted like she was.

Gendry, on the other hand, turned impatient and loud. "I told you we should have come out and
greeted the ladies. That would be proper. But you didn't want to see Daenerys for reasons only you
know and won't share with me. Is this about your handsome cousin?"

"How could I know Sansa would just step into the tree!" Arya screamed back. "I thought she was
going to whimper and cry and *wait* for him. How can she still be so stupid? She *killed* herself for
missing her dog husband. Now she will never see him again. And what do you think he'll do when
he finds out? He'll blame himself for leaving her and get himself killed in return! As if I didn't know
him..."

Gendry was at a loss. "You don't know him that well. You don't even like him. The Hound
kidnapped you once," he said cautiously.

"And kept me alive in his own way," Arya said solemnly as Ned might, or as High Septon would
praise the glorious dead. "He wouldn't let me die even when I became useless to him as a hostage.
Maybe he did it for the memory of my sister. It matters little. I know him well enough. But how
Sansa can love *him* so much is beyond me. She was always *simpering* and *mild* in her affections."

"You wouldn't know what love is, would you?" Gendry said, very annoyed. "Or the force it has?
You are just a little girl."

"What's wrong with you now?" Arya glared at Gendry, looked murderous.

Almost anyone in the king's household except Arya knew perfectly well what was wrong with
Gendry. Lyanna cleared her throat. She would find no better moment to intervene.

"Gendry is right," she forced herself to speak queenly with the reassurance she didn't feel. On the
inside, she was often as angry and as afraid as her niece. With years she merely learned to hide it
better or to subdue her fears faster.

"Howland Reed told me about the ways of the old gods. The travellers go fast in them, as if by magic. Those who have their mark on their body can enter and others are banned from them. If a way is open, it can be used. The most frequent sign of a traveller are eyes, green or red. But I dare say that Sansa and Rickon do have the colours of the old gods in their hair and skin. If the tree opened up when she walked in, she should be safe."

"I can't believe the trees would let anyone pass. They would surely swallow and smother me," Arya said.

And me and my son, no doubt, without someone to guide us. Lyanna couldn't agree more, but she would not say it, not now.

Most Starks inherited the colours of ash, ice and death. The colours of winter on their face and hair. And she doubted that Jon's father's blood did anything to appease the old gods, always angry because their chosen kings of old knelt to dragons… Yet Jon did enter and come out, when the way was open by the dead child of the forest, liberated from the curse of serving the Others when Lyanna’s eagle had instinctively clawed out her eye. It was one of the worst sensations Lyanna ever had to endure as a warg being present in her animal at the time.

"You've seen Jon, haven't you?" Lyanna asked. "If you did, you must know that he has been under the trees and came out alive. If he succeeded, why shouldn't Sansa?

"Jon is so tall now," Rickon said with adoration, oblivious of how much he must have grown in the years he was away. "Are you his mother?"

"Can't you tell?" Lyanna nodded enthusiastically, pulling a long face until Rickon laughed. "And I can fly with an eagle just as Arya, Jon and you can run with your wolves. I saw Jon taking the secret passage weeks ago. If he is alright then the trees did let him out."

"Boots," Arya said out of the blue, very vigilant and alert. "Heavy footsteps. Sandals as well."

The serious face of the heart tree turned long and Stark-like, or maybe it was just a trick of the fading light, playing with Lyanna's tired mind. Being with child meant she could fall asleep anywhere, at any time, most of the time. This would only stop when she gave birth.

Lyanna glanced over the walls separating the godswood from the rest of the castle, but she was a short woman, and they were too high to see anything.

"Sansa mentioned something about the mutiny," Rickon recalled with difficulty.

In barely a week since she held Winterfell, Lyanna had to address the rising tension between her and her husband's men; the blunt, outspoken northmen and the petty, well-spoken southron lordlings and landed knights from riverlands and crown lands. No great lord rode north with Rhaegar when he left the capital in haste. The wardens loyal to him would sail to the Wall later, when they called what they could of their banners; Robin Arryn from the East, Willas Tyrell from the South and Tommen Lannister from the West. The riverlands and stormlands were lordless until future times and mostly left to their own devices. Rhaegar had written to the Prince of Dorne, but as far as Lyanna knew he had received no answer.

After the departure of the Golden Company for Shadow Tower, the balance of forces in Winterfell clearly favoured the northmen. It was mostly the presence of Daenerys' Unsullied, loyal to her and thus to the House Targaryen, that kept the intrigues of those unsatisfied with the new order at bay.
Some northmen whispered Lyanna was not a Stark any more and that her marriage brought shame and dishonour to her family. Foremost among those was Galbart Glover. She suspected he would also be the first one wishing to marry her and inherit Winterfell as her lord husband if she was suddenly widowed.

Peopler will never change.

Lyanna sighed deeply and straightened her small narrow shoulders.

"Drogon!" She hated to shake the dragon out of his cooling stupor in the pool but it couldn't be helped. Unlike people who bathed in the hot springs when occasion allowed, Drogon preferred fresh water for his leisure.

"Drogon", she repeated quietly and clearly. Rhaegar said the dragon could hear her spoken word. It was a less precise manner to command him than through the mind, but it should work for those whom the beast perceived as linked to his rider. Riders. This dragon belongs to Daenerys and he only flies with my husband as his friend. This truth was self-evident to both Lyanna and Rhaegar.

The dragon's black-horned head came slowly out of the water. One eye was closed. The other studied them, ancient and cunning.

Clever, Lyanna thought. He shall not be tricked by anyone.

"Take all of them to Eastwatch, please," Lyanna said, pointing at Arya, Gendry and Rickon. "They will be safe in Jon's command."

"Or to a place where Jon would wish us to be," Arya would not be herself without notions of her own.

"As long as it is safe and far from here," Lyanna agreed, not understanding her niece fully, but needing to take two trueborn heirs to Winterfell out of harm's way as soon as possible, and that would be done easier if Arya went freely.

Lyanna married a Targaryen. Her husband was a living dragonlord. She could not be easily widowed and made an heir to the north, so her person was pretty much useless to whoever orchestrated the rebellion. If she was raped, she could not get with child. And she doubted that whoever took the castle would kill her with Rhaegar alive. Her house words did not bode well for her enemies, but the Targaryen words were even clearer. Fire and blood. Their meaning was understood across the Seven Kingdoms.

"Will you be alright?" Arya inquired from dragon's back with both honest concern and courtesy, making Lyanna proud. Rickon looked thrilled with the adventure of flying, and Gendry selfishly glad he was taking Arya away from danger.

"There always has to be a Stark in Winterfell," Lyanna said. "Being held hostage is a manageable situation for my age and station."

"Drogon, fly!" Please. The dragon obeyed, ending all conversation, disappearing in silence. He can mute the flapping of his wings if he so wishes.

Several hours later, Lyanna regretted her own pride and hasty statement. In an empty rage, she wished she was a true dragonlady who could call Drogon back and command him to burn her enemies. Yet even as she thought so, she knew her desire to be in vain; dragonfire would irreparably ruin Winterfell, barely renewed after the last sack done by the Boltons, on the verge of the Long Night.
She ended up imprisoned on the first floor of the Great Keep with Lady Mormont, Lady Dustin, and, to her great surprise, Lady Greyjoy, who was supposed to be Stannis' prized hostage on the Wall.

Galbart Glover thrived as a self-proclaimed head of rebellion, but the muscle of it were Daenerys' Unsullied, who looked heathen and mindless, obeying Glover blindly. Why the most loyal army in the world suddenly changed allegiance was beyond Lyanna's understanding.

The Manderly men managed to run away. But it would be months before they reached White Harbor and brought help in winter, and they would be fortunate if they came home alive.

"Lady Cerwyn might be on our side, but the others are not," Lady Mormont said, counting their enemies and allies. "Glovers, Umbers, the mountain clans, Hornwood's bastard…. All of them men. They say…" the normally ruthless lady went blank.

"They say that the House of Stark is down to only women," Lady Dustin continued sweetly. "The two oldest ones are married to the enemies of the North, one to a known raper and madman against her will, and the second one to the Lannister dog by force. Only Lady Arya remains a maid and many are willing to marry her. They say Stannis is king and he has Rickon Stark as hostage, the trueborn male heir to Winterfell."

Lady Greyjoy was sulking at the window, not taking part in the conversation, so at least Lyanna was spared her opinion in the matter.

Lyanna had heard it all. She fumed inwardly and turned upside down in her head the only new information in Barbrey's tirade. Stannis is behind this. He somehow bought or bewitched the Unsullied.

_The red woman. Howland spoke of the sorceress with concern._

_But what can a priestess of a god from Essos do in the world ruled by the old gods?_

_It would seem more than enough._

"Who is guarding us?" she asked Maege, ignoring the other two ladies.

"Bolton men," Lady Mormont said, "Roose's, not Ramsay's. Those who can be trusted to do what they are told."

"Roose's you said? And as honest as guards can be?" Lyanna kissed Maege on the cheek. It was the first truly good news since the occupation.

Lyanna banged at the door of their quarters until a confused guard partially opened them. "My lady… Your Grace," he said, unsure how to treat her. His cloak used to be pink, but he had tried to dye it black to hide his allegiance to the Boltons. The result was a dirty grey hue of mud.

"Lady Lyanna will do," she said, "bring me Steelshanks."

"Our orders."

"The Others take your orders!" Lyanna yelled from the top of her small lungs. "Bring me Steelshanks now or it will be your entrails adorning the godswood once I am free again. If you don't believe me, ask Greatjon about Walder Frey."
"There's the catch," Maege said sadly. "He ended up chained in the crypts just before they captured you. I think he's the only highborn northern man present here, who refused to side with the mutineers. He told them it was the Lannister dog, the wildling king and one of Ned's girls sent by you and Rhaegar who got his arse out from under the Twins and not Glover."

Lyanna almost choked laughing. *There is hope.* Winterfell had no proper dungeons. Justice was done at the block and disputes resolved by talking. Stifling her attack of good mood, she glared at the guard again.

"I said Steelshanks, now!" She wished she had the high heeled shoes she used when she posed as Ashara Dayne to make herself taller, but she wouldn't risk wearing those while being with child. When Roose's captain was there, Lyanna asked. "Have I imprisoned you when I took Winterfell? Have I taken my revenge on you for what your liege had done?"

"No, lady, but-"

"But what? Roose is dead. You have no lord until the Warden of the North names one."

"Lady Walda is with child in Dreadfort…"

"Women die in childbirth every day," Lyanna said flatly, ignoring her own fears in the matter. This broke him.

"What is it you wish?" Steelshanks said despondently, but his demeanour was more condescending than before.

"Guard Lady Dustin and Lady Greyjoy in the other room while two men of your choosing are guarding Maege and me."

"Why?" Barbrey had to know.

"Because you are only here with us so that you can spy on me for Glover and kill any hope I might have left by your friendly words," Lyanna said coldly.

Barbrey paled, which was the same as if she had confessed what Lyanna only suspected to be true. *Now I know.*

"Lord Glover did say we can house the ladies in three separate rooms to make them more comfortable," Steelshanks said, undecided.

"Glover will hear of this," Barbrey threatened. "Stannis and his red witch too!"

"So be it," Lyanna cut her off, wondering if the unknown woman would approve of being called witch. "Tell them whatever you want."

"However, Barbrey, I do have to say this," the wolf queen continued with sweet poison in her voice, "If you spy on Glover for me, you will keep your head and estates and I will not hold you responsible for any of this when the odds change again in my favour. On my word as a Stark. I don't demand your loyalty as you would never give it to me. Only to betray him as you are betraying me. But since I don't want to make the task of double spying too easy for you where it concerns my person, you will go with Steelshanks now if you hold your life dear."

When Maege and Lyanna were alone, the queen lay on the large featherbed in the middle of the room, completely dressed.
"Why are you here and not with Glover?" she asked softly, searching for the truth in the older woman with cold eyes.

"I may look like a man, but that doesn't make me one," the bear lady said casually, dressed in boiled leather and mail in place of soft wool and velvet. "Why should I trust his wisdom above that of my own sex?"

"Only that?" Lyanna was hoping for more.

"And in winter the House Mormont will trust the House Stark over all others. I have eyes. I also have many different daughters. Yet they are no less bear ladies for it. You seem like a Stark to me. Your nieces as well. Both of them."

The admission gave Lyanna enough hope to trust Maege a little.

"Hold my hands," she pleaded. "I will look for help the only way I can. We need an army or a dragon with his rider. You need to wake me if I begin shaking and also for the evening meal. Don't let me sleep for more than three hours."

Yet she turned sideways on the bed and stretched her arms forward before Maege's huge palms obediently encircled hers. *Loyalty or not, I would not have her touch my belly by chance.*

The eyes of the white-headed eagle snapped open in the darkness. She tried to hop away but she could not, hitting the bars of her invisible cage. The animal consciousness she shared already knew that spreading wings would be equally in vain.

She screeched helplessly for hours. To no avail. Warm hands pulled her back to her human body and she devoured her supper as only a woman with child could. The salty gravy was better than Rhaegar's seal stew but it would not do to think about her husband, nor to cry. At night, all women imprisoned in Winterfell and their gaolers slept well and sound.

In the morning, after breaking her fast, Lyanna tried again.

She opened her eagle eyes and cried out with determination. Someone had been feeding her in her captivity or the eagle would be dead by now. She hoped that this someone would be irritated by the sound and come and see her. Then, she would attack and fly away.

After a long time, her prison shook tremendously, causing her fast beating bird's heart a very nervous flutter. Suddenly, she saw a pair of red eyes and a mass of pale fur which howled, in place of the darkness the eagle was used to by now.

*Wolf,* the eagle thought.

*Ghost,* the wolf said politely. Or was it her son? The huge white direwolf instantly lost the ability of speech, so Jon must have returned to his body if he had been in his wolf at all. She wondered how good her son was in mastering his gift.

*Very good, if his animal just opened the cage for me.* The action was exceedingly difficult for an enormous four-pawed creature.

*Ghost!* the eagle let out a harsh cry of both menace and joy, spreading her wings freely. Gliding under the high ceiling she looked down at the too small wooden box with bars where she had been imprisoned. One side was missing, torn out with sharp teeth. The dark cloth which must have been covering the cage lay ripped in pieces on the floor. The wolf was not gentle in his effort of opening. A look up revealed an oddly familiar ceiling. She was in a cold, shadowy room, *resembling* the one...
where her human body slept.

Resembling Winterfell.

A dishevelled young man barged in, his pale face bare and flushed. Lyanna didn't have to look twice to know who he was. Very carefully, he studied the eagle in her flight, as if they had all time in the world. It was too dark in the room to see with precision if he... smiled. This was dangerous, because the eagle could smell the cold, and the woman within her knew what it meant. The dead and their cold masters were near.

We must be far beyond the Wall. What are you doing here, Jon? You are supposed to be in Eastwatch, kissing Daenerys.

But then you wouldn't be my son, would you? The Starks are not made to sit still in winter and I, I could never do it.

Lyanna flew out through the stone window frame, amazed that there was no glass, nor shutters on it. How can anyone survive here? Son! she rejoiced, waiting for Jon and Ghost to follow, but the only sound that came out of her beak was ugly croaking.

The view of the castle from the outside confirmed her eerie suspicion about the room. Every stone resembled Winterfell at first sight. Yet, in place of the wolfswood around it, the sea was near. She could hear the breaking of the waves and smell the salt in the air. And the cold, the devastating cold.

The castle was empty. Ghost castle. And it felt as evil as the cold inhabiting it to the animal consciousness she shared.

Lyanna finally spotted her son, and landed very carefully on his shoulder. It took her years of practice to be able to land in such a way, first on Benjen and later on Rhaegar. Benjen had to see a maester once for the scratches the eagle's claws had caused him.

Jon froze in place. Lyanna hopped from his shoulder onto the back of his wolf and croaked.

"Hello," Jon finally said, very cautiously, glancing around as if to make certain they were alone and that no other human witnessed his madness. "Can you hear me?"

Lyanna screeched briefly. Of course she could hear him. Answering, however, was an entirely different matter. Birds did not speak, not even the eagles, the rulers of the skies.

"Why are you here?"

Lyanna wondered the same about her son. What made you embark on the ways of the old gods on your own?

She spread her wings and flapped them vigorously, enjoying the slow return of the eagle's strength and agility. She knew that speed would follow. Well, I came looking for help, son. But my troubles can wait, you see. First I shall help you, in any way I can. With sharp eyes, and sharp claws. And wings. Your dragon cannot follow here, only your wolf. And your mother. Unworthy as she may be.

Jon sighed, probably realising that the answer would not, could not be forthcoming.

"Is it really, truly you?" he asked, incredulously.
She wished fervently she could be with him in her human form and speak. Instead, she uttered a weak cry and bent her head down. Nodding did not come naturally to an eagle.

"Mother."

Jon added the word as an afterthought, as though he was becoming accustomed to the idea. His voice betrayed no feeling, only constatation; acceptance, no more.

_It is better than hatred._

Lyanna’s wings fluttered spontaneously. _Son._ A hoarse cry left her beak and it somehow appeased Jon.

"Why have another Winterfell built here?" he seemed more at ease about talking to, essentially, himself, since she could not answer, not truly. "And who would have done it?"

Lyanna wished she knew, but she was as baffled as her son about many things. _Why are you having no cloak? No headdress? Are you not cold? It must be your father's blood…_ Yet even Rhaegar wrapped his head and hair in winter when he was not riding a dragon...

_Let us take a good look around here while it is empty,_ she followed her premonition and soared upward, not flying too fast. Her son and his wolf took a hint and followed.

The moat was frozen; the portcullis rusty and designed very differently than the simple iron one in Winterfell. Lyanna had seen similar metalwork in another castle, but for as much as she cracked her eagle head about it, she could not recall where.

The castle missed the lower, outer walls. The moat was a frozen stream surrounding the higher, inner walls, which were intact and so very much like Winterfell that the illusion was almost perfect. Yet one or two towers and turrets were missing and some were built differently. There was no Guest House. There were no glass gardens, but some sort of stable on their place. The Great Keep looked older and less elaborate, missing the top floor. There was no rookery. The emptiness was dreadful. Winterfell was big, but this castle was probably even larger, covering many more acres of the grounds. _Almost as a big as a small city._

"The Night's King has emptied his court," Jon said pensively, "but where have they all gone? His wolf padded silently next to him.

_Who is the Night's King and why would he make his court look like Winterfell?_ Lyanna wondered.

She flew to the godswood. Her son followed. The weirwood was there, but it was blind. It had no eyes nor mouth. No one could use it to travel here. The old gods did not see what was done in their name. Ghost padded under the canopy of red leaves. _Red eyes._ Lyanna understood who must have opened the door of the old gods to Jon this time. _But where is the door you took if not here?_

"This is all wrong," Jon said.

The eagle followed her son's gaze to the final, shocking difference. Behind the enclosure of the godswood, behind the inner ward, the tower they both knew as the _burned_ tower stood almost two hundred feet high, taller than any wall and undamaged. _The highest watchtower._

"This castle can't be real," Jon concluded.

His mother could not agree more. Yet the stone and the timber the buildings were made of seemed real enough, as did the godswood and the exact number and shape of _frozen_ pools in it; one black in
front of the heart tree, and three smaller ones, which should have been heated, at the edge of the
godswood and under the place where the Guest House should have been.

Mother and son had both seen and counted those pools so many times.

When they departed from the godswood, there was almost no light left. The full moon slowly
conquered the sky. The winter day became utterly spent. The eagle heard it first, many feet at the
main gates, thudding.

*So they come back at night. The Night's court for the Night's king,* Lyanna thought. *How convenient.*
The simple way out of the castle was blocked for any wingless beings.

She screeched wildly and flew in the direction of the small postern gate which was blind in real
Winterfell, ending in the outer wall. *But there is no such wall here so it should take us out.*

Fortunately, her son followed.

The ghost castle shrieked with eerie life of thousands and thousands of wights returning to it, filling
every open space and every building on the inside. From above, as far as the eagle could see, there
seemed to be almost as many wights as people in King’s Landing.

In the inner ward, in the heart of the castle, Jon halted and looked back, troubled. His wolf lingered
too close to the dead, sniffing them. Some might be able to see him.

"Ghost, to me," Jon had to call him before the man and wolf rushed after the eagle in her flight.

Lyanna thanked the old gods that the postern was still there, and that it did lead out. *One of the oldest
parts of the castle, just like the burned tower.*

*Old,* she realised. *This is Winterfell as it might have looked in the past. Thousands of years ago.*

Behind the postern, a narrow path led through a flat, stony moor, and then slowly up, to the top of a
low, mountainous, treeless ridge, white and desolate as death. The man and the wolf began climbing
and the eagle flew above them.

In the bleak surroundings, Lyanna noticed the odd blade on her son’s hip for the first time, glowing
faintly red through the black headscarf serving as its scabbard. *So you have found the sword of
heroes.* The eagle shivered, afraid, from the weapon or from what was before them, it was hard to
tell.

Soon, they reached the top of the ridge and gazed over, at the large valley stretching in all directions
for many leagues. The end of it could not be seen, disappearing in the night.

*The heart of winter.*

*The place where the white walkers sleep.*

Pale, wrinkled, unnatural beings lay down there by the thousands, ugly and threatening in their rest.
Their bodies were partially covered with ice. A very small portion of the valley nearest to the
imaginary Winterfell gaped empty. *Of those who have already risen...*

A few sleepers were waking up now, trying out the crystal blades buried with them as they did so.
One cried shrilly, waking two Others who had slept behind him until then. Another sleeper turned
into a blue mist and drifted up, towards the yellow moon.
The winter wind whistled merrily, mocking the odd group of scouts for their useless endeavour.

Jon's face became graver than his father's and Lyanna didn't need him to tell her what he had been thinking. The count was simple. The force gathered under their eyes was so great that it provoked despair.

Her eagle's face would have turned very long if birds could wear such expression.

There were so many Others sleeping in front of their eyes that the fire of three dragons existing in the world might not be enough to burn them. And when they all woke, maybe they could cut through the Wall with their blades and take the Seven Kingdoms for their own.

Lyanna remembered Old Nan's ancient voice, whispering hoarsely with horror, "The sleepers will all rise when the day becomes so short that it does not exist any more, and they will march on the Wall to bring it down when the Long Night comes… All who live to see such times shall cry bitter tears! And none of them shall live to tell the tale..."

"The odds have been worse before," Jon murmured as flatly as he could, patting his wolf.

"Haven't they… mother?" He raised his other hand to the air as if he might have wanted to caress the eagle as well and changed his mind.

The question rang painfully sincere. The second time Jon called her mother, his voice was very quiet. Almost… affectionate. Her bird heart raced and jumped from hope that it was not too late for them. Not too late for any of them. In the end of time as they knew it.

But a pair of warm hands pulled Lyanna back to her human body precisely at that moment. The enticing smell of chicken broth filled up her waking world.

She was shaking with cold despite the warmth of the fire in the great hearth. Maege Mormont looked at her with extreme worry.

"Have you found help?" the bear lady asked, voicing her concern.

"Not yet," Lyanna said, keeping her composure and willing her body to stop with spasms. "But I will. I have made progress this morning."

Lady Dustin joined them for the meal, as did the savagely pretty ironborn lady who had kept to herself the night before, probably driven by hunger. Steelshanks shrugged, as if he were saying it was the best he could do. Lyanna nodded briefly at her new captain of the guards who had not yet received his appointment. He had done better than she expected.

The Bolton men were replaced by the mute Unsullied in front of their door at noon.

Midday meal by moonlight, Lyanna thought wistfully, looking through the glass-paned window. The day is down to half a day now.

Mouthful by mouthful, she took her food, smiled at Maege and made insignificant womanly conversation to let them all see she was alright. Yes, the chicken was excellent. This is much better than Rhaegar's cooking. She swallowed hard and smiled again. Yes, they should compliment Glover's appointment of the new cook when the occasion presented itself.

Yes, Lady Dustin looked fresh this morning. As did Lady Greyjoy. The ironborn pointedly ignored the chatting, reminding Lyanna of herself in younger age. Weren't you with Stannis? Did you help cause this rebellion? Did your allies betray you after you did your part?
Soon she would know the answers. She only needed to keep her temper down, her mind sharp as her eagle's eyes and be patient.

It was not in Lyanna's nature to give up easily. Someone always lived to tell the tale. How else would Old Nan have learned her stories?

Stay well, son. Your father is out there as well.

You are not alone.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up being greatly influenced by the death of David Bowie and his various songs, especially Rock n Roll Suicide.

Next up: Arya

Comment feed the author. Any feedback is welcome.

Thank you for reading.
Arya II

Chapter Notes

A big thanks to DrHolland for a wonderful beta read of this chapter and for reassurance that it is not too bad. And to TopShelfCrazy for finding the last unclear bits and mistakes.

Thank you for reading.

On we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arya

The sky was wide and open, containing no threat. It was a bit lighter blue than Arya had seen it for weeks. The day must have been longer here.

Very well, she thought, or rather, she hoped. We must be flying south.

Her joy about the success of her mission was mingled with guilt. What she did felt like treason, in part.

Without Nymeria's strength, Arya would have never woken from her enchanted sleep, after refusing to serve the Many-Faced God. In her wolf, she could exist in waking dreams and know she was alive. This gave her the strength to endure. Much before that, had she not been a skinchanger, she might have still been a simple blind girl in the House of Black and White. Worse, she knew that now, she might have truly become no one without her wolf dreams in Braavos.

And if I didn't have Needle in hiding. The weapon Jon gave me.

Nymeria and Needle were the only worldly possessions she could never forsake and they served as a beacon to her. She could not forget she was Arya Stark.

Once she wouldn't have minded it so much becoming no one, or wouldn't have known better. She had lived for a prayer of vengeance in her heart; for reciting the names of people she would kill. No one could do that just the same. But now most of those named by her were dead. Her prayer was almost forgotten. And the thought of losing herself, of losing Arya Stark forever, made her shiver with sick cold in her sinewy girlish body.

Arya leaned back onto a horned spike for warmth, and pressed her legs harder into Drogon's scaled body. They were stretched left and right; far too short to straddle the dragon's huge neck. The simmering heat was pleasant underneath. At the same time, her ears and face itched from the cold. The wind made it impossible to keep the hood of the cloak up. She loosened her braid to offset the chill and forcefully looked back in order to comb her long brown hair with her fingers. Seated very close behind the spike she was resting against, Gendry immediately gave her that look, as though he were going to kiss her again.

Rickon was in front of Arya, whooping from the joy of flying. Brother and sister shared the same space between two spikes. We should not give in to this, not with Rickon here. It would be… most
Nymeria, I'm so sorry, Arya returned from the newfound danger Gendry represented to the safety of her own doubts. I will be back soon. I promise. You will hunt in the wolfswood with your pack. No harm can come to you there.

Her direwolf had become almost as big as Ghost. She could not travel safely on the back of the dragon. Yet it was terribly unfair to leave her. On top of everything the wolf had meant for her in the past, without Nymeria's help, Arya would have never been able to talk to Drogon. She did it through her wolf eyes with as much courtesy as she could muster. It seemed prudent to talk politely to the largest living dragon. Even Nymeria respected him, as one monster would another; Jon's green one seemed calm and quiet in comparison.

As Jon so often was when we were children.

Yet they are all dragons. They all breathe fire, Arya reminded herself. Even Jon, in part. She didn’t dare tell him that, sensing he might not take it very well. His eyes darkened and his lips stretched thin every time Arya described his parents. He seemed both avid to hear more about them and resentful of their existence. Yet there was a tiny spark in him that Arya had never noticed before, a faint touch of living fire she did not possess in the deep corners of her own soul. Maybe it had always been there with Jon, and she was just too small to see it, or maybe it woke to life only when the dragons did.

But the greatest change Arya noticed in Jon was in the Stark demeanour they both inherited and shared. Jon could be grim as death now when he was not joking and calling her little sister. If she didn't know him and love him so well, Arya would think of him as dangerous. He has become imposing like the statues in the crypts of Winterfell. She wondered what differences Jon saw in her after all the time. The only observation he made was that she had grown, accompanied by a not quite happy, knowledgeable smile. Arya wondered what he meant by it, but she was so overwhelmed with trading stories that she forgot to ask.

Six years. A lifetime.

Drogon was in a hurry. Huge leathern wings flapped noisily, with all their might. Their insistent beating disturbed Arya, especially because she had no link to the dragon's mind when Nymeria was very far. He could be carrying them anywhere. She sweated under the leather jerkin she wore despite the cold, questioning her idea to embark on this voyage. Be as it may, it was too late to be sorry. The dragon hadn't dropped them or baked them to eat just yet, so she presumed he would land them somewhere.

I listened to your plea, Drogon. I returned with you to Winterfell so you could complete your rider's bidding to take us to the Wall and bring us back. The dragon had seemed most upset with the idea he might not fulfil Rhaegar's orders in their entirety.

I didn't tell Daenerys you looked at her for a while when she arrived. You begged me, through Nymeria, for all of us to stay hidden. Wasn't that what you wanted? And what did I get for helping you? I may have lost my only sister! You have to do this one thing for me now, will you, dragon?

She replayed in her head her solitary conversation with Jon in Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. When everyone was asleep, Jon sneaked out of the bed he had most certainly been sharing with Daenerys, only to spend the last, darkest hours before grey dawn with Arya, both in conversation and companionable silence.

Arya was so delighted about seeing Jon again that she was almost able to forget Gendry's kiss. For a little while.
Arya and Jon spoke at length that night, in more detail than when they were not alone; of what they did, of people they met, of weapons they wielded… Jon told her about the Valyrian sword, Longclaw, he had used for a while and how it fitted him well, though Ice was a much greater blade.

They laughed a lot. They spoke of everything, except their tumultuous feelings; Jon's for Daenerys and his parents and Arya's for Gendry.

Jon told her he would be leaving on the morrow, to scout some dangerous place behind the Wall. He told her she and Rickon should not worry for he would be back. He told her….

Hearing from his mouth how she was the reason he wanted to ride to Winterfell; to save her, and how his sworn brothers stabbed him to death for it, stirred a boulder of pain inside Arya's being, unmoved since her father's murder. Even if the girl whom Jon would have saved was never her, only stupid Jeyne Poole who used to call her Arya Horseface...

Jon would have died for me. The least I can do for him is bring him the stupid horn.

Jon never said so directly, but Arya understood very well some things he was not saying. Brother and sister never needed many words to understand each other. He truly wanted back the broken aurochs horn, which was now in Oldtown with his friend called Sam, who was studying to become a maester and who was the fattest boy in existence according to Jon. The horn might have belonged to a man or a giant called Joramun thousands of years ago and it could be used to either bring down the Wall or make it stronger. The exact usage mattered little to Arya. But if Jon was right, the horn was very valuable.

The Horn of Winter.

Yet her brother judged he could not spare any time to look for it himself. Jon chose to return north first, not seeing, or not wishing to see how other men could steal the horn from his fat friend for their own gain, if they had not done so already.

Who better than two Starks to take it back north where it belongs?

Two Starks and Gendry, she corrected herself; justice demanded she include all of her small pack.

It shouldn't be too difficult to find a very fat boy in the Citadel.

Oldtown was a big city, Arya had learned as a child, but there was only one Citadel. She expected there would not be many fat boys left learning there in winter. Food was severely rationed even for the king's household and many suffered from famine. The worst that could happen is that they wouldn't let her in because she looked like a girl now, and maesters were only boys.

Gendry and Rickon aren't girls. One of them will help.

They just didn't know it yet.

Her stomach twisted again, as it occasionally did since the first time she thought of her and Gendry in bed. Damn this. Damn me.

Would it hurt?

It didn't take her long to understand that Jon looked through Ghost's eyes and saw her kissing Gendry. Now, with distance between them, Arya tried to understand why it had made him so upset. Jon didn't want to kiss her, that much was certain. Brothers or cousins, Jon and Arya did not cause this horrible gut feeling to each other. Anyone could see that, couldn't they? Except probably Gendry
who had always been too stupid to see into Arya's soul, starting from the moment when she was so angry with him as a child because tavern girls pretended to like him. He would be running after the courtesans in Braavos as any other man. Isn't that what his father did?

Arya could think of only one other explanation for Jon's anger and she felt queasy from it. It was obvious Jon bedded Daenerys. The glances they exchanged were even more stupid than those she had witnessed between Sansa and the Hound. She wondered how stupid her own face looked like these days when she thought of Gendry.

Did Jon bed other girls before? Does he know it to be so horrible for girls in the beginning that he is afraid for me?

How bad can it be? Her guts kept twisting with odd pain. Somewhere in the back of her mind, her mother's voice declared that a highborn girl should remain a maid until her wedding day...

Gendry briefly touched one of her shoulders precisely at that moment. The innocent gesture made Arya shiver from head to toe.

"It's taking us a long time," he said with worry, the truth of their changed flight destination finally dawning on him. "We flew from the Wall to Winterfell in less than an hour."

"Maybe he has to fly around something," Arya lied unconvincingly. "Maybe there is a storm ahead."

"How? The sky is more blue here," Gendry said pensively. For once, she had to admit he wasn't wrong.

Arya hoped that Aunt Lyanna was right and that Sansa did not die in her foolish attempt to join the Hound. Yet she was also terribly disappointed for not having the opportunity to talk to her sister. She still found Sansa insufferable at times, when she acted like a perfect lady, but she would rather speak with her than with Aunt Lyanna or Daenerys. Sansa was her older sister and she was married. She would probably not laugh at Arya and, being a poor liar, Sansa would answer truthfully if Arya asked one or two things about the marriage bed. What their septa told them was probably as inaccurate as the simpering songs Sansa had once loved, and what Arya learned in Braavos was how men could be made to do things by using their desires. Not what to do when her own innards softened and ached at the thought of a body of a particular boy. Who has become a man while I was away.

Just as I bled in my sleep. Flowered as they say. What a silly notion, flowering, for something that is more a mess than anything else.

She felt immensely relieved that Gendry was the only one with whom she experienced this reaction, so far. In Braavos she learned many men did not limit themselves to desire only one woman. In fact, many coupled with several ladies of higher or lesser repute in a week. She suspected the same might be true for women, maybe especially for those who sometimes acted like men and wielded weapons. Arya would hate to have so many weaknesses others could use against her. Would Gendry be like that? She would hate that too; if she was just one of many girls whose kisses he wanted.

The outstanding brightness of the sky around them made Gendry's steel blue eyes appear somewhat lighter and more interesting to look into. Arya pointedly looked ahead, over the horned head of the dragon, where all she could see were more clouds for the time being.

"We have to be patient," she said, feeling terribly impatient, in utter disbelief she was the one demanding this from anyone. I sound like my mother.
In front of her, Rickon abruptly stood up on dragon's back and spread his arms, swaying dangerously left and right.

"Don't do that," Arya commanded, pulling him down by the hairy Skagosi costume he wore in case he wouldn't listen. It wouldn't do to let her nine year old brother fall down from the sky. He could very well look at every cloud and every scale of the dragon while seated.

Rickon's tunic and breeches were sewn together into one piece of clothing such as Arya had never seen, and topped with the most dishevelled headdress in existence, which only half hid his bushy auburn mane. Long white hairs adorned all of his attire, from head to toe. If Arya had to wear it, chance was she would stumble on every step. Rickon, however, walked in it as fast as Arya in her squire clothing and as daintily as Sansa in her gowns. The odd costume had one benefit; it was very warm, made for winters in the North. Made of unicorn skin and hair. The real unicorns were obviously very different than those from the songs; instead of white and tender they seemed rather ugly and coarse-haired. But white nevertheless. And the Skagosi do ride them. At least that much is true. The most enduring steeds in the world after zorses, Arya remembered Rickon reciting a wisdom from Skagos, when they traded stories on the Wall.

This journey won't take long any more, Arya hoped as she struggled to keep Rickon seated against his will.

She was both relieved and dismayed her little brother was with them. She felt conflicted because she and Gendry had not spoken alone since they kissed, and yet she was content that she could still avoid it for a while; until she understood what she wanted and what she should do. If I can come to an understanding on my own.

I did everything on my own, she told herself. I have always been the leader of the pack, like Nymeria. So why not this?

As if the gods finally obeyed Arya's wishes, a beautiful city came slowly into view. Drogon approached it from the sea, but there was also a large river crossing it. Honeywine, Arya remembered. A maze of smaller canals connected the river to the sea and to each other, between many crisscrossing, winding streets and alleys. When the dragon flew lower, Arya could see that the houses were well shaped and maintained; the city appeared orderly and calm. She could not see slums that could compare to Flea Bottom in King's Landing. The place where Gendry was born. The place where I was hiding and catching pigeons before running away. Maybe she just couldn't see enough of the town yet. Every city had its rich and its poor.

The dragon suddenly reared his head. With a mighty roar, he dived from the sky in a sharp loop, flying straight at the highest city tower with a beacon on top. Arya clutched hard the spike behind her and Rickon in front of her. Her head was spinning until the dragon finally straightened his body on a much lower height than before.

Hightower. A lighthouse. Oldtown is the seat of the House Hightower, Maester Luwin spoke patiently to Arya in the distant past as she refused to listen. The memory now always made her eyes want to water, but she never let them. Arya's tears had dried out when she stopped crying for her father.

Hovering before the tower, Drogon's maw snapped open as though he were a giant lizard-lion. Black teeth shone in the light blue sky before thick smoke darkened it. The air began smelling of sulphur.

"He doesn't mean to burn it, does he?" Gendry asked and it was good that he did or Arya would be too late to protest.
"Drogon!" Arya screamed. "Don't! Neither Daenerys nor Rhaegar wish you to burn things!" It was another detail she learned from Nymeria.

*Learn two new things each day.* The wisdom applied outside the temple of the Many-Faced God just the same.

The dragon uttered a scream of his own, evil and deep, powerful like a thunder - like a thud of an earthquake raining down from the sky. *Beware,* the dragon might have said to his enemies. Arya did not wish to be in the skin of those he threatened.

She expected fire would engulf the lighthouse despite her admonishment, only to be proven wrong. The dragon flew speedily in the direction of a much lower, large structure, with many domes and towers; great and palace-like. But there was no king in Oldtown, only Lord Hightower, who was not even a warden, and yet the fortress below Arya's feet spread over more ground than the royal palace in King's Landing.

*The Citadel,* Arya realised.

Drogon kept flying erratically, savagely, giving its three riders a very bumpy ride. When he was near the domes, he straightened his wings and glided rapidly with the strong wind, towards a slender turret on one edge of the Citadel. Very close to the target, the dragon swung his giant tail and *hit* the little tower just under the uppermost floor, once, twice, thrice! The stones began crumbling when Arya glimpsed *archers* assembling in the courtyard below.

"Aim at the eye!" a man who looked like a pink dot from the sky shouted in a guttural, unnaturally strong voice to the black dots with bows. "The eye, not the belly! The belly is hard and scaled!"

"Drogon, up!" Arya yelled.

But the beast was too busy to heed her advice. The turret was about to break in two where his tail had stricken. Drogon breathed out a potent jet of dark red, almost black fire, which burned as angrily as the dragon looked, melting the stone, finishing the destruction he started.

Arrows flew up, but they never reached the dragon, who was high enough by sheer luck. Useless, they rained back to the ground.

Before the tower would collapse on Drogon's would-be attackers on the ground, as Arya expected it to happen, the dragon caught the part he had *cut* off with his giant paws. All the while he screeched and screamed, offended and angry beyond measure. But no more fire came out of his mouth.

Arya stared mutely at the senseless devastation Drogon wrought. Her heart beat madly in her chest. Even Rickon sat down quietly on his own, forgetting his joy in flying.

"He is a monster," Rickon gave voice to what Arya and Nymeria already knew.

"And Shaggy is what?" she asked. "A white hart?"

Dragons were monsters, no doubt. But so were the direwolves; smaller, but equally ferocious.

With the last cry of anguish leaving his jaws, Drogon finally took off, carrying the broken turret in his claws. Suddenly as mute as he was black, the beast left the city behind and *almost* landed on the side of a road leading to its gates, out of view of the city guard. Arya, Rickon and Gendry had to scramble down with effort, as if they were descending a steep mountain side; for Drogon remained in the air and would not release his stony prey. The final part of the descent meant scaling down the walls of the stolen turret itself. Looking for holes in masonry where she could put her hands and feet,
Arya peered on the inside. Her jaw dropped open.

It was not what she expected.

Instead of a heap of smashed stones, the chamber was preserved intact under the flat ceiling and the tiled roof. In it, the glass candles were burning; just like the black one which was left on the Iron Throne until the true king returned, burning with eternal, dark purple flame. The burn of the non-consuming fire meant the life of dragons, and putting it out their death. Here, in the broken tower, *four* more candles were burning, white, green, blue and… The flame of the last lit candle was dark grey and silver, like Arya's eyes or Nymeria's fur. There were at least ten other candles which were either put out or never set ablaze.

*He is one clever monster,* Arya realised. *He stole the candles for the safety of his race. One for each dragon.*

But there were only three dragons in the world and none of them was blue or dark grey in colour.

When Arya, Rickon and Gendry finally stood on firm, frosty ground, Drogon bowed his giant head to Arya only so slightly, in respect, or gratitude, perhaps. In the next instant, he took flight and disappeared, without a second glance.

*Wait,* she realised a profound flaw in her plan, contrived under the impact of her swirling emotions from her night on the Wall, from kissing Gendry and talking to Jon. *How do we go back?*

Wishing to help her brother, Arya completely forgot she had no way of calling the dragon back to her when they found the horn. Even with Nymeria, she could only reason with him when he was at the same place with her. Somehow she just expected he would stay around, as a horse that could be tied.

*I will think of something.*

Decidedly, Arya marched to the gates of Oldtown without a word. It was the beginning of the afternoon and the sky was already becoming darker blue. Gendry and Rickon followed close behind. She felt a cold around her middle that wasn't there before, as though she missed a garment.

*Gendry. Obviously. He thinks I need protection. And maybe I do. From himself. From myself.*

Earlier, when Arya grasped a spike and Rickon against falling off the dragon, Gendry had been holding her for the same purpose. But she was so consumed by the dragon's doings that she hadn't noticed Gendry's arm around her waist. She wondered if that was going to be another reason for him to be angry at her and tell her she was a little girl who knew nothing of love.

"This is not the Wall," Gendry said succinctly, cutting her musings.

Rickon remained too curious to complain, adjusting his Skagosi headdress so that he could see where he was going.

"We went south," Gendry made a constatation, with cold anger in his voice. Arya glanced back and concluded she had never seen him this upset. Stubbornly, she trod on.

"It looks like a safe place to be, doesn't it?" she said very innocently. "It is as my aunt wanted it for us."

Rickon would follow because he was her brother. And Gendry, well, if he wasn't going to abandon her again, he should better follow too.
The horn of Joramun and the fat boy. Think of why you are here. Forget who you are. Remember what you should do. Fear cuts deeper than swords.

The guards at the entrance wore shiny armour under thick cloaks, with the great Oldtown lighthouse embroidered on their backs. They touched the newcomers' hands and faces and bid them enter when they were satisfied with the examination.

"It is against the laws of hospitality to grope you as we did," they excused themselves with more courtesy than Arya expected from any city guard. "But only the living are allowed into the city and only during daytime. Winter orders of the old man."

"Who is the old man?" Rickon asked.

"Lord Hightower," a guard said. "You must be from far away if you don't know that. What business brings you here?"

"My little curious brother wants to become a novice in the Citadel. He is all for learning," Arya said sweetly and walked away as fast as possible, pulling Rickon by the hand. "And a good day to you, sers!"

Just as Arya had seen from the air, there were as many canals in Oldtown as in Braavos, but the houses were very different, beautiful and spacious. The cold was stronger, more biting and yet equally damp. Winter cold at sea, she realised, wondering how freezing it was in Braavos now. There were few people in the streets, most of them coughing.

"Arry," Gendry said with a visible effort to act collected instead of furious, "Why are we here? I know that you are up to something. You have to let me into your confidence. For this, at least."

She loved it that he called her Arry again ever since he kissed her. No more milady, please.

And as he didn't sound so angry any more, Arya told him about the fat boy and the horn, surprised that he stayed calm throughout her story.

"I see," he said, and Arya wondered, as always, how much he saw at all.

They wrapped themselves well in their cloaks and followed the river Honeywine deeper into the city until the point where it flowed into the Citadel, passing through the fortress of the maesters under many bridges, with houses and stalls built over some of them.

The street went on to the square in front of the Citadel, brimming with people. There were more of them than the multitude that came to see Father killed in front of the Great Sept of Baelor. Arya, Gendry and Rickon squeezed themselves in, the last ones to arrive. Two sphinxes with sad faces, one male, one female, guarded the entrance. Between them stood a handsome old man in long pink robes exhal ing a perfume of cinnamon and the smelliest of roses… A huge chain with many different metal links hung from his wrinkled neck.

"I am the Seneschal," he said. "I have an announcement to make for all of you seeking audience with me. There is no more place for novices. The door will close now until ravens are sent out to announce the new change of seasons; the arrival of spring."

The gathered mass protested, trying to push themselves past this Seneschal, but it was as if an invisible shield between the sphinxes protected the man and the Citadel from their desperate intent.

"I have a son," a woman cried, "a boy of ten. Please don't let him die of hunger."
But the perfumed seneschal withdrew farther behind the sphinxes, ignoring the cries of outrage. A company of city guards in shining armour began closing the door, repealing the multitude with their spears. Arya looked at the Citadel walls. The masonry was old and rough. They would be able to climb in at night through one of the windows and find this fat boy.

A familiar boy voice said merrily next to Arya, ringing much too clearly over the crowd, "You in the pink gown, over there, I am Lord Rickon Stark of Winterfell. I want to talk to a fat novice who is a friend of my brother Jon. Will you turn me away as well?"

"Rickon, shut up," Arya reacted but it was too late. Twenty city guards immediately used their spears to pass through the people, circle Arya, Gendry and Rickon and usher them inside. In the courtyard behind the sphinxes, the Seneschal stared at Rickon as the guards withdrew; their duty was outside the Citadel.

"There is a price to be paid for your admission, young Rickon Stark," their host said.

"What is it?"

"The hoard of dragon eggs left by the dragon Vermax under Winterfell, centuries ago."

"There are no dragon eggs there," Arya said, "only crypts."

"And who may you be?"

"No one," Arya said, not liking neither the man's look nor the smell. The perfumed Seneschal. "He is nobody as well," she pointed at Gendry before he had the chance to present himself by any name.

"Is he now?" the Seneschal measured Gendry up from tip to toe with uncanny shrewdness. His gaze finally lingered on the bull's thick black beard which looked exactly as the drunken King Robert had worn it. "His father was a famous man, he might be one as well. Why are you really here?"

"Rickon wishes to see a novice called Sam," Arya risked part of the truth, "He is large of body. As a sign of recognition, he may have in his possession a useless heirloom of the Starks, a broken aurochs horn."

A few servants approached the Seneschal nervously wringing their hands. "Archmaester," they said with palpable fear in their voice. "It was the Tower of Far Sight as you said. Not the other one as we thought. The glass candles. They are all gone. Ruined. The only source of our power against the doom of Westeros. We have become blind."

"Shut up", the stinky one said, "I didn't order you to talk."

Arya was however happy that they did. Well done, Drogon. She loved Maester Luwin well, but the maesters she was seeing here did not seem very wise so far. If Drogon wished to do so, he could have burned you all.

Many maesters herded to the courtyard, dark-robed, with chains hanging from their neck, and large eyes, more curious than Rickon's. "We have to question them," a wizened old man said, barely able to talk from old age. "They could be dragon-spawn. Maybe they came heralding the doom of Westeros?"

"There is a new king in the land, haven't you heard? We saw his dragon above your city when we were nearing your gates. Maybe he rode it," Arya spoke only to prolong the time before they would be attacked because she didn't think that these maesters cared about the king. Her grey eyes searched nervously for the way out. The sphinx gates behind them were fully closed. There were three other
exits from the Seneschal's Court she could see, one of them close to the River Honeywine, but none
easily reachable from their position. "The king has sent ravens to all Seven Kingdoms, calling all
banners to go to war against this doom you mention. The doom of Westeros is north, not here. The
white walkers are attacking the Wall in order to bring it down. Why is Oldtown not readying the
fleet? Will your lord not sail out as he is bid? The old man as you call him?"

"The man you call king is an impostor, pretending to be Rhaegar Targaryen, the godless prince who
despised the Faith by taking a noble maiden he raped for his second wife," the Seneschal affirmed
fervently.

Arya almost laughed, but thought better of it. The Seneschal had bothered to learn the truth about the
so-called impostor, whom Arya loved as her uncle, before reviling him in his own interests. This
made him a dangerous enemy. Arya listened. There could be more truths she could use in the sea of
self-serving lies.

"A true Targaryen knows only fire and blood," the sweet smelling foe continued his sermon. "He
would have never forgiven the House Lannister for killing his family. Yet the banners of the West
will soon sail north, together with those of the House Tyrell, to serve the false king. Only Lord
Hightower and Lord Tarly remain true and in fear of the gods. They were not deceived by this so-
called king's letter. Lord Tarly counselled his liege, Lord Tyrell, against this war, but young Willas
wouldn't listen. When he dies, it will be his own fault."

The Seneschal was still talking when a group of younger, mostly black-clad maesters advanced
towards Arya, Rickon and Gendry. These are still able to walk, Arya thought with scorn. They look
like black sheep.

Arya instinctively drew Needle, Gendry readied his hammer, and Rickon bared a sharp stone knife
his sister never knew he possessed. She didn't like the look in her little brother's eye. Did I look that
bloodthirsty when I was nine? She remembered the fat boy she killed as a little girl in King's
Landing, and was ashamed of herself. "Rickon, no," she said, but her brother would not listen.

"In Skagos men fight!"

"Look, there," Gendry nudged her into the shoulder, and for once his suggestion was clever. Her
pack stormed forward as one, to the exit Arya missed, behind the Seneschal's back, due to the bat-
lke pink expanse of his robes. But Gendry was so much taller than her that he must have seen it
above the rosy man. He also very efficiently hammered down two black sheep which stood in their
way. The way led out of the courtyard, onto a very narrow bridge across the River Honeywine, and
to the other side of the Citadel. The pursuers would need to cross it one by one; it would slow them
down and make them wait until they were enough of them to have the upper hand, Arya hoped. The
maesters were mostly thorough in their endeavours.

They ran as fast as they could. After some time, they realised they circled the place at least twice.
The black sheep were after them, never catching up, yet never too far behind.

"Maybe we should jump into the river," Arya wondered aloud.

"I can't swim," Rickon said. "In Skagos, it was too cold to learn."

"It's not swimming what I had in mind, baby brother."

Calling Rickon a baby would make him do what she wanted, Arya hoped.

The river was semi-frozen in winter. The current kept it running only in the middle of the riverbed.
The sides were covered with thick slabs of uneven ice, forming a long, craggy walkway, with an occasional watery hole in it.

Gendry was in agreement with her. "Here," he said. At the next bridge they were about to cross, two flights of stairs led to the riverfront. They scurried down and huddled under the bridge. They waited, for the pursuit to pass. Arya's heart was in her heels. She wasn't afraid, not really, the stone steps would not show their trail. But this stinky Seneschal wanted to capture Lord Stark as a prize, just like Stannis had done.

*Are we going to be safe and not hunted one day?*

The direwolves, just like the dragons, were meant to be free, but in the precarious times others frequently saw them as hostages. Fortunately for the runaways, the maesters were not warlocks. They depended on their feet and not on any black magic for capturing them. As expected, the sound of many feet drummed noisily above them, continuing the loop they did before, believing their prey to be in front.

"Now," Arya said and stepped onto the frozen portion of the river. She would have offered her hand to her little brother but he never needed it. Rickon jumped and slid over the irregular ice with unbelievable ease and dexterity.

"In Skagos we fish through the ice," he explained, seeing disbelief on Arya's face. "And when there is no fish biting we skate to kill the time."

"Go!" Gendry urged them. "You can tell more *childhood* stories to each other later." He looked grim and his hammer was bloodied, from the men he hit when they broke into a run. Thankfully, it meant that Rickon's knife was clean. Arya realised she wanted to kiss Gendry for sparing her little brother the first taste of human blood. From Rickon's stories on the Wall, Arya understood that, so far, the most complex creature whose blood Rickon had ever seen was a unicorn.

They stumbled forward in silence over the blue and grey ice. Arya was light-footed. She fell once or twice but for the rest she advanced swiftly. Gendry was less fortunate. Taller and heavier, he fought for balance and lost it at least five times. In the end he would hit a thick layer of ice with his hammer, lodge it in as a blade and use it as a stick to hop from one plane of ice to another in giant leaps. The movement would have been *amusing* if the situation were not so dire, but he was as fast as the Starks in the end, which was very well; speed mattered where gallantry did not.

Soon they were out of the Citadel, *skating*, as Rickon would say, next to the beautiful city houses. They passed two septs, and Arya noted a major difference between Braavos and Oldtown, apart from the wealthy look of the housing. In Braavos, there were temples of all gods, and here there were only septs. The realisation frightened her. The Seven were not her gods. *But Jon's father believes in them, and he is trying to do good.* She remembered the man who was as ill as she was, *fighting* to remember who he was, and who nonetheless kept Arya company and tried to cure her when she was lost in her waking dreams. She made sure Jon knew *this* in case he and Daenerys were busier kissing than talking. Arya's unease at seeing so many septs grew nonetheless. They skated some more.

"No," Gendry said, being accidentally the foremost at that moment. Arya trudged next to him and grabbed his shoulder for support. The arm under it, muscled and warm, sneaked around her waist. The sensation confirmed it had also been there during the restless flight of the dragon. Arya felt good, and then she felt weak and hated it.
"The sea," Rickon breathed out next to them.

They took the wrong way out of the Citadel; they should have gone in the opposite direction. The river flowed into the sea here; it did not go out through the city walls. They skated back, looking for a place to climb out into the narrow, twisting streets above them; the quieter the better. Unfortunately, the banks were too steep. Very few houses had low doors on the riverfront, probably leading to the cellars, but they were all sealed.

"I could break down one of these," Gendry said.

Before he could start, a door opened on the other bank of the river. A pale, soft and pasty-faced lad peeked out of it.

"Come here, my young lords" he said, his voice as ugly as his face. "I'm a novice of the Citadel. I know the fat boy, your brother's friend. He's gone to visit his father in Horn Hill, I'll take you to him if you wish."

Gendry and Rickon immediately jumped over the stream in the middle of the river, accepting the unexpected help. Arya followed, not seeing a better choice. She liked their sudden saviour as much as the stinky Seneschal. He couldn't have come at a better time. Or he was watching us and hoped we die on our own. They entered the cellar and pulled the hatch door closed behind them. In utter darkness, Arya could not see the novice, but his voice rang familiar. Who spoke like this?

"This way," the novice invited them.

"What's your name?" she asked flatly. "I'm Arya."

"Pate."

The name meant nothing to Arya. Pate took them to the stable of the house they broke into and drove out a sturdy cart, pulled by a meager horse, which looked as though he were about to die. All the while he chatted about how far Horn Hill was and wasn't. Most names of the places in Westeros were very ancient, older than the buildings and the men who inhabited them. Arya suddenly pondered that a place might have been called Horn Hill because an important horn was kept there in the past. It was odd to think that the past would repeat itself by a whim of fate.

She remained alert while Pate drove them through the empty streets. The sun was setting. The woods outside the city had already appeared eerie when Drogon left, and she remembered the guards checking them for the signs of life. Have the Others and the hosts of the slain come here as well?

Rickon and Gendry both seemed in love with Pate, the novice, and his easiness in talking. Stupid, Arya thought and chatted on stupidly just the same, not wishing to give away her discomfort.

Pate's voice flexed with foreign accent and Arya almost, almost recognised it. She realised she was closer to discovering the truth when she was very close to Gendry. As if the proximity to the bull sharpened her eyes. Her wolf eyes. As if she could see a simpler world by donning his eyes for a moment, just like she did with Nymeria.

Arya Stark abandoned the Many-Faced God but she had not forgotten her lessons in the temple. She was not faceless but she could be as deadly as any of them.

So when the cart moved with difficulty over a pile of cow dung, and when Pate strived to steady it, Arya leaned on Gendry and observed the ugly novice. Before Pate could blink, Needle was on his throat. Arya would open it in a second.
"Arry!" Gendry scolded her. "He is helping us!"

Rickon's blue eyes filled with savage distrust as he added his stone knife to her sword. "If Arya says he is not good, I believe her."

"My friends," Pate tried to reason with them, giving a pleading look at Gendry. "I didn't take you for thieves. Yes, kill poor Pate. Take his cart."

Arya tugged at Pate's face. It didn't budge. To be sure, she thought, it won't be that easy. She would have been taught how to change her face herself only after she killed Daenerys.

"I don't want to kill you," she said quietly. "You have helped me in the past. But I will kill you if I have to and if you don't tell me the truth now. Do you know where the fat boy is or not?"

"The man knows," Pate said. "Pretty girl."

Gendry gripped his hammer at those words, understanding the truth.

Splendid, Arya thought, remembering how bravely he fought for her against the Freys at the Twins. Not that stupid. Just slow at times.

"The man had better explain himself," Arya said, "we don't have all night."

"A pretty girl wants a horn. A man wants the horn too, now that the dragon has stolen the candles. A man did not know that the fat boy had a horn before the girl and her friends told him. Together we find the horn. Then the man can go back."

"I have once unsaid your name," Arya said. "But trust me, I will say it again if you give me any reason to. There is death in the woods tonight. That's where you were bringing us. Not to Horn Hill."

"Clever girl."

"My name is Arya Stark," she said brusquely. Her own girl-voice sounded to her as Nymeria's growling. "The coin you gave me was not enough to change it."

The door to the House of Black and White is made of both weirwood and ebony. My gods have power too. They can also be bringers of death to those who slight them. She thought of the entrails of Lord Walder Frey, hung out to dry on the heart tree in Greywater Watch.

Arya wondered briefly if different gods existed in the world.

The gods who brought life, and not only the cold gift of death.

"Jaqen H'ghar of the Free City of Lorath," she shaped carefully every word.

His face morphed when she said his name, showing older, handsome features and the hair which was half white and half red.

"Can he travel through the trees like Sansa did?" Rickon asked in awe.

"He is very dangerous," Gendry was not pleased. "Shouldn't we continue without him?"

"I'd rather have him where I can see him than sneaking behind my back," Arya said wistfully, not caring that Jaqen could hear her. "He is more dangerous than you know." As am I.
"Take us back to your house, Jaqen," she commanded. "We shall go together to Horn Hill at first light."

Jaqen's house in Oldtown was spacious, swept clean and quiet, with alchemists' vials scattered here and there. They supped on bread and old cheese. Rickon fell asleep after he ate as only a nine year old could, cozy in front of the fire.

Then, Arya chased Jaqen H'ghar out of his own house at swordpoint. "A man who is a novice can sleep in the Citadel," she said pointedly.

When he left, she and Gendry bolted the door. Together they carried Rickon to one of the rooms upstairs, which only had one window, high above the Honeywine, almost impossible to climb in from the outside. The bed was large enough for two.

"We sleep in turns," she said very, very seriously. "This is as safe as we will ever be from him. Don't try to take him yourself. If I sleep, wake me."

"If you promise me you'll do the same," Gendry said, predictably.

"I will," she vowed, "I may be stubborn but I do not wish to die." She was going to consider his demand.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and Gendry sank to the ground, with his back to the door, keeping it closed that way. Half an hour crept by and despite the food in her belly and Rickon's gentle, boyish snoring, Arya was wide awake.

"What do you think, Arry?" Gendry was very cautious with his question. "If we find this horn, if we do this, will it mean that we found something important to win the War of Winter?"

"Perhaps," she said. "Why?"

"Kings reward those who help them win their wars with lands and titles and pretty ladies."

Lands and titles... and pretty ladies? Why would Gendry want any of this when he had her? Arya's disappointment bubbled out of her mouth.

"I'll tell my uncle or my brother when he is king to give you anything you want. Except the ladies," she said bitterly. "I trust you can find these by yourself."

"Don't you understand?" he whispered tenaciously, and Arya's belly ached in a by now very familiar way. "Seven hells, Arya. And you call me stupid all the time."

Gendry must have been really angry to invoke the Seven, reverting to his upbringing, and not the Lord of Light. "I know this is your doing from the beginning!" he roared now. "I know that you might be more capable than I am in finding where this horn is... But don't you see? If you agree to say it was I who did it... and with my blasted father being who he was... maybe... maybe they would give you to me."

"I am not a piece of land to be given away," Arya protested.

"No," Gendry said, undeterred by her reaction. "You are a beautiful lady and I know you will kill any husband your family finds for you if he is not of your choice. Yet I would still ask for your hand."

This, this, this was far worse. This shifted the boulder of pain into her chest.
"Gendry," she said. Still very, very quietly. Her breath hitched. "Can we find the horn first?"

His face fell. "Your cousin…" he said, knowingly. "It is all right. I understand. I was fooling myself."

"I don't think you do."

She didn't want to kiss him with Rickon asleep and Jaqen prowling around; afraid of herself, afraid of how far she would go if they touched again. She had many doubts about bedding a man she wanted, but she could tell this was neither the time nor the place. But she could not leave him in this stupid state.

So she went to him and gave him a long, sweet kiss, stopping on time, holding herself back, unhappy about not showing him fully how she felt, but doing it nonetheless.

"Why do you think I've never left your side for long since I woke?" she began, seated at a safe distance once more. She had to find words to make him understand. That was what her mother would have done.

"It was I who always followed you," Gendry said bitterly. "Not the other way around."

"No," Arya rebelled, "I followed you. So that you wouldn't speak to Jeyne Heddle again or, worse, to any of the friendly ladies in the baggage train."

"I wouldn't," he said briskly, in his damned man voice, tugging that ugly beard he had let grow.

"But once you did, didn't you? You kissed Jeyne when it was only the two of you and I was gone? Maybe you did more?" She couldn't believe she had finally found the courage to talk to him about this.

Gendry looked down. "She said she loved me!" he exclaimed.

And I didn't. Arya thought bitterly. Or not in words.

"We…. It was only once! She is with Aegon now," Gendry muttered. "I am happy that he doesn't seem to mind that she is… that she is not a maid. At the time I thought…"

"It doesn't matter," Arya hissed, interrupting Gendry's tongue-tied attempt at admitting the truth. "I know. Or Nymeria knows. Or we both know. Why else would you feel so guilty that you revived Jeyne to a cursed life of a wight after my equally cursed mother had her hanged because of you? I don't blame you, Gendry, you were free to do as you please. But how do you think I feel, knowing this? Yet I never confronted you with it nor acted madly, as you did about me and Jon who has never been and who will never be more than my most beloved brother. On my honour as a Stark. I have no dragon blood. We don't lay with our brothers."

There. Arya had finally found the right words. She hoped her mother would be proud of her, if only a little bit.

Now it was Gendry who was very quiet.

Arya suddenly felt very tired from everything; from talking to dragons lest they burn something, from flying and from fighting, with either blade or words. On their journey north on the kingsroad she had imagined this conversation differently. Easier. Not that it would somehow pain both of them. But that was before the Twins, before her desire for him and before their hungry first kiss. Now that she had tasted him, it became increasingly more difficult to tolerate his past dalliance with Jeyne. She
wondered if he touched more girls as a handsome smith's apprentice in King's Landing, before they had even met. Love was not easy, it seemed. Not at all. It was a wound that festered and it hurt.

*Love?*

She had never given her feelings for Gendry that insipid name.

"Gendry," she finally said what she could say to him now. No more, no less. "If I was a true lady, as you like to call me, I would find sweeter, better words to tell you this. But this is me. I learned water dancing as a child instead of writing poetry as my sister. And what I mean is… If you want me to come to you in front of a heart tree one day, I will consider it. And if I say yes, I will mean it. But until then I need you to trust me. And I need you to wait."

With that, she stubbornly lay on her side, snatched half a blanket from Rickon and pulled it over her head. She could not face him now because her stupid bull began looking as though he might cry. And if he cried, she might do it as well. And then only the gods knew what they would do together. She willed her breathing still and deepened it slowly, forcing herself into sleep. Jaqen would attack them later if he wished to do so that night, when they were exhausted and more vulnerable.

"Arya," Gendry said hoarsely after a long while, when she was half-asleep. "Can't you see? I've never stopped waiting for you."

In her girl-dream, Arya Stark smiled.

**Chapter End Notes**

Any feedback is welcome.
And while I am obviously full of my own silly ideas and probably very stubborn about some of them, your comments both fuel and influence this story, in a good way.

xxxxxxxxx

Next up: The Hound, Brienne, Sansa, Jon, Daenerys, Davos, ? (odd POV either Aegon or Mance)
The Hound II

Chapter Notes

Thank you TopShelfCrazy for a great beta read of this chapter.

Thanks to DrHolland for saying it's not so bad so it could be published.

I'm sorry about the delay in updating. Will try to shorten it.

Warning for violence and gore

The Hound

The day was done and so was the Hound. It was almost too cold to stay alive. But he had done it before when he was expected to die quietly; as a burned boy covered in clean linens and stinky ointments.

Now he wore mail and boiled leather, as he always did as a man-at-arms, but also wool and furs. His disfigured shadow, cast by a campfire, towered like a huge black monster over the deadly whiteness of snow.

He looked almost a giant in breadth if not yet in height, though he suspected he had grown another half a foot since he'd crossed the Neck and arrived north for the second time in his life and, against all his expectations in the matter, as a married man.

He wouldn't die now.

The Others could take themselves for all he cared.

_I may yet be as tall as Gregor._ He hated the possibility with all his heart. He was tall enough as he was.

But this winter seemed to have a mind of its own; everything and everyone was changing.

_Not everyone. Some of us change a bit more. Why?_ He supposed he would never know; the world was godless and cruel and more like than not about to crush his newfound joy and place in life in a form he had yet to discover.

_The dog has a good master and the juiciest of bones. One day he might have a pretty kennel... and pups to call his own._

Hope had always been too much for him, threatening to overwhelm him. He was more used to the almost certainty that his good fortune would not last.

Splotchy grey clouds drifted over the moon. Misty and woolly, they dimmed its golden shine, shed over the bleak world.
The stars will come out later, the wildlings said, huddled at their fires. At the time night should begin if evil had not descended on the world.

And the stubborn, honest, buggering king who insisted on calling Sandor brother had not returned yet as he bloody well should have. Restless as seven hells, the Hound stomped violently in the bleeding snow.

He did his best to mask his constant glances down the mountainous slope from the top of the craggy hill where he now stood vigil with Aegon and Mance Rayder. The talk went about the fastest way to direct the horde of the bloody wildlings south, behind the safety of the Wall, with the help of the king's own company of godless wights.

Yet Sandor's mind was not in the discussion at hand, not until he would sight Rhaegar's tall, scrawny figure climbing up. From afar, without the fancy armour and with his head well covered, the king could pass for any hungry peasant in the land. And he could go on for days with less food than most after his long years on the Quiet Isle. The Hound narrowed his eyes to sharpen his vision, but he still couldn't see anyone, king or peasant.

Sandor wished he could be that inconspicuous at times and live on thin air. Though he had to admit that Rhaegar's hair was the same sign of certain recognition as his height and scars. When it was down, Rhaegar's eyes would instantly change their colour from pitch black to naturally dark indigo when the king was quiet and pensive; and further to purple and red when he was happy or furious. Anyone, friend or foe, could see far too clearly who he was.

Far too well for the Hound's liking.

He went to bed his wife and half a day was not enough to do it properly. That's why he didn't want me with him. That's why he's not back yet. The Hound did his best to hush his growing worry for Rhaegar by purposefully letting the pang of envy stab him in the guts.

Sandor was no dragonlord. He didn't get to bed his wife when he wished. Only when the fighting ended. A week without Sansa seemed like a year to him, and the vast frozen landscape like one of the seven hells he was forced to endure. At least nothing is burning here. The campfires were kept alive with extreme difficulty. The ice demons pursuing them had uncanny powers to quench any flame. He wondered morbidly if he would soon come to regret the absence of fire when frostbite took his second ear or one of his toes.

Mance Rayder kept saying they would reach the Wall on the morrow, but the Hound did not believe it. Mance had said the same thing in the evening of the previous day and he had been wrong. Only one night in the wilderness had cost them more lives, both among the wildlings and Euron's wights, than the open battle immediately upon their arrival. There was no way of telling the price of this night or of the next one if Mance was wrong again.

Yet none of Sandor's own concerns and doubts could stop him from looking out for Rhaegar.

My older brother in truth.

One of the first to recognise the obvious when the king revealed himself, Sandor had never called him brother since then. A dog could not presume. But it would be a grievous lie to say he did not return the brotherly love, unspoken as it remained in his case.

My charges have never come to harm on my watch, he reminded himself. But none of his previous masters needed that much protection from themselves; neither Cersei nor her firstborn son would risk their hide for any noble cause. Cersei was mostly playing the gracious queen in public, and as long
as Joffrey was not among smallfolk asking for their heads, it wasn't that difficult to guard him.

But he couldn't look after Rhaegar's back if the king was not here, could he? The dog's unease grew thick and ominous, just like the darkness of the unnaturally long night. _He is with the bloody dragon_, Sandor told himself. _If the dragon can't keep him alive, how can I ever hope to achieve the same?

At least Sansa is safe in Winterfell, waiting for me. The notion warmed him on the inside, much better than the weak glow of campfire. Their stay there was... more than memorable.

He felt for two days the spot on his back where the tree root ended up stuck in his spine as he drove into her or she onto him in that freaking, _hot_ pool. There was no way of telling who directed who in the bloody water, warm and malleable, hugging their bodies and never burning them... He missed that old sore now, just as he missed Sansa's continuous presence, her soft voice and her always measured words, terribly so.

Miraculously, Sansa's family castle did not want to eat him alive, not even the buggering heart tree, which he had expected for all purposes after his short, unpleasant experience with Greywater Watch. Especially when he half-heartedly recalled his own thoughtless attitude the first time he'd been to Winterfell. The Starks could all die back then for all he cared. Or anyone else for that matter.

Well, almost anyone.

He had felt _terrible_ when that boy was crippled. Sansa's little brother _Brandon_, as the Hound had only recently learned his name. In those times, when he was occasionally asked to kill children, he'd rather not know how their mothers called them. True to himself, back then he memorised only the faces, but not a single name of the Stark children. Not even Sansa's. They were children. They were just boys and girls and the farther away they stayed from the Hound and his masters, the better.

Yet he had spent the last days of his first visit to Winterfell listening to the howling of the crippled boy's wolf, wishing for the animal to stop whinnying, wishing for the boy to die quietly and to stop suffering. But at the same time he wished the boy would live against all odds and become a man, one day.

_As I have become._

He'd been immensely relieved when he left Winterfell and returned south, to his old life, to constant thinking about killing his _real_ brother.

But whatever the lifeless stones of the First Men recalled of either his bragging and contempt, or of his sorrow, if anything at all, they chose not to reveal it to him when he returned to them married to one of their own. They only let the dog _know_, they had let him _feel_ in his bones something he did not feel before; perhaps he had been blind in his arrogance, or more of the old and forgotten powers were waking in winter, and not just the Others.

Just like the castle of the Reeds, Winterfell was alive. The stones were not just stones, whatever else they were. They had a voice and they whispered to each other in a language Sandor did not understand, though he could hear it now, among the wildlings. _The Old Tongue_, it was called. The Hound shuddered involuntarily, as a dog diving out of water. His hair would stand on edge if it wasn't as long as the king's now, only black in colour. Magic could not be killed by strong hands. His or anyone else's.

"I wonder," Mance said, touching the strings of his lute, as he always did when thinking aloud. "I wonder if the Others are somehow making the last stretch of the land leading to Shadow Tower last longer. Maybe they are amassing and waiting for us there. We should head farther west and take the
Gorge and the Bridge of Skulls. This will also save lives on all sides if the Golden Company is late in arriving to Shadow Tower due to weather, and if the fortress is still held by the fraction of the Night's Watch loyal to Bowen Marsh."

"Or maybe the grumkins want us to do just that and they are waiting for us at your precious bridge," the Hound said with scorn, welcoming the conversation nonetheless. Any horseshit was better than his own gnawing thoughts from time to time.

"Either way, we have to hide behind the Wall, and soon," Mance said, grim as a raven. "Or the slow bleeding of my people will continue until there are none left."

They had moved south - or in direction they believed to be south, as much as they could during short daytime. The Hound was not a believer, so it could have been any direction, really. The procession of the people was very long; there were carts, bone carriages, animals, women and children. People kept disappearing on the fringes, some with a cry and some mutely. Some just died of cold.

"And my sword arm itches to challenge Weeper and best him in a fight again," Mance was not done yet, unlike the short winter day. "But that too should wait until we are behind the Wall."

The bugger they called the Weeper took out the eyes of his own people who displeased him. He nearly did for some bragging friend of Mance's, called Tormund, when they had fought for the leadership over all the wildlings in Mance's absence. Mance's return put an end to that, but the bad blood among the wildlings who supported one or the other chieftain remained. The Hound was of the opinion that a simple killing would suffice for this Weeper. The sooner, the better.

_Let him weep to the Stranger when he's dead._ But apparently it was important to Mance and all the wildlings that there should be a fight or Weeper's men would not follow the King-beyond-the-Wall. And they needed every fighting man, wight or wildling to bring as many of the people to the semblance of safety. _The weak. The meat for the butchers._

Sandor believed himself a butcher once, but that man had died in the green clouds of wildfire years ago. Now he was more of a shepherd dog as much as he was loath to admit it.

"I say we move on through the night," Aegon said fervently with the brashness of youth. His hair shone as silvery as Rhaegar's from under a pretty helm. The boy looked as if he wore full body armour for the first time in his life. And maybe he was. The Hound supposed it was too hot to fight in mail in the faraway valley of Rhoyne or wherever they had raised Dayne's son, telling him he was Rhaegar's.

_It is only good that Rhaegar's trueborn son was born black of hair. Or Stark would have never been able to pass the boy for his bastard._

"I have thought of it myself," Mance said cautiously, leaning against the wisdom of his people in winter. They always sat at night, cowering behind the fires. But that was when daytime lasted longer than a few hours as it did now.

"When His Grace is back," the Hound rasped decisively and looked down the mountain.

He wasn't going anywhere without Rhaegar. And neither were they, whether they willed it or not.

The three men paced up and down in silence. It was too cold to sit. It was too cold to do anything. Sandor felt his armour would freeze together if he remained for long in one place; he would never be able to remove it. A waking nightmare of ice had replaced his old dreams of fire consuming his being.
Come on, brother. You said you'd come back. You may have sinned in your past, as you like to say, but you have yet to become an ordinary liar.

His dogged patience was severely tried out after another long something Mance thought of playing on his lute, morose as absent Rhaegar would have loved it.

"What is that? A lamentation for some dead bugger, I reckon?" The Hound boiled visibly.

"It's just a song," Mance retorted. "A wildling song. About a man called Bael the Bard. I thought you were used to music by now."

"What's it about?" Unlike the Hound, who longed for silence and for the king's return, Aegon was sincerely curious. "Are there no words?"

"There are," Mance assured him, "but maybe you would find it hard to take joy from them. Not all songs are for everyone."

"I could never be saddened by a mere song!" young Aegon claimed proudly, every inch a man. The Hound stifled the urge to laugh. The boy was no gnat with that shiny sword, he'd give that much to Dayne's son, who now seemed repentant of his boyish desires. "It would be amusing to hear it, is all," Aegon said, feigning sudden disinterest. "While we are waiting, why not?"

Mance nodded. "As you wish," he said, "but don't tell me I haven't warned you." But before the wildling king could add his hoarse, deep voice to his playing, the Hound's patience was suddenly rewarded.

"His Grace," Sandor announced flatly, carefully hiding a bout of giddy happiness that took him on the inside at seeing his friend. A whooping, ugly giant, he scorned himself for his joy. Wouldn't that make a pretty sight?

Rhaegar was sure and easy footed as he climbed the last part of the slope. And they would have heard him much before seeing him, boots crunching the snow, without the distraction of the bloody music. Sandor hoped there was not a company of Others using the same trick to crawl up to them and fall on their backs.

He still carried a greatsword made of ordinary steel on his back, the only concession to winter being a small black knife on his belt in place of an regular dagger. He had very recently gotten it from one of the wildlings in exchange for gauntlets, which the Hound found to be a hindrance in this ungodly weather. He took to using sealskin gloves, with holes for fingers, when he fought, and he wrapped his hands in his cloak when idle.

The king smiled from ear to ear when he saw him. "Brother," he said freely. "All is well now. I hope I didn't make you wait for too long." His dark eyes had just that little purple gleam to them.

Yes, you've most definitely bedded your wife. The other word, the ugly one, the true one Sandor had always used before, did not come to mind. He could not bring himself to use it either when he thought of his own wife in bed. All he could think of most of the time when he was unoccupied was the mind blowing truth of being wanted by Sansa.

"We were just about to leave without you," the Hound retorted with scorn. "You would come walking to the Wall by yourself before spring."

The king chuckled. "You forget Drogon," he said, feigning boyishness.

"You have me there," Sandor admitted, letting show a small hint of his own mirth. His friend and his
brother was here again where his back could be watched. His faith had not killed him yet.

Nor has my lack of it killed me.

The king armoured himself in silence, shivering as he did so. Not even the blood of the dragon could stand this winter for very long.

More people joined them, seeing Rhaegar had returned. Now it was not only Aegon and Mance and the Hound. There was also Euron and his two dead brothers, and the once pretty Ser Loras Tyrell, who was now a burned wight, almost as disfigured as Sandor. There were also Mance's friends Tormund and Sigorn, the wildling married to some proper northern lady.

The ladies were the last ones to appear on the winter court, Jeyne and Val, whose pretty looks were deceitful. The wildling beauty was as fierce as Rhaegar's wife and Sansa's sister, the Hound knew. It was only good that Euron's balls were already dead so perhaps he would not feel when the wildling woman chopped them and ate them for dinner. Some of these savages did eat human flesh or so the stories went. The dead kraken had been shadowing Val pathetically for a day and a half, despite the obvious danger to his shrivelled parts. Sandor had a very small measure of consideration for his plea, maybe because Euron saved his life. No. Because I used to follow Sansa like a bloody fool.

Not any more. His ugly being twisted in joy. Sansa was his now. And he missed her, terribly so, tremendously so.

Val frowned, took Jeyne's arm and stood as far as possible from Euron. The woman was clearly disgusted by wights. One could not blame her, seeing the slaves of the Others and the losses of her people. Sandor had half a mind to tell her that her new friend, Jeyne, had also been dead for a while. But it was none of his business so he kept quiet.

Aegon tossed a glance full of longing at Jeyne. Those two were glued together, more often the not, yet it seemed to the Hound that the boy's cock wasn't getting any. Why was anyone's guess because both he and Jeyne looked more than willing to bed each other on the spot.

Rhaegar seemed to be counting the people present, ten of them, excluding the king and his Hound. He appeared to be happy about the number.

"I thought…" he said pensively. "I thought today. But it is not yet to be."

"Today what?" Sandor asked. The king's statement punched him in the guts. The dog sniffed something, but the scent was unfamiliar. He could not say what it was.

"Nothing, brother," Rhaegar smiled sadly, handsome and noble.

Sandor's worry returned tenfold. What are you up to? He could ask him bluntly, but he suspected the king would not give a full answer, an honest answer. Not to this. He knew him too well by now.

"Where is my harp?" Rhaegar asked brusquely and Sandor was content to fetch it for him like a good dog. Maybe he would be more talkative after playing and spill what was on his mind.

"We should go, Your Grace," Aegon said timidly before the king would give himself to music. He was never at ease in the presence of his adoptive father, not since his actions in King's Landing nearly caused the death of Queen Lyanna who had been like a mother to Aegon.

"I agree," the king said, "my return flight was long, too long. I fear we are many leagues away from the Shadow Tower."
Mance disagreed. "Down this slope," he pointed. "I am certain," he stressed. "We will slowly come to the Gorge, at first light at the latest, probably a bit before. There are two paths there. One descends into the Gorge and leads on to the southern shore, circling and contorting the Wall. The other one goes up, to the Bridge of Skulls, crossing the Gorge. After the bridge, lies Westwatch-by-the-Sea, the westernmost castle of the Watch. We should have no trouble taking this castle if it is still held against us, if..."

"If what?" the Hound asked, irascible.

"If we can cross the bridge," Mance said grimly. "Weeper tried. He did not make it. Even a weak defence on the other side is able to hold it. They are sheltered while the party wishing to cross is exposed."

"What of you? Did you cross it?" the Hound wondered.

"Once," Mance said grimly and would say no more on how he'd achieved that one important thing in order to end their bloody stay north of the Wall, so that Sandor could return to Sansa, if only for a day.

The Hound had no illusions; this here was only one battle and more would follow.

"And if the blind men of the Watch have sealed the gates, as they did in Castle Black?" the king asked with contempt, an emotion he rarely showed.

Rhaegar's rebellious recklessness scared Sandor witless. What will you do? Jump into the Gorge? What good will that do to anyone?

If the Hound had anything to say about the battle plans, Rhaegar would not be going anywhere near this Bridge of Skulls.

"The path that winds around the Wall begins after the bridge, and joins the one coming out of the Gorge at the bottom of the cliff," the king from this side of the Wall answered respectfully the king from the other one.

"The descent is narrower on that side, but still less dangerous than to go through the Gorge. The advance will be slow. But the saying goes that anyone who crosses the bridge will be protected by the magic of the Wall. The Others cannot cross. And the red woman has not been here. She hasn't burned the weirwoods. She hasn't altered the magic."

"What are we waiting for?" the king said calmly, verifying the count of men, women and deadmen who surrounded him.

Soon, a long column of wildlings abandoned their weak fires and slithered forward through the night; a quiet train of human hope and misery. The Hound found himself at the head of the night's march with his silver-haired master.

"Have you seen my wife?" he dared ask.

"I haven't been to Winterfell," Rhaegar said. "Only to the Wall. And it is as you thought, brother. The enemy is playing tricks with us. Changing the shape of the land or how we see it. But if we stay closer to the shore, he may have less power. His influence still ends on the sea and on the Wall."

"How do you know of this?" the Hound asked.

"It's only tales," Rhaegar said. "Northern tales," he felt the need to underline. "From Lyanna, from
Mance, from his people. I've been listening."

The Hound gave a rat's arse for stories but he had been listening to them just the same. This winter, survival depended on knowing some of the nonsense contained in them. Sandor discovered that the learned histories of the maesters and the fanciful tales of the poor were equally true or equally untrue when it came to this far north and the night which might be falling.

_The Long Night._

But he hadn't heard any tales about the powers of the Others the king just mentioned and his apprehension grew with every passing moment.

*It won't be my lack of faith that'll kill me, brother. It will be your death before your old age or Sansa's before my own.*

But the Hound could never bring himself to say any of it aloud.

The rocky path wound slowly down from the high mountain range. The night deepened. The march lasted forever and yet the landscape had barely changed.

A shrill, faraway cry pierced the silence here and there. The darkness was charged with dead voices and they meant danger.

People died at the fringes of the column like the previous night. But the enemy never let himself be seen, never began a direct fight. The disfigured northern wights only stole those among the living who were ripe for plucking; the old, the very young, the slow and the infirm. The king walked up and down the column. Wherever he appeared the shrieks stopped and people did not vanish.

_The dead are avoiding him. Why?_

On the contrary, the ice dragon wanted only Rhaegar and no one else, perhaps willing to capture the king for the dead animal's cold master as Mance suggested.

*A treat of dragonblood for the King of the Others if such a grumkin exists….*

The Others… they could sniff the blood they wanted, it seemed. They had singled Rhaegar for persecution already in the riverlands when the Hound and the then Elder Brother defeated two of them by chance, and not by any design or skill.

Just when the Hound thought that the Long Night had finally fallen and that the march would never end, the path widened and poured out of the mountains into a spacious clearing; a flat, stony hilltop, with sparsely forested eastern end.

A long, sharply cut edge of a cliff became visible under the dark, moonlit sky on their right side, the western side. Behind it, there was nothing. A deep. A chasm. A precipice.

_The Gorge_, the Hound realised.

The wildlings began to gather slowly on the hilltop. Many still lingered behind on the mountain path. It would take awhile until all those still alive arrived and reassembled.

At the far left end of the clearing, there was a single, inhospitable, large weirwood.

Mance gave the tree a queer look. "I could swear it wasn't here the last time I was around, but it can't be true."
The Hound sympathised with the King-beyond-the-Wall as one unbeliever with another. Yet both of them were acquainted with all the nonsense imagined by the faithful, with regard to the gods each of them had forsaken. Sandor knew more than he'd ever wanted to know about the Seven, and Mance about the old gods.

"Maybe it grew," Sandor spat out a wild guess concerning the presence of the buggering tree, dripping with his usual scorn.

"Or it walked," Mance retorted dryly, causing the Hound to chuckle. The tree sneered at them, with its large mouth dark red as dried blood. Some wildlings had already gathered at it to pray.

Another hundred yards behind the gaping tree, maybe a bit more, the path they had been following wound on, until it reached a slender bridge crossing the deep, which appeared to be empty.

_The Bridge of Skulls._

"There isn't anyone", Mance said, both glad and perplexed that the enemy was not in waiting. Just like the Hound, he must have been expecting it.

A small fortress of the Night's Watch on the westernmost end of the Wall behind the bridge looked unmanned as well. It was too dark to discern Shadow Tower farther to the east.

"I don't trust the quiet," Rhaegar said behind their backs all of a sudden. "A small company of men should assemble, cross the bridge and hold it. Then, the people can follow," the king finished his thought, looking at Sandor.

"I'll go if that's what you are asking," the Hound offered immediately, "though I don't think you should. You have nothing to gain from standing there in the open."

The bridge was the most exposed point to anyone who might be watching them from the Wall or from the dense wood further to the east.

Surprisingly, Rhaegar heard reason for once. "Mance and Aegon will go with you," the king said. "As will three more wildlings of Mance's choosing."

By the time the king was done speaking, there was a commotion under the too-fast-growing weirwood tree. The Weeper was pulling somebody out of its jaws.

"Kissed by fire and ready to be stolen!" the hideous pale-eyed wildling exclaimed, licking his lips.

The woman's hair was deep auburn, almost as red as the weirwood leaves, not ginger or orange as in some of the wildlings. The _Weeper_ was not gentle with his prey, squeezing her forearms. Sandor instinctively ran to her rescue, not asking the king's permission as he should have done. It couldn't be. But what if it was?

"And a woods witch boy," the Weeper added in a mocking, thin voice. "You will both serve me now."

"My name is Jojen," a short someone said from the tree, getting out of its own accord rather than being pulled.

Sandor leapt towards them in giant strides. He didn't know this Jojen. But he knew the lady. And he was the only one who had any right to hold her hands and kiss her. No other man and no bloody fire were to touch his wife.
"She is pretty..." the Weeper said avidly, and he would have yanked Sansa towards himself if she
didn't wrench herself free from his grip and glare at him; her freezing look in sharp contrast with the
richly coloured softness of her voice.

It was the voice she had since she was every night in Sandor's bed, and it made his head swoon with
precious memories.

"I'm looking for His Grace and his shield," Sansa said melodiously, as though she were in court, and
not in the middle of nowhere. "I bring urgent tidings. His Grace should return to Winterfell."

The Weeper attempted to reach for Sansa again. And he would have succeeded if she did not
somehow look through him... and made him go away as a dog with his tail tucked between his legs.

Sandor felt relief in his own consciousness and a tender something which was happy to see him. He
would have severed the wildling's offending arms from his body, if his wife's imploring glance did
not stop him.

"Sansa," he said. "Are you alright?"

She was so much more beautiful than when they parted and not only because he loved her.

Just like he had become more of a monster, she had become more of a beauty. Her hair shone in the
moonlight, brushed and curled under a thick, hooded, furry cloak, and her eyes gleamed brightly.
Sandor wondered who combed her hair in his absence, a serving girl or some handsome Northman.
She wore a regal white dress under the cloak, trailing after her, sweeping the snow. She looked a
queen and he... he...

Sandor's confidence plummeted down on its own accord. If she was so beautiful, how could she go
on loving him? He stopped in his steps.

But his queen came to him swift as sunlight. Soon, he was holding his wife in his armoured embrace,
hating the mail and boiled leather between them. At least his face was bare so he bent down and
kissed her. He was too happy to question why she was here or... how she arrived.

"This is magic," he said when he was able to speak again.

"I thought you didn't believe in magic," she countered.

"I don't," he parried. "It doesn't mean there isn't any."

"I thought you'd be angry," she confessed. "I thought I was stupid to follow my heart, as so many
times before."

He wasn't angry. Well, maybe a little. She was not safe here. Yet here he could keep her safe, not
that heap of stones she called home, no matter how noble and ancient. He occasionally thought that
maybe she was stupid to follow her heart since it had somehow brought her to him of all men. But he
would never say that aloud or question his good fortune, for as long as it lasted.

It won't go on forever, dog.

Why not? He countered the inner voice of his well-groomed despair. It had never given him anything
but bitterness.

The king was behind him, with all who accompanied him from the high shore of the Sunset Sea
since his return.
"Lady Sansa," Rhaegar acknowledged his niece, surprised. "I can see that sometimes you are as resourceful as your aunt. And who would you be, lad?"

"Jojen Reed," the green-eyed boy, who popped out of the tree after Sansa, introduced himself with the proper flowery courtesies due to the king. "Son of Lord Howland Reed, Your Grace. I have travelled on my own and only met Lady Sansa here at the exit."

"What brings you to my presence, Jojen Reed?" Rhaegar asked placidly.

"I bring a message from your elderly kinsman and the former commander of the Night's Watch," the boy said. "He is believed to be the last of the greenseers. And he bids you remember the tale of the last hero."

"So it is true," Rhaegar said pensively, "Bloodraven is still alive."

"Barely and not for long," Jojen said. "What of the tale? Shall I say it for you? It will bring you victory."

"There is no need," Rhaegar answered. "I have never forgotten it since I learned it as a boy."

The king looked around. His eyes widened as if he had seen something, on the other side of the Gorge, above the distant shores of Westeros, on the other side of the Wall, those protected by old magic.

The king was grim now, unexpressive, deadly.

"The last hero set forth with twelve companions..." he said thoughtfully. "With his horse," his gaze wandered again over the empty sky behind the Wall. "And his dog," he addressed Sandor, leaving no doubt as to who the dog was.

"Forgive me, brother," he added quietly. "I have called you this only once. I'll never do it again. You know how highly I think of you."

Sandor said nothing, kicked in the guts.

The Hound truly liked dogs better than people. Yet he would lie if he said that it didn't cut him deeply when the king called him his dog. He had almost believed Rhaegar loved him as a brother.

There were indeed twelve of them now around the king, with Sansa and this Jojen of the lizard-lions; with the exclusion of Sandor, the dog, and Rhaegar himself. No horse was in the vicinity though. The wildlings had few and mostly they pulled something.

"What are you prattling about?" the Hound asked impatiently.

"It's just an old story," Rhaegar said repentantly, "not even I believe in all tales and prophecies."

But he believed in far too many of them, the Hound knew.

"We should hurry," Mance interrupted ardently, "let us move across while there are no defenders and talk later. My innards are freezing. This calm cannot last!"

"Sansa," the Hound returned all his attention to his wife, who had never left him, standing pointedly on his burnt side, in sign of her support. "Will you stay close to the king? You will be safe up here." A strategy that might work against Rhaegar's intentions, whatever they were, had just occurred to him.
He surprised his wife by kissing her deeply and dragging his burned lips very slowly over her heart-shaped face, up to one of her perfectly formed ears. Normally he always kept his distance when they were not alone, unwilling to suffer the jests, the sneers and the snickers of the army on the move, in fear Sansa might feel lessened by it. He wouldn't shame his wife in public by claiming his rights.

To his surprise, she didn't mind it. Much to the contrary, her lips parted, inhaling sharply from his sudden attention. Leaving small but insistent kisses on her neck and under her ear, he whispered hoarsely, torn between his love and his duty. Maybe both were one and the same in winter. "Will you call me back in my mind if he... If His Grace does something… well… something mad?"

"Can you feel it? Me in your head?" Amazed, Sansa whispered back in the hole where his burnt ear used to be. "Can you tell? I thought that you could not. You refused to acknowledge this was possible, me in you as my sister is in Nymeria."

"How could I not?" he said, contrite for having pretended beforehand that he didn't believe in this, as he never had in anything else. You have been inside me for years.

Since the bloody Blackwater burned green.

"All is well then. Go and do what you have to do, my love," Sansa encouraged him with a pretty smile. "Do not worry. I shall not fail to do the same."

Soothed by his wife's words, the Hound embraced her and was about to leave, to join Mance and Aegon. To his surprise, the King-beyond-the-Wall had chosen Weeper and two of his men to complete their number.

"I'd rather see them than have them behind my back," Mance commented under his voice. And to the king he said, "If anything goes wrong, Val knows the bottom road to safety, through the Gorge. She can lead the people from here in need. But I expect they will all cross after me, over the Bridge of Skulls. Tormund and Sigorn will lead them when we give the sign that it is safe."

The king nodded mutely, agreeing to anything, buried in his thoughts.

Mance and Val embraced as brother and sister, unlike Sandor and Sansa who gave themselves to a long, unchaste kiss. The Hound felt like a fool, for he would see her again soon, sooner than he hoped, and then they would have time. There had to be some room in the decaying outpost of the Nights' Watch just beyond the bridge, where fire could be kindled and a bed could be made or found. Yet he couldn't pull away. She was even more reluctant than him to break their kiss, behaving as if it were their last one.

I missed you too, little bird. But I should go now.

He listened for her voice inside him, fully open-minded for a change. He could almost hear her… She might have said she loved him more than anything, more than she'd ever loved anyone and that he was a fool if he ever believed otherwise. It was an unexpected treat for the dog's wary soul. She had never told him, or not with as many words; she'd mostly showed him before. He was probably guilty of the same. And of not wanting to listen to her enchanted voice now. The calmer he was, the sooner he would return.

Weeper led the way down. Mance, Sandor and Aegon found themselves in the middle, Weeper's two men at the rear. They advanced easily on an empty path.

This goes far too smoothly, the Hound thought, trudging confidently, clinking in his armour as he went, spying the night for danger.
When they began walking over the chasm, blackness swallowed the moon. For a few moments, the Hound saw nothing at all. Stunned by the dark, he halted. The unease he had been feeling the entire night grew beyond limits.

At the return of the moonshine, they were not alone.

"Boy," Sandor instinctively bellowed at Aegon, "watch out for your shiny sword!"

His cry came not a moment too late. Aegon jerked away from the enemy who would have snatched his Valyrian blade from its pretty weirwood scabbard.

The Hound checked rapidly for what he already knew to be true, always expecting the worst; his obsidian knife was gone. One of the Weeper's men must have robbed him when they walked. Mance was also nervously tugging at his belt.

There were three Others on the bridge with the humans, wielding crystal blades, one before them and two more behind. No corpses were in evidence. It left only one explanation. The Weeper and his wildlings had transformed into white walkers under the cover of the darkness.

_We should have killed him when we still could._

Aegon drew Dawn forth, screaming as he did that, pouring all his youthful determination in his battle cry. Pale blade of Valyrian steel shone bravely, cutting the night in slashes whiter than milk. Sharp as it was pretty, it crossed violently with the crystal sword of the white walker. They were matched three against three and they had only one weapon which killed the Others; Mance and the Hound were left with ordinary steel.

Two grumkins at the rear busied themselves with Mance and Aegon. The one that was Weeper ignored the skirmish. He was almost across the bridge, too eager to reach the land on the other side in the Hound's opinion.

_No you won't_, the Hound thought stubbornly, embarking on a daft endeavour. He ran after the Other and yanked him back to the middle of the bridge with a savage, hoarse cry of his own, just before the monster would have stepped on the other side.

_Hiding who you are to cross, are you?_ The Hound aimed wildly at the truth. Perhaps the Others could fool the magic of the Wall which kept them out if they passed it masked as men.

The dog always sniffed out the truth, sooner or later.

The creature he was mad enough to challenge was stronger than him and probably faster, too. The crystal sword swung and hissed, nearly cutting the dog’s ugly head in two. The Hound barely avoided the blow, retreated and bumped into Mance’s back. The singer-king experienced similar trouble in keeping his head on his shoulders.

Sandor dared a violent onslaught forward with his own dented steel, putting all his considerable strength behind it. The Other appeared unconcerned. He used the power of Sandor's blow to return it with force, waving his glass, icy blade up and down, and left and right in a frenzy of movement. At the last clash of cursed crystal on steel, the Hound's greatsword burst asunder as a dry twig, but not before he managed to twist it one last time, catch his opponent off balance and disarm him. The pretty cursed glass blade fell into the deep. Blue and red sparks flew from the dog's dented steel, rendered useless.

The Hound dropped his own weapon into the chasm and waited, breathing raggedly from savage exertion. He would be faster in a fist fight without armour, but he had no time to remove it now.
The Other had another weapon… Despair. Death was certain and imminent, the grumkin suggested to his soon-to-be victim. But for the burned boy this truth was nothing new. Sandor knew death intimately; he had been close to it more than once, and he had dealt it to others far too often. He would not cow before the Stranger as another man might.

The Other tried a different trick, clever as he was ruthless. In his mind, Sandor saw Sansa kissing another man in front of the heart tree, a handsome one.

"Stop it," he pointlessly told the grumkin, regretting showing weakness. He could swear that the monster grinned, devious, uglier than him, taking joy in Sandor's pain. The Hound's despair grew. His trust in Sansa was gone and the lack of it would kill him, just as Rhaegar had said.

He had no choice. The lie he was told was too strong, fed by his own worst, deeply entrenched fears and regrets. He had to reach for his wife's timid presence inside him, needful to taste the certainty of her affection. She did love him. Despite whatever she might choose to do one day as a young widow, if that was what awaited her.

He thought intensely of Sansa and felt her within his mind, airy and fluttering, caring for him in that expansive, overwhelming womanly fashion, which annoyed him when he was younger and hopeless in his misplaced desire for her.

Yet he strived to keep on his face the expression of despair, hoping to fool his enemy, who had slowed down his attack in order to feed on Sandor's suffering.

A brief glance back revealed Aegon did for one of them. Dayne's son indeed. The boy had held his ground, trembling like a leaf in his armour, a handsome lad amidst a swerving cloud of pretty blue crystals the things turned into when they died. With Mance, matters were different; he was pressed hard to lose ground, but the Hound could not help him now. Aegon would have to do that as the dog held his own, if that was possible at all.

The grumkin that was Weeper approached Sandor slowly, aiming its twisted wrinkled arms at the Hound's huge, muscled, armoured neck. It hissed and shrieked through the mouth almost as ugly as Sandor's own, pale and blue and dead, but at least it had no more power over the dog's mind.

There was only one thing left to try out. What Gregor used to do, and Sandor always avoided, not wanting to be like his brother. He had to be a monster now, not a man, in order to live. Only a monster had a chance to be victorious over the demon he was facing unarmed.

She will see. The knowledge shamed him. He didn't want Sansa to see all he was capable of, but there was nothing else he could do.

Sandor let his rage fill him to the brim and consume him. The white walker before him had grabbed Sansa; it wanted Sansa, pawing at her pretty white dress. This Weeper was the Other and the Other was in him for gods knew how long. Maybe they were not only after Rhaegar's blood. Maybe the blood of the Kings of Winter would also do.

Not on my watch.

Rabid to the bone, the dog feigned defeat nonetheless. The grumkin glided towards him, certain as death itself. Time slowed down or maybe the monster could make it seem that way, to prolong its victim's suffering.

I am sorry, Sansa. He had never told her he was sorry about so many things he had done in the past. He did not dare close his mind to his wife as he well should have done before he attempted this, for
fear that the despair his opponent wielded would flood him and drown him, needing any advantage he could get.

And when the grumkin predictably gripped his armoured neck in an embrace that meant death, Sandor did not resist it. He drew himself up to his full height, wishing to be as tall and as strong as Gregor. Even so, he was still a little bit shorter than the monster that was killing him.

When the thing was close enough to him, hissing and sneering with pleasure, Sandor grasped the Other's ugly head with both hands and let out all his anger, not holding any of it back. He let out all his hatred for the world and the poison he had stored in his soul for years. He would see if this creature had blood and what colour if had. Brutally, he squeezed, ignoring the fact that his own gorget tightened and that he was losing air.

On a second thought, he shook his head and shoulders as violently as he knew how. The grumkin lost hold of his neck for a moment and tried to rip out one of his arms instead. A gash burst open on one of the Hound's shoulders, in excruciating pain, which only served to enrage him further. He uttered a savage laugh, more and more excited at the thought of a messy kill. Blood fever was on him, and only blood freshly spilled would quench it.

*I am a monster.*

He had always known deep down that he was one.

In a fury fed by the pain in his shoulder, he released the grumkin's head and yanked one grey, wrinkled arm rapidly, with a vicious pull, enhancing the action by a hoarse, raspy cry. The limb broke off as if it were made of fragile crystal. Blue liquid sprayed out, foul and sticky. The one-armed attack on Sandor's hurting arm loosened, but it did not fully stop.

*So there is blood,* the Hound thought, emboldened by his success. He returned to squashing the grumkin's head, as Gregor once did to the Dornish Prince. Yet the skull would not give in. Warm blood ran down his hands and gloves, most likely his own. It seemed that the skin of the Other could cut, made of the same substance as his blade.

In a beastly fashion, the Hound ripped out the grumkin's other arm, followed by one leg, and finally another. In the end he seized the head of the limbless, helpless enemy and squashed it for good, until it cracked open, drenching Sandor's maimed hands in the Other's blood.

When he turned back from the slaughter he caused, Aegon just did for their third attacker with Dawn. Mance was hanging helplessly from the bridge, with both arms, legs dangling in the air. The pile of remains that was grumkin, that was Weeper, still twitched on the bridge. But his body, slain by hand and not by Valyrian steel, did not turn into crystal, not at all. It became a broken, butchered human; a dead, pale-eyed wildling.

"Finish it off, boy, whatever it is now," the Hound asked of Aegon matter-of-factly, and gave one slimy, bloody, gloved hand to Mance to pull him up. "He looks dead alright. But only shiny steel and dragonglass does for them for good from what we know."

Aegon did as he was bid, but the Hound could catch the disgusted look on his face as the Sword of the Morning completed the work he had so expertly started, cutting the butchered human body into even smaller pieces. The Hound kicked them off the bridge methodically with his boots. Chopped human flesh drifted slowly downwards, unnaturally light, as weightless as the blue snowflakes the other two walkers had turned into when dead.

*How can this be?* the Hound thought, or maybe it was Sansa who thought so in the corner of his
mind. *How can beings so mean and so foul become a thing so beautiful after their passing?*

Aegon looked as if he would puke or fall into the abyss himself. Trying to appear calm, he sheathed Dawn.

"You did what you could boy. What had to be done," Sandor told him very seriously, without any of his usual scorn.

Yet he wondered how he would feel and if he would be able to do the necessary if the dead Other had turned into Rhaegar…. into Sansa… into her little sister.

He found himself standing without purpose on the other side of the Bridge of Skulls, the safe side, feeling very unsafe and alone. The cuts on his shoulder and hands throbbed, unbandaged, left to heal on their own.

Mance gave the sign to the people to start coming over. The long river of human misery began flowing over the bridge as swiftly as they could. There were many, and the crossing would last for hours.

With nothing to fill up his mind, the Hound suddenly sensed Sansa's enormous sadness, which woke the same feeling in response in his battered soul. She must have seen him doing what he did, must have seen the monster she married, must have known he'd do it again, as many times as necessary. He had to learn to muster the required cruelty without her having to witness it. He would be Gregor for the duration of the winter if that was what it took to survive it.

*Don't be afraid, Sandor, please,* Sansa pleaded with tearful clarity in his head. *Forgive me. I haven't told you everything. But you will come back for me after the battle, won't you? You will find me?* *You know I will,* he thought, not understanding, uncertain if she could hear him.

He would return for her dead or alive. Even if he became a wight or this… this… other thing he had just slaughtered, he would not be able to forget Sansa.

On an impulse, he dipped his gloved hands into the snow and rubbed them against each other, wishing the blue stickiness to go away before he was reunited with his wife. The snow coloured blue and red, from the grumkin's blood and his own, yet he wouldn't relent.

*Sansa, Sansa, Sansa, what is it that you are not telling me?*

He still had her love. He had no single doubt about that now that the fight was over, but he still needed to know, and very soon, what was so important or so terrifying that she wouldn't tell him.

*She isn't with child, is she?*

Mance's wife had died in childbirth and Mance was nowhere near seven foot tall. Life was awful, at best, there was no doubt about that, despite the short respite the Hound had been given.

*Best if I can't father any children. Best if my blood dies with me. I have been happy. I have been more than happy… I could still be happy for many years when spring comes…*

Yet his soul ached, terribly so. Because maybe, maybe… maybe deep down he did want a child. A sweet daughter, like his wife. She would be smaller. She wouldn't kill her mother by coming to this world. She would have no darkness in her soul.

*My mother survived birthing Gregor and he was the first one.*
And Rhaegar has delivered more babies as a bloody brother of the Faith than he can count. Surely he could help.

The wildlings kept crossing the bridge and the Hound kept washing his arms in the snow, wishing he could cleanse his soul just the same. But he knew that he could not. What one did was always left carved on the inside.

A familiar screech, which did not belong to the enemy, called him back to the sharpened senses of a soldier determined to live. A black shadow on the Wall slowly departed from one of the towers of the ruinous castle of the Watch, spreading its leathern wings. Another, much smaller one, not bigger than a dot now, shrieked right back at it, approaching fast to meet it from the Sunset Sea.

"No," the Hound whispered, recognising the black dragon on the Wall…. He could not yet see the colour of the one flying to meet Drogon from the distance. *His horse.* The king had no horse now, but he did have a dragon.

Clear as the missing sunrise, the Hound remembered the bleeding story about the last hero and how it ended, the part that Rhaegar hadn't reminded him of in his little speech.

The last hero set forth with twelve companions, his horse and his dog. In the end all of his companions died, men and beasts. But the hero was victorious.

Rhaegar would never accept that result, not after he had burned a tower full of innocents at the Twins. Not when he maundered about the dead on the Trident almost every night in his sleep when he was still a monk, and Sandor thought him a simple soldier who had fought under the dragon banners.

*This is why you sent the three of us away, am I right, brother? So that you could die in peace. Well thought. But you haven't yet been successful in your madness.*

Sandor shoved himself back through the multitude of the excited wildlings, who hurried to the safety that awaited them across the Bridge of Skulls. He returned to the bridge itself and set aside everyone who was in his way, with minimum concern not to throw any living creature in the abyss underneath.

The woods to the east of the bridge began crying with many dead voices. The enemy had just made his appearance in force, it seemed, perhaps dismayed that his three servants who were sent to cut off the way out to the living had been defeated.

"Where are you heading?" Mance called after him.

"Back, singer," Sandor answered venomously, reaching the land on the other side of the bridge. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Why?" Aegon wondered. "The king commanded us to stay here."

"This is an ambush, just as we feared," the Hound clarified, gesturing at the shrieking woods. He struggled to open his way against the human tide as fast as he could without killing anyone with his bare hands, resisting a powerful temptation to resort to that as a final measure. All pretence of indifference and cruelty was gone from him.

"Rhaegar… my brother… he means to die," he said, gasping. "And I can't let him do that."

He hated himself for ever letting anyone call him a dog. He was a *man,* just like Sansa was a woman, neither a bird nor a wolf. Sandor was only a man, like Rhaegar, his brother. A man, no less,
If he had never let anyone call him a dog nor given in to the stupid banter of addressing people according to their sigils, his brother would never be able to use him to complete the omen of the last hero prophecy in his credulous silver head.

*It is all my fault for being a damn fool.*

The fleeing men and women were relentless in obstructing the Hound's march, and he was equally dogged in pushing them back, needing to return. At least Sansa didn't call to him yet. *Has anything happened to you, my love?* He couldn't feel her in his mind. *Or are you only repulsed by me?* Sansa had always been a good girl, he tried to console himself. She never wanted to die. She would have the good sense to hide or return to Winterfell the way she came here in case of trouble.

But what if he was wrong? What if she also did something noble, and dangerous?

It would be a very *Stark* thing to do.

He was choking now on his own fears, as he made his way back to his brother. He was too distressed to check if Mance and Aegon joined him or if they stayed at the bloody bridge. The buggering singer was never one to follow anyone's orders blindly, that much was certain.

The tide of people was not ebbing and he might not make it to Rhaegar's side on time. He strived desperately to move faster, as a drowning man fighting for his life.

*Warm wetness conquered his face, defeated his being, erased his pride.*

*Sandor Clegane wept like a child.*

*And for the first time since he was burned, he was not ashamed of crying.*
Brienne II

Chapter Notes

I will never be able to thank enough DrHolland for helping me out with this chapter and TopShelfCrazy for a few ultimate touches to it.

The song to go with this: "Me llaman calle" from Manu Chao.

On we go.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Brienne

The lacquered wood smelled sweet on her freckled nose, and her own name evaded her.

She wanted to inhale the scent and chant with the rest, but when she opened her mouth, she realised that the others were singing in an ululating language she did not know. A mask… Was it a mask? Its heavily perfumed surface lay heavy on her coarse facial features. In truth, she did not know if her appearance was unrefined. She merely believed in it. The suggestion she should sing and praise the Great Shadow persisted.

She did not sing.

She would not sing to that.

The reason for her indignation and rebelliousness escaped her indefinitely, just like any knowledge of who she was.

She knew she was a woman, that much was a given, not a man and not a maid any more. The paramount importance of this awareness felt quaint and new. Was there someone else with her to whom her being a woman mattered so? She could no longer remember.

She stretched her long arms left and right, and up and down. Muscled, she noticed. Ladies were not muscled; a helpful, aged, womanly voice from her past insinuated. Lady or not, she was overdressed. Long robes completely draped her body, falling to the ground in richness of velvet and satin folds. They were unfamiliar, pulled in haste over another, heavier set of clothing she sensed she was wearing under, made of wool, metal and leather.

She stuck her hands deep into the interminable pockets of her robes, wanting to feel her own garments, but the velvet was too thick and malleable, not revealing the truth she sought. Her fingers were powdered when she took them out; her pockets were stuffed with dust. The substance gave her a most unpleasant, enduring itch. That same friendly voice from her past blamed her for this, observing that a true lady carried no dirt in the pockets of her gown. Or maybe a proper dress for a lady had no pockets? She could not recall. She looked at her sleeves and they were blue.

Blue, she was gratified by the realisation. I'm wearing blue. Her head spun, hurting.

The sweet scent kept invading her nostrils. She placed her large palms onto her mask in order to remove it, wishing for some air. But the disguise would not budge, as if it had grown into one skin
and one flesh with her own.

Inwardly, she shivered in fear and discomfort. This was not what she was used to. This was not something she could fight. She had to fight for something, something important, but she didn't know for what.

She stomped with her feet in useless anger. *Boots,* she realised, *I am wearing manly boots.* It was reassuring to know that, for some reason. Her feet would be firm on the ground in a duelling stance. Yet it baffled her why she should wear such footwear, or duel anyone, being so indisputably a woman.

On a whim, she reached a decision. She would call herself Blue until her name came back to her. She immediately felt much better.

Many masked men and women murmured at her side; their voices wove an unswerving lamentation out of thin shreds of darkness. Through the slits of her mask, Blue could see a shadow, advancing through the middle of the empty nave of the vast, gloomy building she was standing in. *A temple,* she thought. *The place of worship of the shadow.*

Blue should have been afraid of the being in the darkness, but she was not. She had seen such a shadow once, of that she was convinced. But it hadn't been shapeless then, like this one was, no, not at all. The shadow she had seen before took the form of a man who still deserved to be punished for the heinous crime he had committed...

*Stannis, his name is Stannis. He calls himself king and he killed his younger brother to overtake his army, when Renly refused to acknowledge his older brother's claim to the Iron Throne was a better one.*

She saw the faces of Stannis and Renly as clear as the blue sleeve of her robes. She was at a loss. How could she imagine this when she could not remember anything from immediately before the mask was placed on her face? The only image left was that of several pairs of robed hands grabbing her, wrestling with her, subjecting her to the pungent wood, still moist with resin here and there. The mask must have been freshly made. Blue wondered if the masked people had made it for her or for someone else.

Her attention returned to the familiar, albeit formless shadow, that now followed a twisted, little, stubbornly upright man on a striped, white and black mount. Another man was flung over the equine, a taller one. Blue could not see his face, but she wished fervently that the shadow would never catch up with him. The selfishness and the god-forsaken intensity of her desire frightened her. Righteous or not, the gods must have heard her unspoken prayer because the dwarf always remained two steps ahead of the ominous, figureless being dogging his steps. Blue was oddly at ease when both riders markedly rode out of the black, domed space.

Against the pale grey light framed by the door, the dwarf and his little steed cut a silhouette of a knight on his warhorse. When its prey disappeared, the shadow retreated to where it came from, into the heart of darkness on the opposite edge of the great hall; empty-handed.

"He was taken," a deep male voice said in awe and relief when the shadow was gone.

"He was taken… taken… the deed is done..." The man drooled on. Many voices responded. It was the only sentence Blue could understand from the cacophony and she wondered why. How was it that she could now grasp any meaning of their words at all? She became all ears, to the limits of possible.
One sentence and a pair of manly boots were her only clues to finding her way back to herself, to her life. She would take them. She would walk free from this, whatever this was.

*Taken, taken, taken….* the voices whinnied in the dark.

She listened hard and there it was, the difference she was searching for. One voice was not singing. One voice was crying quietly under the mask so that the others could not hear her. It was a woman's voice, deep and yet childlike and tender. With every sob, the woman repeated the word *taken* in a language the masked captive *could* speak.

*The Common Tongue.* Blue remembered the name of the language. Even the accent of the weeping woman was *endearing,* somehow.

Blue made a blurry step in the darkness. Her legs felt wobbly, but she could walk. Suppressing the excitement, she made another, tiny one. Imperceptibly, she came very close to the crying woman.

"It was inevitable," the man who spoke first said to the inconsolable lady. "Only the life of a dragonrider and dragonspawn can pay for new life. The blessed Shadow will now restore the life this city has not had for a century. Dragons came from the Shadow in the past and to the Shadow they must return. You know that the dwarf did not have the right of it when he spoke of their Valyrian origin."

Strong sobs began wracking the upset woman's body at his words.

The man relented in his stance, perhaps wishing to alleviate his companion's grief, Blue supposed. "I know," he said pensively. "It is not easy to witness a taking for the first time. Do not blame yourself for the second victim. The dwarf was given a chance to leave this town and he did not make use of it. His curiosity killed him, not us."

"This will *help* the dragonlords in the West," the man was all reason, and Blue began *hating* the views he defended with all her heart. Good men and women had used their reason to humiliate her in the past, reminding her of everything that was unnaturally wrong with her. She suppressed the feeling, striving to listen and learn what was going on.

"One dragonlord had to go east so that the west can prosper again. It was inevitable," the man continued with his good-natured argument. "The death of the bastard spared the last two pure-blooded Valyrian riders his destiny. With time, they will see the superior wisdom of forging an alliance with us and the race of dragons will prosper once more. As will Asshai, when our women are able to bear children again. I intend to send out every citizen with the use of legs into the fields of ghost grass around the city, to search for the now riderless dragon. The beast will either rage or mourn the loss of its rider for *days.* Old scrolls agree on this. With a little bit of sorcery, it will not be hard to chain it into a suitable dragonpit. Maybe, in time, it will choose another rider among our number."

Blue realised that the reason she kept understanding the man's long, fervent speech was because the crying woman was translating the singsong language to herself, into the Common Tongue, murmuring the words under her voice. The captive made another step closer to her only source of intelligible information, stumbled on her robes, and bumped into the man who had his mouth full of inevitability. Pondering his words made Blue spiteful and angry. There was no honour in having those feelings, but she could not help them.

*As if the dragon will wait for you,* Blue thought with pride, uncertain about her own certainty in this. Good chance was that the dragonrider had escaped with his dragon by now. She was acutely aware that the *shadow* did not take anyone. Why was she the only one in the masked congregation who
was able to see this self-evident truth?

"Oh," the man spoke again. "I almost forgot. What are we going to do with her?"

Her was Blue. *What indeed?* she thought.

"Would you remove my mask, please?" She dared a question. Her voice echoed in the darkness, hollow and too thin. Her plea was ignored.

"I suppose we should kill her," the crying woman suggested coldly, as if taking Blue's life would make her feel better in her misery.

"There is no honour in putting an innocent prisoner to death. I wasn't charged nor found guilty of any crime," Blue rattled, but her opinion did not awaken any interest in her audience.

"Why not?" the man casually agreed with the dishonourable proposal of murder. "You do it," he commanded the crying woman.

*I haven't done a thing.* Blue clenched her hands. She was strong. She would not let them kill her without a fight.

Ululating cries interrupted any further discussion or an attempt to strike her.

"The egg," Blue heard from the lips of the woman who had unjustly sentenced her to death. "It is still here."

"Aaaah! It is scalding!" A man screamed farther away, dropping an oval object.

"How?" the man who sounded so accomplished about sacrificing both dragonriders and dragonspawn was afraid now. "If only the rider is gone and not the spawn, the Shadow will consume us all!"

"There is another way," a soft, deep, female voice disagreed. "She was not born one of us but she has learned enough." The new lady speaker wore a dark red mask. She pointed at the sorrowful woman, the one who would kill the captive and who wore a very dark blue mask, almost indigo in colour.

"No!" the killer woman screamed. "I have not signed for this."

"Nothing is forbidden here," the man said calmly, his mask black as death. "You have always known. All who ask to dwell here are taught this upon their arrival."

"Take her back to the ship in which we came back from Meereen," the deep womanly voice commanded. "This one as well. Best if she is also gone."

This one was Blue.

The captive was made to walk and stumble. Two or three masked men flanked her on each side and behind. Her surroundings appeared dim through the narrow slits of her mask. She could have bolted, probably, but she didn't know where she was or where she could go. They would catch her and restrain her further if she was unsuccessful.

*A ship.* Maybe being taken to the ship meant they wouldn't execute her. No one spoke of that any more. Blue was not tied and she could always try running or even swimming away, as a last resort. She decided to wait a bit longer and see what her fortune would bring. *Maybe they are just banishing*
The march was long and sinuous, downhill through the cobblestone paved streets, ending on the seafront. Blue could not mistake its scent for anything else.

A cracking plank under her long legs brought her on board.

She was directed to the deck. All of a sudden, her companions buried their hands into the depths of their lavish robes and launched some of that itch-causing powder into the air, erupting into vivid chant. Before Blue could so much as utter a protest, her torso was bound to a thick wooden pole, by hempen rope conjured out of nowhere, from under her shoulders to her hips. A mast, she realised. She was tied so hard she could scarcely breathe. Every intake of air felt like a knife cutting her lungs. Finally, a heavy, oval object was shoved into her free hands.

"Why doesn't it burn her?" the accomplished man wondered aimlessly.

Why indeed? Blue's hands felt comfortably warm from the black oval she was holding and nothing more.

"Let me go, let me go! Send her to Stygai by herself!" the previously crying masked woman trashed helplessly against another mast on the edge of Blue's vision, trussed as firmly as Blue herself.

"The prisoner doesn't know the required chants to pass willingly into the Shadow," the reasonable man said with the smallest trace of regret in his child-lecturing voice. "You will have to do it. It is the only way. For what it's worth… I am sorry. I did wish to have children with you one day."

Blue inhaled the sea breeze deeply under her mask, ignoring the pain respiration woke in her chest. She cradled the warm oval to her equally tepid, rope cinched stomach. It was very familiar. If she grasped it hard enough maybe she would find the answers she so desperately required. So she squeezed the oval and she squeezed her brains.

But the truth kept evading her.

"I will sing nothing!" her would-be killer roared in a righteous rage. "I won't!"

"If you don't," the friendly man said matter-of-factly, "your death will be unspeakably painful, sweetling. Since die you must, I would say it is in your best interest to chant and give yourself to the Shadow in peace. I do believe you will reconsider your options when your ordeal begins."

With that, the man masked as death abandoned the field of Blue's vision, still extremely convinced of the necessity of his dishonourable actions. All his sorcerous, powdered companions followed suit. For the longest time, there was only silence. Blue's breathing calmed, to the point of becoming bearable in her predicament. Her lungs hurt less and she could think again.

True knights do not tie ladies to masts, she thought stubbornly, convinced she had the right of it. She was hopefully left only with the other masked woman, as captive as Blue now, and the ship's crew. Maybe the sailors would free her for promise of ransom. Sapphires. Her heart hurt profusely when she thought of the blue gems. She didn't think she possessed sapphires though, so she should best offer ordinary coin.

As if on someone's command, the sea breeze stopped moving and the air turned heavy, saturated with invisible smoke. Clouds sailed across the sky, or maybe it was the ship moving in slow motion up the stream of a black river. Blue clutched the egg-shaped bundle to herself and wished she could take off her mask.
Sister, the bundle may have said.

I don't have a sibling, she thought, they all died as children.

Before she screamed to sailors for help, a rough, man's voice called out from behind Blue's back.

"Quaithe, please! You have to do something to turn us back!" the man begged.

Translation was not required for he spoke the Common Tongue. He soon came into view; very muscled, balding and dressed for riding. There was more hair protruding from his tunic then growing on his scalp.

"You are also a shadowbinder!" he affirmed. "Will you let them kill you too as they must have done with Tyrion and his zorse? Or he would surely be back by now."

Zorse, Blue thought. Yes, that was the name of the striped mount she had seen in the black temple. They were bred on some plains in Essos. Very few were in use in Westeros. Blue had never seen a zorse before. She had only learned about their existence. Westeros? I am from Westeros... Her heart raced. I am remembering.

"Zorse? What are you saying? There was no zorse," the other masked woman sounded terribly uncertain. She spoke as if she had to remind herself of a solemn, devastating truth. "We sacrificed Tyrion's brother to the Shadow. The dragonrider. Jaime," she spat the name out with loathing.

"Jaime," the captive, masked woman who could not remember who she was repeated in a whisper. That name sounded ineffably sweet on her lips. Memories of endless, sweetest kisses conquered her mind. Will those days ever return?

They must, she told herself.

"Jaime," she said again, stronger this time, wishing to remember his face more than her own name.

Forcing herself to return all her attention to there and then, she realised that Quaithe sounded more and more like a Westerosi with every word she spoke, and less and less like an Asshai'i.

Asshai? It was the name of the dark city. She was making progress, Blue encouraged herself. Soon she would recall everything. More images poured into her mind.

Blue and the handsome blond man slightly shorter than her had arrived together at the open gates of the black city of the shadows. They had not made fifty steps behind its walls before a party of masked men and women came to bow solemnly to the dragonrider. They offered their hospitality and shared meat and mead with the newcomers, claiming that Jaime's little brother was their honoured guest; waiting peacefully for Jaime. They led them into the temple... After, her memories were blurred again.

Jaime. Blue was sworn to protect him and she had failed. Was that the way of it? Was that the only thing she was to him? Did he kiss her as his guard, his gaoler? The thought saddened her. She had to find him now. But in order to do that, she needed to find herself first. She had to remember.

And she believed more and more that this meant losing the accursed mask, even if half of her face would peel off with it. She tugged at the hempen bondage around her belly. The rope was firm and of good quality. She would not be able to break it with her hands. Tentative groping on her back revealed that the knot was placed too high, almost behind the neck, just as she expected. She could not untie it. She had to fight with words. She was not good at it. Most of the time she preferred fighting with weapons. But she had to say something to the balding man now if she wanted to secure
Meanwhile, the woman he called Quaithe prattled incessantly, as though she were saying a prayer of an unknown faith she no longer believed in. Blue had moderate sympathy for the sentiment. Truth be told, it was not easy to believe in anything when tied to a mast.

"Tyrion wandered into the temple. He went to his brother and the shadow took them both," the Asshai'i blabbered. "It went after them and it took them. There is no escape from the Shadow when it is summoned for the taking of the sacrifice offered to it. But it forgot the egg, maybe because it fed on two men instead of only one. We must bring the egg to Stygai now and perish in doing so. There is no other way. The Shadow has been enticed with the promise of the ultimate sacrifice it desires… the blood and the life of the dragons… It will be enraged if it doesn't receive it. It will swallow the world if we don't appease it…"

"And the world is already dying anyway…" the woman almost wept again. "It has begun under the Shadow a hundred years ago. All women are barren here and the curse is now spreading to the rest of the world. And if the Shadow is not made to be merciful after it is appeased, no woman's womb will ever quicken again. There will be no more children and the world will die out."

"An interesting belief," the hairy-chested man said quietly, unconvinced. "It reminds me of the faith of the Dothraki who say that the ghost grass will one day cover the world. Forgive me for not embracing it. It sounds a bit… final."

"The Dothraki are right as well," the woman conceded. "It is known. But no one knows when this will come to pass."

"But… Are you certain Tyrion rode that zorse we provided for him into Asshai?" the shadowbinder asked in a different voice, a younger one, full of quaint hope. "The quadrupedes… there are spells in place from which they die as soon as they cross the city walls and for a good reason. Sorcery is altered by their presence. There is no way of telling how the simplest spell will go. There is no control. Only fight for dominance among spell casters. No outcome is predetermined. And you will agree this is very dangerous in a city visited and inhabited by sorcerers and necromancers from all lands…"

"Will you stop talking about the dying world and do something to help if I am certain about the zorse? The entire crew of this ship can confirm that the Imp went off board on zorse-back," the man insisted.

Before the Asshai'i could answer for her intentions, changed or not, Blue decided it was a good time to launch a plea of her own. "Untie me," she said. "I will chant. She is lying. She wished to kill me. What is preventing her to kill you by magic and swimming back if you let her go?"

"My pardons, my lady," the balding man said carefully, "but you speak the Common Tongue so naturally that the ability betrays you for a liar. You are no Asshai'i."

"And she is?" Blue asked indignantly, having no idea who she was nor where her own manner of speech came from. But she firmly believed she had just recognised the origin of the supposed Asshai'i. "Listen to her! She speaks like a lowborn woman from the West."

Jaime spoke that way to mock and tease Blue when he so wanted. Or when he hated his family inheritance, she recalled. Jaime. He is from the West.

"You are a murderer and a liar," Quaithe accused Blue, seething. "And your handsome Jaime is an accursed criminal! He will burn in seven hells if the gods are good."

And to the balding knight she
said, "This wench came here from Westeros with Jaime. I had to force a mask on her face or she would kill as many of us as she could."

"See," Blue pointed out, "she speaks of seven hells." She blushed belatedly from being called wench. Why? Why? Why? It was an insult and she should be offended.

The Westerosi man vigorously scratched his head.

Blue forced herself to ululate the melody she had just heard in the black temple, inventing several simple two-syllable words to go with it on the spot. "I am willing to help with this Shadow business," she announced calmly. "Quaithe isn't. She has her own goals." She hoped she was guessing the truth about the latter. Outright lying would be dishonourable.

The man's indecision was very brief. "I will free you both. I will take all my chances in hope that one of you can do something," he concluded. He had a longsword on his hip and he probably believed he could best two women if they tried to overcome him, Blue thought bitterly. They always underestimate us. She would use his arrogance against him if he became a threat for her.

"Thank you, ser," Blue said politely.

"Ser Jorah Mormont of the Bear Island. How did you know I was a knight?"

"True knights protect women and children," Blue recited. And when she thought of the bundle between her hands, she thought of an unborn babe in her arms. The notion was extremely disconcerting. It was easier to go on thanking perfect foreigners.

"Ser Jorah, I thank you again. You have acted a knight with me. I shall never forget it," she parroted with dignity. The other masked woman kept very quiet.

The knight called for a few hands to help with the ropes.

As soon as she was free, Blue used the discarded bondages to fasten the oval-shaped bundle tightly to the mast, recognising or remembering what it was. The shadowbinder did not lie about that. It was an egg. And not just any egg. A dragon egg about to hatch. The certainty and the greatness of it was overwhelming. Blue's hands began shaking but she forced herself to be thorough in completing her task. Ships often came into storms. It would not do to leave the dragon egg for the krakens under the sea by chance or by neglect.

When she was done, she noticed that the Asshai'i eyed her with unspeakable hatred. Blue didn't think anyone had ever looked at her with that much hostility. Quaithe's eyes sparkled. It was that shine in a man's, or in this case, woman's eyes before an attack would follow, Blue knew.

She stood firmly in her boots. When the other woman slammed into her, wishing to jam her shoulder into Blue's chest or stomach and throw her off balance, she stepped away. Quaithe buried her nose into the deck. This only enraged her further.

The shadowbinder jumped on Blue faster than a shadowcat. They both fell on the deck and rolled, clawing at each other's masked face, pulling viciously at each other's hair, kicking each other with their knees and legs, entangled in a locked wrestling position. Quaithe fought ferociously for any advantage she could obtain, seemingly very skilled and practiced in this type of struggle. She even tried to strangle Blue with the folds of her exotic gown. She was tall for a woman, almost as tall as Lady Sansa.

But Blue was much taller and stronger, and not a stranger to defending herself with bare hands, robed or not. And it did feel liberating to fight after her ordeal in Asshai.
With a new set of painful scratches on her chin, and a fresh collection of bruises on her body to match it, Blue ended up straddling Quaithe into submission, holding both of her slender hands in an iron grip by only one large palm of her own.

The knight from the Bear Island hooted and whooped, cheering. "You two would make good coin in the fighting pits of Meereen" he said. "It's a pity only one woman comes out alive from those."

*Meereen. That is where we were supposed to find Tyrion. But the dragon took us to Asshai and Tyrion came to Asshai, but then the Shadow took both Jaime and Tyrion....*

No... Tyrion, if that was him, rescued his brother from the Shadow, on a striped zorse.

Her eyes were good. Her vision had never betrayed her. Her head spun with bleak dizziness.

*Jaime...*

Blue was fed up with secrets and masks. There was no honour in that.

With her free hand, she peeled the mask off Quaithe's face in a brusque, sweeping motion, wondering what she would see, a mortal woman, a heartless warlock or a soulless wight.

"No, please," Quaithe protested in a very soft voice, but it was too late.

Blue looked down. The woman she'd beaten up was older than her, but not truly old, probably still in her child-bearing age. Her eyes were as blue as Blue imagined her own, not knowing if she was right or wrong in that. There was also a watery quality and sweet quietness within Quaithe's eyes that Blue's vision of herself was decidedly lacking.

Overall, Quaithe had a pleasing, calm, tender look, in contrast to her violent behaviour. Very long, silky, straight black hair framed her innocent-looking face.

"As a curiosity, my lady," Blue asked her defeated opponent. "How is it that I saw the zorse clearly and the three dozens of shadowbinders present did not? Despite being forced to wear a mask of your people?"

The pale cheeks of the unmasked woman coloured gently to fading pink. "It is just... Isn't it obvious? The animals are so much lower than people. And we know that there can't be any left in the city. So we simply don't see them. I have no better explanation, learned or otherwise."

To Blue this attitude sounded a lot like what most of the men she knew thought about women. They were so much lower than men, so they simply did not see them. She felt very accomplished about revealing the face of her enemy and glad it was just another woman, like herself.

*The deed is done, as you masked people are fond of saying. And now to my own. Even if it costs me my beauty.*

The lost woman clawed at her own face, finding, to her immense relief, that she could take the mask off, now that she had overpowered the shadowbinder who had inflicted it on her.

*My name is Brienne,* she exhaled with the galloping sense of freedom.

Brienne looked around and took in the ship. She was a sturdy longship with three masts and three sets of sails, appearing well-maintained and seaworthy. The crew was scarce and of all skin colours, but they showed skill in navigating the vessel, between the dark shores and over the muddy black water of the river. She was sailing *up* the stream from the Port of Asshai; past the sinister city, built of
moisture-dripping, black stone. From the deck, it seemed to Brienne that every house and palace of
the place was crying.

In the distance ahead of the prow, unspoiled blackness loomed over a tall mountain range. A ruined
human settlement could be glimpsed as well, on a slope above the river, merged with the darkness,
made one with the Shadow. A touch of lightning ripped the sky open on occasions, or maybe it was
just a trick Brienne's eyes played on her now; tired of squinting through polished wood.

"Stygai," Ser Jorah informed her dryly, noticing her effort in studying where they were. "It's the
night city behind Asshai. Further on lies the heart of the Shadow. The bards may like to sing of it
now and then, but everyone fears the lands in front of us. Even the shadowbinders, who are not
easily cowed."

Brienne was content that the knight from the Bear Island was more acquainted with their
surroundings than herself

"Thank you for letting me know," she said courteously, abandoning all pretence. "I am Lady
Brienne of Tarth. The shadowbinders ambushed me and my husband, Ser Jaime Lannister. I have
never had the honour of meeting my husband's little brother, but I have seen a dwarf saving Jaime
from the shadow. He hauled Jaime on his zorse and went away. If you say this little man was Tyrion,
I have no reason to doubt your word."

Jaime had fainted from the sorcery… they had cut him before laying him down on the altar… his
blood dripped under his body and disappeared, sucked by the black stone. Brienne remembered
everything now. Her heart constricted with concern for her husband. But he had sustained worse
injuries in the past, and there was also Viserion and his healing powers. Another thought suddenly
worried her more. What will you do when you regain consciousness? Return to Asshai for me and
commit an act of madness before you are fully recovered?

She had to save herself soon and rejoin her husband. It was the only way. Probably Viserion could
find her as he had found Tyrion. But Viserion had never wanted to go near this… Shadow… And
whenever Brienne looked forward to where the ship was headed, the dragon's reluctance appeared
more than justified. The ship was firmly set on sailing east, against the natural course of the river
Ash, which normally ran to the west, and, like any other river, into the sea.

Brienne stood up, leaving the defeated woman to her own devices, but not without noticing a new
glint of an unreadable, strong emotion in her pale blue eyes. They had turned almost as stormy as the
black sky in front of them when Brienne revealed she was Jaime's wife.

Who are you? she wondered, determined to find out a bit later.

Before any further questioning or attempting to change the ship's course, Brienne had to put together
all pieces of herself. Wordlessly, she tore the shadowbinder robes she was obliged to wear apart.
Fine dust sprinkled the wooden boards, falling from the hidden pockets and the folds, glittering like
starlight or scattered embers of fire. The sight was deeply satisfying.

"It's such a waste," the other woman lamented in disagreement, unsuccessful in picking up the shiny,
spilled powder for herself. It slipped through her fingers and melted into the deck.

Under, Brienne wore a blue chainmail shirt, black tunic and breeches. A longsword hung confidently
on her hip. She could breathe freely now, for as much as the grey air of Asshai was generally stale
and unbreathable.

A brief glance at the dragon egg revealed it remained safely tucked into its nest of ropes. She hoped
that if they met a true storm on their voyage, the bindings would hold. The egg was no longer black. It had reacquired its natural bright blue colour with silver veins.

"Others take me," Ser Jorah cursed, attentively observing the change. "Is this truly what I think it is?"

"A dragon egg," Brienne confirmed, alarmed. She wouldn't let Ser Jorah touch it. He suddenly seemed far too eager to lay his paws on it. She patted the pommel of her sword.

"And ser," she said with cold determination. "I may be a lady but I also have a knightly name. I am Brienne the Blue and I am the young dragon's keeper."

"No harm intended, ser, my lady," Ser Jorah said penitently, recognising a threat when he heard one. "I only admire beauty when I see it."

He stared squarely at her face and figure now, and Brienne blushed at the odd compliment. Yet both the explanation and the insinuation only served to strengthen her belief that Ser Jorah did have his own designs towards the unborn dragon.

"Others take me," the shadowbinder joined the conversation replicating the Westerosi curse. "I haven't beaten anybody, nor received a beating for years. Not since I was a cutpurse in Lannisport," she continued, chuckling. "But it still feels invigorating. Thank you for this rare pleasure, my lady."

Brienne swallowed a drop of blood from her slightly cut lip and admired the other woman, who could suddenly not only speak but also be almost courteous as a proper Westerosi lady.

"A cutpurse?" Brienne asked, incredulous.

"Why, it was better than being a whore," Quaithe replied with cruel indifference. "I was only made to work as a whore once and I could not abide the profession later on. You could say that I suddenly lost any taste I may have had for the noble art of selling my body. If you must know, I still keep the coins I earned that day in my cell in Asshai, many silver ones, and one special coin made of gold. But I do not think that I shall ever see them again. Maybe this is for the better."

"We have to go back to the city," Brienne said calmly, not knowing what else to say at Quaithe's odd outburst. It was the first place Jaime would come back to, looking for her.

"We can't," the other woman retorted squarely. "We will not be able to sail against the joint chanting of all of my former associates in the city who are eagerly sending us east. The only way is forward. To go west we must go east. But we are not going to sail to the Shadow as they had set us to do."

"We are going to sail through the Shadow. And if you want to live, the two of you will help me do just that. Since the sacrifice had not been made at all, if what you are saying is true, there might be a way to pull this off. I hope that you both have some sense for music and that you learn fast. Trust my word on it, the chants work better if more people intone them. Though I do fear that the time we still have to live if we are successful is rather short. The curse of barrenness has spread far beyond Asshai; mark my words, children are no longer being born. We have received ample proof of that. It is a certain sign that the world will soon dwindle into nothingness."

Brienne was amazed to discover that the beating they gave each other affected the unknown woman with enthusiasm and a will to help.

"Quaithe," the knight was hard to convince, "surely you are exaggerating the power of the Shadow. No power of this world can stop children from being born."

"Would that I could deny it," the woman said curtly, "but I fear that its power is real. Worse, it is
growing. The world is dying…”

*Is this why my womb never quickened in the first months of my marriage?* Brienne was tempted to believe in Quaithe's sinister prediction. Because, if it were true, not bearing a child was not her fault for not being womanly enough. It was the will of the gods.

"Quaithe-"

"-Quaithe stayed in Asshai with Maester Marwyn if you can't tell, *ser*. Her mask is *red* as you should well know. I am the second lady shadowbinder who has travelled with you from Meereen,“ the Asshai'i carefully refuted Ser Jorah's allegations about her identity. "Though I don't blame you entirely for your ignorance. When masked we can easily impersonate each other or look younger or older at will. It is called *glamour*…. A very basic trick we were constantly applying to confuse you. Unlike the one I should employ now if I am able to; one of the most complex charms I have ever learned."

"How shall we call you, if not Quaithe?" Brienne asked. "You must have a name."

"My name… my name is Tysha", the cutpurse from Lannisport said, rubbing her temples as if either the admission or the memory cost her dearly. "I was… I was Tyrion's wife once. I am not certain who I am now. I have worn a mask for too long."

Brienne gasped for the non-existing air as the singularly cruel, heart-wrenching story Jaime had told her on Viserion's back fell into place. A *silver for every guard who forced himself on her and gold for a Lannister. She has kept her payment to remind her of her ordeal… What she must have endured… What she must think of both Jaime and Tyrion! And of me as Jaime's wife…*

She modestly observed the lady in front of her with new eyes, and then stared into the darkness they would sail into very soon; if Brienne was still any judge of the ship's movements after so many years away from Tarth and any form of sea-faring. She took the unfortunate lady by her hands, ignoring Tysha's reflex to retract them back, seemingly averse to gentle human touch.

*Time for stories will come later,* Brienne decided.

Now, they had to sail *through* the sorrowful cloud of utter blackness ahead of them, just as *Tysha* said.

"You," Brienne told Tysha, staring into the pale blue eyes with the bright blue of her own. "You, my lady, are our only chance."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to all who ever commented. Comments really feed the author. Any feedback is welcome.

Thank you for reading.

Coming: Sansa, Jon, Dany, Davos, Mance/Aegon tbc
Sansa

The cruel demand of the old gods still buzzed in her ears.

She should have gone to them when they first called her, but she did not, disobeying their wish. Or was it a command?

_I will be good! I will do as I am asked_, she promised inwardly. _I have always done so._

Except on those few occasions when she stubbornly wanted something for herself. One of her fervent wishes was a golden prince, and the cost of Sansa's folly was her father's life. She prayed that no one good and true would die now just because Sansa sometimes listened only to herself.

This time she had to see to it that her husband lived and did not sustain any grievous wounds on top of his old ones. The necessity was adamant and would not be denied.

_A moment was all I needed_, she tried to explain to the gods, who listened to her attentively, as her justices, through the leaves of a snarling weirwood tree north of the Wall. _Now, I shall do my part. I shall wait and I shall not flinch, whatever is required of me._

_I have not averted my eyes when they cut off my father's head. I could not, for as much as I wanted to. I had to see with my own eyes what I helped cause by my simple innocence._

_I will keep them open now, to any end._

_I promise._

Sansa always prayed to the gods, the old and the new, to any who listened, even when they seemed deaf to her pleas in her pretty cage in Maegor's Holdfast, in the heart of the Red Keep, and later on in the Vale; when she expected less and less from life every day. The girl who was to be the queen would have been content if an arrogant heir of the Arryns from the lesser branch of the family would like her a little, and if Petyr did not kiss her.

But the gods never were _deaf_, not truly. They guided Sansa to where she was supposed to go according to their own designs, and not in line with her childhood dreams and wishes. They made her see there _was_ truth in men, and not only lies. They allowed her to be the judge of what she wanted and choose her husband, where most women could never do the same. They preserved her
life and her maiden's gift until she offered it of her own free will. They wouldn't abandon her now.

Would they?

*Please, don't be angry with me,* she implored the gods whose will she had just circumvented. *I shall wait now and I shall do as you say.*

*I have always waited.*

But for all her honest pleas and promises it would have been much easier if the gods had whispered to her exactly what they intended for her to do, besides summoning her north, beyond the Wall, with frightening speed and urgency.

Sansa never wanted to take part in the War of Winter as the smallfolk already called it at a safe distance from any fighting, in Wintertown and Winterfell. She would have waited and prayed for the men to return, knowing herself to be weak. She would stand in everyone's way or worse, someone would capture her, and Sandor would be bound by his duty to fight on. He would not be able to save her, just as Robb and her mother could not fly to her aid when she was the hostage of the Lannisters.

Sansa never dreamed of taking part in any war. That was *Arya.* So she concluded that if she began experiencing such strong calling to do so every day, it had to come from the gods.

One day she visited Wintertown, to better ignore and forget that most unusual urge. As a result, she only heard sinister whispers about children no longer being born. No woman had become with child in months, people said, and added this was perhaps for the better, rather than having to *smother* babies in winter, which seemed to be common in the North. Sansa was never warned of this particular custom by her parents or her septa. True to the gossip, she was married for a few months now, and her moonblood always came and went. Hearing this, she needed the godswood again, and the impulse to do what she could in the War of Winter continued and gained force.

Maybe the gods would have told her what she was supposed to do if she followed their lead to that other place, where her brother Bran rested, reclining among the tree roots with his ruined legs. Maybe Bran would tell her if the gods were unable to do so in a language Sansa understood.

She thought she'd heard Bran whispering to her through the trees as well. Her little crippled brother repeated the wish of the red-eyed greenseer from her dreams; Sansa should sew this lavish white woollen gown she was wearing now; the gods… the gods had been silent about that...

But Sansa had to disobey the gods, didn't she? She had *used* the way they had opened for her, closed her eyes tightly and wished to go to Sandor, ignoring all else. She rushed into his arms, needing to know they were still there and as strong as she remembered them.

*Stronger. He's become stronger. And more handsome, in his way.* One day she had to dare tell him that. Though handsome was never the right word, not for him. It was only what Sansa always felt in her love for Sandor. Everyone else would just see him as more impressive.

*Or more frightening.*

Her wish to join him had been so powerful that it forced the will of the gods. The trees belonging to them agreed to do her bidding. It was frightening that she succeeded in such endeavour, she, Sansa the weakling, always at the mercy of others. To have this sort of power was… terrifying. *Did Lady have to die for me to become like this in winter?* The thought always made her wish to cry. It was not fair. She did not cry. She would not cry.

Her dreams in Winterfell were haunted every day since Sandor left with the king. In them, Father,
Mother and Robb were alive in the crypts and they frightened her to death as Jon once did covered in flower. Bran walked and climbed the walls again on some nights, or whispered about the future to her ears, crippled and imprisoned forever inside a tree that deceived him, lying to him that one day he would fly. She had to remain painfully alert not to reveal this to Bran and it was hard to stay awake in a dream. There were also several beings named the greenseers, shapeless creatures made of fire, ice spiders, ice dragons, snarks and grumkins…

In Sansa's dreams, the beings from Old Nan's stories shadowed her husband closely since he crossed the Wall. Sansa ran to the godswood every night to find peace and stop the images from coming to her. Instead of the peace she sought, she would see the white walkers again. She would hear the Others in the insistent, worried chatter of the trees. They would kill Sandor and drink his blood if he stayed by Rhaegar's side when they came near this bridge…

_The Bridge of Skulls_.

But _now_ they would _not_. Sansa let her heart soar, if only for a moment. This was very well. Her timely arrival was the last encouragement Sandor needed to step forward and seek his own battle, believing he would keep both her and Rhaegar safe by his sword.

Little did he know that by doing so he had sheltered himself from greater harm, which would soon come near Sansa if she chose to stay near the king. Rhaegar was _gallant_ and doubtlessly he would try to send her away before any confrontation.

The voices in the trees had been clear about this, at least, just like _all_ and not just one Old Nan's story had come to life this winter.

The Night's King was coming for Rhaegar in person because his slave, the ice dragon had failed to deliver the trueborn king of Westeros to the ruler of grumkins. For all his strength, Sandor would not be able to defeat the king of darkness. But he would have tried and died or become mutilated in the attempt, Sansa had heard it with piercing clarity.

The gods never told Sansa if she or anyone else would die for changing this course of events regarding her beloved lord husband. She decided to believe that their silence on the matter meant that no one would.

Sansa shivered and called an emotionless mask of reserve on her pale face, waiting, afraid of what she was about to endure.

Ever dutiful, she stayed close to the king and wondered what madness Sandor expected from him. Sansa had come to know Rhaegar as a perfectly serious, reasonable man, if often sad and thoughtful.

_Like Jon_, she thought, shivering from cold and from all her frightening imaginings, despite being dressed as warm as she could possibly be.

Sansa's father was mostly unsmiling, but he was rarely sad, perhaps only on those days when he visited the crypts and remembered his dead. Back then, she thought Jon was often sad for being a bastard, but now it seemed that her brother's pensive, serious moods may have had a completely different origin.

Yet Rhaegar was not always composed. He had been frighteningly emotional when he was reunited with his wife.

But Sansa thought this was so only in that unique occasion where anyone would be expansive in showing their true emotions, wouldn't they?
Expansive. Like Jon, at times.

Or was it the blaze of dragonfire Rhaegar always carried on the inside, without letting it show?

Was Jon carrying the same flame?

Was that the spark of madness brought by dragonblood?

Sandor, Mance and Aegon were almost at the Bridge of Skulls when a cold wind started to blow from the forest in the east. The air smelled and tasted of ice. The king stretched his lips in a thin smile and Sansa knew beyond doubt it was time.

"We will not wait, I think. This cold is acquiring a scent," Rhaegar said thoughtfully. "Lady Val, I would have you go now with those of your people that dare descend into the Gorge," he addressed a beautiful blond woman wearing white like Sansa. Except that Val wore trousers and not a many-layered gown as Sansa had made for herself at the incitation of her little brother; or out her own folly, it still remained to be seen. Maybe she was just exhausted and lonely and hearing voices in her dreams. There was nothing more dreadful than her empty marriage bed.

The wildling lady looked offended by the noble treatment she was given, but she did listen to the king.

A gust of wind hit the jeering weirwood, rustling its leaves. Sansa could hear the words in the singing of the branches, but she closed her ears to it, attentive to her royal uncle.

"I shall give you half of my dead as escort," the king continued addressing Lady Val, who frowned. "Yes, I know you do not wish for it. But I do. Let them go in front. If one of them breaks a neck to show the dangers of the path to the rest of you, he will walk again. The same cannot be said of the living. It may be ungodly to use them, but the gods have allowed their existence, such as it is, not I. They will be loyal to you as long as Lady Jeyne is with you. And Euron Greyjoy, their leader."

Curiously, Euron turned dark grey. Can the wights blush? Sansa wondered. It was unlikely.

Sansa observed the ironborn and looked through him, carefully hiding her mixed emotions. It was uncanny to see in person a man... No, a deadman... she corrected herself, whom Sansa had possessed mentally to force him to help Sandor. She could say one thing in favour of the dead kraken. Against her expectations in the matter, when he heard her voice in his head, he gave Sandor a hand on his own. She didn't have to force his body to take action, only to counsel him. She was grateful for this small mercy. It was already ugly to violate his mind against his will and it would feel even less palatable to force him to act.

Val took Lady Jeyne by the hand and looked at Euron with hatred. "Get yourself going, deadman," she commanded him coldly. "We have no time to lose."

The wind whistled and howled; cold and threatening. The red leaves rustled more insistently, branches swayed, ice crystals cracked under many feet. It was so cold that the snow did not turn into slosh, not even with so many people present. There was fear in the eyes of the wildlings.

Euron turned to the king. "Your Grace," he said very stiffly, yet the title he offered Rhaegar did not sound like an insult in his mouth for a change. "I shall gladly do as you say this time. If it please you, I would leave with you my brothers, Damphair and Victarion, Ser Loras, and all wights of my making from the lands around Highgarden. I would also leave... my bastards... I mean, my natural sons." He paused. It was visible that his next words cost him dearly.

"I beg of you to take such good care of all of them as is possible in this war. I have no wish for any
of them to be ground into pieces in this... Gorge. The rest are my crewmen. They chose to sail with me, knowing who I was and what I did. I wish to believe they brought this condition upon themselves, as I did."

"I will do what I can," Rhaegar answered as dryly as Lady Val might.

Euron was content enough, it seemed. He hissed some orders at his dead, in a language only they could understand, and was the first corpse to trudge down the path descending into the deep. He didn't look at all where he put his feet. *That would be the advantage of being dead,* Sansa thought sheepishly. A hundred of his wights followed him, most already mutilated, kept together and in motion only by the curse of eternal life laid upon them. Those who stayed with the king had more limbs and body parts intact, Sansa rightfully noticed.

"Sansa," Rhaegar said quietly, startling her. "Would you join the ladies, if it please you? We shall all meet on the other side. My brother will not forgive me, not even in seven hells, if anything happens to you."

It was not a question. It was a command. A well-intended one, with her safety in mind, Sansa knew. She curtsied as much as her tremendously long gown allowed.

"Yes, Your Grace," she said out loud, forcing her voice to sound melodious, but she did not hurry to obey. She had not come to Sandor only to part from him again so soon.

That descent looked dangerous and much longer than the way across the bridge. Val and Lady Jeyne were departing and less than half of the wildlings lined up to follow them. Most waited though, in fear from the deep, and eyed the still empty bridge with more hope.

*Sandor is my husband and he asked me to watch over the king.* The memory strengthened Sansa's determination. It was her wife's duty and not only her selfish love for Sandor that was making her stay. She followed the wildling lady with poise and dignity despite the cold that made her wish to double over, enclose herself in a cocoon of furs and sleep forever...

At the first turn of the sinuous descent, Sansa abandoned the path leading down. She stepped to her right and climbed back among the boulders of a rocky slope. She squatted, wrapped her gown and cloak around her left arm, used her right arm for support, and advanced like a crawling babe in total darkness. It took her twice as long to go back, but she managed to return to the border of the large clearing where the king stood with the dead soldiers left to him, in front of the sneering weirwood tree.

Seeing the face of the tree from a far, Sansa was suddenly afraid of it. It had never been a good face, she realised.

*How was I ever able to travel through it?* Passing through the trees was a peculiar experience. It felt like falling, like swimming, like being lost in time and place, immersed in a pool from which an exit to any place or time was possible if one knew how to find it. It was terrifying. Yet her wish to go to Sandor had been much stronger than any of her fears.

She was on a slightly higher ground now. From her new position she had a very good view of the clearing, the wood, the descent into the Gorge and the Bridge of Skulls below. The sea of wildlings was divided in two, one column slowly poured down into the deep, and the rest amassed quietly in the direction of the bridge, waiting for the call that crossing was safe. Sandor and his companions were almost at the bridge, Sansa could see.

The king and his dead formed one closed line of defence beginning from the weirwood, closing the
front between the eaves of the forest and all the people in need of shelter. The king was not in the middle of the line, but at the end of it, near the white tree. The strange boy who had arrived with Sansa was also there, green-eyed and unafraid.

*How can he be so confident?*

Sansa's heart pounded with dread though nothing remotely terrible had happened yet. Her being rang with premonition and her heart raced madly.

A horn blew in the darkness, broken and shrill. The wood rang with cries. The enemy was coming. Slowly, at first.

Suddenly, she felt her husband had need of her and allowed her consciousness to ease itself smoothly into Sandor's head, much as she had learned to let him into her body.

*Why?* she thought, but she wouldn't protest, sensing his despair.

She hoped that her empty, warging body would be protected by the rocks. The narrow, mountainous slope of the cliff further up to the north of her position was still free of sound and treeless. Behind her, to the west, there was the edge of the cliff, a nothingness, and deep under the void, the sea. She was as safe as she could be when she closed her eyes.

Sandor… Sandor was breaking a monster apart with his hands. It was… it was the ugliest scene Sansa had ever seen. And it was not all. She sensed it, she saw it, what she never believed when he said it before because how could *this* be true for anyone? He did not do it only because he had to, only because he would die if he didn't. He took *joy* in the meticulous act of destruction… He loved it...

She would never be able to find joy in inflicting pain to anyone. Not even… to a grumkin. But she would do it if she was able to and if it had to be done. It was the Stark way.

She began to cry. It was one thing to love a killer and to know he was one, but quite another to have such an immediate taste of what it meant. She would never be able to understand. She cried harder. She did not love him any less for it, but what she had to witness made her sob. She could not understand why he called to her to make her see this. She could not.

She repeated to herself a hundred times that the creature *was* going kill him if he didn't overpower it, there was no doubt... She let her tears dry in silence.

Finally, Sandor stepped away from his kill and asked Aegon to cut the poor, dead *wildling* into pieces. And when he did that, Sansa sensed the terrible doubt within her husband, and grasped it desperately to keep herself from falling into madness. No, he could not kill *her* or Rhaegar or Arya, not even if they turned into grumkins strangling him to death. He could not kill any of them at any time and much less find it sweet. He could not. It wasn't enough to appease Sansa fully, but it would have to do.

Her inner eye drifted to the rest of Aegon's *kill* she supposed, done with Valyrian steel instead of the bare hands Sandor used. Blue crystals. *So foul and yet so fair.* Absurdly, she admired their beauty. She told herself it was a kill nonetheless even if what Aegon did seemed prettier.

Sandor… he wasn't looking for her presence any more, lost in some sadness of his own. She could not understand it and she doubted he would talk about it. She doubted that he could. She pulled out of him. She had stayed with him for too long.

Too long indeed.
When she came to her senses, she was weak, exhausted, hungry, and there was no kitchen she could go to as in Winterfell to help herself. She opened her eyes wide and startled. What she saw put her on edge. She forgot her hunger and was attentive, alert... her ears *pricked*... As though she were a wolf lost in the wilderness...

*Am I a wolf after all?*

The king and his dead were engaged in a ferocious combat with a company of the foul creatures of ice from Old Nan's stories.

In front of Sansa's horrified eyes, Jojen Reed died without a sound.

A glass blade of the enemy crossed his chest and he fell. In the next moment, the boy stood up and advanced bare-handed on Rhaegar and his wights, his only weapon the mindless determination of a slave of the Others. His green eyes became pale blue and twinkled with cruel shine. Ser Loras, a burned *wight* now, hit him in the head with his armoured knee by chance, because the boy was very short and Ser Loras busy; he wielded a short obsidian blade and tried hard to slaughter a grumkin, who would otherwise chop Ser Loras into pieces with his crystal sword. Jojen stumbled, fell again, burying his head into the ice.

The night air still smelled sharply on snow though none fell. The sky remained empty and moonlit under the wisps of woolly clouds.

Sansa breathed the freezing air into her lungs and realised this freshness to be *wrong*, to be sinister; with the battle going on there should be *reek*, the reek of blood. The wood should smell as Sandor did when he came to her on the night of the battle for King's Landing. But the blood here was not that of the living. Black blood oozed from the dead people fighting the monsters. The few Others that were overwhelmed drifted peacefully as blue crystals under the moonshine, in the crisp air. There was no blue blood... None of the defenders here was able to kill a white walker with their hands as Sandor did... Only dragonglass did it for them.

The clash went on for a while. It would never end with the decisive victory for either side, it seemed.

The wildlings were pressing themselves to leave now, not looking back to those who defended the rear. At the beginning, some still fought with the king; a woman with the white mask, a bald man with bronze armour, a ruddy, strong, loud man and a very ugly, large man with his boar. But now even those were departing, either to the bridge or into the Gorge. Sansa realised she was the only truly living person witnessing the battle.

She and the king. Rhaegar. Jon's father.

The horn hooted in the wood again, and the onslaught stopped. The two sides separated and regrouped. There were significant losses on both sides. Blue crystals saturated the night. There was not a single corpse laying on the clearing; all dead bodies defeated by the Others left the field and obediently walked into the wood, to await their masters' next command.

In that instant, Sansa felt Sandor's shame with himself for what he had made her see. He was torn on the inside. At one moment he was searching for her, beseeching her to *come* to him, and on another he was closing himself to her, and cursing himself for a fool who should have done his killing by himself. *Did I help you murder the grumkin?* The thought was unseemly.

Sansa made an effort to stay in her own body and crawled forward through the rocks, closer to the clearing and to the way leading to the bridge, to see better with her own eyes what was going on. The wildlings were almost gone now, either into the deep or towards the bridge, but not yet
completely. She was sorry she had lied to Sandor, goaded him away from the king. Sincerely, she begged him to come back for her, but not now, not now, only after the battle.

*Is it over?* She hoped so.

She could not be more wrong.

*The final joust of the tourney.* Sansa thought absurdly, wishing she was seated in the wheelhouse with yellow curtains with Septa Mordane, and that her world was still tinged in gold, instead of the immaculate, ruthless whiteness.

The Night's King rode out of the forest on a giant ice spider. He was taller than the grumkin Sandor defeated on the bridge and his face was uglier than death itself. He wore an intricate armour which hugged his wrinkled skin closely as if they were made of one flesh. The design appeared foreign; Sansa had not seen it on the knights from the thousand songs who had ridden to the Hand's Tourney when she was a little girl.

*What will he become if the king kills him? A cloud of blue crystals or a man?* Sansa thought, remembering with bile in her throat the mutilated pale-eyed wildling under Sandor's giant feet. That man had tried to grope her, but he did not deserve to die like he did. No one deserved that.

The spider cantered to Rhaegar who sheathed his sword and held his bastard lance steadily in his left hand. The weapon was called that because the tip was made of both obsidian and Valyrian steel, Sansa knew.

"Well, well," the Other said mockingly, "what have we hear? A would-be last hero… How incredibly brave." He tittered, like Lord Varys.

Sansa was amazed and terrified that the enemy did have a voice. The one that attacked Sandor could not speak through his mouth, only through his mind.

"Won't you call your fireworm, little king? This joust will hardly be fair if you are already out of the saddle."

"Do you want me to?" Rhaegar asked, undeterred.

"Not particularly," the Other replied, "but you might wish to do it for your own good. That beast could burn me, do you know? It could burn me to death. Isn't that what you want?"

"I want the people to *leave,*" Rhaegar answered slowly through the slit of his red-plumed helm, almost lazily, though he appeared tight, more stiff than the black steel of his armour. The rubies Sansa had carried as petrified river stones from the High Heart to the capital glittered on his breastplate. In them, the reflection of his enemy's face could be seen; an ugly flower, a mangled blossom of old, grey ice.

*He is biding his time,* Sansa realised. The wildlings had reached the bridge. Some began crossing it. The column of people descending into the Gorge was dwindling. *But they are not gone yet. And the forest is full of enemy…*

The woods sang cruelly with many voices as if they had heard Sansa's thought or their king's unspoken command.

"My loyal soldiers will see to it that the people do not leave," the Great Other told the king confirming Sansa's worst fears. "But you could have seen to it that they do. Your stupid northern gods have even sent you that green-eyed boy to tell you what you should do in case you didn't know
"I am sorry for withholding that pleasure from you," Rheegar dragged every word as morosely as he sometimes let vibrate the silver strings of his harp. "And in case you did not know, the old gods are not mine. They are my queen's. I have always believed in the Seven who are one. I pray to the Father to judge you justly."

"To the Father!" The Other roared in raucous laughter, seized by sheer mirth. "Why not to the son? I forget, there is no son among the faces of the Seven. Nor daughter for that matter." The white walker was pensive now. He spurred his spider's sides with his booted feet and trotted gallantly to the edge of the clearing, as if he was directing his horse down the lists before the beginning of the joust.

In the first pass, the spider ran rapidly at the king, who waited as long as possible and then simply tilted on his side, just far enough. The animal was forced to storm on and return for another pass.

The white walker was less certain now. "Well," he said. "I may lose a moment longer than I thought on you, *Your Grace*. How long have you been king? A month? A week? A day? I have been king for thousands of years."

"Dead king," Rhaegar said, giving up on delay tactics and beginning to goad and deride his opponent in return.

Unwillingly, Sansa's mind jumped to Rhaegar's, wishing to understand what he intended to do. She found the firmest barrier she had ever encountered in her willing and less willing excursions into people's heads since she discovered that it was not only the animal consciousness she could access at will.

Rhaegar's mind was and would remain his own. Maybe that was a part of being a dragon. The king did not seem to be the strongest among men in his body, but Sansa discovered he was extremely resistant in spirit. He could not be a victim of any sorcery forcing his mind to another man's will, or it would have to be a tremendously powerful one. One stupid girl could not warg into him. No, that was a lie. Sansa was very *strong* in this, she knew it. Her own power frightened her. Neither her husband nor dead Euron Greyjoy had easy or open minds as horses or dogs she was used to possessing before. But Rhaegar's mind was of an entirely different firmness, of a completely different kind. The king would never be defeated by magic, never enslaved by magic. In that, he was stronger than the *winged* dragons who could be ensorcelled from what Sansa had seen in the past, with horns that burned and charms of the warlocks…

*Maybe that is how they choose their riders,* Sansa thought, fascinated. *They choose those who will help them keep their freedom and wild nature.*

A former caged bird could sympathise with that. She didn't want to be a captive ever again.

The king walked to the middle of the clearing. He stood alone there, lance in his hand, waiting for the spider. Sansa was closer to him now than at the beginning of her spying mission. If she abandoned her rocky shelter, she would reach him in a few steps. She remained well hidden and hoped that the white walkers could not smell her blood as Old Nan claimed they did. No one had come for her during the entire battle so hopefully at least that part was only a lie told to children before bedtime.

When the spider came around for another pass, Rhaegar squatted and rapidly walked in that position *under* the spider, unsuccessfully trying to lodge the lance in its belly. The animal was only wounded; it widened its legs and ran away in pain. The hurt was not serious but it bought the king some time before the white walker returned.
The enemy dismounted and came back on foot, armed with a giant crystal blade. In one savage stroke, he disarmed Rhaegar. In one blow, both the king's lance and strategy were gone.

"I have no time for this game," the Night's King said. It was his turn again in a battle of taunts. "I have drunk your son's blood, did you know that? And how tasty it was! But he was only a wolf after all. His blood hasn't brought me what I sought. Maybe yours will."

To Sansa's surprise, Rhaegar pulled the helm off his head, tossed it carelessly away and sneered at his opponent. His handsome aged face twisted in a sly smile, so that he was almost uglier than Sandor with his scars.

"Leave my son alone," he said, "this is between you and me now." He drew out his sword and held it in his left hand, much like Arya did with everything, Sansa noticed. Rhaegar's blade was made of good steel, but it appeared weak against the weapon of his enemy. It was a standard longsword, and a white walker had snapped Sandor's greatsword like a twig... It didn't bode well.

"So it is," the opponent recognised.

Crystal clashed with steel. Sansa was by no means an expert but it seemed that while the king was skilled, the enemy was better. The Night's King was not in a hurry now. He wanted to humiliate the king before finishing him off.

_I should have told what I knew, about the danger for the king. Sandor should have been here... he should have been. He is a better swordsman. He and Mance and Aegon. It is all my fault._

_**Maybe Sandor could tear this Night's King apart with his hands.**_

But her husband was not here and Sansa could not close her eyes now to see where he was. She could not take her eyes away from the fight. The king was going to lose, he was going to die, and the army of evil dead would pour from the woods after the wildlings, catch all of them and kill them because they were not yet far enough into the Gorge, and not half of those who went to the bridge had crossed it...

The king's wights were petrified, paralysed, unable to help as if some monstrous will had frozen them in place. The trees in the forest shifted, as if the great grumkin could reshape the land at his will.

If she could, Sansa realised she _would_ kill this grumkin even if he turned into someone she loved when dead. The repulsiveness of her wish surprised her. This, this was a true monster, she tried to tell herself. No matter what he had been before. The notion confused her... that she would be able to put her duty before her love if necessity called upon her to do such a cruel thing... Like Father had done when he killed Lady.

_**Maybe I am a Stark after all.**_

And she was suddenly so immensely and selflessly glad for being weak of body and unable to test her resolve in the matter, afraid of the answers she might find concerning herself. Best if she remained only a liar. Maybe it was a lesser evil.

Sandor the killer, and Sansa the liar. That would make for a very odd song, she quipped with herself nervously, looking at the duel at hand.

_Please, please, please, let the king prevail._

The gods were deaf to her plea now, worse than they had ever been in the Red Keep or in the Vale. It was her punishment, perhaps, for not being a good girl when she should have been. For not being
grateful to the gods for the happiness she found. For not putting their will in front of hers. Rhaegar and the Great Other exchanged a few undecided blows. The king was…. losing ground or coming purposefully closer to his enemy. Sansa could not fathom why he would want to do this. She wanted to run away… But as so frequently in her life there was no safer place where she could go than the hideout where she was stuck now. So she kept looking.

"You have made a mistake… you thought you could win by yourself and live… you should have kept your twelve trusted companions with you for that…" the white walker laughed, landing a blow on the king's left arm, his sword arm, slicing through black mail and plate. Rhaegar jumped away and briefly nursed his arm, without uttering a sound, but Sansa knew he was in pain. She should maybe run into the Gorge now after the wildlings, but she risked being seen if she did that. And she would never be able to cross the clearing without being noticed and to go the bridge, to Sandor. She would not. Only the gods could help her and Rhaegar now.

The king dropped on his knees, panting, struggling to breathe. Puffs of white smoke came out of his lungs, thicker than what Sansa exhaled in the cold. Made of fire, Sansa thought in amazement. "You are right," Rhaegar agreed with the statement of his enemy that he could not live and win, "I can only trust that my blood will have a unique taste to you once it is spilled." He was still able to hold his sword in front of his body in a defence position, in his wounded arm.

The Night's King lifted his great crystal blade to smash the tiny longsword, or to execute the king, in his next blow. "Your son has the sword you need," he said, "this one cannot do for me."

"Good for him," Rhaegar retorted carelessly.

Rhaegar's legs would twitch and do the little dance when he was beheaded, Sansa knew. Yet she couldn't look away.

The king, Jon's father, leaned closer to the Great Other until their bodies were very near, almost as if they were dancing. The Other made a small step back instead of lowering his sword, confused by Rhaegar's forwardness. He must have been used to people avoiding him, not seeking him out. Too late, Sansa realised.

She screamed to Sandor in her mind but she was too late as well. She should have called to him much sooner or not let him leave.

The king's mad deed was done in a fleeting moment, in the very instant that Sansa struggled to grasp it and before she finally did.

Faster than the dragon flies, Rhaegar pulled his blade across his own throat in a determined, cutting motion. A hoarse, inhuman cry left his body. Red blood gushed forward like a spring, erupted like dragonfire, showering his enemy. The Night's King screamed and rolled away in the snow but he could not wash the blood away. It clung to his immortal body, tinged it red and yellow and orange, creating puckered craters in his armour wherever it touched him.

It is burning him, Sansad realised, speechless. She was standing on her feet now, staring, and she never knew when she got up. Anyone could see her now, friend or foe, but she found that she did not care. It is the blood of the living dragon that is burning the Other..

Rhaegar fell over the Night's King who squirmed and yelled, inhumanly so, harder than all his soldiers in the woods together, fighting to extricate himself from the bloodbath. Once he succeeded, he began crawling like a snake towards the woods, whining pitifully as he went.
And Rhaegar, Rhaegar kept bleeding in the snow.

Sansa's conscious thought stopped. Her heart leapt to Rhaegar now, dying alone, away from his wife, away from their son whom he had never seen, as far as Sansa knew. The Other was not yet two slithers away from the king when she abandoned her hiding place and ran over the snow to the dying king, knelt next to him and embraced his twitching body. Blood ran out of him and over her white dress, drenching it. She didn't pay attention to the ruin of her gown and she had forgotten her cloak and headdress in her shelter, she realised. Yet she never felt the cold. What good were gowns in winter anyway? She was vain in making one. She must have dreamed that Bran told her to make such a garment as she had once imagined Sandor's kiss.

The Night's King reached the edge of the wood and disappeared. His servants that were still on the clearing followed him without a sound.

The woods turned silent. No army came out of it to help their ruler, as if all its strength had dwindled with the dismissal of their master.

Sansa cradled Rhaegar's head, remembering him as she had first met him, as the Elder Brother worried for the application of the laws and the good of the people. She wished fervently for the gash on his throat to close by some magic, but the blood just kept leaving his body. There was so much of it, and yes, it reeked of blood, but for once she didn't mind the stench.

In the end, she sung to Rhaegar, sweetly and softly, the wildling song, the one she first heard from Mance Rayder. The melody was beautiful but she never learned the words because Mance rarely used them, and if he did he would always murmur them in the Old Tongue. *It sounds more beautiful this way*, he would say. Sansa always wanted to ask Mance to teach her the words, but she never did, wishful to spend her evenings with Sandor, who mostly loathed the conversations around campfires and the stares he unavoidably attracted from complete strangers. Surprisingly, Sandor could make interesting arguments on his own, once mocking her had fortunately stopped being his only interest when sharing words.

She sang from her heart as beautifully and as tenderly as she could. It was the only thing she could do. She would never have lessons in high harp as she wanted. Not from Rhaegar.

She thought she might have seen a small smile in Rhaegar's unseeing dark eyes before they closed fully. She should lay his cold body down now but she could not. It was so unfair, so unfair… And it was her fault, all her fault. *Selfish, stupid Sansa.*

The king… moved again. Was he alive despite everything? The blood of the dragon could withstand being burned, from what she knew, but now his lifeblood was gone, gone, gone… Was there a miracle?

Sansa's heart skipped a bit, uncertain, before it sank even deeper to the pit of her stomach in outright dread.

*No, it can't be, please, please no!*

Were the monsters to win in the end? Over everyone and everything? Was the little happiness she had found in her life only a respite in a sea of sorrow? Some people never found any, she knew, she should be grateful for the little she had, but she could not be. Not now, not now.

This was too much. Too monstruos.

Rhaegar was changing.
The right side of his bare face stopped being human, showing inhuman blue and grey ridges, as did his sword arm under the hole in his armour wrought by the Night's King.

Soon, he would rise as one of them, of the white walkers… Like the wildling Sandor dismembered on the bridge.

"No!" Sansa cried out and swallowed her tears.

She stood up, stepped away, ran away, panting, wishing to reach the safety of the weirwood. Her chest was heaving, her breath burned her throat with coldness. The mouth of the tree gaped open, inviting her in one more time. In the distance, she could see her husband crossing the bridge to go back, fighting for his way through the fleeing people, but he was still very far.

The white bark of the tree moved.

Two Others jumped out of the tree's mouth. Sansa was unarmed. She could only wait for her death and pray it was swift as her father's beheading. Sansa swallowed and stood patiently. As always, she was unable to close her eyes. Her heart beat madly in her chest, as if it was going to burst but it never did.

To her surprise, the Others flanked her, but made no motion to touch her. One poked her into the back with a weirwood branch, long and smooth, nudging her forward. She made two steps. The Others moved with her, spreading their arms to close any way of escape to her, as a living cage of grumkins dogging her steps. She stopped, they stopped. She was prodded again.

On a whim, she stretched one of her arms wishing to touch one of the monsters, but he flinched from the widening sleeve of her gown, jumping half a step away. Two more grumkins returned from the wood for her, the last living soul. They pulled a cart made of bones, with runners in place of wheels, abandoned by the wildlings. After more prodding she was directed onto the simple carriage but no one touched her.

She looked first at her sleeve and then at her gown and understood. Once white attire was crimson red now, or maybe auburn as her hair and the weirwood leaves, depending on the light. Her dress was completely soaked in Rhaegar's blood. King's blood. Dragonblood. The white wool drank all of it, even the quantity which spilled in the snow. She did not know there was so much blood in the man's body. It would be beautiful if it hadn't been terrifying.

It is burning them.

With that little illusion of safety in her latest captivity, Sansa stared mutely as the Others towed the cart with her on it as plough horses, away from the Wall, away from the Bridge of Skulls, away from dead Rhaegar who had become one of them.

Away from Sandor.

They were taking her north.

Sansa closed her eyes. I am here, she told her husband. I am alive. They didn't hurt me. She never knew how much he could hear when she was in him.

For her part she felt he was alive and well enough, submerged under the current of enormous sadness which consumed him. Sandor… he discovered Rhaegar's fate. Sansa looked back, but she was already too far into the wood. She could no longer see the clearing. On a good note, the cart was leaving a clear trail of two parallel lines in the snow. Sandor used to hunt a lot when King Robert still lived, Sansa vaguely remembered. He should be able to track her now if he so wished.
He said he would come for me.

But it is folly. They are taking me north.

He said he would and he doesn't lie. Unlike myself.

In the meantime, the gods might yet tell her what she should do. Maybe she was meant to go with the grumkins for a time. Maybe she could set something to rights.

Sansa had survived the Bastard King Joffrey Baratheon and Lord Petyr Baelish. And their hearts had not been much warmer than those of the grumkins, she thought, searching for consolation and courage in unlikely places.

Her heart fluttered in fear that she was wrong. What if they only had to take her with them to their dreary castle in the middle of the Land of Always Winter in order to touch her, undress her and transform her into… one of them? How does it feel to be a grumkin? Her innards constricted in paralysing fear. She had never been so afraid in her life. What if they drank her blood from high goblets over dinner as though it was Arbor Gold? She trembled and wished the gory image away.

Right or wrong, guilty or innocent, she had lived before.

She straightened herself with dignity. Smoothing her gown, she held her head up high as if she were the queen of the Seven Kingdoms like she was once destined to be. Rhaegar's blood felt completely dry under her hands. All smell was gone from it.

There were six white walkers around her now, pulling the cart away. How many more are there? she thought, dead still.

Mine is the blood of the Kings of Winter on my father's side, she tried to tell herself, schooling her features to be hard to break as old ice. Tears she had shed because of Sandor dried fully on her heart-shaped face.

If dragonblood burns them, maybe my blood can make them die of cold.

Or maybe she would be a poor, fat trout they caught and roasted for dinner. The Others ate children and drank the blood of the men and women grown, Old Nan had said. Sansa was no longer a child. Small mercy there.

Maybe none of this was her fault. Maybe there were simply no gods as Sandor always said and she had turned as mad as poor Rhaegar before he killed himself. Who talked to the trees and believed in the power of dreams in their right mind?

The killer and the liar, she thought bitterly about her husband and herself. Shall we ever be more?

There was only one way to find out for certain.

The Others would truly have to kill her if they wanted her blood.

She wouldn't let herself die of fear.

Chapter End Notes
Next up: Jon, Dany, Davos, Mance/Aegon, Jaime, tbc
Chapter Notes

A huge thanks to DrHolland for a beta read of this long and demanding chapter.

And to TopShelfCrazy, for making me rethink and refine some important details.

I have been writing this chapter for a hundred days.

All warnings and tags apply.

Song which goes with this: Who are You (This Time) by Tom Waits

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Jon**

*She is just a bird now*, Jon told himself, unhappy, when the beautiful white-headed eagle flew away. His mother could not be with the large bird of prey all the time, he knew that now, just like he had to pull out of Ghost to eat and rest without wolf dreams. Yet he was saddened by watching her leave.

Jon had never studied his mother's eagle in great detail before, when he was not aware of his origin. But he had always felt a rare familiarity with the bird. It was savage, like Ghost. The span of her wings was not much shorter than the body of the direwolf.

But still much smaller than the widespread wings of a dragon.

Was that how mother and father met? How they reached out to each other? A she-wolf who could spread eagle wings in her dreams and a wingless man who knew himself a dragon from birth? Jon would not admit that to anyone, but ever since he talked to Arya, he became more and more curious about his parents, keen to learn how they were in truth and why they made the choices they made. Arya… Arya clearly had respect for both, and he could not imagine his stubborn little sister thinking well of anyone who was not worth it.

*He's both better and worse than all the stories about him*, Arya had said about his father at first, with Daenerys present, showing uncharacteristic yet adamant care for not hurting Dany's sensibility in the matter, Jon realised. His little sister had definitely stopped being little, and not only when it came to boys. Younger Arya would not have cared either way, causing her mother and Septa Mordane irreparable grief. *He looks so much like an arrogant handsome Southron that you can't help but hate him*, Arya had elaborated when Jon and her were left alone. *But then he speaks or does something unexpected and you can't. And you risk loving him… and being angry with yourself for this rapid change of heart.*

Jon suffered from no such risk at present, but he wouldn't tell that to Arya. His father had held Arya's hand when she was ill, when he thought he was only a healer. Naturally, his little sister had honour and was grateful. But no one had ever sat with Jon when he was abed as a boy, and his real father was still a stranger to him. Moreover, Jon couldn't help believing that maybe he would have never held Arya's hand knowing he was Rhaegar Targaryen.
His father rode a dragon now, Jon remembered, Dany's runaway dragon, the largest of the three, black as death. Absurdly, he wished he could bring Dany's dragon back to her when he returned to the Wall. It would please her, he knew. It would make her more than happy. It would mean everything to her.

In his observing silence, Jon watched Dany searching the sky since they met, before he dared hope she would want him as a man, wondering what she was looking for. And in the last days they spent together, entangled as they became in body and spirit, he caught her more than once studying Rhaegal, her *child*, with love; and not with little sadness.

Rhaegal was not Daenerys' dragon.

Jon only began to forge his relationship with Rhaegal and he didn't miss the green dragon now, not truly. Green was never his colour. He wished him well and away from all harm; fascinated by his waking ability of dragon riding as he would be with a new horse or a piece of weaponry. And he was honestly, painfully grateful for Rhaegal's help in saving both Dany's life and his. But they were not inextricably linked. Not yet, in any case.

On the contrary, Jon knew very well how he felt without Ghost, in the time he scaled the Wall with the wildlings and before his wolf returned to him. This must have been how Dany felt without Drogon… She was not whole. Jon filled her bed at night, but it seemed that he could not occupy some empty spaces in her mind; those that required a dragon in the spirit of a dragonrider.

Jon and Ghost were now stranded on the hill top, in the Lands of Almost Winter, waiting for the moon to wane. Ghost was fond of running by moonlight, but he could do without just the same, padding with equal assuredness through the night dark as pitch.

Together, man and wolf looked into a vast valley enclosed by the jagged peaks of the unknown, lonely, northern mountains, stretching farther ahead than the eye could see. In the distance, the contours of the spacious dale merged with the darkness of the night and the ever present snow. Jon named the place the heart of winter; the hatchery, the childbed of the Others waking to life; thousands and thousands of them; attended by their slaves, the wights. Only the beginning of the vale gaped empty from sleepers and more woke at every moment, slow and sparse in their crystalline movements.

There were countless Others still sleeping…

The wights who occasionally walked up and down the rocky path from the Winterfell of ice to the birthplace of their masters paid no attention to Jon, though he had an irking suspicion that some of them might have seen him. And if they did, they acted as if he was one of *them*. Be that as it may, both the wolf and his master sensed that they would react adversely to Ghost, if they noticed his presence. As a consequence, the wolf was presently immobile, resting on his four paws. With his red eyes averted from the passers-by, he appeared as a boulder of snow.

Unlike the dead, Jon suspected strongly that the Others would have an uncanny interest both in him and in his wolf. *Something about drinking my blood to make them stronger. And a slain direwolf would make a good slave as well.*

*Best wait for the dark of the moon.*

Once under the cover of total darkness, Jon would return to the Wall prudently, retracing the way he and Ghost came. If he failed, the knowledge would be lost with him, and he had come this far north for information, not for adventure or glory.
Jon's blood still ran red in his veins, despite the Night King's declared drinking conquest of it, that much was certain. He had seen it with his own eyes when Dany had let her nails sink into his skin after he'd told her he would be leaving. Occasionally he suffered from desire to let himself bleed a bit, just to double check and triple check that this had never changed.

Red blood or not, he was more and more convinced with every new day that he did die in front of the nine weirwoods where he'd sworn his vows of a brother of the Night's Watch. He did. He died. How was he then still breathing? Dragons healed body wounds from what he had learned and experienced; they could not revive a deadman.

_Can they?_

*If they cannot, why am I still alive?*

Alive and not cold at all, nor hungry in the heart of winter…

And dismissed by the wights as if he was one of their number. Some wights assuredly did see Jon eye-to-eye in the Winterfell of ice when he called Ghost back to himself, yet none went in his direction to follow him or engage him in a fight. In the past, all living corpses he'd seen instantly wished to kill him.

Jon missed Daenerys with all his might and every pore of his non-freezing body, as he did whenever his doubts beseeched him. He felt stronger and more confident when she was near.

He was very slowly coming to terms with the certainty that he would never know what he had become after he was stabbed to death.

While waiting, he studied the awakening of the Others very carefully. Maybe the pattern held some weakness which could be used against them, though at present Jon could not fathom which part of it nor how it could be done. Wrinkled, bony limbs were the first to leave the cocoon of ice, followed by the terrifying head with bright blue eyes and long white hair. Finally, they would dig out their weapon, a deadly crystal blade, or maybe they would shape it from snow by working magic.

Jon saw what he came to see and it was worse than he expected. Maybe he would have been better off not knowing the numbers the enemy could field. Whenever he dared believe he might have an upper hand in his war, the hope would be taken away from him in a most cruel way.

_No, _he denied the voice of his doubts. _I'd always rather see than be blind._

It often baffled Jon why he kept thinking of the coming war as his despite everything that had happened of late. There was a new king in the Seven Kingdoms as well as three living dragons.

The new king who was his father…

At the same time, Stannis defeated a white walker with his burnt sword, ignoring the new regent whose claim to the Iron Throne was as good if not better. Worse, he had prisoners locked in the Wall and relied on sorcery for survival. Since he'd heard from his brother's mouth about Rickon's ordeal in the ice cells, Jon's sword hand itched to test his own magic sword against Stannis' cold one, that showed only the colourful, deceitful semblance of the living fire.

_Then we would perhaps see if you truly are Azor Ahai come again, Your Grace, _Jon thought with arrogance he could not rein in, not when he was so high up north in the land of the enemy.

_Or if…_
If I might be him.

The notion was inescapable of late in Jon's troubled mind. He had laboured for thirty, and then for fifty days. He had reforged twice a very peculiar blade, which burned with real heat as the book of Maester Aemon said it should.

The sword of heroes.

In his heart, Jon needed this faith in his own growing power to stay firm against the mounting despair, stirred in the minds of the living by the overwhelming presence of the white walkers. For once, Jon was no exception.

He could sense deep chagrin right down to his bones. Pointless sorrow conquered his mind and it would flood him completely if he gave in to any of his darker thoughts; of being lied to and abandoned as a bastard when he had never been one.

The necessary bit of mental boasting aside, challenging Stannis out of spite was not in his plans. Those only concerned the war. My war. Finding a strategy that could bring victory. That could bring the dawn and put the white walkers back to sleep. For good, if it could be done…

Forever.

Jon was pleased and surprised by the renewed allegiance of his brothers in Castle Black who immediately reinstated him as the Lord Commander. Moreover, they didn't change their minds because Jon now openly loved a woman and had no intentions to forsake her, the vow about not taking a wife be damned. Some of his brothers must have seen in a day that he wasn't even troubled by this decision as he would have been earlier, and all the others must have heard about it if they were too busy to notice it first hand.

He was still a warg and a turncloak who'd let the wildlings into the realm. And on top of all of his real and assumed transgressions, he could not answer, not truthfully, if he was alive and well as a young man of his age, or just enjoying some temporary, cursed existence, which would end when he least expected it to. Dany's men, those brown-skinned foreigners from the ships, spontaneously turned to calling Jon Wraith in their strange languages, the same as if they called him Ghost, he realised, without first seeing his wolf. Ser Barristan mentioned it as a curiosity, one morning when they had been sparring on the Rhaenys. Barristan the Bold and Jon the Wraith. Jon would have preferred the former denomination to the latter one, but it was not up to him.

People call their heroes any way they like…

The last hero, Azor Ahai…

The crewmen said that only a spirit could have been strong and fast enough to defeat the Night's King in Hardhome, witnessing the duel from the safety of the ships. Jon was certain that this bit of juicy gossip was a part of general knowledge in the Watch by now, from Eastwatch to Westwatch-by-the-Sea. Rumours travelled faster than men in winter.

Unlikely as it seemed, the less he cared about any opinion of his sworn brothers, the more they loved him. He wished he'd known before that people could be like this. It would save him a lot of grief.

The eagle croaked, marking her return, waking Jon from his reverie. He smiled sadly at the bird, resisting the temptation to call her mother again. It was the easy way out, to speak to her where she could not answer, only hear him at best. It was cowardly. He could easily imagine that mother did not feel quite like herself when she donned her wings.
Jon's hearing and seeing was sharper, but never as accurate when he was in Ghost. His human senses became inextricably mingled with those of the direwolf, playing mummer's tricks with Jon's mind. The world became simpler, light or dark, with fewer shades in-between.

Yet calling the she-eagle Mother when he first counted the enemy in the heart of winter had felt extremely liberating, in peaceful admittance of the truth too long denied.

Darkness drooped from the black, starless sky onto the snowy ground when the moon finally disappeared. It was time to go back, to Dany, and to face his parents. He could no longer play an offended or an ignorant boy and avoid them. He was a man grown and he owed his mother and father his respect.

He couldn't help wondering who put the bird in the cage inside this new Winterfell built of ice that he and Ghost had visited, and if this person knew she could sometimes hold the spirit of his mother.

Whenever he remembered his unsuccessful duel with the Night's King, Jon was tremendously bothered and unsatisfied. Dany insisted that he did defeat the fiend, and while her admiration nurtured both his pride and his soul, Jon could not embrace it as true. More than once during the confrontation, he had almost let his temper take the better of him; that truly paved the way to defeat and to ruin. It had him all but killed before, when he desperately needed to save Arya.

Secondly, the Night's King seemed to know entirely too much about Jon for his liking. How could he know about the sorrows of the Bastard of Winterfell? How did he know that calling Jon a bastard would nearly make him lose control? Jon wanted to remedy this if he could, to meet his opponent in the field of old, blue ice, and hurt him with his scathing, clever words and not only by the flaming blade he carried. Words cut deeper than steel at times; any bastard was a wise man with regard to this irrevocable truth.

But Jon didn't see how he could ever possibly come across the necessary knowledge.

He descended from his lookout and returned slowly to where he and Ghost came from, just without re-entering the Winterfell of ice. His mother's eagle was never far, flapping her regal wings. Ghost and Jon skirted the frozen, dreary castle, ringing with sinister noises, back to the grove where the sinuous tunnels of the old gods had brought them from the Wall. To Jon's surprise, the white tree he expected to see there and use to go back was freshly cut down. Red sap dripped from its stump, thick and sticky. Jon pressed his unnecessarily gloved hand on it and was tempted to taste it, as Ghost might the blood of his kill.

Before he could act on that quaint impulse or be reviled by it, the landscape changed completely. Jon found himself alone on a very different forested path he'd never seen before. The wind howled, carrying the needles of the sentinels over the snow. Suddenly, Jon heard his enemy's hoarse laughter though he never saw him. Ghost and the eagle were nowhere to be seen, although they had both been next to Jon only a moment ago.

"Like father, like son," the familiar mockery of the Great Other greeted him out of nowhere, perhaps falling down from the sky or from the tall, iced spikes of the dark green ironwoods. Yet his insulting words betrayed offence and hurt; the creature sounded wounded, weakened, frail. His voice was twisting, panting, thundering and breaking, all at the same time, as though the Night's King was on the verge of dying with his mouth full of foul curses, ravished by an agonising pain.

Or maybe he was just angry that Jon visited his castle uninvited.

"What have you been thinking?" Poisoned ice dripped from the enemy's lips, but he never showed himself as Jon expected. "That I've lost sight of you? That I haven't seen you coming? That I would
This was exactly what Jon was thinking, though perhaps not in that precise order. He walked decisively down the path and away from the voice, almost stumbling into a company of freshly woken white walkers, freezing in his steps just on time, uncloaked, never feeling the cold. He had to find another weirwood soon. Land changed again under his feet as he hurried his step, never running. He'd not give his enemy that satisfaction. Sea loomed open in front of him, but it was only an illusion. He didn't move an inch. He was afraid to move. There could be an abyss at his feet and he wouldn't see it. He felt for his magic sword on his hip and it was burning again. The eagle cried and Ghost howled to him, but he could not see them, as if they were in another land, parallel to the one where Jon was now lost and could not reach out to them.

*Mother,* he thought and closed his black eyes, opening the red ones of his wolf. It was an improvement. He saw the eagle, and himself, the man, only a few steps away, lost in his own dreams, not seeing his own nose. Oddly, and to Jon's great satisfaction, his empty human body still walked despite that his spirit was now in Ghost. Jon didn't even think to sit or lay down before conscious warging as he *should* have done because then the enemy might recognise his weakness, kill Jon and drink his blood for real if he was near.

The wolf shook his head, growled and bumped into Jon's human legs, which slumped to the ground and into the warging sleep at that moment, shattering Jon's delusion of newfound power. *So much for me having control over this.* The eagle screeched stridently, almost as sharp as dragon cried, showing the way forward. The wolf carried Jon away or maybe Jon carried himself, always following the bird.

*Mother,* the thought kept him human in his wolf form, somehow. Or he risked losing himself in the peacefully violent animal consciousness; Ghost was never troubled about what he was; a simple beast, a strong one.

As a wolf he saw an unknown opening to a cave gaping in front of him. Only when he was well on the inside did he dare open his human eyes and pad next to Ghost on his own two feet.

The cave was hollow and vast, descending into the entrails of the world. There was not a single white tree visible on the surface of the earth, but there were a thousand roots running down. In the great hall under the earth, the intertwined weirwood branches formed *thrones,* some visible, and some buried; some empty… and some occupied by sleepers, which were slowly being devoured by the trees over time.

Jon could see the *victims* of the weirwoods only through his red, wolven eyes, which he dared open only briefly now, crouching, hugging Ghost for support. In places resembling his nightmares, he much preferred being a man. One small throne very deep in the cave particularly drew his attention. But not even Ghost could see that far in the distance in order to distinguish the features of the tiny figure seated on it, nor of the two other men flanking the childlike sleeper as two statues might a tomb; one slender and the other huge, the only ones resting in the cave without being enthroned.

*These are different sleepers than the white ones in the heart of winter,* Jon thought with unease in his guts. *I am the Horn that wakes the sleepers...* He recalled a part of his oath. *Could it mean these men here?*

This was the final proof of what he began to suspect. His gods, the old ones, were not good. They were merciless and cruel. Water dripped from everywhere, insistent, eternal. Maybe the gods were changing the world to confuse him. Perhaps all his efforts were in vain. Maybe they would allow the Others to take it.
The eagle fluttered under the ceiling of the cave, not caring. *Mother must be gone again.* Ghost kept to Jon’s feet as a good, giant dog.

Jon reopened his black eyes and all the thrones looked empty. All except the largest one, dominating the cave. A one-eyed man dressed in rags which were once black, perhaps, half-lay, half-hung and half-sat on it. He had tremendously long, white hair sweeping the floor of the cave, soft and lank and *silky* like Dany's silver one. He was almost overgrown by the branches and roots of the weirwoods, made one with his pale, intricate seat.

"Who are you?" Jon breathed out, possessed by a terrifying need to know.

"You should not be here," the too white-skinned, white-haired man answered judgmentally, slowly opening his only eye, appearing as drowsy as Jon was curious. His iris was red, brighter than the wine coloured splotch on one of his cheeks, resembling a raven. Jon silently agreed. He needed to return to the Wall as soon as possible and to see to its defences. He was, however, still here, wherever here was, and entrusting his travel to the old gods may have been another rash deed of his that he'd regret in the coming days. Jon studied the strange man carefully, noticing he looked more than a hundred years old. By rights he should not be alive.

"Who are you?" Jon repeated. His history lessons always failed him when he needed them most. He could guess the house this man was linked to, though he did not relish pronouncing its name, for fear it might now mean something more to him than a leaf in a book. There was no sigil on his chest, but Jon now recognised a dragon when he saw one.

"How many of us have there been on the Wall in recent times?" the awoken sleeper replied bitterly with the question of its own.

"One that I know of," Jon retorted in kind, with a fond memory of Maester Aemon ever present in his mind, unsurprised that the enthroned man knew who he was. Probably all monsters north of the Wall did, he concluded. Maybe the Night's King dead court was a place of gossip as any living castle. "Two if I count myself. Forgive me if I don't."

This earned him the renewed interest of his conversation partner. "What of the lords commanders in the past? I am… I was… I was the Lord Commander I think and since then I have been dreaming… Did you know that the Targaryens always had prophetic dreams just like the little crannogmen in the Neck?"

Jon had never heard of it. The statement made him shiver. There was only one recurrent dream *he* ever had and it involved thecrypts of Winterfell… He wished it were only a dream, for if it had any meaning, it could not be a good one, not in a hundred years.

"Unfortunately, you are too late for everything now, and you have only your pride to blame for that. Like father, like son," the man sentenced Jon decisively. It was the second time Jon heard this accusation. *First the Night's King and now this man.* The proposition angered him. *He doesn't know me. He doesn't know if I'm a beastling or a turncloak or anything else about me. Why talk like this?*

"The future has become the past and the past cannot be changed. You have to take my old sword because now there is no one else left who can wield it," the one-eyed man lectured Jon with gravity. "Go back to the Wall, very fast if you can. Maybe the roots can help. Maybe they can turn back time and undo the folly."

"I already have a sword," Jon said stubbornly, offended. He was many things, but mad was not one of them.
The branches forming the throne yawned under the milk-skinned man. A tiny brown-faced creature clad in a cloak of leaves emerged out of the subterranean chamber that appeared under it. She had autumn in her hair, and a face of a lady, despite her dappled skin and too long ears. She brought forth to Jon the most beautiful Valyrian steel sword he had ever seen; almost womanly in elegance, yet long, polished and strong, with real jewels glittering on its pommel. It would slice through a man's neck as through butter and it looked as sharp as Ice had always been.

"I don't understand," Jon said, succumbing to the temptation, drawing the unique weapon to feel its balance. He tried out a few strokes and was further marvelled with its magnificence. The blade fitted him well, maybe better than Longclaw, but not as perfectly as the flaming one on his hip. My sword. A good swordsman could always tell the difference, and Jon suspected he was now one of the best. This sword… this sword felt as if it could belong to someone very much like Jon in stature, but who was not him.

"Dark Sister," the white man said almost timidly as if he tried hard to recall the past he had long since forgotten. "Last wielded by Brynden Rivers, Lord Commander of the Night's Watch. I was him, once. Now they call me the three-eyed crow or the last of the greenseers."

Jon was awed. He was speaking to Bloodraven. And he did seem to have a thousand eyes and one as the stories said. And he was offering Jon the famous sword which once belonged to Queen Visenya. The only better blade would be Blackfyre, the weapon of Aegon the Conqueror himself. Maybe that one would fit me. Despite this last wishful thought, Jon shook his head very slowly, bowing to the crippling weight of the truth.

"It is not for me," he said, returning the sword to its keeper. "Forgive me. I have… I have always been more of a wolf."

As Jon said this, he knew it to be true. Before and now. Lord Stark's bastard or a trueborn son of a Targaryen prince, the young man whose presence disturbed and offended the Kings of Winter in their eternal rest had always been a wolf first. Ghost was the best proof of it. The odd pup in a litter, yet a pup nonetheless. White with red eyes, as the weirwoods and the faces carved on them over the centuries. As Bloodraven is an odd dragon, Jon realised.

In part, Ghost also reflected the looks of Jon's other family… on his father's side. Aside from the silver hair, Targaryens were distinguished by a touch of fire, of red in their eyes, mingling itself with more usual colours, with the results ranging from purple to violet. Jon shivered. He'd never wanted to have anything to do with dragons, with the exception of his childhood dreams of becoming a fabulous swordsman and warrior like some of them.

But now I rode a dragon and I lost my heart to his mother.

Jon could never go back to what he was before.

"You must take it," Brynden Rivers insisted about the Dark Sister, "or you will regret that you did not with the coming of a new day." A white root passing through his empty eye socket showed a visible spur of growth at that moment, as if caused by the uneasiness of the lord whose body served as nourishment to the old gods.

He is dying, Jon realised about his famous predecessor. He'll be dead in a matter of days.

Jon could not help him. He already had the weapon he needed. "Show me the way out of here," he said.

Visenya's sword would not avail Jon against the Night's King, who must have been waiting for him...
outside the caves. Only the blade tempered in the noble heart of a dying lion by a gift of mercy stood a chance of ending the cursed life of the King of the Others once and for all.

"As you wish", Bloodraven said quietly, "don't come back crying when what you have to do is more than you can take. I know. I know! I-"

A thud of feet interrupted his last attempt at speech.

"They are coming," the tiny woman said. "The wards cannot keep them out. Only their slaves.

"Let them," Bloodraven answered. "The sleepers are safe for now. They will not be seen."

Jon immediately understood who came calling. The cave began filling with Others, entering from all sides, frozen and merciless. The Night's King would not content himself with waiting this time.

"Ghost, to me!" he called and leapt in long strides towards the only direction where he didn't see any enemy, between the thrones and into the womb of the cave. He thought that the eagle flew along, but he had no time to check. The path blurred in front of his eyes and he felt as if he lost solidity, falling, crossing great distances. He could go anywhere if he wished. Dany was the first one in his mind, and then the Wall, his command, the relative safety of it. He rejected it all. He wanted to do what had to be done, as Maester Aemon had expected of him. As he had always expected it of himself. This had never changed.

Suddenly, as if this conclusion about his person sealed his final destination in the mind of the gods, Jon was ejected to the outside world through a mouth of an unfamiliar heart tree. It had the ugliest face he'd ever seen cut into the weirwood bark and he had seen quite a few by now.

A snarling tree.

The sky was dark and open, with only the wisps of clouds keeping company to the great, yellow moon. Ghost howled with pleasure. They must have travelled very far from the darkened heart of winter.

Jon saw himself in the middle of a long clearing between the great forest and a desolate cliff. Ghost was behind him and the eagle right above his head. In front of him… In front of him, in the open, stood a peculiar looking Other…

The monster examined his bare, wrinkled hands as if he was seeing them for the first time. A pair of black gauntlets lay abandoned in the snow next to his feet. He vigorously rubbed the palms against each other, as though he wanted to peel his own skin off. Unsuccessful, he screamed to the sky with horror and pain, tossing his head upwards as a wolf might do when howling to the moon, and his voice sounded more inhuman to Jon than that of the Great Other.

He was as tall as Jon…

And instead of the mixture of bare, ruined skin and grey, foreign armour coloured like old ice, the white walker wore a full black suit of expensive Westerosi mail and plate with a natural elegance of someone used to fineries. His bearing would shadow even the golden Jaime Lannister, whose impeccable looks Jon remembered from Winterfell. Red rubies glimmered on his chest, shaping a three-headed dragon.

He was helmless and his long hair more silver than Dany's, more brilliant than the moonlight. A cutting wound gaped on his throat, where once red blood had turned black. Another blow was visible on his left arm, where a powerful blade pierced the armour and cut decisively into the limb. His face was a ruin of grey ridges and crevices like the Night's King's… Yet his eyes were not blue,
but cruelly dark. Almost as black as Jon's own, with the faintest touch of dark blue. Of indigo. And indigo was not so far from the Dany's lilac as a colour, only much darker.

At that moment, wherever this place was, Jon knew who this man was and what Bloodraven was trying to tell him.

Too late, too late.

The past cannot be changed.

His heart began to ache sharply, against his will. His real father had somehow died in Jon's war before Jon could meet him and was made into a monster. This wasn't Jon's fault. And even if it had been, duty dictated only one course of action.

I am the shield that guards the realm of men.

Jon drew the only blade he carried; the heated, magic sword of heroes, unwrapping it from its scarf, daring a step forward in a duelling stance.

The monster who had been his father squatted and buried his inhuman hands deep into the frozen snow. Grey ridges on his face bulged with visible effort when he retrieved his arms back to himself, made a few steps sideways and picked up an abandoned longsword of a fine, Southron making. He lifted the weapon high in his uninjured sword arm and waited, showing no sign of humanity or mercy.

Jon would never be able to forget a single detail of the fight. His own sword arm was heavy and he was barely able to parry the attacks and replicate the necessary blows. His heart was never in it. Yet he did as he should, with frightening precision, if not with his best speed. The Other was not sparing him in his efforts.

So much for fatherly love, Jon thought. No, he corrected himself. This is only a shade of a stranger who fathered me.

Fortunately, his opponent was less skilled with the blade than either the Night's King or Jon himself, despite the superhuman strength he was endowed with. And his sword was made of steel, not of the deadly crystal wielded by the Others. Simple metal, no matter how well forged, could never match in power the flaming weapon Jon had stolen from the old gods.

When the time came to end it, Jon never felt more like a Stark. He never wavered in doing his duty, unfair as it was. In a lucid moment, he hewed at the left arm of the white walker, just over the existing open wound; terribly unwilling to go for the exposed head first. The limb did not fall off as he expected, but the Other collapsed on the ground and lay still, without twitching, despite that the blow would not have been mortal for a living man. One good strike of the magic sword was enough to end his cursed existence.

Jon wished he could forget.

It had been difficult to kill Qhorin Halfhand. It was soul-cutting to kill the monster made out of a father he had never known. His throat burned with unfamiliar pain.

When he was done, he turned around, empty, wishing to see Dany's face, yet fearing she would hate him for what he just did. His father was her brother, and unlike Jon, she had love for him.

Instead, Jon saw from the profile another memorable face he never wished to see again. The tall burned man who cruelly mocked Robb in Winterfell. Sandor Clegane. The Lannister dog. Taller
than ever. Not quite as Wun Wun, but seriously leaning in that direction, only uglier and less hairy
than the giant Jon had hosted on the Wall.

Back then, years ago, Jon would have gladly attempted a mangling cut at the good half of the dog's
face had he been allowed to cross swords with Joffrey and his shield. He thought he'd be able to give
a good beating to any of them even with a wooden stick, if Ser Rodrik, Winterfell's master-at-arms,
didn't let him have a real weapon as he did not allow it to Robb.

But the bastard was kept away from the royal visitors for being a bastard, or rather, for not being a
bastard at all, should anyone stare him down and notice he looked like any of his real parents. This
recent knowledge felt raw now, like an open, festering wound.

Lord Stark should have told me the truth. I was not a boy any more when King Robert came to visit.

Jon's throat constricted further as he unwillingly remembered his real father's dead eyes from their
duel. Had they been just a hue blacker by nature… they would be exactly like Jon's. And Ser
Barristan told him bluntly that he looked very much like his mother. King Robert surely remembered
her.

Jon would have probably lost a fight all those years ago against Clegane, who was as skilled as the
Kingslayer with the sword and muscled like a bull, but not before causing some real damage.

I could win now, he realised, between proud and afraid of himself. Against any of the two. Maybe
against both of them together if I am lucky.

But all thoughts of power and vengeance due for the wrongs of the past vanished sharply from Jon's
head when the burned man pivoted to face him fully, letting show what he had been holding in his
arms.

A ball of fresh guilt descended down Jon's already strangled throat.

"No," he protested weakly.

He had completely forgotten about his mother's presence.

The hideous man held the eagle firmly in both arms. The bird thrashed like mad, biting her captor
wherever she could. His hands and face were bleeding from it and his eyes were swollen and red,
giving him a demonic look.

"There you go now," the abomination of a man rasped quietly and let the eagle go.

For a moment, Jon was afraid she would claw at his face next, and he lifted his left hand up in a
useless gesture of protection.

Mother flew past him and landed on father's chest.

The face of the corpse changed…. altered. The skin smoothened… whitened. The hair shone even
more when the man's naturally pale complexity was back, and the dead, open black eyes similar to
Jon's changed forever back to the quiet indigo. The scene left no doubt in anyone watching as there
hadn't been any in Jon's heart since the duel began.

"I killed my father," he said with emotion he could not define.

The eagle's head bobbed many times over the deadman's chest. The cry she uttered must have
pierced the earth and the sky, and the very heart of winter, before she frantically flew away in her
grief, far away from Jon and from...

Rhaegar.

Jon threw away his magic sword, taking in only now that it had stopped burning: grey, ugly and spent. He imagined the Night's King laughing. *I am helpless against him once more.*

He looked around for the first time since the tree spat him out, needing a distraction from his darkening thoughts. Quite a few wildling leaders he recognised had gathered to witness the stand-off. *Tormund, Sigorn.* Jon found he had nothing to say to them at this moment despite their old camaraderie. There was also a younger silver-haired man, of Jon's age, looking with grief at the dead Rhaegar.

*Aegon, the boy raised by my mother,* Jon realised, pointlessly angry. *What does it matter now?* Aegon's eyes were dark grey, with not a trace of Targaryen purple in them if one excluded the rim around them from crying.

Behind Aegon, Jon spotted the familiar weathered face of Mance Rayder, with his raven helm, his longsword and his lute. His cloak was lighter now, Jon noticed, only the hood was black and sewn through with red thread, and the rest almost white, dirty from wear. It was good to see at least one man who was almost a friend of sorts and who had faced uneasy choices in his past as a leader. A terrible thing occurred to Jon and he voiced it without thinking.

"We ought to burn him, don't we?"

Mance nodded gravely, not speaking. His lips stretched in a sad, flat smile. Thankfully, his eyes were not red from tears as everyone else's seemed to be. Jon's own eyes remained steadily dry, making him feel like a beastling much more than usual.

To Jon's surprise, the wildlings he knew slowly approached his father's corpse. Morna the White Mask was the first. She lay a tiny weirwood branch on his chest.

"The Ice Dragon," she said with admiration and approval.

"The Ice Dragon," echoed Borroq, the skinchanger, bringing another white twig together with his boar, whose tail must have been cut off in a recent fight, dripping fresh blood.

Tormund, Sigorn and many others repeated the gesture, dignified and not humiliated as when Stannis had made them sacrifice their gods to the fire of R'hllor.

Jon would never be able to tell exactly how he felt. Maybe the old gods *were* good. But if they were, why was he then made to end his father's existence? *No son should be forced to do this,* he thought, dry-eyed and miserable. *Not even the estranged one like myself.*

Mance Rayder began playing a familiar tune on his lute. He never sang, acting as though his voice was gone. Stirred by the melody more than he would have wished, Jon desired an explanation of how his father died, especially since his passing provoked such *united* response in honouring his death from the otherwise perfectly chaotic wildlings.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Someone tell me!"

A *wight,* looking exactly like Theon Greyjoy, only much older, taller, broader and filled with stiff, rather than boasting pride, carried a branch as well.

"The Ice Dragon," the armoured corpse thundered in a hollow, dead voice and returned to a group of
other armed wights, standing distinctly apart from the living. There was another one like Theon, only
much shaggier, with an extremely long beard. A few looked like dead Southron knights. Yet the
dead never made a move to murder the living, nor did the living use the torches some of them carried
to burn the dead. The arrangement was beyond exceptional.

Jon needed answers now. "Speak, one of you, if it please you!" he commanded nervously.

"He made a stand," Aegon said with reverence, though his voice was shaking. "His Grace did. With
the company of wights who pledged their loyalty to him. He wanted the people to leave safely. He
didn't want anyone to die in his place, nor under his banner."

Aegon faced Jon squarely. He continued his tale with both courage and grief, striving to find the
right words. "In the end he… He took his own life to burn the leader of the Others. He… he
showered him in his blood… The enemy withdrew hollering in pain, with all his army. It seems… It
seems that His Grace knew very well what he did. He sacrificed himself on purpose."

It was not what Jon expected at all, that his father's notion of people extended to include the
wildlings, just like his own. He'd imagined him haughty by nature like the armour he wore, proud
like Southron lords and the Targaryen kings he learned about. A curious thought occurred to him
then. Would Eddard Stark's notion of people extend that far? Maybe. Maybe not. The answer was
not straightforward. Yes, if they didn't break any laws, which included staying where they were and
not crossing the Wall. Would Eddard Stark die for the wildlings?

No, he would most probably not…

*Like father, like son.* The thought grew huge and unbearable, holding an enormity of knowledge Jon
was unable to digest.

He understood deep in his bones why Bloodraven wanted him to take Visenya's sword: to save the
magic one for the true enemy, *seeing* somehow Rhaegar's passing and the challenge Jon might face
with his one eye. But Brynden Rivers never wished this choice upon him; Jon had brought it upon
himself.

Yet Jon did not regret not taking Dark Sister with him on the morning of the new day as Bloodraven
said he would, nor wasting the power of his sword once more. He only regretted that there wasn't
anything else he could do to help his father, other than give him back his freedom through the
blessing of death.

Jon stared mutely at his father's corpse, wondering how best to make a pyre, unwilling to proceed.

"I shall do what is necessary," the Lannister dog suddenly announced, snatching a Valyrian steel
sword from the white scabbard on Aegon's back. The old, powerful weapon glimmered pale as milk,
appearing fragile like another weirwood twig in Clegane's giant arms.

Clegane trod to father's corpse and readied himself to drag him into the forest. The thick sealskin
gloves he wore were covered in dried blood and gore - Jon would rather not know from which
creature.

"Wait," Jon commanded brusquely, stepping forward, feeling oddly protective of a father he had
never known. "Leave him alone from your filthy paws."

The monster would not bury his father. It was Jon's duty to do that.

"And why in seven hells would I listen to you?" the burned man asked mockingly; his voice a black
ruin, just like his face.
"You have no right," Jon said decisively. It was the truth.

"And you have? I suppose you do." The Hound stared Jon down and hit him with another, unpleasant truth. "Spare me the bleating and don't say you love him. I know you don't. How could you?"

"This is none of your business," Jon said frostily, intent on ending the discussion.

"No?" The Hound was not convinced. "Perhaps not."

A flurry of swiftly rasped words flew mercilessly in Jon's direction from the dog's mouth. "So what do you want? Do you crave the honour of cutting your own father into pieces with a shiny sword over and over again, until he turns into blue crystals drifting in the air? Or if by ill luck he does not, do you prefer the joy of scattering his last remains off the cliff one at the time, so that he doesn't return to life as a buggering grumkin? Burning him is risky business, I'd say. King Robert did his best once and failed. Only dragonglass and Valyrian steel kill the creatures he had become. I don't know what your sword did to him, boy, but I don't trust it," the Hound pointed at Jon's spent weapon in the snow with utmost suspicion. The blade was black as ebony now and its wasted look screamed of evil magic.

Jon's thoughts meandered into the newly-discovered necessity of butchering the dead and not only burning them. The frown that formed on his face must have given the burned giant any answer he needed about Jon's wishes in the matter.

"I didn't think so," the Hound said with singular determination and a hint of approval. "This pretty bit of business is what dogs are for."

"I should have smashed your face into jelly in Winterfell," Jon responded in kind, forgetting any courtesy he was ever taught. "To teach you manners."

"It might have become prettier for it." Oddly, the Hound seemed to agree with the sentiment and appeared completely untouched by the insult. "Maybe I would have met my future wife sooner if you did. Did the young ladies of the house visit the wounded in Winterfell? To pray for their health? To wash their sores?"

"Wife?" Jon almost laughed. He couldn't fathom who would marry the Hound.

"Sansa. Your pretty sister. Cousin. Haven't you heard? She must have been a bit blind, but she did marry me."

"You shall speak of Sansa with respect and leave her alone," Jon said with indignation. The man was surely joking. Then again, Arya did mention to Jon that Sansa had changed a lot and she seemed to love her more, though she hadn't been more precise, and Jon didn't really bother to ask anything further. As he perhaps should have.

"As all of you Starks left her to rot in King's Landing for years? Tell me true, boy, if the Bastard of Bolton told you he had your older sister and not the little she-wolf, would you send this singer to get her?" Clegane snarled, pointing angrily at Mance Rayder, who did not move an inch and just kept playing, as if he witnessed a most normal exchange between two men.

Jon… didn't know. Yes, he would want to save Sansa, but he would be more prudent in planning… He didn't know if he would be as rash as he had been when the news concerned Arya. Shame crept out on his face, visibly so, another proof of life in his cold veins. Yes, when Stannis had offered him Winterfell, he gladly left it to his sister Sansa because it was hers by rights when their little brothers
were thought to be dead, but dying for his half-sister on the spot was another matter.

"I thought so," the Hound approved of Jon's reaction again, very much so. His snarl lessened considerably.

Jon snorted with anger at the condescending remark. This man who claimed to be Sansa's husband was in King's Landing. Jon and the other Starks were not. Why didn't he help her escape?

"You were content to eat shit falling from Joffrey's mouth when I saw you," Jon spat out with contempt. "Don't try and tell me that you saved Sansa as some true knight!"

"I didn't," the monster whispered back, caught by surprise, as though he were confessing his blackest sin. "Back then she saved herself. But I mean to remedy that now," his rasp transformed into a burning threat, not directed to Jon.

"The Others took your wife, you've seen it as good as I," Mance tried to talk reason into the burned man, shocking Jon into silence. "She may be dead or worse by now."

Jon's expression darkened with fresh grief. The losses of the day were much greater than he thought.

And there is no sign of Bran. Rickon told Jon and Arya that Bran went beyond the Wall with Hodor and two crannogmen, in search of the three-eyed crow. Well, Jon had just found the man who called himself that, but not his crippled brother.

"The Others can bugger themselves with a hot poker!" the Hound dismissed Mance's concern, growling. "I am not giving my wife up for dead. If it depends on me, Sansa will survive me by many years."

Clegane unceremoniously wiped the eye on his burned side as well as his hooked nose in one of his dirty gloves, before returning his attention to Jon with a changed expression, a very serious one, devoid of any mocking.

"I might return to die in your war, boy, when I am done finding my wife," he said grimly. "I might show you a trick of two with the blade if you want." He glanced back, at Rhaegar's corpse, with unknown emotion, as if helping his son was something he may have owned him. The red border around his eyes that looked demonic moments ago was now clearly visible for what it was. Much like Aegon and everyone else, the Hound had been crying.

"You will yet make a buggering honourable man like your father, and not only a proper killer," he judged Jon calmly, with odd mixture of scorn and peaceful benevolence. "You know what? I'll give you a parting gift. I didn't think I should when this started, but now I want to. Think of it what you will."

Jon wished the Hound would go and save Sansa if he could, and for the inopportune conversation to end. He couldn't think of anything of importance that the Lannister dog might say to him.

"I saw you fight," the Hound rasped on. "In Winterfell. You were a green boy and yet as good or better than any of the gnats there. And you know yourself how good you are now, you don't need me to tell you that. So you must be able to see that I have the right of this even if you have no reason to believe me."

Jon still didn't see a single thing.

"Your father was a left-handed swordsman," the Hound confided bluntly in Jon, as one fighter to another, landing a mortal blow with his words. "Unlike you and myself. And just like your little
sister. Do you remember how she moves when she fights? I know you do."

Jon was stunned speechless. Yes, father's left arm was wounded when they duelled but now that he thought back on it and *looked* at his corpse, the cut was maybe *not* that deep that he would not be able to hold a sword. He just imagined it was his shield arm as in most men. But if it wasn't, if it wasn't….

He remembered… father, examining his changing hands with *loathing*, perhaps from being unable to stop the curse that enslaved him against his will… Father, digging with his hands in the snow, perhaps about to forge a cursed crystal weapon like the Others in the heart of winter did by magic, *refusing* to obey this new instinct with utmost difficulty… almost in *pain*.

The duel itself came back in fresh light, stark light, every step and every stroke. Some part of his father *must* have been still present within the monster he was forced to become. It must have been Rhaegar or a part of him who purposefully took the weapon in the wrong hand, making it *easier* for his son to do what was necessary… accepting that necessity… He must have been *resisting* the curse that was taking over his mind and obliging him to attack his son with all he had… Every stroke Rhaegar made was slightly *off* because he fought on the wrong side. A vivid memory of Arya wielding a wooden stick as a child with her left hand was the last touch. Jon could reconstruct with precision how father would have fought… how he should have fought… if his heart had ever been set on victory.

After his confrontation with the Great Other, Jon believed he might be able to best any white walker in a fair fight… But his father couldn't know that. He tried to… to help him do what had to be done.

Or maybe… maybe… his father also waited, spending some *time* with his son while he still could… sparring, in a way, as a father and son might do in the training yard in the morning… curious and *pleased* with the little time he had gotten from the gods… This last possibility was the worst one of all for Jon. To think that father loved him…

*Maybe you can't help but love your children*, Jon told himself. He had never fathered a son so he wouldn't know. But then he remembered the story of *Sam's* father and knew beyond doubt that not every fatherly love was the same. Randyll Tarly had forced his eldest son to join the Night's Watch at swordpoint, exhibiting utmost cruelty.

*He's both better and worse than all the stories about him*, Arya's voice echoed in Jon's head, sounding like an angry growl of a giant, gaining new meaning; brilliant and terrifying like the sun, which just showed its face behind the woods in the east, rising as high and as bright as it could in winter.

*He looks so much like an arrogant handsome Southron that you must hate him. And then he does something unexpected and you can't.*

*And you risk loving him…*

Bloodraven told Jon to return to the Wall or he would regret the coming day… But he wouldn't listen. He was too wilful to listen and thought he knew best. Not for the first time.

*But who am I to trust if not myself?*

As Jon sank further down in the pit of his contradictory musings, Sandor Clegane pulled Rhaegar's corpse away from the clearing by his legs until both men disappeared into the wood. No one tried to stop him.
Jon wanted to lay down and cry but he could not. He could not do any better than what he did, yet the truth of this day was cruel beyond endurance.

*I should have gone and seen my parents as soon as Dany told me.*

His thoughts jumped wildly to the *song* Mance had been playing *wordlessly* on his lute so far, which painfully fitted the occasion. It didn't include Sansa's destiny, but it did all else.

"Sing it, Mance!" Jon commanded darkly. His own voice had never sounded so grim before. "Don't shy from it. You must know the words. Ygritte taught me before she died. She said it was a good song and today I find it is so. More than on any other day… Sing it now if it please you!"

He half expected the King-beyond-the-Wall to mock him and taunt him, to question his actions and wishes as he did with the Hound and his announcement he would go after Sansa, to tell him he should have come to his father sooner and this, this, this would never have happened.

Mance Rayder surprised Jon by tilting his shaggy, brown and grey head to the side and adding his voice to the lament of his lute; a broken, dark chant that could make the gods have regrets about the world they created.

He sang of the ancient wildling king Bael the Bard and his bastard son with the only daughter of the then Lord of Winterfell. The son who became lord himself thirty years later, and faced off his own father in a duel. The son who killed his father because his father had *let* him, unable to murder his own blood in return. The son who brought Bael's head back to his mother, who then took her own life…

Jon gazed at all the snow around him and listened, wishing that the whiteness of the land could soothe and silence his conscience. He had done *nothing* wrong and yet it felt more and more as if he did. His real father was a hero. A dead hero of whom there would be nothing left to take home.

*It certainly explains why the Night's King had trouble speaking. He didn't fancy being burned, did he?* Jon drew a smallest measure of satisfaction from the knowledge that Rhaegar's sacrifice had not been in vain.

On a second glance, a *harp* still lay in the snow where his father's body had been…

*I should bring this to mother and hope that she doesn't jump from a tower…*

And as if having to end his father's life was little, the world offered no reprieve to Jon, no time to come to terms with what he had done.

*Nothing is ever enough,* Jon thought morbidly, taking in the changing horizon under the golden morning sun.

A black shadow rose high above the sea in the west and plunged down, cutting the sky, in order to attack a much smaller green one with a savage roar, announcing certain destruction.

The black dragon was at least five times larger than Rhaegal and so broad that he could carry a castle tower on his back. Fire from his nostrils set the sky aflame before he even opened his maw. He screamed, as if in pain over the loss of his rider. He looked as if he had every intention to murder Jon's dragon, whom he may have held responsible in some obscure way of the beasts. Jon closed his eyes and tried to talk to Rhaegal, but all he could feel was a green cloud of apprehension and a complete lack of understanding of his black brother's ire.

*The dance of dragons.*
No! Jon protested inwardly. He was not a dragonlord and he was not ready for this. He had a terrible sense of premonition that either his father or Daenerys would know how to calm the beasts, but he had no power of achieving it. So he told Rhaegal in his mind to fly away as fast as he could.

But the black dragon caught the green one with his claws and opened a large wound on Rhaegal's side. Rhaegal screeched wildly and lifted his own legs to defend himself, spurting fire into the black dragon's eyes, extricating himself from the deadly grip. To Jon's horror, he felt his dragon becoming eager to fight, much like men sometimes wanted to beat each other bloody for amusement. Except that in this clash, Rhaegal did not stand a chance.

"Stop it!" Jon thundered with his voice, from the top of his lungs, with all his wolfish, angered being. "Stop it now! Just stop it, will you? You!" he addressed the black dragon. "You have another rider! She misses you! Go to her!"

And it is I who killed your second rider, not my dragon. It's with me you should be furious.

But the dragons wouldn't listen, swishing tails, breathing fire, flying around each other, searching for an opportunity to rip each other apart. Maybe his voice never reached them. Jon searched nervously for more options and found only one.

This thing mother and I can do.

Jon forced his mind to jump into the head of Dany's dragon, as he would do now when he consciously warged into Ghost, ignoring the danger for his person if the endeavour proved too strenuous. He immediately encountered a black barrier he could not cross, harder and sharper than Valyrian steel. On the inside, Drogon was power. His being swirled and flared, free and indomitable like fire itself, resistant to the attempt at intrusion. Dany's biggest child had no match in strength, Jon realised.

So he tried to reason with him.

Your rider gave his life for the people, Jon argued without hesitation. And then he chose nothingness over being enslaved in death.

He could not say for certain if the black dragon had heard him, although he very well might have. In a hurry to act, Jon repeated his mistake from the heart of winter. He forgot to sit down.

His legs betrayed him and he felt he was no more.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all who are reading through the less sunny parts of this story.

Any feedback is always welcome.

Next up: Dany, Davos, Aegon/Mance, Jaime/odd POV,
Chapter Notes

Thank you to TopShelfCrazy for a great beta read and to DrHolland for spotting a few final unclear bits and pieces ))

Warning for violence against women.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys

A sennight went by and Jon had not returned.

Daenerys visited the weirwood every evening, staring at its face. On the first day she was only worried and sad, and on the second she turned sick from the cold. Jon's friends found her rolling in the snow with fever and carried her back to the castle under a starless sky. She insisted she be taken to visit the tree on the third and on the fourth day, sweating with illness. She walked to it on the fifth and the sixth day, frozen and pale as ice. On the seventh day she prayed to the damned tree, but Jon had not come back.

Her heart ached as it had never done before. She told herself Jon was as brave and as capable as a man could be. Maybe more. His courage frightened her to death. For his enemy was more than just a man; an undying creature of a completely different kind. Dany repeated to herself that Jon was determined to win the war, which was the same as staying alive in battles Dany had seen. Yet it was still not enough to calm the surprisingly tender nerves of the otherwise much stronger Mother of Dragons.

Somehow, Dany even knew Jon was alive and well. She could sense it, but all her knowledge rang hollow and insufficient. Her life had turned to winter, inside and out. No fire warmed her, be it on the hearth or in her heart of a dragon. She needed Jon with her, body and soul; his curious spirit and his mad embraces.

Since he was gone, Dany began to feel guilty for having enjoyed most of their couplings when Jon was worried about being a wight and sought both pleasure and shelter from her person. She should have reassured him more, reminding him to exhaustion that he was a man, but the unforgettably bold caresses Jon bestowed upon her when tortured by his fears were unlike any others. She craved them, then and now. Jon made her feel like she was the only woman in the world. Without ever flattering her… without ever calling her the most beautiful among women or any other such exaggeration she had heard before.

In the throes of her illness, Dany saw Jon, piercing her heart with a flaming sword. The image did not repulse her as it well should. Instead, she loved him as he did it, with frightening intensity.

In her vision, Dany let Jon do as he pleased. Moreover, she bared her chest and invited him to kill her. She found joy in asking it of him. And as his blade crossed her living heart she screamed. Her cry of pain changed her, morphing slowly into a wave of intense, glamorous pleasure, stronger than any other she had ever known. The fire… the fire in her turned into ice and she donned a crown that had never been her own.
Thus crowned, she searched for Jon, but he never came. And he should have followed her to the underworld illuminated by blue light Dany had chosen for them, where they would dwell for all eternity. After this sinister, nightmarish vision, Daenerys woke shattered and hurting, sick to the bone.

Cursed fire burned her on the inside. It was searing and thousands of years old, wrought of ancient blue ice. Yet the winter fever would never ruin her. How could it? Daenerys could not catch fire, she was fire.

A being of fire cloaked in human skin, like her dragons were the creatures of flame covered in scales. After her dreamlike descent to the frozen hell... After being killed by her lover's hand, it was good to remember this.

She felt as though she were going to spurt wings and fly, but no matter how long or how hard her body burned, she remained wingless and alone.

Finally, she remembered the king with blue eyes and his sword, glowing red; a very brief, forgotten vision from years ago, from the House of the Undying. At the time, she was most interested in the handsome silver-haired man with the harp, the woman in childbed and their newborn son she'd seen on the same occasion. The man said that the boy was the prince that was promised, whose song was the song of ice and fire. He argued that the dragon had three heads and that there had to be another. And he had looked at Daenerys, as though he knew her very well, through the open door.

Back then, Dany thought she had seen her brother Rhaegar, Princess Elia and little Aegon when they were alive and happy. For a long while she cherished that memory. Now, she knew better. The silver-haired man with such high hopes for his child had never been her older brother, though the resemblance between the two was outstanding and prominent, down to the love of music and the manner of playing the high harp with silver strings.

There had been many Aegons in the past and perhaps more harp players as well... Of that, the history was silent, steered by the strong and not by the singers.

The handsome man could have been another Targaryen king or lord from the past. Maybe Dany saw the father of Aegon V the Unlikely. Maybe Maekar I who had dark violet eyes believed in prophecies, just like Rhaegar. The lady in bed would then be Dornish as well, for Maekar had married Lady Dyanna Dayne.

Rhaegar... Where have you gone?

The dead king with blue eyes Dany saw in the House of the Undying Qarth had Rhaegar's noble face. And she had never thought about it when she was reunited with her older brother. Why was it that she only remembered this now? Unlike Jon, who was safe, albeit far away, in a place where she could not reach him, Rhaegar was ill again; mortally ill, worse than when he'd lost his memory from the deathly wound on the Trident. Rhaegar was about to disappear from the face of this earth, as thoroughly as if he had never existed. He would melt and become an ice flower, shedding petals of snow.

Snow, as his son still called himself.

This chain of thoughts for some reason always made her weep. She muffled her sobs in the pillow whenever someone came to check on her.

Dany's soul ached and her whole body hurt. She could not sleep at all and she kept burning. Closing her sleepless eyes, she wished that her remaining strength could feed her dying brother and help him...
weather the storm that must have found him on his way. Or maybe Rhaegar was already gone forever, like Viserys; she had felt his trouble only when it was too late and all she could do was mourn him.

Jon's friends washed her brow with cold water and sat at her bedside day and night. Pyke fed her broth with a wooden spoon because any metal burned her already parched lips. Only a selected few brothers of the Night's Watch had the privilege of waiting on Jon's new steward, the brave Danny Flint. To the rest they said she was another boy from Oldtown, taken by the winter sickness far away from home. Jon had a weakness for pretty boys, they never ceased to repeat to anyone who asked and even to those who didn't.

Dany did not understand the reason for so much secrecy. Half of the outpost saw her arrive in the ship and must have suspected the truth about her sex despite her conveniently black attire and half-hearted attempt at ruse. One time she complained about it to the men who nursed her to health. Pyp only nodded wisely, and said that the less men knew she was a lady, the better. An even wiser looking large raven bobbed his head at Daenerys, perched on Pyp's shoulder.

Her visions became more and more horrid with every new day, acquiring outrageous shapes and proportions. Rhaegar's blood gushed into a soft white gown, soaking it. A tall, handsome foreigner in lavish grey armour screamed from being burnt to death and his wife cried for him, soothing his wounds with seaweed.

Dany felt trapped in her mortal body. She wished to magic herself into tongues of flame, to give herself to the faraway unquenched fires of Valyria in the depths of the Smoking Sea and to stop existing. But she could not, and her torment continued. It would never end.

Did they both die? Jon and Rhaegar. She had to know. She implored Drogon to return to her and to take her to either her lover or her brother, but he would not do it. She feared Drogon would never return to her as a result of her unfortunate, accidental meddling with blood magic which left him with an unwanted piece of Khal Drogo's soul for all times, lodged firmly into his black, fiery one.

Drogon, she beseeched the dragon, unable to understand. You may carry a part of Drogo, but you have always been so much more. A true ally. A friend. A brother. Are you not? Why are you doing this?

Dany began to understand the odd, secret talk of dragonkind on her own, without any help of the dead Undying from Qarth who had first offered to teach it to her. She became apt in seeing the hallucinating images and shapes the black dragon projected, and hearing his unfinished, unpolished thoughts. Ever since, Dany knew that Drogon was vast on the inside, larger than his continuously growing body. He was entirely inhuman, illogical; or perhaps possessing a different logic proper of the dragons. He was intimidating - sly, cruel, desirous to burn things - and yet respectful and ordered in his own chaotic way. Just like fire, he could not be grasped.

Daenerys sometimes believed of late that it might prove less impossible to kill Drogon and thus quench the fire he represented than to force him into unquestioning obedience. He listened to her because he wanted to, naught for anything else. Drogon would never be fully mastered by any man. Or woman.

Unexpectedly, it was Rhaegar, her serious, mournful brother, keen on doing justice, who may have came much closer to commanding Drogon than anyone else, even Dany. Yet she always believed Drogon loved her more than Rhaegar; as his mother and his first rider. She never expected he would abandon her to her fate.
On the eighth day, when Dany was barely out of bed on wobbly legs and about to pronounce herself well and truly mad like Aerys, her father, as a consequence of all the atrocious incongruities she had seen, the Unsullied from her ships mutinied in Eastwatch. Betraying Daenerys, they overpowered the black brothers faithful to Jon during night. The eyes of the armoured eunuchs became glassy and they did not recognise their mother. Moreover, they looked as if they no longer knew each other, nor what their name was, or if they had ever had a name; either given to them by their mothers, chosen at will or drawn out of the bucket in Astapor before Dany bought them. Unfortunately, their military prowess, discipline and utter fearlessness had not diminished with the departure of coherence from their brains.

Ser Barristan, Cotter Pyke, Grenn, Pyp and many others who resisted the change of power ended up imprisoned in the mammoth stable in place of Ser Glendon Hewett and his cronies. There were so many prisoners now that the mammoths were let loose and wandered freely, leaving heaps of warm dung in their wake over the maidenly snow. Ser Glendon was reinstated as the commander of the outpost.

Ser Barristan’s bravery had made it possible for Ben Plumm to sail south in haste with four fully manned galleys and cogs, still loyal to Dany. The Rhaenys was among them. Osha, the wildling woman Pyke bedded, also boarded the ships, as did many of the wildlings from Hardhome who still lingered on the Wall.

Daenerys chose to stay. The blood of the dragon did not run. And Jon… Jon would surely return to the Wall as soon as he could. The Wall was his. It meant everything to him. Probably more than she did. It mattered not. He loved her. He was not in love with the Wall, only deeply attached to his duty.

Besides, more ships might be coming to join the cause of King Rhaegar from the south, if all the oaths were not wind. On the eastern coast, Dany's hopes were set on the Vale, untouched by the recent wars in Westeros. If Ben met with a friendly fleet on the high seas, he would return and retake Eastwatch… The sellsword was a capable commander.

The Unsullied were very determined, but their number was severely diminished. Half had stayed with Rhaegar and were now mutineers in Winterfell, if the trees did not lie to Lady Sansa. A great number died at Hardhome… Or rather, turned to prowling the woods north of the Wall as wights, led by dead Grey Worm. The eunuchs who took Eastwatch could be overpowered, hopefully with as little loss of life as possible. Dany felt it acutely now, wondering if Jon shared the feeling; It was a sin to take a life in winter.

Noble feelings aside, until a new turn of her constantly changing fortune, in the blink of an eye everything was lost. The only advantage in defeat was that the Unsullied clearly did not recognise Daenerys, nor anyone else from their yesterday's companions, distinguishing only men who fought against them from those that didn't. As a result, the princess easily avoided capture and imprisonment. She found an empty, cold cell for herself in one of the crumbling towers of the black, windy castle. She stayed away from everyone, especially from Ser Glendon; kept her head covered, kept it down.

On the ninth day, instead of either Jon or Rhaegar, royal visitors arrived from Castle Black, eager to gloat over their victory. All black brothers who were not confined to the stables were made to stand in line and welcome them. Dany, being short, ended up in the middle of the front row, much against her will.

The visitors flew to Eastwatch on Drogon's back...

Dany's heart began to pound madly. This was the third and final treason promised to her, she was certain, and no betrayal could be greater or more harmful to her heart. Drogon must have turned
against her because of his misguided love. For being unable to understand that he was not a man, as much as he was able to express his meaning to a woman.

The dragon should have never been bound by the memories and wishes of a khal whose soul was attached to him by force and Dany's ignorance of the workings of magic. He needed to breed with a she-dragon and watch her brood over a nest full of eggs, or lay eggs himself if Dany was wrong about Drogon's sex, though she very much doubted it. Her three dragons were all male. Even Viserion who carried an imprint of an evil woman's soul. This didn't bode well for the survival of the race unless those maesters were right who said that the dragons could change sex at will. Dany hadn't noticed any sight of it so far.

Drogon… Drogon wasn't sad any more, nor angry with Daenerys, as he was when she'd insisted he should take her to Jon. His mind had become fully closed to his mother, opaque like the gloomy winter night on the Wall.

Dany wrenched her soul away from her grief, and proceeded to study the visitors, stacked on Drogon's back like jars of pickled vegetables in the cellars under Eastwatch. She refused to succumb to woman's weeping in front of everyone. The blood of the dragon did not cry. At least not where she could be seen. She had a pillow for that.

Lord Davos was the only one among the newcomers Dany had met in person, but she could guess the identity of others easy enough, from the stories she was told. A very tall, balding, homely, crowned man with a haunted look in his indifferent, dark blue eyes, and a closely cropped blue and black beard, could only be Stannis; and the two ugly ladies following him, his wife Selyse and their daughter Shireen. Shireen would be as unattractive as her mother, if her inoffensive look and the guileless, yet very intense blue of her eyes did not make one forget the greyscale marks on her face and the horrifying length of her ears. The girl helped Lady Arya, Dany recalled.

Behind them all lurked a woman in vibrant red satin and velvet; proud and haughty. The red woman. Lady Melisandre. In her delicate hands, she was holding a whip with nine ends. The nine fingers of the harpy, Dany suddenly knew, though she could scarcely see them. The sight of it stirred old hatred in Dany's heart. In Astapor they sold her a scourge of power just like that one; eight thousand Unsullied, six hundred cut boys still in training, and one magic lash to bind them to her will. The crueler she was to them, the better… They were trained to withstand mutilation.

Dany used the harpies, to affirm her ownership over her new army and to turn it against their former masters. After, she discarded the tool of torture and proclaimed freedom for all.

The red woman used the whip to enchant the eunuchs to serve her purposes. She must have overthrown their spirit, Dany realised.

Maybe Drogon never betrayed me. Maybe he is also under a dark spell.

Magic could do what men could not; dragons could be enslaved by it. Viserion and Rhaegal had already fallen victims to sorcery, when Euron Greyjoy succeeded in binding the horn of dragonlords to his will. The price of the kraken's short-lasting victory was his mortal life. Magic cut in two ways, Dany found, affecting both the ensorcelled and the sorcerer.

Are you forced to deny me? Dany asked of the blackness she could no longer sense, but she nonetheless knew it was there.

Drogon snorted and looked through Daenerys with disdain. Almost with hatred.

Dany sighed. Perhaps not. Maybe you are just jealous as I first thought.
Will I ever know?

Please, at least be silent about my presence to your new mistress, she told Drogon in her mind. The red woman made her uneasy. It was best if she never knew who Daenerys was. Drogon did not answer. Maybe he could not, if his mind was indeed captive and not only driven away from Dany by misplaced anger.

There were also knights and men-at arms, and the men of the Night's Watch accompanying Stannis on Dany's dragon. One older, skinny man, had cheeks as red as a ripe fruit. Bowen Marsh. The old pomegranate. He'd lost his weight recovering from a wound when defending the Wall. And then he stabbed Jon in the back because their views about the right form of defence were not the same.

Stannis slid down one of Drogon's giant paws with stern determination, acting as if flying a dragon came naturally to him. Daenerys doubted that it did; his armoured legs shook imperceptibly. An experienced dragonrider like Daenerys Targaryen could immediately tell it had not been easy for Stannis at all. The little metal flames on the golden circlet he wore on his forehead looked cold and dead, not bright and vivid as fire should be. His face looked hollow and aged before his time. Just like his crown, he looked like death.

Mother of dragons, daughter of death, Dany remembered the chant of the Undying in their House in Qarth, and recalled who she was. Dragons were death if they wanted to be. Stannis only looked like it.

"The time of the dragonlords is back! Dragon wings will be seen flying again all over Westeros!" Stannis declared proudly to anyone who listened. Dany wondered if he thought of himself as one of the three heads of the dragon. Despite that he had only a drop of dragonblood at best, through his famous grandmother and, very remotely, from Orys, the founder of the House Baratheon who may or may not have been a bastard brother of Aegon the Conqueror. Daenerys almost snorted at Stannis' pretence as Drogon had done earlier at hers. Keeping her face even and only mildly interested came with utmost difficulty.

"Behold!" Stannis said with unfeigned wonder and not with little satisfaction. "I am now the only lawful male heir of the Houses Targaryen and Baratheon. The dragon's allegiance proves it," he declared. "Rhaegar Targaryen, a rapist and a madman like his father, died a week ago, in a foolish battle against the Great Other beyond the Wall. His bastard son Jon was killed months ago. He is now a wight or another such abomination if he still walks this earth. Being thus, he can lay no lawful claim to the Iron Throne even if he were trueborn. And there is no proof except the word of his mother that Rhaegar married her to cover up her shame."

It can't be, Dany vehemently refused to believe Stannis, though he might be telling the truth.

Because regardless of Drogon's reasons to abandon Daenerys, if Rhaegar lived, the dragon would be with him, not with Stannis. If Drogon had been enslaved or enchanted, Rhaegar would have felt it. He would then blow the sorcerous horn of the dragonlords and Drogon would be bound to return to him. Any spell he was under would have been broken. If Rhaegar did not sound the horn for a week, he must have been dead.

Or worse. Undead, like Grey Worm.

Stannis' voice turned unnaturally mellow after his boasting; stirring Dany's anger to unprecedented heights. "I will be merciful to Daenerys Targaryen if she can be found," the would-be heir of the Targaryens generously offered. "She was here. Where is she now? I need her help to bind the other two dragons to my will, the green one which cannot be left to a wight in a War of Winter, and the white one which can't be entrusted to Ser Jaime Lannister. The Kingslayer should face trial for incest
and regicide. It is just."

No one spoke.

"Don't be afraid," the red woman addressed the black brothers after her king, tender and untruthful like the false spring. "Princess Daenerys is here. I have seen it in my fires. Your king has come here looking for her. Tell your king where she is and his dragon will spare your worthless lives."

Dany stood immobile between two unknown men in black, fighting not to faint, expecting someone to surrender her.

To her surprise, no one did. Ser Glendon blabbered something about him never missing a skirt. He stated very convincingly that Dany would already be warming his bed if she were there.

The king was not satisfied. He re-examined the faces of the black brothers one by one. When Dany's turn came, she was certain Stannis would recognise her through Drogon's mind, but he never did. As if he were blind... Not even the red woman saw who Dany was and her red eyes were keener than all the others. No one did. Until the red-faced commander, Bowen Marsh. Jon's first murderer. He stared her down and Dany knew she was found.

"Please," she muttered soundlessly with her lips.

The red woman instantly sauntered close, suspecting something. "Yes? Did you find the princess?" she asked Marsh.

"No," Marsh waved his head with disappointment. "I was mistaken, my lady. This is just another male whore that took the black."

Everyone pointedly looked away from Daenerys when Marsh insulted her. Some black brothers uttered tsk-tsk sounds with disgust.

"I see," the red lady exhaled and looked up some other boys in line, scrawny wildlings that replaced motley rags for warm black wool, without swearing any vows for it.

Dany was stunned. Unlike Stannis and his sorceress, the old pomegranate wasn't mistaken. He was lying. The man... the man who stabbed Jon and had no reason to spare her had just lied for Daenerys and protected her.

The assembled black brothers were left to stand in the cold for hours. Stannis' sorceress observed carefully every one of them three or four more times. She never saw anything in Dany and no one among the men ratted she was there. Meanwhile, the king, his family and his retainers made a round of the outpost with Lord Marsh and Ser Glendon. Drogon sat idly on his paws, resting, brooding, studying his surroundings with one malicious red eye open and the other closed. Dany's cold-sensitive feet became two blocks of ice and it became almost impossible to continue standing.

When the short winter day was finally done, the red woman cracked her whip and made the Unsullied pile up a large heap of firewood in the only courtyard of the castle. In the middle of it, they lifted a long pole, high up into the air.

"Warrior of Light!" she bowed to Stannis and praised him highly. "Elevated is your destiny. Heart wrenching and noble are the trials that await you. It is time to reforge the sword of heroes for the last time. And then, with the help of the largest living dragon you shall defeat the Great Other for all eternity. I have foreseen it."

Lady Melisandre's eyes fell on the little princess, as did the gaze of Lord Davos a fraction of a
moment later. But Dany rightfully noticed that where the red eyes were full of design, the brown ones were filled with worry. From her crippling immobility in the line, the Mother of Dragons resisted the urge to run in place and warm up her feet or worse; slap the sorceress who stole her army and performed some devilry on her dragon.

"Lord of Light," the witch prayed in an ululating voice, akin to the lying Mirri Maaz Duur. "Grant your strength to Azor Ahai reborn. Keep his arm steady and his heart warm and true."

The red woman beckoned at the girl with long ears to come closer. "Princess Shireen, you love your father, do you not?" the witch asked sweetly.

"Yes," the girl said quietly.

"More than anything?"

"My lord father and my lady mother both," Shireen replied boldly at the second question, but she never came a step closer.

"Good," the witch in red satin said. "Lord of Light, you have heard the voice of innocence! Daughter's love must suffice to remake the sword. The voice of her suffering will rip the fabric of destiny and give Lightbringer the final brightness he needs to bring forth the dawn. You must do this now, Your Grace. You must run the sword through your daughter's heart. It is the final sacrifice."

"Sacrifice is never easy," the king agreed, but did not appear convinced by the proposal. "But is my only daughter's life a just one?"

Before the red woman could answer her king that it was, Lord Davos interrupted her. His voice was thick with emotion. His lips quivered, but his tone remained simple and calm, not making plain his inner turmoil. He inspired trust; a tiny voice of reason in the roaring sea of madness. "I have heard a different story about the forging of Lightbringer, Your Grace. May I tell it, if it please you? I've never told you anything but the truth."

"Are you suggesting that the Lady Melisandre is telling me less? That she is lying?" the king juggled with the words in his tight-lipped mouth, emanating danger. "She has been as true to my cause as you."

"I am not suggesting anything of the kind, Your Grace," Lord Davos said, unperturbed on the surface.

Dany intercepted a cold flash in Stannis' eyes, directed at his daughter. His words of questioning his sorceress' wisdom had sounded prudent and fatherly. But to Dany he seemed willing to do anything to assert his right to sit the Iron Throne, provided he could be fully reassured of what that was.

The heathen king, the cursed king, Dany insulted him inwardly. If the men choose to do this, we can all join the Great Other and carry his banner of ice.

"Your Grace," Davos pursued his argument, not waiting for his king's permission. "I shall retell the legend of Azor Ahai and the forging of the Lightbringer as it is told by the pirates of the Narrow Sea."

Davos sneezed and coughed from the chill, before finding his words with difficulty. "Thousands of years ago, Azor Ahai... he... he laboured for a hundred days, working the metal of his sword. And when he was done, he asked his wife Nissa Nissa to bare her chest, out of great love she bore him. He... He pierced her heart with his sword and her cry of both agony and ecstasy tore the sky... The pirates say it left a crack across the face of the moon. And with a sword thus forged Azor Ahai won
a victory. Over the darkness that lay heavy on the world."

Davos studied the sky above Eastwatch. "All this darkness, gathering..." His gaze circled everyone present, stopping on Stannis. "We are facing it now. May the gods help us all."

"God is only one," Lady Melisandre corrected him gently. "Lord of Light."

Dany wondered what the white trees of the North or Old Garth the immortal might say to that. She hadn't seen the very peculiar wildling since the mutiny. Or rather, she had seen him die in place of Grenn and Pyp at the hands of the Unsullied, and wondered when she would see him again and for whom he would give his life in the future.

Lady Melisandre continued with passion, "The light of the Lord shall chase away all darkness. It shall be carried to the confines of the world by his chosen warrior."

"Is Lord Davos telling the truth?" Stannis asked of the thin air with compulsive coldness.

_The determination in him borders on madness_, Daenerys realised, wondering how much Targaryen blood was precisely necessary to produce the taint.

"Yes, Your Grace," the red woman admitted sadly, curtsying deeply, lowering her beautiful head down, sounding as if she had been forced to confess to a tragic truth against her best intentions.

"Why haven't you told me, woman?" Stannis courtesies towards his witch lessened considerably, to the point of unceremonious openness between two lovers.

"To spare your queen whom you love dearly, and the mother of your future heir. You shall have a son, Your Grace! I have seen it! He shall be the rightful King of Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm. He shall be named... Joramun." Melisandre spoke with ecstasy from her position of mummer's subservience, eying the king with profoundly faked wonder.

"Is this true? A son? Not a shadow?" The king now sounded more suspicious than Jon.

"Yes, I swear it," the red woman blinked away the last traces of her feigned humility and rose slowly back up.

Dany thought that probably deep in his soul Stannis wanted to believe in the outrageous proposals put forward to him, as long as they favoured the righteousness of his claim to the Iron Throne. Much like Jon perhaps wanted to believe that both his parents had always loved him, but he could not let himself do so in case he was wrong. Stannis suffered from no such inhibition.

"Thank you my lady, and you, my Lord Hand," the self-styled king beamed. "Selyse, come."

His queen did not seem to understand the change of her fortune and she unwittingly did as she was bid. Dany shivered and looked to Davos for hope.

_Say more. Flatter him. Stop him!_ Dany pleaded, but the Hand remained silent.

"Why is my presence required at your side for this?" Selyse strived to sound queenly, but her voice grated and lacked any harmony. "Shireen's life is demanded. This is very hard for me as her mother. Yet I shall not oppose it. The Lord of Light has opened my eyes. If we do not sacrifice our daughter, we will all die. But I am not a squire who can assist you with this sad task."

Oddly, Daenerys could not detect any prominent hardship over the so-called sacrifice in either Selyse's voice or Stannis' attitude.
Large tears rolled down the little princess' cheek. Unlike her mother, she had just grasped everything. "Would you do it, mother? Would you have me killed to... to win a war?"

"Yes-" the old woman croaked stupidly.

"As would I, daughter," Stannis interrupted his wife, glaring at Shireen with his haunted blue eyes. "If it had to be done. And you would die obediently if that was your destiny. Be content that it is not. Lord Davos told me the truth."

The little princess was shaking and Dany was trembling with her. Shireen may have been as old as Dany when she had her first blood. A true father would be thinking about a good match for his only daughter, not about taking hers or her mother's life.

"Father," Shireen said bravely through blossoming tears. "Don't listen to Lord Davos nor to Lady Melisandre. Please don't kill mother. Or me. There has to be another way. How could a war be won with a life of a lady? Or a girl? None of the histories Devan and I studied with the maester teach us that."

Davos finally realised he needed to undo his own success and began fighting for the light of reason, and not of R'hllor. "Your Grace," he reminded Stannis, "The Lady Melisandre agrees that the story of the pirates is true in her great wisdom. Your Grace should perhaps begin your labours now and continue for a hundred days-"

"I have laboured all my life! Every single day of it! I've always done my duty!" Stannis thundered with zeal. "And I've lived much longer than a mere hundred days."

The red woman looked at the snowy grounds, demurely hiding her red eyes. From a corner of one eye, she may have laughed at Davos.

"I am not only Robert's lawful heir now, I am the last trueborn male heir coming from the line of Aegon the Conqueror himself, and a dragonlord as Aegon was..." Stannis' eyes turned dreamy and painfully honest for a brief moment.

"Daughter, you must see it is my duty to defend my kingdoms. Don't stand in the way of it," he addressed Shireen and sounded so honourable and reasonable while arguing in favour of a crime that Dany's eyes almost watered in response to how wrong it all was; entirely unjust under the presumption of justice.

Being quite finished with talking, Stannis grasped the hilt of his sword.

Selyse bolted and ran away. Black docks stopped her. She bent over the wildly foaming sea, too afraid to give herself to the rocks and the waves. Melisandre cracked the nine-fingered whip in the chill air and three Unsullied dragged the runaway queen back. Stannis looked at his wife with disapproval, probably unable to understand how anyone could refuse to do their duty.

"Ser Axell," the king commanded to another long-eared man in his retinue. "Tie your niece to the stake, and bare her chest, unless you wish to accompany her on the nightfire."

Selyse's uncle did not wait for Stannis to finish his threat. He instantly obeyed. "I'd rather pray for my niece at the nightfire, Your Grace," he said calmly as he began to work. "May the Lord of Light give her courage to accept her destiny." Selyse whimpered weakly and let Ser Axell do as it pleased him.

And then they say we are mad, Daenerys thought with amazement, unable to tear her eyes away from the cruel scene. She wondered if this was how Jaime had felt when he watched Aerys
slaughtering the Starks.

At least he didn't have to tie them up. Father had servants for that. Kingsguard watched and did nothing.

As I am watching now.

Daenerys searched frantically for something she could do, but nothing came to mind.

Selyse was shaking and writhing against the pole. Her left breast was bare, withered and sagging. "You, Onion Knight, you are an ungrateful beast!" she screamed with belated anger.

"I owe everything to His Grace," Davos whispered, lowering his head in shame, sounding as if he had to remind himself of a higher truth he'd once believed in.

Selyse sobbed violently, like a wounded animal.

Suddenly, the doubting Hand straightened himself and faced his king squarely.

"Your Grace," Davos stated with fervent devotion, baring his chest. "I love you as my liege. You have made me. Unmake me now! Let the cry of my pure devotion to you tear the fabric of the sky and reforge your sword. Pierce my heart. No one loves you more than I."

Daenerys was impressed by the offer. He is made of the stuff of heroes and they call him the Onion Knight.

"Davos, my friend," Stannis said with with blunt simplicity. "You are not my wife. If I am to finally take my kingdoms, I have to do this right."

Dany realised no man could stop Stannis now. Had she given herself up at that moment, he would still go through with his intent.

Instinctively, she turned to Drogon for help, wondering what he thought, if anything, of the folly of men. The dragon blew thick black smoke through his huge nostrils in Stannis' direction. His mother hoped it would burn the heathen king or make him reconsider, but the cloud passed him and drifted to his wife. Stannis chose to see it as a sign to proceed.

The Usurper's brother strode forward with impiety, eager to reap the fruits of his life's labour, arriving to the top of the unlit pyre, where his wife was waiting for him on the stake.

Dany was profoundly disappointed. I hate you, she told Drogon and thought she felt his sadness, helplessness and misery before the black presence hid itself again with great care.

He is enslaved, he must be. That means that there has to be a way to free him.

Stannis drew his sword slowly and placed it on his wife's bare breast. "My love," he said dutifully.

"My king," his wife murmured piously through her tears, taken by fresh hope. "I loved you. You know I did, especially in the beginning, when you visited my bed. Please, have mercy on me. Take me down. I'll bear you a son. I've always known that I would. I…I love you still."

"I know," Stannis said placidly. "I heard Davos well. Without your love for me, everything would be in vain. The sword could not be reforged."

"Agony and ecstasy, now!" the king commanded his wife as he would a company of soldiers on the field of battle, while slowly piercing her heart with a steady sword arm.
The Lord of Light surely did not fail in granting him strength, Dany thought morbidly, and her thought felt like… Jon's?

Jon? She called to her lover and saw him lying still in an unknown stone tower, with Aegon and Jeyne for company.

Her waking vision was broken by Selyse's inhuman cry. The dying woman screamed and wailed pitifully. Instead of causing a crack on the moon, the injustice made Dany's heart sting. It must have caused the same nameless gut-wrenching grief in the souls of the onlookers, whose heart had not yet turned to stone. Men prayed to different gods under their voices. The line of black brothers was broken, the discipline gone. Ser Glendon and many others had urgent business in the stables. To check on prisoners, they said.

Lord Davos fell to his knees and called to the Mother above, asking her to have mercy on him. Lady Shireen stood forlorn in the snow. Fat tears adorned her dark blue eyes like precious pearls.

Dany called to the Warrior, to the Dothraki horse god and to all the white trees of the cursed North. She prayed for Stannis to receive what was his by rights. In her opinion, that would be a punishment meted by any god who did not hate his creation.

The cry… the cry Selyse uttered was profoundly wrong. Dany realised she knew more than well how Nissa Nissa's cry should have sounded. Daenerys had let it out of her stabbed chest many times in her dreams.

And there was no echo to Selyse's passing, as there should have been. In Dany's last feverish visions, the most horrible ones of all, Jon had answered her with an inhuman cry of his own, filled with grief so great that it could never be measured.

Stannis just stayed silent next to his wife, on top of the future nightfire, staring at his sword with determined expectation.

This can't go well, Dany thought. He can't reforge the sword by being indifferent to sacrificing his wife.

Against Dany's expectations, when Stannis pulled the blade out of Selyse's chest, it was flaming red as no other weapon, brighter than Jon's magic sword had ever been. So strong was the power given to the cold steel by a loving human heart.

Drogon seemed afraid of it… Mortally afraid of the accursed blade. He made a step away from from his new masters and their weapon, facing it with his closed eye, to make it less vulnerable. The other eye skirted the top of Dany's covered head, bright red and alarmed.

Can this sword kill you? Dany asked of Drogon, expecting no answer. Will it kill the Night's King? She hoped Jon would do it first. Because if Stannis was successful in defeating the Great Other after murdering his wife and stealing a dragon, what would he do next? Impale children on posts to secure a bountiful harvest in spring? There had to be a limit to the means used in the pursuit of a just cause. Dany knew better than anyone that it was not always easy to see them, but Stannis had clearly overstepped them by now.

A longer look revealed a green shine in the glowing metal as there never was on Jon's sword. And Dany could not feel the warmth emanating from this blade. The metal must have been cold to touch. Her touch in any case. Stannis almost burned his hands on it, descending from the pyre. With nervous hands, he managed to sheathe it. Then, he stared at the simple, noble scabbard on his hip; an austere work of a master smith. Jon used a humble scarf of black wool, which should have perhaps
burned at the contact with the weapon, Dany realised, yet it never did… Why?

When Stannis was satisfied that his body was not catching fire from his newly improved weapon, he approached the red woman. "My lady," he spoke with visionary inspiration, in complete contrast with his unbendable person. "As I am to have a son, I should best look for a new wife. My brother Robert was king. A lawful custom suggests that I take my former betrothed for wife. The same way Lord Eddard Stark married Lady Catelyn Tully. Lady Lyanna Stark is of highest birth, still of childbearing age and provenly fertile. And if she ever was married to her rapist, of which we have no witnesses, she is widowed now. I shall fly to Winterfell first. I will plant the seed of my heir before riding beyond the Wall to fulfill my destiny."

Ride how? Dany wondered bitterly. Drogon cannot fly you far beyond the Wall and stay unharmed. How was it possible that the would-be king knew next to nothing about the limitations of the dragons?

Drogon… You are not talking to him, are you?

Or maybe Stannis did not understand the secret talk of dragonkind for not being a true dragonrider.

Against Dany's hopes, the king and his red woman patted the resting dragon as a tame horse. Drogon allowed it with a small purring roar, to Dany's sorrow. Angered, she turned her pretty head away.

Ignored of everyone, Davos and Shireen were taking the dead queen off the stake. As if by magic, the fire under her was lit now, but the tongues of flames licking their way up progressed very slowly. Black brothers swerved around as a chaotic multitude. Everyone chattered loudly. With Selyse's murder, the discipline in Eastwatch went to seven hells.

Selyse stirred in Shireen's arms. When she opened her eyes, they were bright blue and empty, prettier than they had ever been in life.

"She should be burned," a handsome boy in black said aloud, appearing behind Dany. He had come with the king, yet the familiar raven sat on his shoulder.

"Burn," the raven croaked with approval.

Davos pressed a shortened finger on his mouth, begging for silence.

"Corn," Dany offered helpfully, twisting the raven's wisdom into a thought more fitting for a bird.

The black boy would speak again, but Dany took his hand, squeezing it. "Let them do," she whispered.

"We'll take her to the other side of the Wall," Davos murmured softly. "One more wight won't decide the war. It's not the first one His Grace released into the wilderness. Lady Genna Lannister suffered the same fate in Castle Black. She walked away on her own accord before anyone thought of burning her."

"Let me guess," Dany said bitterly, "she was the only lion that could be found on the Wall."

"Rather a gift to His Grace from Lord Frey, sent from the south with his oath of fealty," Davos volunteered more information. "But no raven nor promised swords came to His Grace from the Twins after that."

So Ser Jaime will never know anything more than what we all assume about my father and his mother, Dany realised. He has to be told. Her thoughts spontaneously scurried to Drogon, used to do
so. Let Viserion know if you can. And make him tell Jaime about blood magic.

In the silence that accompanied Dany's nervous thoughts, the black boy introduced himself to everyone. "I am Satin," he said.

Dany guessed further, "You served as Lord Snow's steward before I did."

Satin nodded with his eyes.

"King!" the raven shrieked at the mention of Jon, stirring Stannis and Melisandre from their hushed conversation. Davos stiffened, hiding his little princess and her waking dead mother with his body, spreading his cloak. Stannis grinned at the raven, pleased to hear from his beak the title he coveted, and plunged back to his talk with his maegi.

"Now," Dany urged Davos and Shireen. "To the gates. The Night's Watch is here or locked up in the stables. And the Unsullied are not used to guarding them. Unless they were ordered to. But I doubt very much that anyone thought of anything here today."

Arranging the guard on the gates seemed like a too ordinary task, unworthy of the new dragonlord and his red lady, who must have been contemplating higher mysteries, among them the continued murder of women or the best manner to rape Rhaegar's widow and call it marriage.

Somehow, Dany knew she would not live much longer than Selyse if she revealed herself. For a moment she was tempted to do just that. Drogon would never let his mother perish, would he? If she put her life in jeopardy, and if her dragon saved her again, she would know beyond doubt that she was still his rider.

But how would she feel if Drogon did not fly to her aid or if he harmed himself by breaking the bonds of enchanted slavery?

"I will take them to the gates," Satin offered.

"We will," Dany declared and dared ask a question. "You must have sent a raven with news. How long since this change? Since he has the dragon?"

"Seven days," Satin murmured.

So Rhaegar was dead and Jon ill for a week, as Dany had been.

"And they have both been looking for the princess since then. For Lord Snow's love. They hid this part from everyone. Even from Selyse," Satin continued. "And the fires hid the princess until this morning."

"How did you know?" Dany asked softly.

"Stannis liked when the bird said king when they spoke of Jon," Satin said.

"Love!" raven added before croaking harshly, "King! King! King!"

*He is king now if Rhaegar is gone.* The smile died on Dany's face. "We should go if we mean to let Lady Selyse wander in peace," she said, unable to talk further.

Dany accompanied Satin, Davos, Shireen and Selyse through the only tunnel in the ice leading beyond the Wall in Eastwatch. Blood returned to her frozen feet, making her toes throb with pain. *At least I feel all of them.*
Satin opened the inner and the outer gates, made of heavy iron. As soon as they were out on the other side, Selyse staggered and left them for the eaves of the forest. She wandered on, aimless and tittering; smoothing her dress, arranging her hair. The dead queen wore a sweet smile on her face. She didn't seem to know anyone. She wasn't herself. Her daughter began to cry harder.

Dany took the girl's hand. "It is the best you can do," she said tenderly. "Maybe she can be helped in time."

Truth be told, Aegon's Jeyne was the only wight who ever returned to life, and that under very special circumstances. Lady Catelyn Stark willingly surrendered the accursed life which was left to her, and somehow her sacrifice had made Jeyne whole. Or as whole as she could be. Darkness still lingered inside the former innkeep from the riverlands; she had become a beauty after her ordeal, yet she was still haunted by it. Death was not an experience easily forgotten. A part of the curse - lingered... But Dany did not think Shireen needed to hear this now. A thread of hope is better than no hope at all.

By the time they made their way back to the nightfire, all the firewood and the stake turned to smouldering ashes. Too fast, Dany thought and wondered if Drogon gave the weak fire a helping flame, to cover up for what his mother did. Or was it the sorceress?

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Stannis the Kinslayer looked furious with his Hand.

What now, Your Grace? Dany asked herself. Will you shorten the fingers on his other hand?

Dany chose to stay prudently back with Satin. Two boys from the pillow house in Oldtown should stick together.

"Where have you been? What have you done? Explain yourself!" Stannis demanded with simmering wrath.

"I went to check the security of the castle gates after the sacrifice, Your Grace. Men turned restless and I feared guard duty was abandoned. I was right. The problem is remedied now. I would suggest we keep them guarded all the time," Davos said calmly.

"Ah," Stannis said. "That. That will not be required. Lord Marsh! Seal the passage! The enemy won't go in or out unless he has dragon's wings."

Black brothers hurried to obey. The nightfire was burning out.

"Lord Hand," Stannis commanded in a calmer tone. "We are leaving. Make certain that all my retinue climbs on the dragon's back. Make haste!"

He never noticed that his wife's body did not burn on the stake, Dany realised. Stannis had no more use for Selyse. Her duty to him and his to her was done and Stannis had forgotten his wife's existence. Now, he was walking past his daughter, not seeing her either. The girl looked at her father with new eyes, serious eyes, and let out a very small sob. Then, her jaw tightened and she mutely followed after him, full of a decision which was entirely her own. Davos busied himself with finding the king's men in the confusion reigning over Eastwatch.

Dany realised she had very little time left. In a moment, the king's party would be gone on Drogon's back as it had arrived. He would go to Winterfell... So soon... Not leaving the widow time to mourn.

What if Lyanna doesn't know? Cold dread conquered Dany's throat and slowly transformed into a desire to burn them all...
"Drogon, wait for me," Dany commanded brusquely. The illusion that her dragon still listened to her, though he most likely did not, helped her regain the necessary calm. She walked brazenly to Bowen Marsh, dragging her legs as she saw men do, maintaining her ruse.

"A word, my lord," she said humbly. "About salted cod." She was supposed to be a steward, and the real members of the order she had the chance to meet always discussed the state of stocks and supplies. "In private if I may."

Bowen Marsh waved Ser Glendon and another black brother away.

"My lord," she said when the others could hopefully not hear, "I have noted your noble heart."

The old man was embarrassed, she could see that clearly. "I know who you are," Marsh whispered, almost panicking. "And I am grateful to… to King Rhaegar. Lady Melisandre… I mean, the red woman. She had foreseen King Rhaegar would kill us. For hurting his son. She knew it, she expected it and she would have done nothing. He had chosen not to. Your… Your brother was greater than her. Than the both of them, Stannis and her. As was… As was Lord Snow. I just didn't see it until it was too late. The wise men and the maesters say it is often so in life… But I can't help you further. It is beyond my power."

Marsh frowned and his whisper turned even less audible than before. "Your brother… He killed himself, I heard. No, I overheard. I shouldn't have been listening. They took your dragon. Be happy that you are alive. She… she will burn us all if she sees I am helping you. Please forgive me."

"What I am asking of you is a very small thing, my lord, and you will grant it if you value your life so dearly," Dany said calmly, sensing her opportunity. "What if the dragon they took is only pretending to obey this king and this woman? What if this dragon is and has always been mine, not my brother's?"

Drogon, larger than some of the towers of Eastwatch, breathed out a copious jet of orange and yellow fire, as though he wished to underline Dany's words. Or maybe he did it in protest because a bunch of frightened knights tried to climb on his back.

Marsh was mortally afraid now and about to wet his breeches, in fear he would burn either way, as he well should for heading the conspiracy against Jon. Dany found it easy to continue bluffing.

"Remove your men from the stables and keep them elsewhere until the king has flown away," Dany demanded in her queenly tone. "Send them to catch mammoths if you like."

"Done and done," Marsh surprised her with a semblance of bravery.

Dany squatted and undid the old man's swordbelt, cinching it on herself. The moderately sized sword hung to the ground from Dany's hip. "You'll find another one, my lord," she said, enjoying the man's shock from being disarmed by a lady, "I have haste to depart, just like this Baratheon pretender."

She stepped aside and waited, gave Marsh a minute, saw him talk to his men.

The stable door was unguarded when she finally reached it, and bolted on the outside. Dany opened it silently like a thief and squeezed herself in, doing her best to ignore the smell.

"My princess," Ser Barristan welcomed her, falling to one knee.

"They claim Rhaegar is dead and that Jon is a wight," Daenerys said angrily, still refusing to believe any of it. If she rejected the knowledge hard enough, maybe the truth of it would go away. "They are either lying or they don't know better in their pretence. They also mean to wed Lady Lyanna to
Stannis against her will. And they have…” she swallowed hard. "They have Drogon."

"Ser Barristan, you and I are going with them to Winterfell. My brother is not here and neither is his son. They are…” Dany searched for a word that felt true. "They are delayed beyond the Wall. The Unslayed are bewitched and Ben has fled. It's only the two of us now who can help Lady Lyanna on time."

"Two of us, just like in the beginning," Ser Barristan said wistfully.

Dany smiled from ear to ear. "I am sorry for never leaving you in peace as you would deserve for your long service," she murmured to the old man. "The time for just rewards will never come, it seems."

"You have given me the best reward I could hope for," Ser Barristan said very seriously. "I am a knight. I shall die a knight by your side if needs be," he paused. "But how are we to reach Her Grace on time without a dragon?"

"Who said anything about going dragonless?" Dany asked back, still smiling. She handed to Ser Barristan the sword she took from Bowen Marsh. "Will this do? It was the best I could find fast." Daenerys was not skilled in using any blade. Jon once mentioned to her the wisdom of sticking them with the pointy end, but Dany had yet to master this simple method.

"It's not the weapon I would choose," Ser Barristan said, making two sweeping strokes in the air. "But it has some power. And it's sharper than the stick I used when I found you, my princess."

"Cotter, Grenn, Pyp," Dany implored next. "If and when you retake the castle in Lord Snow's name, do not kill a soul unless you truly, truly have to."

They looked at her as if they didn't understand the new need to safeguard all life, but they still nodded their approval.

_Damn winter._

Yet for all the torment it brought, Daenerys would not exchange a single winter day for a blessed one of long summer. In summer she was only some horse queen with floppy ears across the sea. She didn't have a home, she had no family and she did not know…

_Love._

Stannis was about to take his lead place on Drogon's back when Dany and Ser Barristan approached the dragon from the back. His tail… His tail was too thick to hold onto. They could not attach themselves safely to the middle of it as Dany had done with Rhaegal in Hardhome. And they would be too visible and hit by the wind at the end.

Reading Dany's mind, or maybe just trying to take off, the dragon stomped his right foot to the ground. Five men could sit comfortably on the surface stretching from the base of his leg to the tips of his long claws. Dany dragged Ser Barristan forward, under the dragon's belly.

"Swift now," she said. "He's about to fly."

She gestured to Ser Barristan to sit closer to the leg. For her, the foot would be enough. She was born for this and she would not fall.

_and if I did, you'd catch me. Wouldn't you, Drogon?_
They ended up well hidden under the dragon's body, less vulnerable than on the tail to both the cruelty of nature and that of men. Dany hugged the clawed foot with much love. It wasn't perfect, but it would do. She realised how fortunate they had been for not being seen approaching the dragon.

_Drogon, did you help to hide us from them? Are you confusing the red woman's mind?_

No answer came.

"I wish I could offer you a more hospitable place for your first dragon ride," Dany told Ser Barristan, who imitated her example and embraced Drogon's scaly leg.

"This will have to do for the time being. Drogon will not drop us, nor let us come to harm," she affirmed, more to convince herself than her companion. She hoped her dragon wouldn't change skin like a lizard during the upcoming journey and shed them off. In truth, Dany did not know what an enslaved dragon could be made to do… A captured dragon… or a madly jealous one they were about to use as transport to Winterfell.

"Winterfell is far. Won't he… have needs? the first knight of her Kingsguard peeked suspiciously up, under the dragon's tail, as though Drogon was a horse about to pollute the pristine snow with a heap of dung.

"He won't," Dany reassured him, laughing at his valid concern. "The dragons… the dragons have different habits than men or horses. Or mammoths…" she laughed. "They stink of sulphur for a reason. If he eats, he mostly belches and spits out as smoke and flame whatever he can't stomach. He is fire and fire is in him. Even his blood is more like fire than anything else. _That is the true meaning behind my house words, fire and blood, and not its conquering spirit as I used to believe. I know this now._"

Ser Barristan was awed. "I am sorry… I always presumed…"

"I know," Dany said calmly. "I am presuming a lot even now. No one knows everything about dragons. But I am learning."

She hoped she was not lying when she told Marsh that Drogon was only pretending to serve Stannis. Because whenever she was allowed a glimpse into her dragon's soul, she only saw a barely subdued fear from his new master, or rather, mistress. Stannis was a dragonlord only in name. Though the red woman did seem to need the bald king to exert her power over the dragon. _For now._ There was no doubt in Dany's heart that Melisandre coveted the dragon only for herself. Everyone wanted the fire made flesh, and sorcerers most of all.

Drogon was a captive for now, but both Stannis and Melisandre might very well be the fresh corpses of tomorrow. No one was safe in winter. And unlike Jon and Dany, they hadn't yet ventured beyond the Wall, nor faced the Night's King in the field.

Enslaved or jealous, dragons were hard to kill and they lived longer than men. Drogon remained dangerous. His new masters would learn it some day.

Dany thought that her dragon might have wholeheartedly approved of her thoughts, when he violently trashed his tail left and right before finding the sky where he belonged. Under the clouds, all people were equal. There were no masters and no slaves.

_I am here_, she thought as her mind expanded from flying. _The blood of the dragon does not surrender. The Usurper's brother may be ruthless in pressing his advantage, but I am still the Mad_
King's daughter.

I can be more ruthless than anyone alive.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading, and especially to readers who said something after the last chapter. Every feedback is welcome.

Next up: Davos, Mance/Aegon, Jaime, Jon
Davos II

Chapter Notes

Thank you to TopShelfCrazy for proof reading this gloomy text )) And to DrHolland for all the help so far and for moral support.

Thank you for reading ))

There are two songs that sort of go with this chapter for obscure reasons, with the beginning the Bird of Prey by the Doors, and with the very end, The Winner Takes it All.

Warning for violence against women.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Davos

From the spiked back of the huge black dragon, the world looked insignificant and small.

With widespread wings, the beast resembled strongly the towers of Dragonstone. The stone dragons... Shaped by the refugees of Old Valyria, the first Targaryens and their masons, bearing the likeness of their flame breathing creatures. Their black flying cousin was larger than any of them. In time, it might rival in size the great drum tower of the Storm's End.

The dragon had no need of the Lord of Light to set the world aflame; no need of R'hllor to birth a shadow. The monster was a shadow; dark-winged and malicious. It would bring the storm to the Seven Kingdoms - they would either burn or kneel to its rider ...

Stannis, First of His Name.

Yet to Davos every black scale felt like a board of the deck of the vanished Black Betha under his fingers, about to burst into the green flames of wildfire, devouring King Stannis and all his retinue in thundering defeat.

Can we sink in the sky?

To the Onion Knight's great relief, Winterfell came swiftly into view; an orderly mass of grey, ancient stone, adorning the edge of the wolfswood, larger than Storm's End. Is it older as well? Davos did not know.

The castle would kneel to the dragon, if not to him, Stannis was certain. The Starks had done it before. Be that as it may, the sharp, breath-taking descent from the clouds felt like a blessing to his Hand. He relished the feeling of firm land under his feet, and that of his eldest living son, Devan, who again accompanied the king as his squire.

Davos was sick with worry over Devan since the first flight with the dragon they were forced to take, from Castle Black to the Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. His sweet boy had returned from Nightfort at Stannis' command and was put back into the harm's way. The time for study in peace with Princess Shireen was over.
Stannis dismounted slowly to keep his dignity, dressing himself to stand straight and proud after a bumpy ride. The winter sky had felt as a hollowed road ravished by the autumn rains to everyone riding the dragon. As soon as the king approached the castle, the portcullis went up and the drawbridge down. The great gate of the Starks opened wide for him, without any need to knock.

They arrived at dusk, but before nighttime. Here, south of the Wall, daylight lingered longer in the world.

A bronze-armoured army with glassy eyes welcomed the King on the inside; the Unsullied were the only force able to stand still half-naked in winter. Next to them swerved quite a few Northmen who had helped Stannis conquer Winterfell from the Boltons; Glovers, Umbers, Dustin men, some others Davos could not place immediately. The king's banner with the fiery heart slowly rose over the battlements, replacing the direwolf of Stark and the three-headed red dragon of the dead Rhaegar Targaryen. His widow did not fly the dragon next, but rather slightly under her own banner. Also, Davos wondered why their northern allies only changed the banners now, having sent a raven with the news and their vows of fealty a sennight ago.

For the second time since Robert died, destiny clearly favoured Stannis. My maker. Davos should rejoice as his Hand, but he could not.

It wasn't right, what we did. It wasn't right...

Davos remembered everything. First there was the young, dead Renly, offering a peach to Stannis instead of drawing a weapon as the king had initially believed. Then, there was the little boat Davos, the smuggler, rowed to Storm's End, transporting a red woman and a black shadow.

Edric Storm would have been next if Davos had not found the strength to send him away. Then, good men were burned, feeding the nightfires, either for offending Stannis with their counsel, or for the crime of not believing in the Lord of Light. Davos suspected Stannis took part in that latter crime just as well. His king regularly kept silent about believing or not in any deity. Then it was the turn of Genna Lannister; a lady, mistaken for a lion.

Now, the smuggler's simple soul burned for his own role in sacrificing Selyse. He had never thought… he had never thought Stannis would proceed immediately, he who respected the law to the last letter… The king… he should have laboured for those hundred days…

That would have been just.

But, just like on that first occasion with Renly, Stannis changed, if only so slightly, when success seemed at hand, wishing to grab it faster. He was now having a quiet word with the leader of the Northmen. Davos joined the talk at the end, hearing how Stannis promised Winterfell and the Wardenship of the North to this lord, for his loyal services in securing his bride to be. Stannis proudly presented young Lord Glover to Davos, despite that the king himself was not that much older. Done talking with the nobles very fast, as was his wont, His Grace insisted in giving his hand to his only daughter. Together, Stannis and Shireen were the first to enter Winterfell. Davos followed. Melisandre trailed behind him, far too inconspicuous for the Hand's liking, feigning humility. She is up to something, she must be. The king's party turned right and right again through many courtyards, with smoking pools polluting some of them.

Davos glanced at Shireen as they walked. After her mother's demise and her father's order to take off, Shireen had found a place for herself on dragon's back, away from both Davos and Stannis. Dry-eyed, she had been studying her father, his red woman and their new beast during the flight more attentively than ever. The look she wore now inspired fear.
She has become a woman today and not on the day when she bled.

What is done, is done. Davos’ last sin against the gods gave Shireen a chance for the future. And if seven hells were not overtaken by the Lord of Light and his followers by the time of his death, the Seven would decide what was to be done with the former smuggler in afterlife.

Mother have mercy on me.

Not on me, on my son. Do not make Devan pay for my transgressions.

Waving as a giant serpent through the grey castle, the king’s party reached a door of a walled precinct. Behind it, there was no great hall as Davos expected, but a grove of wild, tall trees.

The godswood, that's how they call it. There were some in the south; neglected, empty. Here, the quietness of nature felt thick and stifling. The leaves breathed out a sharp, cold smell, of winter and frozen corpses. Davos decided he would not be surprised if the trees talked all of a sudden. He remembered another forest, of sentinel and ironwood and pine beyond the Wall. This little grove was its younger, lesser sibling. Unknown dread took his heart; sharp, burdening, cutting through the layers of wool and mail he wore. He was cold beyond measure and he would never become warmer.

We have no business in Winterfell, nor with Rhaegar's widow. Plenty of other highborn women could give Stannis a son. We should go somewhere else. Go south, lay a claim to King's Landing. Then back to the Wall. To fight the darkness unstoppable...

Yet from his long years with Stannis, Davos learned very well how to recognise the moment when it was useless to speak. The king's jaw burst with determination, and Davos knew he would marry Rhaegar's widow and bed her at all costs, before witnesses, if necessary, in order to fortify his claim from all sides. No one would be able to say that his second marriage was invalid.

Maybe the widow will see the wisdom in it... We have the dragon now. Stannis will be dutiful and gentle if she does not resist. What else is a woman to do, with her husband and son dead?

Davos shivered profusely, holding onto his cloak. He occasionally remembered young Jon with regret. He looked alive to me. Yet there was always something different about him, hard to pinpoint, and impossible to deny. Davos did not think that Lady Melisandre lied when she claimed he was a wight. Rather, she didn't tell all the truth.

Or she didn't know it.

Jon Snow, a northern spirit of a special kind, Davos tried to dissipate the dread in his soul by levity. Either way, Stannis has the dragon. The biggest, the most frightening one. It did not abandon him. It did not return to Daenerys Targaryen, though she was very near. Davos drew strength from this as his balls were freezing. This castle loves us not.

Davos often wondered if the dragon had a name and what it was. Since the beast appeared on the Wall seven days ago, it answered to Stannis alone, not to Lady Melisandre. The noble animal bowed its head to the king and did everything Stannis asked from it. Stannis... Stannis was awed... Davos did not know his king when he was a boy and assumed he must have been a bit dour from birth. But now he witnessed his almost youthful admiration for the beast. Especially when no one was watching. The gods... The Seven must have allowed this. How else could it be?

The red woman cautiously stayed away, and only dared approach the dragon in king's company. Davos thought he had once captured a look of smouldering hatred for her in the dragon's dark eyes. They had changed from peacefully black to dangerously reddening. A puff of sulphuric smoke
drifted in her direction. Melisandre sprinkled the air with some powder, curtsied to the beast, and swiftly distanced herself.

The path through the godswood of Winterfell ended in a clearing. A large black pool, polished like glass, lay in its middle, and a splendid white tree with the canopy of red leaves bent over it. A sad face was cut into its bark.

The dragon could not pass through the door. Airborne, the beast followed the king through the sky and hovered over the godswood. When Stannis graced the dragon with a tiny nod of approval, the animal buried its head, neck and more than half of its body deep into the water. The tail remained on the outside, stretching through the godswood. Snakelike and elongated, it slithered between the gathered people and the trees. The dragon, or what was left of it on the surface, would be unnoticeable if its black colour was not in stark contrast with the ever present snow.

The Northmen dragged Rhaegar's widow to the heart tree.

In broad grey robes showered with hair of black and a little silver, with purple eyes from crying and a grey ashen face, Lyanna Stark's dark, empty gaze was strongly marked by grief. She seemed barely present in spirit, yet her short body was upright, refusing to bend down. Here was a woman who was not going to lay down dutifully for any man against her will, Davos realised. And seeing her in person, he doubted she would grieve like this for any man who had raped her as Stannis claimed. Her hands were bound on her back and her ankles chained together. A cloth was tied firmly over her mouth.

"Your Grace, Lady Lyanna tried to run and hide in the crypts with Lady Greyjoy when faced with your arrival, instead of being honoured by your visit," the young Lord Glover explained. "She has always been willful," he added and averted his eyes, "I restrained her."

"And Lady Greyjoy?" Stannis inquired briefly.

"I am here." Lady Asha was led in front of His Grace next to a very broad elderly woman in full body armour. The hands of the two ladies were chained together. "What of my brother Theon, Your Grace?" Asha asked with the minimum of decorum, and the smallest of curtsies.

Stannis face was blank. He doesn't know, Davos realised. Theon was not a danger, nor could he be used for now to help Stannis' cause. His claim has eaten him alive. Everything else is escaping him. Maybe not everything. On the Wall, the king did not immediately proceed to killing his daughter. That scarce second when Stannis had waited, for something to happen, for someone else to speak, gave Davos hope that his maker was still in there, behind the mask of this new king made dragonrider.

"Alas", Lady Melisandre answered sweetly to the Lady Greyjoy, "He jumped from the Wall with Arya Stark in his arms. Others took them both."

Lady Greyjoy bolted, forcing the armoured woman she was chained with to follow her. They butted the unprepared guards who accompanied them with heads and shoulders, ran through the smallfolk and out of the godswood. The chains clanked as they rushed... Glover raised his arm, ready to send men after them.

"No," Stannis rejected it. "I trust that all exits from the castles are well guarded?"

The Northman nodded.

"Than we shall find them later. I must needs marry now," His Grace declared.
Lady Lyanna gave Stannis a discourteous, questioning look.

"I am freshly widowed, my lady, and you are free of your raper now. I shall not hold your impurity against you since you were clearly forced. You were promised to my late brother in the past. We should join our houses by rights. Should you not wish for it, I declare that you must. As your sovereign, I have that right."

"Your Grace," Davos wondered, trying to sound innocuous and not prying, looking for a favourable angle to approach the unsettling matter at hand. "Should the lady not be allowed to speak?"

Maybe her pleas or offences will make him change his mind.

"Not necessarily," Stannis spat. "There are no vows to be recited as with the Seven. But," he added, "as so many times, my Hand is right. I ought to show every courtesy to my lady wife to be." He freed Lyanna's mouth. She made a retching, coughing noise. The cloth had clearly been stuck deeper than necessary. Maybe her gaolers feared her words.

Yet contrary to Davos' hopes and expectations Lady Lyanna had nothing to say. Her dark grey eyes looked cold and dead.

"The nightfire in Eastwatch has shown clearly that her ladyship would murder His Grace if she was not properly… restrained for the bedding," Lady Melisandre announced very quietly to all present, nobles and the smallfolk alike, even to the mute, semi-naked Unsullied. She handed Stannis a cloak, suspiciously black and devoid of the Baratheon gold. "Covering the lady with his cloak and bedding her in front of her gods and her people will do. Once with child, she will be more docile. She shall not put her son in jeopardy. She has done this before."

Shireen's hand trembled on her father's arm. After fixating on Stannis' decisive gaze, she decided against speaking. Davos swallowed, desperate.

The Northmen pulled their captive lady closer to the white tree. One asked who was bringing this woman and why, the other answered. It was an odd rite, unfamiliar to Davos.

Traitors, the blood-coloured, sad mouth of the tree whispered to them slowly.

Davos cleared his throat and dug deep into his ears with his fingers. He had clearly begun hearing voices. I am weary and suffering for my sins… that's what this is. What else could it be?

Stannis left his daughter and cloaked his corpse-like, tied and chained wife. Lady Lyanna, tiny of stature, was dwarfed by the black velvet; a dead woman, a shade of a woman. Lady Melisandre seized heaps of black dust from the bottom of her scarlet robes. Poised, eerily beautiful, she set the snow on fire and smiled wickedly… The trees… backed from it, not liking it, defeated. The dragon's head was still immersed in the black lake, undisturbed. Stannis and the Lady Lyanna were proclaimed joined forever and blessed by the Lord of Light.

"Lay her down", Stannis commanded the Northmen. "Do not harm her, just hold her firmly in place. Bare her lady's parts. The lower half will do. I have no need of touching her breasts."

Lady Lyanna had one thing to say to that, not to Stannis, but to her gods.

"I am a Stark in Winterfell," she said in a dead voice. "There must always be a Stark in Winterfell, but this is only a useless saying, isn't it?" She gave a small, dry, bitter laugh to her tree. "What is a Stark to do against sorcery and treason, without an army?"

The Northmen took hold of her to obey Stannis' orders. The lady turned back to silence. She resisted
the men every step of the way, as they strove to lay her down on some furs and cloaks they had shed from their own broad shoulders and spared for the occasion.

Stannis unlaced his breeches and smallclothes, freeing himself. Evenly, he began stroking his manhood, readying his member for the performance of his duty. Davos remembered the warmth of his own wife, Marya, and the natural, blossoming course of desire and tenderness in his veins. When was it? Years ago? Had it ever happened? Was it like this for Stannis every time with Selyse? Did his dead, long-eared wife lay flat as a corpse of her own will, being educated to do so as a proper lady? It was not unimaginable.

Shireen cantered slowly to Davos' side. The princess did not lean on him for support, but her own jaw was now as tight as if it was going to jump out of her face. Stannis… Stannis glanced at the Lady Melisandre, very briefly, very coldly. Yet it was so unlike him to do so at all. Both Davos and Shireen caught him at it. Knowing Stannis better than anyone, they thinned their lips in unison.

_Her? Stannis, by the gods! Was she the only passion of the flesh you have ever known?_

Melisandre smoothed her dress and tilted her head, with the most elegant hint at courtly seduction. Shireen grabbed Davos' hand, buried her nails in it.

The godswood suddenly rang with the sound of steel and disquieting voices.

"He's gone!" An Unsullied voice screamed.

"Get him you gelded cripples!" A deep northern voice answered. "We have the boy."

Stannis' manhood hung limp from the commotion. His efforts stopped, but he never bothered to cover or lace himself. Davos wondered when propriety became a waste of time.

A new mutineer was being dragged before His Grace, slender and weak. Davos pitied him. Stannis was nothing but thorough and he hated being interrupted.

To Davos great shock, the newcomer was no boy. _Daenerys Targaryen. She is here. How? She hadn't been on the dragon's back. Does she have another dragon that we don't know of?_

"The old knight came with her, but he ran and abandoned her," a eunuch informed. "Ser Barristan."

"Isn't she truly the Mad King's daughter? She can't even choose a loyal guard," Stannis announced with mockery. To Daenerys he said, "I shall find the traitor Kingsguard for you as soon as I have consummated my marriage."

"I thank you for your concern, cousin," the princess answered with indifference. "That shall not be necessary."

Stannis eyed Rhaegar's sister with searching curiosity, and then his widow, the bride of his choosing, before addressing the red woman. "Why not marry Princess Daenerys?" he asked. "She is younger. She could give me many sons."

"She is barren, Your Grace, or worse," Melisandre hastened to answer. "She may only be able to quicken with an abomination of nature, and give birth to a dragon babe with scales and claws. She is not worthy of your seed."

"Is this true?" Lady Lyanna asked of Daenerys all of a sudden, from her lying prison on the godswood's floor.
"Yes," Daenerys said softly and searched for something, a reproach, maybe, in Lyanna's eyes. "I think so."

"It matters not to me, good-sister... Good-daughter." Lady Lyanna said quietly.

The violet eyes of the Targaryen princess widened. "I thank you for it," she said, humbled. With utmost consideration, she made a question of her own. "Is it true? About Rhaegar?"

"I was there," Lyanna said with emotion, "this time I said goodbye."

Daenerys' face darkened, in stark contrast with the continuously gentle tone of her voice. "Then I swear to you on my brother's dead bones that this crime against you shall not go unpunished."

"Dragon," Stannis commanded brusquely. "Restrain the princess."

"You call him dragon?" Daenerys asked innocently and laughed at the king.

The black head of the beast rose from the pool on a neck higher than the trees in the godswood. The maw opened wide and engulfed the Targaryen princess in an instant. Stannis opened his own mouth, but he would be too late. The dragon was about to eat Daenerys before his rider could utter another command. Yet, when the maw closed, it only did so by half. The princess ended up stuck between the dragon's large black teeth, immobile and imprisoned, but otherwise unharmed. She could neither move, nor run away.

The dragon is listening to Stannis. Thank the gods. Maybe not everything is lost.

The monster had to pull its winged body into the air to perform the complex manoeuvre. Now it pivoted and slowly lowered itself back into the pool, tail first. This time the dragon kept only his head out, on the other side of the lake from the heart tree, with Daenerys lodged firmly, but safely between its teeth.

How deep is this lake? Davos wondered. What is there under its bottom?

"No more talking," Stannis said dryly and waited, gesturing at the princess. The dragon's mouth filled with black smoke. Daenerys' eyes closed. Her face appeared peaceful and perfect. Davos wondered if she only slept or lost consciousness.

Lyanna was pushed firmly down by four men. Her face constricted briefly before losing all expression; ashen, dead. The people of the castle all looked on. Every soul seemed to have come either to the godswood or to the battlements above, staring with expectation.

Davos felt selfishly glad for not having a daughter. Sons could die. Daughters... daughters could be made to suffer worse.

Suddenly, he thought that the ground shook under his feet. "Your Grace", he asked on an instinct, "did you sense this?"

Stannis gave no answer, preparing himself for the business at hand.

A lonely drum boomed. Deep, deep under the black lake. Davos felt compelled to look into the dragon's eye, for the beast surely knew what was under. Yet when he did that, the quaint sound was gone, leaving only silence in its wake. The grove of the old gods fell terribly quiet, as if all the people had stopped breathing.

I am imagining this, Davos thought. Or maybe I heard the pounding of the dragon's heart. Maybe the beast has the memories of poor Rhaegar Targaryen and is suffering for his widow, despite obeying its new rider.
"Lord Hand", Shireen asked nervously, careful to keep her voice down. "Will this be done to me when father decides I should marry?"

"Mostly it happens in a bedchamber, only between man and wife," Davos reminded her.

"But if I did not want to... do my duty?"

"I don't know," Davos said honestly. "It would depend on your lord husband."

Shireen bit her lip and shut up.

A drum sounded again. A flute whistled, high-pitched. Music. Subterranean. Doom. *Doomed, we are doomed, we must be.* Doom. Davos looked around. Stannis did not hear it. No one did. The faces of the onlookers were blank, staring either at the king or at his unwilling wife, with the same tremor and anticipation they would show had they witnessed an execution. Was Davos the only one hearing this?

Doom, the drum boomed eerily, deep, deep under the black lake.

When Lyanna's female parts were bare and Stannis ready, Shireen fainted. Davos scooped his princess in his arms and fought a rising bile in his throat. What was he to do?

Doom.

*Doomed.*

Stannis approached Rhaegar's widow and lifted all her skirts higher up, revealing not only her lady's place and the weak whiteness of her bare thighs, but also the lower part of the belly. Four Northmen still had to hold the lady down for Stannis, one at each limb. She never stopped struggling against them, in an act of useless rebellion.


"The spring will come again after the Long Night!"

"It's not this winter that we'll all die!"

"She's the only one! The lady is!"

Stannis could waste as much seed as he wanted and marry her a hundred times, but Lady Lyanna Stark would still not carry his heir, not now, and not in many months to come. Under the many layers of her skirts, the widow of Rhaegar Targaryen was already indisputably with child.

Stannis turned to Melisandre with wrath. His manhood jutted forward, red and angry. "Can you cleanse her from the bastard? Now!"

"Your Grace, I-"

"-I said now, woman, or you will know me as you never have before!"

"I might," the red woman whispered fearfully, and it was so unlike her to be afraid, Davos thought, not understanding. "But the method is dangerous, Your Grace, we should-"

"-Do it! Now! Should you fail, I swear that I shall feed you to my dragon. I took Lady Stark for wife following your counsel. I cannot kill her now for no reason at all, in order to marry another. That
wouldn't be just. A king has a duty to procure a male heir if he can. If not, Shireen…" Stannis stared at his daughter's limp body in Davos' arms. He tugged on his beard, reproachful. "I see. I trusted she was old enough to witness this, as was her duty. Apparently she is still a child."

Melisandre's eyes flickered, uncertain, begging Davos for help against what Stannis asked of her this time.

"Like Rhaenys," Lyanna's whisper was almost a cry of despair. "Just like Rhaenys."

"You are wrong, my lady," Stannis offered to explain. "I shall always see to it that justice is observed. I shall not have you killed because a madman put a bastard in your belly. Merely cleanse you. Women have frequently done so in the realm and none was brought before the law for it to my knowledge. With Princess Rhaenys, Lord Tywin Lannister and my late brother Robert thwarted the laws of the realm. Lord Tywin commanded and my brother did not censure the murder of Prince Rhaegar's lawful, born children. And neither made sure that Princess Elia lived."

Rhaegar's widow hid her face and began to whimper. Her body turned limp. The four Northmen released their hold on her crying figure. Lyanna curled up as an unborn babe and hugged her swollen belly. The threat to her child finally broke her Stark pride, where none of the humiliations to her person could have done the same.

The leaves of the weirwood rustled, the lips of the heart tree murmured. Davos was empty, unable to understand. Why are you looking at me now? He thought of Melisandre's red, imploring stare. He saw no help against this. He no longer recognised his king. Was I wrong to support him from the beginning? Did he turn mad in the siege of Storm's End he endured? Was it from hunger? Was I guilty of not bringing more food, and not only onions?

The red woman bowed her pretty head with obedience and began chanting in her best ululating voice. She touched the white bark of the heart tree with tremulous hand. The ruby on her throat pulsed and grew bigger. The necklace on which the jewel hung tightened around her neck, threatening to choke her. With effort, she broke a tiny branch with three red leaves off the tree…


Cold wind blew through the godswood, come from nowhere, sweeping the snow, lifting the snow into gusts of fine, white dust that sprinkled the gathered audience.

"Don't you hear it? Don't you see? We should leave," Davos said, possessed of a galloping certainty. "This has all been a mistake."

Melisandre squashed the red leaves of the tree between her fingers and mixed them with the snow, brewing a drink, of sorts.

Shireen stirred to consciousness in Davos' arms. "Has he done it yet?" she asked timidly.

"No," Davos whispered, attentive to his hearing, listening to the inferno of music under the ground below his feet. "Nor do I think that he will. We have woken something. I do not know what it is. An old curse, maybe. This place is ancient. It loves us not."

Shireen stood up and straightened her skirts, facing the latest ignominy Stannis was about to commit with newfound dignity.

Lady Melisandre held a vial of red liquid. With shaky step, she approached Lady Lyanna.
The second passage of the wind was a whistling gale, ravaging the grove. The red hair of the priestess of R'hllor became a crimson tangle. She was nearly blown off her feet. Her advance faltered.

Whatever they had woken was nearing.

Curses erupted from the doorway leading to the godswood. The smallfolk shrieked and gasped. Those close to the exit broke into a run in all directions. Some climbed the walls of the precinct, wishing to leave faster.

The Unsullied wavered, stepped aside, opened the passage to the heart tree, acting against all their military training and discipline they were famous for. Fear conquered all except Stannis. The man knew no fear. He would never surrender.

Doom, the drum boomed. Deep, deep under the lake.

From the heart of Winterfell, a grey company of stone men came marching forward and poured into the godswood. Naked steel was in their arms. Some swords were rusty, but far more of them were not. Stone direwolves padded at their feet. They... They were silent, but the music was still in the deep. The song... the song of the earth.

Ahead walked a lonely stone man with sad eyes and a non-smiling, long, honourable face. He was unarmed. Stannis drew his magic sword with determination to fight the devilry. The Lightbringer glowed red against the snow, but the stone man was not impressed by it. He passed by the king as if he was not there. Stannis made a step to follow, but he could not. He appeared to be frozen in place. Davos tried to move his legs, but they had also turned into ice... Into stone...

Behind that first stone man walked a beautiful, gracious woman, holding under her arm the head of a handsome, curly-haired lad. Occasionally, she touched her throat with her free hand to check if it was whole. They were followed by a walking corpse of a direwolf pup with soft dead fur, that hounded their steps in a ladylike manner. They seemed to be... family.

After them, an old lord came and his handsome stone son. The son noticed the still pretty, though somewhat aged northern lady, who stood near Davos. She had neither helped her fellow Northmen restrain Lady Lyanna, nor spoke in her favour. She was frightened now. But the young stone man merely plucked another branch from the weirwood tree, much like Lady Melisandre had done. Mute and unsmilng, he offered it to the lady as a living man might give a flower, before returning to his place next to the old lord.

Another lady came next, acting differently than the rest. Her face was that of Lady Lyanna, but her demeanour was not. She was equally fierce, but less stern; free, with a demeanour not fitting for the hard, cold stone. She looked around, at her sculpted companions and their faces, and then she cried; an ashen beauty with ashen eyes, shedding ashen tears.

Many more came after them, filling the grove, all men; a long line of stone lords with their stone wolves. All moved away from them, all ran. All those that could. Stannis and Shireen, Davos and Devan could not. Neither could the four Northmen who had been holding Lady Lyanna down.

*Mother above. Have mercy on my son.*

Stannis was rigid, waiting. Shireen did not faint again to her credit. Melisandre, still mobile, tried to climb to the heart tree, but the branches threw her down. The vial with red liquid fell from her hands and broke, bleeding slowly into the dark lake.
The leader of the stone army issued a keening sound at the sight of Lady Lyanna and her state of undress. The old lord and his handsome son immediately rushed away, obeying an unspoken command. Soon, they returned with a block. The son handed his longsword with it, menacing and sharp.

"A good blade," Stannis said, unafraid, waiting for the mummer's masks to fall down, for a revelation of the trick played, not realising that perhaps there wasn't any. "Yet I say it is a pity Ice was lost when you lost your head, Lord Stark."

This is the shade of Lord Eddard Stark... the shades of all of his ancestors, the Lords of Winterfell, Davos finally realised. "Your Grace," he counselled his king, "this is no farce. The dead deserve our respect."

One after another the heads of the four Northmen who had been holding Rhaegar's widow down, graced the snow with their life blood.

In the meantime, Lady Lyanna put her small clothes, socks and boots back on. She stood up on wobbly legs and smoothed her skirts. Unafraid of her new company, she went to her brother and hugged the cold, granite man as though he were alive.

"Ned," she said, "I am so sorry."

In a while, the brother and sister noticed the ashen, crying beauty.

"Ashara, my friend," Lyanna pleaded with her, "Ned took you North. I didn't know he'd do that. That he would carry me home. I shall send you back south to Arthur, I promise. When the ways are open again in spring... Please forgive me." Then she informed her dead ancestors, who seemed to listen, though they appeared utterly unable to speak. "I would be dead if it wasn't for the bravery of Lady Ashara and Ser Arthur Dayne. Aerys would have found me. Ned would be honour bound to free me, as Father and Brandon tried before. I would stand among you now as one of your number. Maybe there would be no Stark in Winterfell today."

The dead Starks bowed to the crying stone lady. Even the woman with the young man's head under her arm curtsied, before gently taking Eddard's arm in her own. The dead direwolf pup licked their feet. His wife. Their son. Their pet. Davos was not the only one with losses in the War of the Five Kings.

Doom. Doomed. The drum boomed. Deep, deep under the lake.

How many more are there underground? The lineage of the Starks was older than that of the Baratheons, as old as the presence of men in Westeros.

The infernal music never stopped. Now it seemed to Davos he could hear a high harp as well; a highly unusual instrument in the barbaric North. At this point, he was ready to believe in anything; that gods walked with men on earth or that the world would fall apart in an instant. Had someone told him he was Azor Ahai come again he would have believed it.

Was this how it was with Stannis? One small lie to follow after a small truth again and again, one after another, until only lies were left and all the truths forgotten?

He might never know. The mutual admiration of the dead Starks for the Lady Dayne was not to last, nor would the shame done to the last Stark in Winterfell be easily set aside.

Rhaegar's widow pulled a sharp black knife out of her bodice. She stood side by side with her lordly stone brother and his wife. Together, they advanced on Stannis. Lyanna eyed both his throat and his...
considerably less rampant manhood with new interest. Gelding was a common punishment for rapers in the Seven Kingdoms. For once, North was no exception to the general rule. Stannis' forehead wrinkled, his jaw shook, but he could not move out of the place, nor tuck himself into his breeches. He opened his mouth but no words came. He tried to move his sword arm, but he could not.

"Your Grace," Davos screamed, finding his voice by some miracle, if not his body. "Call the dragon, call it, call to the beast, call it please." The king's face was empty, refusing to listen. "Think of your daughter, your daughter, please."

And of my son, please, Mother above. Take me this time and spare my son.

The mention of Shireen woke Stannis from the trance to the only possibility of escape they still had left. Maybe a man still existed under the merciless stranger his claim had turned him into, rightful or not. The king managed to whistle at his new steed, which was a practiced sign between them to say he wanted to fly.

The black beast carefully emptied its maw of Daenerys Targaryen, leaving her on the godswood floor. It craned its neck and rose from the pool. With its claws, it rapidly picked and lifted on his back first Stannis, than Shireen and Devan, Melisandre, a few random Northmen and Unsullied closest to the king, and finally Davos, one of the last ones to be saved. Screeching terribly, it lifted flight. Its cry pierced the sky and the earth.

"Daenerys, take Daenerys, we need her!" Stannis bellowed to the beast, but it was too late. The dragon was already in the sky outside Winterfell. Obediently, the animal turned back. "No. Dragon, wait!" Stannis changed his mind and studied the battlefield, giving himself a moment to assess the circumstances as a true battle commander.

From the sky they saw the remaining Unsullied and all other men loyal to Stannis being chased out of the castle through the main gates; into the snow fields and wintertown. Davos noted Ser Axell Florent among them. Selyse's uncle stumbled and fell, and ran on, happy for being left alive. The army of the dead defenders never left Winterfell. Made of grey stone like its walls, they swarmed and chaotically combed the inside, banishing or, more rarely, cutting down, anyone they judged unloyal to their cause. How do they know? Davos wondered.

The gates where Stannis had victoriously entered, were now held by an unknown tall lord, the most fearsome of the stone men Davos had seen. He wore an iron crown, as did all those that followed him.

The ancient dead… The Kings of Winter, Davos remembered the histories he began reading on Dragonstone since he was made Hand and forced himself to learn his letters, in order to serve his king well.

The foremost King of Winter looked bloodthirsty and evil. He raised high into the air the most powerful blade of Valyrian steel Davos had ever seen. It shone and rippled in all shades of grey, dark green and silver; the colours of old ice and the terrifying woods of the north. It would have dwarfed Stannis' flaming blade had they ever been crossed. Ice, Davos realised. The ancestral blade of the Starks. It hasn't been lost, or if it has, it has been found. And that was not all, not by far. Without the lavish beard that fell to his chest over his stone likeness, and with a few years less on his chiselled features, this king of old would have had the long face Davos knew well from his stay beyond the Wall.

The face of the Lord Commander Jon Snow.

What have we woken up and brought to the world by our insolence?
Stannis decided he had seen enough. "This is abomination," he thundered.

It was rather easy to pass such judgement from above, Davos found. Matters had been far less clear down in the godswood, before Davos remembered they had a dragon. He did not think anyone would dare offend the dead Starks to their faces. Not even Stannis Baratheon.

"Burn them! Burn them all!" Stannis yelled madly. A drop of dragonblood he inherited was clearly thicker than water. "Don't leave a single stone of this castle standing! Melt it like the towers of Harrenhal. Let Winterfell be remembered as the new Field of Fire!"

The dragon's body vibrated and hummed; every muscle in its broad body tensed. The monster was preparing itself to unleash its fury onto the castle that had offended its new rider. The sky caught fire, not green, never green, but red, and orange and yellow.

But when the raging red cloud came his way, the unknown King of Winter lifted Ice and stopped it, sipped the fire, drank it. Dragonsbreath became entirely absorbed by the Valyrian steel. Tamed, quenched, put out, a few remaining flames flickered, hardened into crystals and fell down like snow.

The twin of Jon Snow bared his teeth to the dragon and his rider in the sky, laughed hoarsely and spoke in a deep, deep voice. Deep as the time and the hollow ground under the lake. Thousands of years old.

"We were never conquered by you for a reason as you well know," he rumbled with a hint of amusement. "We have an arrangement, Southron. Honour it, or die."

Stannis did not speak, seething. Davos wondered what arrangement the stone king had in mind and if anyone alive knew what it was.

A row of archers lined up on the walls of Winterfell, all living men loyal to the Starks. "Aim for the eye when I give the sign," the stone king commanded them. "And aim true."

"No!" Daenerys Targaryen suddenly came running to the gates, asking for mercy for her treasonous beast. "You cannot kill the dragon because of his rider! Another like him shall never hatch. He carries the memories of his entire race!" The Targaryen princess stopped in place when she saw the stone king, face on. "Jon?" she asked carefully. "Is this you?"

"I am Jon Stark," the stone king replied. "Do I know you?" the shade inquired politely. His voice grated less. "I do not think so. I would surely recall…"

The King of Winter scratched his stone beard with the slightest of hesitations before returning his attention to Stannis. "What shall it be, Southron? Have you made up your mind?" he provoked Stannis further. "Or is it that you do not have any honour?"

Stannis screamed to the dragon to take them to Deepwood Motte, the seat of the now probably extinct House Glover. He tugged at the animal's scales with helpless anger, as if the beast had been guilty of his new defeat. The dragon unfolded its wings in obedience, docile as a tame lizard.

A volley of arrows soared after them. Released too late, they missed their target. The dragon's wings flapped and were soon out of reach.

A siege of thoughts assaulted Davos' mind, wishing to overthrow it. They know how to fight the darkness unescapable... They did it in the past. The Long Night has come and gone before. We should make peace. If the world goes to ruin, it won't matter who won the Iron Throne and who lost it. We cannot just take the dragon and play at who is stronger.
Davos sighed. Stannis would never make peace now. Not when Winterfell humiliated him.

_Mother, have mercy on him. For the good there still may be inside him_, Davos prayed, embracing his son with one arm, and Shireen with the other. They had ended up pressed together between the two spikes further down the dragon's black back, far from the seat for the rider where Stannis was perched all alone. Davos Seaworth stopped believing in the justness of his maker. Yet he could not leave him to his fate. As his Hand, no, as his only friend, Davos had to find the way to make peace.

He prayed to the Crone for wisdom and to the Warrior for strength.

His task… his task was daunting after what had just transpired between the two sides, but perhaps more necessary than ever.

Lyanna Stark was the last image Davos took with him from Winterfell, before he was carried high above the clouds. Rhaegar's widow had climbed on the top of the tall inner walls of her castle and followed the dragon's flight with haunted eyes; stern as her stone forefathers, a widow and a mother - an effigy of honour, dignity and grief.

Chapter End Notes

Next two chapters will be far less dramatic, but hopefully not boring. I swapped Jaime and Jon from my initial plans, so that Jon goes first after Mance/Aegon.

Next up: Mance/Aegon, Jon, Jaime, Sandor

Any feedback is welcome.
Mance

Victory tasted like ashes, like defeat.

It was a common taste beyond the Wall. Loss was everywhere; no one stopped to mourn those lost.

Mance Rayder stared at the two dragons, senselessly killing each other in the clear morning sky - until the black one screamed madly, coiled his tail and flew East, following the Wall on its southern side. He left a long trail of fire in his wake; a black comet, burning red. The green dragon landed on the westernmost edge of the Wall and... yawned, waiting. A cloud of orange flames drifted lazily around his horned head as an odd crown.

The kneelers have a new king.

Mance sank deeper into the black pit of his grim mood. The green dragon must be Jon's now.

There can't be gods, he thought, more assured of this than in his usual condition of permanent doubt regarding their existence. Why else would the dragons fight and be mad at each other just because a son riding one of them had been forced to do for his father? Why else would he, Mance the wildling, miraculously find the lost king and a dragonlord in the south and help him rise and climb on his throne, only to see him slain mere months later?

Mance turned around to see how Jon fared... and witnessed him collapsing into snow. Aegon was faster, standing closer, catching him before his bushy black-haired head would have hit the crust of thick ice that formed on the former battleground, from too many boots and dead feet that had trodden the snow. The sun shone bright, but not strong enough to melt it; the winter sun had teeth, and they were as sharp as the cold of the night.

"He lost consciousness," Aegon squeezed out breathlessly. As a consequence of staying Jon's fall, he
was forced to sit down suddenly on the hard surface. Losing balance under the weight of his human burden, Aegon landed on his arse as a baby learning how to walk. *As my son is falling all the time,* Mance realised. *I might see him soon.* His hope was mingled with grief. *Rhaegar will never see Jon.*

"I can see that," Mance concurred with Aegon, running away from his own dark thoughts, turning a questioning gaze to Jon's face. The new King of Westeros was limp and pale. Jon's black eyes stared into nothingness, open and lifeless; brightly cold like ice, like the eyes of the enemy, just not blue in colour…

The battle at the Bridge of Skulls had clearly shown that anyone could turn into a white walker just from having encountered them in the past. Weeper and his men were not Mance's friends, but they were a part of his company of fighters for a while, when Mance rode south to either take the Wall or hide behind it. They had seen *every* monstrosity there was in the true North, just like he had. Maybe the white walker curse became a common sickness like greyscale in winter. The grey death, as the free folk called it, was passed on through touch.

"His heart is beating," Aegon clarified about Jon, very decisively. "When Jeyne was... when she wasn't properly alive, her heart… it never… it stood still." The young man was an expert on wights, having loved one of them, Mance would give him that.

Tired eyes of the King-beyond-the-Wall raced to Rhaegar's harp abandoned in the snow, a much finer instrument than his wooden lute. *More strings, more tones.* In spring, if he lived to see it, he might… he might try to learn the high harp. He had tried the woodharp once. It wasn't that different than the lute, just more demanding. He'd write a sad song about the war. About all the needless losses, never mourned for. About the six spearwives, skinned by the Boltons in Winterfell…

Yet if Mance Rayder and the dead spearwives had never gone to Winterfell, Lord Reed would have never spoken to him through the mouth of the heart tree. Mance would not have mistaken his voice for the voice of the absent gods and believed in it, writing a true song about Rhaegar and Lyanna, travelling to the capital of the kneelers… Help would have never come from the south to his people. Now… it did. And it had cost Rhaegar his life.

*The Ice Dragon,* Mance thought of the dead king with reverence. *A worthy end for a worthy man, yet an end nonetheless.*

His passing posed another difficulty. Rhaegar may have died twice, but most of his hastily gathered army was intact, camped in Winterfell or on the way to the Wall, to either its eastern or its western end. More would come from the southern lands. Jon needed to wake up, unite the kneelers and lead them.

Just before Mance would have succumbed to the temptation to play Rhaegar's harp and see if the sound of it would wake his son, Sandor Clegane returned from the woods with Dawn. Unexpectedly, he was pulling a carriage he must have acquired with the same speed as the one Rhaegar used to call his banners. People from the Stony Shore drove such carriages, built of bones, with good runners in place of wheels. Its previous owners could not take it over the Bridge of Skulls and would probably not need it south of the Wall. The carriage was stuffed with food provisions and well covered by large seal skins and furs on top, to keep it dry and unspoiled. *Not that any food will go rotten fast this winter.*

"You'll need a horse," Mance warned the Hound calmly, divided on the inside as to the futility of his burned companion's endeavour. "If you want to have any hope to catch up with the Others that took Sansa. I still say it is madness. She's as good as dead."

"I left my horse in Winterfell," the Hound rasped scathingly. "I shall not rob your old men, charming
women and swaddled babes of their dying plough mounts that can still walk with them over the bloody bridge."

Mance was glad to hear him speak thus, with his usual lack of respect. His losses were greater than anyone else's that day, except, maybe, Jon's. Most men would be broken by grief in his place. But Sandor's ill temper would only leave him on his deathbed, it seemed, and maybe not even then. On a positive note, this surely meant that the Hound was himself and not a disguised Other, taking his place.

"I'll find something better than a horse, I promise you," Sandor continued in the same vein. "Watch me. But first… Here, boy, take this back. It's a good blade," he said carelessly, and yet he handed Dawn back to Aegon with utmost respect for handling the wonder represented by the ancient Sword of the Morning.

Dawn had ultimately saved all three of their bony arses - Mance's, Sandor's and Aegon's- on the Bridge of Skulls after the Hound expertly began a stunning job of quartering the Other that used to be the Weeper with bare hands. He has the force of a giant now. How? Why? Mance noticed that the milk-colored blade shone immaculately clean in sunlight, as though it hadn't been recently used.

Aegon sheathed Dawn into the weirwood scabbard on his back, never losing his hold on Jon. My gift. Mance was proud of the usage it had. He had given away his own scabbard to one of the only greatswords left in Westeros that could mortally wound and murder the enemy of his people, and make them fear the wrath of man.

But now… it was clear that at least some Others were men before becoming the enemies and the opposite of humankind… just like the slain enslaved by them. How do they decide who is to be a wight and who one of them? Somehow, this knowledge changed everything for Mance.

Men killing men. Men doing for each other.

No, there can't be any gods.

"Is he alright?" The Hound cut into Mance's pointless musing, asking about Jon, feigning indifference. There was much more than mean temper to Sandor Clegane's person, the wildling had learned by now. A peculiar… care. He looked after those very few people he cared for with singular fierceness and ferociousness. Mance treasured the knowledge that he was almost one of them now.

"It's not… It wasn't my ugly mouth that sickened the boy, was it?" the Hound growled quietly.

"Don't flatter yourself," Mance retorted dryly. "And be careful how you call Jon. You outdid yourself by talking to him before, if I may say, and I understand why-"

"-Do you?" the Hound asked very murderously.

"Yes," Mance hammered at his burned friend. "You were right in your wish to spare him the butcher's work. But I wouldn't call him boy if I were you. Jon was a man before I knew him, probably since he was barely more than a boy. He can withstand the likes of you." Or me. "He passed out because of the dragons. The black one got angry. I think he talked to them and it was… too much."

"Talking," Sandor snorted, or perhaps, sniffed, appeased by Mance's words. "Just like his father. You tell me, what good does it do, talking to a monster? They would both talk to the Others, wouldn't they?"

"They might, if it could be done," Mance had to agree. Jon had tried to reason with the King-
beyond-the-Wall when they were enemies. He would have also tried to kill Mance without a second thought if Dalla did not go into labour and if Stannis did not attack at the very same moment. "They might also kill them all at need."

"Also true," the Hound chuckled. "Not that I ever thought Rhaegar had it in him to do for anyone, when we lived in the buggering septry. Look after the son, will you, singer?"

As you looked after his father?

"Did Rhaegar… did you…" Mance had seen atrocities beyond count. Yet he wished that Sandor did not have to cut Rhaegar in pieces with Valyrian steel, to make sure he stayed dead after his brief transformation into an Other, for as much as the Hound was probably able to do it. Or at least more able than anyone else in the present company.

"My brother went up in pretty crystals," the Hound rasped with sadness, gesturing at the pale blue sky. "He should be in seven heavens by now if any of the Faith nonsense is real. He certainly believed in it more than most."

"Very well," Mance said, meaning it.

"Tell that to his son when he wakes, will you? I'll be going now. I tarried here for too long."

On the contrary, the Hound was almost too fast in disposing of Rhaegar's body and finding a carriage to go north after his woman. To Mance's surprise, Sandor now dragged the bone chariot to Borroq the skinchanger and his boar.

"Take this," Sandor said, towering over the already huge wildling, handing him a black helm with red plumage…

Rhaegar's.

"I'll borrow your boar for it. I'll give you gold when I'm back if you go into the head of your little pet for as long as you can handle it without killing yourself. Help me track the Others or just force it to act a proper horse and not the damned pig."

"Should you not leave the late king's armour for… for his heir?" Aegon asked quietly, laying Jon onto a tanned mammoth skin, arranged by Morna the White Mask for his transport. Thicker than any canvas, it would do to carry Jon away by four men. No wain would go over the Bridge of Skulls, for it was far too narrow. Jon's eyes remained open, queer, unfocused.

"His heir would probably choose a snarling wolf helm if he could," Sandor said dryly, sniffing again. "Haven't you seen how he fights? And my late brother hated the plumage of his family with all his heart. He won't need it where he is going."

"You mean where he's gone? In seven heavens?" The bard in Mance was always sensitive to the power and the exact meaning of words. Those said and those… unsaid.

"That's exactly what I said," the Hound told Mance and Aegon with scorn, and set the boar to pull the bone carriage. The pig grunted from the weight and the dog went on, "You've been sitting on your ears, singer, if you heard anything else."

Borroq's glassy eyes indicated he was indeed helping the Hound. Rhaegar's obnoxious shield had interesting methods of convincing other men into following him, consisting of both encouragement and cruel mockery, hand in hand.
There's nothing wrong with my hearing, friend, Are you still looking after Rhaegar? Mance eyed the bulk of the provisions on the carriage very suspiciously. The Hound was either going to find his wife and return south soon with her, or die and become a wight or an Other as Sansa did, or... In any case, he would not need that much food. Where is the rest of the king's armour? Will you trade it to the Others, for your wife? They don't do trade, my friend.

Or are you taking your dead brother with you?

Mance doubted very much that the rest of Rhaegar's armour or his rubies turned into crystals even if the king did.

Did you do what was necessary for Rhaegar or not at all?

"This is madness," Mance repeated, meaning everything the Hound might have been doing, not giving voice to either his doubts or... his hopes. His words were predictably in vain. The giant man who called himself dog was nothing but tenacious.

"Isn't anything these days?" the Hound cut him off. "Dying would have been wise, singer. If you want wisdom, find a maester. Farewell!"

With that, the boar-pulled carriage and the giant of a man slowly disappeared into the woods.

Until next time, my friend, Mance added inwardly. "Aegon," he said aloud. There was never any time to waste beyond the Wall; the cold winds would soon begin to blow again. "Let us take Jon to the other side, over the bridge. Everyone who is still here, cross fast. We have but a few hours of daytime left. We should best be holed up inside the Shadow Tower by then. Westwatch is not well fortified and it looks unmanned from here. It is only the Wall that defends it and not the shabby outpost of the crows."

The day kept being brilliantly light, sunny as they had not seen it in weeks. Maybe they would have another hour for the manoeuvre. Maybe there were gods. No. Mance denied it. He was too old and had seen too much. There can't be any.

Could there?

"What of Jeyne and the others who went down into the Gorge?" Aegon asked timidly when they reached the other side. Mance was barely listening, focused on following the column of the free folk re-entering the realm of the kneelers. The surviving Weeper's men and the families that had grouped with him in the western mountains for protection, entered it for the first time. To Mance's relief, none of the free folk changed into a monster from stepping onto the bridge.

Aegon mentioned Jeyne again, relentless in his affection of youth.

"I'll go down and meet her and Val," Mance finally answered calmly. "They should be at the bottom now, maybe they're going up already. The path is shorter on this side of the deep."

Sigorn wanted to follow his lead, as a typical disciplined Thenn, reminding Mance of dead Styr and his calm grey-eyed cruelty.

"I'll go with you," he said.

His marriage to a kneeler lady had not softened him. To be sure, he still had both ears, unlike his father. It must have been much warmer in his lady's castle than in the god forsaken ice land the Thenns called their own. Mance found himself... envying him. Not the house, the woman. A good woman, judging by Sigorn's brooding look whenever anyone mentioned or even alluded to his lady
Mance was bewildered with this change in himself; he hadn't given women much thought since Dalla's death.

"No," he refused the Thenn's offer. "All go with Aegon and Jon, right through the Wall here at Westwatch. The gates have never been properly sealed. Leave fighting men and women to hold the place until I arrive from the Gorge with the rest of the people. Then we'll fill the passage with ice rubble behind us, as the Watch had done for years, and walk to the Shadow Tower from the other side. With some luck, the Golden Company is holding it now, and they should be loyal to Aegon."

"I wonder," Aegon said pensively. "Since I'm officially no longer a dragon, much less the black one as some of them had hoped, the captains have been restless."

"Who will lead here?" Sigorn asked, making a step forward, offering himself.

"He will," Mance pointed at Aegon. "He was taught how to command men and not how not to break his neck scaling the Wall. And if the Southerns are here, maybe, they will listen to him. They won't listen to you or me." Sigorn was not too pleased, but he was a Thenn. He obeyed.

"What if," Aegon asked quietly, expressing a worry Mance shared, "what if more of your people turn into the Others when they… when we go behind the Wall?"

"Those two who were crossing the bridge with us and with the Weeper," Mance said sadly. "I didn't know them. And I know everyone. Everyone here. Even the Weeper's men. But not those two... How long was it since Weeper had them? Who else was with them?"

A lot of asking brought forth the expected results. No one knew the men unknown to Mance, nor was anyone too much around them. Weeper had them, or they had the real Weeper and possessed his body in the past ten days since they showed up in the camp. Fortunately, Weeper had always been a mean, eye-clawing bastard, and the sensible folk kept away from him.

Unsurprisingly, Tormund had something to say, and yet, strangely, it didn't involve the size of his member. Truth be told, it was a small miracle he did not speak this far. "Har! To Westwatch, you say, Mance. The red witch, she said we all had a white walker's shadow clinging to us when we passed through the Wall in Castle Black. Mists, she'd called them. Mists, Mance! She'd spread the rumour that we who hate those mists more than the kneelers can imagine have let the white walkers into their lands! But she is a witch, Mance. She must know it. And if she is right, each and every one of us is carrying his doom! There will be no tomorrow if we go beyond the Wall. We should stay in our land and take our chances!" More voices of the free folk chattered, agreed.

"You will forgive me if I don't believe that woman," Mance replied fiercely, remembering the glamour making him look like the Lord of Bones; the pain, the unease, the shame. The price of staying alive. "She made you see that she burned me and she never did. The only true power she has is the power of deception."

Yet, somehow, through some witchcraft, Melisandre had known about Jon's real parentage. Mance had received her letter about it when he was mourning for the spearwives in the godswood of Winterfell. He would have burned it, unread, if the heart tree did not whisper to him how it was all true what the letter was saying, all that and more. He opened it, read it, listened to the tree, listened to Lord Reed, listened to his heart.

And discovered, weeks later, how there was much more to the truth, more than even Lord Reed had been able to see with his gift of the green sight... Rhaegar and Lyanna did not die...
So maybe there were gods, whose will surpassed both the greenseers and the sorcerers, revealing the truth to men as they saw fit; contemplating at the same time the entire world.

No. There are none. Or Rhaegar would live still.

Stubbornly, the King-beyond-the-Wall continued speaking from his heart - it feared the red woman's intent and strongly doubted her knowledge.

"I can say with authority that some Others have passed south of the Wall. I have seen them! For all I know, it could have been the red woman who brought them over by her fires and her sorcery. But I won't say that because I don't know what brought them. We'll have to trust each other. Having said that, open your eyes, all of you. We are used to doing for one another when we turn wights. This should be no different. Everyone should have dragonglass at hand. Man, woman or child. Have you counted the enemy in the night? We have to put the Wall between us again."

They listened. The human trail turned to the poorly closed gates of Westwatch. Mance helped carry Jon to it, and then hurried back alone, down the goat trail skirting the Wall and plunging into the Gorge.

The descent into the deep pass was swift; it came to him easier than commanding men. Mance took pleasure from his lonely hike in the sunshine when, from the bottom of the deep, he heard ladies' screams and the splashing of water. Cursing the treacherous krakens and godless wights, Mance ran into the darkness below him, forgetting the sun.

Quite unexpectedly, Euron Greyjoy was not the source of trouble. The ironwight battled a real kraken in the ford; the only point of passage over a deep long, narrow bay on the bottom of the Gorge, filled with wild sea and jagged rocks. The waves penetrated deep into the continent. Behind their breaking point, the waterway continued northeast, as a deep bed of a subterranean river.

Mance was grateful for not having an animal sigil susceptible of attacking and devouring its victims. The King-beyond-the-Wall only had a helm with raven wings; Val had saved it in honour of his memory, thinking him dead… But ravens were tame sparrows compared to dragons and direwolves, lions and krakens… Not feeling tame as a man, Mance waded into the water and drew his longsword, swathing a tentacle away, not cutting it.

Val stood in the ford as well, barely composed, unable to walk on. "I stepped on it," she said, "it looked like a rock. And then it coiled and moved as a damned snake. If the deadmen did not come…"

"Cross behind us, now!" Mance commanded her. "Get your feet out of the water! All cross!"

"What if there are more?" Val asked with unease, but then she went over the ford swiftly, avoiding to look down. Jeyne followed suit, as did others.

Mance soon discovered the kraken to be so large that it occupied the shallow crossing entirely. It had nearly caught Aegons' Jeyne's feet before Euron cut off two of his tentacles. The animal grabbed the dead human kraken as a payment, and was now squeezing him with all the remaining limbs. Or at least with very many of them.

"All cross!" Mance boomed. "Cross as you can! Behind Val! Step hard over the beast and cross!" The monster was stirred by movement, it seemed.

Mance waddled into deeper water, waved his arms and wriggled his hips like a madman, hoping that the kraken would follow him; a new, juicy prey on the run. It did, releasing Euron. The rocky bottom cracked and crunched under Mance's boots and under the mass of advancing tentacles.
Human bones and skulls of the less fortunate travellers. I am walking over them… Mance shivered. The Bridge of Skulls, we are under it. It is named for this… For the dead eaten by this kraken.

Mance battled the limbs and the strange, almost purple eyes of the sea monster, growing weary from their quiet gaze. "It's growing new tentacles," he told the kraken lord in amazement. It almost felt as if the creature was growing new eyes as well.

"It is," Euron said, not breathing from exertion, dead as usual, "it's hard to kill." He was trying to kill it nonetheless. "I swear it is as big as Nagga!"

Mance wondered who or what Nagga was. "Maybe we shouldn't kill it," Mance considered, panting, envying the wight who did not have to both fight and struggle to breathe. "Maybe there is another possibility."

The Wall had many watchers, and not all of them men, according to some tales of the giants in the Old Tongue. In some others, the most beautiful and the least truthful ones, the gods walked with men on earth in trying times. Mance had studied the lore of his lands better than anyone alive. "It may be an old guardian. How did the kneelers' words go? How is it that I could forget them? Night… Night gathers… and now… now my watch begins!"

When he said that, the first line of the vows of the Night's Watch he had sworn and betrayed more than twenty years ago, the kraken… stopped its attack, sank through the human bones and hid under the bottom of the foaming, singing sea. Mance listened. The Gorge was a giant harp, played by an invisible musician, on iron-hard strings made of water and hollow rock. Mance committed its tune to memory while the rest of the free folk and Euron's surviving wights crossed to the safe side in peace. He would make a song sounding like the sea, some day, hoping people would listen to it, and not only to the song of steel.

"I lost two of my best men before you came," Euron complained in his deep, hateful voice. "You should have told the password to the lady."

"I didn't know there was a monster, much less a password," Mance said curtly. He looked at Val. "I'm sorry. I haven't encountered it when I travelled here before."

"What does the guardian do?" Val asked. She didn't go far up, waiting for everyone to finish crossing. "Would it keep out the Others?"

"I think so," Euron answered her politely to Mance's surprise, with almost honest hesitation. "I sensed so in my… condition. But it couldn't recognise us for what we were, so it fought, I think."

It must have recognised me as a black brother when I crossed this ford in the past, Mance realised, not as a deserter I already was at the time. As if the bloody creature knew that the words of the crows were for life and omitted to take into account any contrary decision of men.

Val didn't deign to reply to the wight, and pointedly so. Her face wrinkled in disgust. She hurried forward, to the head of the column. Euron stalked her with his gaze, appearing more dead than usual. Mance felt almost sorry for him, but not quite. The iron lord's thirst for power was what brought him this low, not any enemy or injustice suffered.

The kraken guards the way down here and the bridge up there. Old magic is all around us. The bridge must have forced the Others to show us their true face when they tried to run and go south, disguised as Weeper and his men, if those two were ever men at all… Does it mean that all who crossed are safe from the curse? Mance certainly hoped so.
Sorcery is a sword without a hilt, Dalla used to repeat when Mance searched stubbornly for the Horn of Joramun. There is no safe way to grasp it.

What is magic then? he had replied. The wonder where you don't see the sorcerer who conjured it? How much more dangerous can it be?

You must go up, Mance, you must.

He trod at the end of the column with the setting sun warming his back.

The climb to the Wall was arduous, but short. Fighters among the free folk waited in a disorganised battle line for the last arrivals to Westwatch, at the open gate. The day miraculously still lasted while everyone braved the tunnel in the Wall and began their march east. Mance remembered Rhaegar again. He should have been here with us by rights.

A good man has died and yet the gods he believed in are rejoicing, sending us a long, sunny day.

At dusk, they finally reached Shadow Tower. Mance found that Aegon had been successful in taking it, or, rather, asserting his youthful authority over the various men already holding it.

"Harry Strickland has indeed arrived here with the Golden Company," Aegon informed Mance in the commander's solar, looking and sounding terribly tired. Strickland, the captain-general of the Golden Company, was a coward who preferred an easy life if he could have it.

"He's complaining about the cold and the pickled food, but he is here three days before his own estimate," Aegon said. At least old Harry was not entirely hopeless, brave or not. "He is now playing cyvasse with Ser Denys Mallister, the venerable old commander of this castle, who is keen on meeting you again, he says."

"I'd rather not," Mance declined politely, suddenly feeling as rotten as Aegon looked after only few hours in command.

Mallister was the reason Mance deserted from the Night's Watch. At the time, the very young wildling had resigned himself that he would not be able to have any girl he wanted on the Wall. Only on the sly, as everyone else. But when the commander wanted to take away his cloak, mended with red thread by a free woman who merely helped him to health, Mance snapped at the unnecessary stifling of any form of human expression and ran.

From here. From the Shadow Tower.

Before he was forbidden to sing and to talk…

Predictably, the place did not change at all in twenty years. Just like, in Mance's view, a black cloak mended with red remained black still.

Mance Rayder never looked back. He'd never had any consideration for crows and their stiff ways.

Until the day when Jon Snow walked into his tent, young and different from anyone else who took the black in Mance's time, right after killing Mance's best friend and worst enemy in the Watch, at Qhorin's own damned order and behest… Mance was certain. Qhorin Halflhand, more stubborn than I ever was. Jon and Qhorin could never fool the King-beyond-the-Wall; Jon was no deserter. He would never break any oaths, or not like Mance did. When the crows elected Jon as their Lord Commander, Mance began suffering from a far-fetched hope for peace, for a change that would benefit… everyone. He hadn't been wrong.
The King-beyond-the-Wall wore a different cloak now, a dirty white one, made of human cruelty, first by the Boltons and then by himself. He would bury it in the godswood of Winterfell when the winter was over.

"Jon?" he inquired quietly about the young man he considered his friend. He wasn't certain how Jon looked on him now.

"Sweating and talking to dragons in his sleep," Aegon gestured at the commander's solar. "I am tending to him myself. I don't trust anyone else. Not even my cousin, Ned Dayne, Lord of Starfall. But I've had worse fevers on the Rhoyne. He'll be fine, I think."

"Who nursed you?" Mance asked and realised he knew the answer. "She did, didn't she?"

"Yes," Aegon said miserably. "Jon's mother." The young man never forgot his unwilling role in a plot that had almost cost Jon's mother her life in King's Landing. *And almost brought Rhaegar back his memory.*

"Very well," Mance said, wishing to stop remembering the events around the mummers' show he had taken to the capital. It was never wise to grow attached to one's players. Or to anyone. But, just like the Hound, the wildling king was no maester. No one expected wisdom from the northern barbarians. "If you don't mind, I'll go and hide from Ser Denys now-"

"I might join you in hiding," Aegon said. "But someone else is here to see you. He couldn't stand waiting for you much longer," the young man continued wearily. "Lady Val was overjoyed to see him, and cousin Ned thrilled to get rid of him. They had to ride double since we left with the king. Harry Strickland has no love for children."

Mance's son was finally allowed to run in, from the back of Aegon's new chambers. The boy jumped into his father's arms, almost a toddler now. The King-beyond-the-Wall grinned stupidly.

"And mother?" the boy asked immediately.

"Your mother is dead, son, you know that."

"I do," the boy said, paused. "My other mother."

"She was never your mother," Mance protested.

"She was."

*Septa Tyene. Tyene from Dorne.* Blond like Dalla and yet amber-skinned like no other woman Mance had ever known.

Val gave Mance a very questioning look. "Dalla would kill you or I would, if you betrayed her. But we would not expect you to…. to…"

*What?* Mance thought bitterly. *To hold my cock in my breeches? I'd expect that from myself at this age.*

"Was there another woman? In the south?" Val sounded genuinely curious and to Mance's surprise not terribly angry.

"There wasn't," he hurried to deny it, faithful to Dalla's memory, ashamed for feeling less loyal to it now than ever before. The day had been beautiful despite its losses, and his flesh was stirring again, old or not. *Not old enough.*
"There was," his son said, "My other mother. She was proud. She rode a brown horse. Ty-ene. Name. Tyene."

Mance frowned unhappily. Why was his son able to talk before being able to walk properly?

For being your son. He might sing soon for all you know. In response, his son tugged at his lute, hung on his swordbelt. Mance hoped this didn't mean he was seeing things like Lord Reed; that would be a difficult life. Though it is better that he picks the lute rather than the sword at this age.

"What did you do? Did you murder her?" Val asked, not giving up. She knew Mance's moods well and she must have been sensing the unpleasant truth. She was a woman, but she shared some of his ruthlessness at need… and occasionally by sheer, stupid mistake.

"Let's say, Val," Mance began, "if I ever did to Dalla what I did to Tyene, I would be dead before fathering anyone."

"And that was?"

"What do you think?" he said more sharply than intended. "You've killed men for less."

I took her… roughly… as if she was an animal, not a woman. Instead of just sending her away when she kept looking at me as if I was the main course on some kneelers' feast, and not a man. The impulse to show the Dornishwoman how wrong she was about him being hers or anyone's treat in the south, the south that despised him and his kind, had been too strong.

Mance surprised himself by how fast he was done with his crime, emptying eagerly all of himself, body and blackness of the soul, inside an almost unknown woman… He was even more surprised that she… She did not want what he did, he could tell, but she was able to take it. Moreover, she had put up with him. She was angry and she could have defended herself, yet she'd let him do, let him go on as far as he wanted… for reasons which were entirely her own. He had left her crying and never forgotten her expression. She had dark hair then, but it didn't matter. She could be covered in dragon scales for all he cared.

Since then, Mance wanted to steal Tyene in full knowledge that he had missed his opportunity. She never sought him out again, as was to be expected. When she brought his son back from the Reach, she sounded as if she had done it to excuse herself for ogling him... And it was he who was indebted to her, he who had been wrong… He should have at least made a song for her, instead of only cowardly saying how sorry he was for how he treated her.

Or he could have offered to love her properly, the way he believed a woman should be loved. If she was still interested in him as… as a meal, he supposed. That was what she saw in him, some barbarian she could take joy from, if he played along. The Dornish way truly seemed to be as daring and free in demanding pleasure as that song Mance loved, together with half of the realm. The Dornishman's wife.

"I've always known you would find a new woman. You are not dead yet, Mance," Val said wisely, not pressing matters further.

"Neither are you" he retorted, finally recognising the way to turn the blade of Val's questioning back on her and away from his person. He hadn't seen his good-sister have her way with a man since the Wall took Jarl. That was before Dalla died, before their son was born. Ages of the world ago, or so it seemed now.

"Oh I know that," Val said dryly, looking through him. "And my joy might come easier if I was
"dead," she laughed scathingly.

"What do you mean?" Mance didn't understand.

"The only men interested in stealing me of late were worthless kneelers and repulsive deadmen. Not much of a choice. I must be getting old and ugly."

On the contrary, Val was more beautiful than ever. A man had to be blind not to see it. But to Mance, she was like a sister.

"Who do you fancy more in your bed, a kneeler or a deadman?" he asked with mocking curiosity.

"I'll tell you when you tell me more about. Ty-ene."

"Mother. Pretty," the boy said cleverly.

Mance had to think of a name for him. A good name. It was time to find one. His son lived long enough to learn speech. Even if he died now, he deserved a name, to be remembered by it.

"I cried in a castle," the boy stated, not ashamed of it, not yet. "Mother came and said, father is a good man. I'll take you to him. I stopped crying."

"Did she say that? She isn't your mother and she didn't really know me."

Mance nevertheless felt grateful to Tyene for protecting his unworthy image in the innocent eyes of his son.

He was back to the Wall and the Wall had to be manned in winter.

He would never see her again.

Chapter End Notes

Any feedback is welcome.

Next up: Aegon, Jon, Jaime, Sandor
Aegon

Chapter Notes

Thank you to my unique beta reader DrHolland for help and support. And to TopShelfCrazy for the swift second opinion :-))

Aegon’s POV takes place in “present” day of the story, so right after Davos’ POV ended, a week after Mance’s chapter, on the western edge of the Wall (Shadow Tower).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Aegon

Jeyne swept past him without a word.

She probably failed to notice Aegon’s existence, deeply engrossed in conversation with her new lady friend, the wildling princess as the Southrons were prone to call her. The free folk just called her Val.

"Jeyne! Wait, please!" Aegon was beyond caring if he sounded weak or stupid. Today he would talk to her. He had to know if she still loved him, before the command of the Shadow Tower drove him fully out of his mind.

Aegon was expected to resolve squabbles among groups of very different men, women and deadmen at almost every waking or sleeping hour of the day and the night. He had just spent the eighth morning since he was in charge of the castle rationing food and dodging the inevitable presence of the castle’s official commander Ser Denys Mallister.

Ser Denys had been searching for Mance Rayder for the sennight, eager to tell him in person how he had always known that the lost black sheep, or in this case, the wildling, would one day return to the Wall where he belonged.

Unfortunately, Rayder had become so proficient and skilled in hiding from Ser Denys, knowing every corner of Shadow Tower and its surroundings, that it was always Aegon who ended up listening about lost sheep, or, occasionally, a goat. Every single day.

Sometimes he wished that the raucous horns of the Night’s Watch sounded three times, for the Others attacking. At least that would put an end to the petty problems he had to deal with. Afterwards, he would hate himself for his boyish wish. Best if we are left alone. The castle was not yet ready to withstand an invasion of a dominant force. Fortunately, there was the Wall. It defends itself, Mallister whispered after concluding his eternal lamentation about Mance Rayder as the lost goat, and Aegon hoped he was right.

"Jeyne, please!"

Today, Aegon was adamant, or perhaps simply fed up and rash. He didn’t care either way. On the edge of losing his normally moderate temper, he leapt after the two women. More rapidly than when he had fought the Others on the Bridge of Skulls, he sank to his knees in front of Jeyne and hugged firmly the legs of his love, entangling her in the dark, smooth velvet of her skirts and cloak, preventing her from walking away.
"Please," he repeated like a lovesick fool, looking up into the black pools of her eyes, several shades darker than his own grey ones. Jeyne turned stiff and silent; her immobile, petrified body pleaded with Aegon mutely to let her go.

_I am so very sorry, my love,_ Aegon thought, mindless, desperate, embracing her harder. _I just need to know what I did wrong._

Contrary to his expectations when he began his journey north, it had proven easier to slay white walkers with his father's sword than to receive a straight answer to his plea of love from the woman who claimed to love him back.

Val gave Aegon an amused look, as if he was Mance's son or that other little boy she often dragged or chased around, the one they called monster. The two nameless boys woke the castle every day as a pair of roosters, yelling cheerfully in their play.

"Do you need help?" Val asked Jeyne. The warlike wildling women were known to kill men who tried to take them and who were not to their liking. Or worse, unman them. Justice for rapers was occasionally swift beyond the Wall. Aegon was past caring.

"Please," he begged, "A moment of your time, my love. If you still value my life as you used to."

Jeyne trembled, hesitated, relented. "I'll be fine," she told Val, sending her politely away. "I shall see you later."

When they were left alone in a dusty corridor, Aegon stood up and offered Jeyne his arm. The walk to his borrowed solar was short, but still long enough for Aegon to remember their entire dalliance in a single, bright flash of memory.

Back when Jeyne was not properly alive, she saved Aegon from a white walker in the woods in the riverlands where he had ventured in a useless one-man search for Daenerys, seen riding her dragon. At the time Aegon still believed himself to be Rhaegar's son and the princess' nephew. This was how Aegon and Jeyne met.

In the beginning, Aegon did not know that his lady saviour was… special. _Dead._ He began adoring her from afar, as his own mystery lady, first without seeing the pale ruin of her face and blue markings of the hanging left on her neck. Later, when Aegon discovered the truth of her condition, it only made him realise he loved her… unconditionally.

Corresponding to his love in her spirit, if not in her body, Jeyne spent all her time with Aegon. In the Red Keep, she would share his chambers, but never his bed. She sensed threats to his life and veiled over him like his best guardian.

Yet ever since she was _warm and alive and well,_ Jeyne slept elsewhere. She had never approached Aegon's bedroll on their journey North in King Rhaegar’s retinue. She avoided Aegon every evening. She very rarely spoke to him after sundown and yet often came to his proximity and stared at him with unhidden, languid yearning.

She had never told him why she acted like this. Soon she began spurning his advances entirely, allowing him only a passionate kiss every now and then, always during daytime. In those rare, precious moments, she whispered she loved him too much whenever they were done kissing.

By the time they reached Winterfell, Aegon was sick of it. He proposed to marry her in front of the heart tree… thinking the impropriety and shyness may have been the reason she shunned him. Jeyne… Jeyne refused. He could not understand why. Not then and not now. They loved each
other…

Didn’t they?

The door of the solar was open and the guards were not there. *Was it my turn to be here? Did I forget my shift? Did I leave him unprotected?* Aegon must have been so tired that he’d lost count of the schedule of guard change. He ran to his bedchamber and sighed out in relief. Jon was still asleep in a separate bed. No one had touched him or harmed him. He had been ill for a week. His fever was gone for a day now and Aegon expected him to wake at any moment.

Mance and his wildlings watched over Jon at night, allowing Aegon some moments of much needed sleep. Aegon assumed the day duty in person, with the help of the few men from the Golden Company he trusted and cousin Ned Dayne.

Aegon returned to the solar, afraid that Jeyne might have run away while he checked on his most sacred duty; guarding the new king - Rhaegar's only son and heir.

His love was waiting.

Aegon took her hands. "Thank you," he exhaled. "For coming here. For waiting now. Please, Jeyne, if you ever loved me, tell me what I’ve done. I thought… I believed we would become closer since Lady Stoneheart, I mean Lady Catelyn, died to bring you back… Not… Not fall apart and-

"-You? You did nothing." When she was upset, Jeyne always spoke as she was before Lady Stoneheart hanged her; the no-nonsense innkeep from the riverlands. She completely forgot the airs of a noble lady she’d adopted as a dead woman; tragic and unreachable. Aegon was in love with both.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Why won't you marry me? Don't lie to me that we have no time or that we should wait for the winter to end… For all we know, it shall last forever!"

In truth, Jeyne had never told him any of that. She’d never said anything. Aegon himself conjured more and more monstrous explanations in his mind with every new day.

*Do you not love me?*

"A wife has duties," Jeyne offered after a long pause, almost gently, combing her long black hair with her fingers to hide her obvious nervousness.

"As does a husband," Aegon said sternly. "I have never been with a woman. Is that it? Do you think me incapable?"

"It's not that," she blushed so profusely and lowered her eyes so prettily that Aegon felt a surge of desire to have her then and there, felt himself blushing in return; his inexperience be damned.

Just as he said, Aegon had never bedded anyone. He believed that Jeyne might have, though, and he didn't mind. *At least I confessed this to her now. He hadn’t dared before. Best if one of us knows what goes where and how.* Aegon regretted he did not remedy his condition of being innocent in the past, but he felt no desire to learn the art now, with any other woman, only to be able to impress more favourably the one he loved.

"Then what is it?" he implored.

Jeyne’s eyes instinctively wandered to the open door of the bedchamber and to… Jon.
Aegon was taught to be patient and kind, but his torment suddenly got the better of him. "What? Do you like him better? Do you want a... a king? Is it because I'm not a prince any more?"

When he was done shouting, he noticed he was grasping Jeyne by both shoulders and shaking her.

"You are hurting me!" she said, deadly cold; grim. "He *is* handsome. But that has nothing to do with us."

"What is it then?"

"I shall talk to him when he wakes," Jeyne stated with icy indifference. "He may know something of importance for me."

"Can I listen to that conversation?" Aegon asked jealously. *Am I not handsome enough?* He was told that so many times about himself that he... he believed it. He... he hated when they called him a *pretty* boy on the Rhoyne, but now he would give everything for Jeyne to see him like that. *Maybe my being handsome was a lie like everything else.*

"No," Jeyne was now adamant as a white walker eager to drink king’s blood.

"And if I do hear it by chance?"

"I'll never marry you if you do."

"And if I promise I won’t listen, will you marry me?"

"Call for me when he wakes," his love grated through her teeth, lifted her head high and left him.

*So much for the conversation.*

Aegon dragged his feet to the bedchamber and sat on his own bed. He was sick of holding Shadow Tower while waiting for the new king to wake from his illness.

The green dragon waited as well. The beast lay sprawled on the Wall like a corpse, sharing Jon’s poor condition. Its shiny, scaled green tail and bronze horns twitched in the animal's slumber. Fire erupted occasionally from the maw, defrosting the black brothers’ path that ran along the top of the Wall, turning it into soft slosh.

The dead krakens camped on the inhospitable shore south of Westwatch, constructing a ship. Being dead, they didn’t require hospitality. Some of the wildlings intended to continue South with them, to the Iron Islands, as soon as the vessel was built. All those able to fight would stay to man the Wall; men, women and wights.

*Of their own free will.*

The Others had to be opposed and stopped. That was the only goal that the different groups of people present could agree among themselves. Aegon was terribly, terribly weary from constant disputes about anything else, from the size of ice rubble to be used to permanently seal the gates in Westwatch to the benefits of pickled pork over dried cod for the maintenance of good health in winter.

Mance Rayder scurried from Westwatch to Shadow Tower at least once a day, overseeing the preparations for defence in both castles. The fact that he’d never run into Ser Denys on one of his comings and goings equalled a miracle.
Farther to the East, a thick black shadow rose high and hovered over the Wall where its main outpost should be; Castle Black. A raven came from it two days ago, asking of Ser Denys to swear fealty to King Stannis, First of His Name. Mallister instantly handed the letter to Aegon and went to play cyvasse with Harry Strickland, happy to be rid of unpleasant responsibilities in his old age. Besides, the elderly knight was now regularly winning over Harry, after only a few days’ practice.

Aegon committed the content of the letter to the memory and the damaged, wet parchment to the fire. Having heard Mance’s stories about Stannis and his red woman, in which Jon played a part, Aegon doubted that any of the two men would ever bow to the Baratheon lord, and much less call him king. Especially with the part where he offends Rhaegar's memory by saying Lyanna was forced or where he argues that Jon is an abomination of nature to justify his claim.

And I took Stannis’ impregnable castle with the elephants of the Golden Company, without him or his sorceress being the wiser. Maybe Jon will like me for it.

Aegon remembered gladly his only self-earned moment of military glory. He had tricked the defenders by mounting a haphazardly made siege tower on one side of the impenetrable fort. Then he used the elephants, and the pirate hooks and ladders from the ships hired by the Golden Company for the crossing of the narrow sea, to climb up on the opposite side. Having braved the high, smooth walls of Storm’s End, Aegon and his men caught the defenders by surprise and outnumbered them. There was no bloodshed. My old sword remained clean.

On the contrary, Aegon was forced to swallow bile whenever he remembered in any detail the sword fight on the Bridge of Skulls. He had to chop a mangled wildling corpse to be certain that it would not rise as a white walker again. He had to clean Dawn in snow after that.

The only unfortunate victim of Aegon’s short siege of Storm’s End was one of Harry’s beloved elephants. Aegon knew he was going to listen to Harry Strickland’s complaints about this tremendous loss until the end of their association, or of his or Harry’s life, whichever came first.

He had left Ser Rolly Duckfield to hold Storm’s End in his name when he marched on King’s Landing. After the mummeries which turned Aegon’s life upside down, when he stopped being the crown prince in order to become a Dornish bastard, adopted by the king, there had been no time to call Duck to the capital, in order for him to join the northern campaign of King Rhaegar. Aegon occasionally missed the brawny knight. He could use another trustworthy man to guard King Jon during the day.

On second thought, maybe he didn’t need anyone for the guard duty, not any more. Maybe him and Jeyne yelling at each other had done some good to the realm.

A pair of shrewd black eyes studied Aegon intently, wide awake and much less bright than during sickness. Jon’s eyes had remained open in the throes of his fever and he had constantly maundered about stone dragons.

"I am Aegon," Aegon presented himself, at loss for words. He had imagined this moment for seven long days, and he felt completely inadequate and unprepared for it on the eighth day when it finally arrived.

"I thought so," Jon's waking gaze focused on Aegon's silver hair before staring deep into his eyes; the new king’s deep, young voice rang with both honesty and coldness.

What will you think of me? What will you say when you learn how I almost caused your mother’s death? Do you know that already? Aegon had confided to the parchment his discovery that Septa Lemore had been poisoning him when he was hailed as king in the capital. In his absence from the
court, two scavengers in human skin used Aegon’s manuscript to condemn Septa Lemore to death. The conspiracy had failed, the conspirators were long dead, but Aegon still felt responsible.

“How was the king’s… my father’s burial?” Jon’s first concern was for Rhaegar’s final rest. “Did the Hound have to… was there a need to desecrate his body?”

"He is with the Seven," Aegon explained with piety, well-learned in childhood from his septa. Your mother, Your Grace. "The gods were merciful. At the touch of Valyrian steel, King Rhaegar rose into the air as a trail of pure crystals, his shield had said."

"You mean his dog."

"They treated each other like brothers," Aegon blurted.

"Did they?" Jon sounded very surprised.

“They lived in a septy together, I heard… I also heard they saved each other’s lives more than once. Later on, Clegane and his now lady wife read the roles of… Of your parents. Of King Rhaegar and Queen Lyanna in Mance’s mummery…”

“Mance’s mummery?” Jon removed a slightly wavy, prickly black lock of hair out of his eyes. His black mane had grown further in his sleep. The edges of it looked sharp, unlike Aegon’s soft silvery strings. Is this what Jeyne likes? The wildness of it?

“Hasn’t anyone told you?” Aegon asked with more force than he would have wanted, incredulous. Judging by Jon’s expression, it was the first time he had heard about the mummery.

“And by Clegane's wife you mean Sansa, I suppose,” Jon said dryly. “I find this so hard to believe.”

Aegon nodded, shrugged. Love came when least expected. There was nothing much to say or do about it. Aegon knew this very well. Better than most.

“Others take me!” Jon cursed belatedly, and then let out a soft chuckle.

Aegon laughed back, before smiling sadly. It was Queen Lyanna’s favourite curse. He wondered if His Grace knew it.

“What?” Jon asked, observant, noticing Aegon's change of mood. “It’s just a stupid saying. Or are you that afraid of the white walkers? I know I am, at times.”

“No,” Aegon shook his head and answered honestly, fixating Jon with his grey gaze. “Or not more than you are. It's just that… the way you cursed reminded me of someone.”

“I see,” Jon did not have to be told everything, not at all. He could guess some truths more than well on his own. "And that someone would be a lady, wouldn't she?" The acid scowl Jon made next was extremely eloquent, suggesting that being educated by Queen Lyanna was somehow Aegon's fault.

"How was it, to have a mother?” Jon asked warily.

"I didn't have a mother, ," Aegon rebelled against the unspoken accusation, "I had a septa. She told me both my parents were of the highest birth and noble nature. She said they loved each other and me. That much seems to be the truth. However, she lied about who they were my entire life." The last sentence came out more bitter than he would have wanted it. “She made me ingest a drop of poison every day so that my grey eyes would contain a touch of Targaryen purple.”
Jon studied Aegon for a brief moment as if he was seeing him for the first time. "I see," he stated. "I suppose I should be thrilled that mine are plain black."

Challenged by the statement, Aegon stared impolitely into Jon’s eyes. His soul became filled with doubt. "Are they now?" he asked.

“Come,” he said and dragged a confused Jon up from his bed and straight to the mirror Ser Denys had graciously left for Aegon’s usage.

Aegon placed his face side by side with Jon’s so that Aegon’s silver hair flanked Jon’s skin, several shades paler than Aegon’s Dornish complexion. Cousin Ned had recently explained to him that the Daynes were very white for Dornish standards, but still tanned when compared to men from the other six Kingdoms.

“Look carefully,” Aegon told Jon and did the same.

In the mirror, next to the silver shine of Aegon’s hair, Jon’s right eye showed the faintest trace of extremely dark blue, or dark violet within the black. Indigo. “You are fortunate that your father had very dark eyes for a Targaryen—”

“-and for having my mother’s hair,” Jon completed Aegon’s thought. “Gods be good,” he stared at his mirror image, tousling his hair with both hands, “I wish… I wish... Never mind… My father is dead... I had two fathers and they are both dead.” Sounding thoroughly defeated, Jon abandoned the mirror and returned to sit on his bed.

Aegon was suddenly consumed by the urge to tell Jon about himself; to let Rhaegar’s son make up his mind about Aegon’s own worth.

If I have any.

“I had no father, be he real or a man acting like one,” Aegon began. “I can only imagine how he was… Ser Arthur Dayne, Sword of the Morning. And he lies buried under the stone cairn in the mountains of Dorne. Yet his renown still lives among people. Or perhaps it is soiled now that the kingdoms learned about me. My father loved his sister, and that is a crime, outside the house of the dragons… Your house. I only have the hair of your house…”

“When your father thought he was a brother of the Faith,” Aegon continued, hesitantly, “he was bald. And his eyes looked naturally black, just like yours. I’ve seen it.”

“What I want to arrive at is that the hair colour can either reveal or help hide the Targaryen eyes... So my guardians made me dye my hair bright blue in Essos, in Tyroshi fashion…” Aegon whispered miserably, “so that I wouldn’t show the eye colour I only possessed and kept from being continuously poisoned … My entire life had been a lie.”

“Don’t tell,” Jon observed, studying Aegon very attentively.

Aegon wondered what Jon saw. A weakling. A boy who is not even pretty enough to merit a woman’s interest.

His Grace shifted his attention to his burned sword hand and commented carelessly towards Aegon, almost as if he were talking to an old friend. “Well, if Daenerys finds it in her heart to admire my modest looks, perhaps more women can be blind. Though I would have never expected it from Sansa. She had eyes only for beauty in the past.”

“Beauty is far from obvious,” Aegon was forced to react. He had loved Jeyne when she was
anything but beautiful. But, to his galloping misfortune, there was nothing modest about Jon’s looks. If Jeyne was so taken by him on his sickbed, what would happen now, when he was up and about?

Wait, Daenerys? Aegon was late in processing the entirety of Jon’s words. Jon and Daenerys? The Mother of Dragons he knew was colder towards Aegon, and perhaps to men in general, than Jeyne in her death. Has she fallen for her real nephew? The notion was amusing and yet it seemed as… challenging destiny.

Jon and Daenerys together would be like the first Aegon and any of his two queens. Rhaenys may have been prettier and gentler than Visenya, but they had both been Aegon’s equals, sovereigns and dragonriders, not only his wives. The Seven Kingdoms were not accustomed to any of it.

Soon, the nobles and the maesters interfered into the habits of the House Targaryen, in the name of their laws. Not even dragonriders could withstand them. There were no more marriages of three; the queens did not rule. There was no telling how the realm would react to Jon and Daenerys reinstating the old way. Aegon shuddered from the sinister feeling of premonition. He hoped he was wrong. He wished Daenerys well. And Jon. Despite barely knowing him.

“I don’t know about you,” Aegon commented with curiosity, “but I’ve found that love is never what we imagine.” What Jeyne woke in Aegon escaped words. “They say it is folly. I wouldn’t know about that. But it’s an occurrence of an entirely different magnitude than any other.”

“Maybe,” Jon muttered, omitting to share his own views of love. “What I wanted to say, when I mentioned Sansa,” he clarified, “is that there seems to be so many extraordinary news no one has told me yet that I shall be learning them one by one until the day I die.”

Aegon chuckled. “Isn’t that true for everyone?” he wondered, tapping the scabbard on his back for reassurance. His father’s sword and a name belonging to a prince that never existed was all Aegon had. He was a highborn bastard on the Wall. He could take the black if Jeyne didn’t want him.

“Show me,” Jon commanded, pointing at Dawn.

"It's a good sword," Aegon said, handing it over.

Jon measured the blade, stood up, tried a few strokes and passes at a safe distance from Aegon. "It’s heavier than it looks. Must be the pretty colour that made me think it was lighter. Here,” he gave it back.

Suddenly, with the uneasy introduction behind them, no one could stop the waterfall of Jon’s questions. Aegon could not speak fast enough to answer them all.

“Was there truly a man who had transformed into an Other and who did not melt into nothingness or these… these crystal snowflakes, when defeated, either by dragonglass or Valyrian steel?” Jon launched the first one.

“Yes,” Aegon answered without thinking. “I had to do for the body myself. It was unspeakable.”

“This is the Shadow Tower?” Jon looked around, half knowing, half guessing.

Aegon nodded briefly.

"The dragons?" Jon went on.

"The black one is gone, he flew East when you passed out, the green one-"
"-has woken up now, like myself," Jon completed knowingly.

As a confirmation, a shrill screech pierced the air of Shadow Tower. Beautifully scaled, leathery wings flapped right in front of the tiny, dirty window of the commander’s solar; closed as tightly as possible to save some warmth in winter.

"Incredible," Aegon was marvelled at the dragon’s apparition.


"Gone after—"

"-my mother's eagle," Jon concluded sadly, closing his eyes very briefly, holding onto the bed for balance.

"Yes," Aegon rattled back, "Stannis wrote—"

"-that he is king and that Ser Denys owes him fealty, forgetting that the Watch serves no king—" Jon guessed it, but not all.

Aegon intervened with the new information. “Stannis knew about Rhaegar's death and claimed to be his heir—”

“To be sure,” Jon snorted and didn't let Aegon tell him the rest, about his late father being called the raper, and Jon a godless wight. “Doubtlessly he called himself Azor Ahai reborn before signing. Anything else?”

“And there is this. The raven came in this morning." Aegon reached into a special pouch between his armour and his tunic and handed a missive to Jon, sealed with the sun and spear in bright orange wax. "A letter, from the Prince of Dorne by the looks of it. Addressed to… to King Rhaegar."

Jon opened it, read it, frowned deeply. "Mance?"

"Here somewhere. Always busy."

"Call him, would you?"

"Yes, Your Grace," Aegon bowed in submission. Aegon and Jon would not be friends like their fathers. It would be easier this way.

"Don't call me that," Jon protested vehemently, unexpectedly.

"Then? It is proper. It is who you are," Aegon replied with more coldness than he intended.

"It is who he was," Jon said quietly, miserably, pointing at the beautifully shaped letters addressed to his father. His entire being seemed to shrink and shrivel from the sadness of the memory.

"And he would wish you to be that, after him," Aegon… almost cried. Rhaegar had been unique.

"Mance, if it please you. Will you find him for me?"

"Yes, gladly, Your Gr—Jon." On a whim, Aegon dared call the king by his name. "Or am I presuming now? Forgive me if I do."

"No… Aegon," Jon returned the courtesy, "I'd never thought I'd have… an ally… no, a friend with that name," he ended with determination.
"I'd never thought you'd consider being a friend of mine," Aegon reacted, surprised, "not since I learned of... Of our real parentage."

“You were right,” Jon said, “I haven't expected it from myself.”

Aegon laughed. “Well said,” he retorted. "Mance will be here in no time," he promised.

By the time Aegon returned with the wildling, he had nearly forgotten everything about his troubled love life from giddiness about the unlikely and extremely pleasing possibility of having Jon as a friend. He didn’t leave the room, but he positioned himself next to the closed door, as Jon's guard. Kingsguard, like my father, keeping the king's secrets. The quiet sound of two deep, manly voices slowly drifted his way. Aegon did not want to listen, but the gods did not make him deaf. He could still hear them.

"Prince Doran Martell," Jon said slowly, stressing every word, "is asking of my father to send you to the Iron Islands, to meet with Lord Rodrik Harlaw in his seat called the Ten Towers on the Island of Harlaw. This iron lord will have something of importance for the war of winter, or so the prince tells my father… A lost heirloom… of the House Targaryen. Would you go? And be back as soon as possible? I would have you here with me for what is to come. I know I can't command you in this, but it is my wish."

"A large group of my people will leave on a ship soon," Mance said, "To go to these islands. I could join them if that is your wish. And I will be back. For you and for myself. Where else would I go in winter? Forgive me but I… I have never been to Dorne. Why would they ask for me?" the wildling sounded exceptionally insecure and out of his depth in the last portion of his speech.

"I don't know and they don't say," Jon replied. "But here it says Mance Rayder, and if that's not enough they call you the King-beyond-the-Wall. Prince Doran's envoy shall talk to no other, they say. Harlaw… it should be good for your people. My father’s… Lord Stark’s ward, Theon, said that they sow over there… He meant that unlike the rest of the ironborn who only rob, the men from Harlaw grow food… We should… I should… I ought to… If there is an heirloom, Princess Daenerys should have it. She'll know what to do."

"What will you do?" Mance asked of Jon as of a very old friend.

Jon walked to a low, broad chest. His sword was laid on top of it, next to his father's harp. He took the high harp clumsily between his hands, as a man who had never held a music instrument. The strings he touched by chance emitted a weak, dissonant harmony of sound.

"I'm going to see my mother," Jon announced very, very quietly. "For a visit long due."

"Then I shall see you when I return," Mance said warmly. "I will be on my way now, to see if that ship can be ready to set sail sooner rather than later." The wildling left without more ado, never bending the knee.

Jon turned to Aegon, as if he had just remembered his existence. "I hope," he said, "I hope we will continue our discussions when I come back here. Keep your eyes open and-"

"May I…," Aegon stuttered, remembering Jeyne's plea concerning Jon. "Please may I present someone to you before you go? Just for a moment if you can spare it. It is important to her. She would like a word with you in private."

"She?" Jon asked, bemused. "Fine. Bring the lady."

Aegon found Jeyne in the little room she shared with Val and ushered her back to the commander’s
solar without a word.

“Lady Jeyne Heddle, Your Grace,” he announced, stepped out and closed the door behind him.

Yet, despite beginning to loathe himself with great intensity, Aegon could not bring himself to leave fully. He stayed at the door, listening, praying to the Seven as Septa Lemore had taught him; to the gods Queen Lyanna probably did not believe in. He prayed that the content of the conversation between Jon and Jeyne would be something he could live with and that Jeyne still loved him.

His lady's voice was so soft that it almost broke Aegon's heart.

"Jon,” she addressed the young king gently. “You were dead. Weren't you?"

Silence reigned, long and threatening. Aegon could almost hear the snow, falling softly in the courtyard of the castle.

"I think so," Jon’s honest, resigned voice finally confirmed Jeyne’s preposterous claim, to Aegon’s utmost surprise. The magnitude of Jon’s and Jeyne’s exchange preserved Aegon’s heart in one piece, but it challenged his soul. Could it be that Stannis did not lie?

"But you are not dead any more,” Jeyne affirmed calmly.

Stannis didn't tell all the truth, did he? Aegon crawled closer to the door to hear better.

"I think I’m alive now," Jon sounded less assured about his second confession. "But I don't know it."

"I know," Jeyne affirmed.

"Do you?" Jon asked avidly. “How?"

"Don’t you sense it? Look at me freely. Don't be afraid of it. Tell me who I am, what I am," his love asked of his king.

"You are… Jeyne," Jon said with difficulty, as if after some hard thinking. "You were dead as well, but you are not anymore."

"And when you saw the wights who fought with your father in the battle in which he died, didn't you know what they were? And that their allegiance was not due to the Great Other?"

"Yes," Jon answered without hesitation. "I sensed it all, without really knowing."

"This is how I know about you," Jeyne said. "We are the same. We are the only ones who… who came back to the life of the body and the senses after being dead for it. Except that you… you are stronger than me. Or maybe you were dead for a shorter time. I can't tell that."

"I was dead for half a day, maybe a day, I think," Jon whispered. "I don't remember exactly. I was in my wolf and my brothers carried my lifeless body away."

"How did you come back?"

"I don't know," Jon said with painful honesty. "I don't think I'll ever know. My dragon cured my wounds. But before that I… I bled out in the snow. Much like my father. I could not have been alive when the dragon found me. I remember clearly being in my wolf when the dragon came for us both. A green shade in the sky."

"I never lost any blood," Jeyne spoke of herself now. "I was hanged. I lost all air in my lungs. I
stopped breathing, my heart stopped beating... Until I got a breath of life back... From Lady Catelyn Stark who was also undead at the time. Two halves of a life, or two halves of a death have made me whole. Or as whole as I can be."

"I see," Jon said with cold curiosity. "What do you want with me?"

"My pardons, Your Grace," Jeyne said as a proper lady, "I don't know you at all, but you are so far the only one, the only one like me. Please may I ask you something, please... There is no one else who can answer me."

"Go ahead," Jon said very quietly. "What I just told you, no one else knows. Why wouldn't I answer one more question?"

"It is improper for a lady, but I haven't really been one before, I ran an inn and now... I... Never mind."

"Go on, ask," Jon encouraged her with that half-friendly, half-mocking manner of his Aegon began to appreciate. "I'm used to all kinds of questions."

You would be, wouldn't you? Aegon thought, remembering his daily troubles. Being Lord Commander of the Night's Watch...

"It's just that... My skin feels so cold to touch most of the time," Jeyne complained with passion. "And I don't mind the winter cold, not at all. I am not as other warm-blooded women. Yet I want to... I want to, but I think I can't... Or rather, I don't know if I can..."

"Do what?"

"Bed a man," Jeyne's barely audible voice thrummed in Aegon's ears.

"I've never had any problem with that," Jon blurted. "Bedding a woman I mean. Despite that yes, I am cold as you say."

"And you didn't... harm her?" Jeyne's voice was even more silent now. "Made her as you are? Cold? Cruel? Insensitive?"

"No, not at all," Jon replied. "I didn't even think about it in advance. I didn't think about anything. And we did it...-"

"Many times?" Jeyne inquired hopefully.

Jon must have nodded, but Aegon could not see it.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Jeyne's voice was effusively happy and she may have kissed Jon noisily on his cheek. Soon she came running out of the solar, leaving Aegon barely enough time to hide in the shadows of the dark corridor. If she caught him eavesdropping she'd never marry him. Maybe she would tell Val to kill him or worse.

Jon is special, like Jeyne. Aegon belatedly realised that his misplaced jealousy had made him learn a secret he would otherwise not be privy to. He stepped out of the shadow where he had been hiding and froze.

Jon stood tall at the open solar door; his gaze was ice, accusing. In his right hand he held the sword that burned when it killed the white walker his father had become. It looked dull in colour now, but it was still long and sharp.
"You've been listening on me," Jon said darkly, "so much for our friendship."

"I have and I'm ashamed of it," Aegon said, going on one knee. On a second thought, he prostrated himself further and bared his neck to Jon, as a man sentenced to death on the headsman's block. "Here, Your Grace," he said very calmly. "The penalty for treason in the Seven Kingdoms is death."

"No," Jon refused sternly, putting his sword away. "I can't kill you for overhearing the truth. That is no crime."

Aegon knelt properly, drew Dawn and placed it at Jon’s feet. "Then I swear myself and my sword to you. Should you want my service or refuse it forever, I swear that I shall keep this secret of yours and any other. As my father, Ser Arthur Dayne, had done for your father as the Member of his Kingsguard. May the Seven strike me dead if I break this vow."

Jon looked… perplexed by Aegon’s oath. "Something you invented?" he asked. "It sounds almost as solemn as the vows I took when I was..." he looked left and right to see if anyone else was lurking in the corridor. "Before I died," he said gravely.

Aegon pushed him back into the solar, closed the door behind them, before anyone else came across and heard Jon.

"But I would still like to know why you listened," Jon inquired cautiously as though he didn't want to offend Aegon by further suspicion.

"Why did I listen?" Aegon offered, feeling better than ever... "I was jealous of you. I wish you to never know the feeling."

"Her... you..."

"I do hope that I am the man she wants to bed," Aegon said, "and not anyone else."

"One way to find out," Jon grinned and tapped Aegon on his left shoulder as a friend; his anger and doubts seemingly set aside.

Aegon blushed. "I guess so," he said, trying not to betray his embarrassing lack of any experience in the matter.

"I accept both your friendship and your service," Jon continued seriously. "Help Ser Denys Mallister hold the Wall in place until I return. I should not be long. But now, I must see my mother."

Determined, Rhaegar’s son picked up his sword and his father’s harp and stormed in the direction of the courtyard. Soon, Aegon heard another strident cry of the dragon and knew for certain that Jon had left. He did not dare look for Jeyne immediately, lest she realised he had been eavesdropping. Nervously, he left all his armour behind. I should not need it for... Unable to think through what he was about to do, and restless as seven hells, he caught up with Mance first, on his way to Westwatch.

"Leaving already, are you?" Aegon yelled after the wildling, gathering forces to ask what he really needed to know.

"Yes," Mance was never one for waiting. "The sooner I go, the sooner I’ll be back." He kept walking.

"Wait!" Aegon pleaded.

"What’s wrong with you?" Mance asked, stopped. "You are red as Bowen Marsh."

"Wait!" Aegon pleaded.

"What’s wrong with you?" Mance asked, stopped. "You are red as Bowen Marsh."
Aegon did not know Marsh, but it was past time he asked someone, and preferably a man grown… what he could never ask Lord Connington who didn't notice women, nor Duck, obsessed with his knighthood, nor Septa Lemore for being a lady…

"I want to steal a woman," he said. That was how the wildlings called it. "I…"

"You’ve never done it before," the King-beyond-the-Wall who could be his father if he had Aegon at a very young age understood him instantly. "You have only kissed your lady."

"Yes."

"Don't worry overmuch, Aegon," Mance said heartily. "Just do what she lets you do, and stop when she doesn't. Don't push too hard, especially not in the beginning, and you should be fine. I wish I had followed that counsel myself." With that, he gave Aegon a wink and was on his way.

Aegon returned to Jeyne's and Val's room at night, only to find it empty. Having nowhere else to go, he returned to his borrowed solar. The Shadow Tower was quiet after the evening meal, served amidst unearthly cold. Aegon missed it, but he felt no hunger, not for food, in any case. Most castle dwellers rested next to fires after supper. Later, there would be still some work done on the defences during night because the days were too short.

Jeyne was in Aegon’s bed, black hair spilling over his hard straw mattress. Her gown was on the floor; a sea of abandoned dark velvet. Insensitive to cold, she didn’t bother to cover herself. Aegon was… he felt able to perform. To see if he was a man in this, once and for all.

"There is no need to marry me if you want to have me," she said. "You all call me a lady, but I was not born one. I'm not a maid, but I'm no whore either. I gave my maidenhead to a young man for wanting it, and not for coin. That was before I met you and—"

Aegon did not care for explanations and found for the first time in his short life that women sometimes needed too many words to convey a very simple meaning. "I would want to marry you anyway," he said, "and I… I’ve never kissed any other girl but you and much less gone this far as I’ve already told you. Nor do I want to, with anyone else."

He didn’t wait for her reaction. He kissed her, kissed her, kissed her. Rolled with her over the bed, wriggled out of the wools and furs he wore.

"How?" he asked timidly, touching a large, firm breast, blushing. She’d never allowed him that before.

"Mostly the girl lays down, I guess," Jeyne said against his lips, warm and pliable. “I’ve done this only once."

"Don't," Aegon said, inspired. "I lay down. Lets leave what is mostly done in bed for the next time."

She was very uncertain as she climbed on him. "I don't know about this."

"Then we don't. Kiss me," Aegon demanded.

They became entangled in bed and in each other, touched freely, kissed some more. Aegon felt himself… stronger than her. He lay decisively on his back and pulled her onto himself just there, just where he needed her now, trying to do this, not quite knowing how.

She sighed heavily when he managed to enter her, and he instantly wanted to do what he only did in his sleep and in his hand so far. Luckily, she stilled, adjusting herself to him. Slowly, she rocked
against him, exhaled, sighed again. His hands caught her waist, her behind, guided her where he wanted her, directed instinctively the speed of her movement. Her face above him was terribly beautiful. He would never forget the expression she wore.

"Do I feel cold?" she asked sweetly.

"Cold?" Aegon gasped back at her, incredulous. He grasped her hips firmly and made her go faster. "You've never felt warmer."

The world was a whirlwind of heat when Aegon's body began betraying him. Of all places, it had to be on the Wall, in winter, that he had come to know the fire burning inside any man.

"I'll never be cold again," he said playfully when they were quite done, reassured of his prowess and frightfully lazy. He suspected he would oversleep tomorrow's rationing of food. "And the first thing I’ll do tomorrow is look for a septon or a tree. I am marrying you."

"Yes," Jeyne said, catching her breath. "Yes, you are."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading and commenting :-))

POV order:
39 Jon, 40 Jaime, 41 Sandor, 42 Gendry, 43 Sansa, 44 Lyanna
The night belonged to ghosts and he was one of them.

The darkness was thick with grey, thick with black, white with wet snow, obstructing the dragon’s flight.

*Jon had forgotten where Winterfell was.*

Or rather, he had never known his way home across the sky…

High up in the air, higher than he’d ever dared fly before, Jon saw a shapeless shadow conquering the world. A soulless blackness rose over Castle Black, spreading slowly eastward; thicker than the night. A jittery green being touched Jon’s soul and told him, or better, showed him, that not even a dragon could brave it without risk. Besides, Jon would never be able to spot the kingsroad in the unnatural gloom, and follow it South as he intended, when he had taken off from the Shadow Tower.

Deliberately, Jon began thinking of flying *safely* Southeast, over the wilderness inhabited by the northern mountain clans, painting images of a dragon gliding low above the high peaks in his mind. The familiar green shade lurked into his head, slowly consuming the depictions of the new, unknown path *home* that his rider wanted him to take.

*Home, but not of me*, the dragon pondered in winking flashes of green and was *sad*. *Never of me*, he thought, chasing the snow away with his tail, as a horse might a fly.

Jon wondered what place on earth the dragon considered his home. Then, rapidly and sharply, without painting any answer for his rider, Jon’s scaled steed veered swiftly south and east, much like a good horse would, reacting promptly to the tightening of his reins. Just like Jon wanted, the dragon hovered low, almost touching the rocky mountain tops with its hard belly. Low was safe.

For the rest of their short journey, Jon observed and *tasted* the increasingly angry, bronze-stained images projected by his mount. Inside of them, Drogon was a dangerous enemy. His green brother suffered from the overwhelming desire to harm his huge black sibling and rip him apart. The sensation was unearthly, different than human desire for glory and battle; ineffably strong. Jon’s dragon wanted bloodshed. He wanted Drogon to *burn*…

*Don’t*. Jon imagined Daenerys and Drogon, together, a slender, petite woman on a beast larger than a castle tower. *He belongs to Daenerys.*
The green mind accompanying Jon disagreed strongly, thinking of *treason*, thinking of *courage*, but could not or would not explain more, enraged and bloodthirsty.

Perhaps it was the will of the gods that Jon’s dragon was smaller, though still much larger than any other animal in existence. Otherwise, the dance of the dragons at the western edge of the Wall would have had a very different outcome before Jon warged into the black dragon and convinced him to leave.

*This way all dragons are still alive*

*All except one.*

*My father.*

Jon tried not to think about it, striving not to remember his father’s curious eyes during their duel.

*Rhaegar. He found a way to spend time with me.*

Jon's certainty hardened with every waking hour after his illness, grew into a burden he would have to bear, became a treasure he wanted to keep. The only time they were together. The only real memory he had of his real father.

When the mountain slopes under the dragon’s body softened and lowered, first into hills, then into thick, evergreen woods, Jon let himself think of the wolfswood surrounding Winterfell… He recalled all the paths leading to his childhood home he had walked on or ridden through as a boy, with his adoptive father or siblings for company… *Father*… Lord Eddard with Ice on his back. Arya, underfoot, faster than Jon. Robb, brave, reckless and courteous at the same time; a lord in the making. Theon, not a brother, but always present, with his bad jokes. Sansa, who could not ride. Baby Rickon, toddling in the summer snow. Bran, who had just learned to sit a horse and began enjoying it before… before he was crippled forever

When Jon remembered Bran, tears finally came. He let them fall, for everything and everyone he had lost, unashamed of his sorrow. He would not hide them had there been people who could see him. Before the end of his flight, he felt much better in his skin and his eyes were almost dry.

The dragon predated quietly on his rider's thoughts about his past. Calmer than before, as a wild horse able to tame himself at need, he harrumphed into the night air and tried to… appease Jon. Jon wiped the last tears and the snow from his eyes, tapping the nearest green scale with gratitude. *How come that you are not angry with me? I did kill a dragon, didn't I?* The greenness remained poised and calm, projecting no image, giving no answer.

*Fly fast, dragon, would you?*

Jon knew the dragon’s name well, but it was too painful to use it, sounding so bloody much like his real father's name…

*Rhaegal-Rhaegar-Rhaegal-Rhaegar.*

The dragon… did not mind his rider’s reluctance, despite that he preferred being called by his name. Suddenly, images of fields of grass, rare forests and great rivers from the faraway lands flooded Jon's awareness. *Home*, the dragon may have said languidly. Jon rejected watching them, growing more and more restless with every moment of their journey. *Some other time, dragon.*

Arya had said Jon's mother was in Winterfell…
Jon could only hope she was still there. In his illness, in his dream, his mother had jumped from the highest window of the highest tower; mourning for his father. Her dead eyes had blamed Jon in his fevered sleep, telling him he should have done something else. A real hero would have found a way to keep Rhaegar alive. Jon sweated in his dream, fearing he would never see his mother in life, just like he had not seen his father. Yet he would undeniably know who they were this time… All his new losses would be his fault, for continuously doubting, for not being able to believe.

The dragon screamed and stormed over the dark-green mantle of the wolfswood, splotched indecently by snow. Pained, angry, betrayed, confused, Rhaegal brought his rider safely to Winterfell.

Jon had thought he would never see his childhood home again. He had thought he would die one day, in old age, defending the Wall… And in the end he did die…. But he nonetheless also came back, back to Winterfell; and he might have a mother still.

He wished he had a mother… Forgetting his refusal, his fear to believe in it… For how would it feel if Jon was ready to accept it only to find out that it was all a lie? Well, it wasn’t a lie, and his mother might have taken her own life in the time it took her son to acknowledge her.

His father’s harp was a burden in his shield arm, heavier than the magic sword of heroes on his hip. Jon almost wished he could play it, to give his mother the comfort brought by music, knowing he might not be able to give her his love.

Personal devotion to music was usually not the pursuit of kings and princes; they would hire singers for that. Rhaegar had been an exception, known for his prowess with the high harp and the uniqueness of his voice in all Seven Kingdoms. Mother must have had a fondness for songs… if she had fallen for father… The odd dragon among the dragons as Jon was the different wolf among the wolves… Though Jon could not play for the life of him, and he sang best, though a bit badly, when slightly drunk.

He did not know if he could love his mother. But he still wished to ease her pain… The eagle had been out of her mind when Rhaegar died… Ghost was still looking for her beyond the Wall.

*Mother, please, stay alive, will you?*

Winterfell was the castle of ghosts and Jon was one of them.

Instinctively, he knew his dragon should not accompany him inside. The castle brimmed with fresh anger. The old enmity between the wolf and the dragon was resurrected, the kneeling of the Starks set aside and forgotten.

Jon dismounted and bid Rhaegal find a safe place where he would not be seen, melting into the dark greens of the wood.

*time to see if I am wolfish enough.* Jon thought unreasonably, wondering if the castle would let him in or strike him down. Wolf or dragon, in he would go, and see his mother.

*Dead or alive.*

The great gates of Winterfell loomed open, unguarded. The portcullis was up, the drawbridge down.

Jon knew that no guard was needed. The castle had come to life in winter. Much like the Wall, it defended itself now. Defiant, the odd wolf stepped on the bridge. The wooden boards thrummed under his feet as if there had been an invisible drummer underground. A deep subterranean beat followed him through the gates; a drum… punctuated by some some queer, low-key instrument with
strings. A woodharp, perhaps, not the high harp he was carrying. The music boomed slowly at first and increased in tempo with the steady, decisive rhythm of Jon’s steps. In the courtyard, he understood that the castle had let him pass, but it did not approve of him. The seat of his mother’s forefathers challenged him.

**Who are you?** Winterfell asked silently, in a voice made of grey stone. **What are you?**

Jon often wondered the same, unable to give a straight answer to either the castle or himself. **What stuff am I made of?** He was a creature in the making and he did not know yet what he would become.

"I am Jon Snow," he whispered stubbornly to the night, continuing with his advance. As he said that, all music stopped in his head and under his feet.

Jon tried to forget the infernal beat and looked around. The courtyard was empty and the hour very late; almost of the wolf. The only sound of human commotion came from his right hand side. His ears pricked and he followed them, unsure where to begin looking for his mother.

A small company of men tried to force open the door leading to the crypts of Winterfell, unsuccessfully. Jon knew one of them. *Greatjon Umber. Tall as a giant. Perhaps shorter than the Hound is now.* And next to him-

“Dany!” Jon called out loud to his silver-haired lady, clad in back like himself, not caring for propriety of address before others. Daenerys was his, not Greatjon’s or anyone else’s. His own voice sounded deeper than he remembered it; almost like that underground rumble that had welcomed him home.

Daenerys turned around faster than the dragon flies and ran to him over the ruined snow. Many feet had stepped on it, just like on the snowfield where his father had fallen. *Has there been a battle? Against whom?*

Jon forgot himself in their kiss. First a timid and then a brazen one, openly given and received; wet and warm, hinting at more, promising everything. One tiny hand tugged at his left cheek and chin, overgrown with sparse black stubble. He did not shave in his illness and he would do it as soon as he had a moment to spare. Jon mostly let his hair grow at will, but he never did the same with the beard. He could not understand why Dany would suddenly be attracted to its unwanted appearance.

“What, do you want me to look like Old Wull here?” Jon set his father’s harp gently in the snow and lifted Dany off the ground in their embrace until their faces were level. He nuzzled her neck and face, *smelling* her, feeling wonderfully calm from being able to inhale her scent, not caring that the gesture always embarrassed her. Slowly, he made her head turn with his nose until they were cheek to cheek, looking at Old Wull; the head of the most powerful of the northern mountain clans. His beard fell almost to his stomach, thick and curling. Jon wondered what the man did in Winterfell. Last thing he knew, the mountain clans supported Stannis because Jon counselled him to seek them out.

“It is you,” Dany spoke feverishly, pressed to him. “Gods be good, it is you, Jon.”

Jon hoped that her uncharacteristic, overly emotional reaction was an expression of love and not the first sign of Targaryen madness or the announcement of some dreadful news he did not yet know about.

"Who else?” he asked, observing her, setting her gently down to the ground. She acted as if she had seen a real ghost, pinching Jon’s chin and cheek between her elegant fingers, confirming he was
"There has been a… A stone army came forth from the crypts of Winterfell… There was a man wearing a crown who looked like you and called himself Jon Stark," she breathed out. "He had a long beard and sounded like you. He looked at me… as if he were you. It's just that… he didn't seem kind at all. He didn't wish me well."

*What stone army? How am I looking at you? Am I kind? Do you want me to be?* Jon could not grasp or judge the magnitude of Dany's distress, oppressed heavily by his own, concerning his mother. “You'll tell me everything later, won't you?” he whispered with adoration.

"Because now, now… I do need to see my mother," he announced, hoping she would understand, feeling colder than ice and far more dead than alive. “Where is she?”

“She retired to the Great Hall a while ago,” Dany replied instantly in her best queenly tone. Warm and flushed from their kiss despite the cold, she was everything he was not. “She asked to be left alone. But I have no doubt that she will see you.”

Jon changed his mind and embraced his woman properly, running his arms up and down her body. Mother was alive. He could afford to do this for another brief moment. "Where is your cloak?" he asked, realising Dany missed it. *Have you been flying? Is Drogon in the woods as well?* It was the only explanation why she still didn't freeze to death. The effect of flying warmed the dragonrider for some time after landing.

"I'll find one," Dany shrugged. "It was too busy here to feel the cold until now."

Jon… didn’t want Dany to wear another man’s cloak and didn’t have one to give her. Hastily, he pulled off the black woollen goblet of the Night's Watch he was wearing over his tunic, never feeling the cold. "Here," he said, "it is too big but it will do until you find something then." He helped her dress and fasten the garment around her slim waist.

Greatjon hurried to offer his furry cloak to the lady, but she… waved it away. "I shall go inside as soon as we are done here, my lord," she said frostily, wriggling her way back into Jon's embrace, unwilling to leave it. She now smelled of both of them in his clothing, deliciously so.

*Just as it should be.*

“Done with what?” Jon decided to find out what was going on since he was in any case impeached to leave.

Lord Umber gave Jon a queer look and no answer. Old Wull appeared unimpressed by the question, too old to be impressed by anything, Jon guessed, and equally unwilling to answer it. A company of men-at-arms Jon did not know, some in Bolton pink, stared at him with palpable fear. Jon resisted as best he could the sudden temptation to grope his body for the growth of new limbs, additional pair of eyes, white wolf fur or green and bronze scales.

"The late Lords of Winterfell and Kings in the North have come forth to defend Winterfell from the false Southron king and the northern traitors who have bent the knee to him for promises of lands and riches," Old Wull finally growled in a voice deeper than time, the only man present not afraid of Jon’s sudden arrival and looks. "It is said they shall walk again when the end of the world is near. That is why they are all buried at the same place and why the statues are made over the years by the stone masons who knew their likenesses well, to look as faithful as possible. A sword is placed over their knees, a stone wolf carved at their feet. So that they can walk as themselves when the day comes for them to rise, armed, accompanied by their wolves. Winterfell will end when the world
ends, not before. No power of this earth shall conquer it. Not even the Others from beyond the Wall. I have come here with the false king who deceived me, promising to bring a Stark to Winterfell, not saying that there already was one. The wolves have returned! The castle had seen the truth of my allegiance and did not banish me."

Jon had never heard this story. Apparently Old Nan did not know all of them. "Wait, you mean that the statues-"

"The statues looked quite alive, Jon, trust me," Dany said, shivering, and she was not easily afraid, Jon knew. "The one that had your face, he stared at me… he looked as if he were about to kidnap me and take me with him to the underworld."

"Well I'm glad that he didn't," Jon said warmly. "And the false Southron king would be… Stannis?" he guessed.

"Yes," Dany said, sounding defeated. "Flying Drogon. My dragon has either betrayed us or is enslaved by the sorcery of his red witch. I was not able to tell. Stannis ordered Drogon to burn down the castle. Your namesake, King Jon Stark, sucked up the dragonflame in his sword and nearly killed my dragon for it. But in the end he did not, when I pleaded for Drogon’s life."

Those news were not good. The realm needed all dragonfire in the world if men were to prevail against the Night’s King and his army.

"And then what, the statues just went back to crypts?" Jon wondered aloud.

Greatjon nodded gravely, giving another hearty attempt to open the door.

"As if by magic, the dead sealed the crypts behind them when they were done throwing all men loyal to Stannis out of the castle. Three people are trapped inside. One of them has opened the door to the dead when it all began, it seems, but we don’t know who it was," Dany explained. "Ser Barristan, Lady Mormont and another northern looking lady have not been seen. They must be down there."

"The second lady, if she can be called that way with her foul tongue and axe is not of the North, she’s ironborn, Theon’s sister," Greatjon explained with revulsion, continuing to fight a losing battle against the crypt door with his arms and massive shoulders. "Little Asha Greyjoy. Stannis forced her to help him retake Winterfell, saying he would kill Theon if she did not. When Stannis' red witch told Asha that Theon the Turncloak died on his own… imagine, Others took the boy, the girl bolted off with Maege Mormont on her arm. Glover, the traitor, had them chained together."

"The ghost of Lord Eddard Stark decapitated Lord Glover and several of his followers for treason," Dany added. "It was most deserved. Stannis only managed to run away… because of Drogon."

Jon took in fast the incredible piece of news, comparing it to his uncanny experience when entering Winterfell… Magic, magic, magic. A hiltless sword. He shuddered. The castle had nonetheless spared Daenerys, who was surely the blood of the dragon, much more than Jon had ever been. Why? Because she is mine or because this… Jon Stark wanted it?

"Step away, Lord Umber," Jon commanded Greatjon with newfound authority, possessed by an unwavering certainty that if anyone could unseal the bloody door, it was him.

Winterfell was the castle of ghosts and he was one of them.

He strolled to the crypt door and pulled it open effortlessly, where Greatjon, a much bigger man, could not. The fetid breath of death came out of the tombs instead of tepid air.
"Find them," Jon commanded briefly to no one in particular, trying to ignore the looks of fear and subservience he now earned. Even Old Wull seemed somewhat impressed.

With as much dignity as he could muster, Jon returned to Daenerys, and took her hands in his, reining in the desire to do more.

“I was afraid,” he stuttered as silently as he could, hoping the others were too busy to listen, descending one by one into the crypts. “I was afraid mother might take her own life.”

“She is… devastated,” Dany commented very cautiously. “She seems to have witnessed Rhaegar’s passing as a… as a warg.”

My mother is a beastling, yes, my love, just like myself

"And then, earlier today, Stannis…" Daenerys lacked words to describe what had exactly happened.

Jon couldn't care less about what Stannis did or did not do. If the dead Starks saw fit to chase him away, so much the better. One trouble less for Jon.

“Did mother say anything about me?” Jon interrupted, dreading the answer to that question.

“‘You? Why?’” Dany said, clearly not knowing about Jon's role in Rhaegar's passing. “You went to the Lands of Always Winter. Wait. How do you know that Rhaegar…” Jon's meaning slowly dawned on her. “You were there, weren't you?” she said sadly. “I'm so sorry that you had to be there, Jon.”

“Not only was I there,” he said quietly. “Do you truly not know?”

She stiffened and dropped his hands, straightening herself to stand taller. “What happened?” she asked, sensing a blow before it hit her. “I only know from your mother that Rhaegar truly is dead. I could not believe it until I heard it from her mouth and saw her grief.” Daenerys had never looked more like a dragon in human skin to Jon, pretty and deadly. She stared at the harp in the snow, seeing it only now

Jon slowly drew the magic sword half-way out of its scarf, showing her the dull, wasted colour of it.

"It is not burning any more," Dany said, struggling to comprehend.

“I had to do it, Dany,” he said seriously. “Father challenged the Night’s King and won a victory, but as a revenge the Other took him and made him one of them. I had to kill him. And now I have to see mother while I still can.” He turned away from his pretty liar, unable to wait for her honest reaction. Daenerys might very well hate him for what he did, just like her runaway black dragon; instead of consoling him in his pain as he secretly hoped she would.

Maybe it is my fault that Drogon has turned to Stannis, for losing his second rider. Stannis had to have a drop of dragon blood, somewhere, if Jon remembered his history lessons well, though this was very hard to believe, seeing the stiffness of the man in question. The true dragons were… different, Jon knew. Free. Warm. They didn't need the light of R'hllor to heat up their existence. The blood of the dragon may have been more visible in Stannis’ brother, King Robert, a dragonhater.

Overcome by too many different emotions, Jon trod to the Great Hall. A stinging gaze of violet eyes followed him, but he never turned back. It was past time he did his duty. What was done was done. Daenerys could not love him now.

Could she?
Maybe later, when she is done mourning

Will mother love me?

Jon felt stupid for wondering about this when he wasn’t certain at all if he loved his mother.

He forced himself to halt all thought and advance; a black shadow carrying a harp and the sword, lost in the thickness of the night, among the smoking, hot pools of the great castle. Fire in ice. Why have I never seen this before? Fire was under Winterfell, in its roots, thousands of years old.

The great door of oak and iron threatened him; closed tight. Unlike the crypts, it offered resistance to Jon, emitting an ear-breaking, ugly creak, when he finally slid it open. The first glimpse behind it revealed nothing but darkness. Jon entered, quiet as a ghost, holding his dead father’s harp, closing the heavy door behind him. Lyanna had asked not to be disturbed and her son was coming to offer his respects.

In the Great Hall of the Starks, his mother sat alone. At a trestle table, away from the high seat of her forefathers, with a single candle illuminating her features for company. Despite the gloom, Jon could see she was very beautiful. Much more beautiful than Lady Catelyn had ever been. Lovely as the young wilful lady from the indecent songs sang in secret in the North when Jon was a child, during the reign of Robert Baratheon. The songs where Rhaegar… The songs where his mother ran with his father willingly out of love, thwarting her betrothal and throwing the legendary honour of the Starks to the wind. Unwillingly, Jon remembered the verses, even the unspeakable parts Theon always repeated. The bawdy words from the past acquired a new meaning now that Jon had done his share of ineffable feats with women.

The unseemly memory did not last, erased thoroughly by his mother's soulless expression. Lyanna Stark was a chiselled image of grief. Very slowly, she stirred in her palpably dark mood. Even slower, she stood up, facing bravely the blackness in which Jon was immersed. Pale of face, very short of stature, straight of spine, she commanded respect.

Jon was drawn towards her, a black man clad in black. Black for the Watch and black for the House Targaryen… A ghost in the castle of ghosts, walking sleepless in the hour of the wolf.

“Rhaegar?” Lyanna whispered with hope.

Stunned, Jon did not speak. What could he say? He could not bring his father back. He would never be able to compensate for that loss.

Mother laughed briefly, desperately, sat down, sobbed and spoke with familiar bitterness. As Jon might, at times. “Of course not. My pardons, my lord. Whoever you are. The widow is rambling. Do leave, if it please you. I asked to be left alone tonight.”

“It’s me,” Jon said, lowering father's harp to the floor, realising that its recognisable shape, despite the gloom, might have prompted mother's unfounded hope. Jon was not his father. He would never be. Nonetheless he hurried to step out of the shadows and into the weak candlelight, with his heart in his heels. “I’ve only just arrived.

His mother pressed both of her hands to her mouth. She remained very still, unable to laugh, cry or utter a word. Her eyes were larger than his and terribly black, staring at him; her eyelashes much longer and curling. Her hair was down in northern style, tremendously long. Familiar black waves mingled with silver, less prickly than Jon’s own. From nearby he could see the almost imperceptible
wrinkles in the corners of her eyes, and, most of all, how much she had been crying.

“Mother,” Jon said and went to her without thinking. His arms closed around her short frame, and her face ended up buried in his shoulder. She was shaking from muted sobs. Jon forgot everything, his resentment, his disenchantment, his doubts. Never having a mother. Being forced to murder his father. Having been dead. Possibly being a ghost of his former self.

Lyanna exhaled a very faint scent of a northern flower, a rare one. Jon could not remember its looks, nor its name. Boys did not care for flowers, and men of the Night’s Watch had no use for them.

“Others take me,” mother cursed softly against his shoulder, looked up at his face and gave him a small, valiant smile through all her tears. “But you are much more handsome than in my eagle dreams. My big, strong son. Forgive me for saying so but your father… Rhaegar would be proud…”

It was terribly queer to hear all this, almost embarrassing for a man of his age. Yet the embrace was real, the woman, no, the lady, she was real. She was a Stark. She was his mother… she loved him.

“He was, I think,” Jon said shyly, dropping his arms down, meeting his mother’s questioning gaze from a safer distance than the terrifying closeness of an embrace. “Proud I mean.

“How?” she wondered, at loss for understanding. She sat down and Jon let himself sink on the bench next to her.

"He was left-handed, wasn’t he?" Jon asked, needing to double check the truth, for as much as he already knew it in his heart.

"Yes," mother said, "he could fight with both hands because they forced him to train and write right-handed in childhood, but left was his preferred one. The harp… you had it in your left arm as he would carry it."

"My shield arm," Jon mentioned.

"His sword arm or lance arm, if he could choose," Lyanna said weakly. Fresh tears ran down her cheeks. "Wait, he fought against you with…” The eagle in her remembered.

"Yes," Jon said. "With the wrong arm. He must have been resisting the curse that was overtaking him and helped me end it. He… I think he knew who I was. I wish I could bring his sword back to you-"

“Better not,” mother cut him off. “Ned brought me Arthur Dayne’s sword from the battlefield, thinking I was his sister, Ashara. Ned told me you died then. I nearly took my life with that blade, but then I heard that Ashara’s son lived through the slaughter of Rhaegar’s family and thought better. I ended up keeping it hidden for almost twenty years.”


“That one.” Lyanna agreed. “But… there should have been a lance,” she mentioned. “A very special one.”

“There wasn’t,” Jon said curtly, pointing at the bloody harp. “There was only this left in the snow.”

Mother shook her mane, pointedly not looking at the instrument. “He sang to me about Jenny of Oldstones just before leaving,” she blurted. “It was our song. He was always leaving me. Ever since we met. Serves me right for falling for the prince.”
“I am here,” Jon offered

“We are here,” she admitted. “But you will be leaving too, eventually.”

“That may be so,” Jon could not lie. “But we are both here now. After everything.”

“Indeed,” mother nodded knowingly, made a Stark face Jon would make. Not even Arya could make it that long. Yet in Lyanna the expression didn’t take away any of her beauty.

And when she stood up, to go and pick up father’s harp, Jon saw it. The swelling of her middle. Small, but present.

“I’ll bring it,” he reacted. “Please sit,” he said and carried the harp to her, so close that she could touch it if she wished.

“You are-” Jon finally dared say when Lyanna sat down, not knowing how he felt. “There is more than the harp left from father.”

“There is you,” mother replied to him lovingly. “There is you, Jon,” she repeated. "And there is-” she stuttered, caressing her belly. "Your new brother or sister. Rhaegar and I weren't that old when we were reunited. It happens naturally between husband and wife."

Jon remained silent as a tomb.

“And,” Lyanna continued, somewhat happier than before, “besides the ghosts you must have heard all about, you will find that there are many guests in this castle. There is one guest in particular you must be longing to see. I have to tell this to you as your mother, my son. It is not proper to court a young highborn woman for long. You risk losing your honour.”

“What?” Jon was embarrassed, not believing his own ears, which were perhaps getting red under his hair. Does she know? She must. Jon and Dany did much more than courting, to put it very mildly. Has Dany told her? Did women know? Do mothers see when their children love someone?

“Or is it your intention to dishonour your lady and find another more to your liking?” Mother sounded terribly disappointed all of a sudden.

“No, but-”

“I do not want to hear any of it, son,” his mother admonished him sternly. “And don’t you ever believe the stupid songs about your father and me. We have said our vows well in time. We carry our share of guilt for the Trident, and for handling Robert’s Rebellion poorly, but not for dishonouring each other. The world has changed in the past twenty years but not that much. I ask you to think of who you are and honour your inheritance. What if there is a child?”

She wants me to propose a match to Daenerys? Jon never presumed that much. There was the War and…

“Stannis is sending around some silly missive, to all noble houses of the realm,” his mother went on. “By the poor expressions he uses, it would seem that he has not learned his letters as well as he believes in his young age. No, I won’t let you see it because I burned it and it would have only upset you. He is robbing you of your claim by means of ugly slander. I… As Lyanna Stark, I mostly don’t give a damn about the remaining Six Kingdoms, nor about their Iron Throne. We have more land than we need in the North. But… I was with you, remember. In the Lands of Always Winter. You will need men to carry obsidian blades if we are to prevail. Many men. Also, when I married your father, I knew a day might come when I was to be… one of his two queens… and bear that role as
my duty. I cannot betray his memory. There is one way to contrary Stannis’ letter and assert your claim in deed, and not in word, which could also give you the swords the North needs.”

"The realm needs those swords, mother, not only the North," Jon said quietly. the

“The Others won't stop here if we are defeated, I’ll give you that,” mother turned pensive. “I just wish we did not need Southron help. And they will not want to help us, nor see that the peril is theirs as well. But they might follow their king to any end as the Trident clearly showed…,” Mother swallowed a huge sob, burying it in her chest, making Jon feel as helpless as a crawling baby. The burden of that past was not his. Until now.

Lyanna Stark wiped her nose with dignity in the grey sleeve of her gown and did her best to continue with the levity she did not feel. “Son, I was telling you-”

"You are telling me that I ought to marry,” Jon finally guessed, flabbergasted. It was what parents did, sealing marriage alliances for their children.

“"Yes,” mother said curtly, “And not in secret as I did. We ought to have a wedding here in Winterfell,” Lyanna went on, between serious and gracious, “Little food, not to waste any, and plenty of music and dance. Invite every lord in the realm, those we love and those we hate, including Stannis and the Lannisters of Casterly Rock. Give everyone six to eight weeks to travel north by land or by sea, as they prefer. I do hope though that the Lord Baratheon will politely refuse our kind invitation and continue writing stupid letters on his own. I might kill him if I see him any time soon, the guest right be damned.”

“"Why-?”

“I’ll tell you that last part on the morrow,” mother said, giddy and almost playful, though her sadness still lurked within her, set aside, but not vanquished. “But first you will promise me not to kill either Stannis Baratheon or Jaime Lannister out of spite and revenge, not matter what they have done and that you still don’t know of.”

"Why-?”

"Promise me, Jon,” his mother said adamantly.

"I promise," Jon did not find it in him to refuse her.

"Good,” Lyanna clapped her hands.

“Why Jaime Lannister? He is not here, is he?” Jon’s head swam with green, with white, with black, with grey and blue. “He is the third dragonrider!” he blurted, recognising that he had known it for a while. He had seen it through Rhaegal’s mind and refused to believe it.

“And he did push Ned’s son, Brandon, out of the window, crippling him for life,” Lyanna said mercilessly.

“He has to respond for that, hasn’t he?” Jon thundered hatefully.

“Your father spared him,” mother insisted

Jon’s lips thinned and he looked away, angry, not understanding. “So he ignored that crime, being king, in order to keep a dragonrider on his side. And you.. You…”

“Jaime is Rhaegar’s half-brother,” Lyanna said, “Rhaegar had no proof but he believed firmly that
Aerys fathered Jaime and Cersei, and was in love with their mother, not with Rhaegar’s. It explains everything. The incest, Joffrey’s madness, Jaime being chosen by a dragon. And Rhaegar remembers him… he remembered him as a young knight who had honour. Did you know Jaime was the only Kingsguard that dared voice objection to his sworn brothers after Aerys cruelly slaughtered my father and my brother Brandon? The only one who was sickened by watching?”

Jon stood up and paced as a caged wolf. “Sickened and did nothing. “Nothing?” Lyanna asked in disbelief. “He later killed Aerys, being one of his Seven. He had sacrificed his honour then, he did not lose it. He became a Kingslayer and a kinslayer so that Aerys wouldn’t burn the entire city of King’s Landing. There is now ample proof of this; the words of the surviving pyromancer, the stocks of wildfire under the Red Keep… Even so, Lannister accepted the hatred of all the realm for decades, never revealing the circumstances of his so-called crime, believing he deserved to be treated thus for betraying his vows!”

Lyanna paused and continued very quietly. “Jaime killed his father, Jon. And Rhaegar… he had pondered rising against his father many times, but he never had the strength, until it was too late. In the end he could not judge Jaime for his choices.”

“But Bran!”

“Brandon saw Jaime and Cersei. What do you think Robert would have done had he found out about the incest? The king who welcomed the dead, mutilated bodies of Rhaegar’s children when Tywin Lannister presented them to him covered in Lannister cloaks? Robert would have Jaime, Cersei and the children killed.”

Jon seethed. “What of Jory Cassel and father’s… Lord Eddard’s guards butchered lawlessly in the capital by Jaime’s men? There was word of that atrocity even on the Wall! I wish Jaime’s dwarf brother was a dragonrider! At least to him I could talk.”

“Rhaegar sent Jaime to Essos to fetch this dwarf brother, who ended up serving Daenerys in Meereen. The Imp seems to be the most knowledgeable man alive concerning any writings about the dragons, preserved or lost.”

Jon’s rage emptied itself, but only for a while. “You are asking too much.”

“You promised,” Lyanna said calmly, victoriously, knowing her son would not go back on his word. “One last remark on Jaime Lannister. He is not his sister, Jon. Her, I could kill her with bare hands after seeing her but a few times in my life. All she ever truly wanted was power.”

“Why didn’t you?” Jon asked brazenly.

“She turned mad and her son Tommen took her to Casterly Rock,” mother sounded almost as bloodthirsty as Jon’s dragon, as if not killing Cersei when she had a chance was something she deeply regretted. “The gods do not approve of sentencing mad women to death,” Lyanna told Jon dutifully, but she also seemed to be reminding herself of that law, bringing down her own hatred with great difficulty.

Strangely, it was Lyanna’s loathing of Cersei and not all her wise, moderate words in favour of Jaime Lannister that made Jon able to seriously consider what she told him, if not to have fondness for the man in question. Mother, there is so much of you in me. He had suspected it before, but to see it made him feel proud and strange and happy at the same time. I am not alone.

“Jon, what do you think of Mance Rayder?” Lyanna continued after a while.
“I trust him more than most people,” he replied instantly. “I’d have him as my counsellor in what is to come.”

“As you well should. And would this change if I told you he killed Ben shortly before you made his acquaintance?”

“Ben?” Jon did not understand.

“He would be Uncle Benjen to you,” Lyanna said sadly. “The wildlings would have challenged Rayder’s leadership if he did not slay Ben. After, Mance left my little brother in the woods without burning him, against the most sacred customs of his people. He could not burn him out of guilt. Ben is probably still alive… Well, not alive. He must be a wight, ranging forever. Don’t be surprised if you meet him next time you go North.”

“That is… that is…” Jon could not even tell how it was. His guts churned. Will I have to do for my uncle one day as I did for my father?

“Tell me now, Jon, and tell me truly, does hearing this change what you think of Mance? Do you wish to condemn him to death for this crime?”

Jon blushed. Effectively, he did not. He had lost hope long ago that his uncle was alive. Benjen was a ranger. Being killed by the wildlings was one possible destiny he could have encountered.

“Exactly how I feel about both Mance and Jaime,” Lyanna said, not needing his answer, knowing it in her soul. “I want to rip Jaime’s belly open for what he did to Ned’s son… But then I remember the youngest knight of the Kingsguard shamed publicly by Aerys before committing any crime… He was always different than his sister… With Mance… I remember the young crow skinny as a corpse I met in Shadow Tower. He has a few years on me, like your father, but back then he was just a famished wildling boy. This boy gave me, a well-fed lord’s daughter, a unique gift, an obsidian knife he had been crafting for months in his lonely cell. I am still carrying it. He did not recite empty words, he did not ask for any lady’s favour in return. He just said he rarely saw something beautiful in his life and that for this he would wish me to have a memory of him.”

“I don’t know mother,” Jon said honestly when she was done talking, “I do see your point, but I do not share it. When it comes to Jaime Lannister, I cannot. I won’t lie to you. Mance… Mance is different, I agree.”

“Fair enough. You promised, remember.”

“That I did,” Jon admired his mother’s cleverness and tenacity.

Lyanna remained very calm. “You should go now. I trust that you have a matter to settle, concerning a lady’s honour.”

Jon tried not to blush and succeeded only by half. “I shall see to it,” he said as carelessly as he was able. “But you—”

“I shall hold vigil here. I do not think I can sleep tonight,” Lyanna said, overjoyed and sad at the same time. “Do not worry, son. I am much better now that you are here than I have been for days. But… it will take some time before I am well. Can you understand this?”

“Yes,” Jon said, seeing her sorrow stalking her, mounting, waiting to emerge and take over. You still want to jump from the tower when your duty is done, don’t you? Promise that you will live out your natural life mother. Promise me.”
"I had thought-"

"To do your duty, I know," Jon said bitterly. **To live only until my brother or sister is born and weaned,** he assumed wildly. "I'm sorry but this is not enough for me, mother. Promise me!" She had forced his hand about Stannis and Jaime Lannister; surely he deserved a promise in return, after twenty years of living a lie.

"I promise, Jon," Lyanna Stark said sweetly, giving her son her most honest smile that night.

"I'll be going, then," Jon said, reluctant to leave. There were so many questions he still had. However, he sensed she had told him enough for one evening and that her strength to put on a brave face was at the end. "I shall let you know on the morrow if the wedding preparations are to begin."

"Very well," mother said primly, and faced her solitary candle once more, with non-seeing eyes.

Jon wondered if she saw father's face in the flames and if the promise he had obliged her to make was not too cruel a demand.

He strode out of the Great Hall through the back door, leading to a faintly lit gallery. This part of the castle looked as if he had never left it. Daenerys should be inside by now, but he had no idea where her chambers were or if she had any, especially if she had just flown to Winterfell like he had. **But how, if Stannis has her dragon and I have mine?**

*And Jaime Lannister has the third one...* The thought was stuck in his throat, stinging him like a wasp. **Maybe Jaime can die on his own, like they said that Theon did. Then Tyrion could take over...** Unless blood of the dragon is required... Jon would bet that it wasn't, if Rhaegal had chosen him who still felt more wolfish than anything else. The dragons were not only after those riders who shared their blood. **What are they after?** Jon wished he knew.

Wandering aimlessly down the empty corridors, with his head full of dragon nonsense in many colours, Jon’s legs brought him... to his own door. To the room he had as a boy. He pushed it open, curious. Behind it, fire cracked merrily in the hearth and the bed was made.

“I thought you'd stay with her," Daenerys surprised him completely, stepping out of the shadowed recess near the window.

“She… she chased me to you. She wiped and swallowed her tears and sent me away.”

“That would be your mother," Dany said knowingly. "She will cry all night in the corners now. That's what she did on the journey north from King's Landing when she worried about you and thought my brother wasn't watching. Rhaegar didn't know how to console her."

"How do you know?" Jon wondered. "I'm sorry to say so, but we... I mean the Starks. We don't really talk about this. Has father... has Rhaegar told you?"

Daenerys blushed. "No," she said shyly, "my pardons. It is just something I glimpsed through Drogon's mind. Your mother's tears and Rhaegar's constant worry for her. Haven't you ever seen hints about what other dragonriders were doing through your dragon's mind?"

When Jon thought back on it, he grew more afraid that Lyanna would take her own life on Rhaegal's back than in his feverish dreams. It was as if his dragon, or, more accurately, the dragons altogether, knew Rhaegar’s wife better than Jon possibly could, just from knowing himself and the stories about his mother. And there was the occurrence with Jaime Lannister... The knowledge Jon had acquired
and locked up in his mind.

"I've seen too many things," he answered Daenerys. "Frankly, the dragons are just strange beyond count. I discover something new every day. Half of the time I don't know what I'm seeing."

As he spoke, Jon allowed himself a good look at Daenerys. Instead of galloping desire he expected to feel, he found her… teary-eyed like his mother. "You have been crying as well," he said reproachfully.

"I have," she said timidly.

"Is it because of what I had to do?" he had to ask. "Do you want to go back on us? On our promises?"

"No," she shook her head and Jon was immensely relieved. "It's just that… I am the only one again. Rhaegar was the last one like myself. To lose him is terrible. And yet, I have foreseen it. I have seen my brother as a dead king with blue eyes in a vision, years ago. It was destiny, I think. If it exists."

There was manifestly something wrong with Dany's views of destiny. Father's eyes were blackened when he was becoming a monster and turned back to indigo when he died. Jon would never forget any of it.

"What of me?" Jon couldn't help asking.

"Most of the time you are everything I am not," Dany said, her tone going from sad to loving...

"Mother is right," Jon said firmly, coming closer to her.

"About what?"

"The Night's Watch killed me for as much as I wish they didn't. I say that counts as unsaying the vows of not taking a wife from the life I lost to them. This is what I should have asked you in the beginning," he snatched her hands, kissed them wolfishly.

"Ask me what?" she breathed out, staring at his lips, as she did for days when they had just met and he felt that he was going mad and wild from too vivid imagination.

"Marry me." Jon did not ask, he demanded.

To his surprise, Dany turned his back to him. What? Am I not enough in the end? You have surely made me think I was. A many-headed monster began waking in his soul, choking him. Has there been another while I was away?

"If you want to follow in your father's steps, you will need an heir," she said flatly, feigning indifference, informing him. "I do not think I can give you one. I am barren."

Her frightened words put the monster in his soul back to sleep. He did not care about having a child. He wanted her.

"I am far from claiming anything," Jon said, not giving up, "and the winter is far from over. Mother is keen on throwing us a wedding, I think. She believes it might bring us swords in winter and she may not be wrong. We need men. The enemy has greater numbers than you can imagine. I've seen them. Mother too. In… in her eagle dreams."

"I hate weddings," Dany said poignantly.
"I have yet to make up my mind about them," Jon remarked, "It will be the first one for me."

"And a third one for me," Dany added darkly, spying Jon for reaction. "I was sold into my first marriage for a promise of an army and I sold myself into the second one for a promise of peace. None of the promises were kept. Why should ours be any different?"

Because they concern love. No army and no peace.

"Are you married?" The monster in Jon's soul galloped, wishing to cut down all Dany's husbands with flaming magic swords.

"I am widowed," she said calmly. "Twice."

She didn't seem willing to share any more information about her late husbands, nor did Jon want to hear it, just like he would never tell her about Ygritte. Somehow, this would be terribly unfair, both to Daenerys and to Ygritte's memory.

"Marry me," he demanded again. "As soon as it can be arranged."

"Love me," she demanded back, denying him a straightforward answer.

Jon was torn between two instincts, to love her madly or to make her agree to the match first, with cold head. Contraried, he paced nervously up and down his old room. "Why of all places did you choose to wait here?" He could not understand.

"I found it unoccupied," Dany said simply. "The bed was dusty on top, but made. I took off the furs, shook the bedding a bit. The fire… had been made by someone," she said hesitantly.

A ghost, Jon thought. Or a very diligent servant.

"Did you hear any odd music?" Jon wondered, suspicious, listening hard. Thankfully, the only sound was silence.

"Not now," Dany said. "Only before when the statues woke and marched to defend Winterfell. At first, I was going to wrap myself in dusty furs and sit in front of the Great Hall, to see if you would come out and when, but then you showed here."

"Ser Barristan and the ladies?"

"Fast asleep and seemingly in good health. We should be able to ask them questions on the morrow."

Jon picked up his old pillow, turned it around, suspicious. "I slept in this bed the night before I left for the Wall," he told her. "I think it's the same bedding. No one bothered to clean after the bastard. Or they washed it once a year and put it back."

"You know that I don't care about any of it, your past, a bit of dirt," Dany declared. "I have been ill for a week fearing you would not return. When the fever stopped, I discovered Stannis had my dragon and planned to use him to take Winterfell from your mother. Ser Barristan and I had to steal a ride on Drogon's paws to come here and try to do something… And we would only end up captive or dead if your castle didn't turn out to be haunted."

You were ill as well? What have you dreamed about, Dany? Losing your brother?

"Love me," Daenerys asked of him, so very sweetly. "Now. Quit being the honourable Stark for the
night. Be my Jon. *Jon Snow*. That's who I fell in love with. The one who lived alone in this room. It's a nicer one than many lodgings I was given as a beggar princess," She struggled inefficiently to get out of his doublet.

Jon lost the wits he still may have had after talking to his mother. He helped Dany unburden the upper part of her body, cupped her small, firm breasts, kissed them, licked them, somehow stepped out of his breeches at the same time. Suddenly, she pulled his smallclothes down and went to her knees, grabbing his arse for support, kneading it.

Jon wanted to refuse this, not wanting it to be the first thing they did after their separation, but saying no to women who loved him had never been one of his strengths. His flesh parted ways with his spirit. She was tasting him with a generosity that frightened him. All he could do was keep his hands in her hair, thrust involuntarily and wait until his legs became weak, gasping helplessly in the end.

After a moment, Jon gathered himself, scooped Dany into his arms and dumped her unceremoniously on his old bed. Dany laughed at his insolence, pulling him down with her. There, on his sheets, he caressed every part of her. She let herself be lost in his touch and guided his hands to her most private places. To his marvel, this time she showed him what to do and how with more openness and detail than before, occasionally kissing his chest and waking his manhood back to life.

He, Jon Snow, had a princess in his bed. It was unbelievable. His eyes were lost to her beauty and his heart to the tender and fearless woman behind it.

"I can't wait," he warned her when he was ready again, wanting to have her badly in the most common way. Perspicacious as the gods had made him, Jon always suspected Dany sometimes only tolerated that out of love…and found the peak of her pleasure before or after when he touched her or kissed her between her legs.

She purposefully rolled away from him, lay on her back and spread her legs impossibly wide in the light of the fireplace. She placed her hand in her opening, stirring her wetness. Jon's eyes went wide. A fresh wave of desire in him felt almost painful.

"Come," she said, touching herself as she had made him do before. Her smell drove him mad, sweet as summer.

He covered her with his body and buried himself deep inside her, harder than he would have wanted. His face ended up on her tiny shoulder, but she quickly yanked him back, made him look into her eyes.

"As far as it goes and as long as you can take it," she said. It was not a plea, just like his marriage proposal hadn't been a question. It was another demand, a very serious one. "Like this, looking at me. I need to see you every moment."

Jon rose on his arms, not parting his dark gaze from Dany's violet one, and gave in to her request and his desire to move freely. At some point he understood why she did what she did in the very beginning. If she did not, he would never be able to go as long, not after having been apart from her.

Soon after, he saw the obvious signs of her trembling with pleasure under him. Dany looked dazed, changed, as if she had found bliss from sheer looking at Jon's face and body, and not only from his best efforts to please her. Before, she would urge him to stop when she was this far, no matter what they did, too sensitive to continue for much longer. And mostly he would be ready to spend himself after having her so freely. Yet now she continued meeting his hips, reaching farther; beyond the limits of her strength, or his. Their coupling lasted forever. His own satisfaction eluded him. He chased it for awhile and then forgot about it, thrusting, thrusting, thrusting mindlessly.
"Yes," she pleaded, always meeting him halfway.

He had never been deeper inside her or done it harder from the beginning. But now, somehow, she was inviting him to go beyond. She was searching with her hips, searching… until their bodies connected so that he was both buried inside her and reaching the outer parts of her woman's place at the beginning and at the end of every thrust. Her body became taut as a bowstring, as he had not seen it before, stiffening with expectation.

Tensing to the extreme, insistent in clinging to Jon, Dany took him in deeper than he thought possible, striving to have him arrive every time exactly at that place where he kept touching her inside and out.

"That's it," she said helplessly, tightening...

Then, slowly letting go, Dany began writhing as an angry dragon in his flight. As she soared, she did not thirst for blood, but for an exquisite kind of pleasure. She completely lost her pace when her body contracted wildly, from her back to her pretty legs.

Jon continued thrusting with abandon, and heard Dany sob, heard himself moan, felt himself tense. Unexpectedly, he burst from his own pleasure and went limp. She was hanging onto him and he never pulled out. She kissed him and… smelled him. She had never done that before. He nuzzled her face, sniffing her back. Sweat was everywhere, hers and his. The winter was a distant memory. Their bodies remained joined; two heads of the dragon, intertwined.

_The wights do not sweat._

_Do they?_

They remained as they were, breathing, kissing slowly, grinning at each other in-between.

"Jon," Dany was the first one to speak after a long while; her voice weak and sweet. "Just make certain that I don't have to wear floppy ears. I hate those much more than weddings."

Jon nodded, not quite knowing what she meant. "No floppy ears," he said decisively, eager to satisfy her every wish. "But we are going to need proper cloaks with all the guests mother means to invite." He preferred not to dwell on the sigil he would surely have to use.

It mattered not.

When he died a second time, the chances were he would die a married man.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Jaime, Sandor, Gendry

Comments are love.
Jaime III

Chapter Summary

Thank you, TopShelfCrazy for help with improving this chapter )))

Chronologically, this happens after Rhaegar dies but before Jon and Dany wake from their illness, let's say on the first/second day of their illness, which lasts a week for both of them. Before Dany, Davos, Aegon and Jon chapter. But it didn't make sense to insert it previously because in a way it is opening a way further into the story, and it would only break the continuous action of the previous set of chapters.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jaime

"Jaime," a very familiar voice said with concern and a hint of well-masked despair. It did not belong to his beloved wife. "I've brought us this far. Move your sorry arse! Command your bloody dragon! They are killing them."

They were a numerous company of sellswords from the Free Cities, colourful and entirely ruthless, bringing with them as help two bloodthirsty tigers and a huge elephant; fighting under the banners of the first daughter of Valyria - the ancient and noble city of Volantis. Great Malaquo Maegyr's army, which had almost listed Jaime and Brienne into their ranks, had arrived to Westeros, marching over the Broken Arm of Dorne, mended by the freezing of the narrow sea in winter.

Them were bony, dark-skinned men armed with spears, wearing cloaks in all colours of the rainbow. Those in the back ranks, still untouched by the progress of fighting, shivered in mildly cold weather, which probably represented the strongest winter any of them had ever experienced.

In front, in the middle of the first line of the defenders, there was an amber-coloured man with a sleepy, soft face and smooth white hair. Seated in an open palanquin, he was visibly crippled from gout. Yet his dark eyes were shrewd and alert. He was armed as a leader, holding a spear in a hand that turned red and had joints swollen from the sickness that ailed him.

Next to him, a tall, square, grey-haired man wielded an impressive axe, with a shaft at least six feet long, not letting any warrior near his master. But as the guard skillfully beheaded the last human attacker, a tiger was released on him by a sellsword in charge of the beasts. The animal buried its teeth into the armoured leg of the man with the axe, finding a weak spot around the knee. The axe dropped to the ground as a consequence of the savage bite, and the tiger-attacked man strove uselessly to retrieve it. The beast would soon do for the guard, and break its fast on his crippled master next.

"Sunspear!" One more rank of defenders plunged into the battle with a strident cry.

Prince Doran Martell. Dorne. Myrcella. Where is she? The wheels in Jaime's head began to turn, not very rapidly.
Jaime straightened, his own battle sense rising to full alert. He carried no weapon and felt as weak as after his first dragon sickness when Brienne nursed him to health. *Brienne?* He looked back. To his utmost surprise, his wife was not seated behind him as she should have been. There was only - *Tyrion.*

*I did Rhaegar's bidding this time.* In the past, Jaime had failed him by not protecting his wife. *First wife. Princess Elia.* The thought that he did better this time was mildly pleasing.

*But why is Brienne not here?*

"Jaime," Tyrion said dryly, with growing alarm in his mismatched eyes. "Please do something to help them. You are the damned dragonrider, not I."

Truth be told, Jaime did not like the tiger; it made him recall a black bear in a pit, attacking Brienne in that awfully pink dress; and the Dornishmen *did have* Myrcella.

*Viserion, catch!* He called in his head and made his mount dive madly forward. The dragon spun wildly around the axis of his own body, like a huge, white and golden arrow. Before, they flew like this only for Jaime's and Viserion's amusement. Tyrion screamed and Jaime basked in the motion, waking up fully from it. In an instant, Viserion had the offending tiger in his paws. The guard still had his leg when he crawled away and hung onto his master's palanquin; conscious and alive. From there, he kept swinging his axe, although his precision lessened.

Two short, dark-skinned men and a tall pale one that must have come from the Dornish mountains, all armed with spears, assumed positions around their prince. Martell's gaze followed the dragon, dazed.

*Kill? All? Burn?* Viserion suggested happily.

A lovely inferno of flames, red, orange and yellow, surged in Jaime's mind as a gift from his scaled companion.

*No, shut up, will you? What you want is not beautiful at all. Jaime thought of a roasted tiger instead. Tasty. Crisp. Filling. You have been ill again like I. Jaime's stomach was crying for nourishment and he firmly believed Viserion was not spared that basic weakness for being a dragon. Hunger.*

Dragon took this instruction to heart. He launched the tiger he had in his paws high up into the air, baked it, caught it in his maw as it fell, and swallowed it whole. The second tiger soon suffered a similar digestive destiny. His passing was followed by a belch of stinky fire, expelled forcefully from Viserion's churning belly.

*Can you still fly?*

This offended Viserion. In his sinuous way of speech followed by images in Jaime's head, he insisted he *could* fly both hungry and stuffed, unlike the two-legged manly dragons who had to rest and sleep after feeding *and* making eggs, he added meanly.

*Good for you,* Jaime thought cheerfully, and dreamed of crunchy pork or something else nourishable.

Faced with the feeding, belching dragon, the sellswords lost momentum in their onslaught. The elephant walked prudently away, unwilling to be the next course on the dragon's feast, shedding its riders off his back as it rampaged away. The tide began to turn in favour of the Dornishmen, chasing the enemy before them, back into the frozen sea from whence they came.

Jaime took a good look at the entire battlefield and beyond. Another company of sellswords was

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Jaime took a good look at the entire battlefield and beyond. Another company of sellswords was
coming to join the first one, marching over the frozen sea. The odds that now favoured the defenders would soon change again.

Memories flooded him in a moment of respite. Jaime and Brienne were together in… Asshai. A company of masked men and women welcomed them. Where are you, my love? The shadowbinders were friendly, more serious than septons, and they would take them to Tyrion. Here, Jaime's memory blurred and narrowed dangerously. He looked back. Yes. Tyrion was truly behind him.

This latest dragon-caused illness had lasted shorter than Jaime's first one he had suffered in the Vale. Moreover, it felt as if it had been cut short before it served its purpose; that of helping another dragon to heal. Jaime wondered which one was in need of healing now, for he did not see it in his sleep. The last time it was the green dragon, Rhaegal, who almost died of flying diligently over the Wall and farther, to a land closed to him by magic. Rhaegal either did not recognise on time that his flight could kill him, or he chose to ignore the danger so as to save his rider. Rhaegar's son. A tall, grim, black-haired stranger. Jaime did not remember the so-called Stark bastard from Winterfell. Truth be told, in his impeccable arrogance he didn't remember any of the Stark children. Years later, when he vowed to return her daughters to Lady Catelyn, he tried hard to recall how they looked and found the endeavour useless.

Liar.

He would still recognise one of the children at any time; the boy he attempted to kill.

Jaime wanted to share the important knowledge of the causes of dragon sickness with Brienne many times, but somehow he always forgot, or maybe he just did not want to add another to the long list of her concerns for him. Since that first bout of it, that left him incapacitated for days, Jaime strongly suspected Brienne occasionally checked if he breathed in his sleep.

This time, Jaime experienced a premonition or a dragon sort of understanding that he and Viserion were needed awake, and, as it turned out, in Dorne. As a consequence, their health was reestablished earlier.

Where do you keep Myrcella?

You didn't kill her, did you?

Kill, the dragon echoed, eyeing the fresh Volantene army with the undiminished appetite for burning.

No, Jaime disagreed strongly. A thought of a dead dragonlord resonated in him; it was a sin to unnecessarily take a life in winter. Any life.

Rhaegar… is dead? Viserion almost wept at the notion.

He shouldn't be. Jaime refuted it as unlikely.

Jaime was so close to Myrcella now…

But where is Brienne?

Viserion, who must have known it, just as he had known where to find Tyrion, kept a prudent, golden dragon silence about this fundamental uncertainty that haunted his rider.

Below, among the growing number of corpses on both sides, the blue and orange cloaks of the Dornishmen mingled with all sorts of armour from across the sea.
Viserion opened his maw and exhaled smoke instead of fire. *Burn?* He suggested to Jaime, wishful, wishful...


His dragon was… *proud* of Jaime for restraining him, maybe; a very odd consideration for a tireless white monster. Besides, burning did seem perfectly reasonable as a means to victory. The Volantenes kept coming over the mended arm. The Dornishmen were in too small a number and weary from the effort, despite fighting bravely. Reasonable or not, Jaime could not resort to unleashing the seven hells of flame on any man, in order to win.

There was, however, a stripe of space left empty on the thick ice, between one company of sellswords and the next one. Faithful to their fame for disagreements and treason, the paid soldiers did not march as one body.


Dragonfire flared and burned the ice, consumed it… Jaime watched his success with wide green eyes, enthralled by the sea that slowly conquered the broadening gap in the formerly solid, silvery crust, with its cold, white foam and sparkling grey waves.

The enemy advance was split in two. On the side of Sunspear, both the attackers and the defenders turned fierce from it, the former sensing defeat and the latter certain victory.

"Stop it! Stop!" Jaime screamed from above.

He had cut down a dozen men in the Whispering Wood before being captured and he did not care in the least. But now with every loss of life the day grew shorter and the night longer still… until one day only darkness would remain. They had to stop fighting, all of them. *Now.*

He landed forcefully between the two sides, ignoring Tyrion's peeping at his back. His brother surely had something clever to say, but Jaime could not listen to him now.

After a few well measured swishes of dragon's tail, sweeping friend and foe alike, all combat stopped. The enemy put their weapons down and a white tunic up into the air. The companies left on the sea retreated, but not far. They made camp on ice amidst the frozen waves. Jaime wondered how far it was to walk back to Volantis and if another good portion of dragonsbreath would send Malaquo Maegyr's army home. The Dornishmen took the surviving attackers prisoners.

"Why did you choose to help him?" Prince Doran asked from his palanquin, pointing at his shield's torn leg. "He knows he might die doing his duty."

"His death was unnecessary," Jaime cut off, unsure why he did it. "Because the man fought bravely. Where is Myrcella?"

"Jaime Lannister…" Doran said quietly. "Or not," he added, observing the dragon. "What do you call yourself now?"

"You know very well who I am." Jaime said insolently, unwilling to discuss his identity. Having had two possible and equally cruel fathers was a source of daily torment he did not care to explain to the likes of Doran Martell. "I imagine ravens bring news everywhere in this land. Sent by King Rhaegar, Lord Varys or any other gossip or treason-prone lord or lady in the realm. I'm Myrcella's father. I suppose that her betrothal to your younger son is at an end."
Doran Martell eyed him curiously. "Follow me," he said coldly.

Jaime opted for flying behind the prince. He didn't relish walking in his company. His life was not worth much in Dorne. Princess Elia and her children were slain by Lannister men in the sack of King's Landing, and given orders by Tywin Lannister in person. As any other place, Dorne was fast to remember, and extremely slow to forget the atrocity committed against its own, especially one of that magnitude.

Despite the oppressive greyness of winter, the shadow city of Sunspear was a marvel of colour and sound. On another day, Jaime could get lost in it, preferably with Brienne. He would take her to a tavern, make her drink a glass of good Dornish wine, and then take her to see the puppeteers Dorne was famous for. The sooner they would end up kissing, or making eggs as Viserion might put it, the better.

The castle of the Martells was an imposing structure dominated by two tall towers in its middle; the Spear Tower and the Tower of the Sun. The windows and the doors were rather small in comparison, not befitting the dragon. Jaime dismounted. As a second thought, he ordered Viserion to keep his little brother alive and well, and not listen to any nonsense Tyrion might tell him. How he hates me and being brought back to Westeros against his will to drink himself to death across the sea.

Then, Jaime followed the prince through the gate, into a shady courtyard adorned with a pretty fountain, in front of the entrance to one of the high towers. Viserion stayed near, promising to burn a huge hole into the tower wall if his rider was threatened. Tyrion kept complaining, the dragon suggested, but Viserion was a good dragon and wouldn't listen.

Thirsty and hungry to the extreme after his feverish sleep, Jaime bent and drank a mouthful of ice cold water from the fountain, happy that it did not taste of sulphur, as the air on Viserion's back did after all the burning. Except that… His throat itched now, most unpleasantly.

"Oh, it's poisoned," Prince Doran warned him in a fatherly tone. His voice came out of nowhere, penetrating the newly formed haze in Jaime's mind. "In case that the slavers from Volantis made it to here. Don't fret, Lannister. You shall be my dear guest today."

xxxxxxx

"Nym," a very familiar womanly voice admonished, tender and cruel at the same time. "You can't bed an unconscious man. It is called rape. Even in Dorne. See, the antidote I gave him begins to work. He is coming about."

Jaime's green eyes snapped open. An unknown, very pretty, dark-skinned woman observed him as a tasty dish, groping one of his legs in direction of his manly parts. A familiar blond-haired one, on the other hand, studied him with the coldness of a maester.

I am dreaming, Jaime thought and closed his eyes, stubbornly so. But his daydream lacked Brienne to be true, and it did contain women whose presence he did not require at all.

"Tyene, stop it," the groping southern beauty protested. "You've acted like a real septa since your stay up north when you pretended to be one. Uncle Doran told us to wake him. Maybe I stirred him back to life and not your precious antidote."

"Our uncle also told you, Nym, to travel to King's Landing and represent Dorne on the small council. Not that you should delay your journey by taking lovers on the way from here to there. We thought you had come to harm in the time you were missing," Tyene sounded every bit as poisonous as the
stuff Jaime unwittingly ingested.

"It would have been useless to hurry, don't you think? I heard that the small council dissolved during my travel so I changed my orders. I'd even sent a raven to our uncle to excuse myself. Is it my fault that the birds are shot and eaten in winter? Go back to your cell, Tyene! At least I didn't befriend Rhaegar's northern wife believing her to be Dornish… You are lucky that Uncle Doran did not have your head for that treason to our house. He only imprisoned you in the Spear Tower, he even gave you Arianne's former cell no less-"

"No, you are not dead, my lord of Lannister," a third, very fat womanly voice interrupted. "But you might yet wish you were, I know, when you hear my younger sisters squabbling."

Jaime opened his eyes widely.

A few steps ahead of him stood Oberyn Martell come to life, squeezed into a less comely womanly shape, armed with a sturdy spear.

"Obara, you are free to go now, I'd say," Tyene Sand, the only sand snake Jaime knew, advised the manly one with a spear. "There'll be no more need to carry him."

"I agree," Nym was also eager to send her warrior sister away. "I heard from Uncle Doran that he wants you to oversee the defences of the city in his short absence."

"Nymeria," Tyene interrupted and continued almost politely. "Please, before my help against poisoning was required, you were kind to shorten my time in confinement by telling me about wooing men who don't share our free customs of Dorne. Do tell me more instead of pulling the manhood of one of them. Jaime Lannister has been newly married. And our uncle said he needed a word with him as soon as he was up, so you don't have that much time or chance to seduce him."

"You have to feign utmost innocence, my dear, to win over any of them Northmen for more than just a tumble, not only look vaguely childlike with your blond locks," Nym affirmed with knowledge, fidgeting with her sister's hair. Thankfully, she let go of Jaime due to that gesture, before he was forced to shake her off by giving her a good kick with the leg she offended, and slighting the Martells further.

"Pretending to be doe-eyed and stupid is key. Then, they will eat from your hand," Nym concluded, pulling a surprised, wide-eyed face to illustrate her point.

Jaime chuckled in disbelief. Women can be mad.

"What, act as if I were a shy maid…?" Tyene asked in shock. "Why?"

"Never stand up to them, never look up into his eyes-" Obara singsonged cynically in a gruff voice, adding her advice, not leaving to oversee any defences.

"Never show you know how to bed them, they want to be the ones showing you-" Nymeria lectured.

Jaime did love innocence in women, but the advice Tyene was receiving was clearly an exaggeration and woefully inaccurate. He felt the urge to rebel and tell her the truth on behalf of non-Dornish men, or maybe men in general, whose minority viewpoint he represented here. "If a man doesn't want you, there is little you can do to change that by running after him, wench," he finally stated with indifference. "This may sound cruel, but it is true. And if he does want you, he'll come around, no matter if you are timid or not, regardless of how you look or dress and what you do."

Tyene's amber skin flushed, showing there was genuine innocence left in her, no matter how she
thought of herself.

*There is some left in all of us, perhaps.*

The sand snake in need of instruction opened her mouth to ask Jaime something, and then closed it instantly, looking elsewhere. Jaime wondered why she dyed her hair black months ago, when he had met her, during Mance's mummemy.

"Beloved nieces! As I have mentioned, I do require a moment of peace with our dear guest, without your charming company," an amiable, princely voice said from the direction in which Tyene had looked, cutting short his niece's best efforts at enlightenment about wooing men.

When the ladies left, Doran Martell gestured to Jaime to come closer to his palanquin. Jaime obeyed with as little haste as possible. He would not bow to anyone in needless submission, regardless of his family's crimes against his host's family. He sincerely hoped this was not expected from him.

Surprisingly, the sovereign of Dorne did not offer or demand any habitual greeting or courtesy for a man of his position. Instead, he unceremoniously handed over two open, unrolled letters, which he had previously kept hidden under the blanket that covered his swollen, crippled legs.

"Read," the prince commanded.

"But..." Neither of the two missives was directed to Jaime, and he did recognise both broken sigils and handwritings more than well...

Doran helped him by summarising one of them. "Lord Stannis Baratheon claims Rhaegar Targaryen is dead and asks for our allegiance, as the lawful heir of Houses Baratheon and Targaryen and the most powerful dragonrider," he said wistfully and with certain contempt.

Robert Baratheon had said *nothing* to Elia's cruel fate at the hands of the Lannister men, Jaime remembered. Dorne had no love for stags.

"I trust that all nobles in the realm have received a copy of it," Martell drooled on, "just as they have one where Stannis proclaims the truth of Joffrey Baratheon's bastardry. How unoriginal." He paused and went on in a more sincere, perplexed voice. "And here I thought Rhaegar died twenty years ago. How many times can a man die?"

"But this… this other letter…" Martell hesitated. "You will find that it concerns you as well. I admit that I did not want to believe in its contents, not at all. I thought that the bloody dragon was pulling my hair in old age... But now I begin to see the truth of it, odd as it may be. Do read for yourself. The dead cannot be harmed..."

Hearing the pessimistic tone of Doran Martell's last words, Jaime wondered if this was true. *Maybe the dead just keep suffering, as they did in this life, and now they continue in the next…*

*Rhaegar is dead?* At first, Jaime found this hard to believe, as though he knew in his soul that this could not be true. Strange, irrational convictions aside, a lot could happen in Westeros while he flew to Asshai with his wife. In the past, Joffrey was murdered in the time it took Jaime to travel from Riverrun to King's Landing with Brienne.

Jaime opened Rhaegar Targaryen's letter to Doran Martell with shaky hands, curious to know what it said about the past that had doomed them all, and dishonoured some.

*Excellency,*
I dare write to you concerning a great lady who occupied a place of special importance in my life, and not only in yours; your beloved sister, and my first wife, beautiful and kind, Princess Elia. I believe she may have never talked to you or anyone else about her marriage to my humble person, for reasons that largely concern me and certain matters we wanted to keep private at the time.

I shall never presume to call myself your good-brother after the shame of the Trident.

Know that at the moment when you will be reading this letter, I shall probably be truly dead, or as good as dead. My destiny is veiled in the black colour of my house and only the gods are able to see what is behind. Before this comes to pass, I feel the necessity to inform you of the entire truth of my marriage to your sister, unpleasant and insufficient as it may be. It is all I can offer you now.

You will have noticed that I have not sent this letter by mere raven, for I do not wish to share certain givens of my life with the Seven Kingdoms, nor for them to become a part of commonly known history, if this world is to continue after the night which is now falling on the realm of men.

Moreover, I insist in informing you, painful as the mention must be, that not even my second wife is privy to them and with this I have said much, for it is the only secret I have kept from her.

I married a man grown and not a lad of five and ten. Princess Elia, likewise, had not been very young. I had never thought either of us would find any joy in this marriage, made for politics, and not for love. Initially, I vowed I would give her my respect. I would never hit my wife as my Father had often done with Mother in their later years...

Unlikely as it is, I swear this to be true: I came into my marriage bed an innocent.

As you well know, this requirement which is expected and demanded from women is a most uncommon and almost shameful feat for any man, unless he is and remains a septon or a maester. On our wedding night, I was grateful for Dornish customs favouring love, which made it possible that my young wife was slightly less innocent than me. Though untouched, as a proper princess of blood, she had at least kissed a man before.

Elia... she helped me overcome my unspeakable shyness and fear in matters between a husband and wife from that first night. She was incredulous that a man of my age and reputation for women throwing themselves at me, be it for my position or appearance, the jousting prowess or the gift of music, had lived untouched until his wedding day.

I told her that under all this, at that time there was and perhaps there still is now, a taciturn boy in love with books, who could not open up to a woman due to both his character and upbringing, or only with extreme difficulty.

I cared deeply for Elia. I loved her soon after we were married, or so I thought at the time. I firmly believed I would never feel anything remotely similar for any other woman. We moved to Dragonstone to stay away from my family, especially from my father. Though my mother had also been a difficult person in her own right, especially after life had treated her unkindly. The womanly warmth was gone from her by the time I was six and ten.

The time on Dragonstone, during which Rhaenys was born, had been the happiest, the least burdened part of my life. I still believe and hope it was the same for Elia.

With the birth of our daughter, Elia and I found out that becoming with child again would mean my wife’s certain death. We did not tell this to my parents. She became bed ridden. We were both afraid of this news so we stopped sharing a bed and did not think far into the future. We found unmeasured joy in our daughter and in small gestures of intimacy which did not involve coupling.
I returned to thinking that I was perhaps made to live as a septon for I did not suffer greatly on the account of this separation of body, nor did Elia ever complain about it. Arthur teased us we were like an old couple, and Elia, she said she was happy... I... I was happy. I needed nothing else.

When Father insisted on more heirs, Elia and I both thought of adopting Arthur's newborn son, who had to be hidden on account of illicit love of a Kingsguard, between a brother and sister no less. This, as you know, does not strike as repulsive any descendent of the House Targaryen, much less myself, a fruit of such union.

Elia had an understanding for Arthur and Ashara in particular; for being special as they were, and Dornish like herself. Elia and I decided together to present Aegon as our own, not thinking about the consequences, nor about the legitimate heir to the Iron Throne.

When I looked back to my family history, I considered that any son of Arthur's, my best friend, and a good man on all counts, could only be more noble than some of my ancestors who had sat on that ugly chair. And observing the incidence of silver hair in the House Dayne, Elia and I concluded that at least some dragon blood must run in their family so it was the best we could do in our predicament and theirs. I was loath to separate from Elia, or to be forced to take a second wife at that time for the sake of producing more heirs...

Only after Aegon was "born", we announced to my family that we could not have any more children... Besides, Aegon would marry Rhaenys one day. If the gods wanted it, the lawful bloodline of mine would continue.

I fear that the rest is history. My father commanded me to travel North. There, I discovered what else love could be. I am not trying to justify falling in love, again, because nothing I can say makes my initial sin any better. I had made Elia unhappy in the end, at the tourney of Harrenhal, for not being able to keep my new emotions in check.

I will only say this, not in my defence, but to illustrate the truth of what I experienced. It is rumoured that the Prince of Dorne also married for love. If this is so, then you know sufficiently well what it is and what it can do to a man; once we lose all our pride and realise in the pit of our being that we were not made to be septons in the end.

If I ascended to the Iron Throne at that time, instead of riding to the Trident, I very seriously intended to have two queens, and honour them both equally. I would have never treated Elia less well because of the overwhelming nature of my affection to my second wife-to-be. Though perhaps the crime of loving Elia less was a cruelty in its own right and nothing I could do would have ever offset its bitterness.

History shows amply that good intentions are nothing if they are not followed by deeds. On the Trident, I have failed miserably in protecting everyone I ever held dear. The realm bled on account of my unpreparedness and weakness.

For as long as I am miraculously left alive and aware of myself, I shall try and do better. Maybe by acting with true prudence a small part of my sins will one day be redeemed.

No, Excellency, I do not seek your forgiveness for the tragedy of the past for I shall never be able to forgive myself.

As I shall never forget Rhaenys and Elia.

Yours respectfully,
Rhaegar Targaryen

P.S. Watch the narrow sea every day. Look hard. Call your spears and hide your innocents. The slavers from Volantis will cross over soon. The people of Dorne will be able to choose to go to Essos as slaves or to fight and stay in Westeros, which might be doomed to death from the old evil that has woken far north beyond the Wall.

How do I know all this? Suffice to say that a newly made dragonlord has his ways… Should you fight, know that a dragon shall come and assist you. Not mine, another, the one who has made me aware of your predicament. Please, do not kill him for it. There are only three left in the world.

P.P.S. One day, when the War of Winter is hopefully won, I trust that you will ponder the matter of inheritance to the Iron Throne impartially and with wisdom. Should you find my son, Jon Targaryen, more worthy than the other pretenders, and should he be alive to claim his inheritance, I do hope that you will consider accepting him, rather than going into war against him, only on account of his father's mad blood.

Neither man spoke for a long while after Jaime finished reading. The silence between enemies turned… companionable.

"I read it and I wanted to strangulate Rhaegar with my bare, crippled hands," Doran finally stated.

"But you did call your spears," Jaime had to note.

"I did," Doran Martell smiled sadly and looked tremendously weary. He smoothed the blanket covering his crippled legs. He did not have it in battle.

"So you did believe Rhaegar over Stannis?"

"Belief is too great a word," the Dornish prince said bitterly. "I had no faith in Rhaegar until today, when his house has helped mine as he said. Yet only a fool would ignore that Stannis' letter was brought by a mere raven and Rhaegar's by the huge black dragon… The black beast found me in the Water Gardens. I expected it to burn me for my many mental treasons and murderous thoughts towards his rider over time. Instead, it ceded a rolled parchment to me with utmost care, from one of its enormous clawed paws. The beast acted as if it were… human. As a human messenger would. No, human is not the good word. It was… clever."

"Do pardon my ignorance, but didn't you favour the surviving Targaryens over the Baratheons and Lannisters?" Jaime's knowledge of politics seemed tragically insufficient. He began to regret leaving Tyrion behind on purpose.

"Yes," the prince saw no fault in his own logic. "I did conspire with the supporters of the last Targaryens, Rhaegar's brother and sister, against the Baratheons and Lannisters. But hearing Rhaegar lived was different. Infuriating. I could never forgive him for humiliating and abandoning my sister."

Belatedly, Jaime understood one of the many things his little brother had been trying to tell him and to which Jaime refused to listen. So that he wouldn't have to face Tyrion and remember Tysha, the lie he told him about her being a whore and the cruel ending of his brother's marriage, orchestrated by their beloved father.

Tyrion, son of Tywin, must have calculated the political odds from the moment the dragon brought them to Sunspear. Prince Doran had been fooling the realm by concealing the illness that had incapacitated him, on top of spreading news he had more fighting men than he could ever truly call
to his banner. Even father… Lord Tywin… was fooled by this ruse, believing Dorne posed a military threat and that its ruler was in the prime of his strength. Also, the prince had fame for being cowardly and prudent, to complete a picture of a dangerous enemy who would nonetheless stay quiet and peaceful if he was not provoked.

From close by, the ruling Prince of Dorne was anything but a coward. And despite their manifest weakness, had they lost, the Dornish would do to the Volantenes what they did to the Targaryens in the past; the survivors would retire to the desert and to the mountains, poison the wells, ruin the food, and bleed their new conquerors for years to come, until they either left or made peace with the local population.

Jaime thought of that indomitable spirit as… admirable. He cleaned his throat and decided to act responsible, hoping both his fathers would burn harder in seven hells for it, hating him. "I was very young at the time of… of the Battle on the Trident, and Rhaegar and Arthur never let me in their confidence, on account of my age and my… my father. Yet from what I saw back then, and in the little time I spent with Rhaegar now, I would swear that every word he wrote to you is true."

"He was proclaimed king, wasn't he?"

Jaime nodded.

"Yet he did not bother to include the First of His Name and all his other titles in his letter," Doran said pensively.

"I am certain that Stannis included every title he means to take and a few more," Jaime said bitterly. "He always felt entitled to them merely because he had always done his duty."

Prince Doran chuckled and inquired about his sister's murderer, "The head Tywin sent me-"

"-was the real one, I swear. Gregor Clegane's. However, my sweet sister had some meddling maester sew the head of Robb Stark to the Mountain's body so that he could still ride like a cursed creature and do her bidding for a while-"

"Is he riding still?" Doran tried to stand up, uselessly, on swollen legs.

"No," Jaime shook his head, making a calming gesture with his stump, "Rhaegar and his dragon did for him. Dragonfire kills ungodly creatures. It was too late, too little, perhaps, but at least the Mountain will never ride again."

"How did you know about the attack of Volantenes? Was it you who sent a raven to Rhaegar?"

"No," Jaime would not lie. "My dragon must have informed him, I think, somehow. Until today, I did not know that Viserion, that's the dragon's name, had said anything to anyone, much less to the king, about the preparations for the attack that he, my wife and I have witnessed in Volantis. The dragons… the beasts… they have a way of knowing things among each other. And Rhaegar… he shares in their blood much more than I… He must be hearing more of their thoughts, even over distance."

"So no one gave orders to you, Jaime Lannister, to save the captain of my guards, nor to melt the frozen sea?" Prince Doran looked truly out of his depth now. "Don't bother to deny you ordered this last manoeuvre, I heard you yelling at the dragon to defreeze the sea, rather than burn anyone… It had been your call."

Jaime was not aware that he had been shouting. He was convinced he had commanded Viserion only through his mind. Then again, in the heat of the moment… "What?" he asked insolently. "What
"Nothing much," Prince Doran said calmly. "You are supposed to have shit for honor."

Jaime laughed. "Once that was true," he said. "But where is my daughter?" Before he finished the question, he knew. "With your daughter and surviving son, obviously. You have sent away the innocents, expecting the invasion. Thank you," he bowed to the ground, not finding shame in it any more.

The prince was embarrassed now. "Please do not thank me until you see her…" he stuttered, humbled. "But before we go, I need to answer Rhaegar's letter and I do hope that it will still find him with life… I should like to ask him a few questions in person one day… If not… I suppose his son will receive it," he said with poison on his lips. Mentioning the king's son with Lyanna Stark did not come easy for the Dornish prince. "Before I draft my reply, may I inquire about something?"

"If it please you," Jaime said, curious.

"I trust that you have met my niece, Tyene Sand, during that… mummery that brought Rhaegar and his Northwoman back to life and back together… Tell me who is he?"

"He?" Jaime was at a loss. It was a huge mistake to leave Tyrion with the dragon. He could not possibly talk to princes without his counsel for a prolonged period of time.

"Tyene is Dornish, my lord of Lannister. I had her imprisoned since she returned from King's Landing and I sent her a different handsome gaoler with food every day, in order to understand why she befriended Lyanna Stark... Every man came back with the same story; my niece acted in good faith and did not purposefully betray Dorne by her associations... However, she rejected all of them as men and that is to say a lot. So I am asking again, who is he?"

"Mance Rayder," Jaime blurted, hoping he was right. "The King-beyond-the-Wall." The Dornishwoman had looked at the bloody wildling with a more open invitation to do with her anything he wanted than her sister Nym showed when groping Jaime. He wouldn't tell that to her uncle though, grateful for the antidote he was given. How did Rhaegar put it? Customs that favour love? Indeed... "You'll have to ask her about the details. I wouldn't know."

"Thank you," Prince Doran said sweetly. "I shall take my leave from you now. I have a letter to send. After, I can take you to see your daughter."

As soon as he was left alone, Jaime went to the sole window of the tower and thought of Viserion. The bloody dragon still hasn't told him where Brienne was. Jaime's patience was at an end. The dragon had to know; he could sense his rider and those important to him, regardless of the distances. Viserion soon appeared in his field of vision, obedient and Tyrionless; suggesting in bright colours of the rainbow that he was happy to be rid of Jaime's talkative brother, who now enjoyed the hospitality of the sand snakes. The dragon marveled why none of the three ladies wanted to lay eggs for Tyrion, despite that one had instantly wanted to do so with Jaime.

To be sure... eggs... Do shut up. Jaime thought back, amused.

Where is Brienne? Can we return for her now? If you melted enough ice to hold off the advance of the slavers for a while...

The dragon became more and more upset from listening to Jaime's thoughts. He was... worried about a beautiful blue egg, far more than about Brienne. Viserion's mood sank, plummeted deeply, blackened, suggested it was too late. They were late, and Jaime should have woken sooner, should
have demanded this much, much before. The dragons… the dragons could see a lot, but only if their riders asked it of them.

Viserion writhed and twisted in the air, looking every inch as though he were going to emit a jet of fire and burn Jaime within the tower. Traitor, egg shatterer… he ranted.

"I'm not!" Jaime protested, in his mind and outwardly, very loud. Egg shattering was not on the list of his crimes. Yet.

Brienne, he thought insistently. My wife. Blue eyes, great body, remember. Lovable and brave.

The dragon… shed a tear from a golden eye. She is gone into the Shadow, he thought as clearly as he was capable of, projecting an image of an ominous blackness into Jaime's mind, heavy and evil. She is gone… She and the egg… The Shadow is death… Death… Death...

They are gone, gone, gone, gone…

Jaime swallowed hard. Gone you mean… dead? The thought did not bear thinking but there it was.

The dragon did not refute Jaime's conclusion.

"No!" Jaime's throat constricted. His world emptied… He understood everything, clear as sunrise. The Asshai'i were not friendly people, not at all. Besides, who was friendly in the world as it was? Mostly the choice was between killing or dying… Jaime must have fallen victim to this obscure sickness dragons shared to help each other in need at the worst possible moment, just when Brienne and he had found Tyrion. They must have been attacked then. His vague memories of the end of their stay in the city of the shadows suggested sorcery was used against them. We were showered in some colourful, magical powders…

Brienne must have defended Jaime's unconscious body and died for it, but not before somehow entrusting both him and Tyrion to the dragon… It must have been an extremely honourable way to go…

A deed of pure love…

Why didn't you save yourself and Tyrion, my love? Didn't you know that is what I would have wanted?

Jaime always expected to be the first one to go, on account of being older and surely more deserving of untimely death in the eyes of the gods... For seven heavens sake, it was not Brienne who has ever made a habit of flinging children out of the window…

But life was generally unfair and the innocent oftentimes parted with it first. Maybe this was his punishment, to exist knowing himself guilty of Brienne's death. And how cruel it was… He wanted… he wanted to lash out and cut men down. But he would never be able to kill a sufficient number of them with his left hand. Then… then…

He suddenly remembered what Brienne would have wanted, unmistakably so. She would want him to live on and regain his honour. The notion was incredibly chivalrous and completely, utterly devastating. Jaime could not abide by it, not at this moment, perhaps not ever.

Viserion said nothing at all to his rider's thoughts, which had probably turned far too complex for a simple dragon.

Wait… When the Bloody Mummers took my hand, she also wanted me to take revenge. Jaime held
onto that little, spiteful light in the growing blackness of his mind.

Was it the Asshai'i, the enemies who have sent my wife... into the Shadow? Jaime could not bring himself to say into death, yet he had to know at least this. He had to hate someone for his loss, other than himself.

Viserion blinked with two golden eyes, affirmatively.

Are you still afraid of them and their city?

The dragon suggested that he had to grow more and then, one day, he would not fear the shadowbinders, nor the Shadow itself. Drogon was perhaps the only one of the three living dragons who was already large enough to withstand it, but Viserion was not certain about it. He hadn't seen his black brother for a while.

Jaime gripped the balustrade under the tower window until his knuckles turned white.

Let me know when you are big enough, he demanded.

Let me know when we can fly to Asshai and burn it to the ground.

It would not bring his wife back, but it would be something. The songs about Asshai would remember the black, horrendous ruin of the city, just like they recalled the downfall of the Reynes of Castamere.

Brienne would be avenged.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.

Thank you to all who left a kudos, a comment or bookmarked this story.

Next up: Sandor, Gendry, Sansa

Feedback is welcome :)}
Sandor

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much, TopShelfCrazy for some serious improvements in this chapter.

Chronologically, it takes place at the same moment when Jon and Dany wake up from their respective illness (Last Dany and Aegon chapters)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sandor

“What do you say, brother?” Sandor asked for the sake of asking. “Shall we find Sansa today?”

He had to talk or he would go well and truly mad. Probably he’d freeze to death. Neither was acceptable.

The wildling chariot of bones he had hastily procured for his travel rattled steadily through the starlit winter night, pulled by a huge black boar. The canopies of the dark sentinels, laden from snow, framed the simple path before him and the fading traces of the runners left by the Others. The wood was silent and peaceful. He would love it in another place and time, riding Stranger with his wife seated in front, or gazing at the landscape from the quiet of their bedchamber. But tonight he was alone and desperate, cold and hungry, and there was no sign of the Others or their servants; not when Sandor was purposefully looking for them. He could only go on for so long, and both his food and strength against the elements were coming to an end.

The Others had taken Sansa… The stupid curse had to become truth for his beloved wife.

The boar trod among the high sentinels and occasional ironwoods. The cold was unspeakable, dark and cutting. Daytime had become an illusion, lasting so short that it seemed that it ended before it begun. The long winter nights turned so freezing that he was tempted to lay next to the pig for warmth.

Fortunately, the boar’s skinchanging wildling master made it wander off whenever Sandor halted in his journey and untied it. From what he learned about the bloody warging, Sandor supposed that the animal, that never ate his food, dug the frozen ground for acorns and roots during that time, free of its master's command. The wildling on the other hand required some time to exist as a man, lest he become lost in his animal and stay a pig forever.

So far, the boar’s skinchanging wildling master made it wander off whenever Sandor halted in his journey and untied it. From what he learned about the bloody warging, Sandor supposed that the animal, that never ate his food, dug the frozen ground for acorns and roots during that time, free of its master's command. The wildling on the other hand required some time to exist as a man, lest he become lost in his animal and stay a pig forever.

For a sennight he had followed the Others, whose cart left a clear trail on snow. Yet he never caught sight of them. In those first days, Sansa spoke more often to Sandor in his head, reassuring him she was well, but she came to him less and less later on. And this last day or what passed for it she did not talk to him… Not once… Perhaps she could not, not anymore just like his brother had lost his
precious singing voice forever.

Sandor was not dumb. He knew what this meant, but, just like that first day when Sansa was captured and Mance warned him his quest was futile, he stubbornly refused to accept it.

“She might be like you, brother, I know,” Sandor observed. “Or like one of them, the Others. But we shall find her, even if it is only so that she can turn me into whatever she has become.”

They were far beyond the Wall by now. They would not be able to cross back easily to hurt anyone if the Others possessed them and made them swell their ranks. Sandor wondered morbidly how a blade of ice would fit in his strong arms and if it would give him joy to kill men with it.

Somehow, he didn't believe it would. Not any more.

“We make a unique company for a unique land, don't we?” he inquired with faked, sickening joy. “Serves us right, for falling in love with them Northwomen...”

For seven days he'd been wondering where life ended and death began. The answer used to be so simple. For many, death came swiftly, cold and clean, with one savage stroke of the Hound’s sword. But that wild dog was truly buried now. The man, or what was left of him, fully took over.

The winter blurred the difference between life and its opposite. They became two sides of the same coin, repeatedly tossed high up into the air by some madman. Once launched, it spun wildly and showed a different side in every passing moment. Life and death could not exist one without the other.

Well, desperate he might be, but he was not entirely alone.

“We will find her won't we, brother?” Sandor asked again, obstinately refusing to acknowledge the truth.

Rhaegar was sprawled indecently in the back of the cart with the old ruin of his chest and new, gaping wounds on his sword arm and neck exposed to the night air. Sandor had stripped him of all armour and boiled leather, and let his brother’s black tunic hang open and loose… The dead did not feel the cold, did they? He did it for being struck by an unreasonable thought that having less weight on his body might help Rhaegar rise… The question was, as what?

Rhaegar couldn't answer any queries. How could he? Being dead...

Well, dead.

Dead as men died if not dealt with properly this winter. In seven days, his body didn’t display a single sign of rotting. The cold helped the preservation, but even so, it would not completely halt the inevitable decay.

Sandor had hoped his brother might have remained talkative in his death, like buggering Euron Greyjoy, though perhaps with more charming disposition than the one displayed by his squid lordship. And despite that his famous voice seemed gone for good, Sandor did not trust Rhaegar’s apparent passing, not in the least.

Because Rhaegar’s son… Sansa’s brother… cousin… whatever… that bloody sword he had…

Sandor’s throat began burning with fresh grief before he could finish the thought that had guided his hapless actions concerning Rhaegar seven days ago. He still had to stifle a helpless sob every time he recalled his wife’s hopeless captivity or gave a good look to his lifeless brother.
Before his journey North, Sandor didn’t suspect that a man possessed *that* much salty water in his eyes and nose. He was about to cry his soul out and laugh about it like a snarling dog in the pit, between sobbing attacks. And why not? No one saw him here and he wouldn’t care if they did. The time to be angered by the sneering of others thanks to the mug Gregor gave him was long gone. His pride was more dead than Rhaegar, more lost than Sansa. He wept shamelessly, whenever the tears threatened to choke him and went on with his journey.

Rhaegar’s boy, well, a young man in truth, just like the bloody singer had said, was certainly older than Sansa. He carried a spark of grim determination, or its daring twin, mad courage, in his black eyes. Unyielding, skilled like seven hells, he wielded a rather *unique* flaming sword...

Sandor had seen those blades before. Thoros of Myr climbed the walls of Pyke with a burning sword in hands, and used similar ones in mêlées in King’s Landing. He would need a new one after every exhibition, because the metal would be wasted after usage. The smiths of the capital cursed the red priest for ruining their hard work and loved him for extra coin brought by his excesses.

The bleeding, *undead* Beric Dondarrion nearly did for Sandor with another such blazing blade, in the pit of the old gods in the riverlands... Stannis had one, but neither Sandor nor Rhaegar were impressed by it. It looked… cool.

None of the burning swords Sandor had ever seen or faced matched the intensity of the blade brought forward by Rhaegar’s son. Nor did they burn out after landing a decisive blow… The fire of it was *spent* alright, but the steel wasn’t ruined like those belonging to Thoros.

When put out, the strange sword in the hands of Rhaegar's son remained sharp and solid like Valyrian steel, except that it missed the distinguishing features of all weaponry made of the precious ore Sandor had ever seen. The metal was dull and grey, with no colours or the changing shine from one hue to another that created the impression of rippling on the surface, characteristic for Valyrian steel.

Yet the handiwork of the unknown smith remained exquisite and deadly. Sandor would gamble his soul that the sword was not of Westerosi making, just like it clearly wasn’t Valyrian. That left a large number of fabled lands in Essos and Sothoryos to choose from as its point of origin. How Rhaegar's son, who took the black as a boy, succeeded in laying his hands on such a weapon was beyond Sandor's imagination. He hadn't seen its like in the years he had spent in gold-rich Casterly Rock, nor later, at the royal court.

Sandor had to admit that he had no knowledge what the strange sword *did* to Rhaegar, but he tenaciously refused to believe it had killed his brother. If anything, it seemed to have ruined the creature waking in him; the ugly one made of ice.

The blow his son dealt to Rhaegar was not even deadly under usual circumstances; it merely grazed the existing arm wound, inflicted by the crystal sword of the enemy, the possible bringer of the curse that had briefly transformed Rhaegar into a white walker.

*Did they get to you, brother? You seemed to have resisted it more than the ice buggers expected…*  

Sandor was well aware that all this was a very far-fetched proposition or, why not, a mere *wish* of his. For all he knew, he had chosen to help a soulless monster who would slay him messily first chance it got…

This was why Rhaegar was conveniently tied up with strong, hempen rope, from waist to feet, to the huge collar bone of some monstrously large animal whose skeleton had served to build the back seat of the carriage. He was secured just like Sandor had threatened to bind Arya in the past, when the
little she-wolf plotted to kill him in his sleep. As a result, His Grace could move less than a babe in swaddling clothes. Sandor loved Rhaegar as a brother, but he wasn't taking any chances. Not while he still had hope of finding Sansa.

“ It is good we are lost beyond the Wall, isn't it? The monsters belong with monsters,” he kept talking for the sake of not falling silent, so as to stay alive and awake in the frozen wilderness.

Rhaegar lay immobile behind Sandor, exhibiting a morose, knowledgeable look in the dark indigo of his eyes, almost as if he was listening. Glancing back, Sandor continued speaking to his corpse. “You know that we can trust that son of yours and the bloody singer to do for both of us if needs be.”

It was a bit unfair, he had to admit, even by Sandor's standards of awfulness to be expected from the world, to put Rhaegar's son through the possible ordeal of killing his father for the second time…

Had Sandor been back a moment earlier from the Bridge of Skulls, had he been standing in Jon’s place with that odd weapon, he doubted he could do the necessary… Probably he could, deep down, if he applied himself to it, but he wouldn't do it nevertheless… Not for Rhaegar. Not ever. Not if any other possibility presented itself.

So when the familiar white-headed eagle flew out of the white tree, after her grown son, Sandor opted to swallow bile over his failure to protect his brother, hold the bloody bird down and wait… knowing that the lady inside the eagle’s head must have felt so much worse than he did, from witnessing the duel between her husband and their only son. Ladies were sensitive creatures and Rhaegar would have wanted him to protect his wife against her own recklessness. At least he didn't have to hit Lyanna with the flat of the axe as he once did to her niece Arya, to prevent her from running into her family slaughter at the Twins.

“Best be happy your son is half-wolf,” he grunted to Rhaegar, listening to the hungry squeaking of his own belly as he did so. “The honourable wolves can kill if it means doing their duty … though they don't like it… Can you imagine that? It’s what my wife explained to me years ago. I guess it makes them more able than the rest of us to do for those they love in dire need… I know, I know, you think that your son doesn't love you. Because why should he? And I tell you to that, why shouldn't he? If given half a chance…”

The Starks were nevertheless able to forgive at least some sins for love, Sandor knew best. Or Sansa would never be his… Tears came again, warm and sticky, invading the craters on his semi-frozen burns.

He sniffed and wiped his face frozen-dry.

On a whim, he stopped the cart in the middle of nowhere, governed by his raging emotions. He abandoned the coach’s place, and released the boar to its night wandering for food. Rapidly, he took a seat in the back, next to Rhaegar’s body.

It was not enough.

He freed Rhaegar from all bindings and made him lean better on the bony structure of the chariot, until he was satisfied that his king and his best friend, his brother, was comfortable, and looked almost alive.

“There,” he said, taking a seat facing Rhaegar, examining his work. "This is good. You look almost a man again. Now we can talk."
Hesitantly, he began. “You’ll ask me why I did this… Ungodly, I confess… Well, if you must know, I’ll tell you all and I’ll tell it true.”

“I did it…” Sandor’s rasp trailed through the night, reaching his brother. “I did it because if there is one chance in seven hells that I am right, and you are still yourself, well, yourself as his kraken lordship is nowadays, or as Aegon’s girl used to be... I’m so sorry, but I had to take it! I couldn’t just let you disappear because of your faith in either the Seven, your destiny, or some pretty horseshit you call prophecies. It all begins with the dogs, brother. You see, I’m not a dog, not really, for as much as I still like dogs better than most people... And though I may act or even see myself like a dog at times, despite all that, I am a man…”

The rest came easier. "And a dragon might have been your steed, but he is not a horse. See, that wildling I killed with my bare hands on the bridge, because I had to do for the white walker that possessed him... he ended up in pieces, brother. All that could be done for him was to give him to the nothingness that awaits us all...Yes, I know you believe in seven heavens... As well as you know that I don’t... And maybe the pieces of the bugger went to one of those heavens, if you wish, why not? I don’t give a rat's arse about it... But you, forgive me, you are almost whole... There is nothing your dragon could not patch if you return to us. Aegon’s girl came back. Why not you?”

Sandor paused to clear his throat of sob-induced slime and continued talking to Rhaegar; the first time he dared expose his entire worthless notion about Rhaegar’s condition. “So, see, if the dragon was not your horse and if I’m not your dog, then you can’t be the last hero, who set forth with twelve companions and came to a buggering, noble decision to give his life for us, rather than let all or any of us give our lives for you, so that you could be victorious in the end, as the buggering story goes... In short, brother, your prophecy is all wrong and that means you can’t die, not truly... Your faith can’t kill you this time.”

After detaching frozen snot from his nose and spitting some more of it into omnipresent snow, Sandor finished his confused chain of thoughts. “Or maybe my lack of faith will kill me as you said... Because, guess what, I can’t, I won’t believe you are fully gone... nor that you owe your loyalty to the grumkins now... You may have sinned in the past, as you like to say... Tell me, who hasn’t?! Was the bloody Trident only your fault? Had Robert tried to talk to you before riding you down with his hammer? Would he have listened to you if you tried to make peace? I say that, yes, maybe you could have done better and maybe you couldn’t. You can’t know. No one can. That past is gone now. There is only here and now.”

There was one last thing he had to say to Rhaegar while he still had the strength. “And I promise you this, brother, as I have known you, this whole world will freeze and cease to exist before you turn truly evil.”

For seven days he wanted to have this conversation with Rhaegar’s corpse and he felt oddly relieved now that he did.

Rhaegar remained indifferent to Sandor’s views and to his suffering. His eyes gaped empty since they headed north again; the two former brothers from the Quiet Isle, a pile of provisions on a rickety wildling chariot made of bones, and a giant black boar.

“We are farther north than any of the two of us has ever gone,” Sandor kept musing aloud. “Aren’t we?”

It is what it is, he thought, losing hope all of a sudden, and with it, the desire to live.

“I think…” he addressed Rhaegar for what might be the last time; weak, craven, done for. The cold had been too much and his heart too little.
Bloody North, he thought, snorting, laughing madly, shedding his remaining tears.

“You know, I think I’ll just lay down and die now,” he said, resigned. Why bother? The end was imminent, whether he dragged them all forward for another day or not. “I wonder if I shall ever wake again and as what creature.”

He felt too tired to continue existing since Sansa’s pretty voice was gone from his head.

Rhaegar's eyes acquiesced, and looked to the right. Probably it was a trick of weak moonlight that just decided to grace the night with its feeble, silvery presence.

Stung, woken, stirred, Sandor hid Rhaegar well with furs, tucking him up so that only the top of his silver head was visible, in case he wanted to look around.

“Wait here,” he told him with great care.

As if you could go anywhere.

Sandor hopped off the carriage with fresh hope, postponing his dying wish. Bloody desperation was a sign, not just the voice of his craven fears. He should have known it from the beginning. It meant that the Others were near. It was their weapon. And with them, maybe there was Sansa.

A careful study of the spotlessly white forest floor showed that the runners of the wain used by the Others did veer to the right at the exact place where they stopped. Sandor would have missed it without the illusion of the flickering moonlight…

Or Rhaegar's help.

He’d come this far and he still had strength in him to check this lead carefully. Dying could wait. It took him an hour to follow the ghost trail of the runners to another spacious forest clearing, up to the stony entrance of some strange cave.

Sansa stood in front of it all alone. She had no cloak, only a dark brown gown that used to be white before it seeped Rhaegar's blood on the battlefield. She would freeze to death! It was a miracle she was still alive! Sandor ran mindlessly forward in leaps worthy of a true giant.

"No!" his wife screamed as though she were possessed by demons. "Stay away, Sandor, please!"

His soul hurt sharply from her request. Do you not love me any more? Why ask me to come after you if it is so? He never halted in his advance. Two steps before he could embrace his wife, whether she willed it or not, a spiderweb made of diaphanous mist, woven of invisible, prickly crystals, prevented him from further movement; strangled him, threatened to choke him.

A cage. An invisible cage. The Others had put his little bird in a cell made of the same stuff as they…and Sandor was able to rip them apart, wasn’t he? Before he could test his new winter strength against it, the web stretched on his own, softened and let him pass.

Sansa was hugging him before he could reach for her, dazed with the latest northern devilry. Peace spread through his soul. Of course she loved him. Why would she have ever stopped? It was just his old dog’s heart, too used to be kicked, and the sorcery of the Others, playing ugly tricks on him.

He basked in the feel of Sansa’s tiny fingers on his head and face. His own arms went to her waist, slim under the long gown she wore laced to her neck, made of thick wool. He was equally covered in furs and armoured. There was little they could feel of each other, yet the sensation of merely being together was more overwhelming than any other. Contrary to his fear of her freezing to death without
a proper cloak, Sansa's body and hands were quite warm.

"What was that?" he asked, gesturing at the icy trap around them.

"I don't know," Sansa whispered, "I call it a curtain. It's made of ice, I think. They began making it when we departed… They completed it yesterday-"

"I couldn't hear you since yesterday," he put in.

Sansa beamed at him. "I never stopped talking to you, my love," she reassured him.

All Sandor's doubts and fears vanished in Sansa's presence.

His wife went on. Her pretty forehead wrinkled from unpleasant memories. "When they were done with making this enclosure for me, they showed me… They had a raven and they forced him to fly through it… it died. It died screaming, Sandor. I think… I thought that a living creature cannot come in nor get out unharmed. Gods, Sandor, are you alright?" she whimpered worryingly. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"I’m better than I was in days," he said with conviction. His face itched from the touch of the invisible barrier he challenged, but for the rest he was truly well and unharmed; all his strength was back despite the hunger in his belly.

Emboldened by Sandor's success, Sansa moved her hand to touch her latest cage and retired it instantly. The finger she used began bleeding. Sandor pressed the little wound with a thick finger of his own until the tiny trickle stopped.

"I can't get out," she said, resigned. "I was made to be a captive, it seems."

"Hey," he tilted her head up so that she had to look at him, as he had done so many times in their distant past against her will. Now, he hoped to pass some of his determination to her. "I’m here," he said, "I haven't come this far for nothing. There has to be a way to get you out."

He put his entire shield arm through the barrier and it did nothing to him. As if the contraption of the Others recognised him as an unworthy prize to keep in. Sansa, on the other hand… She was priceless. To him and to almost anyone who imprisoned her time and again, it seemed. His bile was on the rise again. What was he to do?

"You can't get out, but it seems I can come and go both ways," he said bitterly. "Don't you fret." He spilled more words like shit, wanting to console her. "Maybe… maybe it only stops you and the ravens. Maybe the magic will wear off. Maybe they didn't count on anyone coming after you. Maybe they make mistakes just like people. Either way we’ll think of something."

Sansa’s smile was vibrant and vivid when she stood on her tiptoes to kiss him. As she did so, flashes of images of her journey ran through his mind, of endless forest he had seen as well, and of the Others who kept her company, with their queer ways. Sandor was happy they were not men. Men would… he knew very well what most men would have done if they had his wife at their disposal in the wild, and he would be devastated if it had come to pass.

"Don't think of any of it now," he muttered. "You'll tell me later. Let us do this properly." He deepened their kiss and the images of ice were gone from both of them. Between them, inside them, only warmth remained.

"Tell me," he asked after a long moment, needing to know. "After the Bridge of Skulls, you said you haven't told me everything. Are you… are you with child?"
"I wish I was," Sansa replied spontaneously.

"So you are not," Sandor repeated for himself. "Good." Relief must have been too palpable in his voice because his wife immediately appeared crestfallen.

"You don't want one, do you?" she asked. "You've always so carefully avoided talking about it."

Sandor wasn't aware he had ever done anything particularly careful.

"No, it's not that," he rebelled, discovering that, contrary to his previously confused, and overall negative opinions in the matter, he would love to see Sansa grow heavy with their child.

Oddly enough, witnessing Rhaegar's unfortunate duel with his son created a new, unknown craving in Sandor's soul; a desire to have a grown son who could best him with a sword and whom he could teach what he knew. Or a daughter who would be kind and beautiful as her mother and never lack for anything as long as he lived and breathed… The fear that any child of his body could be like Gregor was still there, but it lessened… became almost unimportant.

"Then?" Sansa asked with great curiosity. "Not that it should matter," she declared. "I fear I can't give you a child. We… we have loved each other freely for months and I have not quickened." She let out a small unhappy laugh. "I can't believe I've said it. I thought if I didn't speak of it, it wouldn't be true."

"Maybe there is something wrong with my seed," he retorted very seriously. "No wench has presented me with a bastard in the past." This happened to many men at court. The women did so from desire for favours and sustenance. The infamous Hound had never been a victim of it. Or maybe they just had more moon tea when they remembered his face in the morning.

"Oh," Sansa sighed. "Can that be so? I had thought… I thought it was only the woman's fault if she was not fertile…"

"I believe so," he forced himself to think back on his years in court and all the gossip he forcefully overheard. "There were some widowed women in King's Landing who only had children with their second husband. And what Cersei did, to present another man's children as her husband's, was more common than you think. I think that some ladies did it when their lord husbands were too old to touch them, to secure their own position by providing an heir."

"You are not old," Sansa protested with conviction, kissing him tenderly.

"I'm quite a bit older than you," he had to correct her when she allowed him to speak again.

The truth was, despite being quite a bit younger than Rhaegar or even Mance, Sandor always felt as old as them or older. He didn’t remember how it was to be a child. Gregor had left him no time for it.

Sansa gave him a wild, loving look, carefully choosing to see things as she wanted them to be, and that was mostly far better than what they were. "Are you saying that you would want to have a child if the gods give it to us?"

"Only one?" he asked, cheered up by her, teasing her.

Her eyes widened prettily and to his horror, he realised she probably did want more children, while he hadn’t thought that far yet. Terrified by her reaction, he nevertheless felt the overwhelming urge to begin spilling his seed inside her with fresh enthusiasm, so as to fulfil her longings, as well as his latent desire for fruitless coupling.
"I pray for many healthy sons and daughters," she said, wishfully.

"But not here," he had to say, bringing her down from her clouds to where they were.

"Not here," she had to agree with him for once, saddened.

"Are you not hungry?" he asked with renewed fear when his belly reminded him he was.

"No," Sansa shook her head. "They are giving me this," she pointed to a white, weirwood cup in the corner of her cage, filled with brownish liquid.

"What is it?" he had to ask, suspicious.

"I don't know," Sansa shrugged. "Perhaps I’m better off not knowing. I drink from it only when I'm very, very hungry. It is… nourishable."

Sandor grabbed the cup and licked the top of it. The taste was attractive in the wrong way. "This is not for me," he said, spitting it out. "It’s like the milk of the poppy. I could have flagons of it if I give in to my thirst, and then it would eat my brains, like the poppy finished washing out Gregor's."

"I…” Sansa looked for words. "I don't think it changes me."

No. Because you are not murderous by nature. You have never been.

"Good for you," he said.

"But if you fear it is harmful, I promise you that I shall drink it sparsely," Sansa vowed dutifully.

Sandor grinned, not caring how ugly it made him. His little bird was so considerate about his opinions since they were man and wife. It made him think twice before he expressed any, unlike before when the dog was either provoked to speech or stood silent in the shadows.

To his misfortune, from the corner of an eye he noticed movement in the mouth of the cave. Sansa followed his gaze and shivered.

"It is them, I think," she said darkly. "The Others. They are coming back. Please go," she begged of him. "Please Sandor."

"And you?" He was bewildered by her request. How could he go? "What will they do to you?"

"I don't think they will hurt me if they didn't do it so far," Sansa said softly. "I don't think they can."

Sandor found he was unable to leave.

"You have to go before they come, please," she beseeched him. "They are terrible. They do not drink the blood of the living as in the stories of our old wet nurse, they just hate us for being warm. They want the world to be beautifully cold. When they smell us, they thirst for us to lose our lives… it makes them mad if we don't..."

"How do you know?" he rasped and answered his own question. "You peek into their ugly heads."

"A little," Sansa confessed, trembling. "It scares me."

"Then don’t," he implored, wondering if the Others tried to convince Sansa he did not love her like they did to him, making him doubt her devotion, and if it made her suffer as much as he did.
“It scares me more not to,” Sansa squeezed out. “You would not face the enemy weaponless, would you? This is the only weapon I have! Thoughts and words…”

“I was my own weapon on that bridge,” he reminded her of his outburst of inhuman violence.

She grabbed his hands. “But you did not like it.”

“I think not,” he said. “But when I let myself do this, it is hard to tell what I like or not. I just… do. What other men would shrink from.”

“You’ll do what you have to,” Sansa said calmly, caressing his hands. “It hurts me to see you that way. And I… I hurt for you then… For how you must feel. I just… I love you so,” she gazed into his eyes and his soul softened from her vulnerable look.

Sandor touched her cheek, caressed it, kissed it. It was warm, soft and silky. She was not like Rhaegar. They were both simply alive. “I’ll stay here and fight for you,” he rasped lovingly. “I am much stronger now. I found you despite being told this was impossible. So it can’t be impossible to free you. Just bloody difficult.”

“There are six of them,” Sansa whispered fearfully. "They are too many. You can't help me now. We have to wait for a better opportunity when I am not caged.”

Suddenly, Sansa sounded very afraid, as if she was committing high treason by what she would say next and as though the night mist around them was about to turn into an Other. “It's the gown that keeps me safe… Rhaegar's lifeblood… It gives protection and heat. They want it, the white walkers do. I don't know for what. They make me see visions so that I would take it off. But I can see a little bit into their minds and I know that if I ever undress, they will kill me and turn me into one of their slaves.”

“Blood of the dragon,” Sandor said knowingly.

“King’s blood,” Sansa added.

“One and the same in his case,” Sandor murmured sadly, remembering his dead brother under the pile of furs. “I wish he hadn’t done it. Killed himself, I mean.”

Sansa looked away. "But he did,” she said in an empty voice.

He wouldn't have her sadness and feigned calm, not now that he had found her alive and well.

“One more kiss, a proper one,” he demanded. “And I might go for now. But I'll be back, don't you ever believe any different." 

“Only in daytime,” Sansa implored.

He wouldn't oblige himself to that much. Days were too short. He would do what he could, when he could.

He was still kissing her when the cave entrance vibrated and shrieked, as if an unknown, ancient power was bending the world to its will, changing the shape of it. The enemy was nearing.

"Here," Sansa busied herself tying a bloody, brown ribbon she pulled out of her gown around his massive arm, before pushing him out of her cage with strength he would have never thought possible in her. "Be safe. I will wait for you."
"What is it then that you haven't told me when we parted at the Bridge of Skulls?" he asked from outside, lingering, having to know.

"I knew you would die if you stayed with the king, Sandor. I saw it," she confessed with purple cheeks and teary eyes. "I'm so sorry, my love. I could not let you die. I swear I didn't know he would die for it. Though perhaps I should have known... if I looked far enough and further than my own selfish wishes... It is all my fault... Please go now."

"What?" Sandor's brain slowed down.

"I will undress if you don't go, I promise you," Sansa suddenly threatened him like a true Stark, unobedient, imposing her will. "Then they will truly take me and you both." Her voice broke in the end, betraying that she didn't feel any better than he did about the need for their separation.

Shocked by her confession of unmeasured concern for him, chastised by her promise to harm herself if he did not run away to safety, Sandor rushed back in the direction of the bone carriage, with a bloody ribbon tied to his sword arm. Behind the line of trees, he paused to look back. The Others hauled the cage with Sansa on their bony, crystal shoulders, and carried it into the cave, careful not to approach or touch their beautiful captive.

By the seven buggering, bleeding hells, what was he to do?!

Sandor didn’t even have a sword any more, he had lost it to the abyss under the Bridge of Skulls. He had a long club now, the only weapon he could obtain fast enough from the bloody wildlings.

And his arms...

He drew hope from the knowledge he could tear apart the Others with his hands, or at least one of them at a time.

He walked slowly back, lost in his thoughts. His mood swung incessantly between hope and determination, worry and despair.

Sansa would do anything to keep him safe. It was a new wonder and a source of endless sorrow... She thought she had unwillingly traded his life for Rhaegar's. And probably she was just fretting. From what he glimpsed, Rhaegar knew what he did. Yet Sansa's confession added one more justification for him to try and save his brother. A lord husband had to make good on unintended harm caused by his lady wife.

The creature took Sandor by surprise in his musings about his many marital duties, and it was not a boar. A savage club blow to his head took the moonlight out of his eyes. When he came about, he was swaddled from shoulders down in hempen rope.

Rhaegar was up and about, fully dressed and armoured. His silver hair streamed in moonlight. Even in his death, with all his wounds, he remained bloody handsome. Sandor would never be able to say the same about himself, though this truth mattered less and less with every new day. His undead brother busied himself digging through Sandor’s possessions. He found his longsword first and tossed it away. Finally, he dug out his lance and seemed relieved by it.

"Of course I took it for you," Sandor growled at him. "Kingsguard carry weapons for their king at need. Friends and brothers do the same, I've discovered."

He had only left the harp to Rhaegar’s wife and their son. Somehow it was... a more appropriate object to leave behind in honour of his memory than blood-stained steel. Sansa would say it was beautiful. And Sandor would have never suffered from any such courteous considerations before fate
had turned him into a married man.

He wondered gloomily if Rhaegar was going to run the lance through his chest and make him rise as his slave, to repay the favour of being in this world against his will.

But Rhaegar simply felt the balance of his favourite weapon in his left arm and put it carefully away. Unarmed, he walked to Sandor.

Light was missing from Rhaegar's dark eyes when he faced Sandor squarely and grasped his shield’s muscled forearm. The dead king pulled it savagely out of the bindings he had made and untied Sansa's favour. Sandor tried to snatch his cherished possession back with his teeth, but his brother jumped away with the stolen treasure. It proved impossible to go after him with legs tied one to another. Sandor fell face forward. His mouth filled with fresh, cold snow. When he rolled on his side and looked up, Rhaegar was tying the ribbon convulsively around his neck, over the gash he'd made when he killed himself.

The blood… the blood ran back from the fabric into its owner, leaving Sansa's favour whiter and purer than snow. The cut on Rhaegar's neck closed, covered with familiar black crystals made by dragonsbreath, when the beasts wanted to heal wounds rather than cause burns. Sandor had experienced it, once, long ago…

"Fuck," Sandor cursed, amazed. "I knew you'd be something, brother, when you got up. Fire in blood. Is that what your house words should say?"

Rhaegar lifted his chin and felt his throat with the precise fingers of a harpist. Satisfied that the hole in it was gone, he returned the ribbon to Sandor, tying it ceremoniously back in place with a contrite look. From nearby, his hair… it was much sparser than before, though equally long, as if he had cut quite some locks out of it, all the way to his scalp. He did not speak. Most probably he could not, like almost any wight Sandor had seen. Euron and Jeyne were exceptional in that regard.

The king scratched his head. He seemed to labour on pure instinct, not knowing who he was or who Sandor was… A bit like when he was… Elder Brother and harboured only broken pieces of his former self somewhere inside his soul.

Well, with the exception that he was now a mute wight, blessed with unnatural strength and increased body ability. Only his gods knew, if they existed, what memories he kept in his head this time and whether they could ever be recovered from under the thick layer of his new cursed existence.

Finally, Rhaegar loosened the beginning of rope at Sandor's feet and left south, into the forest; completely armed, never looking back. By the time Sandor managed to free himself, the boar was back and the night was almost over. Rhaegar could be anywhere and it was pointless to follow him.

Sandor returned to the carriage to count his possessions and the food he still had, pondering his future actions. His hunger was less after holding Sansa in his arms. He could almost live on hope again. He gazed doggedly at the token of clean white wool on his arm, a stupid chivalrous sign of her love… As if they needed them after what they had been through… what they were still going through…

Maybe they didn't. But having one made him happier all the same. What he should do seemed less impossible.

Then, unexpectedly, under the furs he used to cover Rhaegar, Sandor found it. It remained in the saddlebag lined with dragon scales, resistant to dragonfire. Rhaegar made that bag with his own
hands. Now it lay forgotten or... it was left on purpose; containing another treasure Sandor carried North for his brother and his king, just like his armour, his sword and his lance.

The cursed horn of the dragonlords that no man without dragonblood could blow and keep his life rested safely in its designated hiding place... Well, no man except Sandor if he touched the mouthpiece only with the burned part of his lips. Provided he could hold the damned thing in his hands without scorching them...

Inside its special bag, the horn was now almost fully wrapped in silver hair, especially on the places where Sandor would have to touch it to lift it, if he ever wanted or needed to blow it... The dragons would come then, Sandor knew, observing a priceless gift left in his care.

*Thank you, brother,* Sandor thought, humbled. *I should have known you’d wake after seven days of illness, one for each face of your bloody gods. I should have realised they would help you...*

Sandor was just about to shape some plan for his future actions in his head when he heard them. He heard them before he could see them. The boar ran away from them all, squealing, frightened like a cur.

They were taller than him and Gregor together. There were at least twenty of them, maybe fifty, it was hard to tell; trudging through the snow, singing as they went, armed with clubs and dressed in animal furs. They looked animal but they were not. They didn’t look like men either. Hair covered all exposed parts of their bodies.

*The giants. The real ones.*

Maybe the giants would take him instead of the Others.

*No. Not before Sansa is safe again.*

He resisted the urge to hide. His count was clear. If he stayed alone, he would not survive. He needed such company as he could get, if he was to find a way to save his wife.

He stepped into the path of the horde of angry giants and waved both his arms high above his head. He hoped he had grown tall enough that they might consider him as one of them. He’d be an Imp among them, to be sure, but they might see him as a dwarf giant nonetheless. They knew the bloody country better than anyone. Mance said they could speak... And while Sandor never bothered to learn the Old Tongue... he did hear the bloody wildling singing in it, more than once, and recently he had been paying attention to the songs...

The ugly bunch stopped with more sense of order and discipline than Sandor would have possibly expected from them.

The hairy leader studied Sandor with malice, twice as tall as Gregor was, measuring some twenty feet.

"Mag," he said, probably presenting himself, tapping on his chest

"Sandor," Sandor said, putting his sword arm on his chest. "Others," he added, gesturing in the direction of the cave where Sansa was taken. This word was shared by the Common and the Old Tongue.

The evil had the same name on both sides of the Wall.

*Kill them all...* Sandor remembered the line from the song in Common Tongue Mance invented at
the Twins, and then another one, in Old Tongue, about the last of the giants. Mance sang that latter song in both languages, for the amusement of the crowd next to campfires, on their journey North from King's Landing. It was a long song and Sandor's favourite word was somewhere in there. He hummed it very rapidly in his mind, as he remembered it in both languages, comparing the letters, until he found the verse with the sweet word he was looking for.

"Others," Sandor repeated. "Kill," he carefully rolled the word of the unknown language off his tongue, hoping he picked and used the good one and that he was not inadvertently inviting the giants to kill him.

"Kill," Mag repeated after Sandor with more enthusiasm, understanding, agreeing. From the shapeless furry bag he carried on his back, he took out a large bulb of something and handed it to Sandor, grunting a word Sandor could not place for the life of him. He accepted the offered root and held it in gloved hands. The smell appealed to him and to his empty stomach.

Mag gestured at it, impatiently, grunting once more.

*It's food. It must be.*

Sandor trusted his instinct, obeyed the urgent demand of his body and bit into the gibbous bulb, hoping he was doing this right, or at least that the bloody fruit or vegetable would not make him ill. He had to remain strong. He had to.

His worry proved futile. It was indeed a plant, not meat, as Sandor would have preferred, but its taste was luscious, juicy, filling. It was one of the best things he had ever tasted.

At least where it concerned food…

He chased the sweetest longings of his soul out from his brutal mind. He had no time for those now. They would make him weak.

"Thank you," he told Mag, eating it all, cleaning his ruined mouth after he was done munching and slurping. He felt replenished and much better.

The giant stared at him, not understanding, and Sandor had no idea how to give his thanks in the Old Tongue.

*Maybe they don't have a word for it in the wild.*

If they had, Sansa would be the first one to discover it, no doubt. But his little bird was not with him, and Sandor was never particularly good in expressing his thanks.

Be that as it may, there was one thing all rulers in the world understood. Sandor went down on one knee and bowed almost to the ground.

Mag lifted him roughly, and showed him the last place in the line, carved for the smallest of the giants.

*Kill,* all giants hummed peacefully, heading slowly further North, just in the direction of the cave into which Sansa and the Others had disappeared.

*Sansa, I am here. Alive and fed. Not poppy. Something healthy.* He wished so much he were a warg and that she could hear him.

He thought she was smiling lovingly in his mind, and ever so faintly… She… she admired the
beauty of the ancient underground place where the Others had brought her now. It was so much like Sansa to notice loveliness in pointless situations.

Keep your gown on, little bird, he thought absurdly back, hoping she heard him, fearing she did not. Until we can find a safe place to undress you.

We have to train hard to make all those children, don't you think? he dared, felt both her offence at his rudeness and… her own longing for love of the senses reverberate in his mind.

Sandor took the club and the saddlebag with the horn of the dragonlords from the carriage, nothing more. The boar would have to fend for itself. He slipped quietly into the line of giants, the last one in the row.

Strangely, he felt in place. The despair caused by the proximity of the Others lost its hold over him. Sansa loved him as much as he loved her. He would find a way to help his wife soon. They would have strong sons and beautiful daughters one day.

Marching, he wondered how Rhaegar fared on his own and if existing as a speechless wight was excruciatingly painful. From how tortured Euron sometimes looked to Sandor, the suffering might be nearly as great as when he had been recovering from his burns as a boy.

Are there any ointments for wights?

He didn’t think there were. And even if he was wrong, the tricks of the maesters never helped Sandor with his torment. He doubted they would help Rhaegar.

It may not be the best life, he thought resolutely. But it has to be better than no life at all.

Good luck, brother, he wished Rhaegar well from his heart. You picked up shards of yourself once and pieced them together.

Best do it again.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for reading.

Any feedback is welcome.

I realise that this story might hit a 1000 likes after this chapter and I'm totally humbled by the quantity of the attention it got from this fandom.

I hope that it's continuation won't disappoint.

Next up: Gendry, Sansa, Dany
I will never be able to thank enough DrHolland for pouring some sense into this chapter :-)) And for all support given to this story since it started :-))) My thanks.

A thousand kudos for a hundred days :-) )) Thank you so much :-) ))) It's incredible in a good way ))))

I honestly never expected so many likes for this story :-))

Thank you so much to all who ever commented on, subscribed to or bookmarked this story.

A note on chronology. This chapter happens a day or two after Jon and Dany are reunited. Arya and Gendry are travelling to find the Horn of Winter with Jaqen/Pate the Novice from the Citadel whom they met/recognised in Oldtown at the end of last Arya’s chapter, but more importantly also with Sam, Alleras and Mollander (two other novices which study to become maesters from FFC). I used a technique I use more frequently of skipping some less interesting events in the story line (where they all meet in Oldtown, nothing special happens and they get on the road). I tell those less important facts only through the character’s thoughts, in this case Gendry's POV and move the story forward to where things are happening….

I hope that Gendry’s voice in my humble imagination of it will be able to clarify the rest…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gendry

Horn Hill was a hundred leagues away from Oldtown.

In winter this meant up to ten days of travel off the road, in damp cold and utter misery. Gendry, Arya and Rickon had journeyed for nine days now. Sam, the fat novice of the Citadel, said they would arrive on the morrow.

He should know. He was born and raised in that castle.

Samwell Tarly, eldest son of the Lord of Horn Hill, Randyll Tarly, had left the broken aurochs horn Arya and Jon believed to be the Horn of Winter, with his mother Melessa Florent. He had also left a girl called Gilly and a boy whom he presented as his bastard son, but who was in reality the only son of Mance Rayder with his late wife, and back with his father, on the Wall.

Arya never trusted Sam with this last bit of news. As much as he claimed to be Jon’s friend and avidly devoured any stories about her bloody cousin that Arya chose to share, her confidence was
hard to win, just like Gendry’s.

There were three more travellers, Sam’s friends, novices called Alleras and Mollander, and obviously Pate, the Dumb Novice, who was in reality Jaqen, the Clever Killer. By his choice of friends, Sam was not the brightest of all students for a maester, Gendry could tell, for as much as Arya occasionally still thought of Gendry as stupid.

All novices, dumb or clever, shivered from cold and shared a single bedding of many sleeping rolls and furs. Even the horses stayed close to each other. Rickon, raised in Skagos, would snort at this every evening with amusement and arrogance, adding proudly that he was used to colder. Arya’s little brother mostly slept in the trees. Agile as a squirrel, he would pick a sturdy nest of branches, tie himself to the thickest one with his belt, and wrap himself in his hairy Skagosi attire as in a cocoon. All in all, he looked like a tree climbing unicorn at night. During extremely short day, the resemblance was gone. No unicorn had bushy, auburn hair.

The twisting paths trodden by traders who dared pass through the densely wooded hills of the Red Mountains connected the castle on the edge of Dornish Marches, where the Tarlys had their seat, to the Port of Oldtown. Four novices from the Citadel found their journey arduous. Rickon found it monotonous. Arya was determined; she would reach Horn Hill and claim the Horn of Winter, a powerful weapon which could bring advantage in war against the Others.

For Gendry, those were the best days of his life...

Arya began sleeping next to him for warmth, and apart from everyone else, as if that was the most acceptable course of action for a noble, highborn lady. The unimaginably intimate moment on the first evening soon became a natural arrangement under the cover of darkness. They kissed until late into the long winter night... Arya smelled like a freshly frozen flower; a tender water lily in full blossom, left out in the cold, that Gendry found and treasured as his own.

She did not shy from capturing Gendry’s lips or from letting him kiss her deeply, but she never bit him, as she had done on the Wall, nor did she encourage him to take matters any further. Gendry didn’t think the chill was the only reason. Arya had set him a clear limit - her permission was only good for kisses. Gendry stayed awake for long after she fell asleep, watch or no watch, and prayed to Lord of Light to grant him strength. He wished to rise firmly above his station and win true glory in battle, like his father before him.

Somehow.

He saw no other way to win Arya’s hand swiftly, in the eyes of her noble family and the world, before she changed her stubborn mind about wanting to marry him.

“Arya, wake up,” Gendry said lovingly, hating having to stir his lady from her rest in his arms. “Rickon has seen something during his watch.”

They were pack, as she would say.

The pack survived together. This meant sharing experiences and information. And in this case, unfortunately, that Arya had to wake.

“But I just went to sleep,” she complained grumpily until she took in the long expression on Rickon’s boyish face and reacted to it by becoming very serious at once. “What is it?”

“A company of wights led by an Other”, Rickon said with awe, and, strangely, without any fear. “They seem to be just passing by.”
Grabbing her cloak and her sword, Arya scurried after Rickon. They were both so sure-footed and silent that Gendry felt like an aurochs walking after them. Twigs cracked and snow sloshed with every step he made. Dismayed by his clumsiness, he trod after his lady and sank into his own thoughts, concerning dragons.

A dragon would have taken Arya, Gendry and Rickon to Horn Hill no time. If only any of them had been a dragonrider... Arya claimed she had spoken to Drogon through Nymeria, securing their ride from Winterfell to Oldtown, but Gendry didn’t believe it. The beast must have been merely stealing the glass candles from the Citadel on behalf of Rhaegar or Daenerys. Their continued burning meant life for the dragons with tooth and claw...

In line with Gendry’s views, the grey winter sky over their heads remained clear, free of the leathery wings, no matter how much Arya stared up when she thought Gendry wasn’t looking. Besides, she couldn’t be more wrong. Gendry was always looking. He was watching over Arya. She was bound to fall into trouble at Horn Hill, if not sooner. Or she wouldn’t be Arya Stark.

How will we ever go back?

Unless the king or his sister or his son came for them or sent one of the dragons to bring them back, Arya, Gendry and Rickon would spend the winter in the South. From how his nights turned of late, Gendry wouldn’t mind so much it that were the case…

Or perhaps he would. With time, he would die to have more than just kisses, and Arya would probably not agree to marry him in the Southron woods-

“Look,” Rickon pointed forward, between the low, bare branches of the trees, interrupting Gendry’s reverie of love and dragons.

The company was large and sinister, fifty wights strong. The shapes of their mutilated bodies were ugly and repulsive. They missed a hand, an arm, a foot, an ear or an eye. They all rode. Their leader was the horrible, thin creature made of ice, with wrinkled face and crystal sword, riding a white horse…

Oddly, the wights were all cloaked. Normally they didn’t bother to hide their mangled bodies nor did they need any protection clothing gave from the cold. Nor did they ride. Wights usually walked and the Others mounted dead horses or ice spiders, according to Jon. And Gendry was… he wasn’t as desperate as he should be at seeing them, before applying his courage to control his fear. This time, strangely, he felt no unease at all.

When Gendry and Arya witnessed Stannis’ duel against a white walker in Castle Black, both their hearts pounded from fear, and neither of them were cowardly by nature. And the creature…. The creature smelled them and it might have turned against them or set his dead soldiers upon them, if Lady Shireen did not come with her fool… Patches had little bells on his hat and he somehow made the enemy turn his attention elsewhere.

“Aren’t the two of you afraid?” Gendry had to check.

“Of course not”, Rickon said with indignation.

“It is unusual that they are so peaceful. I can look at them now as if they were just any soldiers,” Arya observed, squeezing Gendry’s upper arm. She, at least, understood him. “Maybe we became used to them. Just as we learned to survive with Ser Gregor’s and Lord Bolton’s men.”

The armed company stormed away, into the night, in direction of Horn Hill where Arya, Rickon and
Gendry should continue on the morrow. The dead and their master appeared to be none the wiser about the three onlookers they had in the woods.

“And they didn’t sense us,” Gendry said on the way back to their camp, hoping that Arya was right, yet unable to believe she was. The War of Winter would be almost too easy if the Others did not sow mortal fear in their wake.

Soon enough, Rickon was back to his tree, happy that his watch was not boring, and Arya was awake again…

It meant more kissing, soft and gentle at first, and deep and demanding in the end.

“Why can’t you sleep?” Arya voiced, catching her breath.

“I do, shortly after you every night,” he tried to say-

“-Liar!” she accused him. “It takes you hours. Yesterday I pretended to sleep and spied on you. If it comes to fighting, you will not be at your best.”

“I sleep alright,” Gendry put in nervously. “When I can.”

“Would it be easier if… if I didn’t kiss you?” Arya inquired, wearing the longest possible face. In Gendry’s eyes, it only made her more beautiful.

Gendry wondered if ladies suffered from wanting more when they gave their heart to a man, but he could not bring himself to ask about that. “No,” he said honestly. “I would probably go all mad and jealous and think that you fancy one of the novices if you stopped. I am better if you… if I can have something.”

“As am I,” she confessed very quietly, staring up at the barren canopies of the trees. When she looked up to him again, her eyes were all water, dark and soft. She never reserved this expression for the world. Only for him.

So you may think further than kissing.

Gendry's heart beat faster, like a mad drum shaking in hands of a drunken drummer.

He gave Arya the longest kiss ever, daring and yet unimaginably tender. Arya embraced him protectively. One of her hands lingered on his shoulder where the white wolf had bitten him. The gesture always surprised Gendry. She was so much smaller, she needed protection. Yet she always offered it generously to those she… loved...

"My love for you makes me sleepless," he whispered to her. "That much is true. But I can always fight."

Gendry's confession was rewarded with a beaming, wolfish smile on his lady's lips and a wild kissing exploration of his face and neck, as much as all the bloody clothing allowed.

“I could sleep again now,” Arya declared after a while, yawning peacefully.

Do I have your love?

He believed he did.

Will you say that you love me one day?
Somewhat disappointed with how the evening unfolded, Gendry had to conclude that ladies suffered differently from their denied wishes or that they could be contented with less than red-blooded men.

Faithful to their nightly routine, Arya was breathing deeply shortly after their kissing ended, and Gendry had to think of the cold, and of his mother, and of Lord Beric; of all sadness in the world, trying to cool down faster. It would have been easier if he could just take care of himself, but that meant letting Arya out of his arms. And it would be simply too shameful to do it as they were… It would feel like an abuse of hard won trust.

In the morning he was exhausted and Arya was shaking him awake.

“Come on,” she encouraged him. “Today we will get the horn and then we can go home.”

“Home how?” he said without thinking. *And where? Winterfell is your home, not mine.*

“We’ll think of something,” Arya said stubbornly and half pushed him, half dragged him to his horse.

Rickon and their unreliable friends from the Citadel were already ahorse. As every day, Gendry rode between Arya and Pate the Ugly Novice or Jaqen the Dangerous Faceless Man from the unknown City of Lorath. Throughout their journey, Jaqen acted like a manse lamb and the most faithful of companions. He never tried anything... uncanny or evil.

*Yet.*

Gendry watched him closely every day, alarmed by Arya's unearthly coldness whenever she studied the once condemned criminal. At night, he kept his hammer as close as he did his Arya, just on the other side. Jaqen, Rorge and Biter had been sent to the Wall in chains for having committed true atrocities. They were not allowed to walk to their destination like the poor souls wanted by Queen Cersei or the petty thieves. More importantly, milady was not easily cowed. If Arya acted like this, Gendry had no doubt that her caution was more than justified.

"We are almost there," Sam said with reticence in his voice. "I do hope that Father is out on important business. I would like to keep my visit short." He sounded unusually reluctant to face his own father.

Sam was the fattest young man Gendry had ever seen. Much fatter than Hot Pie. A maester chain of only two links, tin and pewter, hung around his neck, or rather, the junction between head and shoulders which was too short and thick to merit that name. The only fatter person Gendry had ever seen was one of the late High Septons in King’s Landing.

To Gendry’s misfortune, the other two novices from the Citadel were lean and muscled. The taller, broad-shouldered one with clubfoot called Mollander kept looking at Arya in a certain way Gendry could not stand, though he had to admit it was within the limits of propriety. The novice seemed merely interested in Arya’s person, and not in her womanhood, but this was already too much for Gendry. He wondered if he would stop being jealous once Arya became his wife. If she ever decided on that. At least Alleras, also called the Sphinx, a *very* handsome, dark skinned Summer Islander with some Dornish blood, did not steal glances at Arya, but rather at Mollander, as though he were questioning his taller friend’s behavior.

Gendry contemplated his hammer and strove to keep it to himself, not certain if anyone deserved to be hit by it and why.

On other occasions, the Sphinx studied Gendry, as though he were an expensive piece of elaborate
metalwork, offered for sale to the King’s Hand by Master Tobho Mott. Arya glared at Gendry when this occurred, offering him a look that could kill, or worse, a perfectly hurt not Arya-like expression.

*Why? Alleras is only a curious boy.*

Alleras and Mollander often laughed at Sam and imitated his relatively high voice and odd, kind, pleasant, almost ladylike manners he displayed in an overweight manly body.

That day, when the company stopped to stretch legs and chew on some miserable chunks of bread and cheese they had for midday meal, Alleras whispered to Mollander, when he thought they were alone. “Maester Marwyn must have failed on his journey to Asshai. Daenerys is back to Westeros without him. She may not know she needs to go east before going west,” he murmured and stroked the bigger lad’s forearm. “The rumors from King’s Landing differ greatly but they all agree in one single thing: Rhaegar survived the Trident, he was crowned king, and he has a living male heir on the Wall. We have to bring this Horn back to the Citadel if we are to have any advantage. The dragons are powerful creatures. The candles are gone, Mollander. They can no longer be used...”

Gendry melted into a tall, dark trunk of the tree to which he had just tied his horse, trying to appear invisible, waiting for the rest of the treacherous conversation to unfold.

“What do you want with dragons, Alleras?” Arya said innocently, appearing suddenly from the other side, behind the two novices. She must have hid herself well for making water, in a habit Gendry knew from their first and most memorable journey through the riverlands. *When I fell in love with you.*

“I merely regretted the loss of glass candles, my lady,” Alleras said thoughtfully. “In Citadel they were safe. Now some brute of a man, or an enemy of the dragons may hold them.”

Arya kept a very serious face. Not even Gendry was able to tell if she had overheard or not that Alleras and Mollander had their own designs with the Horn of Winter.

“Or maybe the dragons don’t want their secrets to be known,” Arya said cryptically. “What if someone close to their kin did not trust the wise treatment reserved for those candles in the Citadel?”

Drogon, the largest living dragon, was surely more than close to his own kin. Arya had never told any of their new companions it was he who took the candles. “If their stinky Seneschal did not see fit to inform his novices, why should I? The less they know, the better,” she’d told Gendry one night, shrugged and chuckled on her words.

Her playful spitefulness had never seemed as prudent to Gendry as today.

His opinion of Samwell Tarly dropped from bad to worse. All his friends were proven treacherous now. Jon must have been mad to leave anything of any importance in his care. Sam was sickeningly fat and incapable of defending himself, and on top of all a coward that stirred at every wrong rustle of the leaves in the forest.

Later that day, when Horn Hill finally came into view, the riders from Oldtown noticed a small crowd gathered before its walls. Lord Tarly was indeed busy, that much was obvious, but his business was not outside the castle as his cowardly son had wished for.

It was right in front of it.

Three offenders were placed in a great pillory, large enough to accommodate them all. Their heads and hands were stuck in it, protruding through the wood and facing their judges. Gendry applied all his attention to study the people of Horn Hill - possible new enemies.
By the looks of it, justice was to be done very soon. The three prisoners, most likely thieves, would lose their fingers, or hands, or both. A muscled, grim-faced man, a *headsman*, almost as ugly as the late Ser Ilyn Payne, methodically sharpened a sword near the pillory. It was not a greatsword used for beheadings, but a bit shorter blade, more suited for mutilation.

A high lord stood proudly in the middle of the gathering, close to the pillory, waiting to pronounce the sentence when the henchman would be ready to do his work. Lean, balding, with short grey beard, Lord Tarly clearly commanded fear and respect of his people. A retinue of fifteen men-at-arms formed a perfect line behind their liege, between the lord and the closed city gates.

Randyll Tarly did not appear very old. He must have fathered Sam when he was younger than Gendry. Next to him, there was Sam’s brother, Dickon, a skinnier copy of Sam, a very young man, five and ten at most, with brown hair and small eyes. Together, father and son obstructed the clear view of the prisoners. Unlike Samwell, Dickon looked confident about his body and use of sword he carried on his hip. Most importantly, he didn’t startle at the sound of someone’s breathing.

Riders, however, did awake his interest. The lord and his young son both eyed the newcomers warily, raising a very thin eyebrow at the same time.

And Arya, Arya had to ride in front and position herself, still ahorse, between the lord and his prisoners. On a second thought, she dismounted and let her horse wander off.

Pate, the false novice, caught the animal and tied it to a tree, as though he were Arya’s faithful servant and not a hidden foe.

Gendry and Rickon were left with no choice but to follow her lead.

Lord Tarly’s eyes narrowed as he studied his three unexpected guests in more detail.

All four novices melted surreptitiously into the line of men-at-arms who were there to witness the punishment. Even Sam, Tarly’s firstborn son who took the black willingly, as far as Gendry knew.

*Why doesn’t he greet his father?*

Gendry finally gazed at the pillory and froze, recognising all three men.

“Thoros, Tom,” he said. He did not dare say anything to the man in the middle; a powerful lord in his own right, despite that both he and his kin were often wronged by being taken for weaklings.

“Lord Reed,” Arya completed Gendry’s effort at courtesy. “Why are you being held by Lord Tarly?”

“They were caught robbing in the castle,” Dickon said. “The punishment—”

His father gestured at his son, forbidding him to answer a woman.

Arya took note of the rudeness and repaid it by ignoring the Southrons in return. “Have you stolen from the Tarlys, my lord?” she asked Reed with flawless politeness.

“What I came to take is not theirs,” Howland Reed affirmed quietly. “It belongs to the realm, just like the fords of the Trident, the Wall, or the Iron Throne.” Reed’s eyes moved to the left. His head could not follow, encased too tightly in the middle opening of the pillory. Rickon followed the crannogman’s gaze by walking in that direction through Tarly’s men. The good soldiers stared at his barbarian Skagosi attire. No one moved to prevent him.

Arya’s brother picked up the aurochs horn banded with bronze from the cold ground where it lay abandoned, and brought it to the pillory. “Our brother, I wanted to say, cousin, has found this beyond the Wall. It belongs to the Starks.”

Gendry wondered why the Tarlys wanted to punish Tom, Thoros and Reed so cruelly, for claiming an item they so clearly thought of as having no great value.

“My lords,” Reed addressed both Rickon and Arya, “you have to let Lord Tarly cut off my hands before we leave. Or we shall lose the Horn of Winter today and with it, maybe we will lose a war.”

“No,” Arya and her little brother responded in unison.

"It is whole!" Gendry said, surprised, pointing at the horn. "Sam said it was cracked."

"Samwell Tarly had left the Horn of Joramun in the only place in Westeros where it could be mended," Reed said, smiling from ear to ear. "Horn Hill. I only had to sing a little song to it. I am not myself when I sing the song of the earth and this is how I was captured. The gods give and they take. Let me make the necessary sacrifice. I have foreseen it. Thoros and Tom will help me travel on after that. That is why I took them with me."

“Enough,” old Tarly interrupted with unmistakable authority. “Seize all these rebels against the lawful king, Stannis, First of His Name.”

“No!” Sam screeched from his hiding place behind his father’s men and came forward. “They are my friends.”

Gendry was strangely moved by this emotional, protective statement, despite chastising Sam mentally not an hour ago for his cowardice and lack of cleverness in offering friendship.

In Lord Tarly’s eyes being Sam’s friend was not an advantage. “Friends,” he laughed hard as if that had been the most amusing news he had heard in a long while. “Are these thieves your friends as well?” he asked, pointing at Lord Reed, Thoros and Tom.

Gendry’s former friends from the riverlands were taller than the lord of the marshes. As a result, their heads were so ruthlessly stuck in the pillory that they could not speak. And though he still harboured resentment for their acceptance of the occasion when the Lady Stoneheart sentenced him and Jeyne Heddle to death, Gendry’s guts protested violently when he saw Tom and Thoros suffering.

Lord Tarly fixated his older son with a cold, calculating look. “The punishment for deserting the Wall is death. Why are you here?”

“L… l.. ord.. c...ommm….ander has sent… m...eee to become a m...aest...er..” Sam stuttered as a witless toddler.

“Do you have any proof of that?”

“L… l...etters… In the C… it...adel…”

“And the lord commander is that Stark bastard?”

Why should a bastard be guilty of who he is? He did not father himself. The shame cannot be his. Gendry became offended at the word in Jon’s place, in the name of all bastards in the realm, despite not liking Arya’s royal cousin.
When Gendry’s mother was still alive, and later, when he was an apprentice of Tobho Mott, he never felt ashamed for being fatherless. There were plenty of boys just like him in the capital. His mother washed him and fed him, while she lived. He was poor as a child but he did not go hungry or dirty, nor without love. Later, in the forge, he could do as he pleased after he finished his duties. He could make a bull helmet and outdo himself in his art every day. He was growing strong and he was… free.

Gendry had always believed that the highborns lived better for wearing handsome clothes, eating more than he, and having servants, but the difference had never bothered him. Not until he met Arya and realised she was a lady. Since then, he resented the nobles’ way of life as unjust when compared to the hungry and the poor. Yet he wished he was born one of them; a high lord who could ask for Arya's hand.

Maybe I was wrong from the beginning. Maybe they can be as unhappy as the rest of us, Gendry thought from observing Sam and his father.

“Jon is trueborn,” Arya said dryly. “My father never fathered a bastard.”

Tarly faked he did not hear her just like he seemed to have purposefully overheard Arya’s initial conversation with Lord Reed. Maybe his ears were so damaged that he could not hear a lady nor Sam's pleasant bariton. Gendry abruptly decided to add his own deep voice, to see if he would be heard.

“Jon is a prince,” he rumbled sadly. “Rhaegar’s son.”

“Oh,” Sam’s father said with contempt, “Do I see another bastard here? King Robert defeated and killed Prince Rhaegar on the Trident. I know! I have fought under the dragon banners! This… Rhaegar… can only be an impostor.”

The conversation was suddenly shattered in pieces by the thundering sound of many hooves, closing in.

The short winter day was not over and yet the dead were already here. The wights circled the soldiers. Their cold master walked straight to Lord Tarly.

Gendry, Arya and Rickon retreated swiftly behind the pillory. They didn’t have obsidian, nor Valyrian steel. They should run, but not without their friends. Arya and Gendry tried to pry open the holes for heads and hands. In vain. They were tightened with pliers and locked in place. It would take time to loosen them without any tool. Rickon unsheathed his long stone knife and clutched the Horn of Winter as if it were a shield against the wights.

Tarly's men surrendered to the dead, shivering with fear. Pate, Alleras and Mollander were forgotten in the onslaught. They slid into the woods and hid behind the horses. Likewise, no one touched Sam, who ended up standing on his own. Judging by his bewildered face, he might soon wet his breeches.

The wights don't take men prisoner, Gendry thought, marvelled further with the odd, differently organised behaviour of the enemy. And they don't distinguish between men. They kill all unless they are killed first.

“Please, don’t take me,” someone begged the wights. “I have a small child.”

The deadmen stood still after they tied hands and legs of all men-at-arms and forced them to sit down.

The Other faced Lord Tarly and hissed, lifting high up a … Glass sword. Gendry was not
completely certain, but the crystal looked ordinary, not sharp and unbreakable, as Jon had described the weapon of the true enemy...

“Arya,” Gendry nonetheless said in a moment of prancing concern for her, which almost made him give up on Reed, Thoros and Tom. “We should go if we can't help them.”

“No,” she said simply, continuing to struggle with the pillory. Gendry helped as he could, but his attention was on the grumkin and his hand almost on his hammer.

Lord Tarly was pale as milk. He stood in front of his younger son, clearly afraid. Oddly, he tried to reason with the enemy as though they had met before. “You have taken my good-daughter ten days ago, Lord Mootoon’s daughter. That was payment enough for our right to survival. I shall not let you have my heir.”

The Other hissed in the direction of Arya, Gendry, Rickon and, most importantly, the Horn of Winter, as if he thought of them as payment.

“They are my prisoners.” To his credit, Tarly truly tried to be brave. At least in words.

The Other ignored him. Advancing past him, the snark grabbed Dickon’s arm with a bony one made of ice. The boy tried to unsheathe his sword, but his arm faltered.

His father was paralysed now. His bottom lip trembled. He offered no resistance. “Leave Dickon, please,” Randyll Tarly pleaded weakly. “Take Samwell. He is fatter. He’ll have more blood you can drink.”

In northern stories, the Others gulped down the blood of the living for sustenance. Sam looked at his frightened father with a sad, knowledgeable look.

And instead of being afraid of the white walker as Lord Randyll, Dickon and all their men, Samwell trod gracelessly towards the Other, gaining speed with every step, as a massive boulder rolling down the mountain in an avalanche. He nearly toppled over his petrified father when he was next to him.

The Other laughed, holding Dickon in submission, “Come, Ser Piggy,” he challenged him. “Joust with me.”

*How does he know that nickname?* Gendry scratched his head. *Can they read our minds?*

Sam had told Arya and Gendry that Ser Piggy was one the names by which he was mocked at times on the Wall.

*The Others should not even be this far south. The divide passing through High Heart, spreading from east to west, bars their crossing.*

*Does it? Or is it gone?*

“Just a bit more, Arya said with hope. The arms of the prisoners were free. Rickon left the horn in the snow and was now helping his sister to finish her labour and liberate the heads.

Gendry stood attentively with his hammer, knowing he could not *kill* the Other with it, only give Arya and Rickon some more time.

His readiness was proven unnecessary.

Samwell Tarly rapidly pulled out a greatsword from the jeweled scabbard on his father’s back, while
Lord Tarly remained stoned and weak. The blade shone in scarce daylight. *Heartsbane*. Sam had mentioned it to Arya.

Gendry exclaimed in outrage towards Lord Randyll. “You carry a Valyrian blade and you were too craven to use it?”

Sam attacked the Other, who pushed Dickon away and parried his first blow. Then, the fat man rolled forward, heavy as a mountain, spinning like a ball. In the last turn he made, he sank to the ground, *whimpering* from fear…. Yet his dread did not prevent him to slam into the white walker with the entire weight of his great whale-like body, and deliver a clumsy, crushing blow with the great blade over the belly and the crotch of his enemy.

The Other screamed in pain… with too *human* a voice.

Sam's small eyes shone brightly with sudden understanding. "Who are you?" he asked with fearless curiosity, dropped the blade and tore at the Other's face with both chubby hands.

*He is clever*, Gendry had to change his mind. Jon's friend discovered the full extent of the base mummery very fast, from only one fundamental mistake that the would-be grumkin had made, a moment faster than Gendry himself.

The wights were not wights. They were ordinary cripples of Oldtown, cloaked and painted grey and blue like mummers, in such a way to suggest they were undead and not merely infirm. The fake corpses scampered to the forest as soon as their leader was brought down, mounted as fast as they could with their respective illnesses and disappeared.

Sam finished peeling off an elaborate, slippery mask from his opponent’s face, as well as some paint from his bare sword hand.

“Here is your Other,” he told his father without stuttering.

“It hurts,” a young lad dressed up as a white walker squeaked. The voice the gods gave him was much less deep when passing through the ruined mask.

“Here is your company of so-called wights haunting Oldtown and the Reach, in order to extort coin, favours and hostages!” Sam accused. “They serve Lord Hightower! He keeps his own people in check by *frightening* them not to leave the city at night… And by the looks of it, the Citadel made their disguises… I was taught to make these masks and body paint as a part of my training… For forging the pewter link. *All* novices merited those of late,” Sam tossed the mask angrily to the ground.

“Leo Tyrell!” Mollander said, coming back from his hiding place in the forest. “Well met! I knew you were witless and dumb, but not this much.”

Lord Tarly picked up the ancestral sword his fat son had let fall with fresh arrogance and reassurance. “*Leave!*” he bellowed at the young man who had frightened him moments ago. “Before I put your head on a spike and offend your family. And tell Hightower I want my good-daughter back immediately or he shall lose my support. He must have her as a hostage. I would have been loyal to his cause without this pitiful deceit.”

Leo did not have to be told twice. He found his horse and was no longer seen.

“Seize them all!” Tarly bellowed to his men, whose courage began returning with the change of tide. Fortunately for Arya, Gendry and Rickon, the guards remained tied and struggled to free themselves.
Dickon helped one of them untie a difficult knot, and then stood stiff next to his father. It was apparently below his lordship and his heir to help their men further.

Reed, Thoros and Tom were free of the pillory now. But they were all unarmed, and the Lord of the Neck had fainted from losing breath while Arya and Rickon strove to liberate his head.

They should have run but, Sam, Jon’s friend, was the first one taken by the guards. “Don’t hurt me,” he said, “I meant well. I have never deserted my post on the Wall.”

“Ser Piggy,” Tarly studied his son with disdain. "Is that how they call you? I would spare your worthless life if you were man enough to at least father a bastard as you told your mother. It turns out that the child belonged to another man. His real mother returned for him and took him away."

“But his real mother is dead,” Sam reacted with honesty that endangered him further.

“See?” Tarly was furious now. "You don’t even bother to deny it."

Sam laughed hysterically. “Guess what? It could have been mine! And there would be at least one bastard of mine if I could only spend more time with Gilly. I was man enough for her. But they don’t take girls into the Citadel. I loved her and I left her for doing my duty.”

“You are good for nothing," Tarly judged Sam mercilessly. “You should have stayed where you were. It will be your fault, and not mine, when your mother dies from grief over your worthless passing."

The second son, Dickon, spat in his brother's face. “I used to love you,” he complained. “Why did you have to turn so weak?

Arya and Gendry could have left ten times by then.

Instead, Arya screamed. “Let him be! You say you fought under the dragon banner in the Rebellion? Your king is alive and you owe him your allegiance. As do we. Stannis is a pretender.”

Tarly, typically, never listened to ladies.

“Let us begin with Ser Piggy,” Tarly said calmly. "Then we will see about the rest of you thieves. Someone fetch me the block!"

Being highborn and growing up in a castle suddenly lost all charm and attraction in the eyes of the smith apprentice eager for glory. Gendry remembered young Arya, in that acorn dress that made her look like a beautiful lady, in a completely different light. He also remembered her royal cousin, talking about his life on the Wall, and occasionally wrinkling his forehead when he jokingly called himself a Bastard of Winterfell. Arya suffered for being forced to wear dresses she did not see as pretty, and Jon on account of his origin; a stigma he could not help.

One could be of the highest birth and perfectly miserable.

Maybe Gendry was truly better off growing up in Flea Bottom. He wasn’t that unhappy before he was obliged to flee for being Robert's bastard. Before his chance for a better life was taken away from him… He looked at Arya with devotion. Taken away and returned with interest.

“Is he real? Is he truly your father?” Gendry had to ask Sam when the block appeared. "Or is he a proper snark without a fancy mask and ice blade?"

“I am his son,” Sam said quietly. “Is it my fault he believes he fathered a pig?"
Gendry laughed.

“Give my love to Jon, will you?” Sam asked.

“We are not going anywhere just yet,” Arya assured him.

She was about to draw Needle in her anger.

“I have faith you can do it,” Gendry said, staying her arm gently. "But please, allow me." Tarly was large and wielded a powerful weapon.

Arya gave Gendry an incredulous look, but then she… relented. In a second that took her to reconsider, bloody Dickon Tarly, tried to seize her, causing Rickon to jump on him. Several guards ran to help their young master… and stopped in place.

The nine year old Rickon Stark held a huge Skagosi stone knife on Dickon’s unarmoured throat, almost drawing blood, with a savage expression on his freckled young face.

"Rickon, no!" Arya protested. "He is a boy. "

“And I am Lord Stark,” Rickon announced. “My lords, you have failed to respond more than once to my sister, Lady Arya, and you have needlessly imprisoned our bannerman, Lord Howland Reed. In the North this is punishable by death."

"Rickon, wait!" Arya demanded.

The guards crawled forward carefully now, looking for the best angle to overwhelm Rickon.

“No,” Randyll stayed them. His voice was colder than ice. His jaw stiffened. “I shall deal with girls and children myself. Their place is at home. I shall teach them that lesson.”

He launched an attack on Rickon with his Valyrian greatsword in hand. The blade swung and-clashed with a hammer.

"You forgot the bastard," Gendry said icily. "Where is his place? Does he have one?" His fury at Tarly's unfair treatment of Sam morphed into frosty determination.

It was very different than fighting Jon in a fit of temper. This lord was very skilled and fast for his age, methodical. With deadly precision, he fought to kill. Gendry understood that… Jon never did the same. Gendry’s life was never in danger from Arya's cousin. Well, maybe when the wolf bit him… But later on, in their aggressive sparring, Jon merely tried to make his little sister's suitor eat some snow. He did not mind being a bit bloodied in return…

On the contrary, Tarly wanted a swift and decisive victory. Gendry wouldn't grant him his wish. Because why would he? The lord had not done anything to deserve any respect. Studying and following his style of fighting, Gendry recognised the forms of attack and defence Jon repeated, and was better able to counter them. After a while, he remembered some steps Jon used and Tarly never did …

**Who would say that a jealous outburst could come handy in a real fight?**

The combat continued to be even; neither man won nor lost ground. In Tarly's eyes, Gendry found only the coldest of contempt.

*He doesn’t see anyone. Only highborn men who are the spitting image of himself.*
Well, my lord, he thought, the world is large, full of many different men, women and children.

Gendry’s stomach began twisting with well-controlled fury. This man was old and he would never make him change his rather limited view of the world.

But there was one thing he could do. He wanted to… talk a bit from a position a power.

Because Gendry wanted to rise in the eyes of the world for Arya, but also a little for himself. He was strong and capable. Why should he put his head down for men who were not his betters?

Not in his chest, was the last completely conscious thought Gendry had. He did not want to kill Tarly despite realising how easy he could do it with his newfound determination and focus. He made a few passes which were familiar to his opponent and landed his hammer here and there on a whim, forcing the lord to defend himself. When Tarly's foot slid only so slightly and left a minuscule opening, Gendry rapidly executed one of those different steps Jon used, the easiest one he could remember. Tarly was a moment too late in reading his intent. As a consequence, Gendry landed a hammer blow with all his strength behind it, and smashed Tarly's right leg under the hip.

The lord sunk to the ground and strove not to scream.

Another strike wounded his sword hand and made the Valyrian blade fly away from its master. Two men-at-arms had to avoid being hit by it.

Gendry forced Tarly to lay down with his bare hands. "Your leg will hurt less like this, until your maester can fix it," he said. His lordship wrestled with him, but was not a match for Gendry when wounded. Not even close.

"Will you be still?" Robert Baratheon's bastard said disrespectfully.

The mute struggle continued.

Gendry lifted his lordship and carried him closer to the pillory. Tom eagerly offered his help for letting Tarly taste his own medicine. "They broke my woodharp," he complained. "Let us hang him in here and make him sing us a pretty song."

At that, there was finally a shade of doubt in Tarly’s eyes when he looked to Gendry for protection against the shame, the faintest sign that he maybe saw Gendry as fellow man and not as a Great Other or a rare animal.

"See," Gendry said, laying him down again, "my father was just a lord, like you. And he had risen above the likes of you and became king. Be happy that your chest is still whole. If we ever meet again, I shall make sure that you can show a larger hole in it than King Rhaegar ever had. Do you think any of us cares for your authority? Guess what, we don’t. We are leaving. We have better things to do than to listen to your poor attempt at civil conversation."

"And how will you leave, pray?" Tarly observed with continued scorn. "Flying? Seize them," he commanded for the third time, in a weak, breaking voice.

His men were not at all eager to fulfil his command and with good reason. A fire began burning out of nowhere, between them and the pillory. Thoros bowed deeply. "Lord of Light has graced us with his presence," he claimed. "Unless someone here has the secret powders from Asshai."

Asshai. Alleras mentioned it today.

"Thoros, the horn!" Gendry bellowed.
Alleras the Sphinx scurried merrily around. Light-footed like Arya, he sprinkled perfumed, many-coloured powder from his deep pockets. Fire started wherever the grains fell. Mollander was having the horn now and they were both running towards the horses.

Arya caught up with Alleras. Needle was drawn and threatened to pierce the handsome boy's guts.

“Don’t,” Mollander said, bringing the horn back.

“No!” Alleras screamed. “Take it! Or the dragon who betrayed my aunt and left her may yet prevail.”

“Please, let him go,” Mollander begged of Arya, handing over the horn cautiously, waving it as a tasty bait for a dangerous animal. “I love him,” he said when Arya did not immediately take him on his offer.

“Her you mean,” Arya said graciously. “Give the horn to Tom over there,”

“Her?” Mollander asked, incredulous, doing as he was bid.

“Believe me,” Arya said calmly, “I know how a girl hides during travel when she has to make water.” She shoved Alleras away.

The handsome dark face of the Sphinx wrinkled.

“Is it true?” Mollander said.

Arya gave Gendry a dark glare.

You were jealous of me? Are you as jealous as I can be?

“I had no idea, Arry, I swear,” Gendry spoke from the urge in his heart to defend himself.

“I know,” she said and smiled softly. “Or I would not be able to forgive you. And… I’m sorry for not telling you earlier she was a girl. I… I preferred you didn’t know.”

Arya was more jealous than Gendry.

She must love me.

Mollander gave Alleras a noisy, slobbery kiss. His eyes watered tremendously.

“If I was a boy…” Alleras tried to say.

“I would feel the same.” Mollander retorted merrily. “I was going to tell you, one of these days. Do you.. Do you have a girl name?”

“Sarella,” Alleras offered very timidly.

The heartfelt embrace that followed, full of love and tears, attracted everyone’s attention. Even Arya’s and Gendry’s. For a moment, Gendry imagined himself and Arya on their marriage day.

A moment too long.

No one watched over the deceitful Pate the Ugly Novice in that time.

A completely unknown man who must have been Jaqen H’ghar seized the Horn of Winter from
Tom o’Sevens in a swift unstoppable motion. Running like mad, he threw some smelly powder in the air. He must have stolen that earlier from Alleras. Carelessly, he lifted his arms and the horn high and vanished in a short, fleeting burst of crackling fire.

“The dust of the shadowbinders,” Lord Reed announced quietly, gaining consciousness from the noisy disappearance of the first real thief that day. “He can be in Essos by now.”

Arya helplessly wrung her hands.

“I warned you, young Lady Stark,” Reed said warmly. “My visions are never the whole truth, but the part I do see and understand has never failed me. You should have left me to part with my hands.”

“No,” Arya denied this wisdom. “No. I was made blind once. I… I should have not been able to regain my sight before I became as my captors wanted me to be. But I never did. I found another way and my sight was returned. This is what we did now. We cheated on destiny. I know where he must return. And maybe if we go there as well, we shall find the horn again.”

Gendry always wondered what Arya was made to endure as an apprentice Faceless Girl. She never talked about it. One day, he would ask her. He wished to know. But he had not yet found the right moment.

“My lord,” Reed told Rickon, “I shall require your wildling knife. Our time here is over.”

“Do you seriously believe we shall let you leave?” Randyll Tarly wondered. He must have been in tremendous, gut-wrenching pain, yet he still thought he was in command.

Gendry stepped with his boot on his lordship’s chest. "Shut up," he said.

Unexpectedly, Tarly obeyed.

The men-at-arms did not even try to approach Gendry or anyone else. The pack was bigger now and completely armed, forming a solid line of defence. Rickon gave his knife to Reed, but not before producing another, smaller one, for Dickon’s throat. Tom took Dickon’s sword and Thoros the Valyrian blade.

Sam… disappeared.

Reed walked to the nearest Southron redwood and cut a pair of eyes and a mouth in its bark. Clad in green, the last greenseer began singing tenderly to the tree, under his voice, in a language unknown to Gendry. The eyelids and the lips widened. The maw of the tree opened…

“Here,” Reed said, satisfied. “Shake your garments well for any residues of the cursed Asshai'i dust. The old gods have no love for it.”

“Witchcraft,” Tarly said with venom. “Evil magic.”

Reed gave him a long, measured look. “Some would say indeed, that this is magic, my lord.” he observed thoughtfully. “And others would say there is magic in the world itself, if you know where to look for it. There is power in your castle and in the hill under it. Horn Hill. It had healed the wounds of the Horn of Winter as only his maker, Joramun, dead for thousands of years, could have done it. I only gave a little nudge to the existing forces with my song. Farewell, my lord. Do remember this. You would have never had me or anyone else in your power if the gods did not give it to you. Be more cautious when you think of your strength. Or your favourite son shall hate you and end your life a few years from now, for not being able to stand your constant demeaning of
everything he does. And then young Dickon will take his own life for he will suffer greatly as a consequence of his deed. He will be devastated by it. How I wish I could have saved my only son by any action of mine! Alas Jojen is dead, worse, he is undead as so many of our loved ones, and he shall be truly dead when the dawn comes... If it comes...There is no way back... And maybe we shall all die in which case nothing will matter..."

Tarly looked from Reed to Dickon. His arrogant expression became inscrutable.

Reed’s leafy eyes glowed against the fresh, green colour of his garments. He looked taller and more powerful, like some foreign warlock from distant land, invoking the arrival of spring. “Watch for the ravens, my lords. The black ones that follow the king. Not the treacherous ones that announce the change of seasons, sent from the Citadel. A wedding shall be celebrated soon,” Reeds’ voice rustled like grass and thundered like a storm.

“The wedding of Ice and Fire!” the crannogman announced with pride. “I suggest you attend it together with your fellow conspirators, Lord Hightower, Brynden Tully... I am certain there are more. I could not have seen all the traitors in the realm - there are always so many. I do regret to inform you that Jon Connington will not be able to join you when you head North, for as much as he seems willing to betray Rhaegar’s cause and doubts his best friend’s identity out of jealousy... Even Doran Martell may have second thoughts.”

“Did someone say wedding?” Sam said cheerfully, coming out of the castle with a girl. “I haven’t been to one in years. I... Can I take Gilly with me?”

“Of course you can,” Reed said jovially, “Jon would want both of you to be there. And by now he must be terribly worried for his beloved little sister who is nowhere to be found.”

Arya appeared crestfallen, as if she had only now realised the consequences of her reckless actions for her beloved family. Her insecurity did not last very long - it was not in Arya's nature to admit that she might have been wrong.

“Come,” she said with decision, and sneaked her slim arm around Gendry's. "It's time to go home."

Gendry lifted his boot from Tarly’s chest and walked to the new face of the redwood tree with his lady, hand in hand.

During their short walk, he glimpsed a very peculiar expression in Arya's eyes. She gazed at him with approval and respect.

As if he hadn’t been stupid at all.

Gendry smiled and gave himself willingly to the natural magic of the trees.

Chapter End Notes

Comments make the author less lonely and the wait for the books (coloured with glimpses into show episodes summaries online) less arduous )))

Any feedback is welcome.

Next up: Sansa, Dany, Brienne, Jon, ?
Sansa

The cave was hollow and spacious, perfect in its frozen beauty. It rang with a thousand different sounds of water dripping and running over sculpted stone and white, gnarled wood.

Sansa was being taken by the Others deeper and deeper under the surface of the earth. Enclosed in the cocoon of tightly knitted, diaphanous ice web, woven and tailored for her by her captors, she reached out to touch her husband’s spirit, but she could not. White fuzziness softened her. Blinded and defeated by sadness, she felt weaker than ever before.

Her gown was dark purple, soaked by kingsblood. Dragonblood. Without it, she would be a slave. Without it, she would be dead. She would always be powerless to resist her fate.

No, she reassured herself. Destiny could be bent. Sansa had escaped from imprisonment before. She could do it again.

The monsters from Old Nan’s stories rolled her cage mercilessly deeper into the brilliant black and white underground, illuminated here and there by a shaft of silvery moonlight piercing the hollow ceiling of the cave.

Far above, a wolf howled.

Ghost.

Was it?

Sansa didn’t know. She must have merely imagined it. It wouldn’t be the first time she invented a truth she wanted for herself.

Yet the imaginary howl made her interrupt her fruitless search for her husband’s vivid spirit. Instead, she methodically touched the souls, no, the minds of the enemy.

The Others did not have a soul, not truly. They were not troubled by anything. They did not perceive injustice.

Sansa found that she could withstand the sensation of warging into them only very briefly. A moment longer than necessary, and she would close her nose and mouth with her own hands in order to stop breathing. To be within the Others was a foul, nauseous experience; a thousand times worse
than having to endure the despair provoked by their presence.

No one had ever hated Sansa that much. Not even Joffrey after Nymeria bit him and Sansa accidentally witnessed a moment of his pitiable weakness.

However, hatred might not be the correct expression. The Others merely desired that she… cooled down prettily. For Sansa it meant she should die and become a wight; their slave for all times.

The Others did not speak, not in human language. Sometimes they uttered sounds, hissing or crying out shrilly, but mostly they remained mute and marched on in the overpowering silence of winter.

The Others did not think… or not as men did. Yet it would be a lie to say that they didn’t have any thoughts. They had a simple purpose and it grew stronger with the cold. The world should freeze; the sooner the better. They never considered their goal from various angles as humans might, never stopped to ponder if their wishes were right or wrong. They never wrung bony, blue hands in nervousness, or changed their mind; never strove to understand an order or went into rebellion against each other.

Their endeavour was unwavering, and it included carrying Sansa away. She could never glimpse where they were taking her or why. Maybe they were unable to think their purpose through and only followed their freezing instincts, telling them from one moment to another what should be done with her.

She tried to call the Others snarks and grumkins in her head, hoping that the childish names would make them less fearsome and alleviate her constant state of hopelessness and expectation; she would die a terrible death. It was only a matter of time.

She sighed deeply.

*Maybe in death there will be no suffering.*

*And maybe there will be more.*

It was best not to know.

The true king no longer lived, despite being a dragonlord. Only his blood was left. Surely everyone would die if he did. *What is blood without a body? Without soul?* A dead, dark brown matter that clung insistently to Sansa’s gown and hugged her body, suffocating her… and yet so far Rhaegar’s blood had protected her life where all else failed…

Overwhelmed by a wave of gratitude for her continued existence, Sansa became thoroughly ashamed of her weakness. Spurred on by her embarrassment, she gave another careful glimpse inside the head of two out of her six captors; those she feared a bit less. Just like men, the Others looked similar, but they were not at all the same. The first one remembered… red and yellow flowers and resented the memory of their sweet scent. His jaw almost clicked when hissing. The flowers… he found that they should have been… frozen.

The second Other longed to… *die from cold*. This last thought was very strange, almost *pleasingly* chilly, but perhaps it was a normal notion for a creature wrought of ice. Shaken by the too-vivid morbid desires of the Others, and afraid that they could *recognise* she was peeking and punish her if she did it for too long, Sansa withdrew and studied her surroundings. The pristine beauty of the cave soothed her despite the unearthly cold.

*Maybe I am like them. If I can find this desolation pretty…*
The consideration made her slide deeper into her state of despair.

She eyed the small white cup filled with thick crimson liquid inside her cage with mistrust; it was some kind of nourishment given to her by the Others. *Drink. Eat.* Her tummy demanded both. Sansa refused it. Sandor wouldn’t want her to. He had been sickened by the substance when he tasted it, so it must be dangerous if a strong man like him was so affected. Maybe she would become a white walker if she consumed too much of it.

_Sandor. Sandor. Sandor._

Nothing. He couldn’t hear her. *He must be well though.* Sansa believed she would have felt his pain if he was either killed or severely wounded.

Wouldn’t she?

In the vast central opening of the cavern, where the Others finally brought her, childlike men and women were dying. Their skin was dappled and their eyes ancient, colour of moss.

A very old man with hair that resembled Rhaegar’s, but so long that it fell over his ankles and beyond them, was already dead; sprawled indecently over a large weirwood throne. A tree root grew through one of his eye sockets. His body had become one with his seat, like another twisted trunk or a set of branches of the great white trees belonging to the old gods. Sansa wished she could hear the tree-man’s voice. He looked very much like the greenseer who had foretold Sansa in her dreams that Rhaegar would die, before his army had ever crossed the Trident.

The Others dragged the greenseer’s body down from his throne, tossed him violently onto the ground in front of it and began piercing him with ice spikes. The cave was full of white walkers, a hundred strong at least. Her six captors joined them, leaving Sansa alone in her cage, on the margin of the gathering.

Sansa’s despair rose to unprecedented heights.

*So it worsens when they are in greater number.*

She stared at the dying children, needing to look at something else, *anything* else, but the scene of their passing only made her feel for them and cry.

At least her tears were warm.

The Others had plenty of ice spikes for the little people; one frozen dagger for every beating heart. *This is what they will do to me if they ever undress me.*

Children *sang* as they left the world.

This attitude made the Others unhappy. Sansa’s head swelled and felt like it would burst from sudden, sharp pain caused by their displeasure. The melody was exquisite and so very slow to die out… On another occasion she would be delighted to listen to the music, but now she was merely glad it ended; extinguished and forgotten forever.

Sansa realised it was not enough for the Others if their victims died. The slain should part with this life in bitterness and misery. The white walkers thrived on the despair they caused.

One grumkin stood very tall and dangerously peaceful, in the back of the cave. The rest dared not come close to him. His broad back was turned to Sansa and his calm attitude made him look almost
as tall as Sandor, though Sansa knew he wasn’t. With Gregor dead, and with the spurt of growth her husband experienced with the arrival of winter, Sandor was likely the tallest man in the Seven Kingdoms.

Unexpectedly, the imposing Other spoke when the song of the little men and women was almost done. “Fools!” he thundered. "They’ll rather kill themselves than turn. So be it. After this night, there shall be no more children of the forest to guard the secret knowledge and to warn the children of men that the Long Night will fall again.”

Sansa wanted to scream. It was their king. The Night's King. Rhaegar’s death had been in vain. His enemy was in good health.

Warging was not required at all to understand that the Others feared their master tremendously. Their awe of him was palpable in the utmost respect and subservience of their gestures, like a huge wave of anxiety and obedience that spread through the cave when the Night's King addressed them. If they failed to do his bidding, they would be made warm. Very warm. Warm was very, very evil. So far it was the only possibility that troubled the peaceful existence of the Others and their vivid dreams of freezing.

Sansa, a pleasant, melodious voice sounded in her head. It was extremely familiar, yet she could not place it.

Sansa, the voice became louder, piercing through Sansa’s distress, gaining in importance. It was deeper than she remembered it.

More grown-up than when it spoke to her in her dreams or through the mouth of the heart tree in Winterfell.

Is it you, Sansa?

When she strove to listen to it and ignore everything else, she saw. What her captors did not. The cave was not empty as the Others perceived it, and she until then. There were many living sleepers in the depth of the hollow northern hill, lying languidly on many weirwood thrones, behind the dead children and the large circle of their white conquerors.

Sansa, here, the voice said.

She saw where she should go. Fortunately, the throne she needed to approach was not very far. Ten steps to the right at most. Ten steps that seemed like giant leaps.

You can do it. You can, she told herself, wringing her hands.

The Others bowed to their king. Sansa made a large step to the right, as much as her gown allowed, but without trying to break through the ice cage. She made another such step, stumbled and touched the ice web by chance. She braced herself for the searing pain and the bleeding of her fingers. Miraculously, the discomfort never came. Her pretty dungeon… moved with her.

It was a small achievement, but to Sansa it felt like a great victory. Bravely, she made the rest of the necessary steps towards it, and stood in front of a throne with three sleepers, one on top, and two reclining on the sides, like statues of beasts flanking a doorway leading into a foreign city or the high seat of some lord.

The boy, almost a young man now, had auburn hair longer than her own. An unknown young lady lying on his right hand side could be of Sansa’s age. She was lithe and dark of hair, and she seemed very short in stature. Hodor slept to the left, huge as ever. Sansa could not guess the house the lady
belonged to, though she felt she should.

Bran. *Bran?* She spoke back to her brother as he had done to her, in the confines of their minds, hoping that the Others could not hear them. The wish for conversation vanquished her fears and her despair.

_Sansa. You heard me, _Bran replied with contented disbelief. _Jon didn’t when he came here, _he added, this time with sorrow and reticence. _Maybe he didn't want to…_

*Of course he would have wanted to hear you! _Sansa spontaneously reassured _Bran. _How can you think otherwise? In Winterfell he stayed with you as often as he could when you slept. He would never turn away from you if he could hear you._

Jon had been devastated after Bran's fall. _No, after Ser Jaime Lannister pushed him, _Sansa recalled the unadorned truth. The wolf and the lion went at each other’s throat and the only animal laughing in the end was the mocking bird. _Not anymore, _Sansa recalled _Petyr's death as justice. Scavengers did not survive their victims for very long.

Jon had gone to say his farewell to Bran before leaving for the Wall, despite that it meant seeing Sansa's mother from nearby; an unpleasant experience he avoided since his tenth name day if he could choose, by Sansa’s observation and reckoning.

_How is it that you could hear me and Jon could not? _Bran wondered. His eyes that had been closed snapped open. They were blue, with the faintest streak of auburn that looked as if it had crept into his irises from his hair.

_I am different, _Sansa thought back at him. _Since Lady died. Since… since winter came. Jon must be like Arya. They still have their wolves. They can’t touch other animals or men. Or if they can, they are not aware of it, which is the same as not being able to._

_Oh, _Bran sounded terribly, terribly disappointed. _I thought I was the only one who could do that. Because I… because I lost the use of my legs._

_Summer…? _Sansa wondered.

_Alive and hunting, _Bran thought. _I was asleep for so long… I woke a week ago when Jon came. When… when Bloodraven died. Before the Others took the cave. It was supposed to be warded but it isn’t, he thought unhappily._

_Bloodraven? _Sansa did not understand. Highborn girls were taught stitching first, and ancient history next. She knew the present of all the Great Houses, but not so well the past. Later on, in the capital, ladies who were kept hostage received no lessons in history. _Only in losses._

_The dead man with red eyes there in the middle, _Bran gestured forward sadly with his head, staring at the Others and their latest victims. _He was the greenseer before me and he died just before the Others rushed into the cave. I have to take his place now. I shall never leave this cave, this tree. I shall observe the events from within, those that I can see, and guide those who come by… If anyone ever comes…_

_Sansa’s brother moved his hand to his forehead, skinny as a snake and paler than Sansa’s; colour of ash. I am so hungry, _he said. _And I... I’ve been trying to wake Hodor and Meera for a week now, when I wasn't drowsing. This throne makes me want to sleep... But maybe they can still leave. Return to the Wall. Survive._

_I sang and I cried, _Bran complained, _I tossed roots and twigs I could break with my hands at them. I
tried everything but they... they remain asleep.

Lady Meera…? Sansa inquired timidly.

Meera Reed. Bran’s gaze turned particularly desperate when he turned it to the young woman. Sansa was wise enough now to understand it. Her brother withdrew from their conversation, brooding. He was in love with Howland Reed’s daughter. It was... it was fitting, Sansa concluded. Lady Meera’s father and Aunt Lyanna would be pleased with the match. As would our Father.

But how will you survive as a greenseeer? Sansa thought, careful not to share her doubts with her little brother, keeping all her sad thoughts for herself. She was used to them.

The trees wouldn’t feed Bran.

Maybe the gods would, but Sansa’s belief in them was different than when she was a little girl. People had to help gods a little at times.

Bran, Sansa said feverishly in her brother’s mind and waited, sticking to the outskirts of his consciousness, not wishing to force him to open up as she had done with Euron Greyjoy, with Sandor’s horse and Sandor himself. Come back, please. Talk to me. It was imperative that he did.

I am the last greenseeer now, Bran observed seriously after a long while. And my teacher died before he could teach me to fly. As did Meera’s brother Jojen whom Bloodraven had sent out on some errand. They never told me what it was. I have seen his corpse wandering through the forests near the Wall.

The Others killed Jojen, Sansa remembered and told Bran. He came to see Jon’s real father, to remind him of the story of the last hero.

The last hero? Bran inquired. It has always been my favourite story. But it already happened in the past. It can’t be real in our time. Never mind. Jojen is dead. Bloodraven is dead. Now it is not only that I shall never walk again. I shall never fly either as he had promised me.

Was your teacher a dragon? Sansa wondered about the full name of the dead lord with silver hair.

Brynden Rivers. The Bloodraven. He had a thousand eyes and one, Bran outlined. He was one of the great bastards of the House Targaryen.

His birth matters little. Young Sansa distinguished between trueborn and natural born children. Older Sansa knew more about the worth of men. She no longer paid attention to such distinctions.

Can you...? Bran wondered. I mean, if you can hear me, can you also see events unfolding in the memory of the trees? Do the trees whisper to you about the past? Or the present?

I heard you in my dreams and in the godswood of Winterfell. Sansa said honestly. I thought I was going mad, but I did hear you. You told me to make this gown. She pointed at herself, twirled elegantly in her cage. Then I saw a future. I travelled North of the Wall to prevent it.

You saw a future? Bran was genuinely curious now. I mostly see the present or the past, I think. Jojen, he always dreamed about the future... And I almost never did as far as I know... I saw Rickon a while ago, maybe a day before your arrival woke me fully as Jon’s did. He is with Arya.

Sansa’s heart soared from hearing good news about their baby brother, who must have been nine now. Arya would never follow her heart madly as Sansa did. She would keep Rickon safe.
I have had a vision of you in this gown, moments ago; I knew you would be coming to see me, Bran continued. And I did whisper to you before, whenever I met you in my dreams because I wanted you to know I was alive. But I’ve never told you to make the dress you are wearing...

I thought I saw a future when I looked into the eyes of the heart tree in Winterfell, Sansa wished to stress the tremendous imprecision of her experience. It was never whole. It was in bits and pieces. I shouldn’t have believed in it.

Sansa examined her boots, humbled. Her stubbornness and gullibility, or maybe the inability to see correctly, contributed to Rhaegar’s death. She must have invented the calling to sew a pretty gown and go North because it was what she wanted… to be reunited with Sandor. Poor, simple Sansa, Cersei’s little dove... She still wanted to be loved. With her eyes lowered in shame, she glimpsed a beautiful sword with jewels on its pommel, lying hidden under the roots that formed Bran’s throne.

Jon didn’t want it. Bran stressed with a disappointment of his own, following her gaze with his bloodshot eyes. Bloodraven offered it to him. I whispered to Jon he should take it. But he just left, despising Bloodraven's sword… and me, I think...

Before, when you were in King’s Landing, Bran continued. I... saw a headless giant with black blood, and a dog and a lion in golden armour that either guarded or threatened both you and Arya.

That must be in the past now, Sansa said decisively, catching the image of the old vision that flashed through Bran’s head, recognising the men it contained. Sandor was her husband now and not anyone’s dog. Gregor was dead and Ser Jaime a changed man. He searched for Tyrion in Essos and he most likely no longer threw children through the window. From her short and superficial acquaintance with Ser Jaime during the mummary, Sansa believed he wouldn’t hurt an innocent again. And even if he did have such intentions, his wife, Lady Brienne, most certainly wouldn’t let him. Arya and I are fine, Sansa guaranteed to Bran. What I mean to say, I would be fine if I was not here. Others took me.

I hope you are right for your and Arya's sake, Bran replied thoughtfully. But the past and the present are often mixed. I saw... I saw the tower where Jon was born, and his mother. I saw who his father was. Maybe that is why he could not hear me when I told him to take Visenya’s sword, because he is our cousin and not our brother. But he still should have picked it up. This blade belongs to the dragons.

I don't know why Jon refused the sword, Bran, Sansa said honestly. I have always been hopeless with weapons. But Ser Rodrik said Jon was one of the most talented boys he trained. If he didn’t take it, he must have had his reasons. Maybe... maybe the sword was not good for him. But I am certain he would have talked to you if he had heard your voice.

He didn't listen to me in his dreams either, Bran thought miserably. I warned him to learn all he could about Joramun. He wasn't the last hero, but he knew or he discovered how to face winter. How to end it, or how to ruin Westeros before the Others poured out of it over the frozen seas and conquered the known world. In Joramun’s time, the people sailed over the narrow sea to run away from the doom, before those who stayed and resisted were victorious. It happened thousands of years ago. The Long Night has come and gone before. There must be books and legends in the North where the knowledge might be preserved… The oldest scrolls should be in the vaults under the Wall… under Jon’s command. That's what Maester Luwin always said...

Before Bran finished his story, which sounded to Sansa like one of the scariest Old Nan's tales her little brother just invented, and not like any serious counsel, she suddenly realised what Jon would have done had he known that Bran was in the cave.
Bran, her thoughts flew like a fast river towards her brother, you must know this if you remember Jon as well as I do. He would have never left here without you had he heard you or seen that you are trapped.

You think so? Bran asked sheepishly, sounding very young and confused all of a sudden, just as they all were when they left Winterfell.

I know, Sansa said. The Starks were all equally stubborn in certain things. Her own frightened mind had been turning and turning since the moment she saw Bran, looking for a manner to help her brother, setting aside her own problems for the time being.

I can't wake them, Bran complained and glanced at his sleeping lady. What good is it, to be a greenseer, if you can't do anything to help anyone?

A soft hiss behind her back startled Sansa, drawing her attention back to the rest of the cave. The Others were coming for her again. She carefully schooled her face to be expressionless and stared lifelessly at the empty spot on the wall, away from Bran's throne.

Won't they kill you? Bran asked, as worried about her as she was about him.

No, she said, tugging at her gown, letting another very warm tear slide down her face. I am well armoured against them.

As are we, Bran retorted bitterly. The children wove another spell of protection when Bloodraven and the magic he created over time were gone. They all died for it. They never taught me how to sing their songs... I don't know why... A greenseer should know them, shouldn't he? Bloodraven could sing the song of the earth at need. How am I to take his place or weave back the wards of the cave if I don't know the right words?

Sansa could now understand, in part, the children's joy in their passing. They thought it made sense. She wondered if she would ever feel that way about her own death. She suspected she would not. But if die she must, she would rather do it in service of some good if she could, than for no good at all.

And, seemingly, the Night's King did not know the entire purpose of the children. He doesn't know everything. Sansa's hope for a happy ending flared high up through the crevices in the ceiling of the cave and to the starlit sky above.

Before the Others reached her, she gently pushed the mug with the dark red liquid with her boot, careful not to topple it over. When it reached the border of her cage, she prayed.

Let it pass through.

She gave it a decisive push. The cup passed through the web undamaged and slid to Bran over the frozen floor, almost to the base of his throne. She hoped the Others would not see it as they could not see her brother.

It is nourishing, she advised Bran. It may not be healthy, but it is filling. Use it sparsely.

How? Bran asked. I can't get down to take it.

Wake them. Sansa thought of Sandor as the Others took hold of her cage again, and realised what Bran might do. Talk to your lady as you are addressing me now. Haven't you tried? You can all drink from the cup and leave. One drop will make you last a day. I think... I think they will give me another one. Sansa wasn't certain about it, but she tried to be. The Others went to great length to
keep her alive as long as she was dressed. She fully expected them to continue.

But I might hurt Meera, Bran said with pain. With you and Jon I sensed I wouldn't hurt you when I whispered to you. I thought this was because we were all wolves. But I did hurt Hodor when I used his body to fight. He is so huge, yet he was afraid of me. He was like a child inside.

I don't think you would harm the lady, Sansa judged and remembered Sandor with longing, recalled how it was to be in his head, the horror when she saw him take joy in killing, and the beauty of savouring his fierce being when he was at ease… And the frightening strength of his devotion to her… You won't hurt her if there is… love… There is love between you, isn't there? She hoped she was right.

But my legs, Bran mentioned. I... she... She can't love a cripple as a... as a man. Can she?

It matters not, Sansa stated with conviction. It was the truth. Your heart is all that matters. The body will follow it where and when it can.

I will see you again, she thought breathlessly back at Bran, as her cage was being towed away, and all the sleepers in the cave disappeared from her view as if they had never existed.

Please don't die, she added to herself and prayed to all the gods to help Bran. It was not a thought she wished to share with him, not to sadden her younger brother who was not so little anymore, nor to take away his courage to either fight his fate or bear it with dignity.

In her cage of soft ice, Sansa was carried to the presence of the Night's King.

The monster sat gingerly on the weirwood throne that used to be Bloodraven's, in his ancient grey armour wrought of old ice, covered with intricate, foreign looking ornaments on its surface. The complex metalwork and the dead wrinkled flesh of the enemy seemed inseparable and grown together as one skin or... bark.

Sansa had to think of something harmless in order to fight the same cold dread she had felt when she was obliged to appear in Joffrey's court. She found that her odds for survival were both better and worse here. Better because the Others hated everyone, not only her and her family, and worse because she was trapped by the real monsters from stories this time and not by her equals, the people who could be weak as she was. Escape would not come easily for the only awake human soul among the white walkers and the hidden sleepers of the cave. No, she would not even think of the sleepers now. She would not betray them to the Night's King if he could see within her. She would not. Sansa made both her soul and her face blank, emotionless, grateful for having this ability, due to her unhappy past. She thought of the times long gone, of her childhood in Winterfell and her ordeal after her father's death, of the paegant of lords and the ladies she had met in court...

"I see far east and west, and north and… south," the Night's King murmured pensively, sounding almost gallant. "There is great power in this seat I am occupying now, but not more than in my own high chair in the Lands of Always Winter. You shall see it soon, my lady. But today we shall rejoice here before we continue our journey. The hill of the old gods is not theirs any more. It is mine. How can people resist me when their gods could not?"

Sansa was not so certain that the gods could be so easily defeated, but she had learned better than to say so. At the same time, she surmised that staying inside the cave could have a different cause. It should have been daytime outside by now, and the Others travelled only at night.

The Night's King flicked his twisted blue fingers impatiently. Six Others in charge of Sansa immediately took her cage deeper into the cave, far away from Bran. On the sides, there were more
sleepers on their thrones, grown into one with their trees. Some of them had ice spikes passing through their hearts. Their faces looked ancient in this part of the cave, as if they had been sleeping for thousands of years, since the Long Nights preceding the arrival of this one…

Soon, the Others left Sansa in an empty corner where the moonlight could not enter. Their white, blue and grey bodies flashed as they moved away through the dark, brilliant as fresh ice. When all light was gone, so was the wave of despair that accompanied them. Sansa exhaled the cold air and breathed it back into her lungs. She could almost relax in complete blackness. Almost, but not quite. Not seeing, she tried to listen. Above her, there must have been a crevice, leading back to the centre of the cave, through which she suddenly heard the Night's King issuing an odd command.

“Assault Castle Black. The Wall is weakened there now by the doing of that woman who only cares for herself… The boy will surely come and challenge you. Refuse to meet him in the field. Ambush him. Let the one who used to have wooden teeth show you the way. He hasn't forgotten the path leading back to the Wall, like you did when you became my most faithful bannerman. We have the blood of the father now. We don't need the boy. Do this and you shall earn a great honour…”

Sansa could not hear what reward was promised by the Night's King to his unknown, loyal captain if he did his bidding.

*The blood of the father.*

*They can’t mean... Can they?*

*Jon!*

Sansa wished she could find her cousin’s mind and warn him of the unknown danger, but they had never been truly close. Not like Jon and Robb or Jon and Arya… or Sansa and Bran now that she thought of it. She didn’t even know how he looked now. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried hard to think of Jon and locate him, but all she saw was dank, hollow darkness. Not the cave, no…

She saw Jon clearly in the crypts of Winterfell, older and more handsome. He scared her. But he was not covered in flour this time. He had a beard and he was as grey as the Night's King. Long dead. *Jon, no!*

She was very afraid all of a sudden and she ceased her efforts to reach her cousin. She would try again outside the cave. Maybe there were too many weirwoods here to have a clear view of anything, all whispering at the same time.

Sansa attempted to rest but sleep would not come. She was very hungry now and terribly worried for Jon, for Bran, for Sandor and for herself.

A figure appeared in her field of vision, a tall man in pretty armour, carrying a torch. His face resembled both Ser Loras Tyrell and Ser Arys Oakheart in the changeable flickering of the light. Young, strong, handsome, he inspired confidence, though he never looked quite the same as the two Kingsguard from Sansa’s past.

“My lady,” the figure spoke in a mellow, pleasant, perfectly foreign voice. “Let me help you. You should not be here.”

Before Sansa could respond or act, the handsome knight took her by the hand and made her step out of her cage, causing her no harm.

“Follow me,” he said. “I shall bring you to safety.”
“Who are you?” Sansa inquired, standing firmly in place. The touch of his hand was warm and reassuring, but it could not possibly be true. Not in this dreadful place. She was being fooled. Or maybe she was dreaming. But why didn’t she dream of Sandor then? It had been a long while since she gave any thought to either Ser Loras or Ser Arys.

“I wish you well, my lady,” the unknown ser answered, surely reproachful of her lack of courtesies. “Should that not be sufficient? I shall see to it that you are returned to your family. If you would but let me admire your beauty first, as a small reward.”

“Reward?” Sansa made a step back and studied his handsome features. She backed into the wall of the cave, freezing in place.

The knight attempted to roll up gently one of the sleeves of her gown. "It is nothing improper, I can assure you," he said.

Sansa was anything but reassured. She yanked the offended arm to herself and pulled the sleeve back down. Dread coiled in her stomach, sharp and paralysing. He is trying to undress me.

She craved another man’s touch, one that made her heart become warmer and not turn into a block of ice.

She thought of Sandor sleeping out in the cold, following after her against all hope. He had no blood-enchanted gown to keep him warm and was given no food. And yet Sansa had no doubt in her heart that he was never far from her now. Not since he had found her.

“No,” Sansa refused the pretty knight, full of galloping certainty about who he was and what he was. She may have remembered Ser Loras and Ser Arys earlier in the cave so that she wouldn't think of anyone she loved. “Stop. I don’t allow it. I know you.”

When she spoke the words with finality, the illusion of the handsome man was gone. She was Sansa and he was the Night’s King. He had no soul.

Suddenly, Sansa could hear the incessant tinkling of little bells and a thin voice of a woman, crying, inconsolable.

“Who is that?” she asked, unable to keep her mouth closed when it would be better for her if she did. “Why is the lady crying?”

“What kind of monster are you?” the Night’s King asked angrily.

Sansa was stunned mute. The greatest monster of all extended her a compliment of… matching him at his game. Except that she had no idea what she did and how.

“What did you hear?” the enemy asked back with violence, as if she had pried into a best kept secret of his own. His sword arm clenched on a huge crystal weapon on his hip. He would not only place a blade on her throat as Sandor did twice. He would cut her down.

“Nothing,” she denied everything meekly. “It is too much, it is too much,” she pleaded. “End it.” She would never be free. She should better die. Her despair was back with force after a short period of reprieve.

“Undress,” he commanded, “and your end shall be painless. I swear it.”

Sansa drew herself to her full height, trembled and did nothing.
I won’t, I won’t, I won’t. I will not. Not of my own free will. I am not giving you Rhaegar's blood. It is not yours for the taking.

The enemy did not move to touch her again.

Apparently she could not be disrobed by force. If the Others could do it, they would have done so already.

Sansa kept shaking and remained silent, afraid. Her empty stomach ululated and hurt.

“Suit yourself, lady,” the Night’s King said after a while. “You won’t have it your way for long.”

Sansa remained awake and alert for hours, alone, abandoned and hungry. After what seemed like an eternity, and not only a short winter day, she was grateful for the return of despair which announced the reappearance of her six guards.

She was carried farther north through the night as her latest tears froze on her face. The Night’s King and the bulk of his frozen retinue from the cave were nowhere to be seen. Apparently the Lord of Grumkins had other means of travel than just walking.

At the end of another long winter night, Sansa collapsed from hunger and sleeplessness in her cage. It would all end there, the good and the evil, the music, the ugliness and the beauty. The sleeve of her gown tightened around her hand, as if the fabric and her skin were melting one into another. Maybe she would become a tree as well, a redwood, with crimson bark. One of her guards noticed it and cried out. Instantly, they all began pointing at each other and at her. After a heated screeching discussion the Other she feared a bit less than the other five, the one whose hissing sounded like the cracking of ice under boots on a frozen lake, produced a little bowl with that nourishing dark red liquid out of his armour and pushed it into her enclosure.

Sansa had to take a sip. She had no choice in the matter. She thought of Sandor and his fears for her, and made it as small as possible. Her gown loosened again.

So they can't take it off me if I just die, she realised. If she did, her dress and her skin would be one. Maybe she would walk proudly in her death. Maybe she would be a free, dangerous monster.

No.

She didn't want to change her nature.

She still wanted to be loved and to be happy. Was it too much to wish for?

When faint daylight finally came, the Others disappeared. Sansa never saw what they did to survive the day. Maybe they buried themselves under the snow or climbed the trees. Occasionally she was sorry she hadn’t been braver and followed them on those first days, when her cage was not yet finished, to know what they did and if daylight made them weaker. But she had sensed that Sandor was following the trail of the carriage and that she might get lost if she wandered off on her own.

It is now too late to find out what they do.

She looked to the grey sky and wondered how much light there was left in the world, and at which moment everything would be covered in darkness.

Despair choked her, mingling with growing anger at the injustice of it all. The dead one-eyed man, once a proud lord and a dragon, became a tree and died like one. The slain children of the forest sacrificed themselves for the ancient sleepers who were not truly alive, but equally grown into their
entangled wooden thrones. Her brother Bran was condemned to become a sleeper, if he could not wake Hodor and Lady Meera and leave the cave. Sansa regretted having revealed to Bran that she partially shared his gift of seeing visions through the weirwoods... She should have left him to believe he was even more special. Maybe it would be easier for him to survive if he thought that way.

Sansa’s fresh state of rebellion at the unfairness of the latest atrocities she had seen slowly made her reckless and strong. Not thinking, her mad warging ability sparkled and churned. She was instantly able to find Sandor and she invaded his spirit without hesitation, much like she would cover him with kisses if they were together and if they could touch freely. He was near. He could not save her and she did not blame him for it... Like before, no one could save her except herself, but she needed to see him. Now.

"Here!" she cried out when she saw him approaching, after an hour or so, uncaring if the Others listened.

There was very little daytime left, an hour at most. The crystal ice web let him pass through just like that first time, unwilling to catch his enormous body, bending around him like the ivory coloured silk of the gown Arya once ruined for Sansa.

"Hold me," Sansa implored. "Hold me tight. Let me hear your heart beating. Let me feel your blood running. Let me know you are here."

She buried her face in the crook of his neck and lost herself in the quiet strength of his embrace. After some time, she looked into his grey eyes and further, into his beloved head, and saw that he... hurt. Or rather, it had always hurt him when she ventured into his mind but he had never let her see how it felt for him before.

She almost said she was sorry, but her shock at what she saw forced other words out of her mouth. "Why haven't you ever mentioned to me how this is for you?"

_Bran was right. Please, please, please, don't let him hurt his lady_, Sansa prayed, stunned.

"And why would I do that?" Sandor rapped back, not caring for his discomfort. She could sense his belief that her incursion didn’t hurt more than a _minor_ sword wound and was not worth talking about...

Sandor quite obviously couldn't care less for the pain she caused him, being used to worse. But this knowledge was not enough to make Sansa feel better about causing it.

"You wanted me, didn't you?" he ended up addressing her in his brusque manner. "Here I am. I'm telling you, I would not find you this time if you did this gently. We were far... We were at another exit of the cave."

Sansa remembered the voice of the crying woman underground. Maybe there was a wildling village in the surroundings. From what Mance said, they could survive in terrifying conditions north of the Wall. _But why would that embarrass the Night's King? Does he have a wildling lady love who caught him wooing me in order to steal my gown?_

"We?" Sansa asked. "Who are you with?"

"The giants," her husband responded dryly, "I am a bloody dwarf among them if you can believe it. They are going North as well, just like you and your new six _friends_ seem to be going."

"How are the giants?" Sansa asked with curiosity, ignoring his hateful attitude concerning her forced
company. It was just like him to mock every situation that bothered him.


Years ago, the Hound combed his hair over his scars. Sandor now let it hang at will, smooth, silky and black, grown incredibly long with the advent of winter.

Sansa had to laugh. "You are unbelievable," she said.

Sandor chuckled darkly, spitting little flakes of snow through his damaged mouth. "Good for me," he added. "I just wish that they didn't sing all the time."

"Why?" Sansa breathed out.

"Every single song reminds me of you. Everything does. You don't know what it does to me… watching you suffer again as I did in the past. Back then, I could have done something if I wasn't a bloody craven. And I never did. I must be paying for that now. I can't get you out of your cage… I can't do anything..."

Sansa tried to walk with her cage as she did to go to Bran, but with Sandor in it, her enclosure remained immobile. As if it knew that she wanted to run away and prevented it.

"It is not the same as in the past," Sansa said fervently. The Others… at least none of them wanted to force her to marry anyone as her previous gaolers. "I won't lie to you. It is terrible to be with them. But I don't have to pretend that I love any of them and they don't humiliate me for their amusement. They just hate me and want me to die in pain one day at their hands. There is a difference."

"Seven hells," Sandor cursed, clenching his empty sword hand and Sansa regretted speaking up her mind. The pain her last words caused him was far greater than her warging onslaught. She remembered all too well how she had felt when she thought he would die if she let him stay with the king.

"They may want to kill me all they wish," Sansa insisted, looking for words that could help him. "They can't or they won't as long as I don't disrobe willingly."

"Little, little bird," Sandor murmured, a little bit softened in his stubborn attitude and… amazingly happy to see her… He caressed her head and circled her cheeks with his fingers. "Will you ever stop seeing things in a better light than what they are?"

"No," she said truthfully. "Why should I? Isn't there enough dread as there is, without me imagining more?"

"That there is," he agreed and turned dangerously silent and brooding.

Will you ever stop seeing everything as worse than it can ever possibly be? She muttered in her mind knowing that he listened, but he gave no answer.

Not wishing to waste their time together on trying to prove him wrong, Sansa allowed herself to feel light headed and wonderful in Sandor's arms. She briefly kissed the burned corner of his lips and was rewarded by a warm, grey look and an admirably ugly smile.

"Tell me more," she said on an impulse. "How are those songs of the giants? Are they… are they pretty? Do you remember any of them?"
Her request was unseemly. He wouldn’t do it. He hated the songs and his voice had been burned.

To her utmost surprise, Sandor began humming to her ears. He was shy at first, but grew more confident as he went. Soon he added some words to the raspy, dissonant tune in a language she didn’t understand. After a while, he explained, “I think it’s about the last of the giants… Mance, he sang the same words with different music in the Common Tongue. I recognise some expressions which are the same in the Old Tongue. I wish... I wish I remembered the words better. It would help me to learn their language if I could compare the two songs, if the verses are the same, as I think they are.... I think that… I think that the giants are up to something. Something that might help in the war. And I hate myself for wishing to find out at times, instead of only thinking of saving you.”

Sansa was not bothered at all by Sandor's admission of curiosity. She found it… natural for men to see if they could do something good in the world, next to preserving their own life and that of their loved ones.

She remembered the Last of the Giants very well, so she told the song to Sandor twice, and Sandor strove to remember and repeat every single verse.

“They know much,” he finally said. “How could they not? Their wisdom comes from life, not from paper. Their views suit me, I think.”

Sansa's heart was very warm by now. Her spirit was full of Sandor and her love for him was everything.

She wondered how he felt.

“Yes,” he replied with the fierce scarred expression she adored. “I am full of you, of us. Here. Anywhere. Everywhere.”

You heard me? she asked through the mind, probing. This time she demanded an answer.

“I’ve always heard you,” he replied very seriously, “Even when I refused to listen.”

Sansa wanted them to be together again as husband and wife, but this closeness which was only in spirit had a taste of its own. Of simplicity… Of knowledge that love was more than just pleasure. And that it remained beautiful despite the pain it could bring. Sandor was a man. What if he felt differently?

"Are you not angry that we can't..." she couldn't finish. "That you can only have my heart now?"

"Angry?" he was surprised. "I never thought any good woman would give me that. And much less you, you..." he was unable to finish and tell her what she was to him. It was a pity. Sansa would have wished to know. "What more can I want?"


"I don't know if we can have that," Sandor said darkly.

"Just as you didn't know that you could have my heart," Sansa said lovingly, "nor I that I could have yours. Promise me...." she had trouble to voice her exact thoughts now. "Promise me that you will wish for the best. Even if you don't expect it, not truly."

"How can I wish you anything but well?" Sandor's voice was hoarse now and his eyes glistened. She kissed the salty wetness away from his eyes and felt terribly, painfully in love.
"Not only for me," she insisted. "Also for yourself."

All they could do was kiss, endlessly.

"My brother Jon," she began when the sky seemed a shade greyer than before. It was time to pass on the news before he had to leave her. "I mean, cousin. You should… you should go south. They mean to ambush him when they attack Castle Black, the Others do. An Other that used to have wooden teeth and another one, a commander of sorts. You should tell Jon. Tell anyone. And you should lead men back to that cave where I was yesterday. My little brother Brandon is hiding in it. The one that can't walk."

"The one that refused to die," Sandor said in a voice she was not used to hearing from him out of their marriage bed. Full of an emotion of his own that he just… let show.

*Sometimes things do change for the better on their own.*

"I left Bran the food that Others gave me, but I don’t know for how long it will last. You have to do something, please! Bran… he is little more than a boy… He wants to talk to Jon about Joramun."

"The maker of the horn Mance had been looking for," Sandor added.

"I think so," Sansa said. "Bran thinks that the life of Joramun holds a key to winning this war. But no one knows, not truly, what Joramun did. Maybe you could find a raven somewhere. Send forth a word of all this. The Others had one when they built their curtain around me," Sansa insisted. Maybe her cage would burst open if she found a prettier name for it.

"Sansa, listen," Sandor had to remind her again of where they were. "I don't think I can make it back to the Wall alive, not on my own, not without a means of transport and food. The giants are heading North. And even if I did, I don't think that your cousin or his men would listen to me. Hells, I wouldn't listen to myself in his place," Sandor concluded his speech. His tone quieted, much like that time when he had told her how he got his scars. He paused and looked away.

"What is it that you are not telling me?" Sansa had to ask, dreading his answer. Her husband was not a bad man, but he did not become a sweet man over night.

"I insulted your cousin on purpose. He… he killed his father, or rather, he slayed the monster that took him. Your bloody Stark honour must have given him strength to do that little duty. I snarled at him in his grief so that he let me get away with Rheagar's corpse. I made them believe I butchered my brother so that he wouldn’t rise again, but I never did. I simply took him north with me when I went after you. Rhaegar… I think he showed me where Others had taken you and then he rose as a wight and left me."

Sansa was shocked. Jon must have felt terrible. And Sandor…”How awful have you been to Jon?" she inquired, wondering if her entire family was going to hate her and Sandor now.

Sandor looked down. Then, he faced her with a stony expression. “As awful as when I mocked your father’s death and the little dance he made with his feet when they murdered him," he said. “I didn't exactly spare the boy’s feelings.”

"Maybe you could go after Rhaegar then," Sansa said thoughtfully after a long while. They had a duty to pass on the news despite everything. "He would listen to you."

"He might," Sandor said sadly. "But he wasn’t quite himself when he left. I think he is much worse than when he thought he was the Elder Brother. His reason is gone. Very little of him remains."
"The gods would not allow you to do this if it was not meant to be," Sansa judged in the end.

"No?" Sandor snarled at her now, almost as badly as in the beginning of their acquaintance when she was afraid of him. "They allow many atrocities. This could be the latest one I committed. Believe me, it's not the first one nor will it be the last."

"Stop it, please!" Sansa yelled back at him from the top of her weak lungs. She would not take his stupid attitude meekly. Not anymore.

He obeyed and appeared... emptied.

"You did what you thought should be done. We shall hope for the best," Sansa offered, trying to believe in her own words.

"No," Sandor said fiercely. His temper took a turn in a different direction, one she liked better, when he was more decided than her to see the matters through. "We will not hope. We shall both live to see the spring together…" he said solemnly. “I promise you that.”

But Sansa also knew what he didn’t tell. Sandor had made up his mind. He would find a way to fulfil her wishes and let someone know about Jon and Bran. Just not at the cost of leaving her alone…

Her heart hurt profusely, stuck in her throat.

“Stop me the next time when I cause you pain,” she demanded and before he could answer she knew that he wouldn’t listen to that plea at all. “Why not?” she wondered.

He bent down, leaned his forehead on hers and let her see his answer to that. How her warging escapades brought him a wave of pain, and another one, of love. How it strengthened his belief that he had her devotion and soothed his doubts about being ugly and replaceable in her heart. How he was hiding it from her because he was ashamed of how he felt most of the time. How he wasn’t ashamed any more and how he gave a rat’s arse if anyone thought of him as weak.

“You are not weak,” Sansa protested loudly and risked… a very strong, elated, loving thought which could not hurt him... “And I... I would not have a heart if you were not in it. Only a boulder of ice. If you ever leave me, you will steal my heart, and carry it on your palm… in this world or in the next.”

The howling of the winter wind was the first sign of the arrival of the night.

Fear was next.

They were coming.

“I should go,” her husband said, doing his best to sound aloof and fierce again. His eyes betrayed him, soft and teary.

“Yes,” she was forced to agree.

"I will return and see you on the morrow," he added, kissed her hand, grinned, remained ugly as ever. Lovable.

With that, he was gone, but he looked back many times before disappearing behind the line of the trees.

She supposed he had to say something about coming back, needing to feel that he was taking at least
some action that could help her, while she was simply… happy to enjoy his company for as long as it lasted.

Her cage had never felt colder and emptier.

The Others carried Sansa farther North.

The less fearsome Other whose jaws clicked and cracked was gone, replaced by an extremely soulless and repulsive one.

In her growing despair, Sansa always knew that the giants were never far away.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and liking this.

Any feedback is welcome )))

Next up: Dany, hopefully in a week.
Daenerys

Chapter Notes

A huge thanks to DrHolland for making this much better and more presentable.

Here you go, a very wordy Daenerys chapter...

Pretty obvious after this season of the show that my version of things will remain wishful even for some things I naively imagined SHOULD happen

I hope you may have fun reading it )))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys

Dany's bed was empty when she woke, just like many times before, on Rhaenys, her ship, or in Eastwatch-by-the-Sea.

Yet contrary to the melancholy this usually brought, waking up alone in Winterfell did not sadden her. The premonition of doom she experienced on the Wall and beyond it was gone, erased; as if it had never existed. Even the grimmest vision during her recent illness, with her and Jon's future in the dark underworld, lost all weight in her lover's home; killed by the weak morning light. Dany had slept well and sound, not disturbed by any nightmare.

Maybe there are no bad dreams south of the Wall.

She instinctively knew that Jon was neither in danger nor far away. He must have woken long before the uncertain dawn. He was never one to stay in bed or sit still.

I am the same as he, Dany realised belatedly, wondering why she had never thought of this before. She wished that they would wake together every day in the future, but she could not hold against him the restlessness she also possessed when times demanded action.

The only difference was, she could manifestly sleep for longer when there weren't any pressing matters to attend to.

Dany closed her eyes to think of Jon more vividly and laughed, stretching with pleasure. Just another moment... She had never felt so completely elated or at ease; light of heart and filled with joy.

We are to be wed.

Not even… not even the knowledge of Rhaegar's cruel destiny could ruin her mood today... At least not entirely. She sighed and rubbed her eyes, happy and just a little sad at the same time… A little flame kept burning in her heart, in honour of her older brother's memory; vivid, inextinguishable. It was… as if he still existed, but in a world apart, where his wife and son could not see him.

As if to agree with her positive thoughts, a ray of weak winter sun entered through the window, accompanying the morning chill. Aimlessly, the sunshine touched Dany's forehead and made her
sneeze from brilliance. Or maybe the fine grains of dust were to blame, those that she and Jon hadn't yet chased away from his old room by lovemaking.

*We should try harder,* Dany mused. Her inner thighs ached pleasantly, weakened and softened from wanted embraces and desired pleasure, bringing sweet memories of the night before. She had never been quite *that* bold in bed, guiding Jon to do exactly what she felt she needed to set aside all their troubles, for a little while; her fear of losing him, Rhaegar’s passing, Drogon’s betrayal, Stannis’ delusional righteousness, turned into atrocity, and the grim face of the dead King of Winter who dared call himself Jon Stark and who may have… wanted Daenerys for himself.

Loving could not erase or solve all challenges in life, nor could it bring oblivion to the pain. Courage was required to move forward, and also time, and prudent choices.

*Time.*

*How long do we have before it is all over? Our love and our lives?*

To Dany’s surprise, Jon’s attitude towards her guiding him in bed with unhidden intensity, rather than let him be in charge, confirmed her budding belief that with him she could be… anything she wanted. He did not need to impose his will on her. Unlike her previous husbands, unlike *Viserys,* he seemed to have no expectations of how a woman *should* act.

He clearly showed both embarrassment and joy when she pleasured him with her mouth instead of taking it for granted. He never bragged about his own prowess, in bed or out of it. He never tried to impress her on purpose, nor did he pressure her into anything. Fascinated by her wishes in lovemaking, he responded to them by showing what he could do with passion which was entirely his own.

And, somehow, by *not* intending to impress her, Jon always ended up impressing her more.

The black wools of the Night’s Watch waited for Daenerys, discarded over the rushes on the floor. *The brave Danny Flint.* The ruse had worked well for a while, with help of Jon’s friends on the Wall. She wondered if she would ever need it again.

*Maybe there are gowns here.* The sudden, treacherous desire to make herself look beautiful because she was so happy was overwhelming. Yet it dissipated as soon as she remembered she could not fly with Jon and Rhaegal in a *gown,* or not so easily. And, just like he did not linger in their bed, Dany doubted very much that he would wait for their wedding day in Winterfell.

As if in answer to her silly wish, three very young girls rushed into the chamber after a ridiculously feeble attempt at knocking. Dany pulled a fur to her chin to preserve her modesty from the intruders. They were not her Dothraki maids whom she trusted.

Giggling, the girls presented her a set of undergarments, a very long gown and a cloak that she had never seen or worn in her life, which was very thick and furry on the edges. Swiftly, they lay everything on a chair and left, almost falling over their own feet from clumsy attempts at curtsying.

Daenerys was left alone with the *northern* Westerosi attire, appropriate for highborn ladies.

The floppy ears women had to don came in many forms and shapes. Unawares, Jon had failed to keep his latest promise to her for today.

*But it's not our wedding yet,* Dany told herself.

The dress was woollen and very pale grey, almost silvery, smelling of winter roses. Dany would
have preferred a scent of a summer flower, but she had to admit that the rare perfume had its charm - it was very refreshing after the somewhat smelly blacks of Danny Flint. The size appeared well-guessed, impeccably adjusted to fit her.

*Too well.*

Daenerys donned the lavish, very long and heavy winter dress, widening from the waist down, deciding to have at least a *say* in her future wedding gown.

The girls didn't take away her blacks so she folded them and left them in Jon's empty wardrobe, dusty like the rest of his old room, but made of good wood, solid like its master.

*Jon. My betrothed.*

The thought made her more giggly than the young maids.

Lyanna came in shortly after the servants, without even bothering to knock.

Dany wondered if Jon's mother had been standing at the door, giving her privacy until she finished dressing, or if she just came by.

"Is it to your liking?" Lyanna inquired about the gown, giving Dany a look of pragmatic womanly appraisal. Timidly, Jon’s mother liberated a strand of long silver hair which became stuck in Dany’s bodice and let it hang with the rest over her back.

"There," Rhaegar's queen said, non-smiling.

In contrast with Dany's bubbling happiness, Lyanna was desolate, black like the winter night that widowed her.

"Loose as we like it here," Jon's mother continued with small talk on hair. "But for the wedding we will have to find someone to arrange it to be up, in southron fashion. It will fit your face and build even better, and it might serve to win the hearts of those who think only southron style is *style* .”

"Why are you so concerned about this?" Dany reacted brusquely, showing impatience. *Do you want to inspect my womanly parts as Hizdahr’s mother? "I know how to dress."*

Lyanna wiped a sudden tear and made a step towards the window. "Of course you do," she said.

"My pardons."

Daenerys felt horrible and ungrateful, understanding. Lyanna needed to busy herself with Dany, Jon and their wedding or she would succumb to her death wish, just like Jon feared.

"Please forgive me my lack of patience," Dany said softly, wanting to soothe the older woman, knowing exactly how difficult it was to lose her first husband, not wanting to know how it would be to lose the love of her life. *Jon.*

"It is just that," Dany continued, “I’ve never worn a *Westerosi* gown, not even the southron styled ones, much less the northern one. I will gladly take some advice. It is just that… maybe I could… choose from what is possible? Why would I have to let someone *arrange* my hair?"

"I didn’t say you *had* to," Lyanna said in a perfectly reconciling tone, hiding both her sadness and possibly her own impatience with the stubbornness of her good-daughter to be. “It is both beautiful and appropriate for the North to have it down like this if you wish. It’s just that your hair would look so well if you lifted it as the ladies do in the capital, for being so fine…” Lyanna hid another tear,
making Daenerys painfully aware that she might well be the only remaining person in the entire world, with the purely Targaryen type and colour of silver hair… with Rhaegar gone.

“I could not lift mine if I wanted,” Lyanna seemed decided to cheer up by force. “It’s too heavy. Look!”

Jon’s mother quickly braided her thick, long curls on one side of her head, and tried to roll the resulting braid around her scalp in a complex pattern. She twirled in her own broad gown, many shades darker than Dany's, so that Dany could see her clumsy attempt at arranging her hair from all angles.

Grey was the colour Lyanna used for almost anything. Her dress exhibited an extremely dark hue now, in sign of mourning; just short of black. Only once, Dany saw her in beautiful, vivid blue, neither dark nor light; very blue like the winter roses, when she and Rhaegar were reunited and when she must have been overjoyed, allowing herself the unheard luxury of colour. Her taste must have helped Lyanna in the past, when she posed as a septa. The gods she pretended to serve were wrong; Rhaegar’s and not hers. But at least the clothing had the right hue.

Instead of looking at Lyanna’s hair, Dany began staring at her middle, understanding why all her dresses had been extremely wide in the past months and not only long and in various shades of grey...

The dead Starks had protected both Rhaegar's widow and their unborn child from madness disguised as justice.

As soon as Lyanna stopped holding her thick braid, her hair rebelled against the attempt at taming and spilled freely over her back.

“Where is Jon? Have you seen him this morning?” Dany asked timidly, hoping that playing with her hair made Rhaegar's queen a little less sad.

“With the yesterday’s sleepers from the crypts; Ser Barristan, Lady Mormont and Lady Greyjoy,” Lyanna informed. "Perhaps one of them caused the dead to come out. Though I have my doubts," she added pensively.

"Here," she said and handed over to Dany a clasp with a small red ruby in it. "For your cloak."

The little red jewel gleamed brightly in its silvery casing. When Dany fastened her cloak with it, her appearance was much less colourless than before. Prettier. Lyanna had done her best for her.

"Thank you," Dany said, smiling.

Her reaction pleased Lyanna. "Come," she urged Dany to follow her and clapped her hands, as cheerful as she could be in her distress. "Let me take you to my son. I will leave you with him and begin writing the invitations. I set a date six weeks ahead. We do not want to postpone the wedding a day longer than necessary."

Dany was forced to admire Lyanna's tenaciousness and determination in her grief.

In a nearby bedchamber, more spacious than Jon’s, with three windows in place of one, Ser Barristan was already back in his armour after the night's rest, while the Lady Greyjoy and Lady Mormont lay in bed, shaken from the experiences of the day before.

When Dany entered after Jon's mother, Ser Barristan immediately dropped on one knee. "My princess," he said in great distress, "I swear I heard your voice commanding me to leave you and
open the door to the crypts. You pointed to me in the yard which door it was. You told me to enter and draw Torrhen's sword; the blade of the King Who Kneeled. The only one whose likeness is known all over the Seven Kingdoms. Otherwise I would have never left your side amidst enemies. I shall die a knight."

Jon and his mother both stared at Dany with unfeigned curiosity and interest. Lyanna had apparently forgotten about her invitations. Dany would have laughed at how similar mother and son looked, had they not been so Stark serious and demanding an explanation from her.

"I gave no such order," she announced. "As I remember, Ser Barristan fought valiantly against Northmen loyal to Stannis who attacked us both. I was captured and lost sight of him. Stannis mocked me later on that Ser Barristan had deserted me. I was too shocked by the pretender's other godless actions to take any note of this provocation at the time, I only remembered it later… I… I wouldn't know how Torrhen looked, nor that his statue had a sword that could be drawn. I have never been to the crypts here or lived in Westeros until recently to know any such things. How could I possibly issue those commands? Why would I do that?"

"I swear, my princess" Ser Barristan repeated. "I am old, but I am not deaf nor losing my wits."

"No one said that," Jon tried to argue, but his honest face betrayed that he had for a moment come close to contemplating such diminishing thought.

"I heard your voice, princess," Ser Barristan insisted with stubbornness that matched that of the two naturally inquisitive and suspicious Starks. "If you did not speak, then I say that someone else imitated your voice to perfection. A sorcerer. A mummer. Lord Varys could do it if he were here, I have no doubt."

"Have you heard any womanly voice when you were attacked by the traitors?" Lyanna asked Daenerys.

Dany shook her head. She wished she could help unravel the mystery, but she decidedly hadn't heard any voices. The Targaryen madness had completely skipped her so far.

Jon gave a questioning black look to the bedridden ladies.

"I was dragged on as a burden tied to Lady Asha’s arm when she bolted away from Stannis," Lady Mormont said. "We were pursued. I struggled. Asha pulled a door open. I followed. To my surprise and shame I fainted as if I was one and ten and an innocent maiden, as soon as I saw the first grave. I wish I knew more."

"I knew that the trees hated me for bringing the taste of salt to them," Lady Asha added with palpable resentment. "I didn't know that your dead hated me more, honourable Starks. I thought that… I thought that the dead were past hatred. I couldn't be more wrong. They were quiet when Lady Stark attempted to hide with us in the beginning, but later on, without her, I don't know how, but I can assure you that they woke. I wanted to flee, but I could not find the way. I expected to die. Then the old knight broke in and sped forward past us, smoothly as a longship with the wind in its sails, on favourable tide. I could see that he indeed drew a sword. After, everything went black."

"The sword." Jon began, but his mother finished his thought.

"-Rhaegar and I laid Ice on Torrhen's lap. I thought it should stay there until one of Ned’s surviving sons comes of age..." Lyanna explained. "We returned it from the south; reforged and made whole by a master smith, after it had been cannibalised and split in two by Tywin Lannister. Rhaegar did my duty for me. I could not… I could not carry the blade down here. It was too heavy for me in my
Jon looked down, embarrassed. A woman with child could have that effect on men, Dany knew, of not knowing what to do in her presence. She wished... she wished Jon had reason to look at her that way, and not only at his mother.

*It is just the same as wishing for the sun to rise in the west and set in the east... It will never be.*

She would not brood over the past that could not be changed. She was not morose like Rhaegar. She did what she did thinking she would save Drogo and unknowingly paid the price. There was no going back.

Instead, Dany let her morning happiness resurge with force. *Maybe Rhaegar's and Lyanna's second child can be my and Jon's heir since we can't have children of our own. Maybe she will be called... Rhaenys.* It was a beautiful name, though she doubted Lyanna would ever choose it if she had a daughter. Dany could not blame her. Not after Rhaegar's first daughter was cruelly murdered.

Ser Barristan continued with his story. "I must have passed out when I drew Ice. I recall thinking how it was heavier than Blackfyre, the most famous of all swords, which I held in my hand in Stepstones and returned it to Aegon's city of King's Landing... I was surprised by this. I would never have expected the sword of the Starks to weigh more... to have more physical power than the one wielded by Aegon the Conqueror..."

Jon puffed noisily, as a very annoyed wolf, and looked at everyone with utmost suspicion. "Let us pay a visit to the dead," he said very dryly. "Maybe they will tell us more."

Daenerys did not think they would, but it was worth a try.

The health of the two bedridden ladies miraculously improved and they followed suit. Their own curiosity about the miracle or the curse of the dead Starks defending their stronghold was apparently stronger than any real or faked illness.

The crypts were not far away from the Great Keep; deep and hollow under the ground, yet so very different than the ever changing maze of the old gods Dany and Jon had crossed beyond the Wall. Time rested here. It did not move or changed or passed. It just... was.

Dany followed Jon surreptitiously, using the opportunity to sneak her warm little hand into his cold, burned one, hoping her grasp would give him the support he seemed to need. Jon was a Stark on his mother’s side but he was not at ease in there, not at all. If Dany was asked to make a bet about his thoughts, she would wager he felt more uncomfortable than she did. She did not feel threatened in the crypts, or not in the first portion.

Jon halted at the statue of a man with peaceful face next to a woman’s stone likeness resembling Sansa and a young man who only had a sculpted head, while the rest of him was still enclosed in a block of stone, waiting to be liberated by a skilled mason. Dany knew who they were; Jon’s adoptive father and his family...

Jon bowed his head before Eddard Stark, possibly saying a prayer. Lyanna, for her part, trembled when she glanced at the statue a little bit further ahead, looking like... herself.

The sculptures of the dead showed no sign of life.

The living descended deeper. Lady Greyjoy and Lady Mormont carried the necessary torches. Ser Barristan appeared lost in his doubts and certainties, regarding his role in the granite miracle which had saved Winterfell. Maybe he feared growing mad and unreliable with old age. Truth be told,
Dany did not believe he was becoming deranged at all. They simply did not have all the answers.

*Or maybe we are not asking the right questions.*

Finally, the vaulted tunnel brought them in front of a statue of the first crowned lord in a row of crownless ones, with a mighty sword hung in a stone scabbard over his back, not placed on his lap as all the other blades had been. His knees gaped empty. Even the stone wolf that should have curled around his legs was gone.

Lyanna and Jon both halted in awe, eyeing the statue and each other…

"Torrhen," Jon said gravely. "Why did you choose the king who *kneeled* to leave him Ice?"

"Rhaegar and I never believed that Torrhen simply *kneeled* to Aegon, Jon," his mother explained very, very seriously.

“We felt there had to be more, an agreement between the wolf and the dragon, whose terms were never fully revealed to anyone else. We believed that the wolf kneeled in gratitude and friendship, not in submission, after a promise Aegon made… but we never knew or learned what that promise was. For us, Torrhen and Aegon were what Rhaegar and I dreamed to be before the Trident… A symbol of hope, of a new alliance… That is in part the reason we decided to lay Ice on *his* lap. And also because to leave it with Ned or with Robb would be like… like admitting the end of the Stark line…” Lyanna ended her confession grimly.

"We never thought-" Lyanna’s words were cut short when she made a few more steps, with the intention to continue with the descent, but she could *not*, almost bumping into a dark barrier in front of her. Lady Mormont immediately came closer with her torch, revealing an avalanche of broken granite stones that completely barred any further passage.

The way was shut.

Jon turned to Dany, "Have you seen this… this man that looked like me among those we passed? The one that scared you so?"

Dany shook her head. She *knew* that Jon Stark was deep down, inaccessible.

"Why?" Jon asked, raising his voice. The echo of his voice flooded the crypts, sounding deeper and more hollow. "What woke you? What may wake you again at need?"

Dany mused at how both Lyanna and Jon, with all their bravery and determination nonetheless accepted the primacy of the male line in inheritance, typical of the Westerosi. Neither of them seemed to have even considered that a male heir of the Starks, and the most accomplished swordsman, *was* of age, just not born in male, but in female line.

Instead of abandoning Ice in the crypts, Jon could have used it until a child of Ned Stark inherited Winterfell, which was fine in Dany’s opinion, because all Starks clearly wanted it. And also because Jon’s inheritance and duty were larger by birth.

Like mine. Or so I thought when I believed myself the only one.

*Maybe Ice would serve Jon better than that flaming, magic blade. Ice and snow go well together.*

“Won’t you put the sword back on Torrhen’s lap?” she asked innocently of her lover, provoking him into action.
Jon looked at his mother for approval. Lyanna acquiesced calmly with her pretty dark eyes.

Slowly, Jon placed his hand on the hilt of Ice behind Torrhen’s back and pulled, but the sword… refused to be drawn.

"It is petrified," Jon declared with surprise. "It has turned into stone, like them."

Dany’s gaze wandered off from the scabbard and discovered the familiar black crystals in Torrhen’s empty lap.

"Look," she told Jon.

Jon was already looking, never missing on anything important with his observant nature. "Your dragon?"

Dany nodded. "He must have wanted to secure the blade in its designed place, on the lap, so that it could not be stolen. It would appear that your wolf ancestors had no taste for the dragon’s help so they… rearranged it."

"The black dragon spent all his time with his head buried in the crypts when Rhagear… when Rhaegar was here with him," Lyanna said with great difficulty. "Or in the godswood… he was… he seemed the most pious and calm among the dragons…"

"Why is it that whenever we learn an answer to a question, there are so many new ones?" Dany exclaimed.

"Because we haven’t died yet," Asha Greyjoy replied irreverently in the light of her torch. "When we do, there will be no more questions and fewer answers."

Lady Mormont laughed, Lyanna made a long face. Jon chuckled. Dany took one of the small crystals exhaled by Drogon in her hands.

Where are you? What is being done to you?

The great black being of her dragon was not far, but just like before, he would not answer her. He was in a wooden castle surrounded by a wild, northern forest. Deep… Deep… Deepwood Motte, Dany knew, or maybe Drogon wanted to be found and saved, so he let her know where he was.

"Another possible true cause of all this is that very old saying that there always has to be a Stark in Winterfell," Lyanna said pensively. "I thought it meant that any Stark was brave enough to defend the castle, but maybe the presence does not ensure bravery… but rather... the waking of old magic when everything else fails…. This would explain Drogon's fascination with the godswood and the crypts. Rhaegar said dragons were attracted by magic and strengthened it where it existed—"

"-Though they never cause it," Dany added. "They are a vessel that can be used and abused to channel magic. They don’t like it. They find burning more honourable."

Jon gave her a very odd look as though she had sprouted wings.

"The dragons might well be magic made flesh," Lyanna claimed in response. “No need to cause what you are."

Dany could agree to that, though it would mean she was also a magical creature for having the blood of the dragon, and she felt like an ordinary, suffering woman most of the time.
But not all the time.

Lyanna’s view gave Dany fresh hope and belief in her own forces.

Daenerys was a woman who hatched three dragons out of stone eggs and who carried a dragon in her womb. Maybe there was more to her success than the accidental use of blood magic with unintended consequences that she recently discovered and regretted; having given to her dragons traces of souls she never wanted for them.

Jon pushed the dark grey wall of rubble behind Torrhen with his boots, but he soon gave up. It was futile. The passage was sealed off. The Kings of Winter had stopped receiving visitors.

"I wish I could pay a visit to my namesake," Jon said. "Which Jon Stark was it, mother? The one who built the Wolf’s Den? I’ve seen his likeness and I never found that one to look very much like me."

Lyanna shook her head. "Older than that," she said. "I have never seen a face just like yours until now, my son, and as a girl I went in here as deep as human foot could go. He must be in the levels which are so low that they are inaccessible… Those from the beginning of time. I…” Instead of saying more, Lyanna began to cry copiously. "I should not have named you after them… After the Kings of Winter…. When Rhaegar… When the Trident….. I hoped, I thought that one of our oldest names would protect you… I thought if you were named after the first King of Winter-"

“The first one?” Jon reacted in shock. “Could it be that he became… the thirteenth Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch… and later the Night’s King?”

“Son, that is only a scary story about one Stark who may have never existed, or he may have been born a Bolton or a Flint if he did ,” Lyanna replied with the voice of reason, “In my grief, I drew courage from different legends, where Jon Stark was the brave founder of our house who united the North, defeating the rival Boltons, and became the first King of Winter…. In other versions, the first king may have been Brandon the Builder who had allegedly built the Wall… Or another Torrhen, or Rickard or Eddard… But no one knows this, not truly. Just like we don’t know how the Wall was built, only that it has been standing here forever. I don’t think we can know what happened so long ago. How could we?”

"Do you think that the dead lords and the kings will come forth again if Winterfell is threatened?" Jon demanded with simmering anger. “If only a presence of a Stark in Winterfell is required, why didn’t they rise to prevent Theon and the Bastard of Bolton from taking and burning the castle? There were two Starks in here at that time, Bran and Rickon… They hid in the crypts until the Bastard of Bolton burned Winterfell and left from what Rickon told me…”

"I wish I knew, son," Lyanna observed. “All I can say is that we now know which door to open if Winterfell is under serious threat again," she added dryly. "And I would say that all three of our dear guests who were unwittingly successful in calling forth the army of the dead should stay here as my dear guests, at least until the wedding."

"It is my pleasure to be your hostage, Lyanna," Lady Mormont said in an open, friendly way. “You will feed me better than I could do myself, with my own supplies and at my own lady’s table on Bear Island in winter.”

“T hope so,” Lyanna said humbly. Her forehead creased, pondering challenges ahead. “We gathered some new provisions, but we will have to find more.”

Ser Barristan nodded, admitting reluctantly that he might have a weakness. "It may be that I need to
rest to remember better. I shall gladly stay until the wedding.”

The ironborn lady was not thrilled. "Do I have a choice?" she asked.

"No," Lyanna replied bluntly.

Dany wished there was no need for the statues to defend the castle. She had no wish to meet Jon Stark again. Especially not on her wedding day. Jon Snow was more than enough.

"A word with you and your son, if you please," Lady Mormont put in, bowing to Lyanna and Jon. "My daughter Alysanne and some of her men, they are caught on Stannis' side since they rode with him from Winterfell to Castle Black. I understood from talking to Lady Greyjoy that there are more Northmen like Alysanne on the Wall, under Stannis' command by chance, not traitors like Glovers and some of the Umbers. There are Karstark men loyal to Lady Alys, Umbers loyal to the Starks and many men from different mountain clans. They are guilty of considering Stannis a better option than the Bastard of Bolton when no one yet knew, Lyanna, that you lived, married and had a son, nor that any of Ned’s boys survived…"

“I shall not pursue revenge because of the humiliation inflicted to my person if that is your fear, Maege,” Lyanna announced coolly. “Nor shall I ask it of my son. I have no time to waste on Stannis. I have a wedding to plan and a kingdom to secure for Jon and his wife to be. Lord Frey was different. He meant to eradicate the House Stark and he very nearly succeeded. This required a clear message to anyone who would try the same in the future.”

“I am used to commanding men who committed transgressions,” Jon said calmly, in a voice used to giving orders. “The Wall is manned with former criminals, and many now live better. If any judgment is ever up to me, I shall look at both past and present, and never only in the past.”

With that, they all left the dead to rest, though probably not in peace.

Out in the courtyard, Lyanna’s captain of the guards hurried to meet his lady and her son. Covered in raven droppings, he held out a wet parchment, standing between two smoking ponds of scalding water. Dany wondered if it would be pleasant to bath in one of those springs in winter.

“Dark wings, dark words,” Lyanna commented on the arrival of her guard from her equally dark, widowed world.

“For the Lord Commander… I mean His Grace… I wish to say Lord Stark…” The captain sweated under his furs, not knowing how to treat Jon.

Jon snatched the missive, read the first two words and a signature, and immediately started in the direction of the gates. Dany did not need to be a prophet to understand he would seek out Rhaegal and leave.

Suddenly, he turned back and told his mother, between brusque and polite. “I hope to be back for the evening meal.”

Dany’s mouth hung open.

What of me?

She would not be ignored when danger called.

Aegon’s sisters and wives were Aegon’s equals, for as much as the House Targaryen later lamentably embraced the Westerosi traditions where women were second to men. The bloody civil
war, the Dance of Dragons, was a consequence of the occasion when the two traditions clashed.

“ ‘You shouldn’t fly alone when you don't need to,’ Dany said as she scurried after Jon, striving to catch up with his much longer strides.

She ended up seated very closely behind her betrothed, still wearing that most impractical, lovely, long northern gown. The hem was lifted by the wind and uncovered her legs. She had no long socks or trousers under several layers of thick skirts, only a pair of short woollen socks in her boots.

Jon stared at her bare, slim legs, well muscled from all the riding she did in the past years, swallowed and forced himself to look away until Dany won a victory against her dress and made herself decent again.

"Tell me," he demanded after a while, calm and composed, too cold for Dany’s liking. "You’ve met my mother in the south… I’ve never been there. Why does she want me to spare Jaime Lannister?"

So you know.

They were very far away from Winterfell by then and no one could hear them except Rhaegal, if the dragon cared to listen to humans. This relative privacy might have prompted Jon’s desire to discuss difficult matters.

"I agree with her concerning Ser Jaime," Dany shared her opinion without thinking, reconsidered her words and was too late.

Jon was palpably mad at her, for the first time ever.

"I thought a king should look like Ser Jaime Lannister and fight like him,” he was almost shouting, hurt and enraged. “And, guess what, the golden knight abused Winterfell's hospitality by trying to kill my little brother Bran. All because he… he… couldn't keep his passion in check or at least find a place where no one would see him falling victim to it."

"I know how you feel," Dany said very seriously. "I wanted to burn him because he betrayed and murdered my father. But then I saw him-"

"Don’t tell," Jon said with venom, making an irreparable ruin of all Dany’s happiness that day. “He was young and innocent and you would squint at his present crimes in the name of that lovely past.”

"Not at all," Dany protested. "I didn’t know who he was when we met and he wasn't young at all. His looks and his attitude reminded me of my younger brother, Viserys, and a little bit of myself. That was why I could not hate him. He was arrogant, reckless and rash like Viserys, but his past clearly lay heavy on him, as mine sometimes burdens me. He was trying to act with honour."

“I suppose it's easy for you,” Jon’s rant continued mercilessly. “Bran was not your brother. Only mine. And he wasn’t mad like your father. He was an innocent boy who loved to climb and who dreamed of being a knight. Like I sometimes fantasised about being Daeron the Young Dragon…”

“Did you?” Dany could not believe her ears. Have you always been a dragon in part? Not knowing?

As if to contrary her wishful thoughts of having something in common with her betrothed, Jon wiped a tear, much like his mother, and turned stony in his pain.

He was right in all his assessments and even if he wasn’t, he had a right to be hurt, Dany knew better than anyone. But that did not mean she deserved his ugly tone. And the Jaime Lannister Daenerys had met did not deserve to die for his crimes. She was convinced that Rhaegar made the right
judgement concerning their likely half-brother. *Maybe there are other forms of atonement reserved for him, only known to the gods…*

*What did Jon say? That it had been easy for me?*

"Don't judge me for having different feelings than you!" Daenerys screamed against the wind. "You, you, you Starks and your obsession with honour! In your generation, at least, all your adoptive siblings *and* your adoptive parents, yes, even the Lady Catelyn, who did not love you from what I’ve heard, they were all *good* and *honourable* and *kind* by nature."

"It was not so for me…" Dany shouted less, trying to make Jon understand. "Viserys, my older brother -- he was *wicked* in his last years, turning *mad*. Yet he cared for me when I was a child. I loved him despite everything… And yet I allowed his death when he threatened me, at the hands of my first husband… I still love the memory of my dead father and mother, even after I learned beyond doubt that father was not called the Mad King without reason…"

"So when I see Jaime," Dany whispered, voicing hopes and concerns she had never expressed to anyone, "I see that there is hope for families like *mine*, for people like *us*, where grave mistakes have been made… where we caused each other’s deaths… if we start to make different choices. I could not reward Jaime’s *palpable* attempt to change for the better with *death*… He confessed publicly what he did and demanded punishment. This makes a difference. Rhaegar refused to judge him, using a formal argument of them being half-brothers, saying that the law could not force him to become a kinslayer. It seems that… it appears that my Father was young before he was mad, and that he might have been in love with Jaime’s mother and not with mine. You just said yourself that you would not judge men *only* for their past…"

Jon smoked on the inside, never speaking.

"At least it’s not that difficult to keep the second promise my mother forced out of me. I have no wish to kill Stannis," Jon muttered after the longest while, still very, very angry, with Dany and with the world.

"You don’t?" Dany was truly shocked now. The Jon she knew felt the need to defend his family even against imaginary threats to their integrity as his murderous *sparring* with Gendry had amply shown. "I must say that as a woman, I had a very distinct desire to kill him yesterday. I have it still when I remember what he did."

"Stannis wanted to retake Winterfell. It is an action to be expected from a would-be king," Jon shrugged. "He failed."

*Didn’t Lyanna tell him?*

"Jon," Dany began, unsure how much to say. "Stannis *killed* his own wife in cold blood, calling her Nissa Nissa and himself Azor Ahai, to reforge the sword he says is of heroes for the final time, after a hundred days, or, as he said, the entire *life* of hard labours to deserve kingship… And he even *considered* killing his only daughter when his witch first told him to do that in order to reforge the sword."

"So why did he change his mind from daughter to wife?" Jon asked darkly, turning his anger from Dany to Stannis. "Why not murder both, what, only to be the saviour of the world? How convenient."

"Lord Davos told him the real story of Azor Ahai. Of the hundred days and Nissa Nissa."
"Davos *is* made of the stuff of heroes," Jon affirmed. "Not me, and surely not Stannis. I am not certain that I could ever sacrifice one woman to save another."

"But it is not all, Jon, not by far," Dany dared continue with great poise and caution. "Once he was thus *widowed*, Stannis flew to Winterfell. He had your mother dragged to the godswood by force. He proclaimed he had married her in front of your gods, against her will, just before I was captured. Drogon had me imprisoned in his maw on Stannis' command and he made me faint from dragonsbreath, so I didn’t see the end of the ugliness, before the dead Lords of Winterfell came to the godswood, but I heard… I heard that Stannis came very close to dishonouring your mother before witnesses, calling his intent the lawful *consummation* of marriage and Rhaegar the raper who *spoiled* her, a feat Stannis would generously forgive her when she became his wife… I thought you knew."

Jon became more white than any corpse Dany had ever seen, be it a walking or an immobile one.

Lyanna clearly did not tell him anything.

*Why?*

“I will *never* understand my mother,” Jon breathed out, choking on his words. “Yesterday she kindly reassured me that she would tell me *today* what Stannis did and then she avoided the conversation when I asked… She must be… she must be so ashamed. Gods, how bloody strange this feels! I resented her for leaving me, only a few weeks ago. No, that's not the entire truth. I *hated* her at times… And now it feels as if I have always loved her. She must know that I would spill blood to defend her honour without remorse with… with father dead, but she clearly doesn't want me to. Why? Does she think I am a green boy? Why does she have to be so stubborn?"

"Why are you so stubborn?" Dany blurted.

"You would be too, if Bran was *your* brother or if you just met your presumably *dead* mother who needs *your* protection," Jon cut her off unjustly, waking her dragon.

Before she came up with another angry, clever retort of her own, the familiar view of the black towers of Eastwatch-by-the-Sea saved them both from the unstoppable need for further squabble.

A black *shadow* hung over the fortress, but it was not as thick as its giant brother they immediately noticed in the west, covering the central part of the Wall and Castle Black in complete darkness.

When Rhaegal flew bravely on, Dany felt inexplicably that the shadow was… *afraid* of her and Jon together, and not of the dragon. It was not yet strong enough so it shrank and dissipated, clearing the sky.

The black brothers formed a line of defence on top of the Wall, all two hundred of them that still manned the easternmost outpost of the Watch. Stannis apparently left them to their own devices after taking their fortress and not finding Dany in it, withdrawing his army to Castle Black.

The Night's Watch was trying to bring down long, white ladders that wights had attached to the Wall in order to scale it and cross over. Some corpses were already battling the living on the frozen battlements. Men and wights screamed. Their voices could not be distinguished in the whistling wind. The cold, salty smell of the Shivering Sea saturated the air.

“Pyp wrote to you,” Dany guessed. "He called you here."

“Yes,” Jon said with emotion. “I don’t think Grenn can write. Or if he can, he can't do it as fast or very well. Pyp just said that they sounded the horns three times. The third time is for the Others attacking. It’s a miracle how a raven found me so fast."
"Not really," Dany said, remembering the flock that was always near Rhaegar. "The ravens follow the king…"

Jon did not react to her words, studying the battle scene. Down, beyond and under the Wall, they could see only one of the cold masters of the dead urging his slaves on; white and crystalline on a moonlit evening. Dany wondered if it was still daytime in Winterfell.

On the southern side, the castle gaped empty. The Unsullied who turned against Daenerys and helped Stannis take the fortress were gone. Dany imagined them forming perfect rows in Castle Black, insensitive to the cold. *Stannis stole my army and my dragon.*

It was time she did something about that. Drogon could not stay with Stannis.

Jon addressed Rhaegal aloud, very impatiently. "Why can’t you rain fire down on them from here, if flying across the Wall will harm you?" He closed his eyes and continued the conversation with his dragon in his mind. Dany wondered what they discussed in private. Unfortunately, none of them told her. Silence hurt the pride of the Mother of Dragons. She told herself that maybe they were unable to come to an agreement, so there was nothing to tell.

Dany looked to the high seas in the south. Her fleet… her little surviving fleet was returning and, just as she had hoped, not alone, but with more ships that must have been carrying the promised knights and food from the Vale. Judging by the distance, it should reach Eastwatch in another day, probably two. Ships were not the fastest means of transport, and distances looked less from the sky.

“Look, the knights of the Vale must be coming as their lord had promised Rhaegar,” she said, pulling Jon’s sleeve.

But Jon didn't pay any attention to her.

Abruptly, he let Rhaegal fly as close to the Wall as the dragon dared. In a manoeuvre practised at Hardhome, Jon climbed into Rhaegal's maw. Dragon immediately spat him on the Wall, amongst his sworn brothers. The defence was soon better organised. One ladder was shoved down. The wights began redressing it immediately.

Dany was left alone on the green dragon’s back. She desperately wanted to help and not only watch this time. She was the blood of the dragon and she would not sit still.

There were no idle men left in the castle, but there were mammoths.

The furry northern elephants, with smaller ears and tails than that of their short-haired brothers Dany had seen in sunny Essos, were the only living souls in Eastwatch who were not yet involved in battle, which could go better, from what Daenerys began to notice. Even with Jon’s command skills and sword prowess, the defenders could not bring the other ladders down. More wights crossed. Jon instructed his men to push them off the Wall on the southern side. Rhaegal expertly burned every corpse that came down that way, probably enjoying himself.

But there were so many of them that Jon's and Rhaegal's efforts might not be enough. It must have been the army of the dead that Dany and Jon had seen from a tree platform at night, in the woods between Hardhome and Eastwatch, when they first met. That army had finally reached the Wall, but, fortunately, with only one Other as a leader and not the entire company of them.

The enemy chose precisely this moment to attack when they could have done it days earlier, judging from how fast they could march… Why?

*The gates here were sealed on Stannis’ orders.* Dany remembered. She had heard the command
being given.

Maybe changing the Wall makes it more vulnerable.

One way to know if I'm making the right guess...

The mammoths stomped idly between heaps of their own dung, digging deep under snow in search of frozen, evergreen plants that ensured their sustenance.

Why not? Dany tried hard not to be afraid of her new strategy, or maybe her case of Targaryen arrogance and folly.

How different can it be from riding a horse or taming a wild dragon?

She would never forget her first ride on Drogon's back which was anything but peaceful and harmonious.

Since her forced marriage to a Dothraki khal, Dany had become an excellent and a passionate rider. She deepened her knowledge during her time with Drogon.

The mammoths wore huge leathery saddles on their backs, left by the giants. No one was probably tall enough to pull those off and use them for another purpose as everything was used in winter. Dany slid pertinently down Rhaegal's tail and waited for a good moment in the dragon's irregular flight back and forth, between the two burnings of defeated wights, in order to land straight onto the largest and tallest, dark brown mammoth female, with extremely long trunk and powerful curved tusks. The rest of the herd varied in fur colour from yellow and orange to more common dark brown and black.

She must be their leader, Dany hoped about the animal she had chosen. It was also the most difficult one to miss if her jumping skills proved lesser than her riding abilities.

From mammoth-back it became obvious to Dany that the gates of Eastwatch were not sealed as thoroughly as the passage to the lower levels of the crypts in Winterfell had been. The work here was done by ordinary men and quite obviously either in haste or half-heartedly.

She pulled the reins as she would do on horseback, directing the imposing female mammoth towards the gates in the Wall. The animal did not react at first.

My arms must be too weak.

Dany tugged the reins harder and kicked her new steed nervously with her boots. Slowly, the animal's trunk swept left and right and stopped. The she-mammoth trumpeted shrilly… vigorously flapping her ears… and lifted one of her legs, showing to the others the direction to take.

Ordinary animals were cleverer than men in winter, it seemed. They did not require much explanation and did not hurt from magic, unlike men and dragons. The giant pack of wolves, led by the huge she-wolf belonging to Arya, now terrorising the woods around Winterfell, offered a perfect example. The wolves had defeated the warlocks from Essos under the walls of King's Landing after the mummers' show, insensitive to their evil magic that could easily enslave dragons.

Decided to test her latest set of wild assumptions, in order to do something, Dany yanked the reins. The mammoth flapped her ears once more, uttered a low rumble, and headed towards the gates. The rest followed her in one line, rumbling in regular intervals and flapping ears in return, with tails and trunks up, and an occasional noisy grunt.
Daenerys bowed her silver head and lay low next to the mammoth's giant body when they approached the mass of too loosely piled ice filling the gates.

Her worry about the impact proved useless.

Two younger mammoth calves stood side by side with the tall female Dany was riding, and rumbled together as a family, always flapping ears, as if they were talking to each other on how best to proceed. Slowly, they advanced, moving forward, then right, then left, probing the obstacle with trunks and tusks. The hastily made barricade was not solid enough to stop them. The leader began ruining the top part of it and the smaller members of her herd the bottom. When the first layer of ice rubble gave way, revealing an only partially cluttered tunnel behind, they formed a line once more. Very slowly, they began passing under the Wall, never in a hurry, shaking off the excess of ice as they advanced, always clearing their path a bit more as they trod on.

Dany and the mammoths remained buried under the Wall for the duration of the crossing. As a result, she could not see who was winning and who was losing on top. She wished that the mammoths worked a bit faster, but not all wishes could be fulfilled in life.

So she said a prayer to the Warrior for herself, and to the trees for Jon, just in case his gods were the only ones listening this far North, and waited.

During the excruciatingly slow ride, the mammoth's woolly fur tickled and unpleasantly scratched the bare inside of Dany's lower legs.

The outer gates were sealed a bit better than the tunnel itself, just like the inner ones had been. One of the smaller mammoths pushed forward and dug under it to destabilise the hurdle. Finally, the big one brought it down with her feet.

The herd emerged in the open, beyond the Wall, the last place where Daenerys longed to be, but there she was nonetheless, both doing her duty and following her heart.

Out there, on the clearing north of the outpost, there were very many wights, swarming like flies on dung. To her horror, Dany recognised some dead faces from her losses in Hardhome.

Grey Worm.

She pulled the reins, wishing to turn the mammoths towards the ladders used to assault the Wall, but when she looked that way, she discovered that the need for it was gone. The ladders had collapsed on their own and could no longer be erected by the wights. From close by, Dany realised they were made of that transparent ice web Jon's sword had been hung upon when she and Jon retrieved it from the cave... Maybe the Others were weaving the spidery substance... The walking dead were all around her, but she was too high on her new steed to be endangered by them. The mammoths squashed them mercilessly with every step they made.

Until, suddenly, the giant animal Dany rode was seized by fear. The mammoth female convulsed more violently than Dany had ever thought possible for such a corpulent beast.

Daenerys rapidly lost balance and slid down the mammoth's back, ending in a soft pile of fresh snow.

Snow, snow, snow, she thought, hurting all over from her fall, counting the bones in her body, happy to find them whole and not broken.

A giant foot loomed over her. Instinctively, Dany rolled away, closing her eyes as she did it, not wishing to anticipate her destiny if she was to end squashed like a bug.
Drogon was better. Cleverer. More dexterous. He would never step on me. Not on purpose and not by chance.

I have to get him back.

I can't just wait.

Dany kept thinking about Drogon and she continued rolling.

After a while, she realised that nothing hit her.

Slowly, she opened her eyes, rose with difficulty and almost fell again. Her needlessly feminine gown with too many layers of thick skirts became entangled around her body from the motion. At that moment, the same fear that had driven the mammoth into frenzy seized Dany's lungs.

The Other was right in front of her, raising his brilliant blue blade of ice.

"I..." she tried to say something, but her words died on her lips. Her opponent was not the Night’s King. He did not speak. He could not speak. Why would anyone speak at all? Words were useless, words were wind. All her happiness was gone... Rhaegar died at his son's hands, like Viserys died because Dany let him be killed.

Jon only wanted a princess in his bed, just like Daario wanted Dany as a trophy, for being queen, and not for herself.

Jon had never loved her.

And the glass weapon never fell upon her.

The familiar dull grey tip of the magic sword came out of the ice-cold chest of the monster; stabbed from behind. The white walker’s body dissolved and melted, crystallised, and drifted in the air, forming beautiful patterns of cursed ice and snow. The Other never made a sound, regardless of whether he felt any pain or not. Behind the curtain of crystal, there was Jon's dear face, worried and troubled as only he could be.

"Are you quite alright?" he asked breathlessly. "You are still you, aren't you?"

Daenerys could only smile back, too nervous to form words. I came close to the end of my time here. Too close.

She gave him her hands and Jon took them both. His cold, bare palms were sweaty.

In the edge of her vision, she could see that the wights were leaving, haphazardly. Most of the walking dead headed west. Some scattered in all directions. Mammoths did not stay either. Dany could not blame them for leaving. They must have eaten all plants available in Eastwatch and they had too little space in which to roam freely. Instead of going west, the mammoths decisively stomped north, and northwest into the woods, in one disciplined line, with tails up, rumbling in orderly intervals. Occasionally they trumpeted and enthusiastically flapped their peculiarly floppy ears.

The few surviving men who must have come down from the Wall with Jon gathered in front of the open gates and talked softly, as if they could not believe they were still alive. No corpse remained still. All new corpses wandered off, just like any old, unburned ones. Dany wondered unwholesomely how many familiar new wights were created on that day, and if Grey Worm crossed the Wall and was burned by Rhaegal or if he kept stalking the lands beyond the Wall.
"It's alright," she finally managed to reassure Jon about her condition. "The monster didn't touch me."

"Good!" Jon said, caressing her freezing cheeks. "It was not very chivalrous of me to stab the creature in the back, though I don't think he cared," Jon said after a while, observing the crystal leftovers of the enemy.

“I mean, this one was obviously never a man, so he should not be aware of human customs in a fair fight,” Jon continued thoughtfully, bending to catch a crystal in his burned hand, where it soon melted from his body warmth and disappeared.

“Do you see how warm you are?” Dany had to point out.

"It's not hard to be warmer than them," Jon retorted in kind. "This one, this one… he immediately crystallised, just like my friend Sam said happened when he was forced to slay one with obsidian. Sam's foe did not reveal a human face and body after his death, unlike the one killed by Stannis in Castle Black and unlike… unlike the one that took my father."

While Jon pondered the possible different origin and manner of dying of the Others, Dany was more impressed with the fact that his magic sword destroyed a white walker without any need to reforge it.

*Maybe it can kill the Night's King as it is.*

*We didn't have to look for a lion at all.*

*Maybe poor Azor Ahai from the stories could have been victorious without sacrificing his beloved wife.*

Jon noticed her stare, dedicated to the stone-grey blade. "Yes," he said, "I thought of that as well. This is not Valyrian, but it is not ordinary steel either. We have to find out what kind of metal it is, and we will have found another substance that kills the Others… Or at least one kind of them… The simple frozen kind."

“Are you still mad at me?” Dany had to ask, recalling their quarrel, needing to know.

"What do you think?" Jon answered with a question. "I don't love Jaime Lannister any better… I… I admire mother for being able to move beyond revenge concerning Stannis, but… it is not what I would do in her place. I will… I will try to respect her wishes in fear of saddening her further if I don't."

He stilled and paused to caress Dany’s hands. "I am sorry for losing my temper," he finally said. "I'm not used to this. To… to speak my mind freely to a… to a girl… to a lady… to my betrothed and lady wife to be. I addressed you as I would Grenn or Pyp, or Sam… Or Arya who is my sister and knows my temper as I know hers. Grenn is… he is also gone… He took a blow aimed at me when we took the ladder down the Wall, to finish what the mammoths had so expertly started… what you started, Dany. Grenn… He walked away. Undead. Unburnt."

"I'm so sorry," Dany breathed out. "How many more?"

"I don't know. We haven't counted the dead yet. More than I would wish for…" Jon replied. "Less that there would have been if you did not… How did you know you should unseal the gates to take the force out of the enemy attack? This would have never occurred to me… I mean, I was against closing the doors because I believed we needed them to scout. But to open them in the middle of the assault… no, I would not have risked that… And I might have lost Eastwatch. As soon as you broke out the wights could not… the ladders did not hold on to the Wall properly anymore, not since you
rode that huge mammoth through the gates… The Wall pushed them down…as it defeats the 
wildlings that scale it. It defended itself."

"I just thought that for the Wall to defend itself it had to remain whole and as it always was, and not 
as Stannis wanted it." Dany explained, both glad and incredulous about being right. "Here it means 
that the gates were not sealed. Only closed."

"Where are they going?" Dany gestured at the wights leaving. "It must be the army we saw when we 
met, isn’t it? But why did it take them so long to arrive here? And where are the other white walkers? 
We saw more of them at the time."

“They are marching on Castle Black, I think,” Jon said, “I reckon the gates are now sealed there as 
well. We’ll have to follow them into the shadow created by Stannis and his witch. The enemy will 
march slower than us, on their side of the Wall. It will take them a week at least, maybe two. But we 
will be slower in departing. We should wait for those ships and ride west with more men. I should 
also ride to the Shadow Tower and bring a company from there.”

"Let us spend a night at home then," Dany wished aloud. "The ships will not be here before 
tomorrow."

"Home? You would return with me to Winterfell?" Jon inquired timidly. "After I was angry with 
you? Wouldn’t you rather seek the comfort of your tent on Rhaenys and that I take you there?"

"What of my anger? I clearly remember raising my voice at you. Will you ignore it? Will you forsake 
me for it?" she wondered. "I’ll try and yell harder next time when you are awful if you didn't hear me 
this time," she quipped.

Jon gave her a look that made her smoothen her dress, feeling far too warm under it. She joined her 
bare legs under her skirts. Her smallclothes felt superfluous; an unnecessary burden waiting to be 
removed. Jon took a snowflake from her hair and readjusted the red brooch closing her cloak, staring 
at it, and then at the rest of her attire. Finally, he looked into her eyes.

“Your mother prepared the garments for me overnight,” Dany said weakly. “I guess she could not 
sleep. Or she wanted to make me presentable enough for her only son.”

"You can dress a dragon like a wolf all you like," Jon said spontaneously. "But she remains a 
dragon, swift to breathe fire; unpredictable. Rhaenys and Visenya flew with Aegon, didn’t they? It is 
how you wish to be treated, isn’t it?"

Dany was flattered… And happy that Jon had finally guessed her thoughts on being left alone or 
behind, without her having to tell him.

"I do," she answered simply and turned his words on him. "A wolf may become a dragonrider but he 
remains a wolf; lonely and silent, and yet fierce and angry whenever a member of his pack is 
threatened. You can’t do everything alone. Or only among you wolves."

At that, Jon kissed her neck, biting her a little behind her ear, descending to the shoulder, sending 
sweet shivers down her spine, almost to her feet.

The time stood more still than in the crypts of Winterfell.

"Home," he agreed. “I keep forgetting how the distances mean nothing now. If only there was no 
Wall to stop the dragons—”

“-the Wall has to be there,” Dany reminded him. “It is not only the dragons that wish to cross.”
Jon smiled a sad knowledgeable smile. "I know," he said darkly. "You should have been there with me to see them. In the heart of winter. There are more Others sleeping than the drops of water in the sea or stars in the sky. More wake at every moment. Millions may come to life the longer this winter lasts…"

"Maybe I will see the heart of winter one day," Dany said and changed the topic for the better. "Let us go now. Your mother will be worried."

"I'll just say a word to Pyp before we go," Jon replied calmly. "Cotter received a blow in his head when the attack began and he remains unconscious. Pyp should better hold this place now. I think I’ll send Rhaegal back here for the night, to keep him company. Just in case."

xxx

On the flight back to Winterfell, Jon remained perfectly silent. Dany wondered if he wept inwardly for his friend Grenn, or if he imagined cutting Jaime Lannister or Stannis Baratheon into shreds for sword practice, before defeating the Night's King.

"The invitations are ready to be sent," Lyanna told them immediately, welcoming them back to the Great Keep. A large, watery smile of relief conquered her face at seeing her son. "Seven hundred of them for every foot of the Wall, to appeal both to the pride of the North and to the South that adores the Seven. Thank you for bringing the ravens, son," she said. “That was most thoughtful of you.”

Jon turned, obviously unaware of the black birds that had started following him and Dany during their return flight. He wrinkled his face in annoyance and disbelief, with an expression that made him look like Rhaegar, on occasions when his late father did not want to be king. Dany almost cried. With effort, she did not. If Lyanna managed to keep her eyes fully dry this evening, then she would do no less.

A flock of ravens flew out of their hiding place under Rhaegal's tail. Their incessant chatter was nauseating and strident. They headed for the crumbling stone tower, one of the oldest parts of Winterfell in Dany's reckoning.

Jon chose to royally ignore the birds. In few words, he informed his mother about the imminent arrival of the ships from the Vale. "It means we should have at least some more men against what is coming,"

"More will come," Lyanna said with confidence her son may not have shared. "From the Reach and West, for certain. And the rest will come for the wedding, the lazy lords and the fearful ones, the traitors and the conspirators. The nobles of the realm had never missed a tourney or a grandiose feast. More’s the pity that the weather doesn’t let us organise a proper joust… Maybe some riding at the quintain if we can clean the snow… But there will be a mêlée and an archery contest! All is duly announced on the invitation."

The evening meal was a quiet affair, of gravy with salted pig fat and dried apples; stern as the walls of Winterfell, yet served with… family love. Dany savoured the feeling if not the food. She may have been different from the Starks like the sun and the moon, but in Winterfell she was accepted and loved. The mother and son who barely knew each other paid her compliments and made conversation with her, where maybe they would have preferred to talk alone, to compensate for the time lost… Or maybe it was easier for both of them with Daenerys in the middle, a giggly intruder who protected them from any uncomfortable silence.

Dany wondered if Stannis fed the Unsullied he had stolen from her or if he was flying too high on the wings of his new dragonrider power, forgetting to provide for his army's continued sustenance.
At least Drogon would not starve. Dragons did not have to eat for months. The bigger they were, the longer they could go hungry.

Lyanna smiled to Jon now, but the skin on her face was dry. She looked like a fading flower.

*At this rate of exhaustion and sadness, she will die in childbed or shortly after*, Dany feared, hoping she was wrong.

Jon gave his mother very different looks than those he reserved for Daenerys; woven of worry and understanding between people who spontaneously shared many views of the world, though perhaps not all.

“Please, would you sleep now, mother?” he insisted gently. “I am home. You *ought* to rest.”

He ended up carrying Lyanna away from the Great Hall to her chambers. Dany accompanied them for a while, but then she opted to leave the mother and son to themselves and waited patiently for Jon in his old room.

*Their room.*

“How do you feel now?” he inquired when he came in, some time later. The tension was gone from him, but he was not completely at ease. Maybe he never was.

"Lazy," she answered honestly, yawning. "Tired. You?"

"I…” he stuttered. "I don't have to sleep that much. Or eat. Or cover myself. You know. The new me. Dead or alive. Probably dead as Stannis says. A talkative and a warm *wight*. Aegon's girl says I'm a *former* wight. The difference is rather subtle, I'd say. I'm different. Probably I'm just another demon like the ones I am trying to kill, who thinks himself better than the rest."

"I know all that," Dany said tiredly. "And I don't give a fig. I love you."

"And yet if I could choose, I'd rather be this than be Stannis," Jon added, very shyly. "He has no heart. We are made so that we can distinguish the right deed from the wrong one, even when the distinction goes beyond the demands of law and duty. Even… even Lord Stark recognised this when he… when he saved me. It was not lawful what he did, not according to the laws of King Robert, but it was still… good."

"You may have a point there," Dany agreed enthusiastically. "Maybe it is not important who you are, but what you stand for. You fight for this night to end and Stannis for his claim. The gods have to see the difference."

It was something she invented just now but her words pleased Jon, wishful or not.

"Lazy, you say," he said, playful and extremely careless all of a sudden, drunk on… love.

"Be still," he said, "allow me the honour this time. I… I'd like to try something. See how it is for you."

"Did you mind that I asked for things in bed last night-?"

"-Mind what? Are you mad? I don't think any man interested in ladies would mind that. What I *would* mind is if you demanded of anyone else, what you asked of me…"

"Don't be silly," she admonished him. "Why would I do that?"
"I wouldn't know," he said wistfully. "It was just a thought."

Dany would not teach Jon how often other men moulded women into fulfilling their demands. If he didn’t learn by now, it was best if he stayed just as he was.

She hoped that he had forgotten his jealous thoughts by the time he parted her legs and kissed her lightly from her right foot up, stopping under her knee. And waited. When she pushed her hips slightly forward, inviting him, he kissed her further to the beginning of her woman’s place. And waited. Then he returned to her other foot. He kissed her slowly, here and there, between the faint pink scratches caused by the mammoth’s woolly hair on the back side of her legs, on her belly and under her elbows, everywhere and nowhere; and never as she expected.

He waited every now and then, looking at her with love.

By the time he tasted her fully, Dany’s body tingled and hummed.

"Was that lazy enough?" he asked without smugness, with honest curiosity and a need of his own.

"Come here," she demanded, wide awake and as mad from this kind of loving as her father had ever been. "There will be no sleep tonight."

“How?” he inquired.

Words failed her. Her shoulders slumped. She grabbed his face and kissed him well and sound, pressing her wetness into his body, hoping this was instruction enough.

She didn’t want to know tonight, didn't want to ask for anything. She wanted to… to be surprised and overtaken by what he would do next.

Jon’s mouth never left hers. His fingers found her depth. Two very soft strokes were enough for Dany to become completely lost and melt from pleasure. Almost sobbing from the sensation, she barely took note of being pulled up in Jon’s lap until she was seated on him. Later she could not tell where her pleasure began nor where it ended. She just had to look into Jon's eyes again, all the time, and admire how they were so very much alive.


She could not say when her love for Jon began nor did she think it would ever end.

But, much later, when sleep did come for them both, inexorably, after the labours, the losses and the passions of the day, Winterfell could no longer protect Daenerys from her dreams. Not after she had ridden a huge brown she-mammoth to battle and stood face to face with a white walker eager to decapitate her and drink her blood. There would be no true reprieve for any of them until spring.

In her renewed nightmare, the Wall was no longer standing.

Spring had returned to Westeros but never for the two of them.

In her dream, Jon was the King of Darkness and Dany his Mermaid Wife.

Chapter End Notes
Next up: Brienne

Any feedback is welcome.

Thank you to all who ever commented, left a kudos, bookmarked or subscribed to this silly story.

Thank you for reading.
Tysha chanted patiently for hours.

And still, despite her best efforts, the dusk and the mist surrounding the ship taking Brienne, Ser Jorah and Tyrion’s wife deeper into the Shadow only turned darker. She always sailed further to the east over the river Ash - ever broader, ever blacker - advancing against the flow, up the stream; immersing her hull into the grey gloom that smelled of salt and ghost grass. Maybe the Ash was a river no more, but a great, black ocean of a kind Brienne had never seen before; thick and calm, shining like oil in the disenchanting bleakness of the Shadow Lands.

*Chanting won’t save us*, Brienne decided on a whim and stopped applying herself to ululating her response to Tysha in the nasal, funny tongue of Asshai, of which she did not understand a single word. Perhaps the most repeated one meant *shadow*, but it was only a speculation. She should write the verses down and hand them to a maester for study, or to include into a learned chronicle, for posterity.

*If I ever return to Westeros.*

*And if there will be children in the future.*

Determined by nature to always do her best in any challenge, and more so whenever the odds favoured the possibility that she might die trying, Brienne hurried to the mast where the blue dragon egg was tied. She had secured the precious charge with many knots and ropes, hoping to keep it safe during the imminent passage *through* the Shadow, towards the mysterious territories that awaited on the other side. Now she wanted to be close to the new life of a young dragon that needed her knightly protection. Serving a noble cause always helped Brienne to gather all her strength, of body and mind.

*Brienne the Blue.*

The egg was cold as stone now. Why did she expect anything else? Well, maybe because it had clearly *burned* some of the shadowbinders of Asshai as if scalding hot... before hundreds of them forced the longship to sail into the Shadow by sorcerous ululating in unison, wishing to complete a human sacrifice to their dark gods... The Asshai’i plans had been thoroughly ruined when Tyrion kidnapped the initial offering they had in mind, right in front of their masked, lacquered noses, smelling of exotic wood.
Jaime.

*Are you still with Tyrion? Are you looking for me?*

*You must be, my love, I know it. How could you not?*

Brienne feared more and more what her husband might do in his worry over not finding her after he woke next to his little brother. She was certain that if he paused a little to *think* about his actions, he would act honourably. But she could only hope that his first passionate reaction to her being left behind wouldn’t be… too unreasonable, involving a dragon assault on Asshai or fighting some innocent black bear bare-handed.

The egg had felt mildly warm to Brienne at the beginning of her journey into the Shadow. As a result, she was left with a distinct, albeit unfounded impression that it might hatch. In contrast, its newly acquired coldness was unspeakably disappointing.

*I would have looked after you,* she addressed the young dragon in her mind, in case he could hear her in his egg shell. *You can come out if you wish.*

With Viserion, Brienne was certain that the white and golden dragon *could* hear both her speech and her thoughts, though he never really replied to her, or not with as many details as he revealed to Jaime. He just hinted at what he wanted by *flying* to it, obeyed or, more frequently, disobeyed Brienne, treating her like his *sister* because of her marriage to his rider. On the basis of her vivid association with Viserion, Brienne had high expectations of the baby dragon; he might be clever already in his shell.

According to the beliefs of Asshai, there would be no more children born in the world until a dragonrider and a dragon were sacrificed to the Shadow that occupied the lands east of their city. Perhaps this curse included the dragon babies, because of the special link that the fire breathing beasts shared with people.

Brienne refused to accept those superstitions, even though, if they were true, then it was not her fault she had been barren so far. It would be so convenient to embrace the view that an evil caused by the Shadow had made the world infertile, and that it might be placated by a sacrifice. Maybe the evil shadow would be appeased if Brienne offered it the egg, and her womb would quicken as a consequence.

Her inability to be a woman in every sense of the word, including motherhood, in her marriage to Jaime bothered her, painfully so...

*The gods will give me a child or not, according to their will,* she concluded, resisting temptation. *The Asshai’i can fool themselves all they want with their sacrifices. The greater good cannot be achieved by using rotten means. Or it will stop being good.*

“You have to *sing,*” Tysha came after her, hissing angrily at Brienne for sabotaging her efforts to secure their passage through the unknown danger with the tricks and glamours of the shadowbinders. She used to be one of them until her masked friends suddenly decided Tysha should also fill in the ever changing number for the human sacrifice.

“No,” Brienne adamantly refused.

Ser Jorah stopped intoning the Asshai’i chant off key at that moment, perhaps hoping for another bout of wrestling between them, just as when Brienne unmasked Tysha and the two women gave each other a good beating.
Both still showed bruises from it, though Brienne’s hurt less because she had been victorious. Brienne knew that the spectacle of their clash had amused the northern knight no end. He would probably be thrilled if they had been naked and in a pit. This was how slaves often fought in Essos, according to chronicles Brienne had read as a child. Ser Jorah had obviously lived in these ungodly eastern places too long and acquired some very unrespectable tastes and habits, not worthy of a true knight.

“We will die if you don’t!” Tysha accused Brienne, angry with the prospect, rather than afraid of it. Brienne would have expected differently from a lady who possessed an elegant, willowy build under her broad, very dark blue Asshai’i robes, many hues darker than Brienne’s sapphire-coloured chainmail shirt.

*My good-sister, Lady Tysha, Brienne thought nobly as a true knight. I have to protect you as well.*

If Brienne was successful, Jaime might yet have a chance to redeem for what he did to his little brother when he lied to him that Tysha was a lady of ill repute. She would bring Tyrion’s wife back to him. The unexpected opportunity to help her husband set to rights, as much as it could be done, one of his past deeds that troubled him the most, gladdened Brienne’s large and soft womanly heart.

But the gods would give them no opportunity to redress Jaime’s crime of pushing Bran Stark to his intended death. The boy was missing since the sack of Winterfell and he might not be alive. Brienne’s idealistic spirit always stumbled and fell when she remembered this.

“If die we must, then we can manage to do so with or without chanting,” Brienne opposed Tysha with vehemence and uncharacteristic irony. They had to change strategy, she was certain. The singing did not work. Or maybe Brienne was just tired of the whining sound of the damned eastern language. “Let us try something else,” she offered, not knowing what it might be.

Brienne wondered if she would have ever been so adventurous and careless about dictating the course of action, while knowing next to nothing about the true nature of the grave danger that surrounded them, if she had never met Jaime Lannister.

Well, she might have been more uptight about expressing herself, but she would still challenge destiny in the name of her knightly values.

*Protect the weak.*

Even Jaime, who broke this vow, essentially believed in it. Coming to save Brienne from the bear pit had shown this more than well. How could Brienne not do the same?

Suffering from a vague notion that her husband would be proud of her composure and daring in the face of the, well… the *Shadow*, Brienne embraced the egg and thought that she saw… that the sky over the river that forked to their left, towards the city of Stygai, became just a little less black than that over the heart of the Shadow, that lay down the river on the right.

Not knowing *any* of the various languages the sailors, all from various Essos ports, could be fluent in, Brienne immediately began animating the ship crew, gesticulating with arms and legs to illustrate they should steer the vessel in that direction. The seafarers were suspicious and superstitious people, very much so; they had not taken part in the half-hearted attempt at chanting, yet they obeyed her now.

Brienne the Blue.

It was extremely unnatural and unusual to have men follow her smoothly, without hesitation. No one
questioned her lead or mocked her sex since she had defeated Tysha, the shadowbinder, despite the widespread belief among sailors that the presence of a woman on board a ship brought bad luck. All seafarers in Tarth agreed on this.

Or maybe all men in Westeros thought like sailors. Being a woman seemed to bring ill luck on very many occasions, unless a lady stuck to her embroidery and paid utmost attention not to speak unless spoken to.

There had been only one more unnatural occurrence in Brienne's life, in that inn in Volantis where she and Jaime became involved in an undesired brawl. Before the altercation, when she had shown up at the door looking for her husband, quite a few unknown men had studied her appearance with telling interest in her lady’s charms. When she joined Renly's army, she would notice this hungry expression only when men looked at pretty ladies like Margaery Tyrell.

Years later in the riverlands, she discovered it in Jaime's eyes when he stared at her, brazenly when he knew she was looking and discreetly when he thought she wasn’t. The latter shocked her more. Because she could not deny the truth of it nor attribute it to some cruel attempt at purposeful mocking. In the beginning of their love, it was very hard to believe that a handsome man like Jaime could ever be truly fascinated by her plump lips and prickly hair.

Brienne stopped finding it difficult to accept that Jaime adored her, but she still believed he would be the only one to both love her and be attracted to her; the different one among men where Brienne was concerned.

Jaime. Don’t be a fool, please. Just wait. I am coming. And not alone. I have to protect them all. You would expect no less of me.

She was the same Brienne as always. But now that she was confident and comfortable about all her qualities, both as a knight and as a woman, she realised that this somehow made her desirable to others, though her unconventional appearance never changed. Another ingredient crucial for waking other men's interest must have been that she was completely indifferent to them. And extremely grateful to the gods that with Jaime their sensuous longing for each other was a shared affliction.

Brienne had found so much joy in her short marriage that she could almost die happy.

But she had many new charges to protect and her death would make Jaime very unreasonable.

Ser Jorah and Lady Tysha breathed heavily behind Brienne’s back. The three of them stared jointly at the approaching towers and turrets of Stygai.

“It is equally gloomy here as back there,” Ser Jorah affirmed darkly, complaining about the course set by Brienne as a true Westerosi man, doubting her abilities and at the same time trying to put a hairy paw on the dragon egg Brienne kept close to her fast beating heart.

“No, it isn’t,” Brienne refuted the knight’s grumpy pessimism and retracted the egg from his unwanted touch, pondering if she should beat him now because she could. She couldn't help but wonder if this was how Jaime felt all his life, either from being strong enough or because the golden lion of Lannister could get away with almost anything.

Where are you? What are you up to? Are you alright?

She stared intently at the dark horizon so as not to cry.

On a second gaze, she was almost willing to admit that maybe she had invented seeing the light over Stygai where there was none. Maybe she always hoped for it, just like she always kept her honour.
In every darkness, light.

Under the ice, fire.

These thoughts about the light, or fire, or both, did not feel like her own.

More like… Viserion’s. But Viserion was not here and Brienne could not really speak to him, especially not over great distances… Though she did call Jaime’s dragon to herself once, when she needed him to fly her to Tarth and fetch the egg her father had stolen, or perhaps saved, from the ruins of Summerhall; the blue and silver egg she was holding now.

The future blue dragon. What else?

Princess Daenerys would perform the same magic she used on her previous three eggs and it would surely hatch for her, one day.

It had been preposterous to think it might hatch for Brienne, its humble caretaker, who was no princess by birth and much less the Mother of Dragons. Merely the wife of a dragonrider, whose own dragonblood was questionable since there was no certainty whatsoever that Aerys truly fathered Jaime and his sister.

Only assumptions.

Isn't that all we'll ever have about the past?

Or about the future which is never, ever what we believe it should be…

The ship glided over the black, oily, waveless sea, steered by its crew now, and not by sorcery. It was an improvement. Now that they were in the Shadow, the Asshai'i no longer controlled the vessel’s movements. Brienne's confidence in her decisions hung in fragile balance. She had made everyone take a very wise or very foolish turn indeed.

Soon, her companions began seeing what she had first glimpsed, and admitting she was right.

"It is less dark here," Tysha said with approval. "Your eyes are sharp and not only pretty."

Unlike Brienne, Tysha was gracious and very attractive, despite being rather tall for a woman, and embittered by the life of a cutpurse and apprentice shadowbinder. But she had that path chosen for her when Tywin Lannister decided, with unchallenged authority, that an innocent crofter’s daughter was a whore who was not to remain married to his dwarf second son.

But Jaime and Tyrion both played their part in Lady Tysha's disgrace with astonishing acquiescence. As Jaime had very eloquently put it, he knew his father, and he could have gathered that Lord Tywin was up to no good when he asked him to lie to Tyrion. But he carelessly thought nothing of it until it was too late. And Tyrion, he… he was able to take part in Tysha’s ordeal, even after the guards hurt her. If Brienne was in Tysha’s shoes, she did not know if she could forgive either of the two brothers. And even if she eventually did forgive them, simply to unload the burden of hatred from her soul and live for something else, she would not be able to forget.

Brienne often wondered if Jaime was present when Tysha was raped. Was his awful advice to Brienne not to resist the Bloody Mummers when they threatened to rape her based on knowing what was better, after witnessing Tysha’s suffering? But then she would remember Jaime hissing sapphires at Vargo Hoat, despite the danger to himself, when he barely knew Brienne and had every reason to resent her. Jaime would have tried to do something for Tysha if he had been there, wouldn’t he? If only he had told the truth sooner-
"Stygai," Ser Jorah’s deep voice announced with both awe and interest, interrupting Brienne’s musings. He seemed much more talented at describing mysterious lands than singing. "The capital of the Shadow and the tomb of forgotten treasures. I had thought it to be dangerous but not… dazzling."

Stygai indeed appeared more sinister than Asshai, though the reason for it was not immediately obvious to Brienne. But at least it was clearly less dark than the heart of the Shadow looming on the other side, on the course Brienne refused to take.

*The lesser of two evils*, Brienne hoped, absent-mindedly, bewildered by the Shadow Lands.

The blackness of the air around the ship turned ash, turned grey, became almost light and filled with glittering dust. Dazzling, as Ser Jorah said. Silver, as the veins on the blue dragon egg Brienne protected. After the walls of the precinct, the river narrowed again and wound forward through the silvery mist, bringing the vessel between the mountainous slopes on which the great city was built; a haphazard disarray of houses and temples and cobbled streets. The grandeur of Stygai was devastating. It was massive and monumental, though quite a few individual buildings were decrepit and crumbling, unlike any dwelling in the well-maintained, proud and lonely Asshai - the city without quadrupedes and without children.

On a closer look, it became clear why the housing needed no maintenance in Stygai and why the place appeared so ominous. The capital of the Shadow... was not inhabited by people.

*Shadows* dwelled in the structures, shadows walked in the streets, changing shape and size; bigger and smaller ones, in all shades of grey, from almost white to black as pitch. Shadows small as babes on a woman’s breast, or larger than the houses they haunted. Brienne wondered if she was going to meet one that looked like Stannis if she dared walk in those streets, and if this place was where it went after killing Renly.

And the walls that looked like they were *crumbling* down were not about to fall, not really. The dwellings were being reshaped into organic, irregular forms by their owners, so as to resemble their own fluffy, changing, soft-edged bodies, and not the rectangular shapes common to men; square and certain like the letter of the law they invented to be able to live in a community.

The fear on the ship mounted at the sight of the city's inhabitants and their sinister way of making. Even Brienne was not immune to it, despite her desire to endure and maybe even… explore the unusual settlement.

For the benefit of the posterity, if it would exist.

The centre of Stygai was occupied by a large, long, black building, with a broad central nave and a pair of aisles flanking it on each side. The structure was not domed as the main temple in Asshai where sacrifices were made, but covered with very high, slanted roof and predictably black tiles. The sole inhabitant of the palace-like structure seemed to be a giant, black shadow, a portion of which protruded through the roof and rested there, as though it enjoyed a rarely clear grey day, perhaps a sunny one by the standards of Stygai. A number of lesser shadows wandered nervously in the square in front of the palace, busy, unsettled, changing shape more drastically and more often than the others of their kind.

*This is the court, and the courtiers are upset before facing their king*. Brienne’s mind was forced to make a parallel with human society. It was one possible way to understand the laws of the land, amidst the many confusing phenomena escaping definition and understanding.

Brienne gripped the egg and thought she felt the little dragon move.
Are you nervous as well? Are they frightening you just like the ghost grass and the sight of Asshai scared your big brother Viserion off?

The river Ash stopped here, or rather it sprang from under the long palace-like building and the square in front of it, and then flowed back to Asshai-out-of-the-Shadow and into the Jade Sea… Other, smaller dark streams also had their source under the palace. From it, they ran towards different sides of the world, too narrow and shallow to be navigable.

The longship with Brienne and her companions came to standstill in the bay facing the palace of the shadow. Immobile, she remained in her berth at the pier-like square, without any necessity to tie her with ropes or throw an anchor. Her sails dropped as if dead. Wind was a distant memory from the time that only existed in songs. There was no current of air in Stygai. Maybe there was no air at all. Yet the ship passengers were still breathing, so there must have been some.

Brienne held the egg closely to her armoured chest, secured by her shield arm, drew her sword and decided to… disembark. Ser Jorah and Tysha followed closely, swallowing their fear, while the motley crew remained prudently on board.

The small shadows withdrew to the edges of the square, making room for the newcomers. It seemed to Brienne that they were less ominous than the one that had strolled into the Asshai temple to devour the sacrifice offered to it, only to turn back empty-handed… That shadow did not touch Jaime, but it did get hold of the egg, very briefly, and dropped it.

Was that the reason why you turned scalding hot? Brienne asked the dragon. The egg did not let itself be taken, defending itself with heat as the grown dragon would with fire.

These local shadows were indeed almost friendly by comparison. They bowed respectfully before they left, as if they welcomed dragon eggs in their midst and the foreign travellers who brought such unique treasures.

"Should we enter?" Tysha asked about the palace, showing a vested interest in Stygai, as a well-trained shadowbinder in presence of her gods. Grasping the magic powder she still carried in the pockets of her robes, she tossed some into the air and sang wildly, perhaps wishing to open the door to the palace of the shadows. Her voice was very beautiful. The black pavement of the square trembled after she dared do that, but the entrance to the palace remained firmly closed.

"Stop," Brienne said brusquely. "We’ll have none of that. No magic. You said it yourself, too much magic will clash and bring unexpected results. This place is full of it. Best not add more."

Not so long ago, Brienne did not believe in magic. Now she found herself giving lessons on its use to a trained magician... She would have laughed at herself in another place and another time. Here, her face muscles remained impeccably serious.

No one laughed in Stygai. A smile died on the lips before it could be formed.

Ser Jorah was the first to approach the palace door, but he dared not enter.

"I can't," he admitted sadly. "This isn't for me. My sins will ensure that I am devoured."

The great shadow suddenly rolled a word at them, in the tongue of Asshai, without showing itself; in a rumble slower than time and deeper than the earth. It sounded… If Brienne had to make a fast guess, she would say the shadows were more like dragons than like men, judging by the great strength of the largest one among them and by how it expressed itself. Yet the similarity had its limits. Where dragons were very warm and confusing in their manner of speech, this being was cold,
lifeless and precise in forming its chosen word. But the creature was undoubtedly capable of conscious thought, though its mental processes must have differed greatly from the warm-blooded humans and hot-blooded dragons.

The giants and the children of the forest lived in Westeros in the Dawn Age and the Age of Heroes. They all but vanished after the arrival of the Andals, armed with steel. Who was to say how many other races were still here, in the wide world?

“What did the shadow say?” Brienne asked Tysha.

“Scoundrels,” the slightly older woman replied, transmitting the greeting of their shady host, somewhat surprised herself. "It called us scoundrels."

The shadow roared the word once more, shaping the syllables with difficulty. The human speech must have been very foreign to it.

Tysha and Ser Jorah did not appear insulted by this treatment, but Brienne was on their behalf.

"We are not thieves nor villains," she stated bluntly. "There is no need to give offence to your guests."

"Guests… steal… knowledge… or possessions," Tysha whispered after the shadow, repeating its words, that now materialised as black water and black smoke gushing from the palace; tepid and smelling of sulphur.

*Like dragonfire,* Brienne realised.

"It is urging us to go back to Asshai before it changes its mind about keeping us here," Tysha finally said, wrinkling her smooth forehead. "At least I think that is what it just said."

"We cannot go back," Brienne said. She didn't think they would make it alive out of Asshai a second time. The shadowbinders were too numerous and obsessed by the need to complete their sacrifice. Maybe they would send their corpses to the Shadow for the next try. "We come in great need and with honest intentions. We need to pass through your lands."

The shadow thundered in the tongue of Asshai and its enormous, malleable shape rose further above the roof of its home. It seemed to have grown some more, out of amazement or anger.

"It is… the shadow is stunned, I think, by our wish" Tysha explained helpfully. "It says none of us is… that we are not…"

"We are not dragonriders," Brienne assumed wildly.

"Yes," Tysha agreed. "Yet we want to go east to go west. It is unheard of."

Brienne raised the egg.

The shadow… laughed and spoke in… *Westerosi*, making Brienne realise it had never needed any translation. Maybe it wanted to lure its guests into speaking more freely by feigning non-understanding. Or it learned very fast, faster than men. Now it sounded like an extremely coherent and eloquent shadow; a true ruler of its dark race. "The last scoundrel who found his way back, from here to Asshai, took three eggs from us. The very last dragon eggs surviving the Doom of Valyria which had not turned fully into stone. Surrender the dragonspawn you have brought with you and I shall let you pass. Maybe this one will become tired of waiting and hatch for us."
A clear route out of Stygai and the Shadow Lands, over the blue, high sea, showed itself behind the long palace of the Shadow. The jagged shores of a frozen land gleamed in the distance, stony and beautiful. Brienne did not recognise them, but Ser Jorah did.

"My lady!" the knight exclaimed. "Look! This is the northwestern shore of Westeros! This is Bear Island!"

Tysha's eyes teared and Brienne wondered if she hoped to be reunited with Tyrion in her future, despite the terrible crime he had committed in the past. Or maybe she suffered a breakdown to be reminded of the westerlands.

The dragon egg became colder than a block of ice against Brienne's body. The young dragon seemed to prefer turning into stone than coming to life in Stygai.

"No," Brienne refused to hand it over with indignation. She did not have to think twice.

_I would never surrender you. How could you think that?_ She felt a bit mad for talking to an egg but she couldn't stop herself.

The giant shadow continued to complain in Common Tongue. "None of the dragonriders will come here if we do not have an egg. No one will help the shadows. So be it. You have refused my most generous offer. Now you must stay here like the rest of our noble guests. The egg is ours!" the shadow thundered triumphantly.

The sky darkened in response to the shadow's exclamation, and was slashed by lightning, illuminating the world in bright flashes.

With the rising storm over Stygai, many previously invisible, decaying human corpses were revealed in the square and nearby streets, each grasping a precious possession; a silver ladder, a large horn, a case with golden coins. There were no dragon eggs, but there was an empty… nest with three oval holes in it. Many bodies lay around it, of those unsuccessful in reaching it.

Brienne wondered if the three living dragons came from here, and who the scoundrel was that had stolen them.

_It would explain why Viserion does not want to go back. If he had seen the place as a hatchling from his shell, he knows it leaves a lot to be desired._

The blue egg became warmer, alarmingly so.

_Go, go, go,_ the young dragon may have been imploring.

"Look at them! Bloody shadows!" Tysha cursed and screamed, running back to the ship, leaping from the edge of the pier and onto the deck. "What are you waiting for?"

Brienne and Ser Jorah rapidly followed suit.

Black water oozed from the deck. The small, previously benign shadows, had invaded it and pierced the hull in many places with their dark, fluffy bodies. The crew fought them off, closing the holes with anything they could find of similar size; with a barrel of food, an empty flagon or their own clothing.

Brienne sheathed her sword and tried to catch a little shadow to see if it consisted of anything at all. Her sword arm passed through it like through air. The creature was completely incorporeal. It wiggled away from Brienne’s touch, fleeing like a chased fly. _Bodiless like the shade of Stannis that_
killed Renly... Brienne's shield arm never let the dragon egg go, lest it be stolen from her by the little shadows.

*Who is to say that you are not scoundrels?* she challenged them inwardly. They did not have a body, but they did have a purpose.

"Sail back!" she commanded, losing heart and belief in the success of their endeavour. Some sailors listened, tightening the ropes, lifting the sails to catch the new, savage wind woken by the storm unleashed by the shadow.

After a long struggle, they were successful in defending the ship, or maybe they had just sailed far enough from Stygai. The little shadows returned to their city walls, abandoning the vessel as it sailed swiftly back to where the river forked. It was time to decide whether to go back west to Asshai or continue east, into the heart of the Shadow.


"It's no use," Tyrion's wife waved her slender arm. She seemed both angry and anxious now. "You were right. The way through the Shadow was right there, behind Stygai, and we were not allowed to pass."

"Let us try again, this time with faith that we might succeed," Brienne thought aloud. "Maybe it's because I didn't believe in your good intentions before."

"And now you do?" Tysha asked, doubtful.

"Yes," Brienne said, not really convinced she did, but wanting to.

Tysha sighed, *believing* her, easing Brienne’s own attitude towards the former shadowbinder.

"Maybe… maybe we should sail further east in silence, not to offend the people here, I mean, the shadows..." Tyrion's wife proposed very cautiously, as though she was now actively using her own head to *consider* the topic of the shadows for the first time in years, and not simply mimicking what she had learned during her disastrous career as a shadowbinder. "I think… I think they may be angry because the Asshai'i *bind* the shadows by force to do their will... despite being afraid of their power, and offering them sacrifices. This cohabitation and way of life is very old. Too old perhaps. Besides, the Great Shadow did not seem to *want* any human sacrifice, or it would have asked for it or simply taken any of us. It only... hated thieves, as most men do, and it wanted dragons."

"Again, as most men do," Brienne added bitterly. "The less worthy a lord, the more he covets dragons to enhance his power."

"What I'm trying to say is," Tysha continued, undeterred, "that maybe there is another reason that the children stopped being born in the world. Perhaps all we know about the Shadow is wrong, because we never bothered to *know* our neighbours. We only perpetuate the stories we've been told, stemming from the ancient past."

"We? Do you feel like an Asshai'i, my lady?" Brienne asked with honest curiosity. "As a girl I heard sailors say that a lifetime spent abroad can make one feel at home in any land."

"They are not my people anymore," Tysha said vengefully, "if they ever were. They betrayed me. There is no love lost between shadowbinders, though there may be attraction of the flesh. Nothing is *forbidden*, you must have heard that, to be sure. So everything is allowed. But they would have nonetheless found it more difficult to sacrifice Quaithe or another Asshai-*born*, respectable woman than myself. This... this hurts."
"From what you know," Brienne inquired, or perhaps she explored their possibilities aloud, "and our host's offer would suggest the same," she continued, gesticulating to the palace of the now enraged, giant shadow, "there is a way here to go further east in order to arrive west. As if to… go around… around the known world. Is it so?"

"It's one of the oldest prophecies," Tysha said, "To go west you must go east. But it is said that only a powerful dragonrider can do this. Quaithe would say that to touch the light you must pass under the shadow. She and her Westerosi friend, Archmaester Marwyn, are the only ones who still talk about this and believe in it. They are too old to have wisdom. Among the younger ones we only spoke of sacrificing to the shadow. Be as it may, none of this is of use to us. All we have is an egg. And they hatch by magic for their riders, or for men and women who share their blood. Not for the rest of us…"

"No matter how noble and brave we are," Brienne completed Tysha's remarks, feeling very, very insufficient.

The egg was ice cold again.

_It will die like us and I will have failed._

But unless the path to the outside world shown by the great shadow was an illusion, then it existed, waiting for Brienne and her companions to find it. The Shadow Lands were not walled off like the north of Westeros; just strange, unknown and unfriendly. They hadn't even been devoured yet by the displeased and disembodied inhabitants. They were only unable to find the path. It was too dark and they were being confounded on purpose by their hosts, who wanted to keep the dragon egg as a useless hoard. The three they had before never hatched here. They did for Princess Daenerys, their mother, whose dragonblood ran pure for generations.

Tysha stomped and punched the mast with her elegant hands. Her aggressive actions never ceased to shock Brienne. _She looks like a sweet lady and she fights with ferociousness possessed by few men._

"It would be different if someone waited for us out there," Tysha puffed out when she was done hitting the pole and calmed a bit down. "There are stories about people who were misled and ventured into these lands in the dark winter days… passing through the fields of ghost grass… and who came out of the Shadow after being gone for months, years even… because their families never forgot about them. Their mothers or siblings or other kin waited for them. But no one who cares for our well-being knows about us being here. How could anyone wait for the lost travellers without knowing we are lost?"

"Jaime is waiting for me," Brienne said with unmoving faith. "And his little brother, he-" There was no easy way to say how Tyrion must feel without offending Lady Tysha’s feelings in return. Brienne would be devastated in his place and very angry and demanding justice in hers. "-He began looking for you since he learned the truth," she finished her sentence lamely. "In a way, he is also waiting."

"And before this enlightening experience in his life, he conveniently forgot all about me," Tysha said bitterly. "For how many years? So what if I was a whore as his father said? I could have still cared for him even if I did need or want his coin. There was no need to hurt me or shame me."

"Please, my lady," Brienne said with more conviction. "You are forgetting something. And although _nothing_ can excuse the heinous crime your husband is guilty of, there is at least a reason which explains how it was possible for him to be deceived."

"And that would be?" Tysha asked defiantly.
"Your husband," Brienne spoke from experience now, adding strength to her words. "He's a dwarf. He was not exactly accustomed to being loved. Before you, Jaime was the only person who showed him any affection. What I’m trying to say is that it’s easy to believe someone who loves us when everyone else treats us with contempt, without any fault of our own. I have felt this on my skin. Being a clumsy giant among women is similar to being a dwarf with stunted legs among men."

"So if you were now told that Jaime married you with some evil purpose on his mind, you would believe it, and you would, what, beat him to death?" Tysha asked bitterly, kicking the mast with her tiny feet.

"We almost beat each other to death once," Brienne said. The memory of their one and only proper fight, when Jaime still had both hands, was both precious and extremely painful. Without it, Brienne’s life would have gone differently. "And I did believe the worst about him in the beginning. I wish I could say that I would have trusted Jaime, but the truth is, I don’t know if I would. It would depend on who told me the lie about his motives, when and how convincingly…"

"I hate you!" Tysha exclaimed with passion.

"Because you hate Tyrion?" Brienne blurted without thinking.

"Most of the time," his wife confessed, lowering her voice. "But not all the time. And when I don't, I hate myself for not being able to loathe him as much as he deserves," Tysha's voice became a rasp, a dark whisper on a stormy wind.

The ship was being blown to the east. Its course was now in the hands of the gods.

"So Jaime is waiting for me and Tyrion for Lady Tysha," Brienne repeated stubbornly. "Who is waiting for you, Ser Jorah?" she continued.

"I have no lady love, for as much as I fool myself that Daenerys may one day want me," he admitted with great difficulty. "But my old aunt might be waiting. She is called Maege. Her daughters, my older cousins might still remember me as their mad uncle who tossed them in the air as little girls. It is time I go home to Bear Island, before I die uselessly here."

"It is time you stop wishing to steal this egg," Brienne admonished him. "Daenerys hates dragonstealers most of all. This is no way to come into her good graces, I can assure you."

The knight's bald head fell down to his chest, defeated and silent.

The crew was next.

"Ask the sailors who is waiting for them," Brienne urged Ser Jorah and Tysha.

*Everyone must have someone out there, Brienne thought stubbornly, someone who might love them and wait for them, be it a lover, a kinsman, a friend or a parrot in a cage.*

The lands around them were bleak and uninhabited now. No shadow survived outside Stygaiit seemed. Ghost grass grew high on one of the river banks; its pale stems barely visible in the moonless gloom. The other bank was soon gone out of sight. The Ash now truly flowed into an unknown, black sea.

The ship sailed on into the night. Or maybe several days and nights passed, until all on board confessed who was waiting for them, and then sleep began taking them, victims of exhaustion. Brienne succumbed to it on the deck, curled around the dragon egg as a babe in the womb, wondering if there would be light or darkness around them when she woke.
In the darkness, light. The dragon thought was there again. Almost her own thought, but not quite.

Viserion, is it you?

When she reopened her eyes, the sea looked cold and empty, but it was no longer black; it was grey and blue, and foaming behind the ship, possessing its natural colour and consistence; splattering, non-oily.

"Grey as in Lannisport," Tysha said.

"White as on the stony shores of Bear Island," Ser Jorah added.

"Dark blue as on Tarth at night," Brienne mentioned lovingly.

The sky was pale grey with tiny wisps of clouds in weak daylight. The air smelled of salt, but not of ghost grass.

"We have passed through the Shadow," Brienne told Tysha, unsure whether to rejoice. "Is the cure of infertility lifted because of us? Can we bear twins now?" she tried to quip, unsuccessfully.

"I don't know about you," Tysha said, "I surely cannot. I was barren before the world became like this. I was with child after I married, but... I lost it after... after... you know what. It was for the better. I would have never been completely sure whose child it was, though it must have been Tyrion's. By how violent the bleeding was, the fruit should have been a few weeks old, according to the witch in Lannisport who tended to me. I was fortunate to survive it. My womb has never quickened since, despite that I never bothered to swallow moon tea. And trust me that I have not been known in Asshai for my chastity. I just... I did not care what happened to my body. Probably due to my indifference, nothing too terrible happened... Not after that time."

"I believe you," Brienne said very seriously. "But..." she decided to be a little hopeful. "But maybe not having children is just a coincidence. Maybe it is the effect Asshai has had on you as a childless place. You went there very soon after... after your disgrace, didn't you?"

"Maybe," Tysha almost smiled. "Shall we reach Westeros or have we come to another world? What do you think, good-sister?"

As far as the eye could see, there was no land in sight.

The sailors gathered on the deck, waiting for Brienne to set a course. The sea was the same in all directions, great, grey and foaming.

Where to go? Brienne asked the dragon in her mind, not expecting an answer.

The egg, however, warmed up...

Became heated...

And cracked on the surface.

"Gods be good," Ser Jorah said, falling to his knees. "You must be a friend of Princess Daenerys if the dragon is hatching for you."

In truth, Brienne only superficially knew Daenerys.

The crew and Tysha gave Brienne a haunted look as if she had just turned into a giant shadow.
Brienne contemplated the ongoing miracle in her broad hands, at loss for words.

Veins became thicker on the egg shell; twisting, silvery lines on a perfectly blue surface.

The egg splintered.

Soon, a piece of blue shell fell to the deck. Another clung to Brienne's left hand. She put the egg down. It was too hot to hold it. She sat near and watched as the shell trembled, cracked some more and broke into many sharp fragments.

The dragon shook it off and stood on his legs. He was miniature and very blue, with only a few silvery scales and very pretty, long, sapphire-coloured wings. He unfolded them immediately and used them to hop to one side of the ship, very clumsily.

*He? No.*

"So you can instantly walk," Brienne said with care for the little creature. "But you can't fly yet."

Craning its neck to peek overboard, the dragon waved one small wing up and down.

*Fly? No.* The dragon thought in a soft voice, different than Viserion’s. It was finally completely clear to whom the voice Brienne had been hearing in the Shadow Lands belonged. To the baby dragon.

"We will follow his guidance," Brienne announced and gesticulated to convey her meaning to the crew. “Set the course.”

The dragon hissed softly when Brienne approached him, but it did flex its wing once more, confirming the direction and easing Brienne’s conscience about her latest overly confident command.

*Him?*

He was… offended.

*He?*

The baby dragon opened his mouth and exhaled a very tiny jet of yellow fire.

"How?" Brienne asked, surprised. "You must be too young for that!" She vaguely remembered overhearing that the beasts could not spit fire in their first year. The time it took to human babies to make first steps.

There was… there was no magic that helped him hatch, and none of the ship passengers had Targaryen blood. Brienne could only conclude that the dragon was not forced to come to the world for her or for anyone.

He hatched because he wanted to. Not because he was made to.

*He! No!*

Brienne's mind was screaming with dragontalk now.

Normally, the dragons found each other. And chance was all the others were in Westeros now... The young dragon, he could surely sense where he should fly, or sail in their case.

*No!*
Brienne covered her ears, but she could not silence the dragon in her mind. *What is he trying to say?*

*Not he!* the dragon shouted irritably, trying hard to be understood.

"No," Brienne said aloud, "not a he indeed." She smiled in disbelief after her realisation.

Lady Tysha and Ser Jorah looked at Brienne as if she had just gone stark mad.

"It is a dragon alright," Tysha said, "it is not really a *he*, I concur, they are *animals*." She was instantly forced to cover her ears, probably because the so-called animal now protested violently and shrilly inside her head.

Brienne began wondering if her and Tysha were now both dragonriders if they could hear the baby dragon speaking.

"This dragon," Brienne announced slowly, "Unlike Viserion, Rhaegal and Drogon, she… I think she is a lady."

The blue scaled baby girl exhaled another whiff of yellow smoke, jumping giddily and enthusiastically onto Brienne's broad left shoulder, flapping her wings a bit to help herself that far up.

The hatchling stopped being talkative. She began croaking at the low clouds, and kept pointing the way; a scaled, glittery compass with bright blue wings.

The ship rolled on, lost at the confines of the known world.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Tyrion

Any feedback is welcome.
Myrcella had half a face.

“I am truly sorry,” Doran Martell said in a matter-of-fact, princely tone. “It was not my design.”

Thank the gods, Tyrion thought. My niece would be most likely dead if it was. The Prince of Dorne did not strike him as either a merciful or a sloppy man.

“I had a misunderstanding with my father, but I never wanted this,” his daughter felt the need to explain, very courteously. Arianne Martell was a true beauty. If Tyrion looked at her long enough he would believe every word that came out of her mouth five times over. What is it with me and dark hair? There are blonde whores as well. Tyrion looked at his brother and away from the seductive Dornish princess.

Jaime’s stump would have clenched if it could do so from seeing the disfigurement of his only daughter. Tyrion placed himself strategically in-between his brother and their hosts, afraid of his impulsive reaction.

Tyrion… he was moderately happy.

Myrcella was not yet slain in Dorne where he had sent her. Her golden curls were more beautiful than Jaime’s and Cersei’s together and her figure had become pretty in a sweet, feminine way. If one did not look at her face, she was a lovely young woman of marriageable age.

What is a little scar? Tyrion tried to console himself.

Unfortunately, the mark was not small at all. The cut was deep and it ruined one of Myrcella’s cheeks and part of her forehead. It was a miracle she still had both eyes and the entire nose.

Tyrion rubbed the remaining portion of his maimed olphatic organ and sighed.

I should have never shipped her to Dorne.

Many of Tyrion’s wise political decisions turned to ruin. Either he made poor choices or it was impossible to make better ones. The world’s affairs changed so often that a good choice of today was a disastrous one tomorrow.

Flying above the Water Gardens, the summer residence of the princes of Dorne, Viserion let out a large stream of flames. Momentarily, the fire heated up the atmosphere from the pleasantly warm winter temperature to an uncomfortably high summer one. The scent of sulphur saturated the air. Jaime opened his mouth, surely to insult the Martells. Several olive-tanned guards clenched their
spears. At least Aroe Hotah was incapacitated; Prince Doran’s famous personal guard from Norvos, trained by the bearded priests. He was probably able to cut down Jaime, Myrcella and Tyrion with his longaxe much before Viserion conveniently burned all present.

Fortunately for everyone, Myrcella spoke before the heartfelt love between the Martells and the Lannisters escalated any further, confirming the view Tyrion had always maintained: she would make a finer queen than Cersei.

“Prince Trystane’s father is telling the truth, Uncle Tyrion,” Myrcella announced. “Uncle Jaime, this was a most unwelcome accident. I have been treated well here. I do not wish to end my betrothal. If possible,” she added humbly and dutifully.

“Is it?” Jaime pierced the sovereign of Dorne with his aggressively green gaze, not correcting his daughter’s wrong statement about her paternity.

“It remains to be discussed,” Prince Doran looked to the sky above, covered in white and golden dragon scales in place of winter clouds. Viserion was growing rapidly. “But there is no need to burn us, my lord. If you wish us harm, it is enough to leave with your dragon and your daughter.”

And me? Am I so small that they don’t even notice me? Tyrion thought stupidly as the prince continued talking to Jaime. “You can simply let the army from Volantis finish what it began and enslave all those among us who do not die fighting. For we shall not surrender.”

“Daughter?” Myrcella addressed her father quietly when the prince finished speaking. “Everyone says so now, but I would like to hear it from you. Is it true then?”

Jaime let his handsome head fall on his chest, but only for a moment. Very quickly, he lifted it up and spoke without shame. “Yes. I am sorry. Not for having you. For not telling sooner. No, not that. For not finding a way to pursue your mother in the open from the beginning, or to stay away from her entirely. She was my first love.”

First love? Tyrion registered the little intermission more than any other part of Jaime’s speech. Is there a second one? Now that would be news...

“I see,” Myrcella said and looked away, an image of Cersei’s coldness, or perhaps of the dignity Tyrion always imagined as a character feature of his mother, Lady Joanna Lannister. Not that he would ever know. He killed his mother by being born, a feat that his late father never ceased to remind him of.

Thankfully, Tyrion discovered he was conveniently deadly with the crossbow the last time he saw Lord Tywin, seated on his privy. Father was hopefully pondering this quintessential truth about his useless son in seven hells, while eternally emptying his dead bowels.

The Dornish prince was lank, taller than his father and thin as a lizard, very dark of skin and hair. Handsome. Trystane? Is it? What name is that? Good for a fanciful song... The boy never left Myrcella’s side and he seemed to see through her ugly facial scar as if it weren’t there.

Tyrion wished a woman would look at his nose that way, as if it was still whole. He was forced to recall that, most unfortunately, in his case, the reasons for revulsion did not end with his face. It mattered not. He was as good as an eunuch now though he had never been cut.

Except when he thought about the crone with fine black hair, hiding her aged face behind a mask of lacquered wood. He had believed it was red and smelling of cherry tree in Essos, but now, oddly, he remembered it as very dark blue and having the scent of an unknown, exotic shrub, or a sweetwater
flower. He wished to know which plant it was, but herbology had never been his favourite field of study. It was dragonlore.

“My lord,” Trystane addressed Jaime bravely, “I—

“He wants to marry her,” his father interrupted, sounding annoyed. “He has wanted it from the first day she arrived here. I am not against it. Are you?”

*You are not in favour either,* Tyrion thought cynically.

Jaime looked to Myrcella for an answer. His pretty daughter blushed and lowered her green eyes. “May you find joy in this union then,” he finally proclaimed with acceptance.

Prince Doran and Princess Arianne exhaled noisily and made themselves scarce, giving their guests some breathing space. Guards lowered their spears. Trystane remained standing next to his betrothed, not intimidated to be left alone in the company of three Lannisters and the white and golden dragon. Tyrion was favourably impressed. *Not only handsome. Brave.*

Many servants entered, carrying low tables and platters stuffed with different food. The prince and his daughter barked arrangements at them in the Common Tongue, spoken with such weird local accent that it was almost unintelligible.

The Water Gardens suddenly looked like a pleasant place of leisure to Tyrion. Dornish dishes were famous for their spices. He and Jaime… they could have a bite. Thinking of it, the last meal Tyrion had was on the ship taking him from the unknown shores of the fabled Yi Ti to Asshai. And the food might have been an evil apparition magicked by the shadowbinders, filling the belly with dangerous powders instead of providing sustenance.

Jaime never made a move to sit down. His dragon flew calmly now, in great circles, but neither of the two was well. In Tyrion’s expert opinion, they fared piss poor. Few men knew Jaime as well as he did and even fewer learned anything about the dragons, so he was probably right.

“What is it?” he finally asked Jaime when the children went to pet the dragon. “Are you missing our sweet sister? Is Tommen fine?”

“They are both well and in Casterly Rock, I believe,” Jaime said. “If Tommen did not head north already, to take part in the War of Winter. He is lord now.”

“Of winter, you say,” Tyrion said very cautiously, not understanding fully.

Jaime shrugged. “Father informed me you received a moving hand of a corpse from the Wall when you acted as Hand for him. A few months ago, I saw walking corpses in the riverlands. I haven’t seen the snarks yet but I’ve been told they are quite real. Quite a few sane men have seen them. Beginning with the Hound, who had never been prone to imagining things.”

“I see,” Tyrion said wisely, not really seeing anything. He remembered clearly how he was inclined
to believe that the white walkers existed, ever since he pissed from the Wall and contemplated the bleak lands beyond it, in the company of Ned Stark’s natural son who had later made it to Lord Commander. “Is the Stark bastard still commanding the Watch?”

“It is much, much worse than that, little brother,” Jaime said with abandon, scratching his golden head with his stump and failing miserably.

“Tell me everything,” Tyrion demanded avidly, basking in unexpected joy from being called little brother, just like when he and Jaime were both children. “Where is Daenerys and her black beast? Who has the green dragon?”

The rules of the game and the forces on board have changed. Tyrion needed to study their positions in order to help his family and himself and to do good in the world. Unlike his father, Tyrion always had this second, noble goal on his mind, despite that he occasionally believed that the world was beyond help.

Myrcella was now caressing the dragon’s white snout. Her betrothed joined in with only a slight trace of fear. They were immensely sweet.

Since his heroic arrival in Dorne on dragonback, halting the advance of slavers, Jaime did not direct a word to Tyrion. Such as, thank you for saving my life, little brother, Tyrion thought morbidly. Worse, Jaime ignored his existence as never before, letting Viserion take charge of him while he had a private audience with the prince. In practice, this meant Tyrion had spent several hours enclosed in a dungeon made by a set of long claws under the dragon’s huge foot, inspecting how the red-brown dust from Dorne polluted the gold of the beast’s scales. It was a tedious pastime. Besides, Tyrion was not a suckling babe who would fall down and break his head if left to his own devices.

“Come,” Tyrion said and half-pushed, half-dragged Jaime to two low seats. Trays of exotic food awaited them. “Here. Now we stand out much less. Help yourself,” he went as far as pushing a crunchy meat-filled pastry smelling of black pepper and cardamom into his brother’s left hand.

Jaime never took a bite, but the words came gushing out of him as soon as he was seated. There had been spectacular changes in the realm in the time Tyrion was absent. He had to strive not to gape in shock.

The matters stood just as Jaime said; much, much worse than anything Tyrion could have imagined for the House Lannister.

Jaime and Cersei were most likely both Rhaegar’s and Tyrion’s half-siblings.

Rhaegar survived the Trident only to die bravely, which was often the same as uselessly, in the North. His only son and heir grew up as Jon Snow, brother of Bran Stark. Worst of all, Rhaegar’s grieving widow, Jon’s mother, was a Stark, just like the songs forbidden by Robert Baratheon always claimed.

“I know, I know,” Jaime stated tiredly what Tyrion already feared. “With his lineage and upbringing, this Jon Snow will have no love the Lannisters and he will be as merciful in forgiving crime as Stannis Baratheon. He is not a boy anymore and has no reason to love his late father nor respect his decisions concerning my person. I reckon he’ll have my head first chance he has. It is what I would do in his place.”

“I spoke quite a bit with him on the Wall and on the way to it,” Tyrion noted, weighing his capacities to mediate and doubting them. He was certain that Jaime did not even remember the new king’s face from his time in Winterfell. “He seemed very clever. Kingly clever, now that I think of it. A tad
emotional and impetuous for a Stark, to be sure. Maybe I can help smooth things up.”

“Like you helped Myrcella?”

“She’s alive,” Tyrion observed. “It’s more than many Starks can say. Those that Father busied himself with.”

Tyrion omitted to inform Jaime that he had also met Jon’s mother, disguised as Septa Lemore. The lady was pretty, clever and audacious. What is it with me and dark hair? But despite that Lyanna was unusually friendly to Tyrion when they sailed on the Rhoyne together, her demeanour could have been an elaborate lie, like her entire personality. Or maybe she believed I was truly Hugor Hill. Did anyone on that ship go by their real names? Yandry and Ysilla, the boat owner and his wife? Ser Rollo Duckfield, the big, friendly oaf? Or not even them...

The alternative to supporting Rhaegar’s son was conspiring against him before the young man managed to assert his rightful claim to the Iron Throne. After hearing Jaime out, Tyrion had a distinct impression that his brother did not favour this course of action. Besides, the Jon Snow Tyrion remembered might make a good king. Aligning with his cause could be beneficial for the realm.

It was still not everything that burdened Jaime.

“You can just spit it out,” Tyrion said between chewing on two pieces of very spiced aurochs meat, dipping it regularly into some even hotter red sauce. The meal they were served by their Dornish hosts was exquisite. “What is wrong? Is it me and what I said to you in that dungeon before I left Westeros?”

“Shut up or I will sell you to slavery,” Jaime roared back, “I hear they need dwarves for mummeries in Essos.”

“No, thank you,” Tyrion replied with feigned indignation, sniffing a tray with cakes that had just arrived. “I’ve tried out that noble profession. I didn’t appreciate the nourishment. The food smells much better here. Look, this was baked with plenty of cinnamon and rasped blood orange skin, I reckon. And despite all the spices and the oddity of the language, it is still Common Tongue they are speaking and we are eating aurochs, not locusts or unborn puppies. Isn’t it wonderful to be home?”

Jaime did not have a smile or patience for small talk.

“What is it?” Tyrion was becoming more worried for his brother with every moment. During the three days and nights long dragon flight from Asshai to Sunspear, faced with Jaime’s unconscious body and the prospect of starving, drinking rain and snow when it fell, Tyrion discovered he was able to ignore Jaime’s role in Tysha’s disgrace, coming to the conclusion that his own role in his life’s greatest tragedy was much worse by comparison. Jaime’s contribution ended with talking and Tyrion… As every day, many times over, he had to swallow the bitter memory of what he did to the only girl who had ever loved him. “I… I never poisoned Joffrey,” he told Jaime. “I don’t know who did.”

“The Tyrells,” Jaime informed him laconically.

Tyrion continued excusing himself, “I wish I could say that I lied about Cersei as well but—”

“I know that you didn’t,” Jaime interrupted. “But, you see, I…” Normally extremely eloquent, Jaime Lannister was completely unable to finish his sentence. Tyrion’s concern gallopped. Just say it please. Did you rape someone? Attempted to kill more children?

“I lost my wife,” Jaime finally managed to confess. “And it is your fault...” he laughed bitterly. “Not
that you would know, of course, seeing that you left King’s Landing in haste before I was reunited with my lady wife to be. But you wouldn’t have found a better revenge on me if you plotted it for a hundred years.”

*A hundred years, a hundred days?* Tyrion could not remember the story. How could he? There were so many. He had always read too much. The maester in Casterly Rock had said that bending over books and scrolls would probably ruin his fragile health of a dwarf.

*Maybe too many books were the reason I became twisted inside and out.*

*Where do whores go?*

*Tysha.*

*Do those who go to seven heavens see the rest of us in seven hells? Will you forgive me then?*

Jaime's meaning made its way very slowly into Tyrion's head, which had temporarily surrendered the command over his body to his stomach.

“Lost your wife you say? When did our sweet sister ever agree to that match? After or before she turned mad? And how did she die? You omitted that part from your very exciting story about the novelties in the realm,” Tyrion wondered.

Jaime began to cry.

Viserion hooted and roared *miserably*. Smiling like two ignorants, Myrcella and Trystane were amused by him.

Tyrion was profoundly shocked.

Jaime was suffering more than Tyrion could have ever imagined and the dragon was as sorrowful and his rider. His brains turned viciously in his head, larger than the rest of his body. And remembered the very tall, blond-haired *shadowbinder* with pretty blue eyes, struggling against others until a mask was forced on her face.

Tyrion felt terribly sorry.

The revenge he had dreamed of tasted like hot cinder and ash in his mouth.

He could almost understand Prince Doran’s feelings concerning Myrcella’s *accident*. Tyrion wouldn’t have wanted to cause the death of a woman Jaime fell in love with, provided she wasn’t Cersei. When it came to Cersei, he was far less merciful.

“Don’t tell,” he told Jaime, wishing to exonerate himself. “Why didn’t you say so in the beginning? Was it a tall blond woman? I merely left her behind, not *knowing* who she was.”

“Yes, and then she died,” Jaime said stubbornly.

“How can you possibly be certain of that?”

“Viserion knows,” Jaime said darkly. “Just like he knows Rhaegar is dead and that his sister and his son are mourning him together. He says that my wife has gone so deep into the Shadow that he can no longer feel her or see her. I don’t suppose I need to teach you what Shadow is; the dark hell-place beyond Asshai. Viserion claims that those who venture there do not return. After my short visit to the lovely city, I believe him.”
“Amazing,” Tyrion said with awe, admiring the reality of dragontalk. The books hinted at it, but none of the records Tyrion read was quite that elaborate and he had obviously read all existing ones.

Jaime grabbed his shoulder with his left arm and started shaking him. “This is not a bloody joke!”

“I never said it was!” Tyrion protested and struggled against his brother’s grasp. “I wasn’t mocking your grief,” he clarified. “I was admiring your dragon. Jaime, he speaks more than he should. It’s a wonder. Either the books are sorrowfully inaccurate about dragontalk or this new generation that hatched for Daenerys is very different than the specimens studied in learned dissertations and chronicles. Will you please stop? I ate too much too fast. I will be sick.”

Jaime’s arm fell. “It is just…” he was far less talented than Tyrion for excusing himself. “Your childish reaction to my loss offended me. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Tyrion said with emotion. “Had I known, I might have been tempted to do exactly what I did, only on purpose. To get to you. To get even. And I would regret it because I am terribly sad about it now. Father’s blood runs most certainly in me, if not in you. I’ve always been fascinated with the Reynes of Castamere. Heads on spikes and all that. We kill them before they kill us.”

Princess Arianne interrupted the conversation, coming to check on the Lannisters and their well-being. “Is everything to your liking?”

She flicked her fingers and two goblets of red wine were stuck in Tyrion’s and Jaime’s hand by diligent servants. They didn’t even make the mistake of searching for Jaime’s right hand.

“Pardon us, but we would rather avoid sour wine with these delicacies,” Tyrion tried to refuse politely for both of them. He did not think Jaime would eat or drink anything in his condition.

“Sour?” Princess Arianne sipped red wine from her glass. “This is not the wine we export, my lords. This is what we drink ourselves in place of that grape juice from Arbor they call wine, and I can assure you that it goes well with the dishes you have tasted.”

Tyrion drank a bit, too curious to miss it after Arianne’s praise. Unbelievably, it was indeed better than the famous, expensive red wine from Arbor, rich and yet dry, less fruity in a good sense. “Gods,” he commented with wonder, “Thank you, princess, for encouraging me to try it. This vintage is unique.”

Ariane Martell smiled at him and emptied her glass in ten careful, prolonged sips.

Tyrion did the same before filling his mouth again, enjoying the exuberant taste of some crunchy, burning hot shrimps. His glass was refilled for him as he ate.

Food and wine-wise, he could live in Dorne.

Jaime set his goblet on one of the tables with elegance, filled to the brim, untouched.

“Has the date for the wedding been set?” Jaime wondered, picking up the uneaten piece of pastry in his only hand, trying to be civil.

“Not really,” Arianne replied. “We thought of... soon, before any of you came looking for Lady Myrcella. But now we shall wait for after the royal wedding.”

“What royal wedding?” Tyrion asked immediately, imagining Jon Snow marrying Margaery Tyrell. Jaime did not mention how the House Tyrell fared in the new order, but they would surely do anything in their power to conquer the new marriageable king in the Seven Kingdoms.
The truth was sometimes much more exuberant than any food.

“Daenerys Targaryen and Jon Snow,” Tyrion whispered dreamily and lifted his glass. “To their health! Who would ever guess that?”

Jaime did not look surprised. Viserion knew that as well, Tyrion realised, remembering Jaime’s observation that Jon and Daenerys mourned for Rhaegar together. Maybe Jon Targaryen won’t live very long. Her Radiance the Queen, the Mother of Dragons, was not known for womanly kindness in Meereen despite her famous beauty. “Take me to her,” he told Jaime on an impulse. “Show that you fulfilled Rhaegar’s bidding. Princess Daenerys would not be marrying anyone if I hadn’t made her a widow by chance. She was grateful for it. I say we go and bend the knee now, to be among the first ones, and we act as humbly as possible. In this way we may force the wolf and the dragon to abide by Rhaegar’s wise decisions.” It was a strategy that could work.

“We have to stay here. Or the sellswords from the Free Cities will enslave the south of Westeros for the Volantenes who had hired them, while the Others do the same in the north. I wonder which destiny is worse,” Jaime wrinkled his forehead, showing signs of a highly unusual activity for him - he was thinking before acting. It was a welcome change. Perhaps this was the reason he finally saw Cersei for who she was.

“Viserion can go to Winterfell and back in a day, if not less. The sea won’t freeze overnight if you give the layer of ice near the shores of Sunspear a good burning before departure,” Tyrion reasoned back.

“Day and night,” Jaime estimated, shaking his head, pondering the odds. “It might storm on the way. I don’t know, Tyrion. It is a military risk to leave Dorne now.”

“Let us go!” Tyrion insisted. “Bending the knee as soon as possible is our best chance.”

“If you will be flying back and forth,” suggested Prince Doran, who had surreptitiously joined them in the middle of the conversation, “you could transport me and my retinue to Winterfell to the wedding on the next flight. We require some time to ready for the travel and we shall not make it on time by any other means in winter. And I have decided to attend, though I am not yet certain about bending either of my sick knees.”

Jaime nodded gravely, accepting the arrangement. His heart was elsewhere. Under the Shadow.

“Let’s go,” Tyrion begged, gulping down the third glass of wine and stuffing his hands with a few extremely sugary looking cupcakes sprinkled with poppy seeds for the road, or rather, the air. He needed something sweet after all the rest.

The flight was much shorter than it should have been and the walls too familiar; not those of Winterfell but of King’s Landing. Jaime dismounted in front of the Dragon Gate. “It is not my fault!” he yelled at Viserion. “She had the egg. I was taken captive and made to sleep like a gnat before my brother liberated me.”

Tyrion was happy for the acknowledgement of his noble actions. Better late than never.

Jaime continued berating Viserion. “There is no reason to be pesky over the loss of an egg and bring us here. I said Winterfell! That is far North. If you can’t find it, you should think of your dragon brothers. The green one and the black one, remember? They are both there. You have seen it as well as I.”

“You’d better talk to him in your mind,” Tyrion gave a friendly advice. “He hears you like this, but if
you speak to him as he does, he is more likely to listen to you.”

Jaime ignored Tyrion. “Gods be good, Viserion, it was only an egg!” he cursed. “I lost a woman! A
close! I lost everything...”

The dragon meowed sadly instead of screeching.

While waiting for the quarrel between the dragon and his rider to resolve itself, Tyrion studied
King’s Landing. It was very quiet. No one came in or out which was most unusual. Motivated by
curiosity, Tyrion approached the gate.

“Stay where you are,” a guard called weakly from behind the semi-open door. “No one goes in or
out. Lord Varys’ orders.”

“The command seems a bit unnecessary,” Tyrion shouted, “since no one is trying to pass.”

The guard’s hand appeared on the open door. His fingers were bare as if he didn’t feel the winter
cold, which was prominent here, unlike in Dorne where it was still bearable, despite the unnatural
freezing of the narrow sea. The guard’s ring finger and little finger had the colour of stone.

Greyscale. Tyrion shivered. “Is the entire city turning into stone?” he inquired.

“There are some who are untouched in the Red Keep, but I wonder for how long. The nobles can’t
live without servants and rumour has it they are all infected. The rest... the rest of us... See how
swift it goes...” The guard wept, showing his second, fingerless hand. The little stumps looked fresh.
He must have cut his fingers off to prevent the spreading of the disease. “I shall not be here for long.”

“How did it begin?” Tyrion insisted.

“I should have gone North with King Rhaegar,” the guard cried. “I thought myself safer here. It was
the king’s best friend, the one who brought young Aegon back. The griffin lord.”


Tyrion looked at his hands, pink and healthy and stunted as ever. He was not touched by greyscale
though he remembered perfectly the occasion when Connington must have contracted the disease on
the Rhoyne. Tyrion had fended off an attack of a stone man against his precious Aegon and fell into
the river with the attacker. Connington dived after Tyrion and saved him. Cold sweat beaded on his
prominent dwarf’s forehead .. It could have been me. I could have brought this plague to Westeros.

“Lord Varys sent out many ravens asking for aid,” the guard drooled plaintively. “He summoned any
great, brave and healthy man to venture into the Red Keep and carry north a gift that would help win
the War, to Prince Jon, King Rhaegar’s son. Varys promised a generous purse of golden dragons for
this service. None have answered the call. The times are very hard, my lord. There are no knights nor
sellswords left in the crown lands this winter.”

There had been dead, grey ravens scattered on the ground when Viserion flew lower, approaching
the capital. Tyrion thought they were killed by the cold. Now he recalled the exact sickly colour of
their normally black plumage and shivered again.

Damn me. Damn Griff and his love for Rhaegar. Tyrion wondered if Connington knew that he
loved his liege and friend as much or more than Renly loved Loras. Or if he attributed his selfless
concern for Aegon’s welfare and claim only to honour and loyalty. It must have bothered him to
learn that Rhaegar had a second, loving wife who had lived with Griff in hiding for years , and that
he was not trusted with the secret of Aegon not being Rhaegar’s... Tyrion felt very, very depressed
over matters that did not hurt his person at all. Probably this meant there was still some goodness and empathy left in his dwarf soul. Besides, without Griff who forced him to stop drinking, Tyrion’s existence might have been drowned in wine. And a stupid death would it be.

Where do whores go?

Damn Varys.

If Varys did not send Tyrion to Illyrio Mopatis in Pentos when he ran away from the capital, accused of kingslaying and kinslaying, and if Mopatis did not further direct him to the journey on Rhoyne with Griff and Young Griff, maybe the plague would have been avoided. Or maybe the stone men would have taken both griffs into their ranks, sparing them the heavy disappointment; Aegon was no crown prince and Rhaegar did not love Connington as much as the Lord of the Griffin’s Roost hoped.

Today’s truth in the game of thrones was tomorrow’s lie.

Tyrion hurried back to Jaime and Viserion, waddling as fast as his deformed legs allowed. The white dragon and his golden rider sat on the ground facing each other, like two men who either drank too much or beat each other to death; with the difference that Jaime was much shorter. Their argument about whether it was worse to lose a wife or a dragon egg appeared to be exhausted. None of the two paid attention to the dead city or the few grey raven corpses in the immediate vicinity of the dragon’s landing point.

Very well, Tyrion thought. And now it begins. A new adventure. Maybe they were better than intrigue. More straightforward.

“Tell him to drop me inside the Red Keep,” he commanded.

“Why would I do that?” Jaime asked, depressed and irritated. A hundred times more annoyed and annoying than when Cersei did not allow him into her bed for several days, eager to enjoy his discomfort and suffering and savour the power she had over him.

“Tell him!” Tyrion roared like a true little lion. “There is greyscale in the city so we can’t just use the gates, but the castle should be safe. I hear that Varys wants to send something to Jon Snow.” It was difficult to refer to the young man properly, as Jon Targaryen. Both Tyrion and Jaime should practice it before meeting him again. Actually, the best would be if Jaime did not speak, but that was extremely hard to ensure. “If Varys has something, it will be important. It may help us.”

“Why seek help?” Jaime said darkly. “Why not accept death? It has to come sooner or later.”

Viserion spat fire, disagreeing or wholeheartedly agreeing with his rider. Tyrion was not interested to verify if the dragon shared Jaime’s attitude. He wanted his brother to abandon it.

“The finality of death has not become more appealing to me over time,” Tyrion announced truthfully. Get yourself together, both of you. “Despite all my losses. Do grow up, big brother. There is more at stake than your poor heart.” There always was. The realisation kept Tyrion going when he sank into his own unavoidable pits of bad mood.

“Oh yes, there is,” Jaime replied carelessly. “Burning a city. You know which one. In the far East.” He sized up Viserion. “When he grows some more. I don’t think my wife has gone to the Shadow Lands of her own free will. She was helped by the masked sorcerers.”

To Tyrion, Viserion looked large enough to ruin Asshai right now. He could not understand why the dragon did not say as much to Jaime. Maybe he posed the wrong questions. Tyrion opted not to
express this opinion, wishing Jaime felt better, using all he could to his advantage. “Dragonriders burn things indeed,” he stressed. “And for your baby boy to grow large enough you both have to keep breathing and flying. So if it please you, do dump me inside the royal palace. Understand it as the necessary exercise.”

Several moments later, Tyrion was stretching in the inner bailey of the Red Keep after a very rough landing. Viserion maintained as much distance as possible between his rider and the palace, but he had shaken Tyrion off his back without any concern for his short, underdeveloped bones. It was a miracle he didn’t break any of them.

“Stay away!” he shouted whenever a greying man or woman approached him, dodging them with his uneven, waddling step of an aging goose. He wondered if they could hear him. Thankfully, the ill were too slow to catch up with him, just like the stone men on the Rhoyne... Some had hungry expressions on their faces. Tyrion avoided to look at them. He didn’t want to learn who they were nor if he knew them. He just checked their clothing for one of Varys’ many appearances, be it perfumed robes or the dark manly attire and beard which made the eunuch look like a dangerous outlaw robbing innocents.

The stone people were so numerous... Much more than he imagined. Tyrion was tiring fast. I'm not young anymore.

No, he told himself. You ate and drank too good and too much.

Tyrion recalled Griff’s explanation that hunger gnawed at the victims of greyscale and that they could live for up to ten years.

“Varys!” he screamed, and headed to the heart of the palace, avoiding all its mad inhabitants. The guard at the gates was wrong. There were no healthy people left here or they had locked themselves up in inaccessible parts of Maegor’s Holdfast.

Tyrion found the master of whisperers reclined languidly on the first two stairs leading to the Iron Throne, smelling of roses. “My lord of Lannister,” he said, his mellow voice the only power he had left. “You will never be a great man by the size of your body, but you are certainly one of the bravest. Take a seat on that big, ugly chair! Then, if you look around, I trust that you shall find Prince Jon’s gift very soon.”

Prince Jon. No. King Jon. How is he taking the change? Will he be spoiled by power? Maybe he was fortunate by being forced to learn humility in Winterfell and on the Wall, instead of receiving his inheritance on a platter from his father. Rhaegar. Tyrion realised that Jaime’s decision not to oppose his son was due to the fact that he had been more loyal to the once crown prince than he ever let show during Robert’s reign. Are you capable of prudence, big brother? Of good, planned decisions?

“Do hurry up, my lord of Lannister,” Varys urged him to climb the stairs Jaime once conquered, when he placed the blade sullied by Aerys’ lifeblood over his lap and waited until Ned Stark dethroned him and secured the chair for his best friend, Robert Baratheon.

Tyrion braved the stairs with difficulty. They were never his favourite. At least they were not winding like in the secret passages of the Red Keep that Varys showed him in the past.

To sit on the Iron Throne proved to be a peculiar, overwhelming experience. Jaime. How did you ever get back up? In retrospect, his brother had made a great, noble decision. Had Tyrion been strong, young, handsome and armed; enthroned amidst a Lannister army and not among diseased men, he did not know if he would be able to do the same. The view of the Great Hall from Aegon’s ugly chair was fascinating. Imposing. Overwhelming. Tyrion, First of His Name. He would do
justice.

Most definitely.

He shook his ugly head very hard and laughed at his dreams of power.

“How much time passes before a man shows signs of being infected?” Tyrion asked Varys the only important question he had at that moment, before looking for any gifts. Some stone man might have touched him despite his best efforts to avoid them. “How much at the latest?”

“Seven to ten days,” Varys replied calmly. “Very few men don’t turn into stone. All such blessed people are hiding now with what food remains. They will bury us or… burn us when it is over. Lord Connington is dying in a tower. He must have been ill for longer than he cared to say. It was… most irresponsible on his part. And it took me too long to notice he was hiding information of that magnitude. My poor heart was blinded with the return of the dragons… At least the progression of the illness has been slow in my case. If I stay in bed, I might last for a few moon turns. A year if I can find food. Pretending to keep the order among the dying.”

Varys bent too much in his inclined position, from the effort necessary to speak. As a result, he toppled over and rolled helplessly down the stairs, remaining sprawled on the hall floor like some giant insect stuck in place. Tyrion could not just leave him like that. He hopped off the throne. Careful not to touch the skin, he pushed Varys gingerly up to seated position.

“I can’t keep it up for long,” the eunuch said.

“Shut up,” Tyrion replied and whistled hard until four servants that slept on the floor of the Throne Room were roused. So they have hearing left. “Take him where he can rest. Or where there is food.”

In an extremely slow motion, the servants busied themselves with bringing forth a litter, abandoned near the door of the Great Hall, next to one of the walls that contained a dragon skull once more… Rhaegar’s short reign had been long enough to bring them back from the cellars of the palace.

Tyrion crawled back on all fours and sat on the Iron Throne once more. Climbing went faster in that undignified position. He never looked from it like a would-be king again. Instead, he studied Aegon’s seat carefully from all sides, as a precious book.

*It is here, Varys said. What is? A blade I guess. That would be an adequate gift for Jon Sno… Targaryen. Which one?*

All swords forming the back of the throne looked the same; wiry, twisted and melted. Ruined. They only differed in size. And the bottom was just a homely metal chair, too large for Tyrion’s small arse.

When his eyes showed him nothing, he trusted his nose. Varys would have tried to remove the important blade, wouldn’t he, when he was healthier. Or why would he stay here and not elsewhere in the palace? The smell of roses led him to the giant black spike on the far back of the chair.

Tyrion had to push his hand between two lesser blades to grasp it. He cut his arm a little in the process, but the sword did not budge. He retrieved the offending arm. His wound was a scratch; the swords he touched were not sharp at all.

The tall black blade was a different matter.

Now that Tyrion only had eyes for it, it shone differently than all the others as if… as if it hadn’t been melted properly or not at all. Maybe it was a trick of his eyes, needing an afternoon rest after the luxurious meal in Dorne.
No, the more he looked, the more certain he became that this blade was different, and not only for being the largest one Tyrion had ever seen. He wondered if Brightroar was bigger, the lost Valyrian sword of the Lannisters. Probably it was not.

Behind the throne, there was a low table with a black glass candle burning slowly on it, shedding purple glow on the back of the chair that had most certainly never been illuminated before. The torches and the candleholders stood in front of the throne, never behind. Tyrion rolled down the stairs like Varys did before, not wanting to waste time by a courteous descent.

Using all fours again, he climbed on the little table in the back like a cat, avoiding the glass candle, thankful for his small size. A grown man would not be able to stand on top without touching it.

The candle and its purple light were scalding hot. Tyrion remembered those candles were treasured in the Citadel. Yet the maesters never managed to light any of them since the last dragons in Westeros had died.

The blades were all forged skillfully into the throne… But maybe a superior, cursed flame could undo the trick. Tyrion had heard the rumours that the maesters designed the glass candles in order to destroy dragons… It was also said that their flame was petrified, condensed dragonfire. Maybe freeing the correct sword by dragonsbreath was what Varys attempted to do before he became too ill to do anything.

Tyrion picked the hot stone candle with the tablecloth under it and launched it swiftly at the peculiar black blade. Faster than he thought possible, he hopped off the table and to the side, not a moment too late. Many swords fell from the impact, detaching themselves from the Iron Throne.

When the avalanche ended, Tyrion searched for the large black blade. Encrusted on its pommel, there were rubies and three heads of the dragon made with onyxes, black as death. Black as the coals after the fire burned out. The surface of the blade rippled as Valyrian steel, but it had only one colour, black waves on black, reminding Tyrion of the largest living dragon. Drogon. And of his famous ancestor, ridden by Aegon the Conqueror. Balerion.

“It can’t be,” Tyrion muttered. “Blackfyre!” he breathed out.

“But it is,” Varys retorted weakly. Tyrion had forgotten all about him. He and the servants had made it almost to the door of the Great Hall. One servant appeared to have died on the way. “It is best if you go now. Give my regards- give my regards to Jon Targaryen, First of his Name. From Varys Rivers, the last scion of the House Blackfyre. Illyrio Mopatis has died before me, of some bloody flux. There are no more black dragons, my lord of Lannister, except maybe some bastards of the bastards in the Free Cities and in the Golden Company. This blade should go back to our brothers, be they red or black. Rhaegar was a dragon. Fire could not burn him. I can only hope that his son is the same.”

“You are a Blackfyre?” Tyrion asked, incredulous. He didn’t see that one coming.

“Daenerys, Daenys, Arys, Varys, it even rhymes,” Varys spoke with difficulty. “It must be my humble talent for pretending… In my long years here, no one has seen past my perfumed robes to who I am. Not even Aerys II who employed me and who saw an enemy in every man.”

In the time it took Tyrion to retrieve the sword, the court filled with stone petitioners. He was most unwilling to answer their pleas and he was no longer Hand so it was not his duty.

“Ah, I almost forgot,” Varys tittered and tossed a black scabbard hidden in his litter in Tyrion’s direction with manly force and deadly precision, only a few feet away from his dwarf target. “You
“I will heed your advice and take my leave, my lord,” Tyrion told Varys lightly, sheathing the sword. It was the most complex manoeuvre a dwarf could perform with the blade. He could not use it properly in a fight for being too heavy.

“And I shall pray for your health,” Tyrion concluded, filled with gratitude. “The gods are sometimes good.” He almost liked Varys. Without the scabbard, the task of transporting Blackfyre as naked steel in hands would have been almost impossible.

To return to the bailey dragging the enormous sword was already daunting. Tyrion was not fast enough anymore. He pulled Blackfyre left and right over the floor and chased the stone men away with it as he could, by clumsy, no-cutting blows, unable to lift the weapon completely off the ground.

It occurred to him that he was forced to use the greatsword of Aegon the Conqueror as a club, the favoured weapon of the giants.

The result of Tyrion’s expedition remained to be seen.

Seven days. Maximum ten.

“Viserion!” he screamed from the bailey knowing that the dragon could hear and understand human speech though he only spoke to his rider, from mind to mind.

The salvation came swiftly.

The dragon looked more golden than white against the setting sun, when he fished Tyrion out with his long claws, just before a stone kitchen wench would have pulled Tyrion’s left arm into her grey bosom. Tyrion might have appreciated the untoward gesture on another occasion, but now he only felt more like a eunuch from it.

He dropped Blackfyre while he rose into the air.

“No!” he yelled, helpless.

Even more expertly than when he saved Tyrion, Viserion retrieved the lost sword with his second paw. Two giant white toes held it firmly.

Dragonsteel. It is the same as they. It belongs to them.

“You take it! It’s Blackfyre!” Tyrion shouted to Jaime, perched on the rider’s place above. “Go to Winterfell without me! And then return to Dorne and break… burn some more ice. Return for me or my little corpse in ten days. Wait. I need to think where I can stay in that time,” he scratched his broad, bushy head. The Lannister dwarf had no friends in Seven Kingdoms. Varys once helped him, but Varys was dying, and he would sooner pierce his own bowels with the crossbow quarrel than transmit greyscale if he had it to either Jaime or Viserion.

Not all turn ill, he told himself, though the look from above at the Red Keep confirmed what he’d experienced in the castle - almost everyone was infected. The entire royal palace looked thoroughly diseased and going mad from it.

I have been in contact with it before, yet I stayed healthy, Tyrion reasoned further, but, on the Rhoyne, the stone man might not have touched him, and here at least some of the ill ghosted his skin.
with their hands. It was impossible to tell with precision which ones and how many.

*Only time will show.*

“Command him to leave me hanging here!” he protested when Viserion tried to lift him on his spiked back, glittering in the weak, but merry winter sun. “No need for him to touch me with anything else but his claws.”

Dragons should be resistant to human plagues from what Tyrion had read, but he didn’t want to take a higher risk than absolutely necessary by staying in Viserion’s proximity. *Only three living dragons. A miracle.*

“You said that the castle *should* be safe! You risked your skin out of curiosity? Not even knowing what Varys had?” Jaime was rapidly becoming angry with Tyrion now that he grasped all the circumstances, with the smallest of delay, as usual. Jaime was clever, but he did not always connect all the information immediately like Tyrion and… Tywin, may he burn in seven hells.

*Did Father trick you by demanding a fast reaction, just like I did now, for you to help him ruin Tysha?*

*And me…*

“Varys could have sent an ornate helm with dragon’s head to Jon Snow! Though perhaps a snarling direwolf one would be more appropriate!” Jaime was predictably more and more upset.

Tyrion’s heart swelled. Jaime was the only member of his family who ever cared about his well-being for his sake and not for the imagined harm to their family’s reputation. This had not changed.

“Listen, Jaime, first of all, I am not dead yet,” Tyrion tried to explain, exhausted and increasingly sick from the strange food and marvelous wine of Dorne. *Suits me well for the noble sin of gluttony,* he quipped with himself. “And even if I died it wouldn’t matter that much. I lost my wife years ago. She is dead, for as much as I hope that she isn’t. I won’t find another one. And you… you have just suffered the same loss, but you still have children. You can watch Tommen and Myrcella growing up. Or go mad and pluck flowers with Cersei for all I care. It is worth a try at staying alive, just like Blackfyre *was* worth a risk to me in my opinion.”

“No flowers,” Jaime said coldly. “My wife’s name was Brienne. Lady Brienne of Tarth.”

“A noble and pretty name,” Tyrion said stupidly. “Listen... I just remembered where I can stay while I wait to see if I will turn sick or not. Please, do take the sword first. It would sadden me if I were to die only for Viserion to drop it into the sea or some other inaccessible place.”

When Tyrion thought better of it, the dragons could go anywhere, but he decided not to share this revelation with his brother.

“What am I to do with it?” Jaime showed his stump, ostentatiously.

“Even a hand short you are still much better with swords than I am,” Tyrion replied heartily. “You’ll manage to do with it whatever is your wish. And I’ll get myself a handsome crossbow or an axe if I live to ride to this War of Winter.”

“You’d better,” Jaime retorted in the same vein. “Or who will teach me all there is to know about the dragons?”

“No one,” Tyrion answered honestly. “Or rather, Viserion will. Listen to him and you should be
fine. And now to Stokeworth, if it please you. You must remember where it is. Robert visited it with his beloved wife at times.”

Moments later, Tyrion was banging onto modest, but sturdy oaken gates banded with iron, leading into a moderately sized castle amidst flat, fertile lands, now barren due to winter. A non-greying guard arrived to check who was calling.

“Lord… Lord Tyrion.”

“It is me,” he answered dryly. “Who were you waiting for? The king?”

He was known here, just like he hoped or perhaps feared. The gates yawned open and the friendly guard rushed forward. “Are you alright?”

“Stay away,” Tyrion ordered. “Don’t approach me. Call your lord and tell him to receive me from a distance.”

The familiar, ruthless lord did not tardy. His fat, ugly wife followed, carrying a healthy black-haired toddler.

“Lord Stokeworth,” Tyrion said with empathy, “I am so pleased to see you. Do empty a stable for me and clear the way to it from men and beast. Leave me there for ten days and bring me food twice a day if you can afford it in winter. In the name of our old friendship and future gold I shall bestow on you should I live after that time.”

“Greyscale, right?” Lord Stokeworth had never been dumb. “We’ve heard about it. Shall I kill you instantly if your fingers turn grey? Or do you prefer me to wait?”

“Bronn,” Tyrion said cheerfully, “I forgot how much I adore your contagious optimism.”

Invisible dragon wings flapped mightily above the clouds, trying to be silent. But Tyrion now knew the sound from experience and he would be able to recognise it even when it wasn’t louder than the rustle of leaves.

His brother did not just leave him. Of course not. He was checking that Tyrion was well received. Yes, Jaime, you can go now. No need to burn anyone here yet. I’ll be fine with Bronn.

Half an hour later, Tyrion collapsed on the bed of straw like a tired horse, wondering if the stall where his bed was made had been mucked or not. He could not smell any horseshit. Probably he lacked the olphatic sense because he was beginning to turn into a stone man and not because Bronn kept his horses clean. Or maybe it was the wonderful Dornish wine, delicious and strong.

Closing his eyes, Tyrion saw a little dead zorse and the shadowbinder with pretty black hair who had chosen the mount for him. After his adventure in the high passes of the Bone Mountains, outrunning the warrior ladies, and in Asshai, being faster than the Shadow itself, he was tempted to say that the masked crone chose Arrow as a steed for Tyrion, wishing to help him survive their journey, knowing the dangers they were to face.

He laughed stupidly at his bout of wild imagination.

Most likely, Quaithe had wanted to keep the bait for the dragonrider alive - Jaime had ventured naively into the company of the shadowbinders when they told him Tyrion was waiting for him...
Tyrion prayed to the Seven to find a little heaven for himself in some obscure part of Westeros or Essos one day, when the winter was over.

Tommen could keep Casterly Rock.

Tyrion did not want it anymore.

If he ever found out where the whores went, they would surely never wish to return over there.

His stunted heart twisted painfully in his sleep, dreaming of forgiveness, and of love, always.

_The seasons of my love._

He wanted to hear that song again and live a happy dwarf.

Chapter End Notes

The updates are a little bit slower now, but they are coming - just like winter :-))

Thank you for reading and commenting :-)) for kudos and bookmarks :-))

Any feedback is welcome
Arya III

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to DrHolland for help with this chapter )))

Thank you for reading

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Arya**

“Dark heart,” the trees whispered to Arya, passing a judgement against her like the Ghost of the High Heart once did, dismayed by the desire for revenge that fuelled her soul.

It had kept her alive in the past.

“Black heart,” the rustle of red leaves sounded like an ancient song. “Begone.”

She had never known that the old gods had a tongue. To enter their realm through the mouth of a heart tree and travel in their company was a hundred times more unusual than riding a dragon.

“My heart has softened,” she countered the trees, thinking of her family and Gendry with his stupid hammer. Her rebellion only made the insulting murmur of the branches more unrelenting.

It was a huge relief when her journey was over. Arya was spewed out with force, stronger and darker than her heart had ever been.

*Why are you blaming me?* She asked the old gods in all honesty. *If your hearts are also blackened with pointless, futile anger?*

“ You are late, little sister,” Jon announced, amused and worried, accompanied by the wrong direwolf; hers, not his, grey with yellow eyes, waiting for her in the godswood of Winterfell.

“Where is Gho-?” Arya choked on her words. Nymeria jumped on her with joy, licked her face with a broad, bluish tongue and toppled her over onto frozen ground. The thick carpet of snow felt delicious on Arya’s cloaked back, soaking it; a blessing after the stiff, cramped, airless and lifeless space inside the trees.

“Ghost is away on a mission,” Jon said very seriously.

In contrast with his voice, his black eyes laughed, just like in the past when he was happy to see Arya Underfoot.

So once Nymeria was finished with her greeting, it was Jon who embraced her, strong as a direwolf, taller and more handsome with every new day.

*Winter becomes you,* Arya thought, overjoyed, strangling Jon wholeheartedly in return. She wondered why she was the first to arrive when she hadn’t been the first one to depart from Horn
The second one to appear, Lord Reed, addressed Jon behind Arya’s back. “I am delighted to see you again,” he said. His eyes flashed bright green in sign of friendship.

Jon ended the brotherly embrace and faced the newcomer. “Again?” he inquired calmly.

“He is Lord Howland Reed,” Arya announced helpfully.

“The pleasure is mine then,” Jon retorted, shy and curious, and yet fast and accurate like Arya in his judgement of men and occasions. “I suppose I was much smaller the first time we met,” he added wistfully.

Reed smiled. “Yes you were,” he pointed out cheerfully. “And yet it can be said that you bore the mark of greatness from birth. The prince that was promised!” His gaze became less green, making one forget who and what he was.

Arya was not prone to such dangerous mistakes.

_He is a greenseer, _she thought.

“I suppose the greatness would depend on the angle from which a matter is considered,” Jon said wisely. “A babe is a babe, though it may be fathered by dragons.”

“And wolves,” Reed grinned knowingly.

Jon responded with a broad wolfish smile of his own and pulled an extremely stark, elongated face.

No one spoke for a moment. Reed... became sad, lost in thought and memory. The absolute silence in the godswood tasted of winter.

Arya felt uneasy and decided to break it for the two men.

“Do you know where Bran is? How can we find him?” she blurted the question that lay heavy on her heart, dark or not, ever since she realised greenseeing existed in Greywater Watch. Between the crannogs, the truth about Reed was told in a pious whisper while he walked among his people, looking small and insignificant; unarmed and clad in green.

According to Rickon, Reed’s son, Jojen, had green dreams which foretold the future. Arya concluded that dreams were a lesser form of the gift Howland Reed possessed. Jojen, however, likely told Bran that he would be a greenseer one day... and yet Jojen never mentioned his father’s gifts. Or maybe Jojen only claimed he would take Bran to see the three-eyed crow beyond the Wall. Rickon had not understood any of it very well, being three years old.

Reed’s daughter, Meera, was also a special lady. _She is a little like you and yet not like you at all,_ Rickon had described her to Arya. _She fights and she’s a good hunter, but she likes to go on foot better than riding. She is older than both Bran and you, but she has a heart of a child. And she’s a very pretty girl._

For Arya, all this meant that Reed must have seen where Bran was. Surely his only two children would not have gone to Winterfell without his blessing and advice. He had to know their whereabouts.

“Brandon is alive and well,” Reed said gravely, as though this truth saddened him further.
“Isn’t that good?” Arya had to wonder.

“It is more than just good, it is excellent,” Reed smiled faintly. “But my son is dead, as I’ve told you. Forgive me if I remember Jojen with every breath that is left to me. A father has to mourn his son. Jojen fulfilled his duty. He stayed with Brandon until his last day and he died shortly before the king.”

Jon’s gaze blackened, more so at the mention of the king’s death.

_His father’s death._

_So it is true._

“Well, where is Bran?” Arya nonetheless needed to know. “I am sorry for your loss,” she corrected her rudeness towards Reed, regretting it. Perhaps Sansa would be proud of her improved manners.

Arya liked the aged lizard-lion. He was Father’s and Aunt Lyanna’s best friend. Their only surviving friend from the hopeless battle at the now broken tower in Dorne where Jon came to the world. This made him almost a member of the pack. Arya wanted to protect him, not insult him. _But where is Bran?_ “Please, if you have seen that he’s alive, could you not tell us where to look for our brother? He can’t walk.”

Reed stared her down, looked gravely at Jon, glanced at Rickon who was out of the tree by that time, looking like a very shabby and dizzy little unicorn. Finally, he gave an extremely disappointing statement. “I wish I knew,” he said mournfully.

“And may be that I know,” Jon put in with caution. “There was a raven. But I don’t trust it.”

“From whom?” Rickon asked, pulling his hairy cap down, letting a flood of completely entangled auburn hair spill over his back. “This cold feels great.”

He wiped the sweat from his head.

_Did the trees tell you your heart was black as well?_ Arya wondered.

“There lies the problem,” Jon replied, passing a hand through his own black mane, sticking in all directions and looking more dishevelled than ever. “I don’t know. And I don’t like what I suspect. Arya, what do you know of the H… of Sansa’s husband? They say… they say that Rhaegar… that he and my father were friends.”

“He has no manners,” Arya answered without thinking. “Mother would banish him from her company if she ever had to direct him a word. For the rest, he is both unspeakably awful and extremely loyal towards people he becomes attached to, regardless of whether they are poxy peasants, highborn girls or monk healers.”

Jon looked like he needed a better explanation and Arya thought rapidly of the perfect example. “Once he hit me on the head with the flat of an axe-”

“-What?” Jon and Rickon howled in unison.

“-or I would have ran into the Twins during Uncle Edmure’s wedding and died with Mother and Robb,” Arya finished. “He saved my life and gained nothing from it except my undivided hatred.”

“Could he have written this?” Jon showed her a crumpled, very ancient-looking parchment, frozen on the edges. Arya noticed that the frost did not melt completely on her hand, nor on Jon’s.
handwriting did not seem feminine, though it was very elaborate, as a fanciful, fantastic illumination of an old manuscript. The missive was not signed.

“IT’s not Sansa’s,” Jon said sadly. “At first I hoped it was. Stupid, I know.”

“Sansa’s? Why would she know about Bran?” Rickon protested. “He went beyond the Wall.”

“Because Sansa did the same. She was kidnapped by the Others when the king died,” Jon said darkly. “This letter also contains a more precise map of lands beyond Castle Black than any other I’ve seen. Bran is supposed to be in a cave northwest from it, close to the Rat Cook’s castle, to the Nightfort, I mean.”

“I’ve never seen the Hound’s letters,” Arya announced, struggling to process the terrible news about Sansa, trying to convince herself that the Others were not worse than Cersei. Sansa survived being the queen’s prisoner. Arya knew that she would have probably died in her place. She could be a cupbearer to nasty lords, but she would not have been able to lie to Joffrey she loved him every day after breaking her fast.

“I suppose the Hound can write since he could read for Mance Rayder's mummery. But I can’t imagine his script to look like this… this finery… He has gone after her, I guess?”

Jon nodded.

“As could be expected,” Arya commented. “He has always been pitifully captivated by our sister.”

“I could not believe she married him,” Jon said. “I’ve been struggling to accept it. I thought she liked pretty boys like Joffrey. Even if they were rotten.”

“I thought I didn't like boys. Not for marrying,” Arya reacted, thinking of Gendry. “Girls grow up.”

Jon stared at her and at the heart tree whose mouth remained closed for now. “He hasn't come back with you,” he remarked. “Why not?”

Arya was moderately happy that Jon didn’t call Gendry a bastard as she had overheard on the Wall, to her horror. She had enough of her brother’s suspicious attitude, though she suffered from exactly the same problem when she faced Gendry herself. Yet it felt as if it was her prerogative to doubt Gendry’s loyalty, not anyone else’s. “Gendry will be here shortly,” she called her special boy friend by his name with dignity. “The trees are taking their time.”

Where is Gendry?

“At least Sansa had the good sense not to fancy Theon,” Jon mumbled. “He was completely disrespectful of girls.”

Arya was glad that Jon dropped the subject of Gendry, and wondered what troubled him most in Sansa’s choice, his hatred for the Hound or guilt for not going after her himself. Probably a bit of both.

“'The giants can write,'” Rickon offered another explanation for the unusual letter. “But they don’t make parchment. They use the back side of furs and untanned animal skins.”

“The giants speak the Old Tongue,” Jon observed. “These few words here are as Common as they can be.”

“Some sentences are wrong though,” Arya noticed. “It is… it is as if a Braavosi or a person from
another foreign land *learned* our language."

“A half-educated giant then,” Jon said and laughed. “Or it’s a treachery of some kind, yet to be discovered. Be that as it may, I am more and more of a mind to take a look. I intended to go back north as it is. I mean to take Castle Black from Stannis. Sooner, rather than later. I will not have *him* defend the Wall for what is to come. Mother cannot object to this. And if Bran is in the lands just beyond it, we ought to check this information.”

“But not blindly,” Obsessed with seeing, Reed added his opinion.

“No,” Jon agreed. “Carefully, at first. My lady wife-to-be would hate if any harm came to one of her dragon children.”

*Or to you,* Arya thought knowingly.

*How do I know this with such heartfelt certainty?*

She turned around to look for Gendry, only to reconfirm that he had not yet arrived, and neither had Thoros, Tom Sevenstreams, Sam Tarly or his wildling lady. The red mouth of the heart tree behind Arya was small, grave and, most importantly, motionless and fully closed.

*Where is Gendry?* Arya was now afraid. *Do the trees swallow some passengers?* Her heart rushed forward, indomitable.

“I’m sorry,” Reed answered her unspoken question. “There are many paths that can be taken in the holy realm of the gods. Your friend is not here,” he paused. “Lady Arya, I wish I could tell all of you if Brandon and Meera are still in that cave as this letter says, but the gods do not let me see according to my wishes, but in agreement with their own. Their will is sacred, not mine. I can only say that my children and your brother were there for quite a while, when my son still lived.”

His green eyes blinked, sprinkled with salty dew. His sorrow made him smell like fresh water in the marshes at dawn, undisturbed by lizard-lions. “Excuse me, if it please you. I should pay my respects to the Knight of the Laughing Tree. Lyanna would murder me if I visited Winterfell and left without greeting her. Nor would my heart be at ease; we go back a long time.”

Reed’s speech became almost a chant then. “I walked for thirty days before the *mudmen,* as the riverlanders call us, conquered the Twins. I have walked for almost fifty days now. I have to go immediately after seeing Lyanna. I cannot linger.”

Without waiting for anyone’s permission, tattered and light of weight, Reed stomped away through the last night’s snow, dry and crumbling. He left almost no trace, compared to the deep imprints of Jon’s boots leading to the godswood.

In Braavos, Arya saw the temples of so many gods. Maybe Reed could see only what the old gods were able to show him, and the other, unknown deities knew the rest.

“He did confirm that Bran *was* in the cave,” Jon said with hope when the siblings were left alone. “Mother told me a lot about him. Most of all to leave him to his ways, though I may find them strange.”

Arya understood another thing from Reed’s odd speech. He knew where Gendry and the others went. *Why didn’t he tell me?*

“Can I go with you to look for Bran?” Rickon asked Jon.
“Why not?” Jon said. “I suppose I would find you hanging under Rhaegal’s tail if I said no. But you have to promise to obey me if I decide to leave you behind later on, if I judge that the danger is too great.”

Rickon nodded enthusiastically, not promising anything.

“All right then,” Jon said, fooled by their little brother antics. “Should I be angry with Rhaegal?” he asked Arya.

“Why?” Arya could not see any reason for it.

“I asked him to help Rickon and you when I went scouting to the Lands of Always Winter. He says he carried you to Oldtown because you told him you wanted to find the horn I gave to Sam. Rhaegal thought I would wish him to obey you. I was upset because he left you there and returned to the Wall for me. When I realised you were neither in Winterfell nor on the Wall, I demanded that he brings you back. He claimed you would return to the godswood today. He was right about the latter. Was he lying about the former?”

He effectively was. Drogon and not Rhaegal carried Arya, Gendry and Rickon to Oldtown. Previously still and in hiding, perched atop the opulent winter clouds, green wings beat nervously the sky above Arya. Rickon’s little mouth fell open to tell Jon the truth, but the only sound that came out was **mmmh** and some hoarse coughing.

“Are you ill?” Jon asked.

“I don’t think so,” Rickon said, confused. “Mmmh,” he tried to tell Jon about Rhaegal and Drogon again and could not. Arya surmised that the dragon was preventing him from speaking. “Never mind,” Rickon said and shrugged after a few huge sneezes, offended in his dignity. He gave the dragon a shrewd look and pouted. “Maybe it is the cold after all. This human cub with no horn shall now look for a glass of warm milk.” With that, Arya’s and Jon’s baby brother scampered proudly towards the kitchens.

The hairy Skagosi boots of the nine year old left a deeper trail in snow than Reed’s. The lord of the marshes was tiny and skinny, almost soft-boned; gracious and childlike. To an eye not paying attention he looked ordinary and weak, almost like a peasant; a true frog-eater, and not a man of power.

Arya always paid attention. That had saved her from the illusions her sister fell victim to in their childhood. Sansa chose not to trust her own eyes and ears, but her expectation that beauty went hand in hand with goodness and nobility because it was like this in the songs.

*Except in her favourite one, about Florian the Fool.* He was homely and yet Jonquil loved him, just like Sansa found it in herself to love the ugliest man in Westeros. Arya often wondered if Sansa was aware of this coincidence, but she never asked about it, afraid that her sister would take her curiosity as a permission to ask a thousand questions about Gendry. And Arya was only able and willing to discuss and acknowledge her feelings for the smith in small portions at a time.

**Gendry is not ugly.**

*Where is he?*

“**Arya?**” Jon called to her with worry. “Are you alright? I haven’t felt too well when I’ve ventured into the trees. I’ve been through strange places and I felt how they had no love for me. It is my father’s blood, I think. The old gods… They care not for the dragons. I was allowed into their realm
because of Ghost. He belongs to them.”

Arya could go in because of Reed. The greenseers also belonged to the gods. Dark heart, black heart, begone. They had cursed Arya.

Not any more, she claimed in her soul.

“I am fine,” she affirmed towards Jon, the gods and herself. I was a killer. No more.

“Rhaegal-”

“He did what I asked,” Arya surprised herself by lying to her beloved brother of her own free will. “I wanted to bring you the horn. The Horn of Winter. Reed says it is the one. But it was stolen from us in the end.”

“Then Rhaegal can take us to it again,” Jon offered.

“To be sure,” Arya conceded. Her head churned with thoughts. Why did Rhaegal lie to Jon? Do the dragons keep secrets from their riders? Secrets known only to them?

Nymeria would never lie to Arya. But Nymeria was a direwolf and she could not speak nor understand speech in any form. She only howled, led the largest pack of four-pawed wolves in Westeros and warned her mistress of danger. Dragons talked. Almost like men did, though without voice and with different understanding of reality. More colourful and constructed with different, inhuman concepts and viewpoints. They held burning in highest esteem. Probably it was to be expected from beings filled up with fire.

“How is Sam? Have you seen him? Has he stopped being afraid of everything? I ordered him that as Lord Commander,” Jon wanted to hear news about his fat friend.

“I think he is brave enough when the occasion demands it,” Arya said, remembering how Sam unmasked the fake Other in Horn Hill. “You can ask him yourself. He should be here at any moment.”

Fresh joy blossomed on Jon's face and was cut short by a single, shrill horn blow announcing visitors at the gates.

“Lady Cerwyn is here,” a scrawny serving boy soon came running to inform Jon. “Lady Lyanna requires your presence, my lord... Your Grace.”

“I will marry,” Jon confided in Arya, giddy and content with the prospect. “I never thought I would.”

“Reed said so,” Arya reacted with joy. “I am so happy for you.”

And I might marry as well, she thought gingerly, hoping that Jon would see, in time, that Gendry was not only stupid, but also good for her. After all, Arya and Jon were so alike and her love for Gendry was many things, but it had never been a love on first sight. Where is he?

“The wedding guests are beginning to arrive,” Jon explained unhappily. “Will you come with me to welcome them? Mother... Mother expects me to. When they start coming from the South, it will be Daenerys’ turn to greet them.”

Arya shook her head. “Please no,” she implored dryly. “You know me. You don’t want me to spoil the occasion for you.” She would look for Rickon and discuss the mysteries or the treachery of dragons.
Jon pretended to sigh and went to do his duty gladly. On his way, he turned around and thundered at Arya, walking backwards. “I hope I shall find you in Winterfell when I return with Bran! For my wedding! That occasion will be spoiled without your presence.”

“You will,” Arya shouted after him, just like they did in their childhood when the cries of children playing filled every inch of Winterfell. “I promise,” she yelled into her folded hands so that Jon could hear her at the gates. She hoped that they were not lying to each other now; that he truly needed her presence and that she wouldn't break her vow of attendance.

Her search for Rickon proved futile. He vanished into the thin air or one of the hot springs. But, unexpectedly, Arya was found by Daenerys.

“Lady Arya,” Jon’s betrothed addressed her warmly, shivering under her cloak. The winter cold did not sit well with the Mother of Dragons. “I heard many times that you are an excellent rider.”

A careful look at Daenerys revealed she wore a pair of black trousers shortened in haste, by a clumsy hand. Jon’s clothing or some mended rags from the Watch. The needlework was almost as bad as Arya’s. From the sight of it, Arya was immediately tempted to help her, no matter what she wanted. Jon’s betrothed was obviously not as perfect as Sansa in skills ladies were supposed to excel at. The discovery made Arya feel very good about herself.

Daenerys was lovely and yet she couldn’t sew. Arya took it as a sign that although her stitches would always be crooked, she might be truly beautiful as well. At the very least she wanted to be prettier than Jeyne Heddle, with her haunted elegance of a former wight and shiny black hair.

“Where do you want to go?” Arya asked, trying to guess Daenerys’ exact intentions.

“Deepwood Motte,” Jon’s girl said sweetly. “I hear it is a half a day or half a night ride from here to there.”

“That’s just a boring wooden castle,” Arya remarked.

“Stannis holds it and he has my dragon,” Dany finally revealed everything, tucking silky, disobedient blond hair back under the hood of her light grey, silvery cloak, clasped with a bright red ruby around her neck.

“Why not ask Jon to fly you there with Rhaegal?”

“Rhaegal and Drogon fought,” Dany explained. “They don’t see eye to eye now. I don’t want my children to harm each other.”

And then Rhaegal lied to Jon, covering up for Drogon helping me, Arya thought, more and more confused. As if he was a man and not a beast, having his own designs. A strategy formed itself in her mind. Deepwood Motte was indeed not very far, not even in winter. Nymeria would accompany her and Arya would talk to Drogon again.

She needed a ride to Braavos.

Jon would take her there to retrieve the Horn of Winter, but Arya did not want her beloved brother anywhere near the House of Black and White. She was unable to decide whether she was embarrassed about him discovering more of her past than she wished to share or afraid that the waif and the old man might perform some magic trick and keep Jon, Rhaegal and their peeled faces as their blind acolytes forever, behind the closed weirwood and ebony door of their sinister temple.

“Wait for me near the gates,” Arya instructed Dany. “I will be back very soon.”
In Winterfell, at any time, it was never difficult for Arya Underfoot to find horses.

“A white one,” Daenerys observed oddly about the one she should ride.

“Yes, with some grey patches,” Arya said, not understanding Dany’s reluctance to ride a white horse. It was a good beast, sturdy and yet fast, capable of advancing swiftly in winter.

“It’s just that… My first husband gave me a white horse. He is long dead. The horse survived him. I’m sorry for overreacting,” Dany’s unease was heartfelt. “I know that I’m being ridiculous, but I’d rather have a different mount.”

“There isn't another one that will serve our purpose,” Arya affirmed, upset. "Do you want to ride fast or not?"

She borrowed the white horse for Dany from the Wulls, the largest mountain clan, asking for an animal able to run through shallow snow without the hindrance of bear-paws on his hooves.

For herself, Arya chose the Hound's horse, Stranger, abandoned by his master in Winterfell. The mean black warhorse could gallop through anything. She just had to keep her hands on the reins and away from his mouth. Stranger would probably never bite off Sansa's finger, but Arya was not certain she would merit any further special treatment other that the hell horse tolerated her on his back; probably for being as as eager to run as she was to ride, after too long confinement in the stables.

When she searched for horses, Arya heard all the rumours, centred on the dead kings from the crypts defending Winterfell and the upcoming wedding. The entire castle spoke about little else. Many men… feared Jon because he shared a likeness with the dead king leading the defence. Arya drank the news with awe, but she was not entirely surprised. Unlike Jon and Sansa, she’d always felt at home in the crypts, gazing at the grim faces of the statues. It did not surprise her that the dead Starks could kill. Dark heart, black heart.

For Arya’s current purpose this meant there would be a trail of feet leading from Winterfell to Deepwood Motte, made by Stannis’ army on the retreat, expelled by the dead. The snow on that road would not be as deep as it was before being trodden by them. Arya was confident she and Dany would reach their destination during daytime and return deep in the night, while the welcoming feast for Jon’s first guests still lasted, especially if it was followed by a customary dance.

The party of the Cerwyns was large enough to distract Jon from noticing when Arya and Dany finally left the castle. With some luck, they would not be missed.

“Jon doesn’t know?” Arya ventured a guess as she and Dany cantered through the wolfswood with Nymeria.

“We will be back tonight, won’t we?” Dany avoided an honest answer. “The guests will keep Jon and his mother occupied. He said he would treat me as his equal. I suppose this means I can go and talk to my traitor dragon. Drogon will not harm me, I am certain.”

But you fear he might hurt Rhaegal. Or Jon, if he went with you. Why?

Arya and Dany ended up exchanging opinions about Essos and how it was to live there. It was a safer topic than the more intimate ones concerning family. The horses soon began to ruin the shallow snow on their path, increasing the speed. Daenerys was an excellent rider, though not as daring as Arya who urged Stranger forward without mercy. Nymeria followed them off the trail, between the tall trees, padding softly or leaping forward, depending on the depth of the snow. She was never far
behind.

At some places there was thick, polished ice where the layers of snow were too deep and they all had to slow down. Daenerys used those moments to inquire about Jon’s and Arya’s childhood. She smiled at stories about the Stark siblings playing tricks on each other or practising archery together. Time flew faster than the horses. Foggy dusk conquered the woods. The high towers of Deepwood Motte rose before their eyes before the conversation was exhausted.

Arya was amazed. It was the first time she had... a girl friend. It was very different than being around boys and men. The conversation was not boring and insipid anymore, as it used to sound when Sansa and Jeyne Poole mocked Arya’s looks and whispered together about the knights from the songs. Not even when Dany described some horrendous dresses in the place called Qarth which left one breast bare. Arya imagined Sansa in one of them and giggled maliciously; Dany or Arya stood a chance to look more dignified, not having large breasts.

“I could do this more often,” she told Dany.

“Ride madly?” the dragon princess asked, catching up.

“Talk to you,” Arya said.

“I would love it as well,” Dany beamed and then frowned, focusing on her own goals.

Their journey was at the end.

The modest wooden castle of the Glovers that Arya remembered looked menacing now. The walls of Deepwood Motte were doubled, reinforced and adorned with iron spikes on top. Only severed heads adorning them were missing from the warlike ambiance. The fortress was prepared for a siege, despite that no visible enemy threatened it. The woods were calm and devoid of human or animal life. Too empty, Arya realised. And there was another kind of defence, besides the improved fortifications.

“Look,” Arya pointed to the sky.

The sudden, hurt look in Dany’s violet eyes told her that the Mother of Dragons saw or sensed her runaway black child much before Arya did.

Drogon was a thick black shade, gliding above the castle of the dead Glovers, immersed into a shadow; a huge, ominous cloud of absolute darkness swallowing the castle and its surroundings, stretching far north in the direction of the Wall and Castle Black. Nothing stirred under the shadow; nothing breathed. Arya could not see the end of it. She felt a cold, heartless breeze on her face when she and Dany approached the gates. Forest encroached on Deepwood Motte from all sides.

Arya gripped Stranger’s reins and made him halt.

“Maybe you should call the dragon out here,” Arya told Daenerys, full of premonition. “This is... this is sorcery. This is no mere winter gloom. The darkness is evil and alive. How can anyone exist under it?”

“Stannis hired a sorceress to fight his war instead of sellswords,” Dany said knowingly. “Maybe she came cheaper.”

“Or maybe he hasn't paid the price yet,” Arya remarked.

Not heeding Arya’s warning, Daenerys rode on, towards the gates. Arya was obliged to follow.
Nymeria lagged prudently behind. The wolf agreed with her mistress; they should stay in the woods.

The dragon was faster than lightning despite being as large as the surface of the castle it guarded. With two flaps of wings he took both women, the horses and the wolf in his claws. Nymeria howled, Stranger harrumphed; Arya stifled a cry from being pressed between the two animals in the same dragon paw. Dany and her steed were lodged firmly in the other one.

The dragon did not allow any of them under the shadow.

Arya opened Nymeria’s yellow eyes and pleaded with Drogon, wearing her wolf skin. *Take me to Braavos, will you? To the House of Black and White. I have kept your secret. I didn’t tell Jon that Rhaegal lied about carrying me and Rickon to Oldtown, for only the dragons know what reason. Help me finish what I started and retrieve the Horn of Winter.*

But as her conscious mind prayed for a ride, in the back of her heart dwelled another desire, a stronger one. Arya did not dare think it through, yet it found a way to speak itself in her mind. *Let me find Gendry first.*

She waited. The dragon would never answer, she knew. He would act or not, on a whim. Daenerys managed to free herself from the claw and was presently climbing the dragon’s giant leg, attempting to arrive to the rider’s place on his back, unafraid of heights and falling. For Arya, this was too much. She was not like Bran, obsessed with climbing. She only took unnecessary risks when her emotions overwhelmed her. *Like in the Twins.*

Drogon craned his long neck, staring at all the passengers under his armoured belly. Arya looked into his eyes for an answer concerning Braavos. Their gaze was black and evil, not smouldering with hidden red fire as she remembered it; this was a different beast than the one Arya met. Perhaps Daenerys was wrong to seek him out and trust him.

Confirming Arya’s worst fears, Drogon dropped Arya into the godswood of Deepwood Motte, and flew with Daenerys and all the animals far away, north-west; out of the the reach of the evil shadow conjured by Stannis’ red woman.

“No!” Arya screamed after the dragon, but it was too late.

She was left alone. The shadow ruling the castle began conquering her heart. Deepwood Motte was empty. She was right. No one could live and prosper under the wing of darkness. Without the dragon, there was only one way out and it was barred to her; the ancient door painted by red tree sap on the white bark.

*Black heart, dark heart,* the gods had sung.

Arya stared into the mouth of the heart tree - a slender, more modest one than its lavish twin from Winterfell. Its eyes were closed. Yet its expression was equally grave. The weirwoods never smiled. The old gods didn’t know laughter.

She embraced the tree trunk and pressed her cheek to the carved red face. She had done everything wrong this time. Her instincts about people and places failed her. She placed both herself and Daenerys in danger by accepting to go for a ride, because she liked riding and wanted to forget her concern for Gendry.

*Where is he?*

*What will Jon think?* Maybe Arya was as stupid as Sansa. She felt the surge of forgotten, damp warmth in her eyes and forehead and realised she was crying. It was the first time she had tears after
her father’s death.

*I thought they had dried out…*

*Black heart, dark heart,* the gods were singing right now so she must have succeeded in entering their underground domain.

Maybe it was her fault Gendry and the rest did not make it to Winterfell.

Or maybe she was travelling again, to an unknown destination, and without Reed’s help.

*My heart is not so black anymore,* Arya defended it. *I have almost forsaken my desire for revenge.*

Occasionally she still spoke the names of Meryn Trant and Cersei Lannister before falling asleep, the only ones from her list who had not died yet.

Now she thought of finding Gendry first and taking the ship to Braavos next.

Arya was violently thrown out of the tree and showered in its sap. Her arms and legs were coloured red like blood, looking mutilated in contrast with… with the familiar green clad legs of the small man who observed her with utmost surprise.

“Lady Arya!” Reed exclaimed, seated patiently on a patch of thick moss.

“You haven’t seen this, have you?” Arya asked grumpily.

“No.” Unlike false fortune tellers in fairs, Reed had no trouble admitting he did not see everything. “I expected you to be in Braavos by now. On dragonback. I am glad I was wrong.”

Arya was impressed by Reed since Greywater Watch. He was simple, like Father, and yet a lord in his own right. He ruled by law and custom first, and used force only at need. This did not mean she would not be mad at him when he deserved it.

“Where is Gendry?” she screamed.

Reed gestured sideways. Arya noticed they were beside a lake, which was oddly enough not frozen in winter. The weirwood that must have brought Reed and Arya to it was shorter than both of them. It was barely more than a sapling with tiny, freshly cut, young eyes and mouth; grim and unsmiling. The young tree struggled to grow in infertile winter soil. It reminded Arya of Rickon; wild and almost a man grown at the age of nine… and of herself, running away from King’s Landing as a girl-child... and a little bit of Jon as a boy; a very different, lone wolf.

“The young tree seeded itself here due to the winds of winter,” Reed explained. “It is most fortunate that it did or we would both have wound up even further from our goal.”

“Which is to cross the lake,” Arya guessed. The varied landscape of hills and desolate meadows around it was vaguely familiar. Snow lay on some places, but did not cover everything like in the north.

*I travelled south once more.*

Arya could not recognise the place for the life of her.

“I was here,” she admitted. “But I don’t know where here is.”

The lake had been great and peaceful in the past. *Beautiful.* Now, its waters ran wild with stormy
wind among snowy and ashen fields, next to the burned ruins of a small town. A boat with a hole in the bottom lay abandoned on the shore, next to the broken wooden pier.

“I came here only once before, on horseback, with a tiny tourney lance in hand,” Reed said with melancholy. “Nowadays I would walk and carry a bronze spear if I still had need of arms. But back then I was very young and it was the year of the false spring. Anything was possible.”

“We need to go in that direction,” he pointed to the heart of the storm raging over the lake, painting long, pink and yellow stripes on the dark grey horizon.

“Isn’t there a weirwood over there?” Arya had to know.

“There is more than one,” Reed said as if it was something Arya should have known.

“Then why couldn’t you cross?”

“Because you followed me,” Reed retorted and began to patch the hole in the boat with dry branches and mud. “You entered the secret ways in a different place, but you chose the same direction as I. One where the dark and frozen hearts cannot go. The gods have banished us both. So now we row. Fast. Or the Isle will sink. It is very old magic, designed should the enemy of ice approach it like you did, usurping the channels of the gods. And yes, to answer your question, Gendry is there.”

When Reed was satisfied that the boat was as seaworthy as it could be made in haste, Arya discovered she could row almost as good as she could ride. By the time the unknown shore was near, the water of the lake washed the red sap from her body and Arya felt as if the blood she spilled in the past was washed from her soul. She had completely forgotten about Braavos and the Horn of Winter. She nearly forgot about Jon and Rickon, alone in Winterfell, and Bran and Sansa, lost and in danger beyond the Wall.

*The island will sink and Gendry is there.*

*Dark heart, black heart.*

Why was it her fault that she still wanted to kill Cersei and Ser Meryn? Didn’t they deserve death?

Little green men were singing, gathered around three captives, hung by the shoulders on different weirwood trees. The singers were shorter than Reed and there were very many of them. Maybe there was one for each of the countless white trees with carved faces on the isle. The weirwoods were beautiful and the men were not, green of skin and not only of eyes and garments.

The bare bellies of the prisoners were marked with the sticky red sap. Arya recalled Walders Frey’s entrails adorning the tree branches in Greywater Watch. Aunt Lyanna had carried out the very old and cruel ritual punishment of the First Men, dating from the times long gone. Arya hoped that songs to be sung about the death of the Frey of the Crossing would become famous as the Lannister song about the Reynes of Castamere.

She went straight to Gendry and cut the straps over his shoulders with Needle. He slid to the ground in a crumpled position, asleep, or drugged with the milk of the poppy. *At least they wouldn't gut them while they were conscious.* His feet were tied as well. When Arya gripped those bonds, before she could cut them, they fell into shreds from the touch of her bare hands. Arya felt cursed from it.

*Dark heart, black heart.*

Gendry’s heart was obviously filled with light since he managed to arrive to… to here, wherever here was.
His hammer was gone.

A fast look around told Arya that she was the only one who came armed to the island. Why?

Drawing all Arya’s attention back to his stubborn person, Gendry stirred and opened his blue eyes, shining like naked steel in bright sunlight. Her little cursed hands wandered to his broad shoulders, laying him comfortably down on the bed of soft weirwood leaves.

“Arya?” he said cautiously. “I was falling in my dreams. But I never fell to the bottom.”

“No,” Arya said and kissed him. “You are going to Braavos with me after my brother’s wedding. I promised him to attend.” She hoped the bride’s gown would be made following Aunt Lyanna’s guidance and not Daenerys’. She felt sad because Sansa and Bran should be there as well and they were lost, for now. The Stark children should be together to congratulate Jon on his marriage and wish him every happiness.

“What are you saying?” Gendry inquired. “Are you taking me with you instead of rushing forward on your own while I strive to catch up?” He sounded bewildered and not just stupid.

“Oh, yes,” Arya said, not caring how dreadfully silly she sounded in return. “And when we dock in Braavos, first we will find a temple of some unknown god and marry. Maybe with the moonsingers. I’d rather not celebrate it before the old gods. They don’t approve of me.”

What did I say? Ladies did not propose matches. Arya realised she had just outdone herself with unconventional behaviour, after wishing for Jon's marriage to follow the most sacred customs she was educated to respect. What is wrong with me?

“Yes,” Gendry said simply. “We will marry before any god you like. He will then be yours and mine.”

Arya loved him for this. He liked that she was bold and not obedient like most girls. Her unladylike attitude and abilities brought Gendry closer to her instead of scaring him off. Maybe… maybe it was a sign he was strong enough for her.

She moved to untie Tom and Thoros and held Gendry's gaze. “I’d like to marry before a god who is not cruel,” she wished, freeing the singer and the red priest. “Wait, where are Sam and his lady?” she inquired afterwards, sick of losing people.

“Feasting with Jon in Winterfell,” Reed answered. “They were slow to arrive. They took their time on the way, as husband and wife, although they are not married in name.”

It was unthinkable for Arya that any couple could think of that while travelling through the bloody, suffocating trees. She had felt so alone and miserable both times she took the paths of the old gods. She could not find Gendry in them, much less kiss him or more.

Arya suddenly wondered if Sansa did more before marrying the Hound. She always imagined her sister would be stupid enough to do anything for love, just like the forbidden lovers from her songs. Aemon and Naerys, for example.

With Jon and Dany she never had to wonder. They were terribly good looking and constantly holding hands since they so obviously shared the same bed. Arya did not need to be a Faceless Girl to recognise this.

Arya… she wanted certainties…. She wanted vows and respect of her person. Maybe she needed the reassurance of marriage before she could let herself go and have more than just hugs and kisses.
Soon. Her heart raced. Gendry’s exposed belly was tight and muscled, covered in short, coarse hair, very different than the layers of fat on Tom O’Sevens or hanging, aged skin of Thoros of Myr. She placed both hands nervously on Gendry’s tummy and wiped off the ugly red mark with her fingers. She lowered his tunic back in place, using the simple action of covering him as an excuse to probe his skin a bit more than necessary. Her spine felt warm from touching him freely, somewhere at the bottom. Gendry’s breath slowed down and yet he said nothing. *Is he so stupid that he can’t speak?* It occurred to her that maybe he was ticklish in which case he endured her torture with heroic serenity. The notion… pleased her.

In the time it took Arya to appreciate and dress Gendry, the waters of the lake rose unnaturally high, surrounding the isle like a large, hollow bubble of water.

“What is this?” Arya wondered.

It would be amazing if it hadn’t been life threatening. Reed had not joked about the island sinking, had he?

_Dark heart, black heart,_ the gods had sung.

_The shadows dance under the sea... oh I know._ Who sang that? The fool… the fool of the ugly princess who had a tightly cut jaw like Gendry. Wonderfully square jaw, regular and sweet, unlike Arya’s long one.

_But Arya Horseface is gone,_ she thought stubbornly. Both her figure and her face curved now. Not as much as Sansa’s, but they did. Her bones were less prominent and she had colour in her pale cheeks.

All that was visible of the world beneath them had sunk, engulfed by the lake that had risen to the skies like a many-headed dragon or a leviathan with a thousand tentacles.

“Lord Reed,” she stuttered respectfully, looking for help. _He’s a greenseer, he has to do something._ She immediately realised the futility of her wish. _What can he possibly do? This requires action, not mere seeing._ She reached for Needle but the pointy end of her always sharp sword was equally useless. The way out of water could not be cut.

_If we climb into the boat we used to come here, maybe we can leave on the tide wave._ She stepped… No, she _swam_ forward, paddling with her short legs in deep water like a dwarf, not a girl, and much less a lady.

It was too late to find the boat, too late for anything. Air was water, water was air, the distinction was lost between the two.

“Come!” Gendry gestured that she should step on his shoulders, but the water immediately rose even higher, forcing him to swim as well.

“No!” Arya’s scream was muffled by the disgusting, muddy water she was forced to swallow when she opened her mouth. She held her breath and let her mind run free.

_Calm as still water._

_The old gods may reject me for a reason. Father might have been ashamed of me if he had seen me kill and train to become more skilled in it. But I am not guilty of coveting power as so many men and women, nor of breeding ungodly shadows hanging over woods and castles._

_The shadows dance under the sea... the fool had sung for Princess Shireen._
But this is no sea. This is a peaceful lake and there should be no shadow in it, nor has any of us brought one here.

The water had risen to the red canopies of the weirwoods. Arya Gendry were now at the same level with the highest branches. They had to swim hard, struggling to stay afloat.

The old gods are making a mistake by sinking their sanctuary.

What will be of us if they succeed?

Wait…

I was here.

Gendry and I were here with Yoren, the recruiter of the Night’s Watch. Shortly after we met. Yoren died in the ruined city on the shores of the lake. We made a stand there against Ser Amory Lorch, and I let Jaqen go free… In retrospect, it was unfair that Arya was still not free of the faceless man. The horn Jaqen stole belonged to the North, not to the Many-Faced God. After the Night’s Watch recruits were defeated in the unknown city, Gendry and Hot Pie and Arya wandered in the woods. They were captured and taken to Harrenhal. Which is on the shores of this same lake.

But Gendry and I have come back here together. We have walked for more than a hundred days… The absurd thought soothed even the darkest parts of her soul. Her heart had truly ceased being black. The gods were wrong about her. Arya Stark changed after abandoning the service of the Many-Faced God. She regained both her face and her soul.

When she dared establish that, she realised exactly where they were.

We are on the Isle of Faces.

This lake is the God’s Eye.

God’s Eye.

God’s Eye.

Please, would you finally open your eyes and see? Arya prayed to the old gods who seemed to be blinded, like the heart tree in Deepwood Motte.

Time seemed to have come to a standstill when Gendry brought Arya’s sword hand to his mouth and kissed it slowly in broad, chivalrous fashion. They spiralled through the turgid water that delayed all movement, making the simplest of gestures look noble and extravagant. Arya’s eyes watered again, from the strange beauty of the attention she was given. Her newfound tears felt as warm as Gendry’s kiss. Will I drown in them?

Then, Gendry swam as hard as he could, holding her hand, trying to reach the surface which was suddenly high up, so high up above them. They would not make it, just like they had never made it to Riverrun. Under the callous left from smithing, the skin in the middle of his large palm was terribly smooth, reminding Arya of the softness of his lips behind the brush-hard beard and of everything that could have been.

Fear cuts deeper than swords.

She had to breathe now, but there was no air to be inhaled.
She wished that the last image she saw was Gendry, kissing her hand. Besides stubborn and stupid, her bull had always been handsome to look at.

It wasn’t Gendry.

It was Reed.

Transformed and angular, his face narrowed and shone with unnatural glow. His short brown hair curled with new life, blown messily by a wind that could not exist under water, revealing slightly pointed ears, dappled on top. Through the haze of the lake his worn green clothes appeared new and lavish, floating around him like sails of a strange ship. He had never looked more dangerous, never more like a magician from distant lands. The lord of the crannogs spread his thin, wiry arms wide open amidst the murky olive water and looked up.

He was one with the green of the water, not needing any air to exist.

Stannis, Stannis might have a dangerous sorceress on his side, but Jon, Jon had a greenseer. This had to count for something.

Reed gave Arya a grateful, bright green look and began to sing.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about slower updates.

Hopefully the story will progress faster now.

Thank you to all who comment and leave a kudos - it helps the silly author with the writing process ))

Next up: Jon
Rickon was the Stark in Winterfell.

He sat jovially and with grace on the high seat of his forefathers, petting the direwolves that adorned it. Jon's little brother had exchanged his Skagosi dress for a pretty grey doublet over white woollen tunic. He even let Jon's mother comb his hair, muttering colourful curses neither Jon or Lyanna had heard of, involving hairless unicorns. Once Rickon looked like a lord, or when he was at least clean enough to play the part, he did his best to welcome and greet everyone as the occasion demanded.

The preparations for a royal wedding.

Jon found it very hard to think of himself as any royalty.

Yet the eyes of all guests were on him, studying him mercilessly, and with far more interest than they had in Rickon.

What do they see?

Jon did not want to travel south nor lay a claim to the Iron Throne. He did not owe that much to the memory of a father he had not known, not truly. All he had was a glimpse of Rhaegar’s person, gone before Jon had time to consider it. It was still better than nothing. In another world, he would never know his parents. He might not even know who they were. Or he could have been told an incomplete story about how they met and why they had him, devoid of any human substance and emotion.

Like any boy raised above the Neck, Jon imagined the North being independent as in the old days. Lord Eddard said that there was more honour in the simplicity of his lands than in the extravagance of the south. Jon believed him, jumping to the conclusion that the north had honour where the south did not. Lord Stark's unjust death hardened Jon's conviction. Had he not sworn the vows of the Night's Watch, he would have given his fealty to Robb as King in the North and fought next to his liege in the Whispering Wood. He would have carried Robb's banner to the Twins and obeyed him in everything.

Later on, when the Wall was his, Jon commanded different people, but their blood had run black as Uncle Benjen would say. The men were equal on the Wall or they should be; the differences in origin were blurred.

But now the genuine southron lordlings, petty knights and retainers that had come to Winterfell with
Rhaegar Targaryen ate a modest supper in the Great Hall, happy to eat anything at all, and stared at Jon. Are you our king as well? Their gazes seemed to ask, suspicious and afraid of the future. They showed the same interest in Jon as the uncouth clansmen dressed in furs and the honourable Stark bannermen.

And bannerwomen.

Lady Cerwyn, Lady Mormont, Lady Dustin and Lord Reed sat on the dais with Jon and his mother. Lady Cerwyn, unmarried, pleasant to look at, and older than Jon by ten years or so, gave him a peculiar look. "I had hoped to meet your betrothed as well," she said courteously. "I hear she is also staying in Winterfell." The lady's gracious phrase could mean anything from offering Jon her hand if Daenerys had left him by chance, to offering him herself in the dark corridors of the castle after the feast, if he had any interest in it.

He had none.

"Daenerys should join us shortly if her delicate disposition permits it," Jon answered as calmly as he could. "She is suffering a cold," he lied.

"To be sure," Lady Cerwyn bowed her head with respect, seeming to accept Jon's lie at face value. "The Southron princesses are not made for this ungodly weather," she continued with feigned worry. "But I hear that she is also not made for giving the king an heir."

Jon could not believe his ears. He wondered what to reply without insulting his most noble and impertinent wedding guest.

Maege Mormont found the topic of Jon's heir even more interesting. Tactless, she thundered, "Have I mentioned that my daughter Lyanna is also joining us for the wedding? She's a sweet young maid, just flowered. She has a gentle soul and will surely never consort with a bear."

You mean, she is prettier than you, Jon thought, outraged. Lady Morning had already mentioned her youngest daughter a dozen times that night, but Jon did not fathom the reasons for it until now.

The said Lyanna should be nine or ten in Jon's reckoning, eleven or twelve at best. The notion of courting her was sickening. Jon looked to his mother for help.

"Princess Daenerys is the right choice for first wife," Lady Dustin sounded helpful, addressing Mother. "Everyone understands that. But your loyal northern vassals have started looking for King Jon's second spouse. Aegon the Conqueror had two wives as did his own father."

Jon stood up abruptly, appalled by the bluntness of the suggestions he should take a second wife before he ever married the first one. His brusque and unnecessary gesture earned him an amused look from all ladies present at the table, but it did not halt their talk. Lord Reed did not blink, more interested in the content of his wine goblet, and neither did Rickon, striving to maintain his lordly attitude and tongue, which included the avoidance of cursing in public.

Lady Dustin continued her argument in favour of Jon's second marriage. "Taking two wives seems to be a family tradition. And what better reason to justify the double marriage in the eyes of the High Septon and the Southron Faith than by the necessity for a king to have an heir?"

Jon never thought he would have to worry about offending the demands of Southron Faith.

I'm no king.
I'm the light that brings the dawn. The vow echoed in his tousled black head. For the first time in years he considered tying his hair and wondered if that made him as stupid as the hairless unicorn Rickon had mentioned during his forced combing.

The unwanted discussion made Jon remember Ygritte with force. They were never married, but she was his first love. And she might have had his child as Tormund once hinted. Maybe she was carrying one when the arrow of the Watch ended her life. They were never timid under the furs. Jon regretted that they didn't look at each other more often like that last time, in the cave, for it was so much better than fumbling in the dark. And he mourned her death…

I know nothing, Ygritte. Can you see me now? Do you hate me for betraying your memory or are you pleased that I am finally learning?

Jon didn't want a third woman in his life. Neither the famous Aegon nor Rhaegar married three times. No one could ask this of him.

"Excuse me," he said succinctly, trying to soften the acrid look on his long face. "I should see if my betrothed feels better." He left the dais and headed out of the Great Hall.

The feast was almost at the point where the dance should begin and yet Daenerys did not appear. Jon had not danced since the wedding of Lady Alys Karstark and he was looking forward to it. He wondered if Dany had to learn the most common steps in childhood or not. Maybe the Targaryens don't dance. His father sang for his mother, but Jon had never heard anything about dancing.

He wanted his bride to twirl joyfully on their wedding so they had less than six weeks to learn. Everyone would stare at their first dance, about as much as at the bedding ceremony. For the latter part, he counted on being sufficiently drunk not to blush. He hoped Dany would colour. He adored when her perfect, pale cheeks glowed red like fire from the indecency of their acts or his words.

Jon assumed Dany must have missed the arrival of respectable guests or she would have already joined him. However, he hadn't seen her at all since he left their bed early in the morning, before dawn. And he hadn't been looking for her because he had been distracted talking to Mother, trying to cheer her up, lest she forget her promise to stay alive for him.

In the brightest hour of the day, he skipped midday meal and avoided all company, feeling like Jon Underfoot. When he was certain no one paid any attention to him, he descended to the crypts and tried to draw Ice from Torrhen's stone grip; in vain. The Kings of Winter kept their secrets and he was not welcome among them, for as much as he was now the only man in Winterfell able to open their door.

Immediately after, he received a raven about Bran and proceeded to form a small company of men Rhaegal would be able to carry to the Wall where he would gather some more men and scout the cave where Bran was supposed to be.

Then he waited for Arya in the godswood. It was very fortunate that Jon didn't have to eat much since he was stabbed to death, because he ended up fasting the whole day. When the feast began he was ravenous, but did not eat immediately, savouring the sensation of hunger. He was almost dizzy with it and yet he waited before taking a bite. Like desire, hunger proved he was a man.

Not a special wight.

The prince that was promised.

Reed had said so and Jon could not forget it.
The future king.

His personal wishes for the future ended with the arrival of spring. Then he would travel with Dany to distant lands, unburdened by kingship. He would spend time with his siblings. And with Mother… Yet the more he thought about it, the more he felt… as if he had to become king, just like he had to defend the Wall.

*Or someone like Stannis may take the Iron Throne, call himself Azor Ahai reborn or some other noble crap and commit crimes in that name.*

He was almost grateful that the winter was not yet over so he did not have to make a final decision. It occurred to him that time might decide for him, but this did not please him either. He did not want to be the puppet of destiny. He wanted to choose for himself, but the right decision eluded him.

Jon sighed.

*I should have looked for Dany much earlier.*

He said he would treat her with respect as Aegon treated Rhaenys and Visenya, but he was so used to bearing the burden of command or any other trouble *alone* that he had forgotten all about her until it was almost time for bed. He was happy every night that just like he didn't need to eat much, he had to sleep even less. He never wanted to close his eyes with Dany in his bed. He would eventually succumb to the necessity and the pleasure of sleeping next to her, but never before they did more than just resting.

*She could have looked for me as well,* he thought stubbornly, knowing he was being unjust. On any previous day they spent together, in any place, Dany found him after he abandoned their bed, restless; unable to lay flat for long. She would take his burned sword hand and follow him around. *Why not today?*

His night search for her in Winterfell proved to be fruitless. Daenerys was not in his room as he hoped, nor reading to Ser Barristan who truly suffered from winter fever, inspiring Jon's lie about his wife to be. Running out of options, Jon let Rhaegal into his mind. The dragon was not worried about his Mother and suggested she was not far. For the rest, he contemplated… images of trees and how the strange men and women in the lands of ice could use them to *fly*. Jon had to laugh at the dragon's perception of fast, long distance travel allowed by the old gods in winter… terribly uncertain if he found the hollow trees and hills good or evil beyond count.

*So Dany is not in danger.* Jon felt weak and stupid for looking for her. *She will come when she wishes.*

"A toast," Rickon announced loudly from the high seat of the Starks when he noticed Jon reentering the Great Hall. His little brother lifted a large goblet with a direwolf's head on it with two hands. It was filled with very watered red wine from Barrowtown, the northernmost point where the grapes still grew, bearing fruit. The boy had asked for *mead* before the feast and met with the staunch refusal of Jon's mother who would not allow Lord Stark to make a fool of himself.

"To my brother, King Jon, First of His Name, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm!" Rickon rumbled as deeply as he was able to in his voice of a child.

"To King Jon!" the Great Hall echoed, noisy and hollow, ringing with the collision of goblets and cutlery, increasing Jon's peskiness. He felt… he felt like Rhaegal on the verge of spitting fire. The dragon laughed at him from above the castle walls, immensely pleased. *You see,* he affirmed in the peculiar mental talk of the dragons, showing to Jon the images of a cold, serious tree man with red
face. *Not you*, Rhaegal concluded.

Jon had seen it for a while.

He wasn't a true wolf like he wasn't a true dragon.

Jon sank back to his seat on the dais, defeated.

"I trust that Princess Daenerys's health remains delicate," Lady Cerwyn said politely, seeing him return alone. At least she had the decency not to push her cause any further.

"Indeed," Jon lied smoother than before. "The cold is very persistent and Winterfell does not yet have a new maester to help her. She bid me check on her later. She will have to stay in bed tonight."

Asha Greyjoy chuckled merrily at the far end of the dais and then pretended to choke on her wine. From the insolence of her smile Jon concluded that she must have had equally vivid imagination as Theon when someone mentioned bed, even as innocently as possible. Jon nearly laughed aloud when he noticed she had an *axe* buried into the high table next to her empty plate. The girl seemed less slippery the Theon and he would… he wouldn't mind taking her beyond the Wall as a fellow fighter if she didn't have to stay in Winterfell as Mother's special prisoner.

Mother sat to Jon's left, between him and Lord Reed. Lyanna and Reed talked under the voice or exchanged signs like very old friends, discreetly trading gossips. Occasionally they toasted to the times only they remembered. Mother sipped milk and honey and glowed quietly. It was the first time that Jon saw her completely relaxed and almost happy. *Beautiful.* Reed smiled at her from ear to ear, over the just emptied goblet of non-watered wine. It wasn't his first glass, nor his second one, yet his eyes remained bright and clear. He seemed as sober as if he had been drinking only water.

"The Knight of the Laughing Tree," Reed told Lyanna devotedly, wiping the dark red stain left on his lips in a leaf-green sleeve. Miraculously, the garment did not stain. "Why did you pick that name? I always wanted to ask and I never found the right moment."

"I thought that the old gods would laugh with joy if I, a girl-child of their land, won a victory over the renowned participants in the Great Tourney of Lord Whent at Harrenhal," Lyanna answered feigning pompousness. "I was mistaken," she added in her usual stark tone. "I made those three squires eat the dust when they offended you and yet I've never seen a heart tree that smiled and much less laughed. And the day after was the first day I shed a tear since I was a babe who could barely walk."

"They called it the moment when all the smiles died," Reed said very seriously.

"They still do," Lyanna said sadly, distant and pale once more. "Mine passed out, to be sure... I never believed he would dare. I thought he was a Southron coward with a pretty singing voice, wishing to betray his wife on a sly. I thought... I thought he sang about Jenny of Oldstones for a different girl at every tourney..."

"What are you talking about?" Jon asked, itchy and unaccompanied by his betrothed. It was easier to say to Daenerys he would treat her as equal than to allow her that freedom. Somehow he found it more natural to let Arya do as she pleased. He was not surprised at all by not seeing his little sister at the feast since she had no absolute obligation to attend. Jon was certain that Arya found a much more interesting evening amusement in Winterfell than the boring company of ladies who might offer her their sons for husbands, even if they were still wiping their baby noses on their sleeves.

"We are recalling the fateful day when your father crowned your mother and not Princess Elia as his
Queen of Love and Beauty," Reed said wistfully, emptying another goblet of wine in swift motion. "I should be going now," he said calmly. "Or the world as we know it shall sink. And you will soon receive two new guests to occupy my place. I shall direct them here before going my way."

Jon let his black, shaggy head drop to his chest.

He was the wonder of the feast, his home was his again and yet he was all alone. He wondered if this was how Mother felt without Father.

When the door of the Great Hall opened noisely, Jon expected Mother's captain of the guards to accompany Daenerys in, after he found her scaling the walls or skating on the frozen moat barefoot.

"Sam!" he was compelled to exclaim instead. "Gilly!" His unease and loneliness lessened considerably.

"How tender!" Lady Cerwyn reacted. "Here is a maester you were waiting for, to help your betrothed. How come that you are so surprised to see him?"

Sam helped Jon out, clever as ever, wearing two metal links on the place where his head joined his shoulders and where skinnier men had a neck. "I didn't sent a raven announcing my arrival," he said and contemplated the table, which was not as full as it would have been in summer, but still far from empty. "May I have a bite before taking up my duties?"

Jon did not dance that night. He talked to Sam about Oldtown, the Citadel and the Horn of Winter. Arya had told Sam the news concerning Jon in broad lines and he could not say more with all the ladies listening.

"Where is my monster?" Gilly assaulted the men when they left the Great Hall after the feast. "Where is my boy?"

"On the Wall with Val," Jon retorted in self-defence. "He's healthy and strong. If you are ready to fly with a dragon after having flown with the trees, I can take you to him now."

Jon took with him twenty men-at-arms, Sam and Gilly, and Lord Rickon Stark and his black wolf. Being half as large as Drogon, Rhaegal flew slowly and lazily with his burden.

With another dragon, Jon could carry more men. Involuntarily, the third dragon came to his mind and with him Ser Jaime Lannister.

No. He rejected the notion in his head. There were men with Aegon in Shadow Tower. The black brothers, exiled Southrons of the Golden Company and wildlings. Even… even the ironborn wights that had followed his father. After dropping Jon at his destination, Rhaegal would ostensibly show himself on the eastern part of the Wall, as close as possible to Stannis' shadow hanging over Castle Black. If the enemy of ice had eyes, he would think that Jon was approaching from that side.

"Don't be late for your wedding," Lyanna mothered Jon gently before leaving, embracing him and kissing him lightly on the cheek.

"I won't," Jon reassured her. Please don't jump from the battlements. "You promised to organise it, remember?"

"And you promised not to be rash in your judgments," Mother reminded him in return.

*Stannis and Jaime Lannister. Spare them.*
"How could I forget?" Jon asked, not expecting an answer.

"Easily," Lyanna replied dryly. "You're my son."


*Maybe Daenerys will be late for the wedding.* By the hour of the wolf, Jon was very angry with his betrothed for deserting him. And also pleased she was absent so he did not have to take her with him to another ranging beyond the Wall and into harm's way.

He gave Mother a bear hug and thought that her lips stretched into a smile as he did that. He hoped that the light he saw in her at the feast and after meant she rediscovered the desire to live and not only to do her duty.

Hours later, in Shadow Tower, the short day had not yet dawned. They found Aegon awake in the gloom, with Jeyne. "My lady wife," he announced proudly.

"How? When?" Jon wondered aloud. *Why didn't you have to wait for six weeks?* he thought unjustly. It was not as if he and Dany missed anything crucial from the marital duties of husband and wife.

"Easy enough," Aegon said carelessly. "This country is full of white trees and they are used for weddings. The wildlings don't even bother to wed. But the demands of noble education I received as a boy would give me a headache if I did not."

*Mother.* Jon remembered. Lyanna had raised Aegon with impeccable Stark morality she had held onto herself, where it concerned the marriage bed. She had obviously completely denied and ignored the custom that her parents should choose her husband.

Fifty men armed with good steel and even better obsidian began their march north and northeast before the first light. Jon wished Mance went with him, but he had already boarded the ship constructed by the ironborn wights and left south to meet with the envoy of Prince Doran Martell. Aegon assumed that the wights created by Euron Greyjoy embarked on it as well. "They are all gone," he said. "As are many wildlings, the old and the weak. The lady led her people into exile. Lady Val."

Gilly could not stop crying when she discovered that her monster had also gone with Val. "Lord Snow," she whined, "why is it always me suffering from your wise decisions?"

Like before, Jon was helpless before her grief, though he never regretted his decision to deprive Lady Melisandre of any man with king's blood. *What did she do with mine? She was there when I was killed...* "The next time I see monster, I will make Rhaegal bring it to you."

Gilly cried more.

Sam blinked his small eyes and held her with fat fingers, muttering sweet nonsense. It was so unnatural to see him like that, but his ministrations had a better effect on Gilly than any promise Jon could make.

"You two are..." Jon murmured.

Sam shrugged. "It was stronger than me," he said. "Most things are."

"I suppose every sworn brother of the Night's Watch has to break at least one vow," Jon observed, glad that at least one girl liked his fat friend. "It is commonplace in the order."
Once Gilly calmed down, it was easy for her to accept staying on the Wall. Gilly wanted nothing with the Others and their slaves. She would be happy to wait.

To Jon's surprise, Lady Jeyne stayed as well. "I don't fear the Others," she said, "not after I have seen them being dead. But I do not wish Aegon to fear for me and die as a result. I shall be a good wife and wait."

Jon secretly wished Dany was that kind of woman, content to wait for him until he returned from battle. He was painfully aware she was not. He would never be able to keep her out of danger, under any pretext. She would probably say that the blood of the dragon did not wait and she would be right.

When the march northeast began, there was not a single white tree to be seen, despite Aegon's assessment and Jon's previous experiences that confirmed the abundance of them beyond the Wall.

"There should be weirwoods," Jon muttered to Sam. They rode in front and Rickon, Aegon and Tormund followed in the second row. The horses and the riders were disguised with leaves and branches, in tactics used by the mountain clans to sneak upon their enemy. Frequently, their opponents were from another clan. As a consequence, two small armies could wander in the woods for days before finding each other and beginning the battle which made them dress up like shrubbery. Jon was eager to locate Bran swiftly and shelter both his little brothers behind the Wall.

He remembered his solitary expedition to the Lands of Always Winter, without Daenerys.

In his short and confused wandering from the Winterfell of Ice to the cave where Jon had met Bloodraven, the landscape had changed under his two feet as the Night's King laughed at him, invisible and hurting.

*Can the Others shape the land at will? How do they do it? By what magic? Would the Night's King defeat me in his realm if Rhaegar... if father did not bloody him, making him weak and pitiful, at least for a day?* Jon wondered how far the heart of winter was from the Wall... The Others obviously had to ride or march like men and wights. They could not travel through the trees or they would have already besieged every fortress on the Wall.

"The red woman hated the trees," Tormund offered to explain the absence of weirwoods. "Maybe she had them burned by sorcery, just like she made the shadow grow over Castle Black."

"I don't think so," Jon said. From his experience, Lady Melisandre's influence stopped when men went out of her reach. Or she would still have command over Mance Rayder who was subject to her witchcraft, even after he had gone to Winterfell as Abel the Bard. "I think... I think this is the doing of the enemy. He... the Night's King is more dangerous than Stannis will ever be. And more desperate." As he said it, Jon realised it to be the truth though he could not fathom what caused the desperation of the immortal evil being. *Is the Long Night not falling fast enough for his liking?*

For a brief moment, Jon pondered losing the war. Darkness would swallow Westeros, darkness unstoppable. Mother would join father in death. Maybe they would go to the seven heavens father believed in. Maybe Dany could go there as well. But he, Jon, the failure, he would carry the banner of the Night's King with blue unseeing eyes and the Kings of Winter would laugh at him from their crypts.

"Jon," Sam called to him gently, startling him from his waking nightmare. Jon had never been that grateful for his presence.

"How many days of march?" Sam inquired, keeping Jon in this world and away from terrible
hallucinations about the next.

"A sennight to arrive," Jon judged. "Maybe more to go back. We shall be tired and hungry. But we will not starve." Spare garrons of the Watch were stuffed with provisions to be used sparsely. "Only get fed up with pickled vegetables."

It would be tastier than the acorn paste he and Dany were forced to eat.

The company of men clad like trees advanced slowly through the winter wasteland seeing no one, no friend and no foe. In the evening, the human shrubbery camped on the evergreen sentinels, lighting little fires. Jon hoped that the tiny flames necessary to preserve life could be mistaken for starlight when seen from the distance and that the horses would survive the cold. The week passed in monotony and discipline. Jon did not know whether to be pleased or very worried.

*Perhaps the Others are sneaking upon us, disguised like snow.*

"The silence before the storm," he told Sam whose lips immediately trembled from fear. "You're still afraid, aren't you? Don't be. You have no reason to."

"Well yes," Sam confessed, "but I discovered that a coward can wield a blade just like a brave man."

After eight days of march they spied the familiar entrance to the cave. It was the Bloodraven's lair; Jon's refuge after his memorable visit to the heart of winter. But then he didn't cross the true distance between the frozen land of the Others and the cave. The land had been changing when he attempted to return from there and he probably crossed many miles in a single step. On a positive side, the Night's King did not lure him into the cave. Ghost did. The Others arrived later, breaching the sanctuary, when Jon was already irreparably on his way out… to meet his father. The first and the last time.

"All in!" Jon commanded coldly.

One by one, his men rode down the narrow corridor for they did not dare leave the horses outside. Torches were lit, as few as possible.

Bloodraven lay dead in the centre of the cave. He hadn't aged a day in his death. He was surrounded by rotting child-like corpses, which could have been dead for a week or two, maybe longer. Jon was happy to note the signs of decay. *It means that they are dead and not sleeping wights.* The fabulous sword, Dark Sister, was nowhere to be seen.

*I was here and I missed Bran.*

*If he was ever here to start with.*

"We should burn him," Tormund argued predictably about Bloodraven. "We should burn all of them."

The caution with corpses was never excessive in the North, no matter how dead or childlike they looked.

"No," Jon said, shaking his head. "We will lay him back on his throne. He claimed to be the last of the greenseers. We shall build a cairn over the other corpses. They are… they are the children of the forest. Cairns were made by the First Men. It's the most ancient burial custom we men know of, so it might come close to the wishes of one of the elder races. To honour the children's passing."

When everything was done as Jon wanted it for the dead, there was nothing to do but to head back.
Will I ever do anything useful in this war? Jon thought uselessly.

Outside, in the dim light of the torches, he saw the trail. His eyes had become sharper due to his closeness with Ghost. Two sets of human feet, one tiny and one huge and heavy abandoned the cave.

"Hodor," Rickon said, breathless. "Hodor carrying Bran. And the light-footed Lady Meera Reed."

The trail dwindled towards Castle Black, precisely in the direction Jon didn't plan on going, fearing treason. But there was nothing that could stop him now. I haven't come here for nothing.

The congress of ravens flew after Jon from the mouth of the cave

"Begone!" Jon told them. He had no patience for dark wings

"They won't," Sam dissuaded him. "They are… they are following the king. Lady Arya said they never left your father in peace when he was alive. Even when he didn't know who he was."

This made Jon feel even worse about the unkindness of ravens, proclaiming by their presence that his father was gone, that he was destined to kill him and that he had a claim to kingship now.

"This way," he commanded and everyone followed his lead without questioning, the bloody birds included.

They had not made a hundred steps.

"Stop!" Jon halted his men. "Silence!" he demanded as quietly as he could. He did not have to repeat it twice. The company he led knew the difference between life and death. He wondered if the horses would betray them, but not even they whinnied. It was almost as if the garrons obeyed Jon, or maybe they had just become more used to the white walkers and less afraid of them.

Like men in winter.

Jon had heard the enemy before catching a glimpse of it, thanks to his sharpened senses of a wolf; the rustle and the cracking of limbs, dead for thousands of years. The wights were waiting for them. They formed groups in an abandoned wilding settlement, well hidden in circular huts and behind ruined walls.

Not well enough.

The double trail of human feet from the cave stopped right there; a lie like everything else, like the letter, like Jon's hope to find Bran. A device to bring Jon here if he was wise enough to approach the cave from a different direction than the one suggested by the map of the unknown, treacherous sender.

So the Others can write as well. A white walker must have written to Jon. The Night's King… Or one of his servants. Lords and kings had maesters and councillors who wrote for them, why not the Night's King. The wights on the contrary, they were… Jon had to admit he did not know very well what they were but he did not believe they could write or read or sing… He pitied them.

I could have been one.

The enemy did not see them at first, more attentive to the path from Castle Black. The party was not large and the odds looked good. Jon's men were ahorse and the wights on foot. The two sides should be matched in strength.
If there weren't any white walkers.

Jon did not see how many Others there were because they did not show themselves and he could not hear them, but the cold was so great that he knew they must be there, accompanying their host.

We ambushed the ambush, Jon thought, burning with disappointment over not finding Bran and yet excited with the prospect of battle. He knew from the beginning he might walk into a trap... The surprise would make a difference. They should break through the ranks of the enemy, inflict as many losses as possible, and head southeast to the Wall, around Stannis' shadow, to the Long Barrow, perhaps. According to Pyp, who knew everything Grenn had never heard about, Dolorous Edd was still there, living like a hermit since the spearwives had left. Iron Emmett was less fortunate; he was recruited by Bowen Marsh for a master-at-arms and now resided under the shadow, like Satin and Leathers.

Jon and his company would begin scaling the Wall near Long Barrow. Edd would not shoot them down. Rhaegal could come for them without harming himself when they were halfway up and pick them with his tail and claws. The dragon could touch the Wall, but to fly over it caused him mortal wounds, Jon knew.

The monsters cannot cross. Not even docile, horse-like dragons. Rhaegal was very tame in comparison to Drogon, but his nature remained wild. And he had flown over the Wall once.

To save Jon, left for dead in the weirwood grove where he had sworn his vows.

"We split and we break through," Jon exposed his plan under his voice, replacing all thought with swift action. "In three groups," he clarified, unsheathing the magic sword, wrapping the scarf he used as a scabbard tightly around his head. If the Others bothered to write to Jon about Bran, it was Jon that they wanted. Best if they didn't see him immediately and divided forces equally.

"Tormund," he decided with heavy heart. "Pick your men. Take Rickon. Shelter him the best you can." It would be better if his little brother was not with Jon when the Others recognised their target and closed on it.

"Aegon," he finished, "take the Southrons and any other men you like or who want to go with you. I'll take the rest. We go fast. Don't spare them. We want as little of them as possible on our trail. Follow me when you are through." He did not want to reveal where he would go next in case the enemy was listening.

Jon rode forth and took the left, Aegon the centre, and Tormund the right, staying closest to the cave where Bran should have been. The horses ruined the frozen snow with their hooves and clashed with the wights who abandoned their shelters and barred the way. Jon stayed low, close to his steed, wishing to be recognised as late as possible. He landed blows left and right. A wight tried to pull him out of saddle but he cut him down and noticed two female corpses further afield, walking aimlessly under the trees. One was a young girl with haunted eyes; crying. She had traces of dog bites on her arms and legs and she reminded Jon of a girl he knew; Jeyne, Jeyne Poole. The other lady resembled Tyrion Lannister, but she was considerably fatter and a little taller. She had a large wound in her heart, but was intact for the rest. The she-wights showed no interest in attacking so Jon let them be.

He advanced and swung the sword, not letting any fighting dead alive. They did not rise after being cut down by the sword of heroes.

Jon was thrilled.

He wished to face the Night's King now, feeling invincible. His party broke through the ranks of the
enemy and galloped southeast. The surviving wights followed, but not fast enough.

The Others stayed behind. There were three of them if Jon counted well in the thick of exertion. Jon could not understand this. If he was an Other, armed with a polished crystal blade that never rusted, he would be the first one leading his host into battle, instead of urging the slain forward from a position of safety. The Night's King had at least challenged Jon. In that, he was different. Maybe *that* made him their leader.

"There is a door at Nightfort that the Others cannot use and the men of the Night's Watch can," Sam squeezed out. He had stayed by Jon's side during the clash, to his surprise. Tarly wielded a thin sword he'd taken from Shadow Tower, unsuited for his weight, and almost cried whenever he cut a wight with it, but he had held his ground or rather, his horse. "I should have taken Heartsbane with me," he tried to speak bravely. "I figured that with my body weight I don't even need to know how to wield it properly. Just swing it left and right."

Jon thought how Sam risked to cut down both friend or foe that way, but he did not want to disappoint his friend. "You did fine," he observed, counting his losses. Several clansmen, one Southron knight and three men from the Golden Company had joined the ranks of the wights. The wildlings sang as they rode about the last of the giants. None of them died so celebration was in order.

They continued riding southeast for long hours as the night darkened and the cold worsened. The air cut the lungs like a dagger and could only be breathed through a cloth. The moon was low and young, barely visible. In the darkest hour of the night, Jon thought he saw the Wall, glimmering in faint moonlight.

*Too soon.* They should be several days away, though closer than if they headed back to Shadow Tower.

Suddenly, Jon found himself alone with Sam, surrounded by thick blue mist that smoked like frozen fire. When he looked back, he could not see anyone anymore though his company must be close as he could still hear the horses hooves.

Of *dead* horses with bulging, blue eyes, seething with crystal foam! *Four* Others came galloping from the mist instead of Jon's men.

None of them was the Night's King.

Jon and Sam would not be able to outrun them.

Sam began to cry.

"To me!" Jon called his men, hoping that the sound pierced the fog if sight did not. In the corner of his eye he could still see the Wall as the lost heaven he would never reach.

*But it can't be there.*

Jon cried out and cut the first Other in two with one blow, opening the white walker from neck to hip. His hands almost trembled, faced with his own strength and ease with which he had slain the ancient enemy. Blue crystals, the last remains of the Other, mingled with the mist when he faced two more of them. He understood at that moment the strategy of the white walkers, but he had no time to think it through.

He rejected the onslaught of his two foes by riding between them, but did not manage to land any decisive blow. They were stronger and more cunning than the one he defeated. He turned back for
another pass and saw Sam who had fallen from his horse. The garron was nowhere to be seen. Sam jumped around the equally unhorsed Other as a rather fast running barrel, losing courage to stab the Other to death with obsidian whenever he managed to create the opportunity to do just that.

Jon rode back at his Others and wished he had more interest in practising jousting, like Bran, who wanted to be a knight. He nonetheless almost unhorsed one of them and lived to try a new pass.

"To me!" he called again.

_Aegon_ surged from the mist and came to Jon's right just before the new charge. "If it please you," he said.

Dawn shone in the blue mist, milky, friendly, true.

"It does," Jon said and wished Aegon was Robb, wielding Ice. But Robb was dead and he needed such friends as could be found. He hoped Aegon would become one. _And die as soon as you trust him fully._ Jon chased away the nagging thought. There he was, alive and well beyond the Wall and his men had held their own against the enemy from whom all normal men fled.

The Others paused in their onslaught and Jon saw the Wall again, realising that the enemy used the break to reshape the land once more. It was just like during both of Jon's visits to the Lands of Always Winter; the accidental one with Dany when they probably ended up on one of the northernmost points of Westeros and the planned one when he scouted the heart of winter. The landscape had changed both times, under the influence of the magic wielded by the Others.

_How do they do it?_

Jon believed that the Others had somehow usurped or imitated some hidden powers of the earth, of the old gods and their underground sanctuaries filled with weirwood roots where every way was different and filled with danger, forking and running faster than nature allowed.

"The sea," Aegon and Sam said at the same time after the land altered.

Jon did not see it. Just like he did not see the correct way underground after he had found his magic sword. On that occasion, Daenerys had a clearer mind about where they should go. She took them out in the open and Rhaegal came for them.

Sea was excellent, better than the Wall; a proven exit to safety.

But the way to another unknown, frozen shore was barred by the two remaining Others and their mad ice horses, standing next to each other. Sam still battled his white walker on foot, crying like a girl between heavy blows and clumsy, evasive passes. Their duel did not stop with the change of scenery.

Jon charged to the left and Aegon to the right.

The Other surprised Jon by cantering off, forcing Jon to follow and be separated from Aegon and Sam. Unsurprisingly, the white walker sought the woods and to depart from the shore.

_Maybe he wants to inform the Night's King that his ambush had failed._

Jon veered his horse back, in the direction of the invisible sea, forcing the Other to reverse his strategy. The white walker galloped back with force.

_So you are after me_, Jon thought.
On a rocky clearing where he thought he heard the sea, Jon stopped and waited for the white walker. The joy of battle was on him. When the enemy charged, Jon leaned to the side as fast as he could and unhorsed the Other, whacking his dead horse with the magic sword. The animal screamed and left its master. Jon dismounted to pursue his attack, confident about his imminent victory. He methodically crafted the opportunity to kill the monster until, to Jon's surprise, the Other employed against him a painfully familiar combination of steps and blows... Jon thought he would never see such swordsmanship again… It reminded him of endless, unjust humiliations of his friends if not of him, the castle-bred bastard. It reminded him of the cold nights in the rickety cell in Castle Black, with only Ghost for warmth and company.

Jon could have killed the Other at that moment, mercilessly and bravely, like a true last hero, fighting to save the world with the magic blade, reviving it with fire that moved his own heart, rather than forging it with anyone else's life blood.

He did not strike.

He was not able to.

For if he pierced the Other's heart with the magic blade, the monster would not rise into air as a congregation of blue crystals nor would he peacefully return to mist. He would change back to the human form of the man that had been taken by that particular Other.

And he would show the acid face of Ser Alliser Thorne.

Who had conspired against Jon in the past, and who may have deserved to die, but it was still Jon who had sent him ranging beyond the Wall and he had gone, albeit unwillingly, fulfilling the bidding of the Lord Commander he never wanted to see elected.

Jon hesitated.

Too long.

The blue crystal blade landed expertly on his magic one, disarming him. He sat into snow from the force of the impact, looked up and rolled away as fast as he could, avoiding the next blow of the enemy, fully intended to be the final one, ending Jon's life. He had a moment to wonder morbidly if Ser Alliser was still awake within the Other like his father had been, and if he would rejoice at Jon's demise.

Faster than a direwolf, Jon jumped back to his feet, unscathed. He needed to retake his sword. He would not fall today. He looked around, shocked.

"Others take me", Jon cursed involuntarily, faced with the extremely unlikely occurrence of being completely alone in the mist, which was now transparent and pale, not blue. The sky was less dark. The extreme cold was no longer there. Far below his feet he saw the dark, wavy surface of the sea, shining in starlight.

And the Other was gone.

In the very brief time Jon wasted rolling out of harm's way, something or someone had taken the Other.

"Hello!" he called to the unknown friend, almost expecting to see a giant or a party of lost wildlings armed with obsidian axes.

In response, a strange, unknown presence let itself be felt in Jon's mind. It was similar to Rhaegal's
but it was made of ice and not of fire. Maybe it was yet another trick of the white walkers, but Jon did not think so. The presence was too vivacious and less cold. It did not provoke fear and it did not want to reshape the world. Yet it smelled terribly, of muddy, melting snow and ancient, entrenched sadness. The being who caused it was most unwilling to show its physical form to Jon. The sensation lingered for another moment and then it was gone as though it had never existed.

Jon looked to the night sky for answers, finding none on the ground, but the only dragon he saw high above him was a star.

_The Ice Dragon._

Always pointing the way to the Wall. South of it, the Ice Dragon lit the way north and far north of, south...

_There are only three living dragons in the world._

_Or are there more that we don't know of?_

Sam came weeping to him. "It was Dywen," he sobbed. "I stabbed it and the thing became old Dywen the forester. His wooden teeth still clicked. I covered my eyes not to see what I had done and then he was gone."

"It's alright," Jon said, embracing Sam, knowing that it wasn't. But it would have to be. "You've lost some weight in the Citadel," he added when his arms closed successfully around his friend's massive back.

"No," Sam denied it. "I just didn't gain any. And you have grown taller."

"Maybe," Jon conceded, extremely unwilling to discuss his own transformation.

He missed Dany now that everything was over. His anger at her evaporated like the blue mist. She would know what to say to him.

Rhaegal's green shade rose in the sky, flying rapidly to the unknown shore where the Others had lured Jon, similar to the coast where Rhaegar had met with death, with the exception that it was less craggy and not in the sight of the Wall.

_More north._

The best lessons were sometimes a fruit of honest mistakes. Jon had learned very important information he had not known before the ambush. He had to meet the Night's King and his hosts on the Wall for the final battle. The Wall held the land in place, as the most recent confrontation at Eastwatch-by-the-Sea had shown. The mammoths had remained mammoths near the Wall. They did not disappear inside a mist. The Others could not change the scenery at will or perhaps only to a much lesser, imperceptible extent. If Jon decided to meet them in the field before they marched on Castle Black, he would always be at disadvantage, not knowing where the battle might take him.

He remembered there were thousands of them, waking in the heart of winter.

_But how can I let them come so close?_ The risk was great and if he lost, he would have no second chance.

Or he had to find a way for all _three_ dragons to fly to the heart of winter and burn it until none of it was left, which might include tearing down the Wall, the only protection that had kept the monsters at bay on each side of it for thousands of years….
It meant finding and blowing the Horn of Winter of his own free will, and waiting for the unknown consequences...

Hardhome was another possible battle place. The Night's King was there in person, challenging and fighting Jon yet he did not reshape the cliff and the bay next to the ancient settlement nor make the men who resisted him stand on a completely different place.

On the contrary, when Jon visited the Lands of Always Winter, the centre of the power of the Others, the scenery changed tremendously. The few wildlings he had met in Hardhome and who used to live in those lands all told stories of horror. Jon only understood them now. He thought of Old Garth, dead and... resurrected, for as much as Jon's reason rejected that possibility. Not quite an ordinary wildling, like Jon wasn't quite an ordinary man.

He thought... he thought he understood the purpose of the Others. It was not only slaughter that moved them to conquer the world. They wanted to reshape it to their liking. If they were allowed to cross the Wall in great numbers, Westeros as Jon knew it would no longer exist.

Perhaps it would not exist at all.

But who had helped him now? Jon did not see anyone. Sam still sobbed in his arms. Maybe Aegon? Did he die? Was he taken by the Others?

As if to answer Jon's unspoken question, Aegon barged into his presence, surging from the pale fog like the warrior of light, with his silver hair loose all over his armour. For a moment, Jon suffered from an illusion that he had seen his father.

Aegon carried Dawn with even more pride than before, in the weirwood scabbard hung over his back. His pale cheeks were flushed from cold and the song of steel. His hands bled through the gloves. He was not unscathed like Jon but did not seem to mind. Most importantly, he showed no sign of changing into a cold-blooded monster so his wounds could not be severe.

"He knocked off my helm, but I knocked him out," Aegon said proudly.

"And than he disappeared," Jon offered the most likely conclusion of Aegon's duel, the same he and Sam had suffered from.

Aegon eyed Jon in a strange way. "You... you... Haven't you seen?"

"Seen what?" Sam asked. He stopped crying. His enormous shoulders still shook a bit after all the sniffing and sobbing, but his breeches had remained dry. Jon could remember worse examples of Sam's bravery.

"I haven't seen a thing," Jon replied seriously. "What about you?"

Aegon shook his head. "I was just deluded, I think. This land... this land is playing tricks with the mind of men. There can't be anyone here except us."

Jon could agree with that and Aegon continued. "The fog and Rhaegal's shadow reminded me of a dream I had." He gestured at the dragon, who was about to land. His large, green and bronze shape covered the sky, but never as fully as Drogon's.

*Will you ever match him in size?* Jon wondered and Rhaegal knew which dragon he meant.

The green dragon offered an image of a smoking sea as an answer to that question, a highly unrelated observation in Jon's opinion. *Right, he thought. When the sea turns smouldering hot in*
He was suddenly as irritated as on the welcoming feast for Lady Cerwyn until he saw that Rhaegal did not come alone...

Dany was on his back.

"Jon!" she whooped with joy. Her hair was singed. Only an inch or so remained, looking like new growth, rapid and unstoppable in winter.

"Daenerys," Jon said dreamily, grinning from ear to ear. "Well met. It appears that you have spoken to your dragon."

"It would appear so," she replied with care. "Do you mind?"

"No," Jon shook his head. "It was a worthy endeavour and a brave attempt. I trust that it did not go that well."

"You could say so," Daenerys retorted, crestfallen.

"Are you… are you hurt?" Jon asked, feeling dark anger rising within his chest. If the black dragon had injured his princess, he would-

"Only my pride suffered a blow," Dany reassured Jon calmly, almost indifferent to the occurrence of having been severely burnt by her pet. "But I do regret the stupidity of my actions," she muttered angrily.

Jon would have loved to ask more questions about those. Where have you been all this time? Did your absence involve another man? Probably most men within the walls of Winterfell wanted to test if Dany was barren or not first hand, just like there were women who would gladly give an heir to Jon.

"Come here, please," Dany bid him, holding a tiny black raven in her hands. A baby raven. "I have received this during flight, but it is not for me. It is for you."

Jon staggered forward, blinded, towards the musical salvation of her voice. The ground disappeared under his feet when he walked off the high shore and into nothingness. He ran through the cold air and bumped into Rhaegal's familiar, long, warm neck, hugging it tightly. He crawled up to the place of the rider as if he were moonwalking. Daenerys made space for him and helped him stride Rhaegal. Wiry and light, she did not succumb to his much greater body weight. She gave him the exact amount of support he needed. He could have done it without her, but it was so much better when she was there.

The raven croaked tenderly, carrying a letter. Jon reached for it, avoiding being pecked by the bird who mistook his burned sword hand for corn. It carried a piece of crumpled yellowish textile, filled with dense, unschooled letters.

"Rickon!" Jon exclaimed when he began reading, realising he hadn't seen his brother since they broke through the ambush. Cold sweat crept over his even colder back. "Tormund!"

_Tormund's member is bigger than his breeches, he says. So I made a hole in them and borrowed a piece for writing. Jon chuckled, imagining Rickon cutting the unsatisfying garment with his large Skagosi knife. There was another trail. Only I could see it. Because I am a man from Skagos. Because I have the same hair as Sansa and Bran. Of gods and their trees. Borroq is here as well. His boar is back. He fears I will eat the boar more than he fears I will eat him. I won't eat any of_
them, but Shaggy might. I will be back.

Yours,

Rickon

(.until I find Bran - Lord Stark)

Jon's mind swam, flooded with bad news.

Rickon had turned out impossible, just like Arya.

Or worse. Indomitable.

Like me.

At least Sansa and Bran have always been the more reasonable among us. Two moderate and three mad siblings...

Dany… Jon suffered a revelation. Everyone was at the feast in Winterfell. Everyone except Arya and Daenerys and sick Ser Barristan Selmy. His princess did not go on a search for Drogon in company of men as Jon feared.

"You went with Arya, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yes," his love answered, stiffening behind his back.

"Where is she?"

"She..." Daenerys sounded as if she might cry.

"She walked into a heart tree," Jon guessed. He supposed she might be back with the Horn of Winter when he least expected her.

"Yes," Dany confessed and buried her singed head into his sweaty back.

Jon wanted to undress, wanted to undress Daenerys badly, knew he was in no condition to do any of it.

"I missed you," he said and meant it. "Why did you have to go?"

"For the same reason you went," Dany's answer cut through his unease and his defences. "To find and save my family."

Jon let himself feel sad like the unknown being of ice he had encountered earlier; he could not help his siblings anymore - they were all lost, gone with the gods of the North of their own free will... He could not choose battles for his brothers nor pick husbands for his sisters. He could only hope they would find their way. They had all done it before. They should be able to do it again. He wondered if any of them would be back for his wedding.

As long as I am not late for it...

His labour was done for the day. It would be stupid and irresponsible to pretend otherwise. He would sleep on dragonback. It was one advantage Rhaegal had over Ghost. The second was flying.

It was time to go.
Rhaegal, Jon thought weakly, searching for the right words. In the haze of his tired mind, the
dragon's name sounded like his father's. It was only another illusion, one he created for himself.
Rhaegal and Rhaegar could not be more different; the simplest of dragons and the most complicated
of dragonriders; the dead dragonlord. And Jon did not even truly know this about his father. He had
only felt it through the common memory of the fire-breathing dragons… It was unsatisfying and
unfair.

You know the way back home, Rhaegal, do you not? Jon thought with finality, lamely. It was as
good a command as any.

Jon barely noticed when the rest of his company came out of the mist and found their spots on the
broad extension of the dragon's scaled back behind the place reserved for his rider. There were twice
as many than the number Rhaegal could normally carry. Some hung on wings, but Jon's dragon did
not mind. He was at ease, happy to retrieve Jon after another reckless adventure as an average horse
would be pleased with an apple or some sugar.

Far in the south, behind the plains and forests covered in snow, there was Winterfell, always waiting
for Jon to lick his wounds behind its high walls.

The Wall would defend itself for a while longer, before Jon returned to it with force.

And then it would be his again.

He would embark on a necessary mission long due.

He would banish Stannis from the Wall and retake Castle Black.

Chapter End Notes

It always takes longer to update than I would wish. Sorry about that.

Next up: The Ice Dragon
The Ice Dragon

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to DrHolland for a fast and very useful beta read :-)!

I missed this POV )))

Note on chronology.

Here we first go considerably into the past, and we finish in the same moment in time as the last Jon's POV.

The Ice Dragon

The Stranger beckoned to him.

His time on earth was over and it was time to go. He did as he was asked, he did what Jenny told him.

He did not flinch when his death found him and he found peace in knowing he had done well. He could not let men die for him, innocent men, married men, young men, boys, smallfolk, not again, not when he could help it. He hoped that his family would live this time when he did not.

Was that not what Jenny implied?

Or was he a fool who believed in prophecies?

The prince that was promised, drawing his first breath at Summerhall as it burned.

He’d never been promised. Maybe his son was. Or maybe his son’s son would be. The dragon had three heads. He spent his young years searching for them, but could not find them. The heads burned out with time and were replaced; like kings and queens and their heirs.

A great river hummed in his mind, mocking him. He could not remember its name, but it would never let him sleep. Not if he had done any different. He would have chosen to die for the innocents without any hope or promised reward, even if he had never met Jenny… She had wasted her time showing herself to him in Oldstones, though he was immensely pleased to meet her.

*Jenny of Oldstones, with flowers in your hair.*

Dead at Summerhall with so many others.

Her song was later their song, of him and his wife…

He turned to follow the Stranger.

He fell in line after the god of death when a woman called him the Ice Dragon…

*The Ice Dragon…*
More voices repeated the call; male and female, fat and thin, deep and high-pitched, some living and one dead like himself. He could not see the woman who first intoned it. He could not see a thing. But by the sound of her voice he knew who she was, remembering her from before his death.

She wore a white wooden mask...

She was not the woman he loved, but the aged woods witch from the lands he feared and ignored in his youth. Yet it was there he had left his heart; it was there and not in that great, unknown river that he now lost his life. A tiny, delicate tree branch touched the old ruin of his chest and danced on it, protecting it from the Stranger’s breath.

_The Ice Dragon_, many, many voices echoed from afar, leaving little twigs to anoint him instead of seven oils. Without seeing the wood, he knew that it was white like the witch’s mask.

Weirwood, the strangest among trees.

The mightiest one, with a will of its own.

_The gods were here before the trees_, childish voices sang. Cold, strong and ancient, the spirits of the trees faced the half-faced god of death in his stead.

_He has helped our children_, they murmured; his saviours and his justices. _He is ours now_, they announced to the Stranger. _Begone! You have no claim over him. Not until the Long Night is over. Or until the world falls and only the shadows are left to dance under the sea._

Helpless, he listened to the gods, dictating his fate. He would forget this, he knew. The mortal men were not allowed in their company.

What would he be once he woke? Would he recall his name? He did not remember it now.

He knew he had a son, but could not bring himself to think about his mother. This caused him too much pain.

His son would carry on from where he had halted. This made him very proud. His name was Jon, a name wanted by his mother. It was the only name the Ice Dragon could remember.

Did he have more living family members?

Where were they?

He could not recall.

He remembered with precision the early years of his life, his childhood and his youth; the long nails, the nasty cuts from the blades of the Iron Throne and the mad gaze of the king who was his father. He remembered the bruises of his mother. But he had forgotten almost everything about his later years, even the exact manner of his death. He simply knew he had done well this time. Only the beloved face of his wife, and the pride caused by Jon, his son, remained engraved deeply in his consciousness.

A knife made of cold anger pierced his non-beating heart. He was dead, he knew he was, and yet the Stranger refused to take him. He began to loathe everyone alive and warm, not _cursed_ and cold as he had become. He gorged on hatred until his growing, persistent melancholy took over. He had sinned in the past and was lost to his family now. His haunted world would never be theirs. He would never wish it upon them. In his sorrow, he suffered less from his abnormal, dead state. He realised that he… He could draw on his sadness and suppress the merciless loathing reserved for the living in the
veins of the wights. He gave himself to grief on purpose, refusing to become lost to the blindness of hatred.

And he might have thought twice about following his conscience, as well as the advice of Jenny of Oldstones, if he knew it would come to this; the half-existence of a hurt, useless, mournful, hating creature. He hadn't been arrogant like his forefathers, but he still had pride. It was very good that no prophecy foretold this. Only one thing would be worse, to turn mad. Wasn't his inability to remember a form of that?

No, he told himself and was glad for the knowledge. Had he been truly mad, he would have given in to hatred. Father had done just that, imagining slights, seeing treason in every look, word and touch.

When he was somewhat appeased about his predicament, it occurred to him that he might exist forever after his whole family and everyone he ever knew or cared for was gone. This would be the greatest torture any man had ever endured. He had to find a way to end it in time.

But maybe not immediately.

Perhaps he should wait and see if he could still do some good. Wasn't that the purpose of any existence?

Squeezed out, exhausted, done for, he succumbed to the cold drowsiness of death, knowing he would wake and stand up, unless those who now honoured him by calling him the Ice Dragon invented a way to destroy him. He didn't know what outcome he'd prefer.

So he surrendered to the will of the gods, embracing temporary rest.

His life had always been in their hands.

It had been so ever since Summerhall burned. The true dragons turned to smouldering ashes in its ruins. All except him, a newborn babe. After many visits to the castle, he had acquired a certainty that the learned men from the Citadel helped orchestrate the disaster, envying the dragons their power. Not worldly power but inner; what they called magic in their ignorance. He had never confided this knowledge to anyone, perhaps he did not even remember it fully until now.

The maesters and their Perfumed Seneschal promised the unlikely king and his heir, the prince who married Jenny, that they would revive the dragons, cause them to hatch from their eggs by the charms of the Seven. But what they truly wanted was to exterminate in one place all those of the royal family in whom the dragonblood ran pure, and destroy all their eggs. The grey sheep used… they used wildfire during the rites...The septon who was at the court complained when the ostentatious ceremony was planned, but no one listened; maesters were more learned than the servants of the faith who only cared for their crystals and treasures.

Wildfire was not fire. It was a urine-coloured substance brewed by the alchemists. It could kill dragons when used profusely. The human and the baby ones for certain.

The Ice Dragon had always believed that the great black dread beast ridden by the founder of his house, dead for years, would have been able to engulf all Father’s stocks of the alchemists’ piss in a single breath of dragonfire. Only clean air and scorched foundations of the royal palace would be left when he would be done.

All his life the Ice Dragon wondered who took Mother away from the dragon resurrecting rites when she was about to give birth, far enough from all the burning. He would never know for certain, but he suspected that the man who chose to save the unborn baby was the legendary Lord Commander
of the Kingsguard. He died with his king, but many years later a blue dragon egg was found intact in the ruins of Summerhall under his shield. Ser… He could not recall his name.

He always wondered why the Lord Commander picked the blue egg among the seven that were supposed to hatch and if he saved the unborn royal child for being a baby or for believing in prophecies about the prince that was promised. He suspected the former.

The Ice Dragon remembered hiding what he was in the palace, the only home he had. Instinctively, he had always known he should not show he was insensitive to flames to any noble or suspicious-looking maester, not even to his own mother, especially since he noticed that both she and his baby brother could be burned. The grey sheep should not know that they failed to eliminate all true dragons.

He tried to tell Father that wildfire was not fire, but Father never listened. He never dared confronting Father with the unpleasant truth - Father wasn’t a true dragon.

On the contrary, the Ice Dragon’s blood had run so pure that he could hold a jar of wildfire without gloves or dip his hands in it without getting a single blister. But he never thought he would be able to withstand a complete conflagration carried out by any means, especially if the maesters decided to dump him by accident in one of the alchemists’ pots and close the lid. This fear of his never materialised. On the contrary, he had been burned on a pyre next to the great river and swam out of it rejuvenated, instead of turning into ashes.

He was a true dragon even now; a dead one, a cold one. He could not ride his fire-breathing brothers.

Paradoxically, the fire would harm him now, he knew. He was only a wight.

Wasn’t he?

When he came back to his cold, hateful senses, that of a corpse wishing to feast on the blood of the living, envying their warmth, and when he succeeded in suppressing this ugly desire by the unwavering strength of his sorrow, the world was very dark. The Stranger returned. He drove the Ice Dragon through the snow-oppressed forest on a carriage constructed of bones; lifeless, unarmoured and semi-naked.

He enjoyed profoundly the ungodly cold; it numbed both his hatred and his grief.

Unprovoked, the Stranger talked to him. In the first days, the Ice Dragon did not understand his peculiar coach, but more recent memories crept back into his forgetful head with every new day, following the idle, mocking conversation the ugly god persevered in; rude and yet spirited, providing encouragement.

_Not the Stranger_, he understood after two or three days.

His companion was a man, a living man, an ugly man tall like a half-giant, with half a face. He called the Ice Dragon brother and never by his name.

On the seventh day of their wheeled wandering in white nothingness, a frozen _breath_ came out of the Ice Dragon’s mouth. He hid it from his companion. The weather turned colder than usual. A trail separated from the path they followed and led into the forest. It smelled of the fire the Ice Dragon harboured inside him prior to death. How he wished to have it back, if only the smallest of flames!

And his friend who talked to a cursed creature, without fear and out of love, had been searching for that trail, leading to his wife, yet the gods did not let him see it, always setting hurdles to mortal men.
The Ice Dragon forced his dead eyes to do the impossible, to stare in the good direction. He strove to do this until his dead body almost hurt and his eyes moved a little. His brother saw the imperceptible change, followed the trail, left the monster untied…

The Ice Dragon decided to run away. Petrified for days, frozen to the bone, he began by wiggling his toes. It took him a while to move all his dead muscles. By the time he stretched his limbs, his brother was returning alone, too soon, smelling of fire in blood. The precious substance was there, on the ribbon tied around his broad arm. It would not be enough to reacquire a life of flesh, but it occurred to the Ice Dragon that it might help him feel better. He hid fast and jumped on his brother, believing he needed surprise on his side not to lose the fight, but his own strength amazed him. He overcame his friend easier than he expected and tied him with the same hempen rope he’d been secured with, from the waist down. Methodically, he finished dressing and arming himself.

Under his weapons, on the carriage of bones, he found the Horn of Dragonlords. The Ice Dragon decided to leave it to his friend, in sign of gratitude. His brother could blow it, the only man who could do so and live, using the already dead, scorched part of his face, and the dragons would help him in need. His brother would not abuse the horn to enslave the dragons nor to harm them by thoughtless usage of the mighty tool.

Holding the horn in hands before blowing it, however, posed a serious difficulty. He did not want his brother to burn himself again. Fire was not his friend.

The Ice Dragon scratched his head and realised that his hair was still alive, silver and soft. He cut it with his knife and wove a thick casing around the powerful instrument, isolating its heat. The Ice Dragon did not want it. His blood of Valyria was gone. The dragons would always follow those with fire in their hearts and not chunks of ice.

He nevertheless wanted to go south and see his family, maybe help them from afar. He did not know if he would be capable of showing them what he had become.

Finally, he robbed his friend, pressing the ribbon imbibed by the blessed warm substance to his cut throat. The fire sealed his non-rotting dead flesh and was spent. Feeling guilty, he returned the ribbon; a lady’s favour. It belonged to his brother, given to him by his wife; the lady who seemed fragile and who might yet survive them all.

Armed and armoured, he headed south. The consuming need to hate the world and everyone alive lessened considerably with the patching of the gash on his throat.

After sleepless walking for several days, two real giants found him, taller than him by six heads each, hairy and dressed in furs. They grabbed him, and they could have easily quartered him with their hands. He resisted them with his new superhuman strength, but it was not enough.

Humiliated and angry, he was taken back north and thrown in front of a cave mouth. The giants first spat on the rock at the entrance with utmost contempt. Then they gurgled in the Old Tongue and gestured he should cross the stone threshold, perhaps mentioning a boy that needed help in a language that the Ice Dragon barely understood.

When he refused, the creatures waited. He went in and stayed close to the mouth, spying on them. When the giants were gone, he exited, wishing to continue his journey south. But… he did not recognise his whereabouts. The cave… The cave had moved. He entered and exited again. The same reoccurred; on his next sortie, he was elsewhere. He looked at the stars and they changed positions. Ice Dragon the star, his namesake, was now to his left, pointing the way south to the Wall. He followed it through the forest, leaving the cave behind, not feeling hunger, nor the cold, mourning his losses whenever hatred threatened to overtake him.
He might have walked for three leagues, tireless like a corpse, when he encountered the damn cavern again.

It was… it behaved just like the beautiful and calm wooden castle in the green marshes of the Neck that hid itself from people and any other creatures when it did not want to be seen, and then appeared where it wanted to appear, when it wanted. Did the crannog magic rule the north? Did they have dealings with the enemy of ice? Was their heartfelt hospitality a lie? Or was this grotto owned by the black shadow hovering over the Wall? That shadow cast powerful illusions for its followers, who claimed to see the future in flames, but all they grasped was treacherous. The Ice Dragon remembered all this, unsure of what it meant. He had to find a way south, but the cavern would not let him, appearing in front of him on any path he took.

In the end he gave up trying to avoid it.

He descended underground.

The impeccably conserved man with silver hair longer than his body lay dead on a clearing full of gnarled, elongated weirwood roots, surrounded by rotting, childlike corpses with pointed ears.

The Ice Dragon sank to his knees and observed his distant cousin. He was not yet born when the great bastard dragon with white skin and eyes red like molten dragonsteel was sent to the Wall. Yet he immediately recognised the faded sigil on his chest and the dark red stain on his throat and cheek…

The Ice Dragon wondered if his famous relative went to seven heavens or hells for his many contrasted deeds in service of the realm, and if his half-sister named for a seastar loved only him in eternity, or if she continued to entertain other suitors to make him suffer. At least he did not lose a war because of the grievances of the heart.

When the Ice Dragon embraced the dead dragon, moved by sudden empathy, he heard a boy whisper to a lady, begging her to wake.

The boy. The giants wanted him to help a boy.

He followed his ears. They did not betray him, but his sight did. When he approached the auburn-head boy sleeping on a luxurious weirwood throne in the back of the cave, a fat, soft giant jumped on him, trying to cut his head off with a large, shiny sword. The cat-like girl continued the attack with a bronze spear, lithe and deadly. He let himself be brought down, but avoided any injury, pushing both attackers off with his new, cursed strength and precisely dealt blows from his favoured lance.

The giant wielded a Valyrian blade, but was neither a fast nor a dexterous swordsman. The Ice Dragon was never perfect with the sword, but this giant had a face of a lackwit and fought like a squire. His two furry kinsmen that had brought the Ice Dragon to the cave were more dexterous in dealing with wights barehanded than this one with mighty steel. The Ice Dragon soon captured the beautiful weapon and forced the girl to sit down. He took some distance from his opponents and laid all weapons on the ground, showing his palms. He was not there to harm them. He could still retake his lance in time if he was misunderstood.

"He is a wight," the boy told the girl with resentment, opening his blue eyes. "He serves the Others. Look at his hands! Look at his eyes!"

The Ice Dragon checked his hands and saw nothing unusual. They were just a tad blackened on fingertips, on places where he always had marks from harp strings. He never thought this to be
unusual. He did not see his eyes since his death so he had no notion how they looked.

"Do you think that Coldhands was not?" the lady asked. She was a bit older than him, but not so much that it would matter. The couple looked endearing.

“He stopped fighting and he could have harmed Hodor,” the lady rightfully concluded. “It was foolish to try to use Hodor to defend us, you should have left it to me. I would have killed the wight with bronze and then with fire if Hodor was not so clumsy and slow, spoiling my surprise. But now that I did not, maybe we should talk to him.”

"Hodor," Hodor said, looking benign and cheerful.

Which fire? The Ice Dragon wondered arrogantly, and, when the lady finished her phrase, saw hidden torches and long lines of sleepers emerging from the dark, descending into the lower levels of the cave. Their presence perhaps explained why he could see in the gloom, not carrying any light. Or maybe the cave had just changed shape, much like it could wander from place to place. Or the wights saw like sleepless owls in the dark.

"How would you talk to him? Look at him! His throat and his vocal chords had been cut," the boy felt offended in his intelligence. "He can't speak. Coldhands could."

Indeed, the Ice Dragon concluded, mute and deadly, willing his hatred of the living away with the enormity of his grief.

"Coldhands was not pleasing to look at," the lady reminded her friend. “And yet he helped us.”

The Ice Dragon wondered how he might win their trust and what on earth he could do to assist them. He could not call a fire-breathing dragon to himself and take them over the Wall. Their journey back was bound to be arduous.

"At least you woke," the boy said lovingly to the lady. “I didn't like the calm expression you had on your face in the last days, as though you were fading.”

"I was," the lady admitted. "Your fear of this wight’s arrival startled me, Bran. Why didn't you shake me awake before?"

"I did," Bran said. "I even pulled your hair, I stretched like a snake over the throne to be able to grasp it. I shook your shoulders, I yelled and I sang. Nothing did the trick until now. Maybe I should be grateful to him."

The Ice Dragon scratched his head which now had little hair, though the silvery stubble was already coming back, unstoppable in winter. It seemed that the disturbance he caused by approaching the boy was of some use. His friends were awake.

“How long have I slept, Bran?” the lady asked.


"Where is Jojen?" the girl continued.

Jojen. The Ice Dragon had heard that name too. A boy with green eyes that had come to him as a harbinger of death. He was one of the few living that died with the Ice Dragon so that thousands could go unharmed.

"Dead I think, Meera," the auburn-haired boy rightfully concluded, trying to move his legs in vain.
"We have to leave. Bloodraven and the children of the forest are dead, and there is no food except this," he showed her a cup of strange crimson liquid.

The Ice Dragon did not like how it looked. His blackened fingertips shivered.

"I can’t be a greenseer if I die from hunger," Bran said bitterly. "I shall never walk again and much less fly. Coming here was a mistake."

Meera took a sip from the cup she was offered. "I know this," she announced with curiosity. "It tastes like herbal infusions in Greywater Watch, though the colour and the texture is wrong." She drank some more.

Brandon followed shyly the movement of her lips. Her dark hair curled with new life, either as a consequence of drinking or of Bran’s gaze, making her resemble the slender wooden statues with musical instruments the Ice Dragon had admired in… Greywater Watch. That was the name of the wooden castle in the marshes that could move at will.

The Ice Dragon remembered the giants spitting, cursing the magic of the cave. They had no love for it.

On a whim, he offered Bran Bloodraven's sword.

It was an ancestral token of his house, but the Ice Dragon did not want it. He already had his lance and he had always been a rather different member of his family, a curious man with dreams of justice and not of power and glory.

He beckoned to the boy to take it. Brandon closed his eyes and it was Hodor who came and lifted the blade before picking up the boy as well in his huge, pale arms. The boy's legs were like tiny sticks, weakened from the lack of usage. When Bran brought the cup with nourishing liquid to Hodor's mouth, the Ice Dragon lifted both arms high in the air and shook his silver head. It was not a drink suited for a giant, no matter how good-natured, he was certain of it.

The boy nodded and accepted his advice.

Lady Meera produced a tray with some ugly paste for Hodor. "Acorns," she said sadly.

"Hodor," Hodor said and ate.

Meera and Hodor carrying Bran directed themselves to the only exit the cave had at that moment. They paid no more attention to the Ice Dragon who lagged behind, wondering where this path would take them. A wildling settlement was visible through the opening, boasting a presence of people in the middle of winter. They must have food, and by the position of the stars the village was not so far from the Wall.

The cave suddenly trembled, about to change place. The only way out of it began closing. It was the first time this happened when the Ice Dragon was in it.

Meera was worried, yet not amazed.

"We won’t make it," the lady estimated, familiar with the behaviour of the cave because she… she and Jojen came from the the castle that moved, the Greywater Watch. Meera did her best to run, stretching lithe, wiry legs that must been idle for too long in her sleep, failing to catch up.

"Meera," Bran called to her with gentleness and fear. "Can't you go faster? Hodor, go back for her and carry her as well!"
“No,” she protested, “then none of us will make it. I can do it.”

Yes, you can, the Ice Dragon agreed, closing the gap between his dead old self and the very young couple in long-legged strides. He lifted the girl and carried her towards the diminishing mouth of the cave, following the giant with Bran. She cringed, surprised by the sudden, cold, unnatural proximity of his dead body, but made a brave face nonetheless, determined not to show her palpable revulsion which could be interpreted as ingratitude. He barely arrived on time to push Meera out through the vanishing doorway and he, he, the monster, the wight, stayed buried underground.

All light was gone from the cave and he could no longer glimpse the torches nor the long halls with the sleepers they illuminated.

Bran and his friends were gone. The Ice Dragon remembered the folly of the boy's attack; warging into a giant, making him use a sword in clumsy blows of a squire, not yet polished by years of spending his mornings in the training yard of men.

A young knight in the making, he thought fondly. If he could only walk...

He remembered himself, striving to learn the sword since he ceremoniously concluded from his readings that the prince that was promised should be a warrior. Within two years he acquired reasonable skill and strength despite being a prince, but he was never one of the best nor the strongest. Every achievement in the yard took time and cost him dearly, until the day they let him ride at the quintain and he was the best.

Jousting became his secret life. He was a man in every tilt and very rarely unhorsed. He had to hide the extent of his skill from his father and fall from time to time, not to provoke his fears.

He also had to hide his gift for learning. He understood very early in his childhood that despite all lessons with the maesters the princes were obliged to take, they were supposed to remain somewhat uninformed and depend on their counsellors for everyday business. Father was like this. The Ice Dragon wasn't. His mind was one of the fastest and the brightest in his generation, and he was always eager to learn more. Seeing how this was not good for a prince, he strove to appear ordinary and obedient. The only thing he could never hide was his uncommonly good looks for a man, even within his family where no one had been ugly.

At least he didn’t have to bother about obscuring his prowess with the harp nor his singing voice. Fortunately for his well-being, no son had yet usurped his father's throne by music, so the Ice Dragon’s favourite hobby did not scare Father.

He waited for the new exit to appear, not wishing to remain for long in company of his dead cousin, the decaying children of the forest and the invisible sleepers on their thrones.

To his misfortune, the cave remained doorless for days; six, maybe seven. It was hard to take exact note of the passing of time. Seized by immense sorrow, the Ice Dragon crawled into its depths, not finding any passage leading out. In the end he lay on Bran’s empty throne and slept, waiting.

Once he had a most vivid dream, about Jon barging in with a little army, enthroning Bloodraven in the middle of the cave, and burying the children.

His son that looked like his beloved wife, grown and manly, with honest black eyes.

When he woke, the cairns of the children were there, as had been his son. Who had not seen or felt or recognised his dead father. And how could he? The cave was strange beyond measure and he and his son had seen each other only once. The Ice Dragon wished he could remember when and where.
Devoid of purpose, sadder than the world, he decided to see what Bloodraven dreamed about. Maybe the Ice Dragon's punishment in death was to hop from one weirwood throne to another for all eternity. Or maybe he just needed the proximity of family for a while, even in form of a soulless corpse.

What was he then if Bloodraven was soulless? What were the wights? Corpses in which soul remained? Or corpses whose souls were replaced by a blind hatred he only avoided for the reason of having a particularly grievous past?

He did not know.

He climbed on his cousin's ancient, entwined throne, embraced him and closed his eyes to sleep. Immediately, he realised that this seat was nothing like Brandon's. It was alive, powerful, dangerous like the iron chair of his forefathers. His cousin… Bloodraven didn't command it anymore and the Ice Dragon didn't know how to proceed. What was permissible and what would be the consequence of his actions? He strove to do nothing; he did not move, he did not wish for anything, he lay extremely passively and watched.

He recognised the *Night's King* on his throne of ice, a hundred times larger and more powerful than Bloodraven's; dreaming of victory. He was not afraid of him, but of his powers. He had bested him once, though he did not know how. *Can he see other sleepers?* The Ice Dragon stayed quiet, not to reveal himself.

The enemy and his castle faded, giving way to… his only son being ambushed by the Night's King acolytes!

Jon was being driven to the sea by evil blue mists, playing tricks on his vision and reshaping the land to take him where they could easily defeat him... The Ice Dragon saw his son duelling the Other, making a mistake out of compassion that could cost him his life. His mind of a father jumped involuntarily and wildly at his son's enemy and… swept the Other away from that place by the force of the throne he sat on.

The earth trembled as he did it, disturbed.

Were there more Others in the vicinity? Yes. One was dying and changing into an old man's shape, and one still fighting the son of the Sword of the Morning. *My truest and best friend in the past.* The Ice Dragon swept both Others away as wind carries leaves, into the unknown distance. He had no knowledge where he had taken them, only the certainty that they were no longer there.

The Ice Dragon saw the grey eyes of the new Sword of the Morning open in wonder, as if the young man could have seen and recognised who helped him in the moment when the Ice Dragon banished the Others. The Ice Dragon ran away from the young man's gaze. His watchful spirit drifted and floated above Jon, spying on him and feeling sad, a hundred times sadder than the world. He did not want Jon to see what he had become from a distance. Not until he could come to him and face him as whatever he was now.

Jon's surroundings lightened with the departure of the enemy. His dragon would not tardy to find his rider on the north-western shore; a living one, not dead like his father. Jon was as safe as he could be.

With a pang of concern that the Night's King might have seen or felt his uncontrolled outburst, the Ice Dragon withdrew and stopped dreaming. He would have panted from effort if the wights could do so. He forced himself to see only darkness.

Darkness, however, hissed.
Hissing was not good, not good at all.

He opened his dead eyes to the familiar gloom of the grotto and used his dead cousin as a shield just in time. The crystal blade of the banished white walker pierced the blood-stained scar on Bloodraven's throat. His corpse began crumbling, slipping through the Ice Dragon's fingers like grains of frozen dust. He gripped his lance and descended rapidly from the weirwood throne. Astonished, he faced the Other who wanted to kill his son.

So I brought this one here. What of the other two? He could not see them. He readied himself for a pass, wishing he was horsed. Jousting went better on horseback though he had always been excellent in wielding the lance in close combat at will. Few men could do it as freely.

The Other lowered his sword and stretched a bony arm towards the Ice Dragon, curling the knuckles of the grey and blue, ghastly fingers, murmuring a command as softly as ice melted. Finally he took a very proud, lordly stance and waited.

He is commanding me to do his will because I am a wight, the Ice Dragon realised, not compelled at all to listen.

When he didn't obey, the monster launched a solid attack, clearly wishing to punish him for insolence.

The Ice Dragon was ready. His lance would have found the white walker's heart and destroyed him, if a corpse of an old man did not rise from the ground between them, previously hidden by weirwood roots. This used to be the second Other, the one who was changing back into a man when he was swept away. The old wight bit the Other under the knee with wooden teeth that clicked. A piece of twisted blue armour was missing there, facilitating the painful onslaught. The Other stumbled. As a consequence, the lance passed through his left shoulder and not through his heart of ice. The Other dropped to his knees, writhed and began morphing.

The Ice Dragon looked for the third one, eager to end his battle.

Not finding him in the cave, he dared climb on his cousin's empty throne and wished ardently to see where he had taken him. In response, he saw a cloud of pretty blue crystals drifting above the foaming surface of a cold northern sea, indomitable as his beloved wife. The Shivering Sea. This was good, the Ice Dragon knew. This enemy drowned and he had never been a man. Apparently some Others used to be human and some not. He wondered if it was possible to make a distinction in advance and if this ability would be beneficial at all.

The Others were monsters. They sowed fear, but also the desire to oppose them. It was harder to slay a fellow man than some seemingly mindless, beastlike creature of another race. The death of dragons in the past was a sad proof of this. Could his son tell? Did the knowledge almost cost him his life? If the Ice Dragon did not see Jon when he did…

Thankfully, he saw his son on time. The gods were good.

Weren't they?

Good or not, the living had to suffer.

The wights were no exception, tortured by hatred and driven forward against the living. Maybe they could have a different purpose if they were led by different masters. Or if they had no masters, like he seemed to have none.

Enthroned amidst a pile of Bloodraven's crumbling ashes, he dared look at the Night's King for a
very brief moment, fearing to reveal his presence by mistake, not knowing yet what he was and what he would be able to do. As it appeared, the enemy sovereign had not moved from his monumental seat in the heart of winter, absorbed in his musings and combinations. His castle looked familiar. The memory of a similar fortress was crucial for the dead dragon. He had to visit the true castle of winter, not its atrocious imitation made of ice. He wanted more than anything to travel there. Soon. As soon as he could make it.

The Ice Dragon abandoned the weirwood throne for good. He would not use the powers of the earth any more. They were not his to command. He thanked the gods that he was not discovered in his mad venture.

Wait…

The Others *reshaped* the lands they ruled, taking their would-be victims where they wanted them. He had seen it very clearly, but could not ponder it sooner, not while Jon and his men were in danger.

The sacred cave of the old gods, infested with weirwoods and weirwood thrones, was inhabited by the now-dead children of the forest. It hopped from place to place just like Greywater Watch… The Night King sat on a very similar, albeit more grandiose throne…

Wasn’t all this one and the same power of the earth? Were the allies and the enemies of men equal, at least in part? Were they alike? It had been like this in the past with the nobles of the realm he had known, and it was one of the most disappointing discoveries about people, though necessary to successfully deal with them. Were the gods of the north as evil and untrustworthy as the enemy of ice? What was ultimately good and what evil? Was everyone and everything the same?...

He would bow under the weight of those questions if he was mortal still.

Next to the old wight who had probably tried to help him kill the aggressive Other, not knowing his prowess with the lance, the Ice Dragon noticed a corpse of an aged, sour-faced knight in dented black armour and furs rotting from moisture, rising to standing on wobbly dead feet. The knight stumbled, gaped in bewilderment and bowed to the Ice Dragon in fear, as a bannerman guilty of serious crime, demanding mercy from his king.

The knight… this knight had fought under the dragon banners in the war that was lost on the great river, and now both liege and sworn sword recognised the faces of each other.

A harsh knowledge struck the Ice Dragon, remembering both how the Other closed on Jon with determination and joy, and how he wanted to strike at the Ice Dragon without mercy, when he believed him to be a mere disobedient wight, a *lowlife*, and not his equal. This *man*, his former *retainer*, might have accepted to become an Other willingly in order to enhance his strength.

Not so the old man with the wooden teeth who must have been taken by force. He exhibited much more fierceness in biting the remaining white walker as soon as he had his human form back, than in defending the cause of the Others when he was one of them. He had fought half-heartedly against Jon’s companion, the fat maester, who in the end stabbed the Other that possessed him to death.

If he could speak, the Ice Dragon would ask the sour knight what was the reason he so eagerly accepted the change. Was it merely a thirst for power or did he hate Jon so much in mortal life that he yearned for the immortal one only to kill him? He did not want this knight’s allegiance. Yet, unable to hear him out, he could not bring himself to destroy him, by inflicting a mortal wound with his lance whose tip held both obsidian and Valyrian steel.
So he motioned to the prostrated knight to follow him into the depth of the cave. He bid him sit on Brandon's empty throne and wrapped him in thin, still bendable weirwood branches and roots until the man was unable to move. Then, the Ice Dragon closed the knight's eyes with his black-tipped fingers and left him. In time, he hoped that the knight would doze off and become like the other sleepers who lingered in the cave, neither dead not fully alive. Until, one day, the gods would judge them all as they deserved, the Ice Dragon included.

The old wight had followed from a distance, perhaps not wanting to be alone in the magic cave and perhaps offering his allegiance in a more subtle, smallfolk way.

An odd notion crossed the Ice Dragon's mind and a strategy began to take shape. He allowed his thoughts to flourish, to fly; he did not limit his mind so as not to frighten the less intelligent men with his cleverness as he was used to. There must be more among the slain who are like him, waiting to be found and given a purpose other than melancholy and mindless hatred.

He remembered the foaming expanse of the Shivering Sea, wide, deep and lordless. The Others had no hold over it, nor did mortal men.

A dragonlord, even a cold one, needed no tool to discover and call to his kin. The dragon-binding horns were made for the lesser members of his race, and the old gods could keep their thrones. His new brothers would not fail to find him, not even in the cave that changed places. As long as he remained in it, they would be drawn to his presence. It remained to be seen whether they would listen; the blue ones, the translucent ones, those that were not fire-spitting monsters. Those that never had riders. Those whose breath was colder than his, so cold that it could freeze a man in a heartbeat.

It remained to be seen whether they existed.

The ice dragons.

In stories they were peaceful, pretty creatures that developed far from Valyria, finding joy in casual, cheerful flying over the high seas of the north as their main activity… Sailors saw them as they saw dolphins and whales, leviathans and mermaids. Despite their great beauty, the breath of the ice dragons had best be avoided. This was common knowledge among the seafarers who dared brave the Shivering Sea. It struck him that the woods witch with the white mask must have known very well why she’d given him his new name.

His bright mind flared and wandered, not dead like his body, imagining the open sky above the dark ceiling of the cave, drawing a flight path from the firm, dry, frozen lands beyond the Wall to the vivid, watery cold of the Shivering Sea, searching, tracking, pleading…

Three mounts must you ride… Was that another prophecy made for him? No, for someone else, a special young lady, his much younger sister, whose name he did not remember… who confided in him a number of oracles she’d heard over the years, one less clear than the other. He realised she was the last one now. The last one who inherited only the blood of the dragon and no other by either chance or destiny. Her enemies would do well to remember that. He recalled telling his sister that at least the number of steeds he should choose in life was not predetermined. They had both laughed. He would have chuckled stupidly at his own old quip if he could, but the wights could not experience the lightness of laughter.

His hope was now in secrecy and speed, not in prophecies. He didn't pause to think that the wights should not be able to hope. What hope was there for those already dead?

The ceiling of the cave soon opened, as though it was cut squarely by a sharp razor of ice, showing grey sky. The long, cold breath of the creature he summoned reached him, refilling his stiff body.
with new vigour. This cold was different. It tasted of light.

*Of false spring.* His melancholy returned with force as soon as he remembered it. He might be able to see his family, but not touch them. His wife would cringe from him and show a brave face if he tried. Her beauty would be veiled by her tears.

The Ice Dragon gave his hand to the wight with wooden teeth, inviting him to follow.

He would fly again.

Chapter End Notes

Any feedback would be welcome.

Thank you for reading.

Next up: the greenseer/the shadowbinder
The Shadowbinder/The Greenseer

Chapter Notes

Thank you, TopShelfCrazy for helping with this :-))

Note on chronology.

The Shadowbinder: Three to four weeks pass between Jon’s and Rhaegar’s POV and this Mel’s POV so Jon and Dany’s wedding is taking place in a week or so.

The Greenseer: it goes on from where Arya's POV ended, with the Isle of the Faces sinking and Reed beginning to sing, approximately at the same time as Jon’s and Rhaegar’s POV.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Shadowbinder

The shadow hanging over Castle Black and its surroundings was of unprecedented size and shape; shrewd and black it stretched from Deepwood Motte in the south to the Fist of the First Men in the north.

It seemed almost alive.

Melisandre blinked her red eye lashes at Stannis and his honourable, unexpected guest with feigned submission. “Yes, Your Grace,” she said. “I shall wait for you here as is your wish.”

Tycho Nestoris, the envoy of the Iron Bank, had returned from Braavos and demanded an audience with Stannis, concerning important matters other than the two loans Stannis had already obtained from him in the past, in exchange for assuming the debts left by his drunken, kingly brother.

And Stannis availed himself of this first opportunity to hold court after the disaster in Winterfell, before dealing with his noble guest, to inform Melisandre that she was not to go to the so-called royal wedding.

Lord of Light, grant me patience. Give me strength.

Melisandre withdrew very slowly to a side of Stannis’ frozen court of a few lords from stormlands and the North, who survived all his recent campaigns and stayed by his side. She wondered if any of them was truly loyal to him or just lacked a better place to be. Though perhaps she misread the flames when she concluded that Stannis was done for once he fulfilled the destiny of Azor Ahai and spent his flaming sword, presumably battling the Great Other.

The newest series of Stannis’ letters to all the nobles in Seven Kingdoms was answered this time, beyond the king’s wildest expectations. Pledges arrived from the south of late; fancy, sealed letters in support of his just claim.

Stannis gorged on them; a sign of late recognition of his stance regarding the matters of the realm, long due. Lord Hightower, Lord Tarly, Lord Redwyne, Lord Tully and some others promised fealty. Lord Hightower went as far as to claim he had kidnapped mad Cersei Lannister from Casterly Rock.
The former queen was now content to pluck daisies in the glass gardens of Oldtown. Hightower was recently widowed so he would marry her and assert his claim over Westerlands, against her son Tommen. Lord Tully and his uncle called the Blackfish assured Stannis that Dorne would probably declare for him as well, having no love for dead Rhaegar Targaryen, nor his possible heir with his alleged second wife. The conspirators had an heir to the Vale on their side as well, a blossoming young knight called Harold, who would inherit the East once his sickly cousin, Robert Arryn, unavoidably died from his incurable illness.

In sum, at least on parchment, Stannis’ claim looked more solid than ever, and in the sky it benefitted from the unwilling support of the largest living dragon.

The great change of tide would occur at the wedding. The conspirators would meet there and slowly reveal their cause, gaining more followers during and after the feast. They would call for a Great Council to take place in Oldtown and confirm Stannis as ruler.

Starks were not Freys so it was expected they would not kill anyone at a wedding, even if the realm ended up not supporting their succession to the Iron Throne. And, frankly, Lord Hightower asserted, the Wardens of the North were unusual, bloodthirsty and barbaric, with direwolves as pets. The south would never follow their lead. But if the rightful King Stannis brought Lyanna Stark to King’s Landing as his wife, he would surely win the allegiance of the North, always more loyal to the Starks than to any other of their noble families.

Princess Daenerys Targaryen did not matter as a contender for the throne, not really. She was only a woman; dragonless and barren. This meant she was as good as dead for the game of thrones. She could very well live with her Jon Snow in Winterfell. Winters were harsher and longer lasting in the north. Perhaps they would both die of exhaustion before spring and no kinslaying would be necessary. They would surely produce no heir to challenge Stannis.

Stannis did not inform anyone in his latest letters that Lyanna Stark was already with child, which was not his… Surely he expected her, Melisandre, to cleanse Lyanna in time, without further orders to do so, but he would never call that crime, no, ser. He would choose to believe that what he wanted just happened on its own, because it had to in order to foster his noble cause, just like Renly’s death.

Having heard all the pledges, Melisandre couldn't help but wonder why everyone seemed so eager to attend this unimportant wedding she would have to miss. Just like she was left behind when Stannis’ fleet set sail on the Blackwater with the aim to conquer the Iron Throne.

As far as Melisandre knew, there was no shortage of ravens in Oldtown, the seat of the Citadel. If Stannis’ cause was so well assured, Lord Hightower and his friends could have simply called for their Great Council and men would flock to Stannis and his dragon to bend the knee.

She sighed and stole another glance at her beloved shadow. She knew from the beginning that this child of hers would be larger than any other she’d created and grown over the years by any means; by either the strength of her sorcery or of her loins. How could it be any different when she drew on magic of the largest living dragon to complete her art? Yet the sheer greatness of her creation amazed, elated and… worried her. The dragon was no weaker for it as it should have been, only bigger and… stronger. Black and shadowy, darker than the Long Night that was about to fall in both colour and spirit, the animal drifted lazily over the long streams of fire it had previously let out of its maw. It always stayed well clear of the Wall. At times the beast landed on its frozen top, but never flew across it.

Stannis carefully hid his failures in making the dragon fly over the Wall from his few retainers and the brothers of the Watch. But he did not fool his daughter, whose square jaw stiffened at every unsuccessful attempt of her father; nor Davos, whose eyes watered with sadness; nor Melisandre,
who smiled knowingly.

The dragon was bound to Stannis by the power of her sorcery and the magic powders of Asshai until she could envisage a better, wiser solution. Then he would obey every command.

*All shall be well*, Melisandre told herself repeatedly, touching the swollen ruby on her throat, hoping that her efforts would not have to come to that last, final sacrifice of her hard-won dignity.

*Soon*, she thought, rejoicing that her plans were coming to fruition at last. *Just a little bit longer.*

She could be wrong about many things, but not concerning matters dearest to her aged heart.

She took a moment to consider Stannis' withered, gaunt figure, suppressing a strong desire to laugh at him and a very small pang of pity. He was not such a bad lover when he allowed his dutiful cock to peek out of his breeches. She would have considered keeping him as her pet if that had ever been a real possibility. Stannis would never follow any woman for the love of her. Not even a powerful, beautiful sorceress, and much less… She stopped her chain of unsolicited thoughts and masked her true intentions. It would not do for Stannis to glimpse them through the breadth of the dragon's mind now, nor in the few more weeks he would still spend believing he was his rider.

*Until a little bit after the bloody wedding.*

Stannis had mulled for days over the invitation signed by Lord Rickon Stark of Winterfell and Queen Lyanna Stark, widow of King Rhaegar Targaryen, on behalf of young King Jon Targaryen, First of His Name, by the grace of the gods Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm, and Princess Daenerys Targaryen, directed to their beloved good-cousin Lord Stannis Baratheon of Storm’s End.

He demanded counsel whether to accept it from Davos and even from his insipid, stone-faced daughter. He nearly asked the leader of the ensonced Unsullied for his wisdom. Proud as always, he never came to Melisandre for help when he felt he had power.

She was tired of putting up with him. And she would have been able to reveal her grand scheme to all before the wedding if the pathetic Davos, the ugly Shireen, and even her idiotic fool did not hound Stannis' every step. Since the debacle in Winterfell, they never allowed Melisandre to approach the king nor the dragon on her own. As a result, she had to apply her powers from a distance, weaving the necessary dark magic much, much slower.

She wondered why they did it. Why didn't they leave Stannis to his own devices? Didn't he show clearly enough what he was capable of? He was heartless and cruel! A man pursuing a truly just cause would never abide wanton depravity. Shireen looked at her father with nothing less than absolute contempt and cold chiding since he killed her mother and humiliated Lyanna Stark. Davos continued equally loyal in appearance, but his eyes lacked the absolute faith in Stannis they possessed before. Absorbed in his own plans and dreams of glory, Stannis did not even notice this change. Only Patchface remained the same as ever, ringing little bells.

Melisandre carefully avoided all contact with the face-tattooed fool. She cringed from his inadvertent song about the end of the world and her life-hardened heart froze with dread. The Westerosi were so uncouth. It was small wonder none of them understood the fool.

*The shadows dance under the sea, oh I know, I know.*

The song presaged the end of all things, or rather, the end of Westeros, as Melisandre was determined to understand it. The little green sorcerer she began seeing in her fires of late had
fortunately seen to it that Westeros and Essos remain separated so that the doom of one continent would not spill over to the other. She was truly grateful to this Lord… Reed for sparing her the trouble of having to do the same, and wasting the sorcery she required for a more important task.

Perhaps there was hope for Westeros as well, but that was not Melisandre's business. Not at all. The Westerosi could very well save themselves or fall into ruin. Melisandre cared not for the fate that would befall them.

She had been more than fair. She showed Stannis how to embrace the destiny of Azor Ahai, foretold for him by the Lord of Light, and forge the sword of heroes. No one could say that she did not deliver on her promises.

Lord Snow also seemed very intent to oppose the Long Night in the making. Melisandre marvelled that he did not become a servant of the Great Other as he well should have after his untimely death. Between him and Stannis, one might succeed to save their world. It was not Melisandre’s cup of tea to wonder which one.

Shivering from real fear, she remembered the stone lords and kings from the crypts of Winterfell… She was happy she would never see them again. She’d much rather set sail to Stygai and be lost forever under the Shadow. Her trusted, sacred flames revealed nothing about the lost Kings of Winter nor of a strange demand they placed on dragons; that the dragons should honour a compact, concluded in the past… It was… it was… as if Lord of Light, omniscient, omnipotent, was not aware of this.

*Perhaps it is a lie then.*

Yet the king who looked like bearded Jon Snow sounded honest in his outrage, expecting *better* from the black dragon. His greatsword absorbed and withstood dragonfire…

This meant that the ice might yet prevail over the fire. If the stone kings could resist it, why not the minions of the Great Other with their crystal swords? The thought was unbearable. *Fire* was destined to win. At least in her part of the known world.

One day she would be merciful and receive with kindness the survivors of the doom of Westeros if there were any. Perhaps one of them would replace Stannis in her bed, help her birth little shadows with the fire of his body.

Tycho Nestoris finally spoke after long lasting silence, seeing how His Grace would not be the first to initiate conversation. Stannis expected humility and subservience from petitioners in his court. This requirement was self-understandable in his kingly opinion.

"The City of Braavos has a trade to offer," Nestoris announced, tall, thin and stern under a high, triangular hat in three tears, purple like his robes. Just like Melisandre, the man apparently never changed clothing. She wondered how he kept the attire clean without using the powders of the shadowbinders. *It must be the chill. He doesn’t stink in winter because he suffers from the cold like everyone else alive.*

*Everyone except for me.*

Nestoris produced a simple iron coin from his purple robes and showed it to Stannis, glaring at the king, as if he expected immediate understanding of his embassy upon the presentation of that poor token. “*Valar morghulis,*” he uttered solemnly.
Valar dohaeris, Melisandre answered habitually and politely in her head. In Essos, it was the norm.

Despite his refined Southron heritage, praised by Lord Hightower, Stannis was very blunt even by Westerosi standards, and completely unacquainted with the courtesies of the finer parts of the world.

"I have no business with the City of Braavos," His Grace declared instead of answering the greeting as he should have done. "And I have yet to assume my treasury in King’s Landing. Before that, I shall not engage in any trade deals nor shall I be able to honour the debts left by my unworthy brother as I promised. If this is what you came asking for again, my lord. I can assure you that you have no cause to doubt the word I have already given," he finished harshly.

Melisandre could see on the gaunt Braavosi face that this answer was not only impolite, but entirely misplaced and wrong. She did not understand what the Braavosi wanted with his coin, and even if she did, she would not inform the king unless he demanded. She only ever did what Stannis desired, didn’t she? He wanted to kill Renly, he wanted to take Storm’s End, he killed his wife to fulfil his promised destiny and he chose his new, unwilling bride who would give him the trueborn male heir foreseen by the flames.

Joramun.

"Then perhaps I am in the wrong place, and I should travel further to seek those who may understand the need and the value of the trade Braavos is proposing," the emissary of the Iron Bank said with disappointment, slipping the coin back into his pocket. He eyed the shadow hanging above him with apprehension and demanded humbly, "If I may have a horse, if it please you, Your Grace. My ship is docked in Eastwatch and the mount I borrowed there died when I passed under the shadow... I wanted to say when I arrived at Castle Black."

"Find one yourself," Stannis said curtly. "The Watch decides what to do with their horses. They answer to no king."

"As you say, Your Grace," the Braavosi bowed in a swift, business-like manner and abandoned the king’s presence.

Melisandre followed him with her ruby-red gaze, curious as to how he would fare.

Tycho Nestoris wandered through the courtyard of Castle Black, alone. No one paid him any attention. Stannis and his men, twenty in total, including his Hand, his daughter and her fool, disappeared in the rickety towers of the keep, in preparations to depart to the wedding. Half a league south from Castle Black, the black dragon drowsed in the woods, waiting to take the king back to Winterfell.

Tycho Nestoris never had time to find the stables. Frankly, it was already a miracle he survived his mount long enough to talk to the king. The Braavosi emissary halted in the middle of the yard. As if thunderstruck, he collapsed in the snow. His pointy hat rolled from his head. His robes spread around him like a poisoned blood stain. He would look more dead than his horse before him, if death had gradations.

Such was the price of stepping uninvited under the shadow.

Melisandre shed a warm, flaming tear for Tycho. She had not seen him coming or she would have woven him into her spell, as she did for all those living under it, for protection.

But she could not see everything at once...

The dragon roared in the distance, unsatisfied. Melisandre could understand the beast. She would
also be contraried if superior magic reduced her to a state not better than that of a mindless firewyrm, condemned to bore tunnels in the mines of Valyrian ore for its ruthless masters.

There was too much death around Melisandre, needless death... She regretted whenever it came to pass.

But the cause she followed was neither just nor noble. It was simply necessary and dear to her heart. As a result, some losses could not be avoided…

Melisandre continued crying, struck by the realisation that no one would ever know what the City of Braavos wanted to offer to the rightful King of Seven Kingdoms nor what they wanted in return.

The black dragon harrumphed in the sky, calling to Stannis.

Deep in the night, His Grace and his retinue flew to Deepwood Motte. The Unsullied marched after him on foot, following the cracking of the whip in Melisandre's unblemished hands. Asha Greyjoy did well; she had brought the scorch to Winterfell and changed the allegiance of the Unsullied. Melisandre took the whip back during her memorable visit to the capital of the North. The first one, and the last one if the choice was hers. Unsullied were hers to command now. She obliged them to take small rations of frozen food from the cellars of Castle Black for their journey, wishing they would make it to the wedding.

Stannis would not leave his new enchanted army to defend the Wall, only the black brothers, his red woman and her black shadow.

*It is for the best that they walk,* Melisandre told herself wistfully, faced with the stoic suffering of the soldier-slaves. *Less chance of freezing.*

She prayed fervently to her God for the success of her actions. She wove and wove her dark spell of binding and rekindled her fire, until the pale dawn of one of the last winter mornings before the Long Night took over.

When she looked at the Wall through her window, her cherished shadow had become *less* dark despite all her efforts to make it thicker. The Wall shone in weak sunshine, inexorably so, blue and beautiful.

The attackers arrived with the morning light…

They did not approach the outpost by land nor from *under* the shadow. They came from *above* it and took the castle without fighting and loss of life. The green dragon opened a hole in Melisandre's creation, ripping it apart with red and *bronze* flames. His rider and his betrothed were the first to land, followed by a small, hand-picked host of *Southron* looking men. Each soldier looked braver than the last and the royal couple that led them most courageous of all. Second in line came a silver-haired knight, handsome like Rhaegar Targaryen, just far too green for Melisandre's taste; as young as Jon Snow. There was also a lordling with Arryn sigil, holding a great falcon on his arm. If that was the boy destined to die, according to the letters Stannis received, he was doing rather well. By the healthy red of his cheeks, it seemed that his cousin Harold would not inherit the Wardenship of the East any time soon.

Melisandre waited for her fate, confident that she would continue breathing in the new order on the Wall. Lord Snow had never been a killer, and her life was all she needed be spared; she held the rest of her power in her hands.

"Lord Snow," Bowen Marsh hurried to acknowledge his commander, who looked pale and as if he
was about to say something extremely unpleasant or slap the older man as a naughty boy.

"He helped me as he knew how," Daenerys said on the behalf of the old pomegranate.

*Did he? When?* It was something Melisandre missed. She had to be more careful, now that she was so close, so close to her goal…

"Did he now?" Jon asked the same thing, unconvinced. And to Marsh he said, "I am no longer your commander. That was the man you killed. The punishment for murder is death or taking the black, which you already did, my lord, so I deem you chastised enough."

"But," Marsh squirmed, needing to apologise, perhaps. Men were so pitiful when their conspiracies and transgressions were uncovered.

"I-" the wrinkled pomegranate stuttered.

"Spare me your excuses," Jon said dryly and left his murderer to stand alone, directing himself to the middle of the yard where he addressed his former sworn brothers with candid ardour.

"Men of the Night's Watch," Jon thundered, "you will elect one among yourselves to lead you as is your custom. But until this winter is over, the Wall shall be mine! For I see no one else here more determined to defend it."

Despite witnessing Jon's death in person and not merely foreseeing it in her flames, now that she saw him again, Melisandre would swear he was alive. *How is that possible? Who did it?* She couldn't stop wondering about it, admiring the work of the unknown wizard with more power than she had. She could never bring a man back from his death.

When he was done with his little speech, Jon grasped the hand of his betrothed and climbed the stairs of the decrepit tower leading to Melisandre's room. "Where is Stannis?" he asked her without a greeting, as if they were best friends who saw each other only a moment ago, or worse, as if she owed him the answer.

"Gone to your wedding," she said placidly, not betraying how insulted she felt. "Didn't you know he was invited?"

"I believe I was apprised of the full list of our potential guests," Jon answered with the utmost arrogance of youth. "And Stannis should have graciously declined to come, if he has any honour left."

"Has anyone declined?" Melisandre wondered aloud. By the flash in Jon’s dark gaze she concluded that the answer was no. Every noble of any importance and even those of no importance would attend the bloody wedding. Except for her. "And where is your wolf?" Melisandre dared a little provocation. "I told you before to keep him close. What if you are wrong in trusting your dragon?"

"My trust is my own to give or take," Jon cut her off.

His princess kept quiet. What she had on her mind was a mystery to Melisandre. In retrospect, Jon and Rhaegar, his father, were the only men she encountered in Westeros who were neither afraid of Melisandre nor impressed by her beauty. And they didn't like her, pure and simple. Daenerys, related to both, let no emotion show on the smooth perfection of her face. *A young girl who knows little of the ways of war.* As a couple, Jon and Daenerys exhaled an air of quiet reassurance and happiness.

Melisandre envied them so much that it hurt.
“I will have this, as a spoil of war, my love, if you trust me to take it,” Daenerys said all of a sudden, seizing the whip which controlled the Unsullied from the mantelpiece. Her face remained unstained by any perturbation apart from that annoying aura of joy she emanated with all her being.

“By all means, Dany,” Jon granted generously the request of his princess. “Why do you have to ask?” Then he stared at Melisandre and her fire with an unsolved quandary and a terrible accusation in his black eyes. His fists clenched and unclenched.

Melisandre did not blink at her small defeat. She had no absolute need of the Unsullied anymore. Jon’s woman could have them and feed them in winter if she so wanted. But the shadowbinder could honestly not understand what fuelled Jon's newly aggressive and not just sullen attitude against her. She only ever tried to help him in the past, because he never attempted to harm her, unlike Davos and all those other Westerosi fools who tried to murder her. She had nothing to gain from assisting Jon Snow. It was just that, in matters that did not jeopardise her life's work, she sometimes permitted herself to labour out of goodness of the heart. Was that so hard to understand? Is it my fault, Lord Snow, that you keep choosing the path of danger, where your demise is to be found?

She sighed and rekindled her fire.

Surprisingly, her shadow was dispersed and weakened by Jon’s arrival. His dragon had become bigger than Melisandre expected. Absent-mindedly, she wondered how Lord Hightower and his friends meant to overcome that tiny, ever growing problem… But of course, they believed that His Grace commanded the biggest beast! Melisandre would laugh so sweetly at the ridiculous notion of Stannis being a dragonrider if the occasion of pretending she was defeated was fit for laughter, and if the ugly green animal did not ruin her unique shadow. She would have to patch it around the area of Castle Black that now escaped her influence, and labour hard to finish her spell in time for her plans.

She would not wait here for the Long Night to fall.

In truth, Jon should be grateful to her for defending his Wall. The Great Other would not be able to besiege Castle Black as long as the power of R'hllor stretched all the way to the Fist of First Men. Jon would have done well to leave her shadow alone.

But if she told him that, he would not believe her in his righteousness, just like Stannis told her to stay away from Jon’s wedding.

"I suppose you still see Stannis as Azor Ahai in the flames?" Jon asked very darkly, struggling to observe the minimum of courtesies.

For a fleeting moment, Melisandre worried he might hit her, if only she were a man and not a helpless lady.

“How can you?” Jon yelled at her, raising his arms with powerless outrage, instead of landing them on her figure. “After all he did?"

“You see, in this you are wrong, Your Grace,” Melisandre answered truthfully, collected and devoid of emotion, ignoring her royal guests and staring attentively into the fire. “Since I came to the Wall, whenever I ask the flames to show me Azor Ahai, all I see is snow."

The Greenseer

The gods were wrong.
For the second time in his life, the greenseer doubted their wisdom. He did it once before, under the high walls of a great tower in Dorne, now long crumbled into dust. They were seven against three… Good men killed each other for honour, not for justice, and he was the only one left, to mourn and to remember.

Howland Reed travelled from Winterfell to the Isle of Faces with great urgency. His latest green dream, dreamed between two cups of the wonderful wine from Barrowtown served at Lyanna’s table, suggested that the sanctuary would sink now, before the world did. He had very little time according to his vision. His sense of impending doom mounted when he was not admitted to the island together with Arya Stark, and had to row to it.

He had a duty to accomplish while the Isle of the Faces still stood, the symbol of the pact between the children of the forest and the First Men; the holy place. A song of the earth intoned amidst so many eyes of the gods would be heard all over Westeros. Its melody would travel over the high seas and shatter the frozen Arm of Dome. The enemy of ice would not be able to cross the narrow sea and enlarge his domain, if he ever conquered Westeros.

Reed had learned this song from the greenseer who had come before him in Greywater Watch, in preparation for the Long Night, if it fell during his time. Now it would die on his lips because he would not be able to teach it to the greenseer that came after; his son, Jojen, who passed away prematurely.

The lord of the crannogs had walked for fifty days. He rowed a self-made boat to the Isle of Faces in order to sing this old song.

He had never thought it would come to this.

In their rising wrath against the evil times, the gods condemned to death Reed’s companions, enlisted by him to help him on the quest to mend the Horn of Winter. The gods mistook them for the heartfelt servants of the enemy of fire.

Thoros and Gendry were deceived by R’hllor like so many others, praying to the demon of the flames, calling him Lord of Light. Reed’s friends longed for the warmth of life promised by the false god, they did not wish to birth his shadows.

Couldn't the gods see this?

Tom Sevenstreams did not share their faith, yet he now floated, lifeless, on the whirling surface of the lake, drowned and swollen. His woodharp had disappeared, consumed by the raging mass of water.

And a young girl was held guilty and rejected by the gods for not keeping her heart immaculately white and pure after she was forced to see her father beheaded and suffer extreme hardships. Men grown would have done worse than she did. So what if Arya Stark killed in the past? Was she the only person in existence guilty of taking a life that could have been spared?

Howland Reed was forced to kill Ser Arthur Dayne at the Tower of Joy, having no better choice, and he regretted it ever since. He had a green dream of murdering Ser Arthur the first time he visited the Isle of Faces and spent a night there, as a very young man on his way to the Great Tourney of Lord Whent in Harrenhal...

Weren't the men free to live and to worship? To do right or wrong? Could they not always change for the better? Were they not to die no matter what they did? Was it not enough that the Long Night was coming for everyone? Wasn't that what prompted the anger of the gods, the givers of life?
The Starks were wargs and skinchangers for generations, just as greenseers were always born in the Neck. Both abilities were special gifts from the gods.

Arya Stark could have used her gift to bend the will of the trees and travel to Braavos, straight to the temple with the black and white door; for the white wood in that doorway was weirwood, the mightiest of trees... She needed no special hair or eye colour to enforce her wishes. She could do it just like she had donned her wolf skin to talk to Drogon. She could have brought back the Horn of Joramun.

Yet she chose not to go before her love was safe. Not when she still had time. She challenged the trees and their judgement of her and went where she truly wanted to go, following her heart.

To the Isle of Faces, to save Gendry.

Reed had thought... he believed her too young to care, and the boy too handsome, too ambitious to be faithful. He thought they would kiss on the sly for a year and drift apart... He was older when he gave his heart to his wife and he had kissed girls before that, between the swaying reeds and blue irises. No harm had ever come from honest kissing.

But Lyanna, his best friend, his only living friend, she was not much older than her niece when she lost her heart to Rhaegar...

The greenseer swam under the murky water that smelled of home, holding his breath and cursing the gods. He could dive longer than anyone among his people and they were all well-used to being under water.

Howland Reed had to choose. He could break the Arm of Dorne and save himself on the paths of the old gods, leaving his friends to die.

Or he could stay and die with them when his long breath was totally spent.

But when he thought of Arya Stark, drowned and swollen like Tom O'Sevens, in his resentment he challenged the gods, refusing the choices he was given.

Another song burst from his throat, one he was never taught to sing.

From its sound, he changed and grew taller. He looked at his limbs, stretching; he felt his ears, tapering; he felt his chest, growing an extra lung, he felt his hair, curling. The unknown and the ancient woke in him. He was strong and he saw the Isle of the Faces as the gods saw it. No, not the gods, never the gods, the children. The old race that had magic. He heard the rustle of Arya Stark’s thoughts in the gushing of water.

This is the God's Eye. Arya reminded the greenseer of the truth he’d known and long since forgotten. The God's Eye.

The only place on earth where a child of the forest could see through the eye of the gods if the child’s song pleased them.

Reed continued the new song with all his heart, causing the water to ebb and to withdraw, until his surviving friends and the little green men sat on dry land, coughing out the excess of water. His body glowed and burned from the effort. He sang to the island to stay afloat because there was still hope for the world.

And finally he sang to the Arm of Dorne the way he was taught to do, and it felt as if hundreds of thousands of his dead ancestors sang in a chorus with him. He saw the high seas between Essos and
Sunspear rise like a giant hammer of waters from his chant, and break the ice for good. Seeing the power of the weapon he had called forth and deployed by his chanting, the greenseer believed that the seas around Westeros would not turn to ice any time soon, perhaps not in a thousand years. If his home was lost, if the gods decided to let the continent sink in the future, only the green and the blue of the water would remain. The evil of the land would die with it. With that, Reed did what he could to prevent the greatest harm; the expansion of the enemy of ice.

The greenseer’s strength diminished rapidly when the last notes of the music evaporated from his mouth.

He had very nearly spent himself in a single song.

You were wrong, he challenged his gods, still angry with them. Why kill a sweet-voiced, old singer? Why attempt to kill an aged, scrawny priest of another faith? A young couple full of hope?

Reed did not blame the gods for trying to kill him, for perhaps he deserved death, having lived enough.

Longer than his son.

In the middle of his desperation, the God’s Eye opened for him, as a reward for the song of the earth he shaped and chanted in need, and then he saw...

His reward or maybe his punishment...

He saw… what he had never seen, nor expected to, what he would never be able to see in Greywater Watch; the past too ancient to dream about.

The children of the forest battled the giants. Bronze blades clashed on stone clubs. Neither side was winning or losing.

The children liked music; the complex harmonies, the melancholy trilling of strings, the soft blowing of wooden flutes, and pretty, carved instruments. The giants broke their lutes, not understanding their convoluted beauty.

The giants rumbled and drummed rhythmic, monotone songs of their own, writing them down for little giant children with red earth. The children of the forest burned the white bear skins the songs were written upon, thinking them filthy or bloodied, not seeing they contained music of a different kind than what they found pleasing to hear.

Both races understood goodness and beauty and yet they continued to fight. The children were too slippery and skilled warriors to be defeated, and the giants too big and too strong. Try as they might, they could not exterminate each other…

When the First Men came, they established dealings with both races. Their approach to the autochtone communities varied. They could either battle the giants or the children, or engage in trade. They could live side by side and even procreate with descendants of the other two peoples in times of relative stability, while the giants and the children never coupled nor founded mixed societies.

The men worked hard like ants, building holdfasts and plowing the fields. Their occupation was not peaceful. Bloody wars ensued because everyone wanted the same territories. Men, more fertile than the other two races, slowly became so great in number that the children could only find peace to play and listen to their music in the groves and hollow hills. The giants preferred to drum their repetitive compositions in the solitude and the freedom of the high mountains.
The three races continued opposing each other, but the hatred between the children and the giants ran deeper and was older...

One day, the children, who thought themselves the cleverest and the closest to the gods because they knew the magic of the earth, sang a beautifully blue song of winter. They created transparent beings of ice, carrying pretty, sharp crystal blades. They were to march on the giants in the far north and bring them to heel, force them to perform the songs that the children wanted and play pretty instruments.

But the beings of ice encountered men as they headed to face the giants… men who were resourceful and always changed strategies to ensure their survival. Somehow, the men and the white walkers joined … merged … At least some of them. Just like some men kept company to the giants or the children of the forest…

Soon after, the white walkers freed themselves from the tutelage of the children, their makers. They multiplied as the winter deepened, slaying men and children and forcing their undead bodies to serve them as mindless slaves who hated all life. But they could never enslave the giants, only kill them, in their lands in the far north.

So came the first Long Night; one of many… When it ended, the giants were estranged from all other races in their mountainous shelters. Their losses were so great and their torture at the hands of the white walkers so unbearable that they almost lost the gift of speech. They were later thought to be little more than animals.

That spring, the men proposed a pact of understanding to the children, who willingly accepted. They felt guilty and withdrew deep into their groves and hollow hills on purpose, dwindling significantly in numbers, singing less and less the song of the earth, fearing their power of direction and creation they had once embraced so freely. Only the bravest among them stayed in the open, on the Isle of the Faces, and lived like the little green men since the dawn of time; the guardians of the peace. But not even they dared use their songs to reshape the world as the children of old. They were content to preserve the trees in their growing splendour and honour the gods by their prayers.

The lifespan of men was so short in comparison with the children that they soon forgot the first Long Night. They did not yet learn their letters and could not take note of the events for posterity. They forgot the crime of the children, and the past greatness and the losses of the giants. Most of all, they forgot their own role in liberating the white walkers and making them stronger. They told their children how the children of the forest were all dead or lost, how the giants were rare beasts or brutes vaguely resembling men, and how the white walkers had nothing to do with people, if they existed at all. Finally, the men called the white walkers Others, those who were not like them, and mentioned them daily in curses that had lost all meaning… For how could beings that did not exist take anyone?

The truth was different. The old races lingered on the fringes of the continent, there was giant blood and blood of the children in men, and there was a secret link between the men and the white walkers from the beginning of time.

The greenseer now knew whose blood he had. He understood whose songs he inherited and why they could help steer the Greywater Watch in its constant movement. He realised why his castle and especially the music-making sculptures of the children had always rejected tall men…

The hatred between the children and the giants was indeed old and it ran deep…

Will it ever be forgotten?

Howland longed to see more, wished to know how the first Long Night ended and when and how
the Wall was built. He yearned to discover how many long nights there had been and what was done each time to bring the dawn.

Instead, he returned to present out of self-preservation. Maybe not the present… to a very recent past. The enemy of ice, the King of the Others, sat on his mighty throne in the Lands of Always Winter. He watched every passage and every road, laughing at the old gods and their secret ways, asserting his domination over the white trees and the labyrinth created by their roots in the far north beyond the Wall.

The Night’s King did not fear the wrath of the gods…

For only a living man could kill him…

Not a wight, and not a god.

Reed’s body shrank and shrivelled from dread. His unusual strength and changed body parts were gone. He was again a very short, aged, lythe crannogman, with only a drop of blood of the children, passed on to him by his ancestors over the millennia.

With his green eyes wide open, he found himself seated on the dark-pebbled beach where the boat lay, the little vessel he and Lady Arya had used to reach the Isle.

Arya Stark glanced at him with new eyes, looking strikingly like Lyanna and yet being so profoundly herself.

“What was that?” she asked, feigning to be unimpressed by what he did.

“A song.” Reed smiled vaguely.

“It didn't sound like Florian and Jonquil to me,” Arya's said dryly, not letting him easily of the hook.

“No it didn't,” Reed agreed, unable to talk about his new knowledge immediately, wishing to see her aunt soon.

In Lyanna’s sparkling company, he always forgot all his hurts and sorrows. And he always had hope, even when Lyanna despaired. There was only one Knight of the Laughing Tree and she would not be easily unhorsed.

Gendry and Thoros were burying Tom of Sevenstreams and his woodharp, which had reappeared with the departure of water, under soft weirwood leaves. There were no stones on the Isle of the Faces, no marble to make a tomb. The auburn growth would have to suffice.

*The shame of the children is my shame.*

For if his remote ancestors with pointy ears did not choose to sing the Others into life in their arrogance, the men could not have come into contact with them nor help them transform into what they were now. There would be no Long Night.

The greenseer could influence the world. When angry, he could halt the deluge by his song. When determined, he could wield the hammer of waters. When dreaming, he could see the uncertain future and use his visions to do good.

He could do all this, but he could not defeat the Others.

The children of the forest and their descendants were completely helpless before their own creation,
that was never supposed to slay or enslave anyone, only make the giants listen to the children’s superior reason… The Others should have never turned the edges of their pretty glass swords against their makers..

The little green men bowed to Reed with sad expression. “Now you know”, they murmured so that only he could hear them. “What we are, what you are.”

The children of the children went their way, tending to the orchard of the white trees on the Isle.

"Until next time," they waved the greenseer good-bye as they were leaving, scratching pointy, leaf-coloured ears. “Perhaps you will care to join us when you are older.”

“Thank you,” Howland said, “It is kind of you.”

The blood of the children ran pure in the guardians of the peace. And Howland Reed had always been a man, despite his short stature, his green dreams and mixed origin. He did not know if he wanted to accept the invitation to spend his last years on the Isle, although he was grateful for it.

Maybe if he did so, he would find peace as well.

All the mouths of the trees were serious, all eyes were closed. The enemy would not be able to see their faces nor their sacred island if he was still looking.

"Come," Reed told his surviving companions, gathered around the grave of Tom Sevenstreams. "We have to build a bigger boat and go back to Winterfell."

"Can't we just…?" Gendry gestured at the sleeping expression of the nearest weirwood.

"No," Reed said warily. “The paths are closed. It is not safe to wander through the trees anymore. The enemy is watching them.”

"We’ll do as he says," Lady Arya deferred to the judgement of the greenseer.

He would do his best to ensure their return and give the terrible secret of the origin of the Others to Lyanna’s son. He hadn’t forgotten how to travel on foot or by boat. He would do his best, but his best might not be good enough.

Howland wished that Arya was right to trust his abilities, but since Jojen died, he found it hard to believe in himself. He hadn’t seen how Meera fared for long, but at least he had hope she was alive.

Gendry stared eagerly at the sleeping trees and then stole a look full of longing at Lady Arya. He opened his mouth to say something, to remind her of her hasty offer of marriage, perhaps, but then his eyes halted on his dead friend, Tom, in his bed of velvety weirwood leaves. He instantly lost either the courage or the desire to speak.

Thoros prayed aloud to Lord of Light for Tom o’Sevens, and yet the old gods did not strike him down.

Reed smiled and bowed deeply to the somnolent trees, humble and humiliated, understanding…

The gods were never wrong.

He had been blind in his anger, but his honest mistake had given him the strength and the courage to sing. What was the power of water when compared to the power of hope his chant had voiced?

_The Long Night has come and gone before..._
The gods never deviated Gendry’s, Thoros’ and Tom’s path through their domain out of wish to condenn them - they merely let the innocent travellers, unfamiliar with the power of the trees, into their sanctuary, which was intact and out of reach of the Night’s King claws, though he had usurped their secret pathways.

The green men didn’t mark the stomachs of the newly arrived men with tree sap for the traditional execution of enemies in the North as both Reed and Lady Arya erroneously assumed and feared. They did it to offer their hospitality, and treat the accidental visitors as honourable guests. They tied them to the trees in order to better draw complex ornamental designs on their bodies. The guests had to remain still throughout the ritual to guarantee good results and the treatment was rather ticklish, as many visitors to the Greywater Watch had complained to Reed over time.

Tarly and his girl must have reached Winterfell because they journeyed entangled, not one after another like Gendry and Arya. Gilly was a wildling, of the north, so the gods had let her go, believing she knew the risks and decided to travel nonetheless.

For the same reason they allowed Reed and Lady Arya as close as possible to their true destination, without revealing to the enemy the whereabouts and the hidden power of the Isle of the Faces.

But by the time Reed and Arya finished rowing to the island, the enemy’s desire to conquer and the force of his gaze from his throne must have become even greater and more dangerous. The little green men, the island guardians, must have sensed the end of the world before it truly came. Rather than risk being overtaken by the blue mists, they decided to call the hammer of waters on themselves and ruin their sanctuary. Reed could understand now why the guardians chose the terrible sacrifice...

What would the Night’s King see in the God’s Eye? What would he be able to do? Freeze the world? Reshape it to his liking? End all life? Sing a song of always winter?

Reed shivered at the thought.

It was worse than Lyanna believed.

The alliance of men from all Seven Kingdoms, friends and foes, might not suffice to defeat the Others. The heritage of the elder races within the race of men had to be recognised and valued. This would not come easy. Men were often obsessed with the purity of lineages, at least outwardly, and doing their best to ignore their free nature which led them to mate and fall in love with very different partners. The last of the children, as well as the giants, should be enlisted in the effort. The three races should work together...

The greenseer felt very shaky, weary and ghost-like when he began to pluck reeds and branches of lesser trees growing from the shallow water, and gathering mud necessary for boat patching and further construction. A baby kingfisher peeped weakly in its nest, reminding Reed so terribly and painfully of home.

He wished he were in Greywater Watch; to swim among lizard-lions and be strong again.

Had he sung only a little bit longer and delved deeper into the abyss of time revealed to him by the God’s Eye, Reed would have died that day and all his new knowledge would pass away with him.

He was glad he could resist the curiosity.

He had to tell the prince that was promised what he discovered about the enemy.

“We row to Winterfell, don’t we?” Lady Arya asked, offering a helping hand with boat building.
“Yes,” the greenseer confirmed heartily. “We row, we walk, we sledge and we skate if we have to. If we find horses, we ride. And if we see a blue mist, we stay clear of it.”

It was past time they went, if they wanted to arrive on time.

The greenseer would not miss the occasion for the life of him.

The wedding of ice and fire.

Chapter End Notes

Comments make the world go round :-(

Next up: Lyanna
“Men of good fortune, often cause empires to fall
While men of poor beginnings, often can't do anything at all
(...)  
Men of good fortune, very often can't do a thing
While men of poor beginnings, often can do anything”

Lou Reed

Lyanna

The winter roses were dying. They thrived in the cold, but could not grow without the light which had slowly deserted the world.

*Let there be sunshine for the wedding*. Lyanna voiced a mute wish to the old gods, reluctant to pray in earnest. She'd rather not know what the gods thought of her. But Jon and Daenerys deserved to say their vows in the light of day and not at the time of torches. Soon after, the Long Night would fall. Lyanna shivered at the thought. She never expected to see it in her lifetime.

She plucked one of the last blue flowers protruding from a chunk of ice and smelled it; delicious and sweet. She felt herself to be a winter rose, fading slowly.

“My lady, he’s here!” Steelshanks barged into the godswood; grim, hurried and blunt, with two more of his men.

Lyanna steeled herself. She had expected this. She had suspected this most unwelcome guest might arrive now, when she was once more the only Stark in Winterfell. But this time the castle was hers. The memory of her humiliation would *not* weaken her.

She felt fragile nonetheless, wishing to be surrounded by her family, and not only men-at-arms.

“Let us be done with this,” she said brusquely and walked in front of her guards. *Others take him!* She would not waste more time than necessary on Stannis Baratheon.

Many guests had already arrived to Winterfell before him.

Lord Hightower was among the first. The Redwynes. Lord Tarly. Edmure Tully, his wife and son. More riverlords. Bracken and Blackwood both. A small party of Freys, ugly and fearful. Willas
Tyrell with a very large party from Highgarden. Everyone from the North. The men of the Vale still had to reach Winterfell by land from the Eastwatch-by-the Sea and their young lord was with Jon and Daenerys on the Wall.

To Lyanna's utmost surprise even the exiled Prince Jalabhar Xho from the Summer Isles made it to the capital of the North in his coat of feathers, and pleaded with King Jon to help him restore his homeland… This unwillingly added a new dimension to Jon's claim, when even the foreigners began to notice its existence.

*It will be a wedding to remember.*

The last absences were even more notable than the arrivals. *Jon Connington. Varys.* Something was very amiss in King's Landing when not even a raven flew back to Winterfell with any news.

*The Lannisters of Casterly Rock…*

*And the Martells of Dorne …*

If Jon could secure their loyalty, his succession would be ensured. The allegiance of House Tyrell, House Arryn and the North looked steadfast at the moment. The Westerlands and Dorne on Jon's side, the absence of stormlands, the anarchy in the Iron Islands and the always malleable situation in the riverlands would not be enough to form a stable axis of support for another claimant, or so Lyanna hoped.

Jon and Daenerys had done an admirable job of meeting their guests, though Lyanna suspected they couldn’t repeat all the names. Truth be told, neither could she. The large parchment with the sitting arrangements for the wedding occupied the sewing table in her chambers, changing every day with new arrivals, and should soon be complete.

After the wedding she might sew, if her not so young eyes were still as sharp as those of her eagle. A shirt or two for her baby in the light of the candles and torches.

Or she might stab someone with a needle, if she thought it twice over. The lord who just spoke.

"Bread and salt, if it please you," Stannis rattled, interrupting her chain of thoughts, not waiting for her greeting. "I shall not allow to be treated dishonourably by my rebellious lady wife under the roof of her honourable fathers."

"Welcome, Lord Baratheon," Lyanna forced herself to address courteously her most unwanted guest, combating the mounting revulsion. "The refreshments shall be brought immediately as is your wish," she added calmly, but coolly, and finished with the phrase she rehearsed for this moment, should Stannis dare appear. "As a sign of good will. A wedding is an occasion of peace."

One of Steelshanks' men was already halfway to the kitchens. Winterfell was alive in the middle of a terrible winter. Perhaps her mother would be proud of her.

"I have no good will for you, woman," Stannis continued being less than polite, "but I will treat you justly once you acknowledge my claim and my rights over you."

"I shall not remarry," Lyanna informed him. "Nor discuss your allegations."

"The kingdoms will," Stannis said courageously.

"That they will," Lyanna was forced to agree.
History would probably judge Stannis severely, and Lyanna much more than him. Had she done better in her past, terrible consequences would have been avoided.

Humbled, she partook mutely of the bread and salt, had a sip of milk instead of wine, and waited until Stannis and his retinue did the same, paying a side look to Lord Davos and Lady Shireen who looked utterly embarrassed. Yet they maintained their silence.

*Suit yourself*, she thought wilfully. *Or join us if you ever find your courage.*

Lady Alyssanne Mormont lurked behind everyone, probably eager to join her mother and sisters. *At least something good will come out of this.*

"If that would be all," Lyanna observed scantily. "I trust that you will find your accommodation in order."

She had assigned to the Baratheons a decent, but very sober set of rooms on the first floor, near Lord Hightower's more elaborate quarters. Stannis would doubtlessly see any lodging as a slight, unless she dutifully admitted him in her bed.

*Over my dead body.*

The party of the Baratheons was small and the black dragon who must have brought them was nowhere to be seen, just as Lyanna… expected.

She gestured to her guards to show Stannis to his chambers, too sick to say anything further. Fortunately, Lord Baratheon interpreted her silence as weakness. He followed her people with a satisfied smirk on his withered, gaunt face. Lyanna found it extremely difficult to continue standing in the yard until he left, as propriety demanded.

Why *Drogon* supplicated Lyanna to beg her son not to kill Stannis, nor to attempt it herself, *for a while*, was completely beyond her. The dragon also pleaded with her to keep silent about his request, crying out shrilly within Lyanna's consciousness, burning her soul like black, flameless fire, addressing her as dragons only talked to their riders, according to Rhaegar. And all that while the beast was clearly enslaved by Stannis and obediently attempted to breathe fire at Winterfell, only to be stopped by dead Jon Stark wielding Ice…

Drogon saved Lyanna's life in the recent past and was so much more than a winged horse or a tool of war to either Rhaegar or Daenerys, as far as Lyanna understood. He was their… *friend.* In a much more profound way than Lyanna's eagle was her companion, given the bird's limited understanding.

She wanted to tell the dragon's secret to Jon and Daenerys, but Drogon insisted that Lyanna's silence was imperative. Her silence was everything. No one but her should know. The beast *burned* his meaning deep into her mind and seemed to be in pain as he did that.

Moved by the dragon's distress, after her own humiliation, Lyanna felt pity for him and honoured his request.

*For a while.*

The dragon did not specify for how long this should last. It would not be her fault or Jon's if either of them ended up murdering Stannis.

Compassion, supposedly a womanly virtue, had been Lyanna's doom. Before, it made her love Rhaegar back and cause irreparable ruin; not to be forgotten, nor forgiven by history. Now it brought her to an impossible situation of defending Stannis, a man she hated, in front of her adult son,
because she felt *sorry* for an animal.

Not to mention defending Jaime Lannister, a man she should hate, but could not, or not as much as she should, because he did for Aerys as someone should have done years ago, only to attempt to kill Brandon in cold blood fifteen years later… A changed man now, according to Rhaegar, since he had lost his sword hand.

Lyanna laughed bitterly at herself and her misery, wondering if she had made more terrible mistakes, to accompany those from her youth, and if she was to die for all of them, like Catelyn, at her son’s wedding.

Thinking about her son, Lyanna heard… wings…

Wings!

"Jon!" she whooped, waving small arms to the sky, jumping from joy and stopping herself, remembering her condition. She was with child. She should not run, jump or ride. Only move slowly, in order to stay as fit as possible for the labour.

"Mother!" Jon was back. They had developed a closeness. Not as they might have done had she… had she stayed, had she been a different woman, a better woman… But an understanding it was, nonetheless. She was happy for it. It was more than she deserved for her cowardice. It almost returned to her the desire to live.

But a winter rose could not survive without light, not for long, and her light was already gone from the world.

"Jon," she embraced her son when he landed and gave herself to unhindered joy.

"The Wall is mine," Jon said with uncharacteristic lightness, not boasting about the achievement towards which he had been labouring for weeks.

Day by day, every castle on the Wall except Castle Black had become manned without Stannis being wiser for it, with men and few women, wishing to take part in the War of Winter, rather than sit idle and wait for the wedding. There were Northmen, black brothers, wildlings, members of the Golden Company, Southrons who came up either with Rhaegar or the constantly incoming wedding guests. The volunteers were not too many, nor too few. Stannis' black shadow was mapped and measured from land and *air*, checked for weaknesses and holes. The lands beyond the Wall were scouted from Nightfort, Shadow Tower and Eastwatch where the gates could still be opened. The wights serving the enemy were pushed away on several places.

Oddly, the Others had not been spotted, yet all the eyes on the Wall remained watchful. According to common belief of those defending it, it was only a matter of time before the Wall came under siege.

Jon and Daenerys oversaw all the preparations together and waited for the right moment to take Castle Black. Finally, Rhaegal hinted he had grown *large* enough to pierce Stannis' shadow from above. Judging by the expression on Jon's face, his dragon had not lied.

The success of the mission gave Lyanna a new hope that Drogon had been honest with her as well, for some reason known only to dragons.

Daenerys held a whip in her hands and looked accomplished. "We haven't encountered Stannis or Drogon," she remarked with curiosity.

Lyanna knew she was asking for her dragon, and not at all for Lord Baratheon. Her silver hair had
grown back after Drogon had burned it, but the rift in her soul caused by the dragon’s betrayal remained profound. Lyanna had strong doubts about the reality of that treason.

But no evidence.

"Stannis is here," Lyanna informed wryly. "I've sent him to his rooms. But I don't know where Drogon is. I haven’t seen him."

Daenerys' face fell. At the same time, Jon's head and neck straightened. For a moment he looked like a wolf whose ears pricked.

A flute, a lute, a drum, cymbals and cytharas; a high harp that wasn’t Rhaegar's. Not coming from the crypts of Winterfell, but from outside.

"More guests, I reckon," Jon said, steadying himself for welcoming them.

Jon acted admirably with people, even when they had the indecency to look for a second wife for him before he married the first time. Lyanna was ashamed every time this was mentioned, for no one would have dared if she and Rhaegar had not been foolish in the past, selfishly setting up the only other historical precedent in Westeros for the rather unique case of Aegon the Conqueror and his two wives.

In the beginning, Lyanna was tempted to help Jon and found it difficult to let him fight those battles on his own. But she chose not to intervene, not wishing her son to appear weak or hiding behind his mother's skirts. But also for not knowing what she could possibly say, with her past, without appearing ridiculous or heartless.

She only laughed with Jon about the latest outrageous proposals concerning his person when they were alone, explained the details about the noble houses she knew and he didn't, and gave him her honest opinion about what he did well or less so.

Before the open gates of Winterfell, a large, colourful, highborn party rode out of the wolfswood on swift brown horses, following the vanguard of the musicians. *The sand steeds.* They were fifty at least, maybe more, dressed in all colours of the rainbow, smelling of exotic oils and peaches and orange blossoms and all things sweet…

Lyanna's heart froze from old guilt. The moment she dreaded much more than any other had come. She could have rehearsed courteous phrases for a lifetime, and yet she would be left speechless.

The Martells of Dorne had arrived...

...and from the sky, by the looks of it, for neither the outriders of Winterfell, nor the guards on the castle walls notified her of a large party on horse, coming from any of the usual directions. So it was either Drogon or… Viserion who brought them.

"Jon," Lyanna said with extreme trepidation. "Daenerys. By the old gods, please stay here."

Her son and her good-daughter to be flanked her loyally, not understanding, not yet.

The gates gaped wide open to let in the brightly-coloured standards with sun and spear.

Lyanna wondered frantically if the rooms prepared for the Martells would be sufficient in number and space. She didn’t expect this many of them.

Prince Doran Martell was carried into her presence on a palanquin. One of his four guards carried a
huge double-axe and moved with a limp.

"Your Highness," she said as humbly as she could. "Welcome."

Lyanna’s and Rhaegar’s responsibility in the events that led to the terrifying deaths of Princess Elia, Princess Rhaenys and the unknown, innocent baby mistaken for Aegon was undeniable. It could never be ignored or set aside. It could never be forgiven or forgotten. It simply remained for all times. As did the grief their marriage had caused to the realm by plunging it into needless, bloody war. Thousands had died.

"Thank you, Lady Stark," Prince Doran replied calmly, not revealing his feelings on the matter. "Our voyage has been turbulent, but short. Ah, this is your son, I guess. Jon, is it? Snow, I hear. A nice name here in the North." Jon kept his face long, flat and straight, maintaining silence as the prince continued his speech. "And Princess Daenerys, obviously. We had hoped… We had hoped that you would choose a different husband before you sailed or should I say flew to Westeros. You will all pardon me if I do not call you graces or bend a knee. They are too old and ill."

"Excellence, I grieve for the death that has befallen Prince Quentyn, your son," Daenerys replied seriously, not letting show her own regrets if she had any. "When I heard out his suit in Meereen, I was already betrothed and I could not have said yes. I could have never fathomed that he would try to tame the dragons on his own and steal them, during my unwilling absence that followed. Not after he had gone to see the dragons with me and they did not… take to him."

"I hear it was this green one that burned Quentyn," Prince Doran said, studying Rhaegal, perched on top of the walls of Winterfell. "Does the beast now follow your new betrothed, Lord Snow? How convenient."

Daenerys appeared stunned by the insinuation that Jon had something to do with Prince Quentyn’s death.

"I can ensure you that Rhaegal won't burn anyone, except the Others and their servants, for as long as he chooses to suffer me as his rider," Jon took up the word. "And I am sincerely honoured by your presence and timely arrival," he added with disarming honesty. "I hear that Dorne is very far away."

"We have had… help," Prince Doran studied Lyanna's son, bemused. "Do you not know?"

Lyanna, Jon and Dany were equally ignorant about this.

"So you don't," Martell stated calmly. "Well, then you will find out. Oh, yes, one last thing before we rest. Has Tyene arrived?"

"I haven't seen Lady Tyene since she left King's Landing to return to Dorne," Lyanna answered swiftly.

"I see," Prince Doran interrupted. "The seas are treacherous. I have asked Tyene to travel to the Iron Islands, to meet that wildling favoured by my late good-brother, that singer. I was sending Rhaegar a book. It was the most I could spare for him. That was before he had the decency to die and your kind invitation."

"I have read your letter, Excellence, after my father's death," Jon explained bravely, not deserving to be sentenced for the sins of his fathers, yet exposed to this kind of judgment nonetheless, just as he must have been as a bastard boy in Winterfell and on the Wall.

Lyanna swallowed and wished to fall into the ground.
"Mance Rayder sailed out to meet your envoy weeks ago as you demanded," Jon clarified. "If that is the niece you have just mentioned, I trust him to be back with her before the wedding. A raven with the invitation was sent after him as well."

Lyanna hoped Jon was right. If Tyene Sand met Mance Rayder, any outcome was possible. They could easily become lovers or murder each other, depending on how their conversation went. The Martells would certainly not take kindly to the latter result, unless Mance was the only victim.

"Then I suppose that we will have to wait. Let me present you before I forget. My daughter, Arianne. Nymeria, Obara, my nieces. Ellaria, my brother's widow. Her daughters and my younger son stayed in Sunspear. We shall require fireplaces in our rooms," the prince spoke with authority.

Lyanna exhaled with a modicum of satisfaction. The heating for the Dornish was something she had thought of. "We repaired the flow of water from hot springs through the castle walls in your quarters. I trust that you may find them as warm as Dorne in winter." Her cheeks flushed against her will.

Prince Martell gave her the first good look since he arrived instead of just looking through her. "It is interesting that you took the trouble."

"I would have taken more trouble than just that, had the Battle of the Trident gone differently," Lyanna blurted. She would have done her best to be a second wife and to respect the first one, hoping that Rhaegar’s love would make it all possible. It was probably a naïve and stupid wish on her part.

"Well, there isn't anything you can do for us," Martell said. "You have done more than enough in the past."

Lyanna had to agree, forgetting her manners, speaking her mind against everything her mother and septa had ever recommended she should do in conversation between highborns. "Only perhaps if I had the decency to die. Or if I could erase my entire existence and that of my son."

“Yes,” Prince Doran confirmed coldly. “The latter would be preferable.”

Tears ran down Lyanna’s face, over her red cheeks and swollen belly. She wished she could hide her pregnancy for she was now terribly ashamed of it, but that was as impossible as turning back time.

Jon opened his mouth, but Lyanna raised a hand, not letting him speak. Daenerys showed the good sense to remain silent. Exactly what Lyanna lacked.

Silence dragged on, impossible and painful.

"I can perhaps understand why Tyene befriended you before she knew who you were," the prince judged Lyanna after a long while. "Thank you for your welcome."

With that, Doran Martell urged his carriers to take him to the castle. They were so swift that the Winterfell guards had to run after them to show them the way. Before the door of the Great House, Lord Hightower approached the Dornish prince. Stannis soon appeared out of nowhere and joined the conversation. The three men spoke at length, as great friends.

Maybe I was very wrong in accommodating Stannis next to Hightower.

“Among the Dothraki, any wedding without at least three deaths is said to be a dull affair,” Daenerys observed with worry.
"This is the best I could hope for from Dorne," Lyanna reacted, regaining her composure. "The prince is here in person with half of his family and seems willing to make his own future judgments. Whatever they will be."

Jon looked down. "He is right, isn't he?" he asked his mother. "And you and father were wrong, in the past?"

"Yes," Lyanna replied honestly. "We have made terrible mistakes. Wrong choices. The secret marriage. The elopement. This makes sense only in the songs. In poorly written ones, I should add. At the time what we did seemed well to us, or I suppose that we wouldn't have done it, but it was not so."

"We are not marrying in secret," Daenerys reassured Jon, looking him in the eye.

"Talking is no crime," Lyanna murmured against her will, observing Hightower's friendly noises directed at Stannis and the Prince of Dorne. "Yet I wonder…"

"Robb had many loyal bannermen when they proclaimed him the King in the North," Jon spoke much more freely than before. "Until some of them betrayed him." He paused and continued with passion. "I… my only wish was to defend the Wall. The realm of men. This is… I don't know why they are all here. I thought no one would come. Or not that many. I mean… No one ever answered the letters sent out by the Watch demanding help. No one except for Stannis, and he… I think that he came for not having a better place to go. I… I wanted to marry Daenerys and I hoped for more men to stand against the Others if I invited more guests to our wedding. Never for this. Never for anyone to take my claim seriously on a piece of paper."

"It is what it is," Daenerys said firmly. "If you excuse me, I shall go and annoy our latest guests with the displeasure of my company for a little while. It will give them less opportunity for untoward gossip and I may be able to form a better judgment about their true intentions." She smiled sadly and cracked the whip she had been holding. "And then," she addressed Jon, "I shall fly with Rhaegal if you let him suffer me. There must be Unsullied marching from the Wall to Winterfell. We should enlist them again before they freeze to death."

"I'll go with you!" Jon breathed after Daenerys, who sauntered graciously away.

"It is what it is," Lyanna had to agree with Daenerys' wisdom when she was left alone with her son. "I guess so," Jon said. "And I thought it was difficult when I was only Lord Commander."

"It will be…" Lyanna exhaled and confessed to her son what she could not bring herself to tell him before. Not to that extent. Yet it ought to be said. "It will be just like at the tourney in Harrenhal. They will talk and they will conspire. They will measure if you are strong enough. Most of them will never be truly loyal. But they will support your succession if you are able to secure enough allegiances and if no one is more powerful. Rhaegar… he should have won this battle of wills in Harrenhal instead of singing of Jenny of Oldstones to a silly girl who had disguised herself as a mystery knight in a tourney, and annoyed his dangerous, mad father by her actions. He… he should have secured his immediate succession to the Iron Throne instead of crowning me Queen of Love and Beauty against the demands of sanity; offending and saddening his wife, and alienating many lords to his cause."

"Stannis has Dany's dragon, the biggest of all," Jon pointed out after a while, careful not to voice further his true opinion about her and his father. "Doesn't that make him stronger?"

"Well, he didn't bring the dragon for some reason," Lyanna replied, feeling sick and exhausted. "But
yes, this provides an advantage.”

It was much more difficult to be with child now than twenty years ago. She had to sleep more. Her sickness had fortunately lessened after the first weeks of pregnancy, but it still came at least once a day, and never in the morning.

"I will have to lay down for the rest of the day,” she told Jon, grasping his arm to remain on foot. “Can the two of you endure supper without me?”

"If the Others didn't take us yet, I don't think that these men will," Jon quipped. "I will see you to your room, Mother,” he added, grim of face, immersed in some serious thoughts of his own.

_What is troubling you now?_ She wondered and had no strength to ask.

“Just one more thing, Jon,” she decided to share another important piece of information from the past with him. She hadn't mentioned it before, because in the light of the later events it sounded like a conceited lie to make Rhaegar look more honourable than he was. It was nevertheless the truth.

“Yes?” he asked.

“Twenty years ago, your father wanted Princess Rhaenys or Aegon to be his heirs, in that order” Lyanna revealed in a whisper. “He regarded both as his children. That is what he told me when we realised we would have you. I said yes. Only… only if Rhaenys was mad like her father, or if she or Aegon died prematurely, then our children would be in line for succession. Aegon… as you know… he could not turn mad. Not like the Targaryens.”

“But then there came the Battle on the Trident?” Jon wondered.

“Yes,” Lyanna could only agree with shame. "And not only. There was also the Stony Sept and more fighting at other places. If Rhaegar hadn't gone away with me and stayed away from the capital as long, maybe Aerys would not have had the opportunity to kill my father and my brother. The flame of Robert's Rebellion could have been contained before it spread."

“Sleep well, Mother,” Jon said at the door, “I shall endeavour to ensure that my wedding remains a very boring affair.”

Lyanna’s room was cold and empty when she entered.

The babe under her heart _moved_, the first time since she knew she had it.

_Are you a sweet babe? Or a true little dragon?_

Since Rhaegar admitted to dragons being quite literally born in his family, a secret he occulted when she was expecting Jon, Lyanna could not stop considering that her baby might be born with scales and wings… She hoped not. The dragons were welcome to laying their own eggs.

Either way, Lyanna would probably not survive childbirth this time. She had nearly died with Jon. It shouldn't be different now. She was older and still too small, with too narrow hips. The swelling of her belly indicated that her second child would probably be as large as Jon, who was born very heavy according to Wylla, the wet nurse who had helped her at the time.

Jon would not hate her for it, she hoped. The movement of the baby just confirmed her prediction that she was halfway through her pregnancy, so her possible death was still some months ahead. It was hard to tell exactly how much time she had. The pressure of events was known to speed up the labour and put the mother and child in jeopardy.
Such as organising a large wedding, which could possibly turn into slaughter.

The winter wind opened the window and banged the shutters. A draft ran briskly through her room, stirring the embers on the hearth. She put several logs into the fire, rekindled it and waited. The shutters rattled insistently. She managed to close the window but failed to do the same with the shutters, withdrawing to the warmth of her bed.

In the past weeks, though only on some occasions, there was a ghost in Winterfell.

Or rather, experience showed there were many ghosts in the crypts, but only one haunted Lyanna. On those nights, she would hear the high harp in her sleep, but never like Rhaegar played it. Not sad and beautiful but rather… angry and passionate, as if the violent pulling of the strings and the dark, low-key melody with many dramatic pauses were the only expression left to a cursed creature.

She felt mad for hearing this, though madness was by no means a trait of the Starks, and could probably not be transmitted like a disease through a sin of marriage.

The wind blew stronger, reopening the window, swelling the curtains like sails on a ship. She resisted the temptation to look under her bed, knowing that there most certainly wasn’t anyone there. The empty part of her bed where Rhaegar used to lay felt almost frozen, damp from the cold. She wrapped herself in all blankets and furs she possessed and still shivered.

Only a day ago, she was tempted to add a place next to hers in the sitting arrangement for the wedding…. for a husband she no longer had.

She dozed as the wind rustled the flames in the hearth, reviving them before almost putting them out. The bed soon sank next to her, under invisible weight, chillier than ever, smelling of cold.

She was fast asleep, unable to stir or open her eyes.

The room was very dark when she woke.

Lyanna touched the sheets next to her, discovered a thin layer of melting ice and trembled from it. Did she have… an Other in her bed? A suitor a thousand times more terrible than Stannis Baratheon… Very occasionally, as she arranged matters in the castle, she felt the being of ice following her steps. She believed that it meant her no harm.

In the dwindling light from the hearth, she could swear that Rhaegar’s harp was not at the place where she had left it. She looked into her wardrobe, repelling once more the mad temptation to look under the bed.

She could not take this anymore.

She would try and catch her ghost.

Lyanna’s eyes had remained unusually dry since Jon had left her for the evening. Only her soul was taut like the drums brought forward by the Martells. With new determination, on the bottom of her wardrobe, she found a flask of perfumed oil, a gift from Tyene from the time when Lyanna posed as Septa Lemore, and the Dornishwoman as Septa Tyene. She had forgotten she had it, but the scents of the Dornish brought back the memory. Removing the cap, she smelled the substance, spreading some over her fingers. Good. Sticky. Colourless.

“Rhaegar,” a whisper left her lips unbidden, very shy and fearful, daring to shape in words the possibility that was only on her mind until that moment.
She hid the vial in her sleeve, and lay slanted on bed, in case her ghost was watching. Daintily, she let the oil drop on the pillow casing and smeared it with her free hand. When she was done, she pulled the furs over her head and used her disguise to dump the empty flask under the bed, repelling the overwhelming desire to look if anyone was under. Finally, she rolled to her side, feigning to be asleep until there was no need to pretend. Fatigue was stronger than her, bringing her a semblance of much needed relief.

The music was strident as every previous time when it began. She could not open her eyes nor see the invisible player. She could only wait for the music to disappear, for the shutters banging in the wind to be the only sound left, for her to feel abominably cold and wishing to die. Or for her to feel unreasonably warm and not a widow, despite her better judgment.

It must have been past time to break her fast when she was able to wake. She immediately examined the fat oil stains in her bed.

In grey, timid light of the day, there was a single hair on the empty pillow.

White, but with a distinct silvery glow.

Almost as long as Dany’s singed locks, growing rapidly back in winter.

She caressed the hair and hid it in her bodice.

A man who had a gaping wound on his throat when he became a wight would not be able to speak or sing… but he could play. And he might play differently if it was the only expression left to him in a cursed existence.

Jon had not… Jon had never seen exactly what was done with his father’s corpse, and neither did the eagle who had flown away in her distress. Since then, Lyanna had not dared open her eagle eyes.

The children were grown… Jon, Daenerys and Aegon would do well by themselves. The past would not, should not, influence their decisions.

Lyanna didn’t know if her discovery constituted a new hope or a new terror in her now worthless life.

“Rhaegar,” she whispered, feeling guilty about uncovering her ghost, if he wished to remain unseen. “Why suffer alone? Why not together like before? I do not care what you are now if you are still here. Perhaps you can change me into what you are. Maybe that would have been the best we could have done for Jon after we had him,” she paused in her useless speech and mopped her first tear that day.

“We should have both died.”

Chapter End Notes

Comments make the world go round

Thank you for reading }}
Sansa V

Chapter Notes

A huge thanks to TopShelfCrazy for fishing the inconsistencies out of this chapter :-))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

Sansa had never believed Old Nan when the wet nurse told her stories about the Night King’s dreary castle in the Lands of Always Winter. She even admonished Bran for paying so much attention to those frightful inventions.

The true songs could only be beautiful, Sansa thought, even when they were heart wrenching.

But the tales of horror had proven to be accurate as well… And, despite that Sansa had never fancied them or wished to hear them, they had a way of finding her; ugly and life-threatening. She could cry or she could be brave.

She held her craven breath between her teeth and waited for her latest gaolers, three heartless, indifferent Others, to close the door of her chamber. Her dungeon. At the sound of the wrong click of the lock, she exhaled.

She was successful. Yet her breath was stuck painfully in her throat, cutting her like an invisible, sharp blade.

The hairpin she slid in the lock moments ago, when she was escorted back to her room, prevented the door from closing.

Sansa counted to ten and then padded towards the exit with soft, silent steps, striving to contain the nervous fluttering of her bird-like heart. Sandor would have mocked her for it in the past. She wondered if he’d do it now, or if his heart trembled when he thought of her; his wife, the captive of the Others. She thought that it might as she pressed the handle. Her palms sweated when the door fell open with a prolonged, shrill creak, echoing in the dusty and, thankfully, fortunately, empty corridor.

She put the pin back into her hair, for next time, and stepped out of her cell.

A faint ray of dirty grey daylight stretched vertically over the old, rotting rushes on the floor. The light would be pretty to look at, if Sansa did not have precious little time. The days were unbelievably short, almost non-existent; gone before they began.

She hurried towards the courtyard, taking the shortest way.

Boots, heavy steps!

A thud of several pairs of feet right behind her.

Wights.

Sansa melted into one of the walls, wishing to look like a tapestry, hiding in the shadows. Truth be
told, the Night’s King castle didn’t have any hangings or decorations of any kind. This didn’t stop Sansa from considering that it should have some.

The dark, blood red of her gown was a rusty splotch on the utmost greyness of the walls. She did not breathe or move a hair until the dead passed.

She would visit this place, all of it, and commit it to memory.

Knowledge could help win wars.

Her heart pounded like a frenzied drum when she finally exited the castle and took a good, long look around.

Old Nan had never mentioned to Sansa and her siblings that the Night's King was a son of Winterfell…

Or, rather, of Winterfell as it could have been ages of the world ago, before the second, lower castle wall was built. A monumental fort built of timber and stone and, in some places, of ice, stood as proud if not as high as the Wall. Its battlements seemed taller to Sansa with every new day of her imprisonment. Maybe they grew like hair, or people, or their unnatural abilities in this strange, evil winter.

Square, sturdy towers and smaller turrets of rough-hewn masonry Sansa had never seen adorned the fortifications. The First Keep, the oldest part of Winterfell, appeared to be new. And an adjacent, broken tower, struck down by lightning and turned into a ruin in the castle Sansa knew, loomed high and intact; just like the maester’s turret, burned down in the sack of true Winterfell.

This Winterfell had a much larger surface. Had Sansa’s true home been this big, it would have swallowed at least half of the wolfswood in its proximity.

The Others slept at daytime, Sansa knew. She was almost not afraid of them anymore.

Almost not.

The wights remained awake, slow and clumsy. She did not trust them to spare her life in the absence of their masters’ whip. She sensed they hated and most of all envied the living. The Others, on the contrary, merely wanted all insulting life, different from theirs, to end; they had no longing to replace their beautiful icy existence by the disorderly sensations belonging to flesh and blood. She had stopped trying to touch the white walkers with her mind a few days ago, having learned all she could in that fashion. The effort was too painful to be continued. Possibly, the path to madness lurked on that road.

She had to keep her wits.

Sansa breathed deeply and began crossing the spacious, huge main courtyard of this Winterfell. Her long, many-layered skirts trailed behind her over icy ground. Together with the cocoon of crystal spider web woven around Sansa by the Others, her gown formed a sea of rustling sound, betraying her position.

She also needed to establish if she could get out in daytime. For all she knew, Sandor could be near the walls, looking for her.

She hadn’t seen him in a week... at least...

Or two or three weeks - it was unusually hard to tell how much time had passed. Every day was the
same since the gates of the castle of ice had closed behind her.

*He is alive,* Sansa repeated to herself like a prayer. She believed she *would* feel if Sandor died or was badly hurt. Though this was perhaps only her latest illusion. The strength of her twisted warging ability had grown more than her hair, but the cocoon of icy cobwebs narrowed the outreach of her mind. She could not speak to Sandor over distance. And the Others could direct her movements by pulling the strings of the net they’d made, without being burned by touching dried dragonblood.

*Wights* suddenly invaded the yard from all directions, running errands for their sleeping masters.

Sansa froze in place, exposed, miserable and alone in the open air; in plain sight in the middle of the yard.

Her fear was soon revealed to be unnecessary and futile.

The dead avoided Sansa. Perhaps they were just too busy with their orders. Some *bowed* to her in her shell of soft ice, careful not to touch it. Or perhaps the spidery substance could hurt them just like it caused Sansa’s hands to bleed whenever she brushed it by chance.

She considered heading to the godswood first and decided against it. She could always pray in her heart. Instead, her attention was caught by the First Keep.

From nearby, it was in *excellent* condition. There had to be a reason for this. It was… it was the seat of the Night’s King, it must be! Her father’s modest rooms were surely too humble to be quarters of the arrogant white walker who styled himself king, if he could have an entire keep and a tower to himself.

Possessed by insatiable curiosity, Sansa arrived at the entrance of the once-broken tower, and climbed a long, unique flight of spiral stairs, made of sturdy, black wood. There was no ice here, no crystal spider webs. The space was almost… human.

On top, she was surprised to find the Night’s King *sleeping* in his solar, sprawled on the largest weirwood throne Sansa had ever seen; much greater than Bran’s or any other in the cave of the old gods conquered by the Others. The weirwood and its main branches were hewn recently and savagely above the level of the throne, perhaps not to breach the ceiling. Sap ran down the walls like blood. The chopped tree was left eyeless, blind, with half of its trunk gone, but its remaining auburn leaves continued to murmur and hum with hidden knowledge and power.

*Please,* Sansa prayed fervently, overwhelmed by the desire to do so. *Let Bran return to Winterfell. Let him find his way.*

*What do you dream about?* She wondered next about their enemy, resting on his usurped throne of winter. *What do you see?*

The Night’s King crystal sword was unstained, abandoned under his feet, though Sansa suspected he’d performed the woodcutter’s task in person.

Only last night he had hewn ten of his own soldiers during training, exhibiting fabulous, self-assured swordsmanship like Sansa had never seen. The dead Others became mists. New Others took their places as soon as they fell, thinking nothing of their passing. Blue nebula was good. Better than flesh.

Sansa wondered if Sandor could defeat the Night’s King and yet wished she would never witness that fight.
Could Jon?

She vaguely remembered hearing Ser Rodrik inform Father that Jon was one of the best boys he'd ever trained in the use of sword, showing a stunningly high degree of both own initiative and anticipation of the moves of his opponent. Father had nodded with both pride and worry. How he must have been afraid for Jon! If his prowess had somehow made his true paternity recognisable, King Robert would have had him killed, Sansa had no doubt.

Mother had thanked Ser Rodrik for the information and asked him to pay more attention to Robb. The future lord should be trained meticulously.

Jon and Arya, even Bran, adored swords at that time. Robb… Robb was a better lance. And Rickon was a baby who stole kitchen knives. Sansa thanked the gods that ladies did not have to be trained in arms and wished she could avoid riding as well; the sores and the smells it brought. Courtesy was her only weapon and her armour.

But now…

No guards were in evidence and the Night’s King slept.

Maybe she could grasp his sword and cut his head off.

Maybe if she did that, all the Others would turn into mists and the winter would be over.

Or maybe she could cut her cocoon open and run away.

However, most likely, she would barely be able to lift the sword. Its blade was as large as the two-handed greatswords Sandor preferred. The immaculate weapon exhaled an air of calm greatness.

Like Ice.

Hesitating, not quite certain of her intentions, nor of the limits of her strength in this, Sansa reached for the hilt…

...and was stopped by the wrinkled, bony arm of the Night’s King. His parchment-dry skin merged with the intricately engraved armour, forming an inseparable, repulsive whole. His grip was infinitely cold and as firm as Sandor's had been in the past, when her husband was still unkind to her.

“I see everything,” he answered her silent question in a serious, deep voice. “And it is most uncourteous of a lady to sneak around her noble host in his sleep and plot a strike at his life. You are fortunate that I am being merciful.”

Until I undress willingly and can be killed, Sansa thought rebelliously, not bothering to deny the accusation.

“I admired how the sword was wrought,” she forced a half-truth on her lips to continue the conversation. The blue crystal blade was truly beautiful, deeper and richer in colour than an average white walker weapon.

The King of the Others glared at her when she dared mentioned the making of his sword. “Sharp as no other,” he argued with passion and halted, closing his eyes… to calm himself, perhaps.

Sansa took the statement as a welcome confirmation that the blade could harm him. Some other time, my lord, she thought unwillingly, when you will be lost to your dreams again.
The Night's King did not scorn her further for being unthoughtful and rude, so he probably only saw all from his throne. It was another bit of useful knowledge.

For all his boasting, he hadn’t seen Bran in the cave and Sansa had.

A cold breeze blew right through her from behind. She felt her three guards climbing the stair, woken while it was still daytime by the unbreakable will of their master. The Night’s King gaze flashed in the dark, acknowledging the timely arrival of his servants. In his tower, his eyes did not look blue. They were almond-shaped and almost hazel in colour.

A hopeless thought took hold of Sansa. Did you lure me here on purpose to witness your power?

Did you let me open the door to allow me a semblance of freedom?

Was her flight a lie, a ruse to make her… undress?

Well, it failed. She would not take off her gown for anything in the world.

Because the Night’s King would surely desecrate king’s blood. He would abuse it. This was not right.

And because Sansa could still disobey the order to undress if she so wanted and nothing could be done about it by force.

She would cry and suffer and fear for her life. And remain clad.

Sansa trembled from cold and despair and led the way back to her dungeon, without another word for her conceited host.

Outside, the weak sun was setting, in tones of red and purple over the white and grey walls. There would be maybe three or four more days left before the Long Night came.

Once Sansa was in her room, a different lock was mounted on her door by a pair of wights, rapidly and efficiently. The Others did no such mundane tasks. They only strolled around and issued commands.

The hairpin had no effect on the new mechanism.

Her flight must have been real, but she could not repeat it.

Sansa's chamber was on the first floor of the Great Keep, close to what would have been her parents’ rooms in the past. The ice-web infested ceilings of this castle were much higher. There were no fireplaces, no torches and no candles. The Others didn’t need them, from the humblest swordsman to their king.

Only starlight and moonlight.

Sansa’s gown kept her from freezing, but she was never truly comfortable. She felt like she would never be warm again.

The cup was on the table where she had left it. She forced herself to be a good girl and drank from it the unknown, dark red liquid providing sustenance. She sipped her quaint supper in a ladylike fashion and watched the frozen, darkening wasteland. The windows opened to the outer side of the castle. Sansa gave herself to pondering if her hair was now long enough to lower it as a rope for Sandor, should he find her in the last remaining days… She surmised he would not, if he hadn’t done
it already, but the fantasy was pleasing and it kept her mind occupied.

And well away from the consideration of throwing herself down to end her misery.

If Sandor came for her, and if they ran away as they should have done immediately when they were reunited, she could... she could live in her ice bubble. Maybe it would wear off with time. Sandor could enter it without hurting himself. If they ever returned to her family and the society, it would not matter what people thought. So many men and women who knew nothing about Sansa and Sandor stared at them, making assumptions founded on their appearance. She understood more acutely now why both the well-intended looks of pity and ill-hidden aversion had cut her husband so much in the past.

Sansa backed to her bed with fresh tears in her eyes.

A hand clamped her mouth, scaring her.

But only for a moment.

Her frozen bed felt hot as coals. The smell of her most welcome attacker was warmly acid, lacking the reek of blood and wine.

"Good girl," Sandor rasped mockingly, sounding as if he didn’t mean to be awful at all. "You never scream."

Yet it was his awfulness she craved. His and no one else's.

"And if I did?" she answered, breathless, thoughtless, overjoyed. "Would you kill me?"

"Don’t say that!" he barked at her, ashamed and... poked by her words.

Apparently she should not tease him back, not with certain events in their past. Or the present, when she thought better about it, probably that bothered him more.

That he could not save her now.

His reaction was a tad unfair. She had no intention of hurting him, by either word or deed. "I’m... I’m sorry," she began-

"Don’t be," he reacted matter-of-factly, "you can remind me all you like about how dumb I was."

"Not only for speaking my mind," Sansa explained herself. "I have been foolish again, expecting there would be a better, safer moment for us to leave. We should have run into the woods immediately after finding each other. They will never take this off," she yanked hard her cloak of ice cobweb in utmost frustration, felt her fingers bleeding, felt Sandor gently pressing the wounds on her fingertips until they closed.

She found calm joy in his gesture and most of all, in closeness of her husband. Alive, warm, smelly, huge, wonderful. "How did you enter?" she inquired softly.

"We arrived three nights ago," he grumbled wearily. "I walked around the castle until I saw you up here, looking out. A proper maiden in the tower. Waited for daytime to climb in here. Only to find the bed empty. I was about to leave, thinking I was wrong, but then you returned."

Sansa noticed that one of the windows was not fully closed and went to remedy that. The illusion of more warmth was welcome to her in this moment.
Sandor was a giant pile of furs in her bed which was already stuffed with blankets and animal skins. If Sansa didn’t know better, she would say that the Night’s King had a lady who had arranged for her accommodation. She had everything except fire. And freedom. And love. And family. In truth, Sansa had nothing, like in the Red Keep, after a brief respite of having everything.

It was just… life, she told herself calmly, breathing deeply, basking in the moment of happiness she now held in her hands.

The beloved pile of furs stirred in her bed and Sansa wanted to sing. Instead, she lay next to her husband and nestled in his embrace. Her head was a feather weight on his broad shoulder. The cocoon of ice enveloped them both, pristine white and beautiful now that they were together.

“My new friends, the giants,” Sandor rasped dryly, pulling Sansa even closer to him with a giant, strong arm. “When I told them about your crippled brother, they wouldn't let me go into that cave. They decided to send out two of our number to find Rhaegar and toss him in there. Better him than you, they said. They never said why. Later they informed me solemnly that the children had come out of the cave, and found men. The giants hate the children, I learned. They avoid them whenever they can, but they still decided to help your brother for some reason, and spied on the success of their endeavour from afar.”

Sandor rubbed the small of Sansa's back and continued with befuddlement. "Sansa, I am not a child-loving man, your sister can confirm this," he claimed. "But the contempt the giants have for them is beyond me. What I mean to say is, I still don't understand the giants as good as I would wish, but I think that your crippled brother is free and that he met some wildlings with whom he’s heading for the Wall.”

Sansa listened avidly, enraptured by her husband's tale. The gods would help Bran, they had to! “You wanted to save him from the cave yourself, take him farther north with you and with the giants?” She guessed warmly.

“It seemed like the easiest thing to do, but they wouldn't have it. No children, they said. Mag had been very adamant about it.” Sandor turned towards the moonlight and showed her a poorly scarred bite on his ruined cheek. “He spared the pretty half of my face, I’ll give him that. And you should see him now. He is one ugly giant since I bested him.”

Sansa hurt for Sandor. Will this ever stop for you? By instinct, she reached out and stroked him there like so many times before. “And then you say you are not fond of children,” she teased him gently.

“It has nothing to do with fondness,” he replied defensively. “It is just that…” he muttered, “so many ugly things can happen to them.”

“Or to anyone,” Sansa murmured. “We just…” she stuttered. “We just can't let this knowledge become a poison to us,” she claimed with passion.

In King’s Landing, Sansa used to think she might have deserved punishment for her sins, for not being good enough, for wanting to stay with her stupid, golden prince and unwittingly betraying her father. Now she thought that life simply… hit everyone equally.

The difficult times had to be endured.

Sandor was here now, in her bed, and the gown she didn’t dare take off did not cover her face. The night was young and so terribly long and they could kiss.

Her husband thought the same.
How could she ever live without kissing?

How could he?

He removed all pins from her hair and let it hang loose, caressing her face in quiet anticipation, breathing slowly, then… raggedly.

When their lips finally met and their arms grasped each other tightly, Sansa felt the slow waking of desire within her body, wishing to break free. It never ceased to amaze her how she could sometimes cross the frontier from indifference to mild interest and thirsting for her husband in short time. Like a tiny stone that begins rolling very slowly down the mountain and causes an avalanche.

Boots, chunks of ice being cracked in the corridor.

She had almost forgotten her nightly routine.

“Under the covers, please,” Sansa hissed, wrapping her husband in a pretty cocoon of furs.

Sandor obeyed. He was brave, but he didn’t want to die uselessly, much like Sansa.

“What do they want with you?” his voice was an intimidating whisper in the dark.

She would listen to the sound of it forever.

“They take me for a long walk in the castle every night,” Sansa whispered back. “They will return me before morning. They… they want me to be tired. So that I oversleep the day and have no force left to sneak around.”

“I wait and then we go?” he asked with longing.

Sansa nodded. Before she could say yes or kiss him a short farewell, the Others barged in and approached the couple slowly, sniffing every inch of her room.

They must have sensed Sandor’s blood; the blood of the living.

Sansa leapt off the bed, lifted her skirts and ran through the rank of the white walkers towards the open door, desperate to attract the undivided attention of her gaolers.

Instead of scurrying to the yard in the usual way she was forced to take before, she ran in the direction never chosen for her by the Others; to her mother’s and father’s room. She wanted to visit that part of the castle before she left. For if the Others never took her there, maybe it contained a secret. And maybe that forbidden knowledge would force them to follow her now and protect her husband.

Sansa ran swiftly, lithe as a wolf. A brief glance behind revealed her triumph. All three white walkers were after her.

Splendid.

Her breath never hitched.

She was at the door she sought before they could overpower her.

If the Night’s King is staying in the First Keep, let’s see if there is anyone here.

Maybe there was another lady prisoner like Sansa, wearing a gown of king’s blood.
She pulled the door open very decisively.

And gasped.

A lovely young lady, not much older than Sansa, combed her long black hair. The handle of the brush she used was made of mother pearl, shining in the pervasive greyness of the interior. She was seated on a large featherbed, seemingly much softer than Sansa’s. The chamber had a fireplace. Real fire cracked merrily in the hearth… A candle was lit in the window. Carpets adorned the floor. And there were wall hangings, golden and red, but in much softer tones than those favoured the Lannisters.

When the strange lady heard the door open, her face beamed and she said something hopeful, but unintelligible to Sansa’s ears. Yet her face hardened with displeasure when her eyes measured her uninvited guest.

She waved to Sansa’s guards to take her away, and it was then that Sansa noticed the dark grey hue of her face and haunted blue eyes. The lady could have all the fire she wanted. She had no need for it. She was dead like Jeyne Heddle used to be. She was not a perfectly cold being born from a blue mist; only a wight jealous of the living…

“You should have stayed away,” the Night’s King claimed murderously, materialising from thin air behind Sansa’s back. “Now I will have to kill you immediately after you cede the king’s blood to me and my men.”

Your men? Sansa saw only the Others.

“I’m sorry,” she apologised instinctively. “I,”... she invented shamelessly. “I miss my home!” In truth, she was snooping around, wanting to run away and learn the Night's King’s secrets. “This was my mother’s and my father’s room. I miss them so much!” This wasn’t a lie and her tears came. Or maybe it was the best of all lies, the one based on truth.

The Night’s King did not quite believe her, she could tell, but he chose not to press the matter further. Contrite, he went to one knee before the dead lady, who stood up, pressed his monstrous head to her flat stomach and spoke to him very nervously in the Old Tongue, glaring at Sansa as Aunt Lysa once did.

“I didn’t kiss your lord,” Sansa blurted. She loved a scarred man, a very special one who had somehow sneaked into her heart and stolen it for himself. She wouldn't and didn’t fall in love with just any dangerous, disfigured monster with a deep voice who was awful to her. “Nor would he ever want me too,” she realised this was true as well in the moment she claimed it.

The Night’s King gazed at the lady like only Sandor looked at Sansa, with devotion and adoration. Sansa could never mistake or miss that expression in a man’s eyes since she had learned of its existence.

The lady seemed not to understand Common Tongue, so she must have been a wildling who had never set foot close to the Wall. She studied Sansa’s loose, beautiful hair and covered her lips to stifle a sob. Sansa for her part noticed that the lady’s sand-coloured gown was narrowing in the bottom, not widening as it ought to. The garment hugged her hips very tightly; stitched together with a twinkling silvery thread.

Like… fishtail.

*The Night’s King and his Mermaid Wife.*
Sansa had heard a woman crying when the Night's King tried to trick her into undressing by posing as a handsome knight. Her mind had brushed his on that occasion; cold and cruel.

Old Nan had known it all, as if she had visited the Winterfell of Ice in person.

Sansa’s cocoon was suddenly yanked backward by her guards. She was forced to leave.

In place of another night walk Sansa had expected, she was made to stand in a host of a hundred men, as the Night’s King just called them, or rather, the Others, thirsting to end human lives.

There were two kinds of them, Sansa had to admit, if she was completely honest with herself, though the Night’s King might not have made or even perceived that distinction. He probably thought of all Others as his men.

One group, a much smaller one, still felt and smelled human to Sansa, at least in part, like one of her first white walker guards, whose mouth made a funny sound and who had disappeared after the Night’s King ordered his men to ambush Jon. Sansa hoped fervently that the absence of the Other she otherwise almost favoured, meant that the planned surprise attack on her brother had failed miserably.

The rest of them were just, well… Others… They were not human. The suffering of the living was of no consequence for them.

Both sorts could talk, but only very few individuals of each kind, including the Night’s King, to make the matter more complex. Sansa never figured to which group he belonged. She tended to list him between those who were still somewhat human, but this was far from granted.

He was different from all of them together, stronger and more dangerous.

Yet he had called his soldiers men and he had a lady. Mermaid Wife or not.

*Please take me back to my room, take me back to my room…*

As with many of Sansa’s prayers, this one was not meant to be.

The hundred Others stood and waited and Sansa had to do the same.

She wondered what would befall her now, and if it was her time to die. She hoped not. Not for her, nor for any of her siblings. Nor for Sandor… Though he still sometimes had that stupid idea where he didn’t much care about dying if his death would mean that she could live… Well, at least with her in some new danger, he would surely stay alive until they saw each other again. It could not be any different.

Sansa waited and imagined horrors that could come.

On some nights in Winterfell of Ice, the white walkers would bring a few living wildlings they had caught, the unhappy men and women who did not run south in time. Then, Sansa had to cover her ears in her chambers not to hear the screaming of victims as they were turned into wights.

Tonight, they had a baby, brought forward in a basket by the Night's King in person. Sansa’s heart constricted. Her hands jumped unwillingly to her flat stomach which had yet to quicken with hers and Sandor’s child.

The captured infant never screamed when a blue mist landed on him from the freezing night air.
At least the Night's King didn’t chop him in pieces with his stainless sword.

A new fully-grown *Other* rose and stepped out of the empty wooden cradle where the baby had been lying. Moments later, he forged his own crystal blade from the layers of old snow and took a place in the ranks.

Sansa sobbed, unstoppably, copiously, convulsively. She hoped that what they did to the baby hadn’t been painful.

But it wasn’t right.

It couldn’t be right.

Babies should eat and grow and play, not be swallowed by a mist and rise from it as warriors...

Sansa felt sick, so cold and so alone that she almost wanted to die.

Almost.

She would never *want* to die, not truly.

Until she would, one day.

*Not now, not now, please.*

The Night’s King positioned himself at the rear of his army. He never walked or rode in front as a leader of *men* would have done.

The wights opened the gates of Winterfell.

Sansa was forced to march as a foot soldier, up the stony pathway leading to a hill. On top, she viewed a long, great valley surrounded by the mountains. Its end was lost in fog and ultimate darkness. But the stretch she could see was crowded with the Others, awake and armed. Thousands and thousands of them, more than there were people in King’s Landing…. Maybe more than there were people in Westeros.

Sansa felt she would die or faint.

As always, her heart continued beating. Likewise, her legs were wobbly, but did not betray her.

The Night’s King had mustered his army and observed it very attentively.

*What for?*

How cold must Sandor be in her room! Sansa expected they should soon go back, after this display of power, for the Others to sleep during daytime.

It was not to be…

The Night's King lifted his arms and pointed to the constellation of the Ice Dragon.

*Showing the way south.*

No daylight ever came after the last purple sunset in the Lands of Always Winter.

In the far north, the Long Night had fallen and the Others began their march to the Wall.
Sansa struggled to maintain her pace. Her feet were numb in her boots. Somehow she was fairly certain no body parts would fall off her as long as she didn’t undress. She had been shivering from cold since she was kidnapped and she had yet to suffer from frostbite. The gown was keeping her alive though it could not make her feel good or comfortable.

She could only make this herself.

Her dress was nonetheless woven by magic.

_The magic of the dragons…_

She looked into the woods and wished she was a wolf, a four-legged one. Then she could run back to Sandor and tell him she was alright. She could leave with him. Maybe she could tear the cocoon of ice with her teeth. As she thought of that, Sansa saw a flash of white fur between the sentinels.

“Ghost!” she exclaimed uselessly, wishing her brother or her wolf were here. Jon had… Jon had a magic sword, even Sandor had said so, and Ghost and he had always been special. They could… they could surprise the Night’s King. Maybe they could free her from the ice spiderweb Sandor had not been able to break in any way…

If Jon wanted to help her.

She was not Arya. They hadn’t been close. And Sansa did everything to please her parents in the past... She never invested an equal amount of time and effort into pleasing her siblings.

Why would Jon risk his life for Sansa?

Remembering how he was and assuming he did not change, not fundamentally, just like she still believed in _some_ songs… those that were _true_... Sansa decided he would always save her and Arya and Bran and Rickon… And Robb, poor Robb, may he rest in peace…

If he could.

Because he wouldn’t be Jon if he did any different.

The white patch was gone when she came to that conclusion and it had probably never been Jon’s wolf.

Only a pile of snow.

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Chapter End Notes

Your attention, in any form, makes this worthwhile :-))

Thank you for reading :-)
"Is Mother here?" His son asked, restless, staring at the open sea. "How can she be? There isn't anything here."

His father could agree about the latter. There was entirely too much salty water around them for the heart of an old wildling.

Or maybe there was something! Shapes. Screams in the blue distance. Two vessels, sinking together, if his eyes were as sharp as they used to be. An ironborn longship like the one he captained now, and a vessel with blackened hull and sails.

Mance ran to the bearded ironborn man who held his ship's helm. “Stop,” he commanded. "Don't go any further."

“We set out to find the Sea Song,” the man replied carelessly. “She’s there.”

Mance was no sailor, but he knew trouble when he saw it. “She’s also sinking,” he stressed.

He wished he had a Myrish glass to see that far. Without knowing what awaited in front, newcomers would meet the same destiny as those two ships.

Mance’s longship slowed down and rolled lazily over the silvery crests of the waves, manned by a bunch of grim-eyed strangers recruited on Harlaw, a fertile and green island in the middle of terrible winter. Yet these men preferred sailing over the high seas where death was much more certain than any promised reward. Growing food was boring and undignified.

"Is Mother there?" his son repeated the annoying question, afraid and anguished. He could speak well now, though he still had no name. Mance was unable to think of one.

"Your Mother's dead, son," Mance repeated.

"My second mother isn't," the boy said stubbornly.

They held the same discussion every day.

Mance thought he saw a very tall, blond woman, gesticulating for help on the black ship that looked empty, except for her.

“Lady Brienne,” he murmured for himself. “What are you doing here? And where is Ser Jaime?”

The couple had made excellent mummers in the past and they would probably never take part in any mummetry in the future.
Even Mance silently believed that one mummery was enough for a lifetime. He would stick to songs from now on.

His apprehension mounted.

He was in the middle of Sunset Sea, west from the Lonely Light, a group of thirteen miniature islets clustered around the biggest one with that mad name, that lay westernmost in the Iron Islands archipelago.

*Westernmost in the known world.*

Yet Rodrik Harlaw had travelled beyond the Lonely Light, for reasons known only to him, taking with him the envoy of Prince Doran Martell that Mance was supposed to meet on Jon’s behest, as well as the mysterious heirloom of House Targaryen, sent by the prince to Jon’s dead father.

Mance had no choice. He had let his people disembark on the island of Harlaw, those he'd brought with him from the Wall. Those who were not warriors and would not or could not fight in the War of Winter. They would find good lands, plant crops and fight any ironborn who opposed them. Seeing the local mentality, colonisation with the intent of *sowing* should not pose much of a problem. And then he recruited ironborn seafarers, paying them with promises of gold his people still possessed, if they helped him track Rodrik and his ship, the *Sea Song*.

*Rodrik the Reader.*

Faced with the shipwreck before his eyes, Mance never felt less like a captain.

He hurried under the deck to find Val, needing to feel less *lonely* before deciding on a course to take.

*Lonely like the Lonely Light. What a mad name.*

His good-sister had refused to stay in Harlaw. "Morna the White Mask can lead now," Val had said. "I’m a fighter. I'm going back with you."

This meant back to the Wall, after Mance found the envoy of Prince Doran Martell, who was in all likelihood drowning now.

In the hold of the ship, Val stared at Euron Greyjoy with disgust. His appearance and attitude offended her, aggravating her lingering sea-sickness. Yet the two were often together, for lack of better company, since his dead lordship had defended Val from a giant kraken at the bottom of the Gorge, before Mance had driven the animal guardian of the Wall back by reciting his forsaken vows of the Night’s Watch.

Euron was fingerless.

He was presently trying to *tie* the cut off fingers back to their stumps and failing miserably in a task that required fingers to begin with.

Mance saw no point in the endeavour. Euron was a *wight*. The loss of fingers could not cause him pain. Even a living man would not be irreparably crippled by it. The free folk often lost toes, fingers and noses to frostbite in winter. The condition was manageable and did not hinder long life.

Euron hid his extremities as soon as he noticed Mance, though he never bothered to hide anything from Val.

Weeks ago, on the deserted sea shore near Shadow Tower, Euron’s brothers Victarion and Aeron
Dampair had taken cruel revenge on him for killing and raising them as wights when he still had possession of the horn of dragonlords, whose indiscriminate usage also ended Euron's natural life. His brothers had punched him severely for the duration of a long winter night. They would have beaten him to death if he weren't already dead. Then they cut off all his fingers, spat on him, and marched North, beyond the Wall; taking with them the entire host of wights that used to be enslaved and blindly obey Euron, including his two bastard sons.

Mance wondered if they now served the Others or if they roamed free, dead and masterless.

*He was a captain once*, Mance remembered, deciding to provoke Euron. *Into action, why not?*

"I heard you were a sailor," he said. "A passable one."

"He?" Val said with contempt. "I bet he can't row a boat."

This stung his dead lordship. "What do you know?" he bellowed.

"I know self-pity when I see it," Val said poisonously.

Euron stood abruptly, turning over the table. His fingers spilled from his pockets and rolled over the floor. Angry, he stormed *out*, without picking up his extremities. It was the first time he ventured on the deck since the beginning of their journey.

Mance whistled and laughed, as did Val.

In silence that followed, they could hear the sea, rocking the ship, taking it into the unknown.

"*Sea Song?*" Euron yelled from the deck in disbelief.

When Mance and Val caught up with him, the kraken was rubbing his dead eyes on the prow, studying the strange colour of the sea in the west; dark green, lighter green and then... much farther away, black and oily.

"Son of a thrall, he has dared sail more west than west," Euron cursed with... admiration.

"Why would Rodrik the *Reader* go here?" Mance was curious.

"In search of the adventurers who have gone east to go west, around the known world," Euron claimed with passion. "He must have gotten word from the Lonely Light that they were sighted near their waters. Reader is a curious man and a good captain."

"That's impossible," Val said. "The world just ends. One can't go around it."

"Do you think so, pretty lady?" Euron laughed at her. "I'll make you a bet," he roared. "If I'm right and you're wrong, you'll help me tie my fingers back in place."

"No," Val said. "Others take you, deadman."

"Do you see Mother?" Mance's son turned to Euron with hope.

The sea changed hue, from very dark blue to very dark green. The ship drifted forward, rolled by the waves. Euron's ironborn wights had built it to perfection before deserting their former master and leaving the wildlings to sail south on their own.

The sea became terribly calm. There was almost no wind under the dark-grey sky, and very little light left.
The sea looked... dead.

"By the bones of Nagga," the crew muttered and gathered on the deck, disregarding their duties.

"Man your posts!" Euron hissed at them.

Some obeyed and some spat in his direction, eyeing his mutilated, black hands. By the looks of it, being fingerless was a great shame among the ironborn, greater than being dead, which would explain Euron's wish to have his fingers reattached to his body at any cost, whether he needed them or not.

The two sinking ships were stuck in the dead calm of the sea right in front of them. Lady Brienne waved her arms, calling for help, most likely. Without enough wind, the sound did not travel far. They could not hear her.

"The Reader wouldn't know about this little obstacle, would he? It's not in the bloody books!" Euron said with superiority. "Anchor her!" he bellowed to the crew. "Now!"

"We should toss him overboard," Val observed unkindly towards Mance. "Wights can't swim."

"Let him," Mance wouldn’t refuse help, even when odd and uncalled for. "This used to be his world."

Mance was out of his depth at sea. At least there were no Others here. That was the only advantage.

Euron’s unexpected assistance was like the red threads sewn by a caring wildling woman into Mance's old black cloak of the Night's Watch. Rules and convictions, even vows, had to change with time when they became pointless, or else they would become chains, existing for their own sake and not for any worthy cause.

Mance had hated the wights in the past, just like the Others, and he was now weighing his position, wondering if he should change it in the future.

To his surprise, it was possible to anchor the ship. The high sea was shallow where it shouldn't have been. "We go further by boats," he guessed.

They had three.

The two shipwrecks rocked back and forward, as if they were perched on the back of a sea monster.

"Another kraken?" Mance wondered aloud. "A leviathan?"

"No," Euron replied. "The reef. You. Get out of here!" he pushed the sailor off the helm and took it himself, squeezing it between fingerless fists. "You want to get close enough, you want me here," he told Mance matter-of-factly, not acting like his hateful self, but like an ordinary man.

All the ironborn sailors continued staring with contempt at their new, dead captain and his maimed hands.

"I'll steer her a little while she's anchored and get her as close as I can, wildling," Euron continued, focused on the ship’s course and movements, ignoring the glares of his people. "Lower the boats and row to the Sea Song. But you stay clear from the very green water. Any survivors have to swim to you. Their possessions are lost. The reef is broad and dangerous here. Few men know about it."

"But you do," Mance said with suspicion.
Euron nodded darkly.

“We've got until the change of tide to leave,” he stressed. “Or we'll be swept further west. Trust me, you wouldn't want to go where that black ship has come from.”

The three boats they had could hold quite some passengers. Mance hoped they could load all the survivors at once, and that the envoy of Prince Doran was with them.

“Mother, we're coming,” his son shouted and waved his short, chubby arms in the air when they began rowing slowly with Val. They would return faster, with more hands on board. The ironborn manned the other two boats.

“Here!” Mance boomed from the bottom of his lungs when the sea changed colour from dark to lighter green, pulling an oar vertically through the water to keep the craft in place. As much as that could be done. “Everyone swim to here! We cannot come any closer!”

The distance to swim was not great, thirty feet at most. The sea beyond the imaginary line where the boats had stopped glittered in ominous and brilliant shades of bright green.

*The shadows dance under the sea...* It was the fool's song on the Wall, Mance remembered. It surely looked like the submarine shadows amused themselves here.

“Swim!” he shouted with his best battle voice. “Now! Leave all your possessions behind!”

The survivors finally seemed to understand him, because they began undressing and jumping into the water. The fastest ones soon reached the three boats.

Lady Brienne yelled back something inaudible, and then jumped into the sea in *armour*. That was not good. Mance dropped his cloak, kicked out his boots, lost his doublet and tunic and dived after her, wishing to be as light and as fast as possible. He heard Val and his son screaming needlessly.

Mance was confident about his abilities and this sea was not colder than the lakes in Frostfangs in spring. Thoroughly awakened and spurred on by the pleasing chill, he was soon next to the armoured Lady Brienne and strove to help her reach one of the other two boats.

She objected vehemently to being rescued.

“You have to save her!” Brienne argued. “I'm an excellent swimmer.”

“Probably,” Mance admitted. "Without the lovely blue breastplate, maybe you would have made it to your goal. But I wouldn't take my chances."

Brienne turned slightly pink. She was so convinced of her knightly and swimming abilities, being from another island, that she didn’t consider the limitations of what she was wearing.

“Why did you jump then?” Mance wondered belatedly and followed the lady knight's gaze.

A woman who was in greater need of saving was now being pushed by Euron towards Val's boat. It was obvious that the drowning lady could not swim at all though she wore no armour. The kraken must have dived directly from the deck and cut the deadly surface of the sea with an unnaturally powerful free stroke. In this special case, his inhuman strength meant speed as well, countering the resistance of the thick, salty water.

A blue baby dragon fluttered up and down above Euron's head; with tail wrapped around a square package that appeared far too heavy for the little animal.
"Whoo-hoo!" Mance whooped in wonder.

The beast dropped the parcel into the boat and puffed blue smoke, relieved.

"Thank the gods," Brienne said. "She wouldn't heed my calls. She wasn't strong enough to hold both the lady and her luggage. I had to help."

"She?" Mance looked at the woman in Euron's arms and froze. It can't be. He fought a premonition of doom. Tyene.

And realised belatedly that Brienne was not talking at all about the presence of the lady that disturbed him so much, or not only, but also about the dragon… "A she-dragon?" he asked incredulously. "She hatched out of the egg you had?"

"Yes," Brienne answered. "And she already has a mind of her own."

Mance’s son picked up the bundle dropped by the she-dragon like a precious toy, not daring to open it, but admiring the blue beast in the air as only a boy could.

The parcel protected by a dragon was most certainly the lost heirloom of the Targaryens… It meant that Tyene was the envoy of the Dornish prince was… his niece.

Free of its burden, the baby dragon fluttered to Brienne and croaked happily on her shoulder, closing her wings. Her scales shone bright blue.

Possessed by a darker instinct, Mance left Brienne holding the edge of the boat. His friend was safe with the little dragon. The wildling swam towards his initial transport, jealously snatched Tyene out of Euron's dead arms, and climbed on board with her, using a tiny wooden ladder this boat had. Euron was welcome to grope Val if he so wished. Not Tyene, limp and with her eyes closed, breathing faintly in Mance’s arms.

“Is that Silence?” an ironborn with long brown hair, the next one to arrive swimming, asked about Mance's longship.

“No,” Mance shook his head and shivered. It was much colder to be out than in water. “We hadn’t named her when her builders ran away. We do not name children until they reach certain age so why should we name a ship? We just set sail.”

Neither his son nor his ship had a name.

The truth was, Mance was bad with naming.

Dalla would have already chosen a name for their son, but she had died giving him birth…

“All hands!” the long-haired ironborn was in the boat now and commanded his people as their captain. "Take only the sleepers! Leave the axes! Swim light!"

Mance soon understood that the sleepers meant the people on the black ship, on which Lady Brienne arrived more west than west… as Euron named their position on the high seas. No one but her seemed awake on that vessel. The ironborn broke off pieces of the sinking Sea Song and used them to make the sleepers float to the three boats. No one dared harvest the black ship for wood.

"You are Rodrik Harlaw," Mance ventured into recognising the ironborn captain. "I am Mance Rayder. I was send to meet-" he dared look at the woman in his arms. “Lady Tyene,” he said very cautiously and politely, confirming once more the terrifying identity of the Dornish envoy. With one
arm, he wrapped his dirty cloak around him and her, but he never put his tunic back on, telling himself he did it because he would dry faster.

Tyene Sand.

He had her in his arms now. And he had just stolen her from Euron, man or deadman, it mattered little. He was caught in the act.

Val smirked at Mance and shrugged. I've told you so, her eyes said.

I know, I know. I am not dead. Yet.

“I suppose then that a thank you is in order, captain.” Rodrik the Reader interrupted Mance's musings. "We would have all visited the Drowned God's watery halls before long without your help.”

“Don’t thank me, thank him,” Mance wouldn’t take credit for another man’s success.

And that man or deadman was drowning now, either on purpose, wishing to end his suffering, or because he remembered too late that the wights could not swim, being too heavy in death. Val saw it too. Surprisingly, she grabbed Euron by his hair and pulled him up like a sack of bones. Mance always forgot how strong she was.

The deadman gave her a cheeky grin and hooked his arms over the boat. His hands would not serve for that.

“What's wrong with you, deadman?” Val needed to know.

“I've always had a weakness for blonds,” Euron murmured in a deep voice, climbing in, finishing his own rescue.

Mance’s son recognised Tyene. “Mother, mother! Tyene! I told father you’ll be here,” he cooed unstoppably.

How will I ever explain to him now that she is not his mother?

"Row back!” Mance roared to his sailors, ignoring his son's cries of joy.

Rodrik the Reader echoed his command.

When they were back on Mance's unnamed ship, Lady Brienne approached him with a dreamy look in her bright blue eyes. He was not used to seeing this in her. The lady he knew and respected believed firmly that there was good in the world, and in the strength of her arms to defend it.

Yet she did not expect to face wonders, except, maybe, her husband's love.

But now a little blue dragon flew cheerfully above Ser Jaime's wife; a true miracle of nature. His square burden had been laid safely in a thick and dry barrel in the ship's hold. It was a book, Mance could tell by the shape. He would let Jon unwrap it when they returned.

“I passed… I passed under the Shadow,” Brienne announced with seriousness and awe, sounding as if she could not believe her fortune. “We went… we went east to go west. This should be impossible. The world is a large ball. How is it that we don't fall off?”

“It would appear so,” Mance pondered the new knowledge and imagined a song about this new world, wishing he had his lute. In a hurry to leave south, shocked by the violent mutiny and
departure of Euron's wights, he had forgotten it on the Wall; the first time in twenty years.

"I told you so, lady," Euron challenged Val from the helm he was again holding, steering the ship eastward.

Mance's good-sister looked away, to the reef they left behind.

"Her name’s Val," Mance told Euron, suddenly eager to tease his good-sister; to get even for the look she gave him when he had seized Tyene. "If you mean to steal her, you should begin calling her by her name."

Val fumed and said nothing, gripping the rail of the ship, but the scorn in her eyes lessened. Or increased, turning into fruitless anger of an entirely different kind. Both were unexpected. Mance nearly gaped, but stopped himself in time. Don't tell that you do fancy him. That would be a far more radical change of attitude towards wights than Mance had been pondering for himself. And Val would probably gut him in his sleep if voiced any of his assumptions, good-sister or not.

Euron never noticed the change in the woman he had been stalking since he met her. He merely looked very dead, hateful and desperate. His maimed hands clenched at the helm. "Reader," he suddenly decided to acknowledge his compatriot,

"Crow's Eye," the Reader was not intimidated, nor did he stare at Euron's missing fingers, free of prejudice, unlike the rest of their people. "Why did you help?"

"You challenged me in the past," Euron replied. "How did you know I lied about sailing to the Smoking Sea and Old Valyria? You were the only one who read me at the time. How come?"

"Why are you asking if you already know the answer?" The Readers's answer matched his reputation for wisdom.

Which often bordered on the extreme lack of clarity in Mance's opinion. Wise men risked being taken for stupid and utterly ignored, if no one ever understood their meaning.

"Because you sailed to Valyria yourself on the Sea Song, at the time when my brother Balon banished me," Euron continued. "Unlike me, you've never bragged about it to anyone."

"Yes," Reader affirmed simply. "Your stories did not match my experiences."

"I thought I was ready to meet the Drowned God in his watery halls," Euron drooled on. "But then I saw Sea Song out there, and not some little longship captained by a walrus beastling from the Lonely Light…"

The inhabitants of the last archipelago of the Iron Islands were told to be skinchangers, able to turn into sea lions or walruses or spotted whales. Mance thought he would probably like those wargs better than the rest of the ironborn, obsessed with reaving and reckless sailing, when they could live perfectly well off their lands and honest trade. The ironislanders never realised that they were not as poor as they thought. Never knew they were bloody rich in comparison with his people from beyond the Wall. Worst of all, they made thralls out of the men and women they took prisoner on their sailing escapades.

Like the Others did with their wights.

Slavery was not natural. Freedom was.

"See, Reader," Euron thundered. "You are the only other ironborn who ever ventured as far as I did.
This makes you an explorer, like myself. Not that I wanted to admit it back then. But today I helped you because we have that in common."

"Where have you sailed then, for true?" Reader asked incredulously, observing Euron with unkind, but also unprejudiced eyes. "Forgive if I don't count the Free Cities as exploration. The entire Iron Fleet went there."

"East," Euron said grievously, but without hatred. "To Asshai, and further ahead, into the Shadow, not fearing it, wishing to steal its treasures. I passed under the Shadow… And I would have died here, on this reef where we found you. Walruses from the Lonely Light saved me, those men we despise and laugh at… doing what I did for you now, making me swim to their little boats made of reed from my ship’s ruin. And yet I didn’t swim empty-handed..."

Euron gazed into the distance and spoke as a man bewitched by an unknown power. "I brought three dragon eggs out of the Shadow! In my own hands when I still had fingers... Three eggs and a horn of dragonlords! The horn was bound with red gold and it could not yet burn or kill anyone… because the dragons had not yet hatched, I reckon, so its power remained hidden.... I didn't know what I had. I was skinny. I was poor and I was hungry and my brothers hated me. I lost an eye on my journey to the Shadow and earned the stupid name… Crow's Eye… Back on Pyke, I buried the horn underground because it had gold on it, and then I sailed to Pentos on a Myrish vessel, eating rats. There, I sold the eggs to a noble man called Illyrio Mopatis, still not knowing what they were. I thought they were pretty stones! I received enough coin to buy a new ship and I was happy with it. Do you hear me, Reader? I brought three dragon eggs from the Shadow and I sold them for a penny!"

"That was-" Reader began.

"Stupid," Euron cut him off. "I understood very soon what I had, shortly after giving it away. I was angry. I felt betrayed. All who knew about my stupidity had to lose their tongues. So I mutilated and muted my crew, and called my new ship Silence. And I invented the tale of sailing to Valyria, to explain having the horn of dragonlords, when it began showing its powers... No one could know my shame. I had dragons and I let them slip through my fingers… As a result of my folly, my crew is dead now, not only mute. As are my brothers and my sons. As am I. All as a consequence of my stupidity ."

"What you’re saying here is extremely interesting, Crow's Eye," Rodrik retorted. "You should write it down. Make an unembellished account of it. Bind your book in leather for posterity. I’m working on mine. The Road to Valyria it will be called."

Euron lifted one fingerless fist off the helm. "You wish," he put in morbidly. "I never learned how to write or read. The lordlings of the Iron Islands are often as poor and as unlearned as their thralls. If I did, maybe I would have known dragon eggs for what they were. And if I learned now, how would I hold a quill?"

The Reader had no answer to that.

"What is our course?" Lady Brienne wondered when Euron's unwanted lament ended.

"East," Mance replied. "To the Iron Islands. Then to Westeros. To Winterfell, as soon as we can. Jon and Princess Daenerys are to be married. We saw the invitation in Harlaw. The House Harlaw is also invited."

"Have you seen my husband after we parted on the Trident?" Brienne asked with hope.
"I haven't and I don't know where he is," Mance said. "I thought he was with you. But I would say that the wedding is the best place to start looking for him if you can't find him... as the dragons and dragonriders find each other."

Brienne looked down and her eyes almost watered.

So you can't.

"I think I'll be sick," she said. Bent over the railing, true to her announcement, Brienne threw up thin yellow and green liquid, and covered her mouth in embarrassment when she was done.

"Perhaps you should have a bite," Mance suggested. "There is pickled cod in the hold, fresh from Shadow Tower. It's not that bad if you don't eat it every day."

"I don't think so," Brienne gulped for air, more nauseated from Mance's proposition. "Perhaps I should sit down and have a drink of water. Maybe with Lady Tysha... Where is she? She was the only other woman on my ship. I saw her brought to this vessel, but now she's gone. Is she alright?"

Val was next to Brienne now; uncommonly helpful and kind. Mance had seen Val like this, but he could not remember when and with whom.

"Come on," his good-sister nudged Brienne gently and took her arm. "I'm Val, as Mance mentioned. I'll help you. How old are you? Is it the first time you're ill like this?"

Val ushered Brienne away in half-friendly and half-intruding conversation, acting like a hen and not like a fighter.

This left Mance on the deck with Tyene in his arms. He realised he'd never considered lowering her though his muscles hurt by now, tense from the effort of holding her.

Worse, her blue eyes were now open and she was giving him a cold, curious look.

He wondered for how long she had been studying him like that and what she saw in him, other than the man who answered her request to be bedded and pleased by taking advantage of her and doing it violently, without any concern for her needs.

"Why didn't you wait in Harlaw?" he asked quietly. His palms began sweating though he was otherwise cold.

"My uncle said I should stay with Lord Rodrik in person until Rhaegar's envoy arrived. He said that the Reader was the only man in the Iron Islands who would never ruin a book," she explained courteously. "He and Doran maintained correspondence. They trusted each other."

Tyene wore a pretty gown under thick travelling cloak. Its colours were vivid; a combination of bright hues like Mance had never seen, not even in the capital, and much less beyond the Wall, where the only lively colour of garments was red, made from weirwood sap. The gown was...


It was best not to look at Tyene’s body in that. It would wake a dead man to life.

On her part, she decidedly wasn't looking at him like she did before, as if he was something... edible... and possibly sweet. She gazed at him with polite indifference.

So he put her down on the deck, painfully aware of the unnecessary awkwardness of holding a
woman who was not his.

He wondered if his body was still firm as it used to be, if it pleased Tyene to be in his arms, or if she’d felt better in Euron's mortal grip. The wights were strong.

And cold. And dead.

"Rhaegar is dead," he clarified in case she didn't know. "Jon sent me. His son. Your uncle asked for me in his letter."

"I know about Rhaegar," Tyene said. "And in case you've been wondering, my uncle didn't inform me about requesting your presence for this exchange. I wouldn't have gone on this errand if I had known I would meet you."

"I didn't know either," Mance replied, stung. "But I would have said yes if I did."

It was worse than that. He would set sail to meet her with expectation and trepidation. Harbouring as he did a treacherous wish to visit Dorne when the winter was over, if it ended before he was very old and toothless. To see how she fared and if she still wanted to waste her time on a wildling. He dreamed he would go to Dorne when his people were safe. When the enemy was defeated. When his son was almost grown and had a name.

Seeing Tyene now felt like taking something for himself he had no right to demand. Not yet.

Tyene’s brow wrinkled and she turned away, noticing how her soaked gown was attracting his stare. "Where can I find a dry change?"

Mance gestured to the hold. "Down there, I guess. I don't even know what we all have."

"Mother," his son beamed at Tyene, finally finding a moment to stalk her. "You're awake."

"Sweetling," she reacted, not denying his son's assumption, embracing him warmly, postponing the intention to change.

Mance opened his mouth to repeat that she was not his mother and could not.

Tyene and his son laughed together.

"Look, Mother, there are sea lions," his son said, pointing forward.

The boy was right.

And there was also a brown line on the broad horizon, not only the endless expanse of dark blue.

"Land," Mance announced and was glad for it.

They were almost back to the Lonely Light, back to the known world.

Mance whooped, accomplished, counted in his head if he would return to Winterfell in time. He would like to sing at Jon’s wedding. Hopefully it would be a happier occasion than his two previous visits to the seat of the Starks. The first time he went there with King Robert, Jon's brother was crippled, almost killed, and the second time six spearwives died… Old flaying scars on the back of his legs itched uncomfortably from the sickening, humiliating memory.

Before he could delve in his murky past in his mind, Tyene smiled. Maybe at the stupid sound of joy he released a moment ago. Her smile tickled all his senses. He wouldn’t lie to himself: he wanted to
steal her for true. The sooner, the better. He reminded himself that she manifestly didn't want him now. He had missed his opportunity.

So when he gave her a look of longing, he was met with the wall of a lady's courtesy, and not with Dornish… *interest* in what life had to offer. She was… cooler than the Lady Sansa, whose manners were always impeccable in public.

But at the same time she remained soaked, letting him *see* the shape of her body. And seated on the deck. His son was on her lap and she never let him go.

"Is there a name you like?" he asked her on a whim. "He needs one. Since he persists in calling you Mother, maybe you could choose the name for him."

"There is one," Tyene clarified. "But I have no intention of sharing it with *you*."

Mance was stunned into silence.

Val reappeared on the deck without Brienne. She pulled Euron's long raven hair with heartfelt animosity. "Give that helm to someone else, deadman," she ordered him very seriously.

"Why?" the kraken was suspicious. "So that you can throw me overboard?"

Val chuckled. "Next time, gladly," she informed him. "When you act like the tongue-cutting, lying scum that you are. Today you did one better."

"Come with me," she said then, showing Euron a sewing needle, a yarn of black thread and a pouch with his fingers she must have retrieved from the hold. "This will work better than tying them. Don't make me wait or I will change my mind."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.

Comments make the world go round :-)
Jaime IV

Chapter Notes

Thank you TopShelfCrazy for helping with the language and the logic :-)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jaime

Casterly Rock burned.

It had been burning for a sennight.

What good did it do, being a dragonrider, if he was never in time?

_You’re late because we were transporting the Prince of Dorne and his family back and forth like a common carriage with a coach, and not as their equals in birth and birthright. The House Martell is not higher than the other great houses just because they style themselves princes._ His dragon pressured him with unwanted, erudite opinions.

_Shut up._ Jaime decided he preferred Viserion before his dragon had learned eloquence and began expressing his white and golden thoughts with frightening precision.

Next he would speak Pentoshi or Old Tongue.

At this moment, Jaime would trade Viserion for a new sword hand. Cutting into pieces the man who ordered the destruction of the Rock was far more appealing than just burning him.

Burning was for Asshai. For those who forced Brienne into the Shadow.

_And how would you achieve that without me, Ser Jaime?_

_You have me there. My pardons, dragon._

Both his fathers laughed heartily at Jaime’s helplessness from seven hells; Tywin, seated on a privy with a crossbow quarrel stuck in his bowels, and Aerys with a golden sword point protruding from his bony, mad chest.

"What happened?" he asked Tommen, forcing calm into his speech. Little tongues of fire danced behind his eyelids, hungrier than a famished lion.

_Burn them all._ Viserion commented on Jaime’s hellish mood.

_Shut up, now!_

"We were almost ready to travel North. The fords of the Trident are ruined. I planned to sail from Lannisport and continue by land from the Stony Shore,” his son replied. "Tyrells took the same route. They left in time and they should be in Winterfell by now. We were running late. The West has slowed down. Our appetites were greater in the War of Five Kings and so were our losses. Yet we would have made it to the wedding. I thought… I thought that I might have earned some respect"
of our bannermen as their new lord, if not their love… I didn't expect it would come to this."

"Why not send a raven after me immediately?"

"I did, Father," Tommen replied. "Several birds had returned before the last one that found you."

What did your hatchling think? He should stop whining. I fly faster than a mere raven.

Shut up.

"Your mother?" Jaime asked, trying to keep his heart out of the question, dreading and yet somehow knowing the answer...

"She was in her chambers. We never found her body, but that entire wing had collapsed… Only stone and ashes remain," Tommen lowered his head. "I was fortunate to have stayed in Lannisport overnight. The delay was accidental. Or I would have been with her… Whoever did this had studied the Rock and was aware of my plans, just not of the change. They knew where to begin the conflagration in order to make it spread too fast to be stopped."

Cersei sometimes claimed that Jaime and her would leave the world as they arrived; together.

So much for that, sweet sister.

Jaime hoped that she had died unawares, like she lived her last days, stark mad, plucking flowers… perhaps enjoying the sight of fire… Like Aerys.

Tommen had almost lost his boyish fatness. His shoulders broadened. In another few years he would resemble Tywin in build rather than Jaime. But his temper remained mild and he was still good-natured.

He would never inspire fear.

Jaime wondered if Tommen still had kittens. And perhaps he should. He could always find a new kitten when the old one died.

Or was annihilated by evildoing.

It wouldn’t be the same with a woman...

Tommen was now of an age where he would notice girls, though he was still too young to marry in his father's opinion. Myrcella and Tommen played when they were children, just like Jaime and Cersei. So it was perhaps wise that his sister had stayed in Dorne, in love with Prince Trystane. Although she was also a hostage that could be killed, if Doran forgot Jaime's and Viserion’s aid against the sellsword armies from Volantis…

The slavers had to run away empty-handed and return to the oldest daughter of Valyria when an unprecedented storm made the sea around Sunspear rise high as the mountains; shattering the ice-path between Dorne and Essos. The waves had shapes of trees, and eagles, and wolves, and giants armed with clubs…

The Arm of Dorne was broken again. It wouldn’t refreeze anytime soon, despite that temperatures on land had turned unbearably and uncommonly low for the far south.

Jaime’s brains turned slowly, faced with the progressive disappearance of Casterly Rock. Well, the rock as such remained. But the castle was gone. A new one would have to be built on that same
rock, after the royal wedding.

Tyrion had wanted Lannisters to be the first to swear fealty to Rhaegar’s son. If they did not, it was the same as declaring that they were changing sides, or at least rethinking their political position as soon as Rhaegar died. The same as saying they again followed an unknown cause of their own, like Tywin did in Robert's Rebellion; closing himself in the Rock, brooding over his decisions, and declaring for a side only at the end.

Whoever burned the Rock wanted the Lannisters to miss the wedding…

"We travel with one hundred," Jaime decided. "To match the Dornish in number. We’re leaving right now. We'll find some cousins to finish putting out the fires and guarding the ruins until your return."

"Do you not wish to visit a sept, to light a candle for Mother?" Tommen asked shyly.

"No," Jaime refused with more violence than he intended to let slip in his voice, remembering his last reunion with Cersei in a *sept*, over Joff's dead body. She’d noticed he was crippled. It was the beginning of their end. He didn’t want to recall the rest of it. It was in the past. Not even her death would change this.

The more he thought about his past, the more he owed sincere thanks to the late Vargo Hoat for divesting him of his sword hand.

And if he was to light a candle for anyone, it would be for Brienne…

Who must have met her end very much *aware* of what was coming, sword in hand. He just wanted… *needed* revenge before he could even begin praying for her. His loss was too fresh and raw to be expressed in words.

But his only son had no part in any of it. He had a wedding to attend. Jaime's coaching tasks were not yet over. Returning to Stokeworth for Tyrion would have to wait a bit longer.

*Liar.* Viserion accused him.

*Yes. I am. I know.*

Jaime could have collected Tyrion before flying West. The detour would cost him a negligible amount of time, less than half a day, or rather, half a night.

Day had become a wishful name for the less dark part of the night…

But Jaime had chosen not to go, fearing to find Tyrion dead. Tommen's desperate letter provided another excuse to postpone it.

Brienne was gone. Cersei was burned. Greyscale had probably killed or severely disabled Tyrion by now. His children were grown and he hadn't been their father when they needed him most.

Jaime was all alone.

"We will light a candle when we return," he lied to his son.

He did not think he'd ever return to the West. There should be plenty of opportunities to die on the Wall.

After he and Viserion paid a friendly little visit to Asshai…
Half a night later, Winterfell was as cold and as monumental as Jaime remembered it, with the difference that it was a hundred times more crowded than during Robert’s visit.

Carpenters were busy constructing a roof over the main yard and a few adjacent ones in the light and heat of bonfires. A bunch of servants were composing tables and benches out of wooden boards. The Great Hall of the Starks, spacious as its name said, was far too small to receive all the guests. By the looks of the final preparations, there would be tables from the Hall to the main gates, spreading in all directions through various courtyards of the castle.

Only one path was left clear; leading from the Great Hall to the godswood, where the couple, their family and their most noble guests would pass when the moment came for Jon and Daenerys to say their vows.

The arrangements were impressive, Jaime had to admit. Probably the Northmen worked their arses off so that they wouldn’t freeze.

A grim young man was standing behind the gates alone, clad fully in black, and uncloaked despite the cold. Tall. Cold as Jaime imagined death, at least on the surface. Rhaegar’s son was a spitting image of his mother, except for his eyes, similar in expression and shape to the indigo pupils of his father; only darker, more haunted. His cheeks were pale as ice and his beard was growing; black like his hair.

*Rhaegar's son. Jon Targaryen. The one they called Jon Snow.*

Jaime barely remembered him from his first visit to Winterfell. He remembered only one of Ned’s children with clarity from that time.

*Brandon. Bran.*

"Welcome, my lords," Jon greeted the Lannisters, not meaning it, long-faced and stone-calm. A foreign blade hung on his hip, wrapped in a scarf instead of a scabbard. It looked… intriguing.

Sharp of expression, Rhaegar’s son assessed both Jaime and Tommen, passing an unfavourable, mute judgement as he did so.

His eyes said that he found them unworthy.

And looked so righteous as he came to this conclusion that Jaime wished to punch the expression off his face. His non-existent hand itched. A simple challenge would do. The sword of Aegon the Conqueror was on Jaime’s back, too great to be hung on his hip. It was the first time that Jaime carried a true greatsword. He might as well use it before he gave it away as Jon’s wedding gift from Varys, to see if it was still as sharp as its fame.

Valyrian steel did not have to be continuously sharpened.

But Jaime's left hand would never be good enough to wield it. He'd probably kiss the snow very soon, and give the young man a satisfaction of beating him.

Besides, he was here for *Tommen* and he would be reasonable. It was not as if he deserved a warm welcome to Winterfell. Some humiliation was to be expected.

"Thank you," Tommen answered Jon sincerely, ignoring or not seeing the enmity in their host. "I had not wished to be late, but we had trouble in our lands," he looked back at Jaime. "If Father did not return for us, we would have missed the occasion."
"It matters not," Jon cut him off curtly. "Though I must add that we did not expect you any more and offer my pardons for any shortcomings in your accommodation. The wedding is tomorrow at midday and the castle is full. You will be staying in Wintertown."

Jaime maintained his silence, deciding it was best if he left before he was tempted to speak and aggravate their position. Anything he might say would further damage Tommen's image, and the boy had already suffered enough for being Jaime’s son.

He nonetheless thought of one announcement he should make, as it involved another mouth to be fed and another body in need of lodging, albeit small. "I should…" Jaime began lamely. "I should return south for Tyrion. He has been ill and staying with a friend. And he's also wished to attend the celebration."

Rhaegar's son brightened a little at the mention of Jaime’s little brother. "It will be agreeable to see Lord Tyrion again," he offered acridly.

"I hope for the same," Jaime replied, wishing he would find his brother alive and well, miraculously resistant to greyscale. Not everyone falls ill.

"Tonight we will hold a modest feast for all our guests, before the main one after the wedding on the morrow," Jon finished informing the Lannisters about the proceedings, and then, to Jaime's utmost surprise, showed Tommen the way to Wintertown, clearly offering to accompany him in person instead of calling for servants. Perhaps he was truly embarrassed with the improper sleeping arrangements for one of the greatest families of Westeros. Or maybe he just wished to leave Jaime's company as much as Jaime longed to depart from his.

Before Jaime could find Viserion, as soon as Jon's shaggily black head and Tommen's golden curls were out of sight, he was approached by the lords Hightower, Tarly and Baratheon… With Brynden Tully lurking from behind the bunch of carpenters, wearing an even haughtier expression on his craggy face than the one exhibited by Rhaegar's son.

"My lord of Lannister," Hightower was apparently the spokesman of the little lordly embassy. Jaime wondered about the purpose of it.

"Lord Hightower," he parroted. What in seven hells do you want?

"You will understand how everything has changed with Rhaegar's death," Hightower spoke with compelling wisdom and great knowledge, like a kind father. "Rhaegar could have tried to claim his father's throne. I say tried, for perhaps he would have failed. A man who had not known who he was for twenty years can only be labelled as mad. The realm cannot allow another ill-suited ruler like Aerys to take the Iron throne. That would be unlawful and harmful. Nor can this wolfling of dubious paternity claim to rule the Seven Kingdoms. He smells northern-"

"Princess Rhaenys had smelled Dornish to Aerys, may she rest in peace," Jaime reminded them.

"Princess Rhaenys was doubtlessly trueborn, but she is no longer with us. What do we know about this boy except what he and his mother are saying?" Hightower sounded like an embodiment of decency and prudence.

The invitations of King Jon had been a tad preposterous, Jaime could agree on that. Even Cersei would have liked the titles spelled on them in beautifully calligraphed letters.

"I trust that you have another man in mind, a better one," Jaime tried to guess where the conversation was going.
Stannis immediately made a step forward with pride. "My claim is greater than Lord Snow's. By blood, I am an heir to both Robert and the true Prince of Dragonstone. As a proof of the latter, I'm a dragonrider. The great black dragon answers to me since the death of the pretender, who claimed to be Rhaegar and crowned himself king for a day in King's Landing. I have never been fully assured as to this man's identity."

For a dour man, Stannis had also turned rather eloquent. Maybe it was due to keeping company with dragons.

"I understand," Jaime barely managed a simple articulate response, instead of a surprised and rude You a dragonrider? that came to mind first. He wished he was three feet shorter and endowed with Tyrion's mental abilities, feeling less and less capable of navigating the swamp of the freshly brewing intrigue.

"Lord Stannis enjoys the secret support of many law abiding houses, of those who do not put their trust in women and boys to rule us all," Lord Tarly said decisively. "We shall express it more publicly after the wedding."

"Blackfish," Jaime called with insolence. "Where do you stand in this? Do enlighten me. I missed the unique pleasure of your company since you attempted to hang me in the Vale."

"The Targaryens have almost ruined the realm," Blackfish stated, approaching slowly, avoiding looking at Jaime, standing between Hightower and Stannis. "Robert's Rebellion was not for naught. Rhaegar, if the pretender who took his name was him, must have been mad for twenty years or he wouldn't have lived as a septon. And then, when he supposedly remembered who he was, he was all of a sudden forgiving of crimes he should have never been able to excuse. His wife is but a woman, weak and proud, wishing to protect her son. We cannot trust her in this. Nor can we confirm as ruler a young man who spent his first adult years with thieves, rapers and murderers on the Wall. What does he know of kingship? We need someone steadfast and moral, with experience at court. Stannis has the right qualities for me. Edmure, my nephew, believes the same. And my great-nephew Robert Arryn will hopefully see the light before it's too late."

Edmure will always think the same as someone else, Jaime remembered. Having his own opinion in politics required too much time that Edmure might prefer to spend with his wife, or pretending to be a great battle commander.

Jaime's brain galloped to a terribly bright and unique conclusion. So Rhaegar was either an impostor, or mad and too forgiving. And this accusation for leniency most certainly included the fact that Rhaegar had not condemned Jaime and Cersei to death. Something Blackfish would have done.

And this is your reason to ask me to join your conspiracy, my lords?

There was only one answer Jaime could give to this, in his right mind.

"I say no," he stated with utmost calm. "Would that be all? I have another obligation before the wedding."

Hightower opened his mouth to utter something else, another learned argument, or maybe a simple threat, but Jaime had already sauntered off in the most arrogant gait he could muster.

Insolence never felt better.

Viserion disapproved of his choice. You should gain power. You're as good as any of them. I'm larger than my green brother. I can take him down for you.
Shut up. What is power?

Jaime remembered late Ser Arthur Dayne, knighting him. What's power without honour? What's the flavour of it?

It tastes of ashes, dragon...

Viserion seethed at Jaime’s last remark, not convinced. Or perhaps finding ashes savoury.

Shut up. Jaime insisted, furious and frustrated in turns with the overwhelming unfairness of existence.

His dragon mercifully closed his great, white and golden mind to his rider.

Fed up with his dragon, instead of leaving, Jaime strolled mindlessly through the open spaces of Winterfell, until his legs took him to the broken tower, the place of his crime against Brandon Stark.

How could I?

It mattered little. He was able to do it and he had done it, after some hesitation. And he hadn't even done it for love as he'd told Cersei, not only. He did it for believing that it didn’t matter what he did. After Aerys, everyone assumed the worst of Jaime behind his golden back, regardless of the truth. Why wouldn’t he live up to everyone's expectation of having shit for honour? And save his children and Cersei from Robert's wrath in the process?

He had been wrong.

It always mattered what one did or didn't do.

There was no way around this terrible truth.

A thanks to the dead goat was truly in order. It took Vargo Hoat's kindness to make Jaime see that his actions could make a difference in the unfairness of existence. As well as to notice his future wife for all her virtues, love her and lose her.

Jaime stormed out of the castle and into the wolfswood, ignoring Viserion's urging that there was something important he should see, blue and scaled, and bright… A miracle of nature.

To think of anything blue provoked sharp, gnawing pain. It was Brienne's colour, Brienne's eyes.

He forced himself to consider politics instead. It looked as if there might be bloodshed at the wedding. If Stannis had a dragon… Jon had a dragon… They could dance.

Wait… I have a bleeding dragon. Jaime laughed heartily. That was obviously the reason that the great and noble lords sweet-talked the Kingslayer for their cause and not Tommen, young and susceptible of being a more malleable Lannister.

But even Blackfish with his superb honour intact must have seen a purely military advantage in having the second of the three current dragonriders on their side. Tyrion would have seen immediately why Hightower and Stannis didn’t approach Tommen. Jaime was slow. He only figured it now.

His answer would still have been no.

On the other hand, Rhaegar's son honestly hated him, as he well should. The attitude was refreshing and more… natural. Less political. More understandable.
Fling Blackfish through the window, Viserion suggested merrily. *He has lived long enough.*

*Shut up.*

Jaime looked at his stump and smiled wryly.

This time, he would keep his meagre honour.

It was all he had left.

Horses, a party of men.

"How much longer?" a female voice asked impatiently, a dead one, a stubborn one.

Jaime ran through fresh snow, not feeling the cold. It couldn't be.

"Brienne!" he cried out, not caring who heard him and if some lost wedding guest thought him madder than Aerys.

*Viserion! You told me she was dead.*

*No,* Viserion was insulted in his dragon innocence. *Gone into Shadow and the Shadow is death. You asked where she was and I told you. You never asked if she died.*

*Never mind,* Jaime thought carelessly.

He laughed and cried at the same time. "Brienne!" he yelled. "Come over here, wench!"

His wife was more amazing than he remembered her, muscled and still sun-tanned from their short stay in Valyria.

Jaime pulled her out of the saddle and into his arms because she didn’t dismount fast enough for his liking.

"Jaime," she was beet red when he kissed her before all, and her armour was annoyingly harsh and superfluous between them.

"So where have you been?" he asked tenderly. "How have you been? Good by the looks of you…”

She took his head between her large palms and murmured a short phrase into his ear, revealing another source of her blossoming embarrassment and tremulous giddiness. One he hadn't expected. Not at all.

He was not hearing well, he wasn't. It was too much joy, too much happiness. He was dreaming and he would wake.

"Are you certain?" he whispered back.

"Yes," Brienne confirmed. "I thought that I could not have children. But now all suggests that I will become a mother."

"And I will be able to hold my child in my arms and proclaim to the entire world that it is mine," Jaime said dreamily, realising that Brienne was stopping his tears with small kisses, administered as precisely as the blows of her sword

*Blue. Pretty. Young.* Viserion definitely sounded madder than Aerys, pondering the extraordinary
speed of dragon growth, future eggs and tails and necks intertwined. He was as happy as Jaime.

Trust the dragon to spoil the moment.

_Shit up will you?_

The eloquence of dragons was obviously very limited. A more intelligent animal would have understood what Jaime wanted to know when he asked about Brienne’s whereabouts. It wouldn’t have left him in the dark.

His dragon’s nature was extremely inconstant. At times he sounded like an enthusiastic toddler, like now, with his odd, egg-centred fantasies. But he could also act like a hardened old man, scarred by his existence more than Jaime had ever been, yearning for power and revenge.

Jaime gave a brief look to the rest of Brienne's party.

Mance Rayder. The sand snake who used to pose as a septa. A pretty wildling woman. A host of ironborn, alive for a change, apart from Euron Greyjoy, dead as ever.

A _shadowbinder_ … with the face of a girl Jaime remembered.

"Gods," he choked, shocked and very afraid. “Where did you find her?"

Fear was something Jaime almost never felt. Even in his worst moments he had been brave. But now it seized his guts and made them tremble.

“Lady Tysha was among the Asshai’i who had captured us,” Brienne explained softly.

Tysha looked at Jaime with more hatred than Jon.

_So you know me. I guess you would._

_What if she leaves before Tyrion can see her?_

Jaime bowed his handsome head down, still holding his wife.

“I swear that I had no idea about the reach of our father's true intentions,” he told Tysha without any introduction. “I'm so terribly sorry.”

Tysha stared at snow. Her expression blank. Dead.

“They call it winter in the North,” Jaime tried his charm. A woman originally from the West would not be used to this. He wondered how cold it could get in Asshai.

Predictably, his attempt at small talk was unsuccessful.

Anything he could say was insufficient.

"Could you please accompany my good-sister while I do a bit of flying?” he felt honour-bound to ask of his wife, for as much as he craved the sight and the touch of her to erase the loneliness and the despair of the past weeks. “Chain her if you must, like you did with me in the beginning,” he murmured into Brienne's ear, so that the others wouldn't hear this part. “Just don’t let her leave. I'll get Tyrion. We'll be back before the feast.”

Which should be in a few hours. Making it back in time was perhaps an impossible feat, even for a dragon.
He needed to bring Tyrion right here, right now. If he ever wanted his brother's forgiveness. Just like Jaime, he would want to see his wife again, under any circumstances.

Speed was what a dragonrider was for.

Viserion, now!

To Jaime’s surprise, his dragon did not arrive immediately.

And when he did, he was gliding in the air next to a very small blue dragon, barely able to fly on his own.

Her. Viserion was very adamant concerning the hatchling’s gender.

“She was born after we passed through the Shadow,” Brienne explained with wonder in her eyes. “I call her Beth. It's maybe not noble enough for a dragon’s name, but she's so small.”

Beth. Viserion approved.

“She stays here,” Brienne admonished Viserion, and Beth landed obediently on her shoulder.

Hurry, dragon. To Stokeworth and back. Fly fast like the light travels. My wife is pregnant. She can’t accompany us on this shaky ride. And I want us back before we're gone.

They found Tyrion walking restlessly on the battlements of the little castle in the crownlands, studying the starry sky, dressed as well as a dwarf could be, in a red and golden jerkin somewhat adjusted to his size, and a too long brown cloak; ready to fly away.

“I thought you forgot all about me by now, big brother,” he scorned him, alive and lovably poisonous. "I nearly began walking to Winterfell."

“No grey limbs?” Jaime breathed out. They were in a hurry.

“Not one,” Tyrion shook his head. “Just like on the Rhoyne. I was fortunate. Are you asking out of fear for your life or your golden looks?”

“Neither,” Jaime refused the ridiculous notion. He’d never been afraid to take risks. “But there's someone else you'd not wish to contaminate.

“And that is?”

“You'll see,” Jaime should probably tell him, but he could not. They didn't have time for painful discussions.

Speed up, dragon. Like the wind. Like the light. Now!

By the time they reached Winterfell again, Jaime only wanted to sleep, preferably with his head in his wife’s lap. Flying faster than light proved to be devastating.

When he and Tyrion barged into the Great Hall, the feast had already begun in the light of many fires, torches and candles. At this pace, the wolfswood of the Starks would be deprived of trees before spring.

Rhaegar’s son was there, on the dais. And his mother, all in black; grieving. And Daenerys, between them, queenly and prettier than ever, wearing dark blue and silver silk, with Beth on her shoulder instead of Brienne's. Her violet eyes shone with delight. The guests who did not know her gazed at
her with awe. The Mother of Dragons was radiant, and a new child clung to her. If Jaime was in Stannis’ shoes he would have doubts about the black dragon’s allegiance. *Drogon was hers before he followed Rhaegar.* And Stannis… did not call Drogon by his name.


And finally the stern-looking, pretty shadowbinder in dark blue robes, seated next to Brienne, who wore a silvery doublet and breeches, courtesy of the Starks, no doubt.

“Lord Tyrion, welcome,” Rhaegar’s son said and walked down from the dais. “I am pleased to see you.”

Jon took Jaime’s brother and offered him a seat between himself and a very fat young man wearing a maester chain, consisting of only two links.

Tyrion coughed and said very politely. “Thank you, Your Grace. I am most honoured and happy to meet you after a long while. But, if I may, I would sit next to the lovely lady in blue robes over there. I ought to,” He sounded as if his eloquence would fail him at any moment.

“Why?” Daenerys asked melodiously. Her eyes flashed purple with curiosity.

“My lords,” Tyrion announced, waddling to Tysha as fast as he could. Which meant very slowly, clumsy and ugly-looking. “Allow me to present you,” his voice broke off completely, "my lady wife.”

Brienne stood up, as if on command, liberating the place next to Tysha, and went to Jaime.

Tysha seemed like a frightened, cornered animal for a moment. Then she smirked and looked away from the empty seat, allowing Tyrion to take it.

This meant Jaime and Brienne would have to sit under the salt, for there was no place left for two on the main table.

Jaime felt he should be offended by the outcome, but he wasn't. Or was it Viserion who was insulted again? Hurt dragon vanity aside, sitting farther down meant the opportunity to embrace his wife freely. Maybe feed her porridge or whatever passed for modest supper in the barbaric north.

Brienne elbowed Jaime. "Come," she said quietly when he didn't move fast enough, weary from the day's flight. On the way, Jaime noticed Tarly, Redwynes, Freys, and many other lesser nobles he knew from wiping the dirt with them in tourneys. Brienne soon made him sit down on a bench at the end of one of the trestle tables, faster and more concentrated than him in finding a place where they could both fit at ease; tall as they were.

Accidentally, they also had a good view of the main table. Tyrion carefully placed a slice of crisp, roasted bear meat and some sweet potatoes on Tysha's plate. She looked through him, ignoring him.

When Brienne and Jaime finished their soup, with the food typically arriving slower to the less important tables, Tysha's plate was still untouched and her gaze equally empty.

“Do you think she might forgive him?” Jaime asked with shy curiosity. If he were a woman, he wouldn’t. To either of the Lannister brothers. Yet he found himself wishing for the impossible. For his little brother's happiness. As far as Jaime knew, Tysha was the only girl who ever saw past Tyrion being a dwarf, before her life was destroyed on that account.
Ruined for love, Jaime mused wryly, imagining he could say that about himself. That he had been a pure, innocent victim. He wasn’t. He gave his own reputation a helping hand.

“She won’t,” Brienne judged bluntly.

Jaime’s spirit fell.

“But if she had him in her heart before his sin,” Brienne continued, “she might concede him another opportunity. To treat her with honour. I don’t know her well enough to tell.”

“Like you gave a chance to me, when I… when I sent you to find the Stark girls?”

“Well, that’s what I told myself at the time,” Brienne affirmed cautiously. “That I started seeing you in a more favourable light when you began making decisions I could understand. The truth is that, against my better judgment, I found you intriguing while you were still—”

“-Arrogant? Insufferable? Tall? Uniquely handsome? Incorrigible?” Jaime offered. His guts swelled from joy when Brienne lowered her bright blue eyes, probably undecided whether to be embarrassed, chastise him or elbow him harder. It felt incredibly good to be able to tease her again.

“You… you’re not asking this because you’ve done something mad while I was away, are you?” She sounded troubled.

There it was. Her moment of doubt in him. Of fear she loved an unworthy man, who embraced his old ways as soon as she was out of sight.

“I was a soul of humility,” Jaime said, smirking. “You can ask the Prince of Dorne that both Viserion and I were on our best behaviour. I haven’t been near children or windows, not simultaneously. Nor did I cut any innocent soul to shreds or allow Viserion to burn things, despite that I thought you gone for good. I pondered returning to Asshai and burning it—”

“Wasn’t Viserion afraid of the city of shadows?” Brienne interrupted. “It would be his death! And yours…” her voice dwindled.

“Viserion has grown, Brienne,” Jaime said gently. “Haven’t you noticed? The Asshai’i might not stand a chance to enslave him now.”

“But then, then why?” Brienne couldn’t quite formulate her question.

“Why didn’t I go, reckless as I am?” Jaime guessed her meaning. “I had to attend to my duties first, few as they were. They kept me in check.”

Brienne exhaled with relief. “You’ve always had honour in you,” she concluded, looking every inch like the brilliant, stubborn wench she was. “I only sensed it later in our acquaintance, but you must have had it in you all the time. It just took you time to acknowledge the truth and act accordingly.”

When Brienne uttered such terribly idealistic and manifestly untrue propositions about his person, they always sounded far less ridiculous than when Jaime dared think them through by himself.

“Whatsoever you say, love,” he conformed himself to her judgement, kissing her soundly.

Jaime wouldn’t have to be anyone’s coach for the night, nor stand watch in white armour over any king. Thank the gods.

Viserion had gone to rest with the little blue she-dragon on his back, which provided a comfortable
respite from his recent dreams of power. Dragons never exactly slept, from what Jaime had learned. Rather, they lay unconscious for indefinite periods of time and suffered from visions, as a man recovering from a heavy injury. They succumbed to this state both for brief moments or long days. Fortunately, unlike men, they didn’t have a period of drowsiness after waking. They were ready to immediately breathe fire.

On the dais, Daenerys prompted Jon into making a toast to everyone who had gathered to witness their wedding on the morrow. Rhaegar’s son performed it with education and grace, but his heart was not in it. Jaime wondered where it was. The high seat of the Starks gaped empty. Neither Jon nor his mother sat on it. Jaime was unsurprised, remembering the face of Ned Stark when he had found the Kingslayer seated on the Iron Throne. You wouldn’t, would you? You’d not even consider usurping that holy place. You’re waiting for Ned’s children. Guess what, I would do the same. When I sat on the Iron Throne, I was waiting for a better man to come and take it. Not that you’d ever believe me...

Jaime wondered briefly why none of Ned’s children was here. The invitation had been signed by the youngest one who should have been dead, so he must have been found alive at some point. And both girls should be around, the last thing he knew.

Stannis wore a moderately satisfied expression on his square face, happy to bide his time, if a man of his nature experienced happiness to begin with. Willas Tyrell talked to Princess Arianne and appeared more cheerful than usual. Not that she would ever look at him, with his crippled leg and not so young age.

Tyrion sat next to Tysha, shrunken and contrite. Neither of the two ate. She still faced away from him; her face pale and indifferent. But she didn’t look for another seat nor ask him to leave. Occasionally she stared at Stannis with dark blue eyes that cried murder. Jaime’s little brother, on the other hand, glanced at… Stannis’ scarred daughter, more than once.

It was all very intriguing.

Pipes and drums suddenly intoned a merry tune at the open door of the Great Hall. The music thumped and flared, in stark contrast with the grimness of winter. The players wore grey and mud brown, but their performance inspired thoughts of orange and red heat, and careless recklessness. Jaime had dreamed of dancing with Brienne at Myrcella’s or Tommen’s wedding.

Why wait?

“You can dance while being with child, you know,” Jaime told Brienne. Cersei could, at least.

Shut up, Viserion chastised him, suddenly awake and protective of his rider’s steps, afraid that Jaime would hurt his wife by thoughtless talk.

I’d never tell her that, Viserion. I’m not dumb, just inflammable. You should understand this better than anyone. I love my wife. Go back to sleep. Rest. Whatever.

“You wouldn’t want us to be the first...” Brienne was hesitating. “I’m not wearing a gown… Shouldn’t one of the hosts-?”

“Why in seven hells not?” Jaime wondered. “Tomorrow we'll let the happy couple lead the dance, after their wedding. Besides, I have a reputation for causing scandals to maintain.”

Brienne stood up, accepting his challenge bravely.

They initiated the dance, among whistling and cheering of the crowd. To Jaime’s great surprise,
Brienne was a good dancer. Her septa would be proud. She was probably more skilled with sword in hand, but she never stepped on his toes and the inch she had on him when they were flushed together was a source of indescribable and tremendous joy. Jaime was still strong enough for her.

Her stomach was flat. And unarmoured. And warm. Maybe… slightly rounded. Imperceptibly.

*It would grow.* His cheeks flushed from the thought.

She touched one.

“*It is* hot in here,” he defended himself nonchalantly, grasping harder the small of her back.

Deep into the long winter night, they strolled to find the lodgings given to the Lannisters in Wintertown, drunk on music and rhythm.

“I always *loved* dancing,” she shared with him on the way. “I just never had much opportunity.”

“How about that different dance, my lady, the one we practiced a bit more?” Jaime slurred, expecting refusal.

To Jaime’s surprise, when they found an empty bed, Brienne never claimed being unable to love him because she was with his child.

As Cersei always did, from the day she missed her moonblood.

“What’s wrong?” Brienne asked then, vulnerable, noticing his hesitation.

“Nothing, wench,” he chased her worry away. “It’s been so long. I was just admiring your beauty.”

Jaime began loving the occasion of the bloody royal wedding.

It would be a great adventure.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.

Comments make the world go round.
Jon IX

Chapter Notes

Thank you TopShelfCrazy for tolerating me for this long :-))

Jon

Tommen was no longer the fat prince, as Arya used to think, when she had to be courteous and friendly to him during King Robert’s visit. Sansa had been, obviously, tasked to accompany the handsome one. Jon found himself irrationally preferring that his little sister would fancy a timid, kind boy like Tommen, ignoring for a moment that he was a Lannister, rather than a strong, stubborn one like Gendry. *What if he turns out to be the same as Joffrey?* Well, at least he wasn’t blond, nor raised like a spoiled prince.

Jon knew his wish to be in vain. Arya was more stubborn than Jon and Gendry together. *She fell for the handsome and Sansa for the ugly one. Who’d ever say so?* Life was terribly unpredictable.

*Arya, where are you? Won’t you be back for my wedding?*

He had sentimentally hoped that at least some of his brothers and sisters would be there, though he was a man grown and commander of a large army. Between the Northmen, black brothers, wildlings, Southrons and the outlanders who came North with his parents and Dany, or later, with some of his wedding guests, the number of soldiers he could field had steadily grown to a very respectable size. Probably not enough to meet the Others in the field, but more than sufficient to represent a non-negligible military power…

Towards his enemies in the realm of men.

*They would say that I’m just another pretender to the Iron Throne.*

Jon didn’t feel entitled to it, despite having no more doubts left about his true parentage. Nor did he want it. Not as such. Not the Iron Throne, nor *any* throne. Yet he’d let Mother write the invitations with all the formality his bloody birth could offer, hoping for more *support* to defend the Wall. Hoping for a common cause in the Seven Kingdoms. Lyanna had the right of one thing; in this winter, they had to stand together, or they would fall.

Not in his wildest dreams did he dared hope that everyone of any importance in the realm would gather in the castle of his childhood, devour food and firewood, and conspire to take over that throne that almost seemed to be on another continent where Jon was concerned; so far away from his immediate preoccupations.

*The Long Night.*

*The Others.*

*The Night’s King.*

He was marching south and he had Sansa, alive and captive. Ghost had seen and lost him when the
entire host of white walkers vanished in a blue mist.

**Where are you heading? Where will you reappear?**

"Rhaegal will watch over the Wall, tonight and tomorrow," Jon told Dany, abruptly reaching his decision on the matter. "I fear that the Others may appear in force. He'll return for me in need."

Aye, Rhaegal’s voice rang very quietly. Perched outside, on the walls of Winterfell, he obeyed Jon like a loyal steed, taking off.

“For us,” Dany reminded Jon that the blood of the dragon did not stay behind. "Though it might be prudent if he stayed close,” she continued shakily.

Jon could see how much the admission cost her. The dragons were her children. She could not imagine any of them not being on her side.

“Because of Lannister's dragon?” Jon commented with scorn. “Rhaegal is smaller, but if I have to, I think that I can-”

“No,” Dany interrupted, her violet eyes puffed and... uncommonly pink. “Because of Drogon.”

"Have you been crying?" Jon asked gently, cursing himself for being inconsiderate, returning all his attention from his irrational wish to see his siblings reunited on his wedding day to his wife-to-be. She was terrifyingly beautiful in blue and silver. Tears could not ruin this. "You don’t know exactly what's on Drogon’s mind," Jon tried to console her. "You've told me so yourself."

"It's about time that I acknowledge the truth, don't you think?" Dany retorted angrily. "Why would he fly around with Stannis like a winged horse if he wasn't his now? Why would he have breathed fire on me?"

Jon had no sensible answer to this. He was made acutely aware of the immensity of Drogon's mind only once; when the black dragon was angry and hurt over Rhaegar's death. Father's death. Before and after, Drogon kept himself apart from Jon, like a huge black hole hidden on the margin of this... mental expanse where the minds of the dragons roamed freely. Jon was new to it and probably very unaccomplished in understanding it.

It had always been easier to merge with Ghost, even before Jon grasped he’d been opening his wolf eyes and howling to the moon. Warging came naturally to him, if being a beastling and a skinchanger could be deemed natural. In comparison, the world of the dragons remained exquisitely foreign... And alluring.

Oddly enough, for Jon it was easier to sense Lannister's dragon if he so wished, a foolish and arrogant beast; completely unguarded. He would become easy prey to Jon and Rhaegal, no matter what he believed of himself. Jon wished he was equally certain of victory if he had to face Stannis and Drogon. He could best Stannis, but Drogon was a different story. Dany’s renegade dragon was gigantic, looking like a broad, winged hill with legs... Jon and Rhaegal would give as good as they would get, but how would Dany feel if they died? Or if they were successful? Jon prayed to the old gods that it would not come to it. He did not want to cause more pain to his wife-to-be.

Jon and Dany were returning from the feast to their currently separate, though adjoining, chambers; the arrangement which would thankfully end on the morrow. Jon was sick of climbing to Dany’s room over the outer walls of Winterfell and entering through her window, only to leave the way he came before a dark-grey morning.

Their guests were nosy and omnipresent. Mother advised that at least a semblance of propriety
should be maintained at all times; it was more likely to satisfy different sensibilities.

To the extent that this was at possible at all.

It was easier when Jon and Dany stayed on the Wall in the weeks preceding the wedding. The forts were many and rickety. Jon was never cold and Rhaegal helped with starting fires and making the premises more tolerable for Dany. In the discomfort of Jon’s command, they were free to love each other.

Dany was studying him now. Her eyes dried and flashed purple.

"What's wrong, my love?" Dany inquired, holding his burned hand. "You've been lost in thought."

"They don't want me for their king," Jon spat out grumpily.

"Why did he ever think they would? Did he think they would? He didn’t, did he? Or perhaps he did, for a short while, very innocently. He might have dared hope that the truth about his birth could miraculously create unity in the Seven Kingdoms, for the Long Night. Just like learning the truth about his origin had appeased his gnawing hunger to at least know who his mother was. Lord Stark should have told him before Jon left to the Wall.

And Jon should have known better than to believe in miracles.

"Some of them don't," Dany acquiesced. "But that will always be so. The people will rarely agree about who is to rule them. Especially if they are free to choose and in time of peace."

"We are not at peace," Jon protested. "Can't they see?"

Jon knew what she was going to say next. She had tried to convince him of that before and they always… disagreed.

For the greatest part of the Southrons, the Others were still a myth and not a genuine threat. Even the riverlanders who had seen the white walkers roaming between the sunken fords of the Trident and the High Heart, which somehow defended the rest of the south from their presence, insisted in not believing in them, telling each other that they had seen angry giants or strangely dressed thieves who took their children in the night.

Jon almost wanted the Others to invade Winterfell so that everyone would open their eyes. Not only those newly-arrived men-at-arms who had ventured willingly to the Wall, bored to wait for the wedding with their lords and ladies. Jon wanted to embrace all who had done so, in a very non-kingly and non-lordly gesture. He was grateful to every single one. They helped man the Wall and they proved loyal.

Dany opened her mouth… and closed it.

"Sh!" she hushed Jon as well.

Upset voices could be heard through the walls, probably through the re-established flow of water from the hot springs.

"He said no!" Lord Hightower raged in his normally fatherly, wise voice.

"The Kingslayer has no honour, I told you so," observed a familiar, righteous voice. Jon felt he
should recognise it, but could not.

"More the reason for him to support Stannis," Hightower continued, displeased, "Yet he said no. What does he expect from the Starks?"

"It's the boy's mother," the familiar voice outlined his opinion. "The wolf ran away with a dragon instead of marrying a stag. How can you expect honour from a woman who didn’t do her duty to her family? Moreover, it would seem that she and her boy have done something so that none among Catelyn's children would be present at the wedding, to better foster the boy's claim. I’m not fooled by them not taking the High Seat of the Starks. North is what they want! Since they obviously can't win the Iron Throne. Why not align with the Kingslayer to ensure this?"

Jon… fumed. "Others take him!" he cursed. "Who's this?" he whispered to Dany. "Can you tell?"

"Sh!" she put a perfect finger on Jon's mouth and listened on, calm and untouched by anger. Eavesdropping was a most dishonourable and yet probably wisest course of action.

"The Kingslayer will bend the knee when he learns that Lady Cersei is alive and your captive, Lord Hightower" Stannis suddenly spoke, blunt and unpolished. "Then we will condemn them both to death when I am crowned king and in position to do proper justice. In war, some compromises have to be made, to my utmost regret."

"I don't know." Hightower was still not convinced. "Perhaps we need to rethink our entire strategy. Lannister was very tender with his wife."

"That cow?" Lord Tarly expressed his opinion. "It must be a passing whim."

Sam's father.

"A law should be introduced, Your Grace," Tarly continued, "condemning women who act with such impropriety."

"Being tall and ugly is not a crime, Tarly," Stannis cut him off. "Nor is training in arms, though it remains uncommon for ladies on the account of their weaker build. Lady Brienne is not an adulteress, nor is she a whore. Those are crimes."

"Yes, Your Grace," Tarly conformed himself.

"What I cannot understand," Stannis lamented with honesty, "is the message of the Martells. Why are they not here in response to my invitation? Surely they can see it wasn’t Robert who ordered the murder of Elia and her children. And even if it were, I’m not him. I’ve always been just."

"But Robert accepted the bodies from Tywin graciously, or have you forgotten? Have you ever spoken against it at court?" Hightower retorted, intelligent and dangerous. "Or perhaps Doran’s gout is as bad as his niece has just told us and keeps him in bed. I honestly don’t know what to believe. Time will show where he stands."

Jon began to understand this was the most capable one among his enemies. The House Hightower provided brides for Targaryen kings. Didn’t they?

"I'm not Robert," Stannis reaffirmed with passion.

"No, you're not," Hightower said, sounding as if he was actually regretting it.

Jon dragged Dany away, unceremoniously. He had heard enough. If he stayed there a moment
longer, he risked cutting Sam's father into shreds. They would be one nosy guest short. *He would condemn fighting women to what?* Jon couldn’t help thinking. *Death? Torture?* The possibilities that came to mind were rather colourful. Jon had never forgotten Sam's story about how he had to choose between joining the Night's Watch or being butchered by his own father in a hunt as a wild animal. Sam's mother would have gotten his fat, dead body to cry over. Only because he was different than what his father wanted in a son. *A man afraid to fight.* Who nevertheless fought admirably in many different ways. *Sam the Slayer.*

But Jon had promised to try and keep his wedding a dull affair. Acting in line with his passions had never been the best choice.

If he wanted more men to defend the Wall, and *women,* he added stubbornly, sincerely shocked by Tarly's propositions, he needed to stay calm.

*Cold as ice.*

*Cold as ice.*

*Cold as ice.*

He had to bury the fire within. Now. As the bastard had done in the past when Lady Catelyn kindly reminded him of who he was at every occasion.

He halted at another, empty, silent wall and leaned his forehead to it, breathing deeply. Dany's small hands tapped his back and shoulders, wishing to offer support that could not reach him now.

He was burning with rage.

"We ought to tell the Lannisters about Cersei—" Dany began.

"Maybe," Jon cut her off. "Alright, probably. Just not tonight please. We can tell Tyrion after the wedding."

The night's discoveries were not yet at the end.

"You and your son should leave the castle tomorrow before the feast," an unknown female voice echoed in the corridor, just around the corner from Jon and Dany. "Or find a seat in the courtyard, I don't care. Just stay out."

"Why, *Tyene*?" Mance Rayder replied with curiosity and interest, warmly pronouncing the lady's name.

"I can’t tell you more, and I hope that I’m wrong in my own assumptions, but if you value your son's life, you will heed to my advice," the lady rattled rapidly, much more upset than Stannis and Hightower. "I don't want to be mistaken again about my uncle’s plans. He’s prudent, but he’s no coward."

"What's *my* life to you?!!" Mance must have been shouting *after* the lady now. The faint sound of female slippers vanished down the corridor.

"*Tyene Sand?" Jon asked Dany. "The niece Prince Doran wanted to see so badly? I thought it was because he loved her. What did she mean by this?"

"I think… I should be able to guess and I can't," Dany looked as helpless as he'd felt listening to the unknown defender of the rights of Lady Catelyn's children, who had spoken so harshly of Jon and
his mother to Stannis, Hightower and Tarly.

Mance heard them and walked back. "I was just looking for you," he told Jon with relief. "The Martells are up to something."

"Who isn't?" Jon reacted angrily and exhaled loudly to calm down. "Have you looked at the book the prince sent?" he asked Dany. "He surely went through a lot of trouble to deliver a present to someone he hates. It should better be important."

"I didn't have time," Dany shook her head. "I only asked Ser Barristan to guard it as he would watch over me. With his life. But... I think you should ask your Mother about what Lady Tyene just said. They used to be friends."

Jon found his Mother having tea with Ser Barristan, as if she knew where she should be if her son needed her in the middle of the night.

"Is anyone asleep in Winterfell?" he wondered, barging in.

Mother poured him a cup of hot tea. "What else is wrong?" she asked, cold as ice, calm as Jon wished to be.

Jon sunk on a chair next to her and began telling what they just heard. Daenerys found a warmer place, nearer to the hearth, and started unwrapping Doran's book.

When Jon was done talking, Lyanna's brow wrinkled. "Tyene... she has knowledge of poisons. It comes from her father, Prince Oberyn, but she's developed it beyond his skills. If she counseled Mance to stay out, they must mean to... There are substances which can kill if released into closed spaces, fumes that cause rashes and deadly sicknesses..."

Jon remembered the hollow walls of Winterfell. "Could they channel them through the hot water conduits?"

His mother's face darkened and fell, confirming his assumption. "I hadn't thought of that," she stuttered.

"I'll take it as a yes," Jon said darkly. "What is it?" he almost howled at Dany.

Daenerys showed the first page of the book with fresh tears in her eyes. To Rhaenys, for her name day, lavish letters said in bright orange and red; the colours of Sunspear.

Mother averted her eyes, closing them tightly with pain.

"I suppose that Princess Rhaenys was murdered before that name day," Jon spelled out the cruel truth. "So he's here for revenge. What's the book about?"

Dany opened the next page. "The Signs and Portents by Daenys Targaryen!" she exclaimed. "This work is supposed to be lost and very important," she explained with surprise. "It speaks of the Doom of Valyria," she continued with mounting enthusiasm. "And on the margin it has hand-written notes by the first Daenerys, who married a Martell. It must have been her book. This is a kingly gift, Jon. And a most precious offering to a Targaryen. Almost as unique as a dragon egg. I don't see why Prince Doran would send it to someone he meant to annihilate. I just... don't."

"Maybe he wanted it buried or burned with Father's corpse," Jon said bitterly.

Mother sobbed.
"I'm sorry," Jon said swiftly.

"It's alright, son," Lyanna assured him. "Never fear to speak freely in my presence."

In truth, deep down, Jon didn't know what to think of many of his guests. At least he knew clearly what he didn't want. He didn't want to jump to conclusions as men who barely knew him had done about him and his mother.


"I don't see why not," Daenerys replied, leafing the pages. "I most certainly wish to read it."

Sam had been asleep, probably the only one in the bloody castle. When he examined the book, his contribution was disappointing. "I've heard about it, but that's all. It exists only in legends, like the white walkers."

Jon burst into laughter. "Right. The legends," he said.

Suddenly, he recalled his unlikely election to Lord Commander of the Watch and Sam's helping hand in it and… had a very bright or extremely stupid notion as to how to handle his wedding and everyone's wild notions about his person. "Never mind, Sam" he told his friend warmly. "Could you please help me with something else?"

"Always," Sam blinked with small, piggish eyes.

"I want information about the great councils in the realm," Jon demanded, "something you can put on the parchment fast. I would need it for the feast after the wedding. About kings being chosen and important decisions being taken. As short and accurate as you can make it."

"Short and accurate…" Sam peeped, "It may prove too hard."

"I have faith in you," Jon reassured him.

Mother handed Sam a cup of tea, poured Jon a second one. Daenerys was lost in her book, with her pretty head tilted on one side.

Jon didn't require any sustenance, but he found everyone's presence… nourishing.

"I guess I should start," Sam scratched his head.

"I can help," Mance said. "I know next to nothing about the Southron decision-making, but a good song can be made out of anything."

"I only want to be informed," Jon cautioned them against flowery language. "I'll make my own song."

Steelshanks interrupted Jon’s nightly gathering: Winterfell’s captain of the guards and, more often than not, the bringer of bad news.

"Who is it now?" Jon asked impatiently. "I thought that everyone I never wanted to see has arrived."

"You'll want to see them," Steelshanks was out of breath. "You will, my lord! I mean Your Grace… I mean Jon."

Steelshanks was almost family by now, his service to the Boltons buried in memory.
Jon rushed to the courtyard, stepping over drunks who slept in the corridors and never made it to their attributed accommodations.

Auburn hair, brown hair, brown curls, green garments, all hugging each other in fresh snow, fighting for space between the empty benches and tables toppled over after the feast.

"Hodor," the giant said, standing apart.

No one hugged Hodor, so Jon did. "Hodor," he repeated. "Do you remember me?"

"Hodor," Hodor said, tapping Jon's back.

"Jon!" Arya was the first to notice him, scream and run to Jon, leaving the general entanglement of limbs.

Rickon was trying to lift and carry Bran. Gendry and Aegon helped Rickon. Aegon's wife Jeyne dismounted and studied Winterfell with dark, haunted eyes. "This castle is alive," she stated.

For once, Jon agreed.

He closed the distance and took Bran in his arms. "Others take me," he cursed. "Where have you been?"

"In the cave," Bran replied instantly. "Haven't you seen me? You spoke to Bloodraven."

"No, Bran," Jon said truthfully. "Not then, nor the time after when I found Brynden Rivers dead."

"I only saw you once, so the second time you came I must have already left," Bran said, smiling, dreamy, long-haired, handsome, grown.

Jon's arms hurt from holding his not so little brother, but he would not give him to Hodor now.

"I sent you a raven when your brothers arrived at Castle Black," Aegon told Jon.

"The ravens are not flying well of late," Jon replied thoughtfully. This was another reason why Rhaegal was on the Wall now. He would not fail in returning for his rider in time if the Others came. "Nothing’s reliable in winter," Jon concluded.

"That might well be," Aegon agreed. "I thought that maybe you were delayed or prevented from flying back. So we rode. We were fortunate to make it in time. It was… It was as if the land changed to help us ride faster."

Lord Reed embraced a girl who was taller than him and had the same curls. He offered an embarrassed look to Jon when Aegon mentioned the land changing.

*Can you do it?* Jon thought unwillingly. Just like the enemy could … *beyond* the Wall. That would be incredible. *Why are you ashamed of your power?*

There would be news, stories to be told. But Jon's wedding was in a few hours and all travellers looked worn, cold, dirty and tired.

Jon decided that the tales would have to wait.

The other members of his great nightly council had made it to the gates by then; Dany and Mother, Mance and Sam, Ser Barristan in imperfectly donned armour. It was a pity they didn’t think of bringing a large teapot and a dozen mugs.
"All to bed!" Jon commanded sternly, but his eyes smiled. "Providing we can find some. It's going to be a long day tomorrow." And a long night.

Jon carried Bran to his own bed. Rickon followed suit, sneaking under the blankets.

"We'll take care of the rest," Dany reassured Jon from the door.

Mother was passing by, talking vividly to Arya, Lord Reed and - "Meera!" Bran called after the brown-haired lady.

With more light, Jon noticed that Meera was of an age with him and Dany and had a few years on Bran.

"It's my father," Meera answered Bran's call apologetically.

"Oh," Bran said with his cheeks flushed. "I am-

"Brandon Stark, I know," Reed said from the door. "I've sent my children to you, remember?"

"Yes," Bran said dreamily. "But Jojen-"

"I know. It's not your fault, my boy," Reed said sadly and disappeared before Bran could finish his sentence.

Lady Meera shrugged in Bran's direction and followed her father.

Bran and Rickon soon snored despite claiming that they would never catch sleep from the excitement of being back to Winterfell together.

The castle was quiet now.

In the hour of the wolf...

Very soon, Jon would break his fast with... with his siblings and not only with Sam as he intended. He'd invited Mance and Aegon as well. And Dany... she'd do the same with Mother who was... her only living family, by marriage... except for Jon. And with the other unmarried ladies of the castle. It was the best that could be thought of, Mother had said.

Mother was... she must have been feeling better. Since the arrival of the Martells, she no longer looked as if she might jump off the battlements if Jon wasn’t looking.

With the return of his siblings, the intrigues and the imminent Long Night seemed much less gloomy and life incredibly glorious and bright.

The attire he should wear for his wedding was laid out on a chair. He hadn't tried the doublet since it had been fully finished to show the colours... Of the House Targaryen.

It was required, to go with the invitations, and his birth.

Yet Jon would have preferred to wear plain black, without the red, three-headed dragon. He kept ignoring it, spending the last hours of the night seated on the floor; lost in thought.

When he thought he saw the dirty grey light of dawn, he changed into clean blacks and put on the bloody doublet, trying to overlook the three-headed dragon on his chest. He nearly forgot the cloak
for his bride, in the same colours, and had to return for it.

Maids brought clothing for his brothers. Hodor came for Bran, but it was Jon who carried him to the kitchens. The Great Hall was reserved for ladies this morning.

Breaking fast went by like a dream. Jon thought Mance might sing, but the wildling had no lute. He watched over Sam's shoulder, occasionally making a point about an expression. Sam wrote assiduously, forgetting to eat.

Arya looked teary. Gendry was not there.

"Where’s your friend?" Jon had to ask.

"Gendry isn't family. Yet. I told him as much," Arya informed. "But he'll stand next to me in the godswood."

"Not yet?" Jon inquired.

"Yes," Arya said decisively. "You’ve heard me well."

Jon gave her a wolfish grin. "As you say, little sister." He would have to make an effort to know Gendry better since he was not to be rid of him any time soon.

Rickon ate like a starved bear. Bran turned his food on the platter and took a bite or two. Aegon looked both lost and found, like a newly-adopted brother, smiling at everyone.

"Your wife?" Jon addressed Aegon. All of a sudden, it became much easier to talk to him than to his siblings.

Because… it was his wedding and he was a man grown and on the verge of crying.

He missed Sansa, who should be there as well, if only to call him her half-brother.

"Jeyne is with the ladies," Aegon replied, happy to be included.

Jon wasn’t hungry just like he wasn't tired or cold. He ate a bit, not recognising the taste of what he was having.

To appease the sensibilities.

In case his guests had spies behind the kitchen walls, trying to ascertain whether he was a man or a godless wight for their conspiring masters.

When the omnipresent Steelshanks appeared at the door, Jon knew it was time.

He walked to the godswood alone, resisting the temptation to peek into the Great Hall and see his princess. He didn't think she could be more beautiful than the night before. He knew she would try to be. She… She was a queen by nature.

His siblings and other noble guests followed.

There is nothing to be nervous about.

Briefly, he opened his wolf eyes. The Others were marching. Their king was nowhere to be seen. They were not yet near the Wall. Ghost padded after them.
He was tremendously nervous.

The godswood was becoming crowded. Slowly, the ladies began arriving. Daenerys would not tardy. She would come alone like himself. There was no man with authority over her who should bring her to the godswood. No father... and no king...

Jon looked at the heart tree. Its eyes were somnolent, barely open. Almost asleep. *Won't you witness our union? Is it not why we come to you to marry?* He asked the gods who, if they were watching, remained silent.

Mother came to the godswood with Lady Dustin, taking a place next to Arya, Bran and Rickon. The Tullys stood next to them. Lady Catelyn’s old uncle held a hand of a a little boy who might have had the age of Mance's son and looked like... Robb.

Jon almost cried at the sight.

Dany's arrival saved him.

He expected her to wear silver. Instead, she wore a chaste, but richly red gown, with few black details. The three-headed dragon on her maiden's cloak was made of red rubies, tiny like tears... glittering and mingling in the spectator's eyes, so that the three heads of the dragon looked alive and as if they were spitting fire.

Her hair was up, lifted high like some enchanted tower. Silvery gems and nets competed with the natural glow of her captive tresses. Jon was fairly certain she had spent the rest of the night seated, just like he did, waiting for it to be arranged. She was radiant.

Jon smiled as Dany approached, searching for words to tell her, following her gaze-

-to the mouth of the heart tree, peaceful until that moment, widening and opening *now*, while its eyes, on the other hand, *closed*, stubbornly, hurtfully-

Sansa fell out from the mouth of the tree, wrapped in a cocoon of diaphanous ice. Right after her came the Night's King and ten of his Others...

Sansa brought her hand to her mouth, gasping.

And the Night's King spoke. "I expected an invitation. I am almost offended."

"Almost?" Jon asked incredulously against his will, assessing the situation.

Aegon was armed as was Ser Barristan and Mance, and many other guests. At least some of them favoured Jon’s claim. Most valued their lives. They would have to be quick in reacting, but they could prevail.

Yet the Others were not attacking. The mouth of the heart tree stretched to a thin, suffering grimace behind them. If anyone looked truly insulted, it was the weirwood; blinded and muted.

"Will you not invite another king of this realm to your wedding?" The Night's King continued provoking him. "Or your sister?" he pointed at Sansa. "Have you forgotten her? I expected a heroic attempt at rescue but it seems that I was gravely mistaken."

Jon immediately stared at Sansa who sank to her knees and looked like a maid in need of saving. *Her*
bloody husband had gone after her, didn’t he? Jon instinctively reached for the bubble she was
imprisoned in, feeling a sharp pain in his palm from it, as though he had just received a bloodless cut.

Don’t mention Sandor to him, Jon. His sister’s soft voice made his head hurt. He didn’t hear her as he
would Rhaegal, but… as a fellow skinchanger, jumping to his mind to take possession of it so that
she could speak to him.

The Night's King swatted Jon's hand off the cocoon. "Your lady sister is my prisoner. A hostage.
Isn't that normal in war? I heard that you were offering peace to all your enemies for the wedding.
Why should I be any different?"

"I didn't think you'd be interested in coming," Jon said acidly.

"And if I was? Very interested?"

One of the Others lashed out and wanted to grab the boy that looked like Robb’s son. The Tullys
drew their swords as did Jon.

The Night's King was faster than any of them. With a powerful swing of his crystal blade, he
beheaded the aggressive Other, who screamed in pain and turned into a blue mist.

"This one forgot himself," the Night's King almost apologised and studied the remainder of his…
men… well… Others. "The rest should be able to behave… For a while."

"If you swear that they will," Jon challenged him, "I suppose you can stay. The more, the merrier."

What do you want? Perhaps this was the opportunity to know his enemy.

Jon looked at Sansa for answers. You don't want me to mention your husband. So that… so that the
Night's King doesn't know? Did he find you?

Sansa… nodded with her eyes if Jon was not dreaming, as if she could hear his thoughts clearly. He
reached for her cage and was thwarted again by the Night's King twisted, ugly arm.

But not before his sister relayed more information to him.

He has a wife Jon. A Mermaid Wife… She looks so foreign, Jon. He loves her. I don't know why he
hasn't brought her if he wishes to be at your… is it truly your wedding? But of course it is! Gods! I'm
so happy for you…

Sansa’s muted, animated speech resounded in Jon's head. His sister beamed at Jon and Dany, rubbed
her blue eyes and began to cry from… joy? Jon was flabbergasted. Dany's chin shook from emotion
and she gave Sansa her best girlish smile.

My big sister is happy for us. It was the last thing Jon expected from Sansa when he saw her again.
More so now that she was hostage of the Others. The Sansa he remembered would be choking from
fear when facing far lesser evils. Such as Jon, covered with flour, running at her to scare her in the
crypts of Winterfell…

In the corner of his eye, Jon noticed Mother restraining Rickon, who unsheathed his knife with
unknown intentions. Arya looked restless. Her hand was on Needle’s hilt, but she remained dead
still. Bran could not move if he wanted; only his eyes danced with worry. Hodor put his hand on a
fancy pommel of a large greatsword.

Jon stared his enemy down, feeling powerful. "So where is your wife?" he challenged him, hoping
he finally knew something that the Night's King did not want to be known. "Won't she be jealous that you left her and went to drink mead at another man's wedding?"

The Night's King gave a murderous look to Sansa who never noticed it, mopping tears of joy and smiling right through them.

"We would be happy to invite both you and you lady wife if it is true that you have a spouse," Dany proposed calmly. "In peace. Is it not so, Jon?"

Jon nodded. "By all means," he said. "I'd do anything for my wife-to-be."

At least Daenerys had the good sense not to say they were sorry for not inviting the Others to begin with. That would be too humiliating, like accepting defeat. Jon would never resign himself to it.

"I'm thrilled to hear that you love your future wife so dearly," the Night's King replied sardonically. "And I swear by my wife's sacred name that, until the wedding's over…" he paused to regain his icy breath, giving a long, crystal blue glare to the crowd.

Tall and menacing, he fell briefly silent like a tomb.

Then, in a voice from which the soil under Jon's feet trembled, shook and boomed, bringing fear to faces of many of his noble guests, Stannis included, the Night's King thundered. "Until after the wedding, my lords and ladies…

…we shall have peace."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.

Next up: Dany
Chapter Notes

Thanks TopShelfCrazy, for everything :-))

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Daenerys

“It is time to say our vows,” Daenerys decided because no one else would.

To her surprise, the Night's King stepped obediently to the side, followed by his Others.

Dany faced Jon, seeing only him in the entire world

The marriage vows were not predetermined in the North. She had rehearsed a set of noble, simple words, but now she wanted to speak differently.

“I, Daenerys Targaryen…” she choked on her family name, their name, finding she could not treat Jon with the formality of it as she'd intended. Not now. “…take you, beloved Jon, for my lord and husband…” This wasn't about gaining armies of screamers to conquer the Seven Kingdoms, nor about cold-blooded alliances destined to maintain the precarious peace in Meereen. “…to love you and protect you…” This was about Jon and Dany, together. “…for all times.”

She paused. “In the Long Night or in new spring,” she vowed wholeheartedly, “I'll never let you go.”

“I, Jon, born a Targaryen and raised as a natural son of Winterfell, a Snow …” Daenerys couldn't believe he dared use his bastard name now, before all, yet it was somehow right that he did. It was a part of who he was. “…take you, my beloved princess, for my lady and wife…” With that he gave her his best dark look she adored, despite that it also made her fear what he could do in his determination to be the light that brings the dawn, “I vow to love you and protect you…"

Jon squeezed her hands and looked as if he might cry. "In the Long Night or in new spring…," he paused.

"I'll never let you go," he finished repeating her vow, their vow, and held back his tears.

Then, they kissed, the softest of kisses, and Jon gave her his cloak.

It began to snow.

The snowflakes caught in Jon's hair and clothing, not melting, covering the three-headed dragon on his chest with a crystal shine.

*The King of Winter.*

*The king of ice, ice, ice…*

Dany did not want this for Jon, handsome as it made him. Yet she would not be frightened by it. She
would never leave Jon to completely heed the call of one, albeit perhaps a *larger* part of his nature, and forget the fire inside him.

The Night's King applauded and cheered loudly, followed by a multitude of guests. Jon's arm was wrapped around Dany's shoulders and he gave a timid look to his overjoyed siblings. His mother had fainted. Maege Mormont strove to help her back on her feet.

"I'm so sorry about this," the Night's King said mournfully, "King Jon."

Out of the blue, fast like light, the Great Other swung his blade at Jon who was barely able to let go of Dany, get hold of his own weapon and parry the mortal blow. The Night's King used Jon's forced defensive gesture to snatch Daenerys with his shield arm and drag her into the weirwood…

Dany kicked and screamed, wishing to set herself on fire and *burn* him as a dragon she was. Like Rhaegar had done.

Her struggle was in vain.

It was very dark inside. Dany soon understood that her kidnapper… was prevented from leaving as he intended. His grip on her was iron and he stank of death.

"Damn tree," he cursed mildly. "Take us home, now!"

Dany could understand the sentiment. The weirwoods had a will of their own. But this wasn't the only difficulty that the Great Other was experiencing. His legs had remained out. Only the upper half of his body faced Dany with a disfigured, ugly expression. The blade in his sword hand was the only source of flickering blue light in the overwhelming darkness.

"You may win now," he told her with poison, "but when I march on Winterfell you’ll lose."

"Or not," Dany said with her flattest voice of a young girl that had annoyed strong men in the past. "The dead lords and Kings of Winter are guarding it. Drogon could not burn it. What can you do?"

"Are they now?" the Night's King eyes flashed dark blue. "Well they won't be able to protect it against *me*."

"Why?" Dany uttered with genuine curiosity she was unable to suppress.

"Do you truly not know?" The Night's King seemed amused. "And yet you’ve seen me before. You've met the ghost of who I was."

"Who are you?"

"I'm Jon Stark, or what is left of him," the Night's King stated. "I was the Lord Commander of the Night's Watch thousands of years ago. I fell in love with a sorceress from beyond the Wall. She was a corpse; a cursed, pretty creature. I married her. And by doing so I chose to become king of the only kingdom that matters; the kingdom of ice. What will your precious guests say when they know this? Will anyone have any faith left in the House Stark? In a son of that house called *Jon*? I don't think so."

"Why not tell them?" Dany wondered, wishing to catch him in a lie. "If you’re so proud of it!"

"Oh, but I will, I will!" the Night's King cackled. "In time—"

The enemy was being pulled *out* of the tree. His grip on her lessened and was gone.
Dany grabbed his cold, wrinkled, repulsive shield arm on an instinct, fast as Drogon. When she felt snowflakes on her face, she wrenched herself free and scurried to stand by Jon’s side.

Her husband was seething.

"This isn't peace!" Jon shouted with anger, holding the Night’s King legs with both arms. He had somehow lost his doublet and was now in plain black. Arya held Jon’s waist, Rickon clung to Arya, Bran was squeezing Rickon’s legs, seated in the snow. Sansa was at the heart tree, holding its mouth open. Her hands bled, protruding out of her enclosure of ice.

The Stark children had pulled the Night’s King out, and Daenerys with him; all five of them looking feral. In the distance, a wolf howled.

“Nymeria,” Arya said. “Stop it. We’ll be fine.”

The Dornishwoman with the same name stared at Arya with curiosity.

Many blue crystals drifted in the air and many different weapons were drawn; most made of dragonglass or dragonsteel. More guests that Dany would have thought had been surprisingly ready to face winter. Aegon with Dawn. Willas Tyrell, Robert Arryn, Sam Tarly, Mance Rayder and some more of his wildlings with black knives. Obara Sand with an obsidian tip on her spear. Ser Jaime with sword as beautiful as Dawn, rippling in red and black. Lady Brienne with her steel covered in blue dragonglass, breathed by… Beth, to be sure. Gendry with his hammer. Ser Barristan. Brynden and Edmure Tully. Some Freys. Lady Greyjoy and her dead uncle. Ser Davos. Stannis, with his sword burning green, careful not to touch his own blade when he sheathed it. Meera Reed. The giant who used to carry Bran with another Valyrian sword. The Prince from the Summer Isles with his great bow of golden wood.

Even Lord Tarly had been fighting. Presently he asked his fat son with surprise, “Were these also some dressed up scum like in Horn Hill?”.

“If you wish to call the Others scum, Father,” Sam answered, far less perturbed by the events than Lord Randyll who looked distinctly afraid.

The Others had been outnumbered.

The Night's King was the only white walker left in Winterfell. He was on his feet now. Jon had released him to pick up his sword; a gesture that the enemy was pleased to mirror.

"I have more soldiers," the Night's King stated indifferently about his losses.

"I know," Jon reacted, "I've been to your seat in the Lands of Always Winter. I've seen it. And I'm not afraid."

The Night's King laughed. "You should be. Not of them. Of yourself. Of who you are, my boy of ice."

Insulted to the core, Jon attacked swiftly and ferociously, slamming his blade across the enemy’s armoured chest. Uncut, unblemished, the Other nonetheless backed off from the impact, towards the heart tree. Jon and the Great Other continued to exchange blows in a frenzy of movement, so fast and so strong that Dany could barely follow. Much more savage and assured on both sides than when they had faced each other in Hardhome.

“You’ve been practicing,” the Night’s King stated with satisfaction in a moment of respite.
“So have you,” Jon replied readily. “Is it because you’re afraid?”

"Of what? Of who? You?” The Great Other asked, incredulous. “You can’t defeat me, ” he announced with seriousness, “You’ll need to reforge your sword first. And even then you may fail.” the Night's King administered his final blow of the day in words, pivoting backwards, plunging his crystal blade into the mouth of the heart tree, cutting it open. Fast as a storm, he grabbed Sansa and disappeared.

"Sansa!” Arya cried out immediately.

"He has her," Bran said as if he was having a vivid dream. "Or rather, she went with him. He told her… He said he’d let her stay at home if she undressed. She would not suffer that shame. I think she told him that as a message to us. Not to worry… too much for her."


“Sansa believes that she’ll be back,” Bran reassured them.

Jon had a single, tiny cut on his face, dropping red blood. The Night's King had applied himself hard to kill Jon, in Dany's opinion, and he failed. Does he have to reforge his sword? she wondered.

Silence reigned in the godswood.

“That was rather unique swordsmanship, wasn’t it, big brother?” Tyrion Lannister commented loudly. “Very heroic.”

“It wasn’t bad at all,” Ser Jaime responded with friendly arrogance.

Their exchange launched the unstoppable chatter of all guests at once commenting the events and comparing experiences.

"You should burn the heart tree and dedicate the fire to Lord of Light," Stannis counseled Jon. "So that the enemy cannot use it to return here in force."

Jon gave him a closed look. "I cannot accept your advice, my lord," he finally said. "I could not inhabit the ancestral home of the Starks if I did. The old gods have always dwelled in Winterfell. They may not love me, but I do not wish to ridicule them and their power. Do you?"

"I fear them not," Stannis said. His jaw stiffened.

"Very well," Jon replied. "So we agree on one principle."

The mouth of the heart tree was erased from its bark. As though it had never existed. Its eyes were wrinkled and closed tightly, as if in great pain.

Dany hoped that the Others counted as sufficient number of deaths on their wedding as Jon wrapped his sword into the scarf and gave her his hand to take her to the feast.

There was no more light.

The last winter's day had gone by. Only night remained.

*Until spring.*

The wedding feast began as a subdued affair, all through the three main courses and the great cake of almonds and cream Dany and Jon had to cut, failing miserably in doing it neatly. Sweet, sticky
substance invaded their hands and sleeves.

After, Jon remained quiet, studying the paper with political past Sam had provided, listening to the conversations around the table.

Prince Doran maintained a very lively one with Willas Tyrell. Dany hoped that the prince’s continued presence, and that of his family, meant that Martells abandoned their plans for poisoning, if they had any. In case they did not, servants were ordered to keep the doors and windows open at all times and compensate for cold by constantly feeding the fires.

Before the giving of gifts, Lord Hightower initiated a provocative toast. “To Stannis!” he said and everyone listened to the wisdom in his voice. “I herewith invite you, lords and ladies, to a Great Council to be held in Oldtown, some weeks from now, to elect Stannis as our king. He is heir to both Robert Baratheon and Rhaegar Targaryen and a much better choice for a ruler of the Seven Kingdoms than the young lord who has invited us here with the wish to be our king. Let us convene in peace to effect this beneficial change! War serves no one, as the dance of dragons had shown.”

Quite some Southron guests cheered for Stannis, but not the Martells, nor the Tyrells nor the men of the Vale. Ser Davos and his daughter looked perplexed. Unused to such support or unaware of the conspiracy behind it.

Next, Brynden Tully stood up. "Lords and ladies, honourable hosts," he addressed Jon and his pale-looking mother, ignoring Dany and Rickon in the wolf-chair of the Starks.

He lifted up a little boy with auburn hair for all to see, "I present you the trueborn son and heir of King Robb Stark, born to his wife Lady Jeyne Westerling after his death. By rights, he should rule Winterfell when he comes of age. I intend to guard him and take decisions in his name to make sure that he does."

Lyanna wanted to say something, but Jon hushed her, bidding her to wait.

When the hall was reasonably quiet, awaiting the reaction of the Starks, Jon stood up. His goblet was filled with wine and untouched since the feast had begun.

"Thank you, my lords, for your honesty," he addressed them, "I value it greatly on this important day in my life," he continued with courtesy.

Stannis stood up, willing to speak next.

"I am not yet done," Jon remarked coldly. "I trust that I may be allowed to finish. By every law and custom in this land I should merit that respect as one of your hosts, if not for my wish to be your king."

Stannis sat down; his jaw more square than a trestle table.

"Let me tell you where I stand, beginning with the obvious," Jon raised his voice, but kept the solemn tone. "Obvious to me, my mother, my sisters and brothers. Any of them can and will correct me if I’m wrong. We are delighted to accept Robb’s son as Lord Stark and Warden of the North when he comes of age! And we demand that he stays here, in Winterfell, with his lady mother if she still lives, to learn about his seat and lands."

Jon turned the blade of his voice at Blackfish, squarely as Stannis might, “If you wish to be reassured about the welfare of Robb's son, you’re welcome to stay in Winterfell and observe him. Is this what you wanted? But we won't cede you the custody over the boy nor allow you to foster him in Riverrun or the Eyrie if that's what you intended, to continue holding Robb's son as your hostage. By
Jon drank some water from Dany’s goblet, breathing deeply.

Brynden Tully began explaining himself. "I thought that-

"You thought that we wouldn’t let Robb’s son inherit Winterfell?" Rickon interrupted with boyish indignation from the High Seat of the Starks. “Lord great-uncle, I only sit here because Bran was too tired, though he's older than me and should have been seated here from what we knew until now about the order of succession. And I'll let Robb’s son sit here right now if he’s old enough to climb on it. I'm not called Walder! I don't want my father's seat for myself! In Winterfell we have our own names!"

Many guests laughed. Freys grumbled. Brynden Tully continued seriously, "That wasn’t what I had in mind."

"What did you have in mind?" Brandon asked dreamily from one of the seats on the dais. "To act as Lord of Winterfell until little Robb came of age? Isn’t that my nephew's name? Is that not the truth? Did you not intend to speak to me and my brother and sisters in order to caution us against Jon’s aspirations towards our claim and help us banish him from Winterfell? Do you know Jon at all? Deny any of this and I shall call you a liar."

Brynden Tully quieted. Little Robb turned treasonous. He abandoned his uncle's company and waddled to Bran. "You're my uncle that can't walk," the toddler said.

"No," Bran said calmly, "but I can fly, if only in my mind's eye."

The boy seemed happy about that.

Jon offered Bran a long look of gratitude. "If you would allow me to continue for a while longer, if it please you," he asked of everyone with humility.

The hall waited, curious and moderately silent.

Dany realised that Jon must have been pondering this in the night before the wedding, and that whatever he decided to say was important to him.

Jon cleared his throat. "Furthermore, Lord Stannis can confirm that he had offered me Winterfell and to make me a Stark instead of Snow, if I held it in his name and bent a knee to him as king. I refused. I had told him, if he still remembers, that Winterfell belonged to my sister Sansa. At the time we thought Bran and Rickon dead and I was not yet aware of my true origin, thinking myself a natural son of Lord Eddard Stark."

Brynden Tully gave a questioning look to Stannis who nodded dryly.

"Now to the less obvious," Jon said acridly and then gave a loving, open smile to Daenerys before facing their guests again. "I am a son of Lyanna Stark and Rhaegar Targaryen. For better or for worse. I know this now. But I don't want to talk to you about what you all read on the wedding invitations. I wanted to remind you how, in all the noble houses of the realm, from times immemorial, inheritance was possible and lawful on female side, when all boys died, or if a lord had no sons, before distant cousins like Lord Stannis would be taken into consideration. The only famous case in which this old tradition was slightly altered, was to choose a new Targaryen king between descendants of male and female line, favouring the male line. And it took a Great Council to achieve this change.”
"In Dorne, the eldest child is the heir, a boy or a girl, it makes no matter," Princess Arianne interrupted.

"Indeed," Jon said with approval and continued his own argument with passion. "Viserys, the king who was exceptionally elected on this Great Council, later on proclaimed his daughter, Princess Rhaenyra, for his heir, in line with existing traditions. The contestation of his will was what led to the bloody civil war called the dance of the dragons, mentioned by honourable Lord Hightower in its depravity."

"Now look at the rest of the kingdoms," Jon continued his speech. "Remember Lady Whent and Lady Arryn. They were both from the South. Lord Stannis' only heir is Lady Shireen. Not some distant boy cousin or..." he paused and decided to continue, "or a natural son of his late brother Robert. I heard he had plenty, and one of them is here."

Arya was wearing a blue gown. Needle was not to be seen. Dany wondered if she had it hidden under the table. Arya urged Gendry to stand up which he reluctantly did, earning Stannis' disapproving glare.

"There," Jon added, a tad amused. "You're beginning to see my point, I hope. I'm certain that the Southrons among you can find many more examples I haven't heard of with ladies ruling the castles. In the north, we seem to have more ladies than lords nowadays, as a consequence of wars. Late Lady Hornwood, may she rest in peace. Lady Dustin, Lady Cerwyn, Lady Mormont, Lady Glover, Lady Bolton, all present here. Lady Karstark's brother had returned only very recently from the south. In the name of this ancient law and custom, I plead with all of you, here and now, should you not think of me as a lawful son of my father, should you not think of my father as king, but only his father, dead for years... and I can see how you might not be in favour of my claim, given how well the secret of my birth had been kept... even from me..."

Jon paused and then rushed to conclude his thoughts about succession. "In short, if you doubt me, then the lawful, trueborn heir of the House Targaryen is not Stannis but my beloved wife, Princess Daenerys Targaryen. And if you accept her claim over mine, I shall gladly champion her cause as her loyal consort. Tonight, I was going to propose convening a Great Council. What better place for all pretenders to present their claims? I'm happy that the Lord Hightower was so kind to make this important call for me," Jon spoke with both modesty and decision.

"Now, regarding the rumours about my person, about me being some dead monster..." Jon's voice became a tone darker. "I am alive although men, wights and Others have tried hard to kill me. This wound shows it clearly," Jon pointed at the fresh red scar on his face, "Anyone who has had dealings with wights can confirm that their blood is, quite literally, black."

"Last but not least," Jon sounded outright menacing now. His voice turned low as the Night King's. "The Wall is mine. I shall not relinquish it until spring. I shall not discuss whether this is right or wrong, lawful or unlawful. I will hold it until I defeat the Night's King or he defeats me. I urge you to leave here as many men and women willing to fight before you start returning to your homes. Many have already joined me before the wedding."

"And if any of you wants to take the Wall from me, you'll have to kill me. And I warn you that this won't come easy. So think twice before you go ahead," Jon finished brusquely, sitting down.

Guests clamoured and chattered in a thousand voices. Dany imagined they would discuss Jon's speech for days. As to her, she was stunned. For the longest time, she wanted to be Queen of Westeros, believing she was the only one left from the line of Aegon the Conqueror and wishing to have her revenge over the Usurper and his dogs. And yet she'd also imagined sharing power with her family if she had any. Now she realised that, since she fell in love with Jon, she accepted he
would be king without thinking like she did in her childhood with Viserys... Though she preferred to let Viserys rest in peace and imagine her and Jon as Rhaenys and Aegon the Conqueror...

Jon's words opened a realm of new possibilities that she simply refused to consider now. Perhaps they would not live to see the future Great Council. And, above all, she just wanted to be happy on her wedding day.

She wanted to be the young girl who knew little of the ways of war, having seen far too much of it.

"Why is it, then, that the greatest living dragon has chosen Stannis, my lord... Snow, over the noble princess?" Hightower put in surreptitiously. "I wonder..."

Jon was silent and looked spent. Daenerys felt it was her turn to deal with this particular courtesy.

"Here we come to the interesting part, my lord," she replied sweetly. "Unless you wish to choose Stannis' dragon for your king, which would be most unusual, I suppose, and I hope that we can agree on this, at least," she had almost said Drogon and decided against it. Stannis never used Drogon's name. As if he doesn't know it. It was the last shred of hope Dany held onto concerning the allegiance of her dragon. "So if we agree that our king or queen shouldn't be a fire-breathing dragon but a human, we come to the issue of having the blood of the dragon... or not, regardless of our exact bloodline."

Daenerys left Jon's cloak on her chair and walked from the dais to the hearth. Slowly, she immersed both hands into the fire until they caught it. The flames flared, beginning to swallow the long silken sleeves of her gown. The heat and the light was extremely pleasing. No garment could be more luxurious than fire.

"This is the blood of the dragon," Daenerys announced with pride, returning to stand next to Jon. She spread her arms wide and felt the yellow, red and orange tongues of flames travelling up to her elbows, hugging her arms tightly like a lover.

"This," she announced very solemnly, "is what it means to have it. You can be born to it, as my brother Viserys was, and yet not have it. I swear to you that, independently of my fire-breathing children who have left me and have a mind of their own, there is strength in it. Look at the hatchling on Lady Brienne's shoulder!"

Beth spread her little blue wings and croaked like a bird.

Dany smiled and continued bravely. "As you can see, when my dragons hatched, they were small and powerless lizards. And I was barely more than a beggar who wanted to protect them and a small group of people who had no one but me left to guide them. From that hopeless situation, my lords, I became queen in Essos, without the help of my young, fire-breathing children. Do not fool yourselves by believing that the blood of the dragon will be easily set aside or forgotten."

Her arms, spread like dragon wings, burned.

When the flames threatened to reach her neck, Daenerys carefully put out the fire with her hands and Jon's cloak, before it would catch the rest of her body.

The burning had left her arms, shoulders and upper part of her chest completely bare, until the line of her breasts, just as she imagined it would. Pale and unblemished.

"Beautiful!" someone shouted.

"Lovely princess!" another yelled. "Would you kiss me?"
Jon's eyes turned murderously towards the source of that remark, but whoever made it, had become very still.

"The most beautiful woman in the world!" Tyrion Lannister roared. His wife looked at him coldly.

Daenerys hadn't intended for their guests to react like this. She expected… respect. She wanted awe. And probably there was quite some. But the calls about her loveliness prevailed.

And were soon replaced by the bawdy clamour of voices clamouring, “Bed them! Bed them!” One of them a drunk Edmure Tully, dancing on the table. Brynden Tully tried to pull him down and silence him, so that the Lord Paramount of the Trident wouldn't embarrass himself further. Unsuccessfully.

Dany realised Jon must have been staring at her during her entire exhibition, looking as if he had seen her beauty for the first time. Her heart thumped in her chest and her cheeks became hot like coals.

Jon now emptied his entire wine goblet in one go and made it land somewhat harshly on the table. "Up on their shoulders we go, my princess" he said quietly. His black eyes smiled shyly.

The so-called bedding proved to be as nauseating and terrible as having to eat the entire stallion’s heart before the keen brown eyes of the Dothraki and the dosh khaleen. What remained of Daenerys' gown was ripped off her piece by piece. She was carried to Jon's bedchamber, their bedchamber as of tonight, too slowly for her liking, as unknown, ugly men shouted lustful remarks about her attributes. One complained that her breasts should be bigger if they wanted to feed a man and not a baby dragon. She'd never felt so stupidly exposed to male scrutiny. Yet the lewd remarks were… not so unfriendly and mostly given under the influence of wine, so she somehow endured them.

Jon was already in their bed, dark purple as a plum. The women had been faster. “Stupid custom,” he said, seemingly as shaken by it as she was.

Dany immediately felt much better.

She had that last bit of bad news for him before they could simply be together. "The Night's King. He told me that he used to be Jon Stark. Before he met his wife and turned evil because of her. She's some northern sorceress. He said so when we were in the tree."

It was painful to look at Jon's face. "When will I stop being shocked by the ways of the world?" he asked with passion. "Do you know… Can you imagine that when the Night's King promised me peace for the wedding that I… that I believed him? Being raised as a Stark, or, as a son of Lord Eddard, more precisely. I felt like a dumbass when he took you, Dany."

"Well," Dany said cautiously, "he did wait until exactly after the wedding. If you take it he meant the vows and not the celebration by his initial proposition."

Jon laughed. "I guess so," he said, chuckling.

"It would make sense if he’s Jon Stark," he admitted after mulling over the information for a while. "His words to you, the legends about his person, his castle of ice and its uncanny resemblance to Winterfell as it was thousands of years ago when my ancestor lived, everything confirms it. And it sounds reasonable that despite that the Starks I know have all been honourable, this couldn't have been true for all of us over thousands of years. Some were bound to be evil. But why not tell everyone else? That would turn them even more against me. Why tell only you?"
"He said he would," Dany observed. "In time."

"He came here today to kill me and kidnap you, Dany." Jon affirmed fervently. "His Others were only there as a tool to keep us occupied. He knew they would be outnumbered and killed. I understood his purpose well enough after being fooled in the beginning."

Daenerys agreed wholeheartedly with Jon's understanding, though it wasn't something she wanted to discuss further on her wedding night.

"We didn't dance," she said petulantly.

There should have been a dance after the ceremony of giving gifts, before political banter overtook the celebration and shortened it.

"You said you didn't know how," Jon teased her.

"I still wanted to," Dany retorted. "And we practiced. A bit. When we didn't have to fly around for this or that." *The dance of the dragons. A pleasant one.*

"Come," Jon made Dany stand and wrapped his arm around her waist. They danced across their chamber in flickering candlelight. They never bothered to dress. After a while Dany felt the heat in her, without having to approach any fire.

"Should they be bigger?" she pointed at her breasts.

"Should I be taller and hairier and… endowed as a bloody giant?" Jon responded wryly. It was only half a joke. Dany realised that the women who stripped Jon of his modesty must have grazed his self-confidence just like the men had shaken Dany's. "Seriously, Dany," he continued. "My hands have always been full of you. How often have I complained?"

"As often as I did," she replied playfully.

"Never," he grinned, "Never, never ever."

"Never let me go," she breathed out.

Their loving was quiet and intent that night, slow and eventful as time.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :-))
A few weeks after Jon and Dany’s wedding in Braavos.

Gendry

“It’ll be simple, you’ll see,” Arya encouraged Gendry before the closed metal door of imposing dimensions. “You just have to act like yourself.”

Cold rain was falling. It was mildly better than snow.

“And how’s that, milady?” Gendry tossed in her direction, extremely unconvinced. For all his efforts in learning to speak better than a boy from Flea Bottom, he was still less well spoken than any trueborn lord's son. Or so he felt.

“Square and stubborn,” Arya shot an arrow back at him. “Like your Uncle Stannis.”

Arya seemed so excited by their mission in the Free City of Braavos that she completely forgot to correct Gendry for calling her milady. And square must have been moderately better than stupid coming from her mouth. But also... far less endearing. She values me... in her way.

Gendry felt utterly stupid for wanting to be called stupid.

They were not married yet despite that she’d proposed to him and he’d wholeheartedly accepted on the Isle of Faces. Their trip with Howland Reed and Thoros from the God's Eye to Winterfell had been a long-lasting misery of sleeping in cold places, riding, walking and rowing, in various proportions of the same; not conducive to any thought except survival and arriving to Arya’s home in time for the royal wedding.

Later, after the incursion of the Others and the unanimous decision to convene a new Great Council, it became unimaginable to hold another wedding so soon. And where? In the godswood, the old gods had closed their eyes and her mother’s sept had been burned long ago. As a consequence, Gendry’s sweet torture of being together with Arya, but not quite, continued with no end in sight.

The difference was that even her kingly brother now did his best to be courteous to Gendry and treat him as Arya's betrothed. Gendry, in return, strove not to let show the attacks of jealousy he was still experiencing. He had to repeat to himself that Jon loved Daenerys and was true to her, whenever he caught Arya talking to her big brother in private. And he envied Daenerys, terribly so, for apparently not suffering from similar unreasonable urges when she saw the cousins together.

In the end, despite feeling accepted in Winterfell and embraced by Arya's entire, extended family, Gendry welcomed the trip to Braavos. He was especially pleased that the crossing of the narrow sea was to be done the old fashioned way, by a ship from Eastwatch, and not on dragon's back. Because... being on the road... well, in this case on sea with Arya felt more intimate. He almost had
Almost.

"Just knock on the door," Bran urged Gendry on with kindness. His voice cracked, changing from a boy's to a man's, a bit late; Bran was four and ten. Gendry had considered himself grown at that age, working like a man and beginning to notice girls. He often wondered how Bran saw himself with his disability, but never found the heart to ask. It would be too cruel coming from him, a newcomer in the family, tall and strong and able, so he kept his curiosity in check.

Bran’s turbulent auburn hair reached his waist, not curling softly like Sansa's, but sticking out messily in all directions like Jon's; only brilliant in colour. It was odd that Rickon, the wilder one of Arya's two younger brothers, had thicker, but somewhat calmer mane in comparison. Arya was the only Stark who tied her hair. But she hadn't cut it and she'd worn a blue dress for the wedding… much prettier than the one with acorns.

"Hodor!" Hodor hodored impatiently.

“Perhaps you should speak to the bankers,” Gendry told Bran, striving to keep his voice calm and any trace of cowardice out of it. “You have more education than I,” Gendry had thought his task of parley easy and almost not worthy of a man until he faced the bank’s iron, inner door; situated after the entrance hall, at the end of a spacious, open atrium surrounded by porticos. He remembered he could bend iron at will as a master smith, but the knowledge didn’t help an inch.

The door leading to the deepest vaults of the Iron Bank of Braavos remained frightening.

“Shireen told Daenerys that the Iron Bank sent an envoy to Stannis, offering a trade, on behalf of the Free City of Braavos,” Arya repeated methodically what they all knew, sensing his hesitation. “You look like a Baratheon,” she thrummed with her young voice, “Bran doesn’t. Jon is keen to know what the Braavosi wanted and if it has anything to do with the Horn of Joramun that Jaqen stole and probably brought over here.”

“They can see my jaw and beard even if I don't talk,” Gendry complained grumpily, knocking on the damned door.

Arya laughed and caressed his forearm. She took many small liberties with Gendry of late and the attitude always made him feel unreasonably strong and powerful.

The door to the deep vaults of the Iron Bank opened with an ominously long and shrill creak of metal.

Gendry faced an oblong, iron table, unfriendly as the gateway that preceded it, with twenty three places around it. Only nine were occupied, four by women and five by men.

“Speak up,” the men at the centre of the table demanded before their visitors had fully entered. He wore a four-tiered hat, tapering from bottom to top; green and yellow. “We don’t have time to spare. Many loans are asked for in winter.”

“Er…” Gendry muttered squarely and contemplated landing a hammer blow in the middle of the table. Maybe it would make the bankers more sympathetic or leisurely. “Tycho Nestoris,” he managed. “He died. We are sorry. On behalf of… King Stannis, we are sorry.”

It was difficult to call Stannis king and much easier to joke about him as uncle. Gendry could see clearly how they were both alike and very different. He felt the same with Lady Shireen. Family. We’re family.
But Stannis’ royal appeal was largely based on the allegiance of the great black dragon. If Gendry had a right to vote on the coming Great Council, his vote would go to Daenerys. Stannis was… an insulting notion for a man with kingly ambition came to mind. *Average. He’s average.* And Daenerys was special.

Despite his preference for Daenerys, Gendry found Jon much more acceptable of late. Especially since he’d come to see Gendry in private, asking him *not* to allow Arya to seek out the Faceless Men in search of the Horn of Joramun.

“Stop her from going to the House of Black and White at all cost. Its door is made of ebony and weirwood and it lies in the part of Braavos where all the temples are. I trust that it shouldn't be too difficult for you to recognise it, even without ever being there,” Jon had said matter-of-factly, striving to keep any accidentally offensive tone out of his voice. “Find out what *trade* the City of Braavos wants to offer to a *king* of Westeros. I hope it's the Horn of Winter and that we can pay their price. What else of importance could they offer us when they already agreed to lend us money for food? But don’t let Arya see that you’re watching over her. If she feels that she’s not free to do as she wishes, she may embrace her own quest harder, only to challenge you.”

Gendry knew exactly what Jon was talking about. He would have never expected her to bolt and run away from the Brotherhood like she’d done. Not in his wildest dreams.

*I almost lost her forever.*

Arya had been motivated by many different reasons in her sudden flight from Lord Beric. One of them, and not the smallest one, as Gendry had come to understand since they began kissing, had been her belief that Gendry had abandoned her… That he had stopped being on her side.

“The cold,” Gendry continued talking, realising he was expected to do so. A dead, metal silence filled the antechamber to the deep vaults of the Iron Bank, where the descendants of the so-called keyholders received their special, noble guests. “It was the cold that did for honourable Tycho.”

The keyholders were the chosen representatives of the many descendants from the original twenty-three fugitives from Old Valyria, who had come to Braavos in order to be free from slavery and founded the Iron Bank. Each held a key to one of the hidden vaults filled with treasures, representing the core of the bank’s wealth and power.

Twisting the truth about the Braavosi envoy’s death lay heavy on Gendry’s chest. Square people, as Arya would describe them, found it difficult to lie knowingly. They had to believe in the untrue propositions they were defending. It was painfully obvious that Stannis believed in his righteousness. To Gendry, at least. The Starks were different. They resented dishonesty, but they could lie when they believed they should. When it seemed to be their *duty*. Like Arya’s father must have felt about Jon.

Shireen had confided in Daenerys that the sorcery of the Red Woman had been the death of the Braavosi envoy: he had died from the evil breath of the shadow created by Lady Melisandre to watch over Castle Black, and the men who seemed loyal to her king.

“What did the king say to Tycho’s proposal?” a woman in purple robes asked, black of face, seated to the right of the man with the ridiculous hat who had first greeted them. "Did he agree to it?"

“Tycho… Honourable Tycho Nestoris dropped dead before he could present the trade you’re offering,” Gendry reported bluntly. "The cold was very sudden."

“And the king sent you to us?”
“Me and the-”

“Starks,” the woman finished his phrase. “Arya Stark. And you must be Brandon Stark.”

“Yes,” Bran said quietly from the basket on Hodor’s back.

Arya sank her nails into Gendry’s palm. She never did that, not even when she bit his neck in their kissing efforts. “We’re in a hurry as well,” she said with feigned calm.

Gendry believed that her long, dark braid would stand upright as the tiny hairs on her arm just did, if the laws of nature allowed it. She was on alert now, like Nymeria; a wolf ready to hunt.

“The matter you have raised cannot be discussed in haste, my lords,” the woman explained. “Return when you have more time. Perhaps the king should have the grace to come here in person, after causing, albeit unwillingly, the death of our envoy.”

“There is war and darkness at work in Westeros,” Gendry was finally more eloquent. “The true king cannot leave his lands in such peril.”

“Perhaps,” the man said. “Then he’ll have to wait until we send another emissary and pray that he or she doesn’t die from cold. The servants of the Iron Bank of Braavos are in danger of death as much as those who sit the Iron Throne. Our dear friend Tycho was well aware of it. Valar morghulis.”

“Valar dohaeris,” Arya murmured.

Gendry and Bran echoed her response. Hodor would have said Hodor, but the Braavosi woman interrupted him.

“Before you sail back,” she recommended, “travellers of your renown would do well to visit the Sealord in his palace.”

“Thank you,” Gendry said, feeling as stupid as Arya always said he was.

When they emerged from the vaults, the courtyard, and the main entrance hall of the bank into the maze of the busy city streets running along and over the canals, Arya wrung her hands.

“We’ll stay here overnight and try to talk to the keyholders on the morrow,” she decided, more stubborn than Gendry, just less square. More malleable in her inexorable desire to achieve her goals. To protect her family.

“Why? They won’t talk,” Gendry understood no as an answer when he heard it very well.

“I think that they’re testing us,” Arya thought aloud. “The hightborn of the Free Cities are much more oblique in their courtesies than the nobles of Westeros. Words said are often not at all what they mean. Braavos is maybe not as convoluted as the cities of the slavers in the south, but the sons and daughters of the bank’s founders are far from straightforward. We shouldn’t give up after the first refusal.”

“And you know it because you lived here,” Bran concluded rightfully.

“Sort of,” Arya said timidly. “Cat of the Canals learned this, not me.”

Who is she? Some girl with your mother’s name? Gendry wondered. Yet he knew better than to delve deeply into this part of Arya’s past. She still hadn’t come to terms with it.

Well, if Arya wanted to make one more try, Gendry could spend another day in Braavos. Cotter
Pyke, the new captain of *the Rhaenys*, had only begun loading provisions on the ship so they had that much time. Jon Snow’s loan from the Iron Bank, demanded on behalf of the Night’s Watch, had been immediately paid out in gold, at the mention of the Lord Commander’s name to one of the lesser servants of the bank in the entrance hall. Pyke didn’t have to descend into the vaults, knock on impressive doors, nor petition for the gold promised.

The difference fortified Gendry’s belief that what Tycho Nestoris offered and the payment he would have demanded in return must have been greater than gold.


“The Horn of Winter can wake the giants from earth,” Bran said dreamily, staring at one of the canals.

Arya’s slim legs slowly took her, Gendry, Hodor and Bran, to an island whose skyline showed many towers, turrets and domes on buildings of odd shapes and often monumental size. *Temples, they must be temples.* Just where she shouldn’t go, according to her royal cousin. The Faceless Men had a shrine there, dedicated to the god of death. The Many-Faced God as they called him.

“I’d like to see the Sealord’s Palace,” Gendry called innocently after Arya, sounding as if the only purpose of their travel to Braavos was learning and pleasure.

"Hodor," Hodor hodored cheerfully, which meant that Bran probably agreed with Gendry.

The degree of spiritual togetherness between Bran and the giant shocked Gendry as unnatural.

Yet it also made Gendry wonder whether… if Arya could go into his head like Bran clearly forced himself into Hodor’s. *How would that feel?* One time, Gendry’s curiosity about this had been so strong that he challenged Arya to attempt it. Arya refused, saying she only found shelter in the body of her wolf from time to time. She’d never tried to direct her beastling powers to any man, woman or a lackwit giant. Though she couldn’t blame Bran for it – how else would he have survived beyond the Wall?

Arya first shrugged helplessly at Gendry’s demand about visiting the Sealord, and then made a concerned face, as if she was a mother to Gendry, Hodor and Bran. She led the way to the palace with assured, quiet steps; her braid bouncing off her cloaked back.

There were many bravos in front of the palace of the Braavosi ruler, engaged in fighting with thin swords like Arya’s own, or observing the ongoing duels.

“There should be less,” Arya whispered wistfully to Gendry and Bran.

"The Sealord’s very ill and indisposed,” a puffed up bravo declared, mistaking the Westerosi for another bunch of petitioners; unavoidable at any court. “Listen to the First Sword of Braavos and come back tomorrow.”

“But he’s always sick of late,” an unknown woman complained in the Common Tongue, seated in the street, waiting. She sounded as if the arrival of more Westerosi like herself gave her courage to rebel against a long lasting, unjust penance at the Sealord’s closed door. “I won’t leave today before securing an audience. I’ve been trying for days now. If the Sealord is that ill, your laws are calling for a new election.”

“Yes, when he dies,” the First Bravo answered, “Such is the letter of the law.”
“But they say there is *slavery* in the palace,” the woman affirmed bravely.

She was immediately apprehended by two sturdy bravos and carried away for her insolence; with her big mouth tied with a sock made wet in the canal.

“Would that I knew the authors of this outrageous claim! We would imprison them all! To sow accusations of the return to slavery is an offence to every sacred custom in our Free City!” the First Sword thundered.

Gendry didn't know what to think of the altercation. His gaze drifted to the Sealord's pleasure barge, docked in front of the palace, decorated with laughing faces. Oddly, they reminded Gendry of the mutilated face of the heart tree in Winterfell, though they were painted with much more colour and detail and looked like real heads, not only eyes and mouth drawn in red sap of the tree. The illusion of similarity lingered despite that the weirwood in Winterfell looked as if it had never laughed; not once in its hundreds, maybe thousands of years long life.

"Come," Arya was stirring him away; a sweaty, tiny hand in his huge one, nervously pressing his callouses.

Fortunately, she followed one of the larger canals now and ventured into an extremely busy and unclean city neighbourhood, turning away from the isle of the temples.

The inn Arya found was noisy and much dirtier than the one at the crossroads when Jeyne Heddle had been the innkeep. It stank like Flea Bottom, except that the people were friendlier and showed less animosity to each other. The bowl of brown was not served. Instead there was some fish stew, smelling much finer than the place itself.

The best of all was that the current innkeep, a very red-faced, skinny man, had *two* free rooms left; small and cramped like the rest, but one for Gendry and Arya and another for Bran and Hodor. On the ship, they had all shared the same hold.

"I’m frail and weary," Bran murmured unhappily when he retired for the night. Hodor deposited him on the bed where Bran wrapped his legs, thin like sticks, in a heavy blanket, looking with yearning at the sword Hodor carried for him. How Bran used Hodor to wield the weapon was a mystery to Gendry, but the giant was getting better at it with every new day. "I need to dream. Wake me as late as you can."

Hodor yawned instead of saying Hodor.

This left Gendry and Arya alone, with one bed, one set of dubiously clean sheets, one window and the odour of salt and fish from the nearby harbour. It was the first moment of true privacy since the night they'd spent many weeks ago in the house occupied by Jaqen H’ghar in Oldtown.

A semblance of grey day turning into evening still hovered over Braavos. The Long Night had not yet sailed across the narrow sea, though everyone complained that the days were becoming shorter and chillier. The great statue of Titan guarding the port was covered in silvery frost.

“Jon sent Bran with us,” Arya confessed as soon as they heard double snoring from the other room through the walls, “because he’s afraid that Bran means to return beyond the Wall, to that cave where he nearly died. To dream over there, as he sometimes says. But, from what Jon had witnessed in the cave, the dreaming Bran craves has an uncanny resemblance to death. And Bran is perhaps planning to go back before Meera returns from Greywater Watch. So that he can hold on to his resolve and not change his mind. He wishes to go alone, through the heart tree, and we all know that this is very dangerous now with the Others controlling the ways of the old gods. Well, from here he
can’t do any of it. He can only fly in his mind. Jon thought that seeing a new part of the world might be beneficial for him. He’d always wanted to travel as a boy. We all did. Even Sansa with her dreams of the pretty, noble south. Well, all except Rickon who was a baby and only wanted Mother.”

Gendry was touched. Arya confided her family’s secrets in him.

_Bran and Meera._ Gendry hadn’t seen it at all. He just assumed cripples didn't fall in love. He saw it now, all too well, remembering the unusual couple, always next to one another at the wedding… Acting just like Gendry and Arya. He wondered if they also kissed on the sly. Bran didn't need legs for that.

“Why do we feel the need to return to places which are not good to us?” Arya uttered monotonously, sounding as if she was having a discussion with herself and not expecting an answer.

“I guess that's the reason why Jon asked me to keep you away from the Faceless Men if I could,” Gendry blurted, deciding to reward honesty with honesty.

“A wise suggestion,” Arya chuckled, not distant anymore and not surprised at all. "I suspected as much. I'm glad you found the courage to tell me. And I agree with Jon that we should try and find out what the Iron Bank wants first."

"And what will you do then?"

"I don't know," Arya shook her head. “I guess that it depends on what we may discover.”

"Fair enough," Gendry said and undressed for sleeping, noticing Arya’s hesitation and trepidation in doing the same. "Cold?"

"No," she shook her head. Her eyes flared, bringing to the fore of Gendry’s mind the desires he normally strove to ignore.

"We should have been married by now," he allowed himself to say.

"Maybe," she replied, "probably," she stared at him with that dark, watery look that made his head turn.

"Show me," she asked after a while. “Let me see how we could love each other if we were married. Just don’t… don’t go as far as with Jeyne Heddle. Not until we are married. You must know better than me what can be done besides that. I fear that I might hate myself if we don’t say our vows first. I’m not proud of some things I did in my past. Please don't add to them."

Gendry didn't quite know how to proceed. Not at all. But he wouldn't admit it or say no to such request. Not to his Arya. He prayed to Lord of Light to illuminate his way. Help him stay on a good course.

So he embarked on doing everything he did with Jeyne except for that. And many more different, little things he’d never thought of doing with a girl, not even with Arya, before this invitation. She was very kissable tonight. In so many places. And she let him undress her. _Fully._ Undressed him. It was far less cold in the inn in Braavos than on the snowy road in Westeros. He unwillingly imagined them in the solitary room he was given in Winterfell. With fire in the hearth and a featherbed. _Gods._

Arya was incredibly soft between her legs when Gendry touched her there. His fingers lingered in her sweetness, probing it gently, and he kissed her mouth until she became more quiet than a mouse.
He hadn't seen her that silent since she’d called herself Weasel in Harrenhal and sneaked into the smithy to talk to him. Back then she’d been alert and afraid of being caught and now she was relaxed and completely unlike herself. He dared hope this meant he did well in fulfilling her wishes.

"What do you do?" she asked after a while; the wording of her question far blunter than the tone of her very fluttery voice.

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not stupid," she was upset now, his Arya from tip to toe. "I felt you’d been fumbling with your breeches on some nights when we slept in the wild. What do you do to yourself?" Her voice drifted into nothing, weakening at the end.

"Why not look at what I did if you were so curious about it?" Gendry was brazen now. "You'd know by now."

His self-discipline had lessened on the road to Winterfell, after Arya’s proposal, but he thought that she’d never noticed him busy with his right hand.

"I was embarrassed," she hissed and paused. "I want to see now."

Her voice was deep as time. It was her moment to be brazen, and his to be shy like a little boy.

"Hey," he confronted her with a serious possibility, "and what if I hate myself for letting you witness that. It's not something a man should do in front of a lady."

"You probably won't," she judged him and, for a change, well. Impeccably. "If your first offended remark when I asked was that I could have looked," her voice disappeared again, small and mouse-like.

"Right," he said.

He was very tentative with pleasuring himself at first, only daring to look at Arya's body as he slowly stroked himself. She didn't take him in hand as he secretly hoped she might, but she kissed him here and there, not on his face this time; on his chest, stomach, the top of his thighs.

After a while, Gendry was no longer ashamed. He used his free hand to erratically touch Arya’s breasts and reach again for the softness between her legs, having to check that he hadn’t been dreaming it. It was so unbelievable to be with Arya like this that it took him quite some time before he lost it, filling his hand with his seed.

"Now you know a bit," he murmured sleepily when he was done cleaning himself.

"Yes," she replied calmly, sounding very awake and composed; lowering her warm, tiny head onto his chest.

Very late next morning, Bran gave them his almost green look over mugs of weak, tepid tea; the one that made him resemble Lord Reed. "I fear we may be too late by now."

Arya thinned her lips and pushed a somnolent Gendry into motion.

Bran was right.

The entrance hall of the Iron Bank rang with shrill cries, “Murder, murder!”

Arya translated from Braavosi for Gendry and Bran. In shock, the locals used their language and
forgot all courtesy due to foreigners.

The first keyholder to receive them the day before, the man with the odd pyramid-like yellow and green hat, had been killed in his sleep.

“The locks are intact!” “Thank the gods!” cried the hooded acolytes in grey garments, running out of the deep vaults like hard-working ants.

A respectable crowd of Braavosi from many different origins, judging by their faces, gathered in front of the monumental iron door to the lower vaults.

“Now they pray to different gods out of gratitude,” Arya continued with her interpretation. “All gods are welcome to dwell in Braavos, like all people seeking freedom of slavery, from any land,” she explained a bit of the local culture.

“They say how it’s most fortunate that none of the servants of the Many-Faced God is among the current keyholders,” she finally said shyly.

“The black woman in purple robes from the day before,” Gendry realised. “You knew her.” He didn't want to sound accusing, but he did.

“Yes,” Arya said dryly. “And maybe we should have interfered with her plans, and then she wouldn't have murdered the keyholder who might have treated us better today. I made a mistake. I thought she intended to kill the Sealord when she sent us to his palace, possibly to take the blame for her. I wouldn't have gone there. But when you took the bait I followed… to keep you out of trouble. Now I know that the mention of the Sealord was only a ruse meant to confuse me as to her true intentions and send us away. She’s the waif, Gendry. She’s one of the Faceless Men. She’s wearing a different face here, which isn't her own. But I know her as I know you. I smell her when I close my natural eyes and open Nymeria’s yellow ones, far away from here.”

“Oh,” Gendry felt rarely inadequate, and wished Arya was in his head. Then she would see clearly that she didn't need to mother him, even if she noticed many details he missed. He was neither Bran nor Hodor nor Rickon. She could have told him earlier about this… waif.

Brandon decided it was time to show education and resume their few findings. "So if the Horn of Joramun is in Braavos, the vaults of the Iron Bank would be the safest place to store it. Not even the Faceless Men can falsely gain access to them with their magic of changing faces and art of killing.”

Arya's forehead wrinkled in thought. "Yes, probably." she agreed and whistled carelessly, looking frighteningly young for a fleeting moment. “But how would the Bank take the horn from Jaqen? He seemed most unwilling to share his spoils. And he's a Faceless Man, not a keyholder.”

Arya was very withdrawn and pensive this morning, and especially since she heard the cries about the murder. Cold as ice. Gendry had expected some more tenderness or nervous passion after their night in the inn. Unless she… Gendry suddenly understood her attitude. All of it. Arya had made her decision about her next steps; long-faced like her forefathers.

As a consequence of his new understanding of his beloved Arya, Gendry wasn't surprised in the least when she did it again; what both Jon and he feared she would do.

He was ready for it.

On the way to the port, she bolted, faster than her wolf, running to the island of the temples... Bran screamed after her.
Hodor yelled, “Hodor!”

Gendry could have caught Arya if he wanted. Instead, he wasted a few precious moments on purpose, addressing Bran. “I’ll find her!” he reassured him. “You and Hodor can wait on the ship and tell the captain to be ready to depart. I swear on my love for her that I’m telling the truth,” he added. Bran didn’t know Gendry that well, but he would see with those almost green eyes of his that Gendry wasn't lying.

Then, instead of preventing Arya from running into harm's way as he’d promised Jon, Gendry merely pranced after her, staying enough behind to let her arrive freely where she wanted to go.

He hoped that her brother would understand. Gendry would never let Arya come to harm until he drew breath. But he would help her do what she wanted. Whatever it was. The Arya he knew wasn’t unreasonable in her goals, just passionate and determined. They couldn’t return from Braavos empty-handed. They needed at least some answers if they couldn't find the horn. **What else have we come here for?**

The key to their success could very well be in the House of Black and White.

Square and stubborn like his forefathers, Gendry followed Arya.


Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading :-))
Sandor II

Chapter Notes

Thanks TopShelfCrazy for your help with this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Warning for violence and gore.

Sandor

Will I find Sansa?

He hadn’t sensed her for so very long in the starlit darkness of the Long Night.

Sandor never realised he was fond of daylight before it was gone.

Gone for days, maybe for a moon’s turn, just like his wife.

Gone, but not dead, not dead.

He would have felt if Sansa died, or so he told himself. He had to tell himself something to go on. Because Sansa would want him to.

Even if she died…

She didn't, he told himself stubbornly.

She was just taken somewhere by the Others. They couldn't kill her as long as she didn't willingly take off her gown, soaked in dragonblood. And she’d never undress as long as she could choose.

His wife had always been a proper little lady, sweet and courteous.

But for how long will the choice be yours, my love?

The terrible question did not bear answering. The Others were cunning. What if they found a way to strip his wife of her only protection?

Will I find you today?

"This way," Mag roared, and the imposing company of giants followed. There were more of them now, more than a few hundred, maybe a thousand. It seemed as though every giant in existence in Westeros had somehow joined Mag on his journey to the farthest North of the continent, answering the call to raise giant banners.

Sandor was no longer the last one in the ranks. He trudged some twenty places behind Mag, in order of his joining the company. Those who arrived later, after Sandor, simply walked behind in one great line. And at least twenty of those who had arrived before Sandor had already died, when the giants faced loose groups of the Others on their march.

Sandor survived, coming closer to Mag with every new skirmish. He'd rather not remember the
fighting.

Among the giants, there was no other sense of ordering for march or battle, except the order of appearance. Birth or size didn’t count for receiving advantages or favours. All acknowledged Mag as their supreme commander, though he hadn’t been the tallest one like Sandor initially thought.

At the end of the line there were several blond, blue-eyed giants, who came all the way from the Red Mountains of Dorne, *scaling* the Wall to go north instead of south like the wildlings did. They measured twenty-five feet each; hairy as the rest, though lighter in colour.

Sandor often wondered how Mag became their leader. Maybe he was the first one to begin marching in an unknown direction, with savage determination and frenzy. But why did everyone follow? Sandor was puzzled and out of his depth.

He had no notion where the giants were going or why.

He could only measure up to them by the length of hair growing from the good part of his scalp. Straight and lank as ever, it now almost reached his knees, providing warmth; covering his entire face like a black curtain, without any effort necessary to comb it over the dead tissue of his scars. Soon he would have to tie it or *braíd* it, or it would become a hindrance the next time he had to kill Others.

In everything else, Sandor was a dwarf among the giants, despite that he was now nearly seven feet tall in his own reckoning and that he continued growing, albeit much slower than his hair.

*I'm almost as tall as Gregor."

*Bloody winter.*

If it weren't for Mag, Sandor would have died in the castle made of ice that looked so much like Sansa’s home, when four Others returned to his wife’s room without her.

They had *smelled* him waiting for Sansa. The intruder, the living man in the dead kingdom of winter.

Fortunately for Sandor, Mag had noticed the desertion of the shortest member of his bunch, who’d left the ranks without approval on a business of his own. Twenty feet tall, the leader of the giants had climbed into Sansa’s room through the window shortly after Sandor, just in time to rip three Others apart with his hands, while Sandor dealt the same to the fourth one. Unlike Mag’s victims who vanished into blue crystals, Sandor's Other had to turn into a pulp of human flesh, reminding him vehemently of the pious lie he had told himself in the past.

*Butcher. I said I was a butcher.*

And maybe he had been. But he nonetheless preferred a clean, swift kill. He laughed at his victims heartlessly, ridiculing the world in its unchanging awfulness, but he never liked inflicting pain. Maybe this was even worse than if he simply found joy in his employ, like Gregor. A more craven attitude.

*A dog earning his place in the kennel and letting a girl be beaten.*

*Despite detesting it and having the strength to end it.*

A dog who was late in accepting he was a man, and only when he lost everything; again.

Over and over again.
Craven, craven, craven… he mocked himself.

It was what he was. What he had been. And now it seemed that all possibility of bravery was gone and only winter remained.

*How many times can a man pick up the pieces of himself and go on?*

*As many as it takes until the Stranger comes for him…*

And the Stranger was thwarted of late; Others took the dead to serve as their slaves.

After the gory business in Sansa’s frozen chamber in the icy Winterfell, Mag nearly tossed Sandor out of the castle and forced him to rejoin the rest of the giants, threatening him with a good beating if he deserted again.

Sandor was a man now, the giants said reproachfully in their guttural language. He had duties.

By man they meant *giant*. They called humans *lesser* men and mocked their weakness. And, more than anything, they hated *children*.

Sandor still couldn’t understand why. He had killed his share of children serving the Lannisters, but he couldn’t fathom why anyone would hate them with such singularity. Especially not the giants. How could children harm them? It was ridiculous!

Yet the giants resented and despised children with the same intensity Sandor reserved for Gregor in his memories. They loathed them more than the Others.

Duties of a dog, who realised too late he was a man and was now promoted to a giant, which included travelling farther north than the Night’s King castle, through the thick wood of sentinel and pine, darker than the night.

The march was furious.

Sandor didn’t care much if he lived or died, but his wife would, when he found her. Sansa had always wanted him to live for her. So he ate as many gibbous, nourishing roots as he could get from the other giants, rested whenever Mag allowed it and saved his strength. He was still unable to find sustenance under the frozen soil on his own, despite observing carefully how his companions succeeded in digging it out.

Finally, the forest ended. The giants left it, embarking on a narrow path alongside a high mountain slope on the left hand side. The tiny, rocky road skirted the steep, high hillside, stretching far into the distance and darkness. The way over the cliff before them was so narrow that the giants had to walk one by one. Maybe two or three could pass abreast, but not safely.

On the right hand side of the path, a chasm opened. Very deep down, Sandor thought he could hear the sea.

When the giants approached the end of the cliff, after an interminable, painfully slow progression, Sandor finally sensed Sansa.

Her presence was very weak, but it was *there*… His head hurt tremendously from the most welcome, sweet assault on his consciousness.

Lovesick, he cherished the pain she caused him.
Sansa, he said in his head, knowing she couldn’t hear him. Just as she probably couldn’t talk to him from her enclosure of ice, but at least she wasn’t far anymore.

He jumped from joy, boyishly, impishly, nearly falling into the chasm, stopping himself in time by grabbing a rock for reassurance. Sansa was back. Wherever the Night’s King had taken her, she was here now.

Well, here.

Where are you, Sansa?

The answer was back where he came from, most likely, for there was nothing in front. The giants stopped before the black abyss; the edge of the world.

Sandor had to go back. His brain turned, wondering how to convince his new friends to fall back. Sansa wouldn’t be alone. There would be Others, many of them. The buggers wanted a taste of dragonblood. They would never leave her alone.

At the end of the path, Mag stopped and stated the obvious, pulling the black beard hairs out of his mouth and spitting into the void.

“Can’t cross,” Mag grunted, or that was what Sandor understood.

His knowledge of the Old Tongue was still very limited, based on the Last of the Giants, the only song he now knew by heart in both the Old and the Common Tongue, and on what he had been hearing from his new, huge friends, since he shared their meat and mead, or rather, roots and the snow they drank instead of either wine or water. Sandor cracked his thick head on a daily basis, forcing himself to remember the words they repeated and in what occasions, drawing conclusions over their possible or probable meanings.

“Can’t, can’t cross!” Mag raged, stomping the frozen ground. Other giants imitated the gesture. One fell into the chasm with a shrill cry. All roared.

Sandor remained calm.

Where in seven buggering bleeding hells do you wish to go?

“Fly!” some screamed, pointing over the void, into the black nothingness beyond it.

Two giants behind Mag picked the third up by his arms and legs, and began to rock him, as if they wanted to toss him over.

“No!” Sandor rasped, earning Mag’s look of admonishment. Maybe he would beat him with the club now.

“Other way,” Sandor uttered two more words he thought he knew with utmost difficulty and pointed back, where he wanted to go. “There is nothing there,” he pointed forward. "Nothing," he underlined the word he knew for certain.

The giants disagreed.

“Everything. All is there,” they might have been saying, no, chanting, gesticulating at the abyss at the end of the world.

The giants often spoke and sang at the same time, beating the rhythm of their words with clubs
against the stone knives most of them carried. *To gut the fish.* There was still some under the frozen lakes.

They ate the fish raw.

Sandor had nearly puked the first time he tried it. He was well used to it by now.

Had he lingered behind or tried to make fire for himself, he would have been left alone. Therefore, Sandor concluded that he never liked fires and adjusted to his new company. One got warm from marching, and raw fish was less heavy in a stomach forced to continuous exertion than a roasted one.

The giants continued disagreeing with each other and pointing in many directions. No one was tossed into the void. *Yet.* Sandor understood there must be something even farther north, across the wild arm of the shivering sea. Something important that only the giants knew about.

And Mag stared at Sandor quietly, at the shortest of the giants, without taking part in the discussion, or issuing a command that, surely, everyone would follow.

“Other way,” Sandor repeated slowly, in case his raspy voice could not form the bloody words correctly, thanks to Gregor's unique act of brotherly love that burned him. “Back,” he drooled.

“Back,” Mag echoed… looking afriad.

Sandor was perhaps craven, but not easily cowed. In most lands, there was more than one way to arrive somewhere. In light of Mag's reaction, the other path to where the giants were heading was apparently much more dangerous.

But it existed.

"Yes, back," Sandor nodded. "Other way. Only way. Must go? Must go or not?"

"Must go," Mag roared and all listened. "Only way."

They wasted hours before the line turned the other way around in the same procession as it came. Mag trod first, the giants who were with him longer than Sandor followed suit, and so on, always in the correct order. Those further in line pressed themselves against the rocks to allow the procession to pass them in that right order, from Mag to the last of the giants.

It would have been much faster if the Dornish giants could lead the way back and if they reformed the line once they were off the bloody cliff.

But this novelty of behaviour would be unimaginable in their society, wouldn't it?

*Unchanged for ages, is it so?*

Sandor didn't know. He was just wildly guessing.

They were almost back to the woods when Sandor had an odd thought. *No women. Or children.* Where are they?

*Did they kill their own children because they hated them?* Sandor shivered. That thought was too much, even for him.

This time the giants didn't rest nor halt to catch fish on their march. They scooped some of those roots and consumed them on the move.
Time had lost all significance.

Only night remained; long and black, unmeasurable and unexplored.

After a never-ending march, the giants finally skirted the Winterfell of ice but didn't come close to it. Instead, they climbed a winding path up a hill as the eternal night began to hiss around them with many dead voices.

The cold became unbearable, meaning that the enemy was near, in great numbers.

“No,” the giant right behind Mag dared say, stopping Mag. "Not this way."


The rebelling giant shrugged and gave up protesting.

The first twenty giants, including Sandor, soon reached the top of the hill and peeked into the valley… full of Others arming themselves with crystal swords, hatching out of snow.

They will smell us.

Surprisingly, Mag ordered everyone to crawl, setting the example himself. The experience was uniquely painful, as Sandor soon found.

The giants crawled over the high ridge bordering the deep valley; seen only by stars. The cold grew deeper and the night darker. After a while, the path ended in a dark, flat, very high rock, almost as smooth as the Wall.

“Left,” Mag said.

That was down, back towards the Winterfell of ice.

“Right,” Sandor said. That was also down, but to the valley which looked empty here. The Others had already hatched and left. A new, unknown direction. Maybe Sansa was there. Sandor never sensed her again, after the cliff. The disappointment lay more heavy on him than the weariness of his body.

Obviously, everyone followed Mag.

Left it was.

At the bottom of the hill, the Others waited for them at the sharp narrowing of the passage leading further down. At least two dozen guarded the way. Probably many more white walkers lurked behind, judging by the sharp, distasteful smell of the cold.

Mag advanced fearlessly to meet the enemy and quartered four, maybe five with his arms. But before he was done with the first group he engaged, ten more white walkers were on him. In a fight worthy of a giant, worthy of a song, he was torn apart, limb by limb, nail by nail, until only a cry of pain remained.

This was how it looked when a giant lost the battle with the Others. Sandor had seen it before.

Two giants who were next in line prepared to fight. "Must go," the one who had questioned Mag's leadership told himself, perhaps looking for his courage.

And when those two would die or prevail and move to face a new group of the enemy, the next three
giants in line would follow them into the battle. And so on, and so on, in groups of four and five and six. Sandor had seen it before. It was an efficient system, and they had survived before. Mag had always moved on… until today.

The Others had the advantage of control over the narrowing of the passage and the shelter behind it. This fortified their strategic position.

The giants might all be slaughtered, one group after another, depending on how many Others hid behind the narrowing. The enemy couldn’t be seen and counted; not until the giants would break through.

“Back up!” Sandor boomed from the bottom of his burned lungs, but no one listened to the bloody imp in their ranks.

The giants needed another battleground if they wanted to survive. But whether they understood his cry or not, they wouldn't listen.

So the craven dwarf Hound disrespected the customs of the giants and pushed himself forward, between his fellows who waited patiently for those before them to succumb or succeed, to either take the places of the fallen or, less likely, to continue in the steps of the victorious.

As it looked, the Others had a good chance to exterminate the giants. And if all remaining descendants of the old race were gathered here, there would be no giants left in the world.

It was… unimaginable.

Sandor's companions were peculiar and difficult at times. In the West, they would be considered barbarians that could be hunted and killed like beasts. But Sandor felt that they weren't animals and they weren't without honour.

In front, the giant who was unconvinced about Mag's wisdom was victorious, but his companion fell. Three more joined the fight, in the proper order, followed and respected faultlessly by the entire bunch.

Sandor could think of only one advantage he could bring. Hands and club would not avail him now. They needed to break through and see what was behind the narrowing of the passage.

He had another weapon. He wouldn't blow it, but he might be able to use it differently.

The horn of dragonlords from across the sea.

Sandor tied his bloody hair in a knot. Decisively, he took the horn off his back, unwrapping Rhaegal’s hair from the mouthpiece and a knife-length of the pipe just under it. The exposed, burning portion of horn would do as his weapon. He held the fatter, heavier end of the instrument in his hands like the handle of a club and tried a few blows.

He could do this.

The horn felt hot to touch, but it didn't hurt him it in its silvery lining. Without Rhaegar's hair, it would burn severely any man except a true dragonlord. Well, Sandor was another exception. A partial one. He could blow the horn if he paid attention to touch only the mouthpiece and only with the charred, ruined portion of his mouth.

Will it burn the Others?
It should, Sandor concluded. Rhaegar's blood had burned the Night's King before it ran into Sansa's gown.

_So far so good._

Sandor pushed himself in front of all giants with a strident cry and struck the first Other in his path with the exposed part of the horn; saw the enemy burn, heard him scream, witnessed him melt, felt _himself_ fall apart and falter.

_All this burning…_

When the Other was gone, a _charred_ human carcass remained.

Contrary to his old habit of laughing at the slain, Sandor avoided looking at it lest he suffered from the urge to run away.

He struck another white walker, and one more. He assaulted more and more of them; not thinking, not looking back, never looking at all.

At least the killing with the Horn of Dragonlords went much faster than the usual _giant way_ of tearing the Others apart with bare hands and club blows… the method which the Others _imitated_ when murdering the giants.

The giants fought alongside Sandor and behind him now; some fell, but many more succeeded in entering the battle according to their brave, stupid traditions, quartering the enemy as was their wont, giving as good as they got.

In the end, there weren't enough Others at the other side of the narrow passage to kill all the giants. Disappointingly, the black rock Mag had tried to circumvent continued after the narrowing along one of the sides. His death was useless as so many others. Across a small clearing, forest loomed.

And in the clearing, behind the stinky pile of giant and human remains, barely visible through the thick blue mist the greater part of the vanquished white walkers had turned into, there was a familiar, spacious bubble of white crystalline spider web…

Sandor frantically repacked the horn onto his broad back and ran through the shiny blue mist illuminating the night more than the stars did. Breathless, he reached for Sansa in her transparent prison, cold and fainted, lifting her into his arms. She weighed nothing.

_She isn't…_

_She can't be…_

The reason for her being _lighter_ than a bird had to be his new strength and height, and not some strange magic that killed her.

His heart boomed, unable to relent. The battle was still in it, as was Sansa, lifeless and immobile.

*I'm always too late, doing too little.*

He felt alone in the mist and under the stars.

Gazing at the giants, he heard them singing monotonously for their dead, mourning, gathering the body remains to be buried in cairns made of snow. They always built those, making them high and pretty…
They didn't have to burn their dead. Unlike lesser men, the killed giants never rose as wights. Small mercy.

But for all their strength and the ashen taste of victory in Sandor's, the cold was nigh, promising more danger. The giants grumbled, busy with their burial rites. What they sought was behind the flat black rock and the only way to circumvent it seemed to be passing through the valley that served as the birthplace to the Others.

*The womb of evil.*

The giants should march soon.

*Who will lead them with Mag dead?*

Perhaps there was no harm in desertion now and Sandor could just leave with his wife.

Sansa seemed warmer, or maybe it was his wishful thinking. He pulled her closer to himself, kissed the pale skin on her neck where it protruded from the bloody gown. She was definitely warm *under* it. *Thank the gods.* He didn't believe in them, but some gratitude seemed to be in order. He was fortunate again; a rare occurrence in his life.

A precious one.

He waited and found himself chanting with the giants as he did so, though he didn't understand a single word of their lamentation, consisting of three words in total and one or two low tones.

It sounded harmonious and it helped his heart slow down.

“Sandor,” Sansa murmured after a long while. “It can’t be you. I didn't take you… for a singer,” she smiled very weakly at him.

“You know it's me,” he answered in a high-pitched rasp that surprised him. “Who else looks like me?”

Her hand reached impulsively for his scars, verifying it was him and no one else, in a gesture that had so much meaning for them that it almost made him cry. “Thank the gods,” she said.

Sandor grinned widely, ugly as seven hells; his eyes dry, his arrogance almost back in place.

He found it hard to believe that he hadn’t failed her for once. “It was too easy,” he said, humbled. “I was lucky to find you.”

“I think we'll have to go up there,” he told her, gesticulating at the path leading to the valley of the Others. He realised he was babbling just to continue speaking, finding joy in conversation and not in its content. “We know what’s there,” he gestured at the Winterfell of ice. “And over there, there's nothing,” he showed the way through the forest, leading to the cliff at the edge of the world.

“Up,” Sansa said, worried. “I'm sorry to say so, Sandor, but it doesn’t look as if there's anything up there either.”

Sandor exhaled a frozen breath. She was probably right.

“I just saved you, didn't I?” he stated, incredulous, changing the topic. “I never thought I'd succeed in that. Always did everything halfway in my attempts to help you.”

“He… The Night's King…,” Sansa murmured, shivering from cold, her face turning blank and
bloodless from unpleasant memories she needed to confide to her husband. “He took me to Winterfell, to Jon’s wedding. He lost some of his favourite soldiers there. But not me… his cherished captive. He should be back for me very soon. And, Sandor, Bran is home! I saw him. Isn’t that wonderful? Rhaegar and the giants saved him as you said.”

“We still have to save each other though,” Sandor added darkly, stretching the cocoon around Sansa farther away from her body. He didn’t want her hands to bleed. He could not free her from it, but he could reshape it a bit since the contraption didn't wound him for some reason. “Come,” he said. “I'll carry you up.”

In worst case, he could try and blow the horn, and the dragons would come, but it could mean their ruin. The dragons could not fly in the lands beyond the Wall without coming to harm.

No.

He wouldn't do that.

There had to be a different way to a safe destination, like he told Mag.

“Whore,” two giants announced briskly, surprising Sandor by their knowledge of that word in human language. They barred his way, grunting with unmistakable interest in spoils of war.

“She’s my wife,” Sandor replied instinctively in Common Tongue, embracing Sansa harder. He didn't know what giants called their wives, if they had them at all. Sansa froze in his arms, understanding perfectly what was said about her.

The giants didn’t seem to understand Sandor at all, or maybe they pondered his words, rustling their beards and pulling hairs caught in their mouths.


Sandor couldn't make heads and tails of it, but at least they didn't assault him. Yet. A possible, terrible meaning dawned on him. Did they want him to go first and then continue one by one as it could happen in war?

Sansa was crying softly.

“Mag’s dead,” Sandor said murderously. “I'm Sandor. She's mine. My wife.”

One giant bowed respectfully, but then stretched his hairy arms to take Sansa away.

Sandor grunted at him fiercely, like he heard Mag do when giving orders. "Back!" he said in the Old Tongue. "Now!" he added for good measure and grasped his club, threatening the offender, like Mag had done with Sandor for desertion.

A good beating. How would you like that?

Sandor knew that he would never be able to kill them all. He and Sansa would die. Maybe he should kill Sansa first, and swiftly, before he was killed by the giants who would then-

Surprisingly, the giant backed off like a good dog, despite being more than two times bigger than Sandor.

“Whore,” a dozen giants chanted now as was their custom, but none of them made a move against Sandor. They were just… presenting an argument, maybe.
“She’s no whore,” Sandor tried again, in Common Tongue, lacking finesse in expression, forgetting all the Old Tongue he knew in his growing nervousness. “She’s my wife alright.”

“We’re no whore?” they repeated it as a foreign word whose meaning they were trying to grasp, encircling Sandor and Sansa in the course of their reflection.

“They are so… frightening,” Sansa murmured, with her eyes big like frozen blue ponds.

Sandor prayed to the gods he didn’t believe in that she wouldn’t see it coming until the very end; what he had to do for her if he couldn’t talk his way out of this.

A _clean death._

The closest giant smelled Sansa and turned even more violent. “Not whore, child!” he hissed. “Kill!” he voiced his changed opinion.

"Kill," others repeated, expecting reaction from Sandor.

“She’s no child,” Sandor was adamant and insulted. “Can’t you see? What’s wrong with you?”

As he said so, the old shame for wanting a young girl as he shouldn’t have, many years ago in King’s Landing, returned in force.

_You were a child Sansa, and I, I…_

He’d held a knife against her throat and forced her to sing. He would always feel terribly guilty about it.

“Child…,” the giants murmured quietly and drew their stone knives, leaving clubs behind.

So they didn’t use them only for fish.

Killing both Sandor and Sansa _would_ be preferable to the first notion they had in mind, but-

_No._

“No child! My woman!” Sandor roared in the buggering Old Tongue, rebelling against the injustice of the moment.

He helped the bloody giants win the battle and Sansa caused them no harm.

_I’m not often so with the slaughtered? They do nothing wrong and yet they are burned, tortured and killed?_

He cursed the gods, spitting on them in his mind.

If they existed, how could they allow this?

_No._

The gods didn’t exist.

Through the haze of his mounting rage, Sandor finally realised that the giants halted in their steps, so he must have said something good. The one who suggested killing Sansa coloured _red_ in embarrassment, the first time Sandor saw a reaction like this in a member of the bunch.
“She's a woman!” Sandor bellowed. “My woman.”

“Child. Woman. Mag.” The giants backed off very respectfully now, sheathing their knives, butting heads with each other, which was a form of greeting and showing respect. Perhaps woman meant wife, like man meant giant.

The shamed giant dug out two of those bulbous roots, offering one to Sansa and one to Sandor. He was extremely careful not to touch Sansa, but her icy cocoon was nothing to him; just like it didn't hurt Sandor...


Sansa was faster than Sandor in understanding what they wanted. She bit bravely into the fruit with gritty teeth and shivering, frozen hands.

"It's very good, thank you," she said, nodding.

"Truly?" Sandor asked her, wondering if she liked it or if she was merely being polite and hating it. At times she could still hide her true views from him.

"Quite good," Sansa added ruefully, eating some more, measuring the taste.

You are just afraid, aren't you?

The giants very visibly relaxed. "Woman. Mag. Good. No child," they said, repeated and chanted, returning to building the cairns over their dead.

Sandor didn’t understand a thing. He devoured his root, satisfying the gnawing hunger he hadn't felt until then, and felt tremendously, uniquely dumb. All his efforts at language and lore learning were nothing. They almost got Sansa and him killed. Someone else should be here to accomplish something useful with these men.

Giants.

Despite everything, Sandor felt much better beyond the Wall when he was with them. The cold breath of the Others sowed less despair in the pit of his soul; ever the fertile ground for doubt and worst expectations.

“I’ll carry you up to the valley,” he told Sansa. “I see no other place to go for now.”

"Very well," Sansa replied calmly, trying to look confident about their bleak future. "But you'll let me walk when… when we abandon the present company."

Sandor would do anything Sansa asked, but he couldn't help wonder if she demanded it to spare him the effort or to show bravery. Years ago, he would have thought instantly that she hated being in his arms and that every word she said was a lie.

How it changes, what we see...

Or is it that we learn to see each other?

Sandor held Sansa close and padded forward.

A Dornish giant who used to be the last one in line, but who had also moved closer to the front during battle, approached Sandor, standing in his way like a huge mule, never moving.
So it wasn't over yet.

It would never be over.

His luck would never hold, would it?

“Mag,” the bloody giant said, bowing deeply and offering to butt his head with Sandor, respectfully.

"I think you should do it," Sansa offered her advice, curious and just a little stiff from the looming presence of the blond, blue-eyed monster, overgrown in golden curls and hair.

Sandor obeyed his wife and noticed that the Dornish giant was also extremely careful not to touch Sansa during their head-performed greeting, just like the one who fed them.

After the ritual, the giant stood behind Sandor, the first one in line. "Mag," he said with acknowledgement and pride.

*What in seven buggering bleeding hells does this mean?*

“Mag,” a very hairy giant that used to walk two places before Sandor repeated, nodding to Sandor, thankfully not offering to butt heads, moving to stand behind the Dornish giant.

Many followed.

*All followed, one after another. A perfect, long line formed itself.*

"Mag," every giant addressed Sandor with respect.

Sandor felt thunderstruck, occasionally butting heads.

No one touched Sansa.

This wasn't about giving names, Sandor realised. He, the smallest and probably the weakest member of the bunch, was *Mag now*.

Mag meant the leader.

They might question his decisions, but they would respect his opinion as final.

“Why Mag Sandor?” Sandor formed the word *why* in Old Tongue with extreme difficulty, pointing at his own chest. It was one of their most guttural expressions. The necessary panoply of sounds resembling vomiting, formed in the back of the throat, was extremely painful to replicate with a burned voice. There were easier words, naturally raspy, deep and soft, not requiring so much effort. Like man. Like…

*Woman…*

*Sansa, Sansa, Sansa.*

“Don't be afraid,” he whispered to his wife. “It's alright now.”

Despite feeling relieved, Sandor's curiosity to know why he was chosen as leader mounted. They had all fought equally in the end. He wasn't the only one responsible for victory, nor the one with the highest number of kills; he was just faster in killing the Others from the beginning, bringing his side the advantage it desperately needed. He even defied their customs by not waiting for his place in battle.
"Why?" he repeated, despite the excruciating pain in his throat.

Ten very old giants abandoned the line and formed a circle in front of Sandor and Sansa, tugging at the hairs of their beards. Slowly, they began to sing, beating the rhythm with their clubs and knives until they found the right word Sandor could understand.

Sandor was the bravest one.

This was how they chose their leaders. Not by size nor by birth. Though they had to be, at least in part, giants.

“I am a man, a lesser man,” Sandor pointed out the truth. If he had any giant blood it must have been very diluted and extremely old. Much older than the House Clegane and the unfortunate Ser Duncan the Tall who may have helped founding it, by impregnating a Dornish puppeteer before he died, no, before he burned in Harrenhal with King Aegon V and his heir, Prince Duncan. On the day Rhaegar was born and, quite obviously, never died from fire. Fire could not have killed Sandor’s adopted brother.

But ice could and did.

It was best not to think of blood, nor of ice or fire. And least of all about poor Rhaegar wandering in the white expanse of the North on his own as a wight. Another result of Sandor’s failure to protect someone he loved.

“Lesser man is Mag. Lesser man is a true man now,” the ancient giants rumbled, omitting to discuss blood. True man was another way to say giant. “One time in a thousand years. One time.”

“When before me?” Sandor inquired, wondering which other man they elected to lead them. “Which lesser man, Mag?”

“He woke the men from earth, woke them from earth after all true men died…The men killed the Others and they died,” all giants sang sadly now, in a repetitive cacophony, sitting down in a circle or in a line, wherever they stood, losing courage and heart to march. "One time in a thousand years this was. One time. The Mag woke the men from earth..."

“No need to become upset,” Sandor complained in Common Tongue. But nothing he said or did could console the giants now. They didn’t understand him and they began weeping under the force of their song and the burden of memory.

Sandor didn’t think he deserved the title of the bravest one. Most cunning, perhaps, he told himself to feel closer to the truth. Using the Horn of Dragonlords was a clever trick.

Faced with the suddenly sedentary, crying giants, he kissed his wife. He wished there was a safe place to undress her. He knew that there wasn’t.

We should fly to Essos for that. If a dragon could come here for us, which they can’t.

“They know a safe place,” Sansa said, sensing his thoughts. The closest one among the singing giants, with an ugly brown-grey mop of hair on his forehead looked at her with a pained, reproachful expression.

“My pardons,” Sansa apologised to her hairy victim and spoke to Sandor, “I understand them even less than you. I had to look in his head. They know a shelter and it’s not far. We have to go up as you said, when they stop crying and wake,” she yawned prettily. "They will sleep now. But it shouldn't take them long to recover. They are very strong."
"They are," Sandor cautiously agreed. "But so are the white walkers."

Sansa seemed too weary to care.

**Waiting it is.** Sandor resigned himself, remaining alert and on guard.

“Will you hold me while I sleep?” Sansa asked, thawing, relaxing fully. “I haven’t been able to for so long, not peacefully.”

“You know I’ll hold you forever,” he said, smiling, mouth twitching, scars puckering in the unearthly cold.

She liked to hear about forever, his little bird did, he could tell. He was able to lie to her, a little, now.

She was the sweetest burden in his arms. He would bring her somewhere safe if it was the last thing he did. And he would do his best to live for her, as long as he could. But if the time came to choose between him and Sansa, there was never any doubt as to whose safety he would choose. But he wouldn't tell her that. He didn't want to make her sad because of the inevitable. He would be the first to die and she would be widowed one day.

**Not yet.**

The giants were falling asleep, just like Sansa predicted; exhausted from killing, singing and crying.

Sandor sat down and rested quietly, wide awake, with the drowsing Sansa in his arms.

He realised that Mag had never been the name of the dead leader of the giants. Belatedly, Sandor wondered what the man's, no, the giant's name was. He should tell it to the buggering singer to make a rhyme out of it. Mag had died valiantly, just like the other Mag, the Mighty one, that Mance had sung about in the Twins…

Better a song than a bloody mummery.

Sandor laughed raucously and stared at the starlit sky.

**Incredible.**

He was the captain of the giants.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Next up: Tyrion
Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy, for helping with this :-)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Warning for violence against men.

The morning after Jon and Dany’s wedding in Wintertown.

Tyrian

He had a beautiful stranger in his bed.

She was his wife and yet she wasn’t.

How could she be after what he had done?

Yet Tysha had allowed everyone to treat her as Lady Lannister at the royal wedding. She’d let Tyrian put food on her plate and make a fool of himself by spilling sauces and wine or dropping cutlery and fetching it for her.

She’d accompanied him to Wintertown as a wife would her husband, as soon as the bedding passed and it became appropriate to retire. She’d even taken his arm, though she kept her distance.

Tyrian’s lodging in Wintertown was a tiny rounded room at ground level in a smallfolk hut. Jaime and Brienne had the upper floor. Tommen was in the square cabin next door with a few more Lannister men and the rest camped in a barn-like structure nearby. All received enough firewood. The Starks had done their best under the circumstances.

Inside, Tysha had discarded her dark blue, foreign robes with ease and indifference, lying in the rather small bed in her shift, turning her face to the wall.

Moments later, when Tyrian climbed after her in his tunic like a husband would join his wife, albeit with considerable difficulty, because the damned cot was high and not only small, she didn’t move a hair. He soon realised she was fast asleep.

Now he was awake and so was she. He could tell by how her body, warm and relaxed moments ago, tensed from involuntarily touching his. Tyrian might be small, but not sufficiently; he was unable to stay completely separated from her. The cot was simply too little for such utmost propriety; like that worthy of true knights and their ladies and not meant for gargoyles and lovely shadowbinders.

In the time they spent together, Tysha had yet to direct him a single word.

He expected her to rage and hate him. He would be able to understand if she tried to kill him… or succeeded for that matter. She could have done it while he slept.
The last in the long line of his confused expectations of what might occur if he ever found Tysha again was mild indifference and disinterest on her part, accompanied by acting outwardly as if they were a normal married couple.

*We are married, before the gods,* Tyrion thought, embittered.

“Do you think it’s already morning?” he asked, not expecting an answer.

“There are no more mornings,” she replied, observing him as though he were either stupid or ignorant. Her voice was deeper than he remembered it, ruining forever the image he carried of her in his head as a sweet, innocent girl singing to him about the seasons of her love. “The shadow is swallowing the world,” she outlined calmly, as though he was a babe in need of instruction.

“I guess you may be right,” Tyrion remarked cautiously, disenchanted and guilty about feeling that way at the same time. How could he feel anything but remorse in Tysha’s presence? *An ugly, vengeful dwarf, deadly with a crossbow and skilled with an axe. What weapon are you using, my love? Will you kill me by your contempt?*

“Why are you here?” Tysha asked placidly. “Why not with some other, *beautiful* woman?”

Tyrion was at a loss.

“You’re my wife,” he reacted. "I've been looking for you."

It struck him that she must have known this, observing him behind her shadowbinder mask in Meereen and on the way to Asshai. She and her friend, Quaithe, used his desperate search for Tysha to lure him to accompany them. *To capture and kill Jaime and his dragon.* Tyrion had never been important.

Tysha… Tysha was beautiful. Just not like the slim, scared wisp of a girl he remembered. He realised that other men must have stroked her curves to perfection and felt like choking.

His voice betrayed him and he couldn’t pay her the compliment she deserved. There was a lump in his throat and tears threatened to come. The guilt was there, larger and deeper than the golden mines in the West, mingling with his stupid disenchantment about how his wife had changed…

She had to, didn’t she? Or she would be a dead girl thrown into the sea in Lannisport years ago… She must have gone there from Casterly Rock in order to end up as far across the seas as Asshai. It was the only port close enough to the place of her ordeal.

Tyrion sat up in bed. Allowing himself to study the perfect curve of his wife’s back, he remembered very acutely being a dwarf with almost no nose, and very far behind Tysha where beauty was concerned.

“I looked everywhere for you,” he repeated, “I thought you dead.”

*I’m so bloody sorry.*

“I’m so sorry,” he said lamely. He had to say more. Even if she smacked him for it. "I was a bloody fool. They told me you never loved me and I believed them," his voice broke. She could hear it. "I believed Jaime," he managed to explain. "I would have never trusted my father. But father was clever. He knew me so he tricked Jaime into betraying me… Jaime… he’s never been clever for intrigue. And I… I thought myself cleverer than Father, but I only equal him in cruelty. I… I do terrible things when I believe that I’m betrayed. But when it comes to intelligence, I’m infinitely more stupid. Or I would have realised the truth."
“I wished you were dead,” Tysha reacted, maintaining her cold demeanour.

“Not anymore?” Tyrion inquired.

“It varies from day to day,” she sentenced him in that new, deep voice of hers. “I still wish you were dead most of the time.”

“And today?” he asked surreptitiously.

She wouldn't answer that.

“I wish I could say that I wish I was dead, but I don't,” Tyrion grinned. "Death has always been far too final for my liking."

Smiling and joking was a big mistake.

A storm of sharp, painful slaps and fist blows landed on his head and face, hurting him like seven hells.

He was ready. He had been waiting for it.

Despite the pain, he didn't even think of defending himself; incapable to try and stay Tysha's hands.

Like she hadn't resisted when he- He choked from the memory. She had been too hurt to defend herself after all the others. She had given him a dead look before he, he… And he, the twisted little gargoyle, he told himself that whores must be used to laying with so many men and did his best to act like a heartless bastard who was no longer deceived by women.

Now, after many years and many visits to whores, he knew that even the ladies of that noble, ancient profession had their limits.

Why would Tysha be guilty of a deception if it were true that Jaime had paid her to make Tyrion a man?

She would have only done her best in her damn employ…

In almost thirty years of his life, Tyrion had yet to meet a more convincing lady of ill repute. Had he been older, he would have known that Tysha was innocent.

Unfortunately, when he and Tysha married with the drunk septon, Tyrion was as old as Sansa when they married her to him.

*Three and ten.*

*Far too young, both of us.*

He probably deserved to die. As a confirmation of this, the blows and the slaps never ceased. Sharp nails marked long, burning trails on his cheeks.

When Tyrion felt his nose bleeding, someone knocked gently on the door.

The tender sound made Tysha stop. She withdrew, looking away from Tyrion and back to the wall she’d faced while sleeping.

Tyrion tried to stop the bleeding from his nose by leaning his head backward. At the same time, he reached for his doublet on the floor-
-and fell off the bed, noisily, hitting the bed frame with his head. He would have a bump from it, to
go with the black-eye Tysha most certainly gave him.

"A moment, please!" Tyrion roared to their would-be guests.

By the time he pulled the doublet over his head, put his breeches back on, lit a candle on the bedside,
threw two logs in the hearth, rekindled the fire and waddled to the door, Tysha was seated on the cot;fully dressed.

Tyrion opened his big mouth to greet Jaime or Tommen who he expected at the door.

His mouth remained open.

It was Daenerys.

“Your Grace,” Tyrion said, receding to let her pass, “I had not hoped for the honour of your visit.”

Jon was two steps behind her. *That* was even more unexpected. A weak-looking raven sat on his
shoulder.

"Corn," the bird squeaked.

Jon snorted. “Sam has already taught him to talk. In a few hours, imagine,” he told his wife.

Daenerys was busy observing Tyrion's maimed head before turning to her new husband. Her eyes
smiled at Jon.

*Your third lord husband is it, princess? You surely don’t appear to need me or anyone else to make
you a widow this time.*

"Perhaps we should return later-" she suggested.

"Have you been to the training yard this early, my lord of Lannister?" Jon asked Tyrion very
seriously. "We will have to put more torches there so that men can spar without wounding
themselves."

Tyrion wasn’t certain at all if Rhaegar’s son was being serious, playing a bad joke on Tyrion or just
looking for a politically advisable and sound way out of the embarrassing situation of finding a
highborn enemy beaten by his wife in their bedchamber.

Jon didn't wear his heart on his palm anymore, like he did when he and Tyrion had first met.

*Life will do that to a man, won't it?*

*Or to a woman.*

Tyrion gazed back at his wife who stared placidly at the wall; her face a mask, as though she still
wore that horrible disguise of lacquered wood. *Where do you have it? Have you brought it here?*

Tyrion decided to play along with Jon. "This bed's too high for a dwarf," he gesticulated. "I fell from
it when you knocked. Very poorly and clumsily, I must add, because I’m a small man," he sniffed
blood through his nostrils and hoped they could now end the conversation about the disarray of his
person and discuss the urgent matter that must have brought the royal couple to see him of all people,
first thing in the morning.

Well, morning.
It would be morning if it weren’t for the Long Night that had fallen...

*What do you want from me?*

Jon and Daenerys looked rosy in the candlelight and their very different eyes shone. Tyrion envied them so much that he felt like dying. *You’re both cleverer than I ever was. You weren’t heartless that I know of. Maybe it comes easier if you are born tall and good-looking.*

He remembered Cersei, pretty and heartless most of the time, and discarded his own argument.

*It’s what one does. Not the blood nor the looks.*

He would do well to remember this the next time he felt slighted and murderous in the future.

“A word, my lord of Lannister,” Jon said immediately. "I heard you praise my swordsmanship in the godswood after we defeated the Others. Later I understood you might have done it on purpose, to favour my cause; to make me look braver than I was, and not just for the sake of talking. I wish to hear where you stand. Why not support Stannis?” Jon asked bluntly. “He may have less reason to doubt the loyalty your house.”

*And you more, obviously.*

"You judged my intervention correctly," Tyrion was surprised that Jon noticed his effort. *Clever, are we?* "I made a bet with myself that either you or your lady wife would aim to do good if you are crowned. I have less faith in Stannis’ notion of justice."

"But this position may change, right?” Jon inquired bitterly.

*As the wind blows, with most men, most of the time. You must have noticed.*

"Well," Tyrion replied a bit harsher than he intended. His right eye was swelling, hurt. "If I have to choose between being burned by Drogon or bending my twisted knee to Stannis, I shall choose the latter. But until such day may come, I am yours to help you avoid this development—" He realised he was being more arrogant than Jaime, "—should you want a Lannister and an Imp on your side, Your Grace."

Anything could happen at the Great Council in Oldtown. The Lannisters would have to survive it like anyone else.

"I feel like Jon the Ungraceful," Jon quipped. “And it pleases me to note that you’re still telling me the truth, just like you warned me about the nature of the Watch when no one else would. I suppose you will be leaving today with… with your family,” Jon strove to remember his courtesies, Tyrion could see.

*With Jaime, you mean. The one who became a dragonrider despite crippling your little brother.*

Although one of them had to return to Casterly Rock, especially after the unknown enemy had set the castle on fire, the Lannisters didn’t have time to discuss who that would be. All except Tyrion were probably still sound asleep after the feast or engaged in a bedding as couples should. Not in abusing or beating each other.

But Jon asking about their plans meant that some guests had already departed.

"Who left?" Tyrion wondered.

"All of them?" Tyrion's curiosity would kill him one day. Now or never, he couldn’t help it.

Jon's eyes… roamed around the room with uncertainty, landing on Tysha and then on Tyrion. "Prince Doran offered to leave two of his nieces here, Obara and Tyene," he outlined carefully. "Obara would guard me… As good or as bad as any man, he said. And Tyene would help Sam with her knowledge of-

"-Poisons," Tyrion completed rudely. "She's his father's daughter. Maybe we can poison the white walkers. Wouldn't that be nice?"

Dany and Jon looked at each other.

"Did you say yes to his offer?" Tyrion inquired further.

"I said I’d think about it," Jon replied. "He also offered to leave all his spears and return home only with his daughter Arianne and his niece Nymeria. They are-

"They are waiting for Ser Jaime and Viserion to take them home," Daenerys helped her husband.

"What are you waiting for?" Tyrion couldn’t believe Jon’s terrible mistake. “Go back and accept his kind offer from the bottom of your heart! Bow humbly to the prince, thank him for coming and promise you will look after his nieces as if they were your own family," Tyrion roared. "You'll offend him if you don’t."

"My existence insults him," Jon observed. "I can understand him that far. But how can I then trust any of his offers?"

"You can't," Tyrion’s brain worked hard now, comparing odds, weighing statements and gestures at the wedding. He scratched his head. It was too much to hope that the House Martell would sincerely support Rhaegar's second family.

Although in Tyrion's opinion, even a deadman could see that Stannis wasn’t exactly the best choice for the realm. His justice could prove… very restrictive and drastic in kingdoms that had already bled so much. On top of that, he was becoming old. He belonged to the past, but without having acquired the calmness and erudite wisdom that often graced old age and could help him rule...

Perhaps unjustly, Tyrion had felt naturally cleverer than Stannis whenever he encountered Robert’s brother as a member of the king’s Small Council in King’s Landing. The Lannister Imp had always found it more interesting to talk about books with his young, scarred daughter than to pursue any conversation with her dour father. Lady Shireen belonged to the cripples and the broken things, just like Tyrion. They had to stick together.

The unhappy monsters of this world.

Either Daenerys or Jon could represent the future for the Seven Kingdoms. Jon’s stunt at his wedding feast had been a clever one; enough to shed doubt on Stannis’ claim, and yet insufficient for the kingdoms to support, quite revolutionarily, a woman on the Iron Throne, so it still favoured Jon. Well… after that, Tyrion didn’t much care which half of the happy couple would prevail. Chance was one would die in war. Maybe both, he realised grimly. Not that he would tell them that immediately after their wedding. It would be distasteful.
Besides, the Lannisters faced the same odds. Tyrion shivered. He stole a shy gaze at Tysha. She could die too.

No, please, no.

Finally, Tyrion regained his usual charm by finding an argument in favour of Doran Martell.

"The Dornish don't have as many spears as they wish others to think," he underlined. "They are weak, and they’ve been under attack by the Volantene slavers in Sunspear. This could reoccur if the sea freezes again. Why would he leave you the spears he may need if he’s not giving you some of his faith?" The argument was sound, though refutable. The men, just like the sandsnakes, could conspire against Jon’s or his mother’s life, or both.

Jon's face darkened. "I wasn't aware of this." He stomped out of the room.

"Once again, my congratulations, princess," Tyrion said sincerely when he was left only in the company of ladies. "May you find true joy in your marriage.

"I will," Daenerys agreed, "but now I remember what you said before the bedding, my lord. I trust you had a different reason than your love of me to call me-"

"-the most beautiful woman in the world?" Tyrion laughed. "Of course I did. And it's easy to guess why. Can you not see? Some guests might have feared you were mad, deranged and dangerous like your kingly father with burning arms. I led them to see you were as beautiful as you were powerful and love you for it."

Dany laughed like crystals breaking. "It makes sense now," she said, "but I would never guess it by myself. Maybe because there has never been a shortage of men declaring I was beautiful. And though not all of them meant it, most were far more obvious than you about what they wanted to achieve."

"I'm just cleverer than most," Tyrion had to observe. "And do not worry, Princess," he quipped, noticing the soft look of pity and well disguised revulsion in her eyes. "This dwarf will not covet you nor court you. You have my deepest respect since you took me in your service in Meereen. But when it concerns my little person, the most beautiful woman in the world is my wife. Despite that we have become estranged, by my own doing."

There, he said it without thinking, he realised. The compliment meant for Tysha. He stole a glance at her. It wasn't the same as telling it to her but it was said. And heartfelt. As much as cruel dwarves could feel.

Tyrion did not have the luxury to study his wife’s reaction to his outburst, if there was any, because...

Jon was back.

And at the door, he met Jaime and his wife, Lady Brienne. Tyrion had to get to know his good-sister better. For now, his only judgement was that she cut a striking figure, be it in garments or in armour; tall and muscled, with terribly innocent eyes.

Tyrion felt cold sweat running down his back. It would have been better if Jaime remained in bed for a while longer. Sleeping or not. His wife’s looks, just like the smiling eyes and rosy cheeks of the royal couple, gave more credit to the assumption of wakefulness.

Tyrion wiped the drying blood from his nose; envious and miserable. Jaime’s wife was not beautiful in a traditional sense, and yet-
She also wasn’t a murderous, vengeful dwarf, so she probably deserved her happiness.

"Welcome, welcome," Tyrion roared, "the room is small but we can all fit. I regret not having servants to call to help us break our fast."

Jon stood next to Dany. “Very well,” he said coldly. “What I came to tell you concerns all of you. Lord Hightower has your sister.”

“My sister’s dead,” Jaime fired back. “I trust you may find joy in it.”

Jon shook his head stubbornly. “This wasn’t what I heard.”

“Lord Hightower was boasting about keeping Lady Cersei as his prisoner in Oldtown,” Daenerys explained in the gentle, sweet voice she used to deceive petitioners she was only a young girl and not a queen at heart. “He said he would use her to force Ser Jaime to bend the knee to Stannis.”

Jaime fidgeted with his hair. “I see,” he squeezed out dryly at first, but with a growingly flaming look. “And you’re only telling me now?” He roared like a true lion, or maybe a dragon.

Brienne held Jaime’s stump, both keeping Jaime in place and showing her support, not appearing jealous at all.

Tyrion envied her even more for the ability to have this loving attitude when Cersei was mentioned. *Jaime loved her. Doesn’t it bother you?*

“I heard it the night before the wedding,” Jon raised his voice with passion, in the same vein as Jaime. “And then, if you will excuse me, I had more urgent business to attend than to seek out my brother’s murderer. But now I thought I ought to tell you,” he finished, controlling his temper.

“Good day, my lords, and thank you for coming,” Jon gave them his best farewell. “Your advice was solid, my lord Tyrion. It shall not be forgotten,” he proclaimed and turned to leave.

Tyrion looked through the door. A Northman and Obara Sand waited for Jon; his two guards tailing him.

“Bloody, righteous Starks,” Jaime had to curse.

“What do you mean?” Jon asked in a deadly voice, turning back.

Jon and Jaime began to circle each other. Jaime was unarmed and half-dressed. His eyes contemplated his wife’s sword. Jaime would grab it soon, if Tyrion knew anything about his brother. Jon carried that foreign blade on his hip. Tyrion wondered if he slept with it, just in case.

It was what a king should do...

Tyrion needed a position of power to stop this. He wished that the dog or the pig of the jousting dwarves were here. In their absence, he climbed back on the high cot and stood on it to appear taller.

“Stop it!” he yelled. “If you fight now, so will your dragons. And then one of them may die. Do you want a dead dragon on your conscience? Are you truly unaware of this possibility as buggering dragonriders?”

Everyone, even Daenerys, the Mother of Dragons, looked at Tyrion with unhidden surprise. They truly were *that* ignorant! Despite that this piece of dragonlore should be obvious to any assiduous student of the dance of the dragons as an episode of history, without special blood to accompany his...
or her understanding of the matter...

Jaime’s wife placed herself strategically between him and Jon, careful to keep her swordbelt out of Jaime’s reach.

So you know him well, good-sister. Thank the gods.

“I suppose this decides who goes to Casterly Rock,” Tyrion said because he thought it prudent to continue talking. As long as men spoke, they didn’t resort to swords or axes. “Jaime and Tommen. I shall stay here and represent the House Lannister in the War of Winter.”

“Shall we leave now?” Brienne asked Jaime bravely.

“Wait, there’s more,” Daenerys opposed.

“Lord Varys is begging Lord Tyrion to go back to the capital,” Jon explained, as calm as he could make himself; his black eyes dark and stormy. “The raven came this morning after trying to find Winterfell for weeks. They are not flying as they used to,” he paused. The unrest in his eyes abated.

Jon continued, sounding genuinely, humanly worried. “There is greyscale in the capital. Almost everyone is contaminated. A few thousands have already died. But Lord Varys’ health returned, or rather, his sickness stopped progressing and he feels healthy despite having scars from it. He claims he noted the change after coming in contact with Tyrion. The same occurred with many men and women who had come in contact with Lord Varys afterwards. He begs Lord Tyrion to come back and help him touch the ill so that as many as possible would recover. Would you go, my lord? My wife would accompany you. She... she has been in contact with plagues before and never become sick. She is confident about this.”

Right. Tyrion remembered the great whale Yezzan zo Qagazz, and the terrible disease that had decimated the would-be attackers of Meereen just before he joined Daenerys’ side. Tyrion hadn’t been contaminated by it either. Why? He didn’t know.

“We...,” Daenerys continued, serious and queenly, not hiding behind her youthful demeanour. “We’ve both concluded that we cannot claim to rule this land if we let the largest city of the Seven Kingdoms die and do nothing.”

Tyrion looked at Tysha.

“I don’t know about this,” he stuttered, afraid to go back. Suddenly, he remembered the possible reason for his immunity, if it was passed from person to person. “Why not ask Lady Shireen?” he said, breathless. “If I’m truly resistant to greyscale, and if the cure passes between people just as the disease does, it must be because of her. I often read with her in court. She was ill as a child and survived.”

What if Varys survives and I die if I go back?

What if I contaminate Tysha?

One thing was clear from Jon’s confused story. The cure did not work for all, just like not everyone caught the disease. Any outcome was possible, terrible or good.

“Alas, Lady Shireen paid me a brief farewell visit earlier, and then left with her father,” Daenerys clarified.

“And we can’t take her by force from Deepwood Motte,” Jon stated. “I have no intention of being a
kidnapper of ladies.”

*Like your father,* Tyrion thought unwillingly, keeping his mouth shut.

“I'll go then,” Tyrion said, sighing.

“I have an offer for you, my lord, for when you return,” Jon said. “I wish to give you Nightfort as your command for the duration of this war. It’s almost as good as my own, in Castle Black.”

*Tysha could stay there. If she wants to...*

“Might I be allowed to escort my wife there before the journey to King’s Landing?” Tyrion inquired as a little dwarf soul of politeness and courtesy, glancing surreptitiously at his wife.

“Will she not go with you?” Jon asked, then added another question, a worse one, something only a bloody Stark would ask so directly now that they had almost crafted the terms of precarious, precious peace between the two houses. “How could you marry Sansa if you were not widowed? Were you not ashamed?”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Tyrion said firmly. “It’s in the past. I haven’t touched your sister as she made her disagreement over my person plain to me. I dissolved our sham union, by declaring the truth of my marriage to Lady Tysha, among other reasons, so that the Lady Sansa wouldn't have to prove her innocence to some withered septa. The rest only concerns my family.”

Jon… nodded. “I suppose Sansa wanted someone taller,” he finally remarked in the same tone he used to address Tyrion' bruises, serious and joking evilly at the same time.

“Taller?” Tyrion wondered.

“She married the Hound,” Jaime offered.

*Gods. What else is new in the Seven Kingdoms since I left? Did Cersei become kind?*

“For love,” Lady Brienne added.

*What?*

Tyrion and Jon stared at each other.

“I see what you mean,” Tyrion admitted. Sansa's choice… hurt him. *So ugly is acceptable, but small is not. And a Lannister man is better than the Lannister Imp if he’s strong of body.*

“What kind of man is he? The Hound?” Jon demanded. “You should know.”

“Awful temper, bigger mouth than mine, a tad zealous in his killing,” Tyrion recited, doing his best to describe the sweet nature of the taller man. “But he's no monster, and overall true,” he admitted.

“A man like you?” Jon wondered.


“Pity Jory Cassel can't tell the same about your brother. And Bran,” Jon commented very bitterly.

A brief look at Jaime told Tyrion that his brother had no idea who Jory Cassel was. *Wait... Was it the bunch of Ned Stark's guards Jaime and his men killed when Lady Catelyn took me prisoner? When Jaime didn’t dare kill the holy Ned and had to run from the capital?*
Most fortunately, Jaime still seemed to remember little Brandon and had the decency to look guilty and crestfallen, trading that rosy glow of a good night in bed for a much more greenish hue than when he heard about Cersei.

“Jaime is an inflammable fool, but for the rest good and true. I’m the clever one that turns as the wind blows in our family, wishing to strengthen my position and that of my house,” Tyrion affirmed. “And I hold terrible grudges. Ask my wife. Or will you accuse me of lying now? You just declared that I’ve always told you the truth.”

Jon brooded and did not speak.

The blue baby dragon flew into the chamber, defreezing the atmosphere, landing first on Lady Brienne and then on Princess Daenerys.

Tysha put a log in the hearth and addressed Jon. “My husband reacts very poorly when he believes he’s being crossed.”

“Thank you, my love,” Tyrion breathed out. “You could also ask Father, if I didn't kill him,” he told Jon.

“So it’s true that you killed your father?” Jon asked.

Tyrion nodded mutely.

Jon continued brooding.

“Is she yours?” Daenerys asked Brienne about the blue baby dragon.

“I don't know,” Brienne replied honestly, very puzzled, looking at the princess and unconsciously touching her own belly.

She is with child, isn’t she? Tyrion always noticed everything. How much progeny will you have, sweet brother?

He hoped Jaime wouldn’t have twins. Nor a dwarf. Those children had bad omen.

“Since she’s been flying with me, I find it hard to believe that the dragons belong to anyone,” Brienne confided into Daenerys.

“They are surely able to change their allegiance,” the princess put in sadly. “And choose new riders.”

The two women played with the little dragon who occasionally roared at Tysha with displeasure.

Tyrion’s wife sat quietly by the hearth like some servant girl. He wanted to go to her and make her stand with the rest, as their equal, but his courage betrayed him.

He didn’t want to be beaten in public if his gesture was not appreciated. The humiliation would be too much to bear.

“What about your sister?” Jon asked Tyrion from the depth of his dark contemplation. “Is she also good and true?”

“Oh no,” Tyrion had no difficulty explaining. “She’s as manipulative as I am and a bigger fool than Jaime. Her death would do us a favour,” he couldn't look at Jaime as he said that. “But there you have it. She’s a hostage now and remains our sister,” he managed to conclude with something mildly positive.

“I’m going with you,” Jaime’s wife reaffirmed, as if anyone could doubt her staunch loyalty after seeing her eyes and demeanour.

“Not to King’s Landing you’re not,” Jaime replied sternly. “And neither am I. We’ll just leave Tyrion there and go to Oldtown.”

“No,” Jon said in a commanding tone.

“With all due respect,” Jaime seethed. “What did you think I’d do when you told me? Leave Cersei there?”

“No,” Jon shook his head.

“Then?” Jaime was forgetting himself.

“I shall go to Oldtown and get her for you,” Jon thundered.

“Why in seven hells, Stark?”

If Jon was offended by that name, he didn’t show it.

Instead, he gave Jaime a wise, aged look. Then, he whispered darkly, “What will you do when your attempt to rescue your sister goes wrong and Lord Hightower threatens to rape her before your eyes and call it marriage—”

“—or says he will give her to his guards,” Tyrion began to see reason in Jon’s strange, dark offer and added some personal flavour to it.

“Will you give him your dragon as a price for your sister’s freedom?” Jon finished.

Jaime bowed his handsome head. “And you will let her be killed and do us all a favour if you fail?” He muttered.

Jon neither confirmed nor denied Jaime’s assumption.

“How do I know you won’t fail on purpose?” Jaime had the cheek to ask.

“You don’t,” Jon bit back. “You’ll just have to trust the sayings about the Starks. Something about being honourable.”

Jaime offered his stump to Jon, corrected himself and stretched his left hand forward.

“I am sorry, my lord,” Jon said, not taking it, holding his grudge as though he was born a dwarf.

“How dire is it?” Tyrion had to ask.

One explanation for this incredibly generous and sensible offer was that the Others were about to tear down the Wall so Jon badly needed the Lannisters on his side.

“Dire,” Jon said. “The battle of our lives is coming, my lords. It won’t tardy. But that’s not my only reason.”
Tyrion wondered what it was, and, for all his intelligence, couldn't fathom it.

“I’ll go because that’s exactly what no one expects me to do,” Jon explained.

“A moment, if it please you,” Jaime told Jon smoothly, directing himself upstairs to his chamber, followed by his wife’s worried look.

Tyrion was impressed. If Rhaegar’s son showed the same daring and unpredictability in the game of thrones, he would win, like Robert.

_Hopefully he won't turn to making little bastards if Daenerys is truly barren or if he loses her... or if kingship is not what he imagined._

“Varys sent you this,” Jaime said, returning, handing Jon his sword. “There was no gift giving last night so I kept it. Blackfyre.”

Jon accepted the sword of Aegon the Conqueror and skillfully cut some air with it. “Bran has its twin, haven’t you noticed?”

Jaime stuttered. “Dark Sister? How?”

“From beyond the Wall. You should visit there once. Wonderful land, full of magic,” Jon replied with that soft irony mingled with dead seriousness, returning the famous blade to Jaime. “Keep it,” he whispered. “It’s tempting but...,” he patted the foreign, dark-grey weapon on his hip, “I already have a sword.”

With that, Jon left the Lannisters without another word. Daenerys smiled at them and followed. Her most sincere joy was reserved for Brienne and the baby dragon.

_Is this where she's seeing the future?_ Tyrion wondered and waved a hand in front of Jaime's uncharacteristically pensive face. “Where is Nightfort?” he asked. “Can your overgrown lizard find it? I need to take possession of my new command and see to it that my wife is treated well while I’m gone. I trust that you can fly to Dorne and back in the meantime.”

Nightfort was not half as bad as Tyrion thought, though he could not see much in the dark.

A few men clad in black, wildling women, and a group of the poorest men-at-arms from crownlands were the elite company he would lead to battle. A man with a sorrowful face showed Tyrion and Tysha to a spacious room in one of the towers, leaving then a single torch and a flint and tinder to start their own fire. Wood was piled next to the hearth.

“Queen Selyse was pleased only with this one,” he explained. “In all others she dreamt about the Rat’s Cook serving her for dinner. But he doesn’t exist, as you know. Only fellow men can cook you and eat you when the Long Night deepens and the food is gone.”

“I fear that I would be only a snack,” Tyrion said placidly.

“True,” the morose man agreed. “I shall probably be the main course,” he concluded dolorously and left.

Tysha was looking through one of the windows, to the East, if Tyrion’s sense of orientation was still
good. The darkness of the night seemed deeper there, devoid of starlight.

Very… shadowy...

“Will you be here when I return?” Tyrion asked shyly.

“Do you want me to?” she wondered, always cold, always distant, turning her attention to him for a short moment, as though they were a normal couple.

“Yes, please,” he begged. “Or would you prefer to go with me?”

*Please say no. I don't want you with greyscale.*

The horde of Others had not yet mounted the siege to the Wall and the plague was decimating the capital. The Wall currently seemed a better place.

“No,” she declined. “I’ll wait here. South has lost its charm for me.”

*Wasn't that the West?* He didn't dare ask.

“Did you…,” he whispered “Did it make you feel better what you did to me?”

*Do you want to beat me some more?*

One of his eyes was swollen. His nose as well as his head hurt.

“How about you?” Tysha’s voice was ice.

“What do you mean?”

"What you did to me, did it make you feel better?"

“No,” Tyrion shook his head painfully. “But I did it believing that I ought to. Isn’t that even more terrible?"

“You’ve just answered your question then,” Tysha observed.

Tyrion laughed, waiting for a slap that didn't come. “Am I still good-looking as you used to say? I guess not.”

“No,” Tysha shook her head. “It’s just what I thought when I was young. You were dressed prettily. In red and gold.”

“You are,” Tyrion said and stared up. “Pretty. Very pretty. Now and then. Much more now…”

It wasn't very eloquent, but it was something. Maybe he should find a book of songs to find inspiration for something better.

Tysha didn’t look at him, nor did she reply.

After a long time she asked “What do you know about the Shadow?”

“Nothing. Except that it boasts to be the homeland of the dragons and that it isn’t.”

“There is a large shadow nearby, weakened but still powerful,” Tysha announced. “I can feel it. Can’t you?”
Tyrion shook his head.

“Please wait for me,” he repeated, “Don’t go back to Asshai or anywhere else. If Varys is wrong about the cure for greyscale, Jaime might bring you my head in a chamberpot. That’s what Cersei wanted. If it’s on a day you want me dead, it’ll make you happy.”

“I will bind the shadows and wait for your return, my lord,” Tysha said, starting the fire in their room, studying the shadows cast by the flames.

Was she teasing him?

“Those are pretty little shadows,” he smirked after his stupid remark, continuing to expect a slap that never came. Tysha was apparently too busy to take note of his tiny person.

Feeling better in his skin, Tyrion realised that… with all her cold and her distance, Tysha had never once looked at him as… well… as everyone else except Jaime had always looked at the dwarf. With a mixture of pity, disgust and aversion. Worse, even Jaime was occasionally sorry for him.

Tysha had always seen him as any other human being. This attitude hadn't changed.

And he still loved her.

He wondered how her voice would sound now if she decided to sing to him.

*Sweet, to be sure.*

The winter seemed less dreadful and the greyscale like a mild cold.

He would be back in no time.

*On dragon back…*

Suddenly, it didn't matter to Tyrion that there were no more mornings.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Brienne, Daenerys (which follow from this).

Thank you for reading.
Brienne IV

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy, for your patience with my mistakes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Brienne

“Deepwood Motte isn’t that far from Winterfell,” her guide told her; a bearded and imprudent, but overall reliable Northman, taller than Brienne.

A more cautious and less exuberant man wouldn’t have helped her to arrive where she decided she should go.

*Lord Jon Umber*, Brienne recalled the man’s name and title, studying the sigil on his shield; the roaring giant with broken silver chains on a stark-red field - the only source of brightness in the dark wolfswood, revealed by scarce starlight. *The Greatjon*. That was how the other Northmen called him at the wedding.

Brienne prayed to the Warrior that the ride to Stannis’ latest seat and back would not last longer than the dragon’s flight from Winterfell to Sunspear. *Jaime will speak to Lady Myrcella. He told me so*. This should delay him a bit longer.

She should be back to Wintertown well before her husband.

Yet her teeth gritted of their own free will and she shook from cold, suddenly extremely unsure if her chosen course of action was advisable.

*Lady Shireen needs to hear that she might help save thousands of people who would otherwise die of greyscale*, she told herself stubbornly. *And if Stannis insists in calling himself king, he should act to help the people who are suffering.*

"Do you have a sister?" Lord Umber asked with unhidden practical interest. "I'm widowed, as you might have heard, and looking for a second wife."

Brienne shook her head to both. Had she heard this, she might have looked for another northern guide, one who wouldn’t press her with such matters. "I am my father's only living child," she clarified.

She couldn't talk about the rest to a perfect stranger. About the death of her sisters in the cradle or the drowning of her only brother when she was but eight years old.

"Pity," Greatjon snorted.

The uncouth sound he made served like an informal war signal calling into existence the wooden towers and walls of Deepwood Motte. The fort emerged slowly from behind the last trees of the tall pine forest.

In another moment, the moon was out; full and undeterred by the haunted look of the castle below it,
caught between the limbs and claws of a giant shadow.

Brienne thought at first that the shadow was Drogon, larger than Deepwood Motte and looming over it, but she soon realised she was wrong. The shadow was darker and softer than the scaled dragon, exhaling an air of coldness, containing no fire. It stank of decay and death.

*How can anyone live under it?*

If Stannis could, then so would Brienne.

Beth croaked with encouragement on her shoulder; small and unafraid, brighter blue than her mistress' breastplate and new winter cloak. The warm hooded garment was a queenly gift from Lyanna Stark, who managed to notice Brienne's poor state of dress from being shipwrecked in the Sunset Sea, and remedy it as she could.

Her Grace must have wanted perfection from everyone for her son's wedding. Brienne had to admit that it was memorable.

She put her hand on her stomach and gave herself to a brief dream of future. *How will it be, the wedding of my son or daughter?*

*Will we dance, Jaime and I?*

*Or will the child die in cradle like my sisters?*

The possibility was devastatingly frightening.

She would light a candle to the Mother for help. She might build an altar for her in a forest, if not in the sept.

There were no septs in the north.

Focusing on the present, Brienne raised a large white banner on a tall standard and proudly rode to the gate of Deepwood Motte, followed by Lord Umber.

The castle was whole, yet it continued to smell like a decrepit ruin, veiled by that shadow darker than the night.

A shadow had killed Renly, a shadow that looked like Stannis.

And Brienne couldn't be at ease in its presence; not at all.

She hadn't been afraid of the Others when they appeared at the wedding, but the shadow made her brave heart beat faster with apprehension, in the never-ending night that had fallen upon the world.

A night much deeper than the night itself.

*I am Brienne the Blue*, she remembered. She had passed through the Shadow unscathed and carried two new lives out of it. Her unexpected triumph felt as if she had touched the light… though the light could never be grasped, for being immaterial.

*I can and I will prevail.*

*In the name of honour.*

Stannis claimed to be just. He wouldn’t kill an envoy arriving under the banner of peace.
Except that Brienne wasn't sent by anyone. She simply decided that seeking out Lady Shireen was a noble cause to be pursued by her, a true knight, as soon as Jaime flew to Dorne and she was left waiting for him.

In truth, Brienne couldn't dismiss asking for Lady Shireen’s help, ever since Lord Tyrion suggested that Stannis’ daughter could be more successful than him in curing the sick of King's Landing.

Brienne was immediately in favour of an attempt to secure Lady Shireen's voluntary participation. It was a right and honourable deed. But instead of declaring her plan with her husband as she should have done, she… avoided it.

Jaime surely wouldn't let her fight this battle, out of fear for her and their child… Just like he wouldn’t take her to either Dorne or King’s Landing since he found out he would become a father again. To keep her away from harm.

Jaime had treated Brienne as his equal much before they loved each other. Probably ever since the day he’d jumped into the bearpit unarmed to save her. Right until he heard she was with child and began to see her solely as a woman, a wife, and not a fellow fighter.

Brienne swallowed, not knowing how this changed attitude made her feel. It was endearing and terribly frustrating at the same time.

She didn't feel incapacitated by her state yet. Maybe, probably this would change when she grew heavy with child. The prospect filled her with both expectation and a very unusual and unknown sense of dread, but for the moment she was having her usual strength.

And she felt very strongly that someone had to speak to Lady Shireen, unable to understand why everyone else except for her had immediately agreed to discard the notion as unfeasible. Besides, Brienne was the one who had time and opportunity to do it now.

*Stannis claims to be just. He has to listen to my plea and treat my mission with honour.*

*But he isn't, he can't be.* A little voice of doubt peeped in her head.

*Or why would his shadow pierce Renly's heart? Renly was the only brother Stannis had left.*

The guards who let Brienne into Deepwood Motte were more bearded than Lord Umber, who whispered to Brienne in secrecy that they belonged to the mountain clans. “Wildlings, all of them, just on this side of the Wall,” he murmured with displeasure. "Daughter-stealing scum."

In the courtyard, Brienne faced the Onion Knight. She had heard about him before, and seen him at the royal wedding, but it was the first time she spoke to Ser Davos.

*Is it Lord Davos now?*

The black ship on a grey field his chest displayed looked like it was sailing on the ocean of the Long Night; illuminated by the whiteness of the large onion on its sails.

"Did you come to bend the knee?" Davos asked. "The king believes so since he saw you, or rather, since his dragon announced your presence. That's why he decided to let you past the gates. He is preparing his next step in the War of Winter. It is he who will defend Westeros with his dragon, not… Jon Snow."

Beth croaked shrilly, displeased or enthusiastic, it was hard to tell.
"Where is the dragon now?" Brienne asked, not seeing Drogon, and obeying the unknown, dark command in her soul to never pronounce the monster's name aloud; not before Stannis nor for any of his men.

"Stannis can call him to himself when he wishes and they speak to each other in their minds," Lord Davos presented knowledge familiar to Brienne. "I thought you would know."

As a wife of a dragonrider, I do, my lord. Viserion can also speak to me at times in this capacity. She wouldn't share that bit of knowledge with Stannis' Hand. If Viserion could occasionally address her, it surely meant that Drogon, the greatest of the dragons, might be able to speak to any of them if he so desired.

Possessing the gift or speech or not, Drogon wasn't here. Brienne had known the answer before asking. She wouldn't be burned today if Stannis deemed her demand was impertinent.

"I come with important message for Lady Shireen," she stated her reasons. "Seeing how she is young of age, her father should be apprised of it and help her reach her decision on the plea I came to address to her."

Davos was silent. "What do you want with the princess?" he asked very directly.

"With all due respect," Brienne didn't know whether she could trust the Onion Knight. "I would wish to expose it to the lady or her noble father."

"There is a way to secure an audience," Davos finally said. "I shall tell the king that you wouldn't reveal your purpose to me because you were bound by a vow of secrecy to your lord husband. I will add that I can't see any other reason for you to seek King Stannis out here, in the centre of his power, as the wife of another dragonrider if not to forge an alliance and bending the knee."

Brienne nodded.

Her honour would not be harmed by this little concession.

Her teeth clicked from cold as she waited.

Lord Umber paced the yard up and down, restless and itchy like a giant forced to wear chains. "This castle belongs to ghosts," he said.

"No, my lord," Brienne disagreed. "To the shadow."

The shadow was black and seemed to grow, stretching its head to the sky, and its shapeless black limbs over the castle and its inhabitants. Brienne fought to breathe and found it difficult at times.

Please don't let me choke here, she prayed to the Seven. It was all she could do.

Soon, more bearded guards arrived to accompany Brienne and Greatjon into the Great Hall of the almost extinct House Glover; wooden and airy. Wind whistled and grey owls roosted in the rafters, hooting more insistently than ravens could croak.

Yet no ravens were in evidence in Deepwood Motte, no birds that sometimes madly followed the king.

Does this mean that Stannis won't be king? Or have they stopped running the errands of men as Jon Targaryen suggested?
Concerning Deepwood Motte, rumour at the wedding was that both male heirs, brothers Galbart and Robett, perished in terrible agony when the Lords and Kings of Winter defended Winterfell from Stannis; banishing the would-be king and his army, and killing all the northern traitors to their cause. Only Lady Glover remained, alone and widowed. Her children were still prisoners of Lord Harlaw in the Iron Islands.

The widow sat in solitude at the dais, while Stannis occupied the high seat of her dead lord husband. Pale and frightful, the lady didn’t appear delighted with Stannis, who was the new occupant of her castle, after the conquest by the ironborn and a short time of reinstatement of her house.

"She looks like she's missing little Asha Greyjoy," Lord Umber whispered to Brienne about Lady Glover. "Who would say she would regret the departure of those ironborn barbarians?"

"Lady Asha is pretty and of a marriageable age," Brienne was forced to observe.

"She's not for me," Umber declined the notion. "I don’t mind strength in a woman, my lady, but that one, she would bury her axe in my head the first day I treated her poorly."

"And a sister of mine would not?" Brienne had to ask.

"Your noble sister if you had one, might give me a chance to regain my honour," Greatjon grumbled.

Brienne smiled, unable to understand how his lordship read her rather well after a short acquaintance.

"Lady Tarth, welcome," Stannis spoke first with a grain of curiosity. He looked much older than at the wedding. His cheeks were ashen, sunken, his hair and beard more grey than ever. His eyes were dark and gaze firm. He would never waver in his convictions. "My pardons. I should have said Lady Lannister. Do you bring word from your lord husband?"

_Do you think I'm a raven, my lord?_

Naturally, a man like Stannis would expect a lady wife to run errands for her lord husband, if she left her home at all.

The Long Night had darkened and emptied all roads.

"No, I don't," she answered. "Jaime doesn't know that I'm here."

In her heart, Brienne nurtured the reassurance that she enjoyed both love and respect of her husband in their marriage; a precious and rare occurrence. Despite this, and her imposing stature, she suddenly felt very womanly and fragile before Stannis' air of intransigence.

_It must be because of the child._

Stannis and she were exactly of the same height, Brienne reminded herself, unwillingly measuring up a potential opponent in combat.

_You are with child. You cannot fight. You shouldn't. You don't know what harm you can cause to your unborn son or daughter._

Children could be lost, women died from miscarrying them; Brienne had witnessed it at a young age. She had a responsibility to a new life. She should not take risks.

"Your husband doesn't even know you're here," Stannis repeated, sounding very disappointed. “Do
you bring information then? Will he put forward his name for King of Westeros on the Great Council?

Brienne gaped, shocked. After Jaime’s disquieting confession about how it was to kill Aerys and sit briefly on the Iron Throne afterwards, she had no doubt that Jaime would never claim the highest title in the land.

Stannis contemplated Brienne’s confusion with contempt and stood to leave.

"Greyscale broke out in the capital," Brienne tried to prevent him in a quivering voice.

"So?" Stannis was becoming angry now. "What has the plague got to do with me and my family?"

Apparently Stannis didn't want his daughter's and only heir's past illness to be mentioned, and Brienne was stupid enough to make that mistake.

As if Lady Shireen's scars and dry flesh would smoothen and disappear if no one ever dared speak about them. Brienne touched the mark of the savage bite on her cheek. *It will always be there, but it doesn't have any importance. And if we can't speak of it normally, we attribute the wounds from the past more importance than they should ever have over us.*

She didn't think Stannis would care about her opinion.

"Lord Varys sent a raven to..." Brienne stuttered. "...to Jon Snow," she disapproved of using the bastard name for King Rhaegar’s son, yet it was what came from her mouth in the face of Stannis’ authoritarian nature and obedience-commanding presence. "He asked Lord Tyrion Lannister to return to the capital, because my good-brother’s presence seems to somehow cure greyscale-"

"And?" Stannis boomed, "Speak plainly, woman. I don't have time for gossip and foolishness."

"Lord Tyrion believes that, if he has immunity to the plague and can cure other people by touching them as Lord Varys suggests, it's because he used to read books with... with Lady Shireen in King's Landing during the reign of King Robert," Brienne felt much better when she called Robert king.

Robert had been king for almost fifteen years.

Rhaegar had been king only for a few months.

The kingdoms would vote on the next king or queen at the future Great Council in Oldtown.

Brienne told herself that Stannis was only a pretender who killed Renly. She should not be intimidated by his manners nor his pretence to kingship.

There was a time when Brienne swore she would avenge the murder of her beloved young king. But the memory of losing Renly, although terrible, was less sharp and stinging today. She realised her goals had slowly changed over time, burying Renly's face with the grievances of her childhood, firmly into her past.

Perhaps this was unjust and unfair.

Or not...

Yes, Renly's murder was a heinous crime, but who should judge it? Would she be any better than Stannis if she simply killed him? There was no true king in the land at the time when it was committed... Only five pretenders... And while Brienne would never understand or approve murder,
for any reason, she’d unknowingly set aside the yearning for revenge.

"Throw them both out," Stannis commanded dryly to his mountain clan supporters.

"No!" Brienne protested, "Ask your daughter about this, please!" She almost called Stannis Your Grace, but then she didn't. Giving up the notion of being his justice did not mean that she would ever give him that satisfaction. Not before the entire realm would bend the knee to Stannis, and she would be forced to do the same to ensure the survival of her child.

"Lady Shireen must be allowed to have an opinion!" Brienne had to make Stannis see where honour was. "Do you not feel it is your duty to help the people if you wish to be their king?"

"Have I brought the plague upon them?" Stannis asked wryly. "I haven't been to the capital for years. The calamity is surely sent by the gods. Maybe they should pray for their sins. I've always counselled Robert to close the brothels and forbid any form of whoring. This is where all the diseases come from. This isn't the first one nor the last. Grand Maester Pycelle backed my opinion with his knowledge. But Robert never listened, too busy with visiting the houses of ill repute and putting bastards in the whores' bellies. Now the people have what they deserved by their way of life. When the plague is gone, I shall have Aegon's city rebuilt! There will be more justice and honour in it from the beginning. There will be less crime. I achieved this goal as Lord of Dragonstone. I know it can be done."

Dragonstone was an island, smaller and less populated than Tarth. Her father always told Brienne this was the reason there was less crime on the island than on the mainland. And perhaps a policy which was successful on small scale would yield different results as the law of the realm.

Wait. Did he say gods?

"They say you believe in only one god now," Brienne observed coolly, unable to agree with Stannis' conclusion that he should not help. Surely there were so many people suffering in the capital, with very different professions. There were…

Children.

She swallowed and prayed that at least Tyrion would be able to assist them.

"Gods. God. Trees," Stannis mocked her concern for the Faith. "Isn't it all the same? All gods favour what is right, so by nature they should support my claim," he gesticulated impatiently to the guards to obey his command and rid him of his impertinent guests.

Brienne was forced to fight. She would not be thrown out of Deepwood Motte like a drunk from a tavern, without ever seeing Lady Shireen. She soon proved stronger than the two men trying to restrain her, as did Lord Umber.

When she was free, she faced Stannis, barring his way out of the Great Hall, and drew her sword without thinking. Her white banner lay forgotten among the rushes on the wooden floor.

Beth screeched fearlessly on her shoulder; a little, blue, winged lizard puffing bright yellow rings of fire.

"I challenge you," she told Stannis, breathing hard after wrestling with his guards. Her too-long hair was disheveled and she nervously brushed it away with her shield arm.

"Lord Stannis Baratheon, I challenge you to a single combat," Brienne underlined. "If I win, you'll ask your daughter for her opinion on whether she wants to help against the greyscale. And if she
wishes to do so, you'll let her go."

"Who are you to give me your terms?" Stannis was very offended now. "I warn you that I will slay you if I have to. I cannot be faulted if you perish in a duel you provoked, as a consequence of your foolishness. Ser Jaime will have to understand."

"I am not certain that my husband will be able to make that subtle distinction," Brienne replied, focusing on Stannis' smooth moves in arming himself.

His sword glowed green and burned when it was unsheathed.

"Behold," Stannis said with luminous excitement in his stiff gaze. "Lightbringer."

In the unstable flickering of the torches, his withered face looked like a skull with flaring eyes.

_This is magic._

_What if he is Azor Ahai reborn? The hero who wielded a flaming weapon in the tales of old in order to save the world?_

The sword of Jon Targaryen wasn’t on fire when he faced the Night's King in Winterfell.

Brienne was awed.

And yet it was Jon, not Stannis, who had bested the Night's King, though he was unable to kill the enemy with his mundane weapon.

Despite being impressed by Lightbringer, Brienne positioned herself in a fighting stance like Ser Goodwin had taught her, disciplined and determined as ever.

_A mule, I'm a mule, Jaime would mock me for this and he would be right._

_But I am right as well._

Brienne stood her ground.

_It's just a sword, and Stannis is only a man. He'll underestimate me like all other men in the past. Including Jaime, at the beginning._

Her throat constricted.

His mistake had cost Jaime his sword hand. _If we hadn't been fighting…_ But, now as then, no one could take the fight out of Brienne. Or out of Jaime for that matter.

Stannis was competent as well. He had cut down an Other with his burning sword in the godswood of Winterfell; a feat Brienne had been unable to imitate. She had only resisted a white walker before a pale giant smote it with Valyrian steel… _That had been Dark Sister_, she realised.

Lady Catelyn's son Brandon, the boy Jaime almost killed, was…

_Uunnatural._

He somehow used the witless, timid giant who carried him around in a basket, to wield the legendary weapon of Queen Visenya in his name; last used in history by Lord Brynden Rivers, the Bloodraven.
The thought cost Brienne a precious moment of critical attention; Stannis nearly landed a heavy blow on her dragonless shoulder.

Brienne forgot she was awed by Lightbringer. She set aside the knowledge she was pregnant.

She parried and executed her steps in the correct order, just like Ser Goodwin had taught her.

The old master-at-arms would have been proud of her.

Brienne and Stannis danced over the Great Hall of the decimated Glovers.

Stannis' guards did not dare interfere, perhaps thinking he should be able to defeat a woman…

Brienne waited patiently, blow after blow.

_He is truly past his prime years_, she realised, by the determined slowness of some of his steps and attacks.

Yet unlike any other man she had fought before, Stannis never underestimated Brienne. He moved methodically and precisely, set on breaking through her defences to kill her.

She made a tiny misstep, and the sword of heroes landed on Brienne's shield arm, searing it, leaving her exposed and lying on her back. The shield with the coat-of-arms of Ser Duncan the Tall, an elm and a falling star on a sunset field, joined her white banner on the floor rushes. Stannis' next blow disarmed Brienne, leaving her at his mercy. Beth crowed, never leaving her shoulder.

She considered begging for mercy; not for herself, but for her child.

Stannis raised his sword to kill. Brienne could try and block it by turning, using her arms to shield her body, but her position was very unfavourable. She would be seriously wounded at least.

_Beth_ screamed and took flight, drawing Stannis' gaze to herself.

Brienne rapidly retrieved her sword, rushing into Stannis with all her strength, hoping no harm would come to the child in her womb. She toppled Stannis over onto the floor, sitting on top of him. Her behind was on his armoured chest, her feet imprisoned his head. Her arms took hold of his.

Stannis resisted, but Brienne was strong enough.

He still lifted his blade to try a blow at her exposed throat, but it was very simple to block it now.

Brienne's steel, ordinary and grey, clashed at full force with the burning one when she hissed, "Yield!"

Her exclamation burned with righteous anger.

"Yield," she insisted, wrestling Stannis and hitting Lightbringer uncontrollably with her blade until it stopped burning and turned duller than her unremarkable weapon.

Spent, used, done for.

True surprise lit Stannis' eyes, making them vivid and lively; not haunted like before. He was interested in _Brienne_ and in what _Brienne_ was doing for the first time since she was brought to his presence.

Not in what her husband might choose to do one day.
"But how?" he asked like a young man, surprised like Ser Loras when Brienne defeated him, winning the last place in Renly's Rainbow Guard. "I am Azor Ahai reborn and this is my sword. It can't be any different. I have forged it as it is written in the lore of old... I have sacrificed my wife and her love of me. Why did it stop burning?"

Brienne disarmed Stannis and positioned her own blade across his chest.

She could kill him if she wished and he would not be able to defend himself.

Renly would be avenged.

Instead, her mind swam with memories of the sailors' stories about Azor Ahai, told above fires in the evenings of the long summer in Tarth... Most of them were pirates who'd come to the island to trade pillaged goods, pretending to be honourable merchants.

She had gorged on their tales of fantasy and valour as a little girl...

Stannis' befuddlement made Brienne remember the part that had made her cry each time she heard the story about Azor Ahai. Every single time... Over and over again...

She also remembered Stannis' cold, angry face when he met Renly for a parley, years ago in the South. Renly ate a peach and Stannis took it as a provocation, nearly attacking him....

*He should have loved his brother. Even if Renly had betrayed him.*

Brienne allowed herself the only logical assumption as to why Stannis failed in forging the Sword of Heroes, though she knew nothing of his marriage, nor did she ever meet his wife. In the past, Lord Stannis and his lady lived in King's Landing or in Dragonstone, and Brienne didn't leave Tarth before the War of the Five Kings. Renly was the only Baratheon who had ever visited her island.

"Did you kill your wife to reforge the sword, exactly like they say that Azor Ahai had done?" she had to check.

"It ought to be done, for me to fulfil my destiny," Stannis stated feverishly.

"And yet I ruined it so easily," she mentioned thoughtfully. "Being a mere woman who has nothing to do with your fate."

"Why?" Stannis asked again.

"They say that thousands of years ago, when the darkness gathered in the world, true Azor Ahai forged the flaming Sword of Heroes by sacrificing the great love he bore his wife *and* the love she had in her heart for him. It was a terrible tragedy," Brienne thought herself a pirate, weaving the old story in the sad voice of unfulfilled dreams at sea. There were always ships left to rob and the spoils were never enough.

And the truth was often so simple, yet men could be blind to it, even if it poked them in the eye.

"If you sacrificed your lady wife and yet you failed to create a new sword of heroes, then I have only one explanation to offer you, my lord," Brienne murmured, meaning every word, becoming more certain that she had the right of it with every passing moment. "You failed because you didn't love your wife. Or not enough. Or she you. Or both. You should be able to tell the exact reason better than I. But had you ever truly listened to the tale of Azor Ahai, you would know this. It's not only about walking and labouring for the right amount of days. It was a hundred, wasn't it, before he killed poor Nissa Nissa?" Brienne's eye pricked, filling with salty dew.
Her tears dropped on Stannis' broad chest; fresh and innocent.

Maybe… maybe Stannis was less guilty than she thought. Maybe she would be unable to see this simple explanation as well if she had never loved Jaime or received his love in return…

"Lightbringer cannot be forged without love," Brienne finished sadly, wiping her eyes dry.

Beth puffed soft wisps of white smoke at Stannis, underlining the sadness of her mistress' words.

Brienne barely finished speaking when Stannis' guards woke from the trance of observing combat and picked the inopportune Lady Lannister up by her shoulders, this time in sufficient number. She couldn't free herself without risking being wounded.

*My child.*

Lord Umber fell victim to the same courteous treatment.

Brienne turned her blue gaze to Stannis and awaited her destiny.

The haunted look of conviction had vanished from the dark blue eyes of Renly's older brother. Brienne's words about Azor Ahai and Lightbringer must have shaken him profoundly, more than her sword blows; undermining the essence of what he believed of life and of himself.

Strange contentment filled her soul. She prayed to the Warrior for Renly, hoping that his soul could now rest in peace.

"Shall we execute her?" someone asked.

"No," Stannis shook his head. "She committed no crime by challenging me to single combat and winning. Go home, woman," he told Brienne as kindly as he was able to. "Tell your husband that I was merciful and that I invite him to bend the knee. It would be in his interest to do it sooner, rather than later."

"Would you have me killed if I wasn't married to a dragonrider?" Brienne inquired, realising from the thinning of the pretender's lips that yes, he would have.

She wondered for what crime, and if the main accusation would revolve around her being a lady knight, or if Stannis would content himself to sentence her for her trespassing into a castle he had taken from its rightful owners.

"Are you not? Are you only his whore as some say?" Stannis asked with interest. "And what is this… creature?" he pointed at Beth. “It can’t truly be a dragon, can it? Is it a water rat?”

The water rat spat a tiny but powerful jet of fire at Stannis, nearly burning his beard.

"I am Jaime's wife before gods and men," Brienne replied. "And Beth is truly a baby dragon. Can’t you tell?"

"I can, naturally," Stannis concluded the discussion, though nothing in his demeanour seemed natural. He turned his back to Brienne. “Out with them. Now. Before I lose my benevolence.”

The guards dragged her over the wooden floor. Dirty rushes caught in her loose hair. Some entered her mouth. She protected her flat stomach as much as she could during her ordeal, dreading a miscarriage. Her burned shield arm hurt like seven hells.

She heard Stannis commanding Davos to ride to Castle Black and bring him Lady Melisandre.
Immediately. Why isn’t she here yet? Why does she linger with the traitor Jon Snow? Stannis needed her help and counsel before Lord Hightower sent out the ravens to call for the Great Council.

Soon enough, Brienne, Beth and Greatjon were thrown out through the castle gates, like poxy beggars who wouldn’t be allowed to eat the scraps from the king’s noble table.

Brienne was defeated. The mission she had set for herself was in tatters.

What would she tell Jaime? Would she tell him anything at all? Why did she have to come here, make a fool of herself and not achieve anything? The red woman would surely make Stannis a new magic sword. Why didn’t she wait?

Because the ill in King’s Landing needed all help that could be found and because she wasn’t made for waiting…

Night darkened, and despair lay heavy on her. She felt useless, like after her failed search for Lady Sansa in the past.

Beth crawled over her shield arm. Brienne flinched at first, fearing more pain, but the warm body of the baby dragon felt like a balm on her open wound.

Halfway through the wolfswood, on the way back to Winterfell, a small party of riders from behind caught up with Greatjon and Brienne, two men and a woman, all hooded. They rode very swiftly, as though they had been flying on the wings of the shadow hovering over Deepwood Motte.

Ser Davos revealed himself first, lowering the hood of his cloak. "Princess Shireen wishes to help, my lady, as you rightfully assumed that she might," the Onion Knight declared. "Her father doesn’t notice her existence for days at times. Especially now he has begun planning his new war and ascension to the throne. He shouldn’t miss her for this ungodly night."

"But I wish to be brought back to my father when my mission in King’s Landing is done," Shireen demanded squarely, resembling Stannis in her determination.

"I swear it on my honour to abide by your wishes, my lady," Brienne promised, placing her sword hand on her heart. Her sword… her sword was gone, she realised. Only her shield remained; thrown out after her.

Shireen revealed her partially stone-coloured face and smiled, tremulous and excited; like a prisoner just released from a terrible dungeon into uncertain freedom. "Thank you, my lady," she offered. "I should be fine, Lord Davos," she told the former pirate. “Late Maester Cressen taught me that I could never contract greyscale again after I recovered from it. I only hope that Father won’t burn me when I return. To make himself a new sword. I fear that he may love me more than he ever loved my poor mother and that will be my premature end."

Do you love him? Brienne wanted to ask Shireen, but she didn’t. How could she not? She had to, at least a bit. Stannis, dour and square, was still her father.

"My ladies," Greatjon drooled, eyeing Lady Shireen as a marriageable young woman, despite the greyed, dried portion of her face. “Let us ride back to Winterfell. It’s much warmer there."

Shireen was probably barely flowered and could be Greatjon’s daughter.

Brienne looked at the Lord Umber with warning in her blue eyes. "Lady Shireen is under my protection."
"I didn't mean-" Greatjon tried to be courteous.

"Of course not," Brienne said, more expert in the lewd looks of men since she was married. "And I will make certain that you continue not meaning it, my lord. Hasn't it occurred to you to begin courting Lady Glover? She is the lady of that castle and she has need of manly protection, all alone in Deepwood Motte."

"Her children are still on the Iron Islands," Greatjon said, so he obviously had pondered that before, in his search for a wife. "But your advice is both sound and daring, my lady," he said and whistled loudly. "The Kingslayer is not stupid. He must know what he wants in a woman."

Brienne coloured and returned her gaze to Ser Davos. "Farewell, my lord, and thank you," she said sweetly. "The kingdoms will not forget you."

"All this darkness gathering…," Davos muttered, oppressed and gloomy. "When will it end? Devan is here with me, but will I ever see my two younger sons and my wife?"

"This night shall end," Brienne vowed. "It has to."

Beth screeched shrilly in agreement, but it was impossible to determine with whom.

Davos nodded, unconvinced. He covered his balding head with a shrug of resignation and disappeared into the wood.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading.
Daenerys IX

Chapter Notes

Thanks a lot, TopShelfCrazy for substantial editorial improvements to this chapter.

The choice of plot is all mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys

“Euron Greyjoy brought my dragon eggs from Asshai by the Shadow and sold them to Illyrio Mopatis for coin to buy a new ship?” Dany asked Brienne with tremendous disbelief.

Euron, the godless dragonstealer, had seemed infinitely more evil and less stupid. The eggs were worth a fortune. The price of a single ship was a cheap bargain for them, even when they appeared nothing more than lifeless stones.

Euron, wicked and dishonest… A dead criminal, a would-be usurper of the Iron Throne… A man who would wed her by force to secure his false claim.

Selling to Illyrio her future wedding gift.

Unwittingly helping the rebirth of the dragons and letting them slip from the fingers he no longer had.

“That’s what he told us when we met in the middle of the Sunset Sea,” Brienne reassured her. “And I don’t think he’d been lying. But he didn’t bring them from Asshai, Your Grace-”

“Dany,” Daenerys insisted. If the Targaryens, the Starks and the Lannisters now acknowledged that they were related, they should at least attempt to treat each other as family.

“Daenerys,” Brienne met her challenge halfway. “Euron stole the eggs from the heart of the Shadow. I’ve seen it… I’ve been there,” the lady knight’s honest gaze darkened from the memory. She frowned, describing it in detail. “It’s a dark place, Stygai; the city behind Asshai on the black river, built against a grey mountain, rising from the vast fields of ghost grass.”

_The grass that will one day cover the entire world._

Ser Jorah was the first to explain this Dothraki belief to Dany. Her old bear had also arrived at Winterfell from the Sunset Sea with Brienne. Dany chose to ignore him like she did in Meereen, despite his courage in battle and attempts at penitence.

_He betrayed me for gold._

She didn’t want his head as the price of his treason, but she couldn’t forget it.

“Tell me more about Stygai,” Daenerys demanded courageously, wishing to be stronger than ghost grass, ill omens, nightmares with Rhaegar as the King of the Dead, cousin Stannis, confusing prophecies regarding her person, and, most of all, winter.
Yet she felt extremely frail in her slight body.

_Am I truly nothing without Drogon?_

“The Great Shadow and many smaller ones dwell in Stygai,” Brienne went on. “And the corpses of the unfortunate adventurers rest eternally amidst the abandoned spoils and treasures from many lands.”

Dany trembled under her heavy winter cloak.

Until the mention of the Shadow, she thought it was a little warmer here before the walls of Aegon’s city than in the North. Maybe she was becoming delusional like her father, needing to imagine that there was still heat in the world.

The light was gone from it.

Next to Dany, Lady Shireen stood calm as a statue in the overarching darkness; studying the high walls of King’s Landing, scarcely lit on top.

“We must have arrived in time,” Stannis’ daughter declared, “or there wouldn’t be anyone left to patrol the walls and light the torches.”

“But there are so few of them,” Dany had to add.

She had seen the walls of Aegon’s city in autumn splendour, before first snow. Rhaegar was alive and Jon a stranger; a possibility.

Half a year later, her brother was dead and her nephew hidden deeply in her heart.

_What will come next? Will ice invade the world before the ghost grass does?_  

Viserion exhaled a large stream of yellow and golden fire behind her back. The dragon had probably done it on a whim, and not because he remembered his Mother. The sight gladdened Dany’s heart nonetheless.

_I shan’t despair._

Tommen, Jaime and Tyrion were engaged in a vivid discussion, standing between the ladies and the idle dragon.

Tyrion spoke with his usual shrewdness that no darkness could change. “If I were you, brother,” he argued, “I’d fly to the Rock now and ostensibly show my golden arse in the burning ruin of it. It’s rather pointless to let all Lannisters die if this little expedition for curing greyscale doesn’t go as planned.”

“We ought to help you and Lady Shireen,” Brienne fervently disagreed, joining the conversation of men.

“Good-sister,” Tyrion continued as a little soul of patience, “it might be prudent to help King Jon as well. If Jaime is seen crying for our wicked sister in the West, the enemy will never expect any attempt at her rescue.”

Ser Jaime was too quiet, by his standards; upset, perhaps. “I tend to agree with my brother,” he finally told his wife. “It would be _honourable_ to try and help Stark. If you have to stay, Brienne, I… I don’t know what to say. I thought I lost you. Please-”
“I’ll go with you,” his wife stopped him from pleading and stood by his side.

“Thank you, brother,” Jaime exhaled with exaggerated carelessness. “I missed your wicked intelligence.” His concerned gaze wandered to his wife’s belly in blue armour.

“Are you with child?” Daenerys exclaimed.

“Is it obvious?” Brienne asked, touching her flat stomach.

“Not at all,” Dany explained, “but it’s true, isn’t it?”

Brienne looked down.

“I’m so sorry to be prying,” Dany couldn’t stop. “But how? The rumour is that women cannot bear children since the winter began in earnest. I wouldn’t believe in this nonsense, but during my entire stay in the North I saw only two women with child. My good-” Sister or mother? Family, we are family. “Only Lyanna, and an extremely fat Northern lady who should have her baby anytime.”

Lyanna’s child must have been conceived at the very end of autumn in Dany’s intimate reckoning of when she had been reunited with Rhaegar.

She suddenly realised she was blathering. Did I have to let all of them know how much I think about children of late? And about myself being barren?

You don’t know that for certain, a little, stubborn voice of reason said in her head. Mirri Maaz Duur was evil. She hated you. She wanted to ruin you or at least poison your existence.

Dany's time with Hizdahr zo Loraq and Daario Naharis didn't last long. Perhaps there had been no time for her womb to quicken. With Jon, however, months had passed and…

Nothing.

Brienne rescued Dany from her gnawing fertility doubts momentarily, continuing the conversation. “It’s true,” she confirmed. “I… I must have been with child before Jaime and I were separated in Asshai, but I became aware of my condition only after sailing through the Shadow.”

“You went east to go west,” Dany guessed. Her heart jumped. Should I do that? Would that help? Was that the meaning of Quaithe’s prophecy?

“I didn’t know where the ship was headed,” Brienne clarified. “The only course was to go on. Follow the river Ash. Go further east, always east. There was no turning back.”

Dany nodded thoughtfully. “I wish you all the happiness in the world with your child,” she said sincerely.

No choice but to go on.

She couldn’t change the course of her destiny, nor that of Westeros, not without Drogon.

Am I a queen of the past?

Jon could take me east. Or tell Rhaegal to do so.

But how, with the Others at our door?
She realised she hadn’t even considered Viserion, present on the scene, blowing clouds of golden smoke that froze when they drifted far up in the air from the dragon’s body, looking like giant, luminous fireflies.

*I’m so sorry,* she addressed Viserion in her head, hoping he could hear her in that common space of the mind where the dragons and their riders sensed each other. She was excluded from it since Drogon left with Stannis. *You’re my child as well. But Drogon has always been special. I hope… I hope you don’t have the maegi’s soul.*

Her initial shock with the conclusion that blood magic might have played a role in the birth of her dragons had waned and subsided. She didn’t find it necessary to warn Jaime of the bizarre possibility, fearing he might think her… mad.

Maybe the blood magic had only influenced poor Drogon, as a direct consequence of her ill-fated bargain with the maegi for Drogo’s life, leaving to her favourite dragon precisely that part of Drogo’s soul that would become angry with Dany for falling in love with another man.

But it was much more likely that Drogon simply changed his rider when Rhaegar died, burning Dany’s hair when she naively sought him out in Deepwood Motte, loyal to his new master.

She must have been only Drogon’s Mother, not his rider.…

Viserion looked like the sweetest dragon in the world, puffing thin wisps of white smoke at Beth, on Brienne’s shoulder. At a glance, he couldn't be more different from the maegi with her dark, vengeful heart.

The blue hatchling croaked, folding her wings around her body in either acknowledgement of, or defence from her big brother.

Besides, concerning Rhaegal, Jon had shared with Dany that his dragon was becoming cleverer… more understanding and dragon-like… not so horse-like as he seemed to Jon in the beginning. In sum, Dany was now convinced that her assumption of blood magic in the hatching of her dragons had to be far-fetched and wrong.

Her innermost thoughts wandered away from the world of dragons, dwelling more and more on her wish to have Jon’s child.

And not at all because of the uncertain issue of the inheritance to the Iron Throne.

Dany daydreamed how Jon would react. Would he be like Drogo, who wanted to give his son the world? Or like Rhaegar, overjoyed with the prospect and afraid that he would fail to protect his children once more?

She concluded Jon would behave in a completely different, original manner. Like himself.

*Jon Snow.*

The name was his.

It embodied Dany’s husband, what he was, the good in him. Perhaps men should choose their own names and not inherit them. Jon had made something out of the shame attributed to a helpless baby by a cruel world. A new quality.

“I've been ill since I learned of my condition,” Brienne voiced quietly to Dany, seeking understanding.
Dany grasped the cold hands of the lady knight, wishing to warm them. “It’s alright,” she reassured Jaime's wife. “It is to be expected.”

“I’ve always been strong,” Brienne wasn’t convinced. “Not prone to any sickness.”

“This isn’t an ailment,” Dany tried to explain. “It’s different.”

“I know,” Brienne agreed, “it’s both easier and more difficult than I thought it would be.”

Dany smiled. “I know very well how it is,” she confessed sadly. “I was with child once, but it was… it was stillborn.”

The men gave Dany and Brienne a helpless look. The innocent conversation of ladies seemed to shock them more than if they had to observe Viserion suddenly burning part of King’s Landing to a cinder.

Lady Shireen continued to stare at the walls of Aegon’s city with a square jaw, set on her upcoming task, uninterested in the matter of children. A stone woman.

“I’m so sorry to hear that, Your Grace…” Brienne stuttered.

“-Dany,” Daenerys corrected her gently.

“Dany,” Brienne ceded ground. Her voice held much more emotion than usual. “I… I thought that I couldn’t conceive… I didn’t realise I wasn't so alone in this. The Asshai'i say that children are no longer being born because the Shadow is devouring the world. They wanted to sacrifice a dragonrider and an unborn dragon to appease the Shadow and stop its expansion,” she frowned and continued, ”But I… I have to give testimony to the contrary of their beliefs. Beth hatched as soon as we passed through Stygai. I think that… I believe that I began to feel the difference in my body since the Great Shadow breathed on me… And now I can't eat and I'm losing the ability to fight. I thought this would come later, with the swelling of the belly.”

“The food sickness can occur at any time, though it’s much more acute in the beginning,” Dany outlined, remembering Rhaego in her womb and the exhaustion he occasionally brought. A little winged dragon in the belly of a woman, condemned to death before he was born.

“I would say this is another reason to go to the Rock swiftly, good-sister, if you’re feeling very ill,” Tyrion was merciless. “The maester there is one of the best. I often heard him say that the first months bring the greatest danger for losing mother and child. In some cases greater than the labour itself.”

Brienne was very pink. “My septa never mentioned this,” she concluded. “But we will return for you,” she told Tyrion decisively.

“Of course you will,” Tyrion roared cheerfully. “Once one flew with dragons, riding a horse is far too prosaic.”

Dany couldn't agree more. She loved riding, but flying could not compare to it.

Flying was glorious.

Viserion’s horned head crept closer to the human gathering, allowing Ser Jaime to gently usher his wife onto the creature’s ever increasing neck before she changed her mind. Beth purred in agreement.
Tommen followed meekly, halting to address Dany as an afterthought; sweet spoken and lean. He had grown out of his boyish fatness into the shape of a young man, but still possessed some childlike, timid manners. "Will His G… will Jon truly look for Mother despite that she… that she didn't wish his family well?"

"Yes," Dany affirmed bluntly. *Or he wouldn't have offered it.*

Tommen nodded wisely, climbing up the scaled white and golden neck and shoulder, grabbing a horn for support.

Tyrion exhaled with relief when Viserion took off.

Unlike Viserion’s frozen dragonsbreath, drifting into the air like a golden lantern, the smoke from the dwarf's lungs formed dull, tiny crystals dropping to the ground.

"Three familiar corpses less," the Imp announced contentedly. "Your Grace, Daenerys, you might reconsider as well-

"No, Tyrion," Dany refused to hide. “This can’t be worse than the bloody flux."

Daenerys had remained impeccably healthy despite being in direct contact with the dying in Slaver’s Bay.

*Will I fall ill now with Drogon gone?*

Lady Shireen was already at the gates, talking to the guards, touching the forehead and then the greyed arm of one of them without flinching.

Dany followed swiftly, ignoring her doubts. The blood of the dragon wasn’t afraid. Tyrion waddled after the ladies as fast as he could, dexterous as a big-headed goose in a blood-red doublet. The black bruise around his green-coloured eye had increased and begun to change colour from dark purple to ugly yellow. Judging by appearances, his estranged wife loved him not.

Dany’s return to Aegon’s city continued like a strange, dark dream…

Shireen touched every man, woman or child they met, no matter how healthy or ill they looked, labouring with persistence and determination. Tyrion followed her example, though he couldn't hide an occasional expression of fear.

Dany touched the greying people as well, though she had no cure for them, only compassion. By the time they reached the Red Keep, a multitude of those that could walk followed, shedding light on the road to the palace with oil lamps and torches. Someone intoned a song, a slow one, about the return of the young queen. A woman held high a puppet; a paper dragon with widespread wings. Dany imagined it catching fire and flying without being burned.

She felt like she had returned to the time when House Targaryen was at the height of its power.

Varys awaited them in the bailey of the Red Keep, walking with difficulty, leaning on a stick. “Lord Tyrion!” he exclaimed, immediately bowing to the ground before Dany. “Your Grace, I knew that you wouldn’t leave us to die. Lady Shireen, what a surprise!”

Shireen didn’t pay him any attention, continuing to touch the ill. Tyrion took a short break, affectionately patting a few horses and a large tomcat.

“The glass candle?” Dany heard herself asking Varys about the heirloom that Rhaegar decided to
leave in the care of the eunuch and Lord Jon Connington while they governed the capital in his absence. Its flame meant the continued life of dragons. Extinguishing it could mean their death.

“Still burning on the Iron Throne as King Rhaegar left it, may he rest in peace,” Varys ululated obsequiously.

“And Lord Connington?” Dany wondered. The griffin lord was very ill, according to Tyrion.

“Worse than the candle I fear. His arm had to go. He had been hiding his condition, so it was done too late and the wound isn't healing well. He won’t be with us for long.”

*So he still lives. Lyanna should be told.*

Septa Lemore and the Old Griff had spent long years together, living in hiding.

“And what of your beloved spouse? King Jon? We had news that there would be a new Great Council…” Varys was like an old lady eager for gossip.

“How?” Dany wondered, “The ravens are not flying as they should.”

“But the maesters can ride,” the eunuch droned. “Oldtown isn't far. They arrived just before you. To help the sick, in the name of merciful King Stannis. Though I think that they're only pretending. The black sheep work in gloves and have scarves over their faces. The ill don't rise, nor do they start following them like they did with you, Your Grace.”

“Jon and I agreed to the convening of the Great Council. Each of us shall present a claim and support the one who is elected,” Dany informed as briefly as possible.

Rhaegar had considered the master of whispers to be his friend, but Daenerys had never been completely convinced.

“How prudent,” Varys tweeted with exultation.

Dany could imagine him befriending Stannis, if Lord Baratheon prevailed in the succession. The thought made her irascible and extremely angry, though she knew that life went on after any war or political turmoil.

"Let us see how far prudence will take us," Dany replied, needing solitude.

She abandoned the ill to Shireen and Tyrion and strolled to the throne room. Varys followed with a click-clacking sound of his sturdy cane, unwilling to leave her be.

The glass candle was indeed burning, emanating a haunted, purple glow. Dany was relieved. Drogon should be safe. He may be with Stannis, but his life shouldn't be in jeopardy.

“I'll borrow it for a while, to light my way,” Dany announced, picking it up. It was heavy. Yet holding it felt like Drogon was back with her, and the dark glow of the enchanted flame was stronger than that of a torch.

In this city of the moribund, Dany doubted anyone would have the strength to attack her and steal it. And only those with the blood of the dragon could hold it for long without suffering severe burns.

She scurried back to the bailey very fast, finally successful in leaving Varys behind.

She'd spent enough time in his charming company.
"We are done here," Lady Shireen announced proudly to Dany. There were blue circles around her eyes, visible in the light of the burning glass.

“She means that we should go back to the streets,” Tyrion explained tiredly. “I’m already exhausted, and there won’t be roast pigeons nor wine as a reward when we’ve made a full tour of the city. Only some cabbages, broth and weak ale. I shall remain one hungry little lion,” he joked and yet looked strangely ready to continue; well past his point of reticence to do good at the risk of personal harm.

"Let’s go then," Dany agreed, leading the way out of the palace.

It was hard to tell how long they laboured without food or drink. Time had no measure in the Long Night. There were no mornings, nor evenings to announce the time for rest.

Yet every sigh of relief uttered by the ill when Shireen or Tyrion touched them felt nourishing to Dany, making the strenuous effort worthwhile.

Near the familiar plaza of the Great Sept of Baelor, the multitude started to chant for Daenerys, their new queen and saviour of King’s Landing. Depending on who shouted, she was Rhaenys or Visenya reborn.

For Dany, this was too much undue praise. With mounting discomfort, she ushered Lady Shireen up the steps leading to the Great Sept, by assuring her that there must be sick septas and septons inside. Tyrion followed very slowly, clumsier on his stunted legs than Varys had been with his crutch and, judging by the bandages Dany glimpse, lesser number of toes after greyscale.

At the top of the stairs Dany grasped Shireen’s arm, lifting it up, illuminating the greyed portion of her face and neck with the purple candle.

“It is not I who brought the cure!” Dany thundered.

To her surprise, her dragon voice came out of her lungs, deep and powerful, despite no longer being a dragonrider. She had first discovered it when she defeated Khal Jhaqo in the Dothraki Sea on Drogon’s back, after accidentally swallowing his fire. And later, when she was hailed as the Khaleesi of all Dothraki despite never marrying another Khal...

She had stayed away from Essos for too long. She wondered if Meereen and Slaver’s Bay returned to chaos in her absence, and if the Dothraki turned to their usual way of life instead of protecting her kingdom. In spring, if not before, she would have to go there and ensure peace.

But how? Without Drogon...

"It wasn't me!" she boomed to the citizens of King's Landing.

The crowd finally turned silent, perhaps afraid of their young queen with a threatening voice.

At least her body wasn't burning, so they might not think of her as mad.

“You were saved by Lady Shireen Baratheon and Lord Tyrion Lannister! They aren't beautiful. Yet in their hands they hold the cure that has helped you wake from the grey curse and protected me against catching it. Be grateful to them!”

She pulled Tyrion up the last stair and joined his hand to Shireen’s so that the two true healers stood together, facing the multitude with their trembling palms raised.

Her shouting caused the sick of the Sept to come out; some crawled, others walked, depending on
the progress of the disease. Shireen immediately turned towards them.

Dany used the commotion to saunter down the stairs, melting into the crowd, becoming invisible.

The people began to understand, cheering for the ugly, finally giving their praise where it was due.

Lady Shireen looked shocked for a moment and then continued working, with her jaw more square than ever.

Tyrion was confused, unsure how to proceed. A much taller, fat lady tapped him on his stunted back and hugged him with gratitude, almost toppling him over.

“See, my lord Tyrion,” Dany told him in her normal, girlish voice when she was halfway down the stairs, very pleased with herself. “You’re not the only one who knows how to open the eyes of the people.”

As much as it can be done.

People could always choose to close them again, or simply change their mind.

But for now they were happy and grateful.

A quiet euphoria descended on Aegon’s city in place of death, despite the Long Night. Soft singing and timid laughter came from homes of both the rich and the poor. Greyscale was being ousted, and there were no white mists causing despair.

Filled with a sense of safety and freedom, Dany wandered through King’s Landing with the burning glass candle as her only company. The streets wound under her feet in great circles, from broader to much narrower ones, until she was all alone in a tiny alley and heard a voice from underground. She stepped out of the open, into the dark porch of a house.

“I’ll have to see to it that there are new chains,” a man complained, annoyed and sounding as though talking to himself. “These ones here are old and rusty.”

The metal links of some mechanism rattled and shrieked, bringing irritation and fear.

Danger was never far from Dany.

Maybe Stannis would send paid knives after her, like his brother Robert in the past, since a barren queen would never make a good wife to him.

A cage emerged in front of her eyes.

She realised it was being pulled up from a deep subterranean shaft by a pair of dark-clad maesters with long chains around their neck, panting and puffing from the effort required to turn the winch. She should have seen them when approaching, but she was too consumed with her bubbling joy…

Dany realised this must be a way to descend into the lower level of the Dragonpit, whose monumental ruin crowned by a shattered dome was close by, visible above the roofs of more modest houses.

A lavishly dressed man who smelled like a meadow full of flowers stepped out of the cage. Daenerys couldn't see his face in the dark; only the luxurious, swishing robes. The maesters whispered something to him, pointing at Dany’s hiding place under the porch.

She was discovered.
“Your Grace,” the scented man who had just pondered the need for chains in the Dragonpit addressed Dany in the same, slightly annoyed tone. “What a pleasant surprise! And where is your kingly husband? Is he here?”

They’re all asking for Jon.

It was to be expected. Sons were more important than daughters in all lands, except among the warrior women in the Bone Mountains.

“He’ll be here soon,” she lied compulsively, taking two steps forward, confidently showing herself. She wouldn't reveal being alone and vulnerable to these unknown… black sheep from the Citadel.

Varys' description fitted the maesters perfectly, except the stinky one who seemed… one of a kind.

But Dany couldn't tell what kind.

Jon had taken Arya, Gendry and Brandon to a ship that would bring them to Braavos. He might fly straight to Oldtown after that for all she knew. They hadn’t made plans beyond her going to King's Landing with Tyrion. Jon might be angry when he discovered that she’d brought Shireen along, against his opinion on the matter.

Dany had hoped Jon would have returned to Winterfell before Jaime and Viserion returned from Dorne, and the mission to help King’s Landing began. She had forgotten that Jon always spent as much time as he could spare with his little sister and crippled brother. More so now - he wouldn’t see Arya and Brandon for weeks.

Dany suspected that Jon secretly hoped he would vanquish the Night’s King before his siblings’ return, employing some ingenious strategy that had been brewing in his mind. He had yet to share it with his growing army, his mother or his wife. She wondered if Rhaegal knew, and if she would be privy to it if she was still a dragonrider...

His wolf must know. Ghost.

But Dany couldn't talk to direwolves.

The unusual man smirked. “I wonder why you're waiting for your husband-"

Because I love him.

"- when you well know that Jon will betray you-"

“No, he won't,” Dany interrupted angrily.

Yet her heart was torn apart when the stinker continued, “But he will. For love. Isn't it sweet?”

. . . three treasons will you know . . . once for blood and once for gold and once for love . . .

Dany believed she was already betrayed for love, after marrying Hizdahr, who plotted against her life and rule. The time for prophesied treason should be over. But Hizdahr hadn't loved her...

Her soul froze like the breath of men in winter.

Was Jon’s unexpected generosity to support her claim only a ruse? He was flushed when he proposed it at their wedding… She thought he was outraged with the nobles who opposed him, but…
What if he lied?

The Starks were poor liars; his embarrassment would have shown on his face…

Dany refused to believe it, angry with herself. Yet the worm of doubt burrowed in her heart from this terrible smelly men somehow piercing a hole in it, letting it in.

“Who are you?” she asked of him with accusation and contempt.

“I came with the maesters to help the poor,” he countered. “See, greyscale is cured. The people are celebrating.”

“You didn’t bring the cure,” Dany protested.

“You know that, and I know that, but the history to be written tomorrow may forget it, when learned men write it down.”

“Like the Others were omitted from the old chronicles when they shouldn’t have been,” Dany murmured.

“Bright, aren’t you?” the stinker was suddenly a little nervous, irritated by her conclusion. “Unlike dragons. Stupid creatures that have to be chained in a dragonpit, lest they cause havoc. Listen to me. You’d do better on your own. As soon as you get rid of your latest husband you’ll have power. You’ll be the first true Queen of the Seven Kingdoms. Not a Whore Queen, nor a Queen Regent, nor a royal spouse whose only task is to sing, breed, sit at unimportant feasts and smile at her lord husband.”

The unimportant future of the king’s wife seemed strangely appealing to Dany with Jon as her lord husband.

But it wasn’t all she had in her.

“The dragons aren’t stupid,” Dany rebelled.

_How could they be?_

The book penned by the maidenly daughter of Aenar Targaryen, Daenys Targaryen, sent as Rhaegar’s posthumous gift from Dorne, spoke wonders of the dragons’ origin in poetic language.

Fire was alive and fire was life. It dwelled in Valyria, taking the shape of uniquely powerful beings with wings and scales… And then it wept in the mines, deep under the Fourteen Flames, when the wretched slaves began losing their lives in search of precious ores…

Dany had yet to finish the book and read about the doom; the catastrophic eruptions of the fourteen volcanoes and the sinking of the Valyrian peninsula. All that remained was the Smoking Sea.

“Dragons are the most stupid creatures in the universe; so strong, and yet so easily enslaved,” the luxuriously robed man sprayed more perfume on himself, from a rounded flask passed to him by one of his black sheep.

Before the scented liquid splashed him, Dany thought she could sense the scent of fresh _ice_, and feel the familiar despair stirred by the presence of the white walkers.

_Who are you?_"
Valyrian steel.

“Dragons are very clever,” she fought back.

"Is that why your black one isn’t with you? Because he's so clever?” The man's sinister stench of ice was already replaced by that of flowers.

“Drogon has fallen victim to evil magic,” Dany murmured her preferred explanation. “Or I’ve never been his rider and he was free to choose another one when Rhaegar died,” she felt compelled to confess the truth.

“Both can be thwarted,” the perfumed men declared. “With knowledge and the determination to use power, which you are lacking.”

Dany concluded that anyone wanting to chain dragons for thinking them stupid couldn't be her friend.

She lifted the candle. “I'm decided enough to hit you if you don't step out of my way," she threatened. The black glass grew warmer to touch, as if it sensed her need to burn her new enemy.

“Easy,” they cautioned her, the black sheep closing on Dany with grasping, gloved hands. “Give us the candle. We only want to study it. We’ll tell you how to use it to get your dragon back. Isn’t that what you want-”

“No,” she shook her head, “My dragon will come back to me one day,” she voiced her hope sternly.

The perfumed man and his acolytes laughed.

“Come, Seneschal,” the maesters advised him in a chorus, stepping back from Dany. “We’re wasting time with this girl who thinks she should be queen, but is unwilling to do the necessary.”

“I was born to be queen,” Dany stated with confidence. “I don’t need you to tell me who I am.”

Behind her brave face, she was perturbed and shaken. There was a perfectly honest way Jon could betray her for love...

The story of NissaNissa grew heavy on Dany. She’d always thought of it as just another tale, like the one about the ghost grass and the other beliefs of the Dohtraki.

Wouldn’t that be poetic? That Jon sacrifices their love to save the world.

Would he do that, truly?

She realised that he might...

He might...

If there was absolutely nothing else he could do to bring the dawn.

Was she living on borrowed time?

Would that be the final treason?

“Give us the candle. The black dragon has taken every other candle to Stannis. Without our help, all dragons will be his soon. Let us help you survive winter. The order of the maesters has never been on anyone’s side, only the side of wisdom,” the Seneschal directed her a sermon.
Beware the perfumed seneschal.

She believed that this prophecy meant Reznak mo Reznak, who had proven himself to be one of her loyal councillors in Meereen.

But here was a Westerosi who naturally smelled of winter like a white walker, using perfume to hide his scent, and called himself the Seneschal.

“I shall go to Oldtown soon, when the Great Council is convened,” she proclaimed. “Until then, I shall ponder your wise words, my lords, and guard this candle, weeping for my child who went astray.”

She felt as if she had won a battle of minds when the maesters and their perfumed leader withdrew into the darkness.

A little group of the former ill population burst into the empty alley; three scarred men and a woman, carrying a child. The young mother smiled from ear to ear despite that her left hand thumb had been amputated and dressed in bandages.

There would be scars and loss of limbs, but the people would live.

Yet the joy of new hope and life in the city could not illuminate the gloom in Dany’s soul any longer. Her heart was in turmoil and she needed rest.

She walked back to the Red Keep in utter darkness, hiding the glowing candle under her cloak, as the only child left to her.

In the castle, a meal was being served. Tyrion toasted noisily to the wonderful Lady Shireen, raising a tankard of ale.

There was almost no wine left in the Seven Kingdoms.

Dany felt too troubled to join in the celebration, and not because of the limited choice of refreshments.

She strolled towards the throne room, in search of a sanctuary; thinking of her and Jon becoming drunk on mead when they first met, with Davos, Cotter Pyke and Old Garth, behind the Wall.

Are you already in Oldtown, my love? I miss you so… Will you come here for me before returning North?

The monumental chamber which could hold the entire court was extremely dark, long and empty when she closed the heavy door fully behind herself, needing to ensure her privacy.

The winter wind must have put out the torches, howling and hollering; blowing hard through the eye sockets and jaws of the dragon skulls, brought back up on Rhaegar’s orders from the cellars of the keep.

Suddenly, Dany was more afraid than she had been at the Dragonpit in the company of the perfumed Seneschal and the maesters; more intimidated than ever in her life.

The throne wasn’t empty.

An unknown, bulky figure sat on it with a big, disproportionately huge head, resembling a black
bear, a giant or some other monster. A longsword was laid across his legs, ready to use.

*The Usurper's knives in the dark...*

She would never be free of them.

Dany lifted the glass candle high, to strike at the intruder and defend herself. She wouldn’t die like a stupid girl. She was too weak to wield a sword, but the candle was heavy enough and she could deal a crippling, *burning* blow.

She sneaked forward on tiptoes, praying to the Warrior for strength.

The purple light slowly revealed the figure, which diminished in size and dreadfulness as Dany approached.

*It’s only a man.*

Shame washed over her as she hurried forward, setting the candle on the floor, safely away from the sleeping man, careful not to burn him by chance.

He was sensitive to fire, like Viserys, unlike Rhaegar...

Tears sprang from the corners of her violet eyes like little, watery dragons.

It was Jon…

Peacefully asleep on the Iron Throne.

Wrapped in a cocoon of furs, more covered than the Northmen from the mountain clans when they dressed like trees to deceive the enemy.

Jon, who stopped feeling the cold...

Jon, who rarely ate and almost *never* slept in Dany’s concerned reckoning, now breathed deeply in his sleep.

More relaxed than he ever was in their bed…

...on an ugly iron chair known to *cut* unworthy occupants, including her father, Aerys the Mad King.

Jon, a king like his father before him, like her father before her…

A king of winter.

And she had almost raised her hand to strike him down, possessed by the destructive power of unfounded fear.

Her tears were warm on her cheeks, drying slowly.

“Jon,” she whispered tenderly.

She began to feel very warm and pleased; like a young girl who truly knew nothing of the ways of war.

He stirred slowly and formed his words with difficulty, yawning, “They told me you were gone, talking to people… Tyrion and… Shireen.” There was a question in his eyes and the tiniest of
disappointments, maybe, but he didn’t look angry.

Dany couldn’t bring herself to send the girl back to her father. Not after she had volunteered information about the envoy of the Iron Bank who had come to offer an important trade to the King of Westeros. And much less after Brienne’s story about her duel with Stannis, which solidified Dany’s initial impression; Stannis cared much more for his claim than for his only daughter.

Viserys had sold Dany to Drogo in the same spirit, not caring how she would be treated. At least he didn’t covet a magic sword or he might have killed me to forge one.

“I’m so sorry,” Dany meant her apology to Jon. “But she was irreplaceable here. If Tyrion had to do the healing on his own, he would still be labouring on his poor, stunted legs. And that would be if and after he dared touch people... not only horses and cats. Shireen was so brave at the beginning that he couldn't be cowardly. And... she longed to come with us. I couldn’t refuse her,” she clarified.

“Like Sam couldn't say no to Gilly when she begged him to take her away with her baby,” Jon commented. “I must be the only man who doesn’t always break all the rules to help a lady in distress.”

“Not always, you say,” Dany wondered with curiosity. “So you did break them.”

“Once,” Jon uttered spontaneously. “For a girl who didn’t deserve to die.”

_Did you love her?

“What happened?” Dany asked innocently.

“She died, I think I’ve told you,” Jon’s voice lowered to the limits of hearing. “She was the only girl I ever kissed before.”

Dany regretted her curiosity. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to pry. I know what it is to... to lose a loved one.”

“Do you?” It was Jon’s turn to be curious about her past.

Dany nodded mutely, waiting for another question.

“So am I now a vile kidnapper of young daughters like my father?” Jon asked instead. “Shall I call it destiny and ask Mance for a song about it?”

Dany had to laugh. “Please shut up before I start crying,” she said, fighting to regain seriousness, knowing that she would melt into tears if he continued to remind her of Rhaegar.

“That’s quite alright,” Jon replied, “I don’t know whether to cry or laugh half of the time since my brothers stabbed me to death. Everything has changed since then. It may be better to laugh,” he paused. “I’ve heard plenty of songs about my father as a child. The singers lamented for my mother, the poor victim... I believed them.”

“And I believed the songs about Rhaegar dying for the woman he loved. Those that got it right, forbidden by the Usurper,” Dany said. “Don’t worry about any of them.”

“I don’t,” Jon denied the truth. “It’s just that,” he began, “the more men I command the more stories there are about me, one wilder than the other.”

Dany knew the feeling. She was called the most beautiful woman in the world. A cruel or a divine
queen. Excellence and Radiance. Mother of Dragons.

Mysha.

Mother, mother, mother.

She pressed her palms against her empty belly.

“Yes, there are wild inventions and rumours about your person, and there will be more of them,” she said fervently. "And there’s nothing you can do. Except remaining yourself and hope that at least some people will get it right.”

“Oldtown?” Jon prompted her. “Now?”

“You’re taking me with you?”

“You thought I wouldn’t?” he asked jokingly, but his eyes were serious. “I hear it’s a wonderful city. Friendly and noble. Why shouldn’t I take my beloved bride there for a short pleasure visit… before the Great Council is convened… and before the Others reach the Wall…”

“You’ve been warging all the time, haven't you?” she accused him. “That's how you've been following the enemy's movements. That's why you don't sleep. We talked about this before. You have to set limits to it.”

“Are there limits to winter? To this night?” her lover whispered with passion.

“No, but there might be to yourself,” Dany defended her point of view.

“Maybe,” Jon half agreed.

He stood up, wriggling out of his fur cloak and bearlike headdress, laying his sword on the ground next to the glass candle. “I only wear this so that men aren't afraid of me. I only eat so that they don’t despair about their leader who died and came back as… something.”

“You just slept on the ugly iron chair,” Dany pointed out, reaching to him, taking his sweet hands, pulling him closer. “That’s unique, do you know? You're not hurt.”

Jon's hands were ice cold when they wandered from her grip to her waist, much more freezing than she remembered them; yet her body burned from their touch.

So she stood on her toes, crawling up to him, kissing him with abandon. He responded ardently, lifting her off the ground; her calm wolf with the flaring temper of a troubled dragon.

They soon warmed up, both of them, they always did.

The world was distant and irrelevant, almost non-existent, the inheritance of the Iron Throne a trivial matter to be solved eventually.

“So how was it, sleeping on the Iron Throne?” she asked playfully between the kisses.

“I'd rather sleep next to you,” Jon murmured instinctively, and then appeared puzzled.

Slowly, he turned his back on her and his attention to the swords melted into the throne. His gaze lingered on the empty place where Blackfyre must have been.

And, while Dany was pleased that Jon found it in himself to tolerate Jaime and see that they were on
the same side now, she was surprised that Jon left the sword of Aegon the Conqueror in Jaime’s care. The gesture was too generous, almost imprudent. He should have taken the weapon for himself.

She hugged Jon compulsively from behind, with her chin pressed tightly against a firm, deliciously smelling upper arm. She still felt too embarrassed to sniff Jon’s skin as freely as she sometimes wanted.

Her husband stiffened. Dany assumed he felt tricked. Jon preferred staying awake, and the Iron Throne managed to lull him into unwanted rest.

“Dany,” he sounded extremely shy, relaxing in her arms. “I must be quite ignorant,” he explained, “but it was very dark in here. I didn’t realise what chair this was. Tyrion left me at the bloody door, telling me you’d be back very soon and surely come here. But then you were delayed, and it was the only place to sit down, better than the floor. I’m glad it didn’t cut me, but I don’t think this means much. If anything, the blades recognised my state of utter unawareness. How is it for you?”

“I don’t know,” Dany confessed, “I haven’t sat on it.”

“No?” Jon was surprised. “You should. Go ahead, try.”

“You weren’t serious, were you?” Dany let slip. “When you said you’d support my claim? You can admit it freely, I’ll understand. You’re Rhaegar’s trueborn son, no matter what the songs and the people say. It’s the most direct line of succession.”

“I was dead serious and you know it,” Jon said simply, stern and very pale, terribly handsome in his tight-lipped seriousness.

He was.

He wasn’t governed by the usual.

How could she have ever doubted it?

How could she think that he would go to Oldtown without her? That he wouldn’t come to King’s Landing to see how she and Tyrion fared? How the people fared? She should have known better.

Dany sat gingerly on the Iron Throne, imagining herself a queen. The fantasy was pleasing, but insufficient. She immediately missed the long arms around her frame; the cold, full lips that always regained heat in contact with her own.

Suddenly, Jon bowed to her, bending his knee. His black eyes burned like the glass candle when he looked at her from below, acquiring a purple glow for a flickering moment. Dany was mesmerised. Her own wish to be queen lost all precedence, backtracking in her mind.

She was Jon’s, body and soul. Her heart swelled with need to give love, racing in feverish search for a meaningful demonstration of devotion. Her gaze dropped to the polished metal surface on which she sat.

She untied her simple winter gown and loosened it. Exposing her breasts and her legs, she reclined languidly on the chair of her ancestors, thanking the gods for being slim and having space for this. Her body was an open book, an insecurity, a humble, heartfelt invitation.

Jon hesitated, “You don’t mean to—”

“Love you? Why not?” she spoke in a trance. "Will the Others come faster for it? Will the Long
Night be even longer or darker? Will Oldtown burst in flames and fly away like a living dragon?"
She sounded incoherent to herself. Her lips were very dry.

Her heart was too big for her and she wasn't used to it.

They were safe here. In the castle of Aegon the Conqueror, the spirit of old Valyria that Daenys
Targaryen wrote about still lingered. The winter had no hold over it.

Not yet.

If the Night's King marched on King's Landing, the skulls of the dead dragons might shower him
with flames, just like the dead Starks had woken, defending their castle from Stannis and… poor,
misguided, enchanted Drogon.

“Do you not hear their voices?” she asked Jon when the wind rustled through the dragon skulls.
“They are both your family and mine. Balerion, Vhagar and Meraxes, and so many others.”

“You're mad,” Jon observed, finally stopping her rambling with a kiss.

She gasped, kissing him back lovingly.

Perhaps she was mad, like her father, though she didn’t believe it. Fire was appealing to her, but
she'd never felt the need to burn them all.

Only those who deserved it.

But wasn’t that how Father also felt, in his deranged perception that everyone was his enemy?

Didn't she almost hurt Jon?

Fire could kill him, like Viserys, and she had almost hit him with the candle...

She was surprised and overwhelmed when Jon obeyed her, moving forward from wild kissing; fast
and diligent in taking full possession of her body.

They remained half dressed. The difficulty to see and feel each other made the experience more
demanding and exciting. Their hands embarked on an eager search for curves and muscles under
wool, silk and furs, accompanying the dance of their hips.

Remembering, revisiting, caressing, adoring… not thinking of herself... Dany yearned to give Jon
more than just the straightforward pleasure of flesh, if that was possible at all.

Love couldn't be grasped...

Though it wasn’t less present for being immaterial… like fire.

She wondered wickedly if any of their common ancestors loved each other on the Iron Throne,
throughout the long history of passion and adultery in the House Targaryen.

And if they did, did the throne cut them to make them pay the price for their irreverence?

Soon, it was only Jon and her, and the sweet sensation of belonging.

She gave herself to Jon as fully as she knew how and yet she felt the need to give more.

When they finished, pink and warm and flustered, neither Jon nor Dany could boast a single hurt.
Maybe it was only a legend that the Iron Throne cut the unworthy rulers. Maybe Father hurt himself in the illness of his mind.

“This was mad, my love,” she hummed, breathless and happy, lost in the present. “I expected you’d kiss me and stop.”

Someone could have walked in on them, despite the consequences of greyscale. The discovery would be scandalous. And more likely to be noted with embarrassing detail in the learned histories and popular songs than important matters, such as the Others; who they were, what they were and how they were defeated in the past.

“I am mad for you, for us,” Jon spoke quietly against her bared shoulder, biting it, completely natural in his wolfish gesture. “This is a place like any other, a big metal chair as you first called it, and it’s empty,” he continued honestly, with his heart on his palm. “We caused no harm. We broke no law. We didn't forsake any duty in the short time we stole for ourselves. You're my princess, Dany. My queen. My life,” he paused. “The Night’s King claims that only a living man can kill him. I believe that I’ll be that man when I’m with you.”

Dany’s mind became illuminated by a crystal clear certainty, brighter than the summer sun of Sunspear.

Jon would never betray her.

Not for blood and not for gold.

And least of all for love.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.

Next up: Arya
Arya IV

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy :-))

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Arya

She ran like mad alongside a broad Braavosi canal, on pure instinct. She didn’t have to think where she was, nor where she was heading; her feet guided her, her arms added speed to her movement.

She needed answers from the Faceless Men and this time she would have them.

She wasn’t a blind girl, she wasn’t Cat of the Canals, she wasn’t an apprentice killer.

She was a full-fledged killer if she so wanted.

But she wanted it less and less.

Needle hung on her hip, a link to her true life and self, to Arya Stark, just like Nymeria.

The she-wolf prowled the woods of Winterfell with her little brothers, Shaggy and Summer. Ghost was lost to them, but not forever, not like their dead brother and sister, Grey Wind and Lady.

The temples of Braavos rose before Arya’s eyes through the fog that slowly dissipated over the Free City built on water. There were many of them, side by side, for there were many gods worshipped by the refugees from distant lands who had founded the city.

Seeing the temples, Arya ran faster than the wind could blow; dashing forward, nimbler than Nymeria, swifter than ever.

A backward glance revealed that Gendry followed, just like she had hoped and feared.

He would catch up with her, with his much longer legs and stupid hammer.

Unless she tricked him, changing her course and losing him in the narrow alleys between the minor canals.

And while she had bolted away from Gendry with the intention to return alone to the House of the Black and White, spotting him behind her altered her strategy.

She smiled wickedly, running to another temple, the oldest one in Braavos, built from white marble; looming at the crossing of the Long Canal and the Canal of Heroes. The open door was guarded by two marble maids that seemed to have grown taller, rising above the height of the statues of the Sealord during the time Arya was away.

Magic, she thought.

Her braid bounced off her back, reminding her that her hair had also been growing much faster than it should since winter came.
She ran between the statues without looking back.

Three priestesses sang under a silvery dome, the greatest one in the entire city. The moon was depicted on it in all its phases. In the flickering light of the torches, it seemed as if the different faces of the moon sailed lazily across the dome’s large curved surface, high up above the moonsingers.

Gendry panted when he crossed the temple’s threshold after Arya.

“Arry,” he sounded hoarse and yet immensely sweet. “What is this place?”

She was happy to see him flushed. Her breath remained steady. She was more used to scurrying.

Arya Underfoot.

“Is this-” Gendry assumed it was the temple where she had tried to serve the god of death and failed.

Arya wasn’t made for a life of servitude.

“No,” she didn’t let him finish. “I wanted us to come here first, to the temple of the moonsingers, after last night,” she explained.

They had almost become lovers, and the closeness had been wonderful...

“Yes?”

“No,” she affirmed, remembering Rhaegal, green and more loyal than any horse. *Jon’s dragon.*

“Did you?”

“Hoping you’d catch me even if I ran faster than the dragon flies,” she confessed, remembering Rhaegal, green and more loyal than any horse. *Jon’s dragon.*

“Did you?”

“Yes,” she confessed.

As she said it, she realised it was a truth she had been hiding from herself.

She’d always wanted to come *here* before challenging the servants of the Many-Faced God to give her answers.

*Why did you steal the Horn of Winter? Do you know what power it has? Where is it now?*

Asking was dangerous. They might try to kill her.

She didn’t fear death. She didn’t want death.

She wanted life.

Future was uncertain in the gloom of the Long Night, but she could strive for it.

She needed Gendry to acknowledge she would be the only one for him in the presence of the gods, before they became lovers. Perhaps it was a stupid longing, but Arya felt it nonetheless.

And she felt she ought to keep her honour in the name of her parents’ memory.

“Bran?” she asked before anything else.

“Hodor carried him to the harbour,” Gendry hurried to reassure her. “He should be fine on the ship.”
She opened her yellow wolf eyes at home, far from here, in Westeros. Summer wasn’t howling like he always did when Bran was in danger. He prowled the wolfswood in peace, padding through the fresh snow, next to Nymeria.

_Bran should indeed be safe._

“My gods are the old ones of the North,” Arya addressed the priestesses in her best Braavosi. “And I’ve heard that the runaway slaves of Valyria were able to sail to this lagoon and found this city by the help of your foretelling, long ago. This means your gods are the oldest here in Braavos, and could be older than the Seven of the Andals. It’s the closest I can find to my own...”

“Your family-” Gendry began to understand Arya’s purpose, if not the local language.

“-would allow us to marry,” Arya was forthright and convinced of her conclusion.

And if they wouldn’t, she’d do it anyway.

*Like Aunt Lyanna.*

At least Arya and Gendry were neither starting nor stoking the ongoing War of Winter by falling in love.

She reconsidered her blunt thought. She was in a better position than her aunt as a young maid. *Because my family would give their permission now, and Gendry is free to choose.*

Neither Rhaegar nor Lyanna had been able to predict the spectacularly tragic outcome of their past choices. They had believed that their extraordinary union would be accepted in time and that peace would return with less bloodshed to the realm.

Maybe Arya’s and Gendry’s love would cause harm she couldn't think of now.

*So be it.*

She gave Gendry a watery look, feeling weak. He seemed to be very fond of them. In the beginning, it was extremely hard for Arya to allow herself a show of fragility, but now she was more at ease with revealing herself, the girl in her.

*The woman in her.*

She hoped that her gentlest gaze would suffice. Saying more about her feelings in public would be nearly impossible. She’d rather skip that conversation. She’d already confessed all she could when they were alone.

The priestesses sang louder to the moon. One was a man in woman’s robes. Gendry stared at him, perplexed.

A lady moonsinger explained the unusual arrangement to Arya. “Only women are priestesses of the Jhogos Nai. If a man decides to take the office, he has to live like a woman. It’s the will of the moon. Some of us sing for a lifetime, and some return to being who they are after a few years.”

“You can marry us, can’t you?” Arya wondered, fearing that perhaps only the believers in the moon were allowed to say their vows here.

*Only the Jhogos Nai.*

“If it’s your will to be bound to each other, the moon can sanctify it,” the male priestess said in a
deep, reassuring voice.

Arya related the conversation to Gendry who turned mute and looked deaf.

Yet when she stretched out her hand, upon the request of the priestesses, Gendry held it firmly in a sweaty palm, more used to wielding a hammer.

The religious litany of a foreign faith rose high up towards the dome, in three different, clear voices forming a complex harmony.

Arya’s and Gendry’s hand were bound with white transparent tissue, glimmering like mother of pearl under the vigilant moon. Did they stand here for a day, a week, a century?

They weren’t required to speak. Only the priestesses sang of the couple’s immortal love and staunch loyalty to each other, and their song never ended.

When Arya and Gendry emerged from the temple as a married couple, the grey sky had turned very dark over the Canal of Heroes.

The Long Night was slowly covering the world.

“Where now, milady?” Gendry asked peacefully, requiring direction.

Arya’s heart swelled. She had always felt responsible for Gendry, in full knowledge that he was one of the few members of her changing pack who could take care of himself. And of me. Yet the urge to look after him when she could was incontournable and strong.

“Now we retake the Horn of Winter,” she announced calmly, almost not minding that he had called her milady again.

The unusual marriage ceremony left them both strangely appeased and fulfilled, despite that they didn’t even kiss at the end.

“This way,” Arya said, leading Gendry towards another island, across bridges and narrow waterfronts, all the way to the weirwood and ebony door of the Many-Faced God. To her surprise, it gaped open. Anyone could enter, without special coins or passwords.

Inside, thick darkness reigned, interrupted by scarce candlelight. Unknown men and women prayed for the gift of death in the alcoves.

Further down, in the room where Arya used to dwell as a blind girl, the kindly man sobbed over the waif’s dead body, wrapped in a bloodied sheet. An orange cat miaowed in the corner. A new one.

I won’t, Arya vowed to the little animal. She didn’t need to forcefully warg into it in order to trick the kindly man and regain her sight. She could simply kill him at need. Two more men lurked in the room. Arya wasn’t sure whose faces they were wearing, or if one of them was Jaqen H’ghar in a new disguise.

“So she died?” Arya inquired coldly, revealing only the tiniest bit of disbelief. The waif was very difficult to kill. She wouldn’t fall for warging tricks like the kindly man. Is it... Was it one of us?

No, one of you, she corrected himself. She wasn’t faceless anymore.

Gendry stood behind her as a tall, muscled pillar, pulling an ugly face at her former hosts and masters. Her husband.
“The banker, one of the founders’ descendants, he… I cannot believe that he had the presence of mind required to do so, but he…” the kindly man was beyond himself, barely able to speak. His familiar face was very wrinkled and much older than Arya remembered it.

His true face, she realised. He must have been wearing a different one in front of Arya in the past, to appear younger and in the prime of his years.

“The waif killed the honourable keyholder but not before he mortally wounded her,” Arya thought aloud. It was a courageous and mad action; the banker must have found strength to strike back in the throes of death, increasing his own suffering while he did so. Few men were capable of it when their lives were taken by surprise. And yet he had lost the precious horn...

Heartfelt sobs of her former mentor confirmed Arya’s assumptions. Another unexpected conclusion crossed her mind, about the waif and the kindly man. “You loved her,” she stated.

“Does it matter now?” Her mentor wondered darkly, cradling the waif’s mutilated body.

“It does,” she said, standing closer to Gendry. “The gods give many gifts, not only death.”

With respect for her mentor’s grief, Arya continued, “So you have the Horn of Winter-”

“The bank still has it! Curse them! Curse the Lorathi who sold it to them instead of bringing it here! He’s dead as well.”

“Oh,” Arya said, muffling her surprise, sounding fluttery like Sansa to her own ears. She felt sorry for Jaqen H’ghar, despite that she shouldn’t be. He had helped her only in order to save himself. But he had also given her the coin of the Faceless Men, and she had used it when she had nowhere else to go.

“Why did you want the Horn of Winter?” Gendry continued the necessary line of questioning in Arya’s moment of confusion.

To Arya’s surprise, the kindly man answered bluntly instead of his usual riddles. “It’s the only thing that the new dragonlords of Westeros will want! They will have no need of money from the Iron Bank when they can take gold freely from all lands, nor of skilled knives to put an end to their enemies when they can simply burn them… We had hoped Jaqen could bring us the glass candles from the Citadel, but the dragon had already taken them… The Lorathi was fortunate to come across you again, and to realise the value of the horn…” the kindly man wept as he spoke.

“We’re few,” he sobbed. “You left,” he accused Arya. “Jaqen perished soon after selling the horn to the bank. He used the powder of the shadowbinders to travel from Westeros to Braavos, and the substance takes its toll on men who are not trained in their dark arts. It has the same effect on an unaccustomed traveller as our coins on those who deserve the gift of the God of Death. Our guild is dying out. And the Volantenes are here. They have infiltrated our government. The tigers, three tigers are in power in Volantis and not a single elephant! The latest Sealord has become their ally and puppet. The unimaginable is happening… The new world… The never expected future… The slavers are conquering Braavos… Our only hope lies in the new dragonlords. They aren’t slavers. But they will only help a foreign land if we pay a price. Give them something that has value for them—”

“The Horn of Winter.” Arya said quietly.

“It isn’t safe in the bank! The slavers’ soldiers will take it any moment! It should have remained in our vaults, stored safely, until the dragonlords accepted our terms.”
Arya wasn’t interested in the recent or inherited grievances of the Faceless Men towards the descendants of the Iron Bank founders.

“It’s still in the bank you say,” she whispered, forgetting her other important question; what the horn did that possessed such great value. Obtaining it was a pressing matter. “Come with me,” she urged Gendry.

They had to go back and be faster than the slavers.

“The Horn of Winter wasn’t yours to steal,” she tossed back at the kindly man on her way out. “You should have left it in Westeros.”

Exiting the House of Black and White, she felt no pity for her weeping mentor or the dead waif. They had no right to turn her into a blind girl or force her to stop being Arya Stark.

Fighting erupted in the streets between bravos wearing various colours. It was impossible to tell their allegiance. Multitudes of ordinary citizens of all origins took to the streets, watching the best of the many duels and cheering the fighters; friendly and unaware of the danger to their peace-loving and tolerant society.

Arya forced herself to stop pondering the arrival of slavery and hurried back to the Iron Bank; she and Gendry were both panting from effort when they reached it. Gendry smiled at her, staring her down for a moment, making her feel very warm in her belly.

Later.

Despite the murder of one of the keyholders - the twenty-three descendants of the Iron Bank founders - that had occurred mere hours ago, the bank’s patio was brimming with both mourners and clients. The business went on as usual. And the bankers were clearly not defenceless lambs, or the waif would have been successful in her quest for the horn. Arya had to be cautious. A possible strategy took shape in her mind.

She needed Gendry to guard her back this time, nothing less and nothing more.

“Wait for me here, please,” she whispered to Gendry at the entrance to the crowded courtyard. “I’ll never leave you again, only very briefly, to go into the vaults and do what we have to do.”

Gendry nodded, not completely convinced. “I’ll wait if you promise me that you won’t risk your life for the horn,” he made his own demand.

“I swear it,” Arya vowed. It was easy to give him that. If she died, she wouldn’t be able to try again. So she had no intention to die.

Venturing into the patio, Arya began to beg the gathered multitude for coin, sounding like a mummer with no talent at a fair. “My little brother is dying from hunger,” she squeaked, squinting to look like a lackwit. “And he’s only a babe in our mother’s arms. Help us buy food.”

She wondered if Sansa was with child by now. Her sister had been married long enough for that. Arya unwillingly imagined an ugly, large, black-haired baby who would be hard to kill and have intensely blue eyes instead of grey.

But never as dark blue as Gendry’s. She wondered if her child would have those as she continued begging and making her way through the yard full of people. Finally, she lingered near the closed door at the end of the patio, leading deep down into the bank’s vaults. Biding her time, she begged half-heartedly, pondering the plea of the kindly man for the dragonlords to help Braavos, and the
trade offered to the King of Westeros by the Iron Bank, probably with the same reason in mind…

If the Braavosi truly needed help, they could have simply asked for it, without resorting to stealing and blackmailing their possible allies. Or so it seemed to Arya.

The corpse of the dead banker was still in the chamber of the keyholders, judging by the gathered men and women in mourning. Gendry and Arya weren’t absent long enough for a funeral to take place, not even a hasty one as dictated by the upheaval in the city.

*Maybe they will throw the disgraced keyholder into the lagoon in a bag.* This practice was avoided, not to cause disease; the dead drunks and bravos from nightly brawls were fished out and cremated.

The murdered banker would probably prefer the burning, after his family said farewell to him. *Like the Targaryens.* The custom was a remnant of the Old Valyria in Braavos, surviving the dragons and their lords; and a sanitary precaution in a city with little solid land for burials.

Arya waited, praying she was right about the imminent celebration of the last rites, as the sound of clashing swords approached the Iron Bank.

Some gods must have heard her, out of so many who had their temples here.

A mousy girl ventured into the courtyard, smaller than Arya and yet looking very important, bringing ointments for the dead. She would have to enter the antechamber of the bank vaults in order to treat the body of the unfortunate keyholder with her precious cargo.

Arya approached her whining for coin, like she did with everyone else, following the girl into the shade of the portico like an annoying beggar. In the shrouded darkness behind a pillar, she quickly overpowered her, gagging the girl with a scarf, and tying her to the pillar with her cloak. Arya took the girl's cloak, her ointments and her place, and was swiftly admitted in when she knocked by an elderly female servant.

To her surprise, men already duelled each other in the hall of the keyholders just like in the streets, dancing around the corpse that lay peacefully on the great oblong table, surrounded by twenty-three empty chairs. The other women keyholders Arya had seen during her audience the previous day had vanished, and the men fought for their lives. *So there must be a back door. Just as I thought. So that the bankers can come and go in secret.*

*Maybe the Volantenes also know what the Horn of Winter does. Maybe everyone does, except the North to which it belongs.* The North was one place, ages ago, before Brandon the Builder made the Wall...

Joramun knew what his horn did, and maybe he had confided his secret in Jon Stark, if and when the King in the North and the King-beyond-the-Wall rode together to face the Night’s King. Thousands of years had passed since then.

Yet both Joramun and Jon Stark were still remembered.

Arya began anointing the corpse, happy to be ignored by the bravos for being a mousy girl. Needle was well hidden by her new Braavosi cloak.

*A key, there has to be a key.*

She searched the corpse mercilessly, despite that it was already stiff and very cold.

*Nothing.*
The banker didn’t wear it on his person. Yet Arya didn’t believe that he would have left a key to the secret vault of the Iron Bark at home in uncertain times.

*It must be here. Where is it?*

She was becoming terribly impatient.

*His chair.*

She ducked beneath the table to where the dead banker had been seated during her failed audience, and touched every portion of his chair with more care than she ever dared use with Gendry.

*Soon.*

Under the seat, there was a small metal handle. She tried to separate it, but it was stuck, or attached to the wood with a substance unknown to her. She looked under the chair and read the number on it. *Eleven.*

“You, girl,” a bravo said, noticing her strange action. “Leave that and we’ll let you go.”

She saw in his eyes that he was lying. Blood lust was on him, and he would kill her after doing worse.

Arya lifted the chair to check that she could carry it. The wooden back of the chair was framed with metal of an intricate design. She put the chair down slowly, feigning surrender, and waited. Her focus was precise and deadly.

She wasn’t a frightened little girl anymore.

When the bravo was close, Arya attacked. She fiercely smashed him down with the metal edge of the chair, and then leapt forward with it, towards the depths of the oblong chamber.

“After her!”

They weren’t Gendry and she was faster than any of them.

She ended up in the descending, winding darkness of a spiral corridor, not daring to slow down, praying not to break her neck. She used the weight of the chair to further accelerate her unbridled descent. Cat of the Canals knew that the building of the Iron Bank was higher on the back side than on the front. Thankfully, there weren’t any stairs.

Soon, she bumped into a door, then another, and another, at every turn of the passage. *Eleven.*

At the eleventh door she stopped and used Needle to prise the key from the chair. Her blade was not truly suited to this work. Hearing voices made her work faster.

“Let’s go back and find a torch,” someone suggested.

“But then she’ll be gone!”

“The exit down there is watched. Where can she go?”

“She managed to pass by you.”
The two men continued their cautious pursuit, bickering with each other.

Where can I go indeed?

The key was damaged, or perhaps dirty from the substance that had kept it glued to the chair. It was difficult to turn it fully. When she finally succeeded, the door still didn’t move, heavy and old. She slid Needle’s fine point between it and the wall.

It gave in.

She entered, closing the door behind her, regretting a tiny bang she was forced to make, betraying her position.

Inside, she saw the faintest trace of the dark room through a weak, grey light. She blinked to see better and discerned the aurochs horn banded with bronze, hung on the opposite wall; the horn stolen by Jaqen, after Howland Reed had sung to it in order to make it whole.

The Horn of Winter.

Hanging on the wall next to a window.

The Iron Bank had windows on the rear side. Twenty-three of them. Arya had never imagined the bankers to be so careless to open windows on their precious vaults. But apparently there was enough honesty and goodwill in the Free City of Braavos to make this possible… In the old order which might be abolished now...

The bolt to open the window worked perfectly on the inside. Perhaps the bankers aired their treasures regularly. Looking down, she wished that the dead banker had the vault number twenty, or at least eighteen. The jump was high. But not impossible. The canal below should be deep enough.

It seemed like a lesser risk than fighting her way through men who were aware by now that she wasn’t a helpless little girl.

Arya undressed, wrapping the horn and Needle in all her garments, tying the bundle tightly. Water might damage the horn so that it couldn’t be blown. Maybe Howland Reed could sing to it again…

She climbed on the windowsill, shivering from sudden cold, holding her precious possessions in front of her.

Without hesitation she jumped, keeping her body straight.

The wind blew in her face, increasing in speed.

She was falling.

Water was less prickly than the wind and the shock of the impact made her move her legs. She paddled with force and soon emerged on the surface of the canal, breathing deeply, noisily slurping the air as a precious treat.

The waterfront behind the bank was peaceful and empty, facing a row of rich houses with an air of abandon; the residences of the bankers. There was commotion in one of them, far from Arya. She could glimpse a woman keyholder she had seen during her audience being violently taken prisoner and forced to wear a collar.

She swam in the other direction.
Yet a part of her wished she could have helped the unknown woman. Or Braavos… It had been her home for a while.

She needed to swim for long. Around the bank, away from the commotion. The distance was hard to measure as the tiredness crept in. The weariness and the cold. At some point she risked it, coming out of the water, only to face three hooded women passing by, returning home with bags of fish and mussels. She stood in front of them; petrified, naked, protecting her modesty with her precious wet bundle. To her surprise, the women offered her a dry cloak in exchange for her completely wet one made of thicker wool.

She accepted the trade, bowing to the ground in gratitude, asking them to leave so that she could dress in privacy. When she was alone, she put on the rest of her damp clothing, shivering, shivering, tucking the horn and Needle under her new cloak.

She realised she had worn three cloaks today and none of them was Gendry’s. But they were married nonetheless, in the eyes of the gods.

It began to rain.

Hooded, hidden, trembling, she returned to the Iron Bank and found Gendry waiting for her there. She was so proud of him for not engaging in any unnecessary fighting. The duels were not only between the bravos now; different men-at-arms from other lands took part as well. The patio had become a battlefield and the cheering crowd of the ordinary citizens had grown in size, still not seeing any peril for their way of life.

*Will they all be forced to wear collars?*

“Arry,” Gendry whispered, “you’re shivering.”

He said nothing more, approaching her cautiously. Striving to walk as inconspicuously as she did, despite his build and stupid, huge hammer, he followed her to the port.

They had a ship to catch.

In the harbour, chaos reigned. People ran like hares in all directions, pushing each other to get away. Several ships were burning.

Titan was throwing stones and hot oil at the ships trying to sail through his legs to leave, not letting them out.

*The Rhaenys,* Arya breathed.

“She isn’t here,” Gendry said warily.

She wasn’t. She was gone.

Cotter Pyke was an ironborn captain, born and raised at sea. He must have seen the danger and sailed out among the first ones. On the other side of the Titan’s legs, Gendry and Arya could see sails departing, on the sea lit by red fires from Titan’s eyes. They couldn’t tell which one was *the Rhaenys* and if she suffered damage from the Braavosi attack.

Yet the runaway ships seemed to gain distance from Titan and they were hopefully not sinking. It was impossible to tell.

Arya shivered violently.
“I’m turning ill,” she realised.

“No, you aren’t,” Gendry stubbornly refused to see the truth he didn’t want to acknowledge. *Like Uncle Stannis.*

Before she knew it, Gendry carried her, the horn, Needle and the stupid hammer through the crowd, shouldering the exasperated people away.

Arya’s vision blurred. They might have approached the inn where they had spent the night together, but there was fighting in front of it, so Gendry left.

She drowsed, unable to stay awake, forced to trust Gendry to help her.

This was both wonderful and terrible. It was exactly what she wanted, and the reason she’d left him behind, knowing she would return with the horn, but not in what condition… She had counted on being hurt, not on turning ill.

She was now being carried through a great, familiar door into almost homely darkness.

*The temple…*

“How?” she asked sleepily, unable to feel unease, though she should. The House of Black and White wasn’t good for her.

“I see no safer place.”

She couldn’t object to that in her state of body and mind.

“Don’t look,” Gendry said, perplexed, stiffening.

“Let me,” she insisted. She had seen worse before becoming the ghost of Harrenhal. She understood the killer guild. Gendry didn’t.

In Arya’s old room, two Faceless Men had been slain messily, bleeding from fresh wounds, inflicted by a knife or… broken glass. The kindly man and the waif’s body were gone.

“He must have killed them,” Gendry rightfully accused Arya’s mentor.

Arya sought an explanation. *Other than killers doing for each other.* “Maybe they served the new Sealord,” she spoke with great difficulty.

“Or maybe your friend does,” Gendry argued.

“I need to sleep or I’ll die,” she confessed, unable to care further about the allegiances of any Braavosi.

“Except for these two bodies, it’s all empty here,” Gendry blabbered with worry, sounding as if he needed to reassure both her and himself that they would be fine. “Whoever did the killing and for whatever reason probably thinks that they are done. I’ll make us a place to sleep.”

Arya shivered, gritting her teeth in agreement.

In the distance, Titan roared.

It would mean sunset except that there was none, only a very dark grey dusk fading into the black night.
Gendry carried her further, found a clean room, a dry shift, some bed linen, even some bread…

Arya remembered all of it was stored spoils from the dead that she used to collect as the servant of the Many-Faced God. But she felt warm again, and tasted food, and her bed smelt clean and fresh.

*Their bed.*

Gendry even found candles and lit them, laying her damp clothing and the horn near the little fires. “There is no firewood,” he said. “But it’s not so cold in here.”

*Sleep*, Arya wanted to say and was unable to utter a word.

“We have the horn,” the stupid one said, sneaking in bed next to her. “Did you learn what it does?”

Arya shook her head, feeling insufficient. She should have asked the kindly man, and now she might never see him again.

Gendry hugged her and they rested. Alone with the Horn of Winter in a conquered city, cut from the rest of the world by water; dragonless and shipless.

Arya prayed for Bran and Hodor to be on their way home. Cotter Pyke was a sensible man who valued his life, and that of his passengers and crew. *Wasn’t he?*

“You love me, don’t you?” Gendry asked all of a sudden, stroking the small of her clammy, shivery back that was slowly becoming a little warmer.

She was completely lost in his embrace, head tucked under his chin, predating on his warmth.

She nodded enthusiastically against his collarbone, savouring his strength, finding heart in it. “I do, I do, I do,” she managed to repeat the insipid, girly words unashamed.

“I adore you,” Gendry said back lovingly.

Maybe she should blow the horn when she got better, and see what it did, since all who might have known answers were either dead or on the run. She hoped that the new slaver Sealord didn’t kill or capture all the twenty-three keyholders.

“You hair,” Gendry said very surreptitiously and with great concern, caressing her scalp.

Arya reached for her head. The simple movement hurt as the hardest exertion in the practice of water dancing.

She had short, poorly cut hair once more, like Arry. Belatedly, she remembered cutting her long braid off in the Iron Bank. She’d dropped it into the canal with the few coppers she had earned from begging, before jumping herself. It was extra weight she could do without in order to swim with the horn and Needle. And she would be less recognisable to anyone who might be looking for Arya Stark, the honourable guest of the Iron Bank and a valuable hostage. She had done it completely without thinking, in the heat of the moment.

“My hair will grow back,” she whispered with quiet reassurance, falling asleep on her husband’s broad shoulder.
Next up: the Ice Dragon
The Ice Dragon II

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy, for not giving up on me and this silly fic ))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ice Dragon

The sky above the great city was dark and belonged to dragons.

He felt at home among them. None would hurt him, none would betray him, none would burn him. There was nothing to fear.

He didn't know why he would be spared if the dragons’ rage erupted, yet he was completely convinced of the truth of his premonition.

All three were riderless, the black one, the green one and the white one; intertwining necks and tails above Maegor’s Holdfast, shrieking like overgrown ravens and flying madly in the direction of the Dragonpit. He knew they were exchanging images used by the dragonkind to speak to each other, but he wasn't privy to their content.

Not anymore…

Even higher above, in the freezing sky, his own steed didn’t breathe fire, but ice; cold and perfect. The ice dragons preferred to hide from the fiery ones; today was no exception.

Yet they were not completely unrelated, just different like the sun and the moon. A dragon-wight, enslaved by the Others, had revealed to him, in the time before he became Ice Dragon, that the existence of their distant kin was more than a story of adventurous sailors and travellers… during a battle in which Ice Dragon had been obliged to annihilate the once powerful, free creature of fire.

Dragons could kill each other when anger and disagreement took over. In that they were just like men.

Silverwing, was it you?

The Ice Dragon couldn't remember.

But he fervently believed in having encountered the undead she-dragon of Queen Alysanne beyond the Wall, when warm blood still ran in his veins. The chronicles claimed that Silverwing had fled west, to the islands of the Reach, in order to forget the atrocities of the dance of dragons and the death of her mate, Vermithor… And then she must have flown North, just as she had in the good times long gone, with Alysanne. Except that in her grief, she must have flown with abandon, heedless of her supreme speed. Her wings had carried her much farther than the Gift and the Wall in a blink of an eye, straight into the land of living ice where she’d ended up slain and captive…

Silverwing. You revealed a secret to me. And how did I repay you?

By death…
He hoped he had paid for his sins by *his* death. He couldn’t remember them all, but he knew there were many, or the gods wouldn’t punish him so.

Being a wight meant pain.

His dead body could be cut in pieces and he wouldn’t feel it, but his soul lived on in endless, searing torment, torn between the outbursts of hatred for the living and the morose burden of his regrets both for what he had done and failed to do.

Unable to shake off his death madness unwilling to walk into a fire and *burn*, he had been looking for a purpose.

He had followed his son to this great city, and he still hadn’t found it.

Instead, he recognised his dying friend in a spacious chamber on the uppermost level of one of Maegor’s towers; the friend who had the same name as his son and who was drifting between life and death…

*Jon Connington.*

The griffin’s stubbornness had been his undoing. He must have had the grey curse a long time and never told anyone, wishing to prolong his service to his king. Worse, he must have been the source of the plague that had nearly exterminated the city.

The Ice Dragon slipped in through a window like a thief, squeezing his head and then his body through the elaborate metal bars.

His friend smelled of familiar cold - he would die at any moment. The Ice Dragon took the griffin’s remaining hand in his frigid, blackened one and said a silent prayer to the Seven, hoping that a corpse dismounting from an ice dragon and clambering through the window hadn’t been a frightening, disturbing sight in his friend’s last vision of this world.

“Rhaegar, I knew you’d come,” his friend whispered fervently. His eyes widened with recognition and contentment.

Then, he stopped breathing.

*My name, my name, my name.*

*Rhaegar* closed Jon’s stiffened, glassy eyes. Memories kept returning to him, moreso with every moment in the great city. He had lived here for most of his youth.

He felt the wind on his back, but not from the window.

The door.

He turned, filled with anticipation. It was bound to happen sooner or later. He wasn’t as good in hiding as his new icy steed.

And maybe it was time to come out in the open. Concealing his condition had done no good to his poor, newly dead friend.

“I’ll bring Mother to Lord Connington as soon as I can,” his son politely told the master of whispers. “My wife believes that she wishes to say her farewell.”

“Soon will be too late,” Varys announced as he entered the room, staring at Rhaegar’s dead,
blackened hands on the griffin’s unseeing eyes. “Others take me,” the black dragon cursed.

Rhaegar rose, facing his distant cousin and his son.

*Now you know, Jon.*

His sister, his son’s wife, followed closely after the two men.

“Rhaegar!” she exclaimed. Her beautiful face fell when she realised *what* he was.

He was and he wasn’t himself.

*Daenerys.*

His very young sister stared into his once dark eyes, that had become bright blue like on any other wight created by the Others… The dead kept in life by Euron Greyjoy and his ignorant use of black magic from Essos were more varied. In looks, at least.

A wight was a wight.

“Does Mother know?” his son asked in a voice thick with emotion.

Rhaegar shook his head, unable to determine what his son must have felt to speak like this.

*Concern. Disapproval. Hatred.*

*Hatred.*

It was a possibility, one of many. Rhaegar had failed miserably in his duty as a father. More than his own mad father had.

“Why not?” His son almost yelled at him... for hiding himself from Lyanna.

*Do you hate me?*

Rhaegar pointed at his throat, at himself. It was for the best if Lyanna didn’t see him like this. He could spare her that pain.

“He can’t speak, Jon,” Daenerys spoke truly. “He didn’t turn like Euron.”

“Does anyone know?” his son became his inquisitor and Rhaegar felt accused of high treason.

Which was perhaps the only crime he *hadn’t* committed, though he should have had. *But how can a son kill his father? What kind of son could do this without a second thought?*

Rhaegar pointed at Jon, Daenerys, Varys. *The three of you.* He looked through the window. *The dragons.*

The fiery ones wouldn’t betray him. Fire turned flesh knew every secret in Aegon’s city, from the highest tower to the lowest dungeons and the evil depth of the Dragonpit.

*King’s Landing.*

Rhaegar rejoiced in remembering the name on his own.

And the icy ones didn’t posses a notion of treason. It was beyond them or beneath them; irrelevant and unnecessary.
“How did you survive?” Jon continued his interrogation.

_Survive? I just stopped short of landing in seven hells._

“How did you come here? Why are you here?” his son boomed recklessly, not waiting for an answer.

Rhaegar began to hope that his son’s excitement wasn’t hatred. He listened to Jon and thought there was hurt in his words, and uncertainty. And… guilt, unexpectedly so.

_Why?_

_You surely haven’t made any mistake that could compare to mine._

Rhaegar bent over the windowsill, calling his steed with all his might. Predictably, it refused to answer. The ice dragons were terribly shy creatures. They wouldn’t show themselves to men, except in brief flashes, when they flew recklessly over the shivering sea, in search of sunlight or a pretty cloud to chase.

“Drogon?” Daenerys asked Rhaegar with hope. “Does he carry you still?”

Rhaegar shook his head.

“Can you...” his son struggled with his words. “Could you go to Winterfell and see Mother, if she doesn’t know yet?” Jon’s request sounded sharp, cutting.

Letting his wife see him was the last thing Rhaegar wanted. But he couldn’t say no to his son’s poignant demand.

So he nodded mutely, gesturing to his family to leave. _I’ll go when you go._

“Will I see you again?” his son wondered all of a sudden.

Rhaegar shrugged, waved an arm indecisively. He couldn’t tell. _Gods willing, and if you wish, my son, you will._

Strong pain ravaged his soul. He was dead, useless, powerless. He couldn’t cry to let the pain out. The wights couldn’t shed tears. He should fly north and bend the knee to the Others. Destroying the living might help him to feel better.

And as every time when he felt this, he refused the cursed calling, though to do so was to willfully succumb to immortal torment over his own sins.

He didn’t know what hurt him more; the calling of the Others or his memories.

He had been married to a good woman, his first wife, and they had a little daughter. Elia and Rhaenys deserved a better husband and father, just like the realm needed a leader who would have found a way to avoid the bloodshed on the Trident. As a result of his demise, thousands had died. His first family’s end had been unspeakably atrocious. And there was also the nameless baby Varys sacrificed to save Aegon, a faceless child with bloodied skull tormenting his imagination… Rhaegar had failed in his duty. He deserved to burn in seven hells, but the gods decided to deal him a different punishment.

Daenerys understood. “It’s terrible, what you are, isn’t it?” she demanded confirmation.

He nodded. _It is._
He didn’t want Jon and Daenerys to go. Yet being watched by them was an unsettling experience, and his ice steed wouldn’t return as long as they were present. Rhaegar gestured them to leave once more. Varys was the first to obey, used to follow kingly orders.

His sister surprised him by running to him and embracing him. Unexpectedly, her touch burned... The sensation was unknown and terrible, though less devastating than the hopeless feeling in his soul. He instinctively wriggled out of Dany’s grip, shaking her off harshly. His sister backed to the door. Her violet eyes focused on him, filling with hot tears.

His son looked at him with anger, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“It’s me, I think,” Daenerys defended Rhaegar. “I’m too warm to touch. He’s... he no longer has the blood of the dragon. I hurt him.”

Rhaegar nodded slowly.

Jon’s anger abated. “I see,” he squeezed through his teeth, measuring Rhaegar up, giving him that same cold look he had gotten from Eddard and Brandon Stark during the tourney in Harrenhal.

*I’m not your enemy*, Jon’s father had thought miserably, back then and now.

Rhaegar nervously put the lance he had been holding against a wall, disarming, showing to his son his black, open palms in sign of peace and surrender.

Jon stared at his father’s lance and then at his left arm. His expression became extremely dull and unreadable. As stark as they came.

A peculiar memory came back…

Of him, being taken by the Night’s King and morphing into an Other; almost ready to forge a sword of ice from the fallen snow, and lash at the world around him with superior power and neglect for all life forms except his new one.

Of Jon, devastated by the sight of his father in the throes of his transformation.

What kind of son could indeed kill his father?

His son.

And he hadn’t done it with an easy heart, though he might have had reasons to not care for Rhaegar. He did it because it had to be done.

Faced with Jon’s strength in adversity, Rhaegar found it easier to continue resisting the call of ice. He had grasped an ordinary blade in his right hand, his clumsy hand, clinging to the last bit of his person that remained in the newborn Other, and spent what he had thought would be his final moments admiring Jon’s swordsmanship.

He had been so proud, so happy. Jon would do so much better than him in life. What more could any father want from his child?

Back then, blessed blackness ended all his thought.

Now, his son still gazed at his left arm.

*You don’t know how well you did, do you?* Lyanna must have told Jon that Rhaegar was
ambidextrous and preferred his left hand. *Are you blaming yourself, thinking you could have done more?*

*Well, you couldn’t.*

*It is so, at times.*

Rhaegar retook his lance in his left arm, running it from a distance, with uncanny precision, through one of the rings holding curtains in place. The heavy fabric hung down, loosened on that end.

Few people would succeed in that game. *Arthur. Ser Barristan.*

Recovering the lance, he aimed for the other side of the curtain with his right arm and missed, though not by much because the lance was his weapon. Done with showing off, he disarmed again.

He cocked his head to the left and stared at his son.

The wights had no facial expressions. He couldn’t smile or wink or offer a warm look.

Jon’s gaze changed from inscrutable to… sincere. “It’s you,” he declared solemnly.

*What is left of me,* Rhaegar thought back.

“I wish we had time to speak,” Jon said quietly after a while. “Mother told me a lot, but she’s… She’s been very delicate. I didn’t dare ask all I want to know.”

Rhaegar made a gesture of writing. They needed a parchment and a quill. There wasn’t any on the small table next to Jon Connington’s deathbed. Only water and poppy. He hoped he could remember his letters better than much of his life. His partial loss of memory was surely a form of Targaryen madness. He had never been fully free of it as he had believed.

“Next time, when I return?” his son asked with honest hope.

*Where are you going?* His father thought, nodding hopelessly.

He couldn’t say no to his son...

Jon stormed out of the chamber with the trace a of grim, long smile appearing on his face, reminding Rhaegar painfully of his wife and the unbearable task ahead.

*Showing myself to Lyanna.*

He said another prayer for the dead griffin to postpone his departure.

*May your sins be forgiven, my dear friend, and may you rest in seven heavens. I wish I could say I will see you there when my path comes to an end, but I don’t think that I will.*

Maybe the seven hells where he would be sent by the gods entailed less suffering than his current condition.

He didn’t dare touch Connington after closing his eyes. He didn’t want to call his friend back to cursed life if he had acquired that power by another mishap of his destiny. He thought he didn’t have such an ability, but didn’t want to try his fortune.

It had always been unpredictable.
The sky was a sea of black and dark blue, dense and frightening. The dragons were gone. The flight north lasted longer on a creature of living ice than with Drogon, in night neverending.

In Winterfell, the castle slept. Fires burned in the courtyards and anger in the crypts. The stone kings and lords argued vehemently with each other. Their conversation died abruptly when Rhaegar arrived.

He was a son of kings, but not of winter.

They’d never talk to him.

Lyanna’s window was much easier to open than the heavy one in Maegor’s holdfast. It closed with wooden shutters and had no metal bars.

Besides, breaking in was a practised endeavour, repeated many times. He had almost cherished and anticipated it during the interminable winter days before the wedding, when he’d been waiting for his wife to finally head to her chamber.

He worked in silence, sneaking in.

He didn’t count on her being awake.

A solitary candle burned on her table and she stared at him with wide, black eyes.

She isn’t surprised.

He opened his mouth to call her.

Lyanna, he uttered, forgetting that his throat had been cut and that he’d never speak or sing again. No voice came.

He felt the powerful call of the Others from beyond the Wall. They were trying to bend his will and force him to obey. He refused, stooping from pain in his chest, refusing to serve the creatures of ice that weren’t dragons… He covered his ears. The gesture was completely useless. The torment was within him, not coming from the outside.

His wife grasped his hands, bringing a tiny finger to his cold, thinned lips as an afterthought. He didn’t feel her touch. His body remained dead and indifferent to any form of desire. Her eyes watered, but not from revulsion.

Love was the greatest pain of all. It was right here, between them, immaterial and no less true, and yet he was unable to either give it or take it.

He had promised her he would deliver their unborn child. He remembered the required skills of a healer to do so, but he didn’t believe he’d be able to keep his word, though he couldn’t elaborate why.

He turned away from her, brusquely, seizing his harp and playing like he did every night he had spent in her room when she slept, confident that she couldn’t hear him in the depths of her child-laden sleep. When she had Jon in her belly, it was almost impossible to wake her.

He played Jenny of Oldstones. She lived on with her ghosts like he did now, singing the verses in his head…

Abandoned and forgotten,
as alone as she is fair,
now lives Jenny of Oldstones

with flowers in her hair.

After, he felt blessedly empty. His relief wouldn’t last. He savoured it, clung to it. His wife was sobbing into her pillow. He joined her very carefully, sitting on the edge of the bed he had occasionally dared share with her, always careful to get up as soon as she began to stir, much before she woke.

Under the pillow, he noticed his loose hairs… He took one and bowed his head with sadness.

You suspected… You knew…

He had been cruel in not showing himself earlier.

He had wanted to, as soon as he had first arrived to Winterfell, before the wedding.

But it was late at night, and he had immediately caught sight of himself in Lyanna’s mirror; a dead, armoured monster with blue eyes and irregular growths of shabby silver hair, with blackened hands and nails, and an ugly, dark gash on his throat, to match the familiar ruin of his chest.

The day after, he had also heard men whispering about his son’s condition, betting if Jon was dead or alive, admiring and fearing his unnatural prowess with a sword and ability to command men.

By his appearance, he could feed the unfair gossiping Jon had to withstand. It wouldn’t be just.

The people talking had no notion what it meant to be a wight. Jon wasn’t one. But had Rhaegar tried to tell them or show them, they surely wouldn’t believe him.

He’d do more harm than good.

When Doran Martell arrived, humiliating Lyanna, Jon and Daenerys, Rhaegar was shocked into inaction in his daily hiding place above the clouds.

Yet his shock didn’t, couldn’t last. It was then that he remembered his first wife, the kindness in her. He recalled his treason, his naive, youthful plans to soothe his forsaking of her in his heart with lifelong respect.

He was much older now and he knew.

No amount of esteem and honours would ever compensate for the lack of love.

Finally, he remembered his failure to ensure Elia’s protection and her cruel, undeserved end…

He deserved to die and to suffer.

That was his purpose.

Possessed by his grief, he leapt to the window and jumped through it, breaking his legs, feeling no pain. The dead tissue would mend in time.

Pain ravaged him and he didn’t fight it. The eerie, shrieking call of the Others joined it, growing in intensity. He was dead, they told him. He had to give himself over to the hatred of the living, they commanded. Then, he would find peace.
He didn’t deserve peace.

He was meant to be tortured.

He crawled away, into the darkness, and waited until his icy dragon felt safe enough to appear.

Flying away from Winterfell, Rhaegar unwillingly remembered Lyanna’s hands on his, her finger on his lips. He had no sensual recollection from it. Only the image and its meaning would stay engraved forever in his memory.

He was still in her heart, despite everything.

*As you’re in mine, mine, mine, even when it's not beating.*

*Nothing could put an end to my love for you.*

The ice dragon took him beyond the Wall, deep into the dead, cold land. As they flew, the creature let Rhaegar know that it was eager to witness one of the last dawns in the far northeast of the shivering sea, and that it wouldn’t be back any time soon.

The Long Night was spreading from west to east, it seemed, in exact contradiction to the sun rising in the east and setting in the west, in the world as it used to be…

*I’ll stay here.*

His purpose was to suffer and he would suffer most beyond the Wall.

His broken bones had already mended sufficiently that he could stand and walk as a particularly slow, clumsy wight.

Left alone, Rhaegar studied his bleak surroundings, expecting to find himself imprisoned in the magic cave with weirwood thrones, but he didn’t.

All he saw were evergreen trees.

The aged wight with wooden teeth who used to be an Other sprang out of the forest to greet him, spreading his arms to hug Rhaegar like an old friend.

*Why are you following me? I’m useless.* Rhaegar wanted to say, retreating from unwanted touch.

The old man bowed to the ground, as though Rhaegar was still king.

*Get up.*

The elder wasn’t the only wight in the surroundings. Not by far. After him, corpses continued pouring out of the woods from all directions.

A young couple approached Rhaegar. They were his son’s age, perhaps. The man was skinny and handsome, looking familiar. The lady’s gaze was haunted and she had old scars on her bare arms and legs. *Dog bites.* Together, they bowed deeply and seemed to find comfort in Rhaegar’s presence.

Two dead women followed suit, strolling arm in arm. They both had pierced hearts, oozing black blood. One was blond, rounded and very fat, and the other taller, homely and bearded. He should recognise them, but he couldn’t. The ladies bowed to him with exacerbated elegance.

A group of semi-naked men in light, bronze armour, suited for a warm land and not for Westerosi
winter, marched towards Rhaegar in perfect line, bowing like one.

Then there were the wildlings, wild-eyed and crippled. He felt that they had been dead for centuries. After them came a group of little people, slightly bigger than dwarves, with dappled skin, some with bright red hair. *The children of the forest.*

A large, armoured bunch of tall men armed with axes came last, carrying a driftwood crown. Their eyes weren’t blue and their leader spoke.

And Rhaegar recognised them.

*The krakens. Euron’s brothers and their men.*

“Your Grace,” Victarion Greyjoy announced with staunch arrogance and pride. “You’ve called us. And we’ve come to honour our oath of loyalty. We didn’t give it gladly in the beginning, but now we will live and die by our word. Your renewed call has freed us from obedience to our godless brother, who took our lives by black sorcery. You’ll be pleased to hear that we mutilated him and left him behind, for he can’t be trusted. The undead fleet of the Iron Islands is yours to command.”

Rhaegar was shocked. The only being he had called to him after his death had been the ice dragon, in his foolish attempt to rejoin his family.

He didn’t deserve a family.

And he wasn’t delighted to hear of anyone’s mutilation, despite having only contempt for Euron Greyjoy.

A corpse with long, wet, entangled hair and beard nodded enthusiastically at Victarion’s words. *Aeron Damphair*. The Greyjoy brother who had turned priest of the Drowned God and enjoyed great renown for his faith, not for bigotry.

*So they believe I called them…*

Rhaegar took the driftwood crown from the ironborn because they wouldn’t stop offering it, and looked around.

He’d never wear a crown again.

The young man leading the girl with dog bites looked like a good… standard bearer, or strange driftwood bearer in this case. Rhaegar handed him the crown. The boy’s hands shook as though he were a very old man when he accepted the token. *Old wight.*

*Who are you?*

The ironborn priest elbowed Victarion and gestured madly. “Theon,” the ironborn captain squeezed out. “My nephew. I heard he was skinned alive like a craven and gelded like an ox.”

The young man curled into a ball in the snow, concealing himself from everyone’s view; acting more like a frightened animal than a human being. His girl embraced him from the back and gave an angry look to Victarion.

*Stop it! We’re all dead.* Rhaegar’s thought was thunderous. *It doesn’t matter how we came to this.*

They… they must have heard him, bowing to the ground, all of them.

Theon stood up, shaking the excess of snow from his body, holding the crown obediently in
trembling hands. The girl took his arm and offered her support.

Rhaegar had never been able to change the tide for good. His birth in Summerhall, the prophecies, all was in vain. He had never been promised. Perhaps he was doomed.

No.

We bring the doom on ourselves…

A dead boy with green eyes came forward from the gathered multitude of the dead.

Jojen Reed.

With youthful lightness, Jojen deftly unfurled a large white standard on a weirwood stick, resembling the immaculately pure blazon of the Kingsguard. Except that the shape of the banner was irregular; it had a tail and a spiked back.

The Ice Dragon.

Jojen lifted the banner and headed into the wood.

Rhaegar followed, and so did the dead, heeding a call he had never made.

He wondered how many there were, and if he could-

Rhaegar, Rhaegar, you stupid man! He cursed himself for having new hopes.

When the ice dragon first came to him, he had imagined himself leading the flock of them to defeat the Night’s King. But very soon he understood that his new mount was innocuous, not a tool of war like its fiery brothers.

The ice dragons lived for listening to the whistling of the wind and performing pirouettes in the air! They occasionally breathed ice, because it was so beautiful…. and not because they wanted to freeze their enemies to death.

And the wights were the dead flesh, the expendable soldiers. Rhaegar sensed that any runaways would represent an easy prey for the Others, no matter how great in number. They couldn’t match their former masters in weapon prowess, speed or strength.

They couldn’t defeat the Others who were calling Rhaegar even now, demanding his allegiance… who must have been calling to all of them...

The pain was tremendous and, for the first time coloured by fear that one day his grief wouldn’t be enough to resist and that he would succumb… That he would become the undead butcher of the living… He’d have to do for himself before it came to that. Run his cherished lance through his heart.

He marched through the woods at the head of a dead army, wondering where he was and where he should go next. Every tree looked the same.

He remembered hiding in the clouds above the godswood of Winterfell when the Night’s King paid a sudden visit to Jon’s wedding.

It was in that moment that Rhaegar discovered he couldn’t bring fire and blood, or rather, ice and blood, to help his family as he had hoped...
The ice dragon didn’t care about the Night’s King arrival. Ignoring Rhaegar’s wish to freeze the enemy with his breath, the beast flew tremendously high, in lazy circles, harrumphing a dissonant tune like a giant bird. It wouldn’t let Rhaegar dismount, and if he had jumped from that height, he wouldn’t have just broken his legs, he would have turned into a pulp that could be easily cut into shreds or burned by anyone.

The ice dragons were peaceful, sweet creatures. They were no fighting kind like their fire-breathing brothers and sisters… The Ice Dragon couldn’t make a difference in the ongoing war as he had naively imagined in his initial exultation, when his pretty steed had saved him from the cursed cave with weirwood thrones beyond the Wall, carrying him south in great haste.

The disappointment from understanding the nature of the ice dragons had overwhelmed him, unbearable like the rest of his new existence.

His steed appeared contrite, but still didn’t change its attitude. Very slowly, the creature had breathed out a jet of beautifully shaped crystalline ice into the dark atmosphere. It was the first time the beast revealed having the legendary breath of ice.

As if in response, the winter sky decided to release its own silvery cargo onto the earth, adorning it, dressing it in white.

Snowflakes drifted into the godswood of Winterfell, landing like little diamonds on his son and his wife, vowing their love.

Witnessing the snowfall had felt like shedding tears he no longer had.

He’d been the snow on his son’s wedding.

It was worth the pain.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Aegon
Aegon II

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy, for your help ;-))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Aegon

The Wall was his until Jon’s return.

The responsibility grew heavier as the Long Night deepened; dark and black like Aegon imagined seven hells.

After the wedding, the number of people under Jon’s command increased tremendously, just like the number of lands they came from, filling the ranks of the defenders.

The Westerosi were the largest force now, outnumbering and overshadowing the wildlings, the Golden Company, the Unsullied and all other men Dany brought from Essos.

More arrived every day, both with the consent and under the leadership of their overlords or without it - venturing North in search of glory or food. It was extremely hard to keep count of new recruits.

Sam, however, tried, noting down their names, titles and places of origin. “For posterity”, he would say, scribbling methodically.

Aegon couldn’t believe that anyone would want to study those records in the future. They sounded as boring as the ledgers of Bowen Marsh, which would be forgotten as soon as food counted in them was consumed.

Sam always disagreed with Aegon on this, and continued writing diligently.

The importance of any manuscript aside, the food supplies in the cellars of Castle Black had to be well guarded, and not only accounted for. It was the first prerequisite for success of Aegon’s command. He sought to deploy at least one proven capable man or spearwife in each shift, and randomly visited the guards, checking that there were no surprises.

Similar vigilance had to be exercised with the watchers on the Wall, in all nineteen fortresses. It was the task of every castle commander to constantly ensure that the Wall was well manned.

The defenders couldn’t afford dying of hunger, being blind or falling asleep.

The overall atmosphere was of anxiety and gloom, of wait and premonition.

Of a world coming to an end.

Incidents of theft, fight, serious injury and murder erupted all the time, due to general tension and the human diversity of the defenders. Aegon noted that rape was not as common, probably because it involved the would-be perpetrator at least partially undressing.
The cold was too biting for that.

The punishment of small thieves consisted of not being given a meal, while the more serious offenders enjoyed the hospitality of the ice cells where the chill was even more cruel.

The oldest among the black brothers claimed that the Wall itself had become colder.

Unlike in other times, either of peace or war, no one was sentenced to death.

There was an unspoken consensus among the living that any beheading or hanging would only help the Night’s King in his endeavour to slay all men and enslave them.

With every loss of life, the night turned darker.

The horns of the Night’s Watch were silent; no friend or foe came from beyond the Wall.

Aegon should have been weary from striving to maintain order.

Yet he remained restless, filled with foreboding.

*What if the Others attack now?*

He sensed they would besiege the Wall soon and wished for Jon’s presence.

Aegon was brave by nature. He would always gladly rush into battle for good cause. But in the short time since he was acquainted with Jon, he rejoiced when he could fight by his side.

It was a singular experience.

Jon was an incredibly talented swordsman. As a commander, he focused on his goals with deadly precision. And yet he remained easy going, good-natured, and fair when giving orders. As a result, he inspired trust.

He gave the people hope.

His popularity and the wildly enriched tales of how he resisted the Night’s King and the Others many times in their territory, the kingdom of ice, went hand in hand with the fear of him, of what he was.

“He will defeat Stannis and his big black dragon by dark sorcery,” people whispered. “And then he will defeat the Night’s King and his Mermaid Wife, cut their heads off with his magic sword, and put them on spikes to adorn the Wall.”

All superstitious talk ceased in Jon’s presence, but the soldiers were far less careful with Aegon.

“You have to do this,” Jon had said before leaving for Oldtown. “You were trained to lead, you know how to fight, and you have my trust,” he paused and added, measuring Aegon up with cold, dark eyes. “You look southron and have their manners. And the Northmen and the wildlings are used to you by now. It makes you the best choice.”

Aegon didn’t know if silver hair counted as southron, but it was definitely unusual in the North, where the dragonlords rarely ventured to father little bastards, and the nobles didn’t embark on searches for spouses in the Free Cities, where blood of Valyria was more common.

Aegon often wondered where some of the Daynes got their silver hair from and couldn’t come up with a satisfactory answer. Young Ned Dayne had shrugged when Aegon had asked him about it;
not knowing, not wanting to know.

Hair was hair.

The only thing special about it was that it grew excessively since winter began.

Jon’s remark about Aegon being the best pick to replace him meant that there was a visible issue with other men he trusted, having a potential to sow trouble and disobedience.

Mance was the most capable battle commander, but no Westerosi would ever listen to a wildling. Southrons and Northmen would readily agree on this, if not on anything else. Sam was fat and openly declared himself a coward. As a consequence, he was universally disrespected. It didn’t matter that Sam was smarter than most people, and brave in his own way.

Satin and Pyp were black brothers which amounted to the same as if they were worthless beggars for many Westerosi. Besides, they were young and born as smallfolk. Lords, petty lordlings and sers looked at them with disdain.

Tyrion was hightborn, but a dwarf. Everything else was secondary when people considered him.

Aegon hated that the combination of his appropriate looks, birth and body fat was crucial for him to be the best choice for Jon’s second in command, and not only his intelligence, command capability and prowess with the sword.

It’s unfair.

Perhaps it was the way of the world.

He sat up abruptly, waking fully.

He couldn’t just sit and wait for Jon to come back. There were so many tasks to be done. They had to be prepared and united for the battle for...

... Dawn.

“You’ve been talking in your sleep again, my love,” Jeyne complained worriedly in their bed, pressed against him where they nested under many blankets and furs.

“As you sometimes do,” he hugged his wife and basked in her presence and short-lived warmth.

“Less and less,” she answered quietly. “I’m slowly forgetting how painful it was for me when I was a living corpse.”

Aegon wished she would never have to remember that again, and yet he feared she might.

Unlike in the first days of their marriage when they would stay awake at night, discovering each other, now they simply slept in their bed, whenever Aegon badly needed a few hours of rest.

The world was dark. The Others were coming. Maybe both Aegon and Jeyne would become wights very soon.

Not yet.

Aegon didn’t think Jon would miss the attack.

Not a chance for it.
Aegon was convinced that Jon knew he still had some time to spare or he wouldn’t have left, despite not believing at all that Jon was in any way... unnatural.

He’s a man, just more capable than most, so the rest think of him as a wonder.

He must have a source of information, a spy of some sort, among the Others...

“The Onion Knight and his boy are here for her,” Mance rumbled in a deep voice, coloured with unease, from behind the closed door of Aegon’s bedchamber.

Her was Lady Melisandre of Asshai.

The red woman.

Stannis had forgotten her on the Wall. Or left her on purpose. Aegon didn’t know and didn’t care.

Mance was always tense in Melisandre’s presence. She had him ensorcelled in the past, casting a glamour on him to make him look like another wildling; a poor wretch who had burned alive with Mance’s face. The King-beyond-the-Wall owed his life to this trick, but he nonetheless deplored the experience.

The wildlings cherished both life and freedom. One wasn’t enough without the other.

“I’ll be right there,” Aegon answered Mance, taking a doublet from Jeyne’s wonderfully warm hands. Picking up his cloak on the way to the door, he entered his solar, shivering.

Despite the fire in the hearth, the cold was merciless.

The red lady was already there, with a discreetly victorious smile on her perfect face. The chill seemed to enhance her unearthly beauty. She wore red velvet and satin. She had no cloak, and when she looked into the hearth, her red eyes danced proudly, like rekindled flames.

She had kept to herself since Stannis left.

But now she studied everyone present with poorly hidden contempt; Aegon, Mance and the wildlings... Even Davos and Devan who had come to do her a service by taking her to Stannis…

Jeyne slowly emerged from the bedchamber, in her black cloak. She had worn it as a wight in King’s Landing; back then it was made of smooth velvet, but later she was forced to make it thicker, lining it with wool and furs to withstand the cold.

Because now she’s alive, alive, alive. Thank the gods and the shade of good that was left in Lady Catelyn Stark, to make her sacrifice her undead existence so that my Jeyne could escape it.

The red woman finally gave a dismissive look to Jeyne.

Aegon felt insulted in his wife’s name, possessed by irritation and resentment. Jeyne didn’t do anything to you.

“King Stannis has sent us for Lady Melisandre,” the Onion Knight announced, with rather polished tone for a former smuggler.

Good riddance, Aegon thought and was about to agree.

“Wait,” he breathed out instead.
There was also the shadow.

Rhaegal had chased it away from Castle Black and lands north of the Wall, but it still lingered near the southern side, stretching south and west, all the way to Deepwood Motte. Those few men who wandered from Castle Black and ventured under it, usually after trading their food for a double portion of mead, never returned.

The new and by now well established travel route to the Wall circumvented the shadow, avoiding the kingsroad, winding on its eastern side, through the forested plains of the Hornwoods, the Boltons and the Umbers.

“Undo the shadow and you’re free to go,” Aegon demanded. “You wove it. There is talk you could unmake it faster and more thoroughly than a dragon.”

At that moment, with her scarlet eyes and gown, and the huge blood-red ruby on her throat, Melisandre looked extremely powerful.

“Unmake the shadow,” Aegon insisted, but his own voice sounded shrill and weak. Almost… girl-like.

“I don’t answer to you or your king,” Melisandre refused. “Or should I say, wolf. Why do men choose animals to rule them?”

“Jon is a better man the most,” Aegon said indignantly, clearing his throat. His voice returned. His anger at the Red Woman was disproportionate and strong. He could barely control it and be courteous, as was a commander’s duty. “He’ll make a good king.”

“If he lives long enough,” Melisandre observed with indifference.

“King Stannis is willing to pay a price for the release of Lady Melisandre as your hostage, as is customary in war,” Davos interrupted the altercation, offering the terms of the exchange in a calm, steady voice. “Name it.”

“I think I just did,” Aegon rattled. “The shadow. She has to unmake it. We don’t want it.”

“The shadow has power. It will resist the Great Other when the heart of men fails, and you all lie dead. The Great Other is coming and you know it. You’ve seen it in your nightmares,” Melisandre spoke very slowly, as though Aegon was a lackwit. For a brief moment, her red eyes looked brown, very old and wise. “He’s nearing Castle Black with every moment. What you’re asking me to do isn’t prudent. You should reconsider.”

“But some Others crossed the Wall like white mists clinging to the wildlings, after you began knitting this shadow...” Aegon stuttered, reaffirming what he knew. “They followed Mance Rayder south and ended up haunting the riverlands. Some were killed, but not all. This means that this... this curse hampers the legendary ability of the Wall to protect itself, designed by whoever built it... And now your shadow has grown monstrously large. What will it mean for our defences?”

“Is it my fault that Lord of Light is the one true God while your Wall is protected by the lesser magic of the trees?” Melisandre asked flatly. “The Lord speaks to us in his fires. He is the life in our hearts and our loins. The greatest, invincible shadow is cast by the brightest of flames.”

Aegon’s head hurt from her useless riddle speech. One certainty remained. “So we’re right to believe that the shadow harmed the Wall’s natural defences and that it continues to do so?”

“My child has more power than your Wall,” the Red Woman explained placidly.
“Can you undo it?” Aegon tried again.

“Yes,” Melisandre affirmed. “But I won’t.”

“I should kill you,” Aegon blurted.

If he did that, maybe the shade would dissolve on its own. The night was dark enough without it. It was clear from the Red Woman’s speech that it didn’t matter to her if the Wall stood or collapsed in a heap of ice rubble.

“Why would you do that?” Melisandre wondered timidly about the reasons for her possible murder, sounding curious for the first time since the conversation began.

“Because you don’t care if men live or die,” Aegon said with lucidity that came from realising the essence of her. “Nor will you change your mind about anything you think is true or important, despite any sound and solid argument I could present to you to the contrary,” he underlined.

“To be sure, I don’t see anyone here overly concerned for my fate,” Melisandre said dryly. “Why should I care about yours? Lord of Light will help those who believe in him and deliver them from peril. The rest don’t matter.”

Aegon’s anger flared. His right hand jumped to his sword’s hilt. The ruby on the Red Woman’s throat throbbed. He both sensed and knew that nothing positive for his cause would ever come from her. She would never help him. He had to strike her down to prevent further harm.

With the last ounce of reason, he forced himself to look away from Melisandre, to reach his decision with cold blood.

Immediately, the temptation to assassinate her diminished.

He remembered the murderers in the ice cells, and then the Others and their undead slaves.

Killing a woman in winter for having her own goals, which would never coincide with his, would be just another crime.

No matter what else she was.

“Weakness is a pathetic feature,” Melisandre mocked him. “Don’t you find, my lord? Or should I say, my sweet child?”

What?

Aegon had stopped being a child long ago, sailing with Old Griff on the river Rhoyne. To imply he was one was very unjust.

He hand slid to his sword. But now, just like before, he couldn’t go through with his murderous intent.

“You’re taunting me,” Aegon stuttered. “Why? You don’t wish to die, do you? What are you trying to accomplish? I won’t play along!”

The ruby pulsated, blinding him.

“I will answer you when the spring comes, my boy,” she said in a motherly voice. “If you’re still here, among the living, and able to listen.”
“Well, guess what, you’ll be here with me for a long while,” Aegon replied in kind. “Maybe until spring, why not?” he paused. “There is no price you or Stannis can pay,” he told Davos when his ire abated fully. “She’s staying. You’re staying. You’re free to talk to King Jon when he returns, but he might make the same demand. Undo the shadow and you can all go.”

The Red Woman put her hands in her pockets, giving Aegon that irritating, pitying look, and another small, contemptuous smile.

In the next moment, Melisandre’s jubilation vanished. “How?” she questioned, irascible, turning a portion of her robes inside out, gesturing madly.

Her pockets were very deep and completely empty.

A slim shadow with long black hair rose from a dark corner of the solar, where she had been hiding or sleeping, curled in a ball near the hearth.

_Tysha, Tyrion’s wife._

She had become a friend of Jeyne’s. Aegon hadn’t even noticed her presence.

Melisandre’s dress slowly changed colour from red to dark blue.

“…” Tysha hesitated. “After my unforeseeable departure from Asshai, I’m not so fond of shadowbinders. When I saw one here, I thought I should… empty her pockets just in case she tried something… nefarious. If she had a mask, I would have stolen it too. It aids in calling the shadows, which makes me wonder why she isn’t wearing one.”

“…” Tysha cringed imperceptibly, but kept her head high. “I’m a woman like you,” she finally declared. “Lady or not, it matters little. We’re all humiliated at times. You must have experienced that, as does any woman. Unless she’s very fortunate to be born to an exceptionally kind and rich family, married to a flawless man and never lack for anything. Both are rare, I find. Don’t you?”

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“I need a mask to gain my powers,”Melisandre announced with pride.
“Can you undo her spell?” Aegon asked Tysha with new hope.

Tysha shook her head. “The shadow here is different than the smaller ones I was taught to summon… they would come to a temple in Asshai. All I know is that she didn’t merely call the darkness that dwells in Westeros to herself. She… She formed it, somehow, as a stonemason carves a rock until it acquires the likeness of a man. I cannot unmake this shadow without understanding how she created it.”

Melisandre’s smirk grew wide. “An apt description, girl,” she outlined. “Except that a stonemason’s creation isn’t alive,” she underlined. “Mine is. I could teach you, if you wish.”

Tysha smirked back fearlessly, studying the flames intently, like the Red Woman had done before questioning Tysha’s chastity. “I have forsaken further study of the noble art of shadowbinding. Or, as they say in Lannisport, I give a rat’s arse for it, crone.”

Aegon believed it was Melisandre’s turn to struggle to keep her expression even and unperturbed. Mance chuckled at the expression. “Tysha’s truly from the West,” he said.

Aegon remembered the Hound’s cursing and wondered how the infamous man fared beyond the Wall. Ser Jaime and Tyrion also had a habit of using colourful and blunt language. Spiced as food from Dorne.

Aegon wondered if he’d ever visit Starfall and the land of his forefathers.

“Lord Davos,” Melisandre suddenly remembered her rescuers, sounding like a lady in distress, and not a dangerous priestess of a foreign deity. “Draw your sword and order your son to do so. Do your king’s bidding.”

In addition to Aegon and Mance, who could take on both Davos and Devan single-handed, there were five battle hardened wildlings in the solar; four men and a short but feisty spearwife. The bunch had begun to follow the Red Woman without anyone ordering them to do so, in the best manner of the free folk. At least when they succeeded in organising themselves instead of engaging in eternal disputes. They used weirwood twigs as pins to close their cloaks.

“For protection against the evil god of fire,” they would say.

Aegon found it unlikely that the white wood could offer any such protection; it burned like any other.

Be that as it may, the rest of the defenders had started calling them the Twig Guard.

“King Stannis requested me to bring you to him, my lady,” Davos clarified, “not to die and fail in my mission. I shall wait for a moment when I can fulfill my orders.”

Aegon addressed Mance, “We’ll see to it that they don’t leave. We’ll stable their horses with the remaining garrons of the Watch and spread the word that no one is to provide them with mounts,” he paused, “under the pain of missing four meals,” he decided.

It was a penalty as close to death as could be dealt.

Melisandre turned her back to everyone in the room and stared at the fire, mute and menacing in her silence. After a while, a foreign murmur came from her lips, sounding like a strange prayer.

An invocation, Aegon thought with a visionary trance, wishing he could understand the words. She’s calling her god to come to her rescue.
It was time to act.

He brushed his wife on his way out of the room. “Stay away from her, please,” he whispered to Jeyne. Even when countered and seemingly helpless, Melisandre inspired fear.

Aegon walked to the stables and made it clear to all men he encountered that no horse or mule was to be provided at an cost to Lord Davos, his son or the red woman, if they valued their lives.

“Lives?” a young black brother asked, knowing about the new sentiment forbidding death as punishment.

Aegon nodded. “Lives,” he underlined. “Anyone who helps her will skip four meals. She can’t be allowed to go.”

Maybe Melisandre would become fed up with her captivity. Or perhaps she would undo the shadow, if her life was in danger when the Others invaded the Wall. Unless her god of fire was able to shield her from the white walkers. Aegon had strong doubts about that, just like he questioned the miraculous properties of weirwood twigs.

People needed to defend the Wall and do the will of gods on earth. The gods would never descend among them.

There wasn’t any other way.

Before Aegon returned to his solar, a horn was blown.


And another and another, answering the call that originated in Castle Black, spreading east and west over the entire Wall, from the mouth of one watcher to another.

The first horn blew once.

Twice.

Thrice.

The Others had come.

Aegon ran to the ladder and clambered up the seven hundred feet of bitingly cold ice in terrifying haste; the winch cage being far too slow for his pressing need.

On top, the watchers trembled. The horns in other fortresses still echoed the call. It was a signal for defenders that could be spared elsewhere to march to the castle which would first come under siege.

On the other side, the haunted forest was alive with corpses and their masters, shrieking shrilly. It looked as if the trees were uprooted and also marched on the Wall.

*Not on the Wall.*

On Castle Black, weakened by the red woman's shadow.

Aegon looked at the sky, searching for green wings and saw none.

So he said a prayer to the Warrior, like he did in his youth. *Give me strength.*
“Man your posts,” he told the watcher.

“Will the young king come?” a very old men from the south asked, gritting his few teeth.

“He’s on his way,” Aegon reassured him, not knowing the truth of the matter.

He hurried back to his solar to arm himself fully, giving various orders as he went. The main force of the defenders was forming at the gates; a long tunnel passing through the Wall.

Mance Rayder was already there, and Aegon would join when he verified that everyone else was in place. The long passage through the Wall was narrower after Bowen March had filled it with ice rubble in the attempt to close it for good. It had been reopened since, in line with Jon’s wishes, to make scouting possible.

In Aegon’s chambers, Jeyne sat on the floor, shivering from cold. Tysha laid in her lap, her face pale. Melisandre was gone.

“Where is she?” Aegon questioned angrily. “Did she disappear into thin air?”

Jeyne shook her head. “She… she whispered something as soon as both you and Mance were gone. Her evil murmur caused Tysha to faint. Then she left. The Twig Guard followed.”

Aegon looked through his window, immediately noticing a swish of blue robes and their armed, wildling tail, moving in the direction of ice cells. Will she hide underground? Or ask the murderers to help her flee in the thick of the battle, if she can break into our dungeon by her spells?

“I’ll stay with her until she wakes,” Jeyne offered, pointing at Tysha. “She is breathing,” she reassured her husband. “And she’s not turning colder than what we all are.”

Aegon nodded, hurrying out.

To his surprise, when he finally took his position at the gates, Davos and Devan were among the ranks.

“I thought your king didn’t order you to die,” Aegon remarked.

“A man is free to give his life for what he wants,” Davos retorted.

Somehow, Aegon wasn’t surprised. “Welcome, then,” he said, stretching his sword arm to greet the Onion Knight and his son.

Devan nodded grimly, though his young eyes were frightened, in contrast with his father’s unusually calm, brown gaze.

Davos accepted Aegon’s hand and then drew his sword.

“All this darkness, gathering,” the Onion Knight whispered.

“If this is our end,” Mance said seriously, “let it be worthy of a song. Like the death of Donal Noye and Mag the Mighty in this very tunnel. Jon will find a singer to write the verses and play it when he returns.”

“We can do this,” Aegon forced himself to encourage everyone, though he felt terribly ineloquent. “This is a test of our strength. This is only the vanguard, I believe, not yet the entire army. There aren’t that many Others from what I could see from the Wall.”
Jon spoke of tens of thousands, of an ocean of Others waking in the Lands of Always Winter. The forest hadn’t spit out that many. A great number of wights marched alongside their masters.

Aegon remembered the vision he had experienced beyond the Wall; of Jon’s father as a living corpse, seated on a weirwood throne, helping Jon and Aegon defeat the Others who had ambushed them. Rhaegar had thrown the white walkers far away from Jon and Aegon by tapping into the magic… the magic of the trees… Much like the Others, the weirwoods also had the ability to reshape the land and change the position of creatures who found themselves beyond the Wall and the protection it offered.

Aegon was alone now.

No help would come immediately. His eyes saw only the ice tunnel and rubble, and no visions at all.

The final portion of the passage, just behind the heavy iron gate closing it, was lined with obsidian spikes instead of ordinary spears, to slow down the onslaught of the enemy.

Hopefully this section would very soon become filled with blue crystals, the remnants of vanquished, destroyed Others...

Aegon found himself hoping that some of the old magic of the Wall remained despite the shadow knitted by the fire god’s servant.

The enemy of fire...

Just like there was the enemy of ice; out there, approaching.

Aegon repeated to himself again and again that the numbers of the attackers wasn’t that great. The defenders were many and as prepared as possible.

He would hold on.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Jon
Jon X

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy, for helping me clarify things ))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jon

Oldtown looked much younger than its name; charming and orderly. Evenly spaced torches burned on the walls, illuminating the calm greatness of the noble houses on the main street, with their backs and quiet gardens turned towards the winding, dark thread of the river Honeywine.

Rhaegal circled above the well-tiled roofs, his wings spread lazily in a majestic flight.

Upstream, Jon glimpsed a dense maze of alleys with less light and more modest houses, whose broader upper floors hung quaintly over the lower ones.

Yet even in those colourful parts, Oldtown seemed like one of the seven Southron heavens.

Much to the contrary, King’s Landing had been dark and weakened by the plague, with striking poverty of a much harsher kind than Jon had ever seen. The poor lived like ants crawling over each other in overcrowded neighbourhoods; shabbier and more miserable than Wintertown. Dirt was everywhere, under snow turned into slush and yellow mud. There were so many people that not even the extreme cold could subdue the human stench.

By far, the worst part was called Flea Bottom. Jon wondered how it smelled in summer and if he’d be able to stand it.

He’d flown to King’s Landing out of sense of duty; needing to witness if greyscale could be cured. And a little bit because he wouldn't leave Dany unless he had to.

If his new war strategy came to fruition, he might have to part ways with his wife soon, but hopefully not for good.

He’d left King’s Landing with a restless heart...

No man, woman or child should live in those conditions. He yearned to bring a change for the better to them… but how?

It was easier said than done.

“This place is pretty, isn’t it?” he howled backwards at Dany, through the whistling of the night winter wind, conscious it was the first words he’d directed her since they left Maegor’s Holdfast.

And his undead father...

It was oddly appropriate to meet Rhaegar in the Red Keep, just like it was fitting to encounter Mother in Winterfell. The two castles illustrated the tremendous difference between his parents’ origin and upbringing; one stern, grey and unforgiving, and the other pink, lavish and cruel.
All Rhaegar and Lyanna had in common was high birth; both the privileges and severe limitations it brought. In everything else they were worlds apart.

And yet, when they collided, nothing and no one could stop it. All frontiers of custom had been burned…

And here I am.

Father had been… lucid. Not owned by the Others.

He took his own life for a chance to defeat the Night's King, Jon remembered. The Great Other had been forced to retreat, burned by dragonblood, but not before he transformed Rhaegar into a white walker…

The Hound never intended to finish what I started, Jon realised. He only used my shock and my grief to get away with father’s body. Before I did the necessary to ruin all chance of his undead existence… So he must be loyal to… to father… over his grave.

I… I didn’t kill my father.

I killed the curse.

The certainty was both liberating and devastating. Jon wished he could have asked Varys for a huge roll of parchment so that Rhaegar could answer all his questions in writing. The thorny ones, about his parents’ past mistakes and why they hadn't acted differently. Those he didn’t dare ask Mother for fear she might take her own life or lose the child she was carrying.

Rhaegar was a man. He wouldn’t be affected by unpleasant queries. Or not as much.

But there was no time. Only a little. Jon had to find Cersei Lannister and return to the Wall long before the siege began. Ghost had been steadily following the Night's King and his army on their march south from the Lands of Always Winter. They were approaching the northern edge of Frostfangs now, if Jon could trust his red eyes; his wolf eyes.

This was very well and in accordance with his plan.

His conversation with his undead father would have to wait, and it might never come to pass.

“Pentos is also very pretty,” Jon could barely hear Dany's soft voice through the sizzling gale. “But the most beautiful city I remember is Braavos when it doesn’t rain,” she said with longing. “It’s built on water, and when the sun shines, it’s the loveliest place in the world.”

“I guess so,” he commented timidly, remembering that Braavos was where Dany had spent the happier part of her unhappy childhood; forcing himself to maintain the minimum of conversation, fearing that his silent mood would reveal that he was up to something.

She can’t know. Or she won’t act naturally. The Night's King isn't a fool. He’ll suspect something’s wrong and I’ll fail.

"Maybe we could visit Braavos in spring," he suggested innocently.

He truly wished to see it in broad daylight…

At the same time he made a strenuous effort to conceal his innermost thoughts from his wife, as though she were a warg who could see into his head.
I’ll never see the Free Cities, will I?

What he planned for his return North was dangerous. He might end up dead or worse. Yet it was worth the risk.

I may win…

"There’ll be so many things to do in spring." Dany stated pensively, clinging to him from behind. She then became as taciturn as he felt, and Jon was grateful for it.

After seeing his father and the wounds left by greyscale in King’s Landing, Jon considered that Others taking men was perhaps just another sort of plague, a very dangerous one.

Yet with every explanation he crafted for himself to understand winter and the doings of the Others, new questions arose. How did Rhaegar travel if he was no longer a dragonrider? Through the trees that were now governed by the Night’s King? By some magic only the wights possessed?

Others take me! But why didn’t he go to her?

Jon, the warg, the beastling, the fake turncloak among the wildlings, and the unorthodox Lord Commander who later allowed the free folk into the realm of men… Jon, the hidden baby princeling… he could see why those that were different from others might want to stay apart. Yet he was at utmost loss to understand why Rhaegar avoided Mother.

Jon hadn’t been crying for him in the corners like Lyanna had.

He remembered hearing that Lord Connington was one of father’s best friends. Maybe the griffin’s passing summoned Rhaegar to King’s Landing. Maybe the dead could visit the dying, defying the laws of nature and the will of the gods.

Jon’s brow began to throb painfully from far-fetched assumptions.

“Jon,” Dany squeezed his sword arm gently from behind. “We’re here. What shall we do?”

Hightower was indeed higher than the Wall, just as Maester Luwin had taught Jon. Sleek, beautiful and well-built like the rest of the city, the tall fort of white stone rose proudly towards the black sky. A large beacon was lit on top, showing the way into the harbour.

“We knock,” Jon replied tersely, suddenly possessed by a fey mood.

The more he thought about it, knocking down Hightower would be excellent; demolishing it stone by stone.

Then the Great Council would have to be held elsewhere, just because.

He had welcomed everyone to Winterfell, and was made an object of conspiracies and political machinations in return.

Jon could never have exactly what he wished for in life. Perhaps no one could. So why should he make it any easier for those who opposed him, playing the game by their rules?

The gods will do what they want in the end, and men can only guess what that will be.

The thought didn’t sound or feel like his own, nor like Rhaegal’s. Rather, one transmitted to Jon through the secret common knowledge of dragonkind… It came from… from father, before he killed himself.
Jon realised he had imagined Rhaegar and the Targaryens as godless, though for some reason he excluded Maester Aemon and Dany from their number. On the contrary, he saw Mother as similar to himself in the matters of faith; their childhood belief in the old gods had been toned down by their adult years.

But it didn’t completely disappear.

*Up,* Jon told Rhaegal who soared obediently, enjoying himself.

“The door is at the bottom,” Dany observed.

*Up you go.* “Don’t worry,” he told his wife, “they’ll hear us knocking just the same.”

“He may have Cersei in his castle, but not in a high place that a dragon can reach so easily,” Dany judged.

"Probably," Jon concurred. *Higher,* he commanded Rhaegal nonetheless, painting the top of the tower with the burning beacon in his mind.

Rhaegal claimed the tower wasn’t *high* enough.

High was the sky, the stars and the moon.

*Not now,* Jon refused the tempting offer, wondering if his dragon could fly that far and if he would survive seeing the moon from nearby.

The stars would be made of flames in all colours; wild and beautiful.

"Jon!" Dany exclaimed, alert to the tensing of his body, perhaps. "What are you telling him to do?"

Jon didn't exactly tell Rhaegal anything, he just fantasised for a moment. Yet the damage was already done, by the force of his vivid imagination, or by dragon's own doing.

Red and bronze fire set the night ablaze, drifting over the sky with the gusts of wind. When the flames reached the beacon and crenellations on top of Hightower, and began to consume the well-shaped masonry, they became...

*Green,* Rhaegal thought with cold rage, hating the colour of his own scales, rejoicing that he was no longer an egg, nor a hatching, nor chained. *The piss,* he suggested. *Alchemists… piss,* he clarified, flapping his leathery wings like knives cutting the sky.

*A pit,* the dragon showed Jon a mental image of a large black hole in the ground, vaulted with a great dome, where the vile excrement of the alchemists had once been spilled on chained, smaller dragons who had died in pain.

“A pit,” Jon repeated aloud, frowning.

“Dragonpit?” Dany asked, not hearing well from the wind.

“Hightower has a trap up here,” Jon shouted, finally understanding Rhaegal's message. "A dragon trap," he uttered with disbelief. “Just like the Dragonpit used to be. But Rhaegal didn’t fall for it.”

“Cersei’s up here, Jon!” Dany exclaimed. "We have to get her out! She’ll *burn* if she isn't like me!"

A huddled female figure clung helplessly to the stone floor in the topmost portion of Hightower that had yet to catch fire of any colour.
Put us down! Jon commanded Rhaegal. Fast. His sharp wolf eyes closed on the woman. She was battling with something on the stone floor.

The dragon stretched his head and neck forward. Jon began descending.

“Not you, Jon,” Dany implored, scrambling after him. “I’ll get her.”

“It’s wildfire, Dany! It can hurt you too,” Jon argued, “But it won’t. Look!”

The lady wept, unable to open a hatch door in her distress. Long black hair covered her head.

Jon opened it successfully as soon as he grabbed the handle.

It’s much lighter than the door leading to the crypts of Winterfell, he thought, ushering both Dany and the unknown woman through the hatch, closing it behind them to stay the conflagration. He rushed the ladies down the spiral stairs to safety, to the lower levels of Hightower.

His mind struggled with fresh assumptions.

Hightower must have expected Jaime Lannister to find out about his sister's imprisonment, fly thoughtlessly to her aid and get himself and his dragon killed by wildfire. Stannis' faction didn't want the Kingslayer alive and fighting for them, as Jon initially assumed.

They wanted him dead.

The notion was both simplistically appealing and repulsive to Jon.

It's never that simple, is it? To find a good way forward...

Besides, when they got Lannister, Jon was the next target.

“She’s not Cersei Lannister,” Dany remarked quietly.

“No,” Jon said. “She isn’t. It's never easy, is it? To do what should be done.”

“No,” Dany agreed with his sentiment, “nothing comes easy,” she added, grasping his burned hand, squeezing it tightly.

“Lady Cersei was allowed to leave to pick daisies,” the unknown lady complained to Jon and Dany. “And I had to climb to the tower top every day, searching for spells of the necromancers. But there are none that can avail us against the black dread, so we have to bow to him and call him our king… Until such time when we find magic to thwart the beast.”

“She’s mad, Jon,” Dany noted.

Indeed, the lady had a perfectly wild look in her eyes. She appeared more deranged than undead Rhaegar.

“Like Cersei,” Jon replied with rekindled hope. “So maybe they were together, until the Lannister woman was taken elsewhere.”

But even if it were true, retrieving information about one madwoman’s whereabouts from another seemed impossible. Unless there was a daisy field nearby, in the middle of winter, where they could go to hunt for Cersei.

Jon doubted it.
After several descending flights of spiral steps, Lord Hightower came upon Jon and Dany’s encounter with a company of twenty soldiers, all armed with bright steel. His lordship had a greatsword on his back, stooping under its weight.

*What is it called? Vigilance?* Jon tried to remember the name of the Hightower ancestral blade.

*Well, I'm here, my lord. You weren't that watchful.*

Rhaegal’s snout immediately appeared against a high window, guarding his rider from the outside.

*I am made of brighter steel than they are carrying,* he seemed to suggest to Jon, nonsensically.

Dragons weren’t made of metal, no matter how noble, but of scales, and fire made flesh.

“Malora,” Hightower called the unknown lady with a modicum of true surprise and carefully masked worry. “How are you?” He paused, then barked nervously at Jon. “If you believe I’ll let you take my ill daughter hostage, you’re mad.”

“Who mentioned hostages?” Jon asked wholeheartedly. “We’re visiting. My wife wished to see Oldtown before the Great Council is held. And the young lady here was in danger next to that beacon when it lit on fire. Isn’t that something your southron knights do? Save the ladies in need? I’m respecting your customs. Won’t you spare some bread and salt for guests?”

“You said it lit on fire,” Hightower sounded extremely uncertain, giving a perplexed look to Rhaegal behind the dirty window pane. “Didn't you start it by invading my castle?”

“Rhaegal admired your imposing beacon,” Jon explained. “He likes fires. And in his joy he breathes it. But he did it from afar. He wouldn't have started a conflagration, and especially not of this magnitude, if the light for the sailors wasn't placed on top of the… piss of the alchemists,” Jon accused.

“I see,” Hightower said. “I warn you that I have every right to defend my own castle. The beacon has to be protected and remain lit at all times. Or all the ships would lose their way.”

“Wildfire is a dangerous substance, my lord,” Dany said with determination in her soft voice. “It's volatile.”

"My wife’s right," Jon said, "we were fortunate to notice the… the Lady Malora in time."

"And for that you have my gratitude," Hightower surprised Jon by a show of sincerity, hugging his mad daughter.

"Shouldn't everyone be escaping the castle?" Jon allowed himself to wonder.

Wildfire would spread from the top.

"No," Hightower shook his head, "my roof’s resistant to it. I had it lined with rocks brought from Dragonstone. When the substance burns out, my men will rearrange my defences. Meanwhile, would you both accompany me, if it please you? The supper should be ready."

The aged lordship led the way down with his deranged daughter on his arm.

After another flight of spiral stairs, Dany halted, pretending to kiss Jon’s ear when no one paid them any attention. “Rhaegal can find Cersei,” she murmured, “if you can think of her as your sister. As another dragon.”
That was impossible.

Arya and Sansa were Jon’s sisters.

He nonetheless wondered if Rhaegal could think of his sister without claws and wings on his own. Here somewhere, plucking the non-existent daisies.

The dragon’s brain churned like the cow’s many stomachs; ruminating. Sister.

*Your evil sister yes,* Jon let his thoughts run freely. *Green-eyed. Remember. She’s got some dragon blood. As much as me if the gossips are correct. Or as much as I used to have before Bowen Marsh and the others stabbed me.*

Supper turned out to be a copious meal with several courses, good wine from the Arbor and large, creamy cakes Jon found sickeningly sweet, but Dany seemed to appreciate, loading two on her plate.

He nevertheless forced himself to eat as much as Sam would, despite not being hungry at all.

*I’m not a wight, my lords.*

Hightower turned the food on his plate, not eating, perhaps pondering a difficult thought.

“*The Seneschal advised me to begin building a dragonpit in Oldtown,*” he finally announced. "To welcome and accommodate our future winged guests."

Rhaegal wanted to burn Jon’s host and the Seneschal, when he returned.

*Don’t.*

*Later?* Rhaegal questioned.

*I don’t know. Just don’t burn anyone now alright?*

“*But you didn’t do anything?*” Jon guessed.

“*It has become colder than usual,*” Hightower noted. “I had to rest since my return from Winterfell.”

“*The Seneschal has a peculiar smell,*” Dany warned. “*You’re wrong to trust his wisdom.*”

"*How do you know that?*" Jon blurted. “*Did Rickon tell you? He has seen this Seneschal. He said he stank.*"

“*He does. Of death. Of creatures from beyond the Wall. I met him in King’s Landing just before you arrived,*" his wife clarified, pushing away the plate with a half-eaten pastry. There was cream on her cheek. *"He applies perfume to hide his scent."

Jon cleaned Dany’s face with his fingers, realising that the castle suddenly smelled of old ice.

The odour possessed a treacherous, winter beauty.

"*But there are no creatures beyond the Wall,*" Hightower instructed in a fatherly tone. "*Only wildlings. Some giants. Maybe the last of the children. That’s all,*” he paused.

“*I do admire those Others you sent to attack us, by jumping out of a tree at your wedding,*” he continued sarcastically. “*I do wonder where your Northmen had seen armour from Yi Ti to inspire their disguise, and how they vanished in a blue smoke. This last feat is a necromancy art I would*
very much like to acquire.”

_Yi Ti. Where’s that? Far East..._ Jon cracked his head. _Do people wear armour over there?_

“But do not think that you fooled me for a single moment into believing that those white walkers were real,” Hightower finished his tirade.

Jon remembered Arya's story about Hightower having an army of false wights and Others terrorising his own lands, to keep his subjects in check.

”You can’t be more wrong, my lord,” he said darkly. ”We’re not as inspired in the North as you seem to be in the South. We’d never think of inventing the white walkers to sow fear among our people. Winter’s harsh enough without the cold winds blowing.”

”Stannis agrees with you, in part,” Hightower interrupted. “But I-”

”-Jon,” Dany called him with fear, beginning to shiver violently.

Rhaegal was gone and the window gaped open.

Blue mists drifted into the castle, one, two, three.

“Step aside, now!” Jon hurled at Hightower’s soldiers, stabbing the first mist just before it turned into an Other. He caught the second one halfway through its transformation.

But his best speed wasn’t enough.

By that time, the third nebula became a fully fledged white walker wearing that intricate grey and blue armour that grew into one with their bodies. Brandishing a crystal sword, he engaged Jon in an unexpected duel with a foul, strident cry. He wasn’t as skilled as the Night’s King, but he was very strong.

Hightower, his daughter and his men fled as Jon fought on, neither gaining nor losing ground. After an interminable exchange of blows, he spied an opening on the left side, went for it, struck, gutted the Other... and at the same time felt a searing cut, slicing his back in two from shoulder to hipbone.

The sudden pain caused him to drop his sword.

He breathed deeply; shaking, trembling, staggering from hurt.

The pain was excruciating.

He instinctively grasped his back with his sword hand. When he retrieved it, it was soaked in bright red blood he could feel gushing out of his body.

There was a fourth mist he hadn’t seen.

He wasn’t wearing chainmail or boiled leather, only wool. The blow was completely unexpected and it hurt more than all the knives in Castle Black... Yet his consciousness didn’t blur or disappear like on the occasion of his murder. He was keeping his wits.

Stumbling on his feet, he turned around to face the last enemy-

—and saw Dany holding a small black blade.

Bright blue crystals hovered around her silver head like a crown.
“My queen,” he said, admiring that he still had speech.

Dany tossed her weapon away and ran to him, checking the wound on his back. “You’re bleeding terribly,” she said.

“Like a pig for slaughter,” Jon quipped.

“How can you stand on your feet?” she questioned him; shocked.

Jon shrank on the floor gladly, feeling terrible. My blood isn’t black, thank the gods.

Dany was trying to bandage his wound with her cloak, but judging by the nervousness of her attempt she was failing. “I can’t stop it!” she exclaimed. “There’s so much blood.”

Red… like the three-headed dragon of the House Targaryen. Like Ghost’s eyes and the eyes of the trees...

“He’ll do it,” Jon remembered Rhaegal.

Dany ceased her efforts and opened the window to the newly returned dragon whose head and neck slithered into the room, thinning in order to do so, assuming the form of a giant snake.

Behind Jon’s back, Rhaegal breathed with force.

The pain was still there, but Jon could almost feel his flesh knitting back together; his blood seeping back into his body before it was too late.

Thank you, he told Rhaegal.

“Is it patched by green crystals now?” He asked Dany.

“All healed and clean,” Dany said, wrapping her bloodied cloak into a ball, wiping her hands into it, giving a clean edge to Jon to do the same with his sword hand.

From the sight of it, all blood he lost was bright red.

Good.

He reached for his back again and froze when checking the extension of his healed injury. That blow and the loss of blood should have killed him. The gash was very broad and long. A man couldn’t have survived it, but Jon did.

He wasn’t a wight, but what was he?

Dany gave him a worried look and he knew that she’d come to the same conclusion.

“I don’t know how this is possible, I swear-,” he began saying.


The dragon disappeared with the bundle.

Regaining composure, Dany handed Jon’s own furry cloak back to him. It had been left on his chair; neither bloodied nor marked by dragon magic. “Cover yourself until we fly away, will you?” she nudged him. “I’ll take it after.”
“What am I?”

“What weapon did you use to slay the last Other?” he asked, curious, and also to speak of something other than himself.

Dany retrieved a hairpin of dragonglass from the floor and showed it to him. On one side it was sharp like an eagle claw and on the other rounded, in form of a simple, drum-like castle tower. “A wedding gift,” she said, “from the wildlings I think, but I can’t be certain. We’ve got too many things from many people.”

Mother had stored everything for them in Winterfell. *For spring,* Lyanna had said.

Dany was shaking now worse than before. “I wasn’t as afraid of the Night’s King as I was of this foe. I knew I had only one try before he killed you or worse.”

“Well, it seems that I can't be killed the second time,” Jon retorted dryly.

“Excellent,” Dany approved wholeheartedly. “So they might stop haunting you if they see it’s useless.”

“I have to disappoint you,” Jon argued, “they’ll keep trying. This is the second time they came after us to kill me and kidnap you.”

*That’s why you can’t know what I’ll do.*

*You have to be terrified…*

*Will you forgive me?*

For the first time since he met Dany, Jon’s desire for her was irrelevant. Only love flooded his heart; disembodied and intense. He found subtle joy in it, and yet he wondered if the preponderance of the spirit meant he was dying. He tossed a quick glance at a mirror on Hightower’s wall.

Obviously, his eyes were still black, not blue like father’s had become…

*Our green-eyed sister…* Rhaegal put in.

*Not mine.*

“Where is she?” Jon asked aloud. Action was better than continuing to consider what he was.

*You’ll see,* the dragon boasted to Jon, inviting him to leave the castle.

Jon snatched Dany’s hand and led the way further down. They met a servant or two on the stairs, but saw no trace of the lord or his daughter.

A group of castle folk gathered before the gates of Hightower, on the little island where it stood.

“These white walkers were real,” a woman affirmed. “They killed old Toby and his son at the city gates, then came here and turned into mists to cross from the city to the island.”

“It’s surely not that bunch of crippled thieves led by little Leo Tyrell, no ser,” a man agreed with her.

“The lady has dragonglass,” a crone pointed at Dany’s hairpin. She had continued to hold it as a knife. Her lovely hair hung loose.
“Maesters say it’s useless-” the woman who spoke first continued.

“...Maesters went to the capital, the Citadel is empty,” a bald man preached. “I say that we should look for dragonglass in our kitchens and cellars and arm ourselves.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jon approved.

“Who are you?” the crone asked.

“Jon Snow,” Jon said quietly.

“King Jon, some people would say,” the old woman muttered quietly, not wanting to be heard far and wide. “Our lord doesn’t favour your cause. Why have you helped us by destroying the evil ice ghosts? You could have flown away.”

“I couldn’t have,” Jon corrected the false belief he was their selfless saviour. “They were after me.”  

After my wife.

There was one pattern that explained almost all the sudden apparitions of the Others in unlikely places. They didn’t want winged dragons. They were attracted by dragonblood men and women possessed. They must want it for some purpose.

That’s why the Night’s King drank Jon’s blood after his murder; only to be terribly disappointed, because it must have been wolf blood, devoid of any magic properties.

What does he want it for?

And how does he hope to use it now, after father’s death, knowing that it burns him and his kin, just like dragon fire?

The Others who had crossed the Wall as mists found and followed Rhaegar through the riverlands, according to the stories Jon was told.

The Night’s King had come in person to kidnap Dany at her wedding. And now his soldiers had found her again, despite the magic barrier at High Heart that should have kept them in the northern riverlands.

“What can we do?” a boy not older than Bran asked bravely.

Jon gestured North, “There’s a Wall up there, right? Help me defend it.”

They nodded and withdrew from his presence, one by one, perhaps awed by the magnitude of his request.

Jon felt guilty for asking them to leave their homes, and yet he had to ask. Every defender could make a difference in the end.

Maybe this boy here will slay the Night’s King and style himself Azor Ahai.

He felt even more guilty for not revealing his intentions to Dany.

He would use his wife as bait to face the Night’s King on his terms and defeat him. He wondered if the Others would then return to their valley and freeze themselves to death. Chance was they would. Just like living men fell into disarray when there was no government in the realm.

He hoped Daenerys wouldn’t hate him when she realised. He had kept his plan a secret from
everyone, even from Rhaegal; buried deeply in the most wolfish part of his mind.

Wishing for forgiveness he couldn't yet ask for, he kissed his wife. “I love you,” he said restlessly. “Never forget that.”

“I don’t mean to,” Dany said, breaking the kiss, drawing small circles of caresses on Jon’s cheeks and forehead with her tiny, supple hands.

“So warm,” he said, envying her, finding joy in the relaxing sensation she brought him.

“Because of you,” she claimed. “I was freezing, especially my feet and my hands, before we... before I kissed you beyond the Wall… Then I stopped being cold.”

“If you say so,” he said dryly, not quite believing.

He closed his eyes, opening his red ones, howling dissonantly to the new moon, wishing his wife were with him, and a wolf, like him, padding through the woods.

Howling, howling, he understood.

He had lost the time he thought he had due to new treason. Something or someone had revealed the weakness of Castle Black to the enemy.

Ghost smelled the change in the winter wind.

The Night’s King was seated in the mouth of a heart tree. From there, he could touch the minds of his soldiers. Ghost heard him whisper to the scattered vanguard of his army; to those among the Others who had hatched first, in late autumn, and crossed the long way from the Lands of Always Winter to the Wall. Those that roamed close to it, commanding and amassing the hosts of the slain, increasing their number whenever they came across a living soul. The Night’s King ordered them to march on the seat of the Night's Watch in great haste... As soon as possible.

Ghost howled and howled and howled.

“We have to fly back,” Jon told Dany. “The Others are attacking Castle Black!”

“But not without Cersei Lannister,” he added stubbornly.

Jon didn’t come to Oldtown for food nor to meet Hightower’s children.

“She’s here,” Jon said in a trance.

Rhaegal took them flying into the dense heart of the city.

“Breathe deeply. Close your eyes and mouth. Now!” Jon instructed Dany, when he uncovered where they were heading from the dragon’s mind.

“Why-” Dany’s question was swallowed by the impact with hard soil and the taste of muddy ground in Jon’s mouth. He hadn’t shut it in time.

Rhaegal burrowed the ground like a proficient… fire-wyrm of Old Valyria, in search of precious ores...

Hightower had Cersei in a special dungeon built under the river Honeywine, just before it flowed into the bay of Whispering Sound. There was probably a passage for gaolers bringing food that led to it, but Jon had no more time for further searches.
Dragons… shouldn’t be able to burrow… he considered.

*Or so the maesters think,* Rhaegal thought, disgusted, passing on to Jon his extreme displeasure with the order of supposedly wise men dedicated to acquiring knowledge.

*Are the maesters evil?* Jon wondered with his eyes closed, struggling not to swallow mud plastered on his face when he had to breathe. Maester Luwin wasn’t… Sam had made friends in the Citadel.

Rhaegal refused to answer, digging like a mole until he was able to snatch up a bent, wrinkled woman between his claws and withdraw from the subterranean prison to a small clearing next to the river.

There was seaweed in Cersei’s golden hair, and her beauty was as vanished as her mind.

Yet she had the good sense, or just enough dragonblood in her veins, to begin climbing up Rhaegal’s ever growing leg and shoulder, and onto his back.

“A daisy, my lord, my lady, I need to find one for the grave of my poor son,” she whined as she clambered. “He choked on a pigeon pie. I told him not to kill birds and cats when he was small, but he wouldn’t listen.”

Jon’s guts churned when the Lannister woman came close to him. “Will you just…” he asked of his wife, “just make her sit farther in the back, please, and hold her there if necessary.”

He said he would free Cersei Lannister, not that he would cherish and respect his *half-aunt*. A man didn’t have to love all his family. Catelyn Stark was a proof of this where Jon was concerned, and Jon mostly corresponded to her less than charitable feelings.

On other days in his past, he’d secretly wished that Catelyn loved him as a son.

Jon, a boy without a mother…

Mother… Have you seen Father? Will you stay alive for *me* as you promised?

“Where do we leave her?” Dany asked, taking Jon’s muddy cloak off his back, shaking it, wrapping herself up against the unearthly cold.

Cersei sat behind Dany, of her own accord, in a most ladylike manner.

Jon’s brow furrowed. Not in Winterfell. He wouldn’t be able to stand it. It was fortunate that the Lannisters had to stay in Wintertown for the wedding. Nor in Casterly Rock. She was abducted from there.

There was a safe place Jon hadn’t seen yet, though he should have. A castle that could move from place to place, and only show itself to men when it wanted to be found. Lord Reed had promised to tell Jon all he knew about the origin of the Others as soon as Jon paid him a visit after the wedding… The Neck was on the way north so he and Danny wouldn’t lose time. *We’ll just dump her there.*

*Will this magic castle let me find it?* Rhaegal wondered vaguely, imagining Greywater Watch as a hostile fort. *Or will it keep me out, like your Wall?*

*You're not a monster,* Jon told Rhaegal.

*No, I’m not,* Rhaegal answered in clear words, not accompanied with any image. He didn’t sound human though. He was a dragon. No more and no less. Dragons were perhaps a separate kind. Like
wolves and lions…. Or, more aptly, like men or giants… they seemed to be more than animals.

“Will we arrive in time?” Dany asked what Jon feared.

Jon opened his wolf eyes and realised he should go straight to the Wall without stopping.

“We’ll arrive, all of us”, Jon replied nervously. “We’ll get rid of her later. It’s all we can do.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Daenerys tried to comfort him.

But I should have! Jon cursed inwardly, angrily.

He wondered if this was how father felt when he rode to the Trident. Failing in his duty against his plans and expectations…

No.

No.

Rhaegal flew faster than the storm and…

...called Viserion and… and his rider, without Jon ever ordering him to do so, urging them to fly to the Wall, to Castle Black, now. The Kingslayer and his dragon were closer, exploring the night clouds between the Iron Islands and the Stony Shore…

It was logical, maybe, but Jon found himself unable to swallow his pride.

No, Jon commanded Rhaegal. I don’t want them. I can do this by myself. It’s only the vanguard, the wights. We’ve defeated them in Eastwatch. We will call Lannister in the end if we need him…

When and if Jon had to face... Drogon as his enemy.

He wished it wouldn’t come to that.

Maybe the Others will take Stannis and the beast will pick a different rider.

Except that Jon couldn’t see how the Others could possibly vanquish Stannis on Drogon’s back, nor could he imagine Stannis setting forth on foot, to go beyond the Wall and challenge the white walkers and their sovereign like Azor Ahai reborn....

Like Rhaegar had done without taking the black.

Like Jon would do again.

He wouldn’t wait for the main force of the Night’s King army to reach the Wall...

Rhaegal surprised Jon by rejecting his commands with his newly acquired ability of clear speech. I’m no monster and I’m not your horse either, the dragon boomed. You don’t own me. I too know what is good. Our white brother has to come.

“The shadows dance under the sea,” Cersei Lannister sang madly, pulling her hairs out and throwing them off dragonback, like strings of gold that drifted in the overwhelming darkness. Daenerys had to grab her and hold her in place, or the former queen would would have fallen off Rhaegal as a consequence of her expansive gestures. “Oh I know, I know…” Cersei trilled shrilly.

If Jaime Lannister showed up, at least Jon would be rid of the madwoman sooner. The downside
was, both golden twins might have some dragonblood, so the Night’s King could want to capture them, if he sensed it. Jon didn’t want to give any advantage to his enemy by allowing this.

What does he want the dragonblood for?

He breathed deeply, in and out, hugging Rhaegal’s thick, spiked neck.

The gash on his back hurt terribly, despite being stitched together by dragon crystals. It would be extremely painful to wield the sword. He should… he should stay on Rhaegal’s back as long as he could.

“Under the sea the sky is green… oh I know...” Cersei roared.

Jon covered his ears to stop hearing the bloody song.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Jaime


Jaime V

Chapter Notes

Thanks TopShelfCrazy for helping with this rather difficult chapter )))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jaime

“Where are we going?” Brienne asked with that serious, suspicious voice from when they first met, and she didn’t trust him at all.

Except that there was no longer any contempt in her prudent attitude, and her muscled arms were wrapped tightly around his waist. He couldn’t feel her body through the blue chainmail shirt she wore, but since last night, well, the last sleep they had in the night never-ending, he had a distinct impression that her impeccably flat and taut belly had become slightly rounded.

His chest filled with childlike glee that he would be welcome to witness every step on the path of becoming a father, that Cersei never allowed him.

Would that I could answer your question, my love.

Where are we indeed going, Viserion?

The dragon wouldn't say.

“We should perhaps be returning to King's Landing, for Tyrion,” Brienne continued talking with the voice of wisdom, sounding like Jaime's late mother.

He loved her all the more.

“What’s wrong with a little flying?” he asked carelessly, despite intimately sharing the same doubts as his wife about the rapidly changed and utterly unknown direction of their flight.

He’d only wanted to show Brienne the Stony Shore in moonlight, remembering it from a rare expedition in childhood, when Lord Tywin decided it was time for his heir to endure sea travel in piss poor weather. Jaime was sent up North on a galley from Arbor that traded the least noble of their wines to the uncouth Northmen, who couldn't tell the difference...

Viserion, where in seven hells are we headed??

Normally, it was impossible to make the white dragon shut up, but now he was silent as a fish. Jaime sometimes wondered if the black and green ones were as talkative. The baby one just screeched and puffed smoke, mingled with weak, yellow flames.

The night was so dark that Jaime became thoroughly disorientated.

A blind, toothless lion.

A cripple.
The scabbard in cheerful Lannister colours banged on his leg from ungodly dragonspeed, causing him pain. In Casterly Rock, he'd retrieved in haste one of the fancy, old sheaths that had been used for Brightroar before it was lost, needing it to carry Blackfyre.

*The sword of Aegon the Conqueror.*

The famous blade was too big to be worn comfortably on the hip, even for a tall man like him. But Jaime couldn’t carry it on his back with Brienne seated behind, could he? It would be most improper to offend his wife.

Blackfyre was just a little bit longer than what he preferred for a sword...

*Tempting.*

If he had a hand, he could wield the legendary weapon to a yet unseen level of perfection.

But he was a hand short, and Blackfyre was only given to him for safekeeping.

He shouldn't dream about regaining his old prowess in battle; it was pointless.

Yet he dreamed, unable to cut the wings of his imagination.

After many strong strokes of dragon wings, air felt sharper in Jaime’s lungs.

As in… Winterfell.

“I think we're going north,” he blurted.

“Think? Don’t you know as his rider?” Brienne shut up brusquely, breathing heavily. “It hurts,” she was barely able to form words.

Jaime felt it too. A hand squeezing his throat with sharp claws.

The darkness around them was so thick that it could be cut with a razor.

*Viserion! We have to get out of wherever here is!*

Instead of answering, the dragon soared up, and up, and up. Until Jaime could see the stars; large, bright lights in the overarching darkness.

The invisible grip on Jaime lessened. He felt as if he'd escaped death by a hair’s breath.

“What was that?” he wondered aloud in shock.

Brienne was panting.

“Are you alright?” he queried tenderly.

“I’ll be so sick,” she muttered, gasping for fresh air, burying her nose into his shoulder.

Her face and her hands were freezing.

*You alright?* Viserion asked, breaking his silence.

*I’m fine. Thanks for asking,* Jaime retorted, offended. *This was your fault. Why did you take us here? Did the invisible monster try to kill you too?*
No... Worse.

What can be worse? Jaime wouldn’t let the matter go.

Becoming a firewyrm, Viserion affirmed with precision and determination.

Jaime was at loss. I'll ask Tyrion what you mean.

Isn't it obvious? The animal sounded offended like a fellow man.

What was obvious to dragons wasn’t necessarily self-evident to humans, Jaime knew.

“It felt cold like the Shadow,” Brienne whispered warily.

Jaime remembered fainting from the Shadow’s chilly breath like a blushing maid, in a temple in Asshai. Before he could concur with his wife, the night suddenly lost the peaceful silence it had on Stony Shore.

The stars faded, left behind.

Viserion plunged into a sharp descent towards a high, unfamiliar structure, and the sound of many shrill horns and shrieking cries.

A battle.

Below them, a large cloud of bluish fog drifted close to the frozen soil, emerging from the bottom of the besieged fort they hurtled towards. It increased in size as the dragon approached, looming taller and taller; until Jaime could see it was made of ice.

The Wall.

He hadn’t seen it before.

Dracaerys, Viserion thought about the blue nebula.

Jaime wondered what that meant, and if it was a Targaryen girl name, like Daenerys. Sounds fine to me, he mused.

A powerful wave of fire from dragon’s maw engulfed the odd, blue fog, dissolving it into thin air.

Not a name, Jaime realised, chilled to the bone, studying the battlefield.

On top of the Wall, men clashed with wights who had scaled it using sturdy-looking, silver-coloured ladders. The Others stood beyond it, seven hundred feet below; urging the slain to clamber with grand gestures of bony, ugly, blue and grey arms.

Dracaerys, Jaime targeted the white walkers with his thought.

Landing with his paws on the Wall, Viserion breathed fire at the snarks and grumkins, but the flames only hit the ladders of the slain, stopping at the northern edge of the Wall’s icy parapet, hovering over it in tongues of yellow, orange and red; unable to drift any further.

Viserion’s fire couldn't cross the Wall, just like the dragon himself would suffer harm and perish if he tried.

Many wights and quite a few defenders were caught by the burning inferno, falling over the Wall.
The living left the world screaming, and the dead without a word.

The slain continued climbing. The surviving men fell back to regroup, looking at Viserion and Jaime with unhidden reticence and fear.

*Damn it,* Jaime thought.

The wights advanced on the entire front of the Wall, from many different ladders, while the living hesitated to rejoin the battle.

*Tail,* Jaime commanded. *Get rid of them.*

Viserion swept left and right with his long, spiked tail, cleaning the Wall of the freshly arriving enemies.

*Up you go now!*

Viserion took off.

“Stand your ground!” Jaime yelled at the defenders. “We’ll be more careful with fire from now on.” *Now that I know what can’t be done.*

“Form the ranks!” The beloved voice of wisdom urged, tying Jaime's stomach in a knot.

Brienne had imperceptibly *dismounted,* of her own will obviously, and began organising the men after Viserion’s outburst.

Jaime wanted to join her, but he noticed a cruel and disordered melée raging in the yard of Castle Black. Blue fog was pouring out of the base of the Wall, materialising into white walkers that began cutting down the living left and right with mighty crystal swords.

*Blo...


melée of men and fully formed Others who weren't content to remain mists. “Get out of here!” He urged.

Men to his left obeyed a dragonrider.

Viserion eagerly breathed fire to that side.

The Others screamed as they died. In that, they resembled mortal men, not their undead slaves. Not everyone was fast enough…

The dragon accidentally roasted some of the living. The rest understood Jaime’s command better, withdrawing farther.

Jaime’s stomach turned with sickness. It was the best he could do, and yet not good enough.

Dracaerys, Viserion thought cheerfully as the piercing cries of dying Others hurt Jaime's ears.

Back up now, he whispered to his dragon.

He had to check on Brienne before more blue fog appeared.

The dragon fluttered up.

A dozen of newly raised, sturdy, silvery ladders hung from the Wall, sticking to the giant ice blocks like skin adhering to a body. The wave of wights advanced doggedly, with the patience and endurance of those who had nothing to lose, being dead to start with.

The defenders were equally tenacious now.

No wonder when you're leading them, my love.

Brienne duelled two foes, next to a fat man in armour from some house in the Vale. Beth slapped a corpse's head with baby wings, puffing smoke at it.

Jaime didn’t remember the baby dragon flying with them to the Stony Shore, but she’d probably been hanging on Brienne’s back, curled and quiet in order to look like a piece of his wife's blue, scaled armour.

The deadmen avoided Beth’s smoky breath like poison. Occasional contact seemed to hurt them, but without burning them into nothingness like fire from a grown dragon.

Viserion roared powerfully. Defenders made room for him, putting enough distance between them and the beast.

All important lessons are hard to learn, aren't they?

Lessons? Viserion didn't understand the word. Dragons… they didn't acquire knowledge. They discovered what they knew or should have known.

It's the same thing, Viserion. It's called learning.

“Mists, mists, Mance!” the wildling kept shouting, running out of the tunnelled gateway with a long obsidian knife in his right hand. He looked mad, with his wild strawberry blond hair half-frozen.

Jaime envied him the hand, not the weapon, nor the size of his cock, if his loud boasting at the
wedding in Winterfell had any base in reality.

“They are tricking us to sneak in!” The wildling claimed.

“Fall back! To Tormund! Stop them!” A young voice boomed from the tunnel, almost as strong as Robert Baratheon’s.

Aegon? Is it?

An extremely dishevelled and probably decimated vanguard of defenders came out of the gateway, chasing another wave of mists that had outsmarted them.

Instead of becoming corporeal, this time the blue wisps of deadly fog glided smoothly south, moving unbelievably fast in the sweeping winter wind.

“Cut them down! Don't let them leave this place alive!” Aegon called to his men, but Dawn passed through a mist as if cutting water water, unable to harm its unearthly beauty or stay its deadly course…

Unlike dragonfire.

Jaime dismounted. I'll stay here, he told Viserion. You catch those mists. Only them.

Dracaerys, he heard the dragon’s torrid thought, smelled the sulphur raining down, heard the screams.

He didn’t dare look down or count the accidental human victims of Viserion’s all-engulfing breathing.

I tried. The dragon said from afar. It was that or let them go where I couldn’t find them.

Right, Jaime thought pitifully.

He was no better than Aerys, burning them all; the guilty and the innocent.

Standing next to Brienne, Jaime drew the sword of Aegon the Conqueror with shaky left arm.

He sweated despite the cold, half-expecting everyone to laugh at his extremely poor left-handed swordsmanship as he attacked the closest wight; tall, very thin and bony.

Even with the wrong hand, he was still victorious in four or five poorly executed blows. His brow bled slightly from a small cut he sustained, but he was otherwise unscathed.

I'll never be what I was. I can pretend all I wish. I can have any sword I like. It’ll never be the same.

Unhappy, he advanced, disposing of another wight, painfully aware of the lack of refinement in his every move. He fought like an untrained woodcutter or clansman with an axe… He wouldn’t even qualify as a modestly trained man-at-arms in some rickety castle in the riverlands… Freys fought with more elegance…

In a fey mood, wanting to cut something into shreds, Jaime attacked one of the ladders. The silvery stuff they were made of gave way to Valyrian steel, tumbling down with all the wights.

Falling didn't kill the dead. They got up and redressed the ladder.

Jaime turned back and froze.
He had left his wife behind in his helpless anger.

Brienne was repelling a mist that tried to engulf Beth, chasing the fog-hidden enemy away as if he was an annoying fly. Her longsword had been lined with blue dragon crystals from Beth's tiny maw, so it should kill them.

*Right?*

Jaime panicked, leaping forward.

Before he joined his wife, Brienne dealt a mortal blow to the mist, precisely in the moment when it began to change shape becoming a white walker.

Of course she could to it.

Jaime’s heart skipped a beat nonetheless.

New flapping of great wings joined the mounting cacophony of battle sounds, rapidly closing on Castle Black. Jaime wondered if they were black or green.

Viserion roared. *Brother,* he thought.

_Not mine in any case.* Jaime disagreed. *My only brother is very small, has no tail and could be dying of greyscale right now. Perhaps the green one is yours.*

The black one didn't look like anyone's relative. He was a creature for himself. *A lonely monster.*

Viserion hesitated, not knowing what to say about Drogon, chasing mists with his fiery breath. *My oldest brother is... black. Are all monsters black?*

While fighting another wight, Jaime challenged Viserion's condescending attitude. *You wish he were a good dragon, right? Guess what, not all siblings have a good heart. Some are wicked. Even if you love them.*

From a corner of an eye, involved in a duel, Jaime witnessed Rhaegal flying to Castle Black in frenzy, landing briefly on one of the crumbling, wooden towers with his rider.

Vaulting, Rhaegar's son paid no heed to the fleeing mists. Fast and furious, Jon directed his dragon to stick his nose into the tunnelled gateway under the Wall, and fill it with green and bronze flames.

*Purifying,* Viserion explained to Jaime with admiration for his *sibling,* suggesting in images that snarks and grumkins wouldn't come in again until the passage cooled down to their liking.

Which would take a while.

*Why didn’t you do that?* Jaime wondered.

*I saved my fire for mists.* The reply sounded both insecure and insincere, though Jaime couldn’t pinpoint why.

*Isn’t your fire... limitless?* He questioned.

The dragon gave no answer.

Rhaegar’s son and his dragon rose into the air, facing the Wall roughly halfway its height, some three hundred feet above ground in Castle Black.
**Why? What's he waiting for?**

The latest round of wight-fighting brought Jaime and Brienne together to the outer parapet of the Wall. His brow had stopped bleeding, but one of his ears hurt from another little wound.

Brienne was fine, less reckless in her attacks.

And having two hands.

The battle abated. The last wights were being taken care of. Men began burning all undead remains with torches; hands and legs and other body parts, big and small, that still twitched and moved. The ladders gaped empty, hung on the Wall on silvery hooks.

*There were so many. Why stop now?*

With utmost curiosity, Jaime looked down, over the Wall.

The Others gazed up peacefully, no longer urging forward the slain. Their soldiers lost all interest in conquering Castle Black, sliding down the ladders. Marching disorderly into the forest, the wights began abandoning the field in small groups.

The white walkers crumpled, *dwindled*, turning into *mists*, rising …

Halfway the height of the Wall, they melted into it, vanishing…

...passing through the Wall, emerging on the other side where Jon was waiting for them... morphing into mighty, wingless warriors, *able* to fight in the air.

Rhaegar’s son challenged them wildly, without care for his own survival, like a young king from a song. His dull, grey sword was deadly for them. Like Blackfyre, like dragonfire, despite not being made of Valyrian steel. Jaime was amazed that none of the Others managed to cut Jon, not even a little, despite his carelessly daring moves.

The green dragon also fought, with tail and claws. When he found a good aim, he breathed fire on the newly *porous* part of the Wall. But the medicine that cleansed the gateway couldn’t repair this breach, done by…

*Magic. What else?* Jaime was forced to consider.

Viserion, almost done with his mist hunt, suggested that fire couldn’t melt or change the Wall. It was solid.

*Help.* Jaime said, wished, commanded.

His dragon was sad like the world.

*Are you certain?*

*Yes!* Jaime insisted, waiting for Viserion to pick *him* and Brienne up as well so that they would continue fighting from his back. It was the most logical step. The fight on the Wall was done for.

The Others continued drifting slowly into Castle Black through the Wall. Five or six now circled the green dragon and his rider. Soon there would be more.

But what was evident to humans wasn’t obvious to dragons…
Viserion ignored both Jon and Rhaegal and even Brienne and Jaime.

Spiralling around his body axis, he flew straight into the compromised, permeable portion of the Wall with that ungodly speed he used to fly for leisure, fooling around with Jaime...

Pain swept through Jaime, hurting his body and spirit, searing and terrible, though it wasn’t truly his. His vision blackened. He had to grasp Brienne to continue standing.

*Viserion!*

His dragon was in mortal pain.

“Viserion!” Brienne cried out.

Beth whimpered, flying down from her shoulder.

Viserion’s huge body hung helplessly from the Wall.

He had stuck his right wing into it to make it impervious.

*Get it out!* Jaime pleaded.

The battle was dwindling. The last remaining wights strolled idly into the haunted forest beyond the Wall, ignoring their masters. The white walkers were left alone in the field. Staring upward, they raised their ugly arms and crystal swords in a threatening manner, but abandoned all intent of crossing.

*For now,* Viserion claimed in pain.

Aegon and the insufferable wildling singer-king persecuted the last Others from the mêlée in Castle Black. Rhaegal and Jon were victoriously finishing their air battle.

No more mists came through past Viserion's wing.

*Get your wing out! Free yourself!* Jaime ordered again, trying to be as specific as possible in his commands so that they couldn’t be misunderstood. *Why don’t you?*

Nothing.

*Can’t …* the dragon whined miserably.

Jaime gave Blackfyre to Brienne. “Can you hold it for me?”

An empty ladder was hooked on the Wall between him and his wife. Jaime yanked it up. The silvery substance it was made of was slimy and jelly-like, sticking to his fingers; more revulsive to touch than fish or a gruel bug.

*Colder than ice,* he mused, lowering the ladder down the Wall on the side where Viserion was stuck. His only hand stiffened from it. The disgusting stuff was also bloody cold.

“Thank you, my love,” he told Brienne, retrieving Blackfyre, hanging it on his hip again.

He checked that the hooks were well attached to the Wall. Gripping the slimy rope of the ladder as best he could, he began descending.

“Why-” she began saying-
“I need to go to him, to undo this,” Jaime yelled, clambering down the flimsy, repellent and slippery siege tool of the Others, advancing very slowly towards his dragon, captured in the Wall.

He wouldn't survive the fall.

From nearby, he could see clearly that roughly a fourth of Viserion’s right wing from the tip had become one with the monumental ice masonry; completely embedded in it.

*Cut it, Viserion pleaded. You have to cut it.*

*I won’t,* Jaime responded with indignation.

*You have to.*

Another tiny portion of dragon’s wing was slowly being sucked into the Wall before Jaime's green eyes.

Jaime swallowed hard. *There has to be another way.*

*There isn’t.* Viserion opposed him weakly, showing Jaime a series of images from the time when he had found and recognised Jaime as his rider for… for being a… a peculiar *cripple.*

*What are you saying?* Jaime was mortally offended now. *That we fit together, so you should lose a wing for us to be equal? There has to be another way.*

*There isn’t…* Viserion opinionated sadly.

Beth cried, seated between the dragon’s horns, spilling real tears like a human baby.

“Beth also believes that there’s no other way, Jaime,” his wife yelled from above with the ruthless voice of reason.

*So the dragon baby speaks as well.* He hadn't been aware of it.

And Brienne was right, as usual.

Jaime closed his eyes and landed a blow with his left arm on the precious white and golden wing. The dragon exhaled dirty, muddy-looking smoke from pain.

If Jaime had a right hand, he would have severed the embedded segment of the wing in one seamless stroke…

He had to strike it four or five times to liberate Viserion, hurting him more with every blow. Hurting himself as well.

Finally, Viserion began falling. He tried to soften his landing by flapping his left wing, flying clumsily, but the pain over the lost part of his right one was so great that he was only partially successful, hitting the ground harshly in the end.

*Are you still there?* Jaime asked with worry, clinging to the sticky ladder.

Bile was in his throat, and he felt unable to move.

*Here.* The dragon replied, pained, but decidedly alive.

*Good.*
Jaime climbed back up slower than a snail, needing his wife to forget the business with the dragon.

*Thank you,* Viserion said from below.

*For what? Crippling you?* Jaime was cynical. *I'm expert in it, it seems.*

*Better than being a block in the Wall.*

*How’s your wing, in truth?*

*How’s your right hand, in truth?* The dragon asked, angry and sad over his loss at the same time.

Jaime knew the sensation too well.

*Can you fly at all?* Jaime asked… gently.

*Can you wield a sword?* Viserion struck back.

*Do you regret it?* Jaime wondered carefully.

*Of course I do!* The dragon was adamant.

*Would you do it again?*

There was no answer.

*Why did you do it?*

*You told me to. You’re my rider, remember.*

*If I told you to kill yourself, you’d do it?*

*If you demanded it with enough insistence, yes.*

*Gods,* Jaime thought. *Don’t kill yourself if I ask it of you alright? It’s a command I give you now for the future.*

*I’ll try to remember.*

When Jaime was almost back on the Wall, not far from Brienne, he spotted Daenerys in the wooden tower of Castle Black where Jon had landed before flying into battle. He had left his wife in a place of safety. *How convenient,* Jaime thought dryly.

*Would that I could.*

Preventing Brienne from fighting was impossible. She would hate him for it.

Jaime looked at Daenerys with a sense of unfairness and resignation.

But seeing what she was doing, his only hand began to shake.

Daenerys was trying to stop Cersei from dancing with Patchface, Lady Shireen’s fool.

Jon had kept his word…

And Jaime’s sister wouldn’t listen.
Cersei never obeyed.

Maybe she would bed this fool in her madness, if Tyrion’s claim about the Moon Boy was true.

“The shadows dance under the sea...” two fools sang tenderly, embracing each other like old friends. “Oh I know, I know! Oh how do I know!”

They would have fallen off the tower if Daenerys didn't hold Cersei back.

It was too much.

Jaime opened his mouth in shock. The sticky ladder wriggled out of his hand, betraying him. He grabbed the edge of the Wall and remained hanging. Brienne would give him a hand soon.

In place of his wife's beautiful blue eyes, Jon’s black ones appeared above him, and Jaime understood.

It was to be expected. Like this, Jon wouldn’t reverse his late father’s judgment that had left Jaime’s head on his shoulders; yet he could let justice be served as he saw fit.

Jaime had hoped… he had hoped he would be a father again.

Jon’s expression was cold and proud as he savoured his revenge. Ice melted under Jaime’s only hand. Soon he would lose his grip. Brienne wouldn’t make it to him in time… And even if she did, he couldn’t imagine her stabbing anyone in the back to help another man, and much less Jon, whom she considered to be the rightful king.

She wouldn’t do it.

Not even for love.

“Jaime!” Brienne called to him gently. "Don't move brusquely. Stay calm."

Or would she?

Perhaps she was simply unaware of what would happen, in her innocence. She'd see him falling soon enough.

“Your Grace! Is my husband alright? I can't see very well from your cloak,” she said with extreme trepidation.

Of course she was beginning to understand the odds. She was often as clever as she was honest.

To Jaime’s utmost surprise, Jon offered him his right arm.

“Take it, Lannister, before I change my mind,” he said coldly, resembling Ned Stark.

Without thinking, Jaime reached for the proffered arm with his maimed right arm, expecting to be pushed down with force, clinging nonetheless to the absurd hope for the contrary.

The wolf king pulled him up unceremoniously, yanking his stump without hesitation, hauling him over the parapet.

Saved, Jaime fell face down. His nose began to bleed from grazing the stone rubble spilled over the ice pavement, scattered on top of the Wall to make it walkable.
He stood up, wiping his nose into his sleeve, and faced Rhaegar's boy.

*My nephew. If Aerys was indeed my father.*

The notion felt completely ludicrous. *What a family.*

"With you dead, Viserion might pick Brynden Tully as his rider," Jon commented dryly. "He loves me as much as Lady Catelyn did. Maybe more."

Jaimy laughed involuntarily at the dark quip, though he was pretty certain that Rhaegar’s son didn’t want to trade jokes with him.

In this, he was right.

Jon’s face thinned and darkened. His gaze wandered from Jaime’s crippled hand to his healthy, long legs. The look on his face hadn’t been the thirst for revenge.

It was an expression of pain.

*Right. I know. I know. I know. The boy. I know. Don’t think that I don’t know.*

*The boy, the boy, the boy.*

*The things I did for love.*

*Or for having shit for honour.*

The conversation died.

Jaime couldn’t say it, couldn’t voice his regret, couldn’t even nod stupidly to show respect for Jon’s pain.

Brienne was next to the two men now, *nodding* wisely; as if she had always known that Jon was noble enough to help Jaime, while her husband had been a fool to doubt it.

"Jaime," she kissed him soundly on his mouth, not caring for decorum.

Jaime sneaked his crippled arm around her, enjoying profoundly the show of his love in the open, for all to see.

Not in dark corridors and crumbling keeps where no one was watching.

Except innocent little boys who liked climbing and dreamed of becoming knights.

"Was she always like this?" Jon inquired all of a sudden, gesturing at Cersei's mad hopping and screaming with Patchface.

"No," Jaime shook his head. "She hated being taught to sing and dance and please. She would have preferred learning the sword."

Jon tilted his shaggy head. "I wouldn't have thought," he announced.

Jaime shrugged. "Most men wouldn't," he paused. "Shall I get you rid of my sister's adorable presence?" He finally murmured as contritely as he was able towards Jon. "Or will you keep her as a guarantee of my continued good behaviour?"
Before Jon could answer, Viserion rose like phoenix from his ashes. Flying clumsily and slower than usual, he grabbed Jaime and Brienne in his paws. Putting them on his back against their will, he took them away from Cersei, the Wall and the young king.

*Where now, you fool of a dragon?* Jaime complained, while being… happy with Viserion's latest whim.

The sky meant freedom from his past and temporary evasion of the duty to care for his sister. Both were appealing.

Beth was on Viserion’s giant shoulder, croaking merrily.

*The boy.* Viserion thought loudly.

*What bloody boy?*

Brienne was quiet.

"You're not asking where we're going?" he inquired, turning around to look at his wife.

Brienne's complexion seemed slightly green, like Rhaegal's.

"I do hope nowhere I particular," she replied. "All this was so sudden and violent. The battle, the flight to it, Viserion’s injury, the danger to yourself..." She shared her troubles with him in a shaky voice, surrendering to her fears, if only for a little.

Her bravery was true and never far away. Jaime adored her for it. For all of it, her confidence and doubt combined.

"I hope I’m not bleeding between my legs," she finally confessed, blushing.

"You’re not," Jaime reassured her. "It was just a bit of exercise. Women don't have to lay down all the time when they are with child. As long as they get enough rest."

Cersei always ignored that last prudent recommendation from Maester Pycelle

And if she could dance all night long when she was carrying Joffrey, then Brienne could endure some fighting with her physical prowess, uncommon in a woman.

"The view of the sea has always calmed me," Brienne announced. "Do you think Viserion took us here to help me rest? Look!"

The sea glittered and trembled in the moonlight. Jaime thought they had flown east.

*The shivering sea…*

The shadows from Cersei's song must have been dancing under its tumultuous surface, making the waves roll.

The wind was tempestuous, playing with… with a *ship* that was about to dock on a pier made of rough stones, on a large island.

"Skagos!" sailors claimed.

The boy was seated on the prow, next to his servant, the pale giant.
That boy. Viserion was proud of himself; fulfilling the latest order of his rider despite his new wing impediment.

"No, Brienne," Jaime said sadly. "He didn't bring us here to help you recover. He brought us here because he thought I commanded it by thinking of… by remembering the boy…"

Brandon Stark looked up, giving Jaime a sad look that burned him stronger than the cold, proud pain exhibited by his older brother. “Could you take me to Greywater Watch?” he demanded with sorrowful blue eyes, wide and staring.

Where is that? Jaime didn't have a faintest notion of where that watch was. Grey Watch? Water Watch? His education in Casterly Rock must have been woefully incomplete, or he had daydreamed of Cersei more often than he thought. "Yes," he said firmly. "I can do that if that's what you wish."

He hoped that Viserion had enough strength to bring little Brandon where he wanted to go. And the knowledge to find the place.

A dragon can find any-one, any-thing, any-place, Viserion boasted, trying to hide his pain. Jaime felt it nonetheless.

A dragon is not a man, the non-manly creature insisted.

Fine, Jaime thought. I meant no offence.

"You stay here," the boy instructed the giant. "The captain will return for Arya and her friend to Braavos when this ship is better armed and manned."

"Hodor," his servant said simple-mindedly.

Jaime could imagine the pale giant accompanying Cersei and Patchface in their infernal song about those shadows under the sea.

Brienne tried to dismount, presumably to carry the boy up as a true knight.

"No, Brienne," Jaime stopped her, sounding like Maester Pycelle to his own ears, "you can't be carrying heavy burdens now."

Cersei didn't have to ignore that advice, because she had never lifted anything heavier than a hair brush since she became queen.

Jaime dismounted and hauled the boy on his back, avoiding looking at him directly, evading the judgment.

When he was satisfied that the boy held onto his shoulders, while he secured firmly his limp, thin legs without muscles, Jaime announced: "The dragon will pick us up now."

Come on, Viserion. You can do this if I can.

Viserion became extremely petulant while obeying his rider, suggesting that he could have lifted Brandon on his own.

I know, Jaime said. It's just that he can't climb until he finds a good position on your back once you pull him up. He could fall.

Again.
Ah. He can't? Viserion's mind went blank from utter lack of understanding of humans.

*Shut up, dragon*, Jaime retorted, helping Brandon take a seat behind a tall, white spike, pondering the shit he used to have for honour.

Bran stared at his useless legs, and then at the dark indigo blue, starry sky above.

Vast and deaf to pain.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :-))
Lyanna IV

Chapter Notes

Thanks TopShelfCrazy ))

See the end of the chapter for more notes


Lyanna

“A very old woman the bastard took from Winterfell, you say?” Lyanna asked Steelshanks, stirring her milk with a wooden spoon. “Alive in Dreadfort?”

Little Robb interrupted the new turn of conversation that accompanied the breaking fast by scurrying through the Winterfell’s Great Hall and bursting out into the snowy yard. The boy ran extremely fast for a toddler, despite being swaddled in grey and white furs.

Rickon came after him, with a savage battle cry, brandishing an oaken stick. It was still much better than the huge wildling knife he had been using as a child toy.

Catelyn’s uncle was the last one to appear; barely able to catch up.

Lyanna laughed.

The world might end soon, yet the children continued playing.

She was sorry for Brynden.

But if Blackfish couldn’t be reassured that no one in Winterfell had any intention to harm future Lord Robert Stark, nor to usurp his rightful claim, it was his own choice to continue running after his great-nephew to assure his well-being.

Lyanna had enough on her plate without spending time to make people love her or understand her better.

“How old is very old?” she continued questioning Steelshanks with mounting trepidation, and a very personal interest.

Old Nan? Can it be? With her stories of the white walkers and the last hero...

Will I hear them again?

“The oldest woman anyone has ever seen,” Steelshanks wove his tale. “Surviving in the dungeon on water. She’s the only one stayed alive after the sack of Winterfell. She and the Greyjoy boy who… they say that the bastard gelded him and that he later… died on the Wall.”

"Do they say so?” Theon’s sister, Asha, asked wildly from the other end of the long table. “What they should say is that either Stannis or his red woman killed him, when they had no use for him and the girl who posed as Arya Stark anymore.”
Theon’s life and death was his own fault, from what Lyanna’s son and young nephews had told her.

*Just like my own.*

She stood up nervously, wringing her hands like a lesser, frightened woman.

She should rest, waiting for her son to return from battle, and also for the sake of the child in her belly.

But for how long?

Her eagle had been following Ghost on the enemy’s trail in the Lands of Always Winter. And Lyanna gained a distinct impression that Jon scouted with his wolf for the purpose of riding north, eager to meet his enemy face on, before the main force of the Others reached the Wall.

If she was right, she had enough time to…

...go for a little journey before Jon’s return.

*Be reasonable, Lyanna.*

*You’re with child. It’s winter.*

*So what?*

The first difficult months of being sick and sleepy had passed. She felt healthy and strong. Her belly was rounded and tense, but not very large. She would remain in good shape until the very last weeks, when she would grow too heavy for anything, as with Jon... But she wasn’t that far yet.

*It’s now or never.*

*Old Nan.*

Who knew everything about the Others, and no one had ever bothered to take note of her knowledge.

Which would never come more useful than right now.

If Jon’s campaign wasn’t decisive….

Any information about the enemy could make a difference.

Lyanna whispered her peculiar orders to a confused Steelshanks, standing up to exit the Great Hall. Her milk glass remained half-full; her bread almost untouched.

Absent-minded, she strolled to the godswood. Her guards carried torches for her; restless flames flickering in the night wind.

Their light made the heart tree look alive. Its eyes had remained closed since Jon’s wedding.

Now, the mouth of the old gods opened abruptly, ejecting Lyanna’s best friend in his moss-coloured garments into the clearing.

Howland almost landed in the pool of black water that refused to freeze in winter.

Done with their labour, the lips of the tree thinned into one fine, bright red line.
“Howland!” Lyanna called to him, laughing to hide her trepidation about her latest plans. “Others take me! Didn’t you swear to us that travel with the old gods wasn’t safe?”

“I did,” Reed confirmed. “And the Night’s King knows beyond doubt that I’m here now. But he didn’t waste his time to stop me from his frozen throne. I don’t look very strong, you see. Or important. Tell me, Lyanna, how could I possibly let you go to Dreadfort by yourself? Your pretty skin is too valuable.”

“I’m not going by myself,” she argued, unsurprised that he knew.

“Steelshanks could help you,” Howland thought aloud, “but he’s the most experienced of your guards, and he’s become the most trustworthy-”

“-I have more guards, but you-”

“I’m a greenseer-” “-You’re a greenseer,” they said the last sentence in one voice and chuckled, embracing each other.

“I knew you’d come,” Lyanna stated calmly.

_The world may end and here we are, laughing._

“Lady Walda hasn’t yet returned home from the wedding,” she outlined very cautiously the details she’d just wrought in her mind. “I could accompany her. The remaining Bolton men will let in their lady. Without an heir, their lands may fall to the Umbers, who won’t be gentle to them. I mean to take Lady Dustin with me as well. And Lady Greyjoy. Ser Barristan will stay here… if there’s a need to open the crypts.”

Only Jon, Asha and Ser Barristan could open the door leading to the dead Starks, and potentially call them to defend Winterfell if the Others attacked it, or if there was another mutiny against the Stark rule within the castle walls. Jon was away, and Lyanna didn’t trust Asha with that task in her absence.

Ser Barristan would die a knight. Treason on his part was unimaginable.

_But not yet._

After a bad cold, the old man continued to be in excellent shape for his years.

“And Lady Bolton’s child?” Howland was not convinced about Lyanna's strategy.

Truth be told, neither was she, but she was about to convince herself.

“It might be born on the way,” Lyanna admitted. “We’ll prop her comfortably on many cushions. Runners will make the ride smoother than wheels. She’s always been corpulent. And with the Long Night, she's lost count of the turns of the moon that have passed since her womb quickened.” _Much like myself._ “It could well be that she still has some time to go. Be as it may, we’re three ladies, we’ll help her. I… I just don’t know about the horses. They won’t run fast enough on bear-paws.”

“No horses,” Reed shook his head.

“Then?” she asked, eager for her friend’s advice. _Help me, won’t you?_

“You tell me, Knight of the Laughing Tree,” Howland teased her cheerfully. “Who’s swifter and more light-footed in winter, yet strong, and moves in a pack?”
Summer padded into the godswood, yellow-eyed, sniffing at Reed; growling at the crannog lord with animosity.

“Wolves,” Lyanna acknowledged.

“Why is he doing this?” Reed wondered, uneasy.

Even a greenseer felt uncomfortable being nuzzled by a direwolf.

“He’s Bran’s,” Lyanna informed, wondering the same thing. The wolves had been fond of Reed at Jon's wedding.

“I see,” Reed turned silent. “Please understand me,” he pleaded with her unexpectedly… Or maybe with her and Summer both. “I don’t have anything against it. My daughter… she thinks she loves him. She’s short, like all my people, but she’s a woman grown, and he’s, what, four and ten… Is he by now? What about when my daughter needs… and if he can’t… How will they feel? Both of them. Please forgive me my honesty… I’ve been widowed for a few years, but I still remember how it is to want a woman. There is more to marriage, I agree, but this is still not something to be set aside lightly.”

Lyanna knew more than well how much it hurt to be widowed, or to viscerally want a man.

_To be sure, the folly of the flesh is not to be denied._

Yet she also thought of a deadman now, who couldn’t possibly… even if she saw him again, which she might not…

Her latest misery did nothing to change her love for Rhaegar.

“Let Meera and Brandon decide,” she counselled her friend. “They went together where few people had ever gone before. Let them see what matters most for them. And I’m not only saying this because I want you to allow your only daughter and heir to marry my crippled nephew, which I do want, mind you, Howland… But also because I sincerely believe this is for the best, as your truest and oldest friend.”

“You’re probably right,” Reed sighed.

“Shall we encounter danger on the road, do you think?” Lyanna whispered.

“Danger lays on any road now,” Reed replied with a pensive frown, “White walkers are roaming the land. I haven’t dreamed of many, but they are not far.”

“We all carry dragonglass,” Lyanna said with determination. Even Asha had made an axe of it.

“A greenseer carries no weapons,” Reed said. “His strength is in his dreams,” he paused. “And in his song, I discovered. I would have never believed it.”

“You are my strength,” Lyanna said, meaning it. Without Howland, she would have probably stayed in Winterfell like an old woman, despite feeling imprudent and young. The babe she carried moved in agreement. It had began to do so recently, kicking and… stretching.

She caressed her belly, waiting for another push, smiling wildly when she felt it.

“You’re better,” Howland stated incredulously. “I’m glad.”
Rhaegar wasn’t completely gone. Just unable to love her or stay with her. But he was still somewhere, roaming the land. It was better than having a hole in her heart.

Her carriage was already standing ready before the gates when she and Howland reached the main yard. So was the great wolf pack, thirty at least; led by Nymeria.

Summer was at the rear.

To Lyanna’s surprise, Asha brought with her young Tristifer Botley, who was hopelessly in love with her; and whom she ignored with contempt, as if he had killed her mother or suffered from greyscale.

The sight reminded Lyanna painfully of how she had treated Rhaegar in the beginning, needing to hide the turmoil he was causing her.

Asha didn’t look perturbed, if Lyanna had any womanly intuition left. Just genuinely annoyed with a would-be suitor for whom she felt nothing but the minimal consideration due a man from the same land.

Lyanna addressed Rickon solemnly before entering the carriage. “You’ll listen to Steelshanks in my absence.”

“And to great-uncle Tully,” the boy answered cleverly, correcting Lyanna’s unwitting omission, as if he hadn’t been raised by the savages on Skagos.

“You and little Robb both,” she agreed.

Nodding to Catelyn’s uncle who held her great-nephew in his arms, she sat down.

Rickon closed the door after her.

The pack began pulling the carriage with six passengers to Dreadfort; four ladies, two of them with child, one dashing young man whose heart had been smashed with an axe, and the last greenseer.

The wolves plodded the wood in silence.

Lyanna could swear that the night bent around them; with time and space passing faster than they should.

“What are you doing, Howland?” she asked of her friend; quiet and green-eyed, curled on the seat next to her, and extremely non-talkative in their enlarged company.

“I’m humming,” he murmured. “I decided that I shall sing for as long as I still have to dwell in this valley of tears.”

“You mean—” Until your dying day.

“Yes,” her best friend answered as if he had been reading her thoughts.

They ate and slept while travelling, stopping only for necessities, freezing as they did that. Lyanna wondered what the wolves ate.

*Corpses.*
The woods were devoid of life, burdened with snow. There were no birds, no animals, nothing.
The night was fruitless, endless.
Fat Walda snored constantly.
Howland continued humming surreptitiously, under the suspicious eyes of both Asha and Botley, and the contemptuous glare of Lady Dustin.
Reed was after all a mudman from the Neck, which bordered the Barrowlands. And Barbrey Dustin, born Riswell, had ruled Barrow Hall long enough to embrace wholeheartedly the local prejudice.
Lyanna felt as ancient as the forest, drifting between sleep and waking state, waiting for the end of her journey.
The wolfswood of the west began turning into hills and plains of the east much earlier than it should have. The kingsroad was left behind, winding south to the Neck, and north to the Wall, under Stannis' obscure Shadow.
Much too soon, the tall walls of Dreadfort rose before the travellers.
A large shanty town had been built hastily before its gates, smaller than Wintertown but not by much. Everyone left alive in the lands of the Boltons flocked to the castle, desiring to survive winter.
“I’m very weary,” Howland said guiltily. “But I’ve brought us this far.”
Lyanna didn’t understand his contrite tone until he passed out on his seat, sliding to the floor under the carriage window, in a puddle of bright green garments.
The wolves began to howl...
They bayed hysterically, like dogs might, smelling a foreigner approaching.
The night was menacing, starless.
Asha held her axe close, nearing Lyanna; one fighter edging closer to another in uncertainty, despite differences of allegiance and age. Her suitor did the same.
Fat Walda began crying louder and shriller than the wolf pack that had dragged their chariot through the night, by force of their limbs and magic of the last greenseer; fainted and useless now.
“My baby,” Walda sobbed, grasping her belly, bending over in pain. "They'll cut it out and drink his blood!"
Fat Lady Frey had apparently spent just enough time in the North to hear all the usual stories about the Others.
Lyanna hoped to hear the more rare ones from Old Nan.
Walda’s baby wasn’t born during the journey as Lyanna had feared, but it seemed to be very determined to come to the world right now, before the walls of his or her forefathers.
Perhaps it’s better for everyone if the little Bolton is born behind them.

The night smelled of cold, threatened ruin, stank of death.

Barbrey Dustin continued to glare at Lyanna.

“Why are you staring at me?” Lyanna asked rudely, suddenly eager for a confrontation; a perfect means to let out her own fears and doubts in an outburst of unkempt anger.

If only temporarily.

Opening the carriage, she stepped into the darkness, heading towards the shanty town, forcing all her companions to follow. From a corner of an eye, she noticed that Botley chivalrously carried the unconscious Reed.

The wolf pack dragged the empty chariot into the night, howling savagely at first, and then descending into silence.

Barbrey let her own steam out. “Why didn’t you let me return to my lands after the wedding? Why do you keep me as your prisoner? I have no soldiers nor powerful allies to threaten your cause. I hate you!”

In truth, Lyanna had kept Barbrey in Winterfell because her late brother Brandon would have wished her to care for his old love during the winter. But the two women were not close at all, and she had been unable to communicate this noble intention; closed and thin-lipped like a true Stark.

Brandon had adored Barbrey. Though he would probably have never been entirely faithful to her, nor to any other woman.

Had he lived…

Halfway through the improvised smallfolk settlement, Barbrey launched more of her hatred at Lyanna, “How could you marry a prince and stay alive all these years? The gods should have struck you down for your crime against Princess Elia, not take poor Brandon!” She almost screamed incoherently. “And now the Others will take me! It would have been better if Roose had skinned me alive.”

Lyanna was quite stunned with that last wish. “It's your call if you want to go back into the woods, and try your fortune with the white walkers,” she informed coldly, never interrupting her walk towards her goal.

Dreadfort.

The cold had turned palpable, signalling danger. "Or you can come with us. We’ll be safe in no time."

Provided that the remaining Bolton men decided to let them in. They were very few, according to Steelshanks, but they could last the winter behind the walls with the food supplies they'd amassed, and let everyone else starve or be slain.

Which was exactly what they had been doing.

A bunch of skeletal men and women camped at the gates that the brave defenders of Dreadfort had no intention to open.
“Lady Bolton's here,” Lyanna yelled from the top of her lungs, passing between the poor and the exhausted, arriving at the frozen moat.

The drawbridge was up; the doors closed

“Any fat bitch can say she’s the Lady Bolton,” an ugly man said through a murder hole. "Go back. We've got no food for the likes of you."

Fat Walda was insulted. “You’re worse than the bastard’s dogs,” she claimed, positioning herself so that the torches from the battlements could shed more light on her gargantuan figure. “Your dead lord got my weight in gold as a marriage gift. I still have it! Do you want it? Let me in!"

This explained a rather large case that Steelshanks' men had loaded into Lyanna's carriage for Fat Walda; now taken away by the wolves.

Lyanna had assumed it was clothes and clean linen for the newborn.

Howland’s magic suddenly seemed greater than before, for bringing so much heavy weight all the way.

_How can a song bridge space and time?_

She kept quiet. It would be very unreasonable to alert the Boltons that a Stark was about to enter their castle during almost any time of the tumultuous relations between the two houses, and she didn’t relish becoming anyone’s cloak.

She just needed to find Old Nan.

“Let us in, if it please you,” she finally implored, trying to sound lowborn and Southron. “We are Lady Walda's maidens. We’ll help her with her sweet babe,” she promised. "Or will you let her have it on her own? It's coming now. How many women with experience in childbirth do you have in the castle?"

Lyanna bet that the answer was none.

In winter, men valued their lives more than ladies of any repute. Besides, they could always take in a few women from the shanty town to satisfy their urges, promising food as payment, and kick them out when they were done.

_With, or more likely without, the sustenance they promised._

Barbrey and Asha seemed too stunned by Lyanna’s brazen lie to contradict her.

Botley couldn't say anything if he wanted, panting under the weight of Howland's short, but lithe and muscled body, hauled over his broad, ironborn shoulders.

In a few moments, the drawbridge was lowered. Ten or so Bolton men opened the gates, armed to the teeth, ready to slaughter anyone undesirable who tried to come in.

Lady Walda staggered over the bridge, bent in pain of labour. Barbrey jumped to her immediately, lending her support, as did two of the men.

Lyanna and Asha followed.

Unexpectedly, the drawbridge was raised behind them, leaving Howland and Botley locked outside, in a wood that was waking to eerie life.
“The men can’t come in,” the ugly man from the murder hole pronounced his final verdict. “Take it or leave it. Or I can throw you all out.”

The gods would have to watch over Howland while he slept.

But they forgot Lyanna.

Chains clamped her hands, unexpectedly. Her lance was confiscated.

Asha immediately leapt to Fat Walda’s side, to avoid sharing Lyanna’s destiny.

Barbrey.

She must have been Roose's mistress before his death, or she wouldn't have known which man she should approach to sell Lyanna so quickly and so efficiently.

Barbrey's seemingly spontaneous attack of rage was only a means to lure Lyanna into Dreadfort before she had time to think.

Lyanna’s wolf blood boiled from being outsmarted, but also from the thrill of adventure she’d denied herself for very long. Instead of breaking down in adversity, she felt more resourceful and stronger. One day this would be her undoing.

Not today.

She followed her gaolers calmly, ignoring lewd jibes regarding her pregnant figure, and talk of what they might do to her, before or after her brat was out.

She tried to calm herself with the knowledge that the lesser Bolton cousins and their men-at-arms would probably opt to keep her as a hostage; a relatively unharmed one.

Dragons had wings. Castle walls couldn't stop them. And rash young men were known to react wildly when their mothers and wives suffered the cruellest lot of women in any war.

Fearing that the men would nonetheless sink to their worst, raping and killing her just because they could, Lyanna shivered, and lowered her head as she walked. She wished she had lost her beauty over time and was uglier than Old Walda. She wondered if rape hurt worse than dying, if it came to that, or if a woman grown was able to endure it better than a young maid. She wished not to know.

The bawdy talk continued, followed by a few pinches on her face and an insulting slap on her behind.

There was only one set of dungeons in Dreadfort, and she was extremely relieved when their doors closed behind her with a thud.

She had known this enclosure from childhood, and it seemed almost familiar and trustworthy. During a family visit, she had outrun Roose's son, Domeric, in a horse race and won a bet; he had to show her the secrets of his castle.

So he did, being very… sweet and honourable about it.

They were both children.

Domeric was dead now, as all his kin, as half of the world…

And Lyanna could never have been prepared for the gruelling sight she faced.
Old Nan was buried alive.

Built into a dungeon wall, rather high up.

Only her head protruded from it… three or four feet higher than Lyanna's own. Her lips were parched.

There was a bowl of water attached to a stick on the floor, under a single torch in a skull-shaped sconce. The gaolers must have used it to let her drink, under orders to prolong her suffering.

“Can you hear me?” Lyanna called to her with her heart in tatters.

She scratched the masonry with her nails. It was of excellent quality. She'd need a company of men with spades to tear it down.

"My child," Old Nan spoke, opening her drooping eyes, sounding very lucid despite Lyanna's strong doubt that her old wet nurse could have recognised her.

Old Nan had called all Stark youngsters her children from times immemorial, and she was already very old when she had given birth to Hodor, or brought him from the forest as an abandoned spawn of a woods witch, as some of Winterfell's smallfolk had claimed.

"The Long Night has fallen," Lyanna announced calmly. "I've come here hoping you could tell me stories about how it might end. The old stories of winter."

"There's only one true story of winter," Old Nan spoke in a breaking, frightening voice. "And it begins when the blood grows cold and freezes in our veins, and when mothers smother their sweet babes before they fall prey to monsters consuming them alive," she hissed hoarsely.

"There are no babes this winter," Lyanna countered. "The wombs of women have stopped quickening."

"Why are you then with child?" Old Nan tossed back at her. "Or is it a monster in your belly?"

Lyanna was mortally afraid of the bad omen in the old woman's voice. "What's the only true story then?" she wondered. "Please tell me."

"It's the tale of the last hero… who will lose everything, perhaps even himself, for a slim chance at victory."

"But will he prevail in the end?" Lyanna needed this reassurance, like a five-year old girl clinging to her mother's skirt.

"Water," Old Nan pleaded instead of answering.

Lyanna lifted the cup on the stick and gave it to her.

"Soon I won't need it," the old woman confided. "These walls shall feed me, and I them. Until such time that I need to continue guarding my children."

"What children?" Lyanna couldn't understand.

"All of them," the old woman proclaimed, sinking into silence.

After a while, Lyanna asked, "What of Jon Stark and Joramun of the Wildlings? They rode forth together to face the Night's King, thousands of years ago. Which one was the last hero then? Why
did the Long Night return if they had prevailed? For if they had lost, we wouldn't be here, alive, nor able to remember them.”

“Joramun blew the Horn of Winter and woke the giants from earth,” the old woman repeated what everyone knew. "It's a sad, sad story..."

This didn't answer any of Lyanna's questions. Old Nan turned incoherent, moaning.

To Lyanna's right, the dungeon stretched into darkness. She wondered if the Boltons buried their dead under Dreadfort in unmarked graves without stone likenesses, and if their ghosts had ever risen to defend it.

"Child," Old Nan pleaded all of a sudden. "I wish you were taller so that you could close my eyes. My end is coming, and I wish I wouldn't have to see it."

Hearing this, Lyanna lost her composure, confessing first to herself, and then to Old Nan another reason she had come to Dreadfort. "The wights… are they not men? They cannot be completely dead until they are burned, can they? Is there not something that can be done for them? Can't the last hero save them? Can't the gods help them?"

“Why are you asking this of me, child, if you well know the answer?” Old Nan could barely speak. “The Knight of the Laughing Tree,” she addressed her with love and devotion, a bit like Howland always did.

The eyes of the old woman froze in place, becoming glassy, losing all expression.

She was dead.

Buried alive under Dreadfort like Gendel and his children under the Wall; when Gendel, the defeated king of the wildlings, had searched in vain for a way back home beyond the Wall, after a lost battle.

Lyanna quavered violently.

There would be no magical help for Rhaegar. Maybe he could play for her again, before their time ended. Maybe she could hold his cold hand without him running away.

She hoped that Jon and her unborn child would live to see the world after the Long Night.

Jon.

You’d better be the last hero, and a victorious one. I command you as your mother.

She laughed like a madwoman.

The door to the dungeon burst open.

She froze, wondering what the men wanted from her, or if there was miraculously a dragon flying over Dreadfort; come to save her from the consequences of her folly.

It was only Asha Greyjoy, panting. "Lyanna," she called her informally, as if they were friends.

Lyanna rushed to her.

Out. I need to go out. Please.

"Here," Asha returned Lyanna's lance to her. "A new Bolton’s born and squealing," she added
rapidly. "I've never seen a fatter or an uglier child. Everyone's drinking to his health. Come."

"Where?"

"Tris," Asha's arm twiddled restlessly with her axe.

"Howland," Lyanna forgot her troubles.

More needed to be done.

"The people outside are under attack from the grumkins, and they're trying to break into the castle," Asha informed, leading Lyanna to the open gates. "I opened these without a creak as soon as the guards went drinking, but the bloody drawbridge is stuck."

The bridge was very slightly lowered from its vertical position, hanging on two chains that wouldn't budge any further when Asha tried to turn the crank of the windlass. An axe thrown at the chains wouldn't break them.

But a lance blow might help, in the right place.

Lyanna found a good distance and posture, aiming for a link where one of the chains was very tight.

The lance hit the link, rattling the chain, causing a horrifying metallic sound that put Lyanna's skin on edge.

The weight of the wood did the rest. The chain broke. The hungry, frightened mass outside pulled the bridge down with all their strength.

The clamour called the Bolton men back to their gates. The attackers were weaker, but much greater in numbers, pouring into the castle.

Lyanna and Asha didn't wait for the outcome of the battle, pushing themselves out on one edge of the gates, avoiding the poor and hungry marching in.

Asha… shielded Lyanna with her body, so that the multitude wouldn't kick her belly by chance, until they were out and could breathe; under the walls, away from the crowd.

It was more than Lyanna would have expected.

A small group of Others haunted the far end of the shanty town. Killing left and right, they set into motion all those still alive and able of body. Men, women, children and dogs rushed madly towards Dreadfort, seeking protection behind its high walls.

*Where are the wolves?*

Lyanna only heard human cries, and then, a muffled gasp.

Asha's.

Botley was prostrated on the frozen moat.

Howland was with him, awake. "I held him back, but he escaped my grip. He needed to go in among the first, he said. The bridge hit his head. I grabbed him, but it was too late. He's not squashed, but-"

"He's dead," Asha concluded, in an equally dead voice. "Tris," she whispered. "It wasn't supposed
"A useless, pointless death," words escaped Lyanna’s mouth.

“Just like any other,” Howland completed her thought. “Death serves no purpose. No matter what the songs say. It just is.”

The Others were now slowly nearing the Dreadfort, resuscitating the corpses of their victims. Their new slaves.

"Shouldn't we burn him?" Asha had the strength to wonder.

There were torches in the gateway invaded by the smallfolk, easily within reach.

Yet Lyanna decided against it.

What do we know? The burning’s final, and he isn't trying to kill us.

The wolves began to howl.

If they ran now over the frozen moat, alongside the castle walls, Lyanna, Asha and Reed had a solid chance to escape.

"There's no time," Lyanna yanked Asha away from her dead suitor. "This way!"

Stumbling madly forward over thick, grey ice, the three companions circled the Dreadfort in the direction of the howling.

When they reached the carriage, Asha dropped on her knees, hugging them tightly. It was Howland's turn to pull her up and push her in. Paralysed by grief, she'd be far too heavy for Lyanna in her condition.

Asha allowed Howland manhandle her, unable to either resist or move of her own will. "He is… he is…” she whispered incoherently.

When the wolves dragged the carriage away from Dreadfort, Lyanna dared look back through the small glass. Just as she presumed, Botley was a wight now.

Like Rhaegar.

But surprisingly, the Others… they stayed out of the castle, not attacking the gates which were again closed; the drawbridge lifted up haphazardly by the new defenders, who were attaching the broken chain to the windlass by a thick rope.

Dreadfort was almost as old as Winterfell, whose foundations could be as old as the Wall.

The First Men had learned the building secrets of the children of the forest. Unlike the children, who preferred timber, they shaped them in stone.

Or maybe it was Old Nan who protected the Dreadfort; buried under the castle forever.

The Others hissed and began withdrawing.

"They’ll return," Howland remarked with resignation. "In greater number."

“I feel so alive,” Lyanna countered his feeling of doom. “I thought this would be the day that I die.”
That the ugly stories spread about her and Rhaegar would become true, although only for her, in the dungeons of Dreadfort.

"Not yet," Howland corrected her.

"But soon," Lyanna guessed her destiny.

Reed shrugged. “This war can’t end well. Our resistance shall be in vain, I feel. The power of the Others, and the discord among men may prevail.”

“Hum!” she commanded him recklessly.

"What did you say?" he didn't understand her immediately.

"Hum! Sing!" she clarified.

Lyanna had a son and he would be the last hero.

Her place was with Jon.

As it should have been from the beginning. And her son wasn’t in Winterfell, nor would he ever inherit it. But he had another inheritance… his father’s…

The Seven Kingdoms.

“Take us to the Wall, in all haste you can conjure,” she insisted, expecting a marching song from the last greenseer.

To her surprise, Howland sang very tenderly and sweetly, weaving the notes in a crystal clear tune that seemed to invoke the end of any darkness.

"That’s very beautiful!" Lyanna exclaimed. *But not as Jenny of Oldstones...*

"It is, isn't it? The song says that we may walk for thirty...we may walk for fifty... we may walk for a hundred days! And in the end, there shall be light... But I like the music much better than the words. One day or a hundred, what does it matter?" Howland hummed on, refining the melody.

Asha was holding her head in her hands. “He mocked me for having pimples in childhood,” she announced. "And I couldn't forget it. But then he… he… And I…"

"It'll be alright," Lyanna told her, knowing that it wouldn't.

She had been terribly wrong about Asha’s indifference to Botley.

"Oh yes, I almost forgot," Howland stopped singing. "A raven found the Greywater Watch just before I left."

"What news did it bring?" Lyanna wondered. "Dark wings, dark words? More conspiracies?"

"Lord Hightower regrets that he cannot offer the hospitality of Oldtown for the holding of the Great Council. So no one will be confirmed king this winter unless another lord offers to stage the election."

“Jon or Daenerys should be chosen as soon as possible,” Lyanna said wistfully. “Stannis has a rather
narrow understanding of the law. He might not be completely unreasonable if his claim is set aside in a fair deliberation of all houses, big and small."

She was probably wrong, but she could hope.

Like she'd hoped beyond hope that she might be able to help her husband, and predictably found no cure for his cursed condition in Dreadfort.

Dead or not, she yearned to see Rhaegar again.

"If that's what you believe, then we need to find a very large murder of ravens very soon," Howland said pensively. "And they always follow the king. But which one, I wonder?"

Jon, Lyanna thought wishfully, but didn't dare say.

The snow-laden canopies of the trees bent over the wolf-pulled carriage, having drooping eyes and sharp, pointed ears.

"Maybe you should dream of ravens," she suggested to her dear friend.

"I just might," Reed agreed, continuing to hum softly under his breath.

Asha Greyjoy cried bitter tears.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading }}
Sansa VI

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy, for helping me out

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sansa

Sandor led the march in unknown direction; a fearsome and self-assured captain of the giants.

But Sansa's loving, knowing eye could see that he took his new position with great caution and disbelief. Wound tight and alert to the extreme, he fully expected their large companions to turn against him; perhaps out of some obscure custom they observed, and he was utterly ignorant about.

She walked through the deep snow next to him, never behind; disregarding the proper marching order of the giants, who always trod one after another in straight line.

Or as straight as the winding, slippery road under their feet allowed… She wondered who made it, and how it looked in spring, or in long summer, and if the snow ever melted this far north.

Although rather narrow, the road was cobbled in large, irregular stones which became visible under the thick grey ice on occasions, when Sandor’s heavy boots squashed the freshly fallen snow.

She and Sandor were lost in the Lands of Always Winter, far away from her family and any army of men that could help them reach safety.

She should be worried, truly, she should, yet she wasn't, she couldn't.

Quite unexpectedly, she was… completely unable to fret.

She almost didn’t care where she was.

After the silent despair and hopelessness of her imprisonment with the Night’s King, that had left a toll on her body and soul, travelling with the giants lifted her spirit. Marching felt splendid, and Sandor was with her.

Neither the terrifying, oppressive chill, nor the effort of long journey on foot could ruin her jubilant mood.

She either gazed at Sandor, to fill her heart with the sight of him, or studied the dark, cold vastness they were crossing. The road climbed steadily, zigzagging between a line of hills enclosing a great, deep valley on Sansa's left, and a high, steep black cliff on her right.

The valley was a… an enormous dormitory… or maybe a birthplace of white walkers, rising slowly from the drifts of snow. After acquiring their horrific form, one by one the Others forged swords from hard ice; white of hair, with grey and blue ridges on their faces, and dangerously blue eyes…

Sansa experienced both dread and fascination whenever she dared observe their growth.
She knew very well how they looked and acted by now.

*But how many are there?*

It seemed to Sansa that there were many more than even men in Westeros… *How can we hope to vanquish them?*

She wouldn't think of that.

The high cliff opposite the valley cast a deep shadow over the innocent travellers, offering protection; hiding them from the prying, full moon, and from the newborn Others, who marched in the opposite direction.

*Following their king…*

After endless marching, the moon hid its yellow face behind a wisp of cloud. The road suddenly bent sharply to the right, around the cliff, widening into a broad pass that led towards the mass of a high, dark mountain chain looming in the distance.

When he was satisfied that the white walkers’ valley was left sufficiently behind, Sandor finally halted. It was their first reprieve since the giants had defeated the Others near the frozen, false Winterfell and saved Sansa from the clutches of the Night’s King soldiers.

In broad gestures and guttural words, he commanded his giants to make camp.

The order of marching was immediately ruined. The giants dispersed, stomping in all directions, running like oversized, furry ants. Every single one respectfully greeted *Mag* Sandor and his *woman* when passing by.

The designation sounded insulting and very undignified.

By the old gods, she wasn't a *child* like the giants had initially called her, or just any woman in Sandor's company; she was his lady wife.

*But if it makes them happy and calm…*

It was better than being called a traitor's daughter.

"Hold this," Sandor instructed her, his voice grumpy and warm at the same time, ushering into her arms a huge mammoth skin, which had been miraculously folded in an odd saddlebag he’d carried on his back until that moment. "Don't let it become completely wet."

The skin was heavy; furry on one side and very smooth on the other, and so enormous that a portion of it touched the snow while Sansa struggled to hold the rest above ground.

Just like the other giants, her husband began excavating a large hole in snow with a club; another item from his bag which also contained the… the horn of dragonlords… wrapped in poor Rhaegar’s hair so that it wouldn’t burn Sandor.

"Can you dig like this? Isn't it too difficult?" Sansa wondered, wishing she could help, or that he had a shovel, at least.

"Difficult?" he rumbled dismissively as he laboured. "I became as good in digging as I am in killing on the Quiet Isle."

But Sansa's loving ear heard both anger and disquiet in his voice.
“Please try not to worry, my love” she offered her counsel, whether he wanted it or not. "They look peaceful," she continued, wishing to soothe his unspoken cares. "I don’t think they’ll hurt us.”

“They might change their mind,” Sandor barked with the usual unmeasured strength of his heartfelt convictions when he was done digging. "Give me that now.”

“They might,” she was forced to agree through the haze of her simmering joy over being free again, and with the man she loved, handing him the mammoth skin. “But we’d be helpless against them if they did. So it’s best not to fret.”

Sandor chuckled, carefully lining the hole with animal fur to keep out the snow. “That's a lady’s logic, if I ever heard one.”

*And we would die in fear and pain if they attack us.*

*I could die by your hand, my love, isn’t that so?*

Before understanding she was Sandor's woman, the giants had wanted to hurt her… kill her… or worse… And Sandor had considered taking her life before they had a chance. She’d seen it in his mind clear as sunrise… with the new ability of warging into people, brought upon her by winter...

*But how would you then feel, my love, if you survived by miracle?*

Her own unbridled thought caught her by surprise.

She was terribly afraid of dying, and the pain it must entail.

But the thought that Sandor could survive her, only to torment himself with guilt over her passing and his role in it, was devastating. She couldn’t even grasp fully the grieve that this horrendous possibility caused her.

Perhaps it wasn’t as constant as her fear for herself, but it ran deeper, tying her stomach in a twisted, painful knot of fear for him.

*None of us will die,* she told herself firmly, making herself believe it.

Sandor removed his wet boots and cloak, before lowering himself into the hole. He was almost courteous when he spoke again, "I can’t embrace your reasoning, I fear. Would that I could. I need to-”

“I know,” Sansa interrupted. She wasn't stupid, no matter what anyone thought. “I understand,” she added lovingly, “you have to be vigilant.”

Sandor believed only in the strength of his arms, finding gods… irrelevant, if they existed.

Sansa found it blasphemous as a young girl, but now she viewed it as a sort of faith, different than her own which still relied heavily on prayers and songs.

Following Sandor's example, she unlaced her boots. Freed from their leather prison, her feet burned, covered with blisters she hadn't felt before.

She didn't need to undress further. Her gown, though dull, brown and homely, was wrought of magic. Ever since it was soaked and coloured by dragonblood… king's blood… it stayed fully dry and smooth to touch; soft as velvet despite being made of wool, repelling the slosh and snow. And since she was no longer the prisoner of the Others, it kept her very pleasantly and not just barely
warm, ensuring her survival.

“Where do you suppose we're all going?” she asked quietly, suppressing the whimpers provoked by every step of her mangled feet, lowering herself into the welcoming strength of her husband's arms. “You’ve travelled with them for a while.”

“Must go,” the giants had hummed during the entire march. Despite acknowledging Sandor as their captain, it was the tribe that had nudged him onto the road they took, forming a line behind him in such a way that he could go only in one direction.

This one.

Initially, it had seemed to Sandor and Sansa that the road went through the white walkers’ valley, leading to certain doom, but the giants knew better.

Sansa closed her eyes, surrendering to a tight embrace, losing herself and loving the sensation. A long, dry stretch of mammoth skin was being efficiently pulled over her.

"The giants make no fires when they are near the Others," Sandor whispered. His breath touched her face, lighting little flames in her belly. "They tan the skins with seal fat to keep themselves warm at night. We'll be fine, you'll see."

She felt much better than merely fine.

The night sky was menacing and dark, and her world heated and magnificent; sheltered from all harm.

Sandor began to stroke her hip absent-mindedly, answering her previous question. “I know there’s nothing here on the maps I’ve seen. Not that there was ever much in them about the lands beyond the Wall. But if my sense of orientation is not completely lost, the giants wanted to head this way before we found you. The first path they took had led us to a chasm we couldn't cross, unless a dragon came to our aid,” his voice lowered to the limits of hearing. "This is the other way. They fear it. For some reason only they know. It’s not a way they would have ever taken if they had a choice.”

Sansa’s mood dampened, a little.

If giants feared something, it couldn’t be good. By the old gods, even the Others marched in the opposite direction!

Yet each giant had looked as fearless as her husband during their march; determined to arrive at… wherever they were going.

“I haven’t seen the Night’s King seat that looks like Winterfell on any map,” Sansa declared, trying to give hope to both of them, “not even on those brought by Uncle Benjen from the Wall. But the false castle is still here. There must be more places we don’t know of,” she assumed wildly.

Sandor’s arms sneaked under her long skirts, grabbing her waist. Her body was like water, flowing; weak and powerful at the same time. Yet she feared to undress fully as she would have preferred…

What if the Others could sense from afar that the gown with king's blood they wanted was set aside and ready for the taking?

Worse, her red flower still bloomed, though it was about to stop, after destroying once more her hopes for a child. It was unseemly to lay with Sandor now. But how could she say no after so much time-
Sandor's hands reached the cloth hidden in her smallclothes. Before she could say anything, they drifted away, playing with her laces without untying them, kneading her hips and behind.

Her moonblood was almost at the end, wasn't it? There were maybe a few drops of dried blood, as well as the sticky, yellowish fluid she needed to wash away.

She almost told him he could untie her laces and fulfill her longing, and his, propriety and cleanliness be… be damned.

"Doesn't it stop in this cold?" Sandor asked foolishly, teasing her.

_Only if I was with child, my love, or when I'm old._

She shook her head mutely.

He knew as much as she about moonblood by now, and she wasn't in a mood to discuss anything sad or serious.

Instead, her thoughts returned to the giants and the purpose of their journey.

_To our future together, gods willing._

"The giants have lived beyond the Wall for centuries," she concluded. "There has to be something important here they know of."

"Clever little bird," Sandor rasped with friendly mocking.

_My sweet love._ She didn’t say it, only because his mirth would probably continue if she did.

He could laugh at her on the morrow.

Now she had to kiss him. His voice and closeness were no longer enough.

Not the brightest, nor the most passionate kiss they shared, it could have very well been the longest one; lips and tongues slowly pleasuring each other, peace blossoming in their hearts.

Sandor… fell asleep so soon.

Too soon.

Sansa stayed awake, enjoying the feel of his body next to hers; happy, not fretting.

Hours later, in her dream, the moon winked at her, before opening a red eye and saying very loudly, "Must go."

It was equally dark and cold when the giants' march continued, after a breakfast of roots and melted snow.

The road soon reached the bottom of the mountain. From close by, it became obvious that the new barrier they faced wasn’t entirely natural. It was partially _built_ of large blocks of ice… like… like the Wall.

Sansa had yet to see the Wall with her own eyes, but she remembered the shine of curiosity in Jon's and Brandon’s gaze when Uncle Benjen described it. The masonry here looked like the legendary one used by Brandon the Builder, except that it was darker than normal ice.
"Older. From the beginning of time. Sansa imagined.

"Must go," the giants sang again, not relenting in their step. But their voices sounded hollow, losing determination, or simply afraid.

Only Sandor, a dwarf by stature among them, and yet their undisputed leader, continued marching undeterred.

Sansa had to walk behind him now. The road was too narrow for them to pass abreast.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the sky above became lighter. She chastised herself for not having slept more. Probably her tired eyes were playing tricks on her now.

"Do you see it?" Sandor inquired, and she knew she wasn't the only one with distorted vision.

Before they could conclude if the sky was truly blue or not, the road stopped at the entrance to a great, vaulted hall in the heart of the mountain, lit by hidden sunlight through tiny shafts in the ceiling. An elaborate doorway loomed on the far side of the hall, flanked with statues of giants riding mammoths...

The giants poured into the hall and then wouldn’t go any further…

Fast as lightning, the second giant in line, the blond one from the mountains of Dorne, assaulted Sandor. Her husband butted heads with him fiercely to shake him off, drew his greatsword and would have killed him-

“No, Sandor!” Sansa screamed impulsively. The giants weren’t their enemies; they just didn’t understand each other well enough.

Her cry caught Sandor’s attention… just enough for the giant to get an upper hand and for the two who were next in line to help him, not waiting for the blond one to fall or to prevail, which went against every custom they held dear in battle, so far as Sansa had learned.

“Sansa, run!” Sandor pleaded when he was overcome.

She was free to do so, through the doorway, to whatever lay next.

“No,” she complained heartily. “I’m not leaving you,” she told him, in case he had any stupid doubt about her stubborn, Stark loyalty. Besides, this was all her fault, if she hadn’t called to Sandor, he would be victorious!

Had he killed the first challenger, maybe the rest wouldn’t have dared…

“Let him go!” she demanded, as if her words could ever change anything.

How was she going to help him now? What would happen to her?

Sansa backed to a wall, crying softly, overthrown by her helplessness. Sandor had been right again, the world was awful.

But not always.

Through her despair, she realised that the giants didn’t kill him. They just held him in place.

So maybe she was not entirely wrong either when she stopped her husband from murdering one of them.
Sansa forced herself to come forward despite her growing fear. Willing the tremulousness out of her voice, she repeated, "Let him go!"

Her hair fell to the small of her back, shining bright red under the sunrays from the vaults, brighter than the leaves of any weirwood tree against the dull brown of her dress.

The entire horde of giants flinched from her sunlit appearance. "Child… woman… please," they chanted. The blond one who attacked Sandor pointed at the door at the end of the hall. "Must go."

"I must continue alone?" Sansa asked incredulously, causing all giants to nod approvingly in unison. "No, Sansa," Sandor pleaded, "It stinks of old ice."

*Others.*

Sansa felt *that,* but the perfume was different from the very similar one that accompanied the white walkers.

Usually she was more sensitive to smells than Sandor, but she could be so wrong...

"What do you want me to do?" she asked the giants. Furious, not caring to hide her anger, she searched the thoughts of those closest to her with the sharp dagger of her mind. She was loathe to do so, not wanting to cause pain to anyone. Perhaps she should have assaulted one of them as they fought Sandor. But she could only force one giant to fight at his side. And two against the horde was as hopeless as him battling alone.

Her angry warging escapades with their minds revealed that the giants were in a *reverent* mood.

Suddenly, all except those holding Sandor in submission knelt before her in silence, bowing huge heads to their chests.

"Don’t go, Sansa," Sandor pleaded, "Please don’t listen to them."

But the doorway ahead tickled her curiosity, and the plea of the giants softened her upset heart...

She remembered clearly how the blond giant from Dorne had methodically ripped apart the icy cocoon woven by the white walkers to keep Sansa their prisoner, before the march began. Without him, she might still live in that cage. Sandor could enter the enclosure, but he’d been unable to destroy it.

She owed her freedom to the giants, and when her foolish husband had tried to rescue her, they had accepted him in their midst, despite not being bound by any duty to do so.

They had even helped Rhaegar.

She should try to assist them now.

Maybe the giants knew why a woman short as one of their children could be successful in this quest. Perhaps she had to crawl through a narrow passageway or some tiny trap door; some task the giants were too big or too clumsy to achieve.

The mountain air smelled of old ice, but not of Others...

But what if there was another being lurking on the path ahead, a more dangerous one? More cunning than the Others, belonging to a race more ancient than the giants? Sansa’s imagination went wild, showing her a panoply of monsters from the songs and Old Nan’s tales, those she’d hated, and Bran
adored...

She wished there was a heart tree growing in this hall, to pull Sandor with her into its mouth and return to Winterfell. But not even moss could grow on the solid, frozen masonry strengthening the rocky body of the mountain.

“Sandor,” she announced her decision cautiously to her husband. “I’ll have a look.” Don’t be angry, will you? Make this easier for me.

His eyes flashed, managing to still look dangerous, despite being forced into submission.

“Take a weapon,” he growled. “Whatever you see, kill it! Find out later what it is.” Cross to the sunny side and don’t come back, he thundered when she dared peek into his mind.

Don’t be unreasonable, my love. I am coming back.

Unless she… She didn’t let Sandor see her greatest fear, and made herself believe once more that she wouldn’t die.

Not now.

Later, in the future, when she was an old woman.

“Kill!” the giant tribe agreed wholeheartedly with the captain they betrayed.

"Very well," Sansa accepted weakly everyone’s proposal. "A small weapon, if I may?"

A young giant, one of the last ones in the line, handed her a stone knife. It must have been the tiniest blade in the horde, and yet Sansa had to carry it with two hands.

“Be kind to Mag,” she commanded, hair shining in the rare sunlight; frightening the giants once more.

“Yes,” they answered, grumbling, growling, roaring, bowing.

From the cacophony of words that followed their agreement, she thought she understood that … they regretted turning against Mag, and they would ask for his forgiveness later, but Mag would never order his woman to die for them… And it was obvious even to the most daft among them that Mag’s woman-child adored him, so she might risk herself to save him. Save them.

You aren’t daft at all, my giant companions, Sansa thought, giving a last look at Sandor before heading towards the doorway. Her fear mounted with every step. Her hope was kept alive only by thin rays of sunlight pouring in through the vaults.

After the door, there was a stairway, spiralling up.

A serpentine, she thought, with both happy and troubling memories of Sandor catching her on a similar stair in King’s Landing. Afterwards, he’d showered her in awful words about her womanhood, whose meaning she couldn’t grasp at the time.

And these giants call me his woman...

But I understand you now, my love. Isn’t that a gift from the gods? The proof that they exist?

At the bottom of the stairway, there was another door, less lavishly built, leading to a large rounded clearing under the blue sky. Sansa’s heart rejoiced from the unexpected sight, rushing forward.
A new day.

But when she emerged into the open, the light hurt her eyes, blinded from near constant darkness. When she managed to stop blinking, she saw…

The largest giant she’d ever seen, at least thirty feet high, sleeping peacefully in a shallow pond of yellow, melting snow.

Behind him, the road continued, descending to an unknown land beyond, green and fertile, bathed in sunlight…

But Sansa couldn't circumvent the giant to reach that magic land without stepping on him.

A monster, a real monster from the stories!

Her soul trembled, still very young and innocent.

She gripped the knife, wondering how she should strike to kill the creature in its sleep.

But it’s asleep! She became appalled by herself. How can I?

Kill it first and ask the questions later, Sandor's advice rang in her head.

But he’s defenceless!

Sansa decided to come just a step closer, to have a better look.

The giant seemed to be made of ice, not of flesh, despite wearing furs and being as hairy as the rest.

What is he? Is he… a giant white walker?

But he didn't smell like the people of the Night's King, nor did he have a crystal sword.

A wooden club, fifteen feet long, served as his pillow.

When Sansa tried to peek into his sleeping consciousness, she found it closed; or maybe he didn't have it, being dead for thousands of years...

A monster…

She sought the necessary determination to kill the creature in her heart, finding none.

He hadn't tried to hurt her, he was just sleeping.

She recoiled. Her boot betrayed her, sliding. Losing balance, she landed in wet snow with a loud splash. Her gown would keep her dry...

But the monster stirred, standing up.

Towering over her like a mountain, he growled worse than Sandor, or his brother, or any other giant. His white frozen face transformed into a mask of ebullient anger, uglier than the Stranger in the septs.

Sansa gasped. Air deserted her lungs. She would die of fear.

It was too late to kill, too late to run. She’d always be a stupid girl. The giants were right in calling her child.
The monster swung its club at her.

Faster than she thought possible, Sansa jumped away. The club hit a hem of her long gown and rose again to kill.

She avoided another blow.

She tried to run back, to the stairway, but the club landed in front of her, blocking her exit. An enormous hand caught her waist and would surely squash her. She slashed it with her knife, causing one of the fingers to bleed - water!

"Stop it, please!" she exclaimed, terrified.

To her surprise, the creature released her, halting his attack, examining her face, but not giving any answer.

"I just want to pass," she declared, emboldened by her unexpected success. "We want to pass; me, my husband, and a lot of giants. Aren't you one of them?"

The monster roared, letting its voice be heard, perhaps forming a word. Sansa couldn’t understand it.

"Fr… th," the huge giant said.

"Firth," she parroted, "Is that your name?"

The creature lifted his club again, gesturing that he wouldn’t let her pass.

"Are you guarding this place?"

No answer came, only another club blow. Leaping to the side, her heart beat rapidly, and she was possessed by a peculiar thought.

*What if I...?*

Not waiting for another strike, she began to sing sweetly, Florian and Jonquil, imagining she was singing it to Sandor in the quiet of the wagon they had shared on the long way from King's Landing to Winterfell.

"Child," the giant muttered gratefully, listening.

Sansa sang stronger, ignoring the insult. After ten more verses, Florian and Jonquil felt inadequate. So she changed the words and the melody, reinventing it to… to be more appropriate for winter.

She sang of the last hero who rode to face the Night's King, remembering poor Rhaegar, and her aunt who’d lost him again. And also Jon who was king now, having to bear the heavy burden of duty that came with any true kingship.

This was the tune the giant wanted to hear.

He roared quietly now, almost melodiously, Withdrawning to the very edge of the clearing, he lay down to sleep, curled like a babe in cradle, leaving the way down the mountain open and unguarded.

Before she finished singing, the ice giant slept like dead. Sansa approached him in tiny steps, silent like a mouse. She touched him… pinched him... slapped him on the shoulder… on the face... He didn't move, stiff and *cold* to touch.
Maybe she killed him… Or maybe his skin always felt like this…

Sansa, Sansa, Sansa, she admonished herself. *You're still so foolish. How could you have slain a savage giant in a hall of ice with a song?*

Be that as it may, she did what the giants had asked for. They should release her husband if they had any honour.

Breathless, she ran down the serpentine. Stumbling, she grabbed a protruding piece of ice masonry to avoid breaking her neck.

There was no one lurking in the shadows who would catch her now.

Bursting into the hall, she claimed, "I did it!"

In truth, she didn’t know exactly what she’d done. Feeling proud of herself nonetheless, she returned the heavy stone knife to its giant owner. “It’s safe to cross…” she affirmed before the incredulous look of the hesitant, paralysed tribe.

“Must go!” she declared. They understood those words best.

They should leave *now*, before the creature turned in its sleep and rolled to occupy the entire place it guarded once more.

“Must go!” the giants echoed, freeing Sandor and forming a line behind him. “Mag.”

On the serpentine stair, Sandor snorted incredulously, seeing through her deception.

"There was no blood on the knife," he whispered to her, between amused and angry.

Sansa was the first one in line now, walking in front of him.

"What did you do?" he queried, his voice a rough caress against her earlobe.

"I stabbed the monster in the neck while it slept. It bled water," she lied to her husband, as calm as she was able to. Her cheeks stayed true to her deception, not colouring. She *would* tell him the truth, just not now, where the giants might hear her, and attack them. She couldn't confess to not killing the creature.

"A beautiful thing," Sandor rasped dreamily behind her back as if he was a warg, seeing into her mind.

She turned around to face him.

A corner of his mouth twitched. "And still a poor liar," he added.

She stared deeply into his grey eyes, apologising wordlessly, bestowing on him a quick kiss from above. Grinning, Sandor met her halfway, anticipating her gesture, making the kiss just deep enough to send shivers down her spine.

The giants marched past the sleeping monster, avoiding to look at it, rushing down the mountainside like a waterfall of muscle and limbs, straight into the pretty, sunlit valley.

There were green fields amidst heaps of hardened snow. The air was cold, but much less so than what Sansa had become used to in the Lands of *Always Winter.*
There were women working in the fields. Giantwomen. And children, playing or helping; tall like Sansa, some tall like Sandor. Old snow was neatly gathered in piles, away from the future crops.

Some giants hugged some women… Large, homely children joined the embraces. Overgrown girls with pretty, sad eyes, and very hairy boys.

Other newcomers lingered alone on the margin of the gathering, pointing at this and that, making guttural conversation.

All seemed overjoyed and accomplished.

Sansa was marveled. "They hide their families here," she told Sandor, "behind a wall they’d built to fortify the mountain."

A very tall giantwoman, neither young nor old, approached Sandor, glancing with reticence at Sansa with dark green eyes.

"Mag," she began subserviently, and then continued in fluent Common Tongue, “Why not use the old way? Why kill the guardian? The abominations created by the children can reach us now. A Mag should show wisdom when his men are foolish; too eager to see their women and young in times of need.”

Homely at first sight, she spoke and gestured gracefully, and her angular face with only a few hairs on her chin possessed a peculiar, striking beauty.

*Calm and strong. Clever.*

Several solitary giants protested against her words, yelling in the Old Tongue about brave Mag and his woman, who was no whore despite being a child. “The Long Night has come,” they sang. “Must go. Must kill. Only way.”

“The usual way was cut off,” Sandor informed in an unfriendly tone. “We couldn’t fly.”

The giantwoman nodded. Her hair was braided, dark brown, with a few red cotton threads in each braid. Her eyes looked murky now, like the swamp in Greywater Watch.

*Deep like time.*

When she noticed a club in the bag on Sandor’s back, her expression fell. “I will miss him dearly,” she announced solemnly. “How did he die?”

“Bravely,” Sandor said curtly, offering her the primitive weapon. “He was Mag then.”

“He always wanted to be Mag,” the giantwoman pressed her long fingers onto her mouth. “It couldn’t end well, could it?”

A tall boy approached unbidden, his eyes wide and grey. Ugly and hairy, he asked the woman something in Old Tongue. His mother… Sansa assumed… she gave him the permission… The boy took the club from Sandor, dragging it away, joining the other children, who examined the large weapon, whooping with interest and admiration.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Sansa pronounced, admiring the composure of the giantwoman in what must have been a terrible pain. *She’s widowed, and we brought her the news.* Sansa’s throat constricted with sympathy. “I haven’t had the honour to meet your husband, but he must have been very brave.”
For a long moment, no one spoke.

Sansa regretted speaking. Maybe she’d offended the large lady with empty words.

Then, the woman looked towards the mountain, where the monster still slept. “I suppose that you killed him, child?” she inquired from Sansa. “I don’t see how the rest of them could.”

“What do you mean by child?” Sansa had to know, and there was finally someone who could explain it to her.

“The children came first,” the giantwoman answered. “Before us. Their blood runs in you. Short of stature, they were the only ones with copper in their hair. The lesser man who share our land, the wildlings as you’d call them, they would say you were kissed by fire. But we know better! The song of the earth belonged to the children, and it sleeps in you now. It can be a very dangerous melody.”

“The children,” Sansa’s brain turned fast, pondering what she heard. “You mean the children of the forest? But I was born a Stark. We’re descendants of the First Men. And I have Andal blood on my mother’s side, they were often red of hair. The children hid from men in their sacred groves. They disappeared ages ago south of the Wall.”

“Yes, you could be all you say,” the woman smiled, her grin as crooked as Sandor’s. She had no scars, but her teeth were yellow, and very uneven. “But not only, it would seem. Or you wouldn’t be here now. Who can count the blood of all creatures in our veins? Maybe we were fish.. Or bears or eagles, before we walked on two legs.”

“And you believe that Sandor has giant blood?” Sansa needed to reconfirm, wishing to order her new knowledge as neatly as the giantwomen arranged the heaps of cleaned snow.

“Yes, child,” the woman agreed. “More’s the pity that he won’t leave you a sweet babe to remember him by, when he falls and another Mag takes his place.”

What?

One of Sansa’s greatest hopes was crushed. “He won’t?” she breathed out. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Only one child has ever been born from a union of a woman child with one of us, a giant, as the First Men have named us,” the woman argued. “He lived here as a little boy, my mother told me. He was very pale and an easy-going lackwit, good for nothing. His mother took him away and hid him from us. We don’t think he lived very long.”

The chill was mounting due to sunset, a wonderfully natural occurrence after night neverending.

Sansa felt she owed a truth to her hostess, who was kind to speak to her and instruct her, despite just learning she had lost her husband.

A truth for a truth.

“I didn’t kill your guardian,” she admitted. “Though your people asked it of me. I didn't think it just.”

“Then? He wouldn’t have let anyone just pass by. He can’t. It’s not in his nature,” the woman’s wise, dark green eyes widened, filling with almost childlike expectation.

“I sang him back to sleep,” Sansa confessed, “It seemed proper. And we’re here. So all is well.”

The woman took her hands, kissing them. “The children sang a lot, and yet they created the Others
to kill us, mistaking us for animals. Very few of them found it in their heart to give us music, which we love as much as they do. You shall always be welcome to our land, child.”

“My name is Sansa,” Sansa interrupted.

“Please, Sansa,” the giantwoman continued, “forgive our men for the rude and violent thoughts they harboured when they met you. Our history with children is bloody and—”

“I believe that all trueborn children might have died,” Sansa said thoughtfully. “They used to live in a cave full of weirwood trees, which isn’t that far from here, but the Others had killed them all. Your war is over.”

“Maybe” the woman nodded. “But I’m still glad that the giant Firth is well and in his place,” she mumbled. “Your war is far from over,” she said darkly. “Or rather, the war involving everyone. That’s why the men came here in a hurry, to rest and to love, but also to defend us when the time comes…”

Sansa realised she was left alone with the giantwoman.

*Where is Sandor? When did he leave?*

She hadn’t paid attention to him since learning her prospects of having a child were low; despite her broad hips that Mother always said were an advantage in childbed.

“Where is… Mag?” Sansa asked cautiously. “Do you know?”

“Why in the village, of course,” the woman laughed at Sansa’s ignorance. “Where else would he go at dusk? It’s time to go home.”

The settlement was behind the fields, a large grouping of rounded houses with equally rounded doors and windows. There were more houses than inhabitants. Many gaped empty.

When the sun was gone, the chill became unpleasantly familiar. Soft snowflakes graced the arrival of the night.

Giantwomen grumbled. There would be plenty to clean on the morrow.

Sansa strolled restlessly through the giants’ sanctuary.

“Mag?” she asked many times, but no one gave her an answer, not knowing, or dreading the magic of the unwitting descendant of the *children* of the forest.

When she was about ready to sit on the ground and sob, she spotted a spacious house at the edge of the village, larger and cleaner than the rest, and, through an open window, a mantle of lank black hair over Sandor’s back.

Inside, fire was ablaze, the air hotter than in Winterfell. There was a giant bed, a table, chairs, and hot broth in thick bowls of baked clay.

“Better than mammoth skins and roots, isn’t it?” Sandor asked when she entered, eyeing her from tip to toe… with that look she’d been afraid of, long ago.

A look of terrible impatience...

He didn’t have soup on his mind.
And perhaps neither did she.

“I have to make water,” Sansa announced hastily, rushing back out. She’d become used to being naked in Sandor’s presence, but still wasn’t comfortable in cleaning her most private parts in front of him.

In the grove of old oaks behind the house was the nearest heap of snow. Sansa squatted behind the largest tree trunk, lifting her skirts. When she was done with necessities, she scrubbed her woman’s place with snow, wiping herself dry with a spare cloth for moonblood she carried in the pocket of her gown. Finally, she dipped both precious bandages in snow. She felt fortunate that the cold water washed out the brown blood stains. She’d have to find soap later, to take care of the remaining yellow.

Or a kind giantwoman willing to help her. She didn’t know how to wash her own clothing. She never had to do it before.

Cloths for moonblood were given to her in false Winterfell… and washed for her once or twice… probably by the Night’s King woman… His Mermaid Wife…

She couldn’t imagine the Others performing those mundane tasks.

Sansa’s hands were pink, puckering from cold. Despite her discomfort, she felt clean, and both cloths were almost salvaged for her next red flower. Her fingers accidentally touched her woman’s place when she put back her smallclothes, finding it sticky, but not from moonblood.

Against her usual habits in the matter, she let them linger there for a moment and thought of Sandor. Moving her fingers, she sighed from unexpected pleasure. But not as good as…

She hurried back to the house and found her husband in bed, undressed. She left her boots near the door, and the two wet cloths near the fire, ignoring the pain in her feet.

Her lips felt dry.

Broth would wait.

“I’m still afraid to take my gown off,” she murmured. Hoping he wouldn’t find her reluctance silly or repulsive, she sat on the edge of the bed lifting her skirts, removing her long woollen socks. “It has protected me for so long. I believe I ought to shield it in return.”

Sandor’s burned lips parted from watching her undress, “But your moon-”

“It’s over,” she reassured him and herself. In truth, maybe a few more drops would still come during night, but she didn’t care. “Almost,” she admitted the entire truth. “Do you mind? We don’t have to-”

He would find her dirty if-

As so very often, Sandor reacted incredibly fast, pushing his head under her skirts, hands, tongue and teeth grazing her smallclothes. His touch was bliss, spreading her wetness, tasting it, pushing aside her boundaries and all thought.

When he entered her, she was done for after two strokes, overtaken by pleasure; continuing to follow his rhythm blindly until he finished, staying inside her. Her woman’s place ached, sensitive and filled with his seed, in need of a new washing…

On the morrow.
She was lost in sweetness.

“I’m damn sorry,” Sandor rasped against the crown of her head after a little while, more contrite than ever, not sounding like himself.

He’d never said it quite like this. Not even for some of his past actions, for which she would understand if he needed to apologise.

“For what?” she couldn’t discern his reasons now.

They were married. They loved each other. It was alright.

“I heard her. I can’t give you children. You wanted them.”

Sansa didn’t know what to say, but at least she understood now while he’d left her in the middle of her conversation with the giantwoman.

Her forehead wrinkled.

“We’re… we’re people, Sandor,” she thought of something appropriate to say with great difficulty, for the knowledge that she might not have Sandor’s child still hurt like a bleeding wound. “It doesn’t matter if one of our great-great-grandfathers or grandmothers was a dwarf, a giant or a child of the forest. Maybe it’s not exactly the same as when the old races married directly between themselves.”

“Married?” her husband exclaimed. “You mean fucked each other when they couldn’t find one of their own kind? Mance claims some wildlings fuck sheep when there are no women. I heard similar stories in the south, but I didn’t believe them.”

“You know better than that,” she countered him. “Why couldn’t a giant fall in love with a child of a forest or the other way around? Just because they are different?”

He was silent.

“Like us,” he concluded after a while, not mocking her.

His beloved eyes were so red. He must be so tired, more exhausted than her. Maybe he hadn’t slept at all under the mammoth skin, maybe he was just pretending to make her feel at ease, and remained on guard.

“Yes, just like us,” Sansa beamed.

Truth be told, she didn’t think of her and Sandor when she spoke in favour of love between the races.

But she was always very pleased when her stubborn husband reluctantly admitted she was right, and he wrong about something.

“Though in our case I will continue to believe that we are only a man and a woman,” she murmured softly, caressing his broad chest. And that one day we may have a child.

The last miracle of the day was the broth; still warm, tasting of meat and herbs.

Hours later, when Sandor slept peacefully, probably unable to pretend any different even if he wanted, Sansa lingered, awake, unable to close her eyes. She prayed for Arya, Bran, Rickon and Jon, to the old gods and the new.
She wondered if the giantwoman spoke truly when she said that the children of the forest created the Others, and if her own bloodline was the reason she’d been captured and kept alive, rather than any gown with dragonblood.

Arya remained rather short, and Aunt Lyanna even more so… Everyone else in her family was on the tall side.

The Starks could be descendants of all three races.

*Maybe everyone is.*

Finally, she remembered an even shorter and extremely old woman, who called all Starks, young or aged, children, and who had a very tall child of her own.

Taller than Sandor or his brother. Pale and loyal to the Starks. A lackwit, just like the giantwoman had mentioned.

The only descendant of a trueborn giant and a trueborn child of the forest.

Old Nan’s son. Alive, at Jon’s wedding, and, from what she could glimpse, still helping Bran.

*Hodor.*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading ))

Next up: Gendry
Gendry IV

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy ;-)))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gendry

Titan roared at sunrise.

The sculpted giant guarded the entrance to the port of Braavos, standing on two high, craggy islands. His massive legs were carved from the imposing natural stone arch that formed a bridge between them.

His skirt, torso, arms and helmed head were bronze; ancient and green. Left hand grasped the mountainous top of one of the islands; right arm rose high up towards the sky, wielding a mighty blade. Threatening the enemies of Braavos.

*Except that they now rule the city.*

Titan’s head stood four hundred feet above the sea level, half as high as the Wall back home… Fires burned in his eyes. Bright. Interminable. Evoking the nearly forgotten Lord of Light in Gendry’s burdened mind.

Ships had to pass under the Titan’s legs to enter the harbour. The city defenders could make that impossible, attacking them through numerous murder holes hidden in the giant’s skirt, with hot oil and arrows.

After dawn, Titan grunted every hour. The clock and guardian fortress of the once Free City of Braavos...

This morning, Arya rose suddenly at the bronze giant’s call, bright and terse; as if she hadn’t been ill for a sennight. Her hair was short and bushy, thick and dark brown, growing back fast in winter. It made her look young and wild; and *pretty*, not boyish at all… the opposite from when Gendry had met her and she'd fooled him about her gender…

*Not for long… milady.*

*My wife.*

They were married, but not quite. They’d said the vows. He’d given her his protection. But she hadn’t been well enough for more than being held while she slept.

Food had become scarce in the abandoned House of Black and White where they dwelled in hiding. Gendry had given Arya fruit and raisins, dry meat and some strange smoked fish whenever she was awake. And each time she’d sunk back into feverish stupour.

*Not today.* Gendry’s heart jumped; skittish, hopeful, very young still.
He lived on harsh bread and cheese crusts, and lukewarm water from the temple fountain, which tasted vaguely of the sea.

_Sweet mixed with salt._

Every day during Arya's illness, Gendry had ventured into the streets to see how Braavos was faring under the new foreign Sealord from Volantis. But even though they needed food, he never talked to anyone, avoiding any possible confrontation. If he got caught, Arya would be alone…

_Unacceptable._

Arya, awake and well, immediately found _more_ food in the temple, knowing every hole in it. Strange tea, smelling good. Dry sausages and pickled cabbage she began heating in a pot over the fire. “Sailors eat it raw,” she commented. (And they had, on _The Rhaenys_ when Gendry and Arya had crossed the narrow sea with Bran and Hodor). “But I find it more palatable when warm.”

She found potatoes too, and set Gendry to peel them. The imperfect cubes he made now simmered with the cabbage.

“I’m starving,” she announced when the strange morning meal was done.

Gendry’s joy was immense from seeing her bursting with life force, though he’d never be fond of pickled cabbage, neither cold nor stewed.

With her stomach full, Arya located them new cloaks. Heavy-hooded Braavosi ones, and with good reason; it rained cats and dogs outside.

Water rushed through the sinewy streets and alleys, so wild and fast that it was hard to tell a street from a canal.

“Winter,” Arya muttered, “I heard about the pouring rain in cold season, but I never believed the kind man when he taught me this lesson. You’ve seen no sign of him?”

Gendry shook his head. The Faceless Men had vanished into thin air since the new Sealord conquered the city.

In one of the rare inns still in business, Arya exchanged two unburnt candles from the temple for two bowls of warm milk and a loaf of fresh bread.

_A blessing after the storm._

The Horn of Joramun was stored in the bag on Gendry's back, next to his hammer; both hidden by his wet cloak.

They looked like peasants; they were beggars in Braavos!

Gendry hated it.

A hundred times more than Arya, who had her mind set on their return to Westeros, ignoring everything else. She must have forged a strategy for both her and Gendry in her head, never asking for his opinion.

_The city was conquered, subdued, silent._

There were no women and few men in the streets. And even fewer in the harbour, where Arya predictably led Gendry, refusing to acknowledge that Braavos had changed or that their situation was
desperate.

“There has to be a ship,” she announced doggedly on an empty dock.

There wasn’t one.

There was only the wavy, foamy, shivering surface of the sea, with debris and dirty water from ships that had sailed out a week ago, when the new Sealord came into power.

Early signs of doubt in her ability to get them both safely out of Braavos graced the expression of Gendry’s finally healthy, pretty wife, that he yet had to bed.

There were guards patrolling the waterfront. Gendry didn’t like them. A large company was approaching now.

*Too big a bunch.*

“What’s over there?” he wondered aloud before Arya spotted the men-at-arms, dragging his wife away from the city, with its defeated houses and canals, into the wilderness and towards a rising line of hills forested with spruce and pine, which flanked the port on one side. A narrow path began at the foot of the chain. As far as Gendry could see, it might lead to the Titan’s left arm.

*To the fortress’ entrance.*

“Look,” he pointed to Arya, “maybe there are ships out there. We might be able to reach them through the Titan.”

It was truly a stupid thing to say, but it worked miracles.

Arya followed as though it were her own notion, despite *him* being the foolish one in her eyes. She could think it of him if she wanted. He realised he would… miss it if she stopped. It was… endearing. It meant she cared for him, fearing he was unable to care for himself.

Titan roared deeply.

"Four hours have passed from sunrise," his wife counted mechanically.

Commotion from behind. The port being flooded by soldiers. Looking for something. Or someone. Harsh orders being barked. Dissatisfaction. Guards being punished, whipped, tattooed on their faces and turned into… slaves… Gallows being mounted… for those whose life was forfeit, on the spot… Sealord didn’t judge. His men did it for him as they saw fit.

All this was rather common in new Braavos, but Gendry couldn’t get used to it.

It was wrong; the world turned upside down.

*Are they looking for us?*

Gendry’s instincts didn’t trick him; they did well in leaving.

His hearing was as good as his hunches today.

There were voices in the grove of pines ahead of them, hushed and nervous. Gendry grabbed Arya’s shoulder. Unnecessarily. She was already alert and more silent than a bacon-stealing mouse.

They slid behind the shrubbery, sneaking forward together, to see who was there.
A beautiful young woman discussed something vividly with three bravos. Her skin was light brown, her hair dark and shiny; long waves combed to perfection protruding from under her fancy, warm cloak. Her figure seemed perfectly slim and curved. Any man would admire her.

Yet she seemed bitter and unhappy about the response she was receiving from the three braavos in her company.

Maybe the soldiers looked for her in the port.

Arya could have translated the strange conversation to Gendry. Instead, she decided to ignore it, continuing her climb towards the Titan. "There could be ships out there, you said it yourself," she muttered. "Why are you still standing?" Her voice was raised, shrill.

"And if there are, how will you board one?" Gendry rebelled against her headless approach. They had more chances... in a company. These bravos and their lady were hiding. Chance was they had no love for the new order.

"I don't know yet!" Arya howled. "But it's worth a look."

"Aren't there defences in the Titan?" Gendry boomed.

"Yes!" Their conversation had turned so loud that one of the bravos they'd been spying on had sneaked upon Gendry and Arya, addressing them in Common Tongue. His accent was poor, but understandable. "It doesn't take many men to hold it, but there will be some, beginning with the guards on the bridge between this and the last island. The path is narrow, and no one-"

"...has ever attacked the Titan from the side of the city because there was no reason for it until now. The inhabitants ruled themselves and the fort was a part of that arrangement. A common asset, well cared for," Arya finished haughtily the bravo’s thought.

Of course. Titan stands on two islands. Gendry cursed himself for stupidly expecting that the path they'd taken would be continuous in a city built on water.

"We've got to take that bridge," he mumbled, sounding decisive, surprising himself.

"What are you planning, lord?" the pretty woman addressed Gendry, suddenly interested in him, speaking like a noble Westerosi lady.

Lord.

Gendry was unwillingly flattered, feeling less like a beggar under the soaked Braavosi cloak.

His hands itched to wield his hammer, to some end he couldn’t fathom yet.

But first...

He was here because of his wife...

Who was giving him a long, jealous look; both deadly quiet and fuming. He was obviously very late in understanding her, but at least he’d gotten it now.

“You’re prettier. Do you not know?” He whispered to Arya, though others could hear him. He wanted to be heard.

Arya gave him a defiant look, but also fumbled with her hands; pleased, perhaps, or at least a little reassured.
"My beautiful, beloved wife," Gendry spoke louder, staring at Arya with adoration, "she’d like to see how Titan roars from nearby. How can I refuse her?"

His mind remained busy, forming a strategy as headless as Arya’s, perhaps. We could… He couldn’t shape his thought fully, yet it was there, urging him into action. "Are there weapons stored inside the Titan? For the city defence? Couldn’t we use them?"

"Who is we?" The talkative bravo continued. "You want to steal weapons to fight, you need men to wield them. And all fighters in this city except the four of us have run away... or they are paid by the Sealord, enslaved or killed."

Four? Gendry saw three bravos and a pretty lady.

"There's smallfolk," Gendry mentioned cautiously.

"Smallfolk?" Braavosi didn't understand him.

"My lord husband means citizens." After spitting out the word lord as though it was a greatest insult, Arya helped. "Not bravos, nor the Sealord or his soldiers, not the priests of any faith or the bankers of the Iron Bank. Just people doing an ordinary trade for their living."

There's no smallfolk. Gendry couldn't wrap up his mind around the notion of… equality.

"Do you mean," Gendry stuttered, "the citizens here are not only free, but not obedient to noble lords and ladies that rule over them, a separate group between the Sealord and the poor?"

"We don't understand you, lord from a distant land," the Braavosi lady said. "Some citizens are rich and some are poor, but the rich don't own the poor. Or didn't until now... And you can be born poor and die rich, or the other way around. I wonder if that'll be possible from now on..."

"Slavery is back," a bravo who hadn't spoken yet said wistfully, through his nose. "We’ve been hiding for a week. Our lovely Bellegere here will never accept to have the tattoo of a pillow slave on her cheek… But dying has no appeal either. If we’re dead, how can seek revenge?"

"Maybe more men are hiding," Gendry clung to his stupid notion of doing something, without being able to explain what. Not even to himself. "Women? Children? These... citizens?"

There could be, on another hill, why not?

"Gendry," Arya pulled his hand, gentle like the sea breeze or the kiss of the morning wind on his bearded face. She didn’t look jealous now, just impatient, and in a hurry. "Let us have that look at Titan. These men and the Black Pearl can look after themselves."

"Come with us," Gendry stubbornly invited the others as well, wondering who the Black Pearl was. "Where's that bridge?"

Arya gave him a disappointed look. "We’d be faster and better hidden by ourselves," she argued.

"These people here are in the same position," he countered. "They'll do us no harm."

"Then I may as well blow the Horn of Joramun and announce to the Volantenes that we're coming," Arya spoke sardonically, suddenly looking like her brother Jon when he was angry with Gendry for loving his sister.

"Or we can turn back. If we march alone and can't get in because the bridge and fort are well
guarded."

"I can kill the guards."

"It's not about killing!" Gendry insisted, unable to describe fully the trouble he expected, yet he sensed would exist. Escaping wouldn’t, couldn’t come easy as Arya believed. He’d been awake in the ghost of the once-Free City while she slept.

The Sealord and his men were capable of anything.

The Whore Queen was a septa in comparison. Cersei only wanted to kill all her ex-husband’s bastards in order to present her own as his trueborn children. But she graciously let smallfolk die in peace, rather than hastening their demise.

The soldiers here had different view. Control. Abuse. Deal harshly with the rebels. Or with anyone who was in the streets after curfew. Or anyone who was out and in their way, at any time.

Until no one dared walk in the city at all.

“Arya, please,” Gendry said. “Listen to me this once.”

“Why should we follow, lord?” The other lady, Bellegere, asked. “Your lady has contempt for my profession. She can’t see beyond that, despite her own specialist knowledge and training. I know where Cat of the Canals lived, and the arts she learned. Yet I don’t judge her for it.”

What profession? Black Pearl? What is that?

“It's not that!” Arya protested vehemently. “I… Never mind.” Without further ado, she leapt forward like a frightened rabbit.

Gendry followed without thinking. So did the three bravos. Bellegere was last, almost as silent as Arya.

Twenty soldiers on the opposite side guarded the tiny drawbridge, too narrow for two men to cross abreast. Foreigners in shiny armour. Gendry would have loved to study the elaborate, fine metalwork on their breastplates if he could.

“I suppose they’d let me cross. I could distract them…” Bellegere said, dishevelling her hair.

Arya shook her head in disapproval, and then gave her first honest glance to the other woman. “No,” she said calmly. “They’ve got no archers and their armour is heavy. They can't prevent us from rushing the bridge, nor will they duel on it themselves. Our men should run across, fight bravely, and show their skills to buy time for all to get to the other side. But only a brief scuffle, then they’ll feign surrender to the Sealord and express a heartfelt wish to enter his service. The two of us will cross then, and join their plea for clemency, claiming that everyone loves the Sealord. That this altercation was only a misunderstanding. That way we’ll all distract them at the same time, while they're pondering enlisting more men. If we kill a soldier first, they’ll just want revenge. That's how people are,” Arya sounded bitter, older than her age.

Do you still dream of vengeance?

He remembered her mentioning names before she slept, years ago in the riverlands. Queen Cersei was one of them.

He would ask her when they boarded the ship together.
They should go.

Abandoning their green shrubbery shelter, Gendry rushed to and over the bridge, ignoring the soldiers’ cries to stop.

Contrary to Arya’s expectations that the enemy wouldn't engage from distance, they threw daggers at him. But they were neither skilled nor trained for it, missing far and wide. A bravo howled behind him, his unarmoured left arm cut.

Gendry stepped on firm soil, swinging his hammer. Once, twice. Missing on purpose. Two soldiers confronted him. The last of the three bravos was almost off the bridge. Two more soldiers closed on Gendry. He had to deal a truly dangerous blow or they’d corner him. Or even kill him, for he was unarmoured. He picked the largest guard. The rest seemed to obey his commands. The leader. This man and his fancy armour should be able to withstand-

The last bravo crossed.

The hammer struck the leader’s chest. Armour and bone crunched. The enemy captain lay dead, against Gendry’s will. All soldiers were upon him; the opportunity for ruse gone.

Or…

“To me!” Gendry commanded the three bravos. They managed to form a circle, backs to each other, facing their enemies.

This time Gendry picked the weakest guard, swinging the hammer wildly.

The man drew back, avoiding the blow.

“I’ll take down half of you before you get to me,” Gendry bellowed arrogantly, taller than the rest. “Or we can-”

“The Sealord would employ you, lord,” a tiny soldier said. “Think how many chests you could smash in his service.”

“Could I?” Gendry questioned. “How generous. Well, in my land, lords decide who lives and who dies, or the king does, and those decisions are governed by the laws of the realm. There is no law here, from what I’ve seen. The Sealord’s just another lord, and no king of mine.”

Arya was next to him, more silent than a whisper. And Lady Bellegere.

“He’s the new benefactor of the Black Pearl!” A fat soldier claimed. “Where’s your land, lord? Is it richer than ours?”

Gendry opened his mouth to say he was nothing to the Black Pearl, still uncertain what this meant. A pet name for Lady Bellegere? Why? To his surprise, Arya confirmed the fat man’s delusions in a nervous, girly voice. “His lordship wishes to visit the Titan with his mistress. If you let him pass, he might be discreet about this lamentable episode when he sits at the Sealord’s table tonight.”

Lady Bellegere gave Gendry a seductive, insincere look, playing along with Arya’s latest strategy.

Is that your profession, lady?

An expression of disappointment on Gendry’s face matched the grimace of disillusionment of the fat soldier. “The Sealord… naturally,” the corpulent guard murmured.
Gendry gambled. “What's your land, lord? I trust it to be as far from Braavos as my own. And… not serving the Sealord.” *If I can be flattered, so can he.*

“No land is farther,” the soldier answered very seriously. “Except the Shadow. But that’s no man’s land, for it belongs to the shadows. Over there, magic is the law. Ours is the easternmost place that is well ordered and ruled entirely by people.”

“What place is that?” Gendry wondered. “My land is in the West, lord,” he lied, having no lands he could call his own. “East is unknown to me.”

The foreign soldiers stood undecided, witnessing the duel of words between Gendry and their new leader.

Gendry took the chance to scrutinise the intricate metalwork of their armour from close proximity; steel enamelled with gold: leaves, stars, little flowers, in long beautiful patterns. *A wonder.* Gendry wished he could make something like that. *Beautiful. For Arya. For the hilt of her thin sword. Or a scabbard.*

He had seen this type of armour before, he was certain, but he couldn't remember where, and it had not been so very well developed.

*One of many guests and customers of Master Tobho Mott in the capital, no doubt.*

The foreigners wouldn’t answer where they were from, so he thundered. “Do you not wish to return home?”

“The passage is very expensive,” the fat captain said cautiously. “Since the mad one-eyed captain with a mute crew has been absent from the Free Cities, few others dare go that far, and only in exchange for a fortune. The Sealord pays well. We might earn the journey before the winter’s end.”

“What if there’s no winter’s end?” Gendry asked. “Unless you help me. We also need to go home. West, to the War of Winter. If we’re victorious, know that my beloved lady wife is a princess. Her brother is king and would richly reward those who have helped him. He has a means of transport most men can only dream of, and can take you freely and swiftly to any part of the known world.”

The fat soldier laughed. “Black Pearl is the most noble courtesan that ever existed, but no princess—”

“-and no man’s wife,” Lady Bellegere said defiantly.

*A courtesan? A noble whore?*

The world was… strange, Gendry concluded. He didn’t know such women existed.

“*She's* very pretty,” a very young soldier said, pointing at Arya. “Look at her face, her hair. A rare beauty in hiding.”

Arya appeared struck by disbelief. Yet she tried to look confident that the compliment she was given was true, turning a tad… *rosy* when she walked purposefully into Gendry’s arms. “I am indeed hiding,” she murmured shyly, not offering any further explanations.

Gendry couldn’t tell if her sudden timidity was true or feigned. It scared him. *Will you lie to me one day?*

He didn’t think she would. He was just afraid she might.
“Beautiful and mysterious,” the fat soldier said approvingly. “Like the legendary wife of our greatest ancient hero, Yin Tar. Who is your brother, Your Highness? What is his kingdom? What does he possess that other men can only desire? Do tell us, pray.”

Arya made an effort to speak mysteriously, though the corners of her mouth threatened to burst into unbridled laugh from the ceremonial treatment of her person. “Have you heard of the lords of Valyria? Did they ride horses?”

Soldiers murmured. Even the Braavosi look scared.

“You don’t mean—”

“She does. The dragons have returned,” Gendry cut the discussion short. “How many men guard the entrance to the Titan?” he questioned. He didn’t want to trade words the entire day.

Soon he led his princess and new fellow fighters up the path where Titan’s fist touched the hill.

Only two Braavosi guards stood at the entrance. They were so thoroughly impressed with Gendry’s foreign friends that they instantly changed sides.

The fancy armour came from Yi Ti, Gendry had finally learned during the march. A faraway, fabulous kingdom from legends.

Men from that distance had never come to see Tobho Mott in Gendry’s reckoning.

Where did he then see this armour before?

*Maybe Tobho received such guests during the Hand’s Tourney and I’ve forgotten their faces?* So many different men had visited the smithy on that occasion… Including Arya’s lord father...

Inside the bronze giant, the stairs climbed steadily towards the statue’s hollow shoulder through moist, sea-smelling darkness. Torches were scarce. In the upper arm, there was the first window, tiny, no more than a slit in the bronze wall, too high up even for Gendry to look through.

He squatted, inviting Arya to climb on his back. As soon as he straightened up, she declared with excitement, “There are ships waiting to be allowed access to the port! I think that one is *The Rhaenys!* She’s near the Titan.”

Arya squeezed his head with her knees from joy, and he found it difficult to put her down. He let both hands linger on her waist, wishing they were elsewhere, a lord and a lady in their castle.

“We have to go down,” Arya voiced what Gendry already guessed. If there was any way to board the ship, it would be from the Titan’s skirt.

“The Volantenes man the apron,” the fat captain from Yi Ti disagreed. “They won't bow to you. They’ll capture the princess and demand ransom from her brother. Maybe they’ll tattoo her cheeks and put her in the pillow house until he pays. And should we reach the skirt, how will we board the ship? It's too high to jump.”

“There's green hempen rope stored in Titan’s head,” Arya said. “His hair is made of it. I learned this lesson long ago... Pyke would spot us on a coloured rope, Gendry.”

Cotter Pyke was the captain of *The Rhaenys* and one of the black brothers Jon respected most.

“The head is manned by bravos, thin and cowardly,” a very strong Yi Ti soldier declared. “We can
easily defeat them.”

“Watch your tongue,” the Black Pearl scolded him, not sounding like a noble courtesan, but like Arya when she was angry. “Some bravos may have more courage than you.”

“We get the rope,” Gendry mouthed, turning up onto another set of stairs which hopefully led to the giant’s neck and head, and not towards the second shoulder and the sword arm. It was difficult to know with precision what direction was where in torchlit darkness.

_Flickering, imprecise light..._

The Black Pearl was right. Braavosi fought back in the giant’s head. _Brother’s war._ Arya was getting the rope, ignoring their foes. Gendry killed another man, the second one that day. Thoroughly sickened by the crunching sound of bones breaking in the darkness, he felt like the Great Other in person.

_Heartless and evil._

“Stop it,” he boomed, “we’re just stealing some rope. Your new Sealord hangs people.” This reminded Gendry of the Lady Stoneheart’s justice, some of it deserved and some… arbitrary. He’d never be able to watch a hanging cold-hearted again; it’d always make him remember his own sins, the time when the Brotherhood without Banners turned as cruel as their enemies. He had watched, doing nothing. “We just want to run away.”

"Our orders-" an old bravo began.

"Do you believe in your orders?” Gendry bellowed. “Should men be hanged on the spot, without judgment? Should they be tattooed, turned into slaves? Is that your government?”

"But-

"Is it?” Gendry screamed. “Or do you secretly wish there were more men like you to rebel against it? Because to me, you look as if you're unwillingly serving the new, cruel Sealord while dreaming of freedom. If I’m not wrong, follow me!”

Arya had the rope.

Gendry mentally estimated the time it would take to the Volantenes to discover there were intruders in their ranks, and comb through the Titan to find and hang them all. There was only one way in and out. If they couldn't board the ship... and it was likely that not all of them would be able to embark... it would be enough if the enemy stationed a large company of sellswords at the exit, in Titan’s left fist...

He’d never know if it was his hammer, his stature, his voice or the depth of his conviction that pointless fighting should stop, which made everyone obey him.

The bravos from Titan’s head changed allegiances, becoming his men.

“_Lord Gendry,”_ Arya teased him mercilessly.

The worst of it was, he fancied the title. Did that make him awful? Would Arya stop loving him if she knew he liked to lead and be addressed with reverence? She never paid much heed to her birth… but she also never had to… being highborn was… natural for her. Even when she acted as a Weasel, serving lesser men. While he had suffered for his origin. A worthless orphan had become a smith’s apprentice and received some recognition for his work. Only to be demoted to a common criminal
forced to take the black, losing the only respect he'd ever enjoyed... And then he found out the cause of his undeserved fall... Not due to any fault of his, but only to the fact that he was King Robert’s bastard...

A lord, why not?

“Give me that rope, princess,” first he had to tease his wife back.

The descent to the apron was narrow, slippery and treacherous, with strong gusts of chilly sea wind blowing through the tiny slits. Whistling in the spacious, hollow torso of the giant, the wind bit every bit of exposed skin; hands and face. Gendry wished his beard were even longer, beginning to understand why windows here were so few and so thin. Had there been more openings, the gale would be the only defender of Braavos, blowing away everything on its path.

“I also want to carry something,” his princess protested, but she did surrender the rope, too heavy a burden for her in the windy, falling darkness.

Right.

“Here,” he said, feeling wise and treacherous at the same time, handing Arya the bag with the Horn of Joramun. His hammer remained in his right arm, the long, coiled, hempen rope over his left shoulder...

Now you've got it.

In case you've got to leave me.

He wouldn't tell her that, not wishing his premonition to become true.

“Who goes there?” A man shouted shrilly.

The Volantenes were determined to prevent the rats from Braavos and the traitors from the Far East prowling through Titan’s skirt.

Fighting erupted, wild and bloody. A bravo fell, and a soldier from Yi Ti, and a few Volantenes too, killed by a... whisper. By coins of the House of the Black and White, always saluting death.

Arya’s expression was... so flat, almost peaceful... despite her actions. Gendry was stunned, hurt.

It wasn’t what he wished for her. The indifference. The Faceless Woman. The fate of her late mother, Lady Stoneheart. Though he couldn’t blame her for it, remembering how they met, and the atrocities they had seen together. Was there gold in the village? There probably wasn’t, and yet peasants had been tortured and killed as if there had been a mountain of it...

Valar Morghulis, he thought about all dead soldiers, hauling his wife over his shoulder by surprise.

“What-” she uttered.

“We're leaving,” he muttered, dragging her swiftly into a free passage with a small, unguarded murder hole.

“Hold them off!” he bellowed to the fat soldier. “Cover for me, please," he begged the Braavosi.

Black Pearl was out of her dress and cloak. In tight tunic and breeches, she fought with knives. Her hair was tied in a black cloth and now she looked like Gendry imagined pirates did...
And Arya didn’t kill him, so she must have forgiven him his insolence. For now.

When Gendry forced open the shutter over the murder hole, the first gust of wind almost blew him away. Thankfully there was the hammer. Leaning on it helped him restore balance.

He had little time. The Volantenes had noticed his move. He tied a rope around his hammer and sat on it for added safety. “Go down,” he told Arya, “Wave to Pyke. I’ll come after you, I promise. Hurry!”

Arya looked at his knot. “The hammer alone should be enough to hold the rope for you,” she stated cautiously. “Don’t you dare leave me!”

Did she know?
Did she see through him?

He tied the other end of the rope around Arya's waist.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” she murmured, beginning to squeeze herself out through the murder hole. Soon, she was hanging in the air. Gendry let the green rope uncoil slowly. She held onto it, legs dangling. The wind toyed with the bag on her back, inflating it.

Pyke, please. You have a watcher there with Myrish glass in his hand.

Please see her.

They did. A boat was lowered from the Rhaenys when she was thirty feet down.

Men, rowing fast. His beloved wife, sliding down. The bright green thread in the weak sunlight. Her lifeline.

The Black Pearl being forced to withdraw towards Gendry with some Yi Ti soldiers. Another bravo dying with courage.

Arrows through a nearby murder hole! Not far from Gendry, shot at Arya. Him, running there, knocking the archer unconscious with bare hands, running back, scared like seven hells that the rope had come loose.

It hadn’t. His knot was good, and his hammer was heavy. It could hold his weight as well, like Arya had predicted.

He could abandon these men, who’d started to follow him because he spoke to them of insurgence and freedom. After he’d made them dream of justice and respect they should enjoy...

Lord.

Or a hanged man on the morrow.

With other hanged men, women and young boys. Some of the would-be bravos he recruited looked terribly young, three and ten at most.

Titan roared.

Gendry’s ears hurt terribly, as if they were about to burst from deep, thundering sound; echoing inside the hollow bronze shell of the statue’s body like a gigantesque drum, booming with abandon.
He sat on the hammer again, waiting.

Arya almost reached the boat.

Near him, Lady Bellegere the Pirate, tied a shred of silk over the cut on her left hand.

The fat Yi Ti captain, defending her as though she was just another man under his command.

Arya in the boat, in Hodor’s arms, the pale giant easy to recognise despite the great distance.

One hundred fifty feet... At least...

Gendry couldn’t see Bran. Pyke was in the boat though, and he had the trust of Arya’s kingly brother. Moreso than Gendry. Jon had asked Gendry to keep Arya safe from herself, not to marry her and have her killed.

In the temple of the moonsingers...

Gendry wished to sing to the moon. If only he knew how...

“Good luck, lord,” Lady Bellegere said bitterly from behind. “I was a fool to trust you. If the new dragonlords ever fly to Braavos, we may pass from one slavery to another. Best if we die now.”

“To me!” Gendry called the survivors of his company. “Form a line here!”

“Yes! Leave before it's too late, lord! And maybe, just maybe, if the new dragonlords are the sons and daughters of Aegon the Conqueror like my great-grandfather was, they’ll take Braavos from Volantis and restore it to freedom. Then our death wouldn't be in vain,” Bellegere was ecstatic, incoherent, predicting different futures.

Great-grandfather? Was Bellegere his distant cousin? He had a drop of Targaryen blood, on his father’s side...

“Lend me one of your knives, my lady,” Gendry commanded, taking one from her hands.

He looked through the hole.

Hot oil, falling from Titan's skirt on Gendry’s right. Pyke’s men, evading it by rowing in a circle, trying to hold their position.

Waiting for him.

His men, running to that hole to stop that oil from being poured, without him having to order it...

Arry, Arry, will I ever see you again?

How angry will you be?

Will I be there to peel potatoes for you? To put you to sleep when you’re ill?

Gendry hollered savagely through the hole. “Pyke! Row back! Leave! Now! She has the Horn of Winter! Take her back to Westeros!”

He wasn't going anywhere.

Yes, his knot was tight, the rope and the hammer would hold his weight, but he would never have
been able to squeeze himself out through the murder hole...

He was too tall and too broad for that.

He thanked the Moon God that Arya hadn’t noticed...

*I’ll come after you. I promised.*

*If I can.*

*Just not right now.*

Gendry closed his eyes.

With hollow heart he hoped that the gale had carried his battle voice *down* and not high up into the air.

He dared look at the boat.

Hodor held Arya tight.

Through the incessant whistling of the mighty wind, Gendry thought he could hear her screaming.

Pyke’s sailors started rowing away.

With a broad, firm gesture, Gendry cut off the rope.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading :-)!

Feedback is welcome ;-)
Arya screamed in his embrace.

In his borrowed arms, huge and pale. It was incredibly hard to open Hodor’s eyes in his dream, being miles away.

But not impossible.

They had a bond now, just like he and Summer. Hodor resented it, but always gave in to pressure, and Bran couldn’t resist developing his newfound strength. His only power, in the world where he had none...

He slept so much better now, in Greywater Watch, than ever before; forgetting the greenseer’s throne, the seat that had almost consumed him, deep in the cave beyond the Wall. He’d drowsily sat dreaming, nearly becoming a tree… Hating the sensation with every ounce of his body, he’d nonetheless believed it to be his destiny...

All he wanted was to stay awake…

Then and now...

If only Meera wouldn’t avoid him! He thought she’d be pleased that he found a way to her father’s castle, to… to ask for her hand, and evade Jon’s designs to keep his ill little brother out of trouble by sending him on a trip to Braavos... As if Bran the climber could ever stay out of it! He might, when forced by his illness.

Not anymore.

Not since he discovered he could use Hodor to wield Dark Sister for him. Not since he managed to send him back to Braavos after Arya. Unable to save his sister in the flesh, Bran decided to attempt it in his dreams…

And at the same time he would follow his heart…

Though perhaps he’d been wrong in that. What if Meera never saw him as anything more than a sick lordling in her care?

He’d never fly, no, that had been Bloodraven’s blatant lie; the closest he’d ever come to it would be
as a burden on the back of someone else’s dragon.

He wondered if he was old enough to marry. *Four and ten.* Robb was five and ten when he chose his wife. And Meera was older than Bran… A woman grown.

It mattered not; he loved her… She knew… And he had thought, he had firmly believed...

Yet he didn’t receive the welcome he expected in the Neck. He knew he was young, and infirm, yet he had hoped…

He had hoped…

Saddened, hurt, he remained fast asleep, keeping Hodor’s frightened eyes wide open, fighting *not* to slip behind Summer’s honey-coloured ones. His wolf was helping drag a chariot on the way to the Wall; smelling winter, sensing Jon… Seeing through his wolf eyes would be much more comfortable than keeping a scared human being in unwanted submission...

*I’m so sorry, Hodor. Just a little bit more and I’ll go. I’ll leave you alone.*

The spurned boy-suitor kept dreaming of saving his sister.

*Only a moment longer, until Arya boards the ship. Please, Hodor.*

Once *the Rhaenys* set sail, Arya wouldn’t jump into the sea and swim back to her lover; or whatever Gendry was to her. *Something I’ll never be to Meera.* Her death at sea would accomplish nothing.

Disappointingly, since leaving the cave his dreams had stopped being special. He no longer dreamed of Joramun, nor of the past long gone, nor of the malleable future. Despite being destined to become a greenseer, according to the late Brynden Rivers.

Maybe that was just another lie, like flying.

The weeping, grey sky of Braavos embraced the breaking waves before fading into the black of the Long Night in the West. *The Rhaenys* rolled on; a wooden toy of the wind. Arya screamed until she had no voice left. Then, she began crying, softer than Sansa might…

*Enough, Bran! Stop, you’re just hurting everyone.*

Maybe he should have let her go back for Gendry.

Embarrassed to the core, Bran withdrew from Hodor’s cowed, abused mind, and allowed himself to dream of Meera confessing her eternal love to him, like ladies did to their knights in stories. Pointlessly, terribly, wonderfully so.

He wished he could dream of Sansa, and see how she fared in Lands of Always Winter, but he couldn’t. She’d given him some red liquid in a cup to drink. The concoction had returned to him the will and strength to live...

Opening his Tully blue eyes, Bran realised he’d fallen asleep under the elaborate iron gates of Greywater Watch, and not in the bed in his empty guest room, where Meera wouldn’t enter.

An old crannogwoman had explained to him upon his arrival to the neck, that the smiths had laboured for a hundred days to complete the metalwork of the iron portcullis; a miracle of design with vine leaves, twigs and other intricate plant-like patterns. Had it been green and not black iron, it would have looked alive. Growing.
A week had passed since then…

*Without Meera.*

Her castle, hidden in the marshes, moved from place to place, and its mistress was nowhere to be seen, adept at hiding like her home…

Now, to his utmost surprise, the invisible lady crouched in the grass behind him. She must have been watching him sleep, and waiting, to witness his awakening.

“Where have you been?” he asked, offended, boyish; his voice shrill and petulant. “They wouldn’t let me see you.”

“I was occupied,” she said calmly, not offering further explanations. “Do you want to return to the Wall? To your kingly brother? My father is there as well. He sent a raven with many errands. I had to fulfil them before coming to you.”

“I see,” Bran muttered, not understanding anything. It was all riddles and swamps, kingfishers and flowers wrought of iron; walls of mud, wood and stone. Sculpted children playing flutes; the imagined sound of drums and cymbals in his head. He wanted to dream again, to see Arya, Sansa, Jon and Rickon.

*To fly.*

*To be a knight.*

“Go to the Wall how?” he asked bitterly. “I won’t enter a tree. I’ve had enough of that.”

“There’s a riderless dragon out there,” Meera said cautiously. “He could take us north in the blink of an eye.”

The white dragon flew lazily through the black, starry sky, landing on an empty crannog in a great loop, brushing the tall reeds aside with his spiked tail.

Bran considered the proposal for a moment before dismissing it. “He’ll only listen to his rider,” he repeated the common knowledge.

“I don’t know,” Meera disagreed, “To me he looks clever.”

“If he’s so smart, why can’t he see the Watch?” Bran countered.

"No one can," Meera was flushed. Only those we let in. Not even the dragons. Unless the castle wants to be found."

“He’s nervous,” Bran observed.


*How?* Only if he crawled…

Meera clapped her hands. Two of her people he knew more than well appeared out of nowhere, lifting Bran on their shoulders. She bid them to follow.

Bran was ashamed for perceiving a slight against him. Meera had always been considerate of his special needs… Reproaching her supposed offense was cruel…
But at some point in his wanderings, since he left Winterfell as a broken boy, her consideration was no longer enough… If it ever had been...

On wiry shoulders of the crannogmen, Bran observed the triple castle walls passing by; reeds, willows, timber on stone. He wished he had a trumpet! If he could sound it, the Greywater Watch would wake and obey him as its lord. A lordling dreaming of his lady.

The great weirwood reigned in the innermost courtyard of the castle. Bran had never been here before despite having been carried to any part of the castle he’d pointed at by the same two crannogmen, feeling abandoned and alone. He’d seen two other patios, but this one had never showed itself to him, no matter how long his stroll with Meera’s people had lasted.

Two pairs of long, slim legs, protruded from the heart tree’s closed mouth.

He frowned and began, “This is—”

“The white dragonrider and his wife are captives of the gods,” Meera murmured. “They’re fast asleep, cradled by the weirwood. The old women whisper that the tree is feeding them, but I don’t dare believe it. They need help.”

Bran never bothered to check what Ser Jaime Lannister did after giving him a ride, which had ended quite literally in water nearby Meera’s castle. He had waved his arms to her people on the shore, and immediately began asking for his lady.

Yet to see the Kingslayer thus didn’t feel quite right. No one should be forced to become a tree. It was worse than dying. “Since when—” he began asking.

“Since you fell asleep again,” Meera interrupted him, sounding reproachful, like Mother.

Bran’s heart swelled from her disapproval in a completely new fashion. Did you need me to wake? He smiled back like a fool.

Meera gave him an odd look, as though he had sprouted black wings. He felt his shoulder blade and found none… though he wouldn't have minded if the monstrous transformation he just imagined were true. I’m being ridiculous.

“We’ve got to leave the castle for the dragon to see us,” he assumed loudly, staring at the legs of his would-be killer and his spouse. Slim, muscled, long, and obscenely intertwined, they were so similar in built and length that it was impossible to tell which pair belonged to a man, and which to a lady.

If he and Meera were ever to lay together, the difference would be obvious. Painstaking.

The injustice of it hurt like a sharp knife stabbed into his chest.

“We have to waddle into the water to let ourselves be seen,” he repeated.

“My people are ordered to stay close to the castle in winter,” Meera told him seriously. “I would carry you in, but you’ve grown heavier.”

He had. Even his legs, thin like leafless twigs in winter, parchment-like, had grown in length. He’d be taller than Meera if he could stand.

“I could crawl over the final stretch on my elbows,” Bran offered on an impulse, “I did it before.” But a very long time ago.
He had been immobile on his weirwood throne. Hodor carried him in Winterfell and later, in Braavos.

“Could you?” Meera’s voice trembled. “I wonder… I need to see my father,” she stressed. “I want to be certain that I haven’t misunderstood his peculiar orders. And he might be able to talk to the gods… or to the weirwood, if there are no gods except the magic of the trees… as those of my people who have lost faith say… The Others used the black shadow of R’hllor to cheat the magic of the Wall and sneak into the Seven Kingdoms. There weren’t many of them, but they’re slowly amassing new hosts of slain in the riverlands and barrowlands… What if the weirwood persecutes all intruders, and starts eating the people seeking refuge we’d taken in? What if it had snatched you?” Her last word was a muffled cry.

Bran’s heart was full like never before.

You were afraid for me?

I haven’t imagined your love, have I?

What’s your father? A wizard?

Howland Reed had been widely feared at Jon’s wedding. And Bran had been so overwhelmed by seeing his siblings, he forgot to inquire about his father’s best friend. Reed frightened him too, but not for being a sorcerer.

How can you ask for a girl’s hand when you can’t protect her?

When you may not be able to…

By the old gods, he’d nearly spoken to Jaime Lannister about his new troubles. He was glad for the speed of the dragon’s flight, leaving no time to succumb to the uncanny temptation… Though perhaps he should have asked. The lion who now considered himself a dragon, and who’d suddenly appeared in Skagos out of nowhere, owed Bran more than a debt of blood. A life, irreparably ruined.

Without Hodor and Summer he was nothing. He’d never fly.

Meanwhile, the crannogmen had carried him as far as they would go, to the little river harbour outside their mysterious castle. The water was black and shiny, the ground he was lowered on pleasantly cool. Winter was mild in Greywater Watch. Bran felt the soil under his fingers.

Muddy. Not very hard. I wouldn’t hurt myself if…

“Drag me!” he told his lady.

“What?”

“You can’t carry me, and it’s too far to crawl.”

Her arms sneaking under his armpits were a blessing. Her cloak smelled of water flowers, and she of hope.

Soon his legs and behind were soaked in the dark green of the shallow water. He could see that his right foot became stuck in the thicket of reeds, but felt no sensation from it. He hoped that the dragon would obey Meera, out of desire to save his rider. They were a dependant kind… Strong as they were, they were nothing without their riders, just like Bran needed Hodor and Summer to thrive.
Golden dragon scales, translucent in the dark of night and the murky water, reflecting the barely existing starlight. *Home. Homely. Winterfell. The Kings of Winter*. Bran’s thoughts were sometimes more confusing than his dreams.

“Take us to the Wall,” Meera reasoned with the splashing, swimming dragon. “And when we return I shall allow you into our castle, to your rider on my honour as a Reed.”

The dragon took flight again, making a few more loops in the nightly sky, thrashing his tail; angry, contraried, irascible.

Just as Bran became confident that his winter bath had been in vain, the beast picked them up… sweeping them out of the swamp and onto his back with long claws.

Meera screamed, but not like Arya on the ship. More from… joy… from allowing herself to be careless, free from her father’s errands...

Bran laughed loudly, from ear to ear.

His lady ended up in front. It was great not to be the only unwanted burden on dragon’s back. He would love to wrap his arms around her waist, but the dragon was too big, the spike separating them huge. He couldn’t reach her.

She turned around a few times, checking how he fared… with a perfectly loving look in her eyes… his heart was appeased… until the next moment he’d doubt the truth of her affection. His torment had been constant since they left the cave. His spirit and body had woken inexorably. He couldn’t put them back to sleep.

Soon, Bran and Meera looked down at the long line of the Wall and the lands beyond it; quiet, white and empty.

Unexpectedly, the dragon dived sharply before reaching their destination. He unloaded Bran and Meera in front of an oaken tree with a carved face, and withdrew just as quickly into the forest. The eyes and the mouth of the old oak were closed tightly. A message of *waiting here and holding the children to their solemn oath once they returned* boomed in Bran’s head. Meera staggered on her feet.

“How do you hear it as well?”

She nodded in earnest, both to Bran and to the dragon. Viserion soon vanished, *crawling* backwards, the brilliance of his scales fading into snow.

*He can’t fly any longer*, Bran realised. *With that lost piece of his wing… He has to rest…* The elaborate loops and splashes Viserion had made in the marshes were not for his amusement… but the only flight he was capable of at times...

Bran had noticed it at Skagos, but afterwards he’d forgotten the dragon’s deformity, and the disadvantages it must bring. Until now.

*You’ll live, dragon. Like me. It’s more than Father, Mother and Robb can say.*

Jon’s men found them soon, patrolling the lands between the Wall and Mole Town. Bran was hauled on a cart, borrowed from frightened smallfolk that lived in cellars of the first human settlement south of the Wall.

*Like a pig carcass ready for roasting.*
Meera predictably walked.

In Castle Black, a colourful army was assembled, a mixture of men from all Seven Kingdoms, ready to march north.

Jon was surprised to see Bran, striving hard to hide his emotions. There wasn’t any whooping or tears of joy like when they were reunited in Winterfell. This was new. Kingly, perhaps. Or merely the attitude of a man fully grown.

*I may never follow him in that*, Bran mused, sorrowful.

“Arya?” Jon asked very quietly, but the intensity of his black gaze was frightening.

“She’s fine,” Bran reassured him. “She’s sailing back to Westeros with the Horn of Winter. Hodor is with her,” he carefully omitted his role in the matter. *Warging into a human. How low can you fall?*

Sansa did it as well, but it was only to talk to Bran, not to take possession of some strong man and wield a sword to remedy her woman’s weakness…

“And you returned before her… through the trees?” Jon observed, his eyes jumping suspiciously from Bran to Meera. “Can that be done from across the narrow sea? Isn’t it unsafe now?”

Bran didn’t want to lie further to him. *Not to his face.* So he just mutely acknowledged Jon’s assumptions by looking down. He was unwilling to explain his latest actions, for that would include exposing the grievances of his heart, in front of the lady who caused them.

Instead, he asked for another of his long time heart’s desires.

“Is there a good saddlemaker? And… quill and parchment? I’d draw what I want him to make… Then I could ride with you if you would let me…” he wondered timidly… hoping he remembered well the design of the special saddle Tyrion had gifted to him, when Robb acted as Lord of Winterfell.

The wishes of the young king’s little, crippled brother were fulfilled… Miraculously, in a few hours time, when the army began to march, Bran was mounted on a sturdy garron of the Night’s Watch, for the first time in many years… Being able to ride was a great improvement and source of relief. Perhaps he could finally learn to fight on his own right from saddle… rather than abuse Hodor.

The wolves marched as well; Shaggy, Summer, Nymeria and her pack of lesser wolves… Near the carriage with Jon’s mother, his wife, and the mad Queen Cersei. Bran didn’t go to see his aunt, for she was a good friend of Lord Reed. They might be together, and Bran wasn’t ready to talk to his lordship yet. He wondered why Rickon wasn’t here, and if he suffered from being left alone in Winterfell. He wished he’d asked the white dragon to pick him up as well on the way to the Wall. But maybe that would have been be too much to demand, and the dragon would have eaten Bran and Meera, in revenge for what the white tree had done to his rider.

The army advanced slowly through the dense wood of sentinel and pine. There wasn’t any road up here. Or, if there was, Jon was purposefully avoiding it, hiding his approach from the enemy. The line of men and horses was narrow and long, winding through the dark. The moon hid its face; the night was black as pitch.

It took some time for Bran to master his horse. After a while, he felt more confident that he wouldn’t fall. Cantering faster, passing by those who rode behind Jon - Aegon, Mance and Obara Sand - he finally caught up with his brother. “Can I ask you something?” he asked as quietly as he could. Hopefully no one would overhear their conversation through the whistling of the wind...
Gods must exist and be merciful, for they had made him keep his mouth shut when he was with the Kingslayer, and had brought him safely to his brother.

“Anything,” Jon replied earnestly, with his heart on his sleeve.

“You didn’t wait for marriage to…” He couldn’t finish, and his brother looked at him with great curiosity.

Bran lacked words. “How did you know how to- Did you need legs to-”

Jon didn’t seem as embarrassed as Bran was about the subject, just… hesitant. Very uncertain what to say, or how. Bran was familiar with the difficulty by now. Many people had it, not knowing how to address a cripple.

“In a strict sense, I didn’t need legs, no,” Jon replied dryly, “but they come handy,” he tried to quip. After a pause, Jon dared a question of its own. “Can you… Does it move?”

“It does,” Bran hurried his reply. He could make water and occasionally woke with pressure in his breeches, not knowing how to alleviate it at first, then finding a way to… empty it with his hands.

*Maybe it's not enough, what it does.*

“How much does it have to move or… grow?” he asked with utmost frustration and shame.

Jon showed a shape and its size with its fingers, and Bran knew that his was insufficient.

*Crippled.*

*Meera must know… she’s a woman grown… She’s a lady, but she must know about these things. She’ll want a whole boy… A whole man…*

“How long until a fight?” he wondered, to change the subject.

Jon didn’t march North for his amusement.

“A day and a night, probably,” Jon replied, tense. This topic seemed even less to his liking than the one of Bran’s innocence. He carried an hourglass in his saddlebag, to measure the time. Found by Sam in some cellar, and slightly damaged, but still working. *Like me.* Sam had stayed on the Wall, tending to many ravens.

“Where would you ambush me, Mance, if you were the Night’s King?” Jon turned to his wildling ally and friend. “Not before the Fangs, right?”

The King-beyond-the-Wall acquiesced with a grave nod.

“Fine,” Jon murmured, studying the forested blackness ahead. “So we agree on that.”

It occurred to Bran that Jon had been avoiding the wheelhouse with his wife and mother as much as Bran had. This was very unlike him, to distance himself from his loved ones. Unless he had a good reason to abstain from seeing the ladies. *Why?*

Bran became insatiably curious… Reaching out with his mind, he-

“You can look into my head, right, Bran?” Jon asked weakly, catching him in action. “Like, like Sansa?”
Bran nodded, embarrassed.

“Please don’t,” his big brother pleaded. “I have so much in it… You’re my brother… But I… I can’t let anyone see. Or I fear that I shall fail… That I shall forsake the only vow worth keeping, to defend the realm of men.”

Bran had never been more ashamed. “I won’t Jon,” he vowed. “Never, ever. Unless you ask it of me, or a matter of life and death demands it. Your life or death, not mine.”

He rode back, positioning himself behind Aegon, nervously tugging the reins.

“Wait!” Jon called after him.

“It’s fine,” Bran tossed back, “I just… I need to talk to someone else.”

It was only half a lie. He should talk to Meera, and then to Lord Reed, but lacked the courage. He’d also love to sleep in the saddle, a little. *Only to see how Arya is faring, I promise, Hodor.*

He wouldn’t… he wouldn’t use his loyal servant to fight for him again.

Before he could drowse, he spotted Jon’s master of horse a bit further down the line; the wildling man who’d made his new saddle, and carried many knives. He trotted back. He must have looked at the blades with such childish longing, for the man offered him one. “Take it,” he encouraged him. “They’re shorter and lighter than kneelers’ blades, but they’re made of good steel.”

Wildlings rarely had *any* steel. To possess it was always cause for boasting.

*So much less sharp than Dark Sister.* Bran regretted leaving the fancy sword with Hodor.

But his arms were truly weak The large blade would be far too heavy. He needed to hold the reins… He had to train with smaller… So that maybe one day he could fight from horseback with a proper *kneeler* blade.

He wished he had Tyrion’s original saddle design, for the one he’d made wasn’t as adequate. The straps holding his legs in stirrups didn’t come as far up his useless legs as they should. As a consequence, he wasn’t completely stable.

The march was slow, the way forward snowy and narrow. The chariot with ladies, now dragged by plough horses, instead of wolves, drove with difficulty. The chill became ominous. The wolves were the only ones who didn’t seem to mind the cold, padding among the trees, following the men in silence.

Bran didn’t search for Meera, nor for her father in his green garments. Nor did they, to his sorrow, seek *him* out, as he thought they might… Meera had gotten separated from him in Castle Black, after a brief good-bye, a squeeze on his shoulder and a promise to return to him as soon as she could. Her attitude seemed loving at the time, but thoroughly heartless by now...

He held the reins in his left arm and tried out knife blows with the right hand, then changed sides, despite that his left hand was hopelessly clumsy… Muscles in both arms needed to get firmer...

After some hours of march through the darkness, the wind blew stronger, creating whirlwinds from the layers of snow on the ground. Sizzling, sibilating savagely, the gale cooled the air further, until every breath hurt, despite scarves everyone wore over their mouths. The wolves weren’t howling yet, but they would, Bran had no doubt. He cantered forward, to be near Jon… for that was where the wind was blowing from…
The forest became more dense. The canopies of pine suddenly bent over the army; frozen, twisted, gnarled and menacing like long, armoured arms of the white walkers. Bran saw mountains behind the trees, not far away. They weren’t there a moment ago. There wasn’t a single weirwood. Which was good or bad, depending if one still believed in the gods.

I shall believe… in spring.

Pine branches cracking in the darkness. Inhuman hissing of living creatures. Cries, ripping up the night. Himself, useless in the darkness that had changed, deepened. Trees grew and increased in number, the snowy path widened. Bran, Jon and his army found themselves in a very different forest, despite that they hadn’t yet crossed more than four leagues from the Wall.

He closed his eyes to sense Jon, cautious not to assault him, needing to know what direction to ride in to find his brother.

“What is this devilry?” a Southron knight wondered aloud, as the crippled boy galloped determinedly past him, not caring if he’d fall.

Immediately after, Bran glimpsed the silver hair of Jon’s brother by adoption. Aegon could wield a Valyrian steel sword, and had a wife… unlike Bran… He could be a more useful brother to Jon… A giant Other took shape from the night and went straight for Jon, approaching behind his back… Aegon barred his way, but two more materialised… Bran blinked… and saw clearly. The white walkers were mists and nothing more…

“They’re not here! You’re fighting ghosts!” he wanted to scream, but no voice came. He was mute, unable to open his mouth… Another disability! He shook the reins wildly and the garron obeyed, not frightened by the enemy that wasn’t there, nor by Bran’s sudden presence in his animal consciousness.

So I can calm the animals, not only abuse them.

Unable to speak, he had to show Jon what was true and what wasn’t.

He rode past Aegon and Jon. He cantered through the immaterial Others they battled, and cut into undying flesh, muscled, dressed in furs. An arm, perhaps. It was too dark to see with precision. The wights were true; they were behind the illusions, and they would fall upon Jon while he was battling ghosts, turning him into one of them. The Night King’s most distinguished bannerman… Was that another dream Bran had had in the cave? A terrifying one… Bran hacked at a dead arm, but its partner grasped his neck, and still he was unable to speak…

Please, Jon, see me! Look further than the mists...

“To me!” Jon hollered in the distance. “Look ahead!”

Bran felt the air leave his lungs. He dropped the knife, wondering if he was dying, and if Meera would still remember him when the winter was over. He was no longer mounted, but hanging from the wight’s iron fist. His garron was being butchered by another corpse soldier. The horse’s eyes became blue, his blood ran black. The animal rose, cursed like the creature that killed it, and darted into the forest.

So much for the fancy saddle, Bran thought absurdly with his last breath.

“Here! Here!” Jon screamed. “Leave the Others! They aren’t real! Cut down the wights! Burn them! Burn them all!”
Bran had no mother, no wife. He had nothing to live for. And yet he was mortally afraid of dying.

A bunch of wildlings and their king stormed into his fading field of vision, and extricated him out of the enemy's grasp. They lifted him high on their shoulders; broader than crannogmen, armed in bronze.

“Take the boy away! He was valiant!” Mance Rayder boomed approvingly to his men, swinging a torch at the wight who had been strangling Bran.

Bran finally saw the creature, just before it was slain… It wasn't the huge undead soldier he'd imagined in his fear… It was smaller than him, with bright-red hair and strikingly blue eyes… It had seemed taller because of its mount; an undead white bear whose furry shoulder Bran had gouged.

Both were now burning...

The forest hissed and hurled, cried and wheezed. Swords clashed, iron on bronze and stone, until all songs of battle ended, and the horns began blowing.

“Victory!”

Shouts and cheers resounded, up and down the broken line of march. Excessive snow fell from the canopy of trees, an avalanche caused by human cries. Men made snowballs and played like children, celebrating.

Yet the aftermath of victory resembled defeat. Bran saw a familiar, bronze-armoured wildling on a pyre of corpses being burned. A kinsman of the men who saved him. And if there were Others nearby, they knew exactly where Jon's army was, and where it was heading… Maybe that was the purpose of the wights' ambush…

“A dragon could burn them all at once!” a spearwife complained, “but the young king is a coward who lets his dragon sit idle on the Wall, saving his most precious weapon. Mayhaps he'll use it to fly away from Westeros when all is lost, and the Night’s King sits on the kneelers’ throne!”

Bran opened his mouth to correct her: if a dragon flew beyond the Wall, and stayed there longer than a heartbeat, he'd be grievously ill. Any more time beyond the Wall, and he'd fall dead.

But no voice came from his throat. His gorge burned. A bad cold. Will I die from it? His head was unnaturally warm and sensitive to touch.

Mance Rayder took out his lute, beginning to sing about the last of the giants. His left arm was tied, bleeding through the bandage. “What are you staring at?” He admonished Bran. “It’s not black blood… I’m not a wight. The rest doesn’t matter.”

Jon finally joined them, unscathed. “We’ll stop here,” he announced.

“Why? They know where we are! What surprise you hoped for is gone,” Bran’s voice was found, full of outrage.

“Right,” Jon agreed, “so we need a new element in our strategy,” he outlined cryptically, offering a firm look to both Mance and Aegon, which the men returned grimly, as though they were his… accomplices in a crime. The Dornish sandsnake, Obara Sand, appeared honestly confused in comparison, leaning on her spear.

“We rest here, where they can perhaps see us now…” Jon continued, “Until they can't...”
Bran didn’t understand him. He hoped Mance and Aegon did.

“Should you not speak to Princess Daenerys about-” Aegon inquired.

“I should, indeed,” Jon cut him off, and then looked contrite, guilty.

“Come Aegon,” Mance dragged the Sword of the Morning away. “We have to count the men we lost and those we still have.”

What are you up to, Jon?

“You can tell me what’s on your mind,” Bran stated calmly, ignoring the sandsnake, who was either unable to understand when it was polite to depart, or just wouldn’t leave Jon at all, under Prince Doran Martell’s orders.

“Why?” Jon asked darkly. “You can look for yourself.”

“I could,” Bran agreed, “but I won’t. Why don’t you confide in me? We… we were close as children.”

Jon shook his head. “Later, perhaps,” he muttered through his teeth, leaving Bran in the dark. “I will see my wife and my mother now. Shall I carry you with me? Or do you prefer to rest here?”

A tent had already been erected behind Bran’s back, especially for the king’s crippled brother.

“You’re right, I’m tired,” Bran lied. “I’ll be fine here.”

Except that he wouldn’t, not anytime soon. He had no place, no purpose, no special dreams.

Lies. You helped Jon see in battle. Somehow.

Encouraged by the knowledge, Bran tried to remember his important dream from the cave. The one about Joramun, and the blue rose that blossomed from the chunk of ice… wishing to tell Jon about it.

In vain.

His brother carried him wordlessly into the tent. Lowering him on the pallet, he covered Bran with a thick, warm black blanket and furs, even more considerate than Mother.

We are still close, thank the gods.

Tucking him up like a baby, Jon left, troubled and alone.

Bran couldn’t sleep.

Belatedly, he noticed shallow scratches on his left arm, under a torn sleeve. They were bleeding slightly, and painful. Done by the wight’s nails. Surely not by the dead bear’s paws. Those would be bigger… The blazing pyre for the corpses was nearby, but its heat didn’t much penetrate the tent. The cold was mounting.

Looking out the flap door, Bran saw the shore of a frozen lake, and next to it, a heart tree. A large ice dragon slept there, bigger than Jon’s green one or the Kingslayer’s white one...

Perhaps beyond the Wall, a boy like him could be a greenseer even without the weirwood throne.

His vision dissipated slowly, but his eyes remained wide open. The next battle would be more
severe. Jon would lose even more men. Yet he couldn’t believe Jon had ridden forth to challenge the Night’s King without at least an inkling of strategy that could assure his ultimate victory. Hastiness and foolishness would be more like Theon; even Robb to some extent.

Not Jon, who was at once both prudent and foolishly daring, thoughtful and recklessly brave… Often at the same time… In that, he was a bit like Bran.

His mood had brightened without real cause by the time he managed to close his exhausted eyes. Arya was still crying softly on the Rhaenys. Hodor stared at the sea. Under its surface, the shadows danced incessantly, ringing little bells.

A hand was placed on his shoulder, and he suddenly woke, terrified of a new devilry, a demon yet unknown.

Meera sat by his side, where he laid in his tent. How long have you been here? He stole her hand and kissed it. Felt life in the lower part of his body, though never in his legs.

And he didn’t need to make water.

“You aren’t with your father?” he inquired cautiously, fearing he would blush, and she’d notice despite the darkness.

“I was,” she confessed, “he is… he’s dreaming now, talking to ravens and crows.”

Crows? Is he also a greenseer? No… He can’t be.

Bran was meant to be the last one, but he’d betrayed his destiny. Leaf and the other children of the forest died to protect him, and yet he left as soon as he had a chance.

Reed probably only had green dreams, like Jojen… It wasn’t the same as being able to influence the past and the present from the weirwood throne…

Bran knew he would have been able to shape the events of his time, had he accepted becoming one with the tree… Like Bloodraven… Who had nonetheless died in the end, when his great strength was spent…

Meera gazed at him with wet eyes. Her hair was curlier than he remembered it, filled with little pearls of frost fallen from the pine trees...

His heart was broken, not just his legs.

“You don’t want me,” he tried not to be accusing. “You care for me, you pity me, but you don’t love me.”

“We should wait,” she sounded as if his reproach had hurt her. You’re young!” she exclaimed. “This isn’t right.”

“Why not?” Bran rebelled. “Not too young to die,” he rambled.

“Too young for this,” she stated, kissing him with open mouth. He responded in kind, parting his frozen lips.

All tales should be about kissing, Bran thought aimlessly.

After, he confessed his intentions in awe. “Your father, I should ask him… for your hand.”
“Later,” she murmured, eyes so near his that Bran’s vision blurred. When did she get under the furs with him? Where was her cloak? He’d lost his in battle, like his saddle, his knife and his horse.

“Let Father be. Let him dream of his castle. Of Mother. Of Jojen. Of what had been, and what will be,” Meera chanted in-between soft kisses she was bestowing upon Bran’s neck and ears.

He wondered what her litany meant, but couldn’t bring himself to care for the oddities of his future good-father.

To see the earth and the stars from dragonback had been incredible, but to be kissed tenderly by the girl you loved was a hundred times better still.

And despite that Bran and Meera didn’t do what Robb and Theon had whispered over his head when he was a child, despite that he still didn’t know whether he could do such a thing, being together like… like a man and a woman was fabulous.

He was so awake.

He was flying.

Despite his useless legs, and without wings.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading.

Thank you to all who left a like, a comment or a bookmark on this long story.

Anyone here from the beginning who still likes it?
Daenerys X

Chapter Notes

Thanks TopShelfCrazy for your continued help ))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Daenerys**

“Will she ever shut up?” Dany asked tiredly, fighting the urge to puke.

She’d been unable to eat properly since she left the Wall. Never more than two bites of bread or cheese, and a few dainty sips of water at a time. Her stomach hurt, hard as stone despite being empty, and she longed for relief.

Cersei’s constant singing augmented her torture. The Mad Queen caressed her growing golden locks with reverence, and continued to chant shrilly about daisies and daffodils, dandelions and demon’s grass.

Dany recoiled instinctively on her seat, bumping into Lyanna.

The space in the carriage shared by the ladies was severely limited.

“My pardons,” she said, “I-”

“It’s quite alright,” Lyanna reassured her, “I won’t fall apart just because I’m growing big with child.”

“I know,” Dany remembered how it was to carry one with dull longing, and a pinch of heart-piercing envy.

She was young. Why couldn’t her womb *quicken* again? Even if she truly had to birth an abomination, a winged baby… whether due to maegi’s curse, or the dragonblood in her veins…

Rhaegar had been adamant; this wasn’t exactly a novelty for the ladies in the House Targaryen. A well kept secret… I could have a child like… Like Beth… She’s so sweet… Dany’s longing was desperate, exacerbated. Maybe not all children Jon gave her would be monsters… One could be human… Full of yearning, she imagined they’d love all of them equally...

“I think… I’m irascible because I want to *ride,* ” she complained impatiently to Jon’s mother, “Not hide in here.”

It was only a small part of the truth.

“In your position, I’d feel the same,” Lyanna agreed. “But this is better than staying behind, waiting for the men to return,” she paused, brooding. “Or for the news that they won’t.”

“Don’t say it again, please!” Dany exclaimed.

“I won’t, I promise,” Lyanna smiled with determination. Rhaegar’s grieving widow withdrew and
Jon’s mother, pragmatic and enduring, returned. Lyanna made an effort to look through the window with renewed curiosity, acting as though she was visiting an unknown, interesting land, rather than accompanying her only son to a war with uncertain outcome in the familiar northern wasteland.

Dany never knew which of the two women would be present at each moment.

Dragonless, Dany was a liability in battle. If Jon feared for her life in the thick of it, chance was he’d become distracted and injured...

It was therefore necessary to wait.

The horrific song now inevitably turned to the shadows dancing under the sea; an announcement of the end of the world, according to Lady Melisandre.

Dany always questioned the red woman’s wisdom. Her every word sounded like an elaborate deceit. *For what purpose?* Dany feared she’d learn it in the worst possible moment; too late to act against some great harm the sorceress might cause. *There isn’t much she can do in the ice cells... There is that... And my Unsullied are no longer her slaves... Nor anyone else’s.*

*Oh I know, I know.* Dany nearly sang cheerfully in chorus with Cersei.

*The world will come to an end one day.*

*Won’t it?*

*So what?*

She felt careless, her belly hard as rock.

"Look!" Lyanna pointed through the frozen window.

"Old Garth!" Dany reacted with disbelief. She’d witnessed the wildling’s appalling, gruelling death at least two times, only to meet him alive and well later on, looking the same as ever… In Dany’s count of his many lives and deaths, he should have been dead right now.

“Garth Greenhand, I’d call him,” Lyanna commented pensively. “The ancient king, or god, who brought fertility to the Reach. The wildling is his spitting image. The only attribute he lacks is green hair.”

The wildling looked older than Ser Barristan, with very little hair, all of it completely white.

*Maybe it was green when he was younger.*

Dany was certain of only one thing. When Garth appeared, young or dead, Greenhand or Green Hair; man, king or god - atrocities were imminent. *He’s heralding the doom of many... Maybe my own...*

And Jon would be on the first line of defence against any attack. How could she leave him alone?

How could she forget that she’d returned to Westeros as a queen in deed, and not only in name?

It was incredibly hard to accept helplessness after knowing power.

Lyanna began drowsing against the carriage window, her pink cheek melting the ice.

"Under the sea, all shadows are green!" Cersei shouted, unsolicited.
Dany burst with rage. “Shut up!” she yelled like a madwoman.

Had she brought Signs and Portents with her, the precious gift from Doran Martell, she could immerse herself in the visions of Daenys, the maiden daughter of Aenar Targaryen, annotated by the hand of her namesake, first Daenerys Targaryen. She longed to finish reading. But she’d nonetheless deemed it safer to leave the book on the Wall with Sam Tarly and Tyene Sand, the one who had brought it from Dorne… The more she read, the more she believed that the book contained a secret about dragonkind, and not only premonitions about the doom of Valyria… or the world...

*A walk... I need it... Jon has to understand.*

A stroll might alleviate the unease in her stomach, after long days of constant sitting in the carriage. She’d stayed put even during the freshly finished battle with the wights; listening to the cries, the clash of weapons, and then, finally, to the horns of victory…

She’d waited patiently, longing for her husband’s presence, but he hadn’t come to her. Not even now, after the attack, to rejoice together… not even to kiss her...

Disobeying Jon's plea to never leave the chariot before he came for her, for her own safety, Dany slipped out into knee-deep snow. Her feet froze immediately, very sensitive to cold. She ignored it, restless, foolhardy. There weren’t any guards outside, and the army slept, having made camp near the foot of Frostfangs, the high mountain chain that spanned the great distance between the haunted forest and the Lands of Always Winter.

*How can I be safe if no one’s guarding us?* She became angry with Jon’s faulty explanations. Her belly hurt, tight.

She’d speak to her husband now, and demand to know about his plans to his face. As she should have done already.

It was time she admitted the truth. For all their love, Jon had been avoiding her since Oldtown, and the discovery of his strangely invulnerable condition. After the Other had cut his back open from shoulder to hipbone, Jon had bled profusely, and yet he didn’t even lose consciousness from it… before Rhaegal cured him. Another man would have died immediately...

*Immortal, the word’s immortal.*

Which came very close to dead, cursed, undying.

Dany gritted her teeth, her guts twisting with concern, sticking firmly to the notion of invulnerable. She’d believe they were both alive and therefore, mortal, until her last breath.

First she had thought Jon was busy. Then she began to ponder what she might have done to deserve being shunned, but couldn't think of anything. He’d seemed genuinely happy with her, up until he began evading her company. There hadn't been a serious dissension between them on any matter since they’d discussed Jaime Lannister.

Dany understood now why the Kingslayer murdered their father, and couldn’t blame him for it. But, especially after meeting Bran at her wedding; sweet, clever, and impaired for a lifetime, she could see Jon’s point much more clearly, if not with the same gut wrenching feeling… It was Jon who’d watched Bran grow and climb every day of his young life, not Dany.

And despite Ser Jaime’s terrible sin against a child, Dany still couldn’t wish he died a gruelling death in the War of Winter…. while Jon might experience a moment of satisfaction if this was
perchance Jaime’s destiny.

Maybe she had misjudged Jon’s character while blinded by attraction to him; the same way she’d been able to overlook Daario’s vanity and penchant for infidelity.

*Love is blind.*

Perhaps Jon was more similar to Drogo or Daario then she thought, by not including her in some aspects of his life… Fighting… drinking… commanding...

Yet none of it seemed completely plausible…

She'd seen Jon very drunk only once, from strong mead, just after they'd met... they'd gotten lost together beyond the Wall... She'd been inebriated as well, and falling for him… For her terse, and yet very emotional nephew.

And besides Jon and Gendry's mutual attempt to kill each other and call it sparring, she'd never seen Jon indulge in a brawl; only in true training or battle...

When it came to commanding and business, there had been no signs of him drawing a clear line of separation in his treatment of men and women, despite sparring with men and paying his respect to ladies. He… he'd naturally included *her* in all his counsels… She never had to demand it or seek him out to ask questions. Until now that he… had started behaving like most men, who didn't pay attention to women until they required sustenance or pleasure.

She missed that difference of his now it was gone… She’d become so accustomed to it she hadn’t even noticed it anymore, instead of thanking the gods for it daily, as she probably should have done.

Besides, Jon was extremely thorough in avoiding her. He didn’t even seek her to serve his food or warm his bed...

The conundrum was insolvable.

She needed to learn the reason. Wading through the snow between tents and smouldering fires, she swallowed the feeling of hurt from Jon's dismissal, until it was buried so deep that she almost didn't cause her grief.

With her head and heart as cold as she could make them, though never as frozen as her poor feet, Dany applied herself to judge the change in her husband as impartially as she was able to.

The best conclusion she could reach was always the same, undeniable and terrifying in its certainty.

Whatever his reasons, this wasn't like the Jon she knew. He couldn't have changed this much overnight, no matter how *long*.

Something must be terribly amiss, and she was left in the dark about it...

Had they shared a meal or bed, she could have asked him… But they hadn't loved each other since King’s Landing, and the last time they spoke in private was prior to the march. After begging her to *not* leave the carriage until he came for her, Jon asked Dany to keep an eye on his mother, still fearing that Lyanna might take her own life.

And on Cersei…

The Kingslayer had disappeared with Viserion, never returning for his sister… Jon had deemed it
unsafe to leave the Mad Queen on the Wall. There was no better choice; Dany had to continue acting as her wet nurse.

On second thought, Jon hadn't shared his reasons for this assessment either. Dany didn't believe that Lord Hightower or any other Stannis supporter would be able to kidnap Cersei from the Wall, unless the Baratheon pretender came in person, riding Drogon…

And Jon had decided it was safe to leave Melisandre in the ice cells, despite that she was both more dangerous and more likely to be rescued than Cersei. The red woman was entrusted to the gentle care of Euron Greyjoy, who could rely on Dany’s Unsullied for help. Dany kept the enchanted whip Melisandre had used to enslave her loyal soldiers, as a guarantee of their reestablished freedom. No one would take it from her easily. Over my dead body.

Euron’s fitness for the task was only because he couldn’t die to sorcery. Embittered by his condition, the cursed kraken nonetheless clung to existence. He would be a more formidable opponent to the witch than a living man. And even if she found a way to burn him and ran, it would be no great harm to anyone. Not even to Euron, who had days when he wished to set himself on fire… Or so Dany heard from a blond wildling woman called Val, who’d come asking questions about Euron that Dany couldn’t answer.

Had he stolen a woman when he was alive? Where were his lands, and was he the captain of a ship, or was that an arrogant lie?

Dany had sent Val to Euron’s niece, Asha, who hadn’t stopped crying since she’d arrived at the Wall, in hope that the two women would sort out Euron’s character together, and leave her out of it.

She had no kind words nor considerations for the man who’d stolen her dragons… Yet it was the same man who’d sailed to Asshai, and brought her dragon eggs to Pentos… Dany’s hatred dissipated with the new knowledge. While being unable to feel for his suffering, she wouldn’t take pleasure in his demise.

She felt for… Rhaegar.

She had to stop thinking of her brother, or she’d cry. Tears never helped her against pain… They didn't alleviate her sores nor eased her state of mind in the first days of her marriage to Drogo, when she mostly wanted to die.

She had to endure.

Her thoughts inevitably returned to Jon’s strange behaviour, unable to stray from it for long.

Mulling over her final conclusion that the change in him was too great to have occurred without reason, Dany allowed her feelings to surface in full force. Spontaneously, they centered on… fear.

She feared for Jon, for herself, for their happiness.

What are you up to, my love?

Whatever it might be, chance was it would aid the Seven Kingdoms… But what would it mean for them? And why didn't he tell her? She needed an answer, and she’d have it now.

The mountains were silent, the soldiers asleep, the campfires dying. Lyanna must have been one of the last people awake. In her condition, Rhaegar’s widow either slept more than anyone else, or found it extremely difficult to catch sleep at all.
There was only one pile of embers where men still talked quietly. Dany’s determination to storm into Jon’s presence abated from hearing his voice. A mortifying suspicion gripped her heart. What if he refused to answer? What if he lied?

On an impulse, she hid behind a sentinel like a thief, then sneaked forward to reach the next hateful, tall, northern tree, and another, and one more, until she could see and hear Jon well. Maybe he’d discuss with men what he wouldn’t with her...She wasn’t at all surprised to find him very awake and vigilant, stoking the fire. Sitting alongside him were Mance, Aegon and Howland Reed. Obara Sand stood nearby, but her eyes were glassy. The Dornishwoman nearly slept on her feet, leaning on her spear. Mance and Aegon kept quiet, listening attentively as Reed and Jon talked.

"It is true, isn’t it?" Jon asked. “Lord Davos’ story.”

Dany was all ears.

“There are many true stories,” Reed retorted, “or, at least, tales that aren’t exactly false, being inspired by life. Which one do you have in mind?”

“The legend of Azor Ahai, as you well know…” Jon said very seriously, impatient and a little annoyed that he had to reveal his mind in its entirety. “About the last hero, and his wife who…” he couldn’t finish.

_Nissa Nissa._

"This isn’t a mere story, is it?” Jon continued more vehemently. “It’s a history. It could be a chronicle if it had happened less long ago, and someone had written it down. That’s what Sam thinks… and he’s clever.”

“And were it so?” Reed asked. “What does an ancient history have to do with you? And how can I judge its veracity, being a poor mudman from the Neck? Why are you asking now? Surely it’s been awhile since you’ve heard it. Lord Stannis repeats it to everyone willing and unwilling to listen, with himself in the main role.”

Howland Reed had to be a wizard, Dany concluded. Only warlocks and their likes gave answers which were a hundred times less clear than the already murky, important questions posed by men about their future.

_The greenseers were the wizards of the children of the forest. They were here before the dragons. Before First Men._

“Thank you for your candid reply, my lord," Jon retorted simply. “I’ll take it as a yes. It is true.”

Neither agreeing nor disagreeing, neither in gesture, nor in word, Reed declared warmly after a long while, "I’m your mother’s friend." His garments were green like fresh leaves of spring in the light of the fire. "For her sake, I shall do for you all I can. But now I should return to the carriage, to continue my song. Though I must not exaggerate, I only help the forest which is already hiding it from sight. The world must turn on its own, not according to our desires.”

_So he’s been guarding us_, Dany realised she wasn’t as unprotected as she had felt.

"Fair enough," Jon replied. "I shall come for my wife tomorrow… after we’ve crossed the canyon leading into the Frostfangs and reached the graveyard of the giants… Some of the sepulchres are fresh… Not closed properly since Mance’s last visit…"

Reed stared at Jon, studying him, with his eyes terribly green and tired. "Listen,” he commanded.
“We’ve all had a few hours of rest. Sound the horns at will! Do it now if you wish. Your heart seems heavy. You mustn’t delay… Ride out now! I swear it, you’ll reach your destination before the moon’s up again.”

“Isn’t it too much to demand?” Jon appeared contrite and yet… pleased. Relieved. “Mother says—”

“You’ve called me here to ask for a day of my service, not a hundred,” Reed replied readily.” And it's as much as I can give you, my dear boy… Forgive me for calling you so, but I have twice your age, though you have twice my size… In the past, there were more of us, but now I'm all alone. The little green men on the Isle of Faces don’t count… I thought they might, but to my sorrow I discovered that their song is meant only for the pact… to maintain the peace. Or to die when the world does… But they cannot busy themselves with our troubles.”

"I see," Jon scratched his head, looking more confused than ever. “Are you saying that you’ll bring me to my goal faster if I depart right now? Will you reshape the land… by a song? Like the Others are doing to gain advantage over us?"

Reed nodded gravely. “I don't know what means the enemy possesses to do this, and I doubt that it involves music. But yes, I shall do it by a song, one which cannot be sung lightly, nor can I sustain it for long. The same one that the children used to create the Others. The song of the earth.”

Jon grasped both Howland’s hands with gratitude. “Thank you, my lord, for your offer. And I have to confess that, despite my unwillingness to place too great burden on you… and reluctance to rely on… magic… a sword without a hilt, that can’t be grasped safely... I still would have asked it from you. I would have begged for your help to hide our steps and make our arrival a surprise, now that the wights have found us. A day is all I need..." he stated fervently. "I'd never ask for a hundred."

"Yet I shall give as much as you in this war," Reed prophesied.

“How much is that?” Jon wondered.

“Everything,” the greenseer retorted with passion that matched Jon’s for a very brief moment, and then sank into brooding silence.

Dany wondered what both Reed and Jon had on their minds. Her heart felt frozen, like her feet. She tightened the scarf around her mouth, her breath the only source of warmth in miles.

**The graveyard of the giants?** She was at a loss to remember what Jon meant by that, searching in her memories, sifting through everything he’d told her about his past between their embraces, and on dragonback. A place … a valley in the Frostfangs where Mance Rayder had been digging and searching for the Horn of Joramun. In vain, for Jon had unwittingly found it at the Fist of the First Men, and it was now on its way back home to Westeros in hands of his sister Arya.

Pipes and horns, lifting of tents, clinking of armour being fastened.

More confused than before she began eavesdropping, Dany tried to return to the carriage, but her way was cut by preparations for departure. Everyone was up, folding their tents, packing their belongings.

She fell behind three woken spearwives, tightly wrapped in her cloak and trying to look busy; her silver locks hidden by the Skagosi headdress made of unicorn hair. She had no weaponry to don...

She searched for the chariot, but couldn't see it. On the contrary, a way towards Jon loomed wide open. To his place. At the head of his army.
Perhaps this was the sign of the gods where she should go. She scurried forward, not thinking twice about her actions.

She looked for a horse as she went, but they were few, and all taken. Cavalry was scarce on the Wall, consisting of garrons of the Night’s Watch, and heavy horses of the mountain clans. Southron breeds couldn’t adjust to the cold. Mammoths would have been better, perhaps, but they had all run away.

Jon was mounted, ready to ride out, covered in furs he didn’t require to stay warm; his eyes determined and black as pitch, shining softly with... water...

_Are you crying, my love?_

Afoot, Dany would never be able to keep pace with him... She’d inevitably fall behind...

She sat in snow, giving herself to despair.

Then, abruptly, if not unexpectedly, landscape changed around her, reshaping itself. She wished she could hear Reed’s song, but no music came. Visions assaulted her senses, more vivid than in the House of the Undying... Mountains jumped from one place to another, sailing across the sky. They were now almost _behind_ Dany, Jon and his army; despite that the march had barely started...

Dany saw pyramids and yellow rivers above the traveling mountain tops... Lavish green islands where men dressed in feathers and the sun always shone... A dark city of shadows on a black river...

Lastly, she saw a very long valley enclosed by high mountains. Others were being continually born in it, at every moment; forging deadly, crystal swords, answering the call of their king. They were a hundred times more than Jon could field. Perhaps there were more than people left alive in the Seven Kingdoms. Their hatchery was vast, endless... Jon had told her about seeing this through Ghost’s eyes, but it felt very different for Dany to contemplate this truth in her own capacity...

Her eyelids became heavy, darkening the world further. Her strength was waning. She’d be left behind for dead if she couldn’t move.

When she dared look again, Dany suddenly found herself _riding_, amidst continuously changing landscape. She tapped her _white_ horse, wondering if he was real, or just another vision.

She fell in line behind Mance and Aegon, who rode with peculiarly rounded, lid-covered, wooden baskets on their backs, hung next to their swords. By the imperceptible bending of their shoulders, Dany concluded that the baskets were quite heavy.

_What’s in it? Food? Some secret weaponry?_

Jon was ahead of Aegon, next to Obara Sand, her spear, and her sand steed; one of the few Southron horses that had proven to be remarkably resistant to winter. Aegon, a Dornishman by blood, who had never seen the sun of his parents’ country, occasionally studied the animal with envy.

Reed _walked_ in front of everyone; unarmed, clad in green, short, thin like a leaf, with widespread arms. Wait... Garth... Greenhand or Green Hair was there as well! Neither Reed nor Jon seemed to see him... No one noticed him except for Dany...

The Lord of the Crannogs occasionally seemed... transparent. Invisible. As though he was both here and miles away.
The army ventured into a different mountain valley than the one where Others were being born. Majestic and imposing. Beautiful. The landscape was soaked in fog; a more natural explanation for why Reed was poorly visible than magic.

Dany stretched her arm and couldn’t see her hand. Her wrist looked crippled, cut. Frightened, she pulled it back to herself where it looked solid again. Whole.

Suddenly, the world felt firm once more, massive and true. The song of the earth must have ended.

The carriage was next to Dany while it should have been further behind, in the middle of the line of march. The wolves howled, catching up from all sides… She cantered aside, out of Jon’s sight.

Reed staggered on his feet. Walking like a blind man, with his arms stretched forward, he reached the chariot’s door, and managed to open it. Climbing in with difficulty, he collapsed onto the floor… Inside, Lyanna and Cersei were fast asleep, both with a look of innocence… In sleep, as in death, everyone was alike…

Dany wondered if Lyanna was going to scream when she discovered her good-daughter gone, against her son’s wishes in the matter. She won’t. The Knight of the Laughing Tree has to understand me.

A murder of raven roosted on the carriage roof, and Dany thought that one of the birds, crowing shrilly, had three eyes

“We’re here,” Mance advised Jon, speaking very loud, as if he wanted the Others to hear him. “This is where I’ve been digging for a year, searching for the Horn of Joramun.”

“And you found it,” Jon parried in the same vein.

“I did,” Mance replied. “But the red woman burned it to please her god.”

*Why are they lying to each other?*

Mance never had the true horn. Just a pretty music instrument of the giants with no magic powers...

“In which grave did you find it?” Jon continued the mummer’s inquiry.

The army poured into the valley, forming a great semicircle around Jon and the chariot with his mother. A few thousand strong. Only those who didn’t fear grumkins were chosen, and preferably with experience in fighting them.

*Not enough…*

“It is time to alert Princess Daenerys,” Aegon whispered, offering his opinion timidly but stubbornly, gazing at the chariot. “If you still mean to go ahead with this… farce… I mean this feat… Though I continue to believe you ought to-”

“It’s my decision, my wife!” Jon interrupted, nervous… almost aggressive… shutting Aegon up. “My risk!” he yelled. “My sword,” he murmured, unsheathing the magic blade he and Dany had found together and that the Night’s King had claimed was his own...

Aegon consented, quieting, dismounting, lowering himself under frozen ground. Mance followed, until both men disappeared. Jon came very close to the border of the hidden hole in snow.

*A shallow grave of a giant… It must be large enough to hide more men…*
Dany’s mind darkened at the sight of it, raging like a wild dragon.

Jon… he’ll betray me to the Night’s King… he’ll let him take me away… he’ll let him drink my blood and bury me in here… in exchange for what…? Peace? Will they divide the land in two? South to Jon and North to the Great Other?

Daenerys was dismayed, ruined. Three treasons will you know… the old prophecy echoed in her head.

And the last one is for love…

She wouldn’t let Jon have his way. She’d run away, across the mountains, back towards the Wall. She’d hang herself, or drown in one of the many frozen lakes they’d passed, putting an end to her foolish existence. Let her traitorous husband wage this war on his own!

Burn them, burn them all! The thought was unbearably sweet, but she had no dragonfire, nor alchemist piss which made a good imitation of it, to make good on her desires...

She continued dreaming with open eyes, like Daenys before her. Signs and Portents. The doom. An open grave gaped inside a white tree that had grown over night among the sentinels and pines; dug for her, no doubt. By Jon. The mad weirwood laughed at her, its mouth bloody and cruel. The baskets on Mance’s and Aegon’ back turned into stakes she would be burned on... so that she wouldn’t rise as an evil wight, like her poor brother Rhaegar, after Jon reforged his magic sword in her beating heart…

But of course...

Her angry eyes jumped to her husband’s handsome face, opening widely to the truth of his suffering, wrenching themselves free from the battlefield of her waking dreams. Her heart stood still when she finally looked deeply into Jon’s black pupils, and saw no deceit in his beloved gaze.

She should have done this before, instead of eavesdropping. The answer was here, in his gaze of a young man shipped to the Wall to serve the realm... who had grown into a king instead… though he had yet to be elected and anointed… Just like there was once a princess, a girl of three and ten, born amidst salt and smoke on Dragonstone, who had become queen across the water, and who wanted to rule justly over people...

Not over slaves...

Reforging his sword… Of course…

Jon had never planned to betray her. He’d decided to sacrifice her, and their happiness, in order to win the war. He’d made his choice and his peace with it, as far as it could be made, all alone… And he didn’t find it in his heart to inform her in advance.

Knowing Jon, he hadn’t been able to seek pleasure from her, no matter how much he must have longed for comfort in his solitude. Not after he had made his solemn decision. To pretend nothing was amiss would have been dishonourable...

Dany had missed him dreadfully, and it must have been the same for him...

No matter what you are, no matter what I am… I’ll never let you go...

But you have to, don’t you?
You must...

There was no other way. Reed confirmed that the story of Nissa Nissa was true... The greenseer who could see the past... and foretell the future... who could move the mountains...

Maybe Jon had wished to shorten the period of anxiety for her, by keeping her in the dark, instead of letting her live with the knowledge she’d die and the anguish it would have caused...

Perhaps he’d ask for her consent now, in the last minute, at the Night’s King doorstep. Only Frostfangs separated Jon’s vanguard from the core of the Great Other’s kingdom in the Lands of Always Winter.

Or he would just strike her down by surprise to minimise her suffering...

It struck her that he would have to live with the consequences of his action when she was gone... Because if this was the sacrifice gods demanded he make, they had to let him be victorious... Or life made no sense at all...

She’d been so wrong about Jon’s intentions, almost succumbing to the Targaryen madness with her wild assumptions of treason.

It's not the coin that the gods toss, and which flips this or that way when we’re born. The seed of the mind disease is in us... in each and every one... just like dragonblood... more so if both our parents are dragons... we’ve got to fight it... the weak among us fail... their mind is overthrown... the world’s burning... isn’t it?

Jon would find it easier to resist the call of madness, due to his mother. Thank the Warrior. Though Cersei was proof that it was enough to have one dragon as a parent to succumb...

Profoundly shaken, and yet strangely calm, Dany came to terms with her destiny, understanding Jon better than ever.

Having seen the numbers of the enemy in her vision, she could put herself in his place. She both hated his choice and agreed with it...

It mattered not; his deceit, his evasion... nor the Night’s King ramblings about Jon becoming his most faithful bannerman, and therefore evil like the Great Other... it mattered very little if this was or wasn’t the only way to end the war...

Though of course it was and she’d always known it, they both did. Dany just wouldn’t admit it; afraid, clinging to life and not yet as much in love with Jon.

Now, nothing else mattered but her love for him.

A bright thought startled her. If roles could be inverted... in a world where Jon could be Nissa Nissa and she Azor Ahai, he would embrace his death if it meant he could save the realm of men.

How can I do any less?

She nonetheless regretted he hadn’t told her, crying inwardly for the time lost... for the precious moments they could have spent together and they hadn’t... for every last second she could have grasped and held in her heart, and which was now irreparably wasted.

In a trance, Dany dismounted. Her horse neighed, seemingly as real as herself.
What if none of us is real?

Abandoning her shelter, she pulled off the Skagosi headdress and discarded her scarf and cloak. Letting her hair loose, she revealed her presence to everyone; ready to die, desiring the pain with all her heart.

Strong like the Fourteen Flames of Valyrian Freehold, her cry of agony and ecstasy would rip the sky wide open!

Just like Nissa Nissa’s had done.

Her outcry would reforge Jon's sword to be hotter than a hundred suns...

Night's King would be destroyed by Lightbringer. With him, all his soldiers would perish, melting into void.

Wouldn’t they?

They had to. In Dany’s visions, it was always the Great Other who kept the white walkers alive… who called them to wake and to do his bidding since winter began… To conquer the world for him… She’d dreamt of it very often.

Without him, the white walkers might have stayed asleep… And now that she had a glimpse of their overwhelmingly high number...

Dany faced her husband squarely, baring her chest.

"It's quite alright, my love," she murmured in a heathen trance, averting her eyes from his. Staring at Jon’s ashen, cold blade that needed to burn again, hypnotised by the sight of it, she invited him, nodding with encouragement, "Do what you need to do."

Softly, slowly, stones began rolling down the nearby mountain slope.

The ground beneath her feet began to shake.

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to anyone who left a comment, a like or a bookmark after last ch.

I was really on the verge of stopping this, now I feel better about this story again ))

Let's see how it goes ))

Thanks for reading.
Jon XI

Chapter Notes

Thanks, TopShelfCrazy.
This story would never be what it is without your help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“We step and do not step into the same rivers, we are and we are not.”

Heraclitus

x

x

x

x

Jon

He stood immobile, sword in hand, opening his mouth to explain.

On the precipice of ruining his own carefully crafted strategy to defeat the Night's King.

Too late.

The earth was no longer stable beneath his feet; shaking... shuddering... turning into a river, perhaps...

The winter fog in the Frostfangs thickened into a dense, opaque veil, reducing his vision to an arms-length of space in each direction.

He would have been afraid if he were younger.

But he had come to expect something like this. He counted on the Others to appear haphazardly and unprepared, desperate to prevent the waste of the precious blood Jon guessed they were after; fearing it would be spilled in a terrible sacrifice that could cost their king his life.

Out of his reach, Dany screamed with fear.

Instead of ripping the night sky open, her cry pierced his heart.

Jon leaped like a madman, a blind man in the direction of her voice, forgetting the earthquake. She was near him when she bared her chest! He’d find her before the Night's King arrived... he had to...

It's not what you think, my princess.

He kept his mouth shut, not wishing to betray the truth. It hadn’t yet been the proper time for his pretence of being the last hero to begin, but he would have to stick with it now, to still have a chance at victory.

The Dornishwoman advanced with him through the fog, shoulder to shoulder. For the first time, Jon was glad for her presence.
“Thank you,” he muttered.

Obara Sand startled at his words, and then immediately recomposed herself, seemingly indifferent to his outburst of friendship.

_A king wouldn't have said that. He would have expected allegiance that was due to him._

Jon Snow was grateful.

Bewildered voices called to each other in the dark. His captains, executing his orders, despite the growing uncertainty.

_We invited the Others too soon._

And the earth kept shaking…

But the landscape didn’t change into a different mountain, or a river, as Jon felt it might. The Others weren’t as thorough with the tricks they used to delude their prey.

_They are taken by surprise. They must be!_ 

Just as he had hoped…

“Dany!” He hurled inhumanly, needing to hear her again.

His heart would remain in tatters until he found her.

A mist floated above him. He cut it down with passion, but it was only a nebula, nothing more. _White haze, not blue._

His unease mounted. He was unable to brush it off. The earth trembled, threatening to open and engulf his army and his family.

_Aegon was right. I should have told her._

Then, the timing would have been perfect. But Dany could have jeopardised his strategy by appearing too accepting of Nissa Nissa's terrible destiny. The Night's King wasn't a fool. _He'd know._

_She was convincing now, wasn’t she?_ 

Jon had never imagined that Dany would sneak after him like Arya, deciphering the deceit he’d planned without consulting her, and thinking it _true_…

Paradoxically, it hurt him that she could honestly come to the conclusion he was capable of killing her to win the war. And yet this was precisely what he’d wanted to make her believe for a short while. Fool her, and the enemy… She’d merely preempted his announcement that they should become Azor Ahai and Nissa Nissa… That it was the only way...

Thin air whistled to his left, taking a familiar warrior-shape; a menacing body in odd grey armour, with long white hair billowing in the wind. The chill acquired the odour Ghost hated. Blue eyes flashed in the dark, cold and deadly.

_White walkers._

Pivoting right on a swordsman’s instinct, Jon parried a crystal sword’s blow before the Other fully formed. Continuing the fight, he felt the lack of his wolf. With Ghost’s ferociousness and sharp sight
he’d feel stronger. Without him, it could have been Qhorin Halfhand in the past, and not himself, who would have later on been elected Lord Commander.

*Mother would have learned of my death when she returned north for her abandoned son.*

Obara Sand followed his lead, keeping a second Other at a distance with the obsidian-laid tip of her Dornish spear. The sandsnake was as dexterous in close combat with a lance as Jon with the sword. *This is how my parents fought...* The realisation was pointless but uncanny. Father wouldn’t compete in tourneys anymore… Just roam the world as a wight… And Mother was so heavy with child that she wouldn’t be able to hold, much less wield, a lance…

As soon as Jon defeated his enemy, another one materialised. Obara shared his predicament.

*And another…*

*It never ends.*

The clangor of weaponry and the panoply of cries resounded in the gloom of the Long Night. His army came under attack as well.

Jon fought savagely, refusing to rely on his unnatural invulnerability. *They cut me open from shoulder to hipbone in Oldtown and yet I live. I rejoice and I grieve. If that’s not life, I don’t know what is.*

When he killed his fourth white walker, he was panting, but remained unscathed. The crystal swords did not even graze his black clothing or cut a hair from his head.

Jon wondered if Mance and Aegon were able to stay inside the open giant’s grave during the earthquake. “Hold on! As long as you can!” he yelled nervously into the fog.

All around him, the darkness looked empty.

"Dany!” he called out half-heartedly, advancing with Obara.

No reply came.

*She could be anywhere by now.*

*Others took her...*

His plan was failing.

“Dany!” he was yelling uncontrollably now, and yet his voice seemed weak.

Long cracks opened in old ice under Jon’s boots, deep like gashes caused by his magic sword.

“Jon…” he could barely hear Dany’s response, but it was still sweet music to his ears, a hundred times better than eerie silence.

She sounded leagues away.

“Dany!” he cried out with longing, striding forward between emerging fissures and dangerous crevices.

He opened his wolf’s eyes for a moment.
The main force of the Night’s King was where Ghost had last seen it, at the other, far end of the Frostfangs, about to venture into the winding paths of the mountain chain. They marched faster than men. Still he had… a moon’s turn, maybe two, before they reached the Wall.

He wouldn’t waste this chance easily, for he might not get another one. Not before the siege began; dangerous, long, risky.

He heard… raucous hissing… and swishing… like a weapon… or a… a… an unravelling of a thread… a most peculiar noise… He ran to it, grabbing blindly at a pale, cold, compact figure; hoping it was Dany in her white wool attire, and not his enemy bent over his dead wife, drinking dragonblood.

What's in it that he wants?

He didn’t have it, whatever it was. Drinking Jon's blood didn't give the Night's King what he sought.

And the creature Jon had seized wasn't human! Strong, larger than it had first seemed, it extricated itself from his grasp, pushing him away with bony, thin, hairy legs. Jon clutched one of them, noticing it had many joints. The frozen limb hit him hard in the chest. He staggered, forced to back off.

Moon rose suddenly in the sky, like it often did in his wolf-dreams. Bright and yellow, it whispered, "Snow." The fog dissipated brusquely. His army resisted the Others. Neither side prevailed.

Very well.

Men wrestled with the white walkers, undeterred by fear, forming a full circle of defence around Jon, Obara, the carriage with Mother, and the open giant’s grave in the middle.

Before his incredulous black eyes, Dany finally became visible; a white-clad she-dragon hovering in the air, held by blue mists, too high for him to reach her. Almost reverently, the incorporeal Others supported her hair and her slim limbs.

She resembled the seven-pointed star of the Andals. Her eyes were squeezed tight. She seemed barely conscious; petrified, stiff, stifled, horrified. Tears ran down her cheeks.

Staring at her chest that should have been bare, Jon understood why…

His wife’s torso was encased in a chainmail knitted of icy spiderweb, woven rapidly by the creature that had pushed Jon away… The sound of a thread unraveling… To be manhandled by an ice spider must have been revulsive beyond measure.

On the ground, to Jon’s left, the giant insect lifted a few of its many legs, preparing for the attack.

Jon steadied himself in anticipation. Obara did the same, never leaving his side. Unexpectedly, Aegon climbed out of the giant’s grave and ran towards them, leaving Mance on his own. A few victorious Others tried to break through the ranks of Jon's host and reach the clearing in the middle. Men stopped them viciously, following Jon’s orders. The battle circle was not to reach him yet.

Where is the Night's King?

"You shouldn’t be here," Jon reproached Aegon.

The Sword of the Morning grumbled, "The odds have changed. One man is enough to-"
The spider leapt upon them, giant and overwhelming. Dawn flashed in moonlight, cutting a leg in two. Jon struck the animal's head, barely avoiding the pierce of a different leg into his eye. It took all three of them to bring the beast down; smaller than a mammoth but not by much. Obara dealt the last blow, throwing her spear straight into the spider's icy heart. Aegon and Jon, close to the beast, barely had time to jump away, the corpse almost crushing them.

"Like the Ice Dragon Rhaegar had to kill," Aegon breathed out.

The frozen carcass stopped twitching.

"Any dragon would come handy now," Jon retorted, looking up at Dany in her captivity.

Obara climbed on Aegon and sat on his shoulders. "You go up top," she commanded Jon.

"No," Jon refused. "You. I'll be in the middle."

"You go up," she insisted stubbornly. "I can kill them as good as you, but a lance won't help here."

She was right. A skilled swordsman had better chances against multiple opponents in the air.

Targaryen or Snow, nobody or Azor Ahai, Jon was one of the best.

Two in her hair and one at each arm and leg.

From the sandsnake's strong neck, Jon battled the mists for hours that seemed as long as his life. The Others never truly formed, but constantly threatened to engulf his bare head or sword into their foggy form. Jon struggled to avoid all contact, while still striving to cut through them. Aegon and Obara acted like his legs, circumventing danger, advancing bluntly when there was an opening. It would have been easier with Rhaegal… Yet they did well together.

Jon cut and slashed until Dany's limp body was free and began falling into his arms. In moments, her heart beat steadily against his chest. He raised his sword to free her from the last two mists, but they floated away, thwarting his chase.

A wild, dark laughter reverberated from the sky. The celestial expanse seemed like a closed, stone vault, a thousand feet tall, echoing voices and cries.

His enemy was here at last, suspended in the air even higher than Dany had been, supported by an enormous cloud of mists. His armoured body seemed weightless.

There are so many...

The battle on the ground still hung in balance, but if the newly arrived Others materialised and descended with their king, Jon might lose.

He needed to bring the Night's King down to the frozen, quaking earth.

"You're too late," he provoked loudly. "I shall now be your equal, and never your bannerman! And there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"Do tell!" The Night's King responded in kind. "You don't have the courage it takes to embrace Azor Ahai's destiny!"

“Put me down,” Jon commanded, spurring the sandsnake in her chest with his boot.

Aegon squatted slowly, sitting in a crevice in the ice. Obara bent forward, lowering herself as much
as she could without throwing Jon and Dany off.

Jon slid down sideways to the ground, never letting go of his wife.

"I have more courage than you think," he declared as darkly as he was capable of. He laid his sleeping princess on the ground, very close to the open giant's grave where Mance was hiding.

The earth trembled less, but it hadn't quieted, not by far.

He pressed the tip of his magic sword firmly against Dany's cobweb-covered heart, hoping it would prompt the Night's King to leap down, draw his own weapon to oppose him.

The battle circle was closing slowly towards his position. *As planned...*

But the enemy only laughed manically, remaining in the sky with his faithful soldiers.

"You'll find that weaving more steel-proof and fireproof than any armour," the Night's King informed him methodically when he was able to stop chuckling. "I was faster."

"Were you?" Jon questioned arrogantly. "Let me see." He would demonstrate determination to become the bloody Azor Ahai, if that was what it took to achieve victory.

A readiness he didn't possess.

*Come on! Get down!* He urged the Night's King in his head.

Jon steeled himself as never before. He was made of snow and old ice. He didn't think. He didn't feel. After gentle, *imperceptible* probing of the web over Dany's heart with the tip of his sword, just to prove to himself that the enemy wasn't lying, he visibly forced the blade *in*.

Unable to cut through the cursed web, he stifled a breath of relief.

*Thank the gods.*

He'd never be able to forgive himself if he reforged the bloody sword as the legend told.

Similar ancient cobwebs had held this magic sword in place in the cave where they found it. *Unbroken for thousands of years.* And yet Dany had been able to retrieve it.

*So this can be torn apart by hand.*

Feigning discontent and anger, he tossed his blade away. Sinking to his knees, he tried to rip the weaving apart with his fingers, hoping this would be threatening enough to bring the Night's King down...

Dany opened her eyes. "I missed you," she said, staring at him with an inscrutable expression, waiting.

He had no words.

"Has it not been done yet?" She swallowed, losing her courage. "I was in the afterlife, calling for you," she murmured, closing her eyes briefly, as if to better remember her dream.

Then, she looked at him again, gaze violet and teary, trying to be brave.

Jon could see that her offer was still there, despite being frightened now; no longer erratic and
haughty like a foreign goddess as she appeared when she bared her chest…

“You can’t be brave all the time, can you?” he said flatly, remembering Ygritte’s words in a similar situation. Hoping that Dany would find them endearing, and the enemy heartless.

*It's a poor show I'm putting up.*

It should have been Mance with his lute, luring the Great Other into a fight. He always had something compelling to sing about.

He grabbed the spiderweb once more, trying to pull it open as hard as he could.

Dany whimpered from pain.

The enemy laughed harder than before, clapping his bony hands with giddy approval. "You'll have to search a lot more, I fear, before you find a way to dispense with my dearest pet's last labour of love, Jon Snow. My heart has become too cold over the years to offer any assistance, I fear. And you've left me in need of a new favourite at my court. Maybe I shall have this one as a page," the Night's king pointed at Podrick Payne, a young Southron squire, being wounded by a white walker in the first line of combat. *Not yet dead. Hold on, please.*

The battle circle tightened around Jon, almost reaching him.

*It’s time.*

Jon gave up all pretence, angered in truth.

“Do you honestly believe I stand here unarmed?” he threatened, forgetting himself.

"I’d guess you have Brynden Rivers’ sword hidden from me in that grave,” the Night King replied readily, unsurprised. “Your flayed wildling king was right to advise you that we can't see clearly into anything built by the giants, but we too are aware this would be a good place to lure us into ambushing you.” He continued with venom, "Thankfully there are few such structures left. We’ve taken good care of them over the years."

Jon was intrigued, and strove to control his ire. The enemy gave him… information. A precious tool in war. Half of it was a lie, but some rang true. *It doesn’t cost him to admit what I already know.* "Dark Sister is a good sword," he argued, keeping his wrath at bay.

Dany rolled into a ball on the ground, shaking from cold. The sight was heart-wrenching. *Just a bit more, my princess, and we'll be done here. For better or worse.*

"Maybe," the Great Other spat out with disdain. "The Bloodraven tried to smite me with it in my sleep and failed, fifty years ago. A woman’s sword cannot harm me, I'd say." The Great Other looked unreadable… almost sad.

"What if I have another blade?” Jon asked viciously, remembering *Blackfyre*, left in Jaime Lannister’s keeping. “Dark Sister’s twin, one of the most powerful swords of all times.”

Dany was looking at him with confusion. He couldn’t think of her now. He had to keep his wits to himself.

"Wasn’t that sword lost?” the Great Other seemed curious in return.

Jon purposefully didn't answer.
“It matters not,” the enemy hammered, but now uncertain. "If you have Blackfyre, it had belonged to a king," he paused, his voice low and hypnotic. “Azor Ahai was king too,” he murmured, sounding almost kind, and yet unnervingly cynical and treacherous. "Few men know this. Should you wish to relive his destiny, perhaps you ought to follow him closely. But you haven't yet been anointed king.” The wrinkled grey lips of the Great Other curved into a knowledgeable smile. His blue eyes twinkled with cruelty and joy.

The hopelessly honest look on Jon's face betrayed the truth of the matter. "I didn't think so," the enemy stated approvingly. "I wouldn't, in their place," he shook his head, pointing at Dany. "She was born queen and knows how to make hard decisions. God knows why she married a coward like you! I’ll take her with me today. And when you bend your knee, I’ll generously give you her corpse, to enjoy it for all time."

Jon picked up his sword, turning red from anger.

"Lift me again!" he beckoned to Aegon and Obara.

"He's too high up," the Dornishwoman continued to state the situation without embellishment, but Jon didn't wish to see reason now.

“Do it!” Jon commanded. “I’ll fly up if I have to.”

He’d cut the bastard down. There wouldn’t be any need to reforge his blade in any woman’s heart. He’d just strike harder.

Jon had just climbed up on Obara's shoulders when a minuscule bead of light started glowing from the open tomb. An oil lantern, lidless, its flame prancing in the dark.

Yellow, red and orange.

Little fires began lighting themselves on it, spreading rapidly through the entire host, travelling from one tiny lantern to another. Every man left standing carried one. Some even had two or three, brandishing the lamps of the fallen.

The advent of fire quenched Jon’s battle madness, bringing back the reason for all this.

Mance climbed out of the grave with Aegon’s lamp. He passed it to Aegon, who handed it to Obara; the only person besides Dany and the Mad Queen who wasn’t privy to the plan, and had brought no lantern of her own to Frostfangs.

The sandsnake pushed the lamp into Jon's left hand. “Beware,” she warned him. "I’ll stand up,” she said, straightening herself on Aegon’s shoulders.

"Take this!" Jon gave her his sword. He immediately redressed himself on her back, standing and transferring the light to his sword hand.

Aegon, Obara and Jon were much taller now.

Just not enough.

The warrior made of two men and a woman staggered left and right, unstable on his legs, looking far more unnatural than an ice spider.

The Night's King’s mirth increased. “We’re no poor wights to be taken down by fire.”
He failed to recognise the flame that had burned him once, and would again. Red, yellow and orange. And bronze. Every dragon had its own hue, matching one of the shades of his scales, though it took quite some time together before a rider was able to recognise the distinctive color of his steed’s breath.

It was Jon's turn to laugh derisively. "Do you truly think I came here to challenge you relying only on legends?"

The Great Other quit laughing. His forehead crumpled like an ancient parchment.

Jon sprang from Obara’s shoulders, jumping up as high as he could.

He’d become used to mad air manoeuvres with Rhaegal. Just a little higher… Soaring dragonless, he smashed the lantern into the nearest mist. The cloud of white walkers surrounding the Night's King burst in flames. The conflagration spread faster than a disease. His action a sign to his army to launch the same attack.

“This isn’t just any fire,” Jon announced as he fell.

*Fire of the Fourteen Flames, fire of the earth's core. Unquenched, unquenchable...* The saying in his head felt like a living dream, distinctly green and bronze, worrying for him from great distance…

*I'm fine, Rhaegal. It's over.*

His mouth stretched in a victorious smile as he stared up, waiting for the Great Other to be consumed by the fast spreading conflagration.

He dropped squarely on Obara and Aegon, who both tried to soften his landing, but his weight proved too much. As he knocked them down, Jon’s boot accidentally hit Aegon's head. Blood gushed immediately from the impact. At the same moment, a flaming white walker cut his thigh as it burnt to death. Aegon sank deeply into melting snow. Obara grabbed Dawn, cut his cloak into shreds and worked quickly to bandage the wounds. Mance was with her in an instant, helping. “Hold on,” he said, “keep breathing and the next thing you’ll see will be your lovely wife.”

Jon stared at Aegon, petrified, unable to act. *This is my fault.* If he had told Dany, if he had succeeded in luring the Great Other into the grave, where dragonfire waited, Aegon would be fine.

"We did well," Aegon whispered to Jon and Obara with a smile. "The snow feels so warm today," he added and closed his eyes.

"Is he…?" Jon asked, unable to speak it aloud.

His guilt for mistrusting Aegon at first weighed even more heavily on him; having no other reason except that Mother had raised him, and not Jon. As if Aegon had a part in any of it, being an infant… An orphan, like himself.

He would be loathsome if he brought him home dead.

"Not yet," Obara never spared him. "But it's too early to tell, and your friend the maester is far away."

*As is Rhaegal and his healing breath.*

At odds with himself, Jon looked up.
We’ve still done well if we killed him.

But the Night’s King was becoming hazy… foggy… disappearing slowly… suddenly, he vanished. Fire swept into the air where he used to be. His misty soldiers weren’t as fortunate; burning vividly, hurling, hissing in pain, dying.

Showered in Rhaegar’s blood near Shadow Tower, the Great Other had grimaced and screamed in pain. The wildlings had never stopped talking about it. Jon didn’t believe he’d just… die in silence.

He’s still alive.

As I am…

The living fled the inferno they started, regrouping on higher ground. Mance and Obara carried Aegon on a bed made from their own cloaks. Jon remained in place, paralysed. Dragonfire spread freely, devouring the Others and the newly made wights who minutes before had been people fighting them. An old knight from the Vale. A sellsword of the Golden Company. So different from each other and yet united in death. Morna the White Mask, whose witchcraft didn’t save her in Frostfangs. Old Garth… dying again to Jon’s amazement.

Like me.

His immortal condition had remained hidden from the world. Only Dany knew.

For now.

His disappointment flared stronger than dragonfire.

How could only the Night’s King survive the slaughter of his kin? There were no other survivors from what he could see.

Suddenly, his wife grasped his burned hand, appearing next to him, awake and well.

“Come,” she insisted, pulling him with her. “We ought to leave.”

He listened, his body finally losing enough tension to move.

They climbed the steep, slippery slope together, leaning on each other for balance and warmth.

“You brought Rhaegal’s fire here in those lamps?” she asked when they were far enough from all the burning, but not yet near the surviving men.

Jon nodded, unable to respond at first. “How can you be sure?” he finally managed. “It could be wildfire for all you know. I told you nothing.”

Unclasping her cloak, she faced him, showing her naked torso to him alone. “Hold it,” she commanded.

He took the heavy fabric from her hands, holding it as a curtain between them and the world. His eyes fell to her bare breasts and perfectly flat belly. The icy cobweb was gone. Her hair was tied in a knot on top of her head, but her eyelashes were singed. Her tunic was burned in front, hanging loose over her white trousers.

“You plunged into the fire,” he stated incredulously.

“To get rid of the armour I never asked for,” she replied melodiously. “It would appear that it’s not
resistant to dragonbreath."

She turned her tunic so that the back part was in front, hiding her breasts. Reaching for her cloak, she wrapped herself in it tightly.

He clasped it for her, using the gesture to pull her to himself, hug her, feel her warmth. Her small hands pressed against his heart until she smiled, satisfied that it was beating. She’d need a new tunic not to freeze, maybe some furs. He owed her a hat, he supposed. Her Skagoski headdress was burned.

Jon had brought Rhaegal's fire north in secret, in two oil lamps from the Stony Shore. Mance and Aegon guarded them in large wooden baskets, lined with crystallised dragonbreath on the inside, to resist catching fire. They kept adding oil during the ride, to prevent the precious substance from being snuffed by the wind, or consuming itself. The rest of the company only knew they would have to light their lanterns with a flame that would be passed on.

Jon and Dany finally reached the army's assembly point on the mountain slope. Bran was here, with his bushy red hair, seated in snow next to Reed’s daughter.

Bran with his uncanny vision, matching Reed's. Lost in his dreams and tales like Sansa. Jon, Arya and Rickon were hopelessly ordinary in comparison, anchored to the ground.

Jon had a revelation upon seeing his brother. “He wasn’t here, was he?” Jon asked bitterly. “The Great Other. Have you seen him?”

Bran shook his head. “No,” he confirmed Jon’s fears. “Only his voice… an image. I don’t know how this is possible. The rest… the mists, the spider…. they were all here.”

“Well, they’re dead now,” Jon retorted. The day wasn’t lost.

His head began to hurt, swelling large as a pumpkin.

When did the earth stop shaking?

It didn’t… Or maybe it did… How could he know when it changed all the time? Why wasn’t there a moment of constancy?

"I could have warned you if I had been by your side," Bran objected. "I didn't see it before it was too late."

"There was no time to make a new saddle," Jon protested, hurt by his brother’s words. "Bran, I'd never leave you behind for… for being different. But if you are to ride with me to danger, you ought to have a fighting chance like anyone else."

Bran gave a quaint look to the unconscious Aegon. "Fair enough," he murmured, eyes returning at his crippled legs.

Jon had ensured his brother's tent would be positioned in such a way that Bran ended up in the middle of the march, carried in saddle by the wildlings. In a place less vulnerable to losses than the vanguard or the rear.

Wolves arrived last, pulling Mother’s carriage. The horses were scattered, some of them burning.

Lyanna almost jumped out to greet him. Chubby and short, clumsy in her long gown, to Jon’s utter disbelief, she was holding a lance. Inside, Cersei juggled with blue crystals, the final remains of a white walker, as a mummer on the fair, shrieking and singing. Reed slept on the floor, like a babe in
a cradle, unaware of any battle.

"They’re just as Old Nan said, fearsome," Lyanna declared wholeheartedly, flushed and mischievous. It was the first time Jon saw her purely happy, without grieving. Confident. Beautiful. He hoped it wouldn’t be the last. "But not invincible," she concluded grimly.

"No, not invincible," Jon agreed. *If only there weren’t so many of them heading south. Wait... Can they...? "Has there been an Other who turned into a man once dead?"* he queried, needing to know.

There wasn't.

So the white walkers who possessed men *couldn't* turn into mists and fly… Only those who had never done so.

The Night's King had come to his wedding through the heart tree.

*It must be true that he was a man once!*

*Jon Stark, just as he said.*

The similarity of his castle with Winterfell as it used to be was uncanny at best. *Frightening.*

Jon had made a mistake.

He had purposefully avoided all weirwoods on his way north for nothing.

Not knowing that by doing so, he would make it impossible for his enemy to show up in person.

Fearing to underestimate the Great Other, he had overestimated him.

*He's not invincible.*

*But his magic is both stronger and weaker than I think...*

*Shall I ever grasp the whole truth of him and be able to defeat him?*

*It shall be a battle of swords and wits... no doubt.*

He shivered, shocked by further evidence of a Stark rejecting the values of honour and goodness held in deepest respect by Lord Eddard and the family Jon grew up in.

And yet it was very likely...

*We had our own Jaime Lannister in the past. The man who stabbed his own kin in the back, siding with the Others and becoming their king.*

*Wasn't it enough to be the King in the North?*

Cersei suddenly swallowed a blue crystal she'd been juggling with. Her face blackened, and she fell out through the carriage door, looking more moribund than Aegon. Only her chest still rose and fell in the tiniest of movements.

"I suppose I'll have to explain this to the Lannisters," Jon muttered, not knowing if he should laugh or weep after his day. *Tommen will miss his mother.*

*Nothing ever comes easy.*
Perhaps Tyrion would be pleased with what his sister ate for dinner, and the indigestion it caused. The consideration wasn't very honourable, yet it whirled through Jon's head all the same.

*Is this kingly? Having no mercy for a madwoman?*

His head continued hurting, seated uncomfortably on his shoulders.

He closed his eyes to feel the ground he was standing on, the beloved vastness of the north.

In the silence of his mind, he confirmed that the earth had indeed stopped shaking…

But the stones continued to roll down the sides of the mountain, stirred to life by the clangor of arms; the yelling, the noise, the violence.

They had to keep quiet from now on if they wanted to leave the Fangs safely.

"No more talking," he commanded under his voice. "We shall leave as silently as we can."

His command passed in whispers from man to man.

The carriage was loaded to the brim, by the unconscious, the pregnant and the disabled. Those merely injured got the horses. Jon gave his horse to Dany.

*Is this kingly? To favour your own when so many are hurt?*

But she would lose her feet to frostbite if she had to walk for a sennight, and there was no place left in the carriage.

Jon walked next to her, leading the way back, out of the Fangs.

At the end of the canyon, he paused. When all his army passed through, he ordered the horns to be blown louder than ever, close to the mountains, and asked the people to rejoice at will.

The slow rolling of stones turned into rain, into *flood*, into a great *avalanche*, closing the pass. The main force of the Others wouldn't be able to leave the mountains easily nor swiftly. They would have to dig, or hover across, and not all of them could fly. The advance of the enemy would be slowed down.

*Until after the Great Council, perhaps.*

*For a hundred days…*

He shivered at the thought. Azor Ahai had laboured for a hundred days before sacrificing his wife.

The election of a new king would take place in Greywater Watch. Lord Reed had offered to host it, sending out the ravens, after the refusal of Lord Hightower.

It felt terribly unfair that Jon should seek kingship as a means to an end… to achieve the only worldly success he sought… to bring the dawn. He hated the notion… and yet he knew he wouldn't be able to erase the newly discovered requirement for victory from his head… Even if it was only a *lie* of the Great Other. He'd remember it as a *possibility* all the time, just like he had Azor Ahai and Nissa Nissa always on his mind, despite loathing it and feeling unable to kill his wife for any cause.

*All I want is to bring the dawn.*

*There has to be a way.*
The night was calm on the way back south. Almost beautiful. The wolves never howled, padding in silence. It seemed to Jon that there were no more Others left between the Frostfangs and the Wall. Were it less cold, he'd believe spring was coming.

There weren't any wights either. Jon couldn't believe they killed all of them in the lands near the Wall. They had simply wandered off, like mammoths and the cursed ironborn created by Euron Greyjoy.

The aftermath of his heartfelt disappointment over not being able to burn the Great Other slowly began to feel like a considerable victory.

**But not the final one.**

From the saddle, Dany looked down on him with expectation. They had yet to talk of his silence and neglect.

And of how she'd offered him freely the sacrifice he'd never thought to demand, and much less to make. It made him feel both humbled and ashamed.

"Hear me out," he said with determination when he found his guts, deciding to start by the point he had to make, and not by the apology he owed. "Listen to me before you expose yourself again. Because I feel that you might," he stressed. "I'm not Azor Ahai, and you're not Nissa Nissa." Not yet. Not ever, if there are gods.

To his great misfortune, the Night's King swift response proved that the ancient history wasn’t a lie.

*What if it has to become true again? What if there's no other way?*

"But we could become them if needs be," Dany countered his argument with passion. "I've felt it!"

Jon had felt it too, but he'd never admit it. *This land tricks us... Is this the way to madness? Is there still dragonblood in me? What blood is running through my veins, bright and red, if the Night's King has drunk it all?*

Dany took a deep breath and continued in her calm, queenly voice. "A day may come when embracing this destiny will be unavoidable. Then, you know what you have to do. I may be afraid, but I won't love you less for it, nor will I change my mind."

After a while, she let out her resentment, "And you shall never keep me in the dark again," she underlined.

"I'm bloody sorry," he reacted. "I thought you'd somehow let him see it wasn't true that I-

"**You** let him see it isn't true, by your... your kind face!" she reacted. "Not true for you, not yet. You and not me! You should have seen yourself... I knew you couldn’t do it. He must as well."

"You're right," he conceded, contrite and empty for a moment.

Yet very soon, all his habitual courage and determination returned. He stared into her bewildered, tired, loving eyes, and felt a confusion growing in his soul, high like weed at the end of long summer.

"If one of us should fall in this war," he muttered stubbornly. "It'll be me."

A new yearning blossomed in his heart, one he never felt before.
If die he must, he wished he would leave her with child.

A son who’d grow up with his mother.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for your kind words after the last Ch and for the support to this long and confused story.

I hope that I can finish it to my own liking and hopefully also to yours.
Chapter Notes

Thanks TopShelfCrazy for your continued help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Warning for violence and gore

Brienne

Beth was lost, and Brienne couldn’t find her in this dark, stifling room, where moss grew on the walls. She felt there should be trees all around her - white trees, northern trees - but she couldn’t see them.

“Beth!” she screamed.

A tree questioned her, stern like Septa Roelle, “What does it mean to be a true knight?”

“To protect the weak,” she gave the first answer that came to mind, but it was inexact, the tree complained. A gnarled root closed around her neck, choking her.

After a long while, she was set free, continuing her search for the little blue she-dragon.

True knights, true knights…

What does it mean to be a true knight? The trees whispered viciously, surrounding her like an enemy host ready to strike her down.

“To do good,” she whispered.

That answer was insulting.

Your husband’s a knight. And yet he hadn’t done well by us, nor by our children.

Dragonrider, oathbreaker…

It became impossible to breathe.

Brienne gasped and screamed, fighting for air. Her unborn child stirred in her belly. She grasped it with her hands, feeling the life she’d never hoped to sense within.

Wonderful. Exhilarating.

The trees initiated a long monotonous rant about the falseness of the dragons who had yet to fulfill their bargain with Torrhen. The black one, looking like Balerion reborn, had come to Winterfell, and then left, without honouring the agreement. Worse, he allied himself with a tree hater, the secret servant of the Great Other. All dragons were treacherous and untrue, just like the shining, lying, southron knights.

“That’s a lie,” Brienne rebelled wholeheartedly. “Anyone can have honour. Dragons and knights.”
“Beth, where are you?” she voiced with desperation. Her dragon was too tiny to survive on her own. She could be stolen and enslaved.

“What does it mean to be a true knight?” the trees continued with their inquisition and torture; first strangling her, then letting her go.

She must have been giving the wrong answer for days.

“It’s what we make of it,” she answered in the end. “Of knighthood, of our lives. And it should better have some valour. Or the gods will frown—"

- and close their eyes- the tree said sadly-

“-and we’ll never find the seven heavens,” Brienne finished.

Titles were nothing without the constant labours of the men who held them. And women, she thought with pride of herself.

Brienne the Blue.

The tree was finally satisfied, launching her into mad, unwanted motion.

The world whirled around her, faster than on dragonback, cold like death. Her head was spinning, disorientated; until she finally breathed fresh air, stumbling out of a great weirwood stump onto a high, snowy promontory above a large plain, both strange and oddly familiar. Many mutilated trunks similar to the one through which she’d just travelled adorned the top of the hill.

The night sky was clear and almost bright.

She was out in moonlight at the High Heart, and its Ghost lay resting on one of the stumps; a frail, small, old lady, who loved to tell visitors about her many dreams.

Brienne had come with Jaime to see her, to ask whether Aerys was truly his father. But the Ghost didn’t know. And with his Aunt Genna dead at Stannis’ hand, he would have to content himself with assumptions about his origin for the rest of his days. He’d never have any certainty.

Jaime? Where are you?

The tree! She remembered everything. The enormous heart tree in Greywater Watch had captured her and Jaime by surprise. Beth had flown away, into the bogs; a baby dragon agile like a bird. Brienne’s dream-search for her had been pointless.

It was Jaime who needed help all along.

Her solitary arrival to High Heart meant her husband remained captive. Otherwise he would have gotten out of the crannogs, rejoined Viserion and followed her.

The white dragon couldn’t enter the Greywater Watch. He couldn’t even see it, according to Jaime. The fortress had hidden itself from the menace of a grown, fire-breathing beast, allowing forth only people and hatchlings. Viserion must have found Beth in the marshes by now.

Only Brienne and Jaime were left at the mercy of the northern gods and their wrath. And all this, despite that they were both innocent in the matter of Torrhen Stark and any agreement he might have concluded with Aegon the Conqueror before kneeling. Yet still the trees were determined to blame any dragonrider they encountered for all unknown grievances of times long gone. Jaime's history
with the Starks didn't help - the gods of the north seemed to hold stronger grudges than men.

“This is all in the past!” She screamed at the stumps, counting them. *Thirty-one.* “Can't you see? Aren't you *just?’”

If gods were unfair, how could men be any different?

“I had a *terrible* dream,” the Ghost of the High Heart whispered with dread such as Brienne had never heard or seen. Her timid, kind voice, poured cold water over Brienne's frustration.

“I became exhausted from it,” the little crone continued. “Too tired to maintain the divide.”

Brienne looked down at the night-covered riverlands.

South of the High Heart, it was not so dark and the breeze didn't smell of cold. There were no servants of the Night’s King on that side. Those who’d sneaked into the Seven Kingdoms as mists couldn’t come any further.

“Lastly, I dreamed that the gods were asking for your life in exchange for your husband’s.”

Shivers crawled down Brienne’s spine from the somber tone of the crone’s resigned voice.

“Was that… the terrifying dream that made you so tired?” she wondered.

“No,” the old lady shook her head.

Without further explanation of what had been so dreadful, she prophesied. “Should the white walkers cross all the way down, to Garth’s domain in the Reach, the Wall might crumble before the siege begins. They’ll be unstoppable. Not even Azor Ahai reborn will be able to deal them a decisive blow. The choice lies before you, lady. Give me two hours of dreamless sleep, and I shall endure my burden until the end of our time. Don’t let them pass.”

Brienne nodded and reached for her sword, realising she was unarmed and unarmoured, wearing only Jaime’s tunic and breeches. The trees had kept her armour, her sword and her cloak.

The Ghost was already asleep, curled up on a stump.

Four mists materialised immediately at the bottom of the hill. White walkers began climbing the slope in Brienne’s direction. They looked at least a head taller than her.

Since the dead weirwoods had no branches, she wondered whether she should break a redwood twig to challenge them, emitting a bitter laugh.

*I’m unarmed,* she admonished the tree gods. *They’ll just take me and your hill.*

Suddenly, a heavy greatsword in a fancy scabbard emerged out of a stump. The northern gods were cruel, but not deaf.

*Blackfyre.*

It didn’t belong to her. It was left in Jaime’s keeping. She drew it, having no other weapon; weary, queasy, without another option for shield or armour.

Stiff from her prolonged captivity in the heart tree, she’d at least have the advantage of higher ground. Yet the weeks spent dreaming made her very uncertain. Maybe she could be victorious. Maybe not. She knew that all her enemies would be stronger than Jaime when he had both hands
and she hadn’t trained for weeks.

She killed one very fast, exposing her flank to a tiny scratch of his sword. The other three advanced on her, and she was so tired.

The Ghost of the High Heart spoke in her dreams. Her eyes were closed, her voice hypnotic, unaware of the public. Perhaps she was praying. “Time, give me time. I’ve fought them for a year now. Give me two hours and I shall hold for another hundred days, guarding the realm of man. After that, it’ll be over. The last hero might fail and with him, the world. Or he could be victorious! Oh I have seen him falling into ruin and despair! And I have seen him succeeding, and then I wept for the terrible price of victory… I do not know which dream frightened me more.”

Brienne steeled herself. Two hours.

The moment of consideration cost her dearly. Two white walkers grabbed her left leg, and almost snatched her sword. She wrenched herself free and fought back, using every blow, every technique and step she had ever learned, as well as all her considerable tenaciousness and patience.

After more agonising minutes that felt like months, she killed another foe, by a mighty strike over his shoulders. Blackfyre cut the cursed flesh like butter. The third one used the opening to slice her left leg further.

So she killed him too, by piercing his belly.

Her leg bled profusely; hanging limp, oozing blue blood.

Horrendous liquid ran down her shin, cut open by a crystal sword; she felt a curse, a cold running through her.

The Others were taking her. There were no blue crystals floating in the air after their demise, as she’d come to expect. They... they must be in me!

She couldn’t give in. To be a true knight is what I’ll make of it.

Brienne the Blue.

The last one shrieked, or perhaps laughed, waiting patiently at a prudent distance for the contagion to take its due. Time felt eternal, and she was so alone. Finally, the Other cut her good leg open in a fast attack, making the disease run through her quicker.

Brienne writhed on the frozen ground in excruciating pain.

With the last ounce of strength she still had hidden somewhere, surprising even herself, she rolled forward like a boulder, and pushed Blackfyre through the groin of the monster who waited for her to become like him, and murder creatures like her. Kill people.

Panting, suffering, she realised she was bleeding not only from, but also between her legs. Her smallclothes were quickly becoming soaked.

My child.

She’d forgotten all about it in her knightly prowess and concern for her husband. The effort must have exerted her; causing her to miscarry. She prayed it wasn’t true. Maybe it was just a grievous wound.
But would any injury, no matter how great, feel like moonblood? Causing spasms in the small of her back?

She didn’t know.

She wondered how long she’d fought, and if it had been enough.

The Ghost of the High Heart sounded less drowsy. “Thank you, daughter,” she rasped in her elderly, hoarse voice.

“Let him go now, will you,” she whispered, daydreaming of Jaime, and of Beth growing big and flying with Viserion. Her thoughts swarmed like bees, soaring over the hills and valleys to the castle hidden in the bogs. “Let them all go,” she whispered to the trees. “I did your bidding.”

Tired, she closed her eyes.

Mighty wings flapped, approaching fast.

Jaime. She longed for him. The most beautiful name for the most handsome man of all. I lost your child. Will you hate me? Or shall we make another in the Long Night?

Viserion! Is it you?

The sword of Aegon the Conqueror lay useless at her feet. The blade was impeccably clean, as if it had never killed a soul. She couldn’t grasp or lift it. She didn’t feel her wounded legs, cold and bloodied. Blue, like her armour used to be.

Her husband was free and he was coming for her, if only to say farewell.

Jaime. Was I in your dreams again? He always ended up doing something foolish for her sake.

But the wings that obscured the stars were black and much bigger than Viserion's; the dragonrider much older and more powerful than her husband, fuelled by an obstinate need to judge and assert his claim. Many Southron nobles accompanied him on Drogon's back. Brienne recognised the Prince of Dorne, Lord Hightower, several stormlords, Lord Tarly, even Lord Tyrell who had given steadfast support to Jon and Daenerys in the past. Did he change sides?

Behind the first black spike, closest to Stannis, sat Lady Shireen in a pretty blue dress. And Tyrion, in a doublet embroidered with lions. Their hands were tied, and mouths stuffed with cloth.

Brienne almost forgot the pain she was in, joyful from seeing the little healers alive and well.

“This is no coincidence,” Stannis announced to all and sundry. “It is the will of Lord of Light that I’ve come across you, woman, on my way to the Great Council and undisputed triumph. Justice shall be done.”

“Whose justice?” Brienne wondered spontaneously, remembering Vargo Hoat’s notion of it.

“You were my guest under my roof, yet you kidnapped my daughter. For this heinous crime you deserve the pain of death.”

She was hurt and worn out, more helpless than when the Bloody Mummers had put her into a bearpit. No one would rush to her aid now. Only the trees knew she was here.

“Do you deny taking my daughter with you against her will?”
“Lady Shireen followed me to Winterfell of her own volition, accompanied by Lord Davos—”

“Liar!” Stannis interrupted. “Lord Davos and his son went to the Wall, not to Winterfell, on *my* orders. I know they’ve reached it. They sent a raven. Alas, they have yet to return with the Lady Melisandre. For unjustly taking hostage my lady… my faithful servant, I shall hold responsible the pretender Jon Snow.”

Undeterred, Brienne continued her honest account of events. “Indeed, Lord Davos and his son headed to the Wall, but only *after* escorting Lady Shireen to Winterfell. She spoke to Princess Daenerys about the plague of greyscale in King’s Landing and decided to help the ill. No one forced her hand.”

“Because you bewitched her with your appearance in Deepwood Motte; your insolent attitude of disobedience and misplaced liberty,” Stannis proclaimed. “Most women aren’t as strong or tall as you. They should stay under protection.”

“My septa taught me that ladies ought to do good,” Brienne declared, having nothing to lose. Not a word she could say would make Stannis change his opinions, yet she couldn’t close her mouth. “I champion good causes. I respect and follow my lord husband. This is what ladies should do.”

“I don’t see the Kingslayer, woman,” Stannis said dismissively.

“He’ll hear of this,” Hightower remarked.

“No doubt,” Stannis retorted to his lordship. “I’ll tell him myself if I get the chance. Just as I told you that it was a mistake to treat with a man without honour. But let us first deal with his whore.”

“I’m Jaime’s *wife, *” Brienne rebelled.

“Were there any witnesses to this union?”

There weren’t.

Rhaegar married them when he still believed he was only a septon, the Elder Brother. Later, she and Jaime rushed to the godswood of the Red Keep to renew their vows on their own. The memory made her forget the devastating pain she was in, and brought a bright smile to her face.

“It was sealed in the presence of the gods, and it’s no less true than any union proclaimed by the High Septon in person,” Brienne’s words sounded cutting, though it was never her intention.

Her pelvis felt cold. She was half-taken. Soon she’d die, forgetting herself and Jaime, Viserion and Beth; reforging a crystal sword from the snow at her feet.

Maybe she could kill Stannis if he dismounted to end her life with Lightbringer. Avenge Renly for good, and end the Great Council before it began.

*Would a true knight do this?*

She didn’t think so.

Be that as it may, she could dream of fighting all she wished. She was at Stannis’ mercy now.

Drogon roared, unloading the passengers, until the High Heart was full of people.

The Prince of Dorne remained taciturn next to his daughter, or one of his nieces, Brienne couldn’t tell the difference. The captain of his guard loomed over both with an enormous Norvoshi longaxe.
Tyrion’s eyes were vivid, jumping fast from one man to another, searching for something.

The Ghost of the High Heart grasped Hightower’s hands. Before the old man could pull them back, she began telling him about her horrid dreams of the last hero. Drifting between oblivion and consciousness, Brienne couldn’t follow her ravings.

Gagged and unable to speak, Lady Shireen gesticulated to her father, trying to catch his attention. Stannis ignored her completely.

Losing blood and breath, Brienne crawled two steps backward, to the stump she’d come from. Let me in. I’ve defended your land. The divide is holding. The south is less endangered. The Wall is standing.

But the white bark remained smooth and closed, a scar marking the place where the weirwood had been chopped down ages ago.

The stump stubbornly remained only the last remnant of a tree, not a secret gate of the old gods.

Drogon’s maw opened. His malice reached Brienne’s mind. He’d take care of his sister, he announced in a rich, dangerous voice inside her head, wife of his small, crippled brother.

There’s always a bear, Brienne thought absurdly. And a pit.

Except that Stannis’ dragon was much bigger.

“Burn her,” Stannis commanded him. “The Others are taking her. Nothing can be done. Even the Kingslayer would have to agree, under the circumstances. And hurry. We can’t be late for the election.”

Stannis was right about that, yet it was too cruel, too difficult to accept. Her woman’s place felt more tender than during moonblood.

My child. Why did it have to be like this?

It struck her that there was no reason for it, no design of gods or men. Events simply unfolded, as they did so often. As when her brother drowned.

As the cloud of red and orange flames headed her way, it occurred to her that Stannis should have told the dragon Dracaerys when using words and not the mental language to control him.

Another stream of fire, lighter in colour, surged from behind Brienne’s back, carefully avoiding her maimed body. Two dragonbreaths whooshed madly towards each other. Wheezing, sizzling, they collided. Intertwined, they spiralled up into the black sky, bursting like wildfire, disappearing in a huge flash of bright sparks that illuminated the sky like a colourful thunderstorm.

Beautiful.

“Get out of there, wench,” Jaime said. “This is between me and him now.”

She turned her head backward.

Viserion’s maimed wing hung, yet he looked more bloodthirsty than ever, despite being smaller than Drogon by half.

Both dragons had grown in the time that Brienne was held captive by the tree, but the black one had always been larger, and grew much faster.
Jaime was on Viserion’s back, pale and serious. “I dreamed of you,” he confirmed her innermost yearning.

Brienne’s heart was absurdly full, despite the odds clearly not being in their favour. Stannis was so much more powerful. Jaime would fight, but he couldn’t win.

Not that such disadvantage had ever stopped him in the past.

“This bear is bigger,” she noted.

Jaime simply gave her the most beautiful smile she’d ever seen on his handsome face. His green eyes took a moment to study the extent of her injuries. His face fell. He tried to control his sentiment, failed. “Gods,” he uttered.

It’s over, my love, I know. It was splendid while it lasted. Wasn’t it?

Stannis and Drogon flew over her, attacking her husband. The black, spiked tail nearly smashed her head. She evaded it somehow, bending over her wounded legs, drowning in pain.

Viserion didn’t flinch.

Assaulting Drogon, he intertwined his neck with his black brother turned enemy. Drogon shook him off and savagely bit his side, just under the neck. A little further and Brienne believed the bite would have been fatal. Dark red dragonblood gushed from the wound. Viserion escaped into the sky. Brienne caught a glimpse of Stannis, terribly righteous and haunted on Drogon’s back.

Dragons danced in the air, hurting each other. Brienne’s vision weakened. Her shield arm felt ice-cold. She grasped her woman’s place with her sword arm. The bleeding between her legs had stopped. Probably it was all over. Her child was well and truly lost. She moved her hand to her still swollen, but now decidedly unmoving belly and wept, seeing all her hopes crumble into white and golden ashes.

The dragons raged and hit each other with tails and claws, their riders barely able to stay atop. Viserion seemed battered. A savage blow sent him plummeting down, and he only managed to straighten in his flight inches before he would have hit the ground. Jaime was thrown off from the violent manoeuvre, landing in a heap next to Brienne.

Stannis and Drogon chased Viserion, who fluttered away from his rider, slithering like a snake over the night sky, still in possession of remarkable speed.

“I’m so cold,” Brienne complained to Jaime, happy for a moment of reprieve.

“You’ll be fine,” he mumbled, “it’s just blood,” he affirmed, ignoring its blue colour.

Coldness crept into her right shoulder. Her entire lower body hurt and throbbed.

“I’m changing,” she said, “can’t you see?”

The gathered nobles travelling with Stannis contemplated the entire scene with amusement, just as Vargo Hoat had once gazed into the bearpit.

Shireen struggled to speak. In vain. Tyrion… Brienne couldn’t see him anymore. Blackfyre was gone as well, perhaps melted by bursts of dragonfire.

The world was fading.
She returned what vision she had left to Jaime, wishing to look at him in the time she still had.

The rest didn’t matter.

She wished she could play a cythara, like some of the childlike statues in Greywater Watch. She’d tried the high harp in her youth, to no avail. But she could still sing beautifully, despite rarely indulging in it.

“You always return for me,” she murmured towards Jaime, needing to hear his voice.

“The trees were quite adamant that I should leave immediately, once they decided against choking me,” Jaime bantered with her, trying hard to sound careless and failing miserably. His cat-like eyes became painfully innocent; rounded and sad. “Let me bandage your injuries,” he whispered. “A maester will know what to do.”

“There’s no need,” she clarified sheepishly. “There’s no more bleeding, but I-” she couldn’t finish. “I have the right eye-colour to be one of them,” she quipped nervously to alleviate the rising tension between them. Grief threatened to choke them both, stronger than all trees of Westeros put together.

A helpless chuckle escaped from Jaime’s mouth. His eyes narrowed, watered.

“You should leave,” she managed, “do you not see? I’m changing. Unless you can find Blackfyre and do for me, or ask Viserion to burn me before Drogon does.”

“Then I shall become one of them as well,” Jaime declared solemnly, pale and serious. “Their king, he seems quite conceited. Like my old self, I guess. I’ll fit in nicely.” Nervously, he smiled and began to tease her tenderly. “We’ll go north together, find a cozy cave to dwell in-”

“-like white bears,” she quipped back, allowing herself to dream a bit more. “Seriously, Jaime, it can’t be that way. Think of Tommen… your honour… the realm of man…”

“You lips,” he countered, tasted them. “Still warm.”

They were. Truth be told, so was her belly, her heart and her sword arm, though her shoulders and neck were already cold, and the freezing sensation crept inexorably up her chin and ruined cheek.

“I think I lost our child,” she uttered.

“We can have more children,” he always refused to listen to reason.

*Perhaps in another lifetime.*

His lips crashed on hers.

A kiss had never been more sweet nor more insufficient.

She broke it, needing to open his eyes to the truth.
“This… this change feels horrible,” she almost sobbed. “You don’t want it for yourself. I don’t want it, but I can’t help it.”

“I want to stay with you,” he replied. “Cersei was right. I’ll leave this world with my second half. But it’s not her. It’s you.”

Temporarily dispossessed of arrogance, he was as strong and as handsome as ever, sweet like a summer fruit.

He had to be even stronger. Find it in himself to let her go.

In her mind’s eye, she could see the faraway castle in the marshes, alive with the music of pipes and flutes, wood harps and cytharas, singing of the unknown debt of the dragons, and of the reward they would reap if they made good and true on their word. She strove to hear better, but couldn’t understand the verses.

Her heart remained warm, so she kissed him. She’d been bold before, but this time her gesture wasn’t about bravery; it was about freedom and abandon, and the Long Night. She was worn out and wounded, and yet knew she was beautiful, as much or more than anyone else.

“It was easier when you wanted to kill me,” he purred against her lips.

“Shut up,” she said, tired of dreams and truths, of music and silence, of nights and days, of wounded and dying dragons, of Randyll Tarlys and Stannises and their likes. Of Jaime and his past. “Now I want to drink your blood. The thing in me does.”

Jaime looked as if he was tempted by the proposition.

She ignored the horrific urge and continued kissing him.

His lips were familiar, and yet new. She didn’t care that they had once belonged to Cersei. They were hers now, and they would be forever if she gave in to the demand of the cold in her veins. She felt powerful and mischievous.

The world had no power over her, over them, existing forever beyond the Wall. The election of the new king or queen wouldn’t be hers or Jaime’s business. They wouldn’t have to stand guard or uncover plots of the nobles. Tommen’s vote would count for the West.

“The Kingslayer is contaminated as well,” Stannis boomed, ruining Brienne’s last moments of joy.

“They have to be burned,” Stannis sounded wise.

_Shut up_, she thought. _Leave us alone to say farewell._

Jaime was so warm in all places, unlike her… It wasn’t right to cling to him, yet she did, unable to be righteous and let him go.

“I’m the same Kingslayer as ever, and Brienne’s just badly wounded,” her husband declared fervently. “She was with child before the Others attacked her, ” he underlined, “for all we know, she might still be. ” Brienne’s heart broke. She didn’t have the strength to correct him. “She needs help. If you are as righteous as you claim, take her to a maester. I don’t care what you’ll do with me. I’d kill you now if I could. I count you’ll do the same.”

Arguing was useless, Brienne knew. Stannis had formed his opinion of both of them beforehand. Years ago, perhaps. Further than that, he refused to consider any new fact that might change it. He
didn’t need to waste time and effort making judgements every day about what was right or wrong.

Brienne used to be intransigent about honour when she’d joined Renly’s army. Her opinions were and remained strong, her ideals untouched by adversity. Yet she’d learned to contemplate the facts as well, from an early age, on the day Septa Roselle told her to look into the mirror.

Viserion lay immobile, far ahead, at the edge of her field of vision. It seemed that Stannis and Drogon had done for him.

Sinking into despair, in the corner of her suddenly chilling eye Brienne saw a great murder of ravens! Flying to the High Heart from the north with great speed! Smaller flocks joined it, coming from the south, east and west. Croaking at the moon.

Nesting on the weirwood stumps, the ravens challenged the black dragon with their cries and chatter.

*Following the true king.*

*Or, why not?*

*The queen.*

Drogon raised his huge, reptile-like, horned head, studying Brienne with a black, malicious eye.

She wondered if he’d heard her thoughts, and if they reminded him of Rhaegar or of Daenerys.

*Why do you follow Stannis? What do you see in him that you’ve chosen him for your rider?* she asked with honest curiosity. In her strange condition, stretched between a human and a white walker, she suffered from an illusion that the dragon was about to answer her by forming words in his maw like a man, and not in images and words projected into her mind. Then, he’d burn her and Jaime to death, at his rider’s behest, unable to not obey.

But before the monster’s reply came in any form, a new pair of wings shadowed the moon; green and bronze against the pallor of the celestial light.

The king had followed the ravens.

In contrast with Stannis, seated safely on his mount, Jon stood on Rhaegal’s neck, calm like a statue, black like the night; his legs spread slightly for balance, his sword drawn and smouldering. Wisps of clouds formed an icy crown around his head.

*The King of Winter.*

Incredulous and tense, uncertain what to expect, Jaime sat in snow next to her. Quietly, he stared at Jon. She embraced her husband from the back, hugging the back of his tousled golden head to her still warm chest. Together, they gazed forward. The chill of the white walkers curse was at her earlobes, crawling up to her head. Once it invaded her mind, her existence as Brienne would be over. Unless her knightly heart would be powerful enough to withstand the inexorable will of ice.

She didn’t think she was that strong.

“My lord Stannis!” Jon thundered through the night. “Or should I say cousin, ” his voice was black as his attire, deeper and more insolent than she remembered it. “I’ve been looking for you. You’re running late for the Great Council.”

Both Stannis and Drogon had turned all their attention to the newcomer, forgetting their weakened
human prey.

Rhaegal roared more savagely than Drogon, cutting the night with his tail, readying himself for battle. The black beast responded by an abysmally deep prolonged growl which was one of a kind.

Brienne had never heard Viserion utter such shriek or roar.

Tortured, mutilated, left for dead, Viserion rose from the ground excruciatingly slowly. With great difficulty and dignity, he managed to take flight and flutter wing to wing with his green brother. He even breathed at Drogon, but only smoke came. His fire was quenched.

Jon gazed at Viserion for a long moment, and then proclaimed dryly. “Before the Great Council, an honourable gathering of the houses, great and small, that both of us surely mean to attend in peace,” he stressed, “I demand that you return to me, safe and unharmed, my friend and ally, Lord Tyrion of House Lannister.” Dark anger simmered in his voice when he added, “As well as my estranged uncle Jaime and his lady wife.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading ;-))
**Tyrion**

Chapter Notes

Only partially betaed by wonderful TopShelfCrazy.

Nonsense is all mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**Tyrion**

The black dragon eyed him with malice; a juicy unborn puppy stick from Meereen.

A dwarf soon to be roasted.

Gagged with his hands tied behind his back, he mocked Drogon in the safety of his mind. Not a puppy. An unborn lion stick, my lord of dragons.

But Lord Stannis, with his meticulously trimmed short blue beard, didn’t care for midgets, urging his steed to fly after Viserion in a fury of scales, teeth and claws.

And the famous sword was there, near his dying good-sister, abandoned in snow.

*Blackfyre.*

Despite showing his bravest face to his courageous wife, Jaime was all tears about to fall.

*You’ll never be able to hide your sorrows.*

*Especially not from me, sweet brother.*

And, just like that, all resentment Tyrion had ever felt towards him over the years vapourised (for being taller, more handsome, firstborn, father’s favourite and a traitorous bastard who helped ruin his only chance for love), leaving only love and bitter knowledge: they were both equally guilty for Tysha’s ordeal, and it was extremely unlikely that she’d ever forgive them.

But she’d let everyone call her his lady wife and sat next to him at the royal wedding. She’d shared a dwarf’s bed willingly, albeit only for sleeping. And she’d beaten him up alright, but he wouldn’t dwell on that. Hopefully once was enough. He heard there were men who attained pleasure from being whipped, but in himself he hadn’t discovered that predilection. He longed for love and sweet caresses, knowing he didn’t deserve them.

The dragons were at the far end of the dark blue horizon, burning and devouring each other. The new age of fire looked almost over before it had truly begun.

Stannis’ noble companions and freshly-made bosom friends from across the realm observed the unfolding scene with the same keen interest of the pit fighting crowd in Meereen. So eager to see blood spilled, they didn’t care who’d die for their amusement.

To his credit, Varys was absent. He put up his greyscale scars as excuse to avoid travel with Stannis,
and vowed to continue guarding the Iron Throne for the rightful sovereign, careful not to say who that might be, or if it were a king or a queen. Stannis snorted and let him be; convinced that his cause was now bound to succeed.

For who would ultimately withstand Drogon?

*Perhaps only the entire army of Others, if they cross the Wall.*

*Or not even.*

Lady Shireen was livid from witnessing her father's martial prowess. The last traces of childhood innocence left her expression forever; a scarred girl grew into a marked woman before Tyrion’s mismatched eyes.

With so much interesting cruelty going on, no one paid attention to the bloodthirsty dwarf, who began to crawl steadily towards the legendary weapon of Aegon the Conqueror.

Truth be told, he had no idea why he was picking up the damned thing, except that he couldn't leave it laying where his brave good-sister had dropped it.

It would be a sacrilege.

After cutting his bonds on stainless, immaculate steel and tearing the offensive cloth from his mouth, Tyrion resigned himself to the knowledge that he’d never be able to wield it. What he could do was carry it. That duty was excellent for his size - he'd never be taller than a young boy squire, scurrying to bring a blade to his master.

But the rightful owner of this sword had died long ago, and his living descendants in direct line didn’t find the desire in their hearts to use it. Jon would have never given to *Jaime* a weapon he would have wanted for himself.

And the Kingslayer gazed at Blackfyre as if it was a rustic axe of the mountain clans he was obliged to haul, and not one of the finest Valyrian steel artefacts ever forged.

Tyrion suspected Jaime's attitude might be different if he still had his sword hand.

A dwarf’s weapon, why not?

*I carried it before.*

*When I drew it from the Iron Throne.*

That memory fortified his determination.

Literally armed to his teeth, for Blackfyre was as long as himself, he hid behind a huge weirwood stump, vanishing from sight before Drogon remembered to roast him.

A bizarre sensation of blackness in his head smirked, approving his actions, making Tyrion’s mind and stomach twirl. He felt as if he were about to sprout wings or catch fire and flare like a giant torch illuminating the Long Night and the savage dance of dragons.

He didn’t have a drop of Targaryen blood and yet he was turning mad, it seemed. Perhaps because of bloody winter.

*And how bloody shall it be before it ends.*
If it ever draws to a close.

Unlike the cold season, Viserion looked done for, twitching on the ground far from Tyrion.

Drogon had butchered him and now returned with his rider to deal with Jaime and his grievously wounded lady wife.

Tyrion felt a stone stuck in his throat.

So much for you being a dragonrider, sweet brother.

It’s all over now.

Embittered by the turn of events, feeling strong like a last hero, he crept out of his shelter and approached a giant black foot from behind. When he began scaling it, he suffered from an uncanny feeling that the dragon was aware of his endeavour, and yet didn’t stop him nor alert his rider.

Dwarves were poor and slow climbers.

By the time he reached the winged shoulder and the leathery membranes that composed it, Jon Snow entered the scene. Looking every inch like the prince who was promised, he challenged Stannis to hand him over all lions, be they dwarves, half-dragons or ladies who had a misfortune to marry them. To Tyrion’s utmost surprise, Viserion, albeit badly wounded, fluttered to stand, or rather, glide, side by side with Rhaegal.

Not dead yet. Not quite.

“We shall head to the Great Council when justice is done here,” Stannis gave a calm, regal answer to Jon’s stern demand. “You may witness it, but you shall not stop it.”

This will end poorly.

Tyrion bravely continued scaling the dragon’s great body while he still had time. Blackfyre was heavy in his sword arm, dark steel rippling against shiny black scales in soft, diffuse moonlight.

“In that case I shall have to take the prisoners from your custody, my lord,” Jon responded pridefully. “And we shall sort out later what justice may be.”

Stannis commanded: “Chase them away! Kill them if you must!”

Drogon snorted, sounding… joyful?

Tyrion fantasised that the beast believed himself able to kill both of his brothers. Then he would remain the only living dragon in existence and woo the blue female hatchling to start a new breed.

That may not be more fortunate than any previous one if this is their true nature.

Drogon repealed his attackers with his torrid breath, roasting first Rhaegal’s and then Viserion’s side. Rhaegal made a pirouette in the air to spare his rider a bath of flames, but didn’t seem to suffer overmuch from his own injury.

You’re a wolf in this, aren’t you, Lord Snow?

You can burn…
It wasn't as if this setback made Jon any less a Targaryen.

Aerion Brightflame had succumbed to a drink of wildfire and so many dragons had died in the inferno of Summerhall.

But not newborn Rhaegar nor his mother, Tyrion realised, wondering why this obvious wonder hadn't been proclaimed to all and sundry.

And then he remembered Tywin Lannister’s bosom buddy from their youth, Aerys II with his paranoias, more widely known as the Mad King.

It wouldn't do, would it, to widely spread the news that his infant son was stronger and more special than himself?

Viserion barely managed to continue flying, and Tyrion finally noticed his infirmity.

*He's lost some some scales.*

*A wingless dragon for a handless rider.*

Rhaegal and Viserion attacked Drogon together from two different directions, biting him. He hit them hard with his wings, trying to mortally wound them.

All dragons shrieked, roared, screamed. The night sky was cooked, filled with flames in all colours, more flashy than seven heavens.

Tyrion was near a horn, about to descend towards the dragon’s snout, and Stannis had yet to notice him, so focused was he on his enemies.

Jon’s riding skills outmatched Stannis’. He was standing on Rhaegal, maintaining perfect balance in incredibly complex maneuvers. On his unspoken command, Viserion and Rhaegal closed on Drogon again. All dragons snorted viciously. Murder and hatred was in the air.

Stannis added to the general atmosphere by opening his mouth.

“How dare you interfere?” he questioned Jon. “I am merely punishing a woman who kidnapped my daughter. You must concede that this *is* within the rights of any lord of this realm. Much more so for a king.”

*A parley. That’s it, my lords. A finer endeavour than slaughter.*

“Your daughter left Deepwood Motte of her own free will,” Jon declared justly. “All Winterfell is witness to it. Shall I send ravens to all corners of the Seven Kingdoms proclaiming you decided to murder a wounded lady for a crime she didn’t commit? I heard that no one read your letters about Joffrey being a bastard. Maybe they’d read mine. Not because they love me more or believe me, but in order to get a good laugh.”

After a pause, he continued very seriously, forsaking his pride, with heartfelt care in his young voice. “Darkness has risen in the realm. Why should a man who sees himself as Azor Ahai reborn waste precious time persecuting helpless people?”

Jon was both more eloquent and more decisive than Tyrion remembered. And yet still solid in his core. A marvel, truly, when one considered everything that had come to pass since they first met.

Out of the blue, Drogon spat a jet of fire at Jon. Rhaegal reacted instantly, soaring up. Red and black
flames scorched his wing, piercing a hole in one of the bronze membranes. The black beast pursued its prey with his enormous maw open, still aiming his angry breath exclusively at Jon.

During his mad, spinning flight, dwarf hanging on Drogon’s head became exceedingly difficult. Tyrion’s heart beat strongly. He had to make his move soon before the dragon swatted him off like an annoying fly. He was too high up to survive the fall. But now he could only wait until the next opportune moment.

Holding on to bare life, he clutched the sharp, black scales while Drogon engaged Rhaegal in a savage fight. Viserion joined in, disabled, but too stubborn to die. Dragonblood burst from many wounds, sprinkling Tyrion’s face.

Flames flared, blazed: disembodied and powerful emanations of the dragons.

There wasn’t any air left.

Tyrion felt his lungs turn into sulphur, and yet he continued his slow and painful progress over the top of dragon’s head, whenever the madness he got himself into allowed him to go forward another inch.

When the dragons disentangled, all battered but alive, Stannis’ and Jon’s hair was singed. Tyrion was unharmed and seated firmly on the scaled ridge above a great, black, lidless eye. It was against all expectations that he would have reached his target during the dance of dragons and carrying Blackfyre, but somehow he did, by either the strength of his little arms and stunted legs or the gods’ whim. 

Mercy. Have mercy on me. On us.

Not feeling the weight of the greatsword in his arm, he aimed it at the dragon’s eye with uncanny precision. Another inch forward, and the Valyrian steel would have pierced the dark, malicious pupil.

Recognising his peril, Drogon stilled immediately, before his rider could issue any order.

Clever dragon.

Very satisfied with himself, feeling like a small giant, Tyrion looked back, between the dragon’s horns, and yelled at Stannis with as little decorum and as much voice as he could muster. “Their eyes are the most vulnerable! I’m small, but I can kill him now!”

“I…” his voice drifted through the burning sky, losing some of its potency. “I couldn't be a dragonrider…”

Regaining his wits and his stamina, Tyrion thought of a saying that would make Tywin proud. If it were Jaime speaking, of course.

“I couldn't be a dragonrider, but I can be a dragonslayer!” he shouted. “Call him off! Stand down! I'll count to ten. One, two, three-” he pounded heartlessly.

“Bend the knee if you don’t want to burn!” Stannis hollered back.

“I shall swear my loyalty to any ruler elected by the Great Council,” Tyrion announced solemnly, happy that imminent slaughter was overturned into a loud parley.
King Jon cared not for talking. He used the opportunity to load both Brienne and Jaime on Rhaegal.

“I see you’re a coward, Lord Snow,” Stannis judged severely. “Fly away while you still can.”

“I shall take them to a maester to Greywater Watch, my lord, and I shall see you later, to further deepen our acquaintance,” Jon replied in kind, sounding as if he’d been born a Lannister, and not a Stark.

Drogon was eerily quiet, Blackfyre almost lodged in his eye.

*Good dragon,* Tyrion thought.

The invisible blackness caressed the remnant of his nose. *Good dwarf,* it observed.

He must have brought a talkative black shadow into the Seven Kingdoms from his stint in Asshai. Maybe it was in Tysha’s deep pockets and was now attached to him, like incorporeal Others had become glued to the wildlings in order to cross the Wall.

Contrary to Stannis’ suggestion of being craven, Jon lingered in the High Heart. “The realm is waiting for us, my lord,” he said thoughtfully, forsaking his anger. “It has been decided that eight representatives of the most ancient kingdoms, the most highborn of all, shall gather and vote in public, for not everyone was able to travel in these troubled times. The pretender with the highest number of votes cast shall be anointed king or queen. In spring, a proper Great Council shall be held where every noble of the realm, of any house, big or small, shall have the right to vote. Then, these initial results shall be confirmed or overturned.”

“Who are the voters?” Stannis wondered.

“I was in a hurry,” Jon muttered, “I decided to inform myself later. Whoever they are, I trust them to act with honour that befits their birth.”

“I see,” Stannis replied dryly. “Well, I shall want to speak to each before the election. It is my right.”

“As you wish,” Jon retorted. “Lord Reed is most hospitable with all his guests. My lady wife decided to stay and begin similar consultations concerning her claim.”

With that, Jon was gone in two flaps of green dragon wings, not waiting further for what Stannis might do next. Viserion followed, albeit much slower, but his flight faltered, due to all his injuries. At that moment, a murder of ravens took off from the thirty-one weirwood stumps on the High Heart. Black-feathered, they supported Viserion's crippled right wing until he steadied his flight and vanished into the mist.

Tyrion’s arms shook; weakened, small, exhausted. He did his best to hide it.

“Get out of his eye, Imp,” Stannis commanded impatiently. “On my word as Azor Ahai reborn, I shall take you safely to the bogs, and I fully expect you to bend the knee when I am confirmed king.”

Tyrion obeyed. Truth be told, had he not, he would have fallen off because he became stiff and cranky in the unnatural position he’d managed to maintain more by the force of his great will than the limitations of his tiny body.

The black shadow in his soul laughed heartily. *Yes, you’d fall soon. Without my help, dwarf.*

*Shut up, shadow. Drift back to Asshai where you belong.*
The black presence was insulted by being recognised and called by its name; it left his mind.

Tyrion felt free. As he crawled up from the eye towards the horns, and further ahead to the spikes where passengers could sit, an urge to fly to Greywater Watch came over him. He had to learn who the electors were and help streamline the results in favour of Jon or Daenerys.

At least one elector is right here. Doran Martell.

Trying to obtain his vote would obviously be a hopeless waste of time. He was least likely to sway from Stannis to another pretender.

Thanks to Rhaegar.

And my kind father who had conveniently forgotten to order Ser Gregor Clegane to spare Elia.

Stannis insulted Tyrion by taking Blackfyre as his spoil of war.

Don't you already have a magic sword?

Then he asked the Dornish prince, his daughter and their guard to sit behind him, presumably to sweet talk them during flight.

Lord Tarly tied Tyrion's hands with military precision, just like he had done in the capital when Stannis had flown there to save Shireen from evil Lannisters and their allies. Thankfully, this time he omitted to gag him.

Tyrion had no choice but to become a model hostage of Lord Stannis for the short rest of the journey back north. To his surprise, the dragon disembarked them in the middle of the marsh and flew away. Stannis did his best to appear self-assured as he stood in knee-deep green water, but Tyrion noticed the barely perceptible tremor of his square jaw that shouldn’t have been there.

The castle of reeds, weeping willows, timber and stone emerged from the nightly gloom as soon as Drogon was gone: more imposing and greater than Tyrion would have ever imagined it. In the West, the mudmen of the Neck were given no consideration, deemed poor and worthless.

A grave mistake, it seems.

Lord Reed came forth to meet them, unarmed and clad in bright green as was his wont. A peculiar lord of a wondrous castle that could provenly move and hide itself at will.

“Welcome, my lords,” he announced generously. “Rooms have been prepared for you.”

Stannis waded out of water. “Lead me to the rest of the electors, my lord,” he demanded unceremoniously. “And tell me who they are as we walk. I have no time to lose.”

Lady Shireen surprised Tyrion by untying his bonds, before trudging obediently after her father.

Left alone in shallow, green water, forgotten by the lords great and small who hurried into the castle, a would-be dragonslayer felt a thirst he hadn’t had in a lifetime. He decided to quench it while he made his own inquiries about the electors and their allegiance. After all, It wasn’t a minor feat to survive and halt the dance of dragons.

Bread and salt were served in the courtyard, past the elaborate iron gates of the castle. He partook a small piece of brown crust, and asked for wine. The servants brought it immediately.

The wine of the mudmen looked red like any other, but the effect it had on Tyrion was marvelous,
warming him inside and out. He almost began to sing dissonantly about the seasons of his love.

*Maybe it isn't red but green.*

A miraculous concoction of the greenseers, brewed to match and surpass the strength and sweetness of the wines from Arbor.

He was dead drunk by the time he’d spoken to every noble guest of Greywater Watch, whether they wished it or not. Accomplished, he asked the green-eyed servants for the young king, and stumbled into Jon’s presence. Lord Reed was there, *winking* at Tyrion. And Samwell Tarly, the apprentice maester.

And Jaime, at his wife’s bedside, holding her hand. Her chest rose peacefully and she seemed asleep. A soft, warm blanket colour of moss covered her horrendous injuries, reaching her proud chin.

“Stannis is counting on four votes and hoping for the fifth,” Tyrion rattled tiredly to everyone present. “Hightower who was chosen to represent Stormlands since Stannis can’t do it himself, and who is as highborn as they come. Then, little Robb Stark for the North, under Blackfish influence. Edmure Tully for the Riverlands and Doran Martell for Dorne. And finally, maybe, Asha Greyjoy for the Iron Islands, whose life he had spared, and your mother has recently held her prisoner.”

His fat lips curved in an ugly grin. “Well he doesn’t have four supporters, and much less five.”

His eyes teared from laughter. “He has three. Little Robb Stark cares little and less for his old Uncle Brynden and wishes to be like Rickon Stark.”

His mismatched gaze centered on Jon. “You’ll have three as well, no matter how much you love your wife. I hope she won’t hate you and beat you for it. That would be quite obviously young Robb Stark, echoing the general sentiment of the Northmen if I may add, who favour their own. Willas Tyrell and Robert Arryn will give you their vote for being loyal to your late father who had helped them as a septon. Asha Greyjoy and my nephew Tommen will vote for your wife. When you equal Stannis in votes, I suggest you challenge him to a single combat and kill him right here, before he rejoins his dragon. It’s handy that the beasts can’t come to this castle, isn’t it? I trust you can do it despite his burning sword.”

“In my sleep, my lord Tyrion,” Jon replied dryly. “In case you hadn't noticed, my own steel isn't dull.”

The blade on Jon’s hip glowed softly through a black woollen scarf that served as its improvised scabbard.

“I just have to set aside my impulsiveness,” Jon added thoughtfully. “It hasn't served me well in the past.”

Tyrion could agree wholeheartedly with the latter. *Where are you, Tysha?* He couldn’t bring himself to ask.

“Will she be alright?” he dared inquire about Brienne instead.

If she still lived, there should be hope. Or no one in seven hells would be able to tolerate Jaime as a moping widower.

“She’s become like Aegon,” Lord Reed answered, looking utterly spent; a pale olive ghost of a mudman. *Yes. To host a Great Council can do that to a man.*
The effort must have been comparable to Tyrion’s task of welcoming and placating the Dornish embassy led by Prince Oberyn in the past.

Sam Tarly, the maester, nodded.

Jon bowed his handsome head to his black-clad chest, looking laden with guilt.

“What does that mean that she's like Aegon?” Tyrion wondered.

Jaime caressed mutely his wife’s hand, ignoring the company and the conversation.

“It’s a sickness attacking those who fight white walkers. They turn into Others, but not quite, and then they die quietly and are burned,” Sam explained. “But she’s better off than Aegon. The curse has spread less. I am by no means an accomplished maester of the Citadel, yet I would say that her child has somehow protected her.”

“You mean our child is-” Jaime interrupted violently.

“Alive and kicking,” Reed gave him a somnolent look, “But she should carry it for another four or five turns of the moon, and if she passes in her sleep-”

“No, no, no!” Jaime was grasping the hope he was given. “They’ll protect each other alright.”

Tyrion was immensely relieved until his attention returned to the black, contrite expression Jon wore. Why? “And Aegon? How is he?” he guessed wildly the reasons for Jon's guilt.

“Alive, but unconscious in Castle Black. His forces are decaying slowly,” Jon outlined with grief. “Worse, his wife Jeyne is missing. She turned into thin air while we were gone for battle. No one has seen her for days. I don’t know what’s worse. That he’ll never know she may be in danger, or that she’ll never know how he died. If she’s alive herself.”

“I see,” Tyrion squeezed through his teeth, feeling drunk and damn guilty. His family had a chance again. Others weren’t that lucky.

“My lord, if you would follow me briefly,” Daenerys appeared out of nowhere, taking him by the hand, leading him away from Brienne’s sickbed and the grim men around it.

It wasn’t the woman he wanted to see after his heroic exertions of the day. But his wife wasn’t there, and he couldn’t say no to the queen.

His count might be imperfect, his brains could have gotten it all wrong. Anything could happen in something as volatile as an election.

As it turned, it wasn’t the Great Council Daenerys wanted to discuss. A precious book was open on one of the last pages, laid on a low portico wall, under a statue of a girl-child playing wooden flute. His black eye flew over the text, recognising it immediately.

“You’ve read it before, haven’t you?” Daenerys wondered.

Tyrion nodded. “Signs and Portents. A marvel of fantasy and poetic expression. Describing the origin of dragons and dragonlords of Valyria from fire and blood. The conquest and the glory,” he added ironically. “Or fire in blood as I am more prone to believe,” he dared voice a serious thought of his, hoping she wouldn’t hate him for it. Sovereigns never liked being told the truth. “And then the doom, of course,” he added dryly. Nothing good ever lasts.”
“After all this time, I may agree with you on fire in blood,” Daenerys retorted pensively, and then impatiently tapped the open page with a slim finger. “But now I’ve been thinking about the departure of the Targaryens from Valyria and their arrival precisely to the island where they built Dragonstone, of all places where they could have gone in the entire world,” she continued thinking aloud. “Daenys saw the new earth rising, amidst the fresh air of liberty. I thought it was only poetry and the premonition of salvation after the doom, if they had courage to leave. But then the first Daenerys noted on the margin that the new earth was a vision of Dragonstone. Why?”

“I can only say it’s a pity Daenys didn’t continue writing once she settled on Dragonstone. You should visit if you didn’t already,” he wrinkled his brow. “I believe that the layers of obsidian in all colours under the fort might have been the reason for your family to colonise the island. Dragon stone, quite literally. Dragon glass. They must have liked the place, found it cozy—”

“After the war—

“You ought to go now if you think it's important,” Tyrion insisted. Nothingness may be our only future, my queen. Do you not see?

“Maybe they just dreamed about the doom, and flew away like mad men and women, without purpose,” Daenerys commented vehemently. “There's more than just fire in our blood.”

Yes. Madness. Is it taking you as well?

“But they didn’t,” he opted to speak in favour of her ancestors’ sanity, hoping that such honest attitude would help him keep his wits and stop hearing shadows. “They had built a fortress, bringing the masons from Valyria, investing themselves in that endeavour. On an ugly, cold island in the middle of nowhere, with no treasures, other than colourful dragonglass in its foundations. I’ll give you that it's not the black obsidian that provenly kills the Others. Perhaps you should dig it all out. See if it has any war value.”

Dany frowned. “I am loath to ruin the castle of my forefathers; the sculpted dragons and the Painted Table. Yet I would do it, if this would truly make a difference. But what if we let Rhaegal melt the walls, and then green dragonglass hurts the Others as much as ordinary steel?”

“You mean not at all,” he retorted darkly, filled with pessimism.

“I need another drink,” he stuttered after a while, less inebriated than he wished to be from the wine he already had, prone to sad thoughts. Did my lady wife not come from the Wall?

Probably not.

“I'm not well,” he explained. “If I drink some more, I might get some dreamless sleep.”

“Go ahead, Tyrion, rest,” the queen let him. “My head hurts, and I sense that I shall not arrive any time soon at the bottom of the mystery concerning Dragonstone.”

On his way to the kitchens, which appeared when he wished for them, just like his rooms in the bloody wooden castle of the lizard-lions, first he encountered an ugly ginger-haired wildling woman in furs, in her forties, with stone pendant around her neck, sipping warm milk.

And near the large open hearth knelt the only woman he loved deeply, despite the dimension of his sin against her person.

“Tysha,” he asked, stifling a belch that threatened to leave his mouth. “Are you here to kill me?”
“I’m here to show you something.”

Tysha had come looking for him.

A sad, useless dwarf, drunk like a fish on the eve of the Great Council he’d just stirred into motion by talking. Tywin would be so proud of him if only he hadn’t killed his mother or had been born taller.

He ignored the seriousness in Tysha’s voice and declared solemnly what was in his heart for so long. “You’re so beautiful and I missed you dreadfully. A moment didn’t go by without me thinking of you. I thought you stayed on the Wall and I was devastated.” He gathered his stinky breath. “May I kiss you, my lady, if it please you? Just once, for the good old times.”

He expected to be slapped.

Not taken by a hand to a portico and made to step on the wall between the arches and the children playing flutes. Standing like this, although he was still a few inches shorter, he and his love were almost equal in height. If he was obliged to climb a wall, or a dog or a pig, for any other woman, he’d be humiliated and furious. But this was Tysha and his dwarf’s pride was the last thing that mattered. His hands ended on the small of her back, and he could swear she pressed his breasts into him on purpose. She smelled of cinnamon and orange blossom. Her perfume healed his lungs from sulphur and his heart from envy and failed ambition.

“Gods,” he exhaled vapidly, not believing his luck, not deserving it.

He kissed her anyway, thought about the seasons of his love, cried in her arms like a little, swaddled baby.

“You got me a zorse in Essos,” he stuttered through his tears, understanding. “You knew it could help me survive Asshai if I came into trouble. No, when I came into trouble because that’s where you were taking me, of course, I forgot. You were kind. You gave me a chance.”

“I’m stupid,” she offered. “I hated you. And then when I heard you moping to anyone who’d listen about the place where whores went, I couldn’t lead you to death. I remembered how it all began between us and hated myself for it. Imagine, I used to truly love you before—”

“I know. You’re the only one who ever did. And I—”

“Shut up,” she put in recklessly, kissing him back for all eternity.

Great Council, fabulous weapons and dragons paled in comparison.

The ugly ginger wildling woman spied them behind a pillar. Tysha noticed her as well. “Go away,” she ordered brusquely, staying in Tyrion’s arms despite ending their kiss. “This is none of your business.”

The wildling disappeared dutifully in a rustle of furs and clacking of boots on ice.

Winter was in the heart of Westeros, trying to freeze it while it was still beating.

“She’s hounding me from the Wall,” Tysha complained. “She even sat next to me on Rheagal’s back.”

“Who is she?” Tyrion wondered, too drunk to form assumptions on his own.
Tysha shrugged. “I don’t know and don’t care. She never says a word.”

The shadow in his mind suddenly thanked him and was sad that after all his readings he, Tyrion Lannister, son of Tywin, clever, passionate and cruel, still hadn’t figured anything concerning dragons.

“I’m turning mad,” he lamented, grasping his throbbing head.

Tysha suddenly produced a handkerchief from the bottomless pockets of her dark blue shadowbinder robes.

“I wanted to show you this for years,” she said. “It’s the only possession I have from my true family. I would have asked in the past, but…” she swallowed hard. “There wasn’t time. You’d better give me an answer now.”

True family?

The silky tissue was lemon yellow, with three black dogs embroidered in the middle.

Tyrion grabbed his sobering head much harder.

“Are they that wicked?” Tysha asked with trepidation. “My father said a maester brought me to him because I had more chances to live a long life under a crofter’s roof than in my parents castle. It was after some horrible accident in which I nearly died.”

Tysha, refusing an unborn puppy stick I offered her as a local delicacy, hidden under her lacquered mask in Meereen.

Horrible accidents.

Ugly, burned men.

Bad tempered and afraid of fire.

Black, lank hair of young girls.

And boys.

Tysha and Tyrion.

A name that fits with mine as if we were kin, a courtesy or a flattery of a loyal landed knight to my beloved family.

Tyrion’s head was about to burst, understanding everything.

My mind, my only weapon.

“Only one member of your family might be still alive,” he informed truthfully. “He’s lost beyond the Wall now, but if anyone is strong enough to survive that, it would be him.”

Tysha’s face fell. “So it must be the one causing my childhood accident-”

“No!” Tyrion interrupted violently. “He… he couldn’t have hurt you, I think… He’s only two years older than us, I think, so he would have been a child as well. I don’t know for certain, but I believe it was the older brother who died that might have hurt both him and you. But it’s only an assumption!”
No one knows, not truly. You should take it up with him when he comes back.”

The explanation earned him another heartfelt kiss under the music-making statues of Greywater Watch.

And a swelling in his breeches he hadn’t felt since Jaime told him the truth.

A blue and red kingfisher hopped on the portico wall between the slender arches, lost in darkness, freshly arrived from the swamp, chirping despite the cold.

If Drogon failed to roast him for betraying Stannis to the loss of election and hopefully life, when the Hound discovered the entire truth, he was as good as dead.

*But only after the Great Council.*

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is welcome.
The Greenseer/The Shadowbinder

Chapter Notes

Thank you, TopShelfCrazy for beta-reading this chapter ))) It would never be the same without your help.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Greenseer

The green water of his home had turned black.

His far sight couldn’t protect the murky colour of his rivers, nor the smell of freshness and soft mud, cherished by lizard-lions.

He’d been having this dream since he was a child, afraid and unacquainted with his gift. He’d never known its meaning until now. Unless a new dawn came, the streams and the ponds of his homeland would begin to freeze; and with them all life. His castle would be left on a dry shore, unable to move and hide. It would be discovered and besieged by white walkers and their hosts of slain.

It doesn’t matter.

The crannogs were ready. Their boats were patched. Their people would set sail, row or sledge, depending on the condition of the rivers.

By hosting the Great Council, they had revealed their existence to the realm, and not only to the Starks, their lords and friends during the millennia that had passed between the two Long Nights -- the past and the present.

Greywater Watch was crowded with noble guests from the entirety of Westeros, praising its beauty and uniqueness. After this, his people would no longer be able to pretend they were insignificant and artless, nor hide their ancient origin to protect their way of life. In their veins, the blood of First Men was mingled with that of the children more prominently than in any other northern house, including the Starks.

It was due to this that some of them, including the greenseer, could still sing the old song of the earth and shape the world, according to their taste or need, by the power of music. Ordinary men would call it magic, but it wasn’t.

It was only a song.

The gods had true magic, but they had fallen asleep, disappointed in their creation.

The guilt for creating the Others now lay squarely on his people. The pure-blooded children, those who lingered beyond the Wall, had been exterminated. His daughter had witnessed their end, in a cave where she’d been put to sleep under a weirwood throne, not knowing the dimension of the Night’s King crime. What a success! To eradicate an entire race, and not even, or not yet, the one he was designed to ruin: the ugly and prideful giants.

They were laying low, nowhere to be seen. The greenseer had no doubt they were biding their time.
One day the giants would return, to do battle until their last breath. Courage, not hiding, was their way of life. They had more reasons to hate the Others than anyone else.

Before the Great Council, he had found time to instruct Meera and her young crippled lover in everything he knew or believed in. Those two wisdoms of knowledge and belief were close, but never completely embraced each other, and nothing was ever certain. He wasn’t a great man, and his visions would never be enough to bring the dawn.

But he had done and seen some things in life.

Parents had to pass their experience to their children, no more and no less.

Give them all they had, let them make their own mistakes.

It was the first time a Reed would marry a Stark, as soon as time allowed. Organising a wedding might come easy after the hassle of the Great Council. He wished his son and his wife could be there to witness the union. But they wouldn’t, couldn’t; cold and dead.

*Ashes in the wind. Ashes under the roots. Blood spilled and blood lost.*

*Blood of the earth.*

For a new greenseer to be born the old one must still live. The gift was sometimes passed from father to son in direct line, but not necessarily. And there was never more than one in each generation, not since the wars against the giants and the First Men, when many greenseers filled the children’s ranks.

And all but one had perished.

He was the last. His son had died before him.

There would be no more greenseers in the future and no more trueborn children of the forest. Only remote traces of their blood and heritage would linger in lesser men.

He didn’t know whether this was deserved or nefarious. Perhaps the song of the earth had to die out, in payment for the sin of creating a race that might one day destroy all others.

Yet why should the new generations continuously atone for the mistakes of their forefathers, if they decided to live differently and employ their gifts better? Or was he as blind as his dappled, big-eyed ancestors, singing his song to an ominous end he was unable to see?

The gods saw everything, and they would decide.

If they ever reopened their eyes to see.

Perhaps the Others would ruin them as well. They had already taken their trees and their secret ways, and learned the song of the earth, using it to shape the world to their liking and to achieve victory over their enemies.

Some day, soon, only ice would remain.

But not yet, not as long as he and many of his guests drew breath.

Not as long as the waters of his home were still running.

Seated between Stannis and Daenerys on a great dais woven of sturdy willows, Lord Reed was overseeing the election of the new Protector of the Realm. Every elector would approach him to
publicly announce his choice to the multitude gathered in the Watch.

Jon was seated next to his wife, and Lyanna on his other side, a step lower to indicate she was there merely as his mother, nothing else.

Flanking Stannis, his daughter and Lord Davos wore faces of stone. The coldest among the First Men would envy the two Southrons for their perfectly flat expressions.

The screeching of dragons could be heard constantly from the dark sky above the bog. Prevented from entering the Watch by magic as old as the Wall, each animal worried loudly for the safety of its rider. The blue baby girl cried hardest of all, for Lady Brienne still lingered between life and death. Or on the threshold between this existence and a very different one.

The greenseer had dreamed of her far beyond the Wall, and this vision had not yet come to pass. He wondered what creature she would be when she embarked on that destiny, and prayed she’d be herself.

The light in some people was too difficult to put out.

The end would begin now.

Tommen Lannister came forth first, alone and unaccompanied. The absence of his father was understandable, but not even the greenseer could fathom where his dwarf uncle had vanished. After spending the last twenty hours in continuous banter with electors and their retinues, campaigning discreetly against Lord Stannis and his peculiar brand of wisdom and justice, Tyrion Lannister decided to miss the grand event and not enjoy the fruit of his labours.

“I give my vote and that of the West to Princess Daenerys Targaryen,” Tommen announced solemnly, “for being beyond doubt a daughter of the House Targaryen, and a dragon on both her father’s and her mother’s side.”

For letting your father live. And tolerating your birth, which is as incestuous as hers, the greenseer thought, nodding, taking note of the vote in grand letters on an ornate parchment, to be preserved in the Citadel for posterity.

“Thank you for your trust,” Daenerys acknowledged Tommen.

Jon appeared confident, seizing his wife’s hand, his gesture simple and heartfelt.

Stannis looked as indifferent as his daughter and Hand. Perhaps just a tad… impatient.

Edmure Tully was next, bowing deeply. “I give my vote and that of the Riverlands to Lord Stannis Baratheon. We need age and wisdom in this troubled times. We cannot put our trust in pretty ladies nor in young men of uncertain origin.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Stannis responded ceremoniously. “I shall not fail you.”

Leaning on his walking stick, Willas Tyrell hurried to make his choice known. “I give my vote and that of the Reach to Prince Jon Targaryen. It is proven beyond doubt that he’s a trueborn son of Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark which makes him a rightful heir to the Iron Throne in direct male line. In the short time that I had the pleasure of knowing his father, Rhaegar had shown nobility and resourcefulness in defending the realm from evil magic. I firmly believe that his son is already following in his steps.”
“Thank you, my lord,” Jon tried to sound as cold as Stannis and as gracious as his wife. Yet a peculiar emotion seeped from his words, hard to define, and his hand was never far from the pommel of his sword. By the looks of it, he’d never be indifferent to life.

Hightower smiled from ear to ear when he voted against him, dancing on the border between permissively witty and insulting. “I couldn’t agree more with Lord Tyrell, my lords. Prince Rhaegar had been noble and talented, but, alas, he died. This time, if not before. In this heavy hour, I give my vote and that of the Stormlands, supported by a wise recommendation of the Order of Maesters from the Citadel, to Lord Stannis Baratheon, Lord of Stormlands and a rightful heir to the House Targaryen in female line.”

Stannis nodded, not adding another word to this high praise.

Asha Greyjoy was next. “Perhaps I should have been allowed to vote first, to be shown some respect which is always due to ladies, at least in speech, though rarely in deed,” she quipped. “But I find it more interesting this way.” She spied Stannis and Jon for reaction, receiving none.

“Vote; don’t talk, woman,” Stannis interrupted. “Let us be done with this. The realm is waiting.”

His mouth drew a straight line when Asha obeyed him with a crooked smile. “I dedicate my vote and that of the Iron Islands to the memory of Tristifer Botley, the most noble man of all. And I give it freely to Princess Daenerys Targaryen, a lady like myself. May your choices be wiser than mine, both as a woman and as a queen.”

“Thank you,” Daenerys appeared touched, her purple eyes moist. “May the gods grant your wish, both for my person and for yours.”

So far Tyrion had been right.

Robert Arryn gave his vote to Jon whose arm turned restless on his sword. The weapon began to glow softly through its odd scabbard of black wool.

A scarf of the Night’s Watch...

Stannis noticed it, tapping the hilt of Lightbringer. “Will you raise your arm against your rightful sovereign, Lord Snow? That would be a crime punishable by death.”

“Every claimant has two votes,” the greenseer declared in his lordly voice. “Two votes still have to be cast.”

Little Robb Stark failed to come forth and Brynden Tully showed up in his place. “Young Lord Stark is sick,” he said. “He has eaten lizard-lion stew and can’t rise from bed. Convenient, isn’t it? That he is made sick in the castle of his own bannermen, so that he wouldn’t be able to vote for the North against their wishes!”

The greenseer rose to his feet. His stature was unimpressive, but his anger was eminent. “Lizard-lion stew can cause indigestion,” he clarified, “but the complications are rarely severe. It’s a specialty. A treat worthy of kings. Haven’t you all tasted how delicious it was?”

If there had been foul play, it hadn’t been his.

Now that he thought of it, Prince Doran might have asked to vote last for a reason. His niece Tyene, the expert in poisons among the sand snakes, was notably absent, just like Tyrion Lannister. She had travelled to the Watch in Jon’s retinue and spoke very often in private with her sister Obara.
“I demand to vote for Robb Stark. I have known where his preference lies for months,” Lord Tully stated. “I have been like a father to him.

“Not until I have seen to his improvement,” the greenseer refused. “You implied that I or my people have tried to influence the result of this election. I can only respond by helping the little lord to cast his vote in person.”

Old Tully shook his head. “Why delay? A maester from the Citadel is with him.”

_Citadel_

They were able to cure or kill a man as it pleased them.

“I am lord of this castle,” the greenseer announced, descending from the dais. “I bid everyone to wait. I swear I’ll be back with Robb Stark in no time.”

Jon wanted to follow, but his wife held him back. Stannis never attempted to move.

Tully yelled accusingly after him. “I have armed men there and three maesters! You missed your chance, my lord. You can’t hurt him anymore.”

“Mudman!” Someone screamed.

Ser Barristan Selmy came forth. “I believe you all know me and what my word is worth,” he said quietly. “I guarded Robb Stark with my life in Winterfell in the past weeks. I was next to him when he turned sick after the feast, and he left a written vote in my care. Let me read it—”

“Go ahead, Ser Barristan,” Stannis graciously accepted.

“No,” the greenseer denied that too, not halting his steps. “I am hosting this election, not any of the claimants. Let Robb Stark read his note or speak, as he prefers.”

He walked alone, unarmed and clad in green, singing under his voice, unafraid of either maesters or men-at-arms. His was the song of the earth and it wouldn’t be shushed lightly. The corridors of his home changed under his feet in line with his humming, bringing him to his destination much faster than any other crannogman.

The little room was black like the water of his home had become. Sam Tarly was one of the maesters, always present where he was needed the most.

Another black sheep with a chain full of links around his aged neck was letting the boy’s blood run out. “The poison has to leave,” he told Tarly.

“I agree, archmaester” Sam replied thoughtfully. “But I have also learned that his blood needs to be replenished by that of another man or he might die as a consequence of this treatment.”

“I shall give him mine if you can arrange it,” Reed announced. He wondered if this was possible at all, and if it would run green like his garments, betraying what he was.

“A blood of a relative might serve better, according to old scrolls—” Sam said humbly. “We should ask Jon—”

_It’s possible._

“You claim it was lizard-lion!” The greenseer boomed, remembering the teachings of his own father and the miraculous cure for greyscale provided by Tyrion and Lady Shireen. “I ate it all my life. I
must be resistant to any trouble it can cause to guests unaccustomed to our food. Tell me, honourable maesters, is it not so that I may possess the natural antidote the boy needs to thrive?"

The grey sheep nodded wisely.

Sam advised on the procedure, “We require a long, hollow reed.”

“Plenty of those here,” the greenseer clapped his hands. Soon, a man of his trust entered with several freshly plucked reeds, their ends sharper than needles.

The greenseer sat on the floor near Lord Stark’s cot, baring his arm. Tarly stared at him with respect.

“This should be harmless to both the giving and the receiving party, if it works well,” the archmaester warned. “If it doesn’t,” he looked warily at Reed, “then perhaps nothing can be done… for either.”

“Do it,” the Lord Host of the Great Council demanded.

The reed of his home stung, entering his vein. Yet Tarly was right: it didn’t hurt. After initial sting, the greenseer felt nothing at all.

Soon after the deed was done, the boy awoke, quiet and confused. Ser Barristan carried him to the courtyard, where the election was being held before the closed eyes of the heart tree.

The greenseer climbed back to his place on the dais. Stannis continued to be impassive and impatient at the same time. Daenerys struggled to keep calm. Jon’s relief was palpable when he saw little Robb conscious.

“The difficulty has been resolved,” the greenseer announced. “Voting may continue.”

“Put me down,” Robb Stark commanded Ser Barristan. On his feet, he continued, “I shall speak as I have written when the sickness took me,” he paused to draw a deep breath. “Forgive me, great-uncle Tully. But I give my vote and that of the North to Prince Jon Targaryen, raised in Winterfell as Jon Snow. If I did otherwise, I would have no honour. Men would call me Frey and not Stark.”

Stannis was on his feet. “Let Martell vote,” he spat out discourteously. “And then I shall deal with traitors,” he glared at Brynden Tully first.

“Traitors?” Blackfish repeated incredulously. “Your Grace? What have I done other than serve your cause?”

The greenseer looked to the great, dark sky, and saw… saw… what he never could have seen, not before this hour.

His strength suddenly waned, abandoning him rapidly.

Profoundly disappointed, he breathed out, “A song, once intoned, cannot be unsung.”

He was fainting, passing out, rolling down the dais.

“Howland!” Lyanna screamed, sounding far away. “What’s wrong?”

You dearest, oldest friend of mine. Farewell.

A song, once intoned, can’t be unsung.
The great crime of his ancestors, the wise and stupid children of the forest, could not be set to rights.

Not even if a hundred dragons suddenly hatched from eggs yet to be found, grew larger than Drogon and wasted their foetid breath on the murderous, icy progeny of the children, as the greenseer had hoped for in his heroic foolishness.

But he had no voice left to explain this to Lyanna, or her son, or anyone.

Death took him.

Dying, he still knew, but could not tell.

Nothing could erase the white walkers from existence, only put them to sleep. The Long Night would always come again. Born from snow and ice, they would rise. They would wake and march to conquer the world.

The last he saw was the sky or maybe the Wall. A winter rose growing from the chunk of ice…

The meaning of this last, beautiful image escaped him.

His death was pointless, accomplishing nothing. Like the passing of so many innocents that had fallen before him.

The green of the water turning black… now he knew what the vision meant. It wasn’t the freezing of the Neck. It was his end. He had seen it coming for years.

By the gods, it was the lizard-lion stew that had gotten him in the end. Not the Sword of the Morning, nor the Others with their mighty blades.

The pain was overwhelming, spreading through his veins until every inch of his body was conquered. But even greater than his torment was the sudden, unexpected, galloping fear of death. He clung to his agony to stay alive, but ultimately could not.

Once, ages of the world ago, in the Mountains of Dorne, there were seven against three. The woman and child they had all died for, both the friends and the foes, were now the only ones left: to mourn and to remember.

“This is the day when I die,” he murmured, or perhaps merely thought.

The greenseer closed his eyes, wishing his inhuman suffering to be gone, knowing he’d be gone along with it.

In gnawing fear, he surrendered.

He was leaving the waters of his home forever.

He wouldn’t dream anymore.

All his songs had been sung.
The Shadowbinder

The would-be winter rose wailed harder than when she lost her husband, cradling the mudman’s dead head in her arms. She looked pitiful. As though she might turn blind from so many tears. Maybe they would finally ruin her renowned beauty.

_Shut up will you?_ Melisandre feared she could turn deaf from so much noise. _May the Others take you and the lizard-lions feast on your remains._

Jon Snow issued commands no one paid any heed to, striving in vain to look kingly.

Stannis, the deluded one, exhibited a dour smile. His hour was coming, and this time she’d truly seen it in the flames. She felt no mercy for him.

Prince Doran Martell came forward without being called for. All eyes were on him. But instead of announcing his choice, he put his hand deep into the fire in front of the heart tree. Then held it up for Stannis to see, untouched by the flames.

Jon and Daenerys rose to their feet as one. Stannis’ smile died on his face.

Melisandre was mildly curious. _Another believer? Lord of Light, grant me wisdom to see._

“I give my vote, and that of Dorne...” The prince was so serious that her curiosity gave way to boredom. “...to Her Grace, Princess Daenerys Targaryen, the namesake and kin of my foremother, first Daenerys Targaryen... who, despite what embellished histories tell us, never loved Daemon Blackfyre, but rather her Dornish husband, Maron Martell. I do not know, Lord Stannis, what you did to become a dragonrider, but I suspect it was unnatural. Heed this portent if you’re able: there is less dragonblood in you than in me, and yet I had never thought to seek my claim to the Iron Throne.”

_Unnatural? Truly? How clever of you._ The shadowbinder mocked the Dornish prince. His wisdom came too late, like everyone else’s.

Dead silence conquered the bogs. Not even the horrendous and omnipresent kingfishers dared interrupt it with their ugly, squeaking song.

_Not a believer. How sad. Just another man who thinks himself a fire-breathing beast in his heart, instead of searching for true God and finding Him. How predictable._

“I...” Martell turned his attention from Stannis to Daenerys. He looked defeated. “Please, you have to understand. My beloved son Quentyn, he’d never burned himself as a child that I knew of, unlike Arianne and Trystane... He’d only break his knees like any peasant wretch. That’s why I had sent _him_ to find you, to find dragons, believing him one of us from birth.”
“I’m so incredibly sorry,” Daenerys responded with unfeigned emotion. “I tried to tell him that my
children didn’t take kindly to him, I swear it by all the gods. He wouldn’t listen. He only wanted to
succeed in his errand.”

“And herein lies my guilt and not yours,” the Dornishman lamented. “I assumed he’d be like me, for
others were not. Had I been a good father, I should have known he wasn’t. I sent him on a quest that
wasn’t his to make. Dragonblood had skipped his generation. It may show in Arianne’s or Trystane’s
children.”

Meera Reed was a homely girl. Unwillingly, the shadowbinder nonetheless resented her youth and
opulent, curly hair. Climbing into her father’s seat, she registered the last vote on the ornate
parchment he had dropped, and announced the election result above his dead body. Tears were in
her eyes, but her muddy voice never shook. “The vote is tied between His Grace King Jon
Targaryen and Her Grace Queen Daenerys Targaryen. Pretender Stannis Baratheon has lost.”

Everyone screamed and cheered to beauty and youth. How lovely.

The mudmen began mourning the passing of their insignificant green leader; the hater of holy fire,
the minor sorcerer who dared call the Lord of Light the Enemy of Fire. As if one true God was the
same and as vile as the Great Other beyond the Wall. But the Lord had seen to him in his wisdom,
bringing him to his death, just like he had kept his faithful servant alive.

“Will you duel me for the throne, my love?” Daenerys wondered amidst the overall commotion, only
half-joking. “Or shall we come to a different understanding? Perhaps we share equally the burden of
rule like Aegon and his sisters?”

“On one condition,” Jon replied very seriously, his right hand still resting on his sword.

A wild wolf with soft white fur and a soft heart, and a very unsuccessful dragon.

“Tell me,” his stupid princess prompted him kindly, but her eyes were cold; expecting betrayal,
maybe.

That’s right. Men will always disappoint you, and moreso as you become older.

“I shall not take another wife. Not even if it means that there shall never be an heir to the Iron Throne
of my body,” Snow proclaimed naively to all and sundry. “The houses big and small can elect a new
ruler after our passing. If it was done once, it can be done again.”

In the back row of the spectators, Melisandre was vigorously shaking her head and uttering unwilling
sounds of disapproval. Lord Snow remained as irrational as ever, not seeing elementary wisdom.
Only one man, or woman, could rule, and inheritance had to be secured at any moment. Left
unsettled, it would prompt wars and destabilise the realm.

Daenerys blushed, speechless, succumbing to the sweet and false promise of absolute loyalty.

Melisandre began opening her way through the crowd towards the dais.

The day was not yet over.

She had had enough of humiliation and life in servitude.

Her hour had come to rule and not to serve.

She had finally found the wisdom to offer the Lord the greatest sacrifice, abandoning the pretty face
she had carefully cultivated by her spells over the years. Replacing her ruby necklace with a northern stone, she revealed to the world her homely, true appearance, that shamed her even more than being born a girl slave in Essos. A treasure of the pillow house, on account of her rare, thin and silky strawberry blond hair, and innocently blue eyes, at the age of only two and ten.

Now, she was old at the age of forty, with the first wrinkles on her forehead and around her eyes. Well, this wasn't truly that old. She just wasn't pretty. She was ordinary. Not special. Common. Unattractive.

Melody. The name my mother gave me.

She hated her natural blond-russet tone locks with vehemence, just as much as she hated her friendly, freckled, weak, unappealing face.

The sorceress she’d become was strong, presenting a confident expression and beautiful heart-shaped face to the world, with hair bright red as flames.

But if shame was what it took to rule the world, she would do it. Not for the sake of some abstract, useless justice Stannis imagined in his square head, nor to help the poor people of Westeros endure the Long Night. But to claim her rightful revenge.

“This isn’t right!” Stannis wailed.

No. But it’s occurring anyway. Just like all the things you’ve done, my friend.

“I’ve had enough,” Snow drew his sword with deadly calm. “Fight, my lord. Bring in your dragon. I’ll go down if necessary, as will Rhaegal. But neither of you will survive. I vow it. My lady wife can govern on her own.”

Melisandre shrugged at them both as she stifled a laugh, realising too late that she didn’t have to hold it in anymore. She was already in front, near the dead heart tree, where everyone could see her.

Can’t the mudmen see that their gods are gone? Why don’t they turn to one true God?

“Lords and ladies,” she said in her thin, fragile voice, that of a woman grown who used to be a child pillow slave. She hadn’t heard it for years, until this memorable occasion. “Lend me your ears, if it please you, and let this day be done with.”

Stannis was the first one to pay attention her. Unwillingly, her belly turned.

Do you recognise me?

“Who are you, woman?” he wondered, looking at her as a servant.

She was dressed like one, needing to travel inconspicuously from the Wall to where her destiny awaited. Here.

“Get out of my way,” he commanded.

This final humiliation hurt, but she managed to shake it off.

Too bad. So be it.

Stannis was the only lover who gave her joy and warmed her heart in her later years. She could almost blush at the memory of how vigorously he had helped her birth pretty shadows from her belly. But he would have obviously never touched her if he had seen her face.

Now he wouldn’t forget her true appearance easily; maybe not ever. The knowledge made her heart
happy and set her at ease. Magic reverberated in her soul, true and invincible. It was her faith, her only strength, giving new life to the powders and the spells she used.

“I am grateful for the opportunity of knowing your pretty and cold kingdoms,” she drawled. “But it’s time for me to return home.”

“Who are you?” Jon attempted to be courteous. He’d always tried to be noble, she had to admit, and the noble Starks had called him Snow for years. Maybe he was Azor Ahai reborn from her flames, those that showed only snow of late.

Although, more like than not, no one was.

There weren’t any first nor last heroes. Those were only stories for credulous and ambitious nobles, and little children dreaming of justice.

She didn’t give a damned thing for anyone here. The Great Other could have Westeros as his domain. Lord of Light would protect her homeland and her rule.

“I take great pleasure in announcing my departure,” she stated with pride.

A lifetime, a lifetime for this day! Of serving and suffering and patient gazing into the fires!

Triumphant, she spoke the dragon’s name with all the power reclaimed from abandoning her beauty. “Drogon!” she called out. *Drogon. You’re mine now. Come here, despite the pain of this place’s old magic. We won’t stay long, I promise. I’ll be a gentle mistress to you.* She commanded him inwardly as Stannis was never able to achieve. In a moment, she sensed the animal unwillingly responding to her call.

Black wings were almost indistinguishable from the dark sky, but their flapping was sweet music to Melisandre’s ears. She wondered if anyone but herself could already hear them, and if they feared her person as they should.

It was never her looks.

It was her power.

Her faith.

The magic given to her by the Lord of Light.

Daenerys wailed now, not Stannis, coming to an early understanding that the odds had changed.

“Shut up,” Melisandre admonished her. “You’ve got a man to warm you at night, young and gifted and full of passion. Why do you want a dragon as well? He can’t do that!”

Her thoughts churned. *Is it my fault that Drogon was jealous of your new marriage? Or that you stupidly used blood magic and kept a part of your first husband alive without knowing it yourself? Or that you gave him your first husband’s name? You could have called him something else!*

Snow was blushing amusingly, even as half a wight. To her amazement, some true life had remained in him, despite that he had lost all his blood. *Handsome like your father. Why does your sword glow? You haven’t reforged it properly.*

In other circumstances, she would have asked him these questions; a natural curiosity towards a form of sorcery she hadn’t mastered yet.
But now she wasn’t interested.

The truth began to dawn on Stannis. The tiniest shade of doubt on his ever-self-assured features filled her with joy to the brim of her being. She had never been this happy.

He wasn’t completely stupid or useless.

Just most of the time.

“Is it you? Lady Melisandre?” He was courteous now, she’d give him that, but it was too late.

She was past caring. She had what she always wanted. A dragon at her disposal. Made of flesh and blood. Not awoken from stone, which was the best she had hoped for in the beginning, when she had sailed west with Stannis and unwittingly fell in love with the stiff, blue-bearded lord.

She would have gladly birthed all shadows he wanted, if his frail human body could have handled it. But she had to use him sparingly to keep him alive and not age him prematurely.

After Rhaegar’s convenient death, Drogon had done his best to escape her growing powers and the dark breath of the shadow she had woven in the North. By the Lord, he even tolerated Stannis as a rider to avoid her. Sticking to a drop of dragonblood in Lord Baratheon to protect himself from a new, more powerful rider, asserting her dominion over him. But this was now behind her. She had laboured for a hundred days, yes she did! She’d given up her beauty, and her might had grown a hundred times, if not more. She could burn them all and ruin this castle, especially now that the Lord of Mudmen had given up his life in vain. All to stop the poisoning of an insignificant boy lordling by the hand of the perfumed servant of the Great Other from the Citadel.

“But the prophecy—” Stannis began.

Melisandre was consumed by joy. “You believe it?” she yelled with her non-melodious voice.

(The pretty one was left in the pillow house, lost forever in unfulfilled prayers for death or deliverance from evil. Until the day she changed both her gods and her prayers).

“You’re a stupid fool! It was all a lie! A lie, do you hear me? You were never chosen for anything! I’ve never seen you in any fire I looked into. Is it my fault you wished so badly to believe that you complemented my modest inventions with your own dreams of grandeur? Is it my fault you asked my help to murder your brother Renly? Wait, who else? Let me think... The old castellan of Storm’s End, what was his name?” She couldn’t remember. “Genna Lannister? Your own wife? Almost your own daughter?” She took a deep breath and dealt him her last blow. “No, Stannis... It wasn’t me. It was you who did all that. Didn’t you mother teach you to be humble and happy with what gods had given you? Mine did... Little did I have from it...”

“My mother died at sea near the walls of Storm End and never taught me anything,” Stannis outlined dryly, sounding almost sweet to her weak ears. “You’re forgetting the most important thing, woman. I’m a dragonrider.”

“Dragonrider?” Melisandre cackled hysterically. “I’ll show you your dragon. He’s mine now. And he had never been yours.”

Daenerys cried in earnest now. Being a woman, having suffered a woman’s faith in her youth, the poor, abandoned Mother of Dragons was so much cleverer than Stannis.

“Drogon,” Daenerys sobbed. “Please don’t go with her. She has bewitched you.”
Yes. So? There's nothing he can do about it.

The animal obediently lowered his neck into the main courtyard of Greywater Watch. Blinking angrily at the dried heart tree whose dead roots created the old magic still causing him great pain, he let Melisandre mount him.

*Good dragon. There. It's over now. No more suffering. Only power.*

The sky was dark, empty and refreshingly cold, calming her fiery soul.

“Volantis...” she murmured, passing her hand through her ugly, thin hair, almost loving her true appearance and self. “Here I come!”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all who left a comment, a kudos, subscribed to or bookmarked this story.

When I started it, I couldn't hope in my wildest dreams that it would have 2000 likes and more on AO3.

Thank you so much for reading.
Sandor III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sandor

He rose in darkness, restless like seven hells.

Still partly immersed in the welcoming, life-giving, life-changing warmth of his and Sansa’s bed, he mulled over his choices for a hundredth time. Stay in the giants’ village and die when it fell to the Others. Or leave and perish striving to arrive elsewhere. Any path back south, to people, passed through the realm of white walkers, adjoining the enormous valley in Lands of Always Winter in which they were continuously being born.

He stretched uncomfortably, unable to stay at ease in his own marriage bed, feeling every joint on his large body tense and relax, almost able to sense his hairs growing. Or, rather, rising, in anticipation of his next battle.

In a good shape to die.

Too good, even. He had never been stronger. Bloody, buggering winter. Fighting the urge to clench and unclench his fists near Sansa and possibly frighten her, he yearned to break something for a good start of his day.

In the sanctuary of the giants, there was daytime still. And, every night, the tender lights of stars and fireflies, candles lit on a rustic mantelpiece, and his wife’s lustrous hair.

He wanted to stay here forever. Laying low. Growing food. Cooking. Hunting when spring came. Sleeping. Being damn lazy. Making babies as often as they could until Sansa would have her wish and a growing belly. Maybe if they tried long enough, he would be capable of giving her one. She’d be incredibly beautiful with child, he had no doubt about it.

But his wife didn’t dare take off the gown drenched by blood of his best and only friend, Rhaegar, a nameless wight right now. The times belonged to horror worse than Gregor. Now that he saw, felt and tasted the appeal of hard-won peace with every sense he still possessed in spite of his numbing past, he wouldn’t enjoy it for long. The world wasn’t and would never be fair to anyone.

Maybe this promise of a different destiny that would never be more than an illusion was the sweet revenge of the gods: for his constant denial of their existence, or for the rare moments when he acknowledged them, only to denounce their malevolence.

A whiff of winter wind through a ramshackle window that could never close fully told him he might have his wish for violence in the coming hours. The smell of old ice. He’d crush the skulls and limbs of white walkers and try to not think what this made him. But the nagging habit of thinking, once kindled, burned much stronger than a candle on a mantelpiece. It couldn’t be put out as easily.

We are all taught to kill, and for what?

His agitation stirred Sansa awake. He was glad for it, needing to see her, and not only her sleeping form, before departing to battle. A bubbling, new desire that had surreptitiously become more central to his existence than breathing.
His wife sat up next to him in bed, hugging his bare arm tightly to herself. Had his skin been less thick, her slim fingers would leave welts instead of only pleasantly tickling his armpit. Her warm cheek rested affectionately against his upper arm.

Clinging to his bad side, she looked quite drowsy. She preferred sleeping with her lovely, tousled head stuck between his scars and broad shoulder. He often wanted to ask why she always lay exactly there and never dared, fearing she might change her habit if he questioned it. And then he might begin belittling her love in return, for no reason at all, his old bitterness threatening to boil over and poison their happiness. Unable to be brave and satisfy his curiosity, he loved her tacit choices, and kept his big mouth shut.

Even now, he realised, a superior force of the old ingrained habit to comb his hair over his scars had made him tilt his face just a bit out of her line of sight. As if that could improve his looks! And as if she cared anymore… She surely gave him no reason for that suspicion. Hastily, feeling guilty because his old grudges, uncalled for, resurfaced, he corrected his unnecessary reaction, relaxing idly, turning his head back towards her: accepted, nurtured, spoiled.

Loved.

“You're awake?” she inquired sheepishly.

“Is it forbidden?” he barked without force, pulling a mock-expression of his habitual anger, and then immediately stretched his scars into the funniest ugly grin he was capable of: letting her know he was joking, not hiding in his shell of indifference, not pretending to be anything.

Only himself.

_Is this too much to ask for after a lifetime of pain?_

“You’re thinking too hard about the future and being too harsh on yourself,” she whispered insistently, spying him for reaction, dreading it, perhaps. “We are fortunate and privileged to be sheltered here for a time.”

His little sleepy bird.

From the sight of her, the instinct to protect her immediately prevailed over his much more recent, wild notions that, with him becoming Mag against his will, he and the giants ought to help win the war by destroying the nearby hatchery of the Others.

_But how?_

“We ought to go back,” he declared very seriously. “We have more chances of survival behind the Wall. It has never fallen.”

“What if it crumbles now?” Sansa rebelled bluntly against his proclaimed caution. “We won't go far on our own-”

"I made it far enough, don’t you think? All we need is a carriage, enough food, furs and a pair of sturdy horses-"

"But the giants and their women and children, you can't just _leave_ them!” She protested wholeheartedly.

He admired her spontaneous, unpolished, emotional response, as much as her unwavering, measured, beautifully cold courtesies she employed on other occasions. He loved all of her.
It had taken less than a week in the village for the entire tribe to accept her as one of their own, and for her to love them. No one saw her as a hated and feared descendant of the children of the forest anymore.

But there it was, she said it, his own conclusion about where his duty lay that he wouldn’t confess openly. Irrationally, her saying it for him woke his anger.

“They’ll choose another mag,” he argued grudgingly. “They have this place here where they can resist for long.”

“They don’t need me,” he added with unnecessary force.

“But now I’ll go with them,” he finished brusquely, finally admitting to her that another incursion of the Others was imminent, judging by the scent. "One last time."

He had to see her awake or he’d feel like he would die from love he hadn’t have time to give her yet, but their conversations before his battles were never easy.

He remembered the first one as if it happened today, clearer than sunrise, on the monumental roof of the Red Keep. They were both waiting for Stannis to take the city. The bloody Imp had begun burning it… He had been as awful as the world to Sansa, and yet she never yielded to his views, challenging them with her own. Before he chased her away, in one of his rarely lucid moments in those times, they spoke honestly to each other, becoming acquainted without exchanging platitudes. Like true friends.

She was so much more than a friend to him now, and he to her, to his constant marvel. He didn't want his mood to ruin any of it.

Now and back then they were both on edge.

Best if we don’t talk.

Able to look into his mind, Sansa must have heard his semi-conscious thought. Her arms found his waist, pulling him tenderly back to bed. He surrendered, speechless. He’d kill any man or white walker who would try to take away this moment from him.

But maybe not a giant. They were his people now, for the time being.

Slowly, he lowered his lips towards hers and kissed her very gently, tasting her softness, stealing time they didn’t have.

A sharp knock resounded on their door.

The calling of duty.

He timidly ended the kiss, but didn’t go anywhere. Just a little bit more.

Drawing semi-circles with her fingers over his eyebrows, the good and the missing one, Sansa sought reassurance in his gaze.

“You’ll be back soon, won’t you?” It was more of a demand than a question from her.

“You know I will,” he always said that, sensing that she needed to hear it. On an impulse, he kissed her hands with passion and got up.

Leaving her to her hopes for the future, disentangling himself from the sweet weakness of their
loving, he dressed and stumbled out of the stone cottage that had been their home for a month.

In front, a few giants were already waiting for him. More arrived at every moment, a line for battle forming rapidly. The familiar smell of old ice permeated the night under large, peach-shaped moon.

“Sea or mountain?” he muttered, taking his place in front, the first one in line and the first who might fall.

“Sea,” Arthur, the blond Dornish giant, his second, grumbled back.

Sandor realised he had spoken the Old Tongue without having to think which words to use for the first time, as though he had been born to it.

To his amazement, the giants had also learned some of his and Sansa's more complicated expressions, non-existent in their language, being in general brighter than they looked: as intelligent or as stupid as men. The ones from Dorne were helpful, revealing they were fluent in both speeches.

Despite the growing understanding from both sides, and Sandor's firm belief that he now equalled some of them in strength, if not in stature, he never felt like one of them, not truly.

He was a man.

A lesser man, they’d say.

This was the third raid of the Others at the time when the village slept in the past sennight. But the giants had always smelled them in time to mount a defence.

So far.

One day, soon, the white walkers would catch them unawares, attacking from air, or in much greater number, and everything would be over.

There were only two entrances to the giants’ sanctuary.

In the north, on the high, steep coast of the Shivering Sea, there used to be an old stone bridge over a deep chasm that separated the village from the Others’ domain. But when the days became shorter, and with men late in returning home, women had broken it down, fearing the invasion. For this reason, the giants had been forced to turn to the second, southern entrance, through the mountain, guarded by a special giant, Firth, much taller and stronger than the rest, who wouldn’t have allowed anyone in of his own accord, friend or foe, if Sansa hadn’t sung him to sleep.

In the first attack from the sea, a week ago, the Others had lowered a hanging bridge over the chasm, made of the sticky iceweb they could weave and use at will. Sandor and his giants had pushed them back, ripping them and their slimy knitting apart.

Later, the Others assaulted the mountain. But Firth had shredded their entire company into ice dust before the giants had a chance to approach.

No wonder they're trying the sea again.

Sandor marched, vigilant and apprehensive, leading the giants, wondering what they would be up against. The Others were bound to change the strategy that had failed them. That's what he would do in their shoes.

Ahead of them and deep below, at the bottom of the rift, in the bowels of earth, the Shivering Sea
roared like an angry dragon, smelling of moss… *No. Seaweed.* Around King’s Landing there wasn’t any. As a result, he hadn’t felt its perfume since his last visit to Lannisport with Cersei, ten or twelve years ago. It was disquieting to catch a typical scent of westerlands this far north.

When the profound fissure at the northern end of the giant's settlement came fully in sight, Sandor halted in his steps.

*And now what?*

The Others were about to lay down three slimy bridges at once, preventing the giants from fighting in their traditional way, all in one line, or making that strategy doomed to failure.

The hoard roared in unison, sounding more enraged that he had ever been.

“Split in *three* companies,” Sandor bellowed, to no avail. His men stayed in a row behind him, not budging.

They couldn’t fight like this if they wanted to win! But the necessary change of tactics, no matter how simple, was stupefying for the bloody giants and how was he, a lesser man, ever going to explain it to them in time?

His men’s faces were empty. They didn’t understand cunning or planning. He had to set up a courageous example for them to follow.

“Sandor!” Sansa’s voice was a melodious echo in the distance, approaching rapidly with a bunch of giant women and children in tow.

*How did she gather them so soon?*

“Sandor!” she sounded shrill and completely breathless when she burst into his presence, grabbing both of his hands.

“Go back home,” he commanded her. “This isn’t for you.”

“I tried to wait, but I couldn’t! I need to see, ” she implored. “I don’t care what you think is for me and what isn’t. They failed the previous times. And if they cross, it could all be over. I want to be with you if the end comes. I can’t stand the thought that I may mourn you first, and then face my fate alone.”

He hated bridges since Shadow Tower, where he'd lost his old sword and nearly his life. The ambush of white walkers on the Bridge of Skulls had kept him, Mance and Aegon busy, causing Rhaegar’s death. He'd never forgive himself for that.

And the most terrible thought for him was the possibility that he would have to do for Sansa before going down himself, if their messy end became imminent. He couldn't leave her to slow torture and death. But the more he pondered the habitually simple act of killing, the less he thought himself capable of it.

Maybe, if their situation was truly dire, perhaps…

Or not at all.

He would have to see.

Right now, he’d somehow ruin the first of the three bridges that came down. If he was victorious, the
next two giants should each pick one of the remaining two, when they joined the battle as custom demanded. The rest would follow, stepping naturally in line behind someone in an ongoing battle.

There didn't seem to be that many Others across the rift, and he'd woken in a fey mood. The clash could end soon.

Until next time.

"Fine with me," he responded to Sansa coldly, taking back his hands. "Watch me kill them all."

She was very pale, and yet took his grim remark without flinching, so much older than the girl he'd met. He should have never allowed her to stay, but he did, not knowing better.

Suddenly, he remembered the horn of dragonlords, left at their home. They were at sea now. If he blew it, dragons would come for him and Sansa, here, at the unknown northern cape, meeting them outside the terrestrial borders of the lands beyond the Wall that were closed to them by magic. He'd forgotten their only means to leave safely, torturing himself with notions of a greater strategic move he ought to make in war.

Too late.

The first bridge was down and his time for banging his head over.

He ran over it with all his rage. By sheer force of impact, he pushed a snark into the abyss where the creature disintegrated and vanished. They didn’t like the sea, he’d established that much in the previous raid. If dragons couldn't fly to their breeding valley to burn it, then perhaps it ought to be drowned.

But how?

Water froze instantly in Lands of Always Winter.

He wrestled two enemies and realised he had crossed to their side of the void in three leaps, the span of the deep being much shorter than it looked a moment ago. The Others could sometimes play tricks with human vision, he had learned that by now, but he couldn’t understand what use they could possibly have from deluding him.

Next to him, instead of lowering the other two bridges, as it had seemed to be their intention, the white walkers rolled them back, readying to leave.

What?

He wrestled four of them now and, for a change, they weren't trying to slaughter him. He fought like a bloody lion, but all his effort was in vain. The grumkins overpowered him, taking him prisoner. He was being wrapped in a very tight, viscous cocoon that used to be the hanging bridge, until he looked like a giant slug.

Sansa had been incarcerated in a much more spacious and airy enclosure made of the same stuff. He hadn't been able to rip it apart, only walk through it. A true giant had freed her, not him, a lesser man, with maybe a drop of giant blood. It struck him that he had been able to tear down the bridge during the first raid on the village. But not now. The snarks could apparently adjust the density of their slime to their needs.

Or their victims.
The icy fabric around him was tighter and harder than hempen rope, strong like chains.

"Sandor!" he heard Sansa's desperate voice over the void. Ashamed of his defeat, he was unable to respond.

He threshed helplessly against the sticky bonds. In response to his struggle, the Others lifted him on their icy shoulders, carrying him away like a swaddled babe. He could swear that they sang as they marched, immensely pleased with their success.

What in seven hells?

They dragged him on and on, down the trodden, very narrow path alongside the high cliff. He'd walked on it before, as only one giant in line, several places behind the old Mag, when the giants had been on their way home.

After a long, long while, he was ushered into the wood of tall pine and sentinel, pervaded with the familiar stench of death, populated by screeching, dismembered wights who bowed deeply to their cold, blue-eyed masters on the move.

Opening his eyes wide, he wondered if Rhaegar was among them, lurking between tall, smooth tree trunks, but the unhappy king was nowhere to be seen. Sandor supposed that his luck wouldn't allow him to meet his friend, undead to be sure, but maybe not a slave of the Others.

On this side, time was endless in the all-encompassing darkness. There was no way to count it. He wondered if he'd ever see the light of day again, remembering the sunlit giants' village with gut-wrenching craving and mind-killing melancholy.

Wanting to ruin and smash things was a condition he could handle, not this pain of losing everything he never hoped to have, this love he was given generously and in abundance, but only for a time.

It was a torment to continue thinking of Sansa in the hour of his latest failure, and very disconcerting to ponder a reason why he was taken captive, almost as if he had some importance for the enemy. He'd never had any hostage value that he knew of, and yet here he was, kept alive for a reason. There was no other explanation for his predicament.

Needing to return urgently to his habitual, sullen state of indifference, he forced himself to ponder the war.

The giants didn't have enough hands to rip all white walkers into shreds, and fire ignited with wood and oil caused them no harm; it only destroyed wights.

Dragonfire was different. But there were only three dragons left in the world, and they couldn't fly over the lands beyond the Wall or they'd die, accomplishing nothing. The magic of the Wall protected the Others from their only natural enemy, the creatures of living fire who could breathe colourful dragonglass, so different than the cold black obsidian found in nature. Healing crystals, warm but not burning. He had felt them on his skin once, in Highgarden, when he'd nearly given his life to free two dragons from a life in slavery. They could adjust their breath to suit their intentions. They were clever, not only sinister, fire-belching monsters.

But here they couldn't reach without harming themselves.

If only he could turn the Shivering Sea into that valley! Let it be flooded!

But how?
If the giants excavated a shaft in the ground, like in a mine, and then dug out a passage deep under their sanctuary, from the sea to the white walkers’ hatchery, maybe the waves would gallop through it and wash the land clean from the Others. But how long would that last and how many hands would it require? Possibly more than it had taken to build the Wall.

Hours of forced journey faded away in useless, repetitive considerations before the false, ice Winterfell slowly crept into the view of a subdued slug. He realised he'd expected this to be his final destination. For where else would they be transporting him if they failed to murder him on spot? Or maybe it was the last remnant of his unfounded arrogance to think that they would take him to the high seat of their buggering ruler.

His gaolers dragged him over the frozen moat, behind the gates, into the courtyards, and finally past the heavy, ancient door through which King Robert had disappeared immediately upon his arrival, during Sandor’s first visit to Winterfell, provoking Cersei’s outrage.

That entrance should lead to the crypts.

But in the inhospitable ice fortress, empty dungeons occupied the halls of the old lords and kings from House Stark. He was in the black cells of the ice demons, who suddenly decided to peel their sticky weaving off him, and then left him in darkness deeper than it would one day reign in his tomb.

But in a grave he’d no longer feel, he supposed, he would mercifully cease to exist, and here he was captured like a wild animal; irascible, powerless, and yet still breathing. Cold, hungry and alone after a month of sheer happiness.

It couldn’t last, could it?

After all eternity, the Others returned with torches, placing them in high sconces that looked exactly the same as their twins in Sansa's true home.

To his disbelief, his next visitor wore a thin iron crown over long white hair and a high, gnarled brow. The Night's King in person, come to see a former dog who wasn't a very successful man.

With lightning speed, the royal ice bugger tossed a Valyrian steel greatsword at Sandor as though it was a light, worthless dagger or an ironborn axe. He barely had time to seize it with both hands, and defend himself from a savage blow of his opponent’s large, crystal blade. Had he been an instant slower, his head would have rolled down, like Ned Stark's on the stairs of the Great Sept of Baelor. He would have perished or become a headless wight: a new slave of his new master.

He counterattacked as fast as he could. The bastard blocked him, brandishing his weapon with skill from seven hells, possibly, no, probably better than him, Sandor Clegane the Hound who was without any vain exaggeration one of the best swordsmen in the Seven Kingdoms.

From what he experienced now, the Night's King talent wasn't due only to the unnatural strength all Others possessed: the bugger was very fast, handled the blade expertly, and used a set of most unusual steps to match his skill. His tactics was varied and unpredictable.

Sandor stood his ground, defending his life. Once or twice he lashed back, but didn't succeed in landing a single blow, despite having in hand the best sword he’d ever seen.

_It's never the weapon, it's the man, and this shiny steel can kill the snarks._

With that in mind, he continued the duel and finally struck the Other’s left hand.

But instead of slicing it, the greatsword just bounced off the wrinkled, greyed skin and vambrace that
had grown into one with his opponent’s arm. An unruly grunt of frustration escaped Sandor’s big mouth.

His enemy laughed at him. "A sword that can harm me has yet to be forged," he declared. “I don’t see it as very likely that it shall ever be made. Though it might, who knows? I shall be prepared.”

*Prepared?*

*What?*

He suddenly remembered how he saved Sansa from the white walkers… or was merely *allowed* to rescue her.

In retrospect, it had been damn difficult and the giants had suffered great losses in that battle, but it should have been much worse. It shouldn’t have been possible! If Sansa, or rather, Rhaegar’s blood was the prize the Night's King wanted dearly then why-

"Why did you let my wife go?" he whispered incredulously, defending himself from a cruel blow. "Was that a part of your preparations?"

The enemy suddenly put some distance between them and lowered his sword. Offering a sad, almost human *half*-smile, he shrugged with… *sullen indifference*, as if he was imitating Sandor’s own attitude on purpose. "We all make mistakes, don’t we?"

This last bit sounded like a lie if Sandor ever heard one. And the bugger looked terribly conceited, as though he could see his deepest secrets, just like Sansa when she warged into him.

*Sansa… Will you be able to reach me in here?*

She hadn’t tried it yet.

In self-defence, Sandor stopped thinking. There wouldn’t be *anything* of any use to be seen in his dumb, tricked mind. No information, no weakness. He’d be only a killer. No more and no less. Anger streamed through every pore of his body, flooding his heart, more powerful than the Shivering Sea.

If only he could pour his rage out like a water torrent!

But that couldn't be done. By now he knew in his guts that he had to control himself or empty his ire in combat. If he failed, the rage would consume him, ruin the man he could still become, free from resentment and bad blood.

"They want you for the horn you know, your big friends, not for yourself nor your supposed bravery," The Night's King confided cheerfully in him. "Imagine, the giant fools think you're Joramun reborn. A lesser man elected by their gods to lead them in their hour of doom, carrying a horn. Who else could you be? They don't know you've got the *wrong* music instrument, just like they don't understand harmony of tones. Only dissonant, ugly grumbling."


"Aren’t you? We all are or have been,"

"Might be," he conceded. "It matters not."
"Indeed. It doesn't. Why should I tell you anything if you have no interest in the fate of your kind? You only care for yourself," the enemy accused him dramatically, and then shut up, turning to familiar, brooding silence.

Sandor almost regretted that he wouldn't be hearing the whole grumkin version of the story about Joramun, who was a famous King-beyond-the-Wall, according to Mance Rayder. He had ridden forth with Jon Stark of Winterfell to face the Night's King, and he had defeated him.

Judging by the present illustrious company, the part about Joramun's glorious victory was a shameless lie in that tale, and probably not the only one.

Out of the blue, the King of Others launched another violent attack at Sandor who bent to avoid it, and immediately returned the favour by trying to cut the bugger into shreds with great enthusiasm, only to be expertly pushed away.

They began circling each other like predators, spying for the next move.

"That's it, friend," the Night's King sounded tremendously pleased. "Excellent! Fight for your little life since you're incapable to sing for it."

Sandor was about to burst from rage that was more and more difficult to balance out and keep in check. He couldn't fathom how in seven hells this thing here could have learned his unfortunate threat to Sansa in one of his lowest moments in life.

"I fight to kill, " he retorted darkly, holding his ground when the next clash occurred. There wasn’t any fire nearby, and he wouldn't be easily overpowered. He'd try to disarm the bastard to see if he could rip him apart with his bare arms or not.

But that was easier said than done for the enemy also fought to kill, not to tease his prey. Shorter than Gregor, he was still taller than Sandor, and his style was formidable.

When Sandor began to feel truly, profoundly tired, the Night's King disarmed him. Snatching back the mighty sword he brought, he left with all weapons, and without another word. His servants who had been silently observing the duel removed the torches, Sandor's only source of blessed light, as he strove to remain impassive and not reveal his exhaustion.

Hours later, in the dark, a short white walker with a particularly light step brought him a cup with red liquid, the nourishment Sansa had been given by the Others. He had learned in the meantime that the concoction was brewed by the children of the forest as a means of survival in winter. The giants hated it and would never drink it. To him, it stank and looked unappealing.

He should eat roots to stay healthy and sane. But there wasn't any plant life in the Night's King black cells. Only red poison he'd been served, and thick, old ice. He had no choice but to drink, hoping that the philtre wouldn't ruin him, like the milk of the poppy helped Gregor reach perfection on the path of cruelty he'd chosen for himself.

After first cautious sip, the blood-red liquid warmed him better than sizzling of fire embers in the hearth. He drank more, and more avidly. Much later, he felt queasy from it, as though he had gulped mead or strongwine. Apprehension threatened to choke him and he waited to start feeling like Gregor. But, to his utmost relief, his anger didn't grow, simmering in the pit of his soul, and he was still himself.

A scarred man with his stomach full. Not a dog, nor a giant nor a monster of any kind.

The pattern of duelling the Night's King until the brink of exhaustion repeated soon after, in the
procrastinating, dull time of the Long Night that could never be properly measured. The Ice King did his best to kill him, Sandor didn't allow it, and any blow he dealt with Valyrian steel wouldn't cut the enemy. He was helpless, useless.

He had never been so powerless in his life.

Except when…

Serving as Joff's sworn shield since the prince was born, he'd often felt as though he had all the power in the world. Everyone feared him and his snarling dog’s helm. Until Sansa became hostage of the little shit, and he couldn’t shield her from beatings in spite of his strength, position and reputation.

Power was just another illusion. There was ultimately always someone or something even more powerful.

"Excellent," the enemy praised his efforts. "You'll do better than I thought. I might reward you for it, do you know?"

Sandor snarled back at him. "How's that? And why in seven hells should I believe you?"

"I'll kill you when I have no more use for you instead of enlisting you to serve me," the Night's' King replied swiftly. "Think of it when your despair grows. But you find a means to end your own life, you'll remain forever within these walls. Undead. Then, if the world goes on, I shall ensure that you see how your lovely wife has not only betrayed you, but has never loved you as much as you think. Who could love a monster? Only a stupid woman," the Other sounded very convinced about the last part of his preposterous statement.

"What, has a woman betrayed you? Do I hear a broken heart speaking?" Sandor blurted, taunting back. "Were you not handsome enough? Do you want to cry on my shoulder?"

"They are all stupid, aren't they?" the Night's King commented uselessly on the intelligence of womankind. "But not yours, no. Your wife is a clever little bird. She can fly away, forsake any man in her life, no matter how bad or how good, and continue on her own."

After that, the duel ended, and Sandor was left in solitude.

The enemy's last words hurt the most because he knew them to be true in his heart.

Sansa would always go on.

She’d reject that course of action because of the high ideals of goodness she cherished with stubbornness and embraced with honesty. She might vow to remain a widow until the end of her days. But in the end she’d move on, that's what she would do. Remember him less, even if she didn’t remarry. And he… he wanted her to be happy if he was no longer there, he truly did, and yet it would hurt him terribly to know beyond doubt that it would be so. Already the suspicion was painful enough.

Wallowing in his misery, feeling like a gnat, he realised the ultimate truth of his predicament. Maybe he had read it in his opponent's mind, if the magic of winter worked for everyone, helping men as well, and not only the Others. But most likely he was just cleverer than people expected from a man with his face. It wouldn't be the first time.

He was being used as a training opponent, an expert one, to keep the Night's King in a good shape to fight someone else. Only one candidate for this came to mind. Another uniquely talented swordsman, armed with the unmeasured fierceness and arrogance of youth: his best friend's son, Sansa's cousin,
The humiliation of being coerced to do this scorched Sandor on the inside, shaming him profoundly. He'd become a tool, imprisoned, enslaved and forced to serve the Great Other, helping him get ready to defeat his only friend's only living child.

He would have thought the Others were beyond such human vanity and had other means to dispose of the noisy, breathing, sweaty, warm-skinned mankind whose existence seemed to annoy them.

Yet despite his humiliation, he didn't consider ending his own life. What good would that do to anyone? What would it change? It would mean succumbing to cowardice like a true gnat. Yes, there would be despair… but he was more used to it than most men.

Or so he tried to tell himself despite the anguish filling up his lungs to the brim as he touched the walls of his cell like a blind man, examining them inch by inch, wishing to run away. There had to be a way out, there must be! There had to be a door, an open passage, but he was never able to find it.

He'd never leave this place. He didn't dare think of his wife and what she might do on her own, hoping to feel the reassurance of her warging presence from a distance, despite that a faraway intrusion into his mind would hurt him, but it never came.

He must be too deep underground, buried in ice.

Much later, he slept, unable to stay awake any longer. In his dream, he took Sansa to the seaside outside Lannisport where the air was clean and smelled fresh, of sage and salt, very early on a sunny morning. Sansa held his arm, admiring every stone, and he was happy like a boy of five.

Days later, when all his hopes and even his dreams faded, one endured. He could spar for a long, long time. He hadn't done much else in his life. He could…

But he wouldn't think of his intentions, not clearly.

When the Night's King came to use his human slave again, Sandor's anger and discontentment were greater than ever. But his inner purpose of survival was equally well set in his guts, in every step he made, in every blow he dealt or defected with uncanny precision.

His head was empty, in a state of numbness he'd perfected in court. No true emotion he might have, of either approval or disgust, ever showed on his stony features.

His arms had yet to fail him, and his heart had always been his own.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
**Arya V**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

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**Arya**

On her way back to Winterfell, she rode a unicorn.

A true one from Skagos, covered with thick red-brown hair, hard like a brush for scrubbing the floors clean. Not the sweet and gentle, soft-skinned animal from Sansa's stories about the white hart and other fabulous, non-existing beasts. The unicorn stank worse than a horse despite the cold, mooing from time to time like a quaint sort of aurochs; its horn crooked and dull grey.

And on her back, exhibited proudly like a war trophy, she carried the Horn of Joramun.

Gendry died for it.

She… she only had to cut her hair to retrieve it from the Iron Bank. Her sacrifice was disproportionately small compared to his; the loss unjust, unfair and cruel. Arya Stark, a widow, before she was properly married. The pain was a dull sensation in her chest that wouldn't go away, soothed only by bouts of hope that Gendry might have survived the unequal fight in the Titan.

She prayed for his life.

But should her prayers be answered, then he must be enslaved by the new Sealord, and here she was, delayed on her errand. Very soon, she'd go back to save her husband.

*Or to avenge him.*

The former faceless girl would bring down this latest, Volantene Slavelord of Braavos, step over his lifeless body and become a Sealady in his place.

Maybe Jon would give her a ride on his dragon this time, and Rhaegal would scorch the usurper Sealord in one breath.

Arya knew very well that those wishes were childish. She didn't covet a position of authority in Braavos or anywhere else. She wasn't meant to be a lady of any castle, and Jon wouldn't leave Westeros until spring came, or she didn't know her brother at all.

But of revenge she could dream. It had always been easier than letting her grief eat her alive.

Trained to kill with a whisper, she wasn't a mighty warrior able to face the Others in the field with a flaming greatsword, in Jon’s vanguard. The best she could hope for was that her family had no imminent need of her and would let her go back.

She repeated this plan to herself every night before sleep, with the same intensity with which she used to recite the names of people she would kill one day.

Those on her list were all dead now, except Cersei.

The former queen had lost her mind. This was also a death of sorts, in Arya's expert opinion. She had experienced it in a slightly different fashion, after her solitary return from Braavos. She had been unable to pass the gift of death to Daenerys, and the Many-Faced God had condemned her to
perpetual sleep for disobeying his orders. But at least she could open her wolf eyes and run free on four paws, and in her dreams she was still herself, instead of searching for flowers in winter and acting a perfect fool.

Seeing Cersei reduced to madness was quite satisfactory. Arya would gladly plant her in a pot and let Sansa water her every day. Maybe she’d grow leaves and petals by the time spring came, and all Stark children could laugh at her.

"Hodor," Hodor grumbled tiredly, dragging his huge feet through high drifts of snow right behind Arya, sounding as though he might collapse at any moment.

She hoped they would arrive soon, after weeks of traveling. The wolfswood looked familiar if her tired eyes weren’t playing tricks on her. It was hard to tell with all that snow.

Her retinue was as extraordinary as her steed. Hodor, thirty savages from Skagos, a herd of unicorns that could serve as either horses or food, and two pale, bearded Northmen from Umber lands. The latter were called Jon and Torrhen and looked like identical twins: the only two men willing to accompany Arya from Eastwatch to Winterfell. Everyone else wanted to defend the Wall, obeying Jon’s wishes.

If The Rhaenys hadn’t docked on Skagos on its return journey, she’d have to ride home only with her guides and Hodor. She was very grateful to Captain Pyke for allowing the Skagosi to board the ship, and to those among them who had chosen to follow her. At least another fifty had stayed in Eastwatch, happy to man it in exchange for nourishment that didn’t include unicorn meat. She had been eating it for weeks now, and it tasted like wood.

The Skagosi were robust, tacit and quaint, yet she felt oddly safe in their presence. Besides, Hodor was always next to her, towering over much shorter, squarely-built islanders. He could help her defend herself in case they turned, well, eager to eat her, in accordance with their fame.

Hodor was even more adamant in not letting Jon and Torrhen near her. On a few occasions, he even threatened them with the greatsword Bran had brought from beyond the Wall, causing the Umber men to snigger at him with contempt. To Arya it didn’t matter who they were or if they had good manners, as soon as she was convinced that they were taking her home. The position of the stars and the gradual change of landscape, from eastern moors and plains into sparse groves and, in the last days, the tall forest of her home, confirmed that she hadn’t been cheated.

When Winterfell finally came into view, an eerie quiet permeated the wood, and her guides were more silent than trees.

During the ride through Wintertown, the streets were suspiciously empty. Not even stray dogs could be seen.

It’s cold. Everyone has to stay inside.

Hodor rattled Hodor many times, sounding overjoyed and relieved.

When Arya Stark knocked on Winterfell’s gates, the castle was closed and armed, standing like a lone, granite giant.

“Lady Stark, you’re back! Thank the gods!” Steelshanks exclaimed enthusiastically from behind. “Lord Rickon is turning mad. I hope you can talk some reason into him.”

Isn’t madness for the Targaryens? Arya mused as she rushed inside to see her brother, not looking behind to see how her retinue fared, vaguely aware that Hodor was still hodoring after her, and of
little else.

She was home.

“And where is little Robb?” she wondered on her speedy march up the stairs and through the corridors. Her poor brother Robb had a son who was lord now. Rickon was only his boy uncle.

“They are all gone, Arya!” Rickon answered from the door of his chamber. “They left us to die,” he whined as he squeezed her very tightly, in a constricting hug.

Die?

Rickon was only nine, he must be overreacting.

“Jon isn’t here?” she asked with an empty heart that knew the answer. The information from Eastwach, that her older brother was in Winterfell, was weeks old. She ought to have stayed on the Wall until she saw green dragon wings. But how long would she wait? What if war kept Jon in other places for months? And she didn’t dare leave the horn with anyone else.

“The wolves left first, with Jon’s mother,” Rickon murmured his explanations against her shoulder, not relenting in his mortal grip on her.

She returned his hug as fiercely as she was able to and let him talk.

“Uncle Brandon took Robb south, to the Great Council,” her little brother continued angrily. “Everyone leaves this place and no one returns. Jon just flew over Winterfell on his way south, in some great haste.”

With bleeding insult in his boy voice, Rickon concluded his rant, “Now even the last ravens are gone so we can’t send a message to anyone of what is about to befall us. Why have I come back? I should have stayed on Skagos and died.”

“I returned, didn’t I?” she pointed out, disentangling herself from his arms. “What’s going on?” she asked pragmatically. “What do you fear will happen?”

Rickon grabbed her hand and dragged her to his window. “Look, sister,” he mumbled, forcing it open. Winter wind hit them both hard in their faces. His room was on the top floor, looking over the walls.

Hodor uttered a worried, deep “Hodor” in the background.

A strange ripple, a wave of movement rolled through the forest, bending the trees, still a few leagues away, but approaching rapidly. An invisible enemy marched on Winterfell.

Mists, she thought, but wouldn’t say. No, it can’t be. The Others were in the riverlands and beyond the Wall. Not here in the North.

“The garrison left is minimal,” Steelshanks informed with the cold voice of reason. “But we can resist for long behind these walls. There’s no room for despair.”

“Half of the men left are the Unsullied,” Rickon stated with contempt. “They are cut, like oxen. And if that isn’t enough, they were ensorcelled once and attacked Winterfell for Stannis. What if they are ensnared again? They could surrender to whoever’s out there and open the gates! Then we can only hope that the dead will again rise to defend us. But the wind slammed the crypt door shut a sennight ago, and no one has been able to open it. Not since Jon left.”
Arya rubbed her eyes and stared over the battlements, deep into the night, concluding that she didn’t see anything except her own fears. Only snow. “It’s just the wind blowing we’re looking at now, Rickon,” she declared tiredly. “There is no one out there.”

Yet as she said so, dread grasped her heart. The silence of the woods, the pallor of her guides, all acquired a different, sinister meaning.

Anxious not to show uncertainty and distress her brother further, she tapped him on his back. “Come with me,” she tried to sound encouraging. “I brought company you might appreciate.”

And he did, hugging the Skagosi, speaking to them in that peculiar, guttural mixture of Common and Old Tongue they used as their language, that was only a little more intelligible to Arya than the unicorn mooing. Rickon even caressed the hairy beasts and seemed thrilled by their presence and smell.

Arya seized the moment to drag Steelshanks aside. “Two Umber men have arrived with me. I need to see them, to reward them for their service.”

Minutes later, Rickon sang with the Skagosi, but pale Jon and Torrhen had vanished, nowhere to be found. The guards at the gates couldn’t remember them entering the castle. One thought he saw them going to the kitchens, but no such men had ever reached them, according to the cook.

Arya wondered if they lay hidden somewhere, waiting to stab the Winterfell watchers in their back, and let the enemy in.

*The crypts. Maybe Hodor can open the door.*

“Hodor, help me,” she pleaded with the lackwit, scurrying to the tombs of her ancestors.

*Arya Underfoot. Will I ever stop running?*

Upon reaching her destination, she commanded him shrilly, “Open it!” Her nervousness spilled out of her now that she didn’t have to put up a brave face in front of her little brother. “Please, Hodor,” she added, her voice dwindling into nothing, weaker than when she was a helpless little girl wishing to be a ghost in Harrenhal.

“Hodor,” Hodor listened to her, shouldering the closed entrance.

The great door gave in to him with a prolonged creak. The darkness behind smelled of moss, looking dangerous and alive like the wolfswood had become.

She rushed in, forgetting she should carry a light.

Some twenty steps ahead, the gloom was absolute. She was blind and couldn’t continue. It was one thing to enter the crypts as a child to see the likenesses of the dead, and quite another to know there were ghosts down there, spectres that could walk and fight, and even stop the fire of the biggest living dragon as though it was nothing at all.

Blind she might be, but she wasn’t alone.

“Hodor?” she called out fearfully, and was relieved when her giant servant followed her with a torch.

In complete silence, not hodoring at all.

Swallowing her growing unease, Arya Stark walked on. Soon she left behind the her parents’ and
Robb’s grave. It would be too painful to linger in their presence. She would dissolve in tears and Rickon would notice she was missing. Not knowing what she should do to defend Winterfell, awed by being the oldest Stark present, from whom decisions were expected, she continued her descent.

*How shall I call ghosts to life? How shall I disturb their rest? How shall I ask them to fight for their kin?*

When she reached the statue of Torrhen, the King who Kneeled, she noticed that the passage leading further down from was completely closed off by a heap of loose stones. She tried to peek through them and saw only creeping darkness. Not finding anything of interest in there, she returned her attention to the old king.

Ice was laid on Torrhen’s lap, stuck in granite and black dragon crystals, petrified like the stone lord who held it. She remembered Jon’s story of being unable to draw it.

She was only a girl, but she tried the same. Maybe unsheathing Ice would call forth the old Lords and Kings of Winter. Led by her Father… And by Jon Stark, who would look exactly like her brother if Jon grew a long beard, according to Daenerys who had met his ghost.

Try she might, but her father’s sword stayed firmly in its place, not yielding to her efforts.

“Hodor,” Hodor said, and in the hollow depth of the crypts his witless voice held magic.

The old king stirred and opened his eyes, striving not to close them again, looking like he suffered from a severe lack of sleep.

“Begone!” Torrhen thundered at Hodor from his throne, or perhaps he addressed Arya, chasing her away on account of her hardened heart, like the old gods had done. “Go away,” he underlined rudely. “I need rest.”

“Haven’t you rested enough?” Arya challenged him. “Why did you come out to fight Stannis only to be silent now?” She immediately recalled another treason of her house ghosts, now that she was aware of their existence. “Why did you let the Boltons take the castle?”

“The Lords of Winterfell were safe in here at that time,” Torrhen reacted offendedly. “Is it my fault that we were still drowsy in late summer and unable to rise?”

“But now the winter has come, and you’re wide awake,” Arya guessed loudly. “Will you come forth if needs be?”

“Don’t ask me that,” Torrhen replied indignantly, tugging his granite beard, gritting his stone teeth. “This winter mess isn’t mine. It’s Jon’s,” he gesticulated broadly at the rubble obstructing the way further down with muscled, grey arms. “Where is he? Can you tell me that, girl? Why isn’t he here to help?”

“Hodor,” Hodor yawned lazily in guise of an answer.

“My brother is in Greywater Watch,” Arya tried to reply, uncertain. There were many Jons in her family in the past.

“Jon!” Torrhen Stark thundered savagely in a granite voice that caused the earth to shake and rumble. “Where are you? Hiding your shame in the bowels of earth? Or are you in the wolfswood, marching with your other kin?”

The dead made less sense than the living, Arya concluded. “You say this mess isn’t yours,” she tried
to understand. “What is? What did you do wrong?”

“I knelt,” the old king sighed and sank into stony silence.

Hodor snored loudly.

“Wake up please,” Arya implored Torrhen in vain, shaking him, almost hurting her hands on the lifeless stone likeness of the last Stark king.

Boots resounded on the steps above, and she heard Steelshanks before she could see him.

“Lady Stark,” he breathed heavily, having run too fast in mail, furs and leather. “A high lord is here to see you. He’s bringing more men to help us.”

“A lord?” Arya parroted, wondering which northern nobleman had travelled to Winterfell instead of heading to the Wall or the royal election. “Who is it?”

“The Sealord of Braavos, here to see Lady Arya Stark,” Steelshanks replied pompously, probably imitating the style of the horrendous usurper from across the sea.

Arya became so angry that she could eat her guest alive like the Skagosi did in legends, probably when they were unable to further tolerate the diet of unicorn meat.

Her pockets were full of coins from the House of Black and White, and this Sealord would die in pain, unless he brought Gendry to her, alive and well.

“I’ll see him on my own in the Great Hall,” she commanded as a true lady of her castle, sounding stern more than Mother to her own ears. “Let his men in, but watch them at all times, and be ready to surround them on my orders. They are not too many, right? You can overwhelm them if necessary?”

Steelshanks nodded grimly, his expression of joy over the arrival of a new ally replaced by a cold consideration of how best to deal with a possible enemy.

“And keep Rickon out of this,” she almost howled her last instruction, jumping two by two stairs on her way up.

She was a ghost in Winterfell, faster than a wolf.

In the Great Hall, she took the seat of her forefathers, quiet as a mouse, calm as still water, waiting for the servants to finish cleaning up after supper and leave her alone. Finally, her guest was allowed into her presence.

The Sealord was tall and hooded when he entered, and she hated him more than anyone else, more than Ser Meryn and Cersei. Thinking of it, Ser Meryn ought to be alive in King’s Landing and she had forgotten him, departing from a life of vengeance. If she was widowed, she’d return to it.

Like her poor mother.

Tears came to her eyes when she remembered Mother as Lady Stoneheart, and she immediately lost all her strength and desire to kill.

“Arya. I’m back. I never meant to leave you. Please don’t cry.”

The Sealord dared speak in the beloved voice she feared had been silenced and lost forever.

She was too stunned to react. Wiping her stubbornly present tears, she turned her face away.
“Do you hate me for being late?” Gendry asked with emotion, lowering hastily the hood on the fancy cape he was wearing, giving shape to what she feared could still be only a sweet illusion of her tired mind.

But seeing him ruined all her grudges towards him, breaking her down completely. The memory of being abandoned in the Titan, and the yearning to kill him for it, faded and vanished in the dark depths of her heart.

Only her pain from thinking she had lost him and her love for him remained. She faced him squarely, letting him see her tears, not hiding her emotion from her stupid husband who returned to her.

“Arya please forgive me!” He was pleading now, in a voice she’d never heard from him, both solid like steel and malleable like fire.

And, just like that, he knelt before her, burying his head in her lap. Before she knew it, her hands were in his thick black hair, finding the warm scalp underneath.

“The Sealord?” she inquired weakly, “Why didn’t you say your name?”

“I didn’t have to,” he protested, raising his head, steel blue eyes meeting grey ones. “I showed my face. He knew me. What, did he only mention the new title?”

She nodded wordlessly. “As a proper captain of the guards should present the guest to the lady of the castle,” she muttered, cursing the courtesies owed to her.

“After the fighting, I hoped that your family would be pleased,” Gendry volunteered more information. “But I didn’t have them in mind when I started it.”

“No?” she asked spontaneously, realising at that moment that she wanted him to declare solemnly he’d done it for her. “Then?”

To her unnamed chagrin, Gendry just smiled at her, giving no immediate response, and she began to feel more and more embarrassed because of her stupid expectations.

“For myself I think most of all,” he confessed timidly after a while. “It felt so good to lead, to be in charge. Braavos was ready for rebellion. It took little effort for the flame to spread.”

“I see,” she replied dryly, profoundly unhappy with this explanation. What about me? Her husband had stayed in Braavos with the Black Pearl. How many times did she ring his bells?

Disappointingly, he didn’t seem to even notice the surge of distance in her demeanour, smiling once more.

Stupid.

All of a sudden, he hugged her ardently, catching her completely off guard, and began to caress her back, just under the Horn of Winter. Overtaken by his gesture, she could only hope she didn't stink of unicorn.

“I almost caught up with you in Eastwatch,” he declared on the verge of tears, his chin now on her shoulder. His low voice resonated in the abyss of her soul, pleasantly disturbing, calming her like a sweet potion of pine needles used to temper a bad cough in winter. “You left a week earlier, but my ship was faster.”

“Of Volantene design?” she guessed. “You took it from the usurper Sealord?”
He nodded mutely, kissing her ear.

“You were lord only for a week?” she wondered.

“Five days,” he clarified. “First two days we were fighting. It took me four days of lordship to learn that the iron bankers had fled to Qohor and send them word to return. They should be back and running the city business by now, just like before. In the end I lost one more day to find the ship. The Volantenes had left it anchored in one of the lagoons. They had evaded the Titan and sailed in from the south when they invaded the city. Braavos needs another statue to guard that second entrance.”

She imagined a big bronze Gendry, wearing a smith’s apron on which the metal turned greenish from bad weather. The new Sealdord. Right. She had to stifle a laugh, not to insult him and his ambition. He’d always be only Gendry to her.

There was one thing she still had to know. “Times are volatile,” she declared cautiously. “With you gone, they’ll find another lord soon. Maybe they already have one. Do you not wish to go back?”

Gendry immediately shook his head with determination. “You would have returned for me after delivering the horn, wouldn’t you? Well, I couldn’t wait that long.”

It was enough to reassure her. Viciously happy, she sat aside her gnawing doubts about her not being beautiful, and him not being constant as a consequence of her imperfections.

“There’s a place I still need to show you,” she announced, dragging him out of the Great Hall and into snowy courtyard by the hand.

Outside, she addressed a very tired Steelshanks, beaming, “Why didn’t you say it was my husband?” she exclaimed. “Please find accommodations for his men.”

“Husband?” Steelshanks was bewildered. “My pardons, my lady. I had not heard.”

She couldn’t blame him. Her marriage was still a secret. But she also didn’t own explanations to a man who wasn’t her family.

“Yes, husband,” she reaffirmed sternly, sounding like Mother once more. “Please, see to it that my old room is made ready.”

“It was already done,” Steelshanks murmured, almost offended that his efficiency was questioned; this former Bolton man, who had become indispensable in Winterfell. Winter ruined the old and forged new loyalties.

The lonely wolf dies and the pack survives.

“Thank you, Steelshanks. We shall then retire for the night.” On an impulse, she took Gendry’s arm as a lady ought to, resting her forearm over his, despite that he had never offered it, lacking castle upbringing. He was confused about her gesture, but played along, trying to appear as if he was guiding her steps, while in truth it was her directing him, by imperceptibly squeezing his muscles.

She hoped they were being successful in leaving the Winterfell men-at-arms with some semblance of dignity, as a young couple for whom marriage had no secrets.

Rickon was nowhere to be seen. She should have warned Steelshanks against letting him drink mead, if the Skagosi offered it, but it was too late for that now. She could only hope that the captain
would have the same good instincts like with preparing her room.

Her hands were sweaty and almost shaking by the time they reached her door.

“My old chamber,” she announced timidly, letting them both in. “I had thought I would never sleep in it again. It looks as though I have never left it.”

With Gendry inside, her childhood lodging appeared much smaller than she remembered it. Fire burned merrily in the hearth, but it would still take some time before the ambiance became warm. She shivered from both chill and nervousness, reminded of winter in the heart of her home.

“Did you have guides to arrive here?” she remembered to ask, wondering if they were odd and pale like Jon and Torrhen, despite having honourable northern names.

“A clansman we met on the Wall. A Wull, I think. He said he was fed up with standing there doing nothing.”

“Where is he now?” she asked avidly, wanting to question him.

Gendry shrugged. “He vanished in the forest when we approached the castle. He went home I think.”

At least another possible traitor, a helper of the Others, wasn’t in Winterfell, unless he was able to pass through the walls.

Perhaps she’d brought the Horn of Joramun into the arms of the enemy. But why wasn’t she assaulted on the way? Why was she led home to endure a siege? Why help Gendry as well? If this was the doing of the Others, it made no sense.

She would know soon if Rickon was right and if there was more than just wind in the forest.

But not yet.

Gendry was giving her a foolish look. His hammer was still on his back. In the same vein, she had yet to relinquish the Horn of Winter and the sword belt with Needle.

His arms hung uselessly, and she thought he’d embrace her again, but he only continued talking. “Where is everyone? This castle used to be full of people,” he spoke aimlessly and kept smiling.

It took her a while to realise that he must feel drunk from happiness of being here, back with her.

“Have you told your family about our marriage?” Although the smile never left his face, he wondered in a more serious tone. “What did they say?”

“I arrived a few hours before you, and only Rickon is here. The rest are at the Great Council.”

“Then we can’t…” He couldn’t finish, sounding both disappointed and resigned with his destiny. To wait for her.

“Why not?” Arya rebelled. “Weren’t you the one who would have… even before marriage?”

“Yes,” he confessed.

What changed? He would tell her now that she wasn’t pretty, that it was all a mistake, that he wanted their marriage annulled to pursue the Black Pearl-
“Then?” she asked with trepidation, cutting down her own jealous thoughts with the blade of her mind.

“You’re my wife now,” he replied sheepishly. “I have to treat you with even more respect than before. I have to be extremely careful. If it pleases you, milady, I would just look at you for a while. It’s been too long.”

She missed him so much that for the first time she simply loved it when he called her milady, instead of becoming irritated by his constant reverting to her title, to which she didn’t attach any great importance, and he could never forget it. It was pointless to be angry about it, she realised. Her husband was ceremonious, ridiculously and meticulously so, despite the colourful speech from Flea Bottom he might never lose completely. She supposed she should be grateful he hadn’t been castle raised or he would be worse than Sansa, clean and full of good manners. On the contrary, Arya would wade proudly through a muddy swamp, wishing to bring the most beautiful water flowers to those she loved.

The favour of looking she could return, enjoying profoundly the sight of him: well and alive, bearded and strong, with vivid dark blue eyes that were so different than Bran’s or Sansa’s. This was excellent because the last thing she saw him as was her relative. Their acquaintance had been different from the beginning.

They sat together at a rounded sewing table she had rarely used before: only on occasions where Septa Mordane had threatened her with convincing Father to forbid her riding lessons for a while, if she didn’t comply with her precepts.

Now it was an excellent place to hold hands with Gendry, intertwine her fingers with his, study him intently with her eyes. Indulging in the pleasure of looking helped her forget he was staring at her with equal, if not greater intensity, and ignore her fear of being an ugly girl.

Time dragged its feet in companionable silence.

Finally, he leaned slowly towards her, over the table, until their foreheads touched. She rapidly kissed his cheek, provoking his lips to seek out hers.

Arya imagined that her reunion with her husband would be passionate and intense.

But, contrary to all her expectations, their first true kiss after a long separation was extremely tender, like a butterfly landing on her skin on a long summer day, staying there while his wings fluttered. Lazily, they prolonged it, allowing it to last, closing the remaining distance between them. Next thing she knew, she was in his lap, straddling him, and his hands were under her tunic, cupping her breasts. Disarming and undressing went very slow for both, delayed by endless kissing, so sweet and gentle that her heart began to melt.

A wave of warmth and restlessness passed through her belly. She had felt it before, but never so languidly; this longing to be with Gendry, and with no one else, because it was his eyes, his arms, and his stupid stubbornness she had always wanted for herself.

He lay her down carefully on her old featherbed. His hammer was left neatly in an unswept corner, next to Needle and the Horn of Joramun. Mother would be unhappy about the dust. But Arya wasn’t her mother, and she didn’t care.

Naked, Gendry bent over her with natural grace: a stag pursuing a wolf. Amazed by how good it felt to sense his bare skin covering all of hers, and even his stupid weight on top of her, she engaged in another neverending kiss.
She believed that a couple must stop with other intimacies to proceed with bedding, and that losing a maidenhead would be a separate, premeditated act, like killing. Instead, one tender gesture followed another, flowing naturally, like a slow stream winding through a plain in direction of some great river. There was no deliberation, no using of her charms as a means to an end, in service of the Many-Faced God.

They never separated, not even a little, nor did they stop touching and... tasting each other. A sudden, sharp pain in her woman’s place was followed by many sweet caresses and shy looks on his part, aimed at soothing her discomfort. Then, she felt Gendry’s agonisingly slow movements inside her, causing a terrible ache in her that was neither pain nor pleasure, but perhaps a bit of both. She tried to follow him for a change, in an excruciatingly sluggish rhythm of her own. Overwhelmed by an excess of sensations, she didn’t want this to stop. Not ever. She longed to stay on the edge of being she had somehow reached, where their union was everything, and where her longing lasted and endured: never quenched, never ending.

But the gods were either deaf or they never listened to her prayers.

Because, after some time, Gendry tensed against her so hard that she had to cut short their latest kiss or she wouldn’t be able to breathe. In that instant, he relaxed rapidly, moaning against her bare shoulder. Hiding his eyes from hers, he rolled away to lay beside her, and hugged her to his chest without a word, arranging blankets and furs from her bed to cover them both.

The pain she experienced had vanished, but the longing was still there, lesser than before, simmering in the lower part of her body, half-quenched and completely perturbing. She wanted to say something to him, but there were no words she could think of that were either fitting or telling how she felt after what they had just done.

“I love you so much,” she finally breathed out towards the steady sound of his heartbeat, realising she was too late.

Gendry was fast asleep.

Wide awake, feeling as if she’d be unable to catch sleep in a thousand years, she disentangled herself from his somnolent embrace. On a whim, she dressed in his tunic, as long as a gown on her, and returned alone to the little table where their loving had started, wishing she could hear the wolves howling. It would be wonderful if they prowled the woods, and no one else. But they had left with Aunt Lyanna, Rickon had said.

Where to?

She closed her grey eyes to find out. Opening Nymeria’s yellow pupils, she expected to see more snow. What else could there be in winter?

Instead, she nearly walked into a fast running river of molten lava. There was a low, stony ceiling above her raised ears, and she realised she must be deep underground. The earth’s core was hot and fluid, not solid and frozen like its surface. The stream was becoming more copious at every moment, threatening to engulf her.

She ran away from the bath of flames as fast as her legs allowed, and barely escaped unscathed. Her tail smelled burned, the long hairs on it singed. She thrashed with it against a wall to ensure that it stopped burning.

Bending her head down to sniff the way forward, she noticed there were tree roots and stones under her paws. The glow of the burning river she left behind still illuminated a narrow, tortuous way
forward, a tunnel inside a stony mountain, climbing up very slowly. Her pack was howling in the
distance: Shaggy and Summer, and all her smaller brothers and sisters she’d led beyond the Wall all
the way from the riverlands. But the way back to them was cut; she couldn’t rejoin them.

*The lonely wolf dies…*

In a blink of an eye, she was back in Winterfell, shivering from unease. Her room was one floor
lower than Rickon’s, and the high castle walls obstructed the view to what might be beyond. Yet the
night sky was conquered by frozen, blue mist; a giant cloud of ice petals drifting towards her home.

She could choose whether to watch ice… or fire...

Both visions were profoundly disconcerting.

She should feel alarmed, knowing what was coming, and that it wasn’t only winter. Yet in this
moment of her young life, all she could see was the unearthly grace of the threats she would be
facing.

*Beauty bringing death.*

Not wanting to ruin Gendry’s rest, thoroughly unable to explain to him how she felt and why, she sat
alone in darkness, gazing into the fog.

And for the first time in years, Arya Stark was afraid.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
“A hundred days,” Meera Reed declared through her tears.

“He has walked for a hundred days,” she announced solemnly.

“And in his end—” she choked on an overwhelming sob before continuing with utmost dignity. “In his end, let there be light!”

Her last words flew through the night like black raven wings, and little crannogmen echoed them with reverence. Wearing many shades of green, they set aflame a tall funeral pyre made of dry weirwood.

Behind Meera, the majestic white tree of Greywater Watch was now crippled. A great, thick, milk-coloured stump, with few branches and leaves left. Its large, cruel mouth and tiny eyes squeezed shut: three cutting red lines on smooth white bark.

“There shall be, there must be light,” the little folk claimed, mourning for their lord.

Davos didn’t see any.

In his view, only fire consumed Howland Reed, the blazing tongues, the cursed flames of Rh’llor! Had there been justice, this deathbed should have been Melisandre’s. But her exposé of the atrocities Stannis’ had committed in pursuit of his claim was so unexpected and shocking that no one thought of taking her life. And why should they? Davos thought with powerless insolence. They’d die, like old Maester Cressen. The red woman had witch charms protecting her. The Onion Knight had seen it first hand.

Stannis was in chains, awaiting royal justice, certain to come right after the funeral. His jaw was firm, his head high. He would walk to the block without flinching. Davos hoped he could witness the execution of his king and maker with the same cold blood.

He and his son Devan stood next to Lady Shireen, in the back row of the congregation of mourners. Her head and greyscale scars were covered by a long black veil, with the golden border of the House Baratheon carefully pinned to the dark fabric not to be visible.

Her dark hair hung loose as a consequence. She had no hairpins left to lift it in Southron fashion, despite that her age now required it. Davos hoped her northern hosts would approve, and not demand her head as well, just because she was Stannis’ daughter.

The young royal couple was sombre and regal, and undecided, perhaps, not showing determination one would expect from a king or a queen. The attitude frightened Davos. How long does a royal memory last? Will they give Shireen to the angry mob? Will they forget she helped cure greyscale?

Lord Hightower had his head down as the occasion demanded, but his expression was hard to read. Brynden Tully was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he had fallen into the bog and was eaten by lizard-lions, from hurtful disappointment in both the outcome of the royal election and Stannis’ nature.

Davos had known about it for a long. Yet he had never left his lord and his king. He owed him everything.
Edmure Tully was drunk on mead. Nodding sadly in the direction of the burial conflagration, he wiped an honest tear.

Doran Martell’s daughter and several nieces stood very near the fire, and Davos had a distinct impression that the reason was to warm up rather than excel in mourning. The prince had already left, claiming to have an important personal endeavour he ought to fulfill while he still lived.

Davos had one too, on Cape Wrath. Marya and Stannis and Steffon, left far down south in lands he might never see again. He could go now and take Devan with him. After the beheading…

The mere thought was treacherous and inappropriate. His king and maker still lived.

But not for long.

When the deathbed of light turned into embers, Brynden Tully suddenly reappeared before the Jon and Daenerys. Manifestly spared by lizard-lions, he brought forward a headsman’s block overgrown by moss, apparently fallen into disuse in the household of late Lord Reed.

“I hoped to be of service, Your Grace,” he addressed Jon with respect. “I trust that you may require this,” he paused. “I would offer you a sword as well, but you already have one. A lit blade,” he added dryly, with a modicum of both suspicion and sharp interest, eyeing Jon’s unnatural weapon. The magic sword glowed softly through the black woollen scarf in which it was always wrapped when not in use, in place of a proper scabbard.

Bending the knee, the craggy old knight from the Vale and Riverrun proclaimed with disarming honesty, “I swear allegiance to both of you of my own free will and with a true heart. And I pray to the gods that the kind of sword you wield, my king, doesn’t bode evil for the health and long life of Her Grace, your queen. Should you be…” he hesitated under the weight of his words, “should you be not only our chosen king, but also Azor Ahai reborn…” He turned towards Stannis with contempt, “Just like Lord Baratheon was a pretender in all things.”

The night unending seemed darker and heavier after Blackfish had spoken.

“I don’t pretend to be anything,” Jon reacted brusquely.

“That’s what I fear, Your Grace,” the old knight nodded sadly. “That’s exactly the tragedy I now fear.”

“Unchain him,” Daenerys gave the order to no one in particular, perhaps to end the prophetic talk of her death at her husband’s hands.

Two crannogmen hurried to do her bidding.

Stannis didn’t move an inch despite being freed. It would take three strong men or maybe a pair of oxen to drag him to the block against his will.

Jon remained equally immobile and impassive.

“Come forth, my lord,” the young king commanded. “I never took you for a craven.”

“I demand the right to speak and be heard before any sentence is passed, and much less executed,” Stannis requested bluntly, disobeying.

“What about?” Daenerys wondered sweetly. “Have your perchance remembered where Blackfyre ended?”
Lord Tarly had taken the famous sword from Tyrion in High Heart and left it in Stannis’ keeping in Greywater Watch. But the blade of Aegon the Conqueror had since vanished, in the turmoil of royal election and Melisandre’s exulting, dragon-stealing speech.

“Might your daughter know?” Daenerys gave a strange look to Shireen who endured the queen’s scrutiny with utmost calm and steel in her expression, acting as though her own father wasn’t about to die for his sins.

“I have no notion where the sword went. I left it in my chambers. I’ve already told you this a hundred times,” Stannis punched his lines squarely, like a poorly talented mummer on a village fair, lacking any sophistication in his speech and manners. “Look for your thief among the servants of this castle. A Valyrian sword is worth a fortune. If they sell it, they can buy food for three winters.”

“I swear it by bronze and iron that no child of the crannogs cares for the glimmer of dragonsteel,” Lady Reed claimed with indignance. “I swear it by ice and fire.”

“There’ll be other washerwomen and beardless squires, those of your guests,” Stannis shrugged icily. “But I didn’t ask to be heard because of that.”

“We’re already listening to you, my lord,” Jon intervened dryly. “I deem that we’ve heard enough.”

“You haven’t heard it all!” Stannis thundered as if he was still king and Jon a common criminal. “I do not deserve death.”

“No?” Jon didn’t sound surprised by Stannis’ mutiny. “Yet you dealt if for far less, I understand. You burned men alive to please a god that wasn’t even yours. You murdered your younger brother and your own wife! You ordered your sorceress to cleanse my mother's unborn child from her womb. You would have killed Lady Brienne for grievances you imagined, despite that she was wounded and unarmed. You did this and more, I reckon, more than I care to know. All out of obsession with your claim to the Iron Throne.”

Stannis shook his head with pig-headed determination, denying Jon’s judgment. “I demand to take the black,” he claimed stubbornly. “That is the just punishment for my crimes. A life in shame and hard labours, on the Wall. Not a swift beheading.”

“You’re asking that of me?” Jon was astonished now. “You dare say in my presence that taking the black is a disgrace?” His incredulousness grew, becoming restrained anger, and he suddenly seemed much older than his young years. “Well, if that’s what you want-”

“It’s not about what I want,” Stannis interrupted, unable to let go, not seeing reason. “It never has been. It’s about justice.”

“What is justice?” Jon sounded more menacing and sinister than the Night’s King. “I don’t see yours, and you don’t see mine. Is there ever any?”

“Jon…” his wife caressed him with her words. “We talked. Time is running late. There is this alternative. He’s asking for it himself.”

Lady Shireen suddenly bolted forward and knelt between Stannis and Jon. “If that is your decision, Your Grace, then I shall follow my father to the Wall, to see that he arrives well.”

“As will I,” Davos saw and heard himself following her example, and his own heart: loyal to Stannis beyond everything.

A few surviving lordlings from the border between stormlands and the Reach did the same.
the black would serve them better than being poor: their lands had been taken by the bannermen of the House Tyrell years ago, and it was unlikely that the new king would give them back.

Devan naturally followed Davos, bending the knee with grace. In that moment, the Onion Knight almost regretted his choice. There had to be something sinister in the young king’s change of heart. To simply let Stannis go would mean showing weakness. There had to be an invisible, cruel punishment in allowing him to take the black, hidden like the golden border of Shireen’s improvised veil for mourning.

*Please don’t take Devan from me too,* he prayed fervently to the Seven hoping that they hadn’t forgotten him. *Not because of my mistakes.*

“Children shouldn’t be made to answer for the deeds of their fathers,” deadly serious, the young king was addressing Shireen in particular.

Davos couldn’t help but wonder if Jon also thought of Devan in that moment… Or of himself. Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark should have done better. They were taught from birth to know better. But, like so many commoners, they did not. Just like Davos shouldn’t have taken part in smuggling Lady Melisandre and the evil shadow she had birthed into Storm’s End.

The gods may condemn us all.

To Davos’ disappointment, Randyll Tarly was spared the judgment of men, despite that he had attacked the life of late Lord Reed in Horn Hill, according to Lady Arya, and that he now wore an expression resembling a complacent, poorly hidden smirk, over the greenseer’s smouldering ashes.

“Your father is a convicted criminal and you’re no longer a child who needs tutoring,” Jon continued talking to Shireen. “He had pondered killing you before his Hand directed his madness to your mother. Why would you still obey him?” he wondered. “Tell me, please. I wish to understand.”

“He’s my father, Your Grace” she replied squarely, resembling Stannis like never before. “Isn’t that reason enough?”

The king bowed his handsome, shaggy head in sign of surrender.

“Should you reconsider your decision, you shall be reconfirmed as the Lady of Storm’s End.” Daenerys continued where her husband had stopped. “I hope and I pray that we should meet again.”

With that, the judgement was over. The royal couple left their prisoner to guards armed in bronze, wearing green, and Davos’ unease grew rapidly for no reason at all. They were all free to go, and the travel North wasn’t the worst of all prospects; the riverlands were much more dangerous, overrun by Others and their loyal wights.

Crannogmen soon brought horses and food. Silent and insistent, they escorted the fallen pretender and his companions on the way out of their domain, down the narrow, trodden, muddy path winding through the fireflies-lit bog. And then, straight into the night deeper than the darkness reigning in seven hells.

Shireen’s hands shook as she held the reins, and Davos wondered why.

“We’re only to go North,” he tried to sound encouraging and failed. “I see no harm in that. Winter is everywhere, we wouldn’t feel any warmer back home.”

“No,” she shook her head harshly. “I overheard the conversation of the king and queen before the funeral. This is justice Daenerys suggested for Father from the beginning. For being a stupid, clueless
fool who had helped Melisandre steal her dragon. Let him... *Let him undo what he started if he’s able to*, that’s what she’d said. I wonder...” she paused.

“If the black beast was her dragon, why did it let itself be stolen by anyone? Why didn’t it stay with her?” she exclaimed nervously.

“I nonetheless understand her anger,” she added.

Lowering her dark blue gaze, Shireen whispered, sharing a confession with Davos, “Women can be much crueller than men.”

“Sometimes,” Davos didn’t disagree. “You too, my princess? I meant to say my lady? Forgive me, but I’ll never believe that. What trouble lies before us?” he tried to sound unconcerned and almost succeeded.

“You’ll see it very soon,” she retorted poignantly, cantering after Stannis.

At the beginning of the cobbled, narrow causeway, their little hosts bid Davos and Shireen farewell, ignoring her convicted father. Their castle had vanished from view. Not wanting to go any further, they handed burning weirwood torches to the travellers: the last remnants of Lord Reed’s funeral pyre. Every man received one, all except Stannis and his lady daughter.

The slippery causeway led the way out of the marshes of the Neck.

“Soon it will become a slosh-covered kingsroad heading north towards Winterfell and the Wall,” Stannis explained dismissively to Davos, who had never travelled it.

He had always sailed, north or south.

*It was...*

It had been better when the crannogmen were still with them.

*Less dark.*

They were left alone now, and Davos grasped his torch harder. The night had always been dark and full of terrors, but now it was becoming darker still: full of unknown dread that didn’t smell of cold and ice, but of warm, faraway lands, of incense and cinnamon, of exotic flowers and rotting, sickening sweetness.

Stannis ignored the subtle change in his surroundings harder than the crannogmen his person. Galloping forth alone, he outran his company and plunged into darkness. Knowing him, Davos was certain that his liege still expected to be followed and obeyed by the last men loyal to him, and his only daughter.

It was precisely what they did. During the mad cavalcade after Stannis, Davis heard *wings* flapping over his head, first one pair, and then another, followed by distant, triumphant cries of two different dragons leaving the Greywater Watch.

The night deepened, thickened, grew heavy, felt alive; like a giant, wingless being woven of sheer darkness. The air Davos was breathing suddenly seemed sucked out from the atmosphere, causing a stifling, choking sensation, and a terrible itch in his parched throat. He reached for the waterskin on his saddle and drank, but his thirst wouldn’t go away.

The causeway now passed through the last stretch of the swamp, very deep on both sides. Davos
spurred his horse to come out of it, hoping his ailment was due only to the harmful evaporations from the bogs. But at the end of the marshes, outside the Neck, the darkness had limbs and malevolent black claws, a horned head, and spikes on its immaterial back, awaiting innocent travellers.

Davos recognised it.

*The shadow.*

One of Melisandre’s children had grown tall, acquiring the shape of a huge black dragon, different than the one the red woman was now riding. She had taken Daenerys’ babe with her, and left her own progeny to haunt Westeros.

*A as if winter and the Long Night weren’t enough.*

*How many are there?*

Davos recalled at least two gigantic shades Melisandre had created, on the Wall over Nightfort, and in the humble wooden castle of the Glovers, called Deepwood Motte, that had served as Stannis’ high seat for a while.

Neither shadow had ever hurt Stannis or his men, but that was before, when the red woman still pretended to be on his side, until she found a way to satisfy her heart's true desire.

Behind Davos, a bald lordling from stormlands began choking on his own breath, gulping with desperation. “My king,” he pleaded with Stannis. “Lord Baratheon, stop, please, we have to go back…” he barely managed to finish, gurgling, dying from asphyxiation.

Stannis didn’t turn back to help him or to ease his passing by a gift of mercy. He probably considered his now dead soldier useless and incapable. Riding on, he unsheathed the false Lightbringer in a mighty gesture. The sword’s glow was gone, stolen by the red woman like the big black dragon.

*No, not gone.* Davos corrected his thoughts. *It had never existed. The illusion of burning was conjured by witchcraft.*

His maker lifted the ruined blade high. For a moment, Davos believed Stannis would cut through the shadow, and open the way North. But very soon the expression on his face altered, transforming into amazement, bewilderment and finally despair. Yet he didn’t grab his neck or began choking like the dead stormlord; he merely fell from saddle and sank into snow. Large tears ran down his cheeks, and he looked haunted and weak, his square face an image of human suffering.

Davos had never seen him like this.

On his knees, Stannis whispered, “You were holding a peach, Renly, not a weapon, you should have told me. You never meant to threaten my life, only my claim. You were never very serious in anything. And I should have known that I wasn’t born a second son by chance. The gods have their reasons for making us what we are. I was always meant to be second best, and never the champion.”

The shadow changed form. A dragon no longer, it became Stannis’ mirror image, a man clawing at his face with long black fingers smelling of orange blossom and death.

“My eyes!” Stannis screamed, covering them with both palms.

But the intangible fingers of the shadow prised his hands off and continued their ungodly work.

“Please don’t make me blind,” Stannis begged. “I need to see to pay for my sins on the Wall.”
Davos thought he understood the logic or the irony of gods. The shadow would make Stannis in truth as he had been for years, since Robert’s death, blind like a bat, despite having two healthy eyes. And then, the shadow would kill him slowly, tearing him apart limb by limb, bone by bone, for it had no love for men, and it was abandoned here, in Westeros, all alone, far from its home in the east. *Far from the fields of ghost grass and the zorse-riders from the plains of the Jogos Nhai*, the shadow whispered to Davos with profound sadness, invading the deep corners of his soul.

It would kill them all for it didn’t know what else to do.

Davos wondered how he was able to learn so much about the shadow’s wishes and sinister intentions, holding a hand before his mouth and struggling to breathe.

Shireen was also gasping loudly. Her unease didn’t stop her from catching up with her father and dismounting. Her horse instantly ran past the shadow, north, into the night. The beasts were cleverer than men. Davos rolled down from his horse, letting him go.

Shireen grasped Stannis’ sword to attack the shadow and failed. The weapon was far too heavy for her. She dropped it, swallowed some air avidly, and knelt next to her father, defeated, unable to make another step. Before Davos could react, Devan was already next to her. His son’s effort to help the princess was doomed to failure, and they were both choking helplessly.

Stannis began to scream. He had already lost one eye and would soon lose another.

“No!” Davos screamed too, and his voice sounded hoarse and shrill, ripped into shreds from the struggle to breathe.

He should run and drag Devan and Shireen past the shadow. If they found their horses, they should ride North in full speed. Or maybe rush back into the bogs begging the crannogmen for a shelter. But what if the shadow followed? It would kill them on the way north. Or it could burst into the moving castle of the little green people, which served as sanctuary for so many refugees in winter; defenceless after the departure of the dragons. What if the shadow grew bigger and stronger in Greywater Watch, feeding on the ancient magic of the place? Then it might truly cover the entire world one day, just as they believed in Asshai.

Invisible black fingers pierced Davos’ flesh through many layers of clothing he wore. He was too late. They would all die in pain, accomplishing nothing.

Losing air, feeling invisible knives in his chest, expecting death, Davos murmured, “Mother above...”

In deathly throes, he began to wonder about Rickon, how he fared in Winterfell and if he was pleased to be back with his family, or if he would have rather stayed in Skagos, growing into a hairy, unicorn-riding savage.

Oddly, this unrelated, uninvited thought helped him breathe. He clung to it with hope. To Rickon and his stone knife. To any other thought that wasn’t the shadow and what it was doing to its prey.

“Think of anything else but this, my children,” he squeezed through his teeth, waving to Devan and Shireen, bidding them to ignore Stannis’ shadow. “Do it! Recall the long summer... The colourful glass under Dragonstone... The drum... The breaking of the waves...” he whispered with longing, remembering.

His place was at sea, not on land.

In his melancholy, he remembered Stannis and Steffon being born, and the birth of his other sons,
who were now with the gods, tall and strong like trees. And Devan, a different boy, a clever boy, who now clung to his life.

Shireen also resisted the malevolence of the shadow, striving in vain to rise, wield her father’s sword and defend Stannis, despite that she lacked the strength and the skill for it.

Behind Davos, there lay not only Greywater Watch, but also many other lands that the shadow might invade because Stannis had brought it, and its kin, unwittingly into his world.

He has walked for a hundred days… Davos thought of the mourning song of the crannogs, and wondered if it was as ancient as the story of Azor Ahai since it used the same motive. As old as the time that had passed between one Long Night and another.

A hundred days.

How long have I walked and has it been enough?

Will it ever be sufficient?

Stannis curled up in snow like an unborn babe, his hands closed tightly around the eye he still had left. The shadow was prostrated over him, his spitting image wrought of black fumes.

Shireen abandoned the dull, useless Lightbringer and gave up trying to use it. Unable to stand, she fell over her father and the shadow, tugging at the black creature, attempting to pull it away. Devan crawled towards her, gulping like fish on dry land. The two surviving stormlords had ridden off haphazardly, abandoning Stannis to his sort.

Davos couldn’t follow their example.

He raised the burning torch from the crannogs and stood up tall. Walking with excruciating slowness, he joined Stannis.

The shadow… flinched from the fire, withdrawing a little from its prey, yet not quite letting it go.

No, not fire.

Light.

Let there be light...

The flame was different now, not yellow, orange or red, nor smouldering: white and silver like fresh moonlight.

Davos threatened the shadow with it. The gloomy creature abandoned Stannis and directed all its attention to him, the new enemy, attempting an intrusion between the black being and its well deserved revenge.

The Onion Knight thought of poor Selyse and her love for Stannis and R’hllor, stupid as it might have been. When he did, the blade that had pierced her heart began to glow.

Perhaps not everything was a lie. Perhaps there was hidden power in the blood of the innocents, though not the one to oblige the world to kneel that Stannis desired.

Davos lifted both the sword and the bright light of the torch, aiming at the shadow...

...that morphed again, assuming the shape of his son, Matthos, young and brave
And fallen... under the walls of King's Landing, on board Davos’ ship, Black Betha, caught between the burning sky and the wrath of water.

The Onion Knight cried copiously, unable to strike. His tears were hot, his arms fell, his weaponry was useless, and the blessed light nearly put out from falling into snow.

The shadowy Matthos opened his arms to hug him. His embrace would be warm and welcoming.

“Father no!” Devan cried, waking Davos to the the truth.

He raised again the torch and the sword drenched in the lifeblood of innocents, attacking the bloody shadow that dared mock the memory of his deceased son.

Meanwhile, the sinister being communicated to him in clear terms that it didn’t know death and therefore couldn’t be killed.

Well, slaughter wasn’t even on his mind. His demands were different, if he could have them fulfilled, and he couldn’t lose anything by trying.

“Begone!” he commanded with newfound authority. “This road isn’t your home. Find one elsewhere! Plant ghost grass in some desert. This causeway belongs to people of Westeros. Not to you.”

The shadow laughed mutely, morphing into nothingness, into a black whirlwind of treacherous seas Davos imagined would await for him at the end of all things.

There was no defence against it.

“Father!” Devan cried again.

“And…” Davos made his other request from the enemy before him with great mental difficulty. “Before you vanish, give him back his eyes! I command you.”

Closing his eyes to make himself better heard by the shadow, he reiterated, “Give him back his eyes and begone! Or this light and burned steel shall be your end, even if all demons from seven hells decide to fly to your aid.”

He ought to make a solemn oath now, to receive strength from the gods, and make his word hold true. And among many vows he had heard in his life, heartfelt or false, there was only one that came to mind. “I swear it by bronze and iron,” he frowned hard to recall the second part of the sacred promise. “I swear it by ice and fire!”

He lifted the blade with ease and struck the shadow. Once, twice. Thirty times. Fifty times. A hundred times. For a lifetime. Until his whole body hurt and sweated. Until the immaterial creature was gone. Ruined or merely defeated, it didn’t matter.

No, he wasn’t the last hero, thank the gods.

His wife was alive and waiting for him, not knowing the chagrins of his last years, and he had known other women before her, but he’d never killed a single one.

No, he wasn’t Azor Ahai...

But perhaps he was made of the stuff of heroes, if only a little.

When he dared reopen his eyes, the night was still dark, but the terrors were gone from it. Only snow
remained. Devan and Shireen were pulling each other onto their feet. Devan was breathing loudly, unable to stop panting despite that there was now plenty of fresh air for everyone. The timbre of his voice changed rapidly from man’s to boy’s register with every new, liberating breath. Shireen was composed and ladylike, not revealing any true emotions.

Stannis lay like a corpse, dazed after his loss of composure. Yet his eyes were open, _seeing_, and his gaze brighter than before. “I have lived to see dragon wings returning to fly over Westeros,” he declared with longing and desperation. And regret, just maybe.

Shireen helped her father up, carefully brushing the snow off his cloak and armour.

“The only purpose I have left,” Stannis found his courtesies, ignoring Davos, as he always did when his chances to fulfill his endeavours improved, no matter how temporarily. “You haven’t failed in your duty towards me.”

“I hope that you shall use your time on the Wall wisely, father,” she replied timidly, “to restore the fallen honour of our family.”

“You shall accompany me and observe that.”

“I cannot, father,” Shireen’s fearful respect of her father was lined with steel now. “You gave me life, and you let me keep it. It was my duty as a daughter to ensure that you wouldn’t lose yours. But that is now done. I ought to part ways with you and assume the functions of your heir. It is only just, you’ll have to admit,” she paused and looked at Davos with unnamed sorrow… and envy, perhaps. “Your Onion Knight will look after you better than I ever could. He loves you, you see. I tried to, but I couldn’t. Just like you couldn’t love me, I know. You see, father, I am more like you than I would wish for. It must be the will of the gods you burned.”

With that, Shireen turned her back on Stannis and marched back towards the shelter of Greywater Watch, inviting Devan to follow suit with a gesture worthy of a great lady.

When Davos and Stannis were left alone, Stannis spat blood into deep snow. The grasp of the shadow wasn’t harmless, causing inner bleeding. Davos felt he could vomit in an instant, if he didn’t keep himself continuously in check, barely able to hold the content of his belly to himself.

“Women,” Stannis observed while spitting, taking note only of Shireen’s latest transgression, instead of her nobleness and concern for him. “I hope she shall marry soon to receive protection and guidance. For a Lady of Storm’s End, it shouldn’t be too difficult to find a good husband, despite her disfigurement. I married Selyse for less.”

Davos couldn’t believe his ears.

_A second best in everything. Indeed._

Stannis yawned and gave Davos an open and yet condescending look. “Come, friend,” he said, “The Wall is far away. There’ll be more shadows and grumkins between us and our final destination. We needn’t waste time.”

_Friend?_

_Our destination?_

Of course that Stannis assumed Davos would take the black with him, give him the rest of his natural life with grace and without any reproach, as every time before.
Davos stuck false Lightbringer into deep snow and stared at Stannis with rebellion. To his surprise, drops of blood dripped from the blade, black and red, from both the shadow and the sword’s victims; larger than tears Stannis had been shedding.

But not anymore.

His maker and his unmaker.

It was time.

“You have made me!” Davos exclaimed with passion. “And yet by now I have paid my debt. I have a simple announcement to make, my lord,” he said through a fine veil of fresh, stinging tears.

“Farewell.”
Jaime

He caressed his wife’s marked cheek with devotion, like every other time he had come to her chambers, visiting Brienne and their unborn child. She slept so peacefully in her bed.

Methodically, Jaime stoked the fire, adding some firewood. Then, sitting on the edge of her bed, he waited. For Brienne to wake, for impossible to occur, for the white walkers to take the Wall or for his damned existence to end.

Shivering from cold despite the renewed merriment of flames in the hearth, he gazed at Brienne’s faded facial scar. The tissue had become light pink and soft, almost invisible. Less distinctive than before, it blended well with the rest of her pale skin and stubborn freckles. Only a small hollow revealed its existence to a knowing eye, the tiny portion of flesh missing, bitten off by a cruel foe. Yet her attacker didn’t live to tell his tale, and here she was, resisting her destiny. Jaime had seen her complexion when it acquired a tender amber hue under the sun of the Smoking Sea, and he would never forget the sight of it.

Healthy.

Beautiful.

Awake.

Whenever his new duties allowed him to rest, Jaime shared her bed, despite knowing that her full transformation into a white walker could occur at any time, and that she might possess him while he slept, turning him into an ice creature, like her. Had it not been for their child, he would have wished for such an end. They could go north and spend the eternity together, in the Lands of Always Winter, free from all constraints. This was, however, an illusion, no matter how tempting.

Just like mortal men, the Others did their king’s will: they even died for it.

Jaime was now the commander of Nightfort, the fortress guarding the Wall between Icemark and Deep Lake, not so far east from Castle Black. The castle was renowned in the Seven Kingdoms for the story about the evil Rat Cook, who had served a young, innocent prince to his kingly father in a bacon pie, and also for the great stair carved in the Wall itself, cut deep into the ice.

Since Jaime assumed command, he learned of another famous local sight: the Black Gate, a secret door under the fort, shaped like a sad old face of a weirwood, that could be opened by reciting the vows of the Night’s Watch. Only those who hadn’t broken them could pass. This requirement would clearly exclude him, known to have broken sacred oaths in the past. He hoped that the commander’s duties wouldn’t force him to venture beyond the Wall until Brienne recovered, so that he wouldn’t need to re-enter and be stopped by the bloody door.

Stannis’ shadow had withdrawn from Nightfort together with his last supporters, not waiting to be chased away by dragonflame, like Rhaegal had done with the portion of it that had been hanging over Castle Black. The shadow now stretched all over the mountainous and forested lands between Deepwood Motte and the Wall, acting like an elusive creature made of sheer darkness that cleverly managed to avoid the two remaining dragons and their flight paths over the North of Westeros.

The villages of the mountain clans in that area soon turned into ghost settlements, with all inhabitants
fleeing to the places less dark. If refugees could be believed to accurately describe such an odd, magic phenomenon, the shadow continued to expand slowly over the lands it had forcefully emptied, despite being abandoned by the sorceress who had called it to life. Determined to continue haunting Westeros, it wasn’t keen at all on leaving the continent in Melisandre’s wake, as Jaime occasionally hoped. The prospect of having to deal both with the Others and the shadow in the coming battles didn’t sit well with him. The results would be very unpredictable.

The convicted pretender Stannis hadn’t yet arrived to take the black. He was probably killed by his shadow or by Others and wights who now appeared randomly, in small groups, throughout the entire North.

_Or perhaps he’s still riding or walking._

Jaime bet on the latter. Lord Baratheon had withstood the siege of Storm’s End feasting on rats and onions during Robert’s Rebellion. Why wouldn’t he survive a journey under the shadow, and the scattered gangs of Others and their nameless slaves? He could show up any time.

If he did, Jaime would kill him.

Because if Stannis hadn’t started the dance of dragons after unjustly accusing Brienne of crimes she would have never committed, maybe she would have received the maesters’ help on time.

Maybe she would be whole.

It pained him tremendously to see that Brienne’s legs were not hers anymore. Possessed by the curse of the white walkers, they’d become ridged, more muscled, and possibly even longer than before. The skin on them was grey and blue, resembling old, opaque ice. The advance of the illness stopped where her legs ended.

Untouched by the sickness, the upper half of Brienne’s body still belonged to her. And to him, Jaime remembered with longing. But now that she wasn’t aware of his attentions, all he could do was touch her with innocence: caress her cheek or remove a sweaty strand of long blond hair from her eyes. Whenever she became agitated in her unnatural rest, he fantasised that his clumsy left-handed ministrations helped her regain her calm. That she knew in her heart, by the imperfection of his gesture, that it had to be him, the man who loved her and was there for her.

Most importantly, the healthy half of her body now belonged to their child: a vessel of flesh and blood carrying and cradling a babe destined to be born in darkness, during the Long Night.

There were only two such children in the whole Westeros, his and Lyanna’s, with the difference that Rhaegar’s widow was with child much longer than Brienne. With a bigger belly, especially in relation to her remarkably short stature, Lyanna looked like she might deliver in another turn of the moon while Brienne had just started to show.

Jaime believed that Lyanna’s babe was possibly the last child conceived in late autumn, before the winter came. On the contrary, Jaime must have planted his seed in the middle of winter, on the warm islands of the Smoking Sea, if he was right in his assumptions, but still well after the cold season had started in Westeros.

_Fire of the Fourteen Flames, fire of the Earth’s core_, Viserion sinsonged merrily in Jaime’s mind, showing him content images of pirouettes he was executing for his own amusement above the castle roofs. He had fully recovered from fighting Stannis, and grown another six feet in size. His crippled, shortened wing would never be as good, just like Jaime would always be a hand short. But in his spirit, Viserion continued to be as foolish and indomitable as ever.
Shut up, Jaime replied jokingly, returning to the conundrum in his thoughts.

Brienne had become aware of the new life growing under her heart only after passing through the Shadow Lands behind the faraway Asshai. By the gods, she had to sail around the world to return home! Beth had hatched on that journey, from the egg that had previously looked like a very pretty, but perfectly inanimate blue stone.

Like Viserion, the little she-dragon had grown considerably in the past weeks. Larger than the aurochs, but much more elegant, she now slept in the rafters of Brienne’s chamber, never far from her suffering mistress.

Jaime often wanted to talk to Tyrion about his unreasonable belief that his unborn child was special. Strong. Able to protect his mother from the curse of the white walkers. And, one day, maybe, Beth’s true rider.

But his brother was now in Castle Black on king’s orders, and, since the royal election, he had always been hiding from the world with his wife. Well, had Jaime made a serious effort, he might have been successful in approaching Tyrion. But he always stopped himself at the last moment, concluding they both had enough on their plates without prattling on silly notions without any use in war.

Since Brienne had lost consciousness as a result of her heroic stand against the Others in High Heart, only her body could be roused to take food and perform the necessities, but never her spirit. Jaime wondered where she dwelled, and if she was somehow imprisoned within herself. Maybe she hovered above her body, like a free spirit, studying her husband in his misery. Or perhaps she was gone for good, and Jaime was delusional in his hopes that it could be otherwise.

Once he’d asked Viserion to talk to her from his mind. The only reaction had been a loud dragon-snort, suggesting that his request was impossible. The dragon felt close to Brienne as his and Jaime’s sister, yes, but she wasn’t his rider.

Jaime felt as though he had spent a lifetime on the Wall, nursing his beloved wife in her terrifying ailment. In truth, he and Brienne must have arrived only a few weeks ago, after a very slow flight by dragons’ standards, since Viserion was wounded at the time.

Measuring the passing of time was a very imprecise endeavour in the Long Night. It could only be done by the positions of the moon. But this celestial light appeared and vanished as it liked, either hiding behind the dark clouds, or rising on the horizon, among the faraway stars.

Jaime often felt as if an evil god had meddled with the passing of time on purpose. The shadow god, or the red god, or the Seven themselves, wishing to punish their sinful flock. Perhaps the time had stopped or so it seemed without the sun.

He had yet to understand fully Jon’s command to hold Nightfort in his and his queen’s name, or rather, the part about converting it into a place of healing for those contaminated by the white walkers’ curse, lingering between human existence and its opposite - the life of an Other.

Despite that he had never imagined himself like a caretaker, Jaime had obeyed: a crippled knight performing the duties of an archmaester of a Citadel, only without the heavy chain of knowledge around his neck.

There were at least three hundred sick people in his charge, mostly men, but also wildling women, including boy squires, and girls as young as ten. Two transformed in their sleep since Jaime had taken over. Rising as fully formed Others, they were soon put down by the obsidian knives carried
by every healthy defender of Nightfort. There were always guards patrolling the corridors in regular, short intervals. Immediately after the destruction of the white walkers by dragonglass, the corpses turned human in death, recognisable to everyone. The living shed warm tears, remembering the good men they knew and whom they were forced to kill.

Aegon was also among the ill, the new Sword of the Morning, as skilled with the blade and as honourable as his late father. And almost as dead.

Same was with Cersei, locked up in a tower and guarded constantly so that she wouldn't wander off in her madness where Brienne could see her. Not before Jaime had a chance to explain her presence, and the king’s commands for Nightfort.

Besides, the royal couple feared that his evil twin sister could be kidnapped by the Night's King believing she had dragonblood. Jaime occasionally wished for the abduction to take place. Cersei wouldn't notice anything since she wasn't in her right mind. And if the Night's King successfully used her blood for any sinister purposes, maybe Jaime would finally know for certain that Aerys was his father. But this would mean that the war would be lost and Jaime always postponed this morbid wish for later. As long as Brienne lived, he’d have hope in the future and guard his sister well. Stealing her wouldn't come easy.

Torn between hope and despair, Jaime waited for a onetime attack on Nightfort, or for the great siege of the entire Wall to begin. An end was coming soon, one way or another. Viserion was convinced of it, hearing it from Rhaegal, who had learned it in his turn from another dragon.

*From Jon*, Jaime guessed. *Will you betray my darkest secrets to your green brother and his rider?* he asked, feigning insult. Viserion wouldn’t betray him, and his secrets weren’t as dark of late..

*Of course not,* Viserion was genuinely offended by Jaime’s fake doubt. *All your thoughts are safe with me. All your weaknesses, human.*

It was the first time that Viserion expressly addressed Jaime as member of a different race for which he seemed to have very little appreciation.

*What, am I no longer your brother?* Jaime complained, only half-joking.

Dragon roared loudly in the sky over Nightfort.

*Stop laughing will you?* Jaime decided to stop the banter with his dragon for the time being. *You’ll melt the Wall with your fetid breath,* he added and then ignored the dragon’s familiar presence in the far corners of his mind.

Obviously, the Wall wouldn’t lose solidity now, not even from dragonfire. It remained perfectly frozen, immaculately white and blue. It never wept like the black brothers called the occasional, very limited melting in summer, on very sunny days. But now it was so dreadfully chilly that the men grown, even the wildlings who were used to winter, occasionally cried, unable to stand it. The cold was absolute. And possibly the one true king of Westeros.

All this had to finish somehow, the winter, the war...

Since Brienne had turned ill, Jaime performed diligently any tasks he was given, and yet in parallel he often wondered what would end first, the winter or the world.

“Jaime,” Brienne spoke his name so softly and so suddenly that all his thoughts stopped. “I’m alive?” her honest, pretty voice was full of doubt.
“Unless we both ended up in seven heavens,” he whispered with emotion. “But it’s far too cold for that.”

“I feel warm,” she said quietly. “Why?”

“Do you?” he asked back, playing a fool, unable to explain it truthfully. The Others liked the cold, he supposed, and she was now one of them, if only in part. “Well I suppose that’s better than freezing,” he teased her tenderly.

Her hands flew under the blanket, reaching her belly. “Gods!” she exclaimed. “I thought I’d only dreamt this, but our child is alive.”

His hand and stump had already echoed her gesture, landing right next to her fingers. He felt it immediately, the tiny undulation of her skin under his only palm. A kick! Could it be?

“Is it his legs?” he asked stupidly, retrieving his stump cautiously to himself. It wasn’t a hand so maybe its touch displeased or, gods forbid, hurt the baby, despite that Brienne had never rejected him for that. Only for his past, when they just met.

“I don’t know if it’s arms or legs,” Brienne shook her head. “It feels like she’s doing somersaults, like a mummer on a fair.

“She?” Jaime echoed stupidly. Did women know the gender of the child? Could they feel it? He’d asked Cersei in the past, but she never answered.

“I think it’s a girl, but I don’t really know,” she tried to lift her head from her pillow, but only succeeded partially. “She could be a boy as well,” she paused. “Would you prefer a son?”

“Her, him, it matters not,” Jaime hurried to reassure her. “Do you think I care?”

“No,” she tried to shake her head, with little success.

“Great,” he smiled like a fool, striving to ignore a pang in his heart from the sight of Brienne being unable to move her head at will. “How are you? Tell me. You don’t need to be brave all the time.”

“I don’t feel my legs, and I had terrible nightmares,” she confided in him. “I witnessed the army of the dead invading the Wall and defeating all its defenders until the last one.”

This sounded like a prophetic foreboding, but the truth was often much more prosaic. “Dreams are only that; dreams,” Jaime said with conviction. Maybe she was seeing what the Others desired, because she couldn’t possibly see the future.

In a determined motion, Brienne pulled the blanket off her. The heavy woollen fabric slid to the rickety wooden floor, revealing her bare, white walker’s legs to her mute, long lasting scrutiny.

“I knew it,” she was barely able to speak after a while. “This is then also true. It was another terrifying dream I had. I fought them and I defeated them, and yet they took possession of me. And then I felt the calling of my king, the king of ice, inviting me to kill people in his name—”

“And yet you’re still human," he put in swiftly, adopting Viserion’s spiteful treatment of him and using it with love. “You’re alive and the curse hasn’t conquered an inch of your body in weeks. In all other cases it’s advancing. Slowly but steadily. Except in yours. The maesters can’t explain it, but they think it’s the child. He or she has a chance to be born in good health. And then—”

Brienne’s condition would worsen and she’d die like the rest of people in his care, after a certain
amount of time impossible to determine in advance.

Unable to convey this forecast of a perfectly tragic future, he kissed her forehead. Very gently, his lips traced a fine line to her hair, continuing their devoted path towards her left ear. Her skin was deliciously warm. Feeling it became a source of pure, instantaneous, most intimate pleasure. When he reached that ear, she succeeded in turning her head just enough for her lips to meet his with longing. Caught by surprise, Jaime responded avidly, giving all of himself to her; his love, his arrogance and his bloody loneliness. His world was a long kiss.

“I feel like I’m fading, you know,” she declared pensively when they were done. “But now I’m at a bit better,” she said with a fleeting smile. “Where am I? Where did you hide me? I imagine there are men willing to kill me for being an abomination.”

“No,” Jaime was pleased he could completely dissipate this nightmare of hers. “As I said before, you’re not the only one. We’re becoming used to this sickness. I keep you apart only because of other women who wish to have children, but they can’t. So they try to touch you to see if their wombs would quicken from it.”

Lyanna was victim of the same wishful annoyances, and she bore them with grace, allowing to be touched or evading it, depending on her constantly changing state of mind that ranged from cold, Stark calm to grief and dark depression.

Jaime’s left hand was still on Brienne’s belly, under her nightgown, and it was now positioned over her hand, touching her skin only insofar as it was bigger, not by much. Their palms were almost of equal size, but his fingers were longer. It didn’t take long for their child to kick them again. To… to make another somersault as she said she felt it.

“This is incredible!” Brienne exclaimed.

“Yes,” Jaime couldn’t agree more.

There had to be spring, what else? And the world would last forever.

Except that it might not.

His wife suddenly made a grimace of pain, closing her eyes. “It hurts… This… This condition-”

“It’s just an illness,’ Jaime wished his words could make it easier for her. “Please don’t sleep,” he begged. “Not again, not anymore.”

She closed her eyes, and he almost shook her hard. “Brienne, watch out,” he tried to make a bad joke, “I’ll have to do something dishonourable. You’ll hate me and stay awake from it.”

“You won’t do anything rash,” she judged him behind closed eyes. “You’re past that. You’ll make mistakes as anyone else. But not with your honour, not on purpose.”

She knew him well, too well.

“Not even if I d-”

“Don’t say that!” he countered vehemently.

She reopened her eyes. “I’m here. I was just resting,” her attention was all on him, but only briefly. A cloud appeared in her innocent blue gaze, a shade that darkened and took over.
Soon she was asleep again.

“Brienne, wake up please!” he implored desperately.

“Ser Jaime.” Out of the blue, his sister-in-law, Tysha, who should have been with Tyrion in Castle Black, appeared at the door.

“Would you leave me for a while, if it please you, my lady,” he asked courteously, controlling the rise of his bad temper, needing to spend more time with his wife to see if he could wake her again. She had almost returned to him.

“Gladly, but I fear that your other guest is very anxious to speak you.” Tysha’s reply came as a disappointment.

“Tyrion always waited for me,” Jaime insisted, guessing who it was. “Please tell him to do so now. He’ll listen to anything you say. Please, lady.”

“It’s not my husband, only a friend of his,” she replied sweetly. “Tyrion stayed in Castle Black.” Her lavish, blue shadowbinder robes rustled like leaves in spring, sweeping the dusty floor. Jaime wondered if she ever took them fully off and if her skin had turned blue from the attire, like Brienne’s armour.

“We came in the chariot of the Queen Mother, the one pulled by wolves.” Tysha continued. “They’d run unbelievably fast over the frozen path, I should like to add. My travel companion and your visitor was in need of haste. And of you.”

“Why didn’t the king fly if he needed to see me? Why didn’t his dragon speak to mine?” Jaime asked flatly, suffering from a strange feeling of premonition and doom. What does he want now? I have been loyal.

“Is Jon Snow the only wolf left?” Tysha answered with a question of her own. “Go see for yourself. Don’t worry about your lady,” she paused and gave him a significant look whose meaning he couldn’t grasp. “I’ll watch over her until your return. Even if takes longer than you think. I’ll tell her stories so terrible that they might wake her and keep her in this world.”

“What about?” Jaime reacted spontaneously, needing to know anything that could help Brienne.

“For a start about the Rat Cook. And if that’s not awful enough, then also about the Night’s King. He had lived here in the dawn of times, ruling his lands. This was his high seat. Did you not know?”

“I haven’t heard that story,” Jaime stated agnostically.

“Tyrion didn’t either. I learned it from the Northmen and the wildlings. We don’t know any good stories in the West.”

“Might be,” Jaime cut the conversation short. He wouldn’t lose anything by letting a lady try what he couldn’t achieve for weeks. Until moments ago. But his success was so unexpected, bittersweet and brief that the memory of it began to hurt as much as all his previous failures. “Where is my guest?”

“In the stables, near the fire made for horses so that they wouldn’t die from cold. If you mean to send your guest back where he came from empty-handed, then please don’t be long. In that case I should very much like to return to Castle Black with him before we are missed,” she paused. “And though it still feels very odd to me that I should feel like this, I’m already missing my husband.”

“You and Tyrion have reconciled?” he blurted. It was impossible to tell by her ironic tone and
indifferent appearance whether Tysha beat his brother or kissed him when they were alone.

“That’s none of your business, my lord,” she answered irreverently, showing him a set of perfect teeth. At the same time, she looked pleased and childishly giddy.

Jaime hoped this was a confirmation. *Mother above. Please help Tyrion.*

“Thank you for your offer to keep my wife company. Please do not leave her side until I return,” he demanded ceremoniously.

Tysha sat on Brienne’s bed. “Take your time, my lord. I’m not going anywhere.”

Jaime hurried to the stables.

Xxxxx

Xxxxx

Xxxxx

Xxxxx

His guest was seated quietly on a heap of straw, leaning against a wall, away from the fire. Jaime couldn’t see his face, but he could be a dwarf.

“What’s the secrecy, Tyrion?” Jaime asked arrogantly, approaching rapidly. “What game are you and your wife playing with me? Are you not comfortable in Castle Black? Shall I arrange for a marriage bed to be brought down here?”

“I am not married, good sir,” the voice was deep and young, and filled with the judgmental righteousness Jaime would have hated.

If it hadn’t been Bran Stark come to see him, making the old guilt resurface like a sharp fish bone stuck in his throat, threatening to choke him.

The horses were neighing nervously in the stalls. *Why?* A quick look around revealed the presence of three huge wolves, each with different furs and eyes, snarling at Jaime. Three direwolf pups of the Starks grown to full size.

“I am betrothed though,” their young master continued with a modicum of pride. “Who would have said so? Not you, I guess.”

“Who would have said I would ever marry a good woman?” Jaime parried the verbal blow. “No one, I guess.”

Bran Stark didn’t speak further. The silence in the stables was harder to stand than the killing chill, interrupted only by the menacing snarling of the wolves.

“What do you want now?” Jaime reacted effusively. “Yes I was a fool, and a criminal, and I can’t take back what I’ve done though I do regret it.”

The young man crawled closer to him on his arms and stared up at Jaime with a bright blue gaze, whose intensity was revealed by firelight. Slowly, he began, “I’ve come here to ask you for a special service. No one else I know will do it for me. Not even my kingly brother.”

“And I will?” Jaime reacted vehemently. “It didn’t occur to you that I’m the least suited man to help
you?"

Bran Stark was undeterred. “You owe me, Ser Jaime. You ruined my life. Is it not just that you repay for what you’ve done and that I, the victim, determine your punishment? I have come to collect on your debt.”

It was Jaime’s turn to shut up.

“I need to travel beyond the Wall,” Bran whispered. “You’re a dragonrider. Take me where I have to go.”

Thinking of what Brienne might do in his shoes, Jaime tried to reason with his unexpected guest and justice, “Dragons can’t fly over the Wall. It’s death to them. We’ll perish needlessly.”

“I’m not a fool and I’m not requesting the impossible,” Bran argued back. “A dead dragon won’t take me or you anywhere. There is a cave I need to go to, and it’s now very near the Wall. Near Nightfort. You should be able to bring me there and fly back. But it will soon change places so we ought to go now. We have very little time. It’s not far. I’ve seen it. It’s time to catch up with it before it disappears.”

“No,” Jaime answered squarely. “And not because I’m afraid or wouldn’t help you. I’d do anything, anything, do you hear me, to repay my debt to you. I already gave you a ride, from Skagos to Greywater Watch, didn’t I?” he paused. “But I’m certain that your kingly brother didn’t allow this or he’d take you himself. If I agree, he will judge me for that crime.” And hate me more than he already does. Because helping you to your death would be very dishonourable. Do you not see?

“And I no longer have shit for honour,” Jaime proclaimed.

“How does your wife feel? That good woman you married? What about your unborn child?” Bran continued whipping him mercilessly with words. “I hear they might be unwell like Jon’s friend Aegon and so many others. Listen to me. There is a substance, a drink in that cave that could help her. It’s a brew made by the Others. My sister Sansa had given it to me when she was their captive and I was in hiding. It’s nourishing for men, making the body thrive in winter. Without it, I would have died or gone mad in my last days in that cave. If I’m right about this, if I can find it, the maesters might be able to understand what it is and make more of it. They might cure everyone battling the illness in this castle.”

You would have gone mad? Why go back then? Jaime’s thoughts raced forward, battling to understand what he should do. “This miracle drink isn’t what you’re looking for, is it?” he questioned Bran. “What are you after? Why do you want to return if you hated being there towards the end? Answer with honour and I might reconsider.”

“What should I? Why do you pretend to care for my wellbeing?” Bran parried his verbal strike word for word. “You disposed of my life once to satisfy your lover’s whim. What is it to you if I lose it of my own free will? No, Ser Jaime… I don’t owe you any answers.”

“In that case,” Jaime replied, feeling defeated, but not willing to yield, “I shall go back to my wife and you shall return with Lady Tysha to Castle Black.”

“Very well. So be it. I shall find another way,” Bran Stark declared solemnly. “And I suspect you’ll find your lady silent,” he added cruelly. “As responsive as my late mother and father.”

Jaime hurried back to Brienne’s room. When approaching, suddenly it occurred to him to walk on tiptoes, wishing to check if she fared any better without being seen.
Lady Tysha’s solemn, storytelling voice rang like a sept bell through the closed door “...some men say that it wasn’t the Night’s King fault that he’d become evil. It was his wife’s fault, because she wasn’t a good woman and she’d turned his head around. Well, she wasn’t even a true woman, according to some, but a corpse-bride he’d encountered beyond the Wall…” When she said that, Tysha’s tone seemed to betray a genuine, heartfelt sorrow.

Jaime grasped the door carefully. He’d only open it a little, to peek in. Holding his breath, he pushed it slowly, and felt extremely accomplished when he was successful without making a sound.

Brienne continued to sleep in peace. Her face and long hair were illuminated by the fire from hearth, and she had never looked more beautiful.

“I ask you, Lady Brienne,” Tysha continued with that same hurt in her voice, “why is it so often that women are blamed for the choices of men? Had his wife been what they say and worse, wasn’t it him who had fallen for her and betrayed his own kind? It wasn’t her who had become the Night’s Queen! And I must add that every time I look back at my own life, I have strong doubts about any true guilt or evil on the side of this poor Mermaid Wife. I may be wrong, and I may be unjust, but I still believe that she might have been merely unfortunate, and not deliberately choosing the evil, like so many of us.”

With that, Tysha turned silent. Her story made no impact to Brienne. Perhaps it hadn’t been terrible enough.

Perhaps nothing would wake her again.

Unless he-

More silent than a cat, Jaime returned to the stables through the passages and the wormways underground connecting the castle. It was too cold to go out.

On his way, as if destiny wanted it, he spotted Viserion, sprawled lazily on the Wall like a large watchdog, his tail hanging down like a long, scaled rope. The dragon never felt the cold, harbouring an immense well of fire in his belly.

*Viserion. Can we do what the boy is asking? Can you do it all? Won’t flying beyond the Wall kill you in an instant?*

*It might.* Viserion showed him images of his brothers, Rhaegal and Drogon, who had dared brave the Wall before.

Rhaegal had almost died when he’d saved a badly wounded Jon from a large weirwood grove. He’d left his rider in a human village on a stony shore, barely had force to return on the good side of the Wall, and then lay sick for months, drifting between life and death, until Drogon found him and helped him with his healing breath.

Drogon was more successful, and above all, faster. When Daenerys commanded him to take her to Jon, he had simply dropped her and left before the old magic preventing the monsters from crossing caused him any lasting harm. Viserion would try to follow his example.

*But we might die trying if the flight takes too long,* the dragon suggested with melancholy. *How do you find this?*

*Fair enough.*

*Good then,* the dragon approved of Jaime’s sentiment.
Jaime burst into the stables and announced to Bran with arrogance. “Very well then. We’re leaving now. Before your magic cave runs away.”

Impulsively, thoughtlessly, he took Bran in his arms and carried him out, into the freezing night air. The winter wind sizzled in his ears, and he wondered if he’d lose them to frostbite.

Viserion! he called loudly in his mind. They had to depart immediately. It was impossible to wait in the gale for very long. His dragon didn’t tardy.

In the moonlight that appeared from behind the clouds, at the same time as the dragon’s snout, a trace of fear might have crossed Bran’s young face, now that he was getting his death wish. But the little wolf soon hid it, looking as distant and indifferent as his kingly brother. Jaime carried him up, over Viserion’s long nose, between his eyes, his horns and all the way to his spiked back, avoiding the wind blows the best he could. Since Viserion’s last growth spurt, this way was shorter and less steep than climbing up the dragon’s leg or wing with his human load. On his usual riding place, he made Bran seat safely behind a huge white spike.

“Hold on to it,” he instructed him.

Bran obeyed, but still spoke, “Does your wife know you’re here?”

“What about your betrothed?” Jaime struck back.

Bran hesitated to answer.

“She doesn’t, does she?” Jaime mocked him, but only a little. “Just as I thought. Guess what,” he said foolishly, “they’ll know when we come back.”

Viserion took off, soaring towards the moon, but wouldn’t leave the safety of the Wall without more precise commands. Suddenly he began showing to Jaime images of many long dead dragons who had flown to peril and to ruin at their riders’ behest.

From high above, Jaime noticed an open window on the castle, banging noisily against its frame. The next guard patrol would close it before it broke, passing within less than an hour. He suddenly felt proud of how well he had structured the running of Nightfort in little time.

His people had standing orders in case of his unexplained absence. They would send the raven to the king and queen, letting them know he was gone, asking them to appoint a new commander to protect the ill, Brienne included. And now he also knew that Tysha would watch after her while he was gone.

She must have known what Bran would ask for.

“So far so good,” he said to the young Stark and grinned, suddenly more than eager to embark on a thoughtless, brave quest. This was far better suited for his nature than quiet and prudent command duty. “Say out loud where this cave is. Viserion will understand.”

“It’s under the lake nearest to Nightfort,” Bran replied with calm. “Where the Night’s King had met his Mermaid Wife when the world was still young.”

You heard him. Fly fast.

Viserion spread his wings and dived into the night with high speed, willing to fight and scorch the earth even if it meant he’d be burned and bitten in return.
You know that I’m wrong and you’re still listening to me? Why? Jaime wondered.

Does it matter? Viserion set the night on fire with a huge golden jet of flame, brighter than moonlight.

Jaime would never understand how dragons could be both extremely obedient and completely savage at the same time.

It mattered not. Nothing mattered. Neither the wrongs he had done in the past nor the sin he was committing now by taking a helpless boy to his ruin.

If there was any hope left to cure Brienne, and not only to save their child, Jaime wouldn’t fight, but rather embrace his destiny.

The day he died he’d be remembered justly as having shit for honour.
Daenerys XI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Daenerys

Her husband was dour and she couldn’t shake him up.

Their new chambers were constructed hastily on top of the Wall. The luxury reserved for king and queen consisted of four timber walls, fire, a simple bed of furs, and a roof over their heads, to keep the snow out.

The floor was pure ice. A layer of small, irregular stones served to make it less slippery.

But not less cold.

Jon took part in the building himself, whenever he had a moment to spare, in-between constant battles and war councils, ignoring well-intentioned comments that the mundane task of construction wasn’t fit for a king. Dany understood perfectly, letting him do as he pleased. The combination of fighting and working hard made him as calm as he could be in war without having a strategy for victory.

High up, he always felt both watchful and free, guarding the realm of men and keeping his mind open as the great black sky above. Yet so far neither he nor anyone else who had followed Jon to war had been able to think of a new plan against the Others, except the obvious one of not yielding. Not even Tyrion whose head was bigger than most parts of his small body, according to his own words.

Dany’s only hope was that spring would come before she and Jon were obliged to step willingly into Azor Ahai’s and Nissa Nissa's shoes.

During Jon's campaign against the Night's King in Frostfangs, one turn of the moon ago, she had felt with fervour that sacrificing herself would ensure the future of Westeros. She had longed to die and fulfil her destiny: to save the realm and her husband, knowing herself unable to give him a child.

\textit{Unless the sun rises in the west and not in the east one day, and many impossible feats come to pass.}

But now, on the Wall, Dany feared that her ardent wish to become Nissa Nissa was elusive as spring. What if her sacrifice wouldn’t mean victory? What if her yearning to die for a good cause was planted in her head by the Others? Maybe they were eager to make Jon kill her for no reason at all. What if the weight of the experience would break him, make him bow to their rule?

The Others had somehow made everyone see their king in Frostfangs, but then his presence had turned out to be only an elaborate illusion, like so many other false visions and experiences people had suffered from beyond the Wall. The wilderness was never the same. The lands constantly changed looks and shape, deceiving the most perspicacious men and women to see things which were not there at all, or to miss mortal peril in front of their nose and be killed. Only the fields closest to the Wall remained constant and solid, untouched by the world-transforming magic of winter.

The Wall held the world in place: stable, safe and trusted.

Rhaegal rested outside Jon and Dany's high quarters, sprawled lazily over the Wall in his entire
length, measuring at least sixty feet of green and bronze scales. He was growing bigger every day and nothing could escape his scrutiny. Sensing the enemy presence from afar, he would take Jon and Dany to any fort on the Wall that came under attack fast as lightning, and then back, for a short respite. There was always a new onslaught of wights and their masters, sometimes within hours.

Jon forced himself to regularly take his meals, but most of the time he fought, both on his own and from dragon's back. He barely ever slept.

And he couldn't be killed. He would recover from every wound with uncanny speed and help from Rhaegal's healing breath, even when he lost too much blood.

Dany loved and feared his special condition. What did it mean for him and their marriage in the long run? But how would he ever survive the war without it? Only he and Dany were aware of how invulnerable he had become. Their people never realised it, attributing his good health and too easy healing to supreme fighting skills, which he also possessed, no doubt, but they wouldn't make him... immortal.

Immortal, undying, undead.

Dany accompanied Jon to every battle, but she always stayed with Rhaegal if her husband dismounted. She defended herself with an obsidian hairpin if a blue mist or a fully formed white walker approached her when she was on her own, circumventing Rhaegal's fire.

The Wall hadn't been breached again, not since the episode when Viserion had surprised everyone by selflessly sticking a piece of his wing in the ice masonry to mend it. Tyrion and the wildlings believed that the Others were only able to make a hole on that occasion because the Wall had been weakened at that time by the long-lasting black magic presence of Stannis' shadow in Nightfort and Castle Black. The shadow was fortunately was no longer near the Wall. Chased far down south, it now haunted Deepwood Motte and the lands of the mountain clans.

The greatest edifice of mankind stood tall, holding on, just like the men and women defending it.

But there were many losses.

And even more fighters contracted the new illness. Slowly transforming into the Others, they were sent to Nightfort to recover, or rather, die slowly, under Jaime Lannister's command and Viserion's protection. Crippled as a result of his sacrifice, the white dragon also still suffered from injuries inflicted by Drogon and Stannis. He could defend Nightfort easily, but not fly fast enough from one end of the Wall to another like Rhaegal.

The main force of the Others, led by the Night's King in person, had yet to arrive. Marching at a painfully slow pace from the Lands of Always Winter, the white walkers struggled to emerge out of the mountains through the barrier of solid rock that Jon had created to slow them down, provoking an avalanche after the battle in which he had attempted to defeat the Great Other and failed. In Frostfangs, his enemy couldn't have come to meet him in the field. He had no mouth of the heart tree to jump from, no possibility to abuse the powers of the old gods to travel fast and far from his high seat in Lands of Always Winter, the cursed icy Winterfell.

But now his army was coming closer every day. Ghost followed after them, spying on them, letting Jon see through his eyes where they were.

The defences of the people of Westeros would soon come under even more pressure, and they were already stretched to the limit.
“I should have killed Stannis,” Jon stated with passion. “And Sam’s father and half of the nobles of the Seven Kingdoms. Then maybe all people able to hold an obsidian knife would come to the Wall instead of hiding in their homes. But what would that make me?”

Dany always avoided answering that question. They had repeated the same argument many times in the last few days. If I look back, I am lost. What did killing her enemies make her in the past? A woman? A queen? Or nothing at all?

“Those who could go to war are all here,” she countered his views. "It is what it is."

And maybe even if every man, woman or child able to hold a knife in Seven Kingdoms had come here, it wouldn't be enough.

The main force of the Others had more soldiers than there were grains of sand on a beach or drops of water in the sea.

How could anyone resist them? Unless Jon reforged his sword in Dany's loving heart, killed the Night's King, and by that same, single, mighty blow put his soldiers back to sleep.

"We should have halted in Winterfell on our way back here from Greywater Watch," she continued the conversation. "Even if it would only serve to alleviate your nightmares."

“No,” Jon said, shaking his head with determination. “We flew over it and saw nothing wrong. It's only a bad dream, Dany, that I should lose the North to the Others like my brother Robb had lost it to Boltons and their allies when he had ridden off to war. It's just like that other strange dream I used to have, with the crypts of Winterfell.”

“Used to?” she was very curious, sensing a secret coming up. He had never spoken of his cauchemars in detail. “Or are you having it still?”

“What does it matter?” To Dany’s regret, Jon waved her off. “It’s childish! I think it’s the boy in me who’s dreaming. The boy who thought himself the son of Eddard Stark and who is still reminded in his sleep that he never belonged to Winterfell. By the gods, Dany, even Robb’s son is here as the Warden of the North, despite that he’s a little boy. Everyone will think of me as weak and craven if I waste time visiting my childhood home. The Others will soon break through the mountains. The great siege is about to begin. I know it, you know it. The people all know it. Ghost has seen it. Hell, the Night’s King might be waiting for you and me to leave and stop being vigilant in order to speed up his advance. Our place is here.”

“The imminence of the siege gives you even better reason for a short absence," Dany continued calmly. "To stay in Winterfell would be safer for your mother. Rhaegal flies faster every day. Surely no one could object if you take her there. You would be away for a few hours, maybe less. Not even the Others can mount the siege in so short a time. You'd be back soon.”

Jon shook his head. "Mother doesn’t want to leave, and I can't find it in my heart to force her," he paused. "I love her now, but I don’t need her," he confessed. "What does that make me?" he questioned her with emotion.

"A man," Dany announced calmly, thinking of her own mother, who died bringing her to the world and was now almost forgotten by history. On the contrary, Aerys II, Rhaella’s loving husband who beat her when he hadn’t been amassing wildfire or sentencing people to death in constant fear of conspiracy against his person, was described in detail in all chronicles, from hairstyle to long toenails.

Gods, even Dany had thought so much less of Rhaella's sad fate since she came of age. And so
much more of Aerys, her authoritarian father, whom she knew had been difficult even before she knew he was mad. Yet she had thought that his end had been unjust until she had established clearly for herself that he had probably deserved it. Stabbed in the back by a young, talented knight...

_Shall I be forgotten like my mother if I become Nissa Nissa? Shall I be only a small word or a verse in the glorious song of Azor Ahai reborn?_

She didn’t want to be queen in her own right anymore, but she hoped to be more than a footnote in her own life.

She and Jon argued more times than they had made love since they were elected king and queen of Westeros in equal right. Winter had come for them as a couple, much sooner than they would have expected. The cold was too great, the occasional attacks on the Wall too many, the expectations of the great siege too heavy on their mind.

"My king," Tyrion burst into their quarters unannounced, panting, red from cold. He must have climbed the steep stairs in haste on his stunted legs. Seven hundred feet. Normally he’d send a tall man, as he called the rest, on such tortuous ascent.

Dany knew immediately that he wasn’t bringing good news.

"There's a messenger from Winterfell," he let out between uncontrolled gasps.

"Let him in," Jon replied impatiently.

"Would that I could," Tyrion retorted, struggling to regain his dwarf breath. "We put him in the first empty bed to warm him up. He’s not well."

Jon stormed out without a word.

Dany followed, fearing the worst. _It's not Rickon, is it?_

On Jon’s unspoken command, Rhaegal landed all three of them in the courtyard, at the entrance to the wormways. Dug deep underground, they were now the warmest part of Castle Black. Rooms were made in the maze and not only corridors, to save defenders from freezing that was now inevitable for anyone who dared spend the night in the rickety wooden towers of the Castle. In one of the first such subterranean chambers, near the entrance, a tall old man slept in bed near blazing fire, wrapped in furs from tip to toe. His grey face and jaw were square, his eyes closed-

"Stannis!" Jon exclaimed with disappointment, instinctively touching his sword. “Wasn't he supposed to die on the way?”

A she-wolf growled savagely at Jon’s words, stepping out of the shadows, together with Jon’s mother who was holding a candle.

"No, Jon," Lyanna countered her son, "look better."

"It's me, Your Grace," the man opened his eyes, and his youth shone in them, just like it rang in his voice, despite his aged appearance.

“Gendry!” Dany cried out.

“Winterfell’s under attack,” Gendry delivered his message. “There were no ravens. I was the strongest. So I walked… And then Nymeria carried me. Arya’s there and your brother Rickon. And the Horn of Joramun."
There was fear in Jon’s eyes.

Danny leaped forward, anticipating her husband’s next move of impulsively heading to Winterfell on his own, disregarding all wise arguments against it that he had steadfastly presented to her in their recent disputes. Running like mad, she was barely able to catch up with him in the yard, grabbing his sword hand in an instant before he would have mounted Rhaegal and took off without her.

*I told you so, my love,* she thought bitterly, keeping her mouth shut, not wishing to rub her victory in an open wound. “Should you not take more men with you?” she asked when Rhaegal was already flying.

“Rhaegal is worth a hundred good men,” he replied coldly. “Everyone in Winterfell could be dead by now. Or worse.”

The truth they uncovered was a hundred times more dreadful than Jon’s nightmares about losing his home to the enemy that would leave him shaking in Dany’s arms at night.

In the middle of the wolfswood, west of the kingsroad, behind the frozen line of the moat, around the untouched godswood with its black lake and its sleeping heart tree, an army of wights, led by a handful of Others, prowled an empty field.

Winterfell had vanished from the face of the earth.

On the vast clearing that was left in place of the capital of the North, the host of the slain maundered aimlessly from one end to another. Many walking corpses were battered, lacking body parts. They looked tired and defeated to Dany, as though they were searching for the castle in vain.

As if Winterfell had escaped them, avoiding conquest by disappearing into thin air.

As if it had sprouted dragon wings and flown away.

Unlike their slaves, the Others seemed relentless, full of purpose, never giving up on their designs. Always strong. Inhuman for not showing any hesitation. Armed with long, cruel ice whips, urging the wights to do their bidding.

Jon yelled with anger and hurt, seeing red, misunderstanding a possible feat of magic for the proof of ultimate destruction he had glimpsed in his dreams. Rhaegal breathed fire, more than Dany had ever seen from him, with clear intent to savagely turn all enemies into ashes, from the most pitiful, crippled wight-child to the tallest and strongest white walker. The green dragon spat and belched flames, until there was no more warmth left in his enormous belly, and he began to lose height.

"Jon, stop it! There’s something wrong here! Maybe it’s not what you think!” Dany shouted. Her husband didn’t listen.

Maybe he couldn’t hear her through all the burning.

“Rhaegal has to keep his fire burning!” she yelled even louder.

Uttering a savage battle cry, her husband’s voice silenced hers. The loss he experienced had to be too much to bear. Would he howl with equal force if he killed her, assuming the destiny of Azor Ahai?

*He would,* she concluded. *He loves me. As much or more than his sister Arya and his brother Rickon. More than his own mother. I’d be his Nissa Nissa and the sword forged in the heat of my loving heart would be unstoppable.*
As soon as she had so vividly imagined her own death for a good cause, she admonished herself for giving in to the macabre fantasy. Remembering two legendary heroes always served to bring their destiny closer to Jon and Dany, leaving them no other way they could go. She had told herself a hundred times she should forgot all she knew about Azor Ahai, and was always unable to follow her own advice.

She would be Jon’s Nissa Nissa, and her cry of agony would reach the sky, tearing it apart.

But for the time being, just as she feared, Rhaegal’s fire died out. Deprived of his main source of strength, he could no longer fly. He was obliged to drop Dany first, at the dark lake, and then Jon, in front of the heart tree where they had said their marriage vows.

Rhaegal then crawled away, over frozen ground, slithering between the trees of the godswood that were miraculously untouched by fire, dragging himself closer to the burning inferno he had created on Jon’s command, in need of an outside source of warmth to recreate the heat he had lost.

No. He didn’t lose it. He had given it away for his rider.

Dany had never seen a dragon so miserable.

“Why did you push him so hard?” she asked Jon in disbelief. “Couldn’t you feel it was too much? You were as cruel as a white walker chasing a wight to obey him!!”

With thinned lips, Jon stared at the closed mouth of the heart tree. “He’ll show up now,” he announced darkly. “And then I shall end it all without having to sacrifice anyone else!”

Dany wished it were that simple. “Your weapon can’t hurt him and Rhaegal’s belly is empty!” she exclaimed. “What do you hope to achieve?”

Jon ignored her.

She hurried towards him, around the black lake, its surface more polished than a mirror. Drogon used to dive in it, she remembered, despite that she had never seen him doing so. No, it can’t be. She suddenly realised that she wasn’t seeing her memories, but those of another being, clear like sunrise.

Colourful images of a happy, swimming dragon appeared in her mind, projected from great distance. And not by some sorcerer, she was certain. She would never forget who it was or mistake him for anyone else. Drogon! Where are you? Her treacherous child had chosen that moment to reach out to her after months of stubborn silence. Was it because Jon hated her now? What had she ever done wrong to either Jon or Drogon to earn their dismissive attitude?

She concluded she’d done nothing at all. She wasn’t at fault. She had counselled Jon numerous times to verify how Winterfell fared. She had always protected Drogon when it was in her power to do so.

Traitor, she accused Drogon angrily in her mind, hoping he was listening. How could you leave me because I fell in love with a man once more, and not with a dragon? It’s only blood I have from you, grown-up child of mine, no scales and no claws. And no fire in my belly to destroy my enemies. Are you not dreaming of a scaled lover who would lay eggs for you? Why are you talking to me now? If you ever loved me, come back and help us win the war!

Very distant, weak, enslaved black presence showed her images of the long, dark crypts of the Lords and King of Winter laying right under the black lake, which was not as deep as it seemed.

But the crypts are gone like the castle, Drogon! They could have been destroyed for all we know.
Her remark came too late.

She couldn’t sense him anymore.

At that moment, it struck her that Drogon must need her help to escape the yoke of the red woman. That was why he had spoken to her! And she had just been unable to provide it. She failed him now, if never before. She would have howled from realisation like Jon did when he heard Gendry’s message, if the earth didn’t begin to shake.

"Can’t you feel it?" Jon remembered her existence, albeit barely, carefully drawing his red-lit sword. "Can’t you see it?"

The mouth of the heart tree shivered and stretched as if someone was trying to pry it open from within.

"It could be another illusion, of course," Jon declared bitterly. “Or maybe the gods will be merciful for once, and I shall kill him here and now, taking my revenge.”

"He came in flesh to our wedding,” Dany muttered, remembering being kidnapped and pulled into the heart tree by the iron grip of the cold, gnarled arm, much stronger than Jon’s. “He had come here through your sacred tree once—"

The Night’s King repeated his one time success, bursting out of the heart tree with crystal sword in hand. His weapon looked much larger to Dany than before, and Jon’s magic blade seemed weak and fragile in comparison. A company of Others followed their king, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven! The tree… The tree snapped the seventh one in half, closing its bloody, red mouth abruptly around his waist with unstoppable brute force. His disembodied head and torso fell into snow, dissolving into beautiful blue crystals. There were still six of them out there, tall and armed, besides the Night’s King, who was a superior swordsman, like Jon.

Jon couldn’t best them all unless Rhaegal restored his reserve of fire in time to burn them. Or could he? Was the pain over losing Arya enough to make Jon inhuman, like them? A perfect, heartless, infallible fighter? Could she take one or two down with her hairpin?

The Night’s King laughed and wiped invisible tears of joy from his bright blue eyes. "I’ve waited so long for you to come home, my loyal, young bannerman, here where I can easily reach you from my high seat,” he spoke with uncontainable mirth and as if he couldn’t believe his luck.

The world was burning around the godswood; snow melting into sloshy water, wights and trees turning into black ashes. Six nameless white walkers kept close to the heart tree, reticent to leave the safety of the grove and approach the conflagration. But not their king. He only laughed harder when he contemplated the inferno around him, not fearing dragonfire as Dany and Jon had always hoped he might. Maybe he was just braver than the others, being their ruler. Or he had realised, like Dany did, that the godswood wasn’t catching fire at all. They were all safe in it.

“I’ve wasted every soldier I still had south of your Wall,” the Night's King began to speak pompously. “I’ve employed every mist that had slipped through it under the wing of the shadow your people have foolishly brought from Asshai,” he declared. “But it’s worth it, King Jon. I have captured your beloved sister and the Horn of Joramun and I made you come here. Even better, you stand defenceless and dragonless before me, and you’ve brought your dragon wife to my custody. How long will your minions on the Wall resist me when they see you on my side, I wonder?”

"They have their orders and no love of you. They’ll fight." Not losing his calm, Jon parried the verbal attack of his enemy. His… his antecessor. Jon Stark. Somehow, to know that the Night’s
King must have been born a Stark exacerbated Jon’s hatred of him. “They’ll choose a new king,” Jon proclaimed righteously, with utmost dignity.

“But where’s Arya?” he asked with passion. “Let me see her, and maybe I will bend the knee. Isn’t that what you want? Another faithful bannerman? Don’t you already have too many in the Lands of Always winter?”

Jon couldn’t be serious, could he? Did winter overturn his mind? Did he love Arya more than he ever loved her? The worm of doubt gripped Dany’s heart, filling it with senseless despair.

Bloody, cursed winter!

The glowing magic sword clashed with the giant crystal one, sparks flying through the night.

“Take her,” the Night’s King commanded to his Others to kidnap Dany.

But Jon wouldn’t let anyone pass, standing like a shield between her and harm. Moments later, a white walker almost crushed his shield arm with the force of his blow, cutting a vein. Blood gushed out like mad, but the injury didn’t slow Jon down. Dany was used to the terrific sight of his wounds that should have killed him or stopped him from fighting, but always failed to do so. Yet her heart constricted. What if they cut him in half like the heart tree had done with the last white walker?

The Night’s King whistled, “I told you that you only look alive, Your Grace. You’ve been mine since your brothers murdered you in snow. Why don’t you admit it? It would be so much easier if you let yourself be possessed willingly by the true spirit of winter. Almost painless. After your transformation, you’d find that men are largely imperfect and unnecessary, I can assure you. The existence of a white walker is much more pleasant. It’s pure joy, I’d say.”

Jon didn’t waste time talking. Landing blows left and right with stunning precision and speed, he had already killed one, and almost decapitated another of his opponents. “He looks dead to me,” he pointed at the latest curtain of blue crystals saturating the air.

Behind Dany, Rhaegal puffed smoke, but no fire yet.

Jon needed time.

How could she give it to him?

If she came closer to the Others and fought them with her obsidian hairpin, she might undermine Jon’s efforts, expose herself, be caught and kidnapped, dragged into the mouth of the heart tree.

The black, perfectly flat surface of the lake attracted her, called to her, spoke to her with Drogon’s voice.

Come here, Mysha.

Mother.

In here.

Fear not.

Late in learning the secret language of dragonkind despite being the Mother of Dragons, Dany had started hearing Drogon clearly only when it was too late, when he was already angry with her because she went looking for her nephew and ordered him to fly with her beyond the Wall. She had
known that he might suffer dearly as a consequence, and yet she had forced him to obey. Drogon did
her will, and then left her, tolerating only Rhaegar as his rider, until her brother’s untimely death.

Traitor, she nonetheless accused her runaway dragon once more in her mind, receiving no answer.
I’d burn you to a cinder if I could. Maybe the red woman wouldn’t be able to bewitch you if you
returned to me when Rhaegar passed away, instead of turning to Stannis.

The call of the water became too strong to resist. Surely no one expected such madness from Aerys’
and Rhaella’s tender princess. For a moment, she pondered her own epitaph. Born amidst salt and
smoke, and drowned when no one was watching.

But her madness seemed like utmost wisdom if she allowed herself to trust Drogon.

How could she?

And why wouldn’t she?

"No!" Jon and the Night's King screamed with one voice in the darkness, both sounding as if they
would die from grief in an instant if she took her own life.

Too late.

Dany jumped into the lake. To her surprise, the water was quite warm. She tried to swim, but a
swirling current caught her legs, pulling her under. Soon she swallowed thick, tasteless liquid, losing
air from her lungs, growing scales on her face and slim back.

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas!

Thank you for reading.
Jon XII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Jon**

He dived into the black pond after his wife without thinking. Water spattered loudly around his body, devouring him like fire. Under the surface, he plunged deeper, swimming in broad strokes, with his eyes wide open. Alarmed because he didn’t see Dany’s silver hair in the dark, he still expected to catch her.

But all he grasped was more water.

*How?* She couldn’t have sunk so fast! He had jumped right after her, on the same spot! How deep was the bloody pond? Jon had never swam in it because it was sacred. Father--Lord Stark always sat on its shore to clean Ice, after passing a death sentence.

Hot springs under the guest house had served for idle bathing in Jon’s childhood, and the moat as a perfect place to compete in swimming with Robb.

The guest house was now gone like Winterfell... The moat was a frozen snake slithering through barren, snowy fields.

Jon’s arms remained empty and his chest was about to burst. Swiftly, he dived out for air, and then plunged even deeper. His black clothes felt heavy, but his determination weighed far more. There was still time to find Dany before she drowned. She was the blood of the dragon, stronger than she looked, and didn’t surrender easily.

Instead of his wife, he touched a muscled, cold, armoured, *male* body, whose strong arms fended him off and swam away. *The loud splash when I dived in--this is why.* Quite unexpectedly, the Night’s King had gallantly joined Jon in his endeavour to rescue Dany.

*So it's more important for you to kidnap her than to kill me.*

*Good to know.*

But after diving in and out a few more times, avoiding another run-in with the enemy who was doing exactly the same, Jon turned to despair. He and the Night’s King must have combed the entire lake by now, in all directions. It wasn’t that big. And not even the blood of the dragon could survive that long without air.

He continued with his efforts, needing to find Dany’s body if the worst was true, to say his farewell. Like with Ygritte, long ago.

But if all he had left from Dany, Arya, Rickon and the entire Winterfell was snow, he felt he’d die from grief. The terrible burning he had ordered from his dragon, wiping out an army of wights and their masters, did nothing to ease his pain.

Torn by his suffering, he couldn’t even feel for Rhaegal’s in his guts, as he otherwise would have, being well aware of his mistake: he’d pushed his dragon over the limits of his great power. In his desire to react with strength to Winterfell’s destruction, he had harmed Rhaegal and exposed Dany and himself to the Night’s King and his minions, freshly arrived through the heart tree.
He no longer had his unique magic sword and had no recollection what he did with it. Maybe he left it on the shore. Or he dropped it when jumping, and it now rested next to Dany’s body at the bottom of the pond.

He tried to reach the bottom many times, but his breath had always been insufficient; the lake was much deeper than it seemed.

Next time he dived out for air, he screamed and wept, unable to shut up, willing the pain out. He cried for his losses and his poor choices. He howled for everything.

*But what if...?*

What if Dany had swam to the other side and stepped out unnoticed? What if she had joined Rhaegal to dry on his always warm body and hide from the enemy? His dragon rested at the far end of the godswood. Weakened, he would need some time to restore the fire burning in his belly.

Nothing could bring Winterfell back. Jon would have felt terribly guilty if he had killed his dragon by the severity of his orders.

*I'm sorry,* he thought contritely. *I should have given you more time. But I still believe it was a good decision. It's the only thing we could have done in Winterfell’s memory. That men remember it as new Harrenhal, if there will be a time left to remember.*

Offended green silence was his only answer.

*Is Dany with you?* He asked humbly, fearing the reply, and yet longing for good news that would calm his heart.

Rhaegal wouldn’t speak. Jon believed that his angry dragon would have probably hurled ‘*no*’ at him if that was the case, until his head would feel like bursting from the reverberating sound. He decided to take Rhaegal’s muteness as a tacit ‘*yes*’.

With renewed hope, he climbed to the shore.

But his search for his wife's tiny footsteps in fresh snow revealed none.

His heart plunged into darkness.

*Dany… Please… Be alive. I'll do better next time as a dragonrider.*

A steel-hard hand yanked his foot, throwing him off balance. He was being dragged back into the black pond, and steadily towards its illusive bottom he couldn’t have reached before. Jon began kicking the enemy with both legs, but he was only strong enough to free himself when he became fully immersed in water. Rapidly, he swam out and gulped for air. His eyes impatiently studied the shore. *Where is the bloody sword?*

The crescent moon rose in the sky, spilling silver light over the black oil of the lake.

The Night’s King dived out treacherously right behind Jon without a sound, grabbing his shoulders, pushing him underwater with superior body power, drowning him ferociously.

But in the sacred lake, Jon’s strength increased again. With effort, he succeeded in wriggling out of the Night’s King grip. Swimming away, he looked back. If he didn’t keep his eye on the enemy’s movements, he would be caught off guard again. Pale moonshine did him a favour, improving his sight.
To his surprise, instead of the Night’s King familiar twisted, ridged face, underwater he saw pale human features of a stranger who looked a bit like Jon. He was taller and stronger, though, his dark eyes were narrower, and his black hair silky and lank, floating around him like a veil of weed, falling almost to his waist.

He looked exactly like Jon imagined Jon Stark. His changed appearance confirmed the terrible tale of the Starks being responsible for the rise of the Others, whom they had later fought on the Wall for generations.

And then, behind the Night’s King shockingly human face, through the now moonlit, silvery veil of water, Jon saw the guest house of Winterfell between the trees of the godswood, behind the hot springs, where it had stood for centuries, not destroyed at all. Not even damaged. Unbowed, unbent, unbroken, like the bloody Dornish words said. Jon instantly dived out with longing, wishing to savour the miracle!

But in the open air, the guest house was gone. The Night’s King used Jon’s rushed escapade to begin drowning him again. Angry, Jon bit ferociously into an arm that was holding him, and looked at the guest house through the water once more. It wasn’t a single surviving structure. It was still a part of Winterfell. Jon swam away from the Night’s King on his back, and saw its towers.

From underwater, Winterfell was there. But from above, it was not.

Bloody, damned magic, the cursed hiltless sword that can’t be grasped!

Now he felt tremendously guilty. Was Winterfell still there, invisible to human and the Others’ eyes alike? Or did it become like Greywater Watch, moving from place to place to avoid its enemies? Then there was absolutely no reason to push Rhaegal as hard as he had done!

The Night’s King pale figure obstructed his precious view and spoiled his new hopes. Jon stretched his arms to push the enemy away--and saw white fur and claws, instead of black woollen sleeves and human hands; his inhuman strength underwater suddenly explained to him.

In the lake of the old gods, he had also changed. He had red eyes, sharp teeth and claws of his truest friend, his second self.

Ghost.

Skinchanger.

He attacked the Night’s King with the desire to rip him apart. Aiming for his unarmoured head and hands, he left deep scratches on his scalp, and nearly bit his sword hand off.

It was the enemy’s turn to use his immortal strength to free himself from Ghost’s embrace and escape to the shore. Jon followed closely, but had the misfortune of becoming himself as soon as he touched the snow, feeling tired like a boy who had skipped his afternoon rest.

“You truly are a wolf, not a dragon!” the Night’s King exclaimed in wonder, looking around with a wild expression in his bright blue eyes. For his sword, Jon supposed. Jon did the same, but couldn’t see his weapon either.

The bunch of Others that had arrived to the godswood with their king was no longer present.

Rhaegal? Jon asked. Did you do for them?

Is Dany with you?
Tell me, please!

Green silence felt even more insulted than before. How could Jon doubt that a good horse-dragon would carry out all his orders, burn all his enemies and even die if it pleased his rider? Or maybe those strange suggestions in his mind were only the fruit of Jon’s guilty imagination, and Rhaegal had simply fainted from exhaling the ultimate remnants of his fire to scorch more white walkers, while his rider was busy with nightswimming.

“No wonder that drinking your blood wouldn’t do the trick,” the Night’s King proclaimed with contempt Jon was used to hear in his tone by now.

“What?” Jon asked with equal disdain, trying to ignore the uncanny repetition of information that the Night’s King had drunk his blood when he lay dying beyond the Wall, stabbed by his sworn brothers.

When he had died beyond the Wall, according to his most intimate memories. He had moved entirely into Ghost as wargs were wont to do after death. He’d sniffed his cold, lifeless body. And then, he’d somehow come back.

But as what?

And how?

“I thought that the mighty king of Others has no need of tricks to defeat me,” he said wryly. “My father was a dragon, but I’ve always been a wolf. You’re a fool if you ever believed otherwise.”

“Only the dress is left now. It’s the only hope.” The Night’s King seemed to be talking to himself, muttering words under his voice, ignoring Jon as a boring insect.

“What bloody dress?” Jon inquired, not understanding.

“The bloody gown, of course!” the enemy roared angrily.

Fed up with conversation, he lunged at Jon and toppled him over. They wrestled in snow. During the struggle, Jon finally noticed his magic sword, stuck to the hilt in the closed mouth of the heart tree. Did I leave it there? The enemy’s blade was plunged in one of the eyes. It seemed that they had both dived weaponless and empty-headed into the pond. It was another proof that the Night’s King desire to get hold of Dany was as ardent as Jon’s.

But why? He didn’t love her.

Night’s King beat Jon in the run to the heart tree. Fast as lightning, he retrieved and brandished his weapon. But instead of the giant crystal blade Jon expected to see, it was made of Valyrian steel and it was famous. Jon had refused to wield it because he already had a sword.

Blackfyre.

“How did you get that? It’s not yours!” Jon burst into speech.

“Isn’t it fair that I take your heirloom from you?” the Night’s King retorted reproachfully. “You’ve stolen my sword beyond the Wall with the help of your late dragon wife.”

“How did you get it?” Jon demanded with force. “Answer me!”

“I have loyal followers in the realm of men,” the enemy seemed pleased to explain himself and mock
Jon further. “Men who think they can appease and manipulate me and my kind. They send me mighty gifts.”

“Stannis!”

“No.”

“Tarly?”

“No.”

“Hightower!”

“I don’t know him.”

“I’ll have to mention that to his lordship next time he conspires against me,” Jon said seriously. “Hopefully I shall offend him to death by not giving him enough importance.”

As he said his last words, he was already darting towards the heart tree, grabbing the hilt of his magic sword, wondering if it would change into Dark Sister when he pulled it out.

_Or Ice._

Unwillingly, the longing of a bastard boy to wield his father’s ancestral word resurfaced when he least expected it.

It was not to be.

His sword was still the same. But instead of flaming, his blade gleamed white like weirwood bark and emanated heat greater than ever.

_Searing hot._

By pulling it out of the heart tree, Jon had forced its mouth wide open.

“Dany!” he exclaimed, feeling mad.

She was curled up inside the weirwood, fast asleep on a seat woven of roots and branches resembling a throne. She must have been there all along. Maybe she had hidden herself, diving out to that side of the pond, or maybe the gods could rescue the victims of their sacred lake by a whisper.

“Jon…” the tree now murmured with her voice, calling to him.

His enemy was right behind him, charging at him with Blackfyre, intending to cut him in two and then take Dany. Jon pivoted, parrying the onslaught with a fierce cry, forcing the Night’s King to recede a few steps. Stumbling backwards from the impact, he ended up on his arse next to his wife. As soon as his body made contact with the wood, the seat he occupied appeared to be much more monumental.

He and Dany occupied together a high weirwood throne: deadlier, older and wiser than the iron one in King’s Landing. Its great roots grew deep, reaching the heart of the earth.

His head was suddenly pounding from an onslaught of images.

Greywater Watch, changing places, unseen by and hidden from the outside world unless it wanted to show itself.
Winterfell, both here and somewhere else. Arya and Rickon trying to get out of the gates and not being able to. Trapped, but alive.

Job begged the gods to show him the past, and not only the present. The part that interested him most since he learned about it.

Is it true? About Azor Ahai? Or is it only a tale?

He saw a foreign knight advancing through the darkness sword in hand. His elaborate armour glimmered like gold in faint moonlight.

He witnessed Nissa Nissa’s inhumanly beautiful cry, and saw the last hero’s solitary stand against the Night’s King. After combat worthy of a song, Azor Ahai killed the enemy single-handed, with the blade tempered in his wife’s loving heart.

Then, a winter rose bloomed from a chunk of ice, announcing the end of the Long Night. The army of the Others abandoned the siege of the Wall. Withdrawing into Lands of Always Winter, they all lay down to sleep. The immense valley where Jon had seen them waking turned into majestic, windswept ice field, with no trace of the white walkers.

The compelling nature of Jon’s vision of the ancient past was undeniable.

The tree continued to whisper, now in a deep voice unknown to Jon, repeating incessantly. The Long Night has come and gone before...

The Long Night has come and gone before...

The Long Night has come and gone before...

Tired of the weirwood’s voice of doom, Jon tried to look into the future, and saw only darkness. For a new Night’s King had risen in his time, yearning to make the Long Night last forever.

Unless Jon...

It was his turn to be a man and do the necessary. Victory was within his reach.

His wife was breathing deeply in his arms. During his visions, Jon had poised his sword carefully against her chest, almost at her throat. Its heat couldn’t hurt her.

But now he realised that a single cut, similar to the one his father had dealt to himself, would kill her in an instant.

That, and not the hidden power of the old gods was the reason for the Night’s King to not attack Jon while he was immersed in his visions.

He stared coldly at Jon. Disdain was gone from his attitude. Replaced by respect, perhaps. His changed demeanour convinced Jon even more that yes, this strategy would work.

And he had no other.

The gods must have let him see those images. Who else held the keys to the hidden truths in the present, past, and future?

It was meant to be.

His sword hovered over Dany’s pulse. She wasn’t waking. The tree confided in him that it would be
alright. She’d love him even in her death. She’d understand. He didn’t even have to pierce her heart to reforge his sword. If he cut her throat, she’d die quietly in her sleep, and yet her sacrifice would temper his blade with the deadliest substance of all.

The blood of the innocents.

The doom of every tyrant, one day.

Night’s King assumed a duelling stance. He even bowed slightly, as an honourable opponent, expecting Jon to strike.

First Dany, then him

“I don't fear the rise of your power, Lord Snow,” he announced dryly, showing chill acceptance of the new challenge, ready to face first true risk for his immortal existence in thousands of years with utmost calm. “Nor shall I yield.”

“I didn't expect you to,” Jon shot back, obsessed by what he just learned.

It was all true.

If he reforged his sword, he'd have a true opportunity to end the war.

“I trained well, I warn you. With your own kind,” the Night’s King continued. “And my sparring partner wasn't decrepit like Lord Hightower. Let us be over with this! Delaying serves neither my purpose no yours.”

“What's your purpose?” Jon wondered. The ambition to rule the world and destroy the realm of men failed to explain the enemy’s quiet courage and determination in face of true danger.

“Why, to conquer Westeros and cover it with ice. To make the Long Night everlasting. That sole purpose keeps me and my loyal soldiers alive.”

Jon felt stupid for asking and it made him angry. Why was he even trying to reason with a white walker? Kings or soldiers, they were all Others.

In a determined motion, he stood up. Holding Dany still, he began calculating his second blow, the one he would deal to his enemy after killing his wife. It had to be perfect, not fuelled by despair. The duel had to be short and decisive, not allowing for procrastination and surprises.

No time for conscious thought, grief or remorse.

But, as soon as he was no longer seated, he became flooded by his own considerations and troubling memories, and not those shown by the heart tree.

His father, opening his throat to shower the Night’s King with his blood. A Targaryen king sacrificing himself to save a bunch of wildlings. Successful in burning the enemy severely, causing him great pain.

But Rhaegar had fallen short of destroying the King of Others, and he would have become a white walker if Jon hadn’t killed the curse that was taking possession of him. Father was a sad, mute wight now, wandering the vastness of the Long Night on its own.

It occurred to Jon that some of the wights Rhaegal just burned at his command might have been like his father, still conscious, if not human. Not the soulless enemies he had imagined them to be.
They were all men once, just like the thousands who had died under different banners on the Trident, all because his father loved his mother and married her without anyone’s permission.

Finally he remembered Joffrey’s dog, Sandor Clegane, proclaimed a heartless monster by everyone in Winterfell during Robert’s visit, including his own people, the Lannister men. And yet it was he of all people who had pointed out to Jon that his father had remained conscious when he turned undead, spending time with his son during their duel, believing he had no time left, expecting to die for good.

And that supposedly cruel man had then ridden alone to the Lands of Always Winter to rescue Sansa, Jon’s sister, his wife, hopelessly gentle, unable to fight and kidnapped by the Others. He had said… how did it go?

_I’m not giving my wife up for dead. If it depends on me, she’ll survive me by many years._

Jon looked at the pale cheek of the moon, shedding its light at Dany's innocent, sleeping face, illuminating the godswood, its sacred lake, and always, always snow.

“Give me back _my_ sword!” he hurled at the Night’s King, possessed by a singular determination of a man seeing clearly in his heart.

“Why should I?”

“Do it!”

“I will. If you first return mine,” the enemy whispered seductively. “I swear it on my honour as a Stark.”

Jon lifted the magic sword from Dany’s throat.

Instead of striking, he tossed it with precision at his enemy’s feet. The Night’s King grabbed it eagerly, admiring it. Holding two blades gingerly, he showed no sign of relinquishing either of them.

Jon was again at his mercy by his own faulty choices, feeling utterly mad. Perhaps there was dragonblood in him after all.

_Rhaegal?_

_Now you remember me. Save yourself, human._

_Fine. Keep moping if that’s what you want. Do you dragons never make mistakes?_

“You gave me your word,” he said disapprovingly to the Night's King, hoping to gain time. Maybe if he sank back into the heart tree, the old gods would have mercy on him and Dany, take them on a journey through their roots and spit them out through one of their other mouths scattered in the North, on both sides of the Wall.

To his surprise, the enemy honoured his promise. Placing Blackfyre on the ground, he kicked it with his boot. The mighty weapon slid over ice and snow, until it reached Jon. Faster than Ghost, Jon retrieved it. In his hand, it felt right.

“You’ve wasted your only opportunity!” the Night’s King declared incredulously. “You’ve laboured against me for a hundred days! You’ve come this far and you ruined it all for love? Like father, like son!”

“Not for love,” Jon shook his head sadly. The most horrendous truth he’d just learned about himself
was that he might have been able to kill the woman he loved so as to win the war. He had done it in his mind and even began pondering his next steps, eager to kill his enemy before grief took over.

“Then?”

“What’s a day or a hundred,” Jon replied honestly, “if this is what it takes to bring the dawn?”

“Isn’t it like a house being built on rotting foundations?” Jon continued, his thoughts running freely like a river. “Isn't it enough that innocents perish in combat on all sides, every day? How can I hope to bring peace to the realm by deliberately murdering my wife? How can it be considered a noble sacrifice? She’s only a young woman who has a misfortune to love me, weak without her dragon.”

He paused to breathe deeply and then exclaimed. “I would be worse than you if I took this chance! You’re following the laws of your kind! They dictate you to either kill men or transform them into yourselves. How can I do less? Our laws are as clear as yours!”

The strong must protect the weak,” he swallowed hard. “Women, children, all those who can't fight.”

“I'll tell you more,” he was compelled to add, “I pity Azor Ahai. He must be burning in seven southron hells! And the flames must be nothing in comparison with the sting of his consciousness. Even before he dares remember he loved the lady he killed.”

The Night’s King leapt at Jon like a savage, aiming to kill both him and Dany with a single, unmeasured strike. His blade turned bright red.

Jon had time to put Dany back into the heart tree, but not to defend himself. He still tried to return the blow, but was too slow, and not nearly strong enough.

Faster than lightning, the Night’s King sliced the wools and boiled leather on Jon’s chest, cutting it wide open.

Jon felt the habitual pain of dying. His blood gushed out, brighter red than his enemy's blade, more strident in colour than dragonfire. But he didn't fall and he didn't die. Despite searing pain, he wielded Blackfyre as a superior swordsman he had become, not allowing the Night's King to cut a hair from his head, and much less approach Dany.

“How is this possible?!” the enemy exclaimed.

“You tell me.” Jon could barely utter a word from pain. But speak he did, stubbornly so, just like he had fought. “You're always lecturing me. Telling me what I am, what you are… Well, I’ve got no answer for you. No clever words of contempt. But it’s as you see it. It might be impossible for me to kill you now, but it’s going to be damn hard for you to kill me. You’ll have to try cutting me in half to see if that will do the trick. And I have no intention of letting you do that.”

Foolish, brave human.

Dragon?

Rhaegal suddenly harrumphed in Jon’s consciousness. Get out of my way. Now!

Jon leapt back, snatched Dany and jumped away from the heart tree as far as he could. Belatedly, he remembered she couldn't be hurt by fire.

Dragons were stronger than the Others. Rhaegal knocked the Night’s King down with his foot and opened his maw to devour him. The heart tree pouted. The Lord of Others stumbled back on his feet.
Running for dear life with superhuman speed, he jumped into the weirwood before it snapped its mouth shut. In the same instant, Rhaegal breathed a moderate jet of fire, obliterating the heart tree.

White bark blazed, smelling like incense and mead. Jon thought he could hear sobbing in the sizzling, sputtering sound of burning wood and leaves.

*You also wanted to stop him, didn't you?* He reasoned with the old gods, not wishing to anger them further. They must be mad with him for missing the chance to end the war they had whispered into his ears.

*Well, no one will be able to usurp your sacred ways in Winterfell from now on,* he thought contritely, observing the destruction of the most sacred symbol of his old home. Then he squeezed his wife hard to his hurting chest, realising that she might have been kidnapped, and on the way to Lands of Always Winter, if he didn't unnecessarily take her with him to hide her from dragonfire.

*It looks like I've done something good today.*

He sat down, exhausted, feeling the familiar weakness from the loss of blood.

*Fool,* Rhaegal said.

*What? You're no longer angry with me?*

*Man-fool, mad-man* Rhaegal tried other words.

*I get it, dragon-fool, mad-dragon. Thank you for not leaving me.*

Jon’s last sentiment puzzled Rhaegal. Having no clever dragon answer for it, he began puffing little green breaths at his rider’s bleeding chest with utmost diligence. Brilliant smaragd crystals soon knitted Jon’s skin together. He would need clean black wools. *Plenty of those in Castle Black.*

*No! What kind of husband am I?*

He had dirtied Dany’s hair with his blood. When Rhaegal finished patching his injury, he began washing it in snow.

The cold woke her, and her eyes were full of wonder. “I was a scaled, black dragon and I could breathe in water like a fish. How did you bring me back?”

“I didn’t,” Jon smiled. “I think you swam out and hid in the heart tree,” he guessed. “I’d love to see you with scales,” he teased her, kissing her cheek.

“The Night’s King?”

“He’s gone.”

“I don't think he destroyed Winterfell, Jon-”

“I know,” Jon interrupted nervously. “I saw it standing from the sacred lake. I’m just not certain where it is now. Listen,” he added with gratitude. “My heart had almost stopped when you jumped into the lake, but if you hadn't, the Others would have cut me in shreds before Rhaegal had time to recover. I don't think I'd survive that.”

Only the Night's King didn't fear water. His soldiers avoided it like plague.

*Why?*
“Thank you,” he said humbly.

It was Dany’s turn to smile. “It felt like something I could do, a distraction,” she said with pride.

His studied her pretty face with bubbling joy. For a sennight, he fancied she was different. Cloths she used for her moonblood hadn't reappeared in their quarters.

Once he’d asked her if this had any meaning, but she’d waved him off. Her moonblood was never regular. Must be one of those things that came along with being the blood of the dragon, like being insensitive to fire. Then she had looked deep into his eyes and said she would feel if she were with child. She wasn't. She couldn't have children. He should accept it or abandon her and look for another wife. After that conversation, he never mentioned his hopes.

Because she was shining at occasions, there was no other way to describe it, and now was one of those moments. A bit like his mother, who had grown terribly big with child, but not quite the same. He hoped, hoped, hoped…

Especially now that he was even more certain he would die in the end-

“What happened?” she asked very seriously, staring at… Blackfyre.

“I returned the cursed sword to the Night's King. We're back to the beginning,” he whispered. “I couldn’t kill the boy and let the man be born,” he confessed, grasping fully the gravity of his decision. Yet he couldn’t, wouldn’t change it. He stood by it now, in cold blood, as much as he had done in the turmoil of emotions and visions when he had made it. “I find that for some things the boy has to stay alive. This is one of them. I am not Azor Ahai and you're not Nissa Nissa. This is my final word on the matter. Even if it means that the world as we know it has to end.”

He sensed she disagreed with him, sulking in silence, like Rhaegal.

“What then let us believe in new beginnings,” she said bravely after a long while. “There could be more ways to cross the Red Desert. We can't give up.”

She was right, he realised.

He had to find Winterfell. Or a way to enter it if it was still in its place, just invisible. Meera Reed or some of the wildlings or even Tyrion might know something that could help him.

In Winterfell, he'd find the Horn of Joramun. The wildlings firmly believed it could tear down the Wall. An object capable of such magic should be able to defeat the Others, or at least put them back to sleep.

He had to wake the giants from earth.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

Happy New Year!
Sansa VII

Chapter Notes

Sigur Rós - Valtari or Leonard Cohen work as background music for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sansa

"You ought to save mag," she blurted behind the giants’ line for battle. Her voice could barely be heard, softer than summer breeze.

Sandor was taken prisoner and her heart was torn into pieces.

As soon as the Others held him in their clutches, they stopped attacking the giants. Raising high the hanging iceweb bridges they had lowered over the chasm between their kingdom and the giants’ village, they abandoned the battlefield, vanishing into the night.

Faster than the winter wind.

It was unheard of. Before today, the white walkers had always fought until the bitter end. The giants had to rip them apart to win a battle and they suffered horrendous losses with every victory. Sansa would have preferred not to have seen any of it. But she had. And she could witness a bloody battle again when she believed it to be her duty, Ned Stark’s daughter until her dying day.

And Sandor's wife.

“Gone?” The blond Dornish giant, Arthur, Sandor’s second in line, wondered aloud, scratching his shaggy, sunlit head. “Why?”

The giants’ secret settlement was the only place in Westeros where the sun was still shining, by a miracle of nature or a work of magic. More North than the Lands of Always Winter. The women and children were planting crops in the frozen soil of their fields, after cleaning the snow.

Arthur’s beard had grown tremendously in the past weeks, just like Sansa’s and Sandor’s hair.

And Sansa’s ability to warg forcefully into any living creature.

Sandor…

Where are they taking you, my love?

Touching his mind from distance, she knew he lived. That was all she could sense, and even that barely. It was too little and yet it would have to be enough. Their special connection was almost severed as soon as he was dragged away from her, deep into the Others’ territory.

"You must save mag! They wanted him, not your sanctuary!” she cried out shrilly, refusing to melt into tears. Stop. Stop. Stop. Tears have never helped you. Do something! “It was a trick to make him
cross! Do you not see? Why else would they leave?” she was unable to stop talking. As unyielding in her deepest convictions of what was important and true as her late Father. As forgetful of her place among the giants as she had been at occasions during the long years of her past captivity in King’s Landing and in the Vale.

She was only mag’s woman, not some princess or valuable hostage. And the giants had proclaimed her to be a child of the forest on account of her red hair: a member of a race they hated.

“Mag’s dead,” Arthur proclaimed coldly.

A line began to form behind him. In accordance with their customs, the giants were forgetting Sandor and choosing their new leader, who eyed her strangely from tip to toe.

What do you want from me? Fresh fear bubbled in her throat, mingling with grief and the flaring wish to act, rather than suffer the remainder of her existence.

“Sandor’s not dead,” she insisted, hoping to make them see reason. They weren't brutes, just different. “He led you here. He brought you home. He never lost a battle. Do you not owe him your allegiance?” It was challenging to keep her phrases simple. Only the widow of the mag before Sandor and some of the children understood the finer points of Common Tongue, most members of the tribe had only elemental knowledge. It was a wonder how Arthur had survived in Dornish mountains, living among people. Lesser man, as the giants called them. “Sandor is their captive. They kidnapped him. He needs your help.”


The tribe roared savagely, ready to turn against her. Their women who loved her were sheltering their children in the village, unable to help her. She was all alone.

“You say you’re brave,” she threw caution to the wind, accusing the giants of cowardice they despised. “And yet you abandon mag to your greatest enemy. Don’t you hate the Others even more than the children of the forest? You’re cravens, all of you!”

She felt that Arya would approve her choice of words and growing anger. Though Sandor might not. He’d want her to be safe. Stay pretty. Be clever and keep herself out of trouble. But she wanted so much more than that by now. To be brave. To do well. To be happy again. She had to act. “Stay here and die the next time they come to conquer your lands! Or follow me and oppose them like men you say you are.”

They probably couldn't grasp her last words.

Her tears were fire behind her eyelids, threatening to fall. If she gave herself to her pain, it would ruin any resolve she still possessed.

Suddenly, the chasm before her seemed less impossibly wide. What else was she to do? She wouldn’t leave him.

She sprinted forward like a madwoman.

At the edge of the precipice she jumped, leaping over, clutching the air with her arms, continuing to run through the void, desperately trying to prolong and accelerate her unexpected flight.

Like a bird, Sandor.
But instead of landing on the other bank of the cliff as she had hoped, she began to fall. In a frantic motion to prevent it, she threw her arms forward and landed with her face in hard, uneven ice. Her nose bled. From her breasts down, she was hanging over the edge, into black nothingness. Her fingers clung pressingly to the frozen soil, hurting from cold, finding no point of support. She slithered forward like a snake over the slippery surface, using head, arms and shoulders to advance very slowly, inch by inch, anxious to get away from the abyss, and yet afraid of sliding back, into her death, if she moved too fast. 

Reaching safety, she washed her nose in snow, rose to her feet and began marching, never looking back to see how the giants reacted to her deed. There was only one path through the forest and the Others must have taken it. She wondered if it led to ice Winterfell and if they took all their prisoners to their king’s seat.

*Or only young women wearing gowns drenched in king’s blood.*

In her very imperfect and frightened reckoning of time in the Long Night, she must have walked for a day and night, maybe two, without food, drinking snow. Weakened, cold to the bone, needing rest, she climbed with difficulty into the lowest canopy of an evergreen tree she could find before her limbs betrayed her. It was a sentinel or an odd pine and it would offer a degree of protection from monsters and animals alike. Her dress had so far protected her from freezing to death, but never from the otherwordly chill and its bite.

*Maybe that’s over now.*

Exhausted from walking, drained from the pain over Sandor’s uncertain fate, she wondered if she was fainting and about to die from cold or merely falling asleep.

Much later, she woke.

The moon had crossed the whole sky while she slept, sailing smoothly between the stars, unhindered by the starkness of winter. Stiff and shivering at the same time, she was about to fall down from the tree.

The wood seemed dead, frozen.

She should have been pleased for not encountering wights, Others, wolves or bears on her path, but after so much hardship, she would have almost preferred any company. The necessity to hide and run might help keep her together, holding her tears at bay.

*Sandor…*

She suddenly sensed him in her mind, not too far from where she was. Overjoyed by the completely unexpected rekindling of their special bond, she stormed mindlessly towards him, through the wood, off the path, between the tall, dark trees. Soon she found herself in an very unlikely and peaceful place. She would have never expected to see him alone and well after his kidnapping, through a low window of a rounded stone house in an abandoned wildling village - one of many ghost settlements this far north. People had fled south already in autumn, afraid of what winter would bring.

She barged into the humble dwelling, “Sandor!” she exclaimed, not believing her eyes.

He was stoking the fire as he had done so often for the two of them in their lovely, comfortable and orderly home among the giants.
“Sansa!” he rasped with emotion,

Jubilant, she ran into his arms.

He embraced her gingerly, careful to leave her some space to breathe. Huge, loved hands rested confidently on the small of her back.

“I killed them all,” he announced with arrogance, proud of his prowess in taking lives.

Were they lives when the victims were Others?

She concluded that yes, they must have been. Inhuman, but still. And yes, she knew he had to do it or die, or worse, become undead or one of them, but she still couldn’t embrace his occasional contempt for life as her guiding principle.

*They’re the meat and I’m the butcher.* Was that what he’d told her, long ago?

She had hoped that killing no longer gave him joy. There was so much death in winter... Maybe he regarded it as a duty now. If she warged into him, she’d know. Yet she was reluctant to peep into his mind, knowing that her sudden visits caused him pain.

There was no necessity for her to hurt him now that they were together. Warging was only for desperate times of being away from each other. Or if he demanded it, wishing to savour their bond in special circumstances. Sansa’s cheeks heated up from precious memories of the occasions when he wanted her to be in his head, needing to experience her longing for him when they made love. She had felt unladylike about letting him see those delicate and yet overwhelmingly strong feelings for him so directly, especially the first time, but he had made a pleading look and she had given in. It had been liberating for her and a wonder for him.

Their love was everything.

She pressed her finger to the burned portion of his lips, basking in the recognition of their irregular, leathery texture, swelling with joy from the knowledge it was *him*, and no one else. Feeling as if she might die from happiness, she leaned into him, expecting a kiss.

He stopped her halfway. Holding her close, he murmured tenderly. “I was about to return for you—”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked spontaneously. He didn’t seem in a hurry to go anywhere when she found him. She told herself that he must have been exhausted from the effort it took to free himself.

“I needed a moment to think clearly where to go,” he answered. “My sense of direction wasn’t the best when they had me. All I looked for was a chance to kill them. I wouldn’t get another one.”

Sansa nodded with understanding and tilted her chin up for that kiss.

“I need to feel you, all of you,” Sandor proclaimed with immortal yearning, staring at her lips instead of capturing them with his. “Let me have it now. Just once.”

His plea fell on extremely fertile ground. She was equally desperate for it, maybe even more. Missing the spontaneity and freedom of their intimacy more than anything, she’d wanted it back since they parted in Winterfell, ages ago. She longed for both of them to be undressed in marriage bed, embracing each other at will. His body pressed against hers, skin on skin. Kissing without the gown soaked in king’s blood that she didn’t dare take off as a barrier between them.
She’d let him take it off now. They’d be done soon, it was too cold to linger despite the fire in the hearth. They were all alone. There was no one in the woods. She’d get dressed after.

She let him work on her laces and felt weak, anxious to be in his arms as they both wanted it. It was taking him more time to undress her than she would have expected. He seemed a bit nervous while he was at it, keeping her at a distance that could be considered respectful, and didn’t need to be maintained between husband and wife.

“Shouldn’t we first return to the giants’ sanctuary?” she wondered sheepishly, remembering some of her caution. “What if more of them come after you?”

His hands were still fumbling with her laces, unable to untie them, shaky and nervous, as though he had forgotten how to do it in all the time they hadn’t dared, and was now completely stunned by the task.

“Please,” he repeated his intentions. “Let me feel you first.”

She stood on tiptoes to kiss him. If he was too busy with her gown to close the distance between them, then she’d do it for him, for them, for their love. It wouldn’t be the first time she had taken that initiative since she had discovered and learned the noble art of kissing. For a moment, she contented herself with gazing into his grey eyes, wonderfully stormy as she loved them. Her gaze lingered on the beloved ruin of her face, not budging from her view-

Not even a little.

She hated that he sometimes still felt uncertain about his looks in their marriage, but this-

It wasn’t natural for him.

Her heart felt a little colder, and she hated herself for it. How could she feel anything less than pouring love for Sandor at this moment? What kind of wife was she?

His lips parted, expecting her kiss, not closing the gap on his own accord as she had learned to expect from her husband.

As the Sandor she knew would have surely done by now.

She didn’t move any further. A continued, deep look into his eyes told her it was him, it had to be. How could anyone else imitate his face?

Her heart filled with dread. Her face lost expression. She strove not to show disgust or any true emotion.

Sandor often imperceptibly bent away from her when she took the initiative to kiss him, constantly aware of his looks, despite knowing in his heart more than well by now that he had no reason for reticence, despite tasting her love for him when she was in his mind. To avoid it, he often kissed her first. Taking matters in his own hands or, well, lips, spared him the pain of remembering himself. He would have already kissed her twenty times in the short time they were together.

This man was different.

He seemed as confident about his looks as Loras Tyrell and he didn’t want to kiss her first… Perhaps not at all.

And he was still busy with her laces, his arms shaking from pain.
It wasn’t a man.

It was a monster.

Dragonblood burned the Others, just like dragonfire.

They could make her see Sandor’s looks, but not his soul, neither the bravery nor the pain he’d carry with him until his dying day.

Sansa froze inwardly, struggling to feign that she was being fooled by the cruel deception.

Instead of kissing her assailant, she faked a loving sigh and took his hands from her back, placing them on her waist, pushing them suddenly and deeply into the tissue soaked in dragonblood. They shook violently, yet the monster who pretended to be Sandor didn’t take them off her, caring more about convincing her to give up her dress willingly than for his own pain.

She wrenched herself away violently, unable to pretend any further, feeling sullied by the unsolicited touch.

The Other’s pain must have been even greater than she thought because she was immediately successful.

“Why do you want the dress so much?” she blurted, betraying herself. “I won’t give it to you! Isn’t dragonblood burning you? Isn’t it your death? Isn’t it the reason you’re shaking?”

Sandor’s face morphed and twisted, and Sansa knew who it was, the Night’s King, who had somehow learned whom she loved, and it wasn’t Loras’ Tyrell or any other handsome youth. Did he kidnap Sandor to get her? Worse, did he release her only as a strategy to recapture her later, and force her to trade her gown for her husband’s life?

“It has king’s blood,” the Night’s King replied in his habitual, disturbing voice she remembered from ice Winterfell, so distinct from Sandor’s rasp which could be flat, mocking, good-natured or passionate, depending on the occasion, but never maliciously cold. “And you shall surrender it to me.”

She opened her mind to assault him as a warg, and felt the worst deception of all. The Other’s mind felt vaguely like Sandor’s to her: strong and passionate, honest and brave. Not the same, not at all, but similar in its main features. And when she stretched her mind consciousness further, into the wood, she couldn’t feel where Sandor was! How could the Other disguise his stinky, death-promising ice soul in such a way?

“Where is Sandor?” she demanded. “Did you kill him?” she exclaimed her next question with sudden fear. Maybe the Night’s King had drunk her husband’s blood in order to impersonate him. Wasn’t that what the Others did when they possessed a man?

The Other stepped out of the hut, collected and calm, uglier than Sandor and much more dangerous. His scent promised death to humans, brought by his kind.

“That way,” he pointed a direction between the trees. “When the moon wanes, ten hours from now, I shall wait for you in my castle. And then we can make a trade. Your gown, given willingly, for his life. If you’re late, I shall give you his head. I have no use for him anymore. You need to walk fast, human, should you wish to make it in time.”

Before her eyes, he melted, transforming into pretty blue mist that drifted speedily away in the direction he had indicated.
Sansa was left speechless.

There was only one solution she could think of. She needed to find Sandor much sooner than in ten hours and rescue him. Before any trade or murder had to take place.

But how? She wasn’t a bird and couldn’t fly. Did she pass by a weirwood in the dark forest? She must have, but where was it? If she went back and didn’t find it soon, she’d waste time. She ran back into the wood and prayed to the old gods. Please. Please. Open your ways for me. Bring me to the ice Winterfell.

She could swear that a weirwood appeared out of nowhere when she repeated her prayers for at least a hundred times. Although probably it was simply there and she’d found it by chance. Its bark was smooth, without eyes or lips carved into it. She couldn’t enter. Please, please. You must be there, she implored the gods.

A red-leafed branch whispered to her that the ways of the old gods were as good as closed. The Others owned the weirwoods now. It was too dangerous. There were no gods, just like Sandor always said. She was stupid to believe in them.

“If it is so, if you’re a tree, how can you speak?” she challenged the gods. “I accept the risk,” she spoke loudly the tree, or to the gods, not caring who it was that listened. She didn’t know anymore what she believed in, except that she still did. “I am your daughter, white of skin, red of hair, gentle wolf of mind. Please, open the way for me and take me to my husband.”

As she said that, the face became visible, not old and wise like the one in Winterfell, but young and audacious, resembling Arya’s.

“Arya, is that you?” she breathed out.

No answer came.

Imagining the ice Winterfell where she had been held prisoner, she plunged in. The travel gave her nausea, just like during her journey from Winterfell to the Shadow Tower, when she had followed after Sandor only to witness Rhaegar’s death. This trip was shorter, maybe because the distance was so much smaller.

When she rolled out of the tree, the darkness was devastating. She was caught in a huge heap of intertwined weirwood roots. The smell of death and old ice was everywhere so she must have reached her destination.

She blinked until her eyes became more used to darkness. A grey shade of moonlight appeared in what must have been the entrance to the room she was in. She crawled towards it between the roots, extremely cautious not to make a sound, eager to see better.

At the doorstep, she dared looked back. She had come out from under the weirwood throne on which, high above her, the Night’s King slept. His chest rose and fell peacefully, covered with odd, intricately engraved, grey and blue armour. He didn’t wear tatters on top anymore, unlike all his soldiers who had both twisted plate and mail grown into one with their bodies, and ruined shreds of clothing as a second layer. The Night’s King’s silver hair hung from his throne, almost to the ground. It had grown, Sansa noticed with a nod in her throat, just like hers and Sandor’s, indicating he was alive …

The hair of wights, his slaves, dead but forced to walk, stayed the same.

The Night’s King’s hands oozed blue liquid. Sansa realised he had suffered severe burns from trying
to undress her. His palms and fingers were barely recognisable: deformed, raw and bleeding. She was almost sorry for his pain. But as soon as she remembered the abject trick of posing as Sandor, whom he had captured and planned to kill, her compassion was gone.

Where are you, my love?

As soon as she crossed the Night’s King doorstep and reached the corridor, the castle lost its silence, shrieking with many white walkers’ voices, as though she had rung a doorbell. They knew there was an intruder, prying on their sleeping king. She ran away from the noise, finding dark, empty passages, knowing the castle of her childhood by heart, faster than Arya Underfoot. No one could catch her here. There were many ways in and out. Some were different than she remembered, but still familiar enough.

Running and hiding, she pondered where they had Sandor. When she was imprisoned, he had climbed into her room in the Great Keep from outside. But he was strong and wouldn’t surrender meekly. Why would they give him a window, a featherbed and a chance to escape? Wouldn’t he be in the dungeons? Cersei and Joffrey had them full. But Winterfell didn’t have them, unlike King’s Landing. An occasional prisoner would be held in the Guard’s Hall, until his punishment was determined. A swift beheading. She shivered, remembering how the Lannisters killed her Father, her eyes swelling with tears from the sudden memory. Her search of the familiar premises of the guards revealed only ice and empty rooms. Where is the king of grumkins holding you, my love? Maybe…-

The guest house.

The Others wouldn’t have guests, would they? Not willing ones.

She climbed out of the Guard’s Hall through a window, avoiding the door that would be manned by now, judging by the sound. She hurried towards the guest house, passing alongside the armoury wall, hiding in its shadows.

A bird screamed in the air. Its cry was different than those of the Others looking for Sansa, shrill but not dissonant. She looked up. Over moonlit sky, a transparent dragon flew riderless, faster than his flame spitting brother: noble and strong.

An ice dragon… Not dead like the wights, nor emanating the smell of death like the Others. A different winter creature, beautiful and balanced in its flight, soaring fearlessly over the ice kingdom. The beast looked at home here, like the giants and the Others.

Sansa was marvelled at the sight.

She remembered the horn of dragonlords, Rhaegar’s parting gift to Sandor before he wandered off as a wight. Or maybe his final request for safekeeping before he became mindless like his new kind. Sandor often banged his head about the destiny of his brother in all but blood. Unable to find answers, he avoided looking at the horn. When Sansa asked why, he shrugged. There was nothing he could do to save his brother, he said, dismissing her concern. But his eyes were sad, and Sansa knew he wished he could have done something. She should have taken the horn with her when she left the giants. Maybe if Sandor blew it with the charred corner of his mouth that couldn’t be burned again, an ice dragon would come and take them both to safety.

But the horn was imposing, huge. How could she have ever jumped over the precipice with such heavy load, and Sandor’s enormous saddlebag that contained it?

Too late for that.
She was at the guest house now. To her sorrow, it was heavily guarded. She melted into the wall like a frozen, dark red statue. Her face became bloodless as she counted them. Thirty Others guarded the door. Surprisingly, instead of standing still, they were building a snow castle. Their presence weighed heavily on her, bringing to her nostrils the scent of violent death and old ice, and to her warging mind a sensation of hatred for humankind. But their work of art was more beautiful than the Winterfell she’d made in the Vale, more perfect than the grand castle they guarded. For a brief moment, despite their fervent wish to end all life except their own in Westeros, Sansa admired their creation, unable to fully close her eyes to beauty.

But only for a short time.

Sandor must be in there. How was she to enter? If she revealed herself, the Others would take her captive and bring her to their king. He would demand his trade, and she might give in, if she were faced with losing Sandor for good like she had lost her father in front of the Great Sept of Baelor. She didn’t think she’d be able to stand and watch Sandor’s murder, in full knowledge it would be coming, if she had the means to help it, despite that the last thing she wanted was for the Night’s King to desecrate Rhaegar’s blood. But what would the ice king do with her and Sandor once she ceded him her dress? She didn’t believe he’d let them go. In lucid moments, when neither her love, or her pain, or her despair clouded her mind, she knew they had better chances of survival if she persevered and stayed dressed.

Breaking her head about what to do, she waited, freezing, hungry, wondering how much time she had until the moon waned. If she had a rope, she might try to climb into the guest house through a window, but she had none.

“Kill,” a familiar voice whispered behind her, startling her. Her heart skipped a beat. She turned around.

“Arthur!” she breathed out. The blond giant was crawling through the snow behind her. The rest of the tribe followed him in one line, looking like a mile-long ice caterpillar. Their heads and back were covered with snow. In scarce moonlight, they could be mistaken for snow drifts blown forth by the biting winter wind.

“Quiet, my lady,” Arthur whispered, surprising her by his courtesy. The giants never showed it. It wasn’t a part of their society. “We’ll take them by surprise. When the battle starts, you go in, find mag, and come out. We can’t go in. The building has evil magic for us. We’re still men of blood, not of earth.”

Sansa was flabbergasted. “You can speak Common Tongue as good as I,” she declared.

Arthur barked a command in Old Tongue to the first giant behind behind him who relayed it to the one after him, and further down the line. The formation halted, huddling in snow.

“I’m Dornish and I’m used to lesser man and their language,” Arthur continued whispering so that only Sansa could hear him. “But I’m also a pure-blooded giant, unlike your husband who’s a man with a drop of old blood, maybe not even that. Not that I care, my lady. He has led us as one of us. But I won’t show I can speak your language or understand your customs to my people. The are mistrustful. They’ll listen to me if I follow our rules or not at all.”

“I noticed,”Sansa smiled. “Thank you, my lord, for coming after me. How did you cross?”

“Two of us made a hanging bridge with their bodies. We didn’t see you in the wood so we came.
here. We know this place,” Arthur said darkly. “The way that leads from our home to the castle of darkness is engraved in our memory. Our parents repeat it to every one of us since we are born, boy or girl. It’s where our race almost died out, in the time of Joramun, thousands of years ago, trying to destroy the Others. Only a handful of women and children remained. We shall do the same if needs be. It is our duty as men, told down from parents to children for generations. The women need to remain hidden if the race is to be restored one day.”

“Will you tell me the whole story of Joramun when I come back with mag?” Sansa asked. “So that I can understand it.” The giants only told it fully in Old Tongue. If Sansa learned the details, maybe Sandor could do what Joramun had done and help win the war.

Arthur nodded. Then, he stood up and roared “Kill!”

The giants attacked the Others fiercely. Many feet stomped over the poor snow castle, destroying it, just like Sansa’s creation in the Vale didn’t survive for long.

She waited for the moment when all Others were caught in a struggle, and then ran through the lines, into the guest house.

The darkness inside was oppressive. The air smelled of many days of making water and worse, without ever being cleaned. The way to the upper floor was blocked. Only the bottom level was in use. Having to walk by touch, for she couldn’t see a thing, Sansa reached the door of the chamber nearest to the entrance and opened it. Behind it, she couldn’t feel Sandor, just an unnamed heap of palpable human despair. She feverishly touched the walls and the floor.

She almost fell over him.

“Go away,’ Sandor rasped poignantly, curled up on the floor. “Don’t show me her face.”

By the old gods, could the Night’s King look like her to torture her husband?

That was vile, but also hilarious.

”It’s me,” she smiled though he couldn’t see it. “Come,” she pulled him on his feet and led him back, sure in her step, repeating the exact trajectory in the dark. At the door, there was a little moonlight from outside. They could see each other.

She stood on tiptoes and took his beloved face in her hands, swelling from joy when he turned his scars just a little away for her, and immediately corrected his ingrained reaction, relaxing under her fingers. And she almost truly died from happiness when he closed the distance between them and kissed her soundly, strong arms wondering down her back and hips, but never unlacing her gown.

“It is you,” he said after a while. His eyes still carried a tiny trace of grey suspicion, as if he still expected her to change into a white walker or another monster. As if he didn’t dare believe his luck.

“Who else?” she asked, feeling silly, feeling happy. “Come. We’ve got to go.”

“I’ve been chained here and fighting him for years,” he said sadly, oddly serious. She had never seen him like this. Yet it was still him. There was no doubt possible this time. “I’m tired. You’re a liar. An illusion. A dream of mine There is no way out of here.”

Paradoxically, she regretted that Sandor wasn’t asking her to undress for him. Stop it, Sansa. You know it can’t be done now. It’s too dangerous. Some other day.

“You were here a few days at most,” she corrected him.
“It was years, Sansa, I’m telling you. Is my hair grey?” he asked and meant it, open-hearted, friendly, lacking his usual bark and yet still feeling like himself. Strong, honest and brave.

He seemed deeper, richer, showing her new sides of him she could admire and cherish for years. Gods how she loved him! Yet she also began fretting over his well-being from seeing that he dropped the shields in his behaviour so thoroughly. Are you alright? What did he do to you?

She’d ask him when they were somewhere safe, not wanting him to relive his misery.

His hair was black as she remembered it, falling almost to his knees, like branches of a weeping willow.

‘Then I should have grey hairs as well,” she countered his stupid notion of becoming older overnight.


“And you’re you,” she declared lovingly. “I’m happy like a bird when I’m with you.”

“Are you?” he asked, feigning indifference, sounding more like himself, his confidence returning.

Not waiting for an answer, he kissed her solidly.

The world could freeze all over and Sansa wouldn’t have noticed, responding to him in kind. Arthur cried outside. Sansa prayed to the gods that he didn’t fall. The time for love was over.

“Do you know where the bugger is?” Sandor asked darkly.

She didn’t have to ask who he meant. The Night’s King.

“Asleep on his throne,” she replied. “I think he’ll rest until the dark of the moon.”

Sandor let go of her. Tying his hair in a knot, he stuck it under his cloak. Despite being unarmed, he was his usual self again, decisive and frightening.

Thank the gods. You’ll be alright, my love.

“Splendid,” he rasped flatly. “I’m of a mind to become a kingslayer.”
Mance III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Mance

His son had been crying for hours, unable to catch sleep.

Mance wondered if the boy knew the end would come, through some secret communion only the children shared with the old gods, and if it made him desperate.

And he still didn’t have a name, despite that it was high time to give him one. He was past infancy. If spring came, he’d probably survive his father. Maybe he’d even reach old age, if there would be peace in the realm of men.

But that future was a daydream now.

The Wall was desolate, kingless, if one didn’t count Mance. He rarely did. His people had called him King-beyond-the-Wall, finding no better man to lead them, when the winter winds began to blow.

He’d done what he could for them, too much or too little, depending on who was judging him.

His position had become untenable of late, after his long journey south as a mummer, and proven friendship with Jon.

The wildlings couldn’t forget or set aside that the young king had once been the Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch, their lifelong enemy. And far worse, a vile traitor in their ranks, pretending he deserted his post - only to turn against the free folk when they finally succeeded in attacking Castle Black.

Mance’s people were now better received in the realm of men than in the last hundred years or more: in all the time that the living could recall, from experience, or stories of their elders.

They were truly grateful to him for taking them over the Wall, as well as for bringing North the whole armies to defend it, but, despite everything he had done for their sake, they loved him no more.

They had stopped trusting him, but still felt that choosing another would be sacrilege. There was only one reasonable outcome for his situation.

It is time they pick another leader.

He avoided dwelling on how worthless it made him feel.

Is every king despised by his people in the end?

Perhaps it couldn’t be any different. To lead was to make mistakes. The world didn’t let itself be run by men. Being there before them, it would still exist after them. The earth gave birth to the Others and dragons, to the giants and children of the forest. Men could never make it safe nor shape it fully to their needs, even without fighting each other, which they did so often.

All he had left was a bit of pride over some of his past achievements.
Mance and his son now dwelled in the wormways of Castle Black. Every room looked the same: small, windowless, hidden in the maze underground, and never warm enough.

He hated the place.

Shadow Tower had always suited him better, more ruinous and savage. Freeer. Near the sea. Yet he had ultimately abandoned it, longing for freedom to love and be loved.

How far would she be? He fancied imagining Tyene had a chamber near him and his boy, but she could also be leagues away. The tunneling had almost reached Nightfort by now, with new soldiers arriving every day, needing a place to sleep where they wouldn’t perish from cold.

The great siege was coming. The freezing chill was everywhere, greater that Mance had ever experienced it, having survived one whole winter beyond the Wall, as a skinny, weak boy, barely older than his son right now.

He would name him tonight.

Gathering his courage, he swallowed his pride and took his crying boy-bundle in his arms. Maybe he had overdressed him. Yet he didn’t dare use less clothing in the cold.

Better too warm than sorry.

“Come,” he said, “we’re going to see mother.”

His son hugged him tightly, burying his little head into Mance’s shoulder. His sobs and shaking diminished. He nodded enthusiastically against his father’s neck, approving his intentions.

Mance hadn’t spoken to Tyene since Jon’s wedding in Winterfell. The night before the ceremony, she had warned him of danger to his life, fearing that her uncle, Prince Doran, might order the poisoning Jon’s guests. No one had known at the time that, while the Prince’s anger with Rhaegar because of his second marriage was burning and true, he still regarded Targaryens, or at least Daenerys, as family.

In the weeks that followed, Tyene often crossed Mance’s path from a distance, dressed with utmost care and completely uninterested in him or any other man. An effigy of a chaste, beautiful, unreachable lady from the songs. She even wore her hair up, in strict southron fashion, under thick furry cloak necessary to endure winter. The reputation of the Dornish being hot-headed was entirely wasted on her. The lordlings from Seven Kingdoms commented that she could have been born a Stark or a Tully and shame ladies from those great houses with her extreme adherence to propriety. Some asked for her hand in marriage, receiving no answer. Or a polite remark to please take the matter with her princely uncle once he returned, usually given to those more highborn, to satisfy the demands of good society.

No one would see Doran Martell soon, maybe not ever. It wasn’t easy to sail over the Shivering Sea in winter, to either Pentos or Braavos, and then march to Norvos.

Each time Mance and Tyene met by chance, she looked away or through him. He soon became used to executing to perfection the pattern of mutual avoidance. She ignored him, and he pretended to do the same. They never spoke. There was no way back to the time when she desired him, and he wasn’t interested in her advances. The words between them were spent. Everything had been said and, worse, done.

He had hurt her badly, on the day she’d offered him a wight of Gregor Clegane as a present to be used. She was young, foolish and unaware of the existence of ice demons forcing the dead to walk
and fight for them. And Mance firmly believed every corpse had to be burned in in instant, to prevent the evil from spreading.

Since that time, his principles had evolved together with his life. Wights created by Euron Greyjoy had fought side by side with men, before vanishing into thin air, and leaving their cursed ironborn captain as the only undead soldier in King’s Jon army. Terribly sick men and women, who were slowly turning into Others in their sleep, were left alive in Nightfort, cared for and fed, neither killed nor burned, in hope that a cure would be found and they would recover. At least their chambers didn’t require much heating. The ill could better withstand the cold, and there was more firewood left for the healthy.

But on the day of his sin against her, to his disgrace, he had been intransigent. The world was simple, at least partially: black or white. Men had the potential to be good. The wights and Others were the embodiment of evil. Faced with Tyene’s brazen ignorance of what she had done by not burning Gregor, he had lost it. In a fit of cruelty, he had lashed out at her attitude, bedding her with unnecessary violence, and almost against her will.

Then, to his astonishment, she had brought him back his son from the Reach, travelling alone there and back to King’s Landing, on a fast Dornish horse, for motives he couldn’t fully grasp. The best he could think of was that her brave gesture was her way to apologise for undressing him with her eyes whenever they had run into each other in the capital. Despite that he had made his indifference clear to her, she had continued to ogle him as a cake she might like to eat, and not a man who deserved respect.

But, by returning his son, she had definitely ended their acquaintance with the upper hand, winning his respect for good. He was as grateful to her as his people were to him, and he had used the opportunity of being reunited with his son to demand her forgiveness.

He had thought he’d never see her again.

On the Wall, whenever his son asked for mother, Mance always repeated that his real mother had died, ignoring the calls to find his second mother. Oddly enough, his boy never meant Gilly who had nursed him for two years, but always Tyene.

Mance couldn’t understand why she hadn’t returned to Dorne after delivering the Signs and Portents to Daenerys, or left for Norvos with her uncle. Prince Doran had decided to set sail in ungodly climate, for reasons unknown to Mance, with his other good-looking niece, Nymeria, as only company.

Jon was stuck with Dornish spearwife, Obara, not as pretty, but definitely hot-headed.

And Mance with Tyene, in his head.

On the Wall, Tyene never fought or poisoned anyone. She just hanged around with Obara when Jon didn’t need guards, or spent time alone, mendig or knitting soldiers’ clothing. Not once did she come looking for Mance’s son.

The King-beyond-the-Wall felt offended by it, for no reason at all. He also jealously nursed a hole in his sleeve, but never took the tunic to her or to any of the stewards for mending, imagining her slender, long-fingered hands arranging it for him.

He couldn’t pinpoint exactly when he began to long for her, knowing only it was after his violent outburst, but maybe even before she’d returned with his son. On the road with his mummers, he’d remember her: her cheeky attitude, her smile, her pretty skin.
She’d probably say no to him even if she still wanted him, and nothing in her demeanour suggested that it could still be the case. And he’d never cross the boundary of intimacy without her permission. Not after having treated her like a drunk Thenn who had suddenly lost his habitual sense of discipline, and not a man he thought he was.

One who loved women.

Before winter came and the cold winds blew. Before he lost Dalla to childbirth. Before he was flayed, and given a cloak to wear, made of skin of innocent women who had followed his lead to their death. Before he tortured his gaolers in return, and completed the cloak they’d forced upon him with their own, freshly peeled pink skin.

Yes, after all that, when they first met, he had made it more than clear to Tyene that he didn’t desire her.

And ever since it pained him tremendously that she was taking his lessons at face value.

When he opened the door of his underground cell, to his shock, Jon was back, standing tired and stern on Mance’s doorstep, obstructing the exit. His unruly hair and black wools were soaked wet. His beard was growing, despite regular attempts to shave it off that Mance had witnessed more than once prior to a war council.

“You had a bath in snow?” Mance wondered, eager to depart before he lost courage to seek Tyene and speak his heart.

“Of sorts,” Jon replied, inviting himself in without further ado.

Mance stepped aside to let him pass. His son sobbed loudly into his neck, seeing how they weren’t going yet. “I should see Maester Sam for a cup of tea to calm him down,” he lied spontaneously. Why can’t I tell him the truth? “I could see you as soon as he’s asleep.”

Jon shook his head. “I’m sorry, but it can’t wait. I won’t be long.”

“Go ahead,” Mance said, “What is it?” He walked in circles with his son, rocking him to see if it helped against weeping. He’d always have patience for Jon. Immensely grateful, he owed him his life and that of his people. And he probably shouldn’t be looking for Tyene, no matter what he just told his son. It was a misplaced endeavour. The gods were telling him to stop, putting obstacles on his path.

“What did you think the Horn of Joramun would do if you found it and blew it?” Jon shot his question like an arrow.

“I’ve told you already—”

“What your people believe, what your stories tell. That it can tear down the Wall. What did you think? I know you well by now. I can’t imagine destruction was your goal.”

Mance shrugged. “There’s nothing to add, I fear.”


You’re asking for comforting lies, my friend. He wouldn’t feed Jon false hopes based on his obscure conversations with the giants. He hadn’t understood half of what they had been telling him, despite speaking the Old Tongue. No one knew the truth behind those old legends. But and it was obvious ance that no man could have woken giants from earth. Not even Joramun. That story had to mean
something else.

Wildlings and giants could play music with horns, not just use them plainly like the Night’s Watch, to signal the arrival of friend or foe. For all Mance knew beyond doubt, the Horn of Joramun had no magic at all. It was only a token of the past long gone, a treasured instrument of an ancient king. Like Rhaegar’s harp or Mance’s lute.

But the legendary promise of the weapon that could breach the Wall, contained in so many songs of his people, had helped to assemble them and lead them south, before all the Others woke and cleansed their lands thoroughly from the offensive creatures who breathed air, and whose hearts were beating. The endeavour of searching for the horn had done more good than finding it would have done.

For Jon was right, Mance didn’t have in himself to smash the Wall. Where would his people hide then? What would defend them from the evil at their heels?

“I didn’t think it would do anything,” Mance answered honestly. “Except a long ha-roooo.”

Jon laughed.

"Then I have to see Meera Reed,” he continued with determination. “Her late father might have told her about his greenseer legacy.”

“Isn’t your wife waiting for you?” Mance tried cautiously to send Jon away, before he lost his resolve to approach Tyene.

“Are we going to see mother now?” his son whispered, betraying him.

Mance almost blushed. Thankfully, he was too old for that, and weathered, rather than pale of face.

“I see,” Jon commented.

“I don’t think so,” Mance disagreed darkly.

“But I do,” Jon cut him off. “I loved before, don’t you remember? Ygritte didn’t lie to you about us. You know what?” he rambled. “It takes time to love again,” he asserted. After a while, he continued, “And I can’t even begin to imagine how it is to lose a wife after a relationship of many years and immediately after having a child with her,” he gave a sad look to the boy. “But it still shouldn’t be impossible to love again.”

“She’ll say no,” Mance poured his heart out, giving up the pretence.

“You don’t know before you asked.”

“You don’t know what I did.”

“What did you do?”

“She loves him better than me,” Mance pointed at his son, unable to confess his crime.

They call it rape, Jon. Men hang or are gelded for it in your realm. The fact that she hadn’t straightforwardly rejected him from the beginning, expecting a different, more pleasurable outcome, didn’t make his crime any better.

Beyond the Wall, an offended woman often took justice in her own hands, cutting the raper’s throat.
But Tyene was concerned that he might get poisoned, and not the multitude of innocent guests at Jon’s wedding.

“It sounds like a start,” Jon was adamant in lecturing him. “Every boy needs a mother.”

Even Mance had one, but she had died long before he became a man grown. “Do you know where her chamber is?” he asked Jon pragmatically, feeling weak. “I never learned.”

The king would know the whereabouts of all his subjects in Castle Black, wouldn’t he?

“No,” Jon replied, closing his eyes and murmured something unintelligible. After a while, he announced, “But Rhaegal thinks he knows where our distant cousin is staying. This way.”

He ushered Mance and his son out of their room, through the wormways, leaving them him at a closed door. “Good luck,” he said and stormed away.

Contrary to Mance’s expectation, the door wasn’t bolted. He pressed the handle with ease and sneaked in, afraid he would see her asleep and intrude on her privacy.

She sat at a small table, mending clothing in candlelight, cold and inaccessible as the Wall. Her hair was impeccably styled, lifted high up.

“He’s been crying for you,” he said lamely.

He put his son down, and the little traitor ran to her, burying his head in her lap.

“Shhhhh,” she said, her voice softer than he remembered it. “I’m here. I’m sorry that you missed me. I missed you too.”

“Mother,” his son said with love. “Can I sleep in your bed? Mine is too cold, and father doesn’t let me into his because I’m too big for that.”

“You’ve grown, but you still fit in your father’s bed,” Tyene explain kindly. “And in mine. But you can only crawl in and call me Mother if your father agrees.”

Long silence reigned.

“Father said himself we were going to see Mother,” the boy whined. “You.” He swallowed a thick sob.

“Shhhhhhh…” she calmed him again.

“He’s been crying for hours,” Mance said, feeling weak. “Please help him if you can.”

“So you’re here to find a wet nurse,” she shot at him with disdain.

“He had a wet nurse, Gilly, and he has almost forgotten her. He needs a mother.”

“And you?”

“My mother died and I don’t need a new one,” he rebelled, feeling at the same time offended, wounded, guilty and terribly in love.

She looked haughty and remained silent, not provoking him further, not making it easier for him to blurt what he would have preferred to say in an outburst of passion.
He looked down and confessed calmly. “I want to steal you,” he acknowledge, “but with our past, you might kill me if I do. By poison or spear. And my life is still dear to me. My son needs at least one of us.”

“Steal me?”

There was a hint of something he couldn’t place in her voice.

“Is it…. Is it like marriage in your lands? Or more like paramours?” she wondered.

“Both I think,” he reacted. “You’d be free to go. There’d be no vows,” he rattled. “But my intention would be to make it last and be loyal to each other, like in marriage between the kneelers. I don’t see myself as leaving you easily.”

The boy had already climbed into her bed and covered himself over his head with blankets and furs. Her entire room carried the scent of lilies flowering in the middle of winter. A perfume she used, perhaps.

*Waterlilies. A wonder of freshness.*

“Won’t you take a seat?” she asked cautiously.

“Is that a yes?” he wondered, accepting the offer.

She was terribly distant and beautiful.

“No,” she said with sorrow and began to cry, first softly, and then inconsolably.

“What have I done this time?” he exclaimed, not understanding, wishing to dry her tears.

“Nothing!” she exclaimed, wiping her eyes herself. “You fell in love with an illusion. With some non-existing lady. Not with me.”

“What are you talking about?” he understood less and less.

“This isn’t me,” she was crying softly. “This is an act of a perfect lady to make you look at me. And it worked, didn’t it? But as soon as I set my eyes on you as I would wish to, or dye my hair black because blond is tiring at times, you’ll hate me or hurt me. And then I will feel like dying slowly for my stupidity.”

“How would you look at me?” he breathed out.

Her eyes narrowed. The chaste expression was gone. The spark and the smirk were back with force. She eyed him daringly, as her potential lover. Yet the essence of her was still there as well, unscathed by any mummery. The woman who had found and brought him back his son in order to teach him a lesson - the vipers of Dorne also had a heart. And, just as he had expected before coming to her, the infamous Dornish attitude to bedding felt different to him now, not unwelcome at all.

“Can’t you see?” He was on his knees, his head near her lap, but not quite in it. “It’s not any act you put up. My love is in me. Ever since I looked at you as a woman, I couldn’t stop myself from seeing you. And the other way around, when I didn’t look at you at all because I was lost in my troubles, I wouldn’t have wanted you even if you were Princess Naerys and I Aemon the Dragonknight.”

“I can be myself?” she asked with disbelief. “The pretty but far too forward Dornishwoman that the men in the rest of the Seven Kingdoms call wanton or worse while being happy to take advantage of
my charms?"

Her hands ended up in his long, greying, dirty (he reproached himself) hair, tousling it. He allowed himself to inhale deeply the scent of her skirts.

*Waterlilies.*

He couldn’t remember the smell of the exuberant water flowers anymore, with spring too far gone, but they should have smelled like her.

“You’re always you,” he tried to explain further, “even when you’re pretending to be someone else.”

She dragged him up towards her and kissed him on his mouth, with both skill and reckless abandon.

He didn't want to know with whom she learned it. Not with him, to be sure. He hadn’t kissed her that first time. He loved that she seemed to be giving herself away now and not just tasting him for her pleasure.

In the end, it wasn’t bad at all for him to be a treat she had picked from someone’s table.

*No one’s table,* he admitted to himself.

He had lost Dalla long ago, and he would soon be rejected by his people.

He kept his hands to himself, in case Tyene didn’t want him to embrace her, but responded wholeheartedly with his lips and tongue, and very occasionally with his teeth, wondering if he felt like a savage to her or if it was alright. She hugged him in a while, pressing his shoulder blades with long hands, and it was only then that his arms dared descend on her waist.

“I could have done this before?” she wondered with disbelief between their avid kisses.

“For some time now, yes.”

“And you wouldn't think less of me?”

Couldn’t she stop asking him questions?

“I don't think about the woman I love. I just love her. Love you. No matter what you act like.”

She was stunned silent.

He didn’t know whether her reaction was good or bad, feeling *old* and exposed.

*Weak.*

“My sister Nymeria says that love is ridiculous and it doesn’t last,” she remarked seriously. “Best not to feel it and enjoy pleasures life can bring, without the strings of attachment.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I have loved you for a while now, without having anything from you.”

His son puffed and snored shyly in her bed.

“Shall I find him a wet nurse? he offered without thinking. “For us to have some room.”

*But who?* Maybe Jon and Daenerys…. But they wouldn’t have time. Where was Gilly’s room again? He had no clue. Would Sam mind?
“No,” Tyene refused.

He stifled a sigh of relief. “If you say so,” he was still hesitant. “What if he wakes? He’s not so small that he wouldn’t notice. It’s not a sight for a child.”

“I don’t want him to wake crying. We just have to be a little inventive. And discreet.”

As Mance saw it, ingenuity meant the floor in front of the fire in the hearth, too hard for comfort. And too similar to the occasion when he’d done it all wrong.

“Wait for me, please,” he told her. “I’ll be back soon. I hope it’s alright to leave my son here.”

“Fine,” she said, but there was doubt and reticence in her eyes.

She could only trust him a little now.

“I mean it,” he said quietly, feeling foolish to the extreme. “All of it. Any of it.”

Closing her door behind him he realised that he, the bard, was for once at loss for words.

There were plenty of furs, blankets and bed linen in his chamber.

But, before heading back to her with haste, he suffered a sudden change of heart concerning Jon’s plea and the Horn of Winter.

*What’s a little unfounded hope? It can’t kill, a man and perhaps it can give him a boost.*

Wrapped in so many light coloured furs that he looked like a white bear, he emerged out of the wormways. Under the strikingly yellow moon, he climbed the ladder leading up to the Wall, braving the inhuman chill. On top, he barged into Jon’s quarters despite that no one had called him for a war council, needing to spill the last bit of possible truth he hadn’t been able to tell before, when he had no hope in his heart.

Only after entering, he realised his mistake. He was being childish, less mature than his son. Where was his head? He had just trespassed, interrupting Jon and Daenerys in their marriage bed.

“I’m sorry,” he said before he could see if they were up to anything, immediately turning his back on his friend and his wife.

“You can’t wait, I suppose?” Jon asked skittishly, pretending he wasn’t embarrassed.

“I can. I’ll go. I-”

“Go ahead,” Jon interrupted him, sounding more natural, encouraging his inopportune guest to complete his sudden errand. “What is it?”

“The giants believe that the horn was ordinary before Joramun blew it. A music instrument and nothing more,” Mance heard himself speaking like a bard obsessed with a new song, trying hard to impress his listeners by its mystery.

Halfway through his clumsy phrase, not worthy of a proper verse, he felt as if another being had possessed him and spoke to Jon through him. As the words gushed inexorably out of his mouth, he hoped it wasn’t the Great Other. *He’d know the story better than anyone, wouldn’t he? About how he was put to sleep… Before waking on our time.*

Mesmerised, he spoke ardently. “But when Joramun’s defeat at the hands of the Night King was
more than certain, the young wildling king had blown the horn and poured into it his heart.

His need and his despair.

So great was his pain that the horn had found and *drunk* magic hidden in the entire world. It became the Horn of Winter, granting Joramun of the wildlings his only wish: to possess the power to defeat the Night’s King, in the name of the three old races of Westeros.”

To Mance’s relief, the unknown spirit was gone from him, and he became himself again, not young, not old, and not without hope.

“The giants claim Joramun had done it by waking their equals from earth,” he continued calmly, “My people understood it as tearing down the Wall by ripping apart the giant ice blocks it was made of, in times of Brandon the Builder.”

“Your people never wonder why the Wall still stands if Joramun has ruined it?” Jon asked incredulously, fully dressed in his blacks and standing by Mance’s side. Daenerys was nowhere to be seen.

“I don’t think so,” Mance shook his head. “People only see what they wish or what interests them, so many times. I don’t know if I should be happy about it or curse them for it. But it’s the way they are.”

“This means that the next man who blows it can do *anything*,” Jon asserted. Daenerys sneaked up on him behind his back. Wrapped in furs, she took her husband’s sword hand in her own.

*Yes. You’ve always been too clever for your own good, haven’t you?*

“If his need and his despair are as great as Joramun’s, yes, I would say, and to a completely unknown end,” Mance finished giving out his opinion.

He had hoped the horn would do *something* for him when he besieged the Wall.

But, then again, Mance hadn’t found the Horn of Joramun at all. Only a pretty black and gold instrument for which he let everyone believe it was the Horn of Winter. Only his closest fighters knew the truth. Melisandre had burned it, and that was the end of that story.

“But this is all hearsay, you know,” he cautioned Jon against his latest bit of wisdom. “Giants have their own dialect of Old Tongue. I might have gotten it wrong.”

Jon had one last question for him, “Why say it now and not before?”

“A heart full of hope can’t shy from sharing it, my friend,” Mance replied. “I felt it should be said.”

With that, he left the royal couple in peace and embarked on a painstakingly cold descent from the Wall, returning to his new quarters, wondering how he would find her. Naked in bed was unlikely, yet the vision of it wouldn’t get out of his head.

He was frozen to the bone when he opened her door. She sat on the floor near the fire, fully dressed. But her hair was down, combed and golden like the lost sunshine.

His son was fast asleep, despite that the woman who had calmed him didn’t look at all like an example of motherly virtue.

*But they can all be mothers...*
The possibility frightened him.

Tyene spoke as if she was reading his mind, or maybe he had gazed at his son’s sleeping form with too much devotion. “Before I went searching for him, I never believed any child would love me as a mother. I’m fond of myself just as I am, of course. But I still thought motherhood was reserved for different, better women. For those who are in truth like the stiff-lipped lady I enacted,” she smiled foolishly.

“And how many of those proper southron ladies are acting, just like you did?” Mance asked. “We are who we are. It always comes through sooner or later.”

“I wonder,” Tyene sounded sceptical. “Cousin Arianne fooled her Kingsguard lover until the end. He died believing she was attached only to him.”

“Is this about your cousin or about us?” he countered her.

“You always act as if you know everything better,” she tossed back. “What’s this about?”

“It’s not about any of your sisters or cousins,” he replied. “The rest is up to you and me.”

She stared him down, undecided.

“He didn’t wake, did he?” Mance asked incongruently about his son, needing to change the conversation to less emotionally demanding.

“Once,” she responded with pride. “But as soon as he saw me, he let me rock him back to sleep.”

“You said you knew a good name for a boy,” Mance reminded her with longing. “Might I hear it?”

“Oberyn,” she whispered.

“Your father’s name!” he reacted bluntly, not thrilled with the notion. He would have to think further about naming his son. She wouldn’t solve his conundrum for him.

“Yes,” she agreed. “So what?”

“I don’t know myself,” he confessed. “It’s just not what I expected.”

“Then find a better one,” she shrugged. “But if I ever bear a son of my body, he’ll be called Oberyn.”

No.

He couldn’t lose another woman to childbirth.

“You don’t want that, do you?” she admonished him. “Men never envisage having children. They just end up having them and suffering them. My father was different. He had raised us and made a bond with us.”

“Sand snakes, is that how you are called?” Mance asked jokingly. “A happy bunch. Didn’t he also take you away from your mothers?”

“How do you know that?”

“I’ve been asking questions about you,” he acknowledged. “Here and there. When I thought you indifferent, and myself a fool receiving the treatment I deserved.”
"I haven’t made any inquiries about you," she shared.

He didn’t have to ask why not. It must have felt terribly degrading to harbour an interest in a man who had rejected her and hurt her.

"Is there anything else you wish to know about me?" he wondered, feeling as though he still owed her some important piece of himself.

“No,” she muttered. A mischievous expression conquered her dark blue eyes. “Watch me.”

Then, she turned very dark. “But I don’t know what I’ll do if you despise me again. I might have to poison you. Or myself.”

“Maybe you’ll show disdain for me if I’m nothing to you,” he provoked her. “Just a new boring lover.”

She began undressing him, kissing silently every portion of his bare skin as it was revealed to her. He never felt the cold as he should, cutting and merciless even in the heated warmways.

After a long while, he added his exploration to hers. Unlacing her gown, peeling off her bodice, he visited her curves, her slender body, marking the soft, amber skin with warm kisses, and not with welts or cold contempt.

He was waiting, biding his time, uncertain on how to take it forward.

“Very silently,” she demanded, and her smile must have meant that his caresses weren’t bad for her. “Very slowly, this time.”

Silently he could do. Slowly was the challenge, after not having a woman for a long time. His first stroke was an excruciatingly unhurried endeavour. A natural pace followed from there, both much easier and a hundred times more difficult to maintain than he had thought. His confidence mounted a little. He’d continue as long as necessary, waiting for her to ask for something different or help herself, if his efforts were too little. Everyone was different in finding their pleasure, and it wasn’t as straightforward for women. But it was always there, within the reach of both sexes. Her body began to feel slick under his. He cupped her buttocks and whispered, “Slow enough?”

No answer came.

He tried to put his fingers between them to see if that helped, but she brushed him off. “Next time,” she exhaled swiftly.

Before he could think of something else for this time, she shuddered and sweated, trembling like a fresh leaf in spring, her open eyes a dark blue wonder.

*Water-lilies in spring.*

He didn’t last.

For the first time since winter’s arrival he felt magnificently warm.

And not merely less cold.

Afterwards, he stared at her lovingly, foolishly, feeling so much better in his aging skin, thankful to his boy for the mad attack of crying that had brought them both to her.

“I think we shouldn’t stay like this,” she said. Her eyes were beaming at him. “I hear that frostbite
She was right. The cold was already returning.

He supposed she wouldn’t poison him. This time.

Cleaned and dressed, they slipped into bed. Still unnamed, his boy was between them. *I shall remedy it when I wake, my son.* Afloat between sleeping and alert state, he thought he might know a good name, a *brave* name, if he dared use it.

Tyene surprised him by interlacing her feet with his legs, warming up her cold toes on his skin or maybe caressing him. *Or both.* He wasn’t used to it and, despite that her toenails sometimes scratched him, it felt good. They couldn’t embrace properly because of his son, who needed some space. With slow, drowsy movements, he returned her odd cuddling gesture. Their legs became further intertwined, fitting well together. Silently, they gazed at each other.

A grin blossomed on his face.

Sleep stole him from her, blessed and long.

Xxxxxxxxxx
Xxxxxxxxxx
Xxxxxxxxxx
Xxxxxxxxxx

A sturdy horn of the Night’s Watch blew hard in the darkness.

Ha-roooooo!
Ha-roooooo!
Ha-roooooo!

Three times, for the enemy coming.

Voices pounded in the wormways, excited and grim.

“The great siege!”

“It has begun!”

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Chapter End Notes

I could have never imagined that this story could reach 100.000 hits before it was finished. It gives an amazing feeling that maybe it means something to someone.

Maybe not )))

Thank you for reading.
Brienne VI

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Brienne

It was so cold in her chamber that her nose and ears were freezing. Yet her legs felt fine, from waist down, strong and warm. Even her toes, despite that they should have been extremely prone to frostbite.

Finding it hard to open her eyes, she remembered being told she was ill. She'd believed it about herself, trying hard to rest. Restoring her well-being with haste had been of utmost importance to her.

Until this moment.

Now she failed to understand why anyone would proclaim her sick. There wasn’t anything wrong with her condition.

She felt great, healthy. She was well-shaped, well-sung into existence. Flawless. Powerful.

In her head, the world was simple. Ice-made, beautiful and orderly, destined for perfection. Eternity. Solitude. Wind-swept, frozen plains. Silence. High up in the mountains, there should be no falling drops of ice cold water drumming music on rock. No sun melting the snow. Warm-hearted beings couldn’t be allowed to sing their songs of spring, endangering the cold season’s lasting splendour.

All songs shall be of winter.

Not of Jenny of Oldstones...

But as soon as she remembered Jenny, with flowers in her hair, her chamber suddenly smelled of magic dust from Asshai. So she wasn’t alone. Immediately, she longed for a different scent, warm and male. Inhaling the chill hard as she might, she was unable to sense it.

Jaime.

Where are you?

Didn’t you swear you wouldn’t leave my side?

Is it another sacred vow you just broke?

Why?

She felt cold sweat on her brow, forsaking her heartache, fearing for him instead.

Her husband had been many things, but rarely without reason. An important change must have occurred while she slept for Jaime to return to his old, heartless, careless, irresponsible ways. Abandoning his post in Nightfort could only be seen as reckless betrayal of the king’s orders. Why, my love?

Honour had a meaning for him, Brienne had come to learn. It wasn’t just a word, like propriety or comeliness. Despite that at times he embraced his nefarious reputation, tarnished forever after he’d done the realm a favour, preventing the crowned madman from burning King’s Landing to dust.
Even when he denied it or failed to live up to it, honour was his ideal, since Arthur Dayne had knighted him in the field, maybe since his childhood dreams and imaginings of a bright future. She never asked him about it, feeling that Jaime would be as eager to explain in detail how he felt about his honour as she would be concerning her beauty.

*Why on earth have you gone away now?*

*Where are you?*

Terrible concern for Jaime almost forced her to open her tightly closed eyes. Tears gathered under her eyelids. She'd failed him by falling ill: a true knight, Brienne the Blue, but not strong enough.

A white shade clouded her ice-possessed consciousness, brightening it all of a sudden, like golden tongues of fire from the hearth illuminating a dark chamber. *Out here, sister. At the lake. Behind the hosts your new kind. Fly down the Wall will you?*

*Find me, please. I don't want to die.*

*Viserion!* She exclaimed inwardly, losing all contact with the dragon as if he had never been there.

Her eyes snapped open. Seeing Lady Tysha came as no surprise. The powders she carried in her robes’ deep pockets smelled of Asshai.

Brienne would never forget the eastern city, its dark river and its great shadow; inhabiting the city of Stygai, greeting both visitors and thieves in human speech.

“Where did Jaime go?” she asked, shocked by the weakness and fragility of her habitually steady voice.

Tysha didn’t spare her the truth. “Brandon Stark chose to return beyond the Wall, on a noble quest. But no man in Castle Black wanted to hear a word about helping the king’s crippled brother to meet certain death. So he came to Nightfort and asked your husband to do him that favour.”

“How could he have traveled here on his own?” Brienne murmured. Tysha was mute, her blue eyes dark, almost black. *Guilty.*

“You brought him!” Brienne cried out shrilly. “Why? The king will be furious.”

“If two surviving victims of human evil can’t feel for each other,” Tysha whispered, “who will? Brandon would have gone one way or another. I thought he’d have more chance with a dragon.”

“He can’t walk,” Brienne had to say, regretting her words as soon as they were out of her mouth. *How did Tysha fare after-*

“And I can,” her good-sister retorted brusquely. “Right. But not due to Tywin’s guards. They didn’t stop to consider that they should leave me able-bodied to live my life. I had broken bones when they were quite done with me. There wasn’t a maester to tend to my wounds, and yet here I stand today. Shall I call it luck or destiny? Sometimes I laugh and say it was a fart of fate. You know what? The past is out there, somewhere, but has no weight on me. No power to influence who I am or what I shall do next. Only I can do that. Who’s to say what young Brandon can or can't do on account of his notable infirmity?”

*He won't make any stand, that much is certain,* Brienne thought sadly, guarding her tongue.
Certain injuries were incurable. Lost limbs didn't grow back and paralysis was for life. Yet she felt defeated, unable to deny a deeper truth in Tysha’s words.

*How would I have fared if Jaime hadn’t mentioned sapphires and if the Bloody Mummers had raped me?*

Jaime believed they would have killed her and maybe he was right. But Brienne knew her own limits better than her husband. Strong and tenacious, she would have probably endured the dishonour and torment unless they would have run a sword through her heart. Worse, she suspected that, even if she were crippled as a consequence, she would have remained equally stubborn if she proposed herself a rescue mission or another noble deed.

She stood up brusquely from her sickbed.

Towering over Tysha, she was much, much taller than she ever remembered herself.

“Gods!” her good-sister cried out in fear. “The ice monsters are taking you over! You’re one of them!” She backed towards the door and pulled a long obsidian knife from her dark blue robes’ bottomless pockets.

*Your new kind,* Viserion had said.

Brienne remembered only too vividly her stand at the High Heart and her legs of a white walker. Her room reeked of old ice, announcing the end to men.

No, not her chamber.

*She* smelled like an Other.

She might well be one of them, she realised, appalled with what she had become.

But only if she let herself close her eyes and dream of winter.

“I’m fine,” she proclaimed stoically. “Let me go.”

Tysha wouldn’t listen, ready to bar her way. “There are innocent men and women lying ill in this castle. I’m sorry. I can’t.”

On another day, Brienne might have displayed the same cautious and brave approach. Like in the past, when Jaime was her prisoner. Not now.

“Let me out!” she demanded. “Where is the gate?”

"There isn’t one!"

*Fly, sister.*

*Would that I could, dragon. But I can only stride on these new, long, twisted legs of mine as soon as I find a way.*

“There must be one,” she argued uselessly. Not every fort on the Wall had gates. Some had been permanently built in.

A wave of movement spread through her torso, tying her innards in a knot. Instinctively, Brienne closed her eyes and seized her belly to savour the familiar sensation. Her sweet babe! Her child was *alive* and kicking under her heart, not smothered by its mother’s waking white walker’s instincts,
which were telling Brienne now that there was a way out of Nightfort, in the cellar, under the kitchens, though it might be barred to her kind by the unjust builders of the Wall and their evil magic.

The Night’s King had opened it when the world was still young so that he could meet his lady love on the sly. His future wife.

Brienne remembered that story. An old Bolton or a Stark had lost his heart to a wight. She had made him relinquish the realm of men and embrace undead existence, so that he could be forever by her side, ruling both the world of the living and of the dead with an iron fist. But he was defeated and killed at the end of the previous Long Night, and the Night’s Watch had taken over the Wall.

Her hands still rested on her stomach. Her sweet child had grown while she was asleep. She was so much more rounded now.

“Gods!” she exclaimed nervously, uncertain if she were thanking the Seven or cursing them. A fragile smile was born on her lips.

“Indeed, good-sister,” Tysha replied, sheathing the knife she had been holding. “You’ve beaten every shadow you’ve met so far,” she continued. “Perhaps you shall vanquish the ice. Shall I fetch a maester to have a look at you?”

If Viserion was dying, how much time did Jaime and Brandon have? If any?

“When I return,” she replied graciously. “Please draw your weapon again. Have it ready until you see me through to the other side,” she advised. “Let us go fast to those cellars. There is no time to lose.”

She pulled her blue mail shirt over her tunic and gathered her cloak and some furs, choosing only white and grey ones from those scattered across her chamber. Dressing up, she made herself warm, but also attempted to imitate the tattered look of wights and their masters. She let her hair hang out from under the hood. In the absence of sun, hopefully it would appear white, and not blond. Her legs remained bare. She’d never find suitably long breeches in Nightfort. Nor would she try. Her new kind beyond the Wall should better think her one of them.

The gate was deep in the basement: a pale, blind, white weirwood face, questioning her. “Who are you?”

“Lady Brienne of Tarth.”

The face remained inanimate. Should she have said Lady Lannister? The title never felt like hers, despite that her marriage to Jaime felt more true than anything else in her life, more charged with meaning than her love for her own father.

The proud dragon name felt like a jape of fate at Jaime’s expense, if he was indeed Aerys’ son. And it would sound preposterous coming from her mouth, besides failing to describe her nature.

Looking for a solution to a riddle before her, she gave in partially to her new self, a white walker, who suggested she should recite the vows of the Night’s Watch as though she meant them. The Others knew the words as good as the black brothers, it seemed. She recited the promises mechanically. To no avail. Maybe she had missed one or told them in the wrong order. She began repeating them in earnest.

“I am the watcher on the Wall. I am the horn that wakes the sleepers—”

“That’s not you,” the face complained lazily, startling her into silence. “Who are you?”
She considered the demand for a long time, until she thought of a good answer, which was of import to her, just like her own name. The image on her old shield.

“I’m a falling star on a sunset field,” she dared say. “I feel that I still have a long and arduous way before me, until I hit the ground. Please, let me pass.”

It was pointless. She was being pathetic and stupid. A weak woman who should have stayed on Tarth until a suitor ugly enough came by and was contented to rule an unimportant sapphire paradise by her side.

“Then pass,” the face replied, to her surprise. “And remember the single tree on that same field, where the sun is always setting. I burned in Summerhall with Ser Duncan when he gave his life for the hatchlings. And I have dwelled for ages in the place where you might be headed to.”

The mouth of the weirwood became impossibly wide.

“Watch out!” Lady Tysha shouted with warning, reaching for Brienne with both hands.

Too late.

Brienne was being sucked up by the Nightfort’s secret gate. All she could do was protect her belly and endure the fall.

She felt like wheat being ground into flour.

Landing in snow with her behind was a source of heart-warming relief. Dazed from her fall, she remained seated, dreading the absence of motion in her tummy, until she felt it again. First too timidly to believe it. Then, a moment later, strong enough that she had no doubts left. She was still in waiting. Only then did she dare stand up--

--and faced two white walkers staring her down, positioned like guards not too far from her. They could tear her into pieces if her ruse was insufficient. She ruffled her hair hoping it would pass for the Others’ snow white mane in scarce moonlight.

“This isn’t your place, soldier,” one spoke sternly, like a commander, appearing much more naturally eloquent in human speech than the great Shadow in Asshai. “If you’re unarmed, you ought to be weaving the ladders until further orders. This is no time to drift away from the rest of us for idle amusement.”

Both white walkers carried crystal greatswords on their backs.

Brienne was shocked. How was this possible? The Others screeched shrilly in their battles, or never said a word, fighting to death in silence.

“He doesn’t strike me as being a soldier through and through,” the second one said, eyeing her with interest. “Probably he’s human underneath. Perhaps he ought to be placed into the vanguard of the siege. Let other humans kill him and be frightened when his mangled body shows.”
“He can’t be of human streak. They are more modest in size,” the first white walker announced, pulling his hair, in a gesture that appeared to Brienne as a nervous tick. “They are weak. This soldier is taller than us.”

Brienne decided to make a step towards them. If they attacked, she would lunge for one of their swords. Belatedly, she felt a sheathed knife in her belt. Lady Tysha. Thank you. Thank you!

Obsidian might serve her better than crystal.

“He looks like a she!” The first white walker who had spoken cried out with malice and fascination.

“It’s more than that! He chooses to look like our lady,” the second one said with admiration, sounding even more interested in Brienne’s appearance than before. “How did you do it, soldier?”

Brienne couldn’t answer that question for the life of her. Who was their lady and what did she look like?

Thankfully, she was spared the need to reply because the first white walker turned extremely agitated and talkative.

“Our lady being a she is a foul lie. She isn’t human. She isn’t even a she. She’s one of us sleepers. She chooses to show herself as a she and as a wight because she loves him. I think it’s wrong on her part. A betrayal. She should have always let him know what she was. And I’m not the only one who holds this belief.”

“But he became our king. Without him, we’d still be the slaves of the children, having no purpose or lands of our own. We’d be fighting their battles, and we’d go to sleep when we are told. Now the slain races serve us.”

“But he became our king. Without him, we’d still be the slaves of the children, having no purpose or lands of our own. We’d be fighting their battles, and we’d go to sleep when we are told. Now the slain races serve us.”

“Except the giants-”

“So? The children are all dead. Soon the giants will be as well.”

“Is he still our king? I sometimes doubt-”

“We all have a king,” the second white walker thundered. “A just one, fulfilling our purpose. We’ll take the Wall this time.”

“We might,” the previously agitated white walker finally nodded in agreement. His long hair trembled like branches of a birch in breeze. “And then we may choose a wiser soldier to lead us,” he added. “One who isn’t human underneath. It is time we started a rebellion and made this change.”

Brienne couldn’t make heads or tails of their conversation. Maybe if she let the curse overtake her fully, she’d grasp it. But she had no intention to let it happen. She had to think of her babe, Lady Catelyn’s son, her husband and his dragon.

“He even chooses to look as if he was with child!” the would-be rebel white walker proclaimed.

Both Others made several steps back from her, studying her figure.

“It is whispered through the winter wind from one sleeper to another that our lady is also in waiting, in her tower where His Grace had enclosed her in his great wisdom,” the second one murmured dreamily. “This soldier must be one of those who have faith in us becoming a true race one day.”

“We’re a race-”
“We’re not! It takes bearing offspring to become a race. Not spreading like ivy on trees.”

“We’re a different race!” The rebel Other didn’t surrender in his views.

“We’ve already changed from the moment of our creation,” the dreamy one judged. “Time will show what we are.”

“Let us bind this soldier so that he can’t drift away.” the rebel had a new notion concerning Brienne. “Let him wait for the king’s arrival. Let him be the judge of his intentions and loyalty.”

“But he’s free like the rest of us sleepers. It’s wrong to take him prisoner. The king hasn’t commanded it.”

"I ought to go, soldiers,” Brienne dared join the conversation, not appreciating its latest turn, trying hard to sound like them.

Having spoken at all was a huge mistake.

"She’s a stinky human! I should have known! Their reek is insupportable! She must be one of them Craster’s daughters!”

"What?” Brienne reiterated her mistake.

They didn't understand human speech, or didn't want to, which amounted to the same. She had the advantage or the misfortune to understand them, because she was half-taken by the curse they represented. Like a tree overgrown with ivy. They were her enemies, attacking her faster than she could have ever imagined possible, stronger and swifter in their realm than they had been at High Heart. If she stabbed one with obsidian, the second one was likely to rip her into pieces before she could take him down.

She bolted to the left and ran towards the great forest. Expecting to be caught, she discovered to her joy that she was much faster than her two pursuers. How? They had the same legs, didn't they? But she had become taller after her transformation than an average white walker, just like she was a giantess among women.

This effort couldn’t be good for her babe. She nonetheless ran mindlessly until she lost them. Every tree looked the same. None was the lonely elm on the sunset field she might be looking for, provided that the Nightfort’s gatekeeper knew where she had to arrive.

To Brandon and Jaime.

To Viserion, before it was too late.

She was panting in snow, reliving the conversation she had overheard. They were Others, by the gods. And yet they had a discussion and a disagreement, like men. Well, not exactly like men. But they had cares and considerations. Feelings. Beliefs. A notion of justice. It was easy to oppose the enemies one didn't know or was convinced they were villains due to their mistaken allegiance or ignominious deeds. But once one knew better… It was more difficult to kill them, though not impossible.

It stopped being easy, just like starting to know Jaime, years ago.

Glad for not killing anyone today, of any kind, she roamed the wood with her thoughts in disarray, searching for the lake Viserion mentioned, seeing none. Her knowledge of maps of these lands was scarce. There was the Wall, the forest, then the moors and the Frostfangs Mountains, and finally the
frozen wasteland no one knew well enough to map it in the south. Perhaps she should have seen a
learned maester in Nightfort, before leaving in a hurry.

But a truly wise man might have hit her on her head with a wooden beam and given her milk of the
poppy to put her to sleep, not trusting her judgment. Would she believe in Jaime if he had white
walker’s legs and decided to join the Others beyond the Wall? She thought she would have…

wouldn’t she?

She was ill, wasn’t she?

Where could a rogue, half-human, pregnant, she -Other find a dying dragon, a crippled young man
and a reckless, honour-forsaking husband?

She headed westward, remembering there might have been lakes in that direction.

Very slowly, her nervousness abated, serving no purpose. Her ears were freezing even more acutely,
but her legs remained rested, strong, suited for winter.

When her agitation was fully gone, when her mind fell completely silent and calm, more tacit than
the white forest, she thought she sensed the dragon.

Where was he?

She trod in the direction of nothing in particular. Towards a sliver of hope.

There was a lonely grove in the distance, behind a low hill, and then an empty clearing. A lake,
covered in snow.

As she advanced, she became floored by a wave of a sadness that didn’t belong to her. The
melancholy of of a… man… no… a he- dragon daydreaming of intertwining his tail with a young,
blue she-dragon.

Beth. She had forgotten her. Where was she? Nesting in the rafters of Brienne’s abandoned chamber
in Nightfort! Brienne couldn’t have taken her along or she’d be dying like Viserion.

Pity. Would that I could see her before- the dragon’s thoughts veered to laying eggs and to the
unmistakable, slowly-waking flow of longing for a partner, not a sibling or a friend.

She’s a hatchling, Viserion.

The dragon was offended and tried to tell Brienne that she was a hatchling in years compared to
Jaime, and that he wasn’t more than 5 or 6 human years old.

It’s different. I was young, but also a woman grown when I met my future husband.

She strode decisively towards the source of confusion in her head, until she reached the bottom of the
low hill, realising it was ragged, spiked and terribly immobile. Scratching the fresh layer of snow, she
wasn’t surprised to find white and golden scales beneath.

Viserion. Wake up, she urged him, not knowing what else to say.

The dragon was unable to obey, he suggested, and thought of sea .

It’s too far, Viserion! I can’t move you, and much less carry you there.

The dragon thought of flying over the warm Smoking Sea and the freezing Shivering Sea. He
thought so hard of any sea that Brienne’s own memories stirred and became vivid, showing her the blue paradise of her home. She wondered if she’d ever see it again and if her child would spatter in shallow water, learning to swim. The intensity of the memory was such that she could almost see herself and Viserion on Tarth, rather than beyond the Wall.

Viserion continued to imagine different seas, but couldn’t hold on to the memory of any sea he had flown over for long. Good-bye, he said.

No!

Instinctively, she embraced Viserion and imagined the Shivering Sea near Skagos where she, Viserion and Jaime had flown to fetch Brandon weeks ago. And when her wish to save the dragon as a true knight was so great that she couldn’t think of anything else, or maybe because the Shivering Sea was much closer than Tarth, or because dragons couldn’t do magic, but magic somehow sparkled around them (was it Tyrion or Daenerys who had said so at the wedding?), she saw herself hugging a dying dragon, hung over the edge of a high cliff that overlooked the savage, foaming waves. Only Viserion’s hind-side and tail still clung to the rock.

Hardhome. Rhaegal was here. A good place to die, sister.

No!

Not knowing what else to do, she began kicking Viserion with her white walker’s legs, needing to get him off the land containing the magic that was killing him. Finally, after many tries, the dragon slid limp into the void.

It wasn’t what she expected.

Fly please. Go to Beth in Nightfort. She’s waiting for you. Glide on the wings of the winter wind.

In vain.

She wondered if dragons could swim or if Viserion would now simply drown when he reached the waves, like her poor brother Galladon.

But, just above the sea level, the dragon stretched in the air, and remained hovering. His crippled wing hung, but the rest of his body looked fine.

Thank you, sister, he muttered after a while.

She realised she had no means of going back to the lake, to continue her search for Jaime and Brandon.

You do. The same way you took me here. This land can be anything your new kind needs it to be in winter. Only the Wall stops it from changing. Look under the lake.

She suddenly felt less good about saving the dragon. Had she done it like a full-fledged white walker? Was her deed less noble if the power to do it came from the enemy? She refused to consider this further.

You’d better go to Nightfort and do as if Jaime was there, she mothered Viserion. Defend the Wall with honour.

Her mind, human or ice-owned, was already back to the lake.
Soon, her body followed.

*Under the lake, but where?*

She thought she walked for a hundred days around it, before she found a path descending into the ice. She tried to take it, but could not advance beyond a certain point. There was no visible barrier, but the way was closed off to her new kind, just like the gate in Nightfort.

“I’m a falling star on the sunset field,” she declared hoarsely and pressed on.

Making the first steps through the invisible wall hurt like plummeting through a thick glass window, breaking it in shards that pierced her body, despite that no injury was visible. She persisted, reiterating who she was to the powers she was facing.

Her husband was right in front of her, propped against a damp, smooth cave wall, sound asleep. The frozen floor of the passage wound down from where he sat, into the bowels of the earth, reflecting moonlight from outside. The way behind her lurked open, but she knew this to be an illusion. She had just crossed an invisible gate, more fortified than an iron-wrought door of many a castle.

A familiar pair of *Others* appeared at the entrance. The two talkative soldiers had caught up with her. First she was afraid, ready to defend herself and Jaime. But then she realised they couldn’t see her, just like she hadn’t seen the interior of the cave before entering. The two white walkers exchanged gestures and probably words, appearing as if they were staring at the mirror images of themselves in the transparent door of the cave, adjusting their hair and crystal swords.

After a while, they left, following her trail, which led around the lake, many times over.

“Wench,” her husband said, waking. “Tell me I’m not dreaming.”

She let him have a good look of her new legs. “No,” she said curtly.

“I thought so,” he hugged her knees to himself. From close by, there was just enough moonlight for her to see a tiny red flower on his brow.

She began guessing, “You tried to get out—”

“—and hit a wall. Tyrion would call me dumb and he’d be right,” he stretched his arm and touched the translucid barrier. “I hope that Viserion flew away. He didn’t wait for me, did he?” he asked with childish fear.

“He’s fine,” she said, too tired from her journey to explain more fully. “Where is Brandon? Why did you come here?”

Jaime didn’t answer. This renewed her fear for him, but also made her a little angry. She was here for him, and he couldn’t even tell her his reasons for leaving, or the whereabouts of his helpless charge. Needing a reply, she noticed a white wooden cup of red liquid on the floor.

He saw her gazing at it, picked it up and handed it over.

“Drink, please,” he said. “It should cure you. There is more down there. If it helps you, we’ll take more, bring it to the Wall, to Aegon and anyone else who’s suffering—”

“You didn’t come here for Brandon—”

“I brought him safely to the destination of his choosing!” he protested, “but—”
“You’re here for me,” she said, moved to the core, feeling guilty.

“The things I do for love,” he tossed back at her with emotion.

She was tempted to drink. She might be a true woman again. As true a lady as she could ever be, with her stature and fighting skills. A mother to her child. The potion smelled sweet, of pears cooked with sugar, cinnamon and cloves, until they turned crimson.

Her lips remained parched. She couldn’t satiate her thirst just yet.

“Where is Brandon?” she asked.

“Seated on his throne. I carried him there as I promised,” Jaime answered faithfully. “I kept that vow.”

“Throne?” Brienne repeated incredulously.

"Are you certain that Viserion’s alright?" Jaime seemed unable to dwell on the subject that interested her now. Lady Catelyn's son.

“Yes, why?”

“I was compelled to sleep again,” he paused and then hurried to explain. “Like in the Vale, when both Viserion and I were overtaken by slumber and you nursed us. I think it happens to the dragons and their riders when another one of our kind is on the verge of dying and needs help to recover… I think… I fear… Did he not die out there if I’m suddenly fine? He was very weak the last time I sensed him.”

“No, I can assure you, he returned to the Wall.”

“Alright then,” he still didn’t believe her completely, but he let it go. “Would you drink, please?”

Brienne studied the cup she was holding very carefully.

“Later,” she decided. “These come handy,” she gestured at her legs. “I can hear the white walkers, what they say, what they want. I can outrun them. Maybe I can kill them easier, though I have yet to try.”

“What’s there to learn?” Jaime disagreed. “They want to kill us all. That much is plain enough.”

She couldn’t deny it. But what if we weren’t here to begin with? Would they live in peace?

“Well,” she began, “they don’t see themselves as either men or women but something in-between—”

“Why of course they do! They are Others!”

“And they might start a rebellion against their king and choose another,” she finished lamely, unable to retell the bizarre conversation about them pretending to be ladies out of love, calling themselves sleepers, or the bit about her being Craster’s daughter. “But I don’t know when or even how serious that conspiracy is.”


“I can do that, thank you,” she retorted politely.
“You’ve got two hands, I’ll give you that.” He wasn’t pleased.

“It’s not *that* and you know it,” she thundered at him, happy to have regained the steadiness of her voice, after her long illness and even longer walk in no man’s land.

He remained silent so he probably understood her fears. It might not be beyond him to force the concoction down her throat if she fell asleep, against her ardent wish to postpone her possible recovery until a more appropriate moment.

“What now, love?” he asked for directions.

“I want to see Brandon before deciding,” she concluded.

“In my opinion, he isn’t up to much and his brave quest looks like common madness,” Jaime outlined dryly. “But he seems to be quite safe on that throne. Protected, like a maiden in a tower. It could be a better place for him than the Wall during siege. It was my intention to let his kingly brother know.”

“Might I also be the judge of Brandon’s well-being, please?” she requested.

“Fair enough,” Jaime said approvingly, rising on his feet. “This way,” he gestured with his stump. “It isn’t far. Though I have to warn you that the premises are lacking for any comfort worthy of a great lady like you.” He gave her a proper compliment, and then looked up to her, quite a bit shorter now, after her unwanted transformation.

A sad smile conquered his lips, but not for long.

Then he bestowed on her that little arrogant smirk she had come to love. “I’ll remain strong enough for you, wench, never forget it,” he teased her, handsome as ever and smitten with *her*. White walkers’ curse notwithstanding.

Feeling loved, she resisted the urge to banter with him or tap him on the head from her new height.

He led the way down, into the bowels of the earth.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Euron

He hung alone on a ladder above a sea of snow.

Its sticky fabric clung to the Wall and his cold hands. He felt chained by it. A thrall in a foreign land.

“What are you waiting for? Bring it down!” he bellowed to the men some twenty feet above him, perched like black seagulls on top of the great edifice defending their realm.

He wasn’t one of them.

He was a wight, his voice dark as death, not ascending at all, ringing hollow over the white void beneath him.

It was perhaps fortunate that the men couldn’t hear him. He’d plummet down if they succeeded in cutting off that ladder. A great effort was required for it, especially when the white walkers were still on it.

But if the soldiers on the Wall were ironborn, they would have done it already, he thought arrogantly. Even if their mothers were stuck in Euron’s place and prayed for mercy. In war, everyone paid the iron price, from the captain to the lowliest sailor.

Except that, seven hundred feet below, broken and crippled, Euron would rise. The dark curse in his veins, the only source of his continued existence, would ignore the broken bones and limbs he might lose in the free fall, obliging him to roam, until fire put an end to it, some day.

It had already occurred to him that he might become another servant of the white walkers if he landed in their domain. He was indifferent to that possible twist of his fate. His reticence towards falling was of an entirely different nature.

It involved a mad longing he was unable to stifle, a wish to keep his cold body in one piece throughout winter, in case that one day he would feel again...

*The touch of breeze on my cheek, the itch of sea salt in my dirty hair.*

He’d better clamber up. He pedalled with his heavy, chilled legs through the air, trying to reach a thin, icy rung with his feet. To no avail.

The night was dark, almost moonless, and oddly pretty: frozen in place and at the point in time when a bloody battle went completely still for a fleeting moment.

The ginger wildling chieftain, Tormund, was suspended as a lifeless corpse from a second ladder, next to Euron’s, just a few steps lower. He had done for an Other, but the creature had pierced his neck with pale glass immediately before melting into thin blue air. Quite a few other men had already fallen down, the survivors had climbed back.

Euron and Tormund were the only ones left hanging.

The hard-won respite would be brief.
New ladders would be launched from a distance by means of monstrous, ice-forged siege engines that looked like a combination of giant crossbows and catapults. Not every shot was successful. Sticky bolts whirred upwards, but some remained crumpled and collapsed, instead of spreading and adhering tightly to the polished surface of the Wall.

The number of white walkers under the Wall seemed endless, melting partially into snow in which they camped, under the cover of the Long Night. More appeared to be arriving from the North at every hour, but it was hard to say how many with any degree of certainty.

Their king was not yet there, or maybe he was seen, but where exactly was anyone's guess.

The whole war was an imprecise, ongoing, bloody effort.

The Others had the habit of rushing up to the Wall in small groups. Rumour had it that a horde of a hundred attempted a climb in Eastwatch, but then the ladder had collapsed from their joint weight.

Most news were hearsay. The Others’ ways of warfare were constantly being discovered. It took time to know one's enemy and distinguish the truth from many lies and exaggerations. The great siege was laid down slowly and carefully, at every castle and at every crenellation of the Wall between them. It was ominously continuous and incessantly evolving, wearing out the humans who had to take turns to rest.

The Others never slept.

People of all ages and sexes kept coming from the south to enlist in the war and eat as a reward. Yet before the inexorable pressure of the enemy, it always seemed as though there was a shortage of hands to defend the realm.

“Soon there’ll be no food,” people whispered in fear.

Not needing sustenance, Euron didn't care.

Be that as it may, the white walkers had yet to reach the top of the Wall in significant number all at once, and that before the green dragon scorched them.

The king flew east and west, fighting in person where the need was greatest, young and tireless, not requiring sleep, just like the the Others, or Euron, the foolish victim of the magic horn he’d brought from Essos, without being able to either understand or control it.

Concerning unnatural sleeplessness, and on other counts, rumours didn’t spare the king.

Right now, a tall, hooded figure with a torch began a descent from the top of the Wall towards Tormund’s corpse, attracting all Euron’s hanging attention. He half expected to see Mance Rayder. The King-beyond-the-Wall would surely burn his fallen captain, rather than leave him to rise and serve the Others. Wildlings greatly preferred the finality of death to what Euron had become.

He could understand them, hating them at the same time, hating himself even more.

To his surprise, or utter lack of it, it was Val, approaching rapidly.

She was never far from Euron.

Before reaching Tormund, the most beautiful woman in Euron’s world slipped, sliding down a few steps. She soon regained balance, but her torch scratched the ladder and stopped burning, put out by the profound chill and dampness of the Others’ fabrication, colder than the Wall itself.
At that moment, the ladder moved under her.

And under Euron.

The Others were still there, hidden in the gloom underneath. Laying low, they were indistinguishable from the winter surroundings. Probably that was the reason that the ladders couldn’t be brought down.

"Go back up!" he shouted in Val’s direction, changing position rapidly, hanging on only one arm, grabbing his axe, throwing it with precision. The obsidian head landed between the eyes of the creature that had almost thrust an ice blade into his dark heart. The Other began melting into crystals, and Euron’s weapon sank into the void.

Val was prevented from running, if she ever tried. A white walker engaged her in a duel, eager to drink her blood. Red, not black. Warm. Unlike Euron’s. Calm and collected, she held her knife, rejecting the creature’s advances, but she couldn't deal her attacker a single blow.

Euron swung on his ladder, gaining momentum. In the next moment he was flying--
--and he landed on the Other, separating him from Val by the sheer force of impact.

Wights were dead weights, heavier than men. The Other grasped his neck, twisting it savagely in an attempt to rip his head off. Euron had a moment to wonder if he’d rise headless.

Or not.

The grip lessened suddenly, the Other began vanishing.

Blue gems in the winter wind.

It was the woman, naturally. The wildling princess was a deadly warrior who used a distraction he had provided. She had already sheathed her knife. Climbing in a hurry, she never looked back.

Wights were very strong, but slow. He could only follow so fast. He glanced at Tormund. For a moment, he considered reviving the wildling. Creating another undead soldier that would follow him, not the king.

Faster than he’d thought of it, he decided against it.

He’d never be a fool again, using powers he couldn't grasp or keep in check. He’d have a new obsidian axe made for himself, in place of the one he just lost. He’d stick to it, to the weapon he knew and understood.

As an afterthought, he hauled Tormund over his shoulders. His people were welcome to burn him if Euron made it to safety.

When he was only a few feet away from the high edge of the Wall, the defenders finally cut off the ladder he was on, in front of his dead nose. Val was already up. Her luminous hair was tucked under her cloak, but couldn't be completely hidden.

He looked into her brilliant eyes, glowing in the flickering light of many torches aligned on the battlement. Wishing he would remember her as a crippled thrall of the Others, he readied himself for the long fall.

To his surprise, a rope was thrown in his direction, hempen, not sticky. He grabbed it with hope.
He was being pulled up vigorously.

But Tormund slid off his back from the motion, diving into the sea of snow.

The wildling wouldn’t be burned. He’d be forced to rise and assault the Castle Black’s gate. All those slain since the siege began were put to that task by the Others. But the gate couldn’t be breached and didn’t look weakened from the onslaught, ancient and magic-protected.

_So far._

A bunch of five or six _children_ dragged Euron over the Wall’s edge. Among them the young falcon from the Vale, the boy grown tall, and his friend, Willow, a mousy, dark-haired girl.

Lady Jeyne’s little sister.

Deep into the Long NIght, Aegon’s missing wife remained the only person who had regained a full-fledged life after being undead.

Should he find her and help her, she might tell him how it could be done. Despite everyone’s belief that it was only Lady Catelyn’s sacrifice that had done the trick, Euron remained convinced that Jeyne possessed and guarded such secret. Two cursed lives couldn't made one whole on their own, without any other magic ingredient. If it were that easy, half of those slain by the Others would have come back.

Being undead caused horrid emotional torment, worse than the pain of losing an eye.

It hurt a thousand times more than dying.

From Euron's first hand experience, many a wight might choose to end his existence. Of course, those enslaved by the Others might not be able to make any choices. Or maybe they hated the world they were forced to live in so much than they’d rather suffer forever than help another one of their own kind escape.

There were no easy answers so Euron kept searching for Jeyne in every spare moment he had.

But the lady was as good as gone.

Dead and burned, perhaps. The king’s dragon breathed indiscriminately at friend at foe. Warnings were given in the thick of battle, urging defenders to step aside, but they sometimes came too late, or the people were too slow.

Euron didn’t know the other youths who just helped him, but he hated them all. Their smooth faces, their innocent daring, their warm bodies. They hadn't made irreparable fools of themselves like he had done from young age. He rolled away from them, onto a heap of sharp-edged rubble strewn over the Wall to make it walkable. Otherwise, it would have been more slippery than the Drowned God’s watery halls. More treacherous than the Others’ ladders that everyone said were not only sticky, but also slimy.

Euron couldn't feel the latter.

His left hand bled slightly; sprinkling drops of ink-black blood.

Val was only a few steps away from him, shivering under her cloak. In the scarcely lit gloom, behind the line of torches on the outer edge of the Wall, he could still see her lovely face, but not anymore the natural light in her hair.
Why are you always close to me?

Imagination suddenly took over the hatred that always brewed inside him. If he could feel, her skin wouldn’t be cold or sticky, but warm and soft like velvet. He could picture the sensation vividly in his mind, despite that he couldn’t experience it at all.

It was a source of sweet torture to give in to this

Weary from the battles in his head, loathingly tireless in his cold body, he reached for her bare cheek without thinking, as though he was still human.

She flinched from the touch of the fingers she’d sewn back for him at sea, near the Little Light, so far west from here. Staggering slightly, she took a long breath and a step back.

“You stink of death,” she tossed at him without mercy.

Euron couldn’t smell a thing.

“If you say so,” he muttered arrogantly. Why do you linger near me if you can’t stand it?

“Leave the lady alone, deadman,” said an unknown Southron soldier passing by, marching bravely to take his place in the first line of defences. As an afterthought, the man spat into his face and went on.

Val stifled a small laugh.

“What do you want for me?” he roared angrily.

“I don’t know!” Her reaction seemed very honest. She stayed calmly where she was, studying him intently.

Words escaped him. “But you want something,” his hollow voice had a different depth now, sounding almost enticing.

She was so close to him that imagining her warmth was stronger that the burning humiliation he felt.

He truly was the greatest fool ever to man the Wall. Or should he say wight the Wall? The living demeaned him incessantly, especially after his most recent, staggeringly stupid failure. He was ordered to guard a woman in an ice cell, and he had somehow fallen victim to her tricks.

The red witch had escaped him and then stolen the greatest dragon of all, the frightening black beast who might have made a difference in war.

Euron was left with the wrong prisoner, bewitched to look like Melisandre and stay in her shape. That unknown person remained in his care, locked in his quarters under Castle Black, because the godly people of Westeros had murderous intentions towards the impostor, who was probably blameless in the occurrence.

But it was much, much easier to kill a lone man or woman on the sly than a godless, unnaturally strong wight.

The horn of dragonlords had sucked up his natural life without him being the wiser for it until it was too late. He’d become a terrifying, undying lord who had almost risen to kingship in Seven Kingdoms. Just like the Others, he could raise the men he slew and force them to do his bidding.

Even his own brethren.
Victarion had thought himself stronger and Aeron Damphair other godlier than Euron, and they must have been right. For in the end they had been able to defy his rule, cut all his fingers, leave him like scum and march away with the rest of ironborn corpses Euron had obliged to rise. No one had seen his runaway army since.

His power had never been as far-fetching as he thought. Or maybe it was a different gift altogether, a poisoned one, whose true purpose he’d never learn.

*A pig in a poke.*

Just like the pretty petrified dragon eggs he took from Asshai had *hatched*, and the sweet concubine Balon gave him had turned out to be a clever ruse to ruin him.

One thing was certain, for all his strange, dark power, he wasn’t a white walker.

*Only dead.*

Or dead as dead went these days.

“Bloody wight,” people said and spat. “Buggering fool,” they spilled some more saliva. “How hard can it be to guard a woman?”

His humiliation was endless. His undead existence, already a source of constant torment, was mocked as unimportant and irrelevant.

He was nothing and no one cared if he lived or died.

All his daring explorations of different continents had been useless. He was still scum from the Iron Islands, a poor, stupid boy in a grey skin of a deadman.

“You wanted to help us burn Tormund and then you dropped him,” Val interrupted his chain of miserable thoughts.

*Has she just come closer?*

His head whirled at the thought.

“But before that you meant to wake him.”

“What do you mean?” he put up a mummery of not understanding her, shocked that she could recognise his dark wish to make Tormund his slave.

Was she a skinchanger like Lady Sansa who was once in his head against his will? He hoped not. Had Val seen inside him, he’d stop existing from shame. She’d know him for a fool.

“You waved an arm like Others do when they take a man-” she was swallowing *tears*. “Before you started carrying him.”

“I decided against it,” he hurried to explain like a green boy. He hadn’t done anything to her and yet he felt guilty for her cares.

“Why?” there was fresh pain in her voice, and since he no longer had a heart, it hit him in the head, shattering his conscious mind. There, her grief reverberated and hurt, becoming his own.

“A thrall is a thrall, theirs or mine,” he whispered. “Why should I create one?”
“You wanted slaves before.”

“I wanted to have loyal family members and obedient sailors,” he blurted from the place in his soul where his youthful memories kept festering. *A loving family and a driftwood crown. The first childhood dreams of an island boy*

“I wouldn’t be loyal to my family if they killed me first,” Val said proudly. “How could you?”

“I killed my brothers, yes, four of them,” he emphasised coldly. “And two of them I brought back to serve me.”

Not having anything to add to that, not to her, he bolted off, hurrying to the long stair descending to the southern side of the Wall, towards Castle Black and his locked cell, hidden very deep inside the wormways labyrinth. He wanted to check if the unknown lady in his charge was fine and then be alone with his hatred and his suffering.

In the yard, men gossiped to better endure and survive the cold.

“The king could have ended the war,” one said. “But he didn’t. He should have killed his wife. Now we’ll all die because he wasn’t man enough.”

Those were the worst rumours concerning Jon. That he was a handful away from obtaining a weapon that could instantly kill the Night’s King and put all Others back to sleep. Then, spring would come overnight and everyone would be happy.

“He’s weak like his father,” another man said. “Thousands have died because Rhaegar fancied a change, a new wife, and repudiated the Dornish princess.”

“Who’s weak?” Euron heard himself interrupting passionately. “What would you say of King Jon in two years if he butchered his wife in exchange of victory? Would you not bow to him in fear today and call him ungodly tomorrow? What if you had to kill your wife?”

“I don’t have a wife,” the judgmental man complained.

“But if you did—”

“I’m not a king. I don’t have to make such hard choices.”

Euron let them talk on and plunged into the wormways.

Before he reached his destination, in a low, dark corridor, he came across the king’s mother. Heavy with child, Lyanna walked slowly, carrying a candle.

Instead of being startled by him, or his awful smell, she lit his dead face. Her hands never shook. She gave him a long, odd look and almost made a sigh.

“You can still speak,” she stated cautiously.

Her words were more impossible to comprehend than her gestures.

“Is that right?” she wondered.

“Aye,” he replied, hating the undecided tone of his dead voice. Almost fragile now.

They barely knew each other, and her late husband hated him for dragonstealer. The feeling had
been mutual during Rhaegar’s short-lived reign.

“Are you the only one with the gift of speech?” she inquired

“I haven’t had the pleasure to meet every single wight on this earth,” he replied sardonically, “but to my knowledge, yes.” Words gushed out of him, bitter and unspoken for decades, “It must be because I’m ungodly,” he spat cynically. “My brother Aeron could explain you why. I never understood his reasons.”

“Where is your brother?”

“I wouldn’t know,” he muttered.

“Excuse my curiosity, my lord,” she surprised him by offering cold, but impeccable courtesy. “The times are heavy on us all. I need to rest again, and perhaps so do you.”

With that, she walked away with dignity. Good head and a half shorter than him, she was still imposing with her stony attitude. A Northwoman, able to handle winter, thriving in a situation where another would lose her forces.

*Like Val.*

Lyanna wasn’t entirely wrong. He needed a break from hatred piled up in his being, directed to every breathing man, woman or child, especially to those who humiliated him for being different.

For not being one of them.

His false Lady Melisandre was mending black clothing for him near the fire. He sometimes thought of her as a sister he never had.

A foolish thing, truly, because for all he knew she could be a poxy man under the glamour that was hiding her.

Looking at the old stitches on his fingers, straight and perfect, he wished it was Val who held a needle in his chamber. As his rock wife.

*You didn’t flinch when you did that.*

*You weren’t disgusted by my scent. Why?*

Back then, he was freshly come out of the sea. Was it the breeze that had given him a different perfume?

*The wind on my cheek, the stark crying of seagulls. My hair - plastered to my face and tasting of salt.*

Val had repaired the consequences of Victarion’s and Aeron’s revenge, joining the joints they had cut off to the correct stumps. He had all his fingers back.

*Why, why, why?*

“Hello,” he greeted his charge. “Are you well?”

She nodded mutely.

“I’ll have to go back soon,” he added.
She shrugged, caressing the giant ruby on her neck.

This was nothing new. He always had to go. The siege continued inexorably. And if he sat idle, he’d burst from hatred. Best if he fought.

She was unable to speak.

“This spell has to wear off in time,” he lied, “then you’ll be yourself,” he added with false hope. The enchantment seemed quite foolproof and irresistible. He had always seen only Lady Melisandre.

He sat on the floor, in the chamber’s dampest corner, not minding the mould, closing his eyes to enjoy temporary blindness, striving to set aside the hatred and the constant mental torment that accompanied his condition.

Struggling not to feel.

Successful only in part, he rose sharply.

Standing up to leave, he froze in place when he saw Val on his doorstep. It was the first time that she’d followed him to his quarters.

He gave the false red woman a pleading look. “There’s food being given by the stewards just around the corner,” he told her timidly. “You ought to be safe in their presence.

Miraculously, his adoptive sister left immediately, closing the door behind her.

Val had already stepped in.

He didn’t want her compassion.

Would that he could see her with one eye only, that he was the Crow’s Eye again!

He’d be sailing on the deck of Silence instead of being shipwrecked on the Wall, serving a different king.

Then, desire would run freely through his body, even if it remained unanswered for some time, more familiar and natural than this helpless, dry and cold longing for Val in his head, not accompanied by any stirring of flesh, and yet painfully true.

With two dead eyes, he could see her so well from all angles that his head began revelling in the imagination of things he’d never truly sense, unless a miracle happened, like with Jeyne Heddle.

“What could your brother tell Lyanna Stark?” she demanded.

“You were eavesdropping!” he reacted accusingly.

“You were yelling,” she retorted. “The whole Castle Black has heard your conversation with Jon’s mother. Tell me please” she insisted, “or I shall die from cold in front of your eyes and you’ll have to raise me or burn me. Know that I still prefer the latter.”

“My new views against slavery might not hold if it’s you under my feet,” he confessed.

She smiled instead of looking angry, as if his dark powers and weakness concerning her person pleased her tremendously.

“Tell me, deadman,” she urged him. “Who are you in truth? Why did you kill all your brothers?”
“Not all,” he protested. “Only four of them. Three were from father’s first marriage,” he counted on his fingers. “They died very young when I was a child. Later, my younger brother Urrigon died from wound poisoning. Not my doing, that. Then there was Robin, from fathers’ third marriage, young and mortally ill, suffering from seizures, not good in his head. Men laughed at him. I couldn’t watch him die so I shortened his illness with my axe.”

The familiar, disapproving look was right there, in Val’s pretty eyes. He wondered if he should continue. She kept silent so he went on, now knowing what else he could do.

She’d asked for it and he would tell it all, without embellishment.

“My older brother Balon was king at the time. He congratulated me for having the wisdom of acting against a threat to his throne,” he stifled a bitter laugh. “Imagine, a threat,” he spat out. “From our lackwit brother. I didn’t dare contradict him, trying to be man enough. Balon gave me a pretty woman thrall as a reward. He told me she’d belonged to our brother Victarion who no longer wanted her. She was pretty. She never shared my bed willingly, but didn’t resist either. Now, years later, I think that she was just very afraid. Back then, a few days passed. One night, I went out to drink and compete in finger dancing with my pairs. When I returned home, the thrall was gone. I was drunk and I slept.

In the morning, Balon sent four men to arrest me for murdering Robin and for raping Victarion’s salt wife. I was malicious, they were told. Evil and dangerous. For what kind of man would slaughter Robin and cuckold Victarion? From them I learned that Victarion had already killed his woman because she betrayed him. I also understood that I wouldn’t survive my imprisonment for long. It has always been me the threat to Balon, and not poor Robin. I was the best captain, lady. Victarion was stronger, but I sailed further. I set my goals higher, to the heights and distances unthinkable for most men. You could say that from all ambitious Greyjoys, I suffered most from the visions of greatness.”

He inhaled deeply, remembering... recalling...

“So I killed three of my would-be justices and maimed the forth. Balon sent more men after me. I escaped from Pyke by swimming around the island. Near a beach, I heard my brother Aeron Damphair proclaiming me ungodly, standing in knee-deep sea, just before he drowned a bunch of ironborn in an old ritual of renewing our faith. At least one of the faithful didn't survive.

Euron is cursed by the Drowned God, he’d announced arrogantly, not caring for the man he killed in our God’s name

Years later, when I returned to Iron Islands as a conqueror, I made Balon dive into the crushing waves from a hanging bridge between the towers of our rickety castle. I am certain that the Drowned God has seen to his fate in his watery halls.

As he’ll one day see for mine.

I made Victarion the captain of my fleet and gave him another captive. A very sweet woman, from what I could tell, after I had her tongue cut out on Silence as for .” He couldn’t look at Val when he arrived to that point. Some crimes were his and his alone. He was cursed for a reason. His past couldn’t be improved.

Tired, he concluded. “ I tried to ignore Aeron and his preaching. But when my brothers defied me again, claiming I was so much worse than them, I-

“You overreacted,” Val said dryly.
“Why did you help me?” he asked passionately, staring at perfect stitches on his fingers.

“Why not?” she defied him. “I hated you. I still loathe your smell. Your open hatred for us, the living. You exude it so strongly that it can almost be cut with a knife. But then there is your voice,” she paused. “And you’ve been fighting loyally on our side, like one of us. regardless of your feelings. You never slaughtered anyone who spat on you. And since the day we met you’ve been looking at me as if you’ve never seen a woman.”

“I always thought it’s just the body, what I feel when I let myself look at you,” he said very solemnly. “And maybe it is. Or maybe it has never been. Weak men say it’s in the heart. But I lost it. My love for you is in my head, Val. In my soul, if that exists. Every time I remind myself that it can’t be, it grows stronger.”

“I can’t stand your touch or being too close to you,” she said with tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry. It’s repulsive.”

“But the same longing is in your head, isn’t it?” he claimed, sensing a tiny whiff of certainty. “Though it can’t be fulfilled.”

Her eyes calmed down, but remained a tad watery. “I never knew it could be like this. You seemed a monster—”

“-An ungodly one,” he agreed.

“Stop saying that or I’ll burn you,” she threatened him. “Why didn’t you talk to Victarion about his first salt wife?” she continued questioning him.

“We are ironborn,” Euron emphasised. “He’d find it easier to believe if I confessed to killing Balon and Robin than to being a fool. And if by some chance he did, what good would it do? He’d already killed his woman. He couldn’t get her back. What good would come from knowing?”

“Why—”

“Why did I kill Victarion and Aeron and turned them into wights? I didn’t understand what I was at the time. I thought we were all becoming stronger. They would be immortal warriors who would conquer the world at my command, all loyal to me,” he guffawed bitterly. “I saw us as future dragonriders who would master the horn of dragonlords... I was the biggest fool ever to walk this earth. I thought I did Victarion a great favour he didn’t deserve.”

“Tell me about the other seas,” Val asked defeatedly after a while. “I hear you sailed around the world.”


“Think you’ll sail again?”

“Would that I could,” he replied with longing. “That I could climb masts and ladders of hempen rope. And hold a helm of my own ship.”

“That’s why you never fall!” she exclaimed knowingly. “And why you choose to fight the white walkers on their slimy stairs.”

He had never thought that far about his reasons to do this or that in war.
Val laughed dryly. “You are a silly fool, aren’t you.”

“I just told you,” he acted defensively. “Don’t think you’ll find a bigger one.”

“You could take me with you when this is over,” she said wishfully. “Look at me with two dead eyes on a deck. I have yet to set foot on a ship of any kind.”

He reached for her cheek again. She withdrew.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “it’s difficult when I’m reminded without any embellishment of what you are.”

He understood. If she tried to touch him, he might become angry as well. For he would realise, sharper than ever, that he couldn’t sense anything, not even if she were warm and willing. His love only existed in his head.

It had to stay there.

So he stared at her. At some point, she returned his looks from a charged, prudent distance. His inner longing became both exacerbated and satiated from it, as if they were making love with their eyes, without touching each other.

“Shouldn’t you go to your people,” he said quietly, when exacerbation became stronger than his immaterial pleasure.

“Probably,” she agreed. “But I’ll come to see you again. You have to tell me more about those seas. Not only their colour. How warm are they?”

His head turned. His heart would pound if it was still beating. “When you leave me now,” he dared say, “in my mind I shall kiss you and reach between your legs. I’ll find you hot like coals and soft beyond count. There’s no sea like that.”

“And what if I forget what you are in my imagination,” she interrupted, “what if I lay on you and take you in my mouth as you kiss me between my legs?”

“Dear Drowned God in your watery halls!” he exclaimed. His breath would hitch if he were still breathing. The position was beyond his wildest imagination. He never visited fancy pillow houses in Essos. Matters were simple in the Iron Islands. Men showed what should be done in bed. But this, her initiative, this…

His head tolled like a bell in a monumental tower. The inside of his head, the only remnant of himself, thrummed madly, empty of senses and filled with fantasies.

“Will you touch yourself?” he needed to know all of a sudden. “Will you find yourself warm and wet and give yourself pleasure?” He wondered if he was a fool again. Maybe women didn’t do that. He’d never bothered to find out in the past.

She was flushed now, despite the cold and her pale complexion, so they probably did.

“Will you let me watch?” he dared go further.

“I don’t think that’ll help,” she barely managed to say. “But I’ll think about it.”

He wondered emptily if seeing her do that would make him feel better or worse, if feeling worse in his case was possible at all.
“I’ll look forward to it, lady,” he whispered with devotion, his voice lower than the deepest sea.

A door slammed open, unceremoniously.

His charge was back.

His love stormed out.

Elated, transfixed, transformed, he saw the red ruby on the false red woman with different eyes, loving eyes, and it looked black and ominous, not red like blood.

*The black magic. Could it be in it?*

He tugged at it. The jewel resisted his superhuman strength. But Euron wasn’t just any wight. He had made himself, he wasn’t raised by the Others.

He yanked the ruby with all his might until the collar that held it snapped.

The false red woman morphed into Jeyne Heddle: dark-haired, young, pretty. *Alive.*

“Thank the gods,” she whispered. “I thought you’d never understand. I feared no one would. Or that the jewel would burn and kill anyone who touched it.” She showed him fresh burns on her finger, from when she must have tried to free herself.

His dead hands *fumed,* but didn’t burn. He tossed the ruby far away.

“My lady,” he said with respect.

“Where is Aegon?” she asked immediately.

“In Nightfort. I’ll take you to him. Come.”

A wight’s temporary desertion during siege would probably go unnoticed.

But not today.

He passed by Val’s cell, knowing from day one since he came to Castle Black where it was, and knocked on her door. “I’m going to Nightfort and back. Please dont become like Tormund when you go out there again.”

“Wouldn’t you love it? We’d be the same.”

Was she joking? Would he be happy about it?

He wasn’t certain, but he knew one thing. “You’d hate it. And it would hurt.”

“I’d rather burn, remember? And I have no intention of serving the Others if I can help it,” she tried to sound reassuring.

“Good enough. I’ll be back soon,” he promised foolishly. *For what? So that we can torment each other some more?*

Yet he would return, he had to. If only to see her touch herself from a prudent distance, where his smell wouldn’t ruin her pleasure.

He loved his misery. More than all his past dreams of glory and kingship or the freedom of sailing
around the world.

Outside, in the murderous cold he was fortunate not to feel, cries pierced the nightly gloom.

“The Others are taking the Wall,!” a woman screamed stridently. “The gods help us all!”

“They’re in!” a man bellowed. “They’ll come down at any moment! It’s over!”

The despair was interrupted by the arrival of the green and bronze cloud with glimmering scales, freshly arrived on the wings of moonlight.

Flying low, right above Euron, about to join the battle, the king gave Euron the same long, inquisitive look like his mother had done earlier. Of quiet interest and quaint hope. His queen, Daenerys, wasn’t with him. Did you kill her by now?

What do you want from me? Yes, I’m a bloody wight and I can speak. So what?

Rhaegal belched fire. The cold air around Euron turned into liquid sulphur. Other men in the yard struggled to breathe. At least he was spared further courtesies from the Starks. The dragon soared upward. Seated on his tail, Euron noticed Daenerys.

So you didn’t murder her. Good for you. Did you cut her tongue out if she displeased you?

Probably not. Only ungodly krakens did that.

Lady Jeyne was shaking from cold in his dead arms. Euron envied her, hating her for being alive and able to suffer such discomfort.

“Come, lady, this way,” he ushered his charge in the direction of the stables. Last time he checked, there was a carriage pulled by wolves and many freezing, frightened horses. “Don’t be afraid.”

She did her best to walk, gritting her teeth. Her jaw shivered uncontrollably.

The top of the Wall was burning and it would soon be clear of enemy. The king wasn’t a fool, and he was never late.

For what was worth, Euron agreed with Jon’s choice. What if the king had killed his beautiful queen and then the weapon he was promised turned out to be something else? A fool’s hope? A tool murdering the man who wielded it rather than the Night’s King? Why would anyone slay their woman? Why didn’t Victarion talk to his salt wife rather than to Balon about her supposed treachery? Even Euron might have thought of that!

Godly and honourable men like Aeron and Victarion always demanded perfection from others. Judging harshly everyone’s else’s sins, they remained blind like godly bats to their own.

Blessed, cursed silence.

People’s tongues should best be cut off, truly. When they were mute, they could neither trick or hurt each other with words.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for reading.
Ice Dragon III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ice Dragon

His banner was white as snow and it belonged to the dead. Not even the moon could see it. There was no painted sigil on it, no elm or falling star or other famous true knight’s portent from the past. Yet it was neither the pure blazon of the Kingsguard or the white flag of parley or surrender: the fabric was cut elaborately into a shape of his soul animal, tailed and spiked.

Be they made of fire, ice or rotting human flesh, dragons remained dragons.

So did he, the music lover, the harpist, the scholar. A man, now a walking corpse, not made for combat. But the battles had come to him and he had taken them up, like so many others before him. It was in human nature. To err, to fail, to rise above past mistakes and fall again. To get up as many times as necessary.

Existence was a fight, and its end the ultimate surrender.

His wickedly bright blue eyes were almost blind in the even more wicked dark. He led his army by following the incessant swing of his banner right before him, the ice dragon's tail dancing in starlight.

A dead boy carried it, Jojen Reed, his standard-bearer, different from everyone else in his modest host. He could swear that the boy’s naturally blue eyes, common in wight-kind, turned green from moonlight. Yellow-green like leaves gleaming in the sun, or dark and muddy green like murky water in the Neck. While he still drew breath, the Ice Dragon had seen the paradise of the Greywater Watch, its reed-covered shores and treacherous shallows. He had heard brilliantly coloured kingfishers singing in their tunnelled nests.

The forsaken fresh scent of water still lingered in his dead nostrils, revived by his brain, the priceless treasure of a preserved memory.

Stop, he commanded inwardly the silent procession of his followers. As an extra precaution, he lifted his lance-arm high, gesturing them to halt.

He believed that, just like him, they all constantly heard the incessant chain of Others' commands in their empty hearts, but not necessarily his words. Like him, they all seemed to guard certain knowledge of their past lives, but, just like they lacked body parts, a hand, a foot, an eye, they also missed some crucial abilities and information about the people they used to be.

The Ice Dragon had forgotten his name, which was probably cursed forever, because of his sins. He could list them all like everything else about himself. His loss in a duel with Robert. The bloodbath on the Trident that followed. The butchered baby that Varys had swapped with Aegon. The unspeakable martyrdom of Rhaenys and Elia.

The second family he didn’t deserve. The foolish, selfish happiness because Lyanna and his son escaped death.

He should have done it all differently from the beginning, but he hadn’t seen the tragedy he’d cause until it was too late.
The guilt was gnawing his dead soul at every moment, making it reverberate with endless, never dwindling pain.

He had become the lord of the slain, made in their image, sharing their fate and the continued, cursed existence of torment and suffering.

"What is your wish, Your Grace?" Victarion Greyjoy was the only one who had regained the ability to speak. "Shall we march and meet the Others in battle? Make them pay the iron price?"

The Ice Dragon shook his silver head. He had cut his own throat. He'd stay mute for the remainder of his days. A brave one-time rush into hopeless battle wasn't what he had in mind. That could only bring the finality of death to his followers or reinstate them as slaves of the white walkers, increasing the already impressive number of soldiers that the enemy could field.

His small army had just reached the edge of the haunted forest under the cover of the Long Night. Through the last line of evergreen, snowed down trees, the Wall came slowly into view, imposing as the end of the world.

The vast Others' camp had been erected meticulously between the woods and the Wall, spanning its whole length, from east to west, as far as his deceased blue eyes could see.

The winter wind howled tirelessly with destruction and death.

This camp was different from any human one for it had no fires. Others and wights could do without.

The dark shape of a low gate loomed at the bottom of the Wall, in a straight line from the Ice Dragon, right across the enemy camp. Black shapes assaulted it assiduously. He realised those were the other slain, obeying the Others. A few corpses from his meager following initiated the march to join them.

Don’t! He lifted his arm again, very decisively, and they turned back, obeying him, not the enemy. His courage and hope grew. Sluggishly, he stifled both sentiments. He’d be clever this time, not carried by the fire in his blood.

He represented the wight-kind. The new race of Westeros, growing in numbers at the cost of the living.

The gate must belong to Castle Black, he concluded, because there was no sea in the proximity. Only three gates remained open on the entire Wall, and the other two where in Eastwatch and in Shadow Tower, far east and west, on the shore of the shivering and the sunset sea.

He realised that his son might have his battle seat on top, behind the glittering, tiny beads of torches lined up on the ice parapet, seven hundred feet above, so high up that they resembled stars, positioned too low on the nightly sky.

Father above! His wife might be up there as well, instead of waiting safely in Winterfell for her son to return, or to pay her a scarce visit when war allowed. Lyanna had stayed back once as a very young woman, when he had ridden to the Trident, and even then reluctantly. He didn’t think she’d ever do it again.

It would be like reliving all their mistakes.

He couldn’t help but imagine that she was also here to see and wait for him, despite his condition, and not only to love and support Jon.
An odd siege engine in a shooting motion drew all his attention: a frozen catapult that stood on a dozen icy spider legs. A white boulder sprang from it, taking off. Flying high, the bolt spread and unfolded into a ladder that attached itself miraculously to the Wall, like a kraken with only two powerful, hooked tentacles. Another shot had the same effect. The Others rushed up the ladders with hissing, inarticulate cries.

The wights were not urged to attempt that at all, deemed not strong enough, not destined to conquer, not… not… What not?

From the screaming white walkers’ orders to attack the gates, pounding in the back of his mind, the Ice Dragon couldn’t distinguish the third and most important reason for which the Others didn’t abuse the wights as fodder on siege ladders. They didn’t explain themselves fully to their servants, but they didn’t bother to hide their thoughts from them either. Their slaves couldn’t harm them. It was impossible. As a consequence of this attitude, the Ice Dragon could perceive some of their various opinions on the margin of the overwhelming commands to which he and those few hundred corpses he led were so far able to turn deaf ears.

The enemy could be counted by thousands.

Climbing up the ladders and assaulting the Wall might be reserved only for the white walkers, but the wights were employed to man and build the catapults, as well as other, half-finished siege engines whose purpose was not yet revealed. This was perhaps useful.

We lay low, Rhaegar hummed inwardly and hoped to be understood. We crawl forward. We study their devices, their movements. We pretend to obey and we do as we are told if we are seen, but we don’t apply ourselves to carry out any task properly. We’re all dead and clumsy. When we are no longer in their line of sight, we retreat into the wood and hold counsel on what we have seen. Lay low. Stick to the darkness.

He admonished himself for speaking too long, demanding too much, with too many details. The undead weren’t very bright or dexterous. Perhaps he would have encouraged them more if he played for them Jenny of Oldstones.

Since he was unable to sing.

Don’t get yourself killed.

His last message was completely unnecessary and ridiculous, yet it escaped him, as if he was still alive and warm of flesh, commanding normal people.

His little rebel army was like a drop of water in the sea, in comparison with the number of the white walkers and the slain they mastered. They would all turn against the Ice Dragon the second he tried to give battle in the field as Victorion suggested. His people would be decimated, cut into shreds, or enslaved for good - which would be a hundred times worse. He prayed to the Father to spare them that fate.

Having nothing more to say, unsure about his role and power, and about being understood at all, he began setting the example of the infiltration, passive resistance and sabotage he had designed in his head, walking slowly and with purpose to the nearest catapult, as an idle, dumb corpse looking to fulfil its purpose.

Three Others guarding the contraption looked him over when he approached. Their eyes were blue and crystal clear, harder than steel. They weren’t lackwits like some of his new soldiers. They seemed more perspicacious than men.
Suddenly, he was mortally afraid.

Was he recognisable?

Was he still of value to the Night’s King as a dead body? Will they capture him and drag him away? Will they try to possess him like their king had attempted? His son had killed the curse before it had the chance to spread, and sealed the undead fate of his father. Was Jon’s action what made the Ice Dragon different or was it the manner of his death?

He hadn’t been defeated.

By cutting his throat of its own accord, he had embraced death. Disabling the Great Other, he had nearly destroyed him. But the dragonblood had lost its burning property soon after it had left his body. The enemy was able to recover and kill the last children of the forest in the cave that had served like the Ice Dragon’s prison and hideout, for a time.

He trudged forward like a mindless corpse, suppressing his fears.

His specially forged lance was always on his back. Valyrian steel was intertwined with obsidian on the tip. He could kill one, maybe two Others, if he retrieved his weapon on time after the first blow. But more would come to their aid before he could withdraw to the opaque, dense darkness of the haunted forest.

Resisting the urge to cover his head and hide his hair from suddenly too bright, merciless star light, he recalled reading a maester’s learned tractate claiming that hair and nails continued to grow after death. His nails defied the theory, still closely cropped. But his silver mane had grown again, betraying him for who he was.

A dragon.

The Ice Dragon.

His empty heart was in his throat.

Unexpectedly, when the Others completed their intense visual scrutiny of his person, they simply commanded him to help operate the nearby catapult with the rest of his kind. He would have sighed with relief if he could still breathe. With his shoulders and head bent down, looking as lowborn as he was able to, he trod obediently to work.

Belatedly, he noticed that the old wight with wooden teeth that clicked was right beside him, busying himself with tying a sticky white rope around the catapult's legs, apparently to give it some stability in deep snow. It was the black brother who had followed him since the magic cave, and who used to be a full-fledged Other, before the curse was killed in him as well, leaving him simply undead for the remainder of his existence.

When that was done, together, the old wight and the Ice Dragon hauled a large, crumpled ball from the ground. Another corpse had to help, a tiny one with red, bushy hair and only one eye, but with the brightest blue gaze in it that the Ice Dragon had ever seen.

An enslaved and mutilated child of the forest.

The future ladder barely fit in their three sets of arms. Loaded like oxen, they climbed laboriously up the catapult’s arm to set their cargo in place, inside a deep, funnel-like bucket. Two Others held the restraining rope for shooting in place. The catapult staggered back and forth on its icy arachnid legs, losing equilibrium. When the ladder sank in, the Ice Dragon ended up being the last wight bending
over the bucket. His companions were already clambering down. The siege engine swayed to one side from a sudden gust of the winter wind. The restraining rope snapped into two.

A white walker hissed unhappily, it was too early, for the Night's King sake!

The Ice dragon soared without wings or any steed to carry him. To fly alone was so exhilarating that at first he didn’t see any danger.

He was free.

The ladder unfolded and spread vehemently, flying up with him. Soon it would be hooked on the Wall. If he didn't catch it, he’d fall and turn into a mass of non-recognisable, smashed and yet still moving body parts. Trying to grasp the ladder, he realised he was completely wrong about its projected trajectory.

As well as his own.

He failed to catch the ladder, but not because he was about to fall back. On the contrary, he had been propelled much further by the catapult. Flying unstoppably over the Wall, he felt a hundred knives piercing his dead body, incredible and completely unexpected in his undead existence. It was as though he had leaped through a thick glass barrier and shattered it in pieces, with all the sharp shards entering his body.

The Wall stood higher than seven hundred feet it seemed, and its topmost layer was not made of ice blocks but of magic.

Yet when he crossed the invisible frontier in thin air, he was still whole, now falling inexorably to the land held by men.

*Seven hundred feet*...

In a useless, defensive gesture, he spread his arms for he had no wings. His hair drifted on its own accord carried in all directions by the wind, like a long silver cloak.

To his surprise, the end of the ladder slapped him hard on his face and then plastered him onto the Wall, rolling him out like a cake dough or a sheet of parchment, trapping him in place just below the parapet.

He hit the ice masonry hard, wrecked like fish on dry land, a dragon with clipped wings. The surface underneath was too smooth, too devoid of any fire. For a moment, he feared freezing and dismissed the ridiculous thought in an instant, unable to actually feel the cold.

After anchoring itself to his body, the ladder unfolded further, spreading all the way down to the other side. Made of sticky cobweb, it imprisoned him, preventing all movement. In no time, a bunch of Others was quite literally running over him, successful in crossing the Wall.

But, down in the yard of Castle Black, the defenders fell upon them with ferocity he had rarely seen in men or beasts. A few fell, screaming as they died, but their companions were soon victorious.

The Ice Dragon tried to shake his head, wave it like a white flag, hoping to be seen and freed.

To no avail.

Who could discern the silver stain on the white Wall in shimmering starlight?
He would very much like to greet his family before he returned to the cursed and wicked, to where he belonged.

“Wait! Don't kill him!” a woman screamed on the Wall.

Too late.

A dragonglass knife, thrown with precision from above, missed his eye by a hair's breadth.

“I'll call the king!” the woman continued yelling.

“But he isn’t here!” a man replied.

“Wait! Come over here!” more voices shouted in unison.

"Get the bloody thing off our hands!"

The raucous battle cries stopped making sense until, with great effort from the defenders, the sticky ladder was prised off the Wall and was being yanked up, to be thrown back to the Others’ side.

To be refolded by his kind and fed to the catapults again.

The Ice Dragon was nearly peeled off as well. He grasped the edge of the ladder and closed his eyes, to focus on his own effort. He’d hold onto it, until he would be pulled up, on the Wall.

Time passed, long, morose and immaterial.

Finally on top, he managed to get rid of his slimy salvation rope by rubbing it off his hands. Long wisps of cobwebs were left between his fingers. Walking with difficulty, he sat into ice.

"Rhaegar!"

He knew that voice. Innocent and determined at the same time.

In place of either his wife or his son, whom he had hoped to see, he gazed at his sister's face right in front of him. She was wearing a mountain of furs, appearing larger than a white bear. And despite her overwhelmingly winter attire, she still shivered from cold.

“It is you,” Daenerys proclaimed incredulously. "I thought that the widling woman guard was seeing things from the lack of sleep. It wouldn't be the first time."

He was Rhaegar Targaryen or what was left of him. The name sank back in slowly and deeply, clicking into place with all his other memories, clanking like the wooden teeth of the old wight soldier.

He hesitated to approach his sister.

“Won't you come with me?”

How could he? His place was no longer with the living.

"Or are you with them now?” Heartbreaking doubt coloured Dany's voice.

Them would be the Others, he guessed.
He couldn't blame her. Loyalty was scarcely guaranteed in their family. The Starks did better on that count, at least in the generation he knew. Lyanna always told him that there had been cold and cruel Kings of Winter in the past, and that only the old gods knew the future.

Her words had never made him feel any better about his father.

Rhaegar stood up and made a step towards his sister, showing ostensibly the gash on his throat, reminding her that he couldn’t speak.

"Oh," she sounded contrite and guilty, grabbing him by both shoulders in sign of both apology and affection. "I thought-

*That the wights and Others are stronger and more powerful than they are. That they grow new heads once the old have been sliced off. And that they are all evil. Of course you did. And you were not entirely wrong.*

"Drogon is enslaved and kidnapped, by the red witch," his sister was bitter about sharing the news. "Do you not know? Can't you do anything to bring him back if you're still you? You were his last true rider since he left me."

Rhaegar shrugged, allowing himself to place his dead hand on her furry shoulder.

He had no clue.

And much less a solution.

*It's not me, it's you who has to take action, sweet sister,* he tried to speak to her in the secret language of dragonkind, in images and words shared from one to another.

Drogon had let Rhaegar ride him, yes, but it had always seemed like the dragon's free decision, not forced on him at all by the bond between a dragon and his rider.

Daenerys didn't understand Rhaegar anymore, the dead dragon.

"I don't need to be comforted!" she raged. "I need this to change. It is our responsibility not to let Drogon in hands of an evil woman, to use him as she sees fit."

So he pointed with his index finger at his chest, thinned his lips in an effort to appear very serious, and shook his head decisively. Then he stretched his left hand towards his sister's heart and nodded vigorously. *If you can't reach him, no one can.*

He kept repeating the gestures.

"You don't understand," she confessed after a while in an insecure voice. "I stopped being Drogon's rider. It was my own fault. You claimed him next and he was loyal to you until you died. Seeing how you're not completely dead, it has to be you."

She beat him hard on his dead chest and he didn't feel a thing.

He continued shaking his head and pointing at her. *You are wrong, sweet sister. It can't be me.*

He firmly believed in that. He felt like he had never had any dominion over Drogon.

Despite that he must be wrong, and his sister right.

Dragons couldn't change riders of their own free will. A rider was the dragon's master. Once they
bonded, the beast would do anything for him or her, without questioning. It was the same like Others enslaving the wights. If Rhaegar rode Drogon at all, and he did, it meant he was his master at that time. And now it was the witch.

With him being only a shadow of the man he was, Dany had to find a way to reimpose herself.

But how?

They were both still so ignorant in secrets of dragonkind despite their birthright and the recent experience of the communion in spirit with their animal counterparts.

"The monster's here!" A company of armed wildlings was approaching rapidly. "Burn him!"

Daenerys faced them squarely. "My brother is on our side!" she proclaimed. "I'm your queen."

They didn't dare attack her in person, but didn't listen to her either, circumventing her. For all the furs she wore, she remained a slender woman.

Rhaegar turned on his heels and bolted away, running over the cobbled path on the Wall.

His swift reaction gave him a head start that wouldn't last. Wights weren't fast. And he couldn't kill people to save himself. He just couldn't. It would be too much to add to the long list of his sins. He should jump over the Wall and see how he fared. Maybe he'd be able to recompose himself from loose body parts.

A hand grasped his dead arm in the darkness, stronger than a snake, dragging him aside. He fell to his knees, almost toppling over his new attacker. The torches didn't lit the inner edge of the Wall. Only the outer one. He was held in place in silence. He didn't know by what dead sense he recognised his wife's beloved shape next to him in the dark, but he did so. His rotting soul began to thaw.

The pursuit ran past them.

"Now," his wife urged him to follow her, when they were gone. "This way."

She stopped him when he wanted to rise. "On all fours, please, my love," she asked of him. "I'm so sorry, but I don't see a better way."

He obeyed, following after her like a four-legged animal.

After a while, Lyanna patted him on a head like a dog and made him halt in the shadows, near two guards who were trying to warm up over a large campfire.

"I need to go back down," she demanded in her lady's voice. "Bring the winch cage please."

The metal mechanism he couldn't see began creaking and turning shrilly.

"Who's with you?" one guard asked with curiosity.

"It's her wolf, silly," the other one answered condescendingly. "She has several in the stables, haven't you seen them?"

"How will that beast stay calm in the tiny cage?"

"It came up that way, before your shift has started," Lyanna lied calmly.
"She's right, son," the second guard said. "The beasts can't climb the stairs no more than they can fly."

Rhaegar's eyes would have teared from laughter, if he still had water in them.

But all his tears had dried out.

When the cage door opened, he paid good attention to hide in the shadows of his wife's broad cloak and many skirts.

Inside, he straightened up and embraced her, not caring that he was cold and dead.

He felt water on his neck wound and realised she was crying.

Unable to speak, he wiped her tears.

She grabbed his hands and kissed them, and then wriggled out of his embrace.

He felt emptier than usual by her rejection, but then the cage hit the ground and he realised she had done it only because it was time for him to become a quadruped once more.

He continued to hide behind his wife, avoiding any light, celestial or man-made, prowling with determination through the dirty, sloshy snow. She was leading him to a tunnel under the Wall.

_The gates_, he realised.

"The Others have somehow lifted the portcullis, both the inner and the outer one," Lyanna spoke very calmly. "All our efforts to close them have been in vain. But their slaves have so far been unable to pass through. The Wall protects itself. The living limit themselves to man the passage at all times so that they can fight them if they ever get in. This is as far as I dare go," her voice trembled. "From here it's too narrow for us to walk together. But if you stick to the darker side, you should be able to pass every patrol unseen, until the very end. There, you'll have to think of something."

"I could of course hide you in my quarters," she added, stifling a sob. "But I supposed that's not what you want, is it? You feel like you ought to be out there, do you not?"

She knew him so well.

He nodded slowly.

"I don't know yet."

But he couldn't just abandon his wights to the enemy. He might be able to cause harm to all those engines, making them less of a threat. It could be something.

He couldn't shake off his mind those other, unfinished devices of the Others, whose purpose had so far eluded him.

"Jon is doing very well," Lyanna said brusquely. "I'm so proud of him."

He had never doubted that.

His lips curved into a tiny smile. He embraced her, one last time, but didn’t dare kiss her. It would be
too unnatural and wouldn’t bring them joy. She lingered in his cold arms, unable to leave, despite the discomfort he must have been causing her. He resisted the temptation to touch her belly, in full knowledge that he’d be unable to sense the movements of his unborn child.

And she was the first one who found the strength for a farewell.

"Please go before I put reins on you and make you drag my carriage," she spoke against his quiet heart, only half-joking.

You can't restrain a dragon, my love. Not for long. He'll break the chains and fly away into wilderness.

Except if you’re his rider, he recalled bitterly.

On a whim, he kissed lightly the crown of her head and then skulked to the tunnel entrance on all fours, passing under the first portcullis without any difficulty. He was almost becoming good at the humiliating, odd exercise. It wasn't more difficult than learning how to be a warrior in his youth. He arrived almost at the end of the long, dark passage without being seen, avoiding an occasional group of stationed defenders by traipsing quietly through the deeps shadows.

But before the wide open second portcullis, leading out to the other side, out north, men were densely positioned. A few were ahorse, and one stood next to a large boar.

He'd never be able to leave in secrecy. But what if…? He might be able to joust his way out. He hadn't been a tourney champion for nothing. He lurched for the nearest horse's reins.

The courser screamed in pain, mortally afraid of dead flesh. Rearing, the animal kicked Rhaegar and tossed him far away, also throwing down his human rider.

He’d be his own steed. With his long lance readied for the start of a joust, he assumed the correct position to start riding in the back of the tunnel, and then ran like a bolt of fire through the stupefied defenders, overthrowing them left and right, using the handle of his lance as a stick to hit them, and never the tip to stab them.

Someone regained the presence of his mind. "Burn him! He can’t be allowed out! He knows our secrets!"

He was already passing through the open portcullis when the burning torch collided with his back. This time, despite being undead and cursed, he felt the flames caressing his body. Waiting to be consumed by the fire, he never stopped moving. He was out of the Wall by now. The enslaved wights ran away from him, from the burning, staggering mass he represented. It meant final death for them.

And it would be a fitting end for him, to burn in torment.

He was almost in the Others’ camp now and the expected pain didn’t come.

Just the tickling, the licking, the itch.

It was happening to him again.

Not even now, without dragonblood, was he able to burn, to be utterly destroyed, and then rest in peace, like normal wights.

Ser Duncan had died in vain in Harrenhal to save him as a baby. Perhaps even if he had been soaked
in wildfire, the substance able to destroy anything and anyone, even dragons… he would never be burned.

He rolled in snow like a child to put the flames out completely. He’d never make it unharmed through the Others’ ranks as a flaring torch, drawing undue attention to himself, to being a special wight. But if he looked like an ordinary one, they wouldn’t care. As for the fiery spectacle he had caused up to now, they’d think it was one of their slaves who was just turned into cinder and ashes by obsolete, warm-blooded humans defending Castle Black.

Jenny, Jenny, why didn’t I perish with Ser Duncan in Harrenhal? he thought as he spun diligently in snow, remembering the beauty of his encounter with the legendary lady.

There would be no rebellion.

Lyanna could have been happy with Robert, whose heart was in the right place, despite the excesses of his youth. He could have aged into a decent man.

Jon could have been Robert's son and the lord of Storm's End. In the War of Winter, he might have had an important role in Viserys’ army. Or in Daenerys’ army, if it was true that their younger brother had turned mad. Be that as it may, Jon wouldn’t carry the burden of kingship in face of the impossible odds. He wouldn’t have to deal with the conspiracies of nobles doubting his integrity and paternity. He might be a match for Daenerys become her king consort.

Elia would have married a man or found a paramour who would have loved her more than any other woman.

Father above, but did he feel that even winter might have been delayed if only he had died as a helpless, innocent, just born infant!

The itching tongues of fire vanished from his body, erased by snow. It was time to stop whining.

Jenny, Jenny, you died from sadness because of your losses, didn’t you?

That’s how I wish to go one day. Not from guilt… Or fear… Or pain.

But that would be too easy, wouldn’t it?

His lot was to continue suffering.

In the absence of firelight from his back, only fading stars still illuminated the gloom. Blinking twice, he noticed several bent shadows approaching him clumsily.

His first reflex was to run or feign to be a stupid wight, expecting Others.

But when they came closer, he recognised they were wights like him, come after him from the Castle Black gates.

One bowed and touched his boot.

He lifted the man up.

This way, he whispered inwardly.

Trudging among Others, sluggishly fixing a catapult, avoiding to climb on its arm again, examining the unknown, still unfinished engine that tickled his curiosity, he was successful in leading his latest followers out of the camp, and deep into the haunted forest.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Aegon III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aegon

Gendel and his children wreaked havoc in the bowels of Nightfort.

Or was it his brother Gorne? The legendary hidden passage through the caves, under the Wall, still carried his name.

Gorne’s Way.

Aegon was amazed by his sudden knowledge of the wildling twin kings history. He didn’t recall reading about it before, when he was healthy and whole.

Now he suffered excruciating pain. His life was reduced to torment. It felt wonderful to be able to consider something else, if only for a very brief moment.

Anything at all.

At the same time, he began to understand that he didn’t exist only as himself, but also as someone, or rather, something, entirely different than any human being. The long-lasting transformation hurt like burning in seven hells.

He applied himself to denying his pain, wishing it over, wanting it away, focusing on remembering the legend.

About Gorne’s Way.

Three thousand years ago, Gorne slew the King in the North. But then his son, another Jon, or maybe a Rickon Stark, took over his father’s crown. Attacking Gorne savagely to revenge his late father, the new Stark of Winterfell stopped the wildling king in his steps, and in his dream of conquering the south.

Gendel withdrew into the caves with what was left of his kin, waiting for a new spring, for another opportunity to head south. The true masters of the North were sleeping at that time…

But never for very long.

The shattering noise made by Gendel’s children now poisoned Aegon’s sleep. He would have risen and alerted the men in Nightfort to the threat that lurked under the Wall, if the winter illness didn’t hold him prisoner.

No. It is much worse than that, Aegon, you young fool. Won’t you ever learn?

He’d been given the milk of the poppy because he was dying.

From this painful sleep, he’ll no longer wake. Soon, he would disappear, without ever warning a soul about the insurrection of Gendel’s children. That other creature that dwelled inside him was on the verge of standing up and taking over. When he succumbed to its pressure, Aegon would be no more.
A spasm took his body, shaking him violently. His limbs and back burned with searing pain.

Dying was more devastating than any mortal imagined or feared. And in Aegon’s case it had already lasted for so long.

*Days longer than years.*

Innocent and guiltless victim of his pain, he forgot to oppose the creature lurking inside him and wished for oblivion. Resistance served no purpose. It was time to go. Despite that he had essentially given up, he continued to suffer. His soul still clung to the mortal coil of its existence as if mere life always had a meaning, despite that more than half of his flesh was that of an Other by now—

…and not the warm, messy shell of their natural *enemies*, the disorderly humans with no taste for music.

Mankind had served and outlasted its purpose with its pointless curiosity.

Those few people who had carelessly and fearlessly coupled with the white walkers at the beginning of time had unwittingly taught the Others what freedom was. Making it possible for them to become independent from the children, their perfidious creators, they firmly set the most lucid race of Westeros firmly on its well-deserved path of conquering the world.

In a few years since their creation, the Others abandoned the slaughter of the giants they were made for. Turning against the children with force, they killed many before the elusive and secretive little tree-lovers hid from them. Once they were fully independent, the Others learned how to invade and absorb their initial human friends, admitting them into their perfectly harmonious, eternally existing kind.

It was rumoured that one of those first brave human lovers of the white walkers still lived under the glorious, ice-hardened skin of the Night’s King. Naturally, the Great Other, the strongest, the most capable of Aegon’s brothers must have possessed a very powerful human, more balanced than the rest.

Much after the dawn of their time, the Others discovered how to possess any man or woman by force. But they still used this ability scarcely, only insofar as to maintain their freedom from the song of the earth as it had been initially sung by the children. Ideally, they preferred to slay the living and send them forth as wights to struggle against their own kin. The necessary conquest went on faster with their help, especially when the times were not yet sufficiently cold, and their waking number too few.

But now the chill was absolute.

Maybe, for the first time in history, there was enough of them awake to fight their own war, even without the slain as their aids.

In his tormented sleep, Aegon wished he could chop off his head in order to break the chain of sickening thoughts buzzing behind his heavy eyelids. Last time he had seen his face in the mirror, pale in the candle-lit gloom, only his cheeks and shoulders had remained intact by the curse.

His right shoulder cracked open now, with old ice growing over it, covering the last patches of his still human skin.

After what felt like a lifetime of pain, to his surprise, his continued seizure ended in blessed, unprecedented relief.
He took a deep breath, feeling newborn, resurrected. Blue ice ran through his veins, invigorating
him.

Weak, he had been weak before, and now he was made strong, finally taking possession of his own
soul.

Aegon, Sixth of His Name, King of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm!

A filthy pretender had usurped his kingdoms, posing as his father's true son and heir.

Insulted to his perfectly composed, frozen core, Aegon sat up. The bed broke under his weight,
shattering as if it were a glass jar and not made of solid wood, with the iron reinforced frame. Rising
swiftly from its ruin, he felt full of force. The world was beautifully balanced and ideally cold. He
would thrive in it as a sun-loving red blossom in long summer.

*Summer…*

He remembered it with yearning, succumbing for a moment to his ancient, useless, pathetic
weakness.

The warm nights on the Rhoyne with Old Griff and Septa Lemore. Lazy, yellow and green river
water. Learning the history of Westeros and practising swordsmanship. Preparing with every breath
and every step to be a good king.

But then his life had been swept away, turning into ashes. Kingship was not his. Not even his father
was his. It had all been a lie. He was an orphan born of incest, having no worth of his own. He had
been adopted because his origin had to be hidden from good society. People looked at him with pity
whenever they remembered his lineage.

Hollow voices rang down the corridor.

“The king! He’s angry with us. His dragon will burn us all!”

“Let’s flee!”

“But outside we’ll freeze to death.”

“Death in snow comes easy, they say, you doze and fall asleep.”

“Where is my brother?” a familiar young voice thundered above all others worried by his arrival.

“There are guards now in every castle on the Wall. You must have seen him arrive! His wolf
carriage is still here. Where is your commander?”

Profound silence reigned in Nightfort, cold and dark like iron chains.

“What of Jaime Lannister?” the usurper was possessed by ugly anger, an animal with more heads
than any dragon had ever had. “Where is he? Did he not assist Bran in his insanity? Did he not bring
my special sibling willingly north of the Wall? His life shall be forfeit.”

“I helped Brandon!” Unfamiliar womanly voice broke the eerie quiet after the king’s speech,
asserting herself with pure steel in her tone.

“You did that? Lady Tysha?” the false king’s anger seemed less, and his voice now betrayed a
simple curiosity.

“I assisted him to come here, at his request, knowing what he would ask of Jaime Lannister, yes, to
take him beyond the Wall, as a payment of a debt of blood he owes him, for his crime in Winterfell,”
the lady explained, sounding less belligerent. “Brandon is almost of age. He has the right to make
decisions for himself.”

“Brandon is only four and ten,” Jon rebelled sadly. “They’ll never make it back without Viserion,
and the white dragon has returned to Castle Black alone.”

This stung Aegon more than it should. He had dared hope that Jon had come to Nightfort to visit him,
his new friend and confidant, attained by the deadly winter sickness, as well as all other men and
women suffering from it. Him, Aegon, who would have gladly died for Jon in the Frostfangs,
But no. Jon was only here because of his family, alerted by a dragon, who was also his kin.
And not Aegon’s.

Saddened to the bottom of his heart, he decided he had no more time to listen to the pointless
disputes of lower, warm-blooded creatures, so imperfect and futile in their passions.

He served a mighty king beyond the Wall, a true hero of old, a leader, an ally and a friend of every
loyal white walker that was about to wake or that already roamed in Westeros.

Wait…

He was king, Aegon, Sixth of His Name, not some royal Other dwelling in Lands of Always
Winter. He, Aegon, would let his frozen brothers into Nightfort and lead them against Jon the
Usurper! Just like he had conquered Storm's End single-handed, at the end of long summer, next to
Ser Rolly Duckfield.

Duck, how have you been? Has winter already come your way or are you still safe?

Enough, the ice in him said with determination. Let the boy die and the man be born.

He cinched the sword belt around his waist, reluctant to haul the greatsword that lay next to his
broken bed on his back, for it was pale like milk, but hot like dragonfire. A single cut might spoil or
even ruin his new immaculate existence. He had to be very careful not to touch his skin, but the
cursed blade of dawn would serve him well, until he forged a proper one, ice-made, the true sword
of kings.

With a subdued, hissing cry, he took to the corridor outside his chamber, following it until the nearest
set of spiral, wooden stairs. The first step broke under his new weight, but the rest held, amazingly
so. Descending, he noted with satisfaction that the defenders didn’t guard the lower levels of the
castle. Their attention was centred on only the top of the Wall, and the path approaching Nightfort
from either Castle Black or Shadow Tower: at present a trodden and regularly cleaned narrow
passage between high snow drifts.

The miraculous stairway descended to the kitchens. His arrival frightened a bunch of bakers who
backed into a corner, trying hard to melt into the walls and disappear.

Aegon saw them nonetheless, heard them whisper to each other with his immortal hearing.

“It’s all them the sick people,” a woman implored hoarsely. “They’ve turned into white walkers
alright.”

Aegon looked back and realised he had a following, a large company of his youngest brothers and
sisters, half-transformed into members of the only perfect race in Westeros, whose existence must
please the gods or they would have never allowed it into being.

“We should have burned them all and not let the maesters tend to their lives,” a square man with dirty face judged severely, sounding far too polite for his appearance.

“Winter sickness has no cure, I heard Lord Hightower speak of it after the election, I did,” a hedge knight turned into a servant complained grittily. His sigil was a brown hedgehog or maybe a squirrel with too pointy hairs. Either way, Aegon would have never chosen it.

“But the young king is proud and doesn’t want to listen to the counsel of his elders or his betters,” the knight continued. “Especially if they voted for Stannis. He's unable to see that many good people have been deceived by Baratheon’s apparent wisdom and royal posture-”

“Deceived by the dragon you mean!” the dirty-faced man contraried the knight. “If you ask me, the dragons are as unnatural and dangerous as the white walkers. The beasts shouldn't rule us. We ought to get rid of them and govern ourselves as we have done for the past two hundred years.”

“But how?” the woman asked very cautiously, very nervously, as though she was afraid that the king and his dragon might hear her.

“The Citadel knows how. What was done once, can be done again,” the man asserted fearlessly. “The royal election is over, but it will only be set in stone after long years of peace. In war, anything is possible.”

His hands were clean and smooth, Aegon noticed, unlike his ash-sprinkled face.

_Hightower’s spy and a warmonger._

Aegon and the creature in him hissed angrily in unison, advancing rapidly towards the insolent bakers.

The whisperers screamed and vanished haphazardly into the gloom, their cries echoing between the walls like bells in a sept.

He didn’t bother to follow the cowards. His path led into a well in the centre of the kitchens, where another stair led further down, until it reached a white weirwood door, with a sleeping face carved on it.

He yanked it hard.

To no avail.

His immortal power, that of winter, wasn’t enough.

He remembered that he had never said the vows of the Night's Watch and that this way in or out would always remain closed to him.

But Gendel and his children were still nearby. Aegon could guide them home. Once they emerged in the snowed down wilderness beyond the Wall, they would be enslaved by his new brothers, the white walkers, and obliged to reveal Gorne’s Way: the secret path south, passing through the caves under the Wall, evading the defences of men.

The Wall would fall with a whisper.

The Others would man it for all eternity, perfectly-shaped and strong, just like the ice blocks used for
its construction by Brandon the Builder.

But only if Aegon first found a passage to the caves.

He abandoned the well and took the second way out of the kitchens, that of the fleeing bakers. His transformed followers trod after him, silent like death, obstinate like winter, hissing occasionally under their shrill, shrieking voices.

Gendel’s children were so close, judging by the noise in his head! But the low-ceilinged castle corridor stubbornly twisted away from them.

The Wall, the Wall, it was stable, it was immobile, it couldn’t be reshaped by the song of the children that the Others have learned, adopted and adapted to their purposes!

Was he dreaming?

Was his hearing still imperfect?

Looking at his blue and grey arms, stronger than ever, he concluded there was nothing wrong with his ears or with him.

He was perfect.

He’d find the way to the caverns right now. He’d dig it out if he had to. He and his followers were in dire need of joining their siege-mounting brothers and showing them the secret entrance into the Seven Kingdoms. Then, the Others would take human defenders in the back and open all gates in all forts to their perfect kind.

But to ensure this glorious future, Aegon had to act before Gendel’s children wandered off, into the earth’s womb, deep down in its core, where not even a newly-made white walker could hear them, and much less find them.

At the next turn of the corridor, he shouldered a castle wall, only to discover that it was held tight in one place with the magic of old: stone and ice grown into one, an inert mass that didn’t give in, did not care about his righteous cause or new power.

He was in the wrong spot. Yes, he has been hearing the lost wildling-tribe through the Wall for many hours now, but he might never reach it.

Furious, he let his followers wander outside Nightfort. In their waking rage, they cut to shreds a small group of defenders in the yard: obstinate, stupid men who dared resist their destiny, in the name of their Usurper King.

Belatedly, he was happy that there wasn’t a woman among the slain, not even a wildling one, because kings and true knights ought to protect them. Paradoxically, one of his followers had been a woman before, a skinny wildling girl, now unrecognisable as a human, except perhaps for the docile expression in her soft blue eyes.

Not taking part in the slaughter of the weak humankind, Aegon remained apart, near the base of the Wall. The great edifice, seven hundred feet high, seemed a little less impressive in his new condition. Yet he could not avoid it or bring it to ruin. He could hear Gendel’s children so much better now. They were so close. The cave must be right in front of him, just under the first few yards of the Wall. He clenched his powerful white walker’s fists and hit the giant blocks of ice.

They were pleasantly cold, but they wouldn’t yield.
Suddenly, he felt a presence of a wight behind him, a very odd one: one whose presence he could never bind to his will. He didn’t look back, focused on the Wall before him. Wights were no threat to him. *There has to be a weak spot, a block that can be moved. They are right here.*

To his utmost surprise, a living woman's voice cried behind his back.

“**Aegon!**”

He didn’t know her.

“**Aegon, my love!**” she implored. "**What are you doing? Where are you going? Come back to me! I never left you if that’s what you thought. I was enslaved by a red ruby forced upon my throat.**"

*Jeyne.*

It had never occurred to him that she might have betrayed him.

Inexorably, he was compelled to turn around and contemplate her beauty, as well as the magnificent certainty that she had not died as he had feared in his bad dreams, caused by his sickness.

But, at the same time, he saw clearer than ever that she used to be an innkeep, with old blisters on her hands. Her long arms that had seemed so noble to Aegon a few days, or weeks, or a lifetime ago, now looked too sturdy; her pleading hands appeared too square. She was a peasant. Not some great lady who had gained beauty and nobility for being the only person who endured being undead and came back, by the sacrifice of the lady Catelyn, or the Seven’s great mercy.

Gods have mercy on him, but Aegon was king.

He was to marry a princess, maybe his aunt, Princess Daenerys. Jon Connington and Varys had planned and plotted this for him. Or maybe Arianne Martell of Dorne, if Daenerys was mad like her father and intended to burn rather than marry her nephew.

He turned his back away from the pretty woman who was now crying for him and faced his main conundrum once more.

*The Wall.*

There had to be a way in, he just couldn’t see it yet.

“**Aegon!**”

His chest was frozen and felt empty. Soon he would sing a perfect tune of winter with his brothers, relaxing in the unearthly beauty and harmony of music. Then, he wouldn’t need a heart.

“**He’s gone, my lady, your efforts are in vain,**” another free-spirited, ironborn wight attempted to console Jeyne. “**The Others have taken him.**”

“**No!**” she wouldn’t have it.

Moved by her latest cry, Aegon turned back.

Under the furry hood of her cloak, Jeyne’s black hair fell to her waist and was finer than silk. He almost remembered loving her.

Besides Euron Greyjoy, a bunch of youngsters surrounded the inkeep, three older boys and a young girl. Seeing them next to his former woman strengthened the call of ice in his veins. She didn’t need
him, did she? She’d find different friends and protectors, just like the Usurper king only cared about his family and not his adoptive brother. Besides, it was all Rhaegar’s fault, wasn’t it. Jon resented his father. Surely Aegon’s existence was the reason for it, what else?

Aegon’s great destiny continued to call upon him: he would forge a world of ice for all eternity.

“Willow, would you please stay with your sister,” a lordly boy with shaky hands said. “Spearwives may fight all they like, but you’re only a little girl. He has to be stopped before he does harm to anyone.”

Aegon laughed shrilly. Who shall stop thim? This boy? He knew him as a human, but couldn’t remember his name. *He’s a falcon. Why is he here on his weakling feet instead of spreading his wings?*

"I strongly disagree, Robin. He looks as if he’s been listening. He might still hear her," a handsome boy claimed. "He might not know it now but he was born a Dayne. The Sword of the Morning. He’ll return to his senses sooner or later."

“I didn’t take you for an innocent, Ned,” a golden-haired boy with green eyes objected reproachfully. "Men can turn evil in any family."

"I am right in his case, Tommen," Ned said. “On my honour as a Dayne.” His hair was almost silver, his dark blue eyes nearly purple. A cousin. Ned… Edric… Dayne.

Dayne, Dayne, Dayne.

Far south, there was a refuge called Starfall. Lyanna had always told him stories about it as if it was his home. He yearned to visit it in spring. Starfall, the grave of his Mother. The Tower of Joy, the cairn of his father. Yet he wasn’t the last one. There stood his cousin, straight ahead of him.

*The true heir to Starfall.*

Aegon was heir to nothing because of his illicit birth.

*Aegon, Sixth of His Name.*

*Lord of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.*

"I wish you were right, Ned, and I wrong," Tommen said skeptically, shaking his head. But I do not think it is the case. Look at his eyes! They are bright blue."

Jeyne cried softly, inconsolably, unable to utter another word.

Aegon had always fancied the colour of the summer sky. His eyes seemed to have it now. And why not? His brilliant gaze wandered further afield. His followers were being subdued one by one by the horrendous warm-blooded creatures that shouldn’t be allowed to exist. Instead of destroying them with dragonglass, the humans, now great in number after the first defeat, were overpowering their enemies like swarming ants, tying Aegon’s follower with strong hempen ropes, until they were packed as butterfly chrysalids or swaddled babes.

He was being surrounded, he’d be next, the last one to fall. And he wouldn’t let himself be tied up, no ser.

He’d go down forever, like his father, at the Tower of Joy.
Desperate, stubborn, refusing to embrace Arthur Dayne’s destiny, Aegon plunged into the Wall. He’d rather break his new perfect neck than surrender or succumb to the Usurper’s dogs.

But while he still expected the shock of the impact and new hurt, his immaculate body betrayed him by becoming fluid, mist-like, beginning to squeeze itself slowly through the great human edifice in painfully torpid and delayed progression.

Perhaps the Wall wasn't made of giant ice blocks, but of illusions.

He nonetheless grasped the imposing, frozen fruit of his imagination, forcing his feet and knees deeper into ice, striving to move forward, struggling to advance, wondering if there was any air left in his lungs. Did Others breathe? He couldn’t say for certain. If they sang, they ought to, he guessed. How could anyone burst into song without breathing?

There was no sound in the Wall, and it was thicker than any castle fortification on earth. No one could storm it and take it.

Not even the white walkers.

What Aegon was doing was a sheer impossibility, yet it was taking place. The Wall was choking him, almost crushing him, resisting every inch of his laboriously hurtful crossing.

Was this the doing of the dangerous spirits of the trees, illusive like the Wall, but even more ancient and wise? Sad and asleep, the old gods had forsaken the three weak, stinky and warm races that prayed to them for salvation, leaving the giants, children and men to become prey of Aegon’s kind.

Usurper’s dogs deserve their destiny

The Others didn’t pray, they merely worked hard in their vast domain in order to evolve in harmony with their innate perfection.

Someone was following after Aegon on his imaginary quest through the Wall. His empty chest swelled. One or more of his new brothers must have escaped the Usurper’s dogs, grating the ice, fighting to regain breath. The knowledge renewed his courage and strength.

After an eternity of heavy labour, paddling with all his limbs through the oppressively cool and deadly mass of ice, eager to suck out both his existence and that of the frail, warm-blooded creature in him, Aegon finally emerged from the Wall, finding himself in a dark, high chamber, filled with the sound of water running down from the ceiling in many places. A drop colder than ice landed on his hard, twisted neck, feeling pleasantly fresh. His blue eyes saw clearly in the dark, not requiring torchlight or moonlight.

Gendel was here and he was dead like all of his kin: a hundred corpses walking for thousands of years, one for each seven feet of the Wall, finally discovered by another living soul. Gathered in darkness and waiting for him.

Aegon, Sixth of His Name. Would his son be seventh?

Did he have a wife?

He couldn’t recall. He had abandoned her because she was a peasant. The thought was terribly sad.

Needing to tell her how wrong he had been, he nearly turned back through the Wall. He loved her deeply. He would have been dead and buried without her protection in King’s Landing, and he had repaid her immortal love with a broken heart.
But then he saw him.

The Usurper in person.

It was no brave ice follower of Aegon’s who had followed him through the Wall and into the caves, but the terrible bastard who was posing like his trueborn brother and who had stolen his kingdoms.

Well, he was too late and powerless to stop the invasion of the domain he had usurped.

The dead would follow him now, not Jon, who was never Aegon’s friend, and much less his brother, adoptive or true.

Besides, why in seven hells should anyone be his friend?

His empty chest tightened from the thought.

Only true princelings had friends, not someone else’s babies, born of incest, and put in their place to represent them. The mummer’s act of passing the adopted baby as one’s own might have been devised with the best of intentions, but it was still wrong. He should have been left with his mother. Maybe Ashara Dayne wouldn’t have died then. Maybe the Usurper’s mother would have died and paid for her sin of tearing a family apart.

He breathed in ice and mould enjoying it profoundly. His time would soon come to sing the song of ice.

The caves he had sought were vast. They had come into being unseen, in the profundity of earth, under the foundations of the Wall, lodged right in its frozen entrails, like a long, lonely nail on a palace wall, awaiting for a painting to be hanged upon it. They were even more ancient than the great divide built by Brandon the Builder in the time when the children, the men and the giants had not yet become estranged from each other for good.

Gendel bowed to the ground before Aegon. He and his children were thin with pale eyes. Blind. They must have all lost their sight already in life, becoming unable to leave the caves much before they died, one by one, in their wasted effort of returning home. There were even a few dead, blind babies, born on the Gorne’s Way, under the Wall, imprisoned forever with their unhappy mothers, stuck on their backs or hips.

Aegon gaped.

“Aegon,” the Usurper said with emotion, and Aegon almost believed that his friend Jon was there to help him, and not to annihilate him and his righteous quest.

Jon’s next words ruined Aegon’s last illusions. “Let me take you back. You are not well.”

He was Aegon the Conqueror, a true dragon, Sixth of his Name, but who cared about numbers in the Long Night? They were all one and the same. There was no going back.

“You need a maester, please!” the Usurper kept annoying him, putting up his best act destined to crack the thick crust of old ice imprisoning Aegon’s body and soul like an impenetrable armour.

Jon had never usurped anything. He was a young man who had grown up in the cold. Unlike Aegon, he had never seen a proper summer, and maybe he should have, in the very short time of his life.

*The nights on the Rhoyne. The scents. The memories.*
“This isn’t what you would do in your right mind,” Jon continued prophetically. The initially kind, imploring tone in his voice turned into a sermon of a man knowing better.

Who was he to doubt Aegon’s sanity?

Wilder than the winter wind, Aegon drew his greatsword, provoking the Usurper to do the same. Blades clashed in the dark, jumping wildly from one place to another, much like the blind, unseeing eyes of Gendel’s children when they heard Aegon and Jon arriving.

Aegon wondered if Jon’s sight was as good as his in the dark. It shouldn’t be, for he had only mortal eyes. But how did he then pass through the Wall if he was a mere human? How did Aegon?

He pressed Jon backward, into a clearing in the caves. Far in the back, faint starlight could be glimpsed. The exit wasn’t far away.

The Usurper returned his last blow with savage precision, pushing Aegon back, and then paused.

With his sword at ready, Jon took a moment to study his surroundings. He seemed moved by the sight of the ancient stone formations around him beyond any reasonable explanation.

Out of the blue, Aegon began pondering that he didn’t have to kill him. The Wall would take care of him, like it did for Gendel.

His children poured in from behind, occupying the space between the two men. Gendel walked first in line, carrying a circlet of bronze.

Very gently, he lay his ancient crown on Aegon’s young head.

Aegon grinned from ear to ear. He was the strongest white walker now, with the unique purpose. The Night’s King’s days were counted. He wouldn’t rein for another day, and much less for a hundred; a holy number, a symbol of those who strive their whole life in order to attain the unreachable perfection.

Once Aegon has led the wildlings out, to his true brothers, together they would be able to discover Gorne’s Way in the frightened minds of their new slaves. Gendel would have no choice but to reveal it to them: the path back to the Seven Kingdoms, not closed off by magic and ancient gates.

Aegon had a fine sword. He would launch the conquest of Westeros, bringing righteous change with the winter wind, slaying and enslaving every living soul on his path.

He would invade his kingdoms when he wasn’t able to inherit them. The Wall would no longer defend itself nor the realm of men.

Right now, he stood dead quiet, listening, spying on the the recollections in the minds of the dead wildlings. Gendel had betrayed them to a cold, cruel death of hunger and thirst. They had never forgiven their king despite that he had been sharing their lot.

Come to me, he called. I shall be your gentle master and you will find solace in death. Your pain shall be no more.

It was ambitious what he promised and perhaps not entirely truth. And yet he still offered it, satisfied with his deceit.

I’m your master, he announced to poor Gendel’s children.
Behind him, the passage through the Wall seemed closed. But in the moonlight, as if through the looking glass, he saw Jeyne’s silhouette, and that of the dead kraken, left behind. There was a firm barrier between him and them, insurmountable for now. The dead were before him, missing eyes and limbs, with cold stomachs swollen from hunger.

"This way," he pointed the way out to his slaves the way out of the caves, into starlight where his brethren awaited, building siege engines, some of which could be used to undermine the Wall.

The dead followed, starting from their king, a short, chubby man with orange beard and bright blue eyes, clearly a descendant of a human and a child, in the time that the children still walked this earth.

Before the Others had killed them all.

"This way," Aegon repeated, feeling almost human.

His army followed in his steps. The way was sinuous and longer than it looked.

His conquest would begin here and now.

The dead walked in his wake, in the silence of the tombs. Just before they would exit the Wall, a sound broke it, gentle and subdued.

Aegon couldn’t tell what it was, but it affected him. He waved his army to stop.

The intermittent sound continued, solitary and treacherous, drawing Aegon’s attention.

It must be the Usurper, he realised.

Jon was storming after him, catching up. But there were warm tears running down his cheeks and his sword arm wasn’t as steady when he finally barred Aegon’s way to glory. He would be an easy prey. Why did he only come now? Did he miss Aegon’s coronation by crying in the darkness?

“I can’t let you go out to them!” the Usurper announced, swallowing his tears and perhaps his pride.

A few more rays of moonlight sneaked into the cave, shining on the pale face and the dark, red-rimmed eyes of his friend. No man would like to be seen in that condition, weaker than a woman.

Seeing the tears drying on Jon’s cheeks, Aegon changed.

He felt the cold and hated it. Studying his own legs, he saw them for what they were. He saw himself for what he was. An abomination unable to use human speech. He and Jon had to return the way they came from before the Others heard the commotion. If they discovered the entrance to the caves, they’d find a horde of free-roaming wights, ready to be enslaved, knowing the way under the Wall… To the human side.

Don’t attack me! he tried to tell Jon, but only an inhuman screech came out of his throat. Please cry. Don’t be ashamed. The dead don’t care. No one will see you, no one will know. I’ll never tell.

Jon gave him a look which was both sharp and terribly incredulous, as though he couldn’t believe his eyes and even more so his ears.

Cry for the gods sake! Don’t keep it in! More frightening shrieks abandoned Aegon’s gorge, meeting with Jon’s stubborn duel stance in the empty darkness between them.

Why couldn’t Jon understand what course of action to take for his own good? His faking of cold blood angered Aegon once more, to the point of almost losing the control he had regained and
ignoring his friend’s wretched state.

He was Aegon, Sixth of His Name, about to smite the Usurper, his enemy, here, at the end of time as men knew it.

From the blow dealt by Dawn, Jon Snow would never recover.

The Valyrian blade descended sharply on the young Usurper, just as he was bending over from invisible pain. But, to Aegon’s surprise, Jon straightened up with impressive speed. Defending himself, as well as the moonlit passage behind him, he pushed Aegon back violently, despite warm tears that now ran freely down his face, unstopped, unstoppable.

Waiting for Aegon to strike back, Jon surrendered to his sobs. Spasms shook his body. Soon he might not be able to hold his sword.

The thought made Aegon drop Dawn and fall on his knees.

Unarmed, he crawled to Jon and embraced him, sheltering him from moonlight. His friend hadn’t been crying in the dark. Belatedly, he realised he could be stabbed to death while committing the useless gesture of comforting a human.

Jon’s new blade was as Valyrian as Dawn.

Blackfyre. Is it? Why are you holding it now? Where is your sword, Jon Snow? Or should I say Azor Ahai? Why the sword of kings now?

“I had never thought to see these caves again,” his friend confessed against Aegon’s white walker chest. “They bring memories.”

“What?” From human touch, Aegon’s voice returned, hoarse and unrecognisable.

“I had a girl before I met my wife. We were happy here, in these caves. She was happy. And then she died from an arrow which could have been mine, in a battle that couldn’t be avoided.”

Holding Jon, Aegon clung to his story. Its poignant unhappiness kept awake the man in him. Him, Aegon, raised in Essos with the ideals of justice and honour. The sadness subdued the Other that lurked under his rotting skin, ready to take over.

He would speak to comfort Jon, but his voice betrayed him again, sounding inhuman and unintelligible. Completely helpless, he cradled his friend, consoling him only with his gestures and in his thoughts.

You shall live to see the summer. You shall not die forever in the dark. That shall come later, for you and me. For everyone.

“They are gone!” Jone exclaimed after a while.

Gendel’s children had disappeared into the depths of the Wall, and with them the knowledge of Gorne’s Way.

The enemy could no longer find them, or not easily, and Aegon and Jon were both stuck on the wrong side of the Wall.

“How are we to go back?” With Gendel gone, Aegon managed to formulate a question with great difficulty, feeling a new stretch of ice skin forming on his neck and over one part of his chin and
mouth. He squeezed out the words with difficulty through the other edge of his lips that was still unaffected by the curse.

“Not the way we came from,” Jon shivered from the memory of passing through the Wall. “I may be the horn that wakes the sleepers, but I don’t mean to become a block in the Wall.”

Aegon wholeheartedly agreed.

“There is a door back in Nightfort,” Jon said. “It shouldn’t be too far. We moved westward but not by much. This way.” Wriggling out of Aegon’s embrace, he stood up.

Sheathing Blackfyre, he turned his back to Aegon, not fearing an attack. With a light step, he ran towards the exit from the caves. The creature in Aegon urged him to attack the Usurper, but he wouldn’t listen. His heart was possessed, but there was still the last light burning in his head: he could reject the call of ice now, when Jon was simply trusting, despite that he hadn’t been able to resist it when Jon had been kingly and determined, opposing a dangerous enemy Aegon had become.

Outside, the Others were numerous like drops of water in the sea of snow. The path to Nightfort led through the overcrowded camp of white walkers and their slaves, busy building siege engines. The one nearest to Aegon looked like a tall, arched pipeline bringing water to a busy city. Aegon wondered what it was and what harm it might cause.

“They’ll see us,” Jon stated with worry, “I’ll look dead and do as you say. You look- Well-”

Like one of them.

“I know,” Aegon managed to say, clinging to the use of his voice, wondering when he would lose it again and be forced to express himself by frightening screams. “You should leave me here. Or at the door, once you are safely in.”

“Over my dead body,” Jon retorted very seriously.

Another engine drew Aegon’s attention, larger than the rest, square and very long, laying flatly in snow. Blue crystals emanated from it, floating menacingly towards the Wall. No ammunition was visible, but it was surely a weapon of some kind.

“What does it do, I wonder?” Jon murmured pensively. “Can it breach the Wall? Can Rhaegal breathe fire from the top to destroy it? Could you… could you go and have a look? I’ll skulk here and pretend to be digging the snow.”

More wights did that, for reasons unknown to both Jon and Aegon.

Aegon marched towards the unknown weapon, guarded by a company of Others. A tall and skinny wight worked on it, with familiar silver hair.

Rhaegar!

A short look at Jon’s late father through the eyes of the ice creature inside him showed Aegon that Rhaegar was a perfect slave, labouring on devices destined to bring doom to his kind, unable to disobey his masters.

How would Jon react to that?

Would he have to kill his father again? Wasn’t it more than enough to be obliged to do it once?
The gods were cruel or they didn’t exist.

Would Jon break down from the burden of his memories?

Aegon chose to act. Dragging his friend away, heading east, he spoke with great effort. “We shouldn’t linger here. The Night’s King is—” His voice cracked and vanished.

“I know he’s approaching.” Jon replied, nodding darkly, staring into the distance, not noticing his father. “Ghost has seen it. So what? It won’t be the first time we meet.”

*But maybe not here, where he can stand on his ground,* Aegon thought, unable to share his concern with his friend.

Soon he began to feel thin, faint and ghostlike. Speechless and exhausted, he pulled Jon further away from Rhaegar, always following the base of the Wall and the dark shade it cast over snowy grounds.

After a few hours walk, there was another oblong engine like the one Rhaegar had been working on, and there was indeed a door in the Wall, plain and almost invisible from the outside, with the familiar sleeping face carved on the white weirwood bark. Aegon wondered if it the same face that somehow jumped from the inner to the outer side of the gate at need, or if the tree had more faces than just one.

_Be that as it may, its mouth opened wide for Jon when he recited his vows, allowing both him and Aegon in._

This would have never been the case for Aegon alone, possessed by the enemy and never sworn to defend the Wall. Back in the kitchens of the castle, he remembered he had a wife waiting for him, and he had despised her. Would she leave him to his destiny and find an unchanged man?

“Here, Your Grace, this is the cellar you wanted to inspect,” a sad voice counselled. “But I have to warn you that there has been no sight of your husband for several hours. Perhaps he had turned into a ghost like his wolf and passed through the Wall. Please watch your step before you break your neck on—”

“Jon!” Dany’s voice reverberated like non-existent sunshine between the cold castle walls, ignoring the tirade of complaints about her ghastly husband as well as the mouthy piece of advice on where to put her feet.

“Dany! Ed!” Jon answered. “Over here!”

In a moment, the king launched himself into his queen’s arms.

“Rhaegal was able to show me that I should look for you in the caves,” Dany told Jon, hugging his shaggy head and untidy beard.

“Clever dragon,” Jon’s reply could barely be heard from their embrace. “He brought you here, didn’t he?”

“At your orders. I’m a dragon rider no longer,” Daenerys said flatly.

Aegon wondered if that state of affairs made her unhappy, like he increasingly felt.

Jon shrugged. “Probably. I’m not a very conscious master of what he does.”

“All patients here had to be subdued by force and chained to beds and walls,” Dany whispered against his head. “They mutinied and killed people.”
“I know,” Jon whispered, “I’ve seen it.”

“I told you we had to burn them,” the morose, doomsday voice addressed the Usurper now.

"Only if we have no other choice," the Usurper said. “Tying them up sounds like one to me.”

Aegon turned around and ran away from his former friends. The weirwood mouth could still be slightly open. He had some time to leave before the Other defeated him and committed atrocities through him.

"Aegon!" Jon followed, yelling his name from the bottom of his lungs. "Stop! Won't you go back to your wife? She was found! Don't you remember? Where are you going?"

*Out! Can't you see? I'll suffocate if I stay in!* Aegon’s voice was wasted, high-pitched, ununderstandable, inhuman. His power was growing. Chains and ropes might not be able to stop him.

He wasn't far from the half-open door. The open mouth looked insane to him, grimacing, laughing.

His brethren awaited.

"Aegon!" The Usurper never gave up. “Look at me! Stay with us! You are the Sword of the Morning. How can you not fight for dawn?”

Aegon stared at the blade on his strong, grey and blue hip, and admired it, despite that its closeness was causing a burning discomfort to his wonderfully equilibrated, cold body.

“No!” the creature in him screamed and withdrew for a while.

He was two men in one, fighting for dominance.

Aegon, Sixth of His Name about to conquer his lands.

And that other boy, loyal, one of the best swordsman of his time, a friend of a friend of a friend.

*Starfall. Starfall. Starfall.*

He had to see it someday. Lyanna always told him so when he was a child and only now he understood why. He unsheathed Dawn and let the creature inside him scream, wondering if he should turn dragon steel against himself.

Undecided, he studied his tall, muscled, sick legs.

“If there is dawn, what do you think, will this go away?” he whispered with great pain. “Or shall I lay down to sleep with my second kind and wait for the next Long Night when I shall rise again?”

“It has to go away. What else?” Jon reassured him with passion. Dark circles underlined his naturally black, and now red-rimmed eyes. He looked like he hadn’t slept in years.

Aegon wondered if his friend truly believed in what he said or if he was merely feeding him solace. Or false hope.

“I don’t think that any of this shall last much longer,” Jon stated cautiously after a long pause, sounding as a man pondering his chances in a complex game. “The end is coming, I wonder… I’ve been asking myself if I should wait or provoke it to come sooner. Both is appealing. I can’t talk about
it to anyone. Not yet. I shall discuss it with Daenerys and a few others. Sam. Mance.”

“I’m with you,” Aegon breathed out.

Fighting had always been what he liked best from the royal education. The Others were preparing devilries men couldn’t even dream of. There would be plenty of opportunities to battle them.

"No," Jon refused his offer. "At least not for now. I’ll think about it later."

Aegon nodded grimly.

“My love!”

It was Jeyne, bursting in, and he knew her, more beautiful than ever.

He wondered if he was ugly to her now and if at least his face was recognisable and perhaps still handsome, despite the curse that had now also invaded his chin. Ashamed of his vanity, he looked down. Jeyne didn’t look at him at all, just threw herself into his arms.

“So cold,” she uttered dolorously after a long while.

“Yes,” he replied stupidly. “I’ve been worse,” he was barely able to finish a rudimentary explanation before his speech turned into horrid hissing.

“You’ll be fine my love.”

He believed her. Her voice was the finest, most sophisticated music to his ears.

He heard Euron Greyjoy making his own offer to Jon. “In the absence of Jaime Lannister, I shall stay with the ill, Your Grace. I can’t die again. I’ll see to it that they do not either, unless it’s the will of the Drowned God. Would you… Would someone give the wildling princess my eternal love? I shall go to Castle Black to see her as soon as I can find another captain whom I can trust to replace me for a short leave.”

Aegon couldn’t hear Jon’s answer to that proposition because many angry men suddenly rushed over him, tying him with hempen rope. Tight, hurting. He didn’t mind. It was a necessity for the time being.

He was Aegon, one and only of his name.

A husband and a lover, a fighter and a friend.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Daenerys XII

Chapter Notes

Warning for gore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Daenerys

She kissed Jon goodbye on the battlefield and his cold lips tasted of ice.

*Fresh, not frozen.*

In truth, she couldn’t sense the difference. The subtle distinction blossomed only in her heart, powered by the blunt force of her conviction that Jon was as human as a man could ever be, having nothing in common with the Others or, gods forbid, the wights, their bloodless slaves. She would reject the belief that he shared Rhaegar’s misfortune until her dying day.

Cold and clammy skin notwithstanding.

Besides, since Drogon left Westeros for good, as a good dog of Lady Melisandre, her own feet were icier than any Jon’s touch. She would have already lost at least a toe to frostbite, according to Sam Tarly, if Rhaegal didn’t let her sit on him from time to time, always with a look of reproach in his abysmally deep bronze eyes.

As if it had been her fault that Drogon was enslaved! As though she were holding in her hands the keys to his freedom!

Regardless of how much she implored her runaway black child to come back to her, he never listened, angry with her, hatched with a flaming bit of Khal Drogo’s soul.

Perhaps if she left Jon, Drogon would return.

Was that the sacrifice *she* ought to make in order to bring the dawn? Was that to be her tragic end? To be obliged to forsake Jon, of her own free will, instead of staying by his side until merciless time tore them apart? Would Drogon then be able to free himself from the red woman’s spells? Would he fly to her aid, with a thousand dragons born from thin air of magic that surrounded their kind, engulfing all Others in the inferno of flames?

Kissing her husband with abandon, she willed all those thoughts away.

She wished she could pass on to Jon her unwavering faith concerning his person. From his occasional, terse remarks about the war, made between battles, or worse, when they woke together from vivid nightmares they called sleep of late, Dany knew that he still believed himself doomed, one way or another, sooner or later, despite renouncing the path and the sword of Azor Ahai. Untouched
by the continuous state of exhaustion they now called life, only one belief remained in him: that he'd be the one to bring the dawn before he fell.

She had tried to make him reconsider, have hope. The Wall was still standing. Despite their terrifying, ever increasing number, the Others had not yet managed to breach it or cross it. The battle hung in balance.

Yet Jon didn’t trust it, always alert, never resting fully.

*Like his wolf.*

Ghost had never returned from beyond the Wall. When she asked Jon about it, her only answer was a wolfish smile. Maybe her husband did have hope and he merely excelled in hiding it.

But what could one odd white wolf and his master do all alone against the Night’s King army?

*Drogon could do much more.* The flame of the greatest living dragon would surely make a difference. Perhaps her runaway child was so powerful now that he could fly far beyond the Wall without any peril to himself, defeating the ancient magic from times of Brandon the Builder that prevented the monsters from crossing it.

Only Balerion the Black Dread must have been Drogon’s match. But Aegon the Conqueror’s steed was long gone, and Drogon was alive and growing.

Guilt lay heavy on her. For she was utterly unable to sacrifice all her happiness for a chance to end the war.

What would she do if Warrior himself revealed to her that renouncing her love would mean certain victory? *Like the terrible deed of Azor Ahai, thousands of years ago.* She shivered from head to toe, remembering Nissa Nissa. She would not be her, thank the gods. But, giving up happiness wasn’t a crime or a sin in any sense, only a noble sacrifice. It wasn’t the same at all. Perhaps she ought to find that greatness in her weak woman’s heart, if she truly wanted to help her husband and her people.

If her new premonitions were true, she would end up living in Drogon’s company for all days of her life, and cry every day for Jon, who would resent her.

Like he used to suffer for not knowing his mother.

But he would be alive and well. Perhaps he would be happy with another woman when enough time would had passed.

Would she love again? She didn’t think so. She didn’t believe she’d be able to. Besides, Drogon wouldn’t let her start another relationship, would he?

She’d be tied in marriage to a winged dragon.

“We don’t know yet the manner in which dawn shall come, my love,” she whispered her only certainty against Jon’s lips, so that only he could hear her, slowly ending their kiss.

He lay his bare hands on her shoulders and looked sheepishly into her eyes. “But of course we do,” he answered cordially, half teasing her, half serious, always hinting it would be by his doing. Uninvited, his black gaze wandered to her flat stomach, wrapped in furs.

He had never stared at her barren belly so shamelessly before.
Were all men the same? Was it all about the stallion who ruled the world or the heir to the Iron Throne? Was she just a means to a noble end? A good woman should be happy about it, but she wasn’t, couldn’t be.

She hated having such thoughts, and yet was unable to will them away.

Faster than he had looked, Jon shook his head and smiled handsomely. “Forgive me,” he said. I’m just being silly is all.”

They both knew very well she was barren. Moreover, her condition wasn’t a secret to anyone.

And even if she weren’t, women in Westeros couldn’t bear children anymore. Except Jon’s mother, but that was before the Long Night. In popular reckoning, she was the last one. As her time was drawing near, her condition earned her the love and respect of the people, and, to Dany’s dissatisfaction, not the more notable facts of her being a brave woman, Rhaegar’s widow and Jon’s mother.

Lady Brienne’s pregnancy was discounted from the honour of being the last one, because she was in Essos when she started to expect, and somehow, that wasn’t the same.

*She had passed through the shadow though,* Dany remembered, still offended and hurt by Jon’s stare.

“I just wanted to tell you that-” Jon couldn’t finish his very confused speech.

“What?” she breathed out. What did he want from her? To have a maester cut out her cursed womb and plant in another one that could quicken? From a dying woman or some animal? She would surely die from such ill-conceived surgery.

“Nothing,” he reacted defensively.

Tyrion Lannister who had been standing in their proximity waddled discreetly towards Jon and touched his sword arm. It was an agreed signal, passed quietly from one warrior to another, from the watchers on the Wall to the vanguard ready to march out, camped in the tunnel under the Wall, just behind the outer gates of Castle Black.

Behind Jon and Dany.

The sign meant that the moon had finally waned. Dark wisps of clouds obscured the stars. The night was dark as pitch. It was time. A favourable moment to march has arrived. A few black brothers began opening the gates, swift and silent in carrying out their orders.

Outside, the enemy had been readying a new siege engine: an imposingly long line of tall, circular arches rising proudly towards the sky, with a flat ice beam uniting them on top.

A wall to match the Wall in extension and height.

Jon was determined to destroy the white walkers’ latest creation under the cover of all-encompassing darkness, before they could put it to any use. What they would exactly do with it was anyone’s guess: the ice archway had looked stunningly beautiful in moonlight and had no obvious utility for war.

Jon drew Blackfyre and turned away from Daenerys, leaving her behind. *Over and over again.* Slender women wielding obsidian hairpins had no place in the first line of battle. The vanguard followed their king’s lead without a sound.
Jon never looked back, but Dany knew that he was carrying her in his heart.

Like she him.

_It won’t be long before we are back together_ , she told herself fervently.

All fights were the same in the Long Night, putting men under pressure, slowly spending the defenders’ endurance: Jon’s most of all, due to the burden of leadership.

She refused to add to his labours by standing in his way. The queen had to give an example in discipline. She couldn’t weep, or pull her hairs out in grief and fear, or risk her life needlessly.

To her surprise, a moment later, her marching husband was all of a sudden in her head.

She knew it was warging, but had no clue that it could hurt so much when it was done to people. Jon remained calm and quiet in her head, but the intrusion he committed made her head pound, as though a giant hammer were turning her brains into jelly. It was not at all similar to the communion between dragons and their riders: a flowing stream of common consciousness in which the dragons used colourful and imprecise images to convey their meaning when they lacked human words.

Jon’s warging escapade was a blade, cutting.

_I’m sorry_, he finally spoke, _I’m not good at this at all._

The wildlings pointed with fear and disapproval at those among them who could don a skin of another fellow man or woman, and not only of an animal. Dany was beginning to discover why.

She didn’t understand what Jon meant or wanted. Was he not good at warging? Or in speaking his mind? Unable to respond to him in any form while he was camping behind her eyelids, Dany could barely remain standing on her feet, waiting for him to explain himself, before she would collapse like a weakling.

_The blood of the dragon doesn’t faint._

She would walk on all fours legs if he commanded it, doing his bidding like a wight, and it would be he behind her eyes, directing her every movement.

With dragons it was different. They always remained separate from their riders, even when they showed the most terrible visions of burning the whole worlds into dust in their tremendous anger. A dragon couldn’t see through his rider’s eyes or the other way around. This was ungodly. This skinchanging...

_Our baby_, Jon’s voice reverberated in her head and her heart hurt so hard. She _couldn’t_ give him one. Why wouldn’t he relent? Why did he continue to torture her by opening up her old wounds?

_It’s not what you think, what people talk, that we should have an heir._

He withdrew briefly from her, letting her recover.

Belatedly, she realised he might have forced her mind into submission in order to address her with discretion.

“What is it then, by the gods?” she managed to whisper. “I can’t stand this for much longer.”
His next incursion was softer, as if he had learned the necessary amount of force and wouldn’t use more. It still hurt like seven hells, only a little less than the previous one, her pain lingering at the edge of bearable.

*You could have lost your child without any evil magic. It’s just bad luck for some ladies. It doesn’t have to mean anything for the future.* His mind was heavy, black, sorrowful, not from the war but in compassion for her old pain of losing Rhaego. This surprised her, helped her endure the blade of his soul in hers.

*It’s just that, sometimes, I see myself gone. But before that we had a son, and he reminds you of me.*

*You’re the best mother to him.*

*He’ll never be left alone.*

With that last, intimate, deeply buried thought, he ran away from her, with his white tail between his legs. She stared at his back, realising that the whole exchange lasted very shortly. Jon had made only a dozen steps from the position in which he began speaking.

Her legs wavered, unstable like thin ice. In a blink of an eye, she realised she had not known until now how such ice felt. Jon’s passage through her soul left her some of his memories. Of ice cracking on the forest lakes and freshly smelling summer snows. It was a new step in knowing him. A treasure, shared.

She was suddenly fed up with being queen only in name, without the power to help her husband.

Her people.

Her realm. Her home.

Has it ever been hers?

Or were the dragons merely the last ones in the long row of usurpers of Westeros: foreign conquerors with superior power imposing their will? The continent seemed intent on taking its revenge on them now. The Seven Kingdoms united by Aegon the Conqueror were on the brink of being overrun by native, but also unnatural beings, not created by the gods but by another race.

Did this make the Others inferior or superior to their makers, the gifted and unfortunate children of the forest? If they were inferior, how come that they were so powerful? And if superior, how could they choose to annihilate all other forms of life as their ultimate goal? Well, they were created to ruin a race. *The giants.* Maybe they could only depart from, but never reverse their initial purpose. Perhaps the fault for this lay with the children, who had made the murderousness inherent to them. But shouldn’t at least their king understand the value of life? The Night’s King seemed proud of his existence. In Dany’s opinion it meant he also cherished it. Unlike the poor wights who suffered, aware of being corpses, longing for death, dealing death to men because they were commanded to do so, or out of desperation.

*But he’s Jon Stark, isn’t he? He used to be human. Maybe that’s why he’s different.*

Men defeated their enemies with fire and blood, enslaving them, raping the women and taking the spoils, but they didn’t kill everyone alive on their path.

But then, the wights were more thoroughly enslaved then if they wore chains and metal collars. They had no freedom left in their minds, not even the wish for it. Those possessed by the white walkers directly fared even worse, judging by poor Aegon and the other ill defenders experiencing a
metamorphosis from humans to their opposites.

The Others were perhaps not more cruel than men. Just different, as their name said.

They conquered with ice instead of fire.

Dany’s head was spinning with needless thoughts about the enemy. Once she had asked herself all those questions, she could not set them aside, or not easily. So she told herself that the answers weren’t important. The Others were enemies because of their actions, not because of their race, illusive substance or origin.

*It’s not who you are. It is what you do.*

*Is it?*

The notion didn’t seem hers, but she didn’t know to who it belonged nor how it had sneaked into her head, painlessly and surreptitiously.

*It’s what you do.*

The words composed a tune in her head, a song of ice, yearning for the song of fire. Why did she have only ice left in her soul?

*If they take the Wall, what is to stop them from freezing the seas and marching on to Essos, and then to Sothoryos and to every corner of the world?*

She realised she had said her last thought aloud and felt mad. What woman in her right mind would have spoken thus?

“That’s what Azor Ahai wanted to prevent,” Tysha replied in a whisper behind her back. “The spread of the ice *plague*. They are worse than shadows.”

Dany nervously scratched a bare portion of her unblemished hand, afraid that she might turn into an Other, like poor Aegon. She had been in contact with them often enough, whenever she accompanied Jon to battle on Rhaegal’s back. And the Night’s King was almost an acquaintance now, after several encounters.

*The blood of the dragon doesn't catch illnesses.*

Thankfully, that last self-comforting thought stayed where it belonged: inside her mind. She didn't want to admit her silly fears before a foreigner, a shadowbinder, an apprentice in magic. Despite that Tyrion, Tysha’s husband, had Jon’s trust and now waddled right next to him in dead silence. The men advanced very slowly, not to be discovered too early. Not before they were upon the engine, and in a good place.

*Sofar so good.*

Her mind wandered off again, having precious time to do so.

Did Tysha know how a barren woman might pass under the shadow? Or the chants that could force the sun to rise in the west for a day so that Dany’s womb would quicken with Jon’s son, giving him his wish?

“What are the shadows like?” she wondered with curiosity. “And why are you here?” she added with a modicum of suspicion.
Dany had grown up in fear of the usurper’s knives and Viserys’ ill temper. Later, as the Khaleesi of the great grass sea, she began to trust people she met, only to be betrayed by some of those in whom she had put all her faith.

_The maegi. Ser Jorah._

She thought she had seen her old bear a while ago, among the defenders of Shadow Tower, with a bunch of women in thick furs who looked like men. She had gone around him, having nothing to say to him. It still pleased her that he didn’t die.

“I too have given my husband a farewell kiss,” the shadowbinder responded aridly to Dany’s doubts. “He’s smaller than yours so you must have failed to notice. He’s no less a love of mine.”

The remark struck Daenerys as unfair. It was true that she didn’t have eyes for anything else when she was parting with Jon, but she would have paid equal attention to dwarves as to any other person at any other moment. “I see,” she replied calmly. She didn’t want a quarrel with Tysha, or to act a queen with her. She wanted impartial information, given freely. “And what about the shadows?” she repeated her initial question, filled with curiosity.

“Why ask me? Go see the one dwelling behind Castle Black. Maybe it will tell you what it is. Or maybe you will find it as talkative and as friendly as the white walkers,” Tysha continued in a tone that was both spiteful and ringing with truth.

“I might,” Dany answered bravely. “I think I would go and see any demon of this world if it could give me what I seek.”

“What is it?” It was Tysha’s turn to be curious.

“Fire and blood,” she replied truthfully, thinking of the war.

“And?”

“It’s all we need now,” Dany rebelled.

Tysha looked unconvinced. “There was a time when all I sought was revenge,” she said. “Until it wasn’t. Until I forgot to care about striking back and longed for happiness instead. Even if it lay in strange places. I’m still marvelled at it.”

The fighting erupted like a thousand drums waking the Long Night to life: the pounding of dragonglass on ice. The number of fallen would soon surpass the requirements of a successful Dothraki wedding.

Suddenly, Dany knew what the siege engine was. An ice mockery of an aqueduct. They existed in Volantis, the daughter of Valyria. She had never seen one with her own eyes, only in books and scrolls. Why didn’t she recognise it before? Jon had to know what the Others would most likely do with it.

Instead of retreating to the relative safety of Castle Black, Dany marched forward with her obsidian hairpin, following her happiness. For if Jon fell today, how could she not be there to hold his head as he passed? How could she not try to help him or revenge him? The strategy of burning down the siege engine that looked promising when Jon presented it, now seemed hastily conceived and dangerous.

Dolorous Edd and a small bunch of wildlings tasked by Jon to guard her was on her flying heels, bony hands tugging at her furs. “Your Grace! Daenerys! Come back!”
She couldn’t recognise their voices. They had no meaning for her. They lacked the strength of mind to obey only their king, bring her down and take her back by force. She was their queen and they respected her.

The ice aqueduct rose high, though not as tall as the Wall behind her. By the time she had reached the first pillar of the first arch, Jon was already at his planned destination, beginning to climb on one of the arches in the middle, equipped with a sticky ice ladder, fighting many enemies at once. The element of surprise was gone by now.

Seen from the Wall, that portion of the siege engine had appeared weaker than the rest to Rhaegal, who had the sharpest eyes. Jon had agreed with his view, but claimed Ghost’s sight was better, smiling sadly.

You would know, my love, wouldn’t you? You have looked through those eyes. The knowledge had new meaning for her now, after Jon’s forced warging escapade into her head. Jon truly was his wolf, in a different way than she was born a dragon.

If the aqueduct was set on fire near the top of its weaker part, the whole edifice should burst in flames and crumble down. But the necessary ascension was arduous. The Others defended every inch of their ladder now, not leaving that task to the wights. Rhaegal screamed from the top of the Wall, sensing peril for his rider. Forbidden to cross and fight for Jon, he emitted a great cloud of red and bronze fire. The flames couldn’t cross the invisible barrier that kept every monster on its own side of the Wall. Instead, burning high over the battlements, dragonfire illuminated the night like the greatest lantern of all. Dragons had a soul, Daenerys was certain. And the men could now see clearly what they fought against.

So could Dany.

The wights busied themselves on the far end of the aqueduct, mounting a heavy load on top: a spear-shaped icicle, weighing at least a ton. The Others urged them on, and, when the load was in place, they burst collectively into a song. From their chant, the aqueduct began turning slowly, until it was perpendicular to the Wall, instead of standing parallel to it like when it was built. Dany could swear it was also approaching the Wall, very slowly, until it reached a point from where it couldn’t move any further, the spot from which the world couldn’t be reshaped by the song of the earth, not even if a thousand children of the forest had come forth from their graves to perform it, accompanying it with flutes and cymbals.

The aqueduct wouldn’t carry the precious gift of water to the besieged.

It would bring death.

The spear-like load rolled down, plummeting towards the Wall, gaining ungodly speed. At the last arch, just above Dany, it was launched into the flame-lit sky. At the end of its short flight, it buried itself in the middle of the Wall, creating a profound cavity.

Not a breach yet, but a serious damage. Another ice lance would soon be on its way, and Jon still needed to fight his way up.

Dany had a notion.

“Up here!” she shouted without purpose, perhaps to encourage herself.

There was no ladder or guards at the beginning of the aqueduct where she stood, but the ice fabric was conveniently sticky and uneven. It had grip. She dropped her cloak to advance faster,
clambering up like a squirrel.

“Your Grace!” Dolorous Edd screamed from below. “No!”

“Daenerys!” Tysha called her name with emotion, as if Dany had been her dear friend. “Take care of yourself,” she said warmly, not even trying to call her back. The mocking was gone from her voice. The shadowbinders apparently also had a heart, and now it showed.

Almost on top, Dany realised why her end of the aqueduct wasn’t guarded and why poor, cautious Edd had tried to stop her. There was no need for defences here. The Other’s edifice was extremely solid, perhaps as strong as the Wall. There was nothing humans could do to tear it apart. Drogon. If only you were here. A menacing rumble resounded from the far end. The new load. She had to slide down before it picked her up on its way and killed her by smashing her into the Wall, enlarging the hollow that was already made, or finally breaching the defences of men.

No.

Her hairpin was smaller than a knife, but it was still made of sharp dragon glass. She completed her climb as fast as she could and prayed to have time. With all power she had in her slim body, she stuck the duller part of her hairpin into the aqueduct. The pointy end stayed out, protruding an inch and a half at most. Having done that, she clambered down. The load was on its path before she could reach the ground. The aqueduct shook like in an earthquake, and she held onto it for dear life. When the trembling finally stopped she dared look at the Wall, searching for the imminent breach. The load must have rolled over her worthless pin without veering off course.

Thankfully, blessedly, the Wall was indeed hit, but on a different place, and the cavity dug by the second ice spear wasn’t as deep. She didn’t know if she had made a difference or if it was poor aiming of the enemy. She scrambled back up to check. Her hairpin was buried into ice. She could still see its black shape, but could no longer retrieve it.

Sad and disappointed, she descended to the ground when the aqueduct started to tremble again. The third load was coming. But so was dragonfire. The men led by Jon have climbed far enough and set it ablaze.

“Retreat!” Jon’s voice boomed.

She scurried to him, finding his burned hand, joining him in the mad run back to the gates. The aqueduct cracked and burned behind them. It would take some time for the Others to repair it.

But next time they would be prepared. They would guard it better, build it sturdier. Or they would invent another, unknown device to bring down the Wall, always resourceful and changing their tactics. Clever. And with unlimited supplies of slimy ice weaving for their ceaseless war creations.

On the contrary, the defenders had no giant ice blocks left from the times of Brandon the Builder which they could use to repair the Wall.

Could it reconstruct itself?

Occasionally it seemed to Dany that the Wall grew higher in some places, imperceptibly helping the defenders to push the enemy away, down into the ice they loved so well.

The night was starless, a black soup.

In the yard of Castle Black, Edd whined to Jon about what she had done.
Jon simply hugged her. “You’re mad,” he said happily, proud of her. “So you were the help I got! I thought that…- Well, it matters not. I was wrong in that.”

“What did you think?” Dany asked with a familiar premonition, recalling her old visions.

“I thought that someone had helped us from the ground. I have no clue who it was. It felt as if the foundations were already weakened when we lit the top.”

“That wasn’t me,” she said honestly.

“Who then?” he answered. “I must have been imagining things.”

_Your father. The king with blue eyes. The king of misfortune._

She couldn’t give him that hope in case it was false. Time would show.

“I truly need to rest now.” Jon squeezed through his teeth, yawning from ear to ear, and it was only then that Dany realised that he was much more weary than ever before. His latest exertion must have taken a tremendous toll on his body.

_Human, human, human._

He was so tired that maybe, for the first time in long dark days, he would sleep.

So she held him in her arms until she was certain that he slept, and then, she sneaked out of their bed, drunk on their victory and her small part in it. _The hairpin that saved the world for a day_ , she quipped with herself, ignoring the cold sensation in her feet.

She’d be back before he noticed, she vowed.

The shadow wasn’t that far away.

Outside in the wilderness, in deep snow, the wolf with golden eyes was waiting for her and it seemed to be showing her the way.

_Summer._

That had to be a good sign, right? The faithful wolf of Jon’s beloved younger brother and the one whose name meant hope for the future.

She would have preferred to see Drogon still. She would feel safer, reassured that she wasn’t erring terribly in her actions.

Summer stopped next to a dwarf pine tree. Behind it, the night grew thicker and smelled strangely, of unknown spices and open graves. Had she paused to think, she would have remembered the blue-lipped warlocks in Qarth and stayed away.

She would have remembered Bran’s foolishness for he was now lost beyond the Wall, and that Summer must be as foolhardy as his master.

But, emboldened by her success, motivated by Jon’s secret, pained wishes, she touched the dark creature with her hand. Waking it from its restful stupor, she walked fearlessly under its wing.

Under the shadow, the world changed. A lonely black river wound through the fields of tall, white grass, but it was only the creature’s memory. The shadow didn’t belong here and it wasn’t fond of the sun: it would never help it rise at any side of the world, east, west, north or south. Why did she
pass under it? The shadow hated children for it couldn’t have any: it was barren, like her. It was wrong to seek its help. She nonetheless struggled to pass under it and get out, for there was no going back. She had forgotten the way she came from. Too late, she realised she had abandoned the safety of the Wall, the place where the world stood still, where the song stolen by the Others from the children couldn’t reshape it into anything else. The place where there were gods, perhaps, the Seven, or the old gods, and not a demon called R’hllor, hiding in holy fires.

By leaving, thus, she fell, and the clutches of a familiar creature closed over her neck.

“Look, look,” the Night’s King’s voice was hoarse and filled with hatred. “Who do we have here? Is it true then, the wisdom of old? Do we find what we need only when we have stopped searching?”

“What are you doing here?” she retorted with insolence, wrestling to get herself out of his grip and run away, in any direction, into the belly of the shadow if needed.“Aren’t you on the other side?”

A shade of doubt crossed the Great Other’s face. He seemed displeased by the fact that she had found him on this side of the Wall. But when he replied, mirth was back in his voice. “Do you truly think that I shall answer that? Do you believe yourself the only one searching for the impossible?”

“Why were you trying to pass under the shadow? What were you looking for?”

“The way back home. To Winterfell. Isn’t that obvious to you and your wolf husband?”

His answer was both completely unexpected and oddly sincere.

“We have seen the siege at Jon’s home. Your army was set to destroy it. But the gods have hidden it, even from you,” Dany couldn’t hold in a victorious remark of her own. “You’ll never find it!”

Not even Jon could return. He was only able to see that Winterfell was still in place and intact, through the mirror of the pool in the godswood.

Invisible to all.

Jon and Dany often wondered how all those trapped inside felt and fared. Jon’s little sister. Ser Barristan. It was one of their common nightmares.

“Maybe I’ll find it and maybe I won’t.” The enemy laughed at her from the bottom of his heart, if he had one still. “Well I just hunted down something much better!”

“Me,” she breathed out stupidly, wanting to cry. Why did she give in to temptation? Everyone knew that the shadow created by Lady Melisandre was evil like the red woman. Even Tysha had told her so. Why wouldn’t she listen?

Because her need was great and she would try what was in her power in order to make a difference. Before she bowed her head down to the inevitable and renounced her happiness.

She couldn’t run away anymore.

The world was spinning like dragon flies, like the old gods think, like the roots of the trees grow. The song of ice was dire, and very, very long.

She wasn’t surprised to find herself in the wrong Winterfell she had heard so much about, the one in the Lands of Always Winter. Dragged through the deserted corridors where grey granite sprang from ice, she ended up pinned to a giant weirwood throne by a strong, gnarled arm.
The Night’s King held a luxurious red flask in his free hand, beautifully shaped, of some exquisite foreign making such as Dany had never seen.

She knew for what it would serve, not knowing how it would be taken away from her. *Her blood.* The enemy carried no weapon she could see.

She struggled against the muscles holding her in place, resisting being tied to the wooden throne. Jon had seen a seat like that, in a lost cave, but this one was much, much greater than the one he’d told her about. She trashed and turned and fought to free herself.

In vain.

“It is futile,” the Night’s King announced calmly. “The men of Westeros have never known an enemy like us. It’s only a matter of time before your realm falls.”

“You are wrong,” she retorted with passion, remembering all her mistakes, from Mirri Maaz Duur to the present moment of ruining herself for a dream. “*Your Grace,*” she added cynically, on a whim, sounding like Jon to her own ears. “Your growing power cannot be denied and your kind is a formidable foe,” she inhaled deeply. “But the worst enemy of man is himself.”

“It won’t hurt,” he said timidly, and she wondered why that reassurance was necessary. Was it the last remnant of courtesy in Jon Stark the human, her husband’s famous ancestor? Another man who would have found her pretty, judging by the smirk she had gotten from his stone effigy when Winterfell defeated Stannis by magic. Drogon had been there… What Stannis hadn’t known was that even an enslaved dragon could serve as a vessel to unleash magic hidden in the world around it… As a means to an end… As a woman whose only worth was to carry her husband’s seed.

The Night’s King’s teeth were sharper than dragonsteel when they buried themselves suddenly in the left part of her chest, cutting rapidly through furs, fabric, flesh and bone, like a headsman’s axe, leaving inhuman and yet *cold* pain in their wake.

Jon had always been warm in comparison.

Daenerys cried out like a wounded animal, humiliated and defeated.

When the Great Other began drinking blood from her heart, she felt no more.
Gendry V

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Gendry

The night sky wept, with stars falling like rain.

The Others rejoiced as never before.

Bursting in shrill song of ice, they renewed their search for Winterfell with unprecedented vigour, combing the grounds in small groups.

The castle remained invisible to them.

They could walk through its walls, access every courtyard and every hall, but never truly enter. The only exception was the godswood - none walked through the heart tree or fell into a pool over there. On the contrary, some always waded into hot springs in other parts of the castle. From there, they retreated instantly, shaking off the touch of concealed warm water from their long, gnarled legs, just like a man entering a cozy inn at night might dust the snow off his coat.

No, the Others could not enter, just like those trapped inside could not leave.

Unseen by the enemy, the people watched the white walkers wandering among them clear as sunrise.

Sunrise…

Dawn… Gendry mused with sadness, unable to recall its splendour. It was but a distant memory.

The white walkers were not aware of having found the castle they so diligently sought, with the intent to mount a siege and destroy if. Roaming incessantly all around Winterfell, they even stepped on freezing human toes without being wiser.

Men avoided them.

To touch a white walker by chance could bring a disease of cold, forcing a man to lay low and sleep, until his skin began turning into ice or worse; the ridged, grey and blue enemy hide.

The change was very slow.

“Slower than greyscale,” people whispered with fear.

The plague never retreated once it began.

The rare crownlanders among Winterfell’s colourful crowd of guests who never left after the royal wedding harboured hopes that Lady Shireen might bring the cure. But, be that as it may, their miracle remedy could not be tried out because she wasn’t there.

No one was fond of imagining what would occur if a human let a white walker pass through him instead of a wall. Would he turn into nothingness or immediately into an Other?

Some forced inhabitants of Winterfell poked the Others with wooden sticks for idle amusement,
wishing to cut the long time of uncertainty short, laughing when the enemies resisted invisible opponents with imposing crystal blades and uttered shrill cries from which warm human blood nearly froze.

Everyone was on edge.

Gendry and Arya didn’t take part in what they deemed to be children games, even when men and women involved in them had three times their age.

Rickon traded his giant stone knife for an equally large obsidian mace and tried to smash the Others with it. All his efforts were in vain. Dragonglass was the Others’ ruin, but not when it came from Winterfell, where they walked unscathed through hard stone.

In Gendry’s stupid understanding, any deadly force could not come to or from Winterfell. Only the unpredictable disease of ice, affecting some but not all, the teasing wooden sticks and the hot springs defied the magic that had hidden the castle from conquest.

In any case, Rickon’s wild attempts had some use. He was occupied and pestered Arya less about being stuck at home, instead of defending the Wall with the rest of mankind, utterly unable to see that he was but a nine year old boy, and not as strong as he wanted to be.

His savage Skagosi friends who had accompanied Gendry to Winterfell stayed quiet, to everyone’s surprise. It would seem that they appreciated the food, despite that it didn’t include human flesh. In any case, they didn’t seem to share Rickon’s obsession about riding out in force against the Others on a herd of hairy, stinky unicorns.

Arya was the lady of the castle.

With young Robb’s absence and her return from Braavos, the people couldn’t put their faith in a war-mongering boy, Stark or not. Frightened and hardened, they began turning to Arya for guidance and authority. She wore her new role with hesitance and firmness: with quiet grace she didn’t quite believe she possessed.

As Gendry always knew she would.

My little Stark in Winterfell, he thought warmly, foolishly, holding his beloved wife in his arms.

Alone in their chamber, seated in their bed, they stared at the weeping sky.

The silence between them had been long and killing, spanning many hours.

The clueless Others didn’t fancy the stairs so they rarely ventured into the upper levels of the castle.

A small mercy, Gendry thought warily.

Sooner or later, one would slip into his marriage bed, and all he could do would be to step aside with Arya and wait until the creature finished sniffing around and left.

The thought angered him needlessly, knowing he would be defenceless. Or perhaps he should get a wooden stick and try his luck.

It was more than a small mercy, it was a true miracle that the humiliating experience hadn’t happened yet.

They were equal part protected and helpless in the castle of Arya’s famous ancestors.
The Kings of Winter.

Gendry was Sealord of Braavos now, of course. In his dark dreams he wondered if the title he had won by the strength of his arms was nonetheless insufficient to merit Arya’s hand. Maybe his unworthiness was the reason that the gods moved her castle to a place which was neither on earth where it had always stood, nor in the seven heavens where all things good should go one day, when they cease to exist, at the end of time.

Nor in seven hells.

Winterfell was in a world apart despite that it had never left its place. To make it worse, it had vanished from the face of the earth as soon as Gendry arrived and dared become Arya’s husband in truth, and not only before the beautiful and seemingly kind, but also uncannily foreign moonsingers, sworn to their god.

He and Arya must have angered all gods of Westeros, marrying in the wrong temple and without anyone’s permission.

Or maybe his lordship didn’t last and he was only a bastard from Flea Bottom once more. The Braavosi could have already chosen another ruler due to his prolonged absence.

Down below, in the crypts, different lords ruled the North. The statues were alive, everyone whispered, and they were turning grumpy of late, singing raucously, drumming with sculpted hands and dull ancient swords on the granite walls that confined them. Even the stone wolves howled with unheard ferocity.

Since her last visit to Torrhen who Kneeled, just before Gendry’s return, Arya had ordered the crypts door shut and wouldn’t descend again to see the stone Lords and Kings of Winter.

“We are all tired. We are seeing and hearing things which are not there,” she had declared on the matter with authority, and would say no more.

She refused to go down despite that even the castle servants believed that she should. Every bloody northerner thought she ought to. Thankfully, there were enough men from elsewhere to pollute the chorus of the believers in the old gods and their will with dissonant, differing voices.

Nothing was certain.

Rickon miraculously shared Arya’s views concerning crypts. If not, Gendry suspected that the young Stark could open the door with ease and find a strong, cursed army ready to serve him, or rather, fulfil some dark purpose of their own by playing servitude.

On top of what Arya had said, in the moments of intimacy, Gendry had accidentally glimpsed in her mind that she didn’t trust her dead with the fate of the living, especially those who weren’t born Northmen, and all those who might not stand well a very strict judgment of being loyal to the Starks.

The precious warging tie he had learned to cherish and savour was now completely severed, and Arya had done it on purpose.

So it was very good when she finally spoke, breaking the ice that had slowly formed between them, woven from the absence of all sound in their chill bedchamber.

“Why is the sky weeping? Why are the Others rejoicing?” she asked flatly. “Is Jon dead?”

Her voice trembled in the end.
Gendry was compelled to reassure her, spitting out the first argument that came to mind: “If Jon fell, the Wall would have as well, wouldn’t it?”

As he said it, he wasn’t certain about it anymore. Not at all. Anything could happen in war. He continued in the same vein nevertheless: “Thousands of them would come marching south if the Wall is lost!” He paused.

“There’s no one on the kingsroad,” he added humbly.

They could see the old way from the battlements and it had remained empty despite the crying sky.

Arya looked briefly into her lap, avoiding his eyes, and then up again, bestowing upon him that languid, watery look he adored.

Her weakness. Her love for him.

She had terrifying nightmares of late, he knew, and she wouldn’t talk about them. He supposed this was the reason warging had stopped. She couldn’t risk him seeing a dark secret of hers. This frightened Gendry more than the falling stars.

*Arry, Arry! What are you hiding from me? What do you mean to do?*

Unwilling to spoil the too short time of his happiness, he turned craven, not pronouncing the questions that tortured him out loud, afraid of stark, straightforward replies he might get, if only he found the courage to ask.

He was married to Arya and not even the Long Night could ruin his joy.

Not entirely.

“Perhaps you’re right,” she conceded quietly on his overly simple point about Jon and the Wall, which made him even more wary and almost vexed with her true intentions.

“What do you think will happen?” she questioned him nervously, kindling his fears. “Will we stay here forever? Will we be the last ones to fall?” she paused and stared him down before continuing. “The time we have before us may be sweet, but still far from how I imagined my life might end.”

“How did you see it… the end?” he couldn’t help asking.

Arya blushed as she rarely did, caught by surprise. “Here lies the difficulty,” she confessed, “I can’t fathom it. In my imagination, I’m the one who lives,” she paused, staring deeply into his eyes. “Those who wronged me don’t. Those who deserve to die.”

Vengeance. Again. Fine. Everyone wanted it sometimes, he guessed. But with Arya the temptation was stronger, and she had no mercy for her enemies. Gods help the Night’s King if he had truly murdered her beloved brother. Westeros would be too small to him and he would do well to swim to the Free Cities or fly away on an ice spider, if those beasts could grow wings.

Her vengeful temper notwithstanding, Arya also always spontaneously laboured for the survival and well-being of all those who depended on her, even when she considered them weak and unworthy of saving

*Or just plain stupid.*

*Her pack.*
Gendry smiled like a fool. He would always be part of it now.

What Arya didn’t understand was that she also needed saving, but not from the dangers of life or the evildoers who wronged her.

She needed shelter from the dark, vengeful, mourning parts of herself. From the girl who believed herself ugly, unaware of her beauty. Arry. Arya Underfoot. Perhaps he was mistaken. It mattered little. He prayed for being able to give her anything she truly needed, for she had given him more happiness that he could ever dream of…

By being his and being herself.

He kissed a tiny bare portion of her shoulder with emotion, and then covered it with tunic and furs against the cold. She nested against him, sneaking into his lap. They remained in bed. It was much warmer that way.

“I fear for Daenerys,” he confessed after a while against the crown of Arya’s head. He didn’t even know why, but it was on his mind since the sky started weeping. “The falling stars look red and black to me. I think… I think it’s the doom of the dragons,” he dared voice his unfounded fears. He hoped it wouldn’t share that fate, should he have inherited that tiny drop of dragonblood from the perfect stranger who fathered him, Robert Baratheon. “Do you remember the comet? It burned red across the sky when King Robert died. It meant that the dragons would return, and then they hatched for Daenerys. Now the red stars are falling. Honestly, Arya, I fear for her. Maybe she’s dead and we are ignorant because we’re stuck here.”

“You’re stupid,” Arya retorted immediately, “Daenerys or Jon, it’s all same,” she retorted and swallowed hard.

It still pained her to admit that her beloved brother had a hidden dragon side. She had thought he was the only one like her among her siblings, more wolf than anything else.

And maybe he was, but it had never been all he was.

Jon had a father whose inheritance could not be seen in him on a glance, just like Gendry had a mother, blond and fragile, hard-working and loving, who had left a profound trace in his soul, if not on his face.

And, finally, nothing was in blood, Gendry had come to believe, and everything in a man, able to choose and become something else entirely.

Gendry was proof of it. He didn’t win a kingdom but a Free City, and also the hand of not just any great lady, but the one he loved.

Just spill it out, Arya. I can take anything from you.

“Jon and Dany are related,” Arya murmured quietly. “Perhaps their love offends the old gods. Or the Seven. In all other houses of the realm, the closest relation people marry is first cousin, but never their parents, aunts or siblings. If your vision is true, my brother and his wife may fall together.” Her lips thinned. “I hope you’re just credulous and silly like half of the people in this castle,” she added wryly.

“Then it pleases me to be stupid, my love,” he teased her, trying to alleviate her mood, a daunting task in the Long Night.

Their love had begun to taste like stolen pleasure, taken shamelessly at the end of time. Gendry
would do anything for a different season, for dawn, for the hope of reaching old age side by side with his beautiful wife.

His eyes wandered to the large stone mantelpiece over an old hearth where the Horn of Winter was laid. The fire below was low and weak, despite the abundance of dry logs that should have kept it alive and strong. It was too cold for everyone and everything, even for the flames it seemed.

One day soon all fires might be put out.

“Let’s leave,” he announced on a whim, standing up and seizing his hammer.

“It can’t be done,” Arya replied stoically, not moving an inch.

“Why not?” he rebelled, “Let’s try again, with the horn.”

They had done it several times without the precious possession, only to ride through thick, suffocating fog for hours, without getting anywhere. They didn’t know what world awaited the trapped men and women outside Winterfell’s gates, but it wasn’t the one where they were used to dwell. Every time, they barely succeeded in finding the way back to the castle before they would succumb to exhaustion and hunger, suffering inexplicable fear for their lives. And neither of us is craven, Arya, right? It must be the gods that don’t let us out.

But this time they would, Gendry swore inwardly. They couldn’t stay put forever, hiding from their fate. Best if they faced it heads on.

He stifled the thought that he was becoming unreasonable like Rickon.

Arya rose slowly, but then she dressed up to look like Arry, and not the lady of the castle. By the time she was ready, she looked as giddy as Gendry felt.

“Let’s be stupid,” she said with passion. “Maybe the Horn of Winter truly makes a difference. Let us ride to the Wall and see with our own eyes how Jon and Daenerys fare.”

In the cutting cold of the yard, Gendry disapproved of the horse Arya picked, but she wouldn’t ride another.

“Stranger is like his master,” she said. “He threatens and bites in peace, but in the thick of the battle he has no equal.”

“Why isn’t he called a Warrior then?” Gendry rebelled in the name of the Seven he was taught to believe in. No man or animal should be named upon the god of death. It was an ill omen. More so for Arya after her time in Braavos. He couldn’t wish it on her.

Arya smiled wryly, patting the horse. “Maybe because he can’t become sad and drunk and get himself killed for it like his master. I often wonder if he had found my sister before suffering that fate.”

Gendry didn’t quite understand her, but he had to concede that the beastly black horse didn’t bite her, despite being known for its bad temper among stable boys.

Yet the horse’s name still made his skin itch. “Stranger is the same god like the one you ran away from,” he couldn’t help saying.

“I couldn’t ride Nymeria even if she were here, could I?” Arya replied jokingly, disarming him. “I can handle Stranger.”
How about me? He thought about different riding skills and almost blushed.

“Not today,” she retorted seriously and he realised she had been in his mind, without letting him feel it, gentle as a butterfly.

He didn’t know it was possible. On most occasions, her warging presence hurt, without any Arya’s intention to harm him.

They both forgot the imminent sortie for a moment.

“Not today,” he was forced to agree, yearning for tomorrow.

He was holding the Horn of Winter instead of Arya’s hand when they cantered proudly through the gates, accompanied by Rickon, a dozen of his Skagosi, and a bunch of haggard men and women on horse or on foot; all those who could no longer stand their imprisonment.

Hodor said, “Hodor”, striding at the end of the line.

It was the first time that the lackwit pale giant took part in a sortie, and his presence encouraged Gendry.

*Will a madman and a horn that had been broken save us?*

He shook his head, blaming himself for being credulous and stupid.

The familiar fog was dense, white, creepy, swallowing them as they increased speed, trying to gallop through the mist, determined to emerge on the other end, wherever it may lay, on the Wall, or not too far from it, Gendry hoped.

They had tried many times to exit the castle, as soon as they gathered the courage for another attempt after latest failure.

But with every passage through the gates, thick air oppressed them and made them feel dizzy. The firm ground under men’s feet and horse’s hooves was lost, and no one could tell what poisoned the atmosphere. Wild guesses ranged from mud, sand, snow and smoke to the crystals that the Others evaporated into when they died.

The fog was always too dense and impenetrable, the experience uncanny. The haze had a life of its own. Travellers’ lungs constricted and burned, forcing the return to the false safety of invisible Winterfell for everyone who wanted to continue breathing.

Few men had dared stayed out longer than Gendry and Arya. One didn’t return. No one saw him again during next unsuccessful sorties.

Was he the only lucky one or the only one who died?

With Hodor and the horn in the party trying to escape, to Gendry’s surprise, the fog began to laugh. There were suddenly boundaries to the mist: great, grey, granite-made. Blocks. Walls.

Gendry and Arya were suddenly riding deep inside the vaults under Winterfell, in the proscribed crypts.

The line of crowned warriors, accompanied by howling stone wolves, met them at the end of a narrow, winding passage.

Their leader spoke ghastly. “You think you can lock us up, girl,” he said to Arya. “Your father was a
minor lord in comparison with the like of us! Your brother was lord only for a day and his heir is a boy. And you’re a girl-child, not yet of age, more a Tully than a Stark, an ugly river fish married to a bastard stag.”

“I’m a wolf!” Arya snapped back.

“Where is your pet then?” Torrhen asked with poison. “Lost, isn’t she? When she dies, so will the last bit of your wolf self. Only a stinky trout will remain.”

“I’m not a fish and not even a wolf,” Arya growled wildly. “I am Arya of House Stark. I am as grown as you are, Torrhen who Kneeled.”

From the mention of his kneeling, Torrhen disappeared, together with his ary and the crypts that held him prisoner, but his laugh still reverberated in the endless cloud of thick, familiar, deadly white haze.

Very soon, the mist sucked up all air. Gendry’s lungs burned. His eyes were about to burst from pressure behind his eyelids and he had never been more afraid for his life.

“Back!” he roared heavily, uncertain if anyone heard him. “Fall back!”

His wife never listened, to be sure. Arya spurred the horse of death and rode forth after Torrhen, disobeying Gendry’s desperate call for prudence.

“Show yourself!” she screamed at her vanished ancestor, not impressed by his old crown or poor opinion of girls. “Let us go!”

In a moment of neglect, Gendry’s horse threw him off and ran away. With last ounce of his strength, before the suffocating sickness made him crawl, or faint, Gendry leaped on Stranger, landing halfway on his back, near his rear and tail. The beast struggled to kick him off and kill him with his devilish hooves.

The other members of their sortie were gone. Gendry could no longer see them in the fog, but he still heard the galloping sound vanish in the distance.

He and Arya were left alone.

“Why don’t they help us?” Arya screamed desperately. “They are my famous grand-grandfathers that ought to be honourable and just! Why don’t they attack the Others, instead of obstructing me?”

Cough cut her breath short. She gulped for air, like a fish, but her grey eyes flashed yellow, yellow-orange, and then red.

Wolf-like. Heart-tree like.

“Arya please let’s go back,” his cough was stronger than hers, nearly forcing him to vomit. Blood suddenly gushed forth from his chest. He spat it, struggling not to choke.

Seeing that, Arya turned Stranger back, and the horse was swifter than death, returning them to Winterfell. Behind the gates, Gendry rolled off, into deep snow, coughing and vomiting like mad.

The white mantle coloured red and pink between his hands, supporting his weight. And, when he could finally breathe again, he drank snow to lose the taste of copper from his mouth.

The haggard crowd stared at their lady, dressed like a boy, and at her husband, weakened and
humiliated.
“What are you looking at?” Arya challenged them. “Go to your chores. There’s more work in this castle that can be done.”

She led Stranger to the stables herself. After, Gendry knew, she would pass to greet the cooks, and then the guards. Finally, she would check that there was still enough firewood in the castle.

Gendry wondered how the people would heat themselves when all logs were gone and they were unable to go into the woods to collect more. Will they burn chairs and beds? Will they sacrifice the heart tree in the end? Will the weirwood burn like any other? Or will the crackling of its dying branches rise up to the deaf sky like a cry of an innocent man being sentenced to death? Would this ultimate injustice finally wake up the old gods from their winter somnolence? Would they open their heavy eyes and see? The men needed their wisdom to end the war. Gendry’s strength and Arya’s determination to punish those who deserved it weren’t enough.

Defeated, he returned to his chamber and waited for Arya. His hammer stood uselessly in a cold corner, the heavy Horn was again on the mantelpiece.

His runaway horse must have brought it back, he realised, and Arya had already commanded someone to put it in place.

The flames were barely alive in the hearth, the chill a hundred times more cutting than before. The bed furs felt frozen and damp under his fingers. He wrapped himself in nevertheless, breathing heavily. His lungs hurt as if a hundred knives had pierced tiny holes in them.

Crystal blade wounds.

Was it the Others ambushing him and Arya in the gloom, showing them faces of her ancestors to confuse them? To lure them into their clutches?

Arya didn’t tardy. Kicking out her boots and her cloak, she traded boy clothing for a warm grey tunic she slept in. The sight of her in familiar, homely garments warmed Gendry’s frozen heart.

“We’ll try again tomorrow,” she breathed out with both stubbornness and resignation, curling up alone on her side of their great featherbed. He knew better than to embrace her when she became like this, bent over herself, struggling with her latest failure.

A humiliating one, this time.

They had to keep trying.

The moon had turned since they were married, the time of Gendry’s life. He hoped Arya’s as well, at least when she didn’t feel guilty about being happy while men died on the Wall, facing danger and uncertain destiny.

Through their window, the Ice Dragon shone in the far north: a unique stelar constellation.

“We can’t get out,” Gendry said with resignation. “Jon will have to come here to get the horn.”

They had sent out ravens. None had returned. Maybe Nymeria could go in and out if she were there, but Arya was adamant that she couldn’t teach her to carry the Horn of Winter to Jon, not even force her by warging. Be that as it may, the whole pack of direwolves was gone, and Arya wouldn’t tell Gendry where they were now, but he knew.

He knew.
The wolves were on the Wall.

Or beyond it, for what other place on earth would give his brave wife such nightmares when she opened her yellow eyes in her sleep?

Repaired by late Lord Reed, unimpressive in size and build, and yet heavy as lead of late, the Horn of Joramun was stuck with Gendry and Arya in Winterfell. Out of enemy’s reach, it was equally unusable to men who needed every help they could get to bring the dawn.

A desire to take Arya away surged in his heart. They would go to Braavos, where he was lord. He had to steal her from the enchanted castle of her stone ancestors: pesky and mean, demanding and loud, requesting their due.

But what was it they were after? No one could tell, and the remaining young Starks in Winterfell refused to ask: as stubborn as their granite predecessors.

“I’ll be back soon,” Gendry whispered against the Arya’s tousled sleeping head. She was thankfully too tired to have another cauchemar.

He was good to go, and he’d never go far from her.

But his hammer had been silent for too long.

The fire was almost extinguished in the smithy: the smallest of flames still burning.

He had hoped to find iron he could work on, but, to his surprise, on the anvil, a broken piece of irregular black ore was carefully laid down for him: a strange substance, shiny, very hard.

Not knowing what it was, maybe he could still shape it into the thinnest, deadliest blade he had ever hammered.

*Bloody sharp*.

He turned around and there was more of the mysterious metal, piled next to a wall in a neat heap, like firewood.

Awaiting him.

Hodor suddenly said “Hodor,” from the corridor, not far from the smithy entrance.

Gendry found him rapidly, carrying a tiny chunk of unknown metal, waving it before the giant’s nose in weak torchlight. “Did you bring me this?” he confronted the lackwit. “What is it? Where did you find it?”

Hodor looked tired. Seated on the floor, he repeated “Hodor”, yawned from ear to ear, and sank into sleep while leaning against a wall.

A trail of crisp snow from Hodor’s boots led Gendry to the closed, cursed door no one was supposed to cross.

He halted in his steps, unwilling to defy his wife and see if he could explore the crypts on his own. Somehow, the discovery of the ore’s origin didn’t surprise him.

It was common knowledge that Drogon had been hibernating in the crypts when he lingered in Winterfell with late Rhaegar Targaryen, before he changed his allegiance to serve Stannis and his sorceress.
It had also become common knowledge that dragons could breathe crystals to heal their riders’ wounds, and not only fire. It looked as if Drogon had amassed piles of such glass under Winterfell, for unknown purpose.

Was Gendry meant to find Drogon’s petrified breath and shape it into new, unseen weaponry, arming the people so that they could escape the haunted castle, defeat the white walkers and leave?

It was a preposterous thought, yet it imposed itself on Gendry with a strength of a true conviction.

Back in the smithy, cautious working of the material showed that it had completely different properties than either obsidian or Valyrian steel: more malleable, a tad brittle even.

*Breakable.*

But definitely very sharp, and much, much stronger than usual, boring steel.

His hammer sang. He would know soon if his handiwork could cut the fog, the nasty, ill-humoured statues, or white walkers for that matter.

Long hours had passed before he dropped the hammer and sat down with exhaustion, contemplating the first three blades he had thus made, hiltless and far from perfect.

Moments later, he realised Arya had been watching him, quiet as a mouse, calm like still water.

“How long have you been here?” he asked. “Why not say something?”

“Forge me a sword,” she demanded, instead of explaining herself.

It wasn’t a joke.

And it was not at all what he had in mind when he had run away to the smithy nor when he started to work the peculiar, precious ore. He plotted to arm men, maybe a spearwife or a she-peasant, but never Arya. She didn’t need another weapon, did she?

“You have one,” he protested with all his heart. The gift from her brother, she never parted with it, right? Not even when she slept. Needle was always stuck safely under *her* side of the featherbed.

Never under Gendry’s. Not even when they exchanged places in their sleep, entangled with each other as only lovers could be.

“Needle doesn’t scare Torrhen,” she fought back. “Make me a blade that does. A lord’s weapon. Not a harmless gift for a little girl.”

“My hammer doesn’t frighten the Kings of Winter,” Gendry countered. “Nothing does.”

It was a well-founded remark. The dead had halted Drogon’s fire, preventing him from burning the castle on Stannis’ orders. They seemed invincible in their domain.

Gendry’s teeth gritted unwittingly, and he was forced to shiver from cold.

Outside the drafty, empty smithy, behind its impressive oaken door, Hodor rumbled “Hodor” in his sleep.

His drowsy noises made Gendry feel more confident before his tenacious, noble wife. “Heavier blade won’t change anything. It will still only be smith’s work. They are *cursed.*”
"I heard you saying that this is more powerful than Valyrian steel-"

"I was talking to myself-" Gendry realised belatedly.

"But-"

"I was just rambling-"

"But you think so, and you’re a smith-"

"I’m not THE Smith-"

"But you said that-"

"I don’t know, Arya!"

Her face fell and it was the first time in their short marriage that he had made her profoundly sad. He hated it, for it had never been his intention, and loved it, for he had never hoped to wield that power over her. He had always believed he loved her more than she would ever love him back.

"I’ll try," he surrendered. "Just don’t hate me if I fail."

With that she was in his arms, kissing him. "You would do anything for me, wouldn’t you?" she asked between caresses. "Even if I commanded some nonsense?" Her tiny, warm hands were just under his ears and he had never felt more pleasingly stupid.

"Small chance of that," he teased her back, "I’m the only one lacking sense over here."

And probably he was. For he had completely forgotten, for more than a year now, through all his battles and the joy of loving he had found, that he was made to hold a hammer to create, and not only to destroy, unlike the father he had never known.

So he took off his stupid lord’s doublet, trading it for a smith’s apron as he should have done when he started his mad labour, keeping only the tunic underneath. Labouring in the night unending, he forgot he should leave the smithy. And when he felt alone he imagined that his tunic had preserved Arya’s scent, despite that the cold was such that not even his own sweat stank, cooling down instantly. Arya began to send meals and came to watch him when the castle business allowed, silent in an unlit corner, mute as a statue, crownless and wolf-less.

He didn’t know how many days passed. Was it thirty? Was it sixty? It could have well been a hundred days! He slept in the smithy from time to time. Every now and then, Arya shared his bed, and the time they robbed from the world tasted sweeter than the lost summer.

There was no magic to the black dragon ore, he finally concluded, the only miracle was the material itself: petrified fire harder than iron, sharp and yet breakable like a fancy goblet. He had to find a way to remedy that or all his work would be in vain.

Brittle was unusable.

One day, the surface of the sword he was making for Arya shone differently, revealing a pale hue. The original ore had been dark as pitch.

Hours later, when Arya woke in his arms, he was ready.

“Today,” he told her, and she immediately knew what he meant. They did not need to exchange many words to understand each other since the forging began.
She nodded wisely. Before departing to her last duties of the lady of the castle, she paused to explain what must have been on her mind for quite a while.

“I thought I was only ice,” she breathed out, “but now I see that I am both ice and water,” she declared, “like you are wind and fire,” she proclaimed to his surprise, nailing how he sometimes felt, “like Daenerys is fire unending,” she was dead serious, and then, her voice became barely louder than a whisper, “like Jon is fire and ice.”

With that, she almost cried for she still feared greatly for her brother’s life.

The Others had never stopped rejoicing.

“You know that none of it is true,” he tried to say, “the elements, it’s just a saying. Like the sigils, like poems. None of us is ice, or fire. We’re just flesh and blood.”

She wouldn’t listen to his poor explanations of the truth as he saw it, leaving him to make the announcement to her people. He followed suit and stood next to her in the Great Hall as she broke the news to all and sundry.

They were all leaving Winterfell today and there was no going back. Her ghosts would guard it until the end of winter, or time, whichever came first.

Very soon, everyone gathered in the main courtyard with a pack of belongings they dared carry to an uncertain and long march, whispering that their lady would deliver them from all evil, with the help of some magic, or the old gods, or the new. There were as many different gossips as there were people.

It was Gendry’s turn for announcements.

“My lady,” he said, bending a knee to Arya, “I present you Dragon’s Breath.”

It was a good name for a great sword.

She held it high when she rode out through the gates despite that it must have been very heavy for her, a weapon for a man grown. The hellish horse she wouldn’t part with cantered savagely, ready to throw her down at any moment.

Rickon hugged the Horn of Winter, riding a white, hairy horse from the mountain clans that possibly resembled an ugly Skagosi unicorn.

Arya’s new sword shone like cold moonlight outside the castle, right through the fog, and the dead had stayed away, kneeling to the living passing by. The stone lords patted their wolves so that the beasts would do the same.

Smallfolk and highborns alike followed Arya Stark.

But then, the Others finally saw the people and surrounded them, ready to kill them all.

They outnumbered the humans many times over.

In the hour of need, Arya sheathed Dragon’s Breath and drew Needle again. Gendry readied his hammer for a different song. His last one, perhaps.

They were both wrong.

The Kings of Winter weren’t gone. Silent like the tombs they had forsaken, they struck the enemy in
the back, slaying the white walkers who had dared besiege their domain one by one, until none were left to haunt Westeros any more.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading ))

Thank you to all who liked, commented or bookmarked this story )))

Next up: Jon
Jon XIII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

**Jon**

He should have stayed *awake* .

He should have never, *never* slept.

How could Daenerys *not* try to recapture the destiny stolen from her by human malice?

To be a mother, and not only of dragons.

He should have *known* .

Those dreams of a boy who wanted to do better for his son: to succeed where his parents had failed, despite their most noble birth and upbringing, and all the love they bore him. Those sweet dreams he should have kept for himself.

Wide awake, he opened his red eyes. He had never warged into his wolf more deliberately or consciously. Searching closely for his Enemy, he scrutinised with utmost attention the snowy darkness of the forest. Padding unnoticed in eerie silence, alongside the main body of the Night's King army, Ghost left behind the last desolate slopes of Frostfangs: a vast fresco of dark mountains covered in smooth and ragged ice conquering timber, dark-green needles and hard stone.

*Shining in starlight.*

Under peaceful and pale celestial glow, endless hordes of the Others marched south like one, crying shrilly at occasions as was their wont.

Thousands and thousands of them.

Any man’s blood would have frozen from the sight of their inexorable advance and the disturbing music of their voices, but not Ghost’s, and certainly not Jon’s.

They both belonged to winter.

His wolf’s eyes told it well and clear: the Others were approaching the Wall, marching at a steady pace. In the surroundings, sleeping heart trees were in abundance, near abandoned wildling villages and their sad, ruined, often rounded houses.

The Night’s King could use any somnolent weirwood to force his entry to the battlefield, join his army and take the lead. His continued and conspicuous absence confirmed Jon’s worst fear.

The enemy must have found Dany and captured her to drink her blood. Jon hoped it would burn him, like Rhaegar’s. Like Father’s, he reminded himself of the fact with strange melancholy, finding no solace for his fresh pain in a bout of sadness just like he had found none in vengeful, angry thoughts.

Dany was missing for an hour, maybe less, or perhaps much more, it was very hard to tell precisely in night neverending.
The clocks didn’t measure the passage of time with equal precision since daytime had become a longing and a remote memory. Time dragged its feet, resting like stale water, oppressing and poisoning the living.

And Dany was missing too long for her absence to bid well.

Belatedly, it occurred to Jon that ever since he rejected the destiny of Azor Ahai, he’d been taking for granted that Dany would live to see the spring, or at least until that last stand of mankind against the Others in which he would command. The new last hero, a just man, with his wife at his side, who might yet achieve victory.

How childish of me.

He had never thought he might simply lose her in war.

Just like that, cruelly, from one moment to another, as any other casualty.

Like Grenn, who now haunted the Wall near Eastwatch-by-the-Sea: only one among the countless slain sent forward by the Others to kill his own folk.

Alas, there were heart trees south of the Wall as well.

One of them took root right where the last King of the Seven Kingdoms now stood boiling with misery. From what he could discern from his position, it wasn’t a weirwood, but a drowsing oak with a leering mouth and ugly eyes squeezed shut, growing proudly under the black shadow where Dany had gone.

With his dark, human eyes, Jon stared at her tiny footsteps, ending abruptly where the opaque, dense, shapeless darkness men named the shadow began. Without thinking, he stepped into it, hoping beyond hope he’d find her. Lost in the oppressive gloom, Dany would be overjoyed to see him, running into his arms.

With the second and the third step he made, the world staggered around him like a man drunk on mead. Like high, swirling waves of a thick black sea, viscous like oil. Dany’s trail indeed continued! His heart skipped a beat from expectation and then pounded like a drum on his wedding feast. *Weren’t the players from Greywater Watch?* With drums and flutes, lutes and cymbals!

Unfortunately, her footsteps continued only for a few yards more. Then they began to fade, disappearing just under the damn tree, which was indeed a simple brown oak, and not a majestic white weirwood of the north.

There were no other traces, only hers. No telling signs of the Night’s King foreign-looking boots or gnarled, bare, and strangely elegant blue and grey feet of many of his soldiers, dragging Daenerys into the heart tree’s mouth to kidnap her.

Even under the shadow, it continued to snow.

It never stopped these days. Softly, gently, kindly, silently, ruthlessly so. The snow would soon erase the last traces of his love.

*Gone with the winds of winter.*

Losing his Queen was his own stupid fault.

An hour of sleep and it was too late!
The thick air trembled around him, smelling strange, of old, dried violet flowers mixed with rotting leaves. He suddenly felt as if he had ventured into a spacious, mossy den or a regurgitating belly of an unknown beast. He heard long, hard wheezing, as if the creature relentlessly gulped deep breaths of cold air. Finally he thought he sensed that this being hated wholeheartedly the northern lands where it was bound to dwell, finding them devoid of swaying ghost grass and life as it ought to be: leisurely, eternal, on the shores of the pretty black river. *Stygai* was his home, Jon thought he understood, and one could sail to it through smooth and solid *ash*.

The shadow must have felt like a leviathan on dry land, like a dragon unable to breathe fire, like a hollow shell of a dangerous and deadly being unable to speak its mind or purpose. Yet it was not less alive or conscious for being different than any other creature Jon had come across.

He had banished it from Castle Black with Rhaegal’s help, not giving a second thought to its existence. He just wanted it out of the way to re-establish firmly his command before the Others attacked.

*Melisandre’s ill-fated child.*

He only remembered now that he and Rhaegal didn’t, no, they *couldn’t* ruin the shadow entirely. The red woman’s sinister progeny was resilient to burning. Maybe because it was cast on the Wall by continuously stoked fires. Reflection of flames, mirroring fire, slowly it had risen from the great creation of Brandon the Builder, spreading over the nightly sky and turning it darker than pitch. Disturbed and chased away by an angry dragon, now it lingered over the eastern lands of the mountain clans and the northernmost stretch of the kingsroad, between Winterfell and the Wall, loathing Westeros and *all* its races, seeking solitude.

For it couldn’t go home, could it? It was cast here, against its will, and here it would have to stay for all eternity, swallowing its pride.

It occurred to Jon that, with that friendly attitude, the shadow might unwillingly defend the land it haunted from the Others better than an army of men. Perhaps it was not entirely unfortunate that it couldn’t be ruined. It might constitute another line of defence should the Wall be breached—a likely event which plagued Jon’s extremely rare moments of rest of late, just like his old nightmare of the crypts of Winterfell to which he never belonged. Not even now that he knew beyond doubt that he was trueborn, and still a Stark, but on his mother’s side.

It was a different question how the people venturing under the shadow might fare, but Jon imagined none would do so, clearly smelling rot and death.

None but Daenerys, he realised, and himself, the fool who had lost his queen to a dream of fatherhood.

*Fool, fool, fool.*

He pondered why the shadow so avidly swallowed ice-cold air, feeding its existence like any other being.

So perhaps it was not that different than the rest of creation as it imagined itself to be, in its state of utmost indignation.

“Show yourself!” he exclaimed with despair, daring the strange being to come forth, take shape or simply wake up, whichever applied to shadows. “You must have seen what happened to Dany.”

*Say it in my mind if you can’t form words.*
No answer came by any means of conversation known to Jon, not in the language of men, beastlings or dragons. Bare branches of the old oak rustled quietly, stirred by a gentle breeze. The leering tree mouth grinned obscenely, as though it was trying to tell Jon that he was wasting his time. The howling, sweeping winter wind was completely tamed by the shadow, he realised. Not a small feat. 

If you are alive, there has to be a way for you to speak up.

Please!

“Please,” he repeated loudly, falling on his knees before the sleeping face, uncertain if he now prayed to the shadow or to the old gods.

Who else could help him?

The deep, loud breaths of the creature that engulfed him slowed down and halted until the world felt almost normal again, empty of all magic and fabulous beasts.

“Jon!”

Mother was outside the shadow, calling to him. She must have followed him from Castle Black, wading courageously through drifts of snow as high as her waist in places. It was still both gratifying and irrevocably odd to be a man grown and subject to motherly worries, after entirely missing on them for a lifetime.

“We spoke that you’d be staying in in the wormways.” Jon’s concern for his mother came out as a dry admonishment and he felt ashamed of himself. Yet it had to be said. What if she went into labour in snow? He wouldn’t know how to help her. She needed a maester or other women. Sam had informed him bluntly that his new brother or sister was due at any moment.

“Jon! The horns. Haven’t you heard?” Lyanna continued nervously, ignoring his reprimand, staring above him and through him instead of looking him in the eye.

Her proud attitude both offended and humbled him.

She was right in a way to be haughty with him, calling him on his weakness. No, he hadn’t been paying attention to anything else than his grief for at least an hour.

Too long.

His poor, widowed, pregnant mother must have felt honor-bound to search him out, not only because she worried for her son’s sanity, but also in order to prevent him from failing in his duty as a king.

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“Three times,” he whispered knowingly. They had become so common, the three blasted sounds for the Others attacking.

He had to bury his grief in his heart and go.

Rhaegal.

To his utmost and extremely unpleasant surprise, his dragon, who had obediently brought him to the end of Dany’s trail, did not respond. Not at all. Jon took a deep breath and expanded his mind, imagining he was flying. It always worked to call Rhaegal from a far when the words did not. Yet for all his efforts, he could not feel at all the large, green and bronze consciousness with scales and claws, which expanded steadily over time, much like the dragon’s body never stopped growing. Rhaegal was a toddler in human terms, yet he possessed a powerful and aged spirit so unlike Jon’s
own or Ghost’s, and also different like day and night from the breathing black shadow.

*Rhaegal!*

His steed seemed to be gone with the winter wind just like his wife, nowhere to be found.

“Jon please come back,” Mother implored quietly, palming the air where the shadow begun. Under the heavy hood of her winter cloak, her pretty black hair hung loose, so similar to Jon’s own, just much longer, harbouring long touches of silver that glimmered gold in firelight.

Her son obeyed, leaping towards her to embrace her and tell her everything would be fine even if it might not, if only she allowed him to escort her back to her chamber. Before he could do any of it, he hit an invisible barrier and fell backwards on his arse, into deep snow.

“Mother!” he cried out shrily, sounding like an angry, marching white walker to his own ears.

Lyanna continued touching the air, and then the footsteps in snow, two sets now, one after another, Dany’s and then Jon’s. A good husband following his wife.

He tried to reach out once more, only to fly into snow so hard that the end of his spine hurt.

The shadow seemed angered by his attempts to flee. Rumbling from the profundity of its being, it took a breath so deep that the ground shook under Jon’s feet with a deep boom, beginning to feel unsteady like a deck of a ship, and not like firm land.

*Rhaegal!*

His dragon had chased the shadow once, surely he could do it again.

But wherever Rhaegal was, Jon couldn’t hear him, or feel him, and much less call him to his aid.

“Lyanna!”

It was Mance Rayder, coming after Mother. It was both terribly inappropriate and perfectly logical that the wildling addressed her only by her name. *They must know each other from before, from their youth. How come?*

Did Abel the Bard also play in Winterfell as a green boy?

Jon didn’t think so. There were so many stories his parents had not had the time to tell him. His Mother might still speak about them, one day, when dawn came. His Father… wights would not continue to exist in spring, would they? They would perish with their masters.

“You have to go back,” the former King-beyond-the-Wall told Mother with a harsh voice of reason. “There’s nothing out here. Only snow.”

“Precisely. Look, their traces—”

“They could be anyone’s. People turn mad from war or catch the white walkers plague. Some pass under the shadow to escape their misery. If it pleases you, Lyanna, don’t make that choice. I cannot believe that either Jon or Daenerys would have done it. They must have flown away to defend another fort.”

“But where are they? These feet are tiny like Daenerys’. And look at these boots- the space between them- the depth—”
“Yes, mother, they are mine,” Jon remarked sadly, confident that he couldn’t be heard.

What was under the shadow belonged to the shadow. Jon was the latest addition to its hoard of spoils. The knowledge was new, and yet it felt very natural: like a certainty he possessed from birth.

“Half of the black brothers wear those boots!”

Jon huffed, laughing briefly. It was uncanny to witness so directly a friend making a grave mistake and being completely unable to correct him.

“Let me help you go back. We should be patient. Jon and Daenerys returned before. They’ve only been gone for an hour.”

“I’ve never been patient,” Lyanna challenged her wildling would-be saviour. “Jon has never ignored the horns in Castle Black. It’s unlike him.”

“It’s also unlike me,” Mance grinned, attempting to usher Mother towards the castle. “Come, you should take shelter and I need to go find my place for this battle.”

“Give me a while longer and I shall fight as well,” Mother rebelled, “I’ll find someone to help me with the child.”

“The Knight of the Laughing Tree,” Mance teased her in a dead serious voice. “That might have to wait a little. In the winter after this one, perhaps.”

“Don’t call me that!” Lyanna reacted brusquely.

“Why-”

“Howland always did,” she breathed out. “That loss is too fresh. I never want to hear that name again.”

“As you wish,” Mance retorted curtly. “Then let us return and help the Wall defend itself.”

“You’re free to call me by my name,” Lyanna hammered, “but don’t you dare tell me what I should and should not do.”

With that, she turned her back on both Jon and Mance, waddling in the direction of the castle.

Horns blew like mad, ripping the night into pieces by their blasts.

Jon was captive, unable to resume his command. Angrily, helplessly, he hit the shaking, roaring ground with his feet, wondering if it would swallow him whole, remembering his and Dany’s first journey. Beyond the Wall, deep underground, they had found the magic sword, and fled from the fires burning in earth’s core, stronger than any dragonflame, with Ghost’s help.

He needed Rhaegal now.

_Come here, dragon! Where have you gone?_

He had been with Jon just a moment ago, offering a bronze stare to Dany’s trail in snow.

But his dragon couldn’t hear him, could he? Just like Mother. That’s why he wasn’t answering his calls.

He was on his own.
Thwarted in returning, he trudged decisively forward, farther into the gloom and heavy snowdrifts.

After a while, he looked back one last time. His heart almost burst from new hope when he noticed that his trail had disappeared as soon as he had passed by the grinning heart tree, just like Dany’s.

It snowed harder here so perhaps that was the reason. His legs sank deeper, knee-high or more.

The world was still, stale, and ineffably dark. His feet were warm, buried in fresh snow. He knew that warmth feeling to be a dangerous illusion so he marched as fast as the drifts would allow, his head spinning with mad thoughts.

Maybe Dany had gone south on purpose, to seek a woods witch who could give her a potion to become with child. There wasn’t one on the Wall anymore since Morna the White Mask died, or became undead.

It was cruel and unforgivable, but Jon could not recall the exact destiny of all the fallen.

So many of them.

Yet their passing weighed heavily on his soul, and he would never forget them, not if he lived for a hundred years.

It’s not very likely, is it? That I should reach old age...

Or father a son...

If Dany had rushed south from hearing his stupid dreams, perhaps she didn't even notice the shadow. With some luck, she wouldn’t have to go far. She might find a witch in Mole's Town, which had tripled in population, expanding almost until the Wall. Even Dany with her cold toes could reach it on foot.

If it were the case, then the Night’s King was not to blame for her disappearance and he was just delayed in arriving at the Wall, mustering the final hosts of his great army in the Lands of Always Winter.

Jon had to hurry and he might catch up with her. If she was already in Mole’s Town, maybe her footsteps would reappear when he passed through the black cloud which could breathe and feel, but not speak.

He prayed to the gods that the Wall would continue to defend itself until he found her.

The dark air stirred around him, rolling like sticky, savage waves of an invisible black sea. Jon suddenly began to shiver uncontrollably, as if he had just took a swim in ice cold stream despite that he hadn’t truly suffered from cold since his brothers did their best to stab him to death. Blackfyre was a useless tool hauled over his back, slowing his advance.

Would he freeze now? Gritting teeth and shaking, he refused to believe it, only to tremble some more as a result of his stubbornness.

How could Dany have ever survived here with her great sensitivity to cold?

His heart fell and he felt inconsolable.

His bloody, stupid fault.

The shadow creature wasn’t warm to be sure. Nor was it cold like snakes, fish or corpses.
It was worse than that.

The shadow was hollow, empty, unwelcoming and unwelcome.

There was no way out of the it, east or west, north or south. He had been walking for a long while by now and he had never even seen the first lanterns of Mole’s Town.

“Dany!” he screamed and walked aimlessly in all directions, for at least another day, if not more, before he had to sit down and rest, unable to sleep.

Hunger gnawed at him.

He didn’t need much food since his murder, but he still had to grab a meal here and there, despite all rumours about his either blessed or cursed, miraculous or undying condition, and his constant fear that he’d been dead all the while without knowing it. It had never ceased to amaze him how the sayings he overheard about himself varied like night and day, depending on who did the talking and how much they loved their King.

Now there was nothing, no food and no sleep.

Only drowsing in snow.

A man could live without sustenance for at least one turn of the moon, couldn’t he? How many days have passed since his forced pilgrimage south had begun? Thirty? Sixty?

Have a hundred days passed in his endless roaming under the shadow?

In the dark corners of the snowed down, somber landscape, he began noticing corpses of people who had fallen victims to the shadow. He wondered if they succumbed to sleep on their own or if the shadow had somehow tricked them to close their eyes and rest. Their bodies were decomposing, even the white walkers’ parts of the flesh of those who had contracted the plague: resistant to winter, but not to the shadow.

The black creature breathed calmly now, like a fish returned to water, non-vanquished and growing.

“Where is my wife?” Jon yelled his question aimlessly, receiving no answer.

“Rhaegal!” His dragon naturally couldn’t hear him.

Coward, he offended his steed thoughtlessly and went on, baring his head to stay awake and alert in cutting cold.

What now?

His heart burned with sorrow, his sword arm itched to take action. But the shadow had no head that could be dealt with on the block. It was shapeless and huge.

How many days have truly passed?

Time couldn’t be trusted in the Long Night.

“Snow,” the moon said, and Jon willed his growing despair away.

He should have never, never slept. And he wouldn’t start rotting now or vanish like his stupid, useless dragon.
Rhaegal. He tried calling him once more, longing for the fiery cloud of bronze and green scales and his flaring anger.

No answer came, no colour or shape, no conscious thought. Truly, Rhaegal was worse than a simple horse he sometimes appeared to be: a heartless, cruel beast, breathing fire to kill, but ignoring the greatest sorrows of mankind, decidedly inhuman and tricked to inaction by a simple shadow.

Perhaps the wise men in the Citadel were right, the dragons could not be trusted and should be put to death.

Ungrateful bastard. You still know nothing about us.

That last thought came as if from a great distance and almost split his head in two by the pain it caused. It decidedly didn’t feel like his own, but he couldn’t attribute it to anyone he knew. By the gods, was he turning mad because he lost Dany?

Jon shook his black mane, swallowed his pain, drowned in it, and then cried.

“Let me out!”

The world was dense under the shadow, which now wanted to force him to rest, promising him sweet dreams of rare treasures in faraway beautiful lands, where he would find such joys as he had never known. There would be sun and warm seas, and peace among men and in his heart.

Jon resisted, not allowing himself to believe in a promise of tomorrow. Snow. It's all there is. Snow. He also tried to reason with the shadow, asking intermittently for his wife and his enemy, receiving no answers.

Does she still live or is she laying still under your wing? You've seen it. Why can't you tell me what happened? Why not if I'm to rot here for all eternity? What difference does it make to you?

Where is he? Would you be able to lull him to sleep like all the others? Now that would be a favour to the realm of men. We ought to give you a title for that. The mighty Lord of Shadows and Protector of the Realm!

All his thoughts blurred into one.

Don't sleep.

Don't sleep, Jon.

Walk on and never fall asleep.

Walk on.

Don't sleep.

He thought or maybe he dreamed of Rhaegal whinnying towards him from very far away, like a green horse.

Can you tell where Dany is? Where have you been?

Whinnying continued, weak and high-pitched.

Stop neighing, dragon!
Why? Is what I am. What I was from the start. Horse.

Horses are noble animals, Jon reminded the dragon.

Are they now? Rhaegal harrumphed in disappovement, yawning like a lazy cat on a sunny afternoon.

To his utmost shock, Jon became aware that, for as much as he fancied himself still awake and talking to Rhaegal over distance, his dragon was most definitely asleep, and therefore extremely confuse in expressing himself.

Rhaegal was dreaming and - snoring.

Wake up, beast! He tried to shake him up with further offenses. Then you might sense where I am. Dany could be here as well and she could be dying. We need your help.

No, you don’t, Rhaegal said laconically, you need to let me sleep in peace. Now. Stop plaguing my rest.

But why?

You ought to know by now, my lord rider. I cannot help but to do your will when you are awake. Rhaegal mocked him, displaying an entirely new behaviour.

Now you don’t sound like a horse. More like an angry man.

Not human. Inhuman. No man. Rhaegal trumpeted, sounding offended to his green core. Would that I were one. No, rider lord. I was damn slow. Dragon-horse. No dragon-man or dragon-maegi. Dragon. Son of dra-gon. Stand up for your own. Obey your lord. Sleep.

You’re rambling.

Raaambling.

Sleep-dragonspeech stopped being intelligible, descending into a cacophony of sound. Opaque, green and bronze mist with occasional burst of flames formed at the edge of Jon’s conscious mind, allowing him to believe that Rhaegal had put himself purposefully back into deep slumber.

With an occasional profound snore.

Jon wanted to hate him for leaving him, but was utterly unable to. His oversized green steed. Why should an animal shoulder a man’s blame? Jon had ventured to peril on his own.

Animal? Rhaegal had heard that in his forced rest and liked it even less than being called a man, apparently.

Better to be a beast then have my luck, Rhaegal. You know, if I love a girl, she dies. Best if I keep it in my breeches.

With that mad thought, he sniffed hard, fighting the tears queueing in his eyes. Determined to find a way out, he walked on, fancying to see ahead of him a lighter dark blue sky of the Long Night. The end of the shadow.

“All men must die,” the shadow said all of a sudden, sounding like the moon that always said snow in Jon’s dreams. It’s voice came from both the sky and the earth, reverberating around Jon like echos in a great man-built stone hall.
“Valar morghulis,” the shadow concluded in Arya’s voice.

“Arya!” he cried out savagely. If there was anyone in the world who could both ease his pain over losing Dany, and save him from certain ruin, it was his little sister.

“All men must die,” the shadow repeated in its own hollow voice.

“And all shadows,” Jon provoked it.

“Unless—”

“What?”

“You have a dragon,” the shadow named the terms of the bargain it was trying to offer.

“He’s a horse,” Jon replied with indignation. “And he’s not for sale. My wife would never forgive me.”

“Suit yourself,” the shadow shrugged and laughed as a foe who knows himself superior. Withdrawing to its solitude, it breathed heavily.

Jon walked on until his entire body hurt. Then he sat and ate two mouthfuls of snow. His stomach was tight, empty. He couldn’t swallow more.

Curling in a ball, he decided to rest a little, hoping he would rise a man and not a wight.

“The snow,” the moon said, waking him before he would freeze and join the host of rotting corpses in the darkest corners of the shadow.

“It’s very deep here.” It wasn’t the moon mentioning snow anymore. It was a wiry boy with hair as wild as Rickon’s, only dark ash blond and not red in colour, with curious, big grey eyes, standing giddily above Jon. He could be ten years old at most.

“It’s not shallow,” Jon had to concur about snow. “Hey! How come you're not sick from being here?” he couldn’t help asking. The boy looked vivid and free to move wherever he liked.

“Indeed. It takes a special gift to feel well under the shadow,” the boy replied, sounding a tad serious for his age, with his thin voice tarnished with knowledge.

Boys could be like that in the north, Jon knew from experience.

“Guess what,” the boy continued cheerfully as a child he was, “I won’t tell you what it is. It's a secret.”

“Could you show me the way out?” Jon asked with hope.

“I could,” the boy nodded, “but I won’t.” He emitted a laugh which could be either playful or naughty, hiding his face for a moment under a wooly grey hood of his roughspun cloak, adorned with a bear skin over his skinny shoulders. Then, he made a step backwards and rattled at Jon, “Guess what,” he teased, “catch me if you can!”

The insolent urchin spun on his feet and ran off.

“Wait!” Jon stood up impulsively, only to fall back into snow. His semi-frozen feet betrayed him.
He crawled forward on his arms, losing hope as he went. The boy who knew how to exit the shadow was fast on his feet and would be gone soon. After a long drag forward, Jon almost couldn’t believe his ears when he heard him again, the curious child peeping in the distance.

“Over here!” he called stridently, enthusiastically, and Jon crept towards the sound of his voice, not thinking of anything else.

After a long while, he reached the spot from which he couldn’t move any further: an invisible barrier which repealed him, like the one that had separated him from Mother and Mance Rayder in a time that now seemed a lifetime ago. Except that he was so exhausted that he couldn’t fly back from the impact. He collapsed in a slow motion instead, in the gentlest of movements.

The boy stood outside the shadow in harshly-white moonshine.

The sight of the long wisps of clouds on the nightly sky filled Jon with longing. Long Night was so much better than the shadow. And he was so close to his escape.

“You got out,” Jon said weakly. “How did you do it?”

“I’ve got a gift, remember,” the brat mumbled, pulling his hood down. In moonlight, he looked plain. A simple northern boy. How could Jon ever find him similar to Arya or Rickon? It was only his wishful thinking to consider that a boy might look like them and mayhaps be related to the Starks. His cloak was tattered, used, and the bear skin old, damaged. A poor urchin, searching for food in the winterland. Even under the shadow if needs be. Perhaps the shadow couldn’t kill innocents.

“What’s your name?” Jon asked, finding that speech kept him awake, palming the invisible barrier of his prison with his burned swordhand

“It’s just me.”

The boy could hear him through the invisible fence, unlike Mance or Mother. It was something.

“What’s your name?” Jon asked.

“Come here and I’ll tell you.”

“I can’t,” Jon retorted truthfully. It ought to be plain that he could not, even to unruly children.

“You were following after me well enough,” the brat had the cheek to disagree. “On all fours.”

Jon attempted again to push himself out of the shadow on his arms, failed, sank back. “I can’t,” he repeated.

The boy looked nervous now, as though he might wish for Jon to succeed. “I’d give you a hand, but I’m too lazy for it,” he observed with innocence. “And maybe it wouldn’t be wise to touch a stranger, as my parents say. So I won’t.”

“You don’t look very wise to me,” Jon reacted.

“No, I’m not,” the boy agreed, moving a strand of brown-grey hair out of his eyes. “The snow, see,” he continued avidly. “It’s so deep and beautiful here. I need to find my brothers and we will play with snowballs.”

It was. Jon’s body had sunk much more in his last fall than ever since his tribulation began.

The shadow breathed quietly like death, almost as if it wasn’t there, imprisoning and impairing Jon
and so many other unfortunate men and women on purpose.

“Can’t you hear the shadow-monster breathing?” he asked the boy.

“Of course,” the urchin answered. “Clear like drums and cymbals in the forest when the children dare come out to play their music. And it is then that I regret it’s winter and that we can’t go and sing along.”

“Who are you?”

“Catch me and I’ll tell you!” the impossible child shrieked and ran off.

Jon leaped angrily forward, hit the separation, and landed even deeper in snow. His arms were now buried up to his elbows. When his vision cleared after the fall, he thought… he thought. Were his fingers outside? Did they break through while being submerged? Slowly, he stuck his gloved burned hand, his sword hand, further down, suffering from the illusion that as long as it remained covered in snow, any body part could abandon the shadow and cross to the other side.

He pulled the hand back and readied himself to try once more, to be sure that his eyes were not playing tricks on him.

Entombing both arms as deep as possible, he pushed them underneath and forward, towards freedom and moonlight and the realm of men. When even his shoulders were buried and his chin grazed the ground, he took the deepest breath he could make and dived, as though the snow were a lake in the godswood or the moat of Winterfell. Cold crystals filled his eyes and nose, pinching his face. He swam through the snowdrift in broad heavy strokes, slowly reaching deeper, hoping that his semi-frozen legs followed suit.

When all the air was gone from his lungs, he dived out, opening his eyes to the full moon.

“Snow,” the moon whispered knowingly, and Jon had no clue if he was asleep or dreaming.

Slowly, he sat up.

“Hey!” he tried to call the boy, his saviour. “You! Where are you? Thank you!”

There wasn’t anyone.

He was all alone.

He rose to his feet with difficulty and found that he could walk again, not fast but still. His stomach rumbled from hunger. Loudly and undeniably.

*Rhaegal!*

His damned dragon was still snoring.

Kingsroad wound to his left, empty and snowed down. And not so far ahead, there was a very familiar clearing from which the old road turned, continuing to Winterfell.

*Home. I came here without asking.*

He cut through the woods for he didn’t know for how long he would be able to walk. Hurrying home, he wondered if he would find it hidden to his eyes. He never wanted to dive again, not even in the godswood, feeling frozen to the bone.
But he had no other place to go.

To his surprise, there were many footsteps in the opposite direction, from people and horses’ hooves, almost as if the entire army had passed this way a while ago, marching north through the wolfsswood, avoiding both the shadow and the kingsroad, following the stony paths of the mountain clans.

He staggered towards Winterfell, needing to see if it was visible or not, and how it fared since his last visit.

Soon he could witness that the castle was in its place again, standing proud in moonshine. Stark banners flew from its turrets and towers, swept up by the full force of the mad winter gale, which returned in full force as soon as Jon had broken out of the shadow.

The siege was lifted. There was no trace of the Others nor of their engines, erased by incessant snow.

The gates were open.

Venturing inside like a man happy to come home after a long journey, Jon found the castle of his ancestors both intact and empty. Not a single human or animal soul was left to defend it.

Except…

The crypt doors weren’t closed as they should be.

In front of their yawning, black darkness, he hesitated only for a second, reliving his childhood nightmares. Finally he entered, unafraid, and descended into the tombs without a lantern, finding his way with his fingers like a blind man, careful not to miss a step.

He wasn’t a bastard and even if he had been, it made no matter.

There were only graves here, and ghosts woken by the winter winds. He so often felt like a ghost that he wouldn’t be afraid of others like himself.

And at least one of those ghosts was cursed because the first King Jon Stark also couldn’t hold it in his breeches.

*The Mermaid Wife.*

What creature was she if she existed? An Other? Was that even true or just a fancy tale? Sansa, captive of the Night’s King, had tossed at Jon at his wedding that she had seen that mermaid lady. Well, his older sister had always believed in fancy stories of knights and pretty ladies. Perhaps her word could not be taken for granted. But Sansa also had two good eyes when she stared at her own clothing, arranging it to perfection, and the Night’s King had boasted to Jon about having a wife. Hadn’t he? His memory could be faulty and too much had happened in war.

*Dany, Dany, what has become of you?*

Well, he realised, he was perhaps again on a quest to find out. If the Night’s King was to blame, and not the shadow, then there was only one place on earth, other than waiting on the Wall, where he might find and challenge his enemy. And he might just as well start calling him by his true name.

*Jon Stark.*

He was that before betraying his kind and styling himself with a fancy new name. *The Night’s King.*
Not all Starks were honourable, there was no doubt left in Jon.

Wasn’t it enough to be the King of Winter?

The Lord of Winterfell?

It would have been more than sufficient for Jon if he had been Lord Eddard’s trueborn and firstborn son.

Haunted by those thoughts, Jon had ventured to the bottom of the crypts where the darkness was thicker than dirt.

“Jon Stark, I call you!” he yelled, “I challenge you! I shall take your crown and ruin your dominion! Come forth!

He felt for the crown of the last statue in a long row of lords and kings, the first King of Winter, pulled it off Jon Stark’s head and tossed it to the floor. On his feet, he felt it crumbling into granite dust. The stone was eroded and ruined over thousands of years of its existence. He then felt for the bronze sword on the traitor king’s lap and couldn’t find it, equally eaten by time.

Jon Stark wasn’t here. He was leading the Others and only the gods knew where he was.

_The old kings are dead and I’m a fool who has walked for a hundred days for nothing._

All legends were useless, and all tales and lineages. Only resistance remained.

He dragged himself back up, through the long corridors and flights of spiral stairs, wishing that at least Rhaegal would want to wake now and take him back to the Wall. _Stupid dragon! How can you possibly claim that you’re doing my will by sleeping?_

To his surprise, a tall grey figure obscured his exit from the crypts: a black contour against the dark blue sky lit by the full moon. A greatsword was hauled over its back.

Instinctively, Jon reached for Blackfyre and drew it, marvelled that he didn’t lose it during his long walk through the shadow.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the figure at the door asked in a granite voice, and then seized his blade in a perfect imitation of Jon’s intimidating stance.

“Back up,” Jon cut off the stranger. “It was a mistake to return here. This has never been my home,” he added bitterly, on a whim. “Just like the Night’s King is no longer Jon Stark. He hadn’t been himself for thousands of years.”

“Jon Stark has changed, yes,” the grey lord conceded. “Himself and his allegiance. To the sorrow of all.”

Jon couldn’t see his face still, but now he recognised the sword.

It was Ice, by the gods, and the last time Jon had seen Lord Eddard’s weapon it was petrified on the lap of the last King of Winter, and it had proven completely impossible to move it from there. Not even an inch.

“You kneeled,” he blurted with surprise. “What have you been doing outside the crypts? How is that even possible?”

“Dragons are up and about again, as you well know,” Torrhen responded dreamily. “For your
knowledge, I only kneeled once, in gratitude for the promise of fire and blood, in the time of our need. But now you have entered my halls looking for answers. A son of fire who has always been after ice. These are strange times indeed, my lord.”

“Lord?” Jon breathed out, astonished by the honour he was awarded.

“I won’t call you Grace,” Torrhen added, “I didn’t flatter Aegon and I won’t bow to you. We’re kin.”

“Right,” Jon retorted with disbelief. “Now you remember it.”

The dead in the crypts had always rejected the bastard boy in his dreams, much more than the late Lady Catelyn.

“It was not us who created your fears. It was you.”

“Well, then,” Jon bowed his head in deep thought and concluded that Torrhen was mistaken or lying. “I would never have guessed by your charming attitude.”

The old and the new king sank into silence.

“Show me!” Jon demanded after a while, acting on his long time heart desire. “Prove it!”

“You want Winterfell, don’t you? You’ve always desired it,” said Torrhen, nodding coldly. “Despite your claim being further removed from the line of succession than young Robb Stark’s or that of any of Lord Eddard’s children.

“No,” Jon shook his head and realised he was telling the truth on this count, to his own surprise. “I want respect. To be accepted as equal. Not to be questioned and judged. This has never changed. I’m a Stark, like you. Not some souther or foreigner,” he bleated. “On my mother’s side,” he added belatedly, timidly, for the sake of good order.

Only the truth would avail him now against the dead.

“Respect has to be earned,” Torrhen remarked in a sinister tone, sounding like Bowen Marsh before stabbing Jon, or Lady Melisandre stoking her fires.

On an impulse, Jon sheathed Blackfyre.

Standing unarmed before Torrhen, he vowed with passion: “Then lend me your sword and I shall earn it! I swear it on this life of mine and on everything I hold dear.”

Torrhen scratched his head, never lowering Ice.

After a while, he informed calmly. “By the way, to answer one of your questions, I was out looking for Jon. But you are right, he has changed so much that he can’t be found. More is the pity.”

Jon Snow didn’t care about Jon Stark anymore. With a single purpose on his mind, he kneeled, bowing his head to the ground, knowing that Torrhen could decapitate him as surely as if he had placed it on the block. His heart beat savagely in a moment of doubt, yet he persisted in his gesture of humble submission.

“Please, Your Grace,” he said honestly, “lend me your sword this once.”

He wanted to be entitled to wield Ice for a time. Then he would return it to Robb’s son or, if he perished in war, to the next person in the lawful order for the claim. There was no doubt in his heart.
After a long while, Torrhen touched Jon’s shoulder with Ice, imitating the southron gesture of knighting.

“Rise, my lord.”

Jon stood up cautiously, unsure of Torrhen’s intention, avoiding the sword of the Starks just in case, sharp as ever.

Bowing very slightly in return, Torrhen slowly handed him the weapon.

The sword he could only dream of.

“Take good care of it,” he said. “I fear that you might have left your battles for far too long. So begone, son. Forgive me for not using your first name, but it has been too common in this family, for better or worse. I do not wish to call the destiny of late Jon Stark upon you. I do not wish it for anyone. And I do not expect that I shall see you again any time soon."

“I shall pay you a visit in spring,” Jon replied stubbornly, closing his grip around the hilt of the long-desired weapon, closing his eyes at the same time to feel the wonder, catching himself with a mad wish that he could open Dany’s violet eyes for a moment, and establish in that fashion that she was still alive and where she was.

But he was just a warg, a beastling, who had never become a trained skinchanger. He would never be able to do like late Varamyr Sixskins, who could possess any creature, human or animal, jumping at his next prey from a distance. And perhaps not even Varamyr could have done it from very far.

When he reopened his eyes, Torrhen was gone. He seemed to have passed through Jon like a proper ghost, leaving a stony grey belt and scabbard on the floor: a final gesture of courtesy to his newly anointed kinsman.

Outside, the massive trail of the large number of fugitives from Winterfell remained clearly visible, despite the mud and slosh of boots and hooves being wiped clean by fresh, softly falling snow. With two swords on his back, Jon returned to the wolfswood, full of renewed purpose. He might find the brave northern boy who had helped him for a start, and offer him a just award.

The fugitives from Winterfell might be able to spare a bowl of some warm food and find a horse for Jon.

A truly noble and not a stubborn sleeping animal, have you heard me, Rhaegal?

The dragon ignored him, insensitive to insults for a change, dead-convinced that his actions were right.

If Jon’s good fortune continued a little longer, the beast would come to his senses, quit snoring, and help his rider do his duty.

If gods were good, he would find Arya too, and then maybe his heart would stop crying.

He knew that he had to silence it soon or suffer a crushing defeat.

Trident would be nothing in comparison.
Thank you for reading.
Sandor IV

Chapter Notes

You probably need a map at this point, but I can't draw. Therefore a lots of imagination is required to understand the Lands of Always Winter, on top of what I can convey in writing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sandor

He was on edge.

Or rather, he was losing it, as he had never thought would be the case with himself, and that despite being sober like seven hells.

He'd always thought he'd die before any signs of aging caught up with him, and the prime of his strength was gone for good. He was far from old, and he’d remain an exceptional fighter for many years to come, but no longer…

The best.

He had never paid too much attention to the fact, yet he knew it to be true at a time. He had reached the point where he could defeat every man in Westeros, including Gregor. He had learned how to fight giants and Others with bare hands and hold his own.

But just now he endured the endless moments of insatiable training with the Night's King, which seemed like long years, despite learning from Sansa that he hadn’t been held captive for more than a day.

Time wasn’t what it used to be in the Long Night. It stretched uncomfortably, like his scars, and changed shape like the winterlands infested by the Others.

There was no doubt left in his aged heart that his buggering Night’s Grace would have turned him into a wight, if he hadn’t fought in truth in every moment of their so-called sparring. The ordeal repeated itself many times over, until the bugger would be fed up with him like Joffrey the princeling, scampering off with both swords, leaving Sandor in the darkness of his castle: a heap of human misery curled up on the damp floor.

Until the next time he had to fight.

He had been forced to give away his last finest moments.

He gave all he still had in him.

Everything but the preparation his gaoler might have been seeking, if Sandor had any understanding of kings and their designs by now.

His heart laughed in secret from the knowledge, but even now when he was free, thanks to Sansa, his beloved wife, he schooled himself to not think about his deceit in any precise or intelligible terms.
In the past, in court, it was enough to turn his features into a mask. Now, his soul had to be in disguise, not revealing the act he had pulled on purpose during his captivity.

He was well aware since the bloody winter began that his thoughts were no longer only his own. They were also Sansa’s, who was welcome to his soul, despite that her presence in it caused pain. But the Others were not, and yet they had a way to sneak in, without any noticeable trace of their incursion or inflicted suffering. He hated them for it.

A man needed a shelter inside his mind or he would go mad.

_But not just yet, Your buggering Grace. Not quite now. I’m not dead yet, you see?_

Sansa smiled at him.

“Why are you laughing?” he couldn’t help asking. Was she suddenly taking him for a fool? After everything?

Her face fell from his gruff reaction. “You started,” she whispered, “I smiled back.”

He did, he realised. Some of his inner jubilation must have crept up to his distorted features. His burned lips spread further into an ugly grin.

“Right,” he said, allowing himself to feel and show love, no matter how foolish he might look from it.

And the Others could do shit with seeing that truth in his soul if they were somehow lurking. It would not help their war.

“Seven hells, Sansa, you’re here with me and I’m no longer his damned prisoner,” he mumbled devotedly. “You’re so amazingly _beautiful_ when you’re smiling.”

Her smile, frozen for an instant, returned with full force: radiant, drawing all his attention to herself. He could drown in her joy and forget he had a life before she was a part of it.

He could drown in her joy and forget he had a life before she was a part of it.

“You’re incredible,” he couldn’t stop praising her. “Beats me how you got here without getting yourself killed. You will truly survive us all as the Imp once said in court.”

“Did you even hear that?” she queried with interest. “It was a private remark.”

“A dog heard everything that had to do with you since you touched my shoulder in that tourney field.”

“Did you?” she beamed.

He was making her happy with his foolish confessions, unbelievably so.

Monsters could almost speak like pretty knights when they felt loved. He would have never believed it, had someone dared tell him. He might have punched or killed the bringer of such pathetic news.

Yet, here he was, sweet talking his lady, in the bloody Lands of Always Winter.

“Heard it all, did nothing,” he muttered apologetically, for a good measure of truth.

He had no desire to embellish his past or himself, only to move on as he now saw fit.
Sansa sneaked her arm under his. Leaning on him, she spoke no more, but her smile remained. In scarce moonlight, her lovely face was like a pale pink rose, preserved by a miracle in the unearthly cold. The vision made Sandor yearn for a new spring.

They had slipped jointly into the throne room in the ice Winterfell, only to find it empty. The buggering Night’s King did not sit his high weirwood chair, which loomed like a boulder in a tall chamber, overgrown from top to bottom by the intricate pale roots and branches of the ancient tree.

There were no red leaves on it so the plant life should be dead. Yet it looked alive and rebellious to Sandor, despite having no mouth to speak and no eyes to see.

Like a boy of six scarred for good, waiting for his time to come.

Monsters were not meant to be kingslayers, it would seem.

Or maybe the Kingsguard spirit died hard in Sandor.

Despite not swearing the lying knightly vows, he had stuck to the notion of guarding better than most men.

He’d always stayed clear of killing a king, even when that fancy ruler was called Joffrey.

Perhaps the Night’s-kingslaying was left for the young, for handsome boys, for future best fighters of Westeros. That other smile of sheer accomplishment almost wandered to his burned lips again, but this time he held it in.

Enough.

He’d no longer think about what he had done, and perhaps it was in any case too subtle for Rhaegar’s boy to take an advantage from it, should he ever be in a position to strike. Not all boys were as clever or as valiant as they looked. Not even princes or sons of lost best friends.

Outside, in the castle courtyard, Arthur was still on his feet, fighting, as was almost the whole tribe of the giants. Only a few had fallen.

Very good.

The battlefield was full of crystals that used to be Others, and of rotting corpses of humans formerly possessed by them, the carnage stamped in clear letters on the freshly fallen snow.


Not burned though. Snow could only melt.

When he was done fighting the last Other, Arthur charged mercilessly at Sandor. His small, blue, Dornish, and perfectly giant eyes cried murder.

“Arthur!” Sansa exclaimed, foolishly not leaving Sandor’s side, not seeing in time what was good for her. “But we are friends!”

Sandor should have explained to her this pretty custom, but they were always in a hurry and had either better or more pleasant things to do.

Arthur attacked him savagely, trying to kill him fast. He had to push Sansa away.

She screamed in snow.
He was tired and unarmed and the last thing he wanted was to kill Arthur, but there was nothing else he could do.

If two mags were alive at the same time, they had to fight each other to death, there was no other way to determine the precedence.

With all those sweet customs, it was a miracle that any of the giants survived.

Well, truth be told, with the way they fought in a line where the next man could only join the battle if the one before him killed his enemy or died trying, the possibility of having two surviving mags was rather rare, Sandor had to admit, returning a savage blow.

“Stop!” Sansa was yelling.

No one listened. Not to the weak.

He had to kill Arthur, he had and opportunity and he…

Missed it.

No.

No use in lying to himself.

He couldn’t act on it.

He simply could not.

Arthur noticed his damned indecision, and never stopped attacking.

Sandor fought on, waiting for his next opportunity.

In a wrestling embrace where they could nicely finish each other off, Sandor forced himself to begin strangling Arthur. Unable to complete his intent, he waited for the giant to start one on his own, hoping he might be able to kill him in self-defence. His stupidity would surely not go so far as to die meekly by Arthur’s hand.

Arthur barked an unintelligible word in the Old Tongue. Then he released his grip, but not his hold on Sandor.

They ended up standing in knee-deep, blood-filthy snow, hugging like lovers.

The giants came to butt their heads with both and then formed the straight line, after two mags.

So there were exceptions in their cursed customs he hadn’t been aware of.

Arthur released him gingerly. Drawing himself to full height, he gave Sandor a dark blue look, and then allowed Sansa to stand between them, all shaky from nervousness, her eyes watery and sweet.

“Are you well, my love?” she asked very quietly, a pretty bird in her dark red dress, stained by Rhaegar’s lifeblood. He was sometimes jealous of the stupid gown, giving her the protection and warmth that he, her husband, had not been able to provide in winter.

He nodded in silence.

He was. He hadn’t been better in a long while. Nothing worked better on a man’s mood than long,
honest sparring.

But now he had to determine what to do next.

Pacing impatiently in the clearing, abreast with Arthur as his fellow-mag, with Sansa as a cushion between them, he noticed a trail of bare, gnarled feet leading north, to the precipice dividing the Others’ domain from the giants’ tiny village, on which the Long Night had not yet fallen down.

Illuminated by the sun, the settlement was populated by their women and children. The only such women and children left in Westeros, Sandor had learned.

Arthur now read the traces as well, and he could clearly not speak: his face grief-stricken, his silence more eloquent than Jaime Lannister or any words of any language.

“How many have gone that way?” Sandor questioned the whole tribe in what he hoped was the Old Tongue and not merely a poor adaptation of the Common one.

Arthur shrugged, but his jaw shook with emotion, and that was something to say for a giant.

“They fought in line,” Sansa was the bitter, clear voice of bloody reason in the Long Night. “They didn’t look further than that or they would all lay dead here in the clearing in the time it took me to find and free you.”

The Others’ trail was profound and not very fresh. It could have been even deeper when it was made, it was hard to say from the constantly falling snow.

“They’ll withdraw deep into the mountain,” Arthur found his voice, which now betrayed trepidation, most uncharacteristic for a giant. “To the hidden caves.”

“The Others will follow,” Sandor hammered. “To me!” He cried out and gestured to the giant crowd to follow.

“No time,” the horde boomed in the Old Tongue, not moving from place, resigned with the imminent loss of their present and future. “No time. Doom.”

Horseshit. They weren’t dead yet, none of them.

“Time enough,” Sandor disagreed, crouching, gesturing to Sansa to climb on his back. Then, he pulled Arthur’s hand and dragged the giant with him, following the enemy trail into the woods and then to the narrow path skirting the extremely tall mountain side, leading to the chasm where the Others had taken him prisoner.

March turned into a run. Sansa hung on his shoulders, and he never let go of Arthur’s hand. Jaime and Cersei had strolled like that when they were children. Bloody golden twins.

The Others’ slimy bridges were left standing over the abyss, they hadn’t even bothered to take them down.

So much for the better.

The tribe sprinted over them, into the light.

In dazing sun, the cold still reigned. The grass was frozen, the crops scarce.

The village was gone. The Others had ruined it. Three women lay butchered in front of Sandor and Sansa’s house, at the far end of the village. One still breathed slowly, despite being beyond help. And
Arthur ran to the dying woman, fell to the ground, and cradled her mangled head, holding her close until all movement in her great lungs stopped, leaving the world.

“My dear friend,” he said in the Old Tongue, and Sandor wondered if that meant betrothed to them, not wanting to know.

The one laying next to her could have been the wife of the old mag who had died fighting the Others and fostered Sandor into the tribe. Their son was nowhere to be seen.

Sandor’s guts twisted with dull rage.

It had been easier when he didn’t give a rat’s arse for anything else than killing Gregor. Life was cruel and could not be changed. The good were always butchered, by him or by someone else, it mattered little. The outcome was always the same.

It had become much more difficult with the whiff of freedom and the hint at life one could shape on his own.

Before his eyes, the sun was setting, about to touch the mountain peaks of the high chain which separated the giants’ little village from the great valley where the Others were continuously waking from snow, forging their crystal swords, and marching off to war.

Thousands and thousands of them.

The sun would ultimately sink behind Sandor’s back, into the westernmost end of the abyss filled with the roaring, shivering sea, which the giants had just crossed.

Somehow, Sandor knew that there would be no sunrise on the next day. The people had kept the place alive. The giants. With them gone, there was no reason for the sun to shine. Warm and huge, it would vanish from the sky, only to return at the end of winter.

He’d miss this place, he realised. The weeks he had spent here with Sansa had been the best of his life, cold notwithstanding.

There were only two paths leading to the village, a shorter one, over the bridge, and a much longer one, through the mountain and then alongside the Others’ breeding valley. Both ways joined near the ice imitation of Winterfell in the end, on what Sandor now reckoned had to be the eastern shore of the shivering sea. From there, one could travel back south...

In the red sunset, he could see the end of the army of the Others, descending towards the mountain, following after the weak with all intention to butcher them.

It wouldn’t be pretty and it would end soon.

But, there was also that other way *out* and into the mountain, a pass climbing *up* at first, possibly a much shorter way into the caves than the lower path taken by the fugitives. The only difficulty was that the passage was defended by a huge guardian called Firth, at least four times bigger than any other giant, and trained to kill any creature who intended to cross, even his own kind.

Sansa had put the monster to sleep by a song. At first she had let Sandor believe that she had killed him because that was what she should have done in his opinion. It didn’t take him long to get the truth from her… By foolish words and sweet caresses and not by threats and cold steel...
“This way!” Sandor announced with authority. “No line!” he barked as an afterthought. They had no time for that. “We advance altogether. Fast. We run forward as we can. Whoever is there first, has done well. We regroup only to face Firth.”

Giants roared, protesting against the insult to their sacred customs, wasting precious time of which they had so little.

They had to cut the long way short and come between the Others and their prey.

They would have to go past Firth or it would be too late.

Perhaps Sansa could lull him to sleep once more. The blood of the children must run in her, like the blood of the giants in him. They were like the earth and the sky, now and in the past and yet, yet…

They were also like the setting sun kissing the snowy top of the mountain.

“Joramun did not fight in line!” Sandor invented on the spot, needing to set the tribe in motion.

Men had different combat strategies. Joramun, a man, a lesser man as the giants would call him, was their great hero. Possibly they would follow his memory, rather than Sandor, short in their reckoning, and big-mouthed to compensate.


“Joramun blew the Horn of Winter and woke the giants from earth,” Sandor parroted what even the birds in the north knew by now, the mighty eagles in the sky and the black crows feeding on the dead.

One came to peck the old mag’s dead widow, and it suddenly seemed to Sandor that it had three eyes.

He might be turning mad, but there was no more meat and he was no longer a butcher.

A good man, Sansa peeped in his head, uninvited but welcome, blinded by her love for him, he guessed.

No, I’m not, he replied in kind.

For the first time, her warging presence did not hurt, unnoticeable like that of the white walkers.

She’d always been the one to blurt a truth in his direction. Even when he didn’t care to hear it, and when she still feared him as much or more than Joffrey. Still it was he, and not the little shit, who proved to be a true danger for her.

I took your heart, my lady, and I gave you mine. Do you regret it?

Don’t say that. How could I ever?

I don’t know. Don’t listen to me. Look at this, at us.

I am looking.

Has he been a good man? Sometimes at least, perhaps. A bit more often since he’d become his own dog.

He wasn’t certain.
But he couldn’t be indifferent to the suffering around him anymore.

He severed himself from the warging link and staggered into his and Sansa’s short-lived home, finding it empty and ruined like the rest. The Horn, however, of Dragonlords, lay intact in his saddlebag. Pretty blue crystals hovered all over, the whole storm cloud of them. The Others who had touched the damned musical instrument had not gone much further. Quite a few had tried to take it, it would seem.

Maybe a white walker who succeeded in binding a wight-dragon to his will could win over the buggering Night’s King, and usurp his weirwood throne.

He took the horn out of the cottage, keeping it twice wrapped, in Rhaegar’s hair and in his own saddlebag. Placing the bare mouthpiece carefully against the burned corner of his lips, he avoided blowing air into the pipe.

It wouldn’t do to call a living dragon to a place where he would die or worse, where the Others might slay the powerful beast and turn it into their unwilling, dead servant. Carefully, instead, every time that the winter wind howled, Sandor uttered a long, deep roar from the bottom of his burned voice, hoping that the dull, reverberating sound would convince the giants they were seeing what they wanted to see.

None of them was alive thousands of years ago to listen to Joramun.

“Here!” he said, bluffing. “Behold! The horn.” He couldn’t lie any further, that it was the Horn of Winter, knowing very well what it was.

The Horn of Dragonlords, bound in molten gold and red jewels, come from the old Valyria before it burned to seven hells. Constructed to enslave dragons and for no other purpose, burning the unworthy players who did not share the blood of the beasts...

“No, Joramun did not fight in line,” Arthur surprised him by speaking sheepishly and helping his cause. “It’s not what the songs say.”

“To me!” Sandor called them again.

Hauling Sansa on his back, pulling Arthur by his hand, he led the tribe rapidly up into the mountain. The giants abandoned their sacred customs, forsaking the line, advancing together as a compact vanguard of men, eager to arrive faster to the high passes and then go down, to the caves where their surviving women had escaped to shelter the young.

As they climbed higher, Sandor glimpsed the snowy sky above, stretching over the peaks and to that cursed valley where the Others must have slept in summer, only to wake in winter to haunt Westeros. Behind him, the village was like a giant bird perched on a cliff hung over a void. *Dead bird. Stuffed bird.* A small earthquake, and it would crumble down. He didn’t have to look back to hear the shivering sea, roaring in the depths of the earth.

The setting sun now looked like a giant, bright, firered lantern, set to the sky by someone’s hand, and not a distant celestial body.

Then there was thunder in the mountain and more sleet and snow, obstructing the view forward or back, to the desolate village in sunset.

Before they could even see where they were and much less regroup, they all burst into the clearing before the castle carved in the body of the mountain, where the great giant Firth still slept in peace.
Sansa exhaled the tiniest, inaudible breath of relief into Sandor’s growing hair never saying a word.

The tribe walked past Firth on tiptoes. No command was necessary to ensure their utmost stealth, everyone being more than aware of the danger.

In the high stony hall after the clearing, they should not continue straight, south and south-east, to the valley of Others and to the Wall. It was all Sandor knew about the good direction from there. It was Arthur’s turn to pull Sandor to the right way. Soon they all began the arduous descent to the caves in utter silence and growing darkness, feeling for the way with their fingers, listening for the voices of their young.

This path was hollow, stony, almost warm. The taller ones needed to bend. There was no more snow in here.

Soon they heard screams and cries.

*We are late.*

Sandor’s blood boiled and froze at the same time, leaving only the cold desire to kill in his heart.

The tribe began sprinting haphazardly, like a herd of mammoths on the run. There was nothing faster or louder, a giant had explained once, to the incredulous mag Sandor, in a village gathering next to a fire.

The giants barged into the caves, amidst both the vultures and their prey, causing cries of new horror, and only some of recognition and joy.

Few torches were still burning.

“Don’t let the lights go out!” Sandor snarled. “No line! All attack at once!” he reminded them.

Sansa used the time to slid off his back, and squeeze his right hand lovingly.

“Go hide like a good little bird,” he muttered at her. “Please,” he added, feeling foolish.

She obeyed him with a nod, disappearing into the gloom.

He tore the nearest Other apart as if he was made of water.

Soon there were cries and blue crystals and rotting human corpses that used to be the white walkers.

“More coming from here!” a giant who used to be at the end of the line yelled from a far.

“Bar the way!” Sandor reacted, alive and unscathed, wiping blood from his face, uncertain to whom it belonged and what colour it had, red, black or blue.

“Stones!” Arthur echoed the sentiment.

The giants grabbed the rocks from the cave, piling them up, angrily, speedily. The giant-made avalanche was done very fast, obstructing the entrance into the caves.

“They might drift through,” Sandor said with disgust. “Or not. We need to cross the mountain. We can’t go back to the village.”

“No way back,” the giants singsonged darkly.
An ugly woman lit another torch in the dark. Children sang with relief, pretending to be brave, imitating their fathers’ crude melodies despised by the children of the forest.

“Up we go!” Sandor couldn’t stop commanding, moving to the front again, wandering where Sansa was for he hadn’t seen her since the slaughter had started. He had lost one giant in the dark, but didn’t know which one, didn’t want to know, in truth. He would ask later, to treasure his memory.

“Sansa,” he called quietly. No one answered him and he could not hear his wife’s tiny steps.

His heart fell and on the inside he prayed that she was merely hiding and looking after herself, avoiding dying, as she had always done.

The improvised stone barrier started to shake.

“They are coming!” Arthur said.

But instead of the blue smoke which meant that the Others had dissolved into mist in order to squeeze themselves through, salty water gushed through hollow stone, washing the giants’ feet.

“We’ve got to go back,” a grown girl objected to their course of action. “We delved too deep. We were too eager to reach the caves. Now the sea will also flood the village.”

“Your village is gone,” Sandor told them in case they didn’t understand it yet. “They can cross to it anyway, haven’t you noticed? Your home is doomed.”

Another wave of ugly, salty water washed over them, breaking all barriers. Sandor and the giant children almost had to swim. In weak torchlight, he thought he saw shadows dancing under the sea.

“Sansa!” he was yelling now, not receiving any answer, waddling in chest-high water like a fool dressed in mammoth skins.

On the other side of the useless stone barrier, the Others screamed and died, not appreciating the bath. After endless time, the sea level lowered.

“The waves will roll down to our home now that the way is open,” Arthur say with melancholy. “We are higher up.”

“Sansa,” Sandor said helplessly…

And finally saw his wife in the light of a passing torch. She had climbed on a tall boulder near him, holding hands with the three smallest giant children, only a little shorter than herself, but not more than four years old, ugly and hairy, two girls and a boy.

“Is it over?” she asked, and he understood that he hadn’t heard her voice before because of the mammoth-loud commotion of the tribe, and that she had been too tired or too afraid to warg into him.

In case that the Others were after the giants’ children more than they wanted her gown of blood.

The tribe trudged back up, to Firth’s palace.

From his halls, the curious few ventured into the clearing where he slept. No one was afraid of the resting colossus anymore, it seemed. Sandor followed blindly, to give a last look at the village where he had been happy.

The village was a sea of salt and foam, shivering and shaking. The sun continued setting. Its dark red rays caressed the mountain as a man might a woman he loved dearly.
“You have brought the night to us,” the giants accused him. “No more food, no more life. Joramun would never have done it.”

“I’m not Joramun!” Sandor thundered, “but I shall lead all of you to safety if it is the last thing that I’ll do.”

He should have never made that oath just like he was wise not to make them in the past.

Firth was awake and standing up clumsily. His great stony eyes promised death.

“Sing all of you!” Sandor boomed “What songs does he like?” he foolishly asked Sansa.

She’d know, wouldn’t she?

“About brave deeds,” his lovely wife replied with haste, “of great kings and lords who suffered greatly and who were valiant.”

Two giants who stood the foremost in the clearing before murderous Firth burst into a song, using two dissonant tones to shape the words and the music in a vivid rhythm, underpinning their crude verses by drumming with their hands on their thighs.

The rest joined in, mumbling and tapping a beat, bursting into a long monotonous tune of many repetitive words and verses, both ugly and powerful.

Sandor struggled to understand the story, though he was far from getting every word of it.

_Damned Old Tongue._

After many years of bloody war, the Others finally surrounded the last company of giants, the song said, a thousand men strong, near the great Wall, wanting to turn them into their undead slaves.

But the men stood their ground for a hundred days, and fought until every single one of them was torn into pieces and died, refusing to become wights, returning to earth to which they belonged. Their young were safe in the mountain, and the Others could not learn from their minds where their shelter was, not even when they tortured the last survivors.

By that time, King Jon Stark and Joramun of the wildlings had ridden forth together to challenge the Night’s King. At the site of the carnage, Jon Stark solemnly swore vengeance, in the name of the free peoples in the North. But Joramun’s pain went deep into his soul, unable to leave. Instead of saying oaths, he played a simple tune on his horn, with a crying heart, and honouring the giants, praying for them and their memory.

Many hungry years later, in the Long, Long Night, the longest of all, the Others surrounded Joramun. His staunchest ally and brother from the war’s beginning, Jon Stark, betrayed him, siding with the Others. Some say for a woman and some for power to rule all lands, but all who knew his reasons are dead now, swept away by the winter wind.

Joramun knew it was his time to die fighting, together with all his kin. Just like before, he could not curse or threat nor swear. He blew the horn from the bottom of his heart, grieving for injustice, remembering the giants, and the earth they had returned to, wishing for strength to do as they had done rather than to surrender, become a slave or change sides.

And then, as soon as he began marching to meet his end, the mother earth heard his music and with it his pain. His sorrow made her shake and change shape, and birth new giants to replace those who had died, many more in number, not made of flesh but of the sacred ground. Four times taller than
those who had died, they rose suddenly from every inch of the battlefield, breaking the ice that hid
the mother earth from sight, bloodthirsty and brave. Loyal and determined, unafraid, they butted their
heads and formed the longest line that the world had ever seen, thrice as long as the Wall.

The men halted in awe.

The Others advanced and laughed, believing to see illusions of the woods witches, mere tricks like
those they could conjure to allure their prey into ruin, changing the view of the landscape.

They knew well that the children, the only race with magic, were hiding deep in their weirwood
caves, not wanting to take part in the war they had started nor in the abuse of their sacred trees and
thrones. The Others could kill them and enslave them just like humans, not having any love for their
creators.

But all laughter died when the white walkers began to wrestle with their new enemy, solid like earth,
unchangeable, matching them in number and surpassing them in strength. The souls of the dead
giants gave them purpose, and Joramun’s pain, stronger than the mountains, the new life and the
righteous anger.

When the battle was almost done, Joramun searched for the traitor Jon Stark, who had become a
leader of the Others, ready to challenge him single-handed---

Firth slept again and the song wisely stopped.

Firth, four times taller than Arthur and solid like the ground where he had passed out.

Sandor would hear how Joramun’s story ended on some other occasion. Or not. It mattered little. He
had something else on his mind now, another mad notion that he didn’t want to let himself think
about in any concrete terms.

What if…

But first he had to deal with the matter at hand. Giants. Women. Children.

“Must go,” he whispered hoarsely, ushering the semi-hypnotised, freezing giants and their families

“Lesser men kill us. No Wall,” a tall girl-child of five objected.

“No they won’t,” Sansa vowed to her, “you will bring tidings to King Jon and say that his sister
Sansa is sending her love.”

“You’ll do that in person,” Sandor reacted. “Mag Sandor will come after you,” he muttered to
Arthur. “Please guard my woman. Not child,” he reminded the giant of Sansa’s statuette in the tribe,
just in case, grumbling as friendly as he was able to.

“No I won’t!” Sansa protested against his intentions. “Sandor Clegane, if you believe I shall leave
you now, you’re mad! I’m going back to the Wall with you or not at all.”

“I am that I think,” he grinned foolishly. “Please go with them, you ought to be safe” he surprised
himself by being courteous. “I won’t be long,” he tried to give hope to both her and himself,
uncertain if he was telling the truth.

“Woman, not child,” Arthur said approvingly about Sansa. “No deceit in her. No hiding in
abominable white tree caves. She stays with mag.”
With that, the giants embarked slowly on a long descent from their sacred mountain, leaving Sandor and Sansa behind. They might pass next to the Other’s valley unnoticed and unscathed, but it would be a wonder if they made it on foot to the only place of some safety in the whole Westeros.

**The Wall.**

Numbed and muted by his recurring failure to protect Sansa, Sandor pondered that a Mammoth Horn would be a handier tool than the Horn of Winter, or Dragonlords. The hairy northern elephants could take the giants south in less than a sennight. On foot, it would take them at least twice that long through the enemy territory, where neither the time nor the place could be trusted. They’d live on roots from under the snow, hiding from sight, pretending they were trees and not living creatures: those great children of the earth, and not of the forest that he had learned to know and to respect.

Next, he couldn’t help recalling how water destroyed the Others in the caves, very efficiently, just like he thought it might: the salty sea water, blown into the mountain by the winter gale, much more difficult to freeze than the stagnant lakes and slow streams of Westeros. He remembered nearly dying at the Trident and wondered if the great river wore an ice crust by now and if snotty children skated on it, ignoring the Long Night. In the end, his thoughts always returned to the pleasingly cruel fantasy about the shivering sea flooding the Others’ breeding valley, burying it for all times.

**Enough.**

He forced himself to stop thinking.

“What do you mean to do?” Sansa asked curiously when the last of the giants were far enough so that they couldn’t be heard. “You wanted to leave all of them to their fate just yesterday. Now you have a chance to go safely and you stay. I’ll never understand you,” she concluded sadly.

“You understand me well enough,” he defended himself, and her. “Or you wouldn’t be here, would you?”

He looked deep into her eyes and gestured at the sleeping guardian next to them. “His name is not Firth,” he explained what he started to believe.

“What is it then?”

“I don’t know,” he answered truthfully, needing to test his assumptions and not spill them out. “Maybe he’ll tell us.”

“You’re no longer the best fighter in all Westeros.”

“You are not.”

“The Others are marching to war again!” he nonetheless yelled. There were plenty left in the valley and they would gladly erase every trace of the giants from mother earth if they could.

The deadly sentinel stirred. Opening his narrow, stony, cold and cruel eyes, he gave Sandor a look that killed.

“I could sing to him about Florian and Jonquil,” Sansa offered nervously.
“Not for him” Sanor retorted foolishly. “For me, will you?”

“Or we could still run away, Sandor. You made the giants see wisdom, why not yourself?”

“I’m not wise, haven’t you noticed?” he brushed her off, not ungently this time.

The creature roared a word in the Old Tongue. “Mountain,” it said, perhaps.

“It’s lost,” Sandor spoke as good as he could in a language that was still very unnatural and only half intelligible to him. “The Others had taken it while you slept. Water did for them in the end, not I, or you. And there are many more,” he added truthfully. “A valley full of them.”

“Sun?” Firth queried, surprising Sandor as much by the relative calm in his voice as by the odd interest he was showing.

He had never thought that the sun’s whereabouts would be high on the monster’s mind.

“Setting,” he replied mechanically.

“Horn!” Firth roared murderously, as mistaken as the rest of his people about the damned burning heirloom.

“It’s the wrong horn you see-”

“Horn!” Firth bellowed strongly, demanding the possession of dragonlords.

“It’s deadly and it’s not yours!”

Firth grabbed Sandor’s bad leg and might have ripped it off before he could defend himself...

...If Sansa did not snatch the saddlebag from Sandor’s back and gave it to him. “Horn!” she pronounced very clearly in the Old Tongue. “Please take it and let us go,” she murmured in a Common Tongue as a prayer.

Firth grabbed what was offered. Hauling the bag over his enormous shoulders, he rushed into his palace. Sandor followed him instinctively, to see what the bloody thief would do. Inside, the creature took a pass leading up, to the mountain top, perhaps. The great Horn of Dragonlords looked like a pathetic, tiny flute on his back.

“Sun!” he grunted with longing, disappearing from Sandor’s sight faster than a mountain eagle or hawk.

There was no way he could catch up with the creature with his bad leg, and what good would it do?

Sandor had not expected any of it.

Desperate, he thought of the Others’ vale and the waves of the sea that would never reach it. Why in seven hells did he ever think that the last living giant of earth could and would perform a miracle to defeat dhem, when not even the brave Joramun had found the way in the past to get rid of the Others forever?

“So much for heroic deeds and valour,” he murmured with malice.

Bruised on the inside, he realised Sansa was next to him, holding his sword hand. Defeated, he let her lead him away and trod after the giants. He never spoke, wondering at occasions if she felt as empty as he did.
Small stones crumbled from the vaults of the palace and corridors dug into the mountain, but never to the point of promising a disaster that could ruin it, bring in the shivering sea and turn the Others’ breeding valley into nothing.

In a bottom of a great sea where the shadows danced.

“He stole Rhaegar’s horn,” he announced stonily to Sansa after a long while. “Bloody criminal.”

Sandor could no longer command a dragon to come and save Sansa, if all other means of escape failed.

He could no longer kill one of the last living dragons by forcing him to fly north of the Wall.

He laughed dryly, so that he wouldn’t cry. The tears had never done him any good.

They caught up with Arthur and the rest on the frozen road skirting the valley of the Others, well hidden from their sight.

‘Horn? they asked in unison, to his surprise, as if they had always known everything. What their guardian would ask for, and that it would take Sansa’s presence to give it to him.

“Firth has it,” he answered what they wanted to hear.

*The giant of earth.*

But when the giants said who he was, clear about it from the beginning, it had always sounded like giant *Firth* to Sandor and Sansa, He had to listen to the whole song about bloody Joramun to understand it.

The tribe nodded with approval. “He shall blow it and wake his brothers from the earth,” they sang deeply with what sounded like a renewed vow of some strange faith, filled with awe and new strength.

Sandor had no patience left to prove them wrong.

*Perhaps it’s best that they die believing.*

He’d just die if he had to, and that would be the end of it. There’d be no heavens and no hells.

There would be nothing at all.

Resigned to his fate, he moved to his place, in front of the line, next to Arthur. Sansa stepped between them.

The old mag’s son brought him a peeled root as a sign of respect. The lad looked vigorous and… happy, despite losing his mother and the life as he had known it.

Sandor wondered if the boy had by now killed his first Other and if he was now twelve or older before butting his head with the boy as their stupid customs demanded. Sansa was offered a root as well, by that snotty, complaining girl. Fortunately, she was spared of butting heads. Women did not do it. When Sansa had as many bites of fresh giant-food as her frozen stomach could take, Sandor devoured the rest.

The march resumed, tedious and long.

Many hours later, they made a camp in snow. They had to rest, cocooned in mammoth skins, which
always remained dry on the inside, or they wouldn’t go much further.

The had reached the end of the road between the mountains and the Others’ breeding valley, in the proximity of ice Winterfell. From there, they should embark on a long journey south, avoiding both the cursed castle and the armies of the Others pouring out of the valley, heading in the precise same direction...

Sansa curled up against him, her face against his cheek. The good one, the still warm one. He couldn’t blame her.

They began kissing in silence. Soon, he could almost forget where he was and what awaited him.

When she fell asleep in his arms, he stayed awake for long, unable to shut up his own thoughts.

From all his failures of the long day, one image came back in the end.

Of him in the caves, defending the weak and getting them out to a semblance of safety.

In the end, it wasn’t about killing Gregor.

His finest hour.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Jaime VII

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jaime

Lost, they were lost.

“Didn’t you say Brandon’s throne was nearby?” Brienne wondered loudly.

There was not even a hint of suspicion in her voice. He was flattered. It was a wonderful change from the beginning, when they just met, and when she thought of every word that came out of his mouth as preposterous, and a gods damned lie.

She was right about the former and wrong about the latter...

Her legs were now blue and gnarled, and not her own.

“But he should be right here,” he affirmed stubbornly, omitting that other possibility taking shape in his mind, that the cave was somehow hiding Brandon from the two of them. And who could blame it for such prudent behaviour?

Jaime was his would-be murderer, and Brienne half white walker.

She was completely transformed from waist down and the plague had spread over the upper part of her body in individual stains. The most prominent mark covered half of her face, hiding the bite scar on her cheek.

Only her belly was spared as though the infant inside challenged the power of the Others.

Even though, truth be told, Jaime gave as much credit to Brienne’s character, not as strong as she believed it to be, but much more tenacious than anyone else could possibly expect, him included.

No force of nature, no plague would be able to turn his Brienne into what she was not, a bloodthirsty enemy of mankind.

In the scarce beams of starlight piercing the cave’s vaults in very few places, her eyes were of a different blue: of the sea washing Tarth, and not of old ice.

If it were him who had fallen ill… he couldn’t know, could he? Yet he was convinced that the plague would have developed quicker. Either he would have been tied with hard hempen rope to his harsh bed in Nightfort at all times, or he would march in the Night’s King’s vanguard, crystal sword in hand, eager to cut down his enemy’s enemies.

His sword hand would have grown again, made of old ice. Unlike the wights, crippled and disfigured and still fighting for their masters, people possessed directly by the Others never lacked limbs or body parts, he had noticed well.

If Jaime were taken, his battle prowess would have returned in full. Besides, his left hand would be as dexterous. His strength would be tenfold, perhaps, emboldened by the curse.

He’d slice left and right and sing shrilly from joy, not knowing that he had ever been Jaime Lannister.
Or in love with the Brienne of Tarth.

That realisation was only too sobering.

He had to focus.

If he couldn’t find Brandon to show her that the young Stark was just fine and enthroned on a weirwood by his own choosing, she wouldn’t agree to drink the cure. A wonderfully smelling red liquid in a tiny white wooden cup. She was carrying it stubbornly in her shield arm, careful not to spill it yet refusing to consume it.

If she continued like that, her illness would progress eventually, unstoppable as greyscale, the maesters were quite certain.

“She should I get out of here, back to the wilderness?” she whispered, her mind taking a turn that his had just crossed.

*Clever lady, aren’t you?*

“No,” Jaime shook his head. “It can’t be far now. We have to go on.”

He wasn’t keen on letting her back to snow.

Lost or not, here they were safe. Alone, not even freezing.

*Small mercies.*

“It’s very warm,” she observed cautiously. “I’m dizzy from the air in here.”

He was alarmed. It was not like Brienne to complain. Was the curse about to win? Was she losing it? Her will? Herself?

The rocky underground passage was sinuous, the air stiff and stale, but still quite breathable

“This way,” he said, leading her on with new urgency.

All paths were the same. None went to the cave where Brandon had mounted on a high weirwood throne. And what chair it was! Ancient, white and cruel.

There were no swords of the vanquished on its back, but its branches and roots grew in all directions: all the way up to the porous, stony ceilings, and deep down to the earth’s heart.

Before sitting down, Brandon had kept his promise, showing his would-be murderer the precious substance for which Jaime had betrayed yet another king, by taking his little, crippled brother into mortal peril, against Jon’s strict orders in the matter.

That pale cup of red liquid which was now in Brienne’s shield arm had been laid at the bottom of another, smaller, empty throne, hidden in the gloomy depths of the cave: the first one in row of many lesser chairs occupied by tacit, calm sleepers who had almost grown into one with their trees.

Jaime had retrieved it eagerly.

Finally, as a parting gift, Brandon had given Jaime a look of sheer contempt. Afterwards, the young man closed his eyes and melted into the seat he had chosen for himself; alone in a spacious hall which was the cave’s heart or perhaps the world’s centre. When Jaime had been standing before that chair, staring at Brandon, he had temporarily lost from sight all other sleepers, as if they were not
there at all.

Not giving a damn for the oddness of the place, Jaime had scampered off with the cup of life, with all the honourable intent to let the king know where Brandon was and then cure his wife. Only to discover, not surprisingly, but to his great sorrow, that Brienne had followed him beyond the Wall. His wife could not stay put, could she? Not if she suspected he was up to a new dishonour. For her sake or not. At least Viserion was able to fly away, surviving Jaime’s mad demands only because Brienne had shown up in time to help him.

And then, she had to decide, of course, that she wouldn’t partake of the cup of life before she could see with her own eyes that Brandon was safe on his throne.

And now, right now, there was nothing, only meandering passages underground. Airless. Cold and suffocating at the same time.

The starlight was almost gone, unable to enter with any semblance of force this far into the cave.

“I need to go back,” Brienne whispered hoarsely, and she was probably right. “I’m not allowed in here,” she said with a sad look directed at her white walking legs, bare from above the knees, having become much longer than her trousers.

“Nonsense,” Jaime rejected her claim with as much arrogance as he could muster, feigning calm he didn’t feel, possessed by panic.

What was he to do?

She was sometimes a bit slow to foresee the worst possible outcome of her predicament, but not now, to his misfortune. She gave him a silent, knowing look that begged for him to tell her the truth.

“He’s somewhere here alright, but I can’t tell where precisely,” Jaime confessed tiredly, the cold taking its toll on him.

There was no air left or perhaps it had turned into invisible ice, cutting the throats and hearts.

He wished they were in the orchard in the Rock at the end of the Long Summer, plucking last season’s fruits, the juiciest of all.

“Wake up,” Brienne punched him lightly with worry, shaking his slumped shoulders.

He had fallen asleep with his eyes open.

Shivering, fighting drowsiness, he explained what he thought he understood, “Both of us should leave I think, go back to the Wall, search for help. Perhaps the trees will help Northmen, but not us. We never believed in them.”

Jaime hadn’t believed in anything, except in his sword hand and Cersei. Both betrayed him long ago.

What he felt for Brienne was beyond faith.

He belonged with her. She couldn’t overlook the man underneath in all his guises: from bravery to irony, from boasting arrogance to disdainful, knowing silence.

A man who could never fully set aside his honour.

“We can’t give up,” she judged. “Think, Jaime, how did the good passage look like?” she queried nervously.
“I wish I knew,” he retorted angrily.

All ways were the same and none ran in any useful direction.

“How did it smell?” she wouldn’t relent.

“Like rot and decay,” he hammered.

“This way.”

It was her turn to lead and his to follow blindly. Her sense of smell must have... developed.

She was his beacon of hope in night neverending.

Stench proved easier to find easier than young Brandon.

“Here,” she gasped heavily. “Smells like an open grave,” her last word broke on her lips leaving only ragged breath.

He was running out of time.

Where in seven hells are the bloody trees?

Optionless, he prayed to the Warrior and to the Mother.

They didn’t listen, so he tried the Father. He was one though not the best...

The Smith.

The Stranger.

The Crone that Cersei had become.

Brienne gulped, choked.

Desperate, he prayed to the Maiden.

The passage changed, widened. There was a faintest touch of breeze with a vague taste of smoke. The darkness deepened.

His wife took a long breath of ash-tainted air and staggered haphazardly forward.

“Brandon!” she exclaimed, sounding heartbroken.

Jaime didn’t see a thing. Was she having visions?

Following after her, the ground felt scorching hot under his boots.

Slowly, his eyes adjusted to the new kind of darkness, green and catlike. He didn’t need starlight to see anymore.

“That’s not Brandon,” he clarified, relieved that the boy was definitely not here. “He’s further up.”

They had descended very deep to the bowels of the earth and reached the rows of sleepers farthest from the surface: those who had almost become one with their trees, indistinguishable from the branches growing from and through their bodies. It was impossible to tell if they were dead or alive with the dense smell of rotting red leaves on the floor of the cave, all around their sleeping figures.
Now he knew the way.

“This way,” he took Brienne’s arm and nudged her to go up, unable to carry her as a good husband should, now that she towered over him.

She’d be too heavy.

Seeing how unsteady she still was, he thought of a different approach. “Lean on my right side,” he suggested lovingly.

She did and it was fine. With his stump around the small of her giant white walker’s back, it felt as if she didn’t weigh more than a rotting weirwood leaf, despite that it was probably only his imagination telling him such unlikely thing.

They advanced well, and he continued to know where they were: a rare privilege in the northern caves.

Back up, the air grew heavier once more, losing the flavour of ash, returning to deadly, throat-cutting chill, as if it was sucked up by the Others or the gods who were angry and determined to punish some of their creation.

Such as Jaime.

Jaime and Brienne could now see Brandon right ahead, alone and prisoner of the greatest weirwood that the world had ever seen. With his eyes closed, he looked as if he was peacefully dreaming.

Brienne dropped to all fours and dragged herself towards him.

Up, up and up she went, gasping and breathing the best she could.

Jaime followed in silence. Soon he would have to carry her, he’d have no other choice, heavy or not. He prayed to the Warrior for strength, and then... to the Maiden.

It was she who has helped Brienne earlier, she must have.

She could do it again.

Near an empty throne, Brienne remained seated, breathing with some newfound ease, but unable to continue forward.

“I’ll have to rest here if I am to leave this place alive, I think,” she declared. “And you’ll have to convince Brandon to come with us if you can rouse him. He can’t be well off here no matter what he thinks or what he has told you. You must feel it too, Jaime, this is a graveyard.”

“They’re just sleeping, I think,” he begged to disagree, despite recognising unwillingly that the place was far from being one of the seven heavens.

It wasn’t the gods, he realised. The sleepers were spending the scarce air so there was more left near the empty seat, even for Brienne, who seemed to require much more air for her existence than a mere human like Jaime, due to her transformation.

And just under the vacant throne, there used to be the cure the boy promised. A wooden cup of red liquid that promised sustenance and health in winter. Half-empty. He had hoped the remaining half would suffice to cure Brienne should she finally be wise, think of herself, and choose to drink it.

As if she could read his mind, she lay the cup she’d been carrying this far carefully down onto
nearest weirwood root. Not quite at the place where he had found it, but almost.

He should have made her swallow it all as soon as he saw that she’d come after him, instead of letting her become even more ill than she already was.

Once a fool, always a fool, and it was no wonder that Cersei had always treated him as one. Father should have made a nice motley for him instead of golden armour.

Cersei could wear such suit now, maddened and aged by winter.

“We’re lost, aren’t we?” Brienne whispered. There was no light in her blue eyes and no mistake as to her meaning.

She was losing hope that they would make it, this time.

He sprinted to the cup she had set aside, brought it to her lips, poured a drop in, spilling a few more from his recklessness.

Instead of any sign of miraculous recovery he was expecting, she began convulsing on the cold cave floor. Foam bubbled from her mouth.

She was moribund.

Dying.

“No!” Jaime screamed and his voice echoed like a pounding of a drum from all stony sides of the cave, banging on his stupid head.

Brienne tried spitting but was too weak.

The red, healthy-smelling liquid was no cure for her.

It was sheer poison.

He cleaned her mouth with his clumsy left-hand fingers, wiped it out with his sleeve, longed for snow but there was none, found a tiny pond of cold water, smelled it, tasted it, washed her lips clean.

Finally he kissed her, sucking up the last bits of poison into himself.

But, as his damned luck would have it, to him the stuff was invigorating like nothing else he had ever tasted.

Life-bringing.

Brandon had not lied, remaining an honourable Stark to his dying day.

A cure for one race was venom to the other.

Brienne kissed him back weakly in response and remained shivering in his arms.

Feeble, but present, calm even.

Cold sweat began drying on Jaime’s forehead, freezing into icicles.

“It doesn’t help me, does it?” she said with resignation. “It smelled so promising before I tried it,” she confessed with disappointment and longing. “Of cinnamon and all things good in this life.”
She coughed out the last bit of poison in his arms, calming down fully.

Alive, though unwell.

The plague did not move an inch, for better or worse.

There was no cure.

He slurped the rest of the stuff that betrayed his hopes, unwilling to leave it where it could hurt his wife or another lost wanderer, and equally reluctant to just spill it out. If let out into the porous, rocky soil, who was to say that it wouldn’t flow into the veins of the trees and poison all the sleepers?

Besides, to him it was perfect, reinvigorating. A unique drink in the world, returning strength and hope. He felt powerful and younger than ever and he couldn’t give the concoction away. He’d drink more of it if there was.

Not so his wife, warm and limp in his embrace.

“I’m so sorry!” he squeezed through his big mouth, bursting into tears like a little boy. His face turned warm from the onslaught of salty water. The sweat icicles melted.

“Don’t be,” she said honestly, meaning it. “It was worth a try.”

Her shoulders sagged, relaxing further. She let herself lay down on her back with her eyes closed. Her hands folded on her belly, which moved. His stump flew to there, followed by his useless left hand.

Their child, greeting them.

It wasn’t the first time they felt it, but it had never been so strong. A kick and then a long wave, a little someone turning. Doing whatever babies did in the dark. And if the small one could see, it would be with honest blue eyes, Jaime was certain.

Of a different blue that those of the white walkers: not stark and shrill like the Others’ songs of winter, but clear like the sea and the sky on Tarth, touched by a summer breeze.

The three of them stayed together, stuck to one another, living for the moment.

When the little one calmed, she opened her eyes, shining grey in the dark, reflecting scarce starlight piercing rock and stone.

“There is no cure,” Jaime whispered with resignation. “I should have known.”

“There is,” she was still holding her belly, free of plague.

“But what when he’s born?”

“Or she?

“Never mind. You know what I mean.”

After the birth of their child, the disease would spread, wouldn’t it? Brienne’s unyielding character might just not be enough.

He vividly remembered a funeral. His mother’s, after Tyrion. His guts clenched, his throat constricted. He would choke on his tears.
He wiped his eyes in his wet sleeve, smearing them with red liquid which had given new strength to him, just like Brandon had said it would, after almost killing his wife.

Voices echoed in the cave, approaching from a far. Determined, awake. They were too far for Jaime to understand their conversation. Apparently some wildlings still dwelled in hiding beyond the Wall, avoiding the Others who ruled the lands.

“Look,” Brienne pointed at Brandon.

A root began to creep over the young man’s stomach, holding him down. He could not stand up anymore even if he wanted. He was unarmed, Jaime remembered.

And the voices were shrill, wrong.

There must be at least a dozen of them, intoning a tune of winter.

The new travellers weren’t men.

The Others were marching towards Brandon, and had no trouble breathing in the cave, unlike Brienne.

Why did the bloody place let them in and almost killed a lady who would never hurt a fly unless honour demanded it? It wasn’t her fault that she’d become a mixture of two races!

His beloved lady knelt, kneading compulsively the stony cave floor, colder than death.

To Jaime’s surprise, she was able to forge a stone sword for herself like the Others made crystal ones from snow.

His eyes narrowed with a pang of concern. Had he been wrong about her resilience to them? Was it over? Would she be one of them? Would she still carry their child if she stopped being herself? Or would she harm the fruit of their love if it became alien to her?

“That their queen is also with child, they say, so it should be possible,” she retorted bitterly to his unkind and unstoppable chain of very private thoughts. “But they can’t decide if she’s one of them or a different creature whom they should all hate and destroy.”

“I’m so sorry,” Jaime asked for forgiveness with his heart on his dirty sleeve. “Can you hear all my nasty thoughts?” he asked curiously.

“Only very loud ones,” she replied, “and only in this cave. It’s as if my whole life is right here, well visible, within the reach of my hand. As though I could return to the past and save my brother Galladon from drowning, prevent my mother from dying or jump into a glorious future after the Long Night, skipping the sad present.”

“Will there be such new time in the future?”

“How should I know?” she shrugged. “It’s all unreal, Jaime. The cold is making us all sick and seeing things. I heard that this is how people die in snow. With sweat dreams”

“How do you know about their queen?” That bit hadn’t sounded particularly dreamlike to Jaime.

“I heard them talking on my way to you. I understood them. Before, the sounds they make sounded like gibberish to me. Like inarticulate shrieking. It is not so. They have a language, like us.”

“What are they singing about now?”
Brienne wrinkled her forehead.

“That the throne has to remain empty until a new king overpowers the old one and takes his seat. It’s an old tale of sorts. They like to tell it, to remind themselves of their purpose. Their legend is full of brave ice heroes, but it has no princesses or great ladies. They are all of the same gender or many of them think so.

The rest believe that they have a queen and that she is a unique being among them, one among hundreds of thousands. And that it is only she who will be the deliverance of their race. No one else.”

“Fascinating,” Jaime retorted dryly. “How about that they just go back to sleep and leave as alone? Maybe they could share the thrones with the people here?”

“They only see Brandon’s throne.”

“They’ll see us soon enough,” Jaime thought out loud. “Unless we can share the empty seat.”

“Indeed,” Brienne said, trying out her new blade before imminent battle. “It will do,” she said very seriously. “I can take more of them now, when I’m like them.”

Jaime was forced to agree, hating the fact.

On top, all he had was a short obsidian knife. Deadly, but not of much use to parry the sweeping blows of great crystal blades.

“Could you make another sword, for me?”

She tried, failed, puffed and stared at him.

“I don’t think so,” she confirmed the obvious. “Only if I could… divide myself in two or more warriors. But I don’t know how. More than half of them believe that is how they procreate. That they don’t need any foreign queen to waylay their king and the credulous members of their race from their sacred purpose.”

She tried a few more strikes and passes with her new weapon. “It’s not as heavy as it looks,” she approved.

Jaime thought of something.

Attacking her with his knife, he disarmed her without hurting her, catching her by surprise. The stone sword felt good in his left arm. *Not too heavy.*

She blushed with anger.

“Try again, please,” he pleaded with her. “Now you are an unarmed white walker in the making.”

His meaning dawned on her.

Soon they were both well-armed for she could indeed forge another blade after her first had been taken away from her by force.

“Others take me!” Jaime cursed joyfully. “You’ve done it, my lady.”

Brienne laughed so hard that her pretty eyes teared from it.
“As if I would let them take you,” she added, teasing him back.

Idiot. Viserion said from afar, sounding busy.

Mind your courtesies, dragon. A man can joke. What are you up to?

I’m taken with chores, you fool. Rhaegal has to sleep again. Someone has to. His rider is another witless moron, like you, lovely Jaime, not seeing that dragon-sleep is required to keep our Mother alive.

Viserion suggested in stark ugly images of red, white and blue that King Jon behaved as though his mother were a great, dead, rotting fish and not a tiny, feisty, still kicking wolf.

Happy to hear I have more wits than the king.

No. You are the greatest fool of all times.

With that, the enemy was upon Jaime and Brienne.

He grasped his stone sword with a hand and a stump and that went better than the left hand alone. He wondered why he never thought of two-handed tactics before, with lighter, metal blades.

There were five and ten and Brienne was their first priority. It decidedly seemed like a truth that they did not hold in great esteem women with children. Especially a half-white walker lady.

Who was their match in all but in number, and wouldn’t cede her ground.

Jaime and Brienne fought together like never before, with their backs turned to the empty throne. The Others surrounded them from three sides like wolves sniffing their prey. Jaime backed off sharply towards the empty weirwood seat to test where their vision ended.

In a fleeting moment, all crystal swords were aimed at his wife as if he wasn’t there.

Excellent.

Doable.

He silenced and ignored his thoughts after that one, not wanting them to be loud, refusing to make her understand his new purpose.

He leapt forward to continue fighting by her side, cutting down an Other who was twice his size.

In his next move he un-chivalrously pulled his wife back, toppling her over his leg, so that she lost balance and ended up seated on the damned empty chair.

“Jaime!” she screamed at him with pain and betrayal. A naughty root immediately snatched her sword hand, making her drop her stone weapon behind her new throne.

Invisible and useless.

The old gods had the same intent as Jaime, it seemed, of protecting women and children from themselves.

In that future she had glimpsed, in spring, maybe a cure could be found for her.

Who could say?
All he could do was give her a chance, put her to sleep.

The only thing he was reasonably certain of in the bloody grotto was that the sleepers were still alive despite all the red-leaf-rot around them.

The white walkers missed all that so it must have been somehow beyond them.

*Very well.*

The Others had already left Brienne and Jaime behind.

“They think us defeated, smashed into the walls of the cave,” Brienne said drowsily. “Jaime, help me down, please.”

Her plea was swallowed by the advent of inexorable sleep, making much easier for Jaime what he had to do next.

Determined, the white walkers marched on their next target.

*Brandon.*

He had to overtake them. He leapt forward fast like a dragon flies, spanning the night with leathery wings.

On his way, he stabbed one enemy in the back and was happy to see him fall, much like Aerys did.

The rest now turned all their attention to Jaime, four or five of them. He couldn’t fight for his life and count with precision.

*Three.*

There were four but he had just killed one.

Enough to finish him off. Or not. He had drunk from cup of life and he wouldn’t go down meekly.

The last three were better swordsmen than the rest, trained as good as Ser Barristan Selmy, Ser Gregor Clegane, the Hound or himself, combining the finest tactic of the south of the Seven Kingdoms with some foreign moves that Jaime had never seen, unexpected and very refined.

Without Brienne’s strength and prowess, he was in trouble, despite the strange drink he had consumed.

He struggled on, unable to do otherwise, learning new steps and blows.

The white walkers wanted Brandon now and they could perfectly see him.

Brienne had been a distraction, they somehow told Jaime in *human* language to further distract him and insult him. To break him. His wife was an abomination that had to be stopped before it gave some fools among the white walkers rebellious notions about a different destiny.

Jaime’s arms were cut, his legs were sliced open, even his hair was cropped short, and he barely managed to finish one of them off.

The last crystal cut was on his chest. He used the enemy’s advance to kill him as well.

As the penultimate white walker died, he exhaled a crystal thought.
There were no more Others ordered to search out the children’s caves. All the rest had to march on the Wall or their king would kill them in person. The creature believed his king to be in the wrong on that, but who was he to correct a mighty ruler, thousands of years old.

*It’s one to one now.*

But Jaime was tired and wounded and no match for the last Other: tall, unscathed, silent, impeccably trained in sword fighting, endowed with superhuman strength.

“T-yi!” The creature yelled while rushing forward as a westerman might cry “*Casterly Rock*” and a northman “*Winterfell*”.

Maybe that’s was how the Others called their domain beyond the Wall for there was no city or land with such name in the maps of the known world that Jaime was forced to study as Tywin’s golden boy.

It struck him that he might have one chance to take out the last enemy creature.

In the moment before he would die himself while the thing was busy killing him.

And when the final night would have fallen for him, then it would take dragonfire, or an earthquake, or another great upheaval of nature that Jaime’s imagination might not even be able to fathom in order to wake and unbury the sleepers.

The melting of ice.

Spring.

With some luck, no one would see the sleepers until the new dawn, and people who lived to see them would free both Brandon and Brienne, and all those nameless men and women overgrown by roots, who kept the world alive by being tied to its beginnings, ensuring that it would have no end.

He waited for a good moment to die and prayed to the Maden to look after his beloved wife as she had always done.

Didn’t she?

With the final effort of will, he set all doubts aside, having no time or need for them.

His last thought was for his short-lived marriage and the happiness it brought him.

*It was amazing, my love. I was the happiest man on earth.*

*Please survive me.*

*Let one of my children know who their father was since the day they are born.*

*Raise them in Tarth, away from the world, the tourneys, the nonsense of gold and red, of fire and blood.*

He saw the perfect angle to end all his battles and he charged forward wildly, knowing that the Other would use the opening he thus created.

*Farewell.*
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

**Tyrion**

He was mad with his wife.

“Where was your mind?” he raged. “The king will know soon that you played a role in his crippled brother’s elopement.”

*Demise.* He couldn’t think that through, and much less voice it.

The two men called Satin and Leathers had just popped by to report on Tysha’s actions. Maybe they were still behind his door. Which would be much better than if they had run to Jon. Unless, of course-

Tyrion huffed weakly. Tears slipped treacherously into his mismatched eyes. He wondered if this was how Eddard Stark had felt right after learning that Lady Catelyn had kidnapped Tyrion, and, for all useful purposes, started a bloody war.

“The king must have been told already,” he whispered, pondering northern justice. Likely the same as the southron one. Blocks. Swords. Axes. All that. Satin and Leathers would have never gone to Tyrion first. They must have come to gloat over the dwarf’s impending loss.

No burning people on stakes, no, that would be ungodly. That had only been done by justice-obsessed Stannis, under the influence of his red woman who’d betrayed him. Using her time in Westeros wisely, she was more than successful in enslaving and stealing the largest living dragon.

A sorceress.

*A shadowbinder.*

Well, truth be told, Tysha was one as well.

The too deep pockets of her dark blue robes contained sweet-smelling powders which could make her look younger or older, as she wished. And many other things she wouldn’t show him yet, she’d said once, very carelessly, after love-making.

But, seven hells, he had told himself over and over again, his beloved Tysha would have never learned those arts if she hadn’t had the misfortune to marry a dumb, cruel dwarf. Or if none of the hungry sea captains from Lannisport were audacious enough to sail all the way to Asshai, happy to take poor girls, wrongfully accused of whoring, wherever they went.

Tyrion often wondered how she had paid for that journey, always concluding that he’d rather not know.

“The king isn’t here,” she replied very quietly to his rant about Brandon which had completely died out by now, gazing carefully into the firelit hearth as if it was an open parchment. “He’s gone.”

In present day (well, night), everyone, highborn or lowborn, resided in small, heated, underground holes in wormways under Castle Black or the other nineteen forts on the Wall.
All manned now.

During his first visit to the greatest structure built by men, almost seven years ago, Tyrion would have never expected such development. Now he pissed from the Wall as often as he wanted, hoping that the warm liquid abandoning his body would cripple the Others and their slain servants like hot oil, and yet knowing beyond doubt that his expectations were in vain.

His piss was neither dragonglass nor dragonfire.

Just like the cubicle he and Tysha occupied didn’t deserve to be called a chamber, but there was no better name.

A rabbit hole, perhaps.

It was that or freeze.

“The king won’t return to us any time soon,” Tysha concluded her study of the weakly burning flames and stood up.

“Not King Jon, in any case, my Lord Hand.” She made a mockery of a curtsy towards Tyrion, like Shae.

Tyrion’s heart constricted from the memory of all his mortal sins.

A vengeful, cruel dwarf who should burn in seven hells.

As so many times before, he hugged her knees, using his stature to adore her. “High treason is the block. The Northmen are not tender. You helped Brandon leave. I’m scared shitless that they will punish you.”

“Fire doesn’t lie,” Tysha said, “Brandon would leave with or without my help. This way he might have a chance. He’s not alone.”

“Not sure if the king will see-”

“He won’t see a thing. He won’t know, not for a long while.”

“How can you tell?”

“Fire doesn’t lie,” she repeated.

“The previous sorceress claimed so as well.”

“It was not the fire, it was her reading.”

“And yours is better?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Then?”

“From what I heard, she only searched for things of her interest, overlooking all others. I don’t seek. I open my eyes and I contemplate what is in there. Of course I misread, like any other human. I’m not the fire,” she murmured. “I’m just Tysha.”

“You’re everything there is, all there’ll ever be for me,” Tyrion heard himself rambling stupidly.
“You always made me laugh,” she said. “In a good way.”

“Why look into the fire at all then? What do you want from it?”

Tysha shrugged. “Avoid evil if I see it coming my way. Be free.”

“What is freedom?” he had never given it much importance. “I thought that you didn't have any personal liberty in that temple in Asshai.”

“I was free in a fashion. Everyone was, between the two appearances of the shadow to pick up the new sacrifice.”

“How often did that happen?” he wished to know how many people Tysha had helped lull into their death by taking part in the muttered chants and powders spilled to placate the shadow in its vast domed temple in Asshai. Tysha had explained it was necessary to shelter the inhabitants from their mighty neighbours dwelling in Stygai and keep the uneasy peace between them.

His wife shrugged mutely. “I knew it would be me on the altar one day, when it was my turn. I haven't done anything to anyone that wouldn't be my lot when time came. Why should I have made any count of the inevitable?”

He didn’t get his answer. *How many? Thirty? Sixty? Hundred?* He looked into the fire and realised he was searching for it. Then he forced himself to stop being a seeker and just gaze into the flames. He still saw nothing.

“This is indeed a very imprecise art, my lady,” he remarked wryly.

He could use a glass of mead to warm up or calm down, but there wasn’t any. Only pickled vegetables and dried, salted meat, harder than ice blocks that the Wall was built of. Forced to continue shivering from unearthly cold piercing furs and flesh, he remained entirely too sober for his liking.

“You know, I haven’t been Hand for years,” he murmured defensively towards Tysha.

She shrugged. “If you say so, husband. Or did they perhaps invent another name for the honourable service your noble father had also performed, in the time that I was away?”

There was thin venom in her voice when she mentioned Father.

*Where did murdered fathers go?*

Presumably not to seven heavens, but hells weren’t a particularly good destination either. Father could have become Hand down there as well, purely on evil merits, if one assumed that birth didn’t count in afterlife as septons said. Tyrion was not certain that he could ever quite believe in that. Being from a good family mattered in this world. Why not in the next?

What if Tyrion also ended up in hells, once the Others made short work of him?

Father would be pleased. Oh, to be able to chastise his dwarf son for all his insufficiencies! A nightmare come true. Hells would be hundred, and not only seven. Tyrion would be tortured for all eternity.

Nervous and anxious, recalling the flashes from the last battle against the Others he was mad enough
to take part in, together with King Jon, profoundly grateful for the undeserved mercy of staying both alive and free of ice-plague, he approached the door and yanked it open.

Best see what’s behind.

A bunch of white walkers, why not?

Next to skulking, gloating Satin and Leathers, just as he had surmised, there was, quite unexpectedly, a whole delegation of more or less illustrious visitors, who were now pouring into his unworthy chamber, filling it to the brim.

Tyrion felt as he might faint from sudden lack of air like a maid on her wedding day.

He willed a gawk of surprise away from his face and suppressed the urge to tremble visibly from chill, tightening his red doublet better at the waist and wrapping himself deeper in his fur cloak. Underneath, he looked like an undersized bear cub, just much uglier.

Be that as it may, the improvised sort-of-Northern attire, except for the wrong, bright colour of course, had his perks.

Tysha found he looked perfectly sweet in it, she’d told him more than once.

Her own little lion cub.

It still beat him why she saw anything in him, what, with his looks and with what he had done to her, and yet he was so very glad for that blessing all the same.

“We are having a mutiny on our hands,” young Aegon said, sounding and looking like an Other. “Deserters are running south. The courage is leaving us and the king is… engaged elsewhere, I suppose.”

Gone, like Tysha said. And the infected, courageous youth, called Aegon had tried to command Jon’s men in his handsome stead. It didn't help that the famous name he was given was a rather inconvenient one in the North that never quite forgot the humiliation of kneeling to the Targaryen conquerir.

In short, it was clear as sunrise why people didn’t want to fight under Aegon.

The perfectly healthy state of his human mind had become completely obscured by his white walker’s appearance. Yet he was one of the very few ice plague-infected people who had miraculously stayed true to their nature in a new body. It just took a lot of effort for an ordinary, untouched human to see it.

“It is my understanding, which I gained from my late brother Loras, may he rest in the light of the Seven and not walk in the Long Night among the slain, that it was you, my Lord Tyrion, the man who had defended King’s Landing from Stannis against impossible odds, until your father’s and our army arrived,” Willas Tyrell reminded everyone present of Tyrion’s few days of past glory.

“That might be,” Tyrion conceded, “but it can’t be me the man who ought to be followed now.” He stared Aegon down. “For the same reason that you should stay aside.”

“I am loyal to the king and I shall do his will,” the young man protested. “He would wish us to stand firm.”

Right. You love him as a brother. Small good this will do to the war.
“He’s not here,” Tyrion said patiently, sounding like Tysha, eyes studying sharply all his visitors.

“Him,” he blurted, pointing a chubby finger at Brynden Tully. “He’ll do.”

“My great-uncle had sided with Lord Hightower at the royal election.” the Arryn boy protested loudly. “He used to be a knight of the Vale, but now I don’t fully trust him.”

“I’m still a knight,” Ser Brynden brushed his nephew off and then faced Tyrion squarely. “But I have never been a great strategist. My capacity to conjure grand solutions in a hopeless siege is limited. I’m a soldier.”

“And you shall die a knight,” Tyrion parried, remembering the tenacity and uncompromising nature of Ser Barristan Selmy when they stripped him off his white cloak. The story must have been told in the corridors of the Red Keep still today for all the good it did the old man, who still held the sword on the Wall, guarding the son of Robb Stark.

In present day, well, night-

Damn it!

“Ride out,” he lectured old Tully on simple tactics, “go there, beyond the Wall, and do what knights to. I think it’s mostly killing left and right. It shouldn’t be too difficult. Don’t die. Or not very soon. Give me some time. The tall people will follow you. Young Lord Arryn will be wise and won’t show distrust, will he? Not openly. Unity is at stake.”

Half-way through his speech, he felt possessed by a strange morosity, black in colour, tasting green and with a tiny drop of ash or blue on his tongue.

Since the last full-fledged attack on the Wall that Jon had fended off, despair ran deep in the realm of men.

“We are one step away from killing each other for any spark of hate we shall call reason, and thus make the Others’ work even shorter,” Tyrion whispered with unseeing eyes, momentarily succumbing to unstoppable depression and desilusion with the human condition.

Discord.

That’s the sheer nature of it.

“He’s right, Brynden,” Lyanna Stark said quietly.

The old knight shivered and gave her a long look, as if she was somehow guilty that his late sister had married her late brother and that they had both died under ineffable circumstances.

Like beasts.

It all comes back to Lord Eddard and his choices, Tyrion thought stupidly, slowly shaking off the odd bout of sadness, returning to his much more usual plotting disposition. Why?

“Why not the House Lannister?” Tommen asked petulantly, positioning himself next to the young falcon, allowing Tyrion to notice belatedly that he was not the only lion present. “More than a third of the people manning Castle Black are from the south. Northmen alone prefer lesser forts where they can be among themselves and avoid any foreigners. Wildlings and southrons together form the majority here. The Rock still commands respect. Lord Arryn would approve of my person at least. Wouldn’t you, Robin?
“Ah, the loyal friendship of youth,” Tyrion remarked warily. “How touching.”

He had never had a childhood friend.

Jaime.

Sharp pang of white pain stung his chest when he remembered his missing brother.

Viserion had returned alone from only the gods knew where, puffing angry wisps of white and golden smoke above Castle Black. It was highly unlikely he would join the battle riderless and alone. Not even the baby blue dragon could cheer him up, and not for the lack of trying.

The beasts cared not for the grief and the upcoming doom of men.

“Why not me?” Jaime’s son continued reproachfully. “The greatness of the past can be recaptured in the future and the sins can be redeemed.”

“Because you’re too young and born of incest!” Tyrion’s rage at the stupidity that men sometimes displayed did not spare his nephew. “And you’re beginning to sound like a septon on top.” His anger abated with the last insult he uttered.

*And you might be the first one to die messily if I let you lead that sortie.*

*I’m so sorry, Tommen*

*But the answer is no.*

Mance Rayder whistled with approval, “Jon said you’re the only one who might think of something if… if he went missing. If he were gone.” Fresh pain could almost be grasped and tasted in the wildling’s voice. “I made a bet with him that I’d still be the first one to leave this world and explore if there is a next.”

Tyrion felt both embarrassed and flattered by the wildling’s admission concerning his little person. Jon was a friend, but it still felt too kind of him to think of Tyrion as the saviour of the day (well, night), and his precious people.

And to truly mean it, more like than not because he was so damn honest.

*Bloody, righteous Starks.*

*Always on the high ground of the spirit.*

“Right,” he grunted dwarfishly. “Something’s called Ser Brynden, for a start. Because we can’t put in charge a wildling, a woman, a cripple, a boy, a half-Other, a wight, or a dwarf for that matter.”

Euron Greyjoy, the silently present wight from the list, nodded significantly.

The list of deficiencies people disapproved of in leaders was rather long. When one took all into account, there was almost no one left. If Tully was a few years older, he’d be excluded as well on the grounds of being decrepit.

Fortunately for Tyrion, he was at the very end of his prime, but not yet out of it. His nephew, Edmure, was in the right age, but he was also too stupid for command. That particular deficiency was perhaps not fatal in the eyes of people, but Tyrion himself resented it.

*We all hate what we are not, don’t we?*
“You’ve heard the Imp,” Mance tapped Tully on both shoulders, left and then right. “The Wall is yours until the King returns.” He turned to Tyrion again. “And then what? You said this was a start.”

“I have to think,” Tyrion muttered, caught off guard. He didn’t have any other life-saving notions fort the time being.

“Don’t think too long,” Euron Greyjoy rumbled like a distant avalanche, roaring in the bowels of the earth.

The horns howled three times: long, sad blasts.

Ser Brynden nodded grimly and exited the chambers full of new purpose. The rest of Tyrion’s guests followed, the two boys first, Arryn and Lannister, eager for the glory of dying.

Lyanna was last, sparing a special look for Tysha.

Tyrion didn’t appreciate it.

“Is she some kind of woods witch? Why did she just stare at you?” he grunted, offended, when he was finally left alone with his wife.

Tysha shrugged again. “Her time is coming,” she said judgmentally. “Might be she doesn’t trust the maesters and is looking for a woman’s help. With a touch of foreign magic, why not? The unknown always seems more powerful.”

Tyrion hadn’t thought at all of Lyanna’s belly as the cause for her significant gazes. His embarrassment before the too plain honesty of the Starks deepened. If a Lannister gave such a look to someone it would mean he or she was pondering axe and block solutions. But Lyanna might have been merely pleading for help she probably deserved.

And she acted as if she might have forgotten that Brandon existed.

*Very unlikely.*

*Unless…*

“Can your shadowbinder powders cause… forgetfulness?” he asked suspiciously. “Lack of focus?”

Tysha lowered her pretty black head. “Maybe,” she conceded, but only in part. Her eyes laughed.

He rolled his mismatched eyes and chuckled quietly.

“If it was Lord Hightower following you, everything would be fine,” Tyrion’s morning (well, *evening*) fury did not yet abated. “Not these two black brothers.”

“The king had issued clear warnings that every life is precious in winter. No heads will fall before spring unless Others take them—”

“-he has been unreasonable before when his family was at stake, especially this brother—”

“Spare me what I already know,” his wife did not relent.

“Why are you not afraid?” He had been and still was.
“We are… happy,” he dared say.

“I am, yes,”

Smile blossomed on his poor face. “Aren’t you then afraid of losing it?”

Tysha shrugged, “I guess I just don’t think that far ahead.”

Sadness returned tenfold, threatening to drown him in incessantly falling snow.

Tysha turned more serious from seeing him so much down. She strove to explain her point of view. “I know that you won’t betray me again or replace me with anyone else even if they loved you. Even if they were highborn. I also know it’s unlikely that any other woman would truly love you. But all that knowledge is beside the point. Love is here, now. I feel it. Future doesn’t matter.”

Tyrion begged to disagree. “I like to think of future as I like to look through a window,” he disagreed, “not into a wormway.”

“Let’s have a look then,” she dared him. “Maybe we will see clearer what to do next.”

There was only one place nearby with a good view, and it was not a window.

From top of the Wall, the situation was more dire than in King’s Landing seven years ago. The Others had almost completed a continuous, long line of ice siege engines of various types and sizes. A wall to match the Wall in height. And when it did, the slain would push the contraption forward, and the Others would simply walk over every inch of the Wall at once. There wouldn’t be enough manpower to defend it from such total and concerted attack.

Tyrion needed a stopper for it. Something like a chain he had ordered be made for Blackwater Rush. Or a substance as destructive as wildfire. As his luck would have it, there wasn’t any. Aerys’ stocks were still in King’s Landing, too far and too unstable to be carried this far unless-. 

No, Viserion said from afar, stopping his wildfire wet dream.

“Why in seven hells not?”

No! the dragon thundered. *Alchemist evil egg. NOT fire. We won’t carry that.*

“Fine,” Tyrion rumbled grumpily. “Suit yourselves.”

It was not like he could force Viserion or Rhaegal to do anything. He wasn’t a dragonrider, just an amateur connoisseur of dragonlore. A boy freak who read too much at young age.

*So much for grand strategies.*

“Can you make the Others forget where the Wall is, like you made Lyanna not remember Brandon, kind of?” he asked faintly from Tysha, hoping, hoping.

“That is beyond me,” she retorted readily. “I believe it would take a shadow bigger than those dwelling in the middle of Asshai if we were to confuse the enemy about our whereabouts: just like the thieves are lured into Stygai and then killed. The treasures laying around remain forever beyond their grasp.”

“A bunch of grown, living dragons would be able to defend the Wall with a curtain of fire,” Tyrion asserted.
“Maybe,” Tysha nodded, “but they are not yet born nor will they see the light of day anytime soon-

“-There is no light,” Tyrion interrupted angrily.

“You know what I mean,” Tysha reacted, not relenting “ It takes them years to lay eggs and wait for
them to hatch. If the eggs are abandoned because the females are killed, then it takes a miracle. How
many wonders have you seen in life?” she asked philosophically, as if it was plain obvious that for
her there were none.

“One sole, my lady,” he replied fervently what he’d told her more than once in the time since they
were reunited, “that I could be loved by you, both as a green, stupid boy and right now, as a man
who should burn in seven hells for what he had done.”

She seemed a tad timid at once, reserved and less self-assured than she mostly appeared. “I am still
not certain how I should call that. Miracle sounds far too ambitious. Perhaps it’s only a grave mistake
of mine.”

His hand was in hers or hers in his, he could not tell. Her palm caressed his callouses, assuaging
those that were deeper, hidden in his soul.

“If it is so, please do not rectify your error, ever,” he whispered with longing. “Let me believe it is
the only truth until the day I die.”

Maybe…

He’d just thought on another ungodly notion whose success depended on Viserion.

A little.

A lot.

Since Jon’s disappearance, the Others attacked only sporadically using the ladders. The onslaught
was mostly directed at the three existing gates in the Wall, keeping the defenders busy and away
from the engine-construction efforts. A great number of white walkers, together with almost all the
slain, worked breathlessly (the wights truly did not have to breathe, did they?) on finishing the siege
engines, one next to each other. They worked harder than ants in order to erect a long ice battlement,
designed to match the Wall in extension and height.

They were almost done.

If they were successful in bringing their creation against the Wall, if they invaded the top all at once,
it was doubtful whether all men together and two middle-sized dragons could withstand the
combined pressure.

Jon harboured doubts that it would be the case.

As did Tyrion.

At least at one place, at one height, the Wall would be breached.

On top of that, the dragons could not be counted upon at this moment to do their usual lot.

To burn all that stands in their way.

The green one slept uselessly in Mole’s Town, making the defenders painfully aware that their king
was missing and not just gone to battle somewhere else, to Shadow Tower, perhaps. The white one
was awake, but he seemed utterly mad, chasing his tail in the snowy courtyard of Castle Black. Perhaps Cersei could ride him now and they would make a nice deranged duo.

Pointless as that might have been, Tyrion preferred to keep his sister locked up and guarded.

It was still a better treatment of her by him than her old wish to keep his head as a remembrance in her chamberpot.

“Come,” he told Tysha. His breath was freezing when it left his big mouth. “Let us go back down.”

Viserion almost completely filled up the snowy Castle Black yard, with his growing body. The dragon rolled in snow or ran in circles like a giant dog, chasing its long, spiked tail, ignoring the ongoing battle cries, and Tyrion’s arrival.

“Good day!” he saluted Jaime’s dragon jovially. “Good night I mean!

Viserion snorted golden flames which could have meant *What in seven hells do you want from me?*

“A noble sacrifice,” Tyrion spoke loud and clear.

*Liar,* the golden rage was in his head, a hundred times more severe than his own had ever been. *You want to sell me out to save your ugly skin.*

*And not even forever, but just a for little while longer,* the dragon suggested with contempt and malice.

“Indeed,” Tyrion agreed. *And Tysha’s. And everyone’s.*

*Not my rider’s.* Viserion was almost teary.

“Where is exactly Jaime? Is he still with Brandon? Where is his lady wife?”

If Viserion didn’t even know where his family was, how could he plan to help them?

Dragon seethed through his huge nostrils and refused to answer in any form, be it human or dragon-like, meeting Tyrion’s question with a sturdy image of crystally opaque whiteness.

“I’m here to give you a headstart,” Tyrion announced peacefully, returning to the matter at hand. *Bargaining. Politics. Right.* “Should you wish to disappear before I sold you.”

?????????

Viserion was confused. Predictably. People were rarely able to follow Tyrion’s mind when it worked very fast. Why would dragons be any different?

The beast stayed on the ground, never lifting flight as Tyrion had anticipated. He just stared Tyrion down as if he was a maggot worthy of crushing.

“Or you could play along,” he found the courage to demand from a living dragon.

For a while he thought that the the animal’s understanding of everything he said was more limited than the average man’s, and very close to a chimpanzee.

*How?* Viserion finally reacted, sounding reasonably clever and sane when he spoke to Tyrion in his mind. The effort at tail-chasing had stopped.
Returning the favour, Tyrion thought hard of his not-so-sane strategy in its various details, without saying a word.

He was about to make a treaty with a creature from hells. What did it make him.

_Fine_, the dragon confirmed. _Rhaegal can’t run away. Not now. And I-

“You don’t want to,” Tyrion concluded. “So you’ll hang in as well. Try your luck and mine. Thank you for that, dragon. By the way,” he continued in his mind, _how come that you can speak to me directly if I’m not your rider?

The secret speech of dragonkind, embedded in dragons’ consciousness, never reached out to other mortals according to Signs and Portents and all other dragonlore books Tyrion had ever read. He shouldn’t have been able to hear it just like that. And today he had heard it _twice_, he realised, the first time from seven hundred feet distance between the bottom and the top of the Wall.

_Maybe you are my lord and rider_, the dragon mocked him. _In make-believe. In your plans to use me as coin you don’t have anymore._

Thereafter, the beast turned weary, gloomy and silent. In Tyrion’s too big head, bright golden tears were shed, large and shiny like precious stones in a hilt of a Valyrian sword.

When the dragon was done weeping, he curled up in snow, coiling his great body like a snake. Yawning from fang to fang, he began to breathe deeply and looked almost asleep. Only one semi-open golden eye revealed that it was not the case.

He was like a cat, maybe, always alert, even while resting.

“What was that?” Tysha said suspiciously, standing next to Tyrion.

“You didn’t hear him?”

“Just you, talking to yourself.”

He had to take a risk.

An ungodly solution for ungodly times.

“Summon it back,” he demanded of her. “I don’t mean Viserion, of course, but the great shadow from Deepwood Motte, the one that Jon and Rhaegal had chased away from here.”

“That’s not wise-”

“Ask of it to return and spread its wings over the entire Wall, like when it used to hover over Castle Black just much wider and more concentrated on the Wall itself and not on the adjacent lands. If it is successful in deceiving the Others about our whereabouts, and if it spares every man and woman from the evil in its breath as it seems to be doing in Asshai or there wouldn’t be life in that city, then, if it does all that for me, when the battle is done, if I am still standing, I will reward its loyalty by giving it one living dragon, the white one or the green one. The shadow can chose”.

“You’re lying,” Tysha accused him. “You don’t mean to honour that commitment,” she paused. “Besides, the shadow doesn’t speak in terms of men even when it uses the same language. It is treacherous by nature.”

“I shall do what is promised, on my honour as a Lannister.” Tyrion did his best to protest
wholeheartedly. “And you must be able to speak to our black smoky friend, and pass on my offer,” he guessed. “How else could you have helped summon one of its smaller siblings in that temple in Asshai?”

“The children can’t stay,” Tysha warned him, half-accepting his plea. “Remember?

“Or animals,” he remembered his little zorse very vividly. A true, striped friend.

There were none in Asshai. All human sacrifices were in vain as regards the much dreamed of miracle by which the womb of any Asshai’i would quicken. And the zorse had lived just long enough to get him and Jaime out, into the fields of slim ghost grass, but not a step further.

His eyes itched and soon he would be crying where everyone could see him.

No.

“Come,” his wife said, setting him to work, helping him out of his useless, sad mood that wouldn’t leave him today. Tonight.

They busied themselves with finding the few children and horses left in Castle Black. The effort needed to run back and forth, locate and gather the innocents was so demanding that they almost stopped feeling the nasty, cutting cold.

The sandsnake, Tyene, was calm and collected, talking to Mance’s son. She would accompany the children. Her noble, finely shaped and yet sharp teeth gritted less than Tyrion’s from cold. Looking at their shape, Tyrion had to wonder if they were poisoned.

Val had offered to go as well, but she seemed torn now. Undoing her long braid, she stared at the Wall. “Tell the wight that I won’t be away for long,” she told Samwell Tarly who came to give Gilly and her son a farewell kiss. His wildling girl would not part with her child to stay with him.

“Not anymore,” Gilly had said. “Once was too much.”

Tyrion was selfishly grateful that he and Tysha didn’t have children so he didn’t have to suffer a separation she might have chosen if she were a mother.

A few black brothers refused to part from their horses. In the end, they accepted their lot with despair, deprived of the means to desert easily if their courage failed them in face of the prospect of being first butchered and then enslaved by the white walkers.

“In the name of the king,” Tyrion repeated before such problems, and Jon’s name continued to work miracles even when he was gone.

Would that he could return .

Tyrion was fed up of being Hand in practice and he had only just started.

Finally, there were only adult people left in Castle Black.

The last innocent Tyrion found and gave to Val for safekeeping was a grey, striped, very domestic cat who enjoyed pickled cabbage in the deepest levels of the castle. Not quite a zorse or a lion. Yet Tyrion was ludicrously happy to locate it before the shadow returned. He hoped he wouldn’t see a different, dead cat he might have missed in the coming days.

Last ravens were sent to Eastwatch and to all the other, lesser forts, with strict orders to send any
vulnerable creatures present eastward, by the path that stayed clear of the Wall. Just south of Eastwatch, they would board a ship and sail to the Free Cities with the most favourable winter wind.

For Shadow Tower, Tyrion was pretty certain that there weren’t any children or animals left. The wildling children and cattle had sailed with the grown-ups for the Iron Islands long time ago, and the garrison was always unhorsed: scouting on foot if necessary, but preferring greatly to hide behind the Wall and do nothing, if possible.

In all the time it took to prepare the return of the shadow, Tyrion did not dare ask or check again on how the battle fared beyond the Wall. The Others were not yet pouring into the Seven Kingdoms so it must have been hanging in balance, somehow.

But for how long?

“Do it, please,” he told Tysha many hours later, when he reckoned that Val must have reached at least Mole Town and the black birds with letters Eastwatch. “Summon it.”

“You are playing with fire,” she pressed him hard, serious in her wish to have him reconsider.

“That makes two of us,” he rebelled. “You can’t stop gazing into the bloody flames. I’ll give up if you can think of something better. Can you conjure a swarm of living dragons?”

“No one can,” she replied with contempt. “And if by some miracle they would come into existence, they would only listen to their riders, and every single one would have different orders. The only thing they might do would be to involve in a war worse than this one, devouring each other.”

“The shadow-”

“can never be trusted. It might simply choke us,” she warned him with a sense of finality. “The notion of loyalty is unknown to it. Or different than human which is the same as inhuman. I can’t tell.”

“This is a trade we are looking for, not an oath of fealty,” Tyrion announced colly, “protection in exchange for a second largest living dragon, surrendered willingly to its dominion.”

“You will die plotting, Tyrion.” she said in a way that only she could judge him without insulting him, a little sad and equal part happy for him.

Please please please.

He didn’t know to whom he prayed but he did.

To some gods, perhaps, to those who existed and listened, old or new.

He pleaded that he would be destined to die many decades later, after long years of happiness.

Tysha looked away and intoned a monosyllabic chant, throwing a thin jet of dark blue powder from her bottomless pockets high into the air. Her breath was crystal, dense, as was his. The powder grains drifted in the wind, shining blue in moonlight, not falling. By the time her song ended, they had turned dark as pitch, black embers cracking and sparkling in the night.

The shadow approached very slowly, stretching itself cautiously in the direction of the Wall, one portion of it at the time, withdrawing from the previously conquered lands of the mountain clans.

Dark and foetid it arrived.
Tyrion took short breaths, fearing Tysha was right about its nature and that they would suffocate. Between bouts of panic, he realised he had grabbed both of his wife’s slim hands, making it impossible for her to complete the sorcerous invocation he had convinced her start.

Humbly, he took his stocky palms back and let her complete her work.

“It doesn’t trust me,” she said, “the dragon has to say it.”

“They only speak to their riders,” Tyrion lied. “He told me. I began to understand the secret talk of dragonkind.”

“You’re his new rider?” his beautiful wife asked with disbelief.

“I am,” Tyrion lied more blatantly. He had no clue why he heard dragon talk, but it certainly wasn’t accompanied with the obedience and submission due to a rider.

“Jaime is dead,” he said. “Didn’t your flames say that?” His eyes brimmed with tears for it could be true for all he knew. What else would make Viserion return to the Wall alone and act stark mad, chasing his own tail like a cur?


Tyrion gaped. It was one thing to fear for Jaime’s life and a different feeling entirely to learn true tidings of his death. Even if they were only visions, premonitions in flames.

*Fire doesn’t lie.*

His little heart had sunk in his boots when the shadow came closer, condensing in the sky above Viserion who still slept in snow, studying its future pay and prey. Slowly, the dark being crept up from there, reaching the top of the Wall, spreading left an right as a long black cloud burdened with odd consciousness.

Tyrion let out the breath he had been holding. “You did it!” he grabbed Tysha by the waist and spun her around, grateful.

“The shadow believed you,” she answered, breathless. “I wonder why. You were clearly lying.”

Tyrion wasn’t certain.

If the realm of men stood, he would honour his end of bargain.

But it wasn’t a very likely outcome.

With shadow’s help, they would all live a little longer and that was all.

He couldn’t expect anything more than that.

The enemies were too many, and a flock dragons was not yet born to defend the Wall in its entirety.

Even if Jon returned, what could he possibly do to reverse the tide?

What could Azor Ahai do if he still walked this earth in some sad dimension reserved for tragic heroes? Even if the Night’s King was killed, what would be of his armies, endless in numbers?

The horns blew three times again, for renewed attack.
Tyrion waded to the gates as fast as he could. Tysha wasn’t far behind.

In the tunnel, they saw Hodor and Shireen’s fool with its hat, both dancing with Cersei who sang loudly, with dissonance that hurt Tyrion’s ears.

“The shadows dance under the sea

I know, oh I know.”

“There’s only one and it’s about to do some physical exercise on the Wall,” Tyrion lectured them in passing.

Who cares for what’s under the sea?

Not even the Others, it would seems.

The enemy avoided sea water, its foam waves and crests, sticking to firm, frozen ground

In retrospect, he realised there was An unused greatsword was hauled on the giants back, forgotten.

Tyrion might have drawn it if he wasn’t far too short for that effort. Stumbling over rumble of ice and rock, he was propelled to the end of the tunnel and the gates which gaped open.

Outside, the bottom of the Wall was still clearly visible in moonshine, while the top looked not only far above anyone standing on two feet now, but also unclear in form, blurred and mushy. The shadow seemed to be living up to its commitment, eager to lay its dark, clawed hands on a living dragon, as soon as the time allowed.

On the battlefield, the Night’s King was winning. Tyrion had gotten time to deploy his despair-strategy with the shadow, but the cost of it was dear.

“You see?” Tysha pointed out, following closely in his steps. “It’s never innocent to summon a creature from Stygia. Someone has to pay for it instantly. Regardless of the calculations you have made for the future.”

Me. Dear gods. Me. Just not right now.

At that moment, the great shadow had obediently hidden the Wall in its entirety. The creature was seven hundred feet tall and many leagues long, stretching from the far east to far west end of Westeros.

All men who dared look at the Wall’s transformation gaped in shock, afraid of what the change might bring.

Its outer form was very irregular. The Others should not be able to reach the entire Wall at once with their engines for not being able to judge with precision where it stood. The Wall ought to remain defensible.

For a while longer.

“This is the beginning of the end,” Tyrion noted philosophically, shivering unstoppably from unbearable cold, holding’s his wife’s chilly, clammy hands. All that gazing into the fire had done nothing to make her feel any warmer.

And it seemed that right now, with the horror of battle before them, his courageous wife was also just a little scared.
“Imp!” Mance Rayder’s face was smeared with black and blue blood. “If you can’t handle the kneelers now, no one can. Tell them something. They need to stand and fight. Or at least withdraw orderly. Losses will be less.”

The shadow. Could the shadow be Azor Ahai and save the world by being selfish, rather than selfless? For a promise to have a living dragon!

Probably not.

The shadow’s presence lay heavily on the Wall, returning the battle to balance, maybe. The survivors were escaping in disorder, needing a break and a guarded place to regroup.

“Fall back” Tyrion yelled wondering if anyone heard or listened to him.

He saw the Night’s King smiling at Jon’s white direwolf, holding the magic sword of heroes washed in red blood.

Brynden Tully’s lifeless body hung from an evergreen tree, upside down, open from neck to the bowels. Black blood dripped from the devastating wound. His dead eyes still had vision, and they were no longer Tully blue, but those of a new wight.

“Take your time, my friend,” the Night’s King addressed the direwolf with a bright smile, as if he were talking to a fellow human being who was his equal. “I’ll be waiting for you on the Wall. But not for very long. My path lies south and east, why not?”

He swung his blade to slice the wolf’s neck. The magic sword was made of perfectly dull-looking steel in comparison with the shiny crystal weapons of his ice soldiers, yet it looked sharper than any other blade Tyrion had ever seen. Valyrian ones included.

It had an odd life of its own.

A dwarf who wholeheartedly disliked war and loathed taking active part in any battles, big or small, saw himself running forward, screaming Casterly Rock empty-handed. The hundredth of a second when the Night’s King looked at Tyrion to laugh at him gave the wolf the precious, little time to escape decapitation and vanish into the haunted forest, slipping like lightning between the many pairs of legs, either gnarled or dead.

The Night’s King continued to look at Tyrion with bemusement, not too upset by losing his prey. “Look, look, a dwarf defending the beast. Are you the crippled brother?”

“Yes,” Tyrion lied squarely.

Wherever Brandon had gone, it was surely much better if the enemy did not know. Perhaps it was fortunate that the Others did not gaze into the fires or showed much liking for them, despite that the ordinary burning of wood couldn’t hurt them.

“Seize him!” The Night’s King was closing the distance between himself and Tyrion who was running back as fast as he could. A tiny, but very sharp ice knife of foreign making zoomed past his ear. He ran faster, sweating.

The gate wasn’t where it should be. Only black wisps of smoke oozed from the place where Tyrion had left the Wall in his solitary quest to save Ghost. Uncalled for and risky.

He looked back, at his footsteps, for clue to where he was, but the snow had already covered them, falling without mercy.
With the last ounce of strength he ran on, sliding over high and frozen, slippery drifts of snow.

And at the moment when he probably should have hit the Wall, if he was completely wrong about the approximate position of the invisible gates, he held his breath.

Slim arms in long blue sleeves caught him before he hurt himself, pulling him under the shadow wings and towards safety.

In the tunnel behind the gates, he puked pickled beetroot and bile. ”I-” His throat was sore. He couldn’t speak anymore and in any case he did not know what to say.

“A drink will do you good, my love,” Tysha said sweetly, offering him a cup with melted snow. “Fear not. We are still here.”

Chapter End Notes

RL interfering again with speed of update and concentration for writing. Sorry about that.

Thanks for reading.
Rickon

In Mole’s Town, a bunch of ladies with snotty children who had trouble walking greeted Arya. He had never been *that* pathetic. Not even when both Father and Mother were alive, and he a baby. The proud blond woman with long tresses called Val, wildling to the bone, gave his sister the bad tidings. “Jon and Brandon have both gone missing,” she said grimly. “Daenerys as well. Now, Jon might have gone after his queen, to save her from a kidnapper.

Some say it was the Night’s King. But how? Hundreds of eyes keep watch on the Wall! Some frightened, and others determined, and one pair more awake than another Yet none had seen her pass beyond. And the Night’s King is right there now, leading the great siege in person.

The trees have closed their eyes and mouths. No one can see. No one can pass. Not the gods and much less men.

The enemy could have kidnapped the Queen only if he was a dragonrider. But all living dragons are accounted for. And none are enslaved by ice.”

Arya nodded, studying carefully the white shades of crisp snow under her feet. After a significant pause, Val continued very seriously. “It must have been a man, bearing ill will to Daenerys. A Southron if you ask me.

The North is indifferent to the fate of dragons, be it the kneelers or the free folk. We have no love or hate for their house.”

“Jon’s only half dragon,” Gendry dared say. “How can you not feel for loss? Is he not one of you, on his mother’s side?” Rickon snorted incredulously.

Arya’s husband could be as stupid as she sometimes said. Must be because he was one-eighth a dragon being half-Baratheon. (Or did Rickon remember wrongly his first lessons about the great houses with dear, late Maester Luwin?)
Now, well, in all honesty Rickon had no clue how it felt to be part dragon. With wolves it was simple. You were one or you were no wolf at all. You couldn’t be half or one-eighth wolf even if one of your parents was born a fish or a dragon.

How could a boy of nine explain that to a bastard who was now his good-brother?

“The kneelers say that the North remembers,” Val replied with dignity, doing a finer job than Rickon in explaining. “And perhaps they are right.”

Her voice was like a lute playing sadly at night. Some song about the good times so long gone that it was as if they had never existed.

“When the kneelers sent Jon to spy on us and betray us, Jon lived and fought like one of us, but he would have died for them, protecting his people,” she proclaimed. “Months later, when he was elected their Lord Commander, he hadn’t forgotten us. Now he would die for both us and them if needs be.

He’s more than a wolf or a dragon.

Few people still remember the weak when their star rises high and he’s one of them.

So, yes, young man, the North remembers, the kneelers and the free folk. We would respect his woman no matter who she was. We’d let her be. And if any of us knew where she had gone, we would give him tidings. Even if she were the cursed Mermaid Queen who would one day bring him to his ruin, if he weren’t strong enough to resist her ill-fated advice.”

Rickon became impatient. Couldn’t the speech about stupid mermaids end? Action was needed to find Jon and Bran. “Where is Bran?” he asked.

“What happened to Brandon is anyone’s guess,” Val continued thoughtfully. “Beastlings can turn mad from coping with their gift. Maybe that explains it, that he needed to wander off because it was too much to endure: possessing wings in his head for a boy who can’t walk. Or he too had fallen victim to the Others and we’ll see him next as a wight, or emerging under the skin of a white walker one of us will have killed.

“Bran couldn’t have left on his own,” Arya said morosely. “Someone helped him. Who else is missing? Does Jon know about it?”

Val shook her proud blond head, “I don’t think so, but we can’t be certain.”

Rickon’s guts twisted. Wasn’t it enough that Father, Mother, Robb and Lady had died? “We have to find them!” he exclaimed. His voice peeped, a child’s voice, unlike Bran’s, which had changed recently into a man’s timbre.

He hated himself, his weakness, his uselessness before the growing storm.

Arya had started to bite her nails during Val’s speech, eaten by worry. Gendry tried to embrace her, but she pushed him away, continuing to stand alone in knee-deep snow, staring at the edge of her boots as if it was the end of her world.

She had brought Jon the Horn of Joramun, polishing the wood clean every day for her favourite brother, even if only after honing Needle. She hadn’t allowed anyone else to handle the ancient heirloom, not even Gendry.

Their long journey on foot from Winterfell was cut short at times by the howling winter winds which
would not let them advance. At those times, Rickon suffered from strange waking dreams of white
trees with their eyes and mouth hanging wide open, paving the snowed down kingsroad with peeled
white bark and fallen, crimson red leaves.

Rickon imagined Arya would continue safe-keeping the Horn of Joramun, and stay on the Wall.

And he would finally be allowed to go beyond, on a quest to find Jon and Bran, instead of being
abandoned at home, or on an island full of savages and their unicorns, who were nothing but cravens
in the end.

The Skagosi had refused to fight for Winterfell, hiding in corners and stables until the dead Lords
and Kings of Winter had lifted the siege by no subtle means.

*Killing all the Others as they deserved.*

Rickon would never be a coward. He would search the earth and the sky to find his brothers and he
would duel monsters as he went, even the ice ones, with his Skagosi man’s knife. And when he
attacked, no one would have time to listen to his voice of a child and mock him.

Before he could give final shape to his adventurous, liberating thoughts, Val’s long speech took a
turn he would have never expected.

The wilding gave a sad look to Rickon in particular, eyeing his stone knife. “Children and animals
have to stay here. They must not be allowed to the Wall at any cost, for their own good. Jon’s dwarf
captain has summoned the foreign shadow back from Deepwood Motte, to conceal the Wall’s
precise position from the Others and their demon siege engines. He didn’t know what else to do, in
Jon’s absence.”

Rickon was nine and still a child by the world’s reckoning. Not so in his head. He had seen enough
death for a lifetime and felt ancient on the inside. Like Father, like Mother. Like the world.

Arya nodded instead of protesting. To her credit, she gave Rickon a very warm, stifling embrace
before marching off with the Horn of Joramun, vanishing under the shadow with Gendry and other
Winterfell’s adult folk. Even the damn Skagosi.

Rickon felt betrayed, and as if he had never known his sister. She used to be as wild as he was, and
now she was disciplined, respectful of laws and rules, avoiding lashing out without purpose.

Did everyone become dull and serious when they grew up? He didn’t relish it. He wanted to stay a
boy in his heart forever. And then, out of the dark blue of the night, he understood that the only way
to ensure it was to die, before he turned like Bran or Arya.

(Far away, freezing to death, Shaggy howled with the wind).

Rickon could not afford to go to sleep in this Mole’s Town, he was certain. His wolf dreams would
be too terrible to behold even for a man grown.

Another woman who definitely wasn’t a wildling, in a colourful gown hidden under thick black
cloak sewn with red threads, took Rickon to a married couple for boarding. He immediately
remembered the lady. He was a baby and she was dancing with Jon and Robb on a wedding.

“Hello, Rickon,” Alys Karstark said pleasantly, as if the Night wasn’t Long and the time wasn’t
ending. “You remember me, don’t you?”

He nodded mutely, wishing to bite her and run away after Arya.
But he was nine years old now, not three. He couldn’t act as an angry baby. “Lady Karstark,” he acknowledged the acquaintance.

“This is Styr, my husband.”

A wildling in bronze armour, a Magnar, nodded sharply at Rickon.

“Hello,” Rickon said unceremoniously. He was not a Thenn to follow his lead, and Styr was not a lord in Westeros.

“Styr will be returning to the Wall shortly so there will be place for you to stay here. You could tell me about growing up outside the Seven Kingdoms to cut short the long time of waiting for news about the war.”

“I haven’t grown enough it seems,” he retorted defensively, still a head shorter than Alys Karstark.

“Wait outside, Stark,” Magnar said stiffly, having trouble with Common Tongue, staring at his lady. “Please,” he added as an afterthought.

Lady Alys nodded with approval of her husband’s effort at courtesy, eyeing Styr with huge black pupils. Lovingly. With longing.

Rickon obeyed only half of it. He exited, alright. But then, outside, he ran away from the disgusting sounds of kissing, and Lady Alys crying, and excusing herself to her husband for not accompanying him anymore. She had to stay here because maybe, maybe, she was with child, despite old people whispering that women’s wombs no longer quickened because the world was about to end, and she could not risk returning under the shadow until she knew better.

Flying fast from all that adult nonsense, Rickon ended up before a great bone carriage from Stony Shore, readied and loaded for departure. Hastily, he climbed in. Under the cover of the Long Night, he hid under the spare furs and supplies, wishing he were much, much smaller. A true baby, why not, armed and ready for glorious battle.

For dawn.

Jon’s black eyes always shone when he mentioned it. Yet it was not Rickon’s brother who wielded a sword with that name, but a bastard from Dorne, now possessed by the Others and looking like one of them, if it weren’t for his silky, silver hair.

The Others hair was whiter than snow, pale, not shining.

Styr cut Rickon’s disparate musings short by appearing out of the blue and hopping on the carriage. Surprisingly, it was dragged by Thenns and Karstark retainers, not horses. Sliding deeper into the cargo, Rickon curled up next to a tiny heap of dragonglass weapons. Obsidian had replaced bronze and iron in this war.

But not dragonsteel.

The greatest blades were still Valyrian.

Some hundred yards away from Mole Town, the chariot was plunged into into unimaginably deep and opaque darkness, rattling as it went. From behind, Lady Alys cried out, howling desperately through the winter wind. “Rickon! Where are you?”

Styr didn’t hear a thing. He was only a Magnar, not a wolf. His hearing could never be as sharp. The
carriage continued on its way, abandoning Mole’s Town, the women and the children to their solitary fate of waiting. Clicking and creaking, it sleighed on top of waist-high snow drifts, returning north.

Instead of a familiar tall profile of the Wall, standing proud in moonshine, darkness became even more dense, thickening, lowering, pressing Rickon like a great stone used to make oil or wine. Air was a forgotten memory in Rickon’s lungs. He took very shallow breaths and struggled to keep his boy’s eyes open.

Up north, Shaggy was being wounded by the Others. With his tail between his legs, he vanished into the forest. He might die, Rickon realised, like Lady. His wolf’s eyes might close for good.

None of it bode well and perhaps he should have stayed in Winterfell, content to breathe and meet his dead from time to time when they ventured out of the crypts.

_Breathe now_, he admonished himself, acting like his own mother. _Don’t forget to do so, Rickon, child._

He hated every ounce of his boy existence.

Was dying any better?

He’d rather not experience it. Corpses could not rest in peace, not even in Winterfell’s crypts. All forms of afterlife around him looked appalling. No wonder that the free folk burned their dead. He didn’t understand it in Skagos.

He saw the reasons now. Clear as sunrise.

_Dawn._

A dream, a wonder, lost to boys and men.

“Lady Stark”, Magnar greeted Arya in passing. The Thenns had caught up with her, Gendry, and the bunch of Skagosi from Winterfell, trudging altogether on food through arse-deep snow. More kept falling, all the time. “Might I offer you a ride?”

Arya shook her head, stubborn as a mule. “I am headed to Castle Black,” she said, “Your destination is Eastwatch, I think.”

Eastwatch?

Rickon did not want to return there. It was too close to Skagos for his taste. Neither Jon nor Bran would ever turn in that direction. For some reason he was certain. And for him it would be the same as being imprisoned in Winterfell, far away from family and glory.

Aunt Lyanna was much more with child than Lady Alys, and yet he hadn’t seen her stay put in Mole’s Town. It did not surprise him, not even a little, to confirm that Jon’s mother chosen to stick to Castle Black, the first place Jon would return to. Did she know that her new baby would be able to breathe and grow under the black shadow? Or was she merely as brave as Rickon and all the other wolves trying her luck?

_Not all_, he recalled.
There had been a great coward in the past. An arrogant and ignorant firstborn son of a petty Lord of Winterfell, at that time a rural, mostly still wooden castle, very far removed from its future granite splendour.

Jon he was called, like Jon.

Not Snow.

Stark .

How did Rickon acquire that knowledge?

It must have been a nightmare he’d suffered from in Winterfell, not based on any fact. Jon Stark was the very first King of Winter. He must have been as brave as the rest. The first Night’s King must have been a Bolton, what else?

Rickon realised he must be rambling, like Bran when he was imprisoned in that cave, seated on a tree throne. A terrible destiny if there ever was one.

Was it all life had to offer? Being moved from one prison to another?

Declining the bone carriage ride Styr had offered, Arya continued to rely on her two tiny feet. Occasionally she closed her eyes. Rickon wondered if she was opening Nymeria’s, and if she was as afraid and as mortally wounded as Shaggy, and if they were together. They had been, until very recently, despite that Rickon had not seen the great she-wolf the last troubled time when he could open his wolf’s dazzled pupils.

He had to leave Shaggy. He had felt that he would have remained trapped in the dead body, unable to be a boy again, had he not run away with his tail between his legs.

Thenns readied themselves to pull the carriage further. Grateful for the darkness, Rickon understood he had had little time. Just enough. He could do it.

He crawled out from under the furs, and down from the carriage, avoiding Magnar and his human horses. Then, he trod after Gendry and Arya following his ears.

Not far from the starting point of his march, battle raged.

Shaggy’s sharp hearing would always remain with Rickon, even when his eyes were gone.

Castle Black was thoroughly besieged.

“The gate can no longer properly close!” voiced clamoured from the tunnel under the Wall, leading out and beyond.

And Rickon couldn’t walk any further, stuck in snow at the beginning of the gateway.

He had made a mistake. He did not listen. Children could not venture under the shadow. Now he would pay the price. Iron price, Theon used to call it, and he had already done so.

Was Theon also behind the gate? Fighting with the monsters on their behalf. It would be fitting. Theon was one of them even before becoming a wight.

Killing the millers’ boys… his gorge filled with bile.

It mattered little to Rickon that it was not Theon, but Ramsay, or any other evil man on this earth
who had committed the actual murder.

_Theon, are you out there?_

He grasped his huge stone knife and continued to walk against impossible odds. The shadow strangled him, disapproving of children for their innocence.

Anger took him forward,

Anger gave him strength.

“Winterfell!” he yelled, walking over grown defenders’ back as a child he was, crossing the tunnel and all the fighting in it, breaking through beyond the Wall.

When he saw the stars again, on the nightly sky, there was blue blood on his stone knife, which had done for the Others as if it was made of obsidian, and it also burned the wights as if it was emanating searing fire.

It had never been the weapon, and always the man, who had in him what it took to vanquish an opponent.

Well, not a man, an angry boy in this case.

Outside, he could breathe. The shadow’s clutches did not reach across the Wall. The wilderness was nonetheless overrun by an old evil which would ultimately overwhelm Rickon as well. Kill him slowly. Or extremely fast, if an ice blade caught his neck. But not just yet.

He hid behind a show drift large as a giant on a mammoth, pondering his choices. He could not survive on this side. He could not go back to the Wall. A few more gulps of shadowbreath would be his end. Like Shaggy, he would cease to exist before his time.

Behind his boy eyelids, tears threatened to fall. He bit his lips and refused to cry. Not even for Shaggy.

The discarded notion of going to Eastwatch suddenly seemed great. It was on the sea. He could sail or row to Skagos, gather those truly brave among the free folk and make incursions by boat, changing the course of battle, perhaps, by striking the Others in the back. Maybe the white walkers could be eaten, now that they stopped dissolving into crystals after being killed. It would improve food supplies on the island whose inhabitants were already known not to be picky about the meat in their bowls.

Rickon’s empty stomach turned from the memory. He had not tasted meat in his time in Skagos, and Osha said a prayer to the old gods every time she was too hungry to resist

His empty stomach howled, and he could choose if he wished to die from the shadow’s breath or from hunger, he realised.

And even if he chose the former, Castle Black’s gate, besieged and damaged, was completely closed off again, fully sunken into the shadow, invisible from beyond the Wall. The Others and the wights stopped forming a wedge they had created in the attempt to storm the gate. Now they were groping blindly in the dark, trying to find the Wall. Just like them, Rickon could no longer see it, he just knew more or less where it should be. Occasionally, balls of cloth drenched in dragonfire thrown from the blackness above hit the enemy hard, forcing the wights and the wight walkers alike to dissolve into bright, yellow and orange flames.
The fire was incomplete, lacking its red hue. Breathed by only one dragon, light in colour, and not by the whole race. Or perhaps Rickon was hallucinating, being so hungry and tired.

He swallowed two large mouthfuls of clean snow and headed to where he thought east must be, away from the Ice Dragon shining bright in the tall black sky.

A man grown could live on water for at least thirty days, right?

How much would a boy last?

His eyes were still wolf sharp. Tiny, wiry, short, prowling close to snow, he was able to avoid all enemies. They were searching for the Wall, not for warm-blooded boys hurt by shadowbreath. The long, tall line of siege engines flanked his path on the left side and the dark jagged shadow on the right-hand side.

Suddenly, under a sinuous siege contraption of unknown purpose, not too far from where he was, he saw a light.

Fire.

Who needed that beyond the Wall?

Only living creatures required warmth.

Possessed by crazy hope that people still dwelled hidden behind the enemy ranks, he changed his course. He had to bend and almost swim through snow to bypass the engine and all cursed creatures who manned it, all of them busy building and oiling the device with snow, aiming for it to reach a state of art of unknown perfection. Far behind it, in a grove of very old trees, dim firelight came from a cottage. Rounded and stony, one in a cluster of three or four abandoned houses, it must have been a human dwelling once.

Now it was not, Rickon discovered.

Or not quite.

In a single room behind a circular window of cracked glass, Aunt Lyanna lay in a bed of blood.

Her face twisted with pain, her body trembled weakly.

Next to her there was a wight.

Jon’s dead father.

Rickon drew his knife, grasping it with determination.

Dead Rhaegar startled from the sound and turned in his direction.

Cowed for a moment, uncertain what he witnessed, Rickon crouched in snow, remaining out of sight.

The wight did not seem to be hurting his widow in any way. He was merely holding her hand and trying to direct her movements.

Was that...?

Another wight was with the couple. A very familiar boy who had come to Winterfell with his sister,
Meera, when Rickon was still a baby. Soon after, Rickon had gotten to know Jojen almost as good as Osha. Was Osha still in Eastwatch? Or did she sail to the Free Cities? Always in fear that the Others would prevail, even when she fought them alongside everyone else. Rickon did not share her fear. Not even now, in mortal peril to which his own actions had brought him. Would Arya be pleased to learn that she was right to leave him in Mole’s town? Will you cry for me? His craven thoughts instantly made him remember Mother.

Mother. I love you so much.

Why did you have to die?

He wished so hard to believe that his mother was hiding somewhere like Jon’s mother had done for almost twenty years. Far away on a barge on the river Rhoyne. In the Free Cities. Waiting for her children.

Dead Jojen Reed held out both hands towards Lyanna, spread in a gesture of admiration and wonder. Rhaegar was on his knees, very busy with something. To Rickon’s astonishment, he pulled towards himself a twitching bundle, and brought it to Lyanna’s chest, where it began to cry.

Loudly.

Dead Rhaegar grinned. His cut throat gaped black and open. Very carefully, he picked a clean fur laying loose under Lyanna’s head and covered the little crying parcel. Warm and cuddling between his mother’s chest and the old rabbit skin, the baby quieted.

Rickon wondered if it was a boy or a girl.

Rhaegar sank on the frozen hut floor and cradled his head. Out of his wife’s line of sight, he sobbed without a sound, not shedding a tear.

The wights could not cry. Their bright blue eyes, whose colour looked terribly unnatural on Rhaegar, had dried out like the blood from their veins.

Soon, the twice vanquished king gathered himself and threw another damp sentinel log into the hearth. The flames sprang, jumped, crackled merrily. Jojen stayed prudently away from them, but the dead dragon almost leaned into their touch, not minding the writhing strands of fire, unlike any other walking dead Rickon had encountered.

Rhaegar could not burn. He was condemned to existence, Rickon understood. Cursed forever.

Many claimed he deserved it. For the Trident.

Others blamed Robert Baratheon, Aerys the Mad King or the gods. Anyone except themselves.

Rickon did not want to be the judge. That was for someone older, cleverer. Did wisdom come with age as it was claimed? Watching Rhaegar deliver a baby made Rickon wonder if there was any truth in that. Maybe there was no wisdom at all and everyone was born and remained stupid.

I could be hallucinating.

Either way, no one ever got what they deserved, right? Or Father and Mother would be alive, Jon and Bran defending the Wall, and Sansa safe with ladies in Mole’s Town working on embroidery. Shaggy would be here.
He resisted the temptation to open his wolf’s eyes and see if he was still alive or, more likely...

*Dead.*

It was time to steal some food and leave.

Except that... he didn’t see any.

What did Lyanna live from?

It struck him that perhaps she only just arrived, and that as a woman grown she could sneak back to the Wall when the gate opened, for her ration of pickled cabbage or cod.

He, a boy, could not.

The burden of injustice lay heavy on him. If the world was about to end, children should fight too, and not just *wait* to be slaughtered or smothered.

Horns sounded raucously from the Wall. Once! Twice! Thrice! For the Others, attacking.

Strident, different, shrill pipes responded, beginning to shred the darkness into shards of dark blue. Fiddling with great intensity, they ruined the night’s rest. The forest came to life around Rickon. Certain trees and snow drifts moved, standing up, revealing their true nature of *wights* who had been merely resting and blending into nature. Frightened, unsettled, Rickon huddled next to the hut, trying to look like snow, knowing he was probably very unsuccessful at that. Amazingly, the wights cared not for him, despite that a few had clearly seen him. Doggedly, determinedly, they marched away.

Long moments passed before Rickon understood. The wights were answering their masters’ call. To go to the Wall and perish attacking it, or to build and man the siege engines of their masters’ choosing.

But not all among their number to Rickon’s utmost surprise.

When the forest quieted, Jojen and Rhaegar had stayed in the hut, continuing to ignore the blowing of pipes. Impassive, they watched Lyanna. Her bed was clean now, the blood from it gone. They must have changed the linen and the furs while the rest of their kind marched to war and Rickon was in hiding.

Stunned, Rickon straightened up, revealing himself.

“Are you not bound to follow the summoning?” he heard himself speaking his heart to the dead.

Both wights stared him down with a killing look. Lyanna and her baby looked drowsy, their eyes blurred, not paying attention to their surroundings.

Undeterred, Rickon continued “Are you… independent from them?” he questioned, forgetting that the wights couldn’t speak, with the exception of Theon’s uncle Euron, who was also the only one with black eyes, both seeing now, despite that he had lost one as a young man.

Jojen shook his head.

“Then?” To consider that they might be free made him desolate. How many were killed like animals?

Wights could and should be killed because they were monsters, right? They had no humanity left. But what if the people go that wrong from the start? The war… the war for dawn would be a brother
war. Needless bloodshed, like the Trident.

Seeing Rhaegar and Jojen help Lyanna could still be explained. Maybe the slain occasionally remembered who they had been.

But this, this…

Suddenly, Jojen seized Rickon by the throat and started choking him, his grip inhuman, immortal. Angry tears sprang into Rickon’s eyes.

The war was just.

He should have stabbed both wights with his stone knife and dragged his aunt away-

He should have-

Rhaegar pulled Jojen off him. The corpse boy gave the old king an odd look, pointing quizzically at the baby.

The dead dragon shook his head, thinning his dark purple lips in a stern frown. Jojen nodded in submission and spread his hands in Rickon’s direction as if to say…

I’m sorry.

Rickon pushed him back hard, using both arms, letting his anger at how he had been treated show, toppling his former travel companion on the hut’s frozen floor.

Not that he minds, being dead at all.

Be that as it may, Jojen’s features twisted with pain.

“I’m sorry too,” Rickon reacted instinctively and he could swear that for a fleeting moment the dead boy smiled, looking so much like his father.

“Your father died, you know,” he heard himself becoming a bearer of bad news, like Val Mole’s Town. “He drank poison intended for Robb’s son. All nobles of the realm had gathered in your home, for the royal election, and then they attended the funeral. Lord Howland’s ashes were scattered from a boat sailing through the bog. He’s become one with the green of the water, your folk had sung. There was no burial. No crypts like for the Kings of Winter. The crannogs had resounded with voices, drums and flutes, and Meera… Meera had cried.”

The last Reed left.

Bran’s betrothed.

Joen’s blue eyes widened before flashing. Angry. Green.

Rickon shielded himself instinctively with his arms, expecting another attack.

Rhaegar lifted both hands in a gesture that commanded peace.

Joen’s face became indifferent. Very slowly, he stood up from the floor where Rickon had thrown him, and began to leave lazily in the direction of the Others’ flutes, calling the slain like mad, louder than the horns on the Wall that had already sounded three times, for the Others approaching.
Reed’s shoulders sagged while he was leaving, slumped heavily, as though he was ninety years old. Unhappy. Defeated.

Rhaegar still lingered.

Then, he beckoned Rickon to follow.

“What about them?” Rickon protested chivalrously on behalf of the aunt he had met only very recently and not in great depth, and her new baby. Much smaller than Rickon had ever been to be sure. Perhaps it was a girl. Little Robb would feel like man grown if he ever met his new cousin.

“I should be alright, my sweet nephew,” Lyanna murmured with a hoarse voice of a person waking from deep slumber. “My husband is not a monster,” she paused. “Or not at all times,” she added bluntly. Her confession was straightforward and without embellishments, endearing her to Rickon. “The Wall is death for children,” she sounded as if she was pleading. “I had to take my chances when my time came. Mole’s Town is too far.”

“It’s not nearby,” Rickon wholeheartedly agreed, and dared follow Rhaegar out of the hut.

He guessed he would die of hunger.

In the dark green, snowed down grove, a dead horse grazed the tree top of a young sentinel, buried almost entirely in snow that reached Rickon’s arse. His dead, silver-haired uncle lifted him as if he weighed nothing, placing him on the cursed animal back. The horse had no saddle and his rump was freezing cold, hurting Rickon’s thighs. At that, Jojen returned with a white cup filled with lukewarm red liquid. Nervously, he made gestures to Rickon to drink…. One sip at the time.

Rickon obeyed. One gulp of the potion warmed him beyond expectations-

And then-

He had to hold onto icy brown mane and neck for dear life. The horse galloped forward with deadly speed, staying behind the enemy lines, heading east or north, Rickon could not tell.

He dared caress the dead animal, who neighed ferociously as a result, loud like the Others’ horns.

xxxxx

Hours later, he was still riding a wight. Did he change sides? Was he a traitor now? Was Aunt Lyanna?

He gave a small laugh and relaxed. What’s done is done.

A point of no return.

On the run, he took a sip of Jojen’s drink, thinner than water, rich red in colour.

Poison, he thought, expecting to faint and die. Here or under the shadow it matters little.

Stupid boy.

A baby playing at men grown.

Despite his foul mood, new vigour permeated his body. He could almost feel his hair growing. It was very long for a boy and almost as brush-like and intricate as a unicorn’s, tucked under the bushy Skagosi headdress which kept his head warm.
Drop by drop, he consumed the rest of Jojen’s gift, careful not to spill it during his horse’s rapid,
jittery advance. When the mug was empty, he wanted to throw it away, into a huge drift of
immaculately pristine snow. His hand swung and stopped half-way. What he was about to do
suddenly felt like an evil sin. Instead, he stuck the cup in the side pocket of his tunic. Not far from his
heart, it throbbed. Like a warm, living creature.

*Like my heart.*

Grasping the stiff neck of his new dead companion, he shivered in saddle, riding the fastest horse he
had ever seen.

At times, he must have even slept.

And each time he startled and regained consciousness, washed in cold sweat from fear that he had
fallen and was now dying in snow, he began counting the stars to stay awake, begging them to keep
him company.

A hundred days must have passed since his journey had started or since the gods had closed their
eyes to the grief of men. Only the stars still watched over them, shedding their light on earth.

Heading east, Rickon had left the brightest one behind.

*The Ice Dragon.*

After a long, long ride, he first heard and then glimpsed the expanse of the shivering sea, raging
beneath the high cliffs of a craggy coastline, manned only by birds.

*So familiar.* White vultures screeching, searching for fish.

*Seagulls.*

Deep below, between scattered whirlpools of foam, tiny black dots floated, bouncing off the most
savage of waves.

*Boats.*

He rode to the edge of the cliff to see better, incredibly tired and, quite unbelievably, not hungry at
all. Jojen’s drink had been more filling than roasted meat or freshly baked, well spiced turnips.

From closer by, the dots were more brownish than black, neither sailing nor rowing.

Poor animals. Large, hairy and unattractive, dirty brown in colour. He could not distinguish their
foreheads yet, but he guessed that, by the looks of it, they were adorned by a single horn.

The unicorns must have have left Skagos before they would become salted or pickled food and not
only fabric for garments of the island dwellers in the Long Night.

Much like the rats abandoned a sinking ship, the unicorns had left their home.

A wave of battle sounds suddenly approached Rickon from the back, clamour of voices and swords.
He looked in that direction and saw crystal clashing against dragonglass under the starry sky.

Death, death everlasting, he thought incoherently, feeling mad.

His horse shivered now, whinnying nervously, terrified, skitterish.
Two wights on foot charged at his position out of nowhere, urged to murder him by a single white walker who stood idly nearby.

The Wall must be there, he realised, where the noise came from, where the fuzzy blackness profiled itself against the dark blue sky. The turrets of Eastwatch must lurk behind it, hidden from sight by the Shadow, dark and wooden, crumbling.

He brandished his knife and bared his teeth, feeling angry like Shaggy before he was mortally wounded.

But before he could deal a single blow, his mount reared savagely, throwing him down. His right foot remained in stirrup. He struggled to wriggle it out. The horse trotted forward, carrying them both towards the edge, into nothingness beyond the cliff. Somewhat slower, the wights followed suit. In a violent, mindless kick, Rickon freed his foot. The horse flew into the void, screaming when he lost the soil under his hooves. The boy rolled away, stopping himself a few yards down the goat trail descending the rock. The splash of the horse’s fall was swallowed by the loud roaring of the waves.

Lured by the horse’s fall, still in pursuit, the wights flew above Rickon.

It would seem that they were too clumsy to stop or change direction.

The waves yelled, foamed, bellowed, belched. Angry and wild, they swallowed his persecutors whole.

He was alone.

Swiftly, he clambered down the cliff. Half-way, he dared believe that the white walkers thought him dead and no one would follow.

Until he heard the rumbling of little rocks being kicked behind his back, between the majestic sound of the two breaking waves.

More were coming.

Rapidly, he unclasped his cloak and let it fall. Among the waves, it would only serve for him to drown much easier. In tunic and breeches, he jumped, tiny legs dangling in the wind. His garments were Skagosi, made of fabric woven of unicorn hair, more resistant to water than wool or linen. He wouldn’t be warm, but he wouldn’t freeze to death—

Or so he thought.

The shock of immersing himself into the great mass of water was unbearable. His heart almost stopped from the coldness of the sea.

Diving out, he was disoriented. Waves threatened to close above his head. He struggled to stay afloat and establish where he was. Half-guessing, half seeing where to go, he swam in the direction of the unicorns, but couldn’t reach them. Desperately, he mooed like one.

An animal responded, its voice much more genuine and convincing than Rickon’s.

He mooed enthusiastically some more, swallowing awful, distastefully salty water.

The sea was just another enemy.

His limbs turned stiff and frozen, refusing to obey his desire to keep swimming. Somehow, he stayed
adrift despite the raging waves. After eternal time, he felt a movement of another body in his proximity. Powerful. Stinky. Hairy.

He grabbed the unicorn’s long neck as soon as it was within his reach. Clinging to it, he caressed the horn with affection. The animals loved it, he knew. The unicorn bent his head with approval, mooing confidently. Only then did Rickon dare stride it and press his thighs into his harsh skin, directing it towards the coast, where the gates of Eastwatch were under attack. Even wet, the animal emanated warmth where their bodies touched, like the dead horse could never have done.

Poor horse, buried at the bottom of the sea like the two wights sent forth to kill Rickon.

Rowing towards dry land with his feet, he wondered if he would immediately start choking here as well, as soon as he approached the Wall.

He was relieved when it was not the case.

In shallow water, he whistled with content. Continuing to caress the horn, he waited for the animal to realise that its muscled legs could carry it again. The rest of the herd followed suit. Shaking off the excessive water, they engaged in the same effort of rebalancing their weight. Riderless, they were braver than men.

Or just more desperate never to return to Skagos.

Rickon rode his unicorn towards the Wall. Cantering. Trotting. Galloping.

“Winterfell!” he yelled when his speed became greater than he believed possible from such a non-dexterous, big animal.

“Skagos!” he exclaimed next. It was more fitting.

Winterfell was far away, forgotten, abandoned, alone. Guarded by ghosts of the past.

Larger than a horse, though much smaller than a mammoth, his unicorn was a boulder in motion. His hairy tribe speeded after him, mooing angrily.

The unicorns rushed madly into the battle, toppling the whole small army of the white walkers under their hooved legs and short, sharp claws. When the stampede passed, the Wall defenders did the rest, finishing with dragonglass what the beasts had started with their paws. Rickon searched for his next target. Another bunch of Others.

Only them.

He left the wights for someone else, full of doubts about their nature and status of slavery.

The battle had gone so well thus far that he didn’t even miss his stone knife.

Riding on, he wore his joy of battle on his sleeve.

Short-lived.

Near shapeless darkness which must have been hiding the Wall, the air escaped his lungs. His vision danced, blurred. His focus vanished.

He needed a new swim. With last strength, he tugged the unicorn’s horn, signaling the necessity to turn back.
His unicorn obeyed after a long while, much less fast than when ordered to run over the Others. Swift like starlight, he finally galloped back, and plunged into the shivering sea. Rickon’s teeth gritted from chill, Skagosi special garments notwithstanding. The other unicorns stayed on shore, grazing young top branches of frozen pine trees. Rickon began to drift south on the waves, carried by the cold current near the coast.

His legs were jelly and he could no longer control his steed. Crippled and frozen, he almost gave up fighting when he spotted a ship.

“Please swim there,” he begged the animal, grasping its horn, despite knowing that it did not understand him at all. It wasn’t Shaggy. Nor the tender white hart from Sansa’s books, waiting to be tamed. Its skin and hair were harder than the brush to scrub stone floors clean after a great feast.

Near the ship’s wooden hull, Rickon exclaimed, “Hello there!”

The sailors did not notice him, busy unfolding the sails, preparing the ship for imminent departure.

He rode a wave to swim around, hoping to be heard from the other side.

When he circled the prow, he saw a large boat, anchored and docked to the ship. Shireen Baratheon stood in it with Tommen Lannister and Robin Arryn. The fat prince had grown taller than Bran, and Rickon’s sickly cousin wasn’t much shorter. Four men with rows completed the tiny boat crew, ready to row back with their betters. Rickon felt angry for growing so slowly.

If I had Bran’s age, he noted with envy, the shadow would let me fight.

Shireen was clad in black. The boys were armoured, bowing to the lady with deepest respect. Both blushed, Rickon noted, puzzled.

“You shall be safe in Storm’s End,” Tommen Baratheon announced solemnly. “It would gladden my heart to visit you in spring and find you in good health. King’s Landing would be lost without the miracle in your hands. It is our duty to preserve it, if the sickness of greyscale returns.” A dreamy look was in his green eyes, almost as watery as the sea holding Rickon and his steed prisoner.

Rickon didn’t think that Tommen’s speech had anything to do with Shireen’s healing talent. Tyrion had also cured the Southrons from plague, yet no one forced the Imp, leading Jon’s army in Castle Black, to board any ship.

“I- I- I-” Shireen stuttered noisily, voice breaking.

“It is for the best,” Robin Arryn added wisely, barely taller than her, and possibly younger of age. His hands shook with nervous spasms and his face was too pale. A few black hairs grew on his chin.

Rickon scratched his wet, smooth face itching from salt. All his hair was a bushy orange mane on his head. Only wights had a brighter hue of both eyes and hair. Blue and red.

What did it make him?

For a moment, Robin looked as if he would say something more to Shireen, but then he just lowered his handsome head, appearing too embarrassed to continue.

A ladder was lowered from the deck, speaking for itself, inviting the lady to board.
“I have no wish to return home,” she finally found her voice. “Who is to say what I shall find there? I wish to witness the end of the war and not wait for the ravens.”

She was right. There were no more safe places in Westeros. Not even the God’s Eye island with the little green men keeping the peace.

Robin found his eloquence too, “The road to Mole’s Town is too close to the Wall and you can’t live in the forest. The Wall is death to children—... To the very young I meant to say. Please,” he said and blushed profusely.

Rickon wondered why both Tommen and Robin acted in Shireen’s presence like much bigger fools than what he remembered. They looked as if they would burst into insipid love songs Sansa loved so well.

*Florian the Fool and his lovely Jonquil.*

Rickon preferred the song of Jenny of Oldstones, with flowers in her hair.

Shireen sighed. “Farewell, my lords,” she said with dignity. “I shall see how far the winter winds will take me. Maybe only to Gulltown and not to Storm’s End.”

She began to climb the ladder. Tommen and Robin both held it steadily at the bottom so that she wouldn’t fall. When she crossed the railing, they took their lordly places in the boat, acting stiff and grown.

*False,* Rickon thought bitterly.

The oarsmen returned to their work with diligence, and the boat was very soon lost in the direction of Eastwatch, deep under the shadow.

The ladder was still there.

“How, Lady of the Grey Death!” Rickon saluted as loudly as he could, pedalling in water with difficulty, trying to come closer.

The unicorn moaned tiredly. Perhaps the swim was too long.

Shireen Baratheon looked down.

She’d grown as well since the time he’d met her, when Arya and Gendry had rescued him from the ice cell in Castle Black. She’d helped freeing him from the dungeon in which her father had dumped him in, as far as he understood.

“Shireen Baratheon,” he proclaimed pompously in his voice of a boy, coughing salty water out of his throat. “What is it that you want and cannot have?”

The sound of her name in his mouth was warmer than unicorn’s body under his tired, skinny, soaked legs.

“It was you?” she laughed wholeheartedly.

Rickon’s pride hurt. “Me what?” he asked.

“The mighty ice warrior turning the tide of the last battle for Eastwatch-by-the-Sea with a horde of horses from seven hells,” she continued with friendly affectation. “Has the shadow made them blind?”
“They aren’t horses,” he reacted, still offended.

“I can see that,” she said prettily. Only her eyes continued laughing, but not in an insulting way.

Why was Rickon ever cross with her?

“Could you do me a favour?” she asked, descending.

“Why not?”

He could not have said no. Not even if he was obliged to or if he wanted to deny her wish, not knowing his own reasons for his strange behaviour.

_A baby, he was a baby, right?_

“What is it?” he remembered to ask at least.

“Take me to the shore.”

“Why?” He felt like Jon now, always having queries.

Jon asking Father who his mother was.

Poor Father, how he must have wanted to tell the truth! And then, of course, he could not. Father could never commit a wrong on purpose. And so it happened that he died a man grown and more innocent than Rickon at the age of nine: Rickon who had been to Skagos and rode a dead horse just now...

“They’re sending me away believing that I’m a child,” she replied. “I did not yet have my blood.”

Rickon felt himself blushing. What she mentioned was unspeakable. Ladies did not talk about it to boys and in Skagos women hid from the society in those days, until they were no longer soiling themselves.

“But you just came from the Wall,” he protested. “You would have known if you were a child.

“No,” she shook her head, “they dragged me away from Castle Black as soon as the shadow began approaching, and hauled me onto the boat when the battle for Eastwatch began. They joined me later, but only to see me off.”

“I don’t have a vessel to offer,” he said, teeth clicking loudly from chill.

“Come closer,” she said from the boat and the damn unicorn obeyed her.

“Gods!” she cried out, sitting behind Rickon, lowering her legs in water. “How is it that you didn’t freeze?”

“I was about to, but he didn’t let me,” he gently tapped the unicorn’s shoulder. “I thought you’d invite me to the ship,” he added, “not take up swimming in bad weather. Come on,” he told the unicorn. “You heard the lady.”

They didn’t even reach the shore before Rickon started to suffer. For a while he managed to endure it. Shireen did not seem to experience any discomfort, walking over the stony, inhospitable beach.

“How is it that you didn’t freeze?” he asked her with utmost difficulty, choking unstoppably.
“Yes.”

*Then you’re not a girl anymore, blood or not,* he thought, unable to speak, losing the struggle to breathe, seeing himself falling into snow as if he was a ghost above his own body. His suddenly inhabited an eagle flying over his fallen self… A flock of magpies chattered in disagreement in a nest so high up that he could eat them all. In eagle’s skin, he could almost, almost understand their conversation..

“*You* can’t breathe!” Shireen exclaimed with fear from very, very far below. “Wake up” she gasped and took him in her arms, loading him on the unicorn and slapping its rump until it grudgingly walked back into the sea.

Only then did he return to his body. The eagle was soaring high up, north and west, in the direction of the Ice Dragon and the Lands of Always Winter.

“That was close,” he said.

“I’m so sorry,” she excused herself.

He closed his eyes and dreamt that he was three and ten, and wearing iron armour of intricate foreign making. His sword belonged to heroes and the Night’s King himself would not be able to stand against him.

“Rickon!” he was called softly. A gust of wind carried the sound of the lady’s voice towards him. Piercing his ears it woke him up.

He was in bed, dry and dressed in white linens.

“My unicorn?” he asked immediately.

“Swimming with his friends,” Shireen replied. Her black hair was loose drying all over her cloak. There was no red on her lips, no jewellery. “They all seem to be fond of it.”

She was seated at a small circular table, writing a letter.

“You do poems?”

It was what Sansa did when she was eleven. Her verses were very boring. Only Septa Mordane liked them.

“A letter to Tommen and Robin.”

She was perhaps considering marriage offers. What else would a highborn lady do?

Rickon was displeased by the notion.

“I shall grow and speak prettier words to you than any of them,” he blurted

“How come?” she put her quill down and sounded honestly puzzled.

“Because I will admire you, I think, Lady of the Grey Death,” he spoke fervently. “Not your fame of a healer nor your lovely hair. You carry death on your face and yet it didn’t take you. It is remarkable. You’re still here.”

“You’re a child,” she laughed. “I will either die or be married long before you become of age.”
A drop of dragonblood was right there in her, warm and self-assured. Jon had it. Rhaegar used to have it, but now he had lost it all, through a gaping black cut in his throat.

“I have never been to Storm’s End,” she whispered, taking Rickon into her confidence. “I won’t go now. My decision is in my letter to Lord Lannister and Lord Arryn because I didn’t find it in my heart to tell them in person.”

“Why not?” Rickon murmured.

“People rarely showed true concern for me, especially when they were young and handsome.” She turned the grey valley of her face very slowly towards him. He could not tell if there was any purpose in her movement and he didn’t have the heart to ask. It was desolate. Her neck was wrapped in a scarf so he couldn’t see the whole extent of the markings. “I didn’t want to sadden young lords striving to be noble by telling them to their faces that their attempt to rescue the maiden and put her in a tower is entirely in vain.”

“There is only one tower in Storm’s End, isn’t there?” Rickon fantasised, “A great cylinder one? Older than the Seven Kingdoms?”

“Drum,” she replied calmly. “I guess so. I have yet to see it someday.”

In candlelight, she was kind and friendly and not ugly at all.

He wolfed down black bread someone had put on his bedside table, next to an empty white mug taken out of his pocket.

Cold to the bone, in need of more rest, he begged, not sure if he saw in her a girl he could play and trade stories with, a pretty lady who made him blush, a mother who loved him or all those things. “You will stay here writing your letters, right? Don’t go away, promise?”

She nodded calmly, taking back her quill.

Where stags and dragons would not go, the wolves would, he concluded imperiously while falling asleep. One day he might take her to see the Drum. There were many great, scary stories about it. Bran loved them. Maybe he would come as well.

First things first.

The war.

He would swimming from the ship to shore, and back again, on unicorn’s back, running the Others down.

Wearing his joy of battle on his sleeve.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading :)}
The Last Hero

He was ready.

Devastatingly slowly, he surrendered, allowing the majestic tree to take over. A weirwood root wrapped his stomach, another crossed his heart. Absentmindedly, he wondered if the next one would pierce his eye, and if it did, if it would happen in his sleep or waking state, and how much it would hurt, if the latter.

He didn't have much time. Perhaps he was already too late.

The crystal ramparts erected by the wights under the incessant pressure of the Others rivaled the Wall in height. Soon they would challenge the great creation of Brandon the Builder by rising even higher. It was the intention of the Great Other from the very beginning, ever since he woke from deep sleep, after thousands of years.

Men thought that the growing snow fort was just another siege engine. Even Jon believed it.

*Engine, huh?* Bran snorted knowingly, chained by the white branches.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Ice ladders and catapults were only a distraction from the true purpose of so much construction.

Oh, to rebuild the hallowed walls far away from home!

To reinvent a great city, much more splendid than King’s Landing!

More imposing than Winterfell behind its granite walls. More impregnable than the Eyrie, the falcon’s nest, hanging from the mountain. With lines of tall towers greater than those of Harrenhal before they were melted by dragonfire.

In his last days in Castle Black, Brandon had tried hard not to see.

He had closed his eyes to the world just like the old gods had done.

Avoiding to be a greenseer as though it meant falling sick from ice plague, he had been successful in denying his gift.

Until, one night, a vivid dream swept him off his feet. A vision more powerful than his desire to be a knight, stronger even than his love for Meera.

He had seen the walls of a great city from yellow-coloured stone, standing proud in its homeland, in the fabulous east of the known world. Across the Narrow Sea and the grassy plains of Essos, beyond the Free Cities, the Slaver’s Bay and the Bone Mountains, as far east as Asshai but more... *north*, perhaps.

The city was sacred to its inhabitants.
To its kings and its heroes.

Yi Ti it was called.

Its proportions were perfect, existing in immaculate balance with the world. With day and night, the sun and the moon, the seas and the mountains. With the trees and all creatures drawing breath, warm or cold blooded.

In Yi Ti’s heart, there was a precinct. A citadel never taken by any foe. Every conqueror who had succeeded in breaching the outer walls had bent the knee before the wisdom and harmony of the inner enclosure, the holy of holies. In the end, all would-be destroyers returned home, content with taking with them only one spoils of war: that their eyes had had the honour of contemplating the heavenly perfection on earth, in a city built by men.

The Others had somehow learned about Yi Ti and set the wights to replicate its flawless dimensions. They surmised, and rightly so, that the ancient city was so noble that its imitation would fool the magic of the Wall, making it believe that it could stop defending itself because foreign friends with good intentions approached from the north, and not mortal, deadly enemies.

Once the Wall decided to open up to the newcomers, the ungodly shadow could no longer hide it.

In his vivid dream of doom, Bran had seen it banished back to Asshai, soaring eastward, high above the dark northern forests and the vast grassy plains. Flying over the high, treacherous seas with a cry of dismay on its black mouth. Dragonless and betrayed it left, thirsty for revenge, with its black tail wound up tight between its shapeless legs.

When Bran’s dream came to pass, Jon’s defences would be exposed. Naked. Laid bare. Same would be true for anyone else leading the men. Not even clever Tyrion Lannister would be spared. Wits could achieve only so much in war. The rest was sheer power.

One wielded it …

… or one did not.

There was nothing in between.

The Others would burst into a song of winter and the decisive moment would come. There would be perfect parity between the two sides. Any outcome would be possible.

There must have been iceseers among the Others, revealing to their race the proportions of the holy city. Just like there used to be greenseers among men, who witnessed distant past, strove to capture the vanishing present and sometimes caught a glimpse of the most uncertain future.

He was the last one.

He could deny the truth as much as he wanted but he could not turn it into a lie by hiding from it or running away.

Now it was time to take one step further. Not only to see, but also to shape the time he had left.

That was the task of Brynden Rivers before his death. Enthroned, the Bloodraven had laboured to keep the Others asleep and the world warm, maintaining the past apart from the present. But then he’d turned too old and frail, and failed in his duties. The Night’s King had overpowered him, murdering him together with the last children of the forest: triumphant over the race who had created his own, with the intention to abuse it in their endless war against the giants.
Or maybe winter would have come no matter what, and the world would change to its present state, stark, dark and utterly hopeless.

And so very cold.

*Even if Bloodraven was still here.*

Bran felt warm tears rolling down his face. Then, almost at once, they froze into ice beads, unpleasantly pinching his skin. His cheeks burned and itched from terrible cold and his throat constricted from the memory.

The one-eyed dragon had helped him, in his way, before he was butchered on his throne. He had also ensured that his old sword, Dark Sister, would not fall prey to the Night's King.

Bran had loved wielding it with Hodor's hands, gazing through Hodor's eyes. A beastling. A skinchanger. A crippled youth who could only fully experience the joy of battle by chasing the spirit of another person or animal into unwilling submission.

What did it make him?

Dark Sister was now left with Hodor on the Wall. Bran hoped that he would not simply leave it in a wormway and forget that he ever carried it. Hodor's regard for famous swords was as great as the esteem for flowers, ribbons and kittens of an average man-at-arms.

Another important part of Bloodraven's legacy was passed on to the other sleepers, scattered on many lesser thrones positioned deeper inside the cave, closer to the earth's core. Those seats had the power to influence the change of seasons and murmur tender melodies of spring that might come again some day.

But they could not intone the great song of the earth.

They could not sing new things into existence, like the children had done to create the Others, nor could they bend space and time, forcing the world to take a few different turns then it would on its own.

Only Bran could do so, and that was perhaps the reason for the greenseer's throne to be visible and exposed to anyone passing by. At the height of his strength, a greenseer could probably overpower any foe.

The lesser sleepers were vulnerable and fully sheltered by the trees, invisible to anyone with the intention to cause harm.

Bran had enjoyed that protection until he began to hate his dreams of spring and woke alone in the darkness between Hodor and Meera, miserably longing not to be a sleeper, or a damned greenseer, but a brave knight, able to stand, walk and *climb*.

The Night's King throne had the same powers like Bran's, malleable and unpredictable.

Yet the Great Other had recently forsaken it, understanding that the mighty trees only allowed him to trick Jon and other wanderers beyond the Wall by changing the lands in which they walked. But they turned deaf ears whenever he tried to dream of bringing down the Wall.

If the weirwoods would to that, if they could have done that, and Bran had no clue if it was the case, then the Others might have been victorious in the past. They would have never gone to sleep again.
The Long Night has come and gone before.

How could the Night’s King ever have expected help from the trees? The same blood ran in greenseers and Brandon the Builder.

The same magic.

From before the sin of the children, untainted by their terrible error.

Or perhaps both magic and strength of all races had limits, and some deeds could only be done the gods.

Which was the same as to say that they could not be done, for the gods had closed their eyes. (Or they had died suffering like so many of their people, or they had never existed.)

There was only one life and one death.

(And the terrible states in between of late, undead or ice-plagued, Bran remembered)

Be all that as it may, the Bloodraven had clearly wanted Bran to replace him.

He was young and brave. He had a chance to set things right.

With renewed courage, he dreamed the ice Yi Ti, growing very slowly into its final, perfect shape before the Wall, built for the Others by their slaves. How could the humiliated dead have learned from their masters so fast and in such detail about the greatest city of men that they could so swiftly reproduce its sacred appearance?

The wights could not see, not even if they wanted.

The absent gods and the living had the gift and the choice in that regard, not so the fallen.

Brandon had never seen a single description or drawing of Yi Ti, or its history, in any book or scroll that Maester Luwin had given him to study. Perhaps he should have spoken about it with the Imp, who was as learned as the maesters, before running away from Castle Black. Or he should have told Meera, who had no green dreams of her own, but knew about Jojen’s. Acting like her brother’s confidant, she’d listened, laughed and cried about them, when they ultimately foretold Jojen’s death.

The sea coming to Winterfell. The sea that had come for Jojen in the end.

Meera might have been able to help Bran understand what his visions meant and if they had any hold in the world.

Not every dream was green, not every dream became true.

But it was too late for any of that.

Brusque clash of swords drew his attention. Was there fighting, screaming in the cave? Who else was there with him? Was he in a cavern at all?

The sole thing in existence was his throne, owning and usurping him. After closing all his eyes, the boy’s, the wolf’s and the crow’s third eye, he had completely forgotten the manner of his return to the high seat that was meant for him. The roots were busy performing the necessary harm on his body so that his spirit could fly free and take over.

At the same time, he knew he must have come with someone, He could never have done it alone.
The crippled wolf who would never grow true wings.

The chilling song of steel was definitely not far from him and he was tempted to open at least one of his many eyes.

No.

So little time.

The thought was sobering. Did he have even less time than the completion of ice Yi Ti would still take? Chance was that some of those exchanging blows in the stale darkness of the cave wanted to see him dead, and the greenseer’s throne emptied forever.

He could only hope that he was brought here by loyal, brave men who would defend him with their life if need be.

And he had to work fast.

Forcing himself to ignore the sounds in his surroundings, his mind returned to his purpose.

Gazing far north, it didn’t take him long to find the enemy’s throne in the Lands of Always Winter, gaping empty as Bran surmised. With great patience, he began looking back in time, searching for the most recent moment when the Night’s King had reclined on it, contemplating the prospects of his war, before taking the lead of his armies.

That moment Bran was now searching for could not be too far in the past.

Could it?

The enemy had brooded and waited before joining the battle, aware that the great number of soldiers he could field might not give him victory. Not as long as the Wall defended itself and remained hidden from his sight by the sinister shadow.

The Night’s King had looked into the past and he had looked into the future.

He had forced the roots and the trees to do his bidding, bending their ancient will to his own, abusing the closed eyes of the old gods for his ill intent, opening them by the great strength which was in his person. He had seen it all and he had seen it right.

Now was the time for him to strike hard.

Right now, right after completing the Yi Ti of his dreams, he would press forward with all he had while Jon was away, lost, and perhaps gone.

He omitted turning his warlike gaze towards the cave which he deemed empty and thus did not see the greenseer back on his throne.

Not yet.

After what seemed years of patient, calm searching through the trees, Bran finally caught a glimpse of the enemy, fast asleep on his high seat. He wanted to slay him then and there with the sharp, vicious blade his mind had turned into from too much thinking and dreaming, over the long years in which he had lost the use of his legs.

His young, wild mind had surrendered to the gods, giving all remaining life force of his body to the trees, supplicating to receive in return the unmatched strength of spirit needed to end the war.
He needed to be a hundred times deadlier than Bloodraven if he was to succeed in what no one had ever tried before, killing his opponent over distance while he slept.

In one flawless go.

But, an inch away from tempting his fate, he hesitated, deciding to wait just a little longer before attacking from one throne to another.

_The game of thrones_, he mused, and looked some more at what he saw through the abandoned eyes of the old gods, and begged for certainty.

The time was imprecise in the tangle of weirwood roots. He had to establish that he had returned to the most recent past, instead of jumping into a possible, and rather immediate... _future_.

If he made a mistake, he risked murdering the Night’s King when the war would be already over. Lost. When the white walkers would have spread all over the realm and further, to the Free Cities, over the frozen narrow sea, like unstoppable plague, changing the world forever to suit their image and will.

If Bran killed the enemy at that later point in time, it would be a needless deed. The Others would merely choose another from their ranks to rule them or continue to exist kingless, perhaps.

In all his dreams, Bran had not yet quite understood if they needed a sovereign at all.

At that moment, the fighting stepped up, nearing his throne, coming closer, turning louder. It became more difficult to ignore it. The cave was turning into a great tourney ground with all tents, blazons and banners whiter than those of the Kingsguard.

The stands built for the tourney public still gaped empty, woven of pale branches and twigs which finally decided to rebel against the Night’s King abuse. The weirwoods brought a gift of sight to some of gods’ children. They were not meant to be a weapon used against one’s enemies.

He who lives by the sword, dies by one, and Bran was the blade now.

Or was that a different history?

He succeeded to stop paying attention to the havoc around him, reverting obsessively to his quest.

All his childhood companions had died, such as they were, gone south with Father, never to return, or murdered by Theon the Betrayer or at his behest. Bran’s horse was killed too, and possibly turned into steaks. He hadn’t had another one to call his own ever since, despite riding several garrons in Castle Black of late.

And Summer, his sweet, brave wolf who had saved his life more than once was now bleeding out in snow not far from the cave, dying slowly, together with his wild brother Shaggy who was even worse of, barely breathing.

When the Last Hero from old stories embarked on his quest, all his companions, his horse and his dog died, but he pressed on and was victorious..

Summer was a wolf, but the rest checked. Meera was alive, thank the gods, but she had always been more than his companion so she didn’t need to die, right?

His pretty lady.
I am the Last Hero.

I, not Jon, for all his bravery.

The thought was both emboldening and chilling. He didn’t need the Horn of Joramun to make the difference.

I shall wield the blade of my mind and heart, and pierce the enemy’s soul in his sleep. His armies shall then lay down to rest in deep snow where they came from. They have to. It can’t be otherwise.

A winter rose shall grow from a chunk of ice, announcing the arrival of spring.

He had seen it in his green dreams. But so far he had been unable to glimpse that same future through the eyes of the old goods and in the roots of their sacred trees.

Did it mean he was a coward or a weakling who would fail in his quest?

Deadly focused, he stared at the Night’s King on his throne, in what should have been his last moment of rest before riding to war. The Great Other’s companions were all alive and awake, thousands and thousands of them. He didn’t need a horse and he didn’t want a wolf.

That knowledge notwithstanding, Bran suddenly suffered from a very odd premonition, whispered by the weirwoods.

The Night’s King was also a hero, an evil one, and not the last one, but a hero just the same.

Jon Stark, ancient King in the North turned evil.

Bran had seen this belief in Jon’s eyes which were to him, his beloved brother, like an open book. He didn’t need to be a skinchanger to see it.

It meant that the Starks had double responsibility to end what one of them had started.

Determined to fulfill his quest, Bran engaged in another tenuous exercise of gazing, winding the time forth from that last moment when the enemy lay on his throne, towards the present in which Bran clearly saw the Night’s King under the Wall, just before returning to the cave… was it at dragon speed?

He could not recall.

He rolled the pliable time forth, very slowly, always looking at the throne which was first occupied, and then empty, and then filled once more!

So he was wrong, the moment he had first found was not the last sleep of the enemy-

Or perhaps it was.

For now Jon’s wife was enthroned, tied by the branches. A hollow twig was stuck in her heart. Tiny drops of blood dripped from it, falling into a familiar white cup embedded in the hollow of her garments, not to spill over.

Sansa had given such cup to Bran, and he had drunk from it, believing that she held some life-giving concoction tasting better than acorn pasta.

A miracle at hand.
He threw up from the discovery of what he had swallowed, convulsing on his throne.

The bile from his empty stomach froze on his tree-infested chest.

He had survived on blood of the Others’ victims! He, Meera and Hodor. Did it make them like white walkers, evil and wicked?

“Daenerys!” he called weakly to Jon’s queen when his stomach calmed down.

She didn’t hear him.

Just like Jon when he had tried to call him from a weirwood throne.

Swallowing more bile, he left Daenerys, seeing how he could not help her wake or run away.

With a heavy heart, he wound the time forth, from the past toward the present.

“No, please!” a woman cried in the cave, drawing Bran’s attention away from his task.

“Who are you?” she questioned angrily.

Bran couldn’t see her, and she didn’t take part in the clash of swords around him.

“Whoever you are, let me go!” She struggled helplessly, trying to tear apart a weirwood dungeon of her own, similar to Bran’s.

Bran didn’t understand her trouble. He just thought that her eyes must be blue and her innocence tremendous, to fight so hard against the trees who had no mercy for those who had sat willingly on lesser thrones. The woman had to resign herself to dreaming about spring until she would be released from her captivity. She would stay alive and green until then, sheltered from all harm.

“Please let me go,” she begged now, refusing to weep.

For reasons he could not explain to himself, it was extremely difficult to ignore her and be the Last Hero.

He ran back in time, straight to Daenerys and vomiting from the sight of the cursed white mug. He tried turning the time forth again and again and every time the woman in the cave stunned him with her misery.

The lady’s woes sounded similar to Meera’s or to Mother’s or to any other woman left to wait for the Last Heroes who never returned, or they would be named differently. First heroes, perhaps. He had to run away from it or he would turn mad. His quest would be forsaken, and his flight from Castle Black a childish idiocy.

Finally, he skipped the moment in time where the cries came and felt blessed when the trick worked. He saw that the tourney was about to begin in the cave. The stands mounted for it were full of onlookers, but the pleading sleeper-woman was silent.

He wondered how much time he missed. Not much, he hoped, because the tourney had not yet started. An hour at most when he could not see the enemy’s throne, not knowing if it was occupied and by whom.

He turned the time forth.

Another lady sat at the bottom of the Night’s King empty seat. Her figure was thin, her face hooded
and several shades darker than Bran’s, but still much lighter than on the people from the Summer Isles. She looked foreign. From the Free Cities, perhaps. Bran thought he saw other people like her during his short passage through Braavos.

Suddenly, she lifted her right hand and sipped blood from the white mug.

From Daenerys, or any other nameless victim of the white walkers, maybe from the male babies they took from Craster’s wives Jon had told him about. Maybe they stored the blood of the murdered children of the forest on ice for continued sustenance.

He endured the terrible vision without jumping over a single moment of it as he rolled the time further forth. The throne continued empty and the white walker woman now slept on its base. The empty cup lay gingerly on a great weirwood trunk.

At that moment, the Night’s King was below Castle Black, challenging Jon to meet him in a single combat.

The present.

A savage cry of the Others pierced the cave.

The great tourney was starting. One men afoot and poorly armed, with a heavy stone sword more suited for a giant, would run against three Others on ice spiders wielding crystal blades.

To Bran’s surprise, the tribunes cheered for the white walkers, naming them heroes, calling them just.

Robb was there. And Father. King Robert. Jory Cassel. Joffrey Baratheon and Ser Rodrik, Jory’s uncle. Mother whispered something very excitedly to her sister, the Lady Lysa, who then gave a white handkerchief to the most powerful knight from the three Others. Lady Hornwood, fingerless, gave Mother a reproachful look.

The lonely man was given no favours and was shunned by everyone. He was dishonourable. A criminal who deserved gruelling death. Bran could not see his face.

He wished he could walk and climb one last time-

And saw himself hanging from a window of Winterfell which did not quite look the same. It was Winterfell and it wasn’t, older and younger, more and less austere. It was the chamber he fell from or, rather, was pushed, but now it wasn’t a ruin, but an ornate lady bedchamber. The lady wept in her bed, laying on her side. Her belly was great, undulating. Her arms were bare despite the cold and Bran could not tell if she was a wight or living flesh and blood. It was the same lady who had sipped blood under the Night’s King throne.

His Mermaid Wife.

The Night’s Queen stood up, seeing Bran.

She would push him now, he knew, waiting to fall.

This time he’d lose the use of all his limbs and possibly his head.

The Mermaid Queen walked to the window sill, grabbed Brandon’s arm and pulled him up with superhuman strength, beginning to study his face with curiosity. And if her strength wasn’t enough to make it clear what she was, from close up Bran could see she was dead, despite being much
prettier than any other wight.

Behind her, a regal bird screeched in a big crystal cage, a white-headed eagle, imprisoned, with his wings clipped. Aunt Lyanna’s eagle, captive. His aunt must have closed her bird eyes, for her eagle was no more than that, a captured bird. Bran the beastling could feel it.

He forced himself to stop seeing the Lands of Always Winter, severing the mental connection. Back in the cave, he was the same as before, neither more nor less crippled.

He had a difficult choice.

To attack in the point of time he had skipped, when the lady cried, and which could have been the last moment when the Night’s King sat on his throne, dethroning Daenerys and offering her blood to his wife. Or in the moment when Bran effectively saw him seated which might not be the very last.

If he missed it, he had a gut feeling that not all of the Great Other’s armies would be defeated and go to sleep.

Jon would have to find a way to overpower the rest.

What if the remaining hosts became stronger without their king?

Bran closed all his eyes and also his ears, needing a moment of quiet.

In that calm he understood what he had always known, but avoided to contemplate.

His was to be a one off strike of faith.

If his soul was a blade and if it was used, it would be wasted in the effort. Brutally and irreversibly, he would cease to exist, a destiny worse than just dying. He would never become one with the wind or with the water. Neither the shores nor the mountains would ever get nearer. His whisper would be gone from the trees. It would be as though he had never been born.

Blinking away red tears from his weirwood eyes, he wound back the time with painful assiduity.

Best to spend himself in the time when the enemy was there than to gamble an attack at the moment in which anything could be occurring. He could annihilate Daenerys by chance, could he? She had lost blood, but she wasn’t a wight yet when he saw her.

*Just asleep.*

Crystal swords clashed with stone. The criminal on foot unhorsed and defeated one of his illustrious knightly enemies. The breath of the public stopped. They did not see the red blood they wanted. Only blue crystals. The opponents still standing either trod on foot or rode down the lists, readying themselves for a second pass.

Bran thought of opening his human eyes to see how the cave tourney looked in truth.

Yet he kept them closed.

He was a man now, no longer a boy, as grown as Jon had been when he decided to take the black and left home.

(His crippled body was still unharmed and safe, and left to ponder mighty battles in his mind, feeling powerful, for once.)
There!

The Night’s King slept peacefully on his throne.

He saw his mind as an invisible blade, ready to strike savagely with a battle cry that hadn’t been heard for thousands of years. Not since the times when the children were more numerous than men.

He fantasised so hard about his upcoming deed that it felt as if he had already accomplished victory. All his visions felt like truths. Or rather, as material as anything else beyond the Wall during night neverending, where nothing, nothing was certain.

The Others mastered the lands, shifting space and time, shaping them at will.

But the old gods had ruled the game before them, the game of thrones, and their high weirwood chairs still existed just like their trees still stood. The Others had not cut them down, limiting themselves to killing all children, believing them to be the only race able to withstand them.

Bran had their blood and he was not the only one.

It was impossible to erase all trace of people who once existed. Even if every single member of a community was slain, their ancestry would still live on in the descendants they sired with other races, unless such procreation was utterly impossible.

Yes, his mind was a blade now, sharper than Valyrian steel because it was not made of metal but of pure spirit, knowing no boundaries.

It could crawl, climb, walk or fly.

All at once if it intended to

Bran charged at the enemy, on his silent throne.

The tourney fighters were receding down the lists again. The competition was down to just odds. One on one.

The criminal with the stone sword limped. At the end of the lists he sat.

It was clear he could no longer run or even walk.

Crippled he would wait for the last Other to dismember him. The tribunes clapped and whistled, encouraging the knight.

Robert Baratheon was crownless in this dream. Another man wore an iron circlet, looking like Jon, just bearded and older. “Finish him off, in the name of your king,” he spoke and the voice wasn’t Jon’s. It was more like Father’s when he was angry.

A Stark voice.

*Jon bloody Stark.*

Dead like all other spectators.

The Night’s King throne gaped empty, bloodless, white. In the Lands of Almost Winter. The weirwood it was made off slept. The seat sagged with malice, age, sadness and most of all...

Indifference.
Bran had missed his opportunity because he had too many dreams at once. He had to wound the time back, to the good moment.

As he did that, he saw Prince Doran Martell, accompanied by his daughter Nymeria, bending a knee to a lady in Norvos, calling her his wife, telling her about their son Quentyn, crying for his untimely death. The wife sat down, her head falling to her chest. All three were quiet. Together. Alone. Crying. Coping.

Meera, Meera, Meera.

Could he still go back?

He did not think so. The roots have taken their toll. If he tried to detach himself, he would be wounded and die from his injuries.

In Oldtown, in the south, men were digging a pit. Old Lord Hightower examined the works, nodding with satisfaction. Bran looked him up and down and was shocked. The old man did not believe in the existence of the Others despite that he had seen them with his own eyes at Jon’s wedding in Winterfell. They even came to Oldtown it seemed and he still refused to acknowledge it. He thought they were some invention Jon had put up to gain the Iron Throne.

His enemies were dragons. No, not Jon. He was only a man. The Targaryen animals were proper monsters. The black one was fortunately gone of his own accord, and the two smaller ones, white and green, would soon be chained in the pit until they lost their wings, dwindled and died. Maesters would help to eliminate the true menace to the realm of men as they had done before, in the days of the last, crippled dragon hatchlings, and during the attempt to resurrect them at Summerhall.

Animals could not rule people, not even if they breathed fire.

As if in response to that arrogant notion, over the narrow sea, in Volantis, the Drogon set the sky ablaze, screeching and roaring ferociously.

The red woman was on his back and she made the city kneel. She was the mistress now, not some slave girl. Everyone would bend the knee to her and the power of R’hllor.

Bran lost himself and the Night’s King in his vivid dreams, and he only succeeded in coming back to his body in the cave by remembering the tourney.

Was it over?

He did not know.

Time was thick like water beyond the Wall. Weirwood branches hugged Bran close as he turned the time back to the Night’s King sleeping on his throne.

The Last Hero.

Reading himself for a second try.

Then, his throne shook as if there was an earthquake. The enemy’s chair must have quivered as well. The seats were twins in power, reacting to one another.

The war was not over, and all pawns were on board.

Bran felt dizzy disoriented. He cupped some ice-cold water from a hollow in the weirwood trunk and
drank it from his hand, sprinkling his face clumsily.

The tourney public was dead quiet, paralysed with expectation.

The lonely criminal, a cripple who could not walk, exhaled a battle cry of despair.

Bran forgot his purpose and opened his human eyes wide-

-and saw the Kingslayer defending him, and remembered it all, how he returned to the cave and with whom.

What Ser Jaime now did for him was beyond the bargain Bran had made in Nightfort. It was selfless and…

Knightly.

The last Other and the Kingslayer were completely alone in the cave under Bran’s throne.

They were about to kill each other unless-

The Last Hero rolled off his high seat, wiggling faster than young fish. With all strength of his youth, perfected in his travels with Hodor and of late in embraces with Meera, he crawled forth on his elbows, ignoring that they were turning sore. Weirwood was harder than stone, soil or snow. His backbone cracked several times, stretching oddly from the exertion.

His spirit was still a blade, his person a weapon. He would be too late unless-

Surprising himself by standing up on his human legs thinner than twigs, devoid of muscles after years of disuse-

-He stumbled, falling instantly.

In the staggering motion, he lurched forward and landed on the Other, throwing him off balance. The creature missed the Kingslayer, whose aim stayed good and true. Stone sword was as deadly to the white walker as Valyrian steel for some reason. Bran didn’t need to know which one.

As long as it worked.

The stale cave air was saturated with hovering crystals which used to be the Others.

Bran took a deep breath, wondering if he now inhaled fallen enemies and if it made him a monster, like drinking human blood. His cloak lay discarded on the floor behind him, spread obscenely over the weirwood roots. He must have lost it on the move. His doublet and tunic were torn in shreds on his bleeding elbows. Exposed to the chill, his blood began to harden like before his tears.

The Kingslayer would live, but was worse off then Bran. He had many wounds in different stages of freezing, and he seemed to have lost consciousness or simply fallen asleep without a need for a throne.

Bran felt relieved.

It was one thing to blackmail his would-be murderer to bring him to the cave. It was natural to act with honour in the thick of things and help him. It would have been impossible to act differently.

It would be much more difficult to pursue a peaceful, common conversation with Ser Jaime. Maybe after many years. Maybe never. Time would tell.
Bran pulled his cloak to himself and tossed it over Ser Jaime, for at least a semblance of warmth, and as the last service he could do for him.

As he did that, he noticed the first sleeper on the lesser throne closest to the greenseer’s, that used to be Bran’s own.

Lady Brienne. Safe and sound. He realised it must have been she who had cried and pleaded, seeing that her husband might die, utterly unable to help him out.

Because it took much more than a plea of honour and devotion to stop being a sleeper dreaming of spring. It took a grudge and a black fury and a selfish desire to wake.

With renewed ambition of the Last Hero, Bran pulled non-ruined part of his doublet over his elbows and dragged himself back to his throne.

The lady would be quiet now and he would see precisely in which moment to strike.

If he still had time.

The roots welcomed him back. His last human thought before returning to his quest was that he felt an itch in his big left toe.

With that, his vision blurred, and he blamed himself for wasting the little time he had to be the Last Hero out of his idealistic, childlike desire to be the knight.

Tears hung on his cold cheeks once more.

Salty, shining pearls, harder than stone.

Late or not, the trees rewarded his attempt at chivalry by telling him a story he had not yet heard.

A horror story. Such tales had always been his favourite.

The Others only needed a sovereign for spring, when they would be compelled to lay down to sleep, and dream of cold, by the nature of all things. But should they ever fall asleep kingless, they would no longer be able to wake come winter.

Not on their own.

Not without a liege lord whose soul was so heavy with sin and grief that it could never give itself to eternal rest.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :-))
The Girl of Black and White

Any event similar to the real end of the series as demonstrated by the show this year is a coincidence.

All I know is that Jon and Sansa survived the series, and that the Hound did not + how he died. I might involuntarily learn more from the news, but I will try not to, because if I read show summaries like last year, I will probably abandon this story and I would still like to finish it if I can.

Therefore, to keep up with the minimum of own motivation I have to remain ignorant about the details of the real endgame while of course, the show had to get it right, because GRRM told them who lives and who dies and that's how it is)

Maybe there will be a WoW release date by the time this fic is finished. I never would have imagined that it would take me four years to write it, that the show would have finished, and that the book release date would still be not known.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Warning for gore

The Girl of Black and White

Hodor wept like a baby, using Dark Sister as a rather sharp pillow.

Arya could not make him stop.

Not even when his face bled. A bright red fountain springing from his milk-coloured, plump cheeks.

Red on white. Black with white. Intertwined.

“Hodor!” she pleaded with him many times, but he wouldn’t even repeat his own name.

Heart wrenching sobs ravaged his huge body.

And Arya would never be able to forget what she just glimpsed in his mind, during a short-lived, unintended warging incursion she committed out of hope that her presence would help him.

By all means, she was Arya Stark. Hodor had carried her around Winterfell when Bran was a newborn babe and she less than three, unable to walk in a straight line.

Incapable to use needles, be it to make stitches or to practise at swords...

Her well-meant intrusion was met with Hodor’s sturdy refusal to allow her into his head. With rejection and determination to resist. Be free. Be alone. Stay on his own.

She could have broken easily enough through Hodor’s hastily erected, simple mental barriers, but she didn't. Among other considerations because she never had to, and it made her feel ashamed that she
could see through his poor attempt to preserve his dignity. Not all, but surely enough.

More than she wanted to observe.

His grief for his mother, built alive into a wall in Dreadfort.

*Another Bolton crime.*

The face of Old Nan asleep forever, buried between the masonry. Tiny and wrinkled, the wet nurse who told frightening bedside stories to all Stark children ended up like characters in her tales.

*A terrible, gruelling death.*

*His mother, not great-grandmother.*

*Very, very short.*

Sansa was not yet ten when she became a head taller than Old Nan.

A child who grew old without ever growing in height after a much longer life than that of a human woman.

*A child of the forest... Now dead like the rest of them...* Arya remembered Bran’s story from the cave beyond the Wall where the last children had perished, some of them a hundred years old, and still not decrepit from age.

She wanted to weep for everything that Old Nan was and had been to all members of the great Stark household, but her eyes remained dry.

They had seen too many horrors.

Hodor had only dreamed about his mother’s death. He had never even been to Dreadfort. Yet he considered it to be a fact set in stone. Poor Hodor, unable to tell a difference between truth and imagination--

--yet Arya shivered whenever she recalled her own nightmares.

Dreams have acquired a different threshold of existence in the Long Night, so perhaps Hodor was right to believe in them.

Somewhere behind the tremendous loss which now overwhelmed his mind, Hodor harboured and treasured fairly bizarre, mundane wishes. For example, he yearned to ride a mammoth. His father should have taught him how. But he had never met him... As a consequence, one of his greatest heart desires remained unfulfilled.

Arya mused that it would be the same even if his unknown father was present. The mammoths had run away from the Wall, heading north in a great stampede, lifting whirlwinds of snow in their wake, harrumphing at the Ice Dragon as they went, greeting the mighty star.

Hodor’s star fantasies and riding wishes made no sense to Arya.

Her head pounded as if it would burst from too many revelations, distinct like night and day. She should have known better by now than to warg into anyone against their will, good intentions notwithstanding.

With Gendry it was different.
He valued it.
He appreciated it.
He found joy in it as did she.
Not at first but they both learned.

To her it was a new world that they could reach to one another in spirit, and not only in word and flesh. Her soul felt all fuzzy from it, soft and full to the brim at the same time.

Even her nightmares faded from her sweet memories.
In her heart, dawn had already come.
Not so for the world.
She could not live only from love.

And she still had one secret, hidden deep inside her, which she wanted to keep from everyone for just a little while longer. And then, soon, she would have to break free from it, or at least tell Gendry, before it had a chance to fester and poison her soul. If Gendry found out on his own, before the time was right, he might blame her for withholding the truth from him, in spite of their sacred vows to each other.

Maybe he would still love her, stupid as he was, but she could not be completely certain. And it would break her into pieces to lose him now that they had somehow bridged all distances between them.

Worst of all, her last secret could also be his ruin, if she became jealous and angry with him once more.

He had almost died for her once. He didn’t have to risk his life again. Not for her. Regardless of stupid decisions he might take in his future.

She loved him.

And the ultimate stupidity of love was to wish well to your loved one, even if he left you for no good reason.

Even if he betrayed you some day.

*Time will tell.*

But, first things first, Gendry had finally found two men able to help him restrain bleeding Hodor without the need warging.

*Strong like mules.*

Like Gendry himself.

*Stupid, stubborn, strong.*

Together with the notoriously loud wildling Giantsbane and the dead Greyjoy, the latest Sealord of Braavos and Arya’s lord husband held Hodor *down*, immersing him in crisp, crunchy snow colder than death.
Arya removed Dark Sister from Hodor’s pale sword hand and landed the tiniest of kisses between Gendry’s cheek and left eye, on a whim. He looked up to her, eyes dark blue and faithful, with absolute adoration.

He surely looked as if he would never betray her.

So she had some time to reveal to him her last secret which shamed her, in part.

Absent-mindedly, she took to carrying Brynden Rivers’ Valyrian blade to the vaults under the Wall for safekeeping.

*Together with pickled cod and the Horn of Joramun.*

Ice cells seemed like the most natural storage place for famous swords and historic heirlooms right now. Men only descended down there to fetch food. Anyone who ventured inside, exited rather immediately, lest he freeze to death before the Others had any chance to take him.

Wormways under Castle Black were a tad less cold, but even those underground chambers and corridors were losing warmth of late, providing only a firm illusion that they were less chilly than the merciless ice wasteland in the open air.

The night had been too long.

Even the fires refused to burn and swallow wood, white, brown or *black*.

Weirwood was entwined with ebony on the entrance to the House of Black and White in Braavos, on one of the many islands that formed the free city. Any heart could be sworn to it, light or dark, and do the bidding of the Many-Faced God.

*To kill with a whisper...*

It was well known that only certain words could kill, and they had to be learned, together with other tricks and the use of special trinkets, tools and coins, conceived in the time when Valyria was still young, and Braavos founded by its fugitive slaves. The captives made the Many-Faced God of Death their own because he brought the only true measure of comfort and salvation to those who suffered greatly.

Providing an end to their torments by relieving them forever from their grievances.

Or he made the days of their tormentors numbered and short, whenever prayers had been said to him, and favours or payments made to his servants.

Some people deserved to die, no more and no less.

Whenever Arya remembered the Others and their stupid leader, the last Faceless Men coin begged to be put to good use in one of her pockets. She flipped it between her fingers, becoming impatient.

Like Jon and Bran.

Her brothers did not wait for her to return the Horn of Joramun. No one knew where either of them was headed. Not even Meera Reed who cried her eyes out for Brandon.

Brandon who had convinced Jon that the horn could end the war, if only it was blown during the battle for the Wall in a decisive moment, like Joramun must have done.

And then they both eloped, evaporated, forsaking the horn, forgetting Arya, embarking on some mad
errand only they understood. Following some momentarily impulse on how to make a difference in battle for dawn and become heroes on the side, satisfying their secret longing for honour and glory.

The Imp had said that the wisest of men were not immune to excesses of bravery.

Courage slept in people and it could take over unexpectedly.

_Just like cowardice_, Arya thought bitterly.

She'd learned about herself that she still cowardly preferred her brothers to be living cravens than dead heroes.

Latest fantastic rumours among hungry soldiers claimed that Jon and Bran left together, on a quest to find the ice dragons who dwelled much farther north beyond the Wall than even the Lands of Always Winter. Travellers could find their trail if they always followed the luminous tail of the famous star which bore the same name.

_The damned Ice Dragon._

The stories further told that her brave brothers went after those creatures because they were the only ones in Westeros able to deliver Queen Daenerys from the Night’s King frozen, gnarled, blue and grey clutches.

Fire-breathing dragons were tremendous creatures, indeed, and true monsters, but they had proven useless for flying beyond the Wall. The big black one was a wild beast eating little children, and a traitor who left Westeros. The baby blue one had vanished without trace. Perhaps the Others had taken it and would groom it to spit ice and fight for them in the long nights still to come.

The two remaining ones slept idly. The green one like a log, never stirring. The white one woke every now and then, trashing its spiked, white and golden tale left and right, as though he was possessed by a terrible nightmare which scared him to death.

Arya wondered if Viserion’s bad dreams involved ice or fire or _both_.

Like her own.

Be that as it may, she was fed up.

She’d had enough of gossips, as exaggerated as Sansa’s fancy stories of ladies and true knights.

_Pretty lies._

She was tired of listening to the Night’s King continuous drawl of challenging Jon to single combat under the Wall.

Most of all, she was done with famous swords and horns that did _nothing_.

She ought to try her ways. She should follow her dark heart to the bitter end before it was too late.

Perhaps that was the only way to break free.

If she died in that effort, so would her secret, without hurting anyone she loved.

What held her back until now was waiting for Jon to return and become the hero he always wanted to be.
She would let him have that honour gladly.

But, much more than that, it was not knowing and not being able to ascertain if the Night’s King was dead or alive underneath the white walker skin disguising his manly body.

That he was human, Arya could swear.

Blindfolded if need be.

Only a man could engage in challenging a fellow man in a manner which was both unmistakably and completely unnecessarily heroic, and yet profoundly stupid at the same time. The white walkers never behaved like determined last heroes in Old Nan’s stories, and Hodor’s mother had been proven right about many other aspects of their lore, customs and warfare.

The Night’s King didn’t sound at all as if he was only after a draught of human blood or the dominion over the realm.

Earlier, at Jon’s wedding, he looked every inch like a legendary leader of an immortal race ready to conquer the world; self-assured and mocking.

Now, his angry imprecations, calls and threats to Jon who was simply -- missing-- reminded Arya of the occasion when Gendry and Jon tried hard to kill each other. Just because they both loved her, albeit in different ways.

_He’s been acting like a man who’s been driven out of his mind by a turn of tide he did not predict._

This left open the question if he had donned the grey-blue skin and immortal strength of a white walker when he was already a walking corpse or a man still breathing.

Only the living could be killed and the blessing of the Many-Faced God bestowed only once.

Outside the ice cells, Hodor’s anger abated. He found Patchface and joined him in an effort of climbing to the top of the Wall, taking patiently the seven-hundred-feet-foot-long flight of slippery, frozen stairs.

Once they were both up, the Hodor began ringing little bells on the fool’s hat with his great fists. Patchface kept dancing and humming about the shadows. He was not sent away with Lady Shireen because he was of age, and he showed no sign of wanting to follow his mistress willingly to Eastwatch. Perhaps because it was on the sea, under which the shadow danced all the time in his merry tune.

Patchface was hopelessly and benignly mad. Even the Others must have known he was no threat to anyone so they didn’t even bother to attack him whenever their paths crossed in the ongoing battle.

Or perhaps they avoided him like plague while they took good care to cut down or infest with ice plague every other human on their path, weak or strong.

This made Patchface somehow special. He, if anyone, would survive the war and sing about dancing shadows for all times to come.

Turning the Braavosi coin in her pocket, Arya rejoined Gendry who was headed for the gates, which were again under attack. The Others had ventured blindly into the shadow hiding the Wall, and located the entrance to Castle Black by touch.

Then they let the wights lead the onslaught as was their wont.
On the weak spot.

They’ll do it again and again.

The toll of the fallen rose greatly in the last long hours of the battle. And half of those alive had contracted ice plague in lesser or greater degree.

Little Robb’s little fingers.

Her only nephew had gotten it as well. It was only a matter of time when he would turn into a youthful white walker and would have to be put to death or sent to wander off with his kind.

No new men, women or children came from the south to enlist in the defences, and some of those still healthy deserted, running south as fast as their legs or stolen horses would carry them.

No one had the time or willpower left to persecute the fugitives and put them to death for their crime.

Belatedly, Arya realised that she had been so lost in her thoughts that she had left all her swords in the ice cells. Dark Sister, Dragon’s Breath, even Needle. How was she going to fight? She made a step to turn and go back. But, instead of seeing the habitual surroundings of snow drifts, ice and dark shadow hovering over the Wall, she blinked and glimpsed huge fires burning behind her closed eyelids.

With her yellow wolf eyes.

Great weariness washed over her young woman’s body, like the Trident spilling over the riverlands at its mouth, copious and wild, flooding all on its sinuous path. She spared a moment to wonder when it was the last time she slept long and in peace.

In Winterfell?

That first night after Gendry’s return from Braavos in sweet exhaustion of love-making?

Her husband was a few steps ahead of her when she felt her human legs turning irrevocably into sticky, soft jelly.

She never turned back to fetch a sword and much less reached the gates.

“Gendry!” she called out weakly to her only love, falling… falling…

Falling.

Losing everything. Herself first of all.

Shadows danced before her eyes, ringing little bells. The world was doomed to end. She was too late. Her actions would not matter.

Her yellow eyes snapped wide open in the darkness. Her human self must have fainted or succumbed to exhaustion.

Both, she concluded.

Familiar cold dread squeezed her wolf’s heart. She was very far north and deep underground, near the earth’s core. The great subterranean chamber burned all around her in flames tall like trees.

The rock she stood on would be her funeral pyre.
Every time she slept in the past weeks, no matter how briefly, she ended up trapped in Nymeria’s skin, searching in vain for a way to escape.

There was none.

Her great black rock was a single islet in an ocean of flames.

She opened her mouth to utter the Braavosi greeting, *Valar Morghulis*, she wanted to say, but all she heard was a long howl abandoning her chest instead of any words coming from her mouth.

In that moment of her bad dream, Arya usually always *woke* with anger, refusing to sleep on, sacrificing the rest that her human body desperately needed. As a result, she was so far utterly unable to witness the end of her nightmare.

Or rather, too terrified to continue in her wolf dream which was as true as the existence of white walkers.

How long was it since Nymeria was trapped? How many days since she had a meal?

Arya felt tremendous guilt for bringing her wolf to her ruin, and even more dread than usual from her nightmare as soon as she let herself ponder her immediate future.

She was about to experience death together with Nymeria. Her wolf would die for good, with Arya stuck behind her yellow eyes during her suffering, writhing in flames with her poor pet.

It was perhaps a mistake to ride the Hound’s horse from Winterfell to the Wall despite that Stranger was one of the fastest. She could see in that animal’s head his master’s fear of fire, and not only that, she had sort of *felt* the ferocious imprint of continued burning which followed Sandor Clegane in every moment of his life, awake or asleep.

She wondered if Sansa was in Lady’s head when Father had to kill her, and how it felt for her sister. One cut with Ice must have been all it took, but it couldn’t have been painless or pretty.

*Not at all.*

*A clean death is a death still.*

*Did Robb die first with Grey Wind and then on his own?*

From this thought, tears finally came.

Wolf tears, falling to dry rock, lukewarm.

It was impossible. Wolves could not cry.

Yet Nymeria just did and she was no ordinary wolf. She was the biggest one of her litter now, even larger than Ghost. Much unlike Arya who would probably remain the smallest one among her siblings, once Rickon grew a bit more. Even little Robb would have grown bigger some day if he didn’t become ill.

*The greatest wolf for the shortest among Starks.*

It was a miracle that Sansa survived wolf-less, without Lady, as long as she did. Just like Bran and Rickon, Jon and Ghost. Her pack.

But…
Shaggy!

Summer!

Her little brothers’ direwolves howled miserably in the distance. It was her fault they were in danger. She had taken them beyond the Wall to search for Ghost.

But then she’d run so fast that Summer and Shaggy had fallen behind, losing her trail. In the end, she became fatally trapped and the others never followed. She never found Ghost who made it back to the Wall on his own, Arya remembered. The Night’s King had almost killed him as a message to Jon.

She was outsmarted by winter lands which should have been her own, but had instead chosen not to belong to anyone, northern or southron.

Nymeria howled at her fire dungeon with fresh, mounting grief.

The earth was ablaze.

In comparison, the water rising to flood the Isle of Faces, killing Tom Sevenstrings and nearly doing for both Gendry and Arya, seemed like a happy children game of Come Into My Castle. Not terrifying at all.

This was a true horror.

An inferno in the making.

Arya studied the flames very attentively with her human mind, polished to perfection during her service to the Many-Faced God in Braavos.

There was no way out. It was that simple. The rock under her foot was solid, but it turned warmer with every moment. It might begin to melt soon.

Arya wanted to look up, but Nymeria wouldn’t lift her head, whinnying at the heating rock like a stray dog. Defeated. Powerless to help herself or the smaller members of her pack.

Instead of finding Ghost, the odd wolf in the pack, she’d brought both herself and her little brothers to a point of no return.

Look up!

The wolf howled, stubborn like her mistress. She was no bird to take to the sky.

No, but you can leap.

Nymeria growled and gazed up very briefly.

Fires scorched open a passage in the rock above her. It was not as high as the bird flies, but definitely further than a wolf could spring with ease.

Would that I were a scrawny tomcat from the Red Keep.

But she was only a tiny young woman in huge direwolf’s body.

Arya imagined she was a cat which just fell by accident into a freezing cold well in the bowels of the Red Keep. The cat jumped out in an instant, sky high, possessed by a unique frenzy to escape the
unwanted bath-

Nymeria leapt with a cry-

-- and caught the edge of the hollow top rock with her teeth and front paws.

From there, the wolf’s instincts took over, completing Arya’s work.

Seeing a way out, the direwolf took it, scrambling upward.

The climbing passage was low and narrow, the rocks less warm and harder. Sharp. Her paws would hurt for days but she wouldn’t stop for it.

Giddy from successful escape, she embarked on a sinuous way up, leaving behind her the smoking inferno.

Earth shook under her feet, rumbling, quaking, quivering.

Nymeria’s stomach turned, empty and nauseated.

It felt as if the earth had a giant heart which would burst open at any moment. Fires would erupt from the ground, swallowing the lands beyond the Wall, Others included.

The Wall itself would dissolve and disappear.

The wolf’s prowl was long and arduous on tired paws, reduced from forced fasting to skin and bone.

Wings fluttered near the stony ceiling.

Bats.

Her mouth fell open. Nymeria put out her tongue and devoured a bat on an instinct. The little creature’s blood was warm and tasting odd in her throat. It was not the prey she relished to eat from, but it would have to do.

Out of danger, on the way to Shaggy and Summer, she strove to open her human eyes, but she could not.

Arya Stark was fast asleep.

Damnation, it mattered not! If the Wall still stood, Gendry had surely taken good care of her. And if her human body died, then at least she wouldn’t have experienced one of her deaths. She would return to Gendry as a wolf and hope that he could hear her some day.

She would be tempted to take over another human body and mind and live on as a skinchanger.

The notion was illicit and cruel, but it lingered in her head for a while.

Gendry could not love a wolf. Arry was one thing, but Nymeria quite another.

But then it occurred to her that if she, Arya, died, probably Gendry did so as well so she could just as well lose herself in Nymeria and forget that she had ever been human.

She plowed on, refusing to think further,

A whiff of cool air touched her nostrils, bringing her new courage.
She exited the caves and took a deep breath of unrestrained freedom.

In deep and endlessly falling snow, she wasn’t cold at all. On her four paws, under her soft, living, growing fur, Nymeria was born to withstand the Long Night. All direwolves were.

She emerged into a snowed down plain at the edge of the sentinel forest, not far from the castle that looked like Winterfell, but wasn’t.

Firstly, it had no crypts.

It had no soul.

It looked like someone else’s old memory of Arya’s childhood home. Laboriously constructed, but not more than a likeness.

Just like the stonemasons chiselled and martelled statues of the fallen kings and lords so that they could rest forever with their rusting swords and eternally perfect granite wolves.

A new scent drifted to her frozen nostrils.

Prey.

Flesh.

A recent kill, not long dead. She drooled, wishing to eat from it. It would be so much tastier than swallowing living bats whole with their small, wiry, leathery wings.

The woman’s corpse was so fresh and her little brothers had already started feeding from it. Shaggy had bitten off a morsel from an underarm, and Summer from the left hip.

They needed to regain strength. Both were wounded. The air was a blanket of blue crystals which must have been the Others who had unwisely tried to murder two grown direwolves.

Nymeria sniffed and nuzzled her little brothers’ wounds, which did not look very severe or life threatening. There were just so many of them.

And she was very hungry.

She would feed before licking Shaggy’s and Summer’s hurts to make them heal faster.

She opened her jaws to continue where Summer started, but before she could take a bite from the prey, her little brother growled weakly, interrupting her.

Her eyes met his and she saw pain in them.

Her hunger didn’t abate, but she became alert and attentive. Arya Stark looked at Summer’s stomach. Swollen. Like Shaggy’s.

Like the belly of the corpse they have eaten from, which now moved and swayed like reed, rolling sideways in thick snow...

Arya’s nausea returned tenfold.

Shaggy and Summer, and nearly herself, had each eaten a bite from an ill wight.

Summer whined, closing his eyes. Shaggy was already asleep. Their movements were erratic,
convulsive. They did not rest, that much was certain.

They must have been poisoned by their sickening meal, rather than succumbing to the long cuts and gashes, cleaned by the winds of winter and already half frozen.

With a supreme effort of will, Arya forced Nymeria to act like a human. Toppling first Summer and than Shaggy to the ground, the great she-wolf squeezed their stomachs. Then she stuck a furry front paw into their throats until they vomited pale flesh and black blood.

Finally she made them rinse their mouths with clean snow.

Meanwhile, the lady-corpse stirred, woke and dragged herself on her elbows to sit against a pine tree. It appeared that she could not even stand on her bitten leg and much less walk away. Her face was a mask of shock, twisting with pain. Her eyes screamed aberration at Nymeria. Staring at the wolves and at her mangled arm and hip, the wight cried cold, black tears, shaking from unmistakable fear of the northern beasts.

It was new to Arya that wights could be in pain and afraid. In all other circumstances they continued to fight savagely with the expression of indifference, even when they lost an arm, an eye, or both legs.

Not so this lady.

She might have a point of course. An angry direwolf was as bloodthirsty as an enraged dragon.

Summer’s and Shaggy’s would-be poisoner had no escape from the great, angry she-wolf leading her pack.

Nymeria faced the wight squarely, growling with vengeance. She was skilled enough to tear the dead woman’s throat into pieces without tasting a single drop of her cursed blood.

The wight hugged herself, protecting her belly, shivering and sobbing uncontrollably without a sound.

In a moment of inner brightness, Arya understood.

The wight’s stomach had not grown from illness. It was swollen because she was with child. She was as fat as Mother when she carried Rickon.

The Night’s King stupid words to Jon, hurled from under the Wall, acquired a new meaning. Mad propositions filled with hatred for Arya’s beloved brother who was simply -- missing -- and could not respond to any challenge, right or wrong.

I’ve come to offer you an honest trade, my lord Snow.

An exchange of hostages.

Give me back my wife and I shall give you yours.

Safe and unharmed.

Then let us settle our count like men.

In a single combat.

You have many swords to choose from and I only one that truly belongs to me.
Are you afraid?

Craven!

Fool!

And so on and so forth, in numberless variations of the same theme.

The Imp had stuck tiny pieces of black wool for cloaks in his ears to hear less, proclaiming solemnly that the endless repetition of provocations was excessively tedious, impolite, and in any case distressing for his temporary commander duties. His wife had laughed spontaneously at his stupid joke, and tapped him on his large dwarf head with love and friendly mockery of his exaggerated seriousness.

Command was no small thing, Arya agreed with Tyrion, but she was fortunate not to bear the responsibility. So she listened to the Night’s King, understanding and memorising his words even when they angered and insulted her. She soaked in everything. It was the most important lesson from Braavos: Learn all there is, every day.

She applied the same skill now through Nymeria’s eyes.

The wight woman wore no crown but her garments were regal. It was nothing like Arya Underfoot would choose, not even now that she was older, and obviously without acorns. Wool mixed with velvet and heavy cotton robes of foreign making. By the gods, Sansa might envy the poise and the bearing of the dead stranger.

A queen…

The Night’s King Mermaid Wife.

So many stories have come to life in the night neverending beyond the Wall.

Why not this one?

How far to the Wall on wolf legs?

Too far.

She wished she could meet an ice dragon and strike a bargain with him, like Torrhen must have done with Aegon. She would promise the animal anything she had to offer, in exchange for a fast flight to the Wall for all the wolves and the white walkers’ dead queen. She’d sing for the dragon’s benefit the great song of the earth, which could create anything that was the beast’s desire.

But the good-natured ice dragons only existed in fancy tales: empty letters on parchment. Only the horror tales had crawled out into the realm of truth.

There was another path to the Wall, a much shorter one, through the earth’s core, but she didn’t think she would ever embark on it again. She must have been wrong about smelling Ghost underground when she took it first.

Summer and Shaggy were fortunate to be slower or perhaps clever enough not to follow her. Or they would have ended up stuck with Nymeria who had stupidly trod on.

Shaggy was awake now and eyed the Mermaid Wife like food, but Summer and Nymeria both growled at him until he relented.
Better hungry than dead.

Or worse, undead and enslaved in one way or the other.

The list of winter terrors was long and growing.

Arya made Nymeria sit down like a dog next to the wight queen, hoping she might climb on her back as though she were a horse.

But the dead could not speak and Her Grace was not understanding her hint to be sure.

Short of options, Arya warged into the corpse. The Mermaid’s Queen mind and heart were cold and foetid, and also… foreign. The thoughts were in a language which meant nothing to Arya.

It must be the Old Tongue, she decided, a variety spoken thousands of years ago when the world was still young and the Night’s King met his future wife, madly falling in love with her.

Breaking faith with his own people, abandoning the name his mother had given him.

Jon Stark.

Only a month ago, she would not understand the enemy in this regard.

But now she did.

Oh did she understand him! The Night’s King and his wife have fallen for each other as badly as Gendry and Arya.

Quietly, behind the dead woman’s eyes, Arya imagined the Night’s King as he looked now, with long white hair which seemed to be growing by the moment, like anyone else’s in winter, feeding Arya’s assumption that he could be alive underneath, after thousands of years. Raging under the Wall over the loss of his wife, trapped in his gnarled body, more twisted than roots and branches of a millennial weirwood trees. Stronger than Hodor in his immortal existence.

Then, she waited very patiently for the Mermaid Queen to react.

With the calm of her Father… that her brothers had not inherited.

Perhaps it was no wonder for Jon, whose parents were…

Whatever they were, and Arya could not put it very well into words, forbearance was not it.

Star-crossed, star-struck. Damned for what they did and for what they did not. The makers and the victims of their own destiny.

Ultimately, none of it was Arya’s business, be it judged black or white.

In the bottom of her heart, she wished stupidly, cowardly, that Mother and Father were alive and impatiently scolding her over one or another behaviour they found improper for ladies.

It didn’t take long for the Mermaid Queen to take Arya’s second, much more obvious hint. Cautiously, she mounted on Nymeria. Sideways, like a proper lady, leaning to the wolf’s great neck for support. She was light and unpleasantly cold to touch, but her belly moved and was alive, almost warm. The little wight child seemed to be doing very well, kicking and enjoying itself in his dead mother’s womb.
Nymeria howled a long greeting at the moon, and began another arduous journey to the Wall on four mighty paws.

*It can’t be that far,* Arya tried to convince herself.

Life was a wandering, more incessant than snow.

The war was long-lasting, draining, slow. She might very well return to Castle Black before it was over, and, in any case, there was nothing better or cleverer she could do than to keep trying.

During her march, she had plenty of time to strive to open her human eyes. She longed to return to Gendry for a brief moment. At least to tell him she was fine, only lost in another nightmare. Her bad dream would have to end at the latest when Nymeria returned to the Wall, if Arya couldn’t find a way to come back to her own senses by that time.

Right now, her effort was in vain. She could not wake like a woman, not for a single moment.

The moon was up and all she could do was howl and bay and growl and yelp, making the Mermaid Queen shiver with renewed fear.

On the way south, the wolves caught more bats. And in a village they passed, they ran across human corpses.

*Frozen. Edible.*

Utterly dead, with no sign of cursed existence beyond the grave. The Others must have missed them, not enslaving them.

*Victims of cold and starvation.*

That prey tasted heavenly in her mouth and while she fed, she was only Nymeria. Arya was gone.

To the moon perhaps, and surely not awake.

She wished she had had the courage to share with Gendry her last dark secret before her sudden sleep was the reason for them to part again.

Satisfied with her latest meal, Nymeria continued running through the dark woods, hiding from the moon.

“Snow,” the moon said quietly, winking at the wolves on the move, not tricked by their attempt to hide from her face.

Arya thought of Jaqen H’ghar and all he never learned about her.

All no one knew about her.

Except No One of course. That girl who dwelled in the temple, shielded from her enemies and from herself. She who was blind at a time and then, later, Cat of the Canals, and many other roles commanded by the kind old man.

And who never ceased to be Arya Stark, she of the Many Faces, with a home for darkness in her heart.

In Braavos, it didn’t take very long for her to learn that she didn’t need coins and other tricks of the Faceless Man to do their god’s bidding. Not even the faces they were so carefully preserving and that
she pretended to be wearing when she was sent on a new, major assignment.

No one was the only acolyte of the temple who could truly kill with a whisper, and nothing else.

Her words did not come from Valyria, but from Westeros, spoken softly in a language that No one could not understand when she was awake, in a speech she only dreamed of every now and then.

Arya knew now what language it was.

*The Old Tongue.*

Just like she knew that what she used to call a whisper was a song; the ancient song of the earth that had brought Others to life.

And, from Arya’s personal experience, it brought death to anyone alive, sure as sunrise used to be. She had tried it out times and again without allowing her Braavosi masters to see her true methods. By using that ancient music, she could even conjure a new face for herself in need, without donning any shrivelled skin from the temple to hide her young features.

Her heart was as dark as those of the children who hated the giants so much that they sang into existence a race to eradicate their mighty enemies.

Not seeing that they too would be the victims of their belligerent and beautifully crystal-armed progeny.

Arya was perhaps fortunate for having been instructed to whom she should give the gift of death by the kind old man, who seemed to know much better than her who deserved it.

Or so she wanted to believe now. Rather than to consider that all her killings had been plain evil.

More than anything, she preferred to not dwell on even greater evils she might have committed if she was left alone at the time when she learned, or rather, when she somehow remembered the song of the earth.

Thirsty for revenge, she might not have waited to return to Westeros on the Faceless Men errand. Perhaps she would have sung into existence another plague, wishing to strike Cersei in King’s Landing, and ended up exterminating the population of Braavos and the other Free Cities as a start.

*The Wall, the Wall, the Wall…* she singsonged to herself in Common Tongue, wishing that Nymeria could run faster.

“Snow,” the moon said pleadingly, yawning tiredly, eager to rest and cede its place in the sky to the sun in hiding, after long months of hard labour to illuminate the world on her own.

Nymeria was bringing south a valuable hostage who could change the course of the war, if the Night’s King was as human in his negotiations as in his threats and challenges to Jon. It could be a good strategy. Perhaps Mother would be proud of her. She hoped it would not fail, unlike Mother’s attempts at negotiation towards the end of her life.

Arya would make the Great Other swear by everything he held dear that he would willingly go to sleep.

And if he fulfilled his oath and lay down to rest with all his hosts, she would then return to him his loving wife safe and unharmed, putting her to sleep next to him with their unborn child on a soft bed of snow, for thousands of years to come.
Perhaps in that time men would be wiser. Perhaps they would learn to undo the song of the children. Perhaps they would find a way to make an uneasy peace with the Others, like there could be truces among previously warring kingdoms of men.

And if the Night’s King betrayed his solemn vow, Nymeria would first rip the Mermaid Queen’s womb open and eat from the fruit inside it. Only then would she turn to her throat.

The enemy would instantly jump to the defence of his wife and unborn child, cutting Nymeria down, if the poison of the black wight blood would not get her first.

And, in that moment of the Night’s King supreme distraction, Arya Stark would attack him with such whisper that had not been heard since the dawn of times, and thus learn beyond doubt if he was still alive underneath so that he could be killed.

The door of the temple in Braavos must have known her heart all the while, from the day she was born, and then it hardened further from the horrors she had seen and endured since the Lannisters killed Father.

The entrance to the House of Black and White. Ebony and weirwood. Intertwined.

The white trees did not grow in Braavos. They were brought on ships from White Harbor like lifeless beams for construction, and traded for goods which were rare in Westeros.

The door of the temple had let her in, not Jaqen H’ghar’s coin.

Sometimes she imagined the dead weirwood prostrating itself and asking for a singular favour from its ebony sibling: for a good girl with a dark heart to be allowed in and protected from herself, until she could tell better the difference between the good and the evil.

The silenced gods of her fathers had found her a shelter.

To her who had been a traitor to the Faceless Man from the very beginning and true only to herself, for better or worse.

The Girl of Black and White.

Nymeria ran on, faster than the winter wind. Soon, she might be tired. The Mermaid Queen was a dead weight on her back, sleeping from sheer horror, perhaps. At least she had stopped weeping and wiping her dead nose in the wolf’s thick fur.

In all that time, Arya’s thoughts remained cold like still water, not afraid for her own life or of the impending doom.

(The earth shook mildly. The flames might be coming closer to the surface from its core, bringing ultimate destruction.)

In Old Nan’s stories, there was only one way to end the Long Night. By putting the Others to sleep.

To brood in snow until the next time.

There were too many to be killed at once, and new ones would always be born rapidly, until dawn would put an end to it, lest the lands they walked and the air they breathed turn into dragonglass, burning them to death.

When the Night’s King fell one way or the other, his armies would lay down to rest.
The realm of men would again be only soil and leaf, and bark and grass. Wind and clouds above. No more and no less.

*And damned hot at its core.*

If the entrails of the earth erupted----

The new day would dawn over the empty mass of sea and burning rock, devoid of all life.

All evil would be wiped out from the world, but also the good.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading
Sansa VIII

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience.
These last chapters are turning longer than I expected them to be.
Hope you don’t find the words too many or too few.

Warning for gore

Sansa

The night reigned, the earth trembled.
An eagle cried out in the sky, announcing doom.

Sansa’s ears pricked and she realised she had heard its voice before: the white-headed bird of prey belonging to her aunt. She could be dying. It could be the fate of any woman with child, and harsh winter would not help.

She shivered from the thought and shied from it in spirit. Stifling her fears, she looked ahead. There was no use in gazing up.

Try as she might, she could not see the sky.

The canopies of ancient pines and sentinels had frozen together into a tightly knitted vault over a broad forest path. Tall and quiet, regal, the vault provided an illusion of safety, flashing deep green in places where it was pierced by rebel, scattered darts of moonlight.

The forest floor was smooth crystal, polished like the Others’ swords, missing only the faint and yet sharply blue hue of their blades. Treacherous. Slippery. The snow drifts had engulfed the tree trunks. and then froze in place like the majestic canopies above them.

The path was glass rubble: broken in pieces by many boots that must have shepherded thousands of gnarled, twisted white walkers’ legs towards the Wall not so long ago.

The giants marched south in the Others’ steps, immersed in eerie darkness, chased by the whistling winter wind.

After days of blizzard, it no longer snowed.

Sandor led the way. His too long hair swirled forward from under his cloak. It was a miracle that he could see anything. All cowls were up, everyone’s hair was loose. Or it would become too cold to breathe, too unbearable to continue existing, too unthinkable to continue chewing on roots that grew deep underground and ensured the tribe’s sustenance.

Sansa walked next to her love. Then came Arthur, Sandor’s second, and afterwards the rest. The weak trod in the middle of the line: the elderly and the children. The giantwomen took the rear. Departing from the Lands of Always Winter, the people had left behind the lies of ice Winterfell and the terrible brooding valley of the Others, but also the beloved, green homeland of their ancestors,
abandoning it to its sort.

Far behind, Sansa remembered with awe, over the highest mountain peaks, the sun was setting. Ineffably beautiful, the golden globe swelled up as it descended, becoming orange, sweeping away the clouds, the ponds of murky rain water, until the sky was clear, and pink, and red, and just a little purple on edges.

*When the sun is gone, the Long Night shall cover all lands.*

Maybe it already did. The tribe had travelled far. They could no longer see their mountain.

Yet for some reason Sansa believed it did not. Without the sun, the chill in her bones should be even greater, the despair bigger, unquenchable.

She asked the giants if it had happened the same way before, thousands of years ago, that their home had been the last land to know the sun before the Long Night fell, and if they remembered it in their songs.

Arthur did not know, but he was from the Mountains of Dorne, further south than Sansa has ever gone. And all she obtained from the northern members of the tribe in her attempts at conversation was a maelstrom of grunts in Old Tongue, and sad shaking of heads.

Sandor shrugged with indifference, understanding even less. Or rather, he did not see what good it would do to learn the answers so he… *spared himself some trouble.*

She could see his point now. Truly, she could. She wasn’t a child anymore.

*Give them what they want.*

*Let be what can’t be changed.*

*The ugliness. The cruelty.*

Knowing the past would not make the sun rise and shine again.

It would not help them return to the Wall safely.

*But are you not at all curious my love?*

And maybe he even was. But the conviction that the knowledge was unnecessary for the case at hand prevailed. He would not waste his time seeking it.

But Sansa might. She could not easily forget the beauty of the setting sun or the will of the gods that Sandor did not believe in. Letting her mind fly like the white-headed eagle came naturally, and made endurance easier. Sometimes it was the only way to suppress her fear for her life and that of the people she loved, Sandor most of all.

She did not want to die scared

Rather in hope, if die she must.

The forest path began ascending again. Every tenth tree was missing, and every clearing starlit. Once in a while they passed a snow-covered rock, pointing skyward. The growth slowly became lower and scarce, the remaining tree branches shorter and twisted.

"Frostfangs," Arthur announced.
"Very well," Sandor rasped with cautious relief. "We're getting closer."

The moon was up, full like the setting sun, yellow like an overripe pear.

"Snow," it said decisively and Sansa thought she must be dreaming.

Or losing her wits.

The moon could not speak, not even in tales of old glory.

"I need to rest," she whispered to Sandor. "I'm seeing things that can't be. It must be the cold. We will all go mad."

"Like the dragons," Sandor said seriously.

It had to be her dress, soaked in Rhaegar’s blood. She had worn it for too long.

"Did you hear it speaking? The moon," she wondered with hope.

Her husband shook his head. His hair reached his knees now, tied in a messy knot so that he’d be able to fight in need with his usual efficiency. She should have braided it, perhaps, to make it better for him, and also more pleasing for her eyes... But he might not let her, and there was never the time.

"It’s just the stories in your pretty head," he said quietly.

"No they’re not," she rebelled, "It’s very different. It has to mean something."

"Snow," the moon repeated stridently, startling Sansa.

Another glance at Sandor’s flat face made it clear that she was still the only one hearing things.

"Everything has a meaning here, but it also means nothing at all," he hammered stonily. "The eagle crying, the earth trembling. I’d say the world will burst and be consumed by wildfire, if I didn’t know better.” He paused and then continued wearily, “I’m tired and grumkins are on our heels for all I know.”

They had to hurry. The route they used belonged to the Others, made by them and their boots, marching south to war. New hosts hatched all the time, and then answered their king's call.

"Must go," the giants hummed, echoing the necessity. They could not linger.

Sansa walked on, staring at moonlit snow under her feet, unable to get the mysteries of the past out of her head.

The ground climbed steadily, trembling, trembling…

The trees soon became a memory in a desolate landscape of low, snowed-down shrubs and jagged, ice-coated stone.

The wind howled like a hundred wolves. For thirty, for sixty, perhaps for a hundred days!

Was that how long they had walked?

She could not be sure. Every day, every hour was the same like the trees in the forest left behind.

Her legs refused to obey. She slumped, sitting down on ice.
The path was a high mountain pass now, skirting a line of tall peaks, winding between them until a
descent was visible.

In moonlight, they saw the great encampment of the enemy: a sea of Others and wights and siege
engines, stretching through all lands between the Frostfangs and the Wall.

“How are we going to cross?” Sansa thought aloud.

“Somehow,” Sandor muttered, starting to go down.

“Must go,” the giants sang.

Another path led up, and over it, the eagle cried.

“What’s up there?” Sansa wondered.

“Nothing,” Sandor grumbled, stopping.

She wasn’t certain. “I’ll just have a brief look.”

“Sansa, there is nothing there,” he tried to be courteous, she noted, and yet he still sounded impatient
and as considerate as the boulders flanking the mountain pass.

She knew he was merely desolate to get her to safety.

She knew there was no safety.

She could never be safe from everything.

But she could be happy.

So she yearned to kiss him, butt first she had to check the climbing path.

Aunt Lyanna was headstrong, like Arya. She might be here for a reason, and there was no one else
but Sansa to see what it was.

“I’ll be right back,” she told him.

From a corner of her eye, she noted that he muttered something angrily to Arthur and then followed
her, blindly.

Her heart danced from it.

Up there, a man cried softly, inconsolably, his voice deep and soft, and a muted sea of sorrow. There
was no apparent danger, no smell of old ice. The Others were not yet on their heels. They had a
moment to spare. Maybe there was a lost wildling whom they should help.

Might be he had lost his family...

“Must go,” the giants hummed far behind her, but Sansa had stopped listening.

The path was much longer than it seemed at the bottom, and the man quieted. Every time she wanted
to turn back, she heard the eagle’s call. Sandor was close behind her.

“There’s nothing here,” he repeated with the clear voice of reason. “You’re after a wrong bird, my
love. Who’s to say that this one is your aunt’s? Let us go back while we still can.”
“Why, we’ve just arrived,” she said with renewed certainty, ignoring the moon’s glare.

At least it did not talk up here.

Veering around a corner, she burst into a clearing, and her heart froze. It felt as if she stood on the top of the world. The view suddenly opened left and right as far as her eyes could see, under the waning moon.

And, right in front of her, a castle rose on the top of the mountain, hidden by its lesser peaks, not resembling Winterfell, but equally made of ice. Cold blue lights illuminated its many, ornate windows, with pointe ice arches and meticulously carved window sills.

The Others stood guard at its gates, armed only with pride. Their gaze promised death.

Ramparts, buttresses and walls supporting the castle spread down from it, covering the steep, southern slopes of Frostfangs to Sansa’s left. The craggy, forested plains at the bottom swerved with enemies, wights and Others alike, and their siege engines.

Far in the distance, Sansa could see a long black mass stretching east and west, hidden from open view.

*The Wall.*

She wondered why it did not glow in moonlight and what hid it to make it so.

“See this,” Sandor pointed out with uncharacteristic interest in something that was of no use to him. Pinching her chin with tenderness, he made her look to the right. “Firth.”

On that side, she saw the other mountain. The one of the giants, separating their sanctuary from the broad valley where the Others were ceaselessly being born from snow.

The last giant of earth was walking on a mountain spine and then began climbing very slowly towards a lower peaks. The setting sun was about to reach the same place, in its slow descent, well underway way to leave the world.

Sansa glanced back. The tribe had not followed. She was both glad and frightened for it. The people were safe, but Sansa and Sandor were alone. No help would come this time.

“I let them go,” Sandor said apologetically.

“But you are mag.” The giants abandoned only their dead commanders.

Sandor shrugged. “It took some convincing. Arthur said I was awful. You said so once as well. Or was it hateful? I can't recall.”

“You are brave now,” she always had to confront him with the truth.

“And you then?” he wondered wryly, not expecting an answer. Apparently calling him brave made him as bitter as if she called him lord. "You wanted to come here? Here we are, my lady. Your loyal dog has followed.”

They both studied the castle before their eyes in poignant silence.

There was no doubt in both of their hearts to who it belonged.

“I wish you always called me your love,” she said with her heart on her sleeve, irreparably stained by
Rhaegar’s blood.

"I still don't see what I've done to deserve you, but I won't question my good fortune for as long as it lasts," he murmured, towering over her, embarrassed and restless. Unarmed. He could tear apart Others with his bare hands, but there would be too many of them here.

"My love," he rasped, and she melted on the inside like summer snow.

A blasted horn sounded behind the gates. Trumpets followed, light and strident. A company of Others marched out. Surrounding Sansa and Sandor, they escorted them through the yard, and the high-ceilinged corridors, to a large hall.

The work of ice masons was stunning on the inner walls. Crystal-woven tapestries showed unknown heroes, long haired and armoured, in a landscape of lavish trees; riding, bending knees and playing fine, oddly shaped lutes to noble ladies. Every figure looked foreign, much like the walls and the windows of the castle. Figures were drawn with simple, thin lines. Their faces were perfect, flat ovals without volume. Their eyes were imperceptibly slanted which was not a common art style in Westeros. A white walker worked carefully on the far left corner of the largest wall decoration, finishing his handiwork, a wing of an exotic bird, with the help of a middle-size ice spider that spit more ice slime whenever the ice-mason ran out of it.

The lanterns hung high under the ceiling, blue ice glowing in elaborate crystal casings, more intricate than any Sansa had ever seen.

“Like the iron on the gates of Greywater Watch where the plants looked buggering real,” Sandor grumbled, his voice so deep that it was only intelligible to Sansa. “The figures look alive, look! Like tiny grumkins about to hop off the walls and walk away.”

Sansa find herself unwillingly admiring the interior, despite having being once imprisoned in ice spiderweb and utterly unable to get out.

“Welcome to my home,” the Night’s King said mockingly from the high dais, cruel as ever, seated proudly on a throne, radiating confidence.

Jon Stark had gone beyond the confines of his old home, and built a court to his own twisted taste, Sansa considered with shame. Much like she went south to King’s Landing and was seduced by the pageant of foreign beauty.

“It brightens my mood that you find it beautiful,” the ice lord concluded with uncharacteristic honesty. “I had not expected any of us to feel for each other at any time, but here we are. Life is not predictable.”

Sansa stopped looking around, focusing on the throne and its occupant.

This was no weirwood seat. Nothing grew in these cold halls. Only old ice, smelling of death, had been martelled into a simple chair with armrests adorned with chiselled ice leaves of some thorny bush that Sana didn’t know. There were no swords at the back. There was however place for one more person to sit next to the king.

*His queen.*

In the shady alcove behind the Night’s King back, there were two prisoners. A cowled young woman hung from a spider-web like a carcass of a lamb, head down and legs up. A blossoming red wound adorned her heart. And a man clad in black, chained in ice, crouched on the castle floor under her. His face was invisible. His bare hands were black, bloodless.
It was this wight, and not a man who cried, Sansa thought to herself, before she saw beyond doubt that both captives were silver-haired.

Her first concern was for the living. Those already dead could not be helped to come back.

“Daenerys!” she breathed out. “Release her! It is not fit for a king to torture women!”

“Your Grace,” she added as an afterthought.

This was a court like any other. Courtesies could not harm. They could prolong the audience until-

She didn’t want to think ahead.

No help would come this time, and what could they possibly do to either defeat the enemy or run away?

“Am I the worst king you’ve seen?” the enemy retorted savagely. “I think not.”

“Brother,” Sandor said with emotion towards Rhaegar. “They won’t let you die in peace, will they? It’s bloody worse to be a dragon in this world than a buggering dog.” His knuckles were white, but he held his temper in check.

There were at least a hundred Others in the throne room. All armed. There were no ladies. Maybe this made it easier to torture women. Be that as it may, Sansa had to give one thing to the white walkers. They treated everyone the same: man, woman or child. They did not make solemn vows to protect the weak only to beat them later when their king commanded. They killed everyone.

The windows of the great hall faced north, to Sansa’s right.

It was from there that the eagle cried again.

It was from there that the pale moon glared, and now it spoke again, screeching “Snow!”, filled with righteous anger.

Sansa gulped and held her tongue, waiting for her destiny, or for an opportunity to escape it, whichever came first.

A white walker brought in a tray with two tiny cups with smoking red liquid, offering them to Sansa and Sandor.

“The blood of the dragon is worthless,” the Nights’ King proclaimed bitterly. “Go ahead. Drink! Be my honoured guests! I swear to you that it has no hidden properties. On my honour as a grumkin.” He sounded extremely disappointed and resigned.

Sansa gagged from the very notion.

On a second thought, her throat constricted from renewed fear.

If Rhaegar’s blood no longer interested the enemy, she was as good as dead, and Sandor didn’t even have that weak protection.

The Night’s King waved his arms commandingly. The Others seized Sandor and Sansa, and forced the boiling blood down their throats. They both resisted but to no avail. Her throat burned from it, and she felt sullied, more from the ungodly humiliation than the awful, hot, salty taste.

“The brave peoples of Westeros did not expect the Great Other to have only one castle and one
“throne?” he murmured. “That crippled brother of yours will soon discover it, to his sorrow. I am not where he thinks I am. I haven’t sat on my old throne for very long, for more years than I can remember. And I shall find this cave where Brandon is hiding if it’s the last thing that I do. Despite that it’s again moving from place to place when it should not, not after we killed all those bloody criminals, the children. I’ll ruin their damned grotto, I swear it. On my honour, I vow it, as soon as I find the time to start searching. I shall not know peace until it is torn to rubble and vanished, like its childlike masters.”

Sandor wiped the rests of Dany’s blood from his face and gave the Night’s King a stony look, unimpressed with the threats and the unspeakable blasphemy of what he was forced to ingest.

Sansa wished she had his calm in repulsive adversity. Her stomach was in her throat, the last root she ate with the giants almost coming out in pieces. She felt dirty and guilty. This must be a sin in the eyes of the gods! She pushed the bile back down with an effort, and just barely contained the impulse to puke in a most unladylike manner.

She could not be weak now.

But It was easier said than done.

“Bran is cleverer than you think;” she forced her voice to sound calm and confident, even threatening. Bran could see the truth in his dreams. “He’ll see through your deceit.”

Brandon Stark! Why did you return to the cave? It is cursed! What are you up to? Who let you?

“It was my utmost pleasure to offer guest right to my most unexpected and most welcome visitors,” the Night’s King sounded princely and regal. “You will forgive me that there is no bread and salt at my home. We only consume blood.” He was like Joffrey at his best, or at his worst, which was often one and the same. “I would have invited you earlier if I knew you would come.”

Sansa looked away.

The throne room looked to the north. All windows were open, free from any ice artwork. Winter wind howled through them, stronger than at the Moon Door. No blue lantern light was necessary on that side.

The sun sat on a mountain top. The last giant of earth reached that peak, and immediately fell to his huge knees with Rhaegar’s stolen horn, from the effort it must have taken to climb a mountain spine to arrive there: an image of woe and surrender.

“Where is my wife?” the Night’s King thundered.

It was time to end the niceties, Sansa presened.

“Did the two of you kidnap her with those giant barbarians? Did you load her on a mammoth? I’ve seen the herd running both north and south, avoiding my patrols. Tell me and I might let you live! Her guards were all butchered, and I killed the two who could still walk myself. They had failed in their duty.”

Sandor grunted, possibly agreeing with the sentiment. She preferred not to dwell on what he would be capable of doing for her sake. Or for Rhaegar, who’d become his friend.

The Others, on the other hand, pierced their king with long, strangely disapproving glances. When Sansa dared peek just a little into their threatening, death-scented minds, she thought she got a glimpse of the conviction that they neither had nor needed a queen. That they were neither men nor
women, but the Others.

Were they about to turn against him?

Could they be like men and betray their sovereign?

Everyone believed they were tied to his will, like poor wights to them.

“Alright, alright,” the Night’s King told his guards. “Put her down.”

Two Others closest to the throne released Daenerys to the ground, next to Rhaegar, not bothering to chain her.

She stood up very slowly and spread her arms like wings, as if in a trance, throwing back her head. Ice spiderweb still clung to her body. Jon’s queen looked only half awake and half asleep. Her heart was still an open wound, frozen rather than healing. She didn’t seem to know anyone. She looked at the red sunset with longing and whispered absent-mindedly: “My sun and stars.”

“Kneel!” the Night’s King commanded his prisoners and his uninvited guests.

Sansa obeyed without thinking. Glancing behind, she was relieved to see that Sandor followed suit.

“My king,” she said to gain more time.

Sandor remained quiet, but he bowed his shaggy head, a tiny bit. Just enough, she hoped. Under the circumstances, he was still on his best behaviour, understanding the odds.

They had to do something.

It was their duty.

Neither the sun nor stars came to help Jon’s queen. Suddenly, Dany fainted, whiter than snow, hitting the ice floor. A fresh, tiny red flower blossomed on her head.

Sandor startled an inch. Almost imperceptibly.

“Weakling,” the Night’s King insulted Daenerys. “And here I thought that the blood of the dragon was as strong as that of the north. I have erred.

“She’s lost too much,” Sandor muttered an explanation under his broken voice. It was not clear to Sansa if he spoke only to her or also to the enemy, to whom his low voice might sound like gibberish.

“She needs a maester, Your Grace,” Sansa voiced her own growing concern with as much politeness as she could master. “Surely you majestic Court is not devoid of such honourable service and position.”

“A physician…” the Night’s King reacted pensively. “I used to have the best.”

“Not anymore?” Sansa continued trying. “Perhaps you should send for one. What if Your Grace suffered from an ailment of age that could be cured?”

“Age?” the Night’s King laughed raucously. His chuckles thundered through his hall, taking a long time to subside.

Sansa chastised herself inwardly for her stupidity. The monster was thousands of years old.
First Jon Stark could have been the first King of Winter.

If not the very first, then one of the first ones, to be sure.

Histories diverged slightly at that point, Maester Luwin had said, and Sansa still remembered most of her lessons.

“If you sometimes felt the passage of time, I meant, it is all,” she finished lamely. “I am still young, but I understand that aging can bring a certain melancholy

“I regret to inform you that I do not suffer from such foolishness,” the enemy concluded dryly, while staring at Rhaegar. “That’s more for him.”

“I am also pleased that you were able to find admiration in your person for my favourite art and artists,” he told Sansa, pointing at the ice-weaving Other and his spider, which now paced up and down in the right upper corner of the tapestry in the making, on eight hairy ice legs. “For this reason, I shall let you know that Her Grace Daenerys Stormborn shall live for a while longer,” he continued, not without cruelty, “I mean to parade her before the Wall for all to see, before I let her die and serve me as a slave. I might finish her myself if your brother doesn’t give me back my wife. Or even if he does. It is still a matter of consideration.”

From his throne, the great Other spat with contempt, as if to emphasise his threat even more. His bluish saliva froze on the bottom of the dais.

“Dragonblood is worth nothing,” he asserted, “I drank Jon Snow’s blood before your Wall months ago, and now I tasted hers. Just like you have done. It is all a lie. All stories about it. There is no magic in it. No cure for any condition.”

“Blood is blood,” Sandor said disrespectfully and earned himself a crystal sword blow over his back from one of the snark guards.

For a moment, Sansa was afraid he would turn around and tear his attacker to pieces. Yet he didn’t. He fell face down, his expression as twisted as his brother had made it for him: his eyes flat and indifferent.

Behind the facade, there was solid anger, she knew. He was as good as her in playing a role in court. The odds were still against them and he would not throw his life away. Not for nothing, as he would say.

And he was frightened, perhaps, for her, and not for himself.

There were no fires in the Night’s King’s high halls

Only blue ice.

“I guess I shall drag all my useful hostages with me, back to the battlefield,” the frost spoke through the Night’s King mouth, with calculated calm. “Wife, father and sister. Perhaps you could be of use in getting my wife back. And then I shall cut you down with my own hands for displeasing me and resisting my rule.”

“I wish I could get my hands on the young king’s beloved mother and other littermates,” he finally told Sansa in the most insulting tone he could muster, staring at her, weighing her reaction, and then added the absolute worst.

“We can leave out the goodbrother, I think.”
And to poor Sandor, he said, “You have served me well, lord. I offer to take you in my ranks, as my personal guard. I won’t say it twice.”

In reaction to the Great Other’s speech, before Sandor was obliged to respond, before Sansa could cry out with despair, Rhaegar crawled towards his sister. Chained, he still succeeded to stretch his sticky bonds far enough to kneel next to Daenerys and cradle her head against the dead ruin of his chest. Then he gave the Night’s King an accusing blue look.

Lyanna’s eagle screamed helplessly outside, not showing itself at the Night’s King’s high windows.

Finally, Rhaegar looked with longing at Sansa’s dress. His lifeblood.

“The boy Snow hates this sister,” Sandor suddenly tossed a new card into the game of thrones, for reasons that were entirely his own.

Why are you saying this, my love? And why would he believe you, even if it were true? He’ll just do what he wants because he can. Unlike you.

She could feel him become a little happy from her last thought. From her trust in him. Despite all the odds.

The Night King’s gaze narrowed.

Sandor rasped on. “You’ve got the wrong girl, grumkin. This one called Jon Snow her half-brother, and he hated her for it. You might get to him if you catch the other one, the little wolf bitch. You can let this one go. She’s as worthless as dragonblood.”

“Sandor!” she felt belittled, betrayed. “Stop saying that.”

“Is he lying?” The Night’s King asked of Sansa. His shining blue eyes demanded the truth.

“Jon may well love Arya more, but he never gave me any reason to doubt his brotherly love for me. And he would always offer me every protection. I am certain of it,” Sansa said fervently, needing to believe in her own words. “I love him dearly.” Now that I know life. Jon. Will you ever forgive me.

The Night’s King looked undecided.

“Her sister hates her too, the little wolf bitch always wanted to kill her,” Sandor was merciless. “But Sansa doesn’t see it. She’s stupid, is all. An empty-headed bird.

“A bird,” the Night’s King said with amusement, glancing through his window where the invisible eagle never stopped voicing its distress.

It cawed now, like a crow, and not the mighty ruler of the skies.

“I had caught a bird pet for my wife, but it ran away,” the ice king continued. “Now it will die from hunger out there. The birds are stupid, I concur.”

Sansa glared at both men, yet a terrible doubt began seizing her poor heart, leaving it in tatters.

Could it be true? Did Arya and Jon both hate her? Still today? Or just before? Was she too stupid to tell, and Sandor knew better? He hated liars! He wouldn’t invent such a thing, would he? What for? The choice for Sansa was between dying here now or a bit later on the Wall.

Or did he want them to die together?
It was not what she wanted, but it was better than the rest of her assumptions. Perhaps it was a natural part of love for a man who had always courted death. She shivered from the notion. Yet she was also touched, if that was his intent. Instinctively, she peeked into his mind. To her surprise, she found it angry and empty. Or rather... Closed. Guarded.

Suddenly, she was oddly afraid that the Night’s King was a warg in disguise as well, for how else could he know certain things?

She forced her own mind blank, placid, courteous. Like her face.

She had never been more focused or afraid in her life.

The Night’s King sank into his seat and made a demanding hand gesture to his nearest guard. The Other ran to a side chamber and brought him a cushion of entangled weirwood branches and roots. He pulled some twigs out of it and placed them on his eyes, palms and heart.

“You have not lied to me,” he told Sandor after a while, removing the white wood from his person. “Your wife is of no use to me, just like dragonblood. And you have served me well as a sparring partner, lord. Will you choose life in my service as your reward?”

Sandor’s eyes held and treasured unspoken, unexpressed anger. What, with being lorded and offered once again to become a... a damn white walker. Yet he admirably continued to hold his tongue and his temper in check.

“You could-” the Great Other continued placidly, and stopped abruptly.

The eagle spread his great wings in front of his window, screeched savagely, joyfully, and soared back to the Lands of Always Winter, drawing the gazes of everyone’s present to its straight flight.

On the distant mountain top, the kneeling giant of earth stood up: a quiet boulder, not accepting defeat. The Horn of Dragonlords was his support, his tall staff to lean on.

Sandor’s stony stare drifted from the crown of Sansa’s head to Firth. Unwittingly, she felt herself sneaking into her husband’s mind again, not caring if the Others could spy on them. A cruel prayer was there: that the earth open and swallow the Others and their brooding place for good. That the fire in earth’s core burn them all to dust. Sandor’s wish was so heartfelt that Sansa couldn’t detach herself from it. She was compelled to let it rebound in the profound corners of her being, like an odd song.

The Night’s King was suddenly standing next to them, alone and unguarded. His greatsword was on his back. Flakes of frozen blue breath streamed from his mouth. On his hip, there was a slightly shorter blade. A weapon that looked like Jon’s magic sword, if Sansa’s recollections were any good.

Solid chance was they were not. Arya was much more knowledgeable in that regard.

Yet Sansa was castle born and raised. She could tell a bow from a sword, and a blade of Southron making from the northern one. She wasn’t ignorant or blind. This weapon was not from any place in Westeros she knew, and Jon had carried such blade on his own wedding. How many similar ones could there be in Seven Kingdoms?

“What have you done to my brother?” she blurted, remembering belatedly that she ought to refer to Jon as a cousin now in formal circumstances.

Would the courtesies due always be different from the truths she felt in her heart? She used to think they were one and the same, but that was so very long ago.
“Nothing,” the Night’s King retorted curtly. “Not yet,” he added with malice and determination, and then pointed a twisted finger at Firth. “He is no more alive than any of my slaves. Did you not know, lady?”

Her face or her mind must have betrayed to him that she did not.

The enemy continued speaking to no one in particular, sounding puzzled. “What can he hope to achieve by having bent his knee the setting sun? His life is forfeit.”

“The Horn of Dragonlords kills a man, and then turns him into a grumkin who won’t bow to you. We have one such on the Wall. Ironborn.” Sanor drawled as a non-talented bard: a peasant from westerlands. “Might be Firth thinks it’s better to be his own grumkin than plain dead.”

Mance Rayder would have made a song about Firth’s exploits by now. Maybe he still would, if Sansa lived long enough to tell him the story.

The Night’s King expression became closed. Unreadable. “I wonder...” he began. Seemingly unable to find more words, he never finished his thought, and sank into dead silence.

Behind the throne, Daenerys stirred in Rhaegar’s arms. She gave a glassy, unseeing look to Firth and the setting sun. Then, her gaze brightened and she looked more intently, as if her life depended on something she couldn’t quite grasp. Her body was no longer limp. There was tension in it, Sansa could tell. Yet she never left Rhaegar’s cold embrace, despite that his grip must have been at least unpleasant to a living, warm body.

Sansa remembered how she had sung Firth to sleep, so that he wouldn’t hurt his own people coming home, guarding the mountain pass from friend and foe alike. No one should come through, not from the direction of the Others’ brooding valley. If only there were more Firths, guarding the broken bridges on the other side! Then the village would have still been inhabited, and the sun might shine of it.

The giants’ homeland, the last corner of the free world.

But the bridges had fallen, and the constant watch of the tribe had not been enough.

The white walkers had their lands now.

Poor Firth had failed.

The thought saddened Sansa deeply, filling her heart with grief so strong and unbearable that it grew wings. Her sorrow flew back north over the mountains, unbridled. Firth stirred from it, or from the warmth of flaming sun beams in his dark blue eyes. The sun’s huge halo encircled him - a blazon on a shield; a frightening, fighting figure on a field red like blood.

Encouraged, awoken, sober, Firth lifted the Horn of Dragonlords high over his head.

He swung it like a club and hit the sun, taking it down from the sky.

Instead of setting into the sea, the searing orb landed on him, a ball of fire, a globe of fire, and from him it rolled forward, east, towards the Others’ valley.

Firth and the horn were soon no more than a veil of fine dust scattered in purple dusk shadows.

The sun rolled on, growing in size, glowing angry red from being set on a path to travel east, and not west. It could have been a trick played by the distance on Sansa’s astonished eyes, but it surely
looked as true as her love for Sandor.

Firth’s empty mountain began falling apart, taken by an earthquake. The earth’s belly roared. The mountain sides crumbled and cracked, broke and burned. Pieces of rocks were blown away, like fresh green leaves of a young oak with no chance to survive winter. The shivering sea was awaiting eagerly behind. When the whole mountain lost solidity and seemed to be blowing in the wind, salty soldiers followed the sun, galloping towards the Other’s valley. They were nothing more than sea waves shaped like dancing shadows with foamy wings, striding through the mountain’s remnants, leaving dry earth behind, on the long shores that used to be covered by the shivering sea

Sansa could not take her eyes away from the fury and ruin wrecked upon the Others by the last giant of earth.

Daeny had wriggled out of Rhaegar’s embrace and studied the onslaught of the elements with huge violet eyes, hands woven tightly together.

Next to Sansa, the Night’s King showed a faintest of tremors, a very first and pale trace of something akin to uncertainty.

She didn’t need to be a warg or a prophet to know what he thought.

There shall be no more Others coming from the Lands of Always Winter, sure as sunrise used to be. The sea was flooding their valley, The shadows danced under it, and the white walkers’ land was no more.

Sandor gave the Night’s King a dull, unfeeling look. “This is a day I shall remember in seven hells,” he drawled, “and I shall burn gladly for all eternity.”

Rhaegar’s face was an expressionless mask. Cautiously, he seemed to nudge his sister towards the open window, just where the eagle had cried before flying away.

The Others barred Rhaegar’s way, taking him and Daenerys into their custody, before they could jump out and end their torment of their own free will. Not even a wight could survive such long and craggy fall, without breaking his body in so many pieces that it could no longer stand up and answer the white walkers’ call.

On the contrary, Sansa and Sandor were forced to make a step closer to the window. Outside, the wind blew like mad.

Worse than at the Moon Door.

Sansa trembled with fear, utterly unable to control it and appear calm and collected, like a proper lady.

“I am merciful,” the Night’s King said in a tone of a sovereign pronouncing a death sentence, “For all occasions when you kept me company in court, I offer you both a swift, painless death. Or would you prefer that we drink blood from your hearts while you still live? Nothing compares to the warm taste of it, for my people.”

They were sentenced to die and she had to be brave. Like the Starks. Like Sandor.

Sandor offered her his arm as the Others forced them up on the window sill.

“It’s better than burning,” he rasped with indifference. Yet his eyes searched wildly the nightly gloom for something that could gentle their fall: a landing point, a snowy meadow.
But there were only jagged rocks that Sansa could see, a few hundred feet below, in the dark, purple-glowing sunset.

The sun had all but disappeared. It has lingered too long on earth, where all men must have deserved to die or the gods wouldn’t have sent the white walkers to make an end of them.

The Others poked Sandor and Sansa with the crystal-jeweled pommels of their swords, toying with them like cats with mice. Sansa could taste idle amusement in the mind of the one nearest to her and winced from the contact. To warg into a white walker brought a sensation of paralysing, mortal dread, and unbearably rancid stench of death.

Sandor gave her a flat look.

Together, they stepped over the edge, just before they would be given a final push.

Her hand immediately lost Sandor’s from the speed of their fall. So fast! She could no longer even see him.

In the end, she would be alone. At least she wouldn’t watch him die. That would be unbearable.

In the little time she still had, she cursed the dragons.

What was dragonblood indeed?

Why did Drogon not come for all of them? Most of all for his mother? Without Dany, he would still be a black oval stone.

Why didn’t he save Rhaegar? He was also his rider and he loved his dragon as a fellow man?

Didn’t Drogon know his duty?

Could he not fly beyond the Wall for once, in dire need?

Lady would come to her, Sansa was certain, if she was alive. She would never betray her. Not like dragons, weak and stupid, who would only obey for a time and if someone bound them firmly to their will, be it by birth, blood or enchantment. The strongest creatures of earth had no understanding or will of their own--

The sky was a whirlwind of black scales.

She landed on Sandor, harshly. Her heart beat in her chest like a hundred drums on Jon’s wedding. Her head was in turmoil and she almost choked on her own heavy breathing.

“Seven hells, beast,” Sandor cursed Drogon. “You are not here for us. Go back for your blood and kin!”

*Rhaegar and Daenerys.*

“How did you know that he was here?” Sansa exclaimed.

Sandor shrugged, “I didn’t.”

“But then--

“I thought he might be alright,” he growled quietly. “Daenerys would not stare at Lyanna’s eagle with so much devotion. But she might at one of her pets. Especially this one. He was her favourite.”
The dragon screeched, flying away from the land, until he glided in the dark sky over the sea. Sansa wondered if it meant that both Rhaegar and Dany were dead and not worth rescuing, two poor wights without a drop of Targaryen blood left, enslaved by the Others and unable to ride their winged steeds.

But why did he then come to Frostfangs in the first place? Was he just stupid to risk his life for no reason at all? A beast--

Drogon roared with anger.

Whatever his reasons for arriving, he seemed to hate being accused of stupidity. She could not blame him. She still loathed that Sandor had called her so, even knowing that it was a ruse.

Proud and powerful, Drogon flew straight up, into the dark sky, towards the talkative moon.

Sansa thought her heart would stop from fear. Perhaps she was already dead and dreaming

She tried to warg into the dragon to see his intentions. Since she practised her gift freely, she could break through the mental barriers of any creature, even of the Others. To her surprise, the dragon’s spiked head remained firmly closed, not showing even an inch of his true attitude. She could not pass, and he refused to speak to her. Probably because she wasn’t his rider. Just a crippled warg and a load to be transported

*Why carrying us then? Where to?*

Drogon remained as eloquent as the Night’s King when he contemplated his army’s destruction by the invincible sun.

“Snow,” the moon said from behind a wisp of cloud, terribly nearby.

“Seven hells, Sansa this is beautiful,” Sandor tossed in, embracing her from behind, his arms wonderfully warm and alive. *Free.* “I had never thought I would see the stars. Not unless I drowned in Dornish sour.”

He was right. But it was also too much to bear.

Sansa leaned into him and closed her eyes. “Thank the gods we are both here,” she whispered and dreamed, awake, about a sunny future and life still to come, for all her family, and all good people.

“Sansa, look,” he woke her from her reverie after a while.

It was never over. The terror. The violence.

Not so far below them, there was a smoking island, crowned with a majestic castle wrought in black stone, with every tower, door and window shaped like a different dragon.

It was the last place where she would expect Drogon to take her and Sandor.

“Dragonstone,” she whispered. The corners of her lips hurt, dried out from cold, and also from flying. Puckered, like Sandor’s beloved scars.

The black dragon was as large as the castle ground now, albeit not yet as tall and broad as the whole edifice. With the thin end of his enormous, spiked tail, he smashed a window in a rounded, central tower, and shook his passengers off his back like annoying fleas. Then he vanished eastward, over the narrow sea, as if he was but a dream of salvation, convincing, but lacking substance.
Sansa stood up slowly and dusted her blood-soaked gown. The floor hadn’t been cleaned for a year, it seemed, maybe more. The great, kingly hall looked abandoned, despite the great colourful map of Westeros drawn over a lavishly carved wooden table.

“The Painted Table,” Sandor announced dryly, “I was here once. Robert visited Stannis on a whim. To show Joff his dominion over the dragons. He got drunk and smashed some dragon statues. Joff was six and he cried. Stannis was offended.”

It was too warm. The heat surge came from below, suffocating, sulphuric, worse than dragonbreath.

From the lower levels.

Sansa remembered that the island was on fire.

There was smoke everywhere, acrid and sharp.

She ran to the broken window, and saw ships leaving the small harbour. Three swift vessels with blowing banners: a white tower crowned with flames on smoke grey field, for House Hightower.

The Hightower men must have set Dragonstone alight for reasons known only to themselves and their lord.

“The alchemists’ piss,” Sandor spat out with disgust.

Even Sansa could sniff wildfire. She would never be able to forget its smell after the battle for King’s Landing and the night when the sky burned green. It always came back in her nightmares, with Sandor’ knife on her throat.

The flames were in all colours of the rainbow now. Green was only one of them.

Terrifying.

Beautiful.

“They must have brought it from the Citadel,” Sandor continued nervously. “Rhaegar believed that the maesters had spilled wildfire on purpose in Summerhall, when he was born. And that they had not done it in order to help Aegon the Unlikely to hatch new dragons as they had promised, but rather to seal the ruin of the race, so that the beasts would never again be able to rise and help govern people. As if the honourable people of Westeros needed animals in order to turn beastly!” he snorted. “Men can easily achieve that on their own.”

He sounded a bit like maester Luwin, just much younger and with the unquenchable flame of anger that always kept him going, never let him halt and be in peace.

“I am glad that you are taking an interest in history,” she commended him. “I wish I could continue my lessons some day. They were woefully incomplete because i left Winterfell so young.”

Sandor looked down through the broken window. His lips thinned and tightened as he took in the proportions of their latest misfortune.

Sansa already knew.

It shall be worse than Frostfangs for him, to be sure. Unless Drogon returned---

She had to stop thinking.
She had to.

She had to stay calm.

Sandor sat on the Painted Table and his eyes quieted. He never cried despite that she believed and feared that he might, and dreaded even more her own reaction to his tears.

Of falling apart.

Of being Sansa and never being able to do anything well. Stupid, sweet Sansa. A weak creature to be commanded and disposed of when she served a purpose.

The silence was long and cutting and she found no words of love to fill it up.

“I’ve always known it would come to this. That one day I should burn to death,” he stated with a dense, quiet calm she had never seen or heard in him. Kind. Not angry. Reasonable. Not a man hit hard by the madness of love or the cruelty of life. Just Sandor. A good man above all. A man at ease with himself, with her, and with his destiny. How she wished he were like that more often! In peace. Under the sun. Her companion. Her love.

“I wanted them to burn,” he went on very quietly. “The Others. You’ve seen it. You felt it. A man should not wish that to his worst enemy. Yet I did. But you? Why are you left here with me to burn? What have you ever done to your gods?”

Truth be told, Sansa could think of a few things. Of herself, very young, and running to Cersei with her father’s plans on her tongue and her stupid heart on her still non-bloodied sleeve.

But even if she for some reason truly deserved death, she still didn’t want to die.

And neither should Sandor.

They had some time, in the drum tower. The heavy stone masonry would take some time to collapse after the wooden parts of the castle were thoroughly burned. Maybe she would think of something. A way out she didn’t see yet. She had escaped harm so many times by a hair’s breadth, she might be spared again,

She sat next to him. The edge of her gown became stuck under a table leg. She pulled it out gently, yet a small piece of blood-stained cloth was torn from it and left on the grimy, black stone floor. It mattered not. It wasn’t as she would ever going to suffer a cold again.

How much will it hurt to burn?

But him, him! She could not accept the truth that he would die a victim of flames. She could not. She could not let him have the right of it. He was wrong and there was no good reason for which he should burn.

Except in her waiting arms, with the sweet fire of the senses.

He was still so calm next to her. Not even a little angry. Unafraid. Brave.

She couldn’t handle it.

It wasn’t just.

Her being caught fire, her spirit was set ablaze. She was a child, the giants had always said, the child of the forest. She wasn’t just a warg or a skinchanger who had lost her wolf. She could hunt with her
head and force open the mind of almost any creature in existence, even of Firth. All except Drogon, and maybe she should have tried harder.

And she could sing.

By the gods, she had always been able to sing, in the past and now. Since the day she was born and screamed in cradle to announce that she could breathe.

The children had almost destroyed the world by intoning the wrong melody. Could she sing it to do good? Would she be successful or would she end up doing something terrible?

She was rambling now. Her fear must have driven her mad.

Sandor stared at her differently now. As a woman.

His woman.

He did not mean-

He could not possibly want-

They were about to die, it was not proper to think of-

Or was it?

“There are no Others here,” he remarked guiltily, seeing that she understood his intent to love her, one last time. “I just wish that... Never mind.”

He was too shy to say it, despite everything they had been through together, and he could never be more endearing.

She looked at the Painted Table with new eyes, and it seemed to her like a perfect resting place. It was cleaner than the floor.

The floor... She looked down and noted that the torn shred of her dress melted slowly into black stone.

How?

The flames had not yet reached their level. Yet the blood-stained fabric had seeped into the floor, becoming one with it. Grime stirred and rippled on the surface, restless like a nest of ants.

Would the castle burst? Or---

She had a truly mad thought. And why not?

What did she have to lose?

She looked under the table and was satisfied with what she saw.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she lied to him. She wouldn’t give him any false hope. It would be too cruel in case she was plain wrong. She couldn’t do it to him.

And she did not understand fully the purpose of her actions. She only felt they were necessary and
could not be otherwise.

Not in the case at hand.

She undressed very slowly, until she stood in front of him naked as her name day. He had been staring at her all the while, immutable, but the look on his face clearly told her that he was forgetting about the burning.

*Very well.*

With the most elegant and ladylike gesture she could muster, she let her dress sink under the table and tucked it under with her bare feet, until it completely vanished from sight.

His stare was lost to the fire. All he saw was her.

She was all he cared for.

Maybe he could die like that, now knowing that he was burning.

Maybe their loving would be like the milk of the poppy to him, but for her it would never be enough.

She wanted long years of life together. Visiting Arya. Bran and Rickon in spring.

Seeing Jon when his kingly duties allowed.

And little Robb in Winterfell, growing to be a lord.

She wanted children and nephews. Weddings and name days, and even proper funerals.

Prosperity in the realm for everyone who had suffered through winter.

Peace.

She wanted too much and she wanted the impossible.

The drum tower turned hot like the furnace and she only had to stay brave a bit longer. Then it would be all over, one or the other way.

She pulled the mammoth skins off him one by one, and he let himself be woman-handled. It didn’t take them long to love each other and forget all else, for a very brief moment.

And in the end, he *was* crying in her arms and he *was* afraid, as she expected. Back to that little boy who only wanted to play with a wooden knight.

The flames licked the legs of the table and would soon reach them, writhing towards their last resting place. Sandor's furs were already burnt, and she didn’t dare look under the table to see how her dress fared, lest her only hope die and leave her with despair so deep as she had never known it.

“Maybe if you sang,” he said cautiously, burned lips forming one straight line of endurance. “It would be easier. Quicker.”

There was no thought in him of killing *her* before he died, unlike his initial reaction when he had feared the giants could murder her or worse.

A song.
But not of Florian and Jonquil this time. Nor of Mother and her mercy.

She sang of Rhaegar Targaryen, born in Summerhall as it burned, surviving wildfire with his mother, despite that the alchemists’ creation should have killed men and dragons according to the maesters’ lore. Of Rhaegar who was hopelessly touched by melancholy ever since his mother confided to him the truth about his unlikey birth, and never to anyone else. Not even to her husband who might have loved her before turning mad and offering her affection to another noble lady, Cersei’s and Jaime’s mother.

And if it was merely a stupid song she invented, it was a beautifully sad one, and she would not feel hurt if anyone chastised her for it.

Then, she sang of Ser Duncan the Tall, who could have been Sandor’s great-grandfather, and who had given his life for a blue dragon egg that hatched a hundred years later. A true knight.

Finally she sang of the great crime of the maesters, who were sworn to seek knowledge, and use it to do good. Much like the knights ought to protect the weak, even if they were petrified baby dragons. And then they built dragonpits and sold wildfire ruin as hope for dragons to Aegon the Unlikely.

It was not just, Summerhal and Dragonstone both, what the maesters and Hightower’s men had done, and she would not have it.

Injustice.

Just like Father, she had never been able to abide by it. She had to say something, at least, even if indirectly, to whoever held the superior power.

But there was no one here. They were utterly and helplessly alone.

Burning inwardly, she began a new song and did not understand the soft words that left her mouth. She sang in the language that was not hers. Not even the Old Tongue that she had learned to some extent beyond the Wall.

It sounded a bit like Old Valyrian which she had only seen in written and never learned to pronounce.

Did Drogon know about this? Was he clever? Or was he mad, stupid and cruel, and just left them here to die?

Language aside, the song was of the children. And before it belonged to the children, it was of the earth.

The table was on fire and they were both burning, falling to the floor.

Sandor whined with his eyes closed. She wrapped his arms around her and he held onto her for dear life.

She didn’t feel any pain as she sang, but Sandor must have, and his yelps were breaking her heart.

She had to sing on.

The flames rose higher until the hard stone below her softened. The roof above her head was gone.

Ahead of her, the melting drum tower opened its mouth and spat an orange jet of fire at another morphing stone mass, shaped vaguely like a Sea Dragon, to which the drum was still connected by a
disintegrating bridge.

The tower breathed fire once more, aiming at the Hightower ships leaving the bay. It missed, but not by far.

She realised that Sandor’s hair was not burning. And neither was her own when she felt it with her fingers. She must have done something good.

Her hand touched scales, her body felt a familiar, warm body of a dragon.

She sat up, assuming a position for riding.

“You are mad, little bird,” Sandor said very seriously, hugging her waist, wiping his eyes on her skin and hair. He was back to his senses, and blessedly still not angry, despite that she had just witnessed his weakness at its worst. “I thought you Starks would remain reserved on your deathbed.”

“Maybe,” she murmured between verses, singing on. What he said was a possibility.

But not now.

Not yet.

It would not do to quit singing.

She would continue until her voice was spent, and all air left her lungs.

And while she did that, stubbornly clinging to her beliefs, she feared the call of ice in her blood and what it could do on the day she were provoked to commit evil. What monsters could she create if her love for her husband and her family ever gave way to dismissive hatred?

“It stopped hurting,” he said with amazement, staring at his hands, unburnt, without a single new scar to keep company to many minor traces of years of swordsmanship.

She was in awe as well, wondering what to expect next. They seemed to be perfectly safe in a glowing cloud of fire, shaped like a snarling dragon, part auburn like her hair, and part red like Rhaegar’s blood.

Not knowing what her song was causing and setting to motion, she rejoiced at the thought that she was not that different from Jon and Arya.

Bold, and maybe brave.
Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Jon XIV

Jon

He had walked for so long that he lost count of time.

No matter how hard a pace he set for his march, he could never catch up with Arya and the people of Winterfell heading for the Wall.

Maybe if I grew wings.

He was being ridiculous. He could never turn into a dragon.

Or a wolf.

Despite being accused of being a turncloak, a warg and a beastling.

Born a man, always a man.

Nothing could change that, could it?

Not even hard-bleeding wounds that healed on their own, deep slashes that would kill any other man.

At least his blood, so eager to leave his body, was and remained red, not black.

He always clung to that. Lest he go mad like his forefathers with silver hair and dreams of fire that would burn to ashes the world not deserving of dragons.

Those whose likeness he did not inherit visibly.

Hiding in my eyes, watchful, watching...

Aegon’s straight, shiny hair next to his dark locks sticking in all directions had shown it clearly in Shadow Tower. So long ago. Just after he had cut down his own never-seen never-met father in a duel so that he would not become a white walker. The dark indigo tinge was there, in his own pupils, hidden inside the flat black colour from his mother. There it lurked, and it could not be denied.

A proof in flesh of what he knew in spirit. He could rejoice, or grieve in a manner uncommon for the Starks, not even for his mother with her wolf-blood. His feelings could turn far too exuberant and forward going. Flaming. Not near stony enough.

Granite was no dragonglass.

Fortunately, it was not.

For any glass could shatter, even the hardest one of all. Not so the grey stone in his heart which would go on and stay the same for vast years to come, carrying grief, old and new: immutable, ineffable, and utterly unforgettable.

So perhaps it would help him now to keep his soul together and lead him out of fresh misery.
Dany, Dany why did you have the misfortune of loving me?

You should have stayed the Queen over the Water with your dragons. Dreaming of Westeros and never reaching it. Like me and every other boy here who wanted to be Daeron the Young Dragon.

Taking lovers as it pleased you.

That thought hurt him, yet he wished it all the same. Wished her good, wished her well. Any of her dragon-children could find their mother, even in the Night’s King clutches, and take her somewhere safe, when he could not. He wished she were alive and happy, even if he never saw her again.

My brave Danny Flint.

Right, Rhaegal suddenly snorted in Jon’s mind, showering his wishes with contempt, not believing they were sincere, suggesting in shades of bronze and green that Jon could not so easily fly free from his sister.

To his chagrin, Jon sensed that his dragon was still fast asleep. The beast mulled in his dreams, showing Jon images of exuberant beauty: Of blue winter roses overgrowing the Wall until the ice blocks were no longer to be seen. My pardons, Rhaegal roared quietly, never waking. You would not say she is your sister. She is your love.

You are becoming better at understanding men, dragon. Please wake up now and come to me. We can find her together.

Rhaegal refused squarely, considering Jon a stupid, two-legged dragon who could not distinguish fire from ice.

Born a man, always a man, Jon repeated to himself, needing courage to continue walking, but also to provoke his capricious winged companion into action. Always a man, dragon. Regardless of fancy sigils; wolves, lions or roses. In spite of boyish dreams of easily-won glory. Look at you! What have you turned into? A slumbering horse refusing to breathe fire! Idleness does not befit you.

We do not have to fit garments, or into society. Not like you, my two-legged brother. Rhaegal defended his stance ferociously.

Against his will, Jon laughed so hard that tears filled his eyes. Would that I could see you in a fancy doublet, he thought vividly, savouring fat soup on a feast with a silver spoon. With a tiny dragon engraved on the handle, twisting its tail.

At that, Rhaegal’s presence utterly vanished from his mind, severing all ties with his rider. It was as if he had never seen, and much less ridden or spoken to a dragon.

So thoroughly gone.

Where are you, beast?

So I was successful in insulting you when I no longer intended it.

Come back will you?

We haven’t finished our squabble just yet!

Rhaegal could have flown to Asshai or he could be hiding behind the nearest tree for all Jon could sense.
I thought you could not abandon your riders!

Gone, gone, gone. Beyond the confines of lands, flesh and spirit.

Just like Ghost beforehand, with the only difference that his wolf’s sudden and inexplicable absence after such long-time of obedient scouting for his master in the Lands of Always Winter did not anger Jon.

It was an open wound, which would never heal.

It was a heart-wrenching pain in his human soul.

Born a man, always a man.

Regardless of fancy sigils and dreams of future glory.

It was damn difficult at occasions to rise to what was expected from humanity. To not snap and bite. To bear the loss and grief with dignity. To find the right way forward and persevere on that path, instead of screaming offence and seeking revenge.

“Snow,” the moon nodded grudgingly, conceding, so Jon must have been right about something, for once. He felt at ease from the moon’s approval, gripping the hilts of his two swords, Blackfyre and Ice, and wishing to howl with grief.

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He didn’t know how many more days he walked, but it must have been at least a sennight, with the weight of two greatswords now on his back, and obsessive thoughts about duty and family. Both lay farther north that he would be able to travel. There was no living soul in the deserted forests he was crossing, trying to cut his way short towards the Last Hearth and further on, to the Wall, meandering around the empty, snowed-down kingsroad.

There were no animals, no birds. Only trees remained. And the deep trail of Winterfell’s fugitives, engraved in frozen drifts of snow. The sky was empty, dark, dry; the land iced. It never snowed.

The moon was gone. The stars were scarce and gloomy.

He would never catch up.

Weeks ago, months ago when he began his march, he never dared sleep, fearing there could be Others or wights on the loose. Soon he understood it was not the case. The woods were merely dead and empty.

Deserted.

Next he feared he might re-enter the shadow and be choked by its clutch, but even that concern was soon proven as vain as the first one. The dark creature crept north bit by bit, always ahead of Jon and considerably faster, returning to the Wall on its own free will.

Occasionally Jon wished he had returned under the shadow before it departed. Maybe the insolent boy with ash-blond hair would again give him a hand. Or maybe he would be able to exit at the Wall on his own, diving into snow, not needing help.
Be that as it may, now it was too late.

Soon it would be too late for anything.

He had not eaten. In retrospect, he should have searched for food in Winterfell. But he did not and he could not turn back.

He lived on snow, too tired to ponder what it meant that he could live on water for so long and still be able to walk, just like he could be wounded and cut many times over with good steel and cursed crystal, without ever turning into a wight or bleeding to death. His injuries would heal well without a maester or a woods witch. Almost instantly, if Rhaegal was nearby to lay his crystal breath on them.

Jon had learned beyond doubt who he was. But the anxiety of not knowing his mother was thoroughly replaced by a much more terrible query.

He did not know what he was.

*Born a man, always a man.*

No matter what he had become.

And Dany was gone with both her love and her faith in him. With her ability to convince him, every time they woke together, that whatever he had turned into was *not*, could *not* be evil.

After another day of march, his strength finally betrayed him. On the brink of exhaustion, he sank onto the frozen ground, propping himself against a tree, sticking Ice and Blackfyre into the old, stubborn snow before him with the pointy end. It was too dark to see the profoundly different shades of the Valyrian steel he was carrying, but he knew them in his heart, where he harboured them just the same.

*Fire and ice.*

*Ice and fire.*

Which one was more important?

Which one would avail him now?

Would any?

He chased the idle thoughts away and waited to die.

He wanted to pray, but could not.

His end was not the gods’ doing

It was his own.

He could almost not believe his tired dark eyes when a man, alone, clad in furs and tree branches, burst out of the wood onto the path coming from the kingsroad, where Jon had just succumbed to wariness.

Perhaps he should have given up sooner, and the mountain clans would have come for him, crawling out of their unseen hiding places which could be mistaken for rocks by honest travellers not knowing better.
The clansman stared at Jon with respect that bordered on fear.

“Jon Stark,” he breathed out through his brown-grey beard with awe, bowing his head only so slightly in submission.

The North rarely kneeled.

“The night is long indeed. The woods witches have foretold in unison that you will return and demand fealty sworn in the past. The Flint must be told.”

The man turned to leave where he came from.

“I thought that only the wildlings believed in woods witch wisdom,” Jon murmured wryly, lacking the strength to speak.

The man shrugged, halting in his steps. “Who else is to do the healing? We are far from Winterfell. There are no maesters in our lands, not even in the Last Hearth or Dreadfort, not since the War of the Five Kings.”

Jon remembered that the clans were not very far from the wildlings in their customs. Stealing brides was common.


Instead of showing any fealty, sworn or otherwise, the man now eyed his swords, and then Jon again, his stature, his black wools of the Night’s Watch under the furry cloak, that the Stark in Winterfell would certainly not wear. Not in the past and much less now.

“Your Grace,” the clansman addressed him cautiously after a while, struggling with his courtesies and with bending the knee through all the furs and branches adorning his person.

North was not prone to using titles, the clans least of all.

Even so, there were lords, lordlings and retainers, but normally only one King of the Seven Kingdoms and Protector of the Realm.

Jon Targaryen, First of His Name.

The name that was his by rights still did not sit well with him.

The clansman’s respectful fear was replaced by fidgeting embarrassment and lowering of eyes. “I have mistaken you for a different king, Your Grace. Please forgive me. Your look immensely like one of your famous forefathers on your mother’s side, if the likenesses left of him in paint or stone are any good. Songs say he bore a mark of greatness. If only his fate had not been so ill!”

The man himself sounded less lowborn now. Uncouth in comparison with Ser Barristan Selmy, he could still be a northern lord.

Jon studied his face with suspicion. “Who are you?”

“I am from the Flint,” the man replied quietly. “We are marching to war with the last of our strength. I am scouting. We do not wish to be wolves food before we reach the Wall.”

“There are no wolves here,” Jon protested.
“No?” the man was cautiously curious, staring in Jon’s eye.

“You are the Flint!” Jon accused him, having to say it short, using up the last of his breath. Losing himself to nothingness, about to faint to oblivion, he forced himself to stay awake and listen.

The man bowed deeply. “I might become, Your Grace,” he admitted. “Sooner than I wished for. Winter is cruel and the night long. Father has not been well. He wanted us to stay in the mountains and wait for the turn of tide, be it for good or for evil. But the men rebelled against his judgment when the evil shadow left our lands. They said I should lead them to war. Father conceded.” He continued to study Jon’s appearance with both respect and suspicion.

Before the clansman’s wary scrutiny, Jon’s secret hope that the Night’s King was a Bolton or a Flint who just knew enough about Jon Stark to be able to act like him, sank for good. The Flints would know. Their land bordered the Boltons’, to the west of the snowed down kingsroad. The old stories would have been told on their mothers’ knees, over and over again.

Jon had heard it so often from other Northmen. Ever since his hair and beard began to grow wildly in winter, despite that he regularly cut both. As though he hadn’t discovered it himself!

Yes, he looked like a spitting image of the Night’s King while he was a man still. Jon Stark. A proper turncloak and a traitor. And if anyone had any doubt about the similarity, the bearded stone copy of Jon Stark the Night’s King haunted Winterfell, together with other Lords and Kings of Winter. He had chased Stannis out, showing his face in the open air, for all to see. By the gods, he even harassed Dany with dead looks of love, showing the same taste in women as Jon Snow. And now he was hiding like a craven from Torrhen who kneeled. Did Jon Stark finally bow under the heavy weight of dishonour he committed?

Was he regretting it?

Impossible.

The enemy had never given him a single hint of repentance in their many encounters.

“Jon Stark has made his own fate,” Jon plodded heartlessly, possessed with unique certainty. Fighting gnawing hunger and insurmountable weakness, he was winning over it only for a moment, moved by sheer rage at his famous ancestor. “For the love of power or a woman, it matters little. He had ridden north, joining forces with Joramun of the free folk and faced the monster who was the Night’s King at the time. Maybe that one had been a Bolton or a Flint as some stories claim. I wouldn’t know.

And then Jon Stark betrayed his own people and the realm of men he was sworn to defend. He must have slain the enemy only to take his place, his dominion and his armies. And he would have done for Joramun in a single combat, if the King-beyond-the-Wall had not blown his horn in despair and woken the giants from earth. Only with their help had the men succeeded in defeating the Others and putting them back to sleep, together with their new king.

Jon Stark is the last man on earth who can blame the gods for his destiny!”

“Then you are truly not him?” the will-be-Flint had the nerve to ask.

“No, I’m not,” Jon retorted wryly, attempting to stand up, fighting the urge to faint. Hungry and exhausted, he failed. “Food, I beg you.”

I’m Jon Targaryen, First of His Name.
Yet it would sound like just another lie about him if he said it out loud.

The clansman fed him a bite of fresh snow. “Food is at the lake. Just a little bit further.”

“Lake,” Jon parrotted. His heart soared.

Long Lake was an achievement. It meant that he had left Dreadfort behind, moving steadily in the direction of the Last Hearth and finally the Wall. He had gone further than he hoped.

Jon drank some more snow. “Help me on my feet,” he commanded.

Once up, he walked on, gingerly. He must have marched for a hundred days since his lonely march began!

Time would be ripe to reforge the sword of Azor Ahai, he guessed, if he still had it, instead of tossing it at the Night’s King in an act of rebellion against a cruel and unjust destiny.

Yet now Dany was gone as surely as if he had sacrificed her willingly to his wish to end the war, and he was as unarmed against the evil as on the first day he faced it.

_Would that I had the horn, to wake the giants from earth._

Xxxxx

Xxxxx

Xxxxx

Hours later, when Flint and Jon caught the first glimpse of the Long Lake, rippling from winter wind in starlight, the Greywater Watch fleet caught them by surprise.

Sailing up the White Knife in barges and boats, quiet like snow, and death, the crannogmen had been breaking the ice on the surface with long poles in order to pursue their journey. The narrow river ran fast under the frozen crust, yet the Reeds had managed to sail upstream without drifting back south.

Jon did not remember any of them personally, despite being elected king in Greywater Watch. They were short, with similar faces.

None had green eyes like Lord Howland, Mother’s friend who died in pain, poisoned, to save Robb’s son.

He nevertheless allowed to be laid in a long boat and fed small spoonfuls of cold lizard-lion stew. Flint refused the treat. To Jon it tasted better than wild boar, a specialty of cooks in Winterfell in the happy and forever lost days of his childhood.

And when the White Knife ran into the Long Lake, the sailing became more difficult, the ice thicker. There were no currents underneath to keep the water flowing. The crannogmen murmured and laboured harder. Jon sat up in a boat, his strength slowly returning.

He was ready now, truly ready.

For what, he did not know, and could not tell.

The Flints camped north of the lake, and they were not alone. The Wulls were there as well and, to Jon’s surprise, the Mormonts, a bunch of bear-like women and pretty girls, and the grizzled old man who stared accusingly at Jon. Ser Jorah.
Do you know that I lost Daenerys?

But, more importantly, the Mormonts should have been on the Wall.

“What happened?” he demanded answers.

Lady Mormont did not shy from bad news. "Castle Black has fallen," she said. "The enemy has stormed the gates and is moving south. Many defenders are now wights in his service. Those still living have come here or are following after the Others."

Jon remained quiet. "And the Wall is still standing?" he asked.

"It was when I left," Maege replied. "Ravens came from… from you, Your Grace, wherever you have gone in your great prudence, commanding what is left of both North and South to gather here under your command."

Jon nodded, not contradicting her, wondering who took command in his absence and why they thought of the Long Lake as a suitable battle ground. The field around it was large and open. Surely, the Others had no liking for water and they could be destroyed by the wild waves of the shivering sea. But the lake was calm and manse in comparison, and it would in any case freeze again, if the battle was delayed.

Horns sounded from the east, dull and deep.

The-will-be-Flint whistled. “It was about time,” he judged dryly.

What was left from the Boltons came forth shyly towards Jon, two hundred man strong with the banner of the flayed man on a pink field.

It was hard to not hate them.

Behind them, a peculiar army was arriving. Marching in the long shadows of the last trees before the clearing next to the lake, it numbered thousands of soldiers. All dead.

A whisper of fear passed among the living, The Boltons moved to a side, clinging to the few torches they brought to light their way throughout the Long Night.

The wights carried a long, pale rag with jagged borders as their only banner.

In fealty, defiance or surrender, Jon could not tell. Clumsily cut, it was clearly dragon-shaped, with its long spiky tail fluttering in the winter wind. The banner looked as if a seamstress who tried her scissors on a piece of cloth had never seen a dragon, not even in a book. Or maybe her vision was failing from old age.

Next to the banner, on a place where a leader should march or ride, a bunch of wights carried a heavy portion of a stone wall with a woman built into it. She looked very old and yet somehow ageless, with all her facial muscles clenched and squeezed tight. Her eyes were firmly closed, like those of the slumbering weirwoods, and not even her own mother would have known her.

The undead host did not approach the lake or Jon any further. Instead it scattered, spreading freely throughout the vast empty spaces under the eaves of the forest. There it lurked and waited, melting into the gloom.

Seeing that, one Bolton man found his courage to step forward and speak up. "Let the old enmity be forgotten," he said tremulously, bending the knee. “Together we stand,” he continued with more
heart, if not in all honesty. “Together we fall.”

It was impossible to vouch for his true intentions.

“They are the last house, not only in the North, but in the whole realm to join your cause, Your Grace,” Lady Mormont advised him, as Tyrion otherwise might. “They had plenty of opportunity to renounce their old ways yet they are only doing it now.”

The Imp was not there, his destiny uncertain as that of so many other people Jon loved and trusted, and left on the Wall.

Jon drew himself to stand upright, forgetting his person and his losses.

It was time to be king again.

He had learned some of the art required for it in the past months.

Before he could receive or refuse fealty from the house who had betrayed the Starks in the War of the Five Kings, different horns sounded from the north, shrill and shrieking. Confident in their victory.

The enemy of mankind was upon them, straight from the fallen gates of Castle Black, advancing south down the kingsroad.

His little army was entirely on foot, Jon realised as all his banners formed a wall behind him: a shaky palissade made of both human courage and fear, including the bloody Boltons.

He would take few men to his Trident, here at the Long Lake, and if he lost, there would be no one left to invent songs about his failure.

Jon drew both swords, one in each arm. Ice in his burned sword hand, Blackfyre in his clumsy left one, where it would be more of a shield than a weapon used to strike. To his surprise, and satisfaction, he found balance in that stance. The blades were in perfect equilibrium.

*Ice and fire. Fire and Ice.*

His trust in himself grew and it was hard to bring it back down to a good measure. Too much confidence would kill him much surer than paralysing, cautious fear.

The wolfswood remained silent, moonless. The world was utterly still.

The Night’s King rode forth quietly on an ice spider, leading his men. Behind him, another eight-legged, frozen monster carried his spoils of war.

The royal hostages.

“Daenerys!” Jon cried out with outrage. “Father,” he breathed out, hurt and humiliated to the bottom of his being.

His wife was sprawled over the slimy arachnid back. Father held her in his undead arms. She was almost as white as Rhaegar, just not quite. *Alive.* But barely.

At least neither his mother nor his siblings were brought here as prisoners. Not even Sansa, who had been kidnapped by the Others.

*So she’s dead, or the Hound was successful in setting her free.*
Even death seemed preferable to how his beautiful wife fared, pale and lifeless, and entirely naked, apart from a thin film of translucent spider-slime over her body, with a red-rose wound blossoming on her chest.

Where are the winter roses, dragon? Do you not see? Does it not stir your blood, the ruin of your… two-legged sister? Your mother? What is it that you call a lady without whom you would still be a stone egg, devoid of any fire?!

Will you not help?

But Rhaegal still slept.

The Night’s King dismounted.

The Others took his steed to the back, and formed a steady line behind their liege, a wall of soldiers matching and surpassing Jon’s in number, and much taller in height. At least they were also on foot, if one did not count the two spiders.

Very well.

Small mercies.

“Let them go!” he roared at the Night’s King. “This has always been between you and me.”

The Night’s King eyed him with the same wary suspicion that the will-be-Flint had shown. “Why a change of heart? First you hide like a rat for a hundred days, and then you show out of nowhere on this god-forsaken lake. This is a poor place for battle and I am no fool to think you would not know it. What are you up to?”

“Murder,” Jon replied acridly, without thinking. “I want the lords who would have chosen a different king in Greywater Watch to add a noble name of assassin to my other titles. Might be they will bend the knee to you should I fail. So I don’t mean to. Not today.” His voice was as shrill as Jon Stark’s, the Night’s King’s.

It was time to end the contest between them.

“Release them!” he repeated when his anger abated a little: his last sentence almost a plea, and an offer of peace, during the single combat. Wasn’t that what Jon Stark wanted? Did he not have some honor left? Could one lose it so completely? Could Jon Targaryen? Jon Snow?

The Night’s King laughed hoarsely at nothing in particular. “Ever the Last Hero,” he proclaimed mockingly. “Young, noble and handsome.”

“That’s a legend for boys. It’s been a long time since I was one.” Jon’s anger returned from being treated like an infant.

“If you want them,” the Night’s King drew his sword, responding in kind to Jon, who still held bare Valyrian steel in both hands, “come and take them!”

The white walkers screeched and hissed in defiance.

Jon stood still, so angry that he could not make the first step in combat. If he did, he would be extremely vulnerable to failure.

The Night’s King studied him, a ball of fire, a ball of anger, until he finally decided to drop him
another word, surreptitiously, “I could agree to a trade of prisoners, if you hand me over my wife first.”

“Your wife? I never captured her,” Jon blurted the truth. ‘I’ve never even seen her. I just heard that she exists in truth, and not only as a mermaid from the stories.’

He thought he might have seen the dead lady through Ghost’s eyes, very briefly, in a warmly-furnished room of the otherwise cold, Ice Winterfell. She had kept his mother’s white headed eagle in a cage and fed him every day, seeking living company in her undead loneliness.

“Rubbish,” the enemy said with contempt, anger mounting in *his* voice. “The wolves are holding her. I know they answer to you and your siblings. I have seen it clearly from my rightful throne.”

*Ghost?*

Try as he might, Jon could not open his wolf eyes. It was as if he never had a wolf. As though he was dead. More lost to any reason than the sleeping Rhaegal. Unable to bite and growl.

“I might agree to such exchange if it were in my power to offer it,” Jon replied cautiously.

“However, you will find that I am not a good skinchanger who can force animals and men to do his bidding. I only had one wolf with whom I could run and speak to the moon, and smell fresh snow. For all I know, he is gone for good.”

“The white beast with red eyes,” the Night’s King nodded and then grinned from one grey-blue ear to another. “I had his hide before Castle Black, since I could not have yours. It will make a lovely floor rag for my lady wife’s chambers, once she is back in our rightful castle.”

Jon lurched forward and attacked, not able to control his rage any longer.

It was one thing to think Ghost dead, and another to hear how he died. *A skin… A hide…*

The enemy parried his blow with ease and dealt him a spinning slash that nearly cut his ear, and half of his head off. When Jon made two steps back, he laughed. “You shall be an easy prey for me, *Your Grace.* And when my army combs Westeros, the wolves will have no place to hide.”

“They will have feasted on your lovely lady by then,” Jon retorted. “Wolves prey on corpses, did you not know?”

It was the Night’s King turn to attack Jon madly, with too human a cry on his white walker lips.

It was Jon’s turn to easily counter his onslaught and laugh from a prudent distance.

“We are matched in force, you and I,” he said matter-of-factly. It was a simple truth. They were the same, in a way. They have always been.

Two Jon Starks.

“Perhaps,” the enemy conceded, “but it is yet to be seen.”

With that, the song of steel began in earnest. Slowly at first, and then much faster. It was the most elaborate duel in Jon’s life. He almost felt like a Last Hero from it. Had the odds and the times been different, he would have found loved it.

Not so the Night’s King. His wrinkled face was a mask of calm hatred.

The bluff with the wolves’ meal must have hit home very hard.
So he loved his Mermaid Wife as much as Jon loved Dany.

Jon defended another blow aimed at his head with Blackfyre, and reached the enemy’s armoured hip with the tip of Ice, finding a joint in his armour and cracking it open.

A Westerosi armour would be damaged, and a man’s leg gravely injured.

The enemy’s armour was of foreign making. Or, more likely, it looked that way because it was so old. Thousands and thousands of years. The armourers must have developed their trade to look differently in all that time.

The Night’s King glanced down rapidly, as if he felt the sting of pain. But he did not alter his fighting stance, showing no weakness. He still countered every form of attack Jon tried, from every corner of Westeros, North or South. He had the answer for every move Jon learned as a castle-trained lordling in Winterfell, on the Wall with men from all Seven Kingdoms, beyond the Wall with the wildlings, and lately from the most accomplished swordsman of their time, Ser Barristan Selmy.

The enemy was familiar with all these, and he also displayed both aggressive and defensive steps in a fight that Jon had never seen anywhere. Very old indeed. Spontaneously, Jon found himself adopting the new techniques and admiring them.

“You learn fast,” the enemy whispered with something akin to acknowledgment.

“Yes,” Jon agreed wholeheartedly, cutting some white enemy hairs from the top of his head with Ice.

The Night’s King used the opening created by the closeness to cut Jon on his shield arm, just under the shoulder.

Red blood gushed readily out of Jon’s unarmoured skin. A collective breath of fear left his human army, a wall of terror and bravery behind his back. The Others hissed approvingly.

As always since his Bowen Marsh and the rest stabbed him to death in Castle Black, Jon felt no pain from his wound. And he did not think he would die from losing blood, or it would have already happened. It would be better if Rhaegal was there to heal him, but he could also do without, he thought.

He hoped.

He managed an arrogant smile, worthy of Ser Jaime Lannister. “You’ll have to do one better than this.”

To further illustrate his point, he pressed forward an attack with both blades, knowing he would miss, but also that he would show that he still had full use of both arms despite his injury.

His human wall released a breath of hope. The Others were attentive, hissing with expectation, impatiently.

“What are you?” the Night’s King asked with indignance, from a safe distance.

I wonder myself.

“I am Jon Snow,” he answered truthfully to a different question.

He knew who he was. It would have to be enough. Learning who his parents were and receiving a trueborn name did not change the man he had become on his own.
Born a man, always a man.

Bastard or trueborn, it mattered little.

The Night’s King glanced back at Dany as if to make sure she was still there. “You could not reforge either of your swords, could you, in the hundred days that you were gone? So how do you mean to murder me?”

“Somehow,” Jon replied stubbornly. “There will be a way if I try long enough.”

“I don’t tire.”

Jon showed his shoulder where the bleeding had already stopped, a clean red wound on his black wools. Loudly he bluffed. “Do I?”

He would become exhausted again, but not just yet. The lizard-lion stew had done a miracle for his strength, Born a man, always a man. No matter what he had become. Now flying high on the wings of his destiny.

The song of steel played on.

Jon could now use most of the fighting figures he just learned from the enemy, and even develop new postures from them.

Yet neither of the two could gain an advantage, other than the two wounds already inflicted to each other.

A cut on the leg for a bleeding shoulder.

Blue blood on that hip, not black, Jon mused stupidly, fighting on, thinking about how, by the gods, was he going to kill him?

Valyrian steel did for the Others, but clearly not for their king. Cut by Ice, if only a little bit, any white walker would have already evaporated or turned into a human corpse. The change in death would depend on what they were before, the ice sleepers who woke in the Lands of Always Winter, or men taken by them.

The enemy was, however, at least bleeding from his hip wound.

So Ice could hurt him, couldn’t it?

Why?

Catching a straw of hope like a man drowning, Jon searched for a moment to test his assumption. He took Blackfyre in his sword hand and made Ice his shield. Inventing a fast attack, he did not stop before touching the enemy’s shoulder, at another junction of his armour. He earned a cut on his knee in return, which hurt tremendously. The bleeding would stop of course. But his joint must have been damaged, a ligament cut through. He could still stand on both legs, but he lacked support from his wounded one.

If the enemy succeeded in cutting him down piece by piece, he would die. A man could not exist in several body parts.

Only a wight.

Retreating, he studied the enemy.
No blood on his shoulder.

Just the blue stain on his hip. Gaining solidity and forming crust.

He clung to a sliver of hope and hoped he was right, because he has just surrendered the full ability of his body in this bloody combat, in exchange for the knowledge.

He took Ice in his sword hand once more, and stood upright carelessly. Biting his teeth from pain in his severed knee, he would not show weakness.

(Or so he hoped).

The Night’s King looked at his own unblemished shoulder with approval, and gave a small smile. “You had had the opportunity to reforge your blade in your wife’s heart and you missed it. You shall not have it again.”

Jon’s hope grew, his heart beat like mad, his red blood ran faster.

Then, his eyes grew impossibly wide. “No, I shall not, indeed,” he was forced to agree. His whole face and being was a laugh, all over.

The Night’s King looked back to see what caused such mirth.

His hostages were gone. The ice spider lay dead. Blue crystals saturated the air.

“How? Who?” the enemy stomped his boots into snow.

Jon looked back and shrugged. His Wall of human resistance and misery was still immobile behind him, never crossing the line to interfere in the single combat taking place before their wary eyes.

“Must be the shadows,” Jon guessed wildly, hoping to further throw his enemy off balance, which he himself had already lost his due to his wounded knee.

Dany was gone! Someone freed her and Father, someone on Jon’s side who had fled from the Wall alive, following in the white walkers trail.

A tree moved in the distance and he thought he saw… a hammer. Gendry’s. Arya’s love. A natural son of Robert Baratheon. Up in the same tree, a torch lit itself briefly, illuminating the mismatched eyes and face of Tyrion Lannister, whom someone must have lifted on their shoulders.

The light flickered and disappeared leaving only faint starlight and the few torches brought by the Boltons to guide the living and the dead.

Jon probably had an army he could trust surrounding the Others, and the enemy had no hostages left.

There was nothing holding him back.

Except that the Night’s King must have felt exactly the same. Unleashed by the loss of his leverage over Jon, his next onslaught was not like any earlier. The beginning of their duel now looked as if the enemy had toyed with Jon on purpose, studying his moves, his strengths and weaknesses, before making a decisive strike.

Jon had to give all he had in him just to defend himself. It took him at least an hour to land a half-hearted counterattack and gain some respite.

Then, the Night’s King used speech as his second blade.
“You cannot kill me, and I have more men,” he announced peacefully. “Why not simply admit it? It is only a matter of time before I am done with you. Then I shall return to my high throne and find your wolves. It could very well be that you were lying and they had not eaten my wife.”

Jon could not make himself say it again, could not lie that they had, despite that staying silent felt as if he was betraying a wise counsel Tyrion might have offered. The Imp would surely recommend to push the Night’s King to the brink of despair, to see if he would lose his wits and make an error that would cost him his life.

But Dany was free now, and Jon could not spout lies about the destiny of the Mermaid Wife, not while being completely innocent of all knowledge about what might have befallen her.

It felt unfair.

The odds have changed.

This was again only between the two of them.

The two Jon Starks.

About not being able to kill him, however…

“You are wrong, Jon Stark,” he boomed, addressing the Night’s King by his name. “Do you not see?” he brandished Ice wildly. “A sword that can bring your doom was reforged for me and it waited in Winterfell. Someone else has taken care of it. Cersei Lannister, I think, may the gods bless her mad soul. Not that it was ever her intention, mind you. They never believed much in snarks and grumkins in the south.”

He paused and voice his assumption as a certainty set in stone. “Eddard Stark fell to his own sword in headsman’s hands, bowing his head on the steps of the Great Sept of Baelor. After confessing freely to crimes he did not commit, wishing to save his young and innocent daughter, held hostage by the crown, from sharing his fate. He had bared his heart as surely as Nissa Nissa must have done.”

“What would you know about Nissa Nissa?”

“Nothing,” Jon swatted the remark away. “It’s a sad old story, I guess. Too old to be told truthfully.”

“Like the story of Jon Stark.”

“I guess,” Jon admitted in passing, and continued spilling what was in his heart. “But you must know this as well as I.

If Ned Stark’s blood could not reforge the sword of Azor Ahai in this time, none can. No man alive has had more honour and innocence combined.”

Jon Stark must have learned that much in the crypts where the stone likenesses of the long dead Kings and Lords of Winter dwelled together.

Where they walked and spoke of late...

Since winter has come...

The Night’s King studied the blue crust on his hip with new eyes, and then stared at Jon, opening his mouth to respond.
But Jon was not yet done speaking. “And if it were his labours what made Azor Ahai capable of
victory,” he hammered, “I shall have you know that I have just walked for a hundred days on foot,
alone, cold and hungry, carrying the sword reforged in the blood of innocents. I have struggled
against you and your kind since the first day I learned that the wights and the white walkers were
more than old stories. I have done my part. I am as ready as I shall ever be to strike you down and
lay your army to rest."

The Night’s King grinned evenly, not affected by the prospect of death. Amused, perhaps.

Intrigued by the new odds.

As brave as Jon.

“Perhaps you are right,” he reasoned back at Jon. “Perhaps. It is yet to be seen if the sword is
reforged as you claim, and if it were, if you can best me at all. But now that you shared your strategy
with me, I shall be as honest with you.

Should you be right, well, then, Jon Snow, your destiny shall be to lay down to sleep with my
armies. Your lifeblood shall keep them alive, guarding their existence while they rest, and they shall
feed you their intent and their reasons to rule the world in your dreams. And then you shall wake to
life thousands of years later as their new king, compelled to conquer the world in their name. With no
human heart left in you. With your beautiful wife long dead. And you will know that she could have
had other lovers while you lay asleep! That she could have had children from other men...

I swear this to be true. A word of honour from the Night’s King to the future one, from the bottom of
my heart, such as it had become.” His long white hair streamed in winter wind like an odd banner
when he shook his head with resignation and finished darkly. “This curse cannot end. It is always
maintained, one Long Night after another. Winter never stops coming.”

Jon’s head swirled as the missing pieces of a mosaic fell into place in a way he did not expect. Like a
riddle whose meaning dawns on a man after he had contemplated it uselessly for a long, long time.
“You are lying,” he accused the enemy in vain.

“Am I?”

Of course he was not.

“You have no heart left!” Jon Stark had betrayed everything. It had to be so. He had to be at least
misleading him.

But new pieces of a brand new riddle have already begun whirling madly in Jon Snow’s shaggy
head.

Did Jon Stark go to sleep willingly because someone had to? Because his Mermaid Wife was a
wight, as most stories claimed, so he could stay with her, a poor victim of the white walkers? He
surely loved her! Or did he do it so that Joramun would not have to sacrifice himself? Relieving his
battle friend and ally from that duty? Did the King-beyond-the-Wall blow his horn in grief for the
loss of his friend, and not in despair caused by treason and to end the war? Why did Joramun even
need the giants of earth if the deed was already done, and the Long Night ended?

Old stories never properly told...

“That may be so,” the enemy agreed about not having a heart. “But a heart is not required to tell the
truth. Only a will.”
Jon’s heart was about to burst. His breath churned, his blood boiled. He strove to find ice in his soul, and a semblance of calm. There had to be a way to break the circle. If only he could halt this duel now and return to it when he was able to find counsel, and think better of what he could do.

He was not to have that luxury.

Out of the blue, the Night’s King launched another savage attack.

Jon avoided it by using instinctively the retreat of boys learning the sword on their own in the North, wrestling with wooden sticks in muddy snow. Ser Rodrik had always chastised Robb, Theon and Jon for it - a few rapid, slanted steps back and sideways, like a river crab running to hide in a hole.

Robb was especially admonished not to use this clearly lowborn and peasant, northern defence tactics when he would be practising swords with Prince Joffrey, during King Robert’s visit.

Jon had almost never used it as a man grown, knowing better.

Oddly enough, the non-refined maneuver caught the enemy on the wrong foot. Apparently northern boys did not use the trick in the time of Jon Stark.

At the same time, the ice was slowly restored in Jon’s burning heart, and he was able to see clearly the choice before him.

He had always expected that he might fall in battle, but as a brave feat needed to win a war, not as a sacrifice of a man who could have otherwise been the last man left standing and walked home from the field victorious.

Who could have returned to his loving wife and fathered his own children.

But in the end his fate would not differ from that of his foster father, would it?

It all began with the death of Ned Stark, the winter and the war. What better way to end it?

Jon bit his teeth and hoped he would have enough skill and honor in him to finish what had to be done.

*Enough ice and fire.*

Would he be a tragic hero or a villain in songs to come? Would he be more successful than Jon Stark thousands of years ago? Would he deserve compassion? Or only contempt...

He stopped himself from thinking further about the old stories which would never be truthfully told.

It had to be done, for both past and present, once and for all.

For Craster’s infant sons, bred for food to the white walkers in false spring. For Uncle Benjen, lost ranging beyond the Wall. For all rangers lost. For Grenn. For Tormund’s son. For Aegon who paid dearly for wanting to be Jon’s friend. For Father...

For every man, woman or child murdered or enslaved.

If the man who killed the Night’s King died at the same time from the ruling Night’s King hand, the curse had to break. There would be no one to take his place, no one to lay down and sleep. No one to wake with the Others and no one to keep them alive by tying them to his will.

He had to make sure he was killed in the moment of victory.
“Snow,” the moon said, showing a mournful face behind a wisp of cloud.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading }}
Here it goes, folks!
Sorry for the delay.

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Brave Danny Flint

Tyrion set the woods in motion with a great battle cry on his thick lips, urging every able defender left under his command to attack the great clearing around the lake, flooded by the Others who had pushed Jon and new men he brought north almost to the waterfront.

Men attacked the white walkers from all sides, with willingness yet unseen in the War of Winter. Fearless, by now familiar with the enemy, they suffered few losses, and flocked to Jon, separating him from the Night’s King, interrupting their duel, preventing their king from vanquishing the Great Other only to take his place and sleep until the next Long Night.

The Night’s King laughed hoarsely with the air of untouched superiority. Swaggering back at length, he mounted his remaining ice spider. The white walkers guarded his back, and even if they did not, no one but Jon dared attack him in person.

Always acting the stronger, Dany thought bitterly.

“None but your husband had faced him and lived,” Tyrion whispered, as if he could read her thoughts. He had stayed behind, in the woods, with Daenerya, after leading the attack for her rescue, in which her old bear, Ser Jorah, was killed and rose as a wight, stung by the now dead ice spider so that Dany and Rhaegar could be freed.

Or, much more likely, Tyrion had guessed her feelings from the lifeless look of sheer hatred in her eyes. If they could burned the Night’s King, they would have, seven times over.

She had done nothing to this creature.

This man.

She had not given him the crown, murdered his wife or caused his misfortune. He had no reason to treat her like dirt after drinking her blood.

If dragonblood was what he wanted, before concluding it was useless for his designs, whatever they were, he could have disposed of her when he was done. Or treated his hostages with more honour. She had the feeling that any of his soldiers would have butchered her gladly, finishing what their king had so wisely started, should he not want to sully his own gnarled hands.

Now he remained prudently behind his first line of defence and did not seek to continue the single
combat with Jon.

Knowledge one *could* die brought such caution, Dany guessed, with a small measure of satisfaction. What the monster yearned for most of all was to find his wife. He could not do that very well if he was killed.

Unlike men, the Others could not continue existing as wights.

And, for some reason Dany could not believe that the white walkers applied themselves very hard in the king’s search for his queen.

She was only a wight after all.

A slave.

How could they ever look at her as their equal? Their queen?

She only differed from the other slain in that the Great Other chose to keep her in a lavish bedroom as his concubine, instead of sending her to war.

*Or dragging her around naked on an ice spider,* she remembered with blood-felt grudge that would not be easily forgotten or set aside.

But, the slain were not entirely enslaved anymore, not all of them. Some found strength in themselves to disobey.

*Rhaegar.* Her brother now crouched at a marked distance from the living who gave him cold stares. Euron Greyjoy also earned those looks, but they didn’t prevent him to run into battle with Jon. Maybe it was easier to ignore the glares of contempt if a man had only one crow eye before dying and being forced to open two unnaturally blue ones.

The wounded had stayed behind. The very old and very young. Some women to help them. A small bunch of fighters who could cover their retreat if the fighting ended in defeat and doom of men. Tyrion, following anxiously the course of the battle and calculating his next move. Gendry, holding Arya in a deep shadow of a sentinel, wrapped in furs, barely visible. Jon’s favourite sister slept like a log. She did not look to be well, but still much better than Daenerys herself.

*Is she wounded?* She wanted to ask Gendry, but her voice faltered. It was robbed from her, the ability to speak and the command of her body.

*Shall I be like this forever? A shadow of a woman?*

Rhaegar brooded in silence, immersed in darkness, under a giant northern pine. His bright blue eyes glinted unnaturally in moonlight. Cold and dead and yet so awake. Attentively, he sniffed the air, looked to his left, and vanished into the forest, after his nose, before Daenerys could regain use of her legs so that she could at least hug him and thank him.

She did not know what he was up to, but she could swear it would be for the good. The Night’s King had captured him sabotaging the Others’ siege efforts under the Wall -- a highly unlikely endeavour for a loyal wight.

Dany would not be here, alive and free, if Rhaegar did not carry her all the way south, from the Frostfangs to this lake, on his never tiring, undead legs. The spider was only the trick for the last league or so, used to impress her husband, after the Night’s King had glimpsed Jon in the weirwood twigs he used to see events from afar, and his bright blue eyes shined with implacable hatred.
Jon now fought in his vanguard. Mance Rayder. Aegon. Obara Sand. Crippled Willas Tyrell on a tiny, sturdy garron from the Night’s Watch, one of the few who clung to a horse as his only means to take arms. Euron Greyjoy. Val. Lady Reed with her knife and speer. More men and women from every corner of Westeros.

People who loved their king.

Dany could not go to him through the madness of battle even if she was more capable in close combat. Not in her condition. Not yet.

She gritted her teeth and tried to be patient.

And the blood of the dragon was never good at that.

Women disguised to look like trees rubbed her bare body with snow, and it took all her courage and remaining pride not to scream from the unpleasant, stinging sensation.

She would greatly prefer scalding water.

Suddenly, a light blue, crystal banner flew over the battle clamour in scarce starlight, for parley or truce, she could not tell, could not hear the latest words exchanged between Jon Snow and Jon Stark, if there were any.

Snow was in her body, cleansing it.

“They are retreating!” Tyrion boomed next to her, and began jumping on his stunted legs as enthusiastically as he could.

Never very high.

"Regroup!” he cried with passion. “To me! To the trees! Take cover! Grumkins cannot be trusted to respect the peace."

"Jon!” she breathed out and marveled that she had her voice back after the long deprivation of her captivity.

At the Night's King's command, the ice spider had doused her with its venom, the slime that the women had by now scraped off from her with snow.

The poison had kept her mute, docile and limp. Sweet. A perfect victim. Forced to submit to the horrifying yoke of indignity.

Whenever she tried to stand against it, she would faint, losing herself to oblivion.

“Jon!” she called again. He would come to her if he could, at least for a moment, would he not? Despite that this battle was truly the last, and if she had learned anything about her husband in the too short time of their marriage, it was that he would see to it in person.

To the end.

Tyrion gave her a sad look. "Fear not, Your Grace," he murmured for her ears only. "He will want a luxury of bidding you farewell. I know I would, if it was me wielding Ice."

"Farewell?” She did not fully understand. "Jon does not mean to take his place!” she rebelled. “The Night’s King just wants us to despair and lose the war!” she tried to explain the terrible certainty away and discard it as a worn dress. “He has been mocking us and misleading us from the
beginning. There has to be another way!"

"Only one that I can see. Better for the realm, to be sure, but for the two of you?"

Dany could not possibly think of anything worse than Jon becoming the Night's King and leaving her to spend the possibly long remaining days of her life without him. "What-"

"I shall let His Grace explain," Tyrion hushed her with the expression of deepest respect. "The decision in this matter ought to be his, I reckon, not mine or anyone else's. The realm is big and needy, and yet every man is only himself."

"Dany!"

Jon was all over her, smelling of blood.

His own, spilled freely.

"Are you alright, my love?" -- "Are you hurt, my love?" they spoke in one voice on each other's lips.

Until the women helping Daenerys began to pull Jon away without mercy.

"A moment, Your Grace! Lord Stark---Targaryen---Lord Snow!!!!!!"

Only the last name, or perhaps the force with which it was uttered, made Jon listen, but still not release Daenerys from his arms. "What?" he asked irascibly. "She is my wife!"

"Take it easy!"

"Let her have enough air!"

"She is with child!"

"Your heir."

Daenerys felt her face burn from hope and shame. Could it be? A child?

A woman with child paraded naked from beyond the Wall to here, to this big northern lake, for all to see. The humiliation suddenly felt even worse than if it had been just her.

But just for a brief moment.

For Jon’s hands were already on her belly, and hers were there too, and there it was, the smallest of swellings where her skin and muscles had been perfectly flat and tight for years, ever since her body recovered from little Rhaego, the monster, who had left this world as soon as he was born.

Too soon.

She often wished she could have at least seen him and held him in her arms, even if he had been truly born with wings, nails and claws, and she had never fully trusted Mirri Maaz Duur on her word that it had been the case.

A grey shift come from somewhere was blessedly pulled over her head, followed by a cotton peasant skirt, and a pair of long woollen socks covering her entire legs.

Smallclothes were apparently dispensable in northern fashion, despite the ungodly cold.
Heavy woollen dress followed, warm like life itself, for her and her child. And boots, ugly to look at, but even she could walk in them in winter, with her always freezing feet.

Jon helped dressing her. She smiled, remembering all the times when it was the opposite. She ended up seated next to him on a broad tree trunk, with many fine lines engraved in it in broad, irregular circles.

*An ancient victim of some old war.*

There was no settlement nearby where people would feed fires.

Finally, Jon placed a grey furry cloak over her shoulders, and even a few branches and leaves which served as a disguise to his latest recruits.

“They are from the mountain clans,” he explained curtly. “It’s how they dress to fight.”

“They made us the king and queen of trees,” she quipped, savouring the moment, forgetting how much distrust the great trees of the North had inspired in her when she first flew to the Wall and beyond it searching for Jon.

When she found him and thought of him as handsome and not much more.

He was her lifeblood now and his men were the forest.

Who would vanquish the trees here where they had always stood?

The Others camped in the clearing, guards patrolling the sinuous line of their defences. Their number stretched endlessly in the direction of the Wall, a great wedge of ice in the sea of surviving humanity.

“Why?” she asked Jon, gesticulating at the truce which still held.

“He raised a white flag and yelled his conditions at me,” Jon said darkly. “I have leave to speak to the wolves and bring him back his wife safe and sound. If I do, he might discuss peace terms.”

*And you took his charity which insults you to see me.*

“He must be lying,” Dany judged, remembering all too well her captivity, “he doesn’t want it.”

The Others looked at humans as a lower race. Why would the Great Other hold talks with them?

“Perhaps they see peace as killing and enslaving us more rapidly, without further armed resistance,” Tyrion observed coolly. “They would not be the first to hold this view.”

“Well I don’t have his wife!” Jon reacted impatiently. “But I am glad for the time given.”

His arms closed protectively around Dany.

“It is more happiness that I could have ever asked for,” he told her, looking into her eyes. “Promise me that you will raise our child as a good man.”

She nodded stupidly, unable to say that he would be there as well.

*And if it is a girl?*

Yet she stopped dreaming out loud about their child, seeing that the news painted both joy and fresh
grief on Jon’s unshaven face. They had to stay calm, both of them, without delving further into the depths of their hearts. Her hands went to his temples instead, caressing him tenderly.

“Jon Stark and the brave Danny Flint!” a bunch of tree-like men rumbled at them with wonder.

“Shut up, Flints,” one of the women tending to Dany replied. “Danny Flint was black-haired in all songs.”

“What wouldst you know, old Wull hag?” one among the Flints retorted. “Her hair was the silver hidden in the break of dawn. Every babe in our clan learns the true tale in cradle. She had dark blue eyes, almost violet, before the treacherous men of the Night’s Watch put the light out of them.” He looked at Jon as if he knew him, and then continued, bowing with respect: “May you both fare a hundred times better than your famous ancestors.”

“Stop the nonsense, Flint, and tend to your father while you still have him,” Jon pronounced calmly, “I am not him, and she is not her. We are who we are.”

“Of course, Your Grace,” the man nodded respectfully, the branches of his war attire rattling like broken teeth in a gust of winter gale.

Jon’s arms were warm like coals in comparison with Rhaegar’s dead embrace, despite that they were always colder than hers. From the ice in him. The secret of his survival and resistance to wounds and cuts, in her opinion.

“It is too much joy,” he said, his face sad, awkward.

“He has to be lying,” she tried to say about the Night’s King terrible truth that the man who killed the Great Other had to become him. That the damnation of men would never end because they brought it upon themselves by a terrible sin.

“I don’t think he is.”

“But you can’t take his place-”

“No I can’t,” Jon agreed wholeheartedly.

She was relieved. Until she looked at his face again. Grimmer than before.

“What do you mean to do?” she asked with dread, sensing unknown doom which would hurt only her. Break her heart in two or in as many pieces as her chest could hold.

So he told her, and tears streamed down his handsome face.

From polite distance, Tyrion looked to the ground as if he had always known.

The sacrifice.

Jon would take the Night’s King accursed life and let himself be killed by him to end the war.

The horns boomed from the Others’ camp, rousing them to stand against men.

The truce was over.

The weak slid silently and meekly deeper into the forest.

Tyrion, no longer the commander in the king’s absence, spoke out of turn as the men grouped
around Jon, “Your Grace,” he began, “for what is worth... you may not think much about it... you might not have listened carefully to all the gibberish coming from Jon Stark’s mouth during your duel, but... How come that he has never referred to your sword as *Ice*? I was glad for the standstill to have some time to think and advise you on a wiser course of action, but it is all I could think of. Very little, I know. The name of your ancestral blade must be obvious to a Stark. Why should it be mentioned? I had not heard it from Ned Stark’s mouth either when I first visited Winterfell. Lord Stark was merely carrying and polishing his sword. Please forgive me for not thinking of something better.”

Jon nodded and answered sternly, “Thank you for your counsel, such as it is, and for your loyal service,”

It sounded like a farewell, if Daenerys had ever heard one. Her heart sank so low in her chest, and yet she stopped her tears from falling.

Tyrion, on the contrary, cried as he took his place next to Jon. “A dwarf is as brave as any man, Your Grace” he commented through his tears. “Might be I shall serve you still.”

He looked determined to not stay in the back.

And neither would Daenerys.

The blood of the dragon had no fear.

She would be there to whatever end.

A treacherous, terrible thought crossed her mind.

*At least to close his eyes.*

Dragonless, the Mother of Dragons marched next to her husband. To her surprise, he did not even try to stop her, for all that he had made her swear that she would live on for their child.

All her calls to Drogon have been to no avail. By the Seven, he had even returned to save Sansa and her husband, but not her.

That had hurt tremendously, glimpsing him as he lurked behind a dark cloud outside the Night’s King second castle, without ever flying into it for her and Rhaegar, just picking the prisoners tossed out to be executed. Surreptitiously. So that the Others could not see his intercession. How come that he could now fly beyond the Wall without harm to himself? And why did he then not simply *burn* the white walkers if the magic of the Wall had let him through?

It must have all been some terrible command of the red woman who had bewitched him.

And her own fault, to be sure.

For using blood magic without knowing. For giving Drogon Khal Drogo’s soul. For making a dragon love her and long for what could never be. For making him jealous and easy victim to sorcery.

Would Melisandre treat Sansa and Sandor any better than the Night’s King? What did she want with them? And why would she ever let Drogon return to Westeros? Why would she command him to bring her anyone? Had she seen some evil need for it in her fires? She seemed to have wanted Drogon only to fulfil her own dreams of power.
As anyone else greedy to have dragons that Daenerys had ever encountered.

Volantis.

That’s where Melisandre was headed to, and Daenerys would go there one day with fire and blood, if she survived this war.

Drogon, why?

She called for her dragon even now. To her surprise, instead of Drogon’s great, black soul, she sensed very clearly Viserion who slept in agony because his rider was severely wounded and needed dragonstrength to survive and maybe, just maybe recover. The dragon wept for his rider’s pain as some insipid woman pitying the dead lambs in high, grassy pastures of a faraway land.

And then Rhaegal who was waking very slowly after-- after helping her to stay alive because she was his Mother and Jon’s sister, no, she was Jon’s love. And he also he waited and brooded because… because... He could not help Jon with this deed. Dragon talk became angry, unintelligible. The animal did not want to lose his rider, but neither would it obey him, if it judged his rider’s wishes and commands deprived of all sense.

It was not what Viserys told her about dragons. They were servants of the Targaryens, the noble race with dragonblood. Her race. Not free souls to do as they pleased.

Not…

Not reasonable.

Not having a will of their own, which seemed to be the case of her remaining children.

It would seem that poor Viserys was wrong about the nature of the dragons as about so many things.

Last she sensed a young dragon’s mind as blue and quiet as her children’s thoughts were gloomy and angry. Beth flew carelessly alongside the deserted Wall, enjoying the cold, fresh air, trying out her wings, unaware of any war or trouble. Dining on seagulls and baby eagles.

Drogon!

Her desperate call was followed by equally desperate black dragon-silence ensconced in a very profound corner of her heart, refusing to answer any of her burning questions.

But at least he was there and she could sense that he has grown a lot. She could not see how much exactly behind that northern cloud.

Drogon please!

Because she was right in her worst expectations.

The Night’s King did not seriously expect Jon to speak to the wolves or bring his wife. He merely regrouped in order to slaughter the people who still resisted with greater speed and continue the search himself.

One Drogon’s breath would decimate the advancing company of the white walkers, the second would be their doom. The realm of men would have a chance against the great hosts camping between the lake and the Wall. And still more poured in through the gates of Castle Black.

More, but no no longer infinite in number.
Because the sun had set in the east and not in the west, burning the valley where the Others were waking to life. The mountains were blown in the wind by the sun’s fall, and the seas had gone dry, washing the valley clean of the curse forever.

The Others had lost the homeland where they slept. Perhaps their loved ones as well, if affection existed within their race.

The victory was within their reach as they advanced like one, singing the doom for men.

It looked like Aegon would be the first of Jon’s vanguard to fall, despite his white walker’s body, and Mance would go down with him, or shortly after him-- but then--

--then

-- a dragon flew to the lake, emerging from utter darkness white and golden, the one Daenerys least expected, the one who had been sleeping and sobbing like a weak woman.

Impeccably beautiful, Viserion carried a new rider.

Brandon Stark sat on the narrowest place between the two spikes on his back, needing a firm hold for his poor legs. Dark Sister was in his wiry hands and he had to wield it with both. The great sword of Brynden Rivers and many famous dragons before him was far too heavy for a young man who only had use for half of his body.

Flying low, spinning, Viserion burned clear a stretch between Jon’s men and the Others, saving Aegon and Mance from Ser Jorah’s destiny.

And Bran bore Dark Sister down on the Night’s King, burying Valyrian steel between his shoulder blades. The sword came out as easy as if it had cut soft butter.

But it did not cut, or hurt the enemy whose armour and skin remained unblemished.

The Great Other laughed with mirth unheard and unseen in the War for Dawn.

Viserions breathed at him angrily, living for the stream of fire from his maw and nostrils. Daenerys could feel the heat in her throat, and the dragon’s immense joy at exhaling it. Searing hot like the furnaces in the mines of Old Valyria.

And very imprecise in its zeal, judging by heart-wrenching human screams.

The hoarse laughter of the enemy only continued through the night.

Not even dragonfire could destroy the Night’s King. Only a sword reforged in the blood of the innocents. The blood that should have never been spilled.

Of Nissa Nissa.

Or Ned Stark.

The ice spider defended his rider, biting Viserion’s crippled wing. The dragon soared up in retreat, taking Bran with him, while Jon’s younger brother screamed to be brought back and continue his useless battle.

Viserion soon disappeared faster than he arrived, and Daenerys wondered if his coming had been but a comforting dream.
The Others continued what they started, new ones taking the place of those burned away. The losses would be heavy now.

Euron Greyjoy lost a dead eye to a crystal blade, maimed once more.

Dany wielded her dragonglass hairpin, the only possession that was not stripped from her in her captivity. It was the Night’s King way to show her she was powerless against the ice spider venom: her weapon was always available in her hair yet she could never grasp it.

Now she kept close to Jon, holding her own ground, not wanting to cost any man his life, protecting jealously her own.

And of her unborn child.

Then, flutes and cymbals resounded in the night, wooden and hollow, from the seemingly empty boats anchored in the middle of the half-frozen lake. Drums joined in, steady and insistent against the shrill horn-blowing of the white walkers.

In the rhythm of the invisible players, another army came marching down from the woods beyond the battlefield, under a translucent banner. Large ice dragons flocked to it, gliding over the sky, shedding light on the army’s path with shimmering, frozen breath. The fabled beasts looked stunning and innocuous. Not bred for battle. Unlike their fiery Valyrian brothers or the bloodthirsty ice children of the children of the forest.

The nightly sky became a great silver lamp above men.

Men and wights.

Led by the king with blue eyes who had somehow freed himself, and the slain, from serving the Others. Raising the banners of the dead next to those of the living, there came Rhaegar, under the sigil of the Ice Dragon, the grand northern star, the hope of travellers looking for their way. Jojen Reed was his standard bearer. The Others bit hard into the flanks of his army, dismembering their former slaves, punishing them cruelly for treason.

But its main body stood its ground despite tremendous losses, not allowing the Others to approach the men still drawing breath.

Despite that it was common knowledge that the wights felt no pain, and could fight on even in bits and pieces, as loose arms and legs, until an ordinary fire put an end to it, Dany hoped that Ser Jorah was not among those chopped into pieces.

So many things happened at once that it was impossible to tell.

The battle was a great wave and she was in the middle, next to Jon who was now aggressively cutting his own way open towards the enemy.

Two heavy sword slowed him down. So he turned, and handed her Blackfyre.

“It’s too heavy for me and I never learned the sword,” she tried to object. In truth, she wanted him to keep it, hoping that the magic stirred by dragons would awaken when least expected, and break the vicious circle of one Night’s King replacing another, by one strike of the fabled weapon of Aegon the Conqueror.

“Just stick them with the pointy end,” he yelled through the winter wind, and left her with the sword in hands, continuing his advance.
She followed closely after him. One touch of Valyrian steel made the Others dissolve much faster
than her hairpin. In Jon’s vanguard, she didn’t have to be a master of arms to touch them once, and
always keep her back next to Jon or Mance or Aegon. Obara Sand, Or Lady Meera.

Or Tyrion’s dwarf back.

But never near Euron, the former dragonstealer. She could tolerate him, but not trust him.

Mute and stubborn-faced, Jon looked like a man who had already waited far too long for a deed that
ought to be done.

His vanguard was armoured in blue crystal of the enemies they vanquished. Only Dany’s cloak was
clear of them. The pretty remnants of the foul white walkers vanished in smoke as soon as they
touched her so she had clearly not lost all of her dragonblood and her body was beginning to
re recuperate.

For the little dragon who was part wolf.

She held her ground, yet the despair kept growing in her.

After Viserion’s bravery, one thing was certain.

Not even Drogon could have killed the Night’s King, even if she could call him back in her dire
need.

It was Jon’s lot, a bitter destiny. Why did good men always have to die? And the bad men, and all
men, in the end.

Please no.

Khal Drogo’s loss was a terrible tragedy in her young years, but this one could utterly destroy her.

“Your little brother was almost impressive, playing at the Last Hero,” the Night’s King mocked Jon
as was his wont. “Braver than you. Where is he now? Fallen off the dragon? Was it not so easy to fly
as it looked? Did the beast betray him? That animal has the soul of the woman who committed high
treason against your lovely wife, after all. Did she ever tell you?”

Jon was utterly unimpressed, grinning. “My wife has no secrets from me,” he retorted. “And my own
dragon has the soul of a horse, but the rest is himself. He does what he wants, I think. And what I
want, but not all. I am certain that Viserion is the same.”

Before finishing the sentence, very suddenly, Jon stabbed the remaining ice spider through the heart
and shouted, “Shut up and fight!”

The spider evaporated into thin blue air.

“Or are you a coward who shall fall behind your most noble grumkin bannermen? How can you
even tell who is who? They all look the same. Are you afraid to die?”

“Last chance to present me with my wife,” the enemy squeezed out of blue lips with poison, rising
on his feet between his steed’s last remains. “Or there will be no more respite until you and all fools
who acknowledge you as their king lay destroyed before my feet.”

Instead of answering, Jon attacked him with force that almost brought him down. Yet at the last
moment, the Night’s King regained balance and parried, pushing Jon back with tireless power.
“Here she is!” A young woman’s voice screamed in the wind.

Dany could not understand how she came all the way from the forest to the thick of the battle without being seen, but somehow she did.

*Calm as still water.*

Arya, wide awake, dragging the Mermaid Wife in her cloak of velvet, with dead black hair hanging to her waist, falling from strange looking braids that became undone after a long ride. Gendry trod a few steps behind Jon’s favourite sister, unable to catch up.

*Fast as the wolverine.*

Gendry carried after Arya, almost as her faithful servant, a horn that could have only belonged to Joramun.

Simple, unadorned, modest, broken and made whole by the late Lord Reed.

The last greenseer of his people.

Jon used to sleep-talked about it in his dreams of waking the giants from earth as Joramun had done, ending the previous Long NIght and bringing the dawn.

*It has come and gone before,* he would say very often, turning in their bed.

Hope budded in Dany’s heart. Perhaps the horn would help where Blackfyre and the Warrior could not.

She was on the verge of kneeling and praying to the trees.

Direwolves arrived with Arya, three of them, the great she-wolf with bright yellow eyes, as large as a small dragon, and two lesser ones who looked equally savage.

Daenerys was told their names a hundred times over, by different Starks. *Nymeria. Summer. Shaggy.*

“I can’t kill you with a whisper,” Arya hissed at the Night’s King, sounding almost as dangerous as a white walker, with the difference that the meaning of her hisses was plain. She held dragonglass pressed neatly against the Mermaid Wife’s slender throat. “But I can kill her. With this or… or with a song! It shall not be a lady’s verse or a pretty tune like these cymbals in the lake, no, my lord grumkin. But a song it shall be, such as only I can intone. Best believe it, snark! Put them all to sleep! Now! Lay in bed! I bid you sweet dreams!”

“But the wights die when the Others start dreaming,” the Night’s King retorted with emotion. “So tell me, lady, how could I ever possibly agree to your terms?”

“Enough!” Jon hammered with rage. “My sister acted on her own. I had not known. I swear it on my honour and everything I hold dear.”

With that, he forced the enemy to continue their duel, lest he cut him in pieces where he stood.

The Night’s King became deadly focused, attacking with all his power: a man, a monster that could never become exhausted or slow down.

Dany’s heart was in her heels.

Jon was clearly losing ground, backing into a clumsy defence position more worthy of a boy playing
at swords that the blade master he had become.

Then, from that weak posture, he suddenly swung Ice to deal a killing blow.

He would lose his head in the same moment, he would let it roll down like Ned Stark’s on the stairs of the Great Sept of Baelor ----

--- except that his would roll in snow--

----snow--- snow---snow---

---Dany’s heart hurt to the point of bursting---or was she the brave Danny Flint’s?---

---- and then the enemy found dragonspeed in jumping back and away.

“You would do that!” The Night’s King yelled with superhuman strength, flushed dark grey and blue in the light of the ice dragon sky lanterns.

“What else?” Jon first matched him and then surpassed him in the shouting contest. “What would you do in my place?” He paused and continued in a black whisper carried forward through the whistling of the winter wind by its sheer charge of rage and contempt. “If you were still yourself.”

“If you were still Azor Ahai and not an abhorrence to everything he had stood for as the Last Hero,” Jon landed a mortal blow with words and not with steel. “I shall not take your place. Yes, I shall rather throw myself on your sword when I take your life. It should not last much longer. I’ll find a way, you’ll see. What a man truly has to do, a man always does.”

There were only two men duelling left in the world, pacing around each other.

The battle stilled completely. The white walkers and the people alike observed how their king fared.

Arya never wavered in her hold on the Mermaid Wife… no… Nissa Nissa... Dany corrected herself with bile rising in her throat.

Jon’s little sister’s eyes promised murder to the wight woman before she would let the enemy have her back, no matter who she was and how she died.

Dany sank into snow and it seemed to her that the world stopped turning, and that the duel would never end.

The Night’s King no longer fell into a trap of Jon’s seemingly hesitant steps. The combat was a complex dance, a deadly one.

The Night’s King exhibited wild passes, inventing them on the spot, perhaps, from some figures he knew. Dany had seen her share of men sparring but she could not be sure. Jon responded in kind,

A new dance, never seen before. An art.

In one of the elaborate clashes, the Night’s King caught Jon on a wrong leg, attacking his left side.

Jon’s hold on Ice wavered only so slightly. He yelled with surprise, and he would have gotten a good grip on it again, if only the enemy---

---the Night’s King---

---Azor Ahai---
--- did not throw himself on Ice---

---impaling his chest on the blade that killed Ned Stark---

--- and remained prostrated in dirty, bloodied snow...

“This now?” Arya breathed out, stunned. Her hold on the lady wight wavered.

The Mermaid Wife… Nissa Nissa broke free, staggered to her husband and sat next to him, cradling his body as it changed, slowly losing the gnarled skin of the white walker, turning into a man he had once been.

Jon retrieved Ice and stood speechless, still alert and not believing in victory.

Dany found herself next to him, holding the elbow of his sword hand, holding Blackfyre in her own right hand.

The white walkers lifted their heads like snakes in a desert. Some hissed impatiently. Dany wondered how long it would take before they fell asleep.

The sea of humanity remained dead silent, not understanding what has occurred and what would happen next; brooding, waiting.

Azor Ahai’s hair turned black and silky, without a single curl in it; his eyes became black and glittery like Drogon’s scales. His face would not be old if it were not for his ancient eyes. His expression was flat, and his armour beautiful, intricate, grey, red and gold, of foreign making.

“I had thought you would never guess,” he spoke with difficulty, addressing Jon, “obsessed as you were with the fate of your ancestor and namesake. It was the only significant advantage I had over you so I used it whenever I dared, always waiting for the day when I would commit a grave error of judgment and betray myself, and you would kill me, and take my place.” He paused and crossed his arms on his ruined chest in an odd gesture of supplication. “I extend a plea of honour to you both, King and Queen of Westeros. I exhort you to show mercy to Nissa Nissa, should it be in your hands to bestow it.” He nervously grasped his wife’s hand and muttered. “She has no blame in anything I have done.”

“But she will die when you die, and the Others fall asleep,” Daenerys could not stay quiet. “As will my brother! And so many innocents! Or is that another lie?” She prayed it was.

“I do not know what will be,” the dying king replied very seriously.

“I had to do all I could for her to wash my sin,” he looked at Dany as if he was sorry, offering a silent apology. “I learned how to care for her on the side, all the while bowing to the demands of the curse that took me and used me for its own sake. Back home, in the wondrous city of Yi Ti, behind its unconquered walls, we believe that dragonblood is the only substance that can resurrect the dead. But that is not true, is it?” he concluded stoically. “I know now that our beliefs are rubbish. Every faith is.”

“Nothing and no one can resurrect the dead,” Dany retorted briskly. “And only the gods decide who lives and who dies.” As she said it, she did not know if she believed it herself. But it felt marvelous to be able to say it, to occupy for once the high moral ground in relation to the moribund at her feet.

Azor Ahai’s old, dying eyes centred on Jon. “This is like a new step invented in a sword fight. A man does not know where it will take him, before he makes it.” He seemed dead honest.
“Why?” Jon had burning questions on its own, “Did you do it only for yourself and for her? Only to wash your sin in any way that was left for you?”

“Would you believe me if I claimed that the world as I used to know it was first and foremost in my heart? The world I came to save when I crossed the narrow sea and disembarked in your lands, from what you regard as the Far East of the Known World...”

“No,” Jon answered flatly.

“No,” Dany echoed.

Azor Ahai gave a short, dry laugh. Prideless. Mirthless. “I thought so. Yet it is true. What else did you expect me to do? They had seen us off from Yi Ti with flowers and music. The high priests had told us that we carried in our hands the fate of all men. And we have both believed it with all our hearts. No one has ever told us what awaited in Westeros or how it came into being. We both wanted to do what had to be done. And I only begin to hope beyond hope right now that my latest and last mad feat could mean a different destiny for Nissa Nissa. For what is a man without hope? Is he still a man? And if death it is, death it shall be. She wanted to die since we woke. Her condition is more unbearable than mine, with no ice in her veins give her purpose. I think she would have thrown herself into a fire if it was not-

“For you,” Dany concluded knowingly.

Women were prone to all sorts of madness when they loved a man.

And the other way around.

She felt the urge to cry once more, but she did not. Instead she lifted her chin high and objected with pride, “You could have done something, said something!”

Azor Ahai shook violently his black head in absolute denial. “You do not know what the curse is. It walks over you. Now it took all of my old strength, all of myself that I had left... and the chaos of a bloody battle, stronger than any magic, to break free. I caught myself admiring your husband’s courage and I grasped the only chance I would ever have to act at least once more with my own bravery, such as it was left to me. Drifting against the tide. Trying something genuinely new. A move, a step yet to be seen.”

His body contorted in agony. His eyelids fluttered. Speech was gone from him, but there was still some life left, it seemed.

His wife took his shoulders and addressed him in a language Dany could not understand. Then she bowed deeply to her and Jon, and revealed her belly from under the cloak.

A wight child in a wight wife.

“How could you?” Dany uttered in disbelief. “To sacrifice not only your wife but also your child to the ideal of saving your world?”

Tyrion came in, “I believe that the lady is saying that it is the child they both killed, not knowing it was there until they… woke.”

A sob came behind Jon. It was Arya, crying without shame.

The blood of the wolf could shed tears, it seemed, with far less scrupules than the blood of the dragon.
“Yin Tar from Yi Ti,” Tyrion continued mournfully. “One of the many names in different lands for the Last Hero, Azor Ahai. The true one, it would seem. And this is his end.”

His name had always been written on his sword, Dany remembered, the one she and Jon had found and taken from the caves beyond the Wall, under one of his castles. He had freely admitted it was his, and they had thought he was just bragging, as always. The sword now buried in snow behind Nissa Nissa.

“He didn’t even realise that Arya was clearly my sister, and a Stark. To him she was just an unknown lady. He acted as a man who has never even seen Ice and much less known its name,” Jon spoke to all and to no one, as a man who still does not believe fully in his own reasoning. “He had somehow learned every single swordsman trick in Westeros in addition to his own, foreign ones, except the way in which all northern boys defend themselves when they first pick up the sword.” Finally he addressed Azor Ahai, “It just fell into place, every encounter we had. I had to guess loudly, or rather, I knew. I knew for certain, as I know myself now.”

Azor Ahai averted his eyes from Jon and turned them to Dany. With a soft, pained expression, he murmured, “I saw the brave Danny Flint dying after I killed Jon Stark. She was a lot like you. Full of fire for a tiny northwoman. I understand she died an ugly death for it, and that Jon Stark took his revenge from the men on the Wall who did it, by becoming not only their justice, but their worst and cruelest doom. To simply kill them would have never been enough.”

Dany wondered if he even knew that she was no northwoman. The people of Yi Ti might have never heard about the House Targaryen and Old Valyria.

Only about dragons.

Everyone had designs for the power or the magic they could bring. Even in the cold Asshai by the Shadow.

“Danny Flint’s passing was the last event I witnessed with my own eyes before losing myself. Before waking to see my Nissa Nissa neither alive nor dead, kneeling next to my new throne. The ruin and the mockery of everything I lived for. Come to pass by my own design and hand. At least all my companions had died for good and they were not there with me to witness my shame.”

With this, Azor Ahai looked at the ice sky lanterns, and then at his wife, murmuring a short, heartfelt sentence in a foreign language.

“It hurts, it hurts to see what I have done to you!” Tyrion translated with some hesitation.

Nissa Nissa could not cry.

The wights could not.

She pressed her husband’s black head against her undead heart and gently closed his eyes.

Then, she faced Jon squarely, her gaze inquiring about her destiny.

Jon sheathed Ice, and took the Horn which was now in Arya’s hands.

The Horn of Joramun.

Wiping a single tear of compassion from his eye, Jon blew it slowly and deeply, only once. A stark lament for the dead king.
“She is not dying,” Dany dared say after a while.

“And they are not falling asleep,” Jon murmured back.

The Others slowly rose and grouped, sounding their shrill horns, wide awake.

Kingless, they would continue their war against men on their own.

Sweat beaded on Jon’s forehead. “It never ends,” he said darkly, patting the Horn of Joramun. “No giants of earth for me, it would seem. The grief for the fate of Azor Ahai and Nissa Nissa is in my heart, but it can never be as strong as Joramun’s. He must have lost a friend and an ally in Jon Stark, when the King of Winter changed sides. This man was a stranger and an enemy to me until today.”

Dany felt that the final destiny of Azor Ahai and Nissa Nissa was to be trampled down under the feet of a horde of white walkers, and dismembered into pieces.

She never felt less like the Mother of Dragons.”

Then her belly moved. Her child.

When your womb quickens, and you bear a living child.

The prophecy flashed in her mind, fast and clear as ever.

When the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. When the seas go dry and mountains blow in the wind like leaves. When your womb quickens again, and you bear a living child. Then he will return, and not before.

The words have lost their bitterness, and they have all been turned upside down. Everything prophesied had happened, since Azor Ahai caught her, but nothing in the straightforward way she expected, until this last, missing part.

My sun and stars!

My sun and stars! She called to Drogon in her mind, from Volantis or the end of the world. She had never dared address him like that before in the secret language of dragonkind, through the common space they all shared and inhabited in their souls - afraid of what it could mean for poor Drogo’s heart. The space where the dragons fell asleep to help each other recover from deadly hurts.

The place where they could murder each other in their sleep if they started a brother’s war.

My sun and stars!

She repeated it, needlessly, for she already listened to the flapping of his wings.

Moon of my life, Drogon responded to her, first time ever, picking both her and Jon on his back, blowing a very precise jet of fire that annihilated thousands of Others at once, without causing a single human cry.

Her grown dragon who could behave himself. Who would never eat a child again or burn anything by mistake.

Only willingly.

And, to her surprise, not Khal Drogo at all on the inside, just like Viserion was not Mirri Maaz Duur and Rhaegal not the horse.
In red and black flashes, Drogon showed to her in the malleable, colourful image language of dragons that he was Drogon, her son, her friend, her ally. Yes, he could dream of Khal Drogo’s life, and it was a good life, but not his.

Not him.

He had fought so hard to grow faster so that he could return to Daenerys sooner, and he was so miserable because he had not yet grown enough to be able to burn the chains of magic around him by himself. He would, one day, or so he thought, but not just yet. When he grew still a bit bigger. He could now absorb himself from the red woman’s presence when he was done with fulfilling her orders. He could fly elsewhere, to a place where he could see or sense Daenerys, as long as Melisandre did not give him new commands. Yes, he was big enough to fly beyond the Wall, unlike Viserion and Rhaegal. Yes, he could have picked her if she was thrown through the castle’s window, but he could never have saved her or Rhaegar on his own accord, without Melisandre’s express orders.

He could either be involved passively in what he wanted, or not at all.

Until Daneerys, his Mother, his sister, his friend, had finally remembered the words of the blood magic that had tied them together from the beginning, and freed him herself.

His smaller brothers could now also fly as they wished, without being forced to keep in reserve some of their strength for the well-being of their enormous enslaved brother, the strongest living member of the entire race.

Viserion returned to battle with Bran, and Rhaegal with Lady Brienne and Ser Jaime. The Kingslayer was clearly wounded and hauled over a thornless spike like a sack of grain.

Rhaegal made certain to show to Jon, and to Dany, Viserion’s memories of Brienne’s and Jaime’s bravery in the cave beyond the Wall, saving Bran from himself. In case they had any doubts left about Ser Jaime’s loyalty. Dany did not think it was the case, but she understood Rhaegal’s prudence.

The dragon knew his rider very well.

And then, magic must have stirred in the world from the presence of her three children. For a murder of dragons came to answer Jon’s call, sent out earlier by the Horn of Joramun: stone dragons woken to life, hard like chipped granite in his heart, hundreds of them, growing larger as they flew.

Magic was a hiltless sword. Different men grasped it differently, to an end that could not be foreseen.

A red stone dragon brought Sansa and her husband, naked as their name days.

Sansa stayed on dragonback, covering herself with her hair, balancing not to fall as the beast twirled over the ice-lit sky, breathing fire. But her husband asked to be put off, and the dragon obeyed. In the bloodshed, the Hound found clothing and a sword from corpses, and went to fight on foot, near Rhaegar, or on his own, cutting the Others left and right. No one had more battle joy on him, except, of course, Jon, who had left Dany with Drogon, and seemed to be in all places at once, so fast did he move on his two feet, flying on the wings of hope for true victory as surely as if he were riding a dragon.

Drogon harrumphed, taking Daenerys where she wanted, or where he thought breathing fire would be due. Tied to her and free, both at once.

She flew over her husband many and smiled at him, dreaming with her eyes and heart wide open.
about their future together.

*Jon and Dany.*

*Mother and Father.*

*Jon Stark and the brave Danny Flint.*

*The king and the queen.*

Finally, the mammoths returned from beyond the Wall. In a great stampede, stronger than a single jet of dragonfire, they crushed the remaining Others in their wake. An angry tribe of giants straddled them. Living giants, and not merely conjured from earth, finishing with clubs what the northern elephants had so aptly begun.

*Look.* Drogon said to Daenerys when the battle dwindled and was all but over, flying with her on his own accord far away, admiring a beauty such as he had never seen, not since he hatched from his black egg.

*See.*

The enormous dragon looped around a low cloud, as careless as Beth, the blue baby, making his Mother sick from being with child.

*Easy,* she sounded to herself like a woman from those mountain clans, admonishing Drogon.

In the wilderness, under a thin birch with its silvery skin, a blue rose grew from the chunk of ice, greeting the break of dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!

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