### Summary

The holy texts of two great temples in Braavos spoke of a child who was named Chosen, two hundred years after the Doom of Valyria. An order of assassins took the task of finding this child in the land of Westeros, where the game of thrones was at its peak and people—kings and beggars alike—were dying like flies. This child is Arya Stark of Winterfell, whose power originated from the nameless, faceless old gods.

As she struggles to either deny or affirm her selfhood, she unmaska great many discoveries about this phalanx of great dealers of death and the city which they serve—hidden histories,
conspiracies and betrayals, a higher truth, and her unquenchable passion for an enigmatic Lorathi.

I own nothing in this fic (pictures and links are from outside sources that I just wanted to share with you, guys). A Song of Ice and Fire is GRRM's.

CHAPTER TITLES: FROM KITTY'S_WORLD (Ayv jorrāelan, ŋuha raqiros!)
False Realities

“Come child, a story.

What is it, mother?

Signs have shown themselves, the day is near—the day when all these will end. The sweat and toil, the blood and the misery.

Will we leave the freehold? When? Whereto?

Time is never certain. But there is a special place—as far as in the northwest of the land of the east.

Will we live to see it, mother?

Have faith, child. We will. We will.”

Chronicles of Bondage, Fifth Chapter

The girl who was once Arya Stark has gotten used to the routines of working for a fishmonger named Brusco. “My name is Cat,” she had told him in broken Braavosi. “No ser, no parents, I now live alone. I need a place to stay, food to eat, some money. I will sell what you'll have me sell and help you around the house.”

He was apprehensive at the beginning, but his daughters seemed to have taken pity on the girl. “We need more girls around here, Father. To help with the laundry and the stitching and all. You cannot rely on the boys, surely you know that,” one of the daughters said.

Every waking day, she would go with Brusco to the fish market to purchase daily catch which she would sell by the wharves in the Drowned Town. The breadhouse owner was always her first customer, saved for the fourth day of each week, and he always bought crabs and mussels, six and four each. She sold oysters and cockles, and whenever the catch was good, prawns, to one of the brothelkeepers and to his sister too, who runs the alehouse; although she was not entirely sure if the woman was truly the brothelkeeper's sister. Her familiarity with the locals earned her the name “Cat of the Canals”, and should some townsfolks ask, the others would tell them, “The oyster girl, Brusco’s helper.” Then, a long walk to Ragman lane towards the harbor, where the non-local ships and boats dock. The Happy Port is there, and Merry always bought eleven or twelve oysters from her. The cart was heavy, and her back was always painful at the end of each day. The Cat wiped the sweat above her lips as she recalled her Kindly Man's instructions:

“Observe people—their faces, behavior, manner of speaking. Even their expressions when the sun hits their faces, or when a paid paramour walks by, or when the boat that will take them back to their ships is a little too delayed. Beware of false realities, child.” They were walking past the acolytes and devotees lighting candles in the hall, towards the temple’s garden.

“How does a girl know which realities are false?”

“Consider this: how do you think would a certain sailor react should a paid paramour pass
him by, with the sweetest smile on her lips, and a seductive flutter of her lashes?"

“He will smile back and be pleased, he will dream of her, and maybe follow her for she might lead him to a nice place and warm his bed,” the Cat answered confidently. Arya Stark had brothers, and her brothers talked about paid women a lot, a lot. Robb and Jon used to sit with Theon Greyjoy near the kennels and talk about her with soft lips, and her with full, round breasts, and her with the sweetest cun—

“No, child, he would not.”

She looked at the Kindly Man in confusion and attempted to rule her face. A girl must not think of Arya Stark’s brothers, and the bliss she had felt when they played with her, teased her, taught her. She felt her chest constrict and so she heaved a sigh. “He would not?”

“He would not. He would look at her with anguish, for he is a lowly sailor and she was his lover before. He would feel only torment for he could only look at her, and not touch her, much less kiss her on the lips. False realities child, are seen by the eye. True realities are beyond what sight can perceive. You understand this, child?”

At night, she would sleep beside Brusco’s daughters: the older one is Brea, and the younger, Talea. When Brusco drifts off to sleep, Brea would climb up the rooftop and meet a boy. She would spend an hour or two there, and climb back down to tell them about this boy she was having dalliance with. “Oh Talea, Oh, Cat! I have never seen such beautiful pair of blue eyes before! And his lips are so warm yet so light against mine; they taste like berries and ap—”

“His hair?” the Cat asked in Braavosi. Her eyes glinted with sudden interest. “Tell me about his hair.”

The sisters were unsure at first if the Cat was only feigning interest, but she was lying on her stomach, her chin resting atop her right hand, and her eyes were with a certain flicker.

“Midnight black,” Brea uttered dreamily, to which Talea let out a repressed, coquettish scream.

“Oh,” the Cat responded in a somewhat unimpressed tone.

“Do tell us about his hair, Cat. Who is he?” Brea demanded, her eyebrows raised.

The Cat was taken aback. “He? Who are you talking about?” She turned over so her back was now against the bed, but the girl pulled both of her hands to allow her to sit. Two sisters stared at her accusingly, their smiles with a hint of mischief. One of them even spanked her with a throw cushion.

“Stop denying his existence, Cat. You speak of his name in your fantasies every single night without fail,” Talea giggled, trapping a small, soft flesh on the girl's inner thigh between her thumb and forefinger. “Tell us or this will be really painful.”

That precise moment, the Cat wished she had Arya Stark’s Needle with her. It was not helping either that Brea was tickling her sides. She wanted to convulse in short laughs and scream with pain at the same time.

“S-stop it, stop it!” she pleaded in suppressed fits of laughter.

“Then tell us who that boy is, and why he makes you touch yourself at night!” Brea urged.
She let out a pathetic giggle, not because Brusco’s daughters were playing with her, but because she wanted to hide the sudden hollowness she felt within. Seven hells, how could one person even miss another this much?

“R-red, red, with white streaks…” she managed to say in between breaths.

The girls stopped bothering her sides and looked at her in a teasing manner. “Heavens! Red and white hair? Why, that’s fascinating! Is he Westerosi?” Talea queried.

“Lorathi.”

“Ooooooh, Cat is in love with a Lorathi!” Brea screamed so loud, it was a wonder Brusco was not a bit disturbed in his state of slumber. He was a heavy sleeper, anyway, which explained why the girls could go out and come back in.

Talea kissed her cheek softly and whispered in her ear, “What’s his name?”

There was one and only one name. It was true, she spoke it every night—consciously, subconsciously, even unconsciously perhaps. Heavens forbid, she might have really been touching herself every night while uttering that name. It was the only genuine thing she knew about the man, but that did not stop her senses and her very core from thinking about him, dreaming of him, wanting him; such that at every turn, it is he that she sees, and his voice she hears. She had kept him locked in the deepest recesses of her capacity to think and feel, but nothing would remain hidden for long, this she knew. Every morn and every night she prayed—to not succumb to such emotions, no matter how strong they may be—and every morn and every night she felt like exploding to a thousand, thousand fragments. Oh, she knew his name the same way she knew what hers had been.

Jaqen H’ghar.

“Caaa-aaat,” Talea still whispered into her in a sing-song. “What’s his name?”

The Cat looked at the two girls with a sigh and whispered back: “He has no name.”
"A Crowned Curse"

"An unmistakable red streak atop the morning and night skies, this shall be a gift unto all of you. This streak, as red as the flame that would light a hundred dark nights, As red as the blood of living men and their children, This will speak to you of the face she dons, or that which she hides."

Songs of the Faceless; XII

It was most opportune that the Titan’s Daughter will make its way back to the east this time of year. The Lorathi had spent every last amount of time and patience learning about ravenry and smithing, as if more can actually be learned about these subjects towards maestership.

He was tired of wearing the pig boy’s face, even more enervated in pretending to be engaged in the usual debates and discussions about whether astrology gives men more knowledge than astronomy. He was exhausted of the politics, of the vanities, and he questioned the frivolity of all of it.

After almost a week on horseback, he had reached the Saltpans. The captain whom they call Ternesio had given him one of the best cabins in the ship, and refused to accept his silver. “Valar Dohaeris, my dear brother. The silver is but unnecessary. But please, do remember that I am called Ternesio Terys, and my sons are named Denyo and Yorko.”

The captain had gone lengths to make a man repeat the names, for according to the Creed, a Faceless Man cannot kill anyone whose name he knows. Finally, the anchor was lifted and the voyage began. One week. The Lorathi proceeded to his cabin, and a soft smile formed in his lips upon seeing it. He was undeniably impressed with the cabin he was given—large bed, with a bedside table and a reading lamp, a cushion chair, a small dining table laden with fruits from the Free Cities. And a Pentoshi carpet, he thought to himself. It is in times like these that a man gets to love what he does.

He sat on the edge of his bed and took out a large, thick, and seriously worn out book from his equally worn out saddlebag. His fingers traveled along the spine, touching the embossed title —The Death of Dragons. A task has been carried out, and many more will come. Many more, when he reaches the docks of home. He placed the book back inside, lest someone opens the cabin door and sees him with it. He was done slitting throats for the time being. He laid himself down and closed his eyes, in an unsuccessful attempt at sleep—as the case had been for many nights since he had witnessed what the Dothraki called shierak qiya—the bleeding star. It was a bright red streak atop the morn and night skies, as the Songs said it would appear. And true enough, that red streak, that bleeding star, or whatever bloody cosmic object the men of Westeros and Essos would call it, that led him to her.

“Boy, lovely boy! A man has a thirst…”

He rubbed his palms a little too roughly upon his face—his real face—and got up the bed to pour himself a goblet. Yes indeed, he had a thirst during that cool autumn morning, but that was not mere thirst for water or for ale. It was more of a thirst to…have her notice him, have her speak with
him. This was the child the Songs have sung about, and she was…

So, so lovely.

Such loveliness a man had never seen in the life of him. At the back of his head, he contemplated how it all began. He knew it was evil to rejoice upon the death of a brother. Had his brother not died, he would never have met that lovely girl. Was she a curse to a man? He asked. For she is always in a man’s reveries.

“You must go quickly,” his Elder had ordered him during the gathering of the masters. “We have received message from your brother that the situation is chaotic in the west, and that is to say the least. The child’s father has been imprisoned by the ruling monarch for treason, and the child’s life may be in danger. You must go to her.”

He was not to be convinced that easily. “And how will a man know that this is indeed the child we are looking for?”

“Astrography. One of the masters studying cosmic patterns predicted the red streak that is about to show itself in the skies in a few days. The Moonsingers have claimed the same,” one master with a comely face answered.

“There are thousands of children in the west who might fit the description of the child mentioned in the Songs. Are you sure we are all looking in the right place?” A man further asked.

“We can never be sure,” the Elder answered. “We could only hope that your brother in the west was not mistaken in interpreting the signs offered to us. Once you find her, you must watch her closely—her face, her capacities, her character. You know how the texts painted her, do you not?”

He smirked. “A man can recite the verses of the Songs in his sleep.”

“Very well then,” the master with the comely face held out his arms as if signaling a conclusion. He held the Lorathi’s gaze with a seemingly challenging air which the latter met with slight curiosity. “Begin your preparations.”

He arrived in what the western folks call the King’s Landing seven days after. The first thing he did was to locate his brother for surely the child was with him. He wore the face of a manservant and navigated through the chambers and halls of the Red Keep. He hid for a few seconds upon hearing heavy and quickened footsteps until he finally found him beside a broken wooden sword—his Braavosi brother—bathed in his own blood, barely breathing, barely…alive.

“Brother,” he fell beside him and cradled his head in his arms. “Where is the child?”

His Braavosi brother looked at him with his very calm eyes and said. “Find her. She escaped. Find her.”

“Not after a man gets you out of this place. You need to be brought to safety, a man brought a potion—”

The Braavosi held his arm tight to silence him. “Valar Morghulis. Find the girl.” And with a sharp breath and a smile serene, he communed without perturbations in the Unseen, with Him of Many Faces.
He shook his head in despair but time was not a friend, and so he stood and rushed to find her and through clenched teeth whispered, “*Valar dohaeris.*” In his mind, he recited a verse from the Songs—twelfth:

*Crowned with the shade of the ground men tread upon, grasping her steel of Old Valyria...*

He ran outside and looked, as the crowd led him to a spectacle at the other side. “Beheading! For treason!” They were shouting, with amusement as clear as rays of gold, as if the whole scenario would be nothing but mummer’s play. He dashed past men, and women, and children, past the beggars at the stonesteps and a few nobles-on-horses, till he reached that place where all the small crowds converged into an even larger one. *How will a man find a brown-haired child with Valyrian steel in this madness?* The man complained to Him of Many Faces. The Lorathi wearing the manservant’s face knelt on one knee in supplication, so his god would show her to him. And when he stood, he saw her, at the foot of one religious statue whose name he does not know.

*Crowned with the shade of the ground men tread upon, grasping her steel of Old Valyria...*

He ran towards where she stood but in an instant, she was gone—grabbed by a man clothed in pure black from head to foot, calling her roughly, ‘Boy! Boy!’ The man in black pulled ‘her’ who was now ‘him’ towards a narrow alley and cut most of ‘his’ hair. *Deception,* the Lorathi wearing a manservant’s face thought. He could not kill that man in black who now held the child, for he was not marked by anyone for death. Furthermore, she was not to be taken against her will.

“Wait there by the wagons. I will bring you north—home. You like that, eh, boy? Quickly now, come on!” The man in black pushed her towards the traveling wagons. “Let me just get the rotten ones from the Black Cell.”

The Lorathi remembered how he quickly drafted a plan, how he darted to the Black Cells and seconds later, he was in one of the confinements, without a key, without breaking a single steel bar, without the slightest noise.

*Though, not without being seen.*

Two fearsome and enormous monsters of men, whom he would later call Rorge and Biter, held each other in a state of faintheartedness, witnessing a man enter a cell without *actually* entering it. *What the hell,* he thought, rolling his eyes. *They have seen a man anyway.* He covered his face with the palm of his right hand. The manservant’s face ebbed away as he slowly dropped his hand, and what stood before the two terrified monsters was a *man,* red and white of hair.

He pressed one forefinger against his lips and the two monsters merely nodded their assent. Afterwards, the journey to the North inside a perfectly dispiriting cage.

The Lorathi swallowed what remained of the wine in his goblet and put it on the table a little more forcefully than he should have. He pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance and closed his eyes real tight. Heavens, he wanted to sleep. He needed to sleep. What is difficult in his temporary repose is the fact that he wakes up more exhausted than well-rested. What is more difficult is the fact that he could not admit to his dire self why this is.

*Was she a curse to a man?*

He looked at his cabin bed, no doubt as comfortable as it is inviting, but he could not bear to lie down on it. All he saw in that bed was one lovely girl, whose scented hair he kissed, whose bold, gray eyes he stared at with a want he could not quite explain, whose soft lips he rubbed gently with his thumb as he told her, “Speak three names.”
What folly! An offer of three deaths in place of three lives which he could have easily saved himself, if he wanted to, such is not written in the faceless creed. He merely wanted to do something special for her.

_I should have kissed those lips._ He thought, unconscious he was, of the fact that he was biting his thumb and gently shaking his head.

Realizing the obsession overtaking his facelessness once more, he stormed out of the cabin towards the deck.
You Were Right

I am Faceless.

I am Nameless.

I am No One.

And No One I must be, in order for me to realize how to be Anyone.

No One must only think and do, not feel. For when No One feels, he becomes.

And when he becomes, he will be lost.

Faceless Creed; 16th leaf

“Tell me three things I must know.”

The Cat had just finished her week’s task at Brusco’s and was back at the temple in the fifth day. Similar to how things were, she had to state to the Kindly Man three things she had learned—either observed or perceived—during her four days’ worth of work. They stood in the Atrium, eyes upon the pool that contained water that either poisons or heals.

“Hiding a finger knife is easy, so is using it with sleight of hand. Red Roggo showed me how,” she began, to which the Kindly Man responded, “Most interesting.” She pressed on. “Three moons from now, the Blue Lantern and the Dome will host a series of poetic plays and a Braavosi noble—the new Sealord who will replace Ferrego Antaryon will be there. I heard some stories. Antaryon’s health is failing—”

The Kindly Man held out his hand, directing her to stop. “Halt right there, you merely overheard that the Braavosi noble may become the new Sealord, it is but uncertain that he will indeed be.”

The Cat nodded her agreement and breathed deeply. Precision. She has to be precise in delivering information to the Kindly Man.

“And the third?” he asked.

“You were right.”

Confusion settled upon the Kindly Man’s brow. “Right about what, child?”

“A girl saw this young sailor and a paid paramour who walked by him. He…he appeared beleaguered when he saw her, and when she saw him, too. They were lovers, before,” her shoulders dropped an inch due to a certain emotion she could not name. “He could not be with her anymore.”

The Kindly Man chuckled at her statement. She looked at him, with an effort to hide her irritation. “Child, who are we to say what becomes of the future? You only know what you have seen, or what you thought you have seen; not what you believe in.”

“That is true,” she calmly said, controlling her urge to raise her voice a pitch higher. “But if a
girl does not believe, how will she understand? By that, if she failed to understand, how will she act at all?"

“That, child, is for another lesson,” the Kindly man countered in order to dismiss her. “Do prepare, will you? Your Faceless Master has arrived and he wants to meet with you in the Hall of Acolytes—”

“Faceless Master?” she interjected, and for a moment there, the hairs on the nape of her neck rose on their own as she felt a sickening pleasure in her belly. *Seven hells, not right now.* The Kindly Man narrowed his eyes in response to her sudden enthusiasm. “I—I mean, a girl means…why the Hall of Acolytes? She is not yet one.”

“She will be, though time is never certain,” he stated, kissing his thumb and pressing it upon his forehead—a religious act. “As for your Faceless Master, he was the one who gave you that coin; surely a child could not have forgotten about him. Run along, you reek of oysters and the canals.”

The Kindly Man walked away and the Cat whisked to the bath chambers. She reached it in a few seconds and in her state of haste, she started removing her garments before realizing that she had not closed the door.

*Must you really be in such desperate hurry?* She admonished herself. *For sakes, the man could wait!*

She walked to it and bolted it shut. Then, her feet tested the water in the tub. It had gone terribly cold. Rolling her eyes in impatience, she wallowed in and began cleaning herself. After she had finished scouring, soaping, and rinsing, the Cat rushed to her own chambers located at the first tier and this time, locked the door as she dressed up in her black and white robe.

It was not when she was walking towards the Hall where they would meet did she feel this abrupt impulse to run back to the comforts and assurance of her own chambers. Can she really claim herself to be No One? Will she ever? Such absurdity! A girl is no better than Arya Stark’s older sister then, who thought of nothing but romance, and enchantments, and the thrill of all of it!

*The Cat must have some sense, surely, he does not feel that way.*

With quivering hands, she turned the knob and entered the Hall of Acolytes in the most serene manner as was humanly possible. She closed the door behind her gently…

There, at the farthest end of the long table in the center of the hall, there he sat. In a most lackadaisical manner, that is.

She walked towards where he was, despite her weak knees and her natural instinct to fall. She wanted to be swallowed by the ground whole, or vanish into thin air, whichever comes first. His features were clearer to her as she drew closer to him. *Flowing red hair, with white streaks, beguiling, heavy-lidded brown eyes, expressive visage.* She was taken back to Harrenhal, where a distant memory of one Arya Stark heard girls giggling with admiration as he passed by, smiling most enigmatically as he was being led by Lannister soldiers to the keep.

*Oh, Jaqen.*

When she had decided that the space between them was enough, his deep voice broke the silent tension.

“Come, lovely girl.”
She walked three more steps, sure yet uncertain. All she knew that moment was a stream of conflicting emotions and thoughts surging within and without. They both held each other in a gaze—his, amused and hers, strong-willed. She stopped, praying to Him of Many Faces that he fails to notice her feelings of unrest.

“Closer. Until a man tells you otherwise.”

Her distant imaginings toyed with her. If she were Arya Stark, she would have come up with a witty yet sour retort, “Closer? How close exactly is closer? How would I know that you don’t have a switchblade hidden inside your smallclothes, waiting for you to use it? And who are you to tell me, ‘until I tell you otherwise’?!” But she was not Arya Stark, not anymore. I am No One. And No One must only think and do, not feel. And he, he is her Faceless Master and therefore, she must obey. She was so immersed with her self-thoughts that she had not anymore paid attention to counting her steps, and so she found herself so close to him, and if not for his hand held out to signal “Enough,” she would have fallen straight into his arms. She backed a couple of steps away.

“Hah…” she exhaled, and felt relieved. She had held her lungs hostage for quite a few seconds before that, not allowing it to breathe air in and out. Or maybe, this was something that cannot be helped. She heard him chuckle softly.

“Lovely, lovely girl,” he whispered as he let his eyes wander to her face, her neck, her breasts, down to her hips and thighs, and back to her face once more. “She has grown. So much in a man’s absence, in fact.”

She held out her chest and tried to stand as tall as she possibly can. “Yes, I have. A-a girl has.”

The Lorathi raised both of his brows in amusement. “Just so. And what has a girl learned while a man was away? Apart from, sweeping and scrubbing the floors, of course. And discounting a girl’s newfound ability of wiping naked bodies of dead men. Do tell.”

She looked at him with furious incredulity and seethed, “So, you have not changed a bit.”

The last time he visited the temple was eleven moons back. She was five and ten. He stayed only for a couple of days, to personally hand over an important message to the Kindly Man. She grew interested for she was sure it was about Westeros, possibly about Bran and Rickon, or even Sansa, or…Jon, but she never got to know what the message was about. She was scrubbing the stone pillars one morning when she heard his voice so close…felt him, even.

“A girl scrubs the pillars too severely. It’s quite a good thing she is not scouring the Warrior’s nose, or it could have cracked at such forceful, cruel hands. The Kindly Man would be disappointed, and as a punishment, he would deny a girl any faceless assignment,” he teased against her ears. She kept on scrubbing, though heavens knew she was shaking all over at his nearness.

“This is a temporary task, he made it clear,” she answered without looking at him. “Valar Dohaeris, or is a girl wrong?”

He laughed softly. “No, most certainly not. A girl must learn how to use her hands anyway in…accomplishing various tasks.”

Enraged and slightly embarrassed, she swiftly turned to him to give him a good hit on the
face. When she did turn however, he was already feet away from her, and she did not even hear him walk away. He left her, still laughing to himself.

He stood in front of her, lifted her face so he could look directly in her eyes. In a quiet voice he asked, “Who are you?”

She rewarded him with the same strong stare and responded, “No One.”

In narrowed eyes, he assessed her. “Liar,” he whispered. “A girl who was a boy, a boy who became a girl, oh, was she good at lying.” He bent and moved his face the closest to hers, such that they were perfectly leveled with each other—eyes, nose, lips. A single, slightly wrong and uncalculated move and his lips would touch hers. The Cat was unsure if she wanted this or…if she wanted this. She would not succumb to his games, though. She had been his instrument of diversion for far too long, even though he was not physically with her during the last months.

A faint whiff—cloves and ginger and petals, and the sea. She could almost taste him. He was…minty. He spoke. “A girl dares to lie to her Faceless Master?”

It was pure torture, how could he demand this from her when it was he who was gone for many, many moons? How could he even tell if she was lying or being truthful?

“A girl is No One, or did a girl’s Faceless Master lose his excellent sense of hearing when he was out at sea these days past?” She answered with all the impetuousness she could gather.

He smirked, then walked back towards his seat to retrieve something from under it.

A pair of boots.

The Lorathi held the pair in front of her and with a hard expression, ordered her to confess. It was the old pair which she gave Brusco, the old pair that belonged to Dareon who was once a brother of the Night’s Watch turned into a paid singer in Braavos. The Cat had lured him to one dark alleyway before she slit his throat. The dead man should not have abandoned his post, should not have walked out on his sworn duty.

“I—A girl had to sentence him to die. He was a deserter of the Wall. The dead man broke a sacred vow. And since a girl passed the sentence, she must swing the sword,” she stopped when she saw the Lorathi’s expression change from curiosity to controlled rage.

“Deserter of the Wall? Sacred vow? Sentence him to die?” He repeated the girl's words through clenched teeth. “These are words of a Westerosi. Put together, these are words of a Northerner, of a Stark. What trickery is this, that a girl would tell a man and Him of Many Faces that she is No One? Such perjury, such shameless deceit!” With those last words, he violently threw the boots behind him, and they hit the wall so hard the Cat was almost sure the soles got separated from the shoes themselves.

“What would you have me do?” She screamed back at him. “He deserved to die!”

“By Arya Stark’s standards, he does,” he mildly countered. For a second there, the girl thought she detected a hint of fear, worry. “But we give men the gift when the price is paid, according to the standards of Him of Many Faces. We bestow men with death, but we do not presume to judge them.” His expression softened when he saw her misty eyes, and those angry tears threatening to fall. “When is my girl going to learn?”
Out of unadulterated guilt and resentment towards him and herself, she fell to her knees and bowed her head. The Cat would not have him see her on the verge of losing herself. *Tears are a weakness*. She prepared herself, her senses, her physicality, to what might be the most painful beating she would receive since Weese’s at Harrenhal. The Kindly Man made sure she gets a strike whenever she does anything at all that fails to coincide with the creed of the faceless. But this…*Jaqen* made it clear. What she did was beyond faithless and subversive.

How could she fail him after everything he had done for her, after his own belief in her capacity to realize who she could be? How could she not surrender to self-denial?

“F-Forgive me, Master,” she pleaded in a hushed tone as she shut her eyes as tight as she could, as if in so doing, she could numb herself from the pain that is threatening to sear her flesh any moment now. This is not Westeros anymore where she could stab any person who dares annoy her in the slightest sense with Needle or a knife. She is now an apprentice to the House of Black and White, and if she would not care to learn their discipline, she could never hope to further her skills in giving the gift of death to those who deserved it. She thought of Arya Stark’s kill list but willed herself to quit immediately. Those names should mean nothing to her for she is not and must not be Arya Stark.

Instead, she felt him gently lifting her to stand. She stood up cautiously and felt his thumb caressing her right cheek. When she opened her eyes, she met his own and his own was full of… fondness. He smiled and said, “A man would swim in his own blood before he gives a girl even half of a single beating.”

She smiled back, relieved, and placed her hand atop his that was against her cheek. She had asked herself countless of times if there was anything she could do that was grave enough for him to not grant her forgiveness. So far, there was none, and she was not one to test the limits of his patience which seemed to really stretch itself out for her sake. “I am so glad you have returned, Jaqen,” the girl said.

“Yes, lovely girl,” he murmured in response. “A man is, too.”
The Marionette

“Mother, why are there dragons in the world?

They are creatures of magic, my dear child. No one knows why they live with us.

Are they evil, are they good?

No answer is certain. Men use them for evil, men use them for good.

But for those who rule us, Mother?

Hush, dear child, we must not speak against them who feed us.

Is it true? That those who rule us are immortal, Mother?

No child. Anyone can be killed.”

Chronicles of Bondage, Second Chapter

Supper has ended and the acolytes had started departing from the common hall one by one. In ordinary evenings, most would proceed to their respective chambers and take rest, while a select few would visit the small library and further their knowledge about the Creed and the Order’s methods. Some might have tasks that would require them for the time being to leave the temple and return late in the night, or after a whole day, to three.

The Lorathi had spoken to his apprentice and instructed her to prepare for combat lessons very early on the morrow, after which they would visit the Temple of the Moonsingers. The girl probably had a lot of questions plaguing her that moment, but chose not to ask. *Or perhaps, she would choose to barrage a man with questions tomorrow, this one is certain,* he thought.

The gathering of the masters had just commenced when the Lorathi took his seat opposite the ‘Kindly Man’. He surveyed the entire room, which was relatively well-lit than most, while occasionally smiling or nodding at his fellow masters. They were all seated behind a round table made of old yet sturdy weirwood, the center of which contained carvings of their title in Braavosi: “*Enferux Andrei autem Mystiki Shivitatum*” which in the Common Tongue reads “Faceless Men of the Secret City.”

He saw the same, old faces saved for one whose owner sat beside him; and she was the woman his lovely girl had been calling the Waif. The woman has been with the temple ever since she was young, and has proven to be very exceptional with potions and poisons. Unbeknownst to many, he and the woman were actually in good terms, and quite close to each other.

“…and are asking for the assistance of the House in matters of proper burial to three Braavosi commoners at the outskirts of the Sheelba Square,” the Lorathi heard the Kindly Man say.

“Burial duties. How lavishly magnificent,” the master with the comely face commented. Some masters laughed at his attempt at a jape, except for the Lorathi, the Kindly Man, and the master with a stern face.
“Worries are not for the likes of us, brother,” the Lorathi said in response to the comely master’s jest. “Burial duties are for acolytes. Unless you desire to go out of your way for Him of Many Faces and attend to the crypts yourself.”

More laughter. The comely master was not amused. He regarded the Lorathi with an air of arrogance and gave him a measured retort. “No complaint there, brother, but on the condition that you generously allow your apprentice to attend to those crypts with me.”

Before the Lorathi could respond, the Waif had diverted the subject to more pressing matters. “Speaking of the Westerosi apprentice, I believe her name day is but a moon away. The girl will be six and ten, and as was discussed in previous gatherings, she must be introduced to the Songs and its prophecies.”

“Precisely,” the Kindly Man answered, suddenly occupied. “The girl has shown a most sterling knowledge of the Creed and Methods, but application is still beyond her reach. Our brother has arrived from the Citadel of the West, and concluded the task exceptionally--much reverence to Him of Many Faces. Could you walk us through your plans?”

“A man has decided that after combat lessons tomorrow, a girl will head straight with him to the Moonsingers,” he answered.

“Too early for that,” the comely master commented.

The Lorathi was about to throw a flaring comeback, but the Waif placed a heavy hand on his arm, signaling that he must calm down and view the commentaries in objective light.

“I’m afraid that I would have to agree, brother,” a wide master said in a shrill voice that could be mistaken for that of a woman’s. “Moonsingers have an entirely different faith system. How prepared could you say is your apprentice?”

The Lorathi smirked at the question, but his eyes never left those of the comely man’s who seemed to be most pleased with their staring game. “A man’s apprentice will never be prepared for such a task that would practically require self-sacrifice. Who would be?” he directed his gaze to the Kindly Man. “But as we say, time is never a friend. If we do not act in haste, they who are in West of Westeros will—”

“Yes, brother, we know what catastrophe is,” were the sardonic words of the comely master, which the Lorathi chose to ignore.

The Kindly Man shot the comely master a warning look before succumbing to seconds of contemplative state. The Hall of Masters grew silent, awaiting the Kindly Man’s judgment on the matter. “The girl, though gifted in texts and combat, has not fully mastered self-denial yet. Heavens, she still utters the names of people Arya Stark wants dead—like a litany before sleep. Without self-denial, she would never rediscover her identity. Loss of self must happen prior to the repossession of selfhood. We need the girl to be Faceless and a Stark.”

“Or else, we could never gain the support of Westeros,” the master with a stern face added.

“Just so,” the Waif responded in thoughtfulness. “I wonder what it is that is holding the girl back from disowning herself. She has to, if she wants to be skilled at changing faces.”

The Lorathi was biting his thumb and shaking his head once more. This he does when reflecting, when thinking about his lovely girl, or both. He wanted to storm out of the Hall of Masters and leave them with their religious and philosophical nonsense. Here they were—the masters—
mapping out his lovely girl’s life as if she was some kind of marionette, then deciding if she was a sheep to be kept for the time being or a sheep ready for slaughter. Was he the only one who actually cared about what would become of her? Or perchance, was he the only one who actually concerns himself about her too much?

The Waif touched his arm once more to rouse him from his many ponderings. She inclined her head to the comely one who was now making the most preposterous suggestion to the masters.

“…she met my brother in Westeros, and we could all agree that he is her link to her own selfhood as a Stark. To train her to become No One, she must be under the tutelage of one who was never with her in the West,” the comely master suggested in all pomposity.

The Lorathi scoffed loud enough for everyone to hear. “And a man supposes you are recommending yourself?”

“Ah, brother,” he answered. “Why, coming from you! I have to say, regarding me as worthy enough to be the Electi’s Faceless Master is truly…touching.”

“If you had spent even the littlest amount of your precious time perusing the Creed, you would have certainly learned by now that the Faceless who discovered her, through Him of Many Faces, becomes her Faceless Master,” The Lorathi quickly retorted, looking at his brother with disbelief. “Our Braavosi brother died protecting her, and so a man took his place. Or are all these foreign-sounding to you?”

The comely master merely smiled and shrugged his shoulders in an attempt at nonchalance. “Not at all brother. I am also aware, as the creed mentions, that ordaining a new Faceless Master for a certain apprentice is necessary should the current one fail in his duties.”

“Enough!” the Kindly Man boomed. The Elder never loses temper in gatherings, but the two masters have gone too far, and time is of the essence. He glared at the comely master, then his eyes bore on the Lorathi. Regaining his composure, he calmly advised them, “Please, do tell if you both want to be dismissed from this gathering. Do tell if you want to be dismissed from the temple altogether.”

“Forgive us, Elder.”

The Kindly Man counted a good five seconds before nodding his acceptance. With a sharp intake of breath, he continued. “What news of Volantis?”

To which the stern-faced master answered, “We are more fortunate in obtaining the support of an army of the dead than of the masters of Volantis.”

“Slavemasters,” the wide one corrected him.

The Lorathi heard each and every suggestion, argumentation, negation. But since he was not wholeheartedly listening, he never understood the rest of what had transpired in that gathering. All of his logic, his intuition, his reason—hells, all of him—had forsaken the ‘now’ and had wandered onto ‘would be’. There were so many things to explain to his lovely girl, so many things to teach her, so many things to…tell her. For the first time, he did not know how to begin, and how to proceed once he had realized how to begin. He was consumed by an ugly interfusion of emotions directed towards her—concern for her learning, devotedness towards her safety, filial attachment, a certain fondness he could not quite comprehend and…yearning.

And...a string of sensations too terrifying to explore.
He thought of her, and he prayed for her protection.

*May she be sheltered from harm. Give her peace, give her contentment, give her bliss.*
A Girl is Two Things

"A man has five senses.

A Faceless man has six.

Sight, Hearing, Smell, Taste, Touch,

And the capacity to perceive what lies beyond.

The Electi has eight."

“Concerning the Use of Sense Faculties”, Methods of the Faceless Men

Blood, and flesh.

Rustling of leaves, soft sound of unsure footing, damp soil.

Have not eaten in days... Blood and flesh... I need to kill.

Run, run, RUN! Leap and catch through your strong paws... tear! Fill your rumbling insides with your kill.

Have not eaten in days... So weak.

She woke up with a start. As her eyes started to adjust to the trail of morning sun coming from her chamber’s reasonably-sized window, her thoughts tried to decipher the essence of her very bizarre dreams as of late. The Cat felt an inexplicable connection with the body containing her spirit in the dream, allowing her to spring long distances to the point of near-exhaustion, enabling her to communicate with creatures she was entirely sure were not human, even strangely letting her...feed on a prey, an act which was almost too satisfying in her state of reverie and most troubling in her state of awareness, such as now. The last time she had a dream such as this was when she was still in Harrenhal, right before being roused by a man of red and white hair, offering her three kills. “Friends may talk in secret, yes?” He had said. No, there was surely another, with the Hound. It was a drowned body of a woman which she had dragged from the river by the Forks--a naked corpse. She had woken up in hysterics.

The Cat lazily swung her feet to the cold, stone floor and suddenly remembered that she was supposed to see her Faceless Master for combat lessons. Her belly growled in hunger.

Must I eat first? No, I must dress up, eat quickly, proceed to combat rehearsal, and do some temple-hopping with my master...her stream of thoughts went.

Master. How strange-sounding the word was to her, she realized, as she ran from the acolyte’s hall and headed straight to the kitchen to collect some leftovers. The breaking of fast most likely ended half an hour ago, and for purposes of inculcating discipline and value for time, the temple upholds a “Be prompt or starve” policy intended for all masters, acolytes, and apprentices. No soul seemed to know her increasing habit of sneaking in the kitchen for scraps, except for the temple’s cook, of course, but the old lady never seemed to mind. Usually, she is joined in her scrap-searching by a gray tubby chartreux cat which she had named “Ned”. Her Ned cat was not in the
kitchen that time, though.

After having her fill, she skittered her way towards the combat room and found it empty.

What she found instead, arranged in a strictly neat array on the floor, were training weapons, one of each to be exact. There lay a dagger, a set of bow and arrow, one arming sword and a longsword, two Westerosi broadswords of opposing thickness, a cutlass, a Braavosi rapier that looked a lot like Arya Stark’s Needle, a Dothraki arakh, a Qartheen paramerion, and like an odd duck among the flock, a vial of Strangler.

The Cat walked towards the neat row of weapons and knelt to study them more closely, running her fingers along the blades in a careful fashion, until she felt a finger brushing away a lock of hair that covered her right ear. Then, she heard him whisper against it, “Clever girls, when they are late for combat lessons, must go barefoot. A girl must not risk being heard. What if the one waiting for her is an enemy and not a friend?”

She tried to hide the small smile forming on her lips, and swiftly turned her head to the direction whence his voice came. The Cat saw…nothing, except for a single ray coming in from the open window to her right.

“Learn to use all of your senses, will you? Just because you thought a man’s voice came from the right would mean you would oblige your head to turn to the right,” he teased, walking towards her from the far end of the room on her front side, all dressed up in his dark Braavosi tunic. “A man may whisper words to you on your right but be your left. In the same way, he can make it appear as if he would stab you with a rapier straight to your heart, until you feel the sharp, deadly pain starting from your spine all the way to your belly.”

The Cat was breathless. Hells, he’s really good, she thought. “It’s not just the direction,” she stood up, masking away her marvel lest he sees it. “It’s also the distance. Tell me…no, show me how you got from here to there. Teach me how to change places in the blink of an eye, Jaqen.”

She noticed him flinch upon hearing his own name, but he seemed to dismiss it. The Lorathi knelt next to where the weapons were and lightly traced his fingers across the blade of the longsword. He kept on teasing her. “A man will teach you how to do this the next time you catch him in the right direction, yes?”

“I want to learn now,” she demanded. “I might find it useful for future tasks, especially now that the Kindly Man has trusted me to carry out week-long ones.” She knew this was not true, the Elder has been giving her tasks that would allow her to observe, perceive, and at times, spy on others. “You’re my Faceless Master and it is imperative that you teach me these skills.”

“Choose a weapon, insistent girl,” he ignored her. “Choose a weapon that you think would strike a moving target. Which weapon do you believe could subdue a man considering the fact that he shifts from one place to another in a finger’s snap, and explain why.” He stood up and gave her that challenging stare, a small grin playing across his features.

The Cat drew in a handful of breath and rolled her eyes. “That’s easy. I choose—”

“A man forgot to tell you,” he cut her. “Don’t get it wrong.”

She scoffed. “The dagger, of course.”

The Lorathi appeared impressed but quickly hid his reaction. He paced across the room and gestured for her to continue.
It was the Cat’s turn to reward him with a triumphant stare. “I cannot use arrows, they are meant for long distances. I cannot use the swords and sabers either, they are primarily for short-distance combat, and I would hate to run after you across the room with a rapier or a paramerion in my hand—too inconvenient and you might beat me to the chase. The Strangler, well, unless we were sleeping on the same bed, I would not be able to pour drops into your night goblet, would I?” The words were out before she realized what they meant. She felt her cheeks burn, and for a second there, she could not look at him. *What had I been thinking?*

His soft chuckle indicated that he heard her and he somehow…understood what she meant. Could he really? Even she could not recognize the intent of her own words!

“Fair enough reasons,” he purred, inching closer to her. He towered over her, so she tiptoed a bit to make herself appear taller. “But a girl has not told a man why the dagger is best to use.”

She lifted her face to look at him. “I-I could stab or slit critical parts of you if you’re near,” she stammered, “or throw it and strike you if you’re far.”

“Show a man,” the Lorathi said, handing her two daggers by the hilt. The Cat wondered if he had pulled those out of his sleeves for he was surely not carrying them a mere second ago. “Strike the target.”

She tilted her head in confusion. “You mean you?”

“Silly girl,” he beamed. “A man meant those.” He pointed at three hay-filled dummies of men hanging on the wall twenty-five feet away from them. “A man will give you both daggers if you strike at least one target hard, fast, and with precision.” The Lorathi removed the sheaths and revealed two lightning-shaped Valyrian blades. These blades seemed to change colors when light strikes them a certain way, as if the blades were prism playing with phosphorescence. Each hilt was ornamented with three types of stones arranged in a column—obsidian, jade, garnet.

“Oh, Jaqen!” The girl screamed and jumped in delight. She stroke one blade gently with her forefinger. “They’re precious! I want them, please…”

The Lorathi was bewildered by the girl’s reaction. *These, for her, are beautiful things.* A part of him marveled at this girl’s unconventionality, at her eccentricities. Not petals of roses, not bottled fragrances—daggers, swords, poisons—these are the things that fascinate her.

“A girl must earn them,” he said. The Lorathi picked up three daggers from a small weapons coffer then placed the two Valyrian blades inside it. The daggers were in between the fingers of his right hand as he walked back towards the girl. “Go to the back and move the targets wherever you like, but make sure they are still pinned on the wall. This should not be difficult, considering that the wall is very wide, you see,” he ordered her, then with a wink added. “A man will not look.”

The Cat scoffed at her Lorathi master and marched to the back. *I could move these wherever I want.* A flood of mischievous thoughts rushed through her mind as she glanced at the Lorathi whose back was facing her. She began unpinning the targets while watching her master closely to be assured that he would not cheat and look back. The Cat climbed up and placed one target on the farthest corner of the wall that it almost touched the combat room’s ceiling.

“Can a girl get any slower with that?” The Lorathi japed.

She rolled her eyes at his words. “Can a man please practice patience and wait without complaining?”
As quietly as possible, she placed the second behind a curtain concealing the door that led to the armory. This was pure deception, she knew, but the impishness in her thought that it should not matter where the target was if he really is that good. She let the third sit on the floor, its head tilted to one side in a mocking stance, as if challenging whoever it is that would throw a knife at it. The Cat surveyed her attempt at a masterpiece and giggled. She walked to the safer side of the combat room, glancing at her master whose back was still on her. “The targets are ready, if you please.”

The Lorathi shook his head. “A girl cheats.”

Before the Cat could react, the Lorathi had quickly turned and gracefully released two daggers from his fingers, hitting two of the targets on the chest in a manner swifter than wind itself. The first target on the far corner was pinned even more against the wall, while the one with the tilted head dropped sideways to the floor. The Cat could do nothing but look at the dummies, then at the Lorathi—with eyes seemingly asking him ‘How in the world?’ The Lorathi walked towards the girl, touching the last dagger’s tip with his forefinger.

“A girl is two things,” the Lorathi said, flickers of amusement and irritation evident in his countenance. “A liar and a deceiver. She thinks she could win any combat by disregarding rules.”

The Cat was breathless as she beheld the Lorathi with astonishment. “There are no real rules in combat,” she replied. Then with a challenging air, she added, “And you have forgotten one last target.”

With raised brows, the Lorathi smirked at her. “Of course, there is one last target, lovely girl.”

Her master toyed with the dagger’s hilt, transferring it from one finger to the other. All of a sudden, he slightly tilted his body to face the armory’s door and with a quick movement of his right hand, hurled the dagger towards it. The sound of blade hitting fabric then hay then wood was heard as the curtain slightly ruffled at the force.

The Lorathi turned to look at her who now wore an expression of awe mixed with disappointment. He was not pleased at how she had manipulated the situation. “If a girl fails to hit one target, not only does she lose her chance on those two Valyrian blades. She will not be given any faceless assignment for seven full days.”

“Jaqen—” she protested, but he cut her words by holding her shoulders with both of his hands. He turned her so that it was her back this time that was facing the targets. He then walked towards the coffer, retrieved the two Valyrian blades and handed them to her. “Don’t aim. Throw. The target is moving so aiming is, well, an impossibility.”

She nodded at him with utmost enthusiasm, though nervousness was evident on her face. He shook his head in amusement and placed three dummies in various positions across the wall. “Ready,” he signaled, then began counting.

One…

The Cat pictured the possible distance of the targets from her and measured the strength of her throw towards them.

Two…

She then visualized where the daggers must land.

Three.
A quick hurl. She let her left hand freely circle above her head—tilting her body sideways, using her peripherals, and releasing the first dagger. Then, her body made a full tilt to face her target, as her right hand circled above her and her fingers hurled the second one. With two loud thunks, both daggers landed—one on the target’s chest, another, point blank on its head.

Realizing what had happened, the Cat screamed in utter delight and ran to retrieve the daggers that were now hers, while the Lorathi, eyes wide and clearly stupefied, was still trying to put two and two together. He had moved the targets to an entirely different location in that expansive wall.

After recovering, he spoke. “Twelve moons ago, a left-handed girl could not even balance a dagger in her right hand. Now, two daggers in the head and the heart. A man would have to say well done. How did a girl manage this?”

The girl excitedly sheathed her blades and responded, “The Handsome Man taught me some.”

The Lorathi’s expression darkened and with a calculated tone, asked, “The Handsome Man?”

For an unknown reason, the Cat felt as if she had said the wrong thing. Her Faceless Master looked a little displeased and so she elaborated. “Y-you know, the master who uses artifice. The one with the comely face,” she explained then shrugged casually.

The Lorathi scoffed and signaled that they start returning the weapons inside their proper chests. “A girl gives everyone funny names—Kindly Man, The Squinter, Fat Fellow, Stern-Faced Man,” he shut one chest a little too loudly which startled his apprentice. “And now, Handsome Man.”

“Jaqen, I…”

“A man wonders what funny names a girl has made up that she thinks suits him,” he cut her, his expression sarcastic.

The Cat did not have to think hard. For Jaqen?

Friend? Protector? Hero?

Beloved? Sweet Redhead? Her Steamy Lorathi?

She shook her head to get rid of such thoughts and tried to salvage herself from embarrassment. “Jaqen, I’m sorry. I would stop with the names, if that pleases you.”

“It is hardly a man’s business, really,” he replied sourly. “After midday meal, Moonsinger’s Temple. Tomorrow, how to throw daggers without moving your hands,” he rolled his eyes at his lovely girl’s astounded expression. “Yes, and only a man can teach you that.”

“Thank you, Jaqen,” she smiled at him appreciatively. “For the lovely blades.” She knew he would give the daggers to her whether or not she struck the target successfully. It was as if he really knew in his very core what she wanted and how she wanted them. She could not quite tell how he does it, but he always surprises her with what he does. She suddenly felt culpable for his change of mood. She should not have said that name.

“You earned them,” he simply said. “Now, if a girl will excuse a man, he plans to have a most pleasant conversation with another.”
The Cat’s eyebrows furrowed with both curiosity and a sense of feminine alarm. “Another? Who?”

He walked past the girl. “An equally comely woman a lovely girl has named the Waif,” he said, then exited the room with his usual Lorathi sashay.

Her eyes widened with at first, surprise then with disbelief mixed with…

“Aaaaargh!”

The Cat reached for the chest filled with daggers and randomly picked out five. Despite the storm of emotions consuming her that moment, caused no doubt by her damnable Lorathi master, she was able to practice with her dagger throwing quite well: head, chest, groin, left foot, right foot. She hit all target parts.

She did the same with the bow and arrow, and finished with shadow sword fighting minutes later.

Little did the Cat know that her Faceless Master was by the far side of the combat room’s door, observing her reactions with hidden delight.
Faith of Men

“A special place, a sanctuary is bestowed upon the afflicted!

*T’is one which the breath of fire could not reach.

Look no further, for there lies a veiled gulf obscured by mystical wisps of clouds—

There we will find rest, there we will find ourselves once more.”

“Vision of a Slave”, Chronicles of Bondage; Chapter Twenty-three

A man with the face of a *jhat* and a girl with the mask of a priestess were walking along Moonsinger Lane.

“Why must you be the warlord, Jaqen?” The priestess asked. “I could dress up as a *jhat*. The Moonsingers allow the women to dress as men if they have proven themselves worthy to become warlords.”

The *jhat* rolled his eyes. “Most amusing, lovely girl. And what would you have a man do? Dress as a priestess?”

She snorted at the image of her Faceless Master wearing what she was wearing right now. The priestess wore a long, flowing robe of white, with semi-sleeves that cover only the lower part of the arms, extended to the wrists and held by bands of silver. She wore a matching silver belt with a single tassel hanging from the right waist down to the leg, indicating that she was a priestess whose only function is to serve the temple through the singing of songs and reading of holy texts. Two tassels symbolized the higher gift of healing, and three tassels symbolized the highest gift of serving as judge.

The girl dressed as a priestess loved the fabric, it was light to the touch and breezy too, although the skirt, from her knees down to the feet, was too transparent for her taste. She knew that it left little to the imagination when she emerged from her chambers down to the atrium to meet Jaqen. He looked at her in an appraising manner, the way a paying man would look at a virginal consort. *You interpret his stares way too much*, she admonished herself. It was such a relief that when he helped her wear the priestess’ face against her own blood-smeared one, no dark dreams surfaced at all. The memories of the priestess whose face she wore were nothing but a series of temple duties.

In contrast, the man wearing a *jhat’s* face wore a steel gorget around his neck, dark scarlet, leathery brigandine on his torso atop a soft scarlet tunic, thick iron bands to the wrists, and leather breeches and brown boots. The warm Braavosi climate did not seem to bother him. Unlike her who had to cut a part of her facial flesh and draw blood to wear a mask, the Lorathi master merely had to slide his palm across his own visage to change faces. She had asked him countless times before how he does it, and only today did he give her a plausible explanation.

“*A man chooses five faces from the hall for a mission, then commits them to memory. Once done, he could change his face to any one of these whenever the situation demands it,*” he explained.
“You would teach me how, Jaqen, yes?” the girl said excitedly.

He rubbed her chin with his thumb. “Yes, but a girl must become No One, so she could be Anyone.”

The Moonsinger Temple was the largest in the City of Braavos. It was a structure towering all others beside it—a mighty mass of snow-white marble, topped by a huge silvered dome whose milk glass windows show all the phases of the moon. Its crescent-shaped beam is supported by two large marble maidens. Atop the seemingly endless temple steps is a large stone tablet containing the engraved words of the first law of Braavos: “No man, woman, or child in this city will ever be put to slavery.”

The jhat and the priestess walked up the steps and approached the white, massive double-doors. The priestess felt jhat’s hand on her arm, pulling her to him.

“Before we enter the temple, lovely girl, a few reminders,” he began.

She scowled. “Jaqen, we have talked about all these hundreds of times. I already know them! I could recite your own reminders to you, if you wish.”

He regarded her with a stern expression and she relented. “This is no joking thing. A man wants you to observe and listen well. The Priestess will drown you with stories about the temple’s history, and you need to remember every, single detail. Yes, tellings—hope, infinite darkness; and a man wants you to heed them all. Does a girl understand this?”

“Yes, Faceless Master,” she replied in the sweetest manner. Her Faceless Master was not impressed.

“This is the real thing now, lovely girl,” he told her in a hushed tone, and he appeared somewhat distraught.

What have I led her into? The Lorathi thought. Everything must proceed according to plan, subjective instincts must not be allowed any place in the whole matter. Unless she learns the whole story little by little, she would not be able to act according to what her fate would allow. Her fate, as written in the prophecies of both temples.

“I need you to have faith in me,” he told her.

She smiled and held both of his hands in hers. “I always have, Jaqen. Since Harrenhal, up until now. You know this, right?”

The Lorathi smiled back and brought both of her hands to his lips. Since Harrenhal. That precise moment, he wanted to name her, brand her his.

“Harrumph,” the sound of a man clearing his throat broke their train of dialogue. This man was dressed like a jhat too—a real jhat. He was staring with raised eyebrows at the scene he was witnessing. Another jhat was holding a priestess’ hands outside the sacred temple—an act not only frowned upon but forbidden. “Perhaps, the High Priestess would like to speak with the both of you about temple observances. I understand you are…novices to the faith of the Moonsingers,” the man said in a quiet yet severe tone.

The Lorathi wearing a jhat's face dropped the priestess’ hands gently and straightened up. “Yes, I believe the High Priestess would truly want to see us.” The real jhat arched his brow in mild
confusion until the Lorathi tossed him an iron coin. The other man studied the coin closely, and with an expression of recognition, looked at the both of them and said, “By all means. Please brother, sister. Follow me.”

The interior of the temple consisted of large, immaculately white stone pillars, four on each side, and two elevated platforms made of marble in the middle. The lower, wider platform is where the devotees kneel to pay homage to their deities and to carry out other religious rituals. On the upper, relatively smaller platform is a statue of what could be supposed as the temple deity—a majestic faceless figure of ivory and silver standing on top of what seemed to be mountains, holding a crescent moon in its left hand. Only the priestess-healers and priestess-judges were allowed to venture onto the second platform.

They were led further into the temple towards a smaller double threshold. The real jhat opened one door to allow them to enter. The High Priestess was waiting for them, dressed in the same silken white robe, with four tassels dangling from her waist. She was bald, and the top part of her skull was somewhat pointed, as if it was bound when she was but a young child so it would take such shape. She was nevertheless exquisite. The girl wearing a priestess’ face found herself drawn to the High Priestess’ simplistic beauty.

“Valar Morghulis,” she heard her Faceless Master say. The girl imitated her master’s words.

“Valar Dohaeris,” was the High Priestess’ answer. “Please, remove your faces.”

The girl looked at her Faceless Master as if asking for permission, and he gave her a small nod. The man let the jhat’s face melt away from his touch, and aided his apprentice in removing her face-mask.

Upon seeing her true face, the High Priestess shook her head though she was smiling, and her eyes began to water. “Please, sweet child, come to me. Come closer. I want to see you.”

The girl did as she was told.

“White and silver…white and gray,” the Priestess whispered, caressing her snow-colored skin and gazing intently at her irises. “Gray eyes that will soon become green once the gift of seeing is given. Do you love the Moon, child? Do you sing to the Moon? Do you speak to the Moon in the darkest of nights, when it is bright and full?”

The Priestess was speaking in riddles but the girl understood what her last words were. She threw a quick glance at her master, as if deciphering what is it that he wanted her to say. “I am not a wolf, I do not howl during a full moon,” the girl responded. “I do not love the moon, neither do I speak to it nor sing to it.” She wanted her Faceless Master to be pleased, to prove to him that she can indeed be No One. This may well be a test, and this woman wanted her to fail.

“Oh, but you are,” the Priestess softly countered. “You are faceless, you are nameless. Yet you wear that face and carry the name that comes with it. It cannot be helped. It must be this way.”

The girl darted her eyes towards her master and let them stay there, willing him to explain. His arms were folded across his chest and he seemed to be in deep reflection. He heaved a sigh and finally spoke. “Could My High Priestess please honor a girl with her tales of old? A girl came from the other side of the Narrow Sea and is unfamiliar with our great tellings.”

“Oh, but you are,” the Priestess softly countered. “You are faceless, you are nameless. Yet you wear that face and carry the name that comes with it. It cannot be helped. It must be this way.”

The girl darted her eyes towards her master and let them stay there, willing him to explain. His arms were folded across his chest and he seemed to be in deep reflection. He heaved a sigh and finally spoke. “Could My High Priestess please honor a girl with her tales of old? A girl came from the other side of the Narrow Sea and is unfamiliar with our great tellings.”

“Yes,” the High Priestess softly countered. “Of course,” the Priestess mildly nodded as bade the girl to sit on the marbled floor opposite herself. She held both of her hands and let their fingers intertwine. “Close your eyes, child. Perhaps you know this story more than we do.” The girl did as she was told and listened to the soft sound of
“Tell me about Braavos.”

The girl was taken back to the Titan’s Daughter, where the Captain’s son had told her about how the city was built. “It was a labyrinth of illusion, established by slaves that revolted against their Valyrian captors. They took control of the ships meant to transport them to captivity. They say that the Moonsingers prophesied that the slaves will find shelter in a lagoon hidden behind pined hills and seastones. The thick fog covering the lagoon will conceal them from passing dragons commanded by their dragonlords, the tale said.”

“T’is one which the breath of fire could not reach. Look no further, for there lies a veiled gulf obscured by mystical wisps of clouds—There we will find rest,” The Priestess recited in a shaky voice.

“Braavos is now the most powerful of the Free Cities,” she continued, then heard her Faceless Master’s proud voice saying, “…the most powerful Free City in the Known World, without contest—a personal opinion. The title is not Qarth’s unlike what some fanatics would claim.” She kept her eyes shut.

The Priestess’ soft voice spoke to her once more. “You mentioned the Moonsingers.” The girl nodded. “Tell me what you saw when you entered their temple.”

She slowly let out air from her lips. “A deity.”

“What deity?”

“A Faceless deity,” she said, but thought it better to continue. “He—Sh…It was holding a crescent moon, and standing on top of mountains or mountain ranges—”

The Priestess cut her. “The Electi has eight senses. The deity was standing on how many mountains?”

The Electi has eight senses? What does that even mean? And it was not like I counted. The other mountains were hidden from plain sight anyway. Hells, why should the count of mountains matter?!

“How many?” The Priestess stirred her from her thoughts.

“I—I don’t know. I was not paying attention…”

“The Electi has eight senses. The deity was standing on how many mountains?” The woman repeated.

Seven? Eight?

Give her a count from your gut.

“Fourteen. Fourteen mountains.”

She released her hand. “Open your eyes, child.” When the girl did, she found the Priestess smiling at her. The older woman cupped her right cheek. “Fourteen. And when you were younger, do you remember anyone telling you any lore about fourteen mountains?”

She rummaged through her most recent memories. “No. I was never told anything about any
mountain by my Faceless Master or the Elder.”

The Lorathi spoke. “We are not speaking of a girl’s memories. We are speaking of Arya Stark’s. Surely, she of noble birth might have listened to a few or some bedtime tales from the maester or the septa.”

The girl scowled at her master’s teasing, but when she looked at him, his face was nothing but serious and pensive. She thought hard and cursed herself for not paying attention to her lessons back in Winterfell. She pushed beside her sudden thoughts about Ned and Catelyn and Robb and Jon and—

“Fourteen Fires. The string of volcanoes located in Old Valyria,” she suddenly declared, rewarding her master with a quick, triumphant glance. “The Fourteen Fires caused the Doom and killed all dragonlords and their beasts except for the Targaryens.”

“How many times has the Doom happened?” The Priestess pressed on.

“One.” She answered in slight befuddlement. “That was the story.” She turned at her master to confirm. He merely nodded.

“Once in the past, this is the truth,” he said in a measured tone, as he walked to where they sat. “But we are not in the past anymore, are we, lovely girl?”

The girl pondered on this, and her countenance seemed to be that of a thinker and a knower, until she burst out laughing. Her titters were the only sound heard in an otherwise serene religious place. She willed herself to an abrupt stop upon spying that both the Priestess and her Faceless Master were at a standstill, staring at her in disbelief. Her master appeared clearly irritated. “T-the Doom, I mean, Old Valyria is gone! Most of it is at the depths of the Smoking Sea,” she paused, checking if she was right in her musings. “How can there be a second doom?”

“You see, the faiths, such as the Moonsingers, the House of Black and White, The Believers of the Red God and even of your Seven have ways of seeing things before they happen—we call them prophecies,” the Priestess mildly explained, reaching for the girl’s hand to help her up.

“Pardon me, but how do you exactly know if the prophecies work? I meant no offense,” she asked. This time she wondered if this was truly a test her master put her through. A task to sharpen my memory? Or perhaps to check if I was paying close attention to details, if I observed my surroundings well? Or maybe, he was trying to make me admit about lost things concerning Arya Stark.

“A girl must not ask if prophecies work,” her Faceless Master signaled that she faced him. “Because prophecies make things work. The founding of Braavos, the conquering of Slaver’s Bay by the Dragon Queen, even your War of the Five Kings and may the heavens forbid, the Army of the Dead, all of these were born out of prophecies, so do not speak ill of them.”

The girl, clearly chastised, bowed her head to the Lorathi as a sign of concurrence. That did not stop her from clarifying things, though, for Arya Stark asks questions, Arya Stark is radically skeptical about everything, Arya Stark—is a distant memory of a girl who watched her entire family slaughtered by their enemies, and did nothing.

“What if the prophecies are wrong?” She questioned.

“Then, it would be glorious indeed for all of us, would it not?” The Priestess touched her cheek once more. “We pray every waking hour just so the prophecies that speak of cataclysm do not
come to pass. But in a hundred prophecies of doom, there is a prophecy of hope that will triumph over the doom.” The woman kissed her cheek. “And I was fortunate enough to still be alive to see it.”

They spoke of other things, such as how the Moonsingers emerged from the priestesses of the mounted raiders of Jogos Nhai, found far east of the Dothraki Sea. A woman can be a jhat or a warlord but has to dress up like a man, while a man can be a priestess but has to don a woman’s attire. “That was what I told my master. He would look most agreeable in a priestess’ robe!” the apprentice japed, and this was met by a sneer and an eyeroll from the Lorathi.

“And yes, we bind our skulls from birth to our second year so when our coming of age arrives, we will be presented to the rest of the horde in this fashion,” the Priestess confirmed.

“It must have been truly painful.”

“Oh, but of course. Binding one’s skull is similar to forbidding the river take its own course. Unlike flesh and bones however, the river can and will eventually reclaim its turf. The flesh and skull on the other hand, would have to take the shape of that very thing that binds them. And so, here we are, with heads the shape of teardrops,” the Priestess gestured at her face.

“Why do it then?” the girl queried. “Why do something that is harrowing?”

The woman looked at the Lorathi and gave him a soft, dazzled smile. Her master, as if comprehending what the message of that smile is, if any, replied, “Believe me, I know.”

The Priestess spoke. “We descended from the Jogos Nhai—we are not Dothraki, or Meereenese, or YiTiSh. People know us through our zorses and our shaved, teardrop-shaped heads. Identity, sweet child. This is who we are.”

*Identity*, the girl repeated in her thoughts. *What a hollow word.*

When time was over, the Faceless Master and his apprentice thanked the Priestess, wore their faces, and went back to their own temple. Endless questions overwhelmed her after setting foot on the Temple of the Moonsingers. Her master promised her that she would learn things in her visit, but she was almost sure she was more dumbfounded now than ever.

*Second Doom? Prophecy? The Electi?*

“I have to do a lot of reading,” the girl told herself aloud, without her realizing it. They were now gazing at the poison pool in the middle of the temple’s atrium. “It is certainly too much to take in a single day.”

“Yes, a girl must read,” the Lorathi said. He tilted his head to one side and gazed ardently at his apprentice’s face as he traced its contours. She closed her eyes, implored Him of Many Faces to delay time, or order it to cease altogether. “A man promises that a girl will know about these things and more whilst she stays in this House. As a man has mentioned before, we now reach the point of truth, the point of what is real.”

“Uh-huh,” the apprentice murmured, still feeling her master’s light touches upon her nose, her jawline, her lips. *What was he saying again? The truth? What’s real—heavens, I hope he doesn’t stop. Oh, Jaqen...* She felt a warm sensation growing inside her belly, and upon her inner thighs. She clutched at her master’s tunic and pulled him a little closer to her. Then, his fingers slowly moved to trace her snow-colored neck and her collarbone. When her master *did* stop, her eyes flew open in irked surprise.
“Jaqen!” she called through gritted teeth, half-demanding and half-pleading.

He merely smirked at her and walked to the atrium’s exit. “Combat room tomorrow. Be prompt.”
The Death of Dragons lay open on the Waif’s table. She flipped through the pages.

Slowly and carefully, she placed on the table different vials, small dishes, and canisters of various elements: kelp, red myhrr, wormwood, a collection of cured liquids including extracted venom, moondew. She dipped a thin glass rod on one of the liquid vials and placed two drops on the infusion she was working on. The concoction hissed and released a burnt, metallic stench that bathed the whole workchamber.

The Lorathi entered, then backed away, holding his breath in a fit of nausea.

“Most filthy business,” he said, coughing as he sat beside the woman.

“I can hardly complain,” the Waif replied without looking at him. “Unless I follow the procedures in this precious book of yours, we are never going to get anywhere.” She turned back to the writings, mouthed out the words on those leaves almost inaudibly.

“Just so,” he agreed. “A man believes his sister has everything, yes?”

The Waif picked up a small parchment from her coffer and skimmed through it. “Two more things, I need. Ash residue and dark grass. We can get ash from the volcanic remains from the Smoke Sea and dark grass, well…”

“A man has an acquaintance with a female from Asshai, we will certainly obtain your dark grass. She was seen last in Qarth and a man has reason to believe she is still there,” the Lorathi assured her. He attempted to poke a plateful of moondew with his forefinger but the Waif slapped his hand away.

“I need it before the second turn of the moon, brother,” she said, then with a quiet tone, shifted to another subject. “How is your apprentice, if I may ask?”

“Oh, doing beautifully, thanks in large part to a man,” he smirked.

“Very well, tell me more,” the Waif urged.
The Cat gawked at the dagger that lay on the palm of her left hand, in deep meditation she willed it to move and hit the target.

“It’s impossible, Jaqen!” she fell exasperated on the floor. “I followed the steps to the last point but I just could not do it. It’s not for me, perhaps.”

He forcefully pulled his apprentice up and repeated his instructions rather impatiently. “Empty yourself of all thoughts except for your intention of controlling the steel. The steel will follow if it knows its purpose, and the one who holds it would naturally give it such motive. Your thoughts must connect to the steel’s quintessence, not the other way around.”

The apprentice was not intimidated by the edge on her master’s tone. “Quintessence? For sakes, it’s inanimate!”

“Nothing is inanimate,” the Lorathi stated, emphasizing each word in an effort to control himself. “Or did Ned Stark of Winterfell not teach his daughter about the old gods that can be found even in rocks and water?”

The Cat was surprised at the mention of her father’s name, by her own Faceless Master of all people. She looked at the dagger once more. ‘What if there are simply certain things which he knew that he cannot teach me? Hells, he’s just too awesome!’ She turned her eyes to the dagger her master was holding and gasped as it flew and landed solidly on the target, when all the Lorathi did was open his damned hand!

She whimpered in what might have been a combination of frustration and wonderment. He tilted his head to one side as if saying, “See that?”

“If a girl managed to disarm a man in a rapier duel once, surely, she could do this thing,” he pushed.

She shut her eyes and whispered, ‘Calm as still water’. She exhaled sharply and looked at the dagger’s blade. ‘They say that everything has substance,’ she silently spoke to the steel. ‘So that follows that everything has life. And you are not an exception, are you?’

When she opened her eyes, she felt her mind turn into a blank slate, with one thought and one thought only—to make the steel ‘obey’. She directed all the energies she has to influence it. The girl saw a faint glint run across the blade to its tip and with the slightest motion of her finger, she released it.

Whatever the next thing she did was, it most certainly worked for she saw the dagger that she was holding a second ago now piercing the target’s stomach. She quickly turned to her Faceless Master who was grinning, and deliriously jumped up and down in the rhythm of triumphant sounds coming out of her lips.

“I don’t believe it!” She shrieked in delight as she leaped to hug the Lorathi.

He suddenly found himself lifting her, letting her legs wrap around his hips. ‘She smells like the most intoxicating wine in both the Known and Unknown Worlds,’ he thought. ‘My Lady of Stark…’

They stayed in that position seconds even after his apprentice’s euphoria had died down. He
merely supported her bottom and her waist, and he felt her legs wrapping around his lower torso more tightly. He knew his heart was hammering in his chest yet all he could do at that very point was to slide both of his arms around her sides and hold her close. She brushed his flowing red hair with her nose and whispered in his ear: “Jaqen…”, as she twirled his white locks with her finger.

‘Temperance,’ the Lorathi quoted from the Creed. It was foolishness to stop, but they had to.

“What has a girl been eating? She’s quite…weighty,” he japed. “If she wishes to keep doing the same stunts and rolls as in the duel a while ago, she must be careful with what she chews.”

He felt her flinch. And when she slowly stared at him, she appeared wounded.

The Cat swung both feet to the ground and freed herself from her master’s grasp. She promptly retrieved the daggers and walked back to where he stood, trying to keep a straight face. “Let me try that again, master.”

“She did not do well in poisons today,” the Waif reported, after hearing the Lorathi’s account, with the exception of their tangled bodies in the combat room, of course. “Your apprentice usually understands all procedures in a single explication, but today it took me five times to walk her through the process.”

The Lorathi clicked his tongue in concern. It could not have been what he had said earlier, could it? His lovely girl is not the sensitive type. It was but a harmless jape about her weight. A man had to do that. Only the gods know what a man could do to her had that scenario lasted a mere half second more.

“Which mixture was it?” he inquired.

“Essence of Nightshade,” the Waif replied, and the Lorathi had to nod because it was indeed, a simple semi-poison, and very easy to concoct. “What have you been telling the girl about me, brother?”

He narrowed his eyes at the woman and attempted to recall if he had said anything at all to his apprentice about the Waif’s lessons. “A man does not remember any telling that was consequential, why?”

She heaved a sigh and calmly placed down the glass rod and vial she was holding. She turned to her brother and informed him of the situation with a hint of worry. “She has been distant lately, and a little…hostile. To me, particularly. I am not saying that I cannot anymore work with her, but this is getting challenging. She does not ask, she questions. She does not perform, she merely complies. Brother, you are well aware that I am to give answers to the Elder, and time is fast approaching.”

“Yes, yes. A man will definitely confer with his apprentice regarding this matter——”

“It is not just that,” the Waif interjected. “Please do not use me in your efforts to make the poor girl jealous. I would most surely feel dejected if she would grow resentful of me.”

The Lorathi was thoroughly aghast. He shook his head most vehemently and laughed, to what or whom exactly, he wasn’t sure. He struggled to clarify and justify his earlier words and actions. “A girl must break the habit of naming everybody. It certainly does not fit our codes. Tell a
man, do you find it acceptable at all that she calls you ‘the Waif’? A foundling? Her habit of naming people gives them character, and as a result, she tends to attach herself to the faces she names. She transfers such habit to herself."

The woman shifted her attention back to her tools. “Brother, I do not mind being called ‘the Waif’, the same way that you do not mind being called ‘Jaqen’. We are No One.”

“Jaqen is a man’s name.”

The Waif scoffed. “Brother, have you forgotten? Jaqen is dead.”

Why, of course. It was the very statement he had left his lovely girl after handing her the coin and teaching her the words. All his life he had believed that to be true about himself, such that it was not trouble for him at all to introduce himself as ‘Jaqen H’ghar.’ It was nothing but an appellation to match the face he was wearing, to conceal his facelessness, to create an illusion of selfhood and particularity.

The horrendous albeit beautiful thing about it all was this: as long as he has a name, he’s vulnerable to anyone who can pay the price of the gift from Him of Many Faces; but as long as he has a name, he could be someone for that girl—not just one face out of a thousand that she had already seen. “It only takes a name for A Faceless to be able to carry out the mission of giving the gift,” the Kindly Man always said. “Needless to say, it only takes a name for any Faceless to become conquerable.”

“She had started bleeding ten moons ago,” the Waif told him out of the blue.

The Lorathi shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Trying to regain lost composure, he said, “A man does not see how this is his concern.”

The Waif threw him a mocking stare. “A female who had started bleeding is said to be prepared for more intimate affairs. Stop playing the part of an imbecile.”

The Lorathi chuckled nervously, and although he would most passionately deny the fact, he was addled by the effect his sister’s words had on him. More intimate affairs, is it? He ran his fingers through his hair and considered various ways to approach this ‘revelation’. He buried his teeth in his thumb and recited the Creed in his hidden consciousness: Temperance, Serenity, Faithfulness, Honor, Duty, and Selflessness. The ideals suddenly seemed altogether meaningless!

The Waif who was now mixing venom extraction with the mhyrr chanced upon her brother’s flushed face. She shoved him brutally and regarded him with disgust. “Seven hells, brother! I only meant that her present condition will allow others to use her in fullest service to Him of Many Faces. It goes without saying that as her Faceless Master, and most likely than not, a Guardian, your duty to preserve her in all and every aspect has reached greater heights. What are you even thinking? Sweet heavens…” Her expression was that of someone who was about to throw up.

“A-a man was thinking of the same thing,” he lied. “Tell a man though, what must he do when that time comes? The Elder would most definitely assign her tasks that would require her to use…herself, and to what extent, a man could only guess.” He was plagued with an inexplicable sense of disquiet. What really are the boundaries a Faceless Master must not cross in ensuring the safety of his apprentice? If such a disturbing task was indeed necessitated by Him of Many Faces, who was he to say ‘no’?

“True. And I hate to tell you this, but you also have to protect her from yourself,” the Waif continued with indifference.
“Myse—a man’s self?” he inquired, slightly antagonized.

The Waif merely heaved a sigh, as if the whole conversation was boring her to death. Or perhaps it was because the Lorathi was acting like such a hypocrite. “The girl is clearly lusting after you. I don’t get it.”

Jaqen did not know whether to feel pleased that his lovely girl seemed to be harboring certain favorable emotions towards him, or to feel offended that his sister appeared to be questioning his supposed attractiveness. Vanity, Overbearance, these are the things a Faceless Man must rid himself of. Hells, many moons ago, he never had any problems at all with the Creed. He was a devout follower of it—from the very first letter up to the last iota. But now…now.

A thin, male acolyte peeked in the doors of the Waif’s room and in a shaky voice announced. “The Lorathi Master is summoned by the Tyroshi Master in the combat room for the demonstration, if he pleases.” He then promptly walked away as if staying there a second more would be the end of him.

“Please excuse a man sister, he almost forgot he has duties today,” the Lorathi stood up.

“The demonstration is not necessary and you know it,” the Waif replied, now inspecting the infusion through a small spectacle.

“Yes, but how will a man teach the ‘Handsome Master’ a lesson if he would beg off the demonstration? Valar dohaeris,” he finished, then walked to the combat room.

The Lorathi found the comely master in the middle of a small platform that serves as the combat arena. He was speaking in front of the temple’s eighteen acolytes seated in a circle around the platform, the Lorathi’s apprentice included. He noticed how all of them listened intently as the master showed them how to trap a broadsword’s blade using both palms of one’s hands and without drawing blood from those hands. He asked the assistance of an older acolyte for the purpose and the other acolytes mouthed out unintelligible sounds of awe at the demonstration. Arms folded to his chest, the Lorathi leaned sideways against the door and rolled his eyes as the master did a series of broadsword exhibitions used in various fighting scenarios. “When the assailant is behind,” he said wielding the sword in graceful fashion. “When there are assailants on both sides,” more wielding. “And when there are multiple assailants coming from above,” still more wielding. His brother was quite impressive, the Lorathi had to admit, if he was not such a threat to him in the position of Faceless Guardian.

The Lorathi caught his apprentice’s eyes and held them for a few seconds. She regarded him viciously and turned her attention to the comely master.

“Ah, brother!” The comely master preluded. “I almost did not notice you standing by the door.”

“I did not want to ruin the entertainment,” the Lorathi answered.

“Entertainment?” the comely master replied, pretending to be offended. “Oh, but brother, swordfighting is a method. We must not regard it as mere amusement.”

The Lorathi dismissed his brother’s pretense with a wave of a hand. “Just so. But it is also a craft, an artistry—much like dancing,” he said, his gaze directed upon his own apprentice. She still looked at her Faceless Master with the same ferocity. Hells, she must have been truly hurt.

“Eyes on us,” the comely master ignored the Lorathi’s rebuttal. “Observe closely the
strengths and the weaknesses of each attack,” he continued, looking at the Lorathi upon utterance of the word ‘weaknesses’. He chose two broadswords and tested the weight of each.

The expression of every single acolyte in that room mirrored that of suppressed excitement. Everyone anticipated what would happen in the ‘demonstration’ to be done by two of the temple’s most able masters. The Lorathi stylishly picked up a broadsword from the collection and one acolyte clapped four times in eagerness before realizing the childishness of what he did. The Lorathi then proceeded to face the comely master in fighting stance.

“One rule, though,” the comely one said as if he had just remembered it. “We are allowed to show only our swordfighting skills, meaning, no fancy footwork and ‘magical’ shifts from one place to another to dodge an attack.”

The Lorathi smirked. “If you say so.”

The clash of steel was almost deafening. The comely master charged with a series of gyrating attacks using his left then his right but the Lorathi managed to evade these by wielding his broadsword in the opposite directions. Their steels connected, forming a triad of sword tips, but the comely master pushed the Lorathi’s sword with both of his own and ruthlessly lunged to attack him, side by side.

The Cat clenched her skirts tightly and gasped upon seeing her master’s shoulder come in close contact with his opponent’s second steel. The Lorathi rolled over, knelt on one knee, and recovered in time to deflect another attack. With quick, labyrinthine thrusts and well-angled movements, he managed to send the comely master’s left-hand steel flying to the air before catching it. The Lorathi quickly tossed the broadsword to his apprentice, who caught it by the hilt. She looked at the broadsword as if it was some kind of prize and then turned her attention to her master. He merely smirked at her and rolled his eyes.

The comely one was fuming as he launched another strike using his right-hand steel. Both masters wielded their broadswords in twists and turns in order to either defend themselves from an attack or make one. The entire combat room was delirious with acolytes cheering for their favored master and jeering at their less favored one. The Lorathi made a sequence of serpentine thrusts which the comely man countered with equal sophistication.

The shouts of feverish acolytes could almost be heard in the usually tranquil atrium. A series of advances from the comely master was met by strong blocks from the Lorathi. Five minutes…eight minutes…and not one of them gave up on their own weapons. A short ripping sound was heard in the midst of pandemonium—the Lorathi’s sleeve was torn from shoulder to elbow. He only met the comely master’s smirk with a nod, as if the tear did nothing but fuel him up. Ten minutes…then, in a split-second, the comely master’s steel toppled onto the platform, as the Lorathi artfully swung his broadsword and had it land an inch from his opponent’s neck.

“Concede,” the Lorathi whispered.

Frenzied sounds of cheers and applause came from the spectators.

The comely master was still arrogant in defeat. He raised one finger to silence the acolytes. Then, he gently pushed the sword’s blade away from his shoulder and moved his hand to shake off whatever dirt the steel left on his tunic. “Lorathi luck,” he spat, without taking his eyes away from the other master.

The Lorathi smiled sincerely and held out his hand to the comely one. “That was a good fight, brother.”
“Just so,” the other replied, and gave the Lorathi a phony handshake. He inched closer to him and whispered against his ear disdainfully. “I know what you did to my steel, you Valyrian bastard. It suddenly grew heavy in my grasp and it seemed to resist my movements. I am assuming you shamelessly used your enchantments again and cheated your way to victory.”

The Lorathi chuckled softly. “Making the enemy’s steel acquiesce to your purposes is a swordfighting skill, brother.”

The acolytes were dismissed by the comely master with a gesture. “Tomorrow, one to one combat. Choose an opponent. Now, to your duties.”

Seconds later, the chamber was empty of acolytes. The comely master spoke again, while sheathing his broadswords, “Deceit, brother. Do not let it be your weakness.”

The Lorathi looked at his brother and answered, “And do not let grudge be yours.”
“A man might befriend a wolf, or even break a wolf, but no man could truly tame a wolf.
Wolves and women are wed for life.
You take one, that’s marriage.
The wolf is part of you from that day on, and you’re a part of him.”

Haggon

“She that was Chosen can bend creatures to her will.
She therefore becomes one with them, as she is above them.”

Songs of the Faceless; X

The Cat sat on the edge of her bed and flipped through the pages of the Songs absentmindedly. Earlier that day, she had a clear outline of duties and tasks, and when to undertake these. She was supposed to peruse through at least a chapter of the Songs that night, but in the light of recent events, she was thrown in the dark, clueless about how to even begin.

She was almost determined to forgive her Faceless Master’s offensive words during combat lessons. She waited until supper was finished before approaching him. The Cat followed him to the hall that led to the masters’ bedchambers, occasionally glancing at her back to make sure that no soul was following her. She almost leaped when she felt something furry against her left foot, but realized quickly that it was only the gray tubby cat.

“How are you doing, Ned?” she asked the cat out of habit. For her, these questions were nothing but rhetorical. The cat closed its eyes as she cuddled it.

Searching for mice in this vast temple.

She blinked twice at the information that suddenly entered her head. She tried to overlook it and persuaded herself that it really is in any cat’s nature to look for mice; and that she merely filled her mind with the answer she was expecting. She steals in on little mice feet, but a man hears, Jaqen once told her when she sneaked inside the bathchamber at Harrenhal to give him the second name. “Can you hear mice feet too, when they scurry around corners, Ned?” The feline only languidly walked away, one cat tempting the other Cat to follow him, as if he was one maharajah with a crowned head.

Now, where did Jaqen go?

She continued towards the hall and found him, as if by will and trickery of the deities, in the temple’s bathchamber.

The door to the chamber was ajar. She gently removed her sandals and tiptoed slowly, closer to the threshold and saw Jaqen, his back facing her.
His lower body was submerged in the tub’s steamy water. The Lorathi brushed his hair with his fingers—his hair, red with white streaks, was wet and heavy and glistening as droplets of water on its strands toyed with the candlelight. Even his damp skin shimmered in that half-dim, half-lit room, its tan masquerading as gold. His arms and his back were so well-defined the girl wondered if the deities have sculpted them from the marbles of the Great Unknown. Perfectly chiseled statues of kings in the capital will crumble to smithereens, no doubt.

And when he shook his head, his shoulder-length hair sent more crystals of water flying beautifully in all directions.

Almost…statuesque.

The girl stood still, letting her eyes take all of him in. Her fingers clasped the doorframe tightly, and she found herself breathing through her mouth. Her lips have gone dry so she licked them. Her toes started to curl, she felt her stomach flutter in crescendos as her chest pulsed uncontrollably. She bit her lower lip and was about to take a step when—

“Yes?”

Startled, she swiftly turned her head to the voice and came face to face with the Waif.

The Cat was speechless and paralyzed. What was she doing in front of the bath chamber? What was she doing in front of the bath chamber in barefoot?

She prompted herself to think fast. Quick, calm.

Facelessness.

“Yes?”

The Waif tilted her head to one side and narrowed her eyes, apparently unconvinced. She slowly rubbed her forefinger around the rim of the pitcher she was holding. “The Elder needs you.”

The girl nodded her assent. The Waif then entered the bath chamber where Jaqen was and to the Cat’s surprise, the woman closed the door.

What in the world…

The Cat lingered a few seconds more. She heard the Waif’s voice, and Jaqen’s voice… Then, the Lorathi’s rich laughter…

All she remembered right after was how she almost flew from the bath chamber to the atrium where the Kindly Man was.

The Elder asked her if she was not feeling well, she was “as pale as the snows of the North” he said, but the Cat assured him she was fine. He spoke of Dareon the Deserter that she killed, the Faceless Creed, and of how the Faceless Men give the gift of death but do not hold the authority to condemn the receiver of that gift. The girl’s mind was not with her, though.

Arya Stark’s contemplations took over the Cat’s. Imagination is sometimes a cruel thing. Yes, it gives people certain power over their inevitably mortal limitations—it allows persons to fabricate their own realities, and so they discover themselves capable of being anyone, of doing almost anything. On the less merciful side of things however, imaginations can shatter them. The torments brought about by malevolent figments of one’s mind are almost boundless, like immense waves—
and at times, people savor wallowing in their own self-pity.

    No, imagination is always a cruel thing.

    At that precise moment, her thoughts played heartless tricks on her—about Jaqen and the Waif, the Waif and Jaqen, and the two of them in the bath chamber. Two masters, together. She drew in sharp breaths spasmodically, trying to ignore the twisting pain that suddenly grew in her chest. Without her own self noticing, her left hand had already formed a fist, and had rubbed itself against her throbbing chest gently. She threw her head back as her eyes darted towards the atrium’s ceiling, as if beseeching Him of Many Faces to aid her in her struggle to contain herself.

    “You are not well,” the Elder said, apparently concerned. “Drink this milk, ‘Arya’, and go to sleep.”

    She couldn’t sleep.

    A solitary teardrop fell on the page of the book she held. She closed it and placed it under her pillow. More tears streamed down her cheeks and she angrily brushed them away. Arya missed them all—Ned, Cat, Robb and Jon, Bran and Rickon, Hodor, Sansa.

    The snow, the godswood, the laughter in front of the fireplace and the fighting in the dinner table, Horseback, arrows. Nymeria…Even Gendry and Hotpie. Arya missed them all.

    How did I even lose all of them? I must be cursed.

And Jaqen.

    “If the day comes when you must find me again, just give this coin to any man from Braavos and say these words to him, ‘Valar Morghulis’.” She heard his voice echo in the stillness.

    It took Arya Stark a couple of years before she realized how that iron coin could change the course of her life. She already lost almost everyone she had, and was only looking at two choices—despair over her life or move on and plan her revenge. She chose the latter.

    When Jaqen came, she was almost sure that he was sent by the gods to rescue her, although she was too proud to admit to herself that she needed some sort of saving. She owed a great deal to him, to this House. They sheltered her and fed her, and gave her a certain sense of purpose higher than her own. They saw something in her that was worth exploring—whatever that was. They gave her companionship just when she thought she was nothing but a lone wolf after the other wolves in her pack had been taken and slain and skinned.

    Yes, she saved him once. But did he not save her in many more ways? Even after she named him for death, he still gave her that coin. He even offered her the closest thing to a home.

    “A girl will weep, a girl will lose her only friend.”

    When did she even begin relentlessly punishing herself with thoughts of him?

    She remembered how she had asked the gods for wings so she could fly back to Winterfell. Make me a wolf. The weasel soup, the coin, then the words. He had left her in Harrenhal, but Arya Stark was beyond certain that there was a minute yet unconquerable shred of him which he had planted in her.

    Courage.
Jaqen made her brave again.

This bravery she preserved and cultivated within her. Arya Stark carried that fearlessness within her like a second skin, and she was almost sure that Death itself dreaded her very shadow. She had traversed the cruel way to the Twins with Gendry and Hotpie, been with the Brotherhood, endured the Hound’s company, slaughtered men with ruthlessness unheard of a child, with *Valar Morghulis* on her lips; and in the midst of all these, she carried Jaqen with her.

And it may be true; for whenever she takes part with the Hound in a sickening and brutal bloodbath, she would always dedicate the kill to three names: *For Ned, for Catelyn, for Robb*. Then, she would look over her shoulder and hope to find Jaqen there, looking back at her with a small smile of approval.

The fault was hers. She was the one who placed Jaqen in that undeserved pedestal, and then forced herself to climb up on the same pedestal to prove her worth. Worth as a what? As an apprentice? As a friend? As someone who could be more significant to him than all these?

*He’s your Faceless Master. And to him…you are No One.*

More tears. She brushed them away gently this time. She laid on the bed as her lips uttered names she has not spoken of since she came back from the canals.

“*Dunsen, Raff the Sweetling, Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei, Walder Frey. Valar Morghulis.*”

She uttered the names again, and again, and again, hardening her heart as if such an act could provide her comfort. Sleep looked down upon her with mercy and stole her consciousness.

_____________________

**Voices.**

*Follow the sound, quietly now. They must not know they are being hunted.*

*Laughter. I hear jests. And fire crackling in the not so distant woods.*

*Conceal yourself, keep watch only with your eyes that see well in the pitch-blackness.*

*One…two…three of them. And another one.*

*It’s now or never…Kill and eat.*

The Cat dreamt of many things that night.

She found herself in someone else’s anatomy. It was not the body of a man, neither was it a body of a woman. In that form, she had four legs and eyes that can see in the dark, eyes that can see farther than what was normally possible. She could feel her thick coat protecting her from the chilly air. *Winter is coming.* She was in the middle of the shadowy woods with her companions. And her companions were all…direwolves.

The taste of fresh blood and raw human flesh was still in her mouth, even as she tried to wipe the trace with the back of her hand. But one cannot really move limbs whilst in a state of trance. The Cat was aware that she was in full control of her thoughts and her actions. It’s just that…she was not
herself.

She killed and fed on four men.

A woman in red lacquered mask spoke to her in a fleeting whisper.

_Wolf-girl…Chosen…bring the Winter Wolf four fire-beasts. The night will be long._

Then she set eyes upon the great Titan of Braavos. The majestic fortress serving as the free city’s protector was crumbling from its broken sword down to its feet of black granite. A lone ship approaches the entrance but the Titan was silent—not a single roar of warning came out. Colossal sea waves threatened to overwhelm the ship but it kept moving until it reaches the lagoon undetected. The sea began hissing and bubbling, until its perilous waters melted the granite, sending the Titan into an unthinkable monumental collapse.

She heard the screeching cries of dragons. _Take me back to Winterfell_, she told the enormous, magical beasts. One heeded her plea and sailed the skies with her. The girl let her hands touch the beast’s glistening scales even though her eyes could not see the creature itself. In her flight, she saw the Grey Cliffs and Dreadfort, and finally, home. _Here_, she told the beast, but it kept flying—past Bear Island and the Bay of Ice, past Sea Dragon Port…further, further West until Westeros was no more.

_Lyanna…_  

_Lyanna…beloved, come with me._  

_I am promised to someone else. We both are. You know I cannot._  

_Love…you love me, do you not?_  

_I do…most ardently._  

_Then, let’s run._

When the Cat woke up the next morning, she was blind.

_Perhaps this is an illusion, or a test_, she calmed herself as she sat up. _A punishment?_ It was total eclipse, and even after she had rubbed her eyes and blinked for what might have been a hundred times, it was clear as water that her sight was simply lost. Pitch-black, not the slightest hint of a glimmer, and she realized that the perfect darkness impelled the obscurity she felt within herself.

_Can blind eyes weep?_ She asked, swallowing the heaviness she felt rising up in her chest. Until she heard the sweet, sweet sound of his voice—warming her and consoling her.

“Lovely girl…”

She inhaled sharply. As much as she wanted to treat him with silence, she could not.
“Jaqen.”

The Lorathi stood up from where he was sitting and walked slowly towards the bed. He knelt and took both of her hands in his. He caressed them softly, tracing patterns over her snowy skin. Then he leaned closer to her so that his lips could touch her cheeks. The master did not kiss his apprentice, he merely grazed his lips across her face, as if his very presence and his soothing voice were not enough to console her.

“My lovely girl…”

Despite the utterly maddening sensations brought by his lips on her skin, the Blind Girl managed to gently push the Lorathi away. Her hands slowly moved to touch the contours and features of his face, as if discovering them for the first time. In the absence of sight, she used the tips of her fingers to memorize him. His hair was silky to the touch, his eyebrows were thick, his eyelashes were long, his eyelids, heavy. She could not see his eyes but she knew they were brown and shimmery when the sun hits them. His nose was prominent and strong, his lips, soft and full. He was…smiling.

The Blind Girl dropped her hands to her lap. “You find all these entertaining, I suppose?”

The Lorathi chuckled. “Most certainly. Yes.”

The nerve of him. Here she was, struggling to make use of other senses to compensate for the lack of one, and here he is, taking great advantage of the situation. Here she was, tending to her heart’s invisible bruises, and here he is, acting as if he did not do even the closest thing to wounding her.

*How would he even know?*

“Please, do carry on. A man did not object, did he? He has always said that a girl’s hands can be used to accomplish various tasks,” he said in a teasing voice.

She ignored him. “I would love a productive conversation. What is the task assigned to me?”

The Lorathi sighed, then muttered something about her lack of humor. “Cat of the Canals is dead. A girl is now Blind Beth, and she will beg near the Inn of the Green Eel and near Pynto’s and gather information. She lost her sight, so she must learn how to use the other four. She will hear stories and detect lies within these through the changing tones of the voice of whoever might be speaking. She must know which coins are from Lys, or Tyrosh, or Volantis simply by touching them. She must distinguish between the smell of a Braavosi noble and a Pentoshi merchant. She must be able to tell if a small drop of liquid on her tongue is Dornish wine or Myrish ale. How is your Braavosi and High Valyrian?”

“More than excellent,” she replied passively.

“Good.”

Blind Beth stood up and felt the ground under her bare feet. The floorstones were colder than ever. She extended both of her arms forward, moved them left then right, to make sure nothing is in her way. She felt the Lorathi’s strong hand grip her arms. He slightly tilted her body so she could face him.

“What did a girl dream of the night before?”

She straightened up and shrugged her shoulders. “Many things. Same as you. Same as any
other person.”

“Just so,” the Lorathi answered. “But in our dreams, we do not shake violently, nor do we tear bedlinens. We do not howl or snarl.” He uttered the last sentence almost cautiously.

She gasped and ‘looked’ at her master. “I was howling?”

“The whole night, lovely girl,” the Lorathi said, and with a tinge of disappointment added, “And a girl was pleading someone to…take her back to Winterfell.”

The Blind Girl was breathless. My master was in my bedchamber the whole night? She tried to focus on the Lorathi’s concern. What to say? She could not even understand the nature and meaning of her own dreams, how would she expect herself to explain these to someone else?

“That is why they are dreams, Jaqen,” she murmured for lack of a better explication. “They allow you to be able to do anything, be anything.”

The Lorathi pulled her closer to him. Through clenched teeth, he admonished her. “Listen carefully. Dreams are only as plain or as perplexing as the ones who possess them. For some people, the line that exists between dreams and realities is either blurred or nonexistent. A girl must decide if she wants to serve Him of Many Faces or if she would rather play princess-and-castle in the North. Who are you?”

She almost hesitated. When her Faceless Master shook her lightly, the ambiguity vanished and she answered with conviction.

“I am No One.”

The Blind Girl felt her master’s hands cupping her cheeks. “A moon from now, the Council of Masters will decide whether or not a girl could be initiated into the Order. A man is concerned about how truly prepared a girl is.”

“A girl will be ready,” she seethed, forcefully removing his hands from her face. “A girl can wield seven various types of swords, concoct poisons, and erase men from the face of the earth. For sakes, Jaqen!”

The Lorathi heaved a sigh at the girl’s sudden indignation. A man wonders if other apprentices speak to their masters in this way. He ignored the unsettling feeling, demanded. “Tell a man something…anything at all about a girl’s dream that he must know.”

Her mind was so riddled with mystifying thoughts as of late, and she was not sure whether to feel terrified at the uncertainty or spirited and excited at the mystery of it all. But she must trust this man, surely she must trust Jaqen; for if she would not, the whole concept of trust for her would disintegrate.

“I killed four men,” she whispered.

“Valar Morghulis,” he replied, dismissing it. “What more, sweet girl?”

“You don’t understand—I fed on them.”

The Lorathi was alarmed. The Blind Girl heard him blow air from his mouth at her revelation. “Y-you fed on them.” She nodded. “And?”

“A woman…” the girl began. “Masked. She spoke of four fire-beasts—that a winter wolf
needs them. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Had the girl been able to see, she would have spied on her master’s face, reflecting that of unrest. *Masked woman?* The Lorathi repeated to himself. *It couldn’t be possible. She had never seen Arya Stark before, a man is sure.*

The Lorathi committed the account to memory and locked it there, deciding on how to best approach it should another dream of her happen. But no, he knew the girl must not have any more visions concerning any more masked women—although Jaqen H’ghar has an acquaintance from their lot, their ways were a sacrilege to the House of Black and White. The girl’s unconscious perceptions must not be powerlessly exposed to one of their kind at any time and in any situation.

“Never speak to anyone of this dream about the woman,” the Lorathi told her. “Promise me, girl.” She only nodded, her forehead creasing with confusion. “What more?”

“Dragons, Jaqen,” she confessed. “A dragon took me West of Westeros. And the Titan of Braavos—it collapsed in my dream.”
A Lie

“We Braavosi descended from those who fled Valyria and the wroth of its dragonlords. We do not jape of dragons.”

Tycho Nestoris

“They conquered us, and ripped us from our homelands, child.

They stripped us away of our history, our faith.

We were forced to forget who we are and were allowed to remember only one thing:

That we are not men. We are No One.”

Chronicles of Bondage; Chapter Eleven

In the Hall of Masters, four faceless men discussed recent developments concerning the Lorathi’s apprentice.

“We were right all along. Temporarily taking away the girl’s sight indeed enhanced her… gifts of entering the mind of another creature—a direwolf, you say?” the Kindly Man directed his question to the Lorathi who merely nodded. “I have always marveled what these descendants of the first men could do.”

“Fascinating,” said the Handsome Man. “Imagine being able to control the will and deeds of something other than your own self.”

“A man would have to agree, it is as fascinating as it is alarming. The girl has told a man that the direwolf in her dreams slaughtered four men in the woods—and ate their carcasses. It seems to a man that she could not fully subdue the creature’s actions just yet. Otherwise, she would have chosen other animals as prey,” the Lorathi stated, though unsure he was of his own conclusions.

“Her gift is, I suppose, currently in its stage of inception,” the Stern-faced Man added. “The Northern folks of Westeros have a special name for such a gift. I wonder…”

“Warging,” the Handsome Man supplied. “For direwolves, that is. But if she could assume the being of any other creature, then skinchanging might be the more accurate term.”

“Perhaps,” the Kindly Man interjected. “She can be taught to control the animal not just in her dream state, but in her roused state. It is not unheard of. When did you first see her do this, brother?”

The Lorathi sighed. “In Westeros—Harrenhal. A man found her howling in her sleep—”

“In her sleep?” the Handsome Man asked with raised brows. “You mean to say you and the girl slept on the same room in Harrenhal? On the same bed?”

I sought her out that night, the Lorathi thought, his lips forming a thin line. He gave his brother a steely look but before he could reply to any of his questions, the Stern-faced Man spoke.
“You told us something about dragons, brother.”

The Lorathi turned his attention to the other master. “The girl spoke of riding a dragon to Winterfell. Instead, it took her past Westeros.”

“And what did she see there?” the Kindly Man promptly asked. He sat upright, suddenly occupied by the information.

“A man is afraid that is the extent of that particular dream. The girl never got beyond that part.” The Lorathi weighed telling them about the collapse of the Titan, but thought it better not to. One at a time.

Four fire beasts for the Winter Wolf.

No, it was most certainly not a simple slumber-induced dream. The shadows could enter her mind, and the repercussions of this, though unknown, were needless to say perilous. The Lorathi decided to keep the masked woman to himself. They cannot know, not ever.

“Ah…A vision? A sign, maybe?” the Kindly Man mused. “Forty dragonlord families perished during the Doom except for one—Targaryens. As we speak, the Silver Queen is in Mereen plotting to settle in Dragonstone for her invasion.”

The Handsome Man stood and poured them all goblets of wine. “I have spoken with Tycho Nestoris recently. Considering that the Iron Bank still has some sort of deal with the Lannisters, it is difficult to ascertain whether the Silver Queen will be a friend or a foe to Braavos.”

“The Iron Bank always has a way of bringing allies to our side,” the Stern-faced Master offered. “The Targaryen defeated the slavemasters in the Slaver’s Bay. She’s one with the Braavosi cause.”

The Lorathi chuckled at the irony. “That may be true. But then, she will bring the armies and slaves she was able to acquire in Essos to fight for her and serve her in Westeros. She renamed the Slaver’s Bay ‘Dragon Bay’ the same way that she calls ‘slavery’ something else. And she has three dragons, enough to make the whole West kneel before her. Considering her actions, can one truly say that she had freed anybody?”

“Oh, beloved brother, must you be too hard on the Silver Queen?” the Handsome Man retorted. “Who knows, you might be given a task that would you require you to meet her. It is known that Daenerys Targaryen of Old Valyria likes to consort herself with…men of a certain hair color,” he finished, letting his eyes linger on the Lorathi’s white locks before turning his eyes back to his brother’s face.

The Lorathi smirked. “Should that happen, brother, a man will make a motion to the Order that the task be given to you, seeing that you are very much interested in the Silver Queen…and women in general—”

The two masters’ series of antiphons was silenced by the Kindly Man’s fist on the weirwood table. The Stern-faced Man almost choked on his wine.

Stillness cloaked the entire hall.

“Enferux Andrei,” the Elder quietly said, underscoring each word. “Faceless Men.” He eyed each of the two masters with the bitterness of a father in the face of two belligerent sons. “Not one of you seems to understand the current threats faced by this great city. None of you seem to want to adopt some sense of discernment on the unfolding that may happen any time now. All you ever do—
the two of you—are revel in your own dissension and entertain the masters with your sickening farce during gatherings. If you cannot at least be civil with each other, then I suggest you take the face you were born with and leave this temple.”

The two younger masters were clearly chastised. Not one of them spoke a word.

“To your duties,” the Kindly Man dismissed them. “Not you,” he said, referring to the Stern-faced Master. “Concerning Volantis, brother.”

The Lorathi Master and the Handsome Man exited the hall, still eyeing each other with hostility.

“Keep a close eye on the Electi,” the comely one said as they walked to the atrium.

“That is a man’s duty as it is his right,” the Lorathi replied with equal sourness without looking at his brother.

The Handsome Man smirked. “Yes, do your duty and uphold your right.” He tilted his head to the right to glance at the Lorathi. “Especially now that she is growing up so fast.”

Beth has been blind for seven days.

She remembered how she liked being Cat of the Canals. She suddenly missed Brusco, and Brea, and Talea, and the folks buying from her cart of clams, oysters, and prawns every morning. She missed being able to see the hustle and the bustle of locals and visiting ones alike in the Ragman harbor, and looking at the beautiful paramours in the brothels.

As instructed, she spent days begging in the area near the Green Eel and in Pynto’s tavern. Some days were unkind, like that day near Satin Palace where she had to endure rocks thrown at her by some urchins. “Beg somewhere else! This is our turf!” they had shouted. She tried listening to their voices and realized there were four of them. If only I knew what their names are, she thought, then I could definitely put them in Arya Stark’s list. She cast the thought away and convinced herself that Arya Stark was someone else—a girl that was once her but not truly her. She ended up with a cut near her lower lip when a stone hit her there. The next day, she brought the two lightning-shaped daggers with her.

Some nights were merciful, like that night at Pynto’s tavern where she was given half an eel pie, a chunk of cheese, and watered wine. All she had to do was listen to Pynto’s tale of how he boldly seized a spice ship. When she grew tired of listening to tavern owner’s antics, she turned her ears instead to the conversation of some customers in Low Valyrian.

“Yea, they boarded them wildlings from Hardhome and the poor ones did not even know they would be sold as slaves in the Bay,” one drunken patron said. “Lysene pirate ships, I heard. One o’ they ships got hammered by the storm and had to dock here in Braavos. Got caught by the Sealord Antaryon himself, shipping slaves, those unlucky bastards. ”

All these, she told the Kindly Man.

“Tell me child,” the Kindly Man said. “Why do you do what you do, think what you think, and feel what you feel?”

“For Him of Many Faces,” she answered.
It was a lie. She knew she was doing all these for someone, but certainly not for Him of Many Faces. *For Arya Stark, perhaps?* To a certain extent, yes. But truly, for whom?

*Lovely girl...* she could almost hear him whisper in the wind.

One time, she trained with another acolyte using sticks. He had the upper hand at first, simply because she could not see. She felt Ned’s fur brush her ankles. “Help me, Ned,” the Blind Girl pleaded the cat, just to humor herself. “Tell me where he is coming from so I could hit him back.” It was as if the heavens took pity, for she saw the acolyte from a certain angle, hitting her in an almost brutal fashion. She did not know, nor did she care if it was Ned’s eyes she was using. The Blind Girl anticipated the attacks and blocked them. Soon enough, she was the one attacking the acolyte without cease, which scared the poor lad’s wits. Her Faceless Master observed her the whole time.

At night she dreamed.

*Lyanna...*

*Beloved.*

*Did anyone see you? Your father? Your brothers?*

*No, my love.*

*Come with me.*

*Whereto?*

*A place of Joy.*

The Waif was particularly satisfied with the way the Blind Girl was identifying coins and handling poisons—she could still concoct the Long Farewell merely by touching the ingredients and smelling them. She knew how much of an ingredient must be mixed with a certain amount of this or that liquid. After those lessons, they would play the lying game, wherein she would have to separate truths from falsehoods in the Waif’s story by relying on the mere tone of voice, then provide the truthful explanation to the lie. She learned that the Waif as a young girl was offered by her highborn father to Him of Many Faces, and asked for the death of the Waif’s stepmother, who had been poisoning her for years.

That night, they played the game again.

“I already knew about poisons since I was little,” the Waif said. “This was why they took me into the order.”

“A lie,” replied the Blind Girl. “You learned about poisons when you got here.”

“Very good,” said the Waif. “When I wear a face, I take a certain potion so I would not suffer from the nightmares of the face’s former owner.”

“A lie. Everyone suffers from the nightmares, except for solid face changers,” the Blind Girl asserted. “And no potion could prevent the nightmares from coming.”

“Excellent.” The Waif was clearly pleased. “You are getting good with this.”
“Just so,” the woman acknowledged her. “Very well, onto the last…Jaqen H’ghar and I shared some passionate kisses in the bath chamber six nights ago.”

It was as if ten thousand arrows shot Arya Stark in the heart.

She knew she breathed in some air to calm herself, but somehow in her sudden state of anguish, she forgot to expel it. She felt Arya Stark’s fingers clenching Arya Stark’s skirt. She wanted to scream and hurl herself to the Waif so she could scratch the flesh off the woman’s face, her arms, until she could feel bits of the woman’s bloodied skin inside her fingernails. She wanted to pin her to the ground so she could savagely claw the woman’s eyes out of their sockets. Oh, how she wanted to yank the Waif’s hair out of her scalp and flay her living…

But what is the use? If I do all these things, would Jaqen…would he even…turn his attention to a shameless girl who named him for death in the godswood at Harrenhal?

Who are you? He would always ask.

No One. She would always answer.

There was nothing else to do but end the game.

“A lie,” the Blind Girl said in her quietest voice. “Y-you…shared those kisses with him seven nights ago.”

A good five seconds passed. The Waif finally spoke. “You have a very good memory. One thing, there is a difference between what is true, and what you think is true.”

She only cursed the Waif silently.

The Blind Girl was finally allowed to retire to her bedchambers. She walked through the halls slowly, nearly falling and tripping because of pure exhaustion and sorrow and wretchedness. Can the blind weep? She asked herself. She knew the answer, for hot tears streamed uncontrollably down her cheeks. She did not even have the least amount of strength to wipe them anymore.

She entreated Him of Many Faces.

Give me back my sight. So it is not only darkness that I see.

She remembered the last time she shut her eyes and wished for them never to open again. Ilyn Payne had the Ice ready to decapitate Ned Stark, and though she willed herself to look, for it may be that her very sight might prevent the tragedy from happening, she could not bear do it. Was it a blessing that Arya Stark did not see her father’s head get brutally separated from his own body? Maybe it was. The ravens flew overhead—it was the saddest view. But nothing in the whole world could ever be comparable to the profound sorrow of losing a father.

Still limping, the Blind Girl opened the door to her chamber and got inside. Her throat felt utterly painful—but she had to hold back the sound of wailing. Tired…I’m tired of being blind. She locked the door and let her body slowly collapse to the floor. And of everything else…

Right now, I am tired of being brave.

For a moment, she sat with her back against the hardwood door, seeing nothing yet
hearing…something.

Footsteps. Towards her. By instinct, she reached for the lightning-shaped dagger inside her robe pocket.

“No need for that, lovely girl.”
Light in Motion

“The Electi makes use of five senses to perceive plain certainties,
As other men do.

She makes use of the sixth to find hidden realities:
Perception of what lies beyond.

She makes use of the seventh and eighth to discover higher truths:
Foreknowledge and Consciousness of what lies within the thoughts of men.”

“Concerning the Use of Sense Faculties”, Methods of the Faceless Men

The Blind Girl tightened her grip on her dagger’s hilt.

“A girl has issues,” the Lorathi master spoke. “Trust issues. A man understands, because without seeing, how will she know if she’s right or wrong? How can she be certain about anything?” He continued to walk quietly towards her.

She listened carefully to the man’s voice, and she knew it was unmistakably her master’s. For reasons unknown though, the Blind Girl found it painstakingly difficult to trust what that voice was saying. “I need to be sure about who you are. If you are Jaqen, tell me something that only the two of us know.”

The Lorathi’s amusement was apparent when he laughed softly. “Or what? You will throw daggers at a man?”

“Yes,” the Blind Girl seethed, rising from the floor. “A girl will throw the first dagger at a man and cut his throat with the second to make sure he’s dead.”

The sound of his charmed laughter reverberated in the small room. “Very well, lovely girl. I will tell you not one, but three things.”

The next thing the Blind Girl knew was her body being pinned against the hardwood door. Then, she caught the sound of metal against the stone flooring—her daggers, she was sure, lay there uselessly. Sleight of hand, she thought. It was too quick, and quiet, and imperceptible! The Lorathi’s hands held both of her sides and she found herself completely breathless with feelings of fury, helplessness, and something else. She felt him gently blowing breeze on her face, to brush away strands of her hair that clung there. His lips touched her ears. She whimpered and he mildly chuckled in response.

“Three things only the two of us know,” he said almost inaudibly. “Chyswick…Weese…Weasel soup.”

He pressed his body harder against hers. If she does not do anything, she would no doubt lose consciousness. “Let me go,” she spat venomously.

He did not move at all. “A girl likes to play dangerous games. A girl threatens an assassin—
her own Faceless Master no less— with her fancy daggers. She even went so far as to say she would kill him. Did a girl lose her wits to think that a man became faceless by taking empty threats from lovely girls?”

She felt herself being pulled harshly towards the bed. She furiously sat on its edge and tightened her grip on the cushion as she battled against a rushing flood of emotions she could not understand, much less name. She shoved away all torturous thoughts about everything and planned her next course of action. Must she confront him? Ask questions? She heard the Lorathi retrieve something from her small table. He pulled a chair, sat in front of her and held out a cup to her lips. It smelled of nice, warm milk.

“If a girl says her name,” the Lorathi said. “A man will give her eyes back.”

It was almost too easy. She had a lot of names and she was so tired of being sightless—Arry, Lumpyhead, Weasel, Horseface, Nan.

Cat of the Canals, Blind Beth, Wolf Girl...Arya of House Stark.

Instead, she gave him the answer that she knew he would want to hear. “A girl has no name.”

“Just so,” the Lorathi answered and the blind girl thought she heard from his voice a hint of disapproval. He tipped the cup to her lips and made her drink the sweet, warm liquid. She closed her eyes and when they opened, she saw Jaqen holding out an obsidian candle in front of her. It appeared to be ridged and twisted, slender as a sword, its length sparkling despite the fact that there was only a single plain candle lit in the room.

All of a sudden, the obsidian candle lit up.

If one had been blind for seven days, the soft flicker of light from a simple candle would be the most beautiful thing in the world. But this was an obsidian candle—it was pleasantly and magically bright. The girl who was once Arya Stark has heard of them from Old Nan, who when alive, believed ancient magic and higher mysteries still exist in the world, an assumption that was much to Maester Luwin’s chagrin.

“Dragonglass candles, child. They let you see across seas and deserts, beyond mountains and plains—but only if you descended from magic itself. They let you speak with another whose place is endless of miles away from yours.”

All her life she believed these candles to be myth, and now, she only stared in awe as its light transformed the yellow flicker of the plain candle into glittering gold, and her master’s hair into flaming scarlet with ivory streaks. The whole room was bathed with colors and splendor such that they have never seen. In the blink of an eye, its light went out.

Breathless, the girl asked. “W-where did you get that? Is that for the temple? Is it true it has powers? How did you light it?”

The Lorathi laughed, clearly too amazed with what he had just seen. “One at a time, lovely girl. A man obtained this candle from the Citadel in Westeros for the temple, yes. Indeed, it is said to possess some magic. And a man did not light this candle, no,” he studied the obsidian in his hands, then looked at the girl. “You did.”

She blinked. “I lit the…the…”

“The dragonglass candle, yes.”
“How did I light this candle without knowing I can?” She grabbed the candle from the Lorathi’s grasp and let her fingers feel its ridges. “They only light up when dragons exist in the world, and they now do, in Meereen; and they only light up when there is magic involved…”

The Lorathi was smiling. He merely looked at his apprentice and said nothing.

“No…” the girl shook her head and snickered, and oh, was it music to her master’s ears. “I am not a sorceress, Jaqen. I mean, you know me!”

“No, lovely girl, you are not a sorceress,” he said, moving his face closer to hers. She drew in breath at her master’s nearness. “But you are a Stark.”

“Was,” she corrected him. “What does that have to do with lighting dragonglass candles? If I may say, you’re the one who could perform enchantments—I’ve seen them in the combat room. I’ve seen them in Harrenhal.”

_I’ve seen you create spectrum of colors out of water droplets in the bath chamber, through nothing but your red of hair_, a voice inside her flirted. She dismissed the thought as soon as she heard the Waif’s voice replaying through her mind. _Jaqen H’ghar and I shared some passionate kisses in the bath chamber…_

The Lorathi only smiled. “Most faceless masters can do those things; but to warg into a direwolf and possibly other creatures, to be able to hear conversations from afar, and possibly perform a lot more other things in the future, only a lovely girl can do these.” Then, with a whisper he added, “There is magic in your blood.”

_You truly are a fascinating one, are you not, lovely girl?_

“What do you mean I can listen to conversations from afar? Like in another room? I do not eavesdrop! It is forbidden in the temple,” the apprentice said. She closed her eyes and willed the obsidian candle to light once more, but it did not. She examined its ridges once more, and smelled it. It smelled of petals in water.

The Lorathi stood and paced the room. “A man and his brother have observed you at Pynto’s tavern. You reported some things to the Elder which you claimed you have overheard—about some wildlings taken as slaves by Lysene ships, do you remember this?”

“Yes, I do,” the girl answered. The drunken fellow who talked about that was such a loudmouth, anyone could have overheard him. “He was practically announcing the thing to anyone who would listen, as if it was some kind of a newly enacted decree.”

“That drunken fellow was upstairs, sweet girl,” the Lorathi stopped pacing and faced her, arms folded. “In another tavern _away_ from Pynto’s. The master you so boldly named the Handsome Man placed him there and told him to say those things while you,” he shook his head in amazement. “You were downstairs at Pynto’s tavern. You heard about the Lysene ships _specifically_ because your Kindly Man told you to listen to conversations about captured slaves. The Masters thought you might possess this skill so we created conditions for you to demonstrate it. Who would have thought the trial would work and a girl would prove to be… _full of surprises._”

The Lorathi uttered the last three words in an inexplicably seductive undertone, enough for his apprentice to feel a disturbing yet pleasurable shudder. The girl could not believe what she was hearing. How could she even have… _gifts_ she knew nothing about? Being a Stark—in the past that is—does not explain how she could possess the capabilities her master just spoke of. Arya Stark’s father did not seem to have it, neither did her mother. As for her siblings, Arya Stark was better than
most of them in certain things like arrows and swords, well, except for Robb and Jon, but that’s it.

“This is impossible,” she muttered, for she did not know anymore what to say.

Her Faceless Master took her hands and pulled her up from the bed. For seconds, they simply gazed intently at each other, neither one breathing a word. It was the Lorathi who broke the silence.

“Something that is impossible cannot exist simply because its existence is essentially flawed, yet here you are.” The Lorathi pressed his lips gently upon his apprentice’s cheek and let them linger there. Arya Stark closed her eyes and allowed herself to drown in a wave of thrilling sensations, from her chest, down to her belly.

*If I would just move my head a little, and open my mouth…I could kiss him.* She let her fingers run through the silky strands of his flowing, red hair. Cloves, ginger, petals, the summer sea…she marveled at the scent of him. *I love his scent…I love it more than the scent of hay in the North and of snow.* The Lorathi touched her on the small of her back and pulled her closer to him. She was barely clinging on to her sanity. Her hands ran through his sleeves and gripped tightly him there.

“You must be very tired,” she heard him mutter against her hair. “Sleep, and we will talk more tomorrow.”

Her eyes opened wide in surprise. “What? N-no, I am not tired. Jaqen, please…” The once Blind Girl had already forgotten her state of depression mere minutes ago.

“A girl has a lot of questions, and a man will answer them tomorrow, *Mercedene,*” the master said. “We will talk of your new assignment as well.” He headed for the door. “Sleep well, lovely girl. And please, no attacking men in the woods tonight.” With a smirk, the Lorathi left.

The girl who was now Mercedene was left standing in the middle of her dim-lit room, still in want of answers and in want of him.

“I can still recall from recent memory the last dragonglass candle that burned,” the Kindly Man said. He and the Lorathi were sitting in the atrium directly underneath the statue of the Stranger. Jaqen H’ghar had just finished recounting to the Elder the events of last night. “It was a hundred years ago. I never thought I could again witness one lighting up in this very temple. If we further her instruction, we can be assured that her remaining senses will be unlocked.”

The Lorathi was silent. His lovely girl’s training is proving to be more challenging in each passing day, and his apprehensions are becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. Simply put, he was plagued by worries for his own apprentice and for his tasks in the Order and the city. There is this nagging feeling that he could not quite explain.

He knew that the undertaking which the Order had so forthrightly placed upon his apprentice’s shoulders is extremely dangerous, to say the least. It is as dangerous as it is totally valuable. If the visions of the Moonsingers and the prophecies in the Songs were indeed true, then the City of Braavos might truly be staring at its own ruination in the face. This great city was built by slaves that escaped from the chains of the Valyrian Freehold, and for centuries it stood. Even the greatest powers in all of Essos and Westeros could not claim to be greater than Braavos.

*Dragons, Jaqen. A dragon took me West of Westeros.*
No soul on the face of the earth has ventured West of Westeros and lived to tell the tale. The first and the last person to try and discover what lies in there was a Stark, who they called Bran the Shipwright. For his love of the vast ocean, this former King in the North attempted to sail beyond the Sunset Sea and was never heard of again. The Braavosi even dedicated one mummer’s play for such an account—as they always do whenever Westeros faces a series of tragically ridiculous events of its own making. From distant memory, the Lorathi recalled one play titled “The Silly Shipwright.”

*T’is man is a Shipwright, thus t’is man shall sail,

West of Westeros, a place of secrets—conquered it shall be!

Old gods, guide this ship across the tempest, past the waves may it not fail…

Comrades, follow this man and your sorry doom ye shall see!

When he heard his lovely girl speak about the dreams in detail, he felt fear—something he had not felt for a very, very long time. Jaqen H’ghar felt afraid for her.

“Hopefully, we would be able to answer some questions now that we have the glass candle. My lovely gir—a man’s apprentice could no doubt use it since she already showed that she could light it. It is said that a warg can enhance the glass candle’s properties. Certainly, we would be able to see things beyond Westeros through her,” the Lorathi said.

If the Kindly Man noticed anything at all about the Lorathi’s way of referring to the girl, he gave no sign of it. “Fascinating things, glass candles and wargs. No wonder many men are helplessly…drawn to them.”

The Lorathi bit his lower lip. He certainly is slipping in his speech more frequently than before. “Another thing, Elder. The girl mentioned dreaming about the Titan of Braavos collapsing. A man is sure it is nothing, though—”

“When was this?” the Kindly Man quickly turned to the Lorathi, obviously alarmed.

“The same night she warged into the direwolf.”

Self-assured footsteps were suddenly heard in the otherwise peaceful atrium. The Handsome Man wasted no time in announcing the recent news. “Forgive me, brothers. The Sealord passed away just last night.”

The Kindly Man and the Lorathi exchanged glances in shared understanding. “Valar Morghulis. And the selection for the new Sealord?” the Elder asked.

“Knives are coming out as we speak, but a certain Tormo Fregar is said to be favored by the magisters,” the Handsome Man answered.

“That was rather quick,” the Lorathi commented. “Usually the name of the person leading in the selection is not announced until after three days.”

The Handsome Man shrugged. “This man might be more influential than we think.”

“Do find out as much as you can about this Tormo Fregar,” the Elder told the Handsome...
Man, with a flicker of recognition in the old man’s eyes. Then, to the Lorathi, “When are you going back to the Moonsingers with your apprentice?”

“As soon as she finishes her task as Mercedene, Elder. As of the moment, she is with Izembaro at The Gate,” replied the Lorathi.

“Very well. Her six and tenth name day is in fourteen days, as is the Unmasking. How very fortuitous that she was born on the day Braavos was declared a city to the rest of the world. Beautiful, beautiful,” the Kindly Man declared.

That is why she is the Electi, the Lorathi thought. That is why her undertaking will be too great.

In the silence of the temple, he entreated Him of Many Faces.

Shield her from all pain. Keep her safe. Hide her under your powerful cloak.

“Where in the bloody hell is my crown?”

Izembaro, the head of the mummers, was in his usual grumpy state. Seconds ago, he was wearing on his head the fake crown which he would use for his scene as “The Fat King” and now it is nowhere to be found. There was always chaos behind the curtains especially if a well-known envoy from Westeros will watch the play. The girl whose name is Mercedene grew curious about the said envoy. She saw Big Brusco, the fat fellow who will play the role of the boar, painting the sign for tonight’s act: The Bloody Hand by Phario Forel. Her belly was fluttering and she was a little fidgety. I deal with death, and I have stabbed men in the past without a quivering finger. This is nothing but a mummer’s play, she convinced herself. There was Bobono, who will play the Bloody Hand—the ‘demonic dwarf’ with whom she will have a rape scene in the second act. She will be playing the part of the sweet maiden.

Mercedene ran to the privy to settle herself, and was dismayed to realize that she had thrown up. The girl felt a little dizzy and uncomfortable, but told herself that surely, this cannot be that bad. When she saw the fake crown, she quickly grabbed it and tossed it to Izembaro. “Your grace,” she japed.

“Mercedene, come and help me with these laces,” the Lady Stork called to her. “Sweet, sweet girl,” she endeared her as she pulled the laces so the bodice of the gown could shrink. The Lady Stork’s character is that of Queen Cersei, and had the girl been Arya Stark, she would have placed something in the Lady Stork’s wine that would make the woman shut her eyes and never open them again. The Lady Stork is a fine one, Mercedene thought. I like her more than Daena.

“Oh, look! Come Mercy, quickly!”

Daena was peeking through the curtains to check upon the audience. The pit was almost full with people, locals and non-locals alike. “That is the Westerosi envoy,” she heard Daena say. “They have lions for their sigils.”

Mercedene surveyed the pit and she saw a familiar face. All of a sudden, she remembered an orphan boy who was once Arya Stark’s companion, who they called Lommy Greenhands. The familiar face belonged to the man who drove a spear to the boy’s throat when he could no longer walk. She slipped past Daena and headed inconspicuously to the pit. As she walked towards the envoy, she could tell that the man with a familiar face already saw her but did not at all recognize
her, as she was wearing Mercedene’s face.

“Listen, child.

Those dragonlords took for themselves slaves—they served to them as women of pleasure.

It mattered not what the slave’s will is, or that the slave was human.

Those slavers—how they loved the freshly flowered. How they lusted after maidens.

Mother, hide me then.

I woke up this morn with bloodstains on my sheet.”

*Chronicles of Bondage, Chapter Twenty*

Rafford “Raff” the Sweetling cared very little about what his companion was telling him that dragging evening. He wanted very much for the mummer’s play to begin, heavens knew he needed the diversion. A visit to the brothel afterwards would certainly conclude the night most perfectly.

“How long do you think will we stay here?” his companion asked. Rafford merely shrugged his shoulders and yawned. “The Swyft must return with the gold from the Iron Bank, or the Queen will surely have his head.”

A lovely girl approached them from the side and spoke to them in Braavosi. When they gestured to her that they could not understand, much less speak the language, the girl told them, “Izembaro said to make happy them lords,” in the Common Tongue. She was terrible at it.

“Disgusting! You Braavosi sleep with your young girls?” the companion spat at the girl.

“Not so young,” Rafford smirked and stood up to follow her.

She led him to a small room a little far from the stage curtains. Despite the busy sounds in the backstage and by the pit, the girl knew their dalliance cannot be disturbed here. They both sat on the bed made of straw. “So, you are a mummer. What will you play?” Rafford’s eyes were lust itself.

The girl giggled. “You be a mummer, too, m’lord. I teach you lines for the mummer,” she whispered in his ears. She licked them and bit them gently, and Rafford felt the growing bulge in his breeches. “Just give girl Braavosi coin, m’lord.”

“Unlace me,” he ordered her. “You ever had a mammoth in between your legs before, girl?” He teased her. The girl felt Rafford’s hands tracing the line between her breasts. He placed light kisses on her neck. She responded to his kisses and touch by sliding her finger down the inside of his thigh. She heard him groan with pure carnal desire.

Slowly, the girl slipped her hand inside the small sack she carried underneath her skirts. She let her fingers feel her dagger’s hilt. *He is too preoccupied to even notice his own death coming after him.* A quick yet calculated pierce, and Raff the Sweetling will be one with the dust on the ground.

*Who are you?* The girl heard her Faceless Master’s deep, gravelly voice in her muddled head.
She could not fail him again, she realized. Cat of the Canals already killed Dareon the Deserter for Arya Stark. Must Mercedene kill Raff the Sweetling for Arya Stark as well? She swallowed the painful lump that formed in her throat. If she does this thing, when will Jaqen ever acknowledge her value as a faceless man? When will she ever be worth...anything to him?

For Him of Many Faces, I will spare his life, the girl whose name was Mercedene persuaded her own self; but she knew she has perjured herself terribly.

It was heresy, what she said. And if only the Creed and the Methods and the Songs, and all the other holy texts of the Order and the Moonsingers could speak, their old and wise pages would scream of her falsehood.

For truly, it was all for Jaqen.

Mercedene abruptly stood up from the bed and headed for the door. Rafford caught her by the wrist and savagely pulled her toward him.

"Wait a second, did I say we were finished yet?"

In a flash, the girl pulled two daggers from her small sack, aimed one straight blade at the pervert’s neck pulse, and aimed the pointy end of the other at his bulging groin. The man stared with dread at the daggers threatening to slice through his precious physical parts.

"It would only take me two seconds to put you in your place. If you do not wish to be fed to the eels, then I suggest you keep your trap shut and delight yourself in the show," Mercedene said in flawless Common Tongue, between clenched teeth. "Now, if you will excuse me, I do not plan to miss my rape scene."

Convinced that she had made herself crystal clear, she replaced the daggers in her skirt pockets and stormed out of the room.

Raff the Sweetling relaxed upon the girl’s exit, his curious yet amused eyes still directed at the door. A reckless yet dauntless act, he thought, I wonder how my brother handles her. Rafford let his right palm move smoothly along his face to reveal that of the Handsome Man’s, whose lips now played the hint of a smile.

The comely master who wore Rafford’s face earlier now donned the face of a Braavosi second captain. He crossed the pit with that debonair walk of his, which gained him some coquettish glances and whispers from the women among the audience. A certain lady speaking in muffled tones with her male companion stopped midsentence upon seeing him, and giggled flirtatiously when the disguised master winked at her, much to her male companion’s dismay.

The mummer’s play had just started when he sat beside another master who wore the face of a Braavosi noble. “Must you really choose a face from the hall that you know can attract the ladies’ attention?” the Lorathi asked his brother in Ghiscari Valyrian, without giving him so much as a glance. The Lorathi’s eyes were focused on the raised platform where the Fat King was, currently in the middle of his lines, “The seven-faced god has cheated me!”

“I choose any face from the hall, brother, you know that,” the Handsome Man replied nonchalantly. “It is not my fault if the features of the dead face I choose are enhanced by my wearing
“Serving as feast for the eels, no doubt,” the Lorathi answered. Slitting his throat was easier than reading a page of the Faceless Creed. The Fat King was weeping comically, “My sons’ crowns are gold, and mine is black…my daughters’ crown is gold, and mine is black. What a lamentable day! The curse is on me!” Laughter and cheers filled the pit as the Boar appeared from behind the curtains, doing a series of farcical movements. The Lorathi quickly glanced sideways at his brother. “How did it go?”

A small smile played at the corners of the Handsome Man’s lips. “Oh, you know. She showed a tremendous amount of restraint, considering who the Sweetling was. A touch here, and a few kisses there… but your apprentice passed—”

“Touch? Kisses?” the Lorathi was thunderstruck. His mentalities were no doubt rattled to the core as his eyes grew wide with incredulity. His brother merely regarded him with raised brows, seemingly agog at the Lorathi’s sudden near-outburst.

“Yes, touch and kisses,” the Handsome Man confirmed. “Is there a problem? You know that this Sweetling fellow, sick bastard that he was, preferred consorting himself with younger girls—not that your apprentice is that young. Naturally, she had to use that knowledge about the Sweetling’s preferences to her advantage, and I had to play the part.” He turned his attention to the mummers but his Lorathi brother still stared at him with narrow eyes, his jaw hardening with repressed fury.

“Where?” he demanded in a hushed yet foreboding tone.

The Handsome Man heaved a sigh and casually replied, “In one of the backrooms.”

“Where?” the Lorathi repeated, his tone more vicious, the single word resounding carefully controlled rage.

The Handsome Man looked at his Lorathi brother with bafflement and mocked pity. Oh, brother, what has happened to your facelessness? The master spoke in a manner that hoped to calm the Lorathi down. “Where? I touched her between the breasts, and kissed her on the neck. It was nothing. Are you telling me you mind? Because, let me tell you that this was an assignment from the Elder himself. Without this task, we would not have known that she now has full control of Arya Stark’s unstable emotions. She could have attacked Raff the Sweetling, a man from Arya Stark’s list, but she did not. Facelessness. Would you rather that we disobeyed the Elder’s directives?”

The Lorathi saw the sense in his brother’s pronouncements, albeit, he could not force his mind to reconcile with the rationality of the words he had just heard. His lovely girl, touched and kissed by another man? Even he was careful not to cross those boundaries—well, not that he had any intentions of doing so, or as he would like to convince himself.

A voice in the deep recesses of his mind quipped. So, you believe you own the girl now, do you? You believe that you now have the liberty and authority to decide which tasks she must and must not take for Him of Many Faces?

The Lorathi combed his fake, jet-black hair with his fingers, in an effort to quiet his inner self. He placed both elbows on his lap and let his chin rest on both of his clenched fists. He wanted to laugh at himself, but mostly, he wanted both of his fists to land on his brother’s handsome face. As if it could not get any worse, fate played a jest on him as his lovely girl emerged from the backstage for her rape scene.
The Bloody Hand forcefully lifted his lovely girl’s skirt and ran his hands through the length of her legs. The crowd’s interest was obviously heightened by the act, and cheers and jeers reverberated throughout the whole pit. “You demonic dwarf!” was one man’s scream, which was followed by a series of others.

“Lannister filth!”

“Tear her clothes and fuck her bloody!”

“Cockless bastard, how will you even do it without balls?”

Jaqen H’ghar could hardly keep his gaze fixed at the scene. Surely, he was not that dimwitted to think that this Bobono actor, though he fancies her, would actually do abominable things to his lovely girl. And Izembaro is an asset of the Faceless Order, he knew that this whole mummer’s farce was nothing but a part of the wolf girl’s training. ‘Temperance,’ he told himself. But then, he heard his lovely girl’s sweet-sounding, yet agony-filled voice of plea in that sea of obnoxious viewers hurling insults and mockery at both the Bloody Hand and the Maiden.

“Don’t, oh don’t…I beg of you, don’t touch me…”

Jaqen H’ghar knew he was being driven to the edge. His jaw hardened even more.

“Please, m’lord. I am still a maiden…”

The Maiden was kneeling low on the platform, her face almost touching the solid wood. All of a sudden, the crowd burst into a roaring cheer as the Bloody Hand ripped the Maiden’s robe, exposing her bare back. “And tonight, my Sweet Maiden shall make a man of me!” the dwarf shouted triumphantly.

Unable to watch any longer, Jaqen H’ghar rose from his seat and left the pit, deaf to the sounds of his brother’s voice calling him back.

She felt mentally despoiled during that rape, but she brushed the nagging thought away. *I have learned five things, though one I will keep to myself. The rape was good.* The girl had heard from two Westerosi men that the gates of Castle Black had been opened to wildlings. She was sure of it—that these tellings were of no consequence to the Order, that she may withhold them for the time being, and that she must let Arya Stark decide on how to approach such information. *Oh, but you are nameless,* she admonished herself.

Mercedene traversed the quietness of the temple’s atrium and felt softness against the ankles of her tired feet. She smiled then looked down. “How are you, Ned?”

Without so much as a feeble sound, the cat walked away.

But then he stopped, and turned his head back to her as if demanding that he be pursued.

Mercedene’s eyes narrowed at the creature’s curious animation; however as if she was drawn into the unyielding effects of some hypnosis, her exhaustion forgotten, she could do nothing more but follow him.

The passageway was dark, but her eyes were quick to adjust to the hint of candlelight in the now distant atrium. The girl took eighteen steps and saw split passageways of five—like fingers of a
Ned was leading her to the inner sanctum.

*I shouldn’t be here.* Ned—the old Ned that is, the one they have betrayed, used to give the wolf girl a good scolding when he would find out through the Septa that she had been traipsing around the serpentine passages of the Landing’s keep. One can never trust a soul in there.

She lifted her skirts and began walking away, but paused midway as her peripheral vision caught sight of her Kindly Man at the end of one of the tunnels—the fourth. The passage was barred by an *iron* door. Mercedene leaned her back against the crooked stone wall for the old man held a lantern. *And a book. How could he read in this eclipse?* She had to remove herself from the path of light and conceal her shadow. Hanging the lantern upon a hook, he produced from his robe pocket an ornate key and turned the lock thrice. He entered, closed the door, then secured the latch.

The girl took slow yet sure footsteps towards the Iron Door. And if her Faceless Master be correct, she did not have to press her ear against the door to ascertain what occurs on the other side. It was made of iron anyway—and even with the aid of glass to hear, plain auditories would be futile.

Mercedene closed her eyes and let her hearing seep through the metal door.

Voices. Two of them.

*Lovely, lovely piece of work. Dragonkin, being History of House Targaryen from Exile to Apotheosis—the Life and Death of Dragons. Your assassin was no doubt very efficient.*

*The Winter Wolf?*

*Yes, resurrected…by the red god, no less.*

*Unthinkable, and an abomination—mother, then half-brother.*

*Starks possess the blood of the gods, they are almost impossible to kill—unless beheaded.*

*And we have a powerful one on our side, Nestoris. Don’t we, now?*

*And another one. The Iron Bank has given the Black a loan for sustenance during the harsh winter. And wildlings too, he wants them safe. The Stag had secured one as well, for the war.*

*The plan?*

*Retake the North with Stannis. The damnable Lannisters will never pay, the great lion is dead. Then, the North will smuggle back their liege lord—the youngest.*

Mercedene’s eyes flew open. Air was suddenly scarce in that passageway, and the dark became darker.

The girl knew that name—Nestoris, the banklord of the Iron Bank of Braavos. Why was her Kindly Man with him?

It is known that the founders of the Iron Bank were sixteen men and seven women—numbering three and twenty; and each of them held a key to the bank’s great subterranean
vaults. Mercedene let her sight skim through the stone walls and ceiling of the passageway. She was clearly feet below the ground, and the iron door that stood like a daunting fort separating her from the two men, may well be the threshold to that vault.

The Iron Bank will have its due, it is always said. Those who ask for loan from the Braavosi and fail to repay might have cause to lament on such folly, for the Bank has been known to make lords and princes collapse…

*And it is also rumored to send assassins against those lords and princes it cannot remove.*

More than this…more than this. Mercedene’s thoughts were deeply addled.

*Resurrection.*

*Retake the North.*

*Smuggle back their liege lord—the youngest.*

Mercedene let herself suffuse Arya Stark’s last memories before she had sailed to Essos. Winterfell was in a state of hopeless ruins, reduced to the point of ashes by the Greyjoy traitor—and she might include him in her death note—and Arya Stark’s two younger brothers were presumed dead. And Jon…Jon.

The masked woman. Winter Wolf.

Life and death of dragons.

The girl broke into a run from the darkened passage to the atrium, with the cat trailing quickly after her. In her state of haste, her foot bashed against a small stonestep, causing her to plummet onto the ground. She used both elbows to support herself to stand, trying and failing. Finally, through the mercy of the old gods, she was able to carry herself up. The faceless girl felt numb all over, but perhaps, it was well an ambiguous blend of perturbation and of shadowy, shadowy spirits within her.

“Jaqen…I must speak with him.”

She found herself in front of the poison pool.

Breathless, she darted to the statue of the Warrior and knelt before it, hands clasped, head on the floor. *Help me in this battle. Deny me of myself. My name is Mercedene…my name is Mercedene…*

The Waif’s hands gently squeezed excess water from the man's shoulder-length, ivory-colored hair. A small basin was placed at the bottom-back part of the wooden tub to collect the excess. She then dipped a fine-toothed comb in a small pitcher of thick liquid dye made of combined black walnut hull and red ochre. The comb touched the thin strands of that hair, and the pearly-white color was replaced with a deep shade of scarlet.

She does this twice every turn of the moon in order to conceal the Lorathi’s flaxen hair. The Waif would repeat the process until she was assured that his crown was colored deep red to the last strand. He sat in the wooden tub full of steamy water, with his arms resting on both sides. His eyes stared at the sconce holding five candles in place, their light then steadily blazing, now flickering. He could still hear those voices in his already aching head.
“Don’t, oh, don’t…I beg of you…I am still a maiden.”

“A touch in the middle of her breasts, and a kiss on her neck…”

The Lorathi closed his eyes and tried to put all his irrational sentiments at the back of his head. “You’re using a different dye? It certainly smells a little zesty,” he asked the woman.

“I added berries to the mixture,” the Waif replied. “Let’s see if it works well.”

After applying dye to the last set of locks, they both waited for the liquid to dry and get absorbed by the strands. The Lorathi had always asked the Waif to dye his white streaks scarlet, but for an unknown reason, that lightly shaded stroke of hair seemed to repel the color.

“I have been hearing excellent news from the Elder, brother,” the Waif broke through the tranquility. “The girl lighting up the glass candle, and a most agreeable conclusion to your trials in the tavern and at the mummer’s earlier today.”

The Lorathi did not answer.

The Waif, surprised by her brother’s unusually distant behavior, asked him. “I suppose something disagreeable happened?”

He heaved an irritated sigh and began recounting the events at mummer’s. “On the neck and between her breasts! Our Tyroshi brother clearly took advantage. He was well aware that he could accomplish the task without necessarily doing those…lascivious acts. A man wonders how the Elder would react to this.”

It was the Waif’s turn to feel irritated. “You worry yourself too much about trivialities, brother. There is no need for that, I can assure you. Our Tyroshi brother certainly has more sense of self-restraint than you do, especially these past few days.”

The Lorathi turned his head back to look at the Waif. “Excuse me?”

The woman only scoffed at him. “Do you seriously think that the Elder is blind to all that is happening between you and the Electi?” the Waif said in a steely voice. “The stares, the teasing, the touching, your curiously profound concern for your apprentice—please brother, the Elder has eyes in the temple. Now, let this be clear to you. Most likely, he does not wish to concern himself with what you do with each other inside closed chambers, it is your personal business. As long as it does not hinder at all with any task given to you for Him of Many Faces, he could not care less what you do. But recently he has voiced out his anxieties about your…capability to carry out the task as her Faceless Master.”

The Lorathi shook his head at the absurdity. “Does he mean to say that he has found someone better than a man at this task?”

“Quit from your pretense at modesty, everyone knows you’re the most qualified,” the Waif said. “It does not mean though that you are not vulnerable to committing mistakes, and to making decisions based on your emotions instead of your logic. Once the girl learns of her place in the Songs, she will be granted the chance to decide whether or not she would accept her fate, well, a fate imposed upon her if you ask me.”

Jaqen H’ghar sneered. “And what does the Elder suspect that a man would do? Talk the girl out of the deadly task and take her back to Winterfell?”

“No, not to Winterfell,” the Waif studied the Lorathi’s hair and decided that it was ready for
rinsing. “To... anywhere safer than here.”

“As soon as the prophecy happens, no place in this world—whether Known or Unknown will be safe,” he groaned and covered his face with both hands. “Even after all these years, the Elder still has difficulty trusting my motives. This is not fair, sister.”

“The Elder does not trust anybody, you must know this of him,” the Waif smirked. She had finished rinsing his hair which was now a full, deep scarlet from the tips to the roots, and she smiled at the result.

Three seconds have passed before some strands of his hair gradually changed back to immaculate white.

It was as if there was a spell cast on the Lorathi’s hair so the white would stay as it is; it was as if it did not want itself to be concealed at all. *What is hidden will be revealed, in a way or another,* thought the woman.

Finally, the Waif spoke softly as she studied his white streaks with fascination. “But you, he does not trust you too much simply because you are a bastard of Valyria.”

“A curse,” Jaqen H’ghar whispered.

“Or a gift,” the Waif countered.

The woman promptly went out of the bath chamber after delivering the favor to her Lorathi brother. The Lorathi rose from the wooden tub and toweled himself dry before putting on his robe.

He took one last look at himself in the mirror, the white streaks of his otherwise full red hair were still there. He gently shook his head as he felt an inexplicable sense of self-loathing overpowering him.

When he finally went out of the chamber, he found the Waif speaking to a calm, yet fuming lovely girl.

“...a new poison I have been working on. I have a most useful book, we will look at the procedure tomorrow,” the Waif told the girl who nodded her agreement. “*Valar Dohaeris.*” The woman walked away carrying the pitcher of scarlet dye.

The girl turned her attention towards her Faceless Master. Her demeanor was composed, but her eyes were wild with suppressed rage. The Lorathi raised his eyebrows and walked towards his apprentice.

They stared at each other for what may have been millions of seconds—a man flashing a most charming smile at a girl, and a girl responding to his thoroughly immature playfulness with a malevolent glare.

“Lovely girl,” he called to her. He narrowed the distance between them and lifted his hand to her hair, his thumb and fore toying with her dark locks. Very slowly, his other hand roamed to trace the outline of her left shoulder—so, so lightly with his fingertips, all the while biting his lower lip, as he kept his gaze locked upon her flushed face. He only chuckled softly at her anger, like one with the emotional capacity of an unfeeling rock. “How was a girl’s training at Izembaro’s?”

She did not answer, and her expression was that of pure spite at him.

“One lovely girl did well in the mummer’s today. A man must say—”

The apprentice did not even let her master finish speaking. She straightaway bolted to the
door of the bath chamber and slammed it solidly behind her—that the walls almost shook at the impact, leaving the Lorathi dumbfounded.
The girl whose name was Mercedene was plagued by perplexing visions the night before.

A raven with third sight flew across the roofs of what was once Arya Stark’s home. Facades and ashen parapets were festooned with banners of blood-colored X’s, and the castle grounds were full of people she could not recognize except for one—the wailing ghost of Jeyne Pool, Sansa Stark’s closest friend. The Greyjoy traitor—and he spoke to the specter, which was then languidly glissading across the North’s expanse, he whispered to her, “Arya Stark spits, she does not curtsy.”

A long and horrifying howl was heard throughout that snow-blanketed realm—the monumental sun was replaced in the skies by a full blood moon. Burning stags like the ones in the Fat King’s tapestry charged forth and slaughtered every man, woman, and child; as the sound of keening interfused perfectly albeit eerily, and in faintness, with the coldness of wind that blew Winter. The carnage ended and she drifted to the great hall of the Northern Castle, where a white direwolf sat on the lord’s table. The northern conspiracy, they talked amongst each other in hushed tones.

Arya…Arya…

It was the voice of a young boy far beyond the Wall. She followed the sound and was led to a weirwood with a carved face, and the face was bleeding. She saw tracks of what seemed to be someone who was dragged in the snow.

Arya…

Her eyes wandered to her left, right. She turned around, hoping that the owner of that voice will show himself. Her eyes locked on the raven with third sight which she had seen in the Northern Castle. It had such familiar eyes—deep blue, and she knew those eyes from before.

A sudden realization hit her on the chest…a sudden recognition. The girl felt like screaming at the top of her lungs in her unadulterated misery. She wanted to take the raven into her hands and cradle it.

Bran.

It flew away, leaving her solitary in the middle of an impending snowstorm.

Mercedene woke up with a deep sense of hollowness.

The girl ran into the Kindly Man on her way to the common hall for the morning meal. *Three things*, she recalled. Her apprenticeship with Izembaro ended last night, and she realized how much she would miss the warm conviviality of her ‘friends’ at the mummers’. Lady Stork had been very affectionate, and Big Brusco certainly loved making everyone laugh at his behind-the-curtain jests. Surely now that she would not be coming back, Daena would have to find another companion in her
usual occupation of staring at comely lads and giving remarks about their noses, choice of clothes, or their footwear. Bobono, who no doubt liked her in more than a friendly way, would be the most affected of the lot. “Mercy, Mercy, come to my room tonight,” he would always jape.

“I trust that you have my three things?” the Kindly Man asked her.

“Yes.”

“Go on, child.”

“A Westerosi envoy was at the mummer’s last night. Lions for sigils, Lannister guards with them,” she began. “Harys Swyft was either to pay a loan or make a loan in the Iron Bank, as per the Westerosi Queen Mother’s directives. He arrived at the mummers’ with the Otherys courtesan.” She made no mention of Raff the Sweetling. Mercedene did not know who he was, Arya Stark did. And she is not Arya Stark.

The Kindly Man appeared to be a confused, though the girl knew it was nothing but pretense. “The Queen Mother gives directives?”

Most certainly, because in Westeros, the reigning King is a young, spineless boy and a bastard born of incest.

“I’m sorry,” the girl said, abruptly realizing how suspiciously well-informed she was about Westeros. “I meant, the Westerosi King.”

He gestured for her to carry on.

“There were rumors of Tormo Fregar being selected as new Sealord of Braavos, and that he won the position by gaining only one vote more than his opponent from the magisters,” she continued. The Kindly Man regarded her with narrowed eyes though his expression was unreadable. She marveled at how the Kindly Man managed to effortlessly maintain facelessness despite those micro-expressions.

“And the third?”

“The thin, old man, the one who was making bad in an insurance claim on ships is dead,” she said. “His heart gave out.” The assassination task was nothing but effortless. Of course, the thin man was a man of great stature and had guards following him wherever he went. The girl decided to use the thin, old man’s clients as middle persons. One client had a bag of coins which the girl replaced with another bag full of nickel chips coated in Strangler. The thin, old man was not very wise; if he had been, he would not have bitten one coin to test its authenticity. But then, how would he know that it was poisoned?

This was one of those rare moments, because the Kindly Man smiled. “Valar Morghulis,” he said.

“I have a fourth.”

The Elder raised his brows in a mixture of delight and surprise. “Very well, let’s have it.”

“Daenerys Targaryen will sail for Dragonstone two days from now.”

Maybe it was only her wits playing with her eyes, for she saw a certain flicker in the eyes of the Kindly Man. Disorientation? Alarm, perhaps? A possible war in Westeros will surely have tremendous implications for Braavos—the Iron Bank will inevitably be involved in the fiscal matters
of it all, which means that the Faceless Men will have to make sure that the Iron Bank, "in one way or another, gets its due." The girl wondered though if Braavos would be involved with matters beyond the gold.

“From whom did you hear this, child?”

“Pentoshi sailors.”

“Just so,” the Kindly Man said, suddenly pensive and immediately unreachable.

The girl prayed to the Warrior the night before, and for a moment Mercedene was convinced that Arya Stark was in all finality, lost on her. There were certain things that must be kept, and certain others that must be disclosed, though not on her part. She will become a faceless man, and sooner rather than later, she would have to be informed of tellings that to the Order were cardinal.

“Will the Elder allow a girl one question?” She said, then bit her tongue afterwards. Mercedene had been speaking with, dreaming, thinking about the Lorathi a lot more than was necessary, and she was inheriting his manner of speech, as if it was one with the Creed that must be mastered.

*Enough Mercedene, you are nothing but his plaything.*

“A girl had already asked one,” the Kindly Man replied with a faint tone of humor. “I do not see any reason why she should not be allowed to ask another, especially now that there is one less thin man in the world.”

Mercedene looked at the Kindly Man’s eyes. He was in a jovial mood, so she told herself, very well—ask.

“Who died in the North and was resurrected?”

Of course she knew the answer. It was possible—she had been with the Brotherhood and a priest called Thoros. Only those without crowns could not be brought back from hell. In the midst of this knowledge though, she wanted clarity straight from the House of Black and White, the very Order which she serves—she wanted assurance. Why the apparent interest in Starks? Mercedene was not Blind Beth anymore, yet the former realized how more destitute she was of vision, given all things she had unraveled at the opposite side of that iron door. *I’m tired of being blind…*

Eavesdropping is forbidden in the temple. It’s the training stick against her flesh, then.

To the girl’s surprise, the Kindly Man’s mouth formed a small, yet astounded smile. “Ah, but your old man knew you followed the cat. You live with Faceless Men, after all. However evil child, do you know what that door was made of?”

“Iron,” she replied, gritting her teeth at having been called an evil child. He was eluding her questioning.

He chuckled softly. “Close, close my child. Steel from the Smoking Sea—reforged seven times.” The Kindly Man bent in order for his face to be leveled with the girl’s, his expression that of an affectionate father. “Such power. Not the steel though—you.”

The girl’s brows creased and so the Kindly Man elaborated. “Even your Faceless Master does not possess that kind of heightened sense.” He straightened up then patted Mercedene on the head. “Sustain yourself, and serve. *Valar Dohaeris.*”
The old man left her query unanswered and walked to the passage that led to the Hall of Masters.

She headed to the combat room after breaking her fast and practiced the use of a longsword with a shadow. Her Lorathi Master entered the room but she paid him no mind and continued rehearsing. He did not seem to have any intention of clarifying with her what exactly happened last night, because he wordlessly gestured that they start sparring. Except for a few pointers coming from him, they never talked.

“Left foot forward, lean a little and put your weight on your legs.”

“Angles. Do not leave any vulnerable part of your body exposed.”

“Make use of your peripherals to anticipate an attack from either side.”

They merely sparred in silence, neither one giving up the longsword. Whenever he disarms her, he would sigh impatiently, and she would promptly retrieve the sword without the smallest of sounds coming out of her throat. She would nod and then they would spar again. This went on for about a full hour.

As their steels clashed, Mercedene would make claims and Arya Stark would counterargue.

*Too much defense, charging is essential. Or I will exhaust myself just blocking his longsword.*

*Oh yes, you have exhausted yourself for him a lot, a lot.*

*I am made of water... outflow of calmness, stillness. Pick up the longsword, Mercedene, then make another attempt.*

*Yes, Arya Stark. Pick up the longsword and stab him with the pointy end.*

Her left arm ached like seven hells but she carried on. Cold sweat escaped from her open pores and her eyes burned. Mercedene’s heart pumped blood all over her anatomy thrice as fast and she almost drowned with it inside—and the liquid was thick, only wolves drink of it. This is Jaqen H’ghar she was sparring with; and nay, she cannot appear weakened or fatigued or capitulating in front of him. Never will she give him that. She dropped her longsword again. She pulled her hair with her fingers, very much irked, and knelt to retrieve it.

As if sensing that she has had enough, he concluded the session.

“A girl moves her upper body too much every time she launches an attack. She will tire herself easily this way. A man suggests that she relies on the force of her left arm in delivering blows, and move her body only when dodging a counterattack.” His deep, rough voice betrayed no emotion. “Any questions?”

He was too impersonal, and to his apprentice, this attitude of him at that precise moment was downright unreasonable. Every damned day, he would tell her things, and pull her close, and put his
mouth all over her face then leave her just like that. After awakening and provoking her inner sensualities, he would share nights with another.

_Damn this, Jaqen H’ghar._

She may have slammed the door of the bathchamber in front of him a little too forcefully, and yes, he might have felt disrespected. But what was his right to demand for respect when in fact, he was spending hours inside the bath with the Waif? How in the world, Known and Unknown, was that act of him in any way honorable?

_It would only be honorable if I was the one with him in the bath_, a little voice that she was not even sure was hers taunted her. She vigorously pushed it aside and spoke.

“How old are you, Jaqen?”

He merely raised his brows, apparently dazed at her choice of question. “Why does a girl ask a man this?”

She rolled her eyes at him and returned both longswords to the small armory. “You asked me if I had questions. There it is, then.” She walked back to face him. Mercedene folded both arms in her chest and regarded her master in close scrutiny. The girl let her eyes travel from the top of his head to the soles of his feet, as if assessing and deciding what his age is.

Her master was not amused, but he answered her nevertheless. “A score and three, why?”

_Seven years…_ the girl thought. _It is not really that big of a number is it? Some people in Westeros even wed a man with a woman and the gap is twenty years._

“And how old is the Waif?”

The Lorathi smirked and shook his head. “Why is a girl suddenly so interested with numbers? Names are not enough for her, are they?”

“How old is she, Jaqen?” she repeated the question with a quiet yet grim tone. The Lorathi was amazed at how persuasive his lovely girl could be. He cannot quite understand where her very influential persona was coming from. From an ancient power she has, perhaps? Hells, she was able to even convince him to spearhead a massacre of eight Harrenhal guards and free tens of other Northerners in place of the one last name he demanded from her.

The Lorathi merely shrugged. “This a man does not know. The Waif never spoke about her age with a man.”

Mercedene laughed bitterly. “Oh…that’s curious. You mean to say, you shove your tongues in each other’s throats every single time you bathe each other and you do not even know how old the other is?”

The Lorathi’s mouth fell open.

Where were these preposterous accusations coming from? His chest grew heavy as he remembered the previous night, and found himself wanting to burst out in rich laughter at the silliness of it all. He thought better of it, fortunately. He is the Faceless Master and she is his apprentice. It does not matter if she was the Electi the prophecies spoke about—she needed to be disciplined the same way the other apprentices were being put in their proper places.

“This is an outrageous accusation to two Faceless Masters of this House,” the Lorathi said in
a voice with a thick hint of warning. He walked slowly towards her. “A girl must watch out for senseless words that come out of her pretty yet obnoxious lips.”

Mercedene clenched her fist, burying her nails in the palm of her hands. She almost thought she had made her own flesh bleed.

“Stop playing stupid games with me, Jaqen!”

She took three quick steps and grabbed her master’s tunic. “Stop, will you?!” She shook him violently but he did not budge at all. “I’m tired of it, so just stop!” He merely looked at her with an expression of both amusement and displeasure. “What do you want from me? Why do you touch me? Why do you put your lips on my ears, my hair, my cheeks? Why do you confuse me so and make me believe in your lies that you give a damn about what happens to me?!”

All of a sudden, she began tugging at the belt that held his breeches tight on his waist, frustrated sounds coming out of her throat. The girl’s hands were quick, and she managed to unfasten the belt with ease.

The Lorathi was stupefied, but the facelessness in him acted in haste and out of pure logic. “What the—hands off now. Mercedene, enough. Hells, Arya, stop it!”

She was having none of his admonitions, so he quickly seized both of her hands and forced them away from his belt, whose leather buckle was now almost detached from the pelt it held. She was holding back the sound of screaming, and he knew he had to silence her. The Lorathi pulled her and wrapped his arms around her soft frame, one hand stroking her back to calm her down.

“Is this not what you want, Jaqen? Let me go! You heartless beast!” She thrashed against his hold and pulled the neckline of his tunic. The wolf had overtaken the mummer, and the wolf was furious beyond reason.

The tension was at its climax but the Lorathi had to contain it. He pulled her so that her back was against his chest, and pinned her steady to the ground. Both of his hands cuffed her wrists above her head. Her hair was strewn all across the floor and her cheeks were wet with angry tears. He straddled her but did not put all of his weight. Her spine was flat against the floor as she writhed underneath him. He spoke against her ears and tried to pacify her.

“Shush…lovely girl, please,” he implored. “You do not know…you have no idea…”

She spat. “You’re right, I have no idea! You never explain anything to me!”

Such strongheadedness, he thought. Jaqen H’ghar placed his forehead against hers and shut his eyes, entreat ing Him of Many Faces to intervene. “Arya Stark, you do not know what you are asking from a man. You have no idea how a man feels, do you? Sweet heavens, if only I am allowed to kiss you right now…” His right hand roamed freely to brush the tears from her cheeks.

“Then kiss me,” Arya Stark ordered him ferociously. “Kiss me and let’s see who could do it better with you—the Waif or I?” She struggled and pushed and jolted, and so he slowly let her hands go, and those hands traveled once more to his belt, tugging at it, as if clamoring for something more than just a kiss.

The sound of self-assured footsteps startled them both, but before they can do the slightest thing to prevent themselves from being discovered at such a questionable position, the Handsome Man was already at the threshold.

“Brother, you ar—” his speech was cut off by the scene he witnessed. With exaggeratedly
raised eyebrows, his eyes surveyed his Lorathi brother on top of his own apprentice, whose hands now clung to her master’s belt. The girl made guttural sounds in an attempt to explain the undoubtedly puzzling situation but the Lorathi spoke first, in a completely unembarrassed tone.

“Yes, brother, we’ll be there. Give us a moment, please,” he said, as if aware of what the Handsome Man would say. He slowly rose from the floor and held out his hand to his apprentice. She took it to stand, and then smoothed her now crumpled skirt. The Lorathi in turn, fixed his belt.

“Yes, brother, we’ll be there. Give us a moment, please,” he said, as if aware of what the Handsome Man would say. He slowly rose from the floor and held out his hand to his apprentice. She took it to stand, and then smoothed her now crumpled skirt. The Lorathi in turn, fixed his belt.

“Very well,” the Handsome Man replied in an obviously entertained tone. A second later, he was gone.

Mercedene sat quietly in the Hall of Masters in the temple’s third tier. Despite the flood of emotions threatening to drown her that moment, she tried her very best to compose herself. The Lorathi was seated to her right, and the master she had named the Squinter was to her left. Although she wondered what she was doing inside a hall full of ordained Faceless Men, she kept her mouth shut.

She could not decide whether or not a certain clarity finally showed itself after their confrontation a while ago. He was absolutely silent when they went up to the Hall of Masters, and she was worried that she had crossed the line and offended the Lorathi.

Mercedene tried to distract herself by observing the hall’s interior: there were eleven chairs—twelve if hers was counted. One was unoccupied, and she was guessing that this was the Kindly Man’s seat. At the back of the Elder’s seat was a statue of a deity similar to that which she had seen before at the Moonsinger’s Temple, only smaller. Him of Many Faces, she thought. Ned-cat sat on the statue’s feet, then rose up to saunter around the room. Behind the statue was a long passageway which she assumed led to the second entrance of the Hall of Faces. The apprentices were allowed to use only the first entrance on the other side.

Her eyes locked on the Waif who was speaking with the master with a plagued face. Who is she to Jaqen?

The girl saw the Handsome Man walk to the empty seat beside the Waif. He lightly traced the woman’s shoulder with his forefinger before sitting down beside her, much to the girl’s surprise. Mercedene warily turned to Jaqen in order to see his reaction but he was only gawking at the weirwood table, too preoccupied to notice anything else. The Handsome Man now stared with twinkling eyes at her and Jaqen, his lips forming a small yet provoking smile.

The Elder finally took his seat.

“Valar Morghulis,” he began.

“Valar Dohaeris,” the rest of the gathered masters answered.

“A few years ago, one noble Braavosi brother took the task of training a young highborn girl the art of water dancing,” the Elder continued.

Mercedene’s brows shot upward. Syrio? She quickly turned her head to Jaqen, as if pleading for confirmation. The Lorathi merely nodded and gestured that she must listen to the Kindly Man.

“Another brother took his place when our Braavosi comrade was killed by the Westerosi Queen’s men. Needless to say, he successfully led this hightborn girl to our temple as he continued to
acquire for us two most inestimable possessions—Death of Dragons, a valuable book from Maester Thomax’s quill only the Citadel of the West has, and a dragonglass candle, which for a hundred years had not burned. Until recently, until now,” the Kindly Man’s eyes moved from Jaqen to Mercedene, as he placed the green glass candle in the middle of the weirwood table. “Welcome to the Order, Arya of House Stark.”

Though surprised she was at the Kindly Man’s use of the name, she responded nonetheless with a hard tone, “You’re naming the wrong person, I’m afraid. Arya Stark is dead. A girl is No One.”

“Oh yes,” the Kindly Man agreed, chuckling at her seemingly parroted response. “Indeed, you have successfully denied yourself of your very self. Your training masters saw to that. Finally, a girl is No One; and if we must become No One for us to be Anyone, then No One can be Arya of House Stark. Or have you not read the texts, child?”

“I—I have,” she stammered. Arya Stark shook her head in puzzlement. “I just could not…” she struggled for words. This, and a lot of other affairs, was for her becoming too taxing. The girl looked at the Kindly Man with a face in want of answers. “Why make me deny myself then? Why go through such an elaborate process if in the end, I would be allowed to be who I am?”

“A very good question,” the Kindly Man said, rubbing his chin with his fingers. “Well, then. Tell me what the golden line is, let us see how well you know the texts.”

The girl who is now Arya Stark straightened her back to prepare herself for a definitely lengthy discourse about the Creed and Methods. “It delineates among the various versions of the self one has. It draws a border between who you are and who you are not.”

“Just so,” the Kindly Man conceded, but he was only in the beginning of his questioning. “And where is the state of being No One in the course of discovering who one is and who one is not?”

“In the middle.”

“What is in the end then?”

Arya Stark blinked twice. What is in the end? She doesn’t know.

The Kindly Man, as if sensing the difficulty of his question, placed the palm of his left hand on the weirwood table. “First, you must know who you are and who you are not.” He moved the same hand a little to the right, to signal another point. “Second, you must become No One to serve Him of Many Faces selflessly—to deliver his gift.” He once again moved his hand to the right to emphasize a last. “Third and final, you must become who you are supposed to be.”

The girl repeated the Kindly Man’s abstractions inside her already chaotic head. Who you are and who you are not—facelessness—who you must be. No sense. No sense at all.

“Being No One is not a conclusion to becoming a Faceless Man,” her Lorathi master interjected, as if reading her disorientation. “It is a means to an end. And the end is far greater than any version of self a person might ever have.”

The more she discovered the faith, the more she realized how riveting it was. Still, she asked, “Are you telling me that I am supposed to be Arya of House Stark? Because I was born Arya of House Stark. I was Arya Stark long before I came to the temple, long before the temple made me disown her identity!”
“And who is Arya Stark, child?” The Kindly Man returned her question.

“The youngest daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn Stark of Winterfell,” she promptly answered.

“That cannot be all that Arya Stark is,” said the Elder, his melodious tone prompting reflection on the girl’s part.

He’s speaking in riddles, all of them are. After her verbal and almost physical altercation with Jaqen earlier, and…all the vagueness from the other side of that iron door, she realized she had no time for senseless conundrums. She was about to stand up and leave the hall when the Handsome Man spoke.

“The high shadows in the long night have spoken thus: wait upon her; she that was Chosen, she that was sent. And she will come to all of you…” he recited the lines from the Songs with his usual dashing style.

“In the changing of the moon, in the sun’s complete turn,” her Lorathi master carried on with the lines. “Time is never certain. Nevertheless, she will come.”

Her eyes grew wide at the revelation.

From leaf to leaf, she had perused the Songs and she knew of what it spoke of—a powerful child who possessed eight senses and the gift to bend creatures to her will. The child descended from the blood of the old gods who, in the Isle of Faces, entered into a pact with the First Men through the greenseers of the forest.

Among others, she is greater. Only Death, unless she conquers it, would be higher and above her.

But she’s a myth.

“How in the world can I be the…”

The statement was left suspended, for Arya Stark burst out into rich, high-pitched, childish giggle.

The last time she had laughed like that was when the Hound took him to the Vale so he could demand ransom from the Lady Arryn in exchange for the girl’s freedom. When they reached the Vale however, the Lady Arryn, much to the Hound’s disillusionment, had been dead for three days. She did not know for how long she giggled, but when she saw the shocked, offended expressions of the eleven masters including her own, she forced herself to stop.

“Y-you cannot be all serious.”

“Do we all look like we’re not serious, child?” the Stern-faced Man asked.

The girl, suddenly embarrassed, shook her head. “I apologize;” then with a pronounced disagreement added, “You must be mistaken, though. I cannot be an Electi.”

“The Electi,” the Kindly Man corrected her.

The girl heaved a sigh. “The Electi. I mean, what is my place in all these? What more can I offer to the Order that its great Faceless Masters could not give it?”
The Kindly Man pushed the green dragonglass candle closer to her. He motioned to it with a slight tilt of the head. “I wonder the same thing, so what do you say we all find out?”

“Find out what, exactly?” the girl asked.

“What is West of Westeros.”
Rebirth

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“She who was gifted with seeing will find herself in places even the greatest sails could not reach.

She will discover many a great things—both bewitching and bloodcurling,

Wonders and horrors, magnificence and abominations.

She will lay eyes on these, and when she does,

Pray, that she chooses the good.”

Songs of the Faceless; XXVI

Cloaked in silence, the Hall of Masters was then a perfect reflection of facelessness—of concealed fervor and suppressed litigious anticipation. They were trained assassins. Their hands deal with sanguine scarlet fluids and painstakingly slow tortures and anatomical turmoils—prior to Death’s voice with a gentle chide, “Enough, demise has enveloped him.” For sometimes, acquired instincts compel them to stab deeper, strangle harder, inflict agony in a much more creative manner. Even Death frowns upon all these—the gift is a gift, and must be delivered gently for even dead men when named, deserve respect when dire time comes for life to depart from their mortal frames.

They were assassins—they must not be overwrought, or, like the innocent young who thinks of everything enthralling, awakened with childish thrill at visions—enchanted they may be.

Hells, they must not be this excited.

Arya Stark stared hard at the dragonglass candle and willed it to light up. No sign of flame—magical or otherwise, came out of its tip.

This is ludicrous, she berated herself. My Faceless Master—with his witticisms of ‘You are a Stark’. I was and am, now. Well then, was I really the one who lit this up before?

It was not helping either that the Handsome Man was very audibly tapping his fingers against the weirwood in all restlessness, muttering under his breath, “Oh, gods…” The woman beside him gave him a soft shove—a gesture of reprove. Quit it, the woman had said, but he only rolled his eyes.

What did Ned Stark once tell her? There is a trace of the gods in everything around us—in the leaves, the wolves, the ripples of water, the ground of stones and soil.

The rocks, the whistle of wind.

Winter.

Even in the aspects of nature we could not see, much less comprehend—animistic manifestations of them act so we may not forget, and so we may believe.

And when we believe, we somehow manage to dream and do. We do, and things happen—
mostly ordinary, wondrous sometimes—producing this cumulative effect, one event setting off a chain of others. And this, and this, Ned and Old Nan had said, is the source of magic.

Magic is both evil and good. By the gods, it is evil because it is good.

Old gods and their creation—the cosmos above and terrestrial sphere a little beneath it, meeting each other through the vanishing point. Surely an obsidian candle cannot be excluded in such an assumption. It came from the very core of the earth, spewed by volcanoes on the surface. It must have a trace of the gods, too. A believer must beseech that the old gods listen and show themselves in that which they have created.

Connectedness with those created—perhaps, this is what she needs; to find the abode that is common among men and other creatures. But how?

She spoke to the candle in a hushed tone, and thought herself ridiculous. If she was to find out the truth about her ‘fate’ as they put it though, then she must harness whatever supposed gifts she has to at least gain knowledge of such fate, doubtful she may be of it.

“Show us what we need to see, pretty glass candle. What mysteries do you have for us?”

Ned the tubby cat strolled across the hall and found his sweet spot once more at the foot of the statue. Help me Ned, Arya Stark spoke to the cat on her own, help me convince the candle to light up. She giggled inwardly at her own frivolity, but she remembered how she got through Ned before—a lot of times in truth. Did the cat not aid her in seeing the acolyte that brutally hit her with a stick when she was still one Beth? Did he not speak to her before about his plans to chase some mice in the vast temple? And just recently, did he not lead her to the unraveling of a great many things about the Order and its connections to the North?

Most of all, did Jaqen not tell her that there is magic in her blood?

Help me, Ned.

Help me, help me, help me.

Ned. Help.

Arya Stark’s gray-colored iris moved rapidly from side to side until only the white sclera is visible. She knew she was falling into deep, unconscious state but she could not govern over what was about to happen. Ned the cat, seemingly entranced, rose from the statue’s feet mechanically, leaped to the weirwood table, and walked towards the girl. It wandered in circles around the obsidian then sat primly in the middle of the table. The masters, though awe-struck, understood what was happening—Arya Stark was warging into the cat.

At that point in the clock, Arya Stark was one with a creature of the old gods, and as she herself is a creature, the symbiosis is a breathing perfection.

Human, Animal, Stone—all alive, and the triangulation of forces in their very entities formed wholly in the realm unseen, fully consummated, that is, even more impeccable in configuration than the Great Pyramids of Meereen.

Finally, the glass candle lit up.

It was an almost blinding flash of white light overwhelming the expanse of the hall. Its fluorescence cannot be concealed, because it seemed to be dancing in wave-like patterns, illuminating the once half-lit room.
The white split into colors of green and blue and red, each color gradually fading into a different one, such that the light grew at one time and receded in another. The masters wore black, charcoal gray, dark purple, and the colors seemed to absorb the luster and reflect it at the same time; while the statue of Him of Many Faces glowed in response to the beam.

It takes magic to light up a dragonglass candle, but it takes heightened sense and ancient gifts to make it function.

And at that same point in infinity, Jaqen H’ghar cared not, stared not at the magical dragonglass candle—his eyes were locked upon Arya Stark’s face and that only, marvel evident in his features, as he was helplessly drawn into her more and more. He was collapsing, his facelessness was. Surely, he cannot be aroused in a hall full of Faceless Masters. *Oh Arya Stark, the things you do.* His breeches were thin, and the masters were perceptive—they are all Faceless Men for sakes, of course they would know. And now, he was already biting his thumb. *Stop,* he rebuked himself.

Arya Stark returned to her roused state and witnessed the display of lights, while some of the masters stood from their seats, in an unsuccessful attempt of concealing their awe of the phosphorescent patterns. Some of them were intent on examining the candle itself.

*West of Westeros.*

It was a mirage which Arya Stark could ‘see’ with her own two eyes, but it was all coming in too fast. It was as if she was being carried and flown in a rush to places she could and could not name. Her vision flew past the Titan and the Shivering Sea towards the White Harbor, and castles and lands she knew not of—until she was driven north, *North* towards a place Arya Stark had always known.

*Home, take me home.*

Winter is coming, and the vales and lowlands were now a carpet of green and brown laden with white. The air was thick and wintry, and a surge of it seemed to permeate into Arya Stark’s flesh and marrows, and she shivered. Verily, the cold is colder now, embittered and intensely numbing, as if the winter that is about to arrive is one impending doom that will lay waste and horror in an immeasurable scale.

*But I love the Winter,* she whispered to herself, *I am a daughter of the North.* She was so close to the fortress she had seen in her dream. She knew the castle so well—the halls, the grounds, the chambers, the crypts…even the mystery it held. A flock of ravens obscured her vision, ravens when Ice was drawn and she could not look at Ned’s severed crown, and she heard that voice summoning her once more—the voice of a blue-eyed child inside the mortal casing of a raven with the third sight.

*Arya…*

Arya Stark of Winterfell could remain in that place and never go back. She had taken a risk and fallen off a void, and those who simply stand and watch do not in any way, have the right to judge her according to her decisions, self-indulgent they may be.

*Arya…the blue-eyed boy called.*

*Yes, Bran…I’m home.*

But then, there was another voice, it was the voice of a man. She has heard that voice before, back when she was still a sheep turned into a mouse. Back when she navigated her way in silence—in the towering, ghost-riddled walls and halls of a massive, burnt castle north shore of the God’s Eye
Lake. *Maybe he was sent by the old gods to help me.* The man’s voice was unfathomably soothing as it was unnerving, and she was beyond sure that the heavens knew how that voice had hinged and unhinged her senses and her very sanity.

* A girl says nothing…a girl keeps her lips closed. No one hears, and friends may talk in secret, yes?*

At times people leave to find themselves, Arya Stark realized. It will never mean that they will forget. She urged herself to move past Winterfell…west towards the Sunset Sea...

For what may have been a laboriously endless moment, all she saw were the blue waters and its waves, heretofore tamed, now ferocious. It was only the sea—a stretch of it from end to end, without any sign of land or life, apart from what may be beneath the waters. The rays of the sun reflected in the tempestuous waves blinded her.

“There’s nothing…” Arya Stark said, eyes still fixed on the candle. “I see nothing in the West.”

“Go further, lovely girl,” she heard that man’s voice.

Water, perpetual water.

*Endless…measureless.*

The girl wanted terribly to escape from the figment for she felt herself drowning and gasping for air.

*No one had ever been to the West of Westeros and had lived to tell the tale.*

Helplessly, she plunged into the shadowy seas, and felt her lungs about to explode as they were filled with saltwater. She shut her eyes and called to Him of Many Faces. The old gods are in seawater even, and the sea is friend, not foe. She felt herself struggling to reach the surface, and strived to take even the most infinitesimal breath of life.

She toiled so her vision would allow her to see further and beyond.

The old gods heard her supplication. They too, are in the waves.

*West of Westeros.*

And there it was.

The Great Sea—there it was for her to fully behold.

Bewitching and bloodcurling. She witnessed wonders and horrors, magnificence and abominations. A loud gasp, and Arya Stark felt a man’s hand clasping her own. *A man knows,* he seemed to tell her, but nay, this time, he doesn’t know—no one does, even she who has already seen, and is still seeing. The girl was short of wind, and her head was afloat in the skies and lost in the majestic yet horrendous apparition.

*Find us…*

*Reach us and reward is unto you.*

*Sweet child, lives stolen—anything at all.*
Sweet child…

It was a gracious invitation, and very, very few mortals, if at all, are beckoned.

Arya Stark was one of them now, and the price of this beckoning will be too great. Lost souls lashed out on her and she screamed, though no sound came out of her quivering lips—it was only the illusion of reverberations. And it was silent.

The flame emanating from the glass candle suddenly flickered then died.

Arya Stark’s gaze was still upon the candle. Her labored breaths were now coming out of her partly opened mouth, and her body was trembling slightly, albeit uncontrollably. She hid her face in both hands in an attempt to quiet herself, and when she heard Jaqen H’ghar’s deeply concerned voice saying, “Lovely girl…” there was nothing she could do but throw herself in his arms. She shamelessly threw manners of propriety in the wind and abandoned her wits in order to feel even the slightest sense of refuge.

“Jaqen…Jaqen.”

His name on her lips, though a mere whisper, was lifeblood itself in the verge of perishing.

The man called Jaqen bit his lower lip in slight embarrassment, evading the questioning stares of the other masters. Dragonglass candles are magnificent; still, no faceless must be carried away by the torrents of it all. The Lorathi let his arms wrap around her frame that was now crouched against his and whispered, “Arya…sweet girl,” for lack of anything to say.

She tightened her hold of him. Her face, she buried in his neck. “Jaqen.” The girl said. “Jaqen.” As if his name was clarity in the face of all obscurity she saw, felt, realized.

The Handsome Master whispered something to the Waif and the woman only nodded her assent.

“And what did you see, child?” the Kindly Man pierced through the silence.

She gathered herself as she slowly tore away from the Lorathi. Then, the girl shook her hands, as if getting rid of whatever unwanted residue the vision might have left in her.

In the midst of drowning in the Great Sea, compassionate tempest came to her—serving as air to her lungs. She traversed its core, not her though, her spirit and consciousness.

“Lands.”

“In the middle of the Great Sea?” the Kindly Man confirmed.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Dear gods, impossible.”

He was the most astute and knowing of them all, this was why he is the Elder. In the middle of the other masters’ confoundment of what the girl has revealed, with few or perhaps none of them comprehending what she meant, he held up his hand to signal calm. Oh, the Elder knew the Songs and the gods like the back of his hand—better, in fact.

“Terrains, suspended in stratos,” the Kindly Man removed his leather-framed spectacles, wiped them, all the while shaking his head and smiling. “The gods do have some sense of humor.”
He chuckled, ignoring the sounds of skepticism and incertitude, and the Elder never chuckles like that. He gazed at the girl most convivially. “Very well, sweet child. Surprise us.”

Arya Stark stared at the ceiling, shut her eyes, breathed.

She spoke.

*Waters of silver, trees glowing and undying. The wind speaks. It knew my name—by gods, it knew.*

*Rapids cascaded from the floating terrains to the Great Sea—and it may be that the waters of the ocean, of all seas—Sunset, Shivering, Summer, Jade—came from these immense falls. They never run out. They never dry.*

*And the sun never sets. The moon is beside it and the moon, it never disintegrates in the sun’s flames—it tempered it.*

*I…I have dreamed of this before.*

*Sweet child…*

*Gold, sapphire. The shimmers. The ground is of these. Resplendence, Elder…unlike anything, anything at all.*

*It is impossible to reach, unless through self-annihilation. And they knew one and only one language.*

*Magic.*

*Only a few are summoned. But fewer leave that place. Oh, to go back is…*

*Sublime, yet malefic.*

Manners of facelessness were cast carelessly aside. Every single thing which anyone in that hall knew, in all his life, seemed to fall into pieces. This, that is in the West, is a thing greater than the greatest of all bewitchments. It was not the Nightlands, heavens no. There was simply no fitting appellation for it yet.

The Kindly man kept his calm. He merely nodded at the girl with an apparently satisfied smile. “What else?”

Arya blew air from her lips.

“Enchanters…winged. And…and birds reborn in fire and ashes.”

These words, and the Hall of Masters was enveloped by pure hue and cry. Some were cynical of the find, others were alarmed, still, others were inexplicably astounded. Essos could identify its history with bits and pieces of sorcery—what with Valyria and Darkest Asshai, not to mention the unexplored Far East which is said to be ruled by emperor gods. However, no canon in the whole Known World had documented about any such creatures, and there was simply no way to comprehend the telling.

But then, there were some rumors about the existence of *winged horses* in Skagos by the Shivering Sea.

The Kindly Man, though bewildered, lightly tapped the weirwood table thrice in order to
quiet everyone down. “Continue, dear child.”

Arya Stark let her eyes travel across the hall, to every face that was there. She looked at Jaqen, as if asking for permission to continue, and he only gave her a reassuring look.

“Seven fires,” she whispered.

The hushed talks once again intensified. The Kindly Man held another hand up to silence everyone. “And?”

“Dragonlords. Fire beasts and…”

Arya Stark shut her eyes gently and in inner stillness that was then one with the chaos of the outer, implored the comforting cloak of Him of Many Faces.

“Retribution.”

Tycho Nestoris let out an embittered laugh and drained his goblet of wine. He sat behind an oak table in his banklord’s chamber and regarded the Elder of the Faceless Men with incredulity.

“What do you expect me to say to the new Sealord and the magisters, brother? That apart from the Targaryen Silver Queen and her nephew, there are other dragonlords that might have survived the Doom?” He scoffed and shook his head vehemently. “And winged sylphs in floating islands! Damnable birds that rise from ashes! These are all preposterous claims, not to mention impossible; and they will think us laughable charlatans! I am a banklord, for sakes! I have a reputation to uphold here!”

The Kindly Man sat opposite Nestoris and with calm conviction, replied, “Two great temples have received prophecies about this—two great faiths that have founded this very city. Brother, I pray that you do not mock the gods.”

Tycho Nestoris was a bit shaken by the mention of the gods; he himself is a man of faith. “But these are prophecies—their fulfillment is not a thing assured. Now, I do not deny the magic of dragonglass candles and skinchangers; but assuming that the child’s visions were true, assuming, let this be clear, why would dragonlords even venture back to Essos, when they have already claimed for themselves prosperous…wafting islands in the Westernmost?” He snorted most disrespectfully and with sarcasm, added. “And flying humans!”

“He snorted most disrespectfully and with sarcasm, added. “And flying humans!”

“Do humor me, brother,” the Elder asked. “But what had made the Valyrian Freehold rise to power?”

The banklord shrugged his shoulders, as if the question did not require any sort of thinking. “Their dragons.”

“Yes and no,” the Elder replied. “Their dragons and their slaves. They ruled by spreading terror across their colonies, by dehumanizing men, women, and children whom they have forcibly taken from the Empire of Ghis and the Isles. When they defeated the Andals and the Rhoynar, the other races from all over Essos cowered in fear and either retreated to their useless sanctuaries or succumbed to their powers—did nothing as the slavemasters continued to conquer and pillage.” The Kindly Man poured Nestoris more wine. “If I may quote one wise acolyte we have at the House of Black and White, ‘fear cuts deeper than swords’.”
Nestoris stared at the Elder with narrowed eyes, still unconvinced. “You said it so yourself, West of Westeros is laden with gold and sapphire! Possibly more gold and sapphire than any place in the Known World has. What more do they need from our cities?”

“Wrathful glory.”

The banklord secretly shuddered at the thought.

“And witnesses to that glory,” the Elder continued. “If you know the dragonlords the way you claim to, then you must know that it is not in their blood to remain in a far-off island of gold and sapphire and sorcery without anyone to see them and carry their tale of terrifying greatness over the centuries.”

“It has been four hundred years, brother,” Nestoris answered in a breaking voice. “The Valyrian Freehold is in ruins, and its former colonies have established the Free Cities.”

“You do not rebuild anything that was not lost,” the Elder replied. He leaned closer to the banklord as if compelling him to understand the horrifying entanglements of it all. “Valyria was the greatest civilization that ever was or ever will be. It had everything—power, dragons, enchantments. The dragonlords will not let five millennia of dreadful greatness remain underneath the Smoking Sea forever. Perhaps,” he paused, placing his thumb on his forehead, then his lips—his religious gesture. “Perhaps, four hundred years of wait is long enough.”

Nestoris fell silent, eyes directed on the floor. “The Targaryen Queen? She had certainly toiled to restructure the conditions in Slaver’s Bay.”

“Of her intents, we know nothing yet, except that she will sail for Westeros to reclaim the throne,” the Kindly Man replied. “And we do not know where her loyalties would lie, once the prophecies happen. Oh yes, she is the Breaker of Chains, but she also claims to be from the Blood of Old Valyria. We do not know what her course of action will be once she discovers about the other dragonlords—dragonriders and hatchers, not to mention.”

Tycho Nestoris was no fool. The Iron Bank is a powerful institution, said to influence the strongest, most effective leaders. Its gold could even force one king out of a throne and instate another. However, if the endless gold and sapphire West of Westeros would even have any hint of truth, then the Iron Bank will be nothing but just another one of the gold repositories in the Free Cities. That is, if the dragonlords would even allow Braavos to survive. He laughed inwardly at himself—ruination, and here he is, worrying still about gold and loans.

“How in the seven hells did they even reach the Westernmost?”

“Not through plain ships, this I can assure you,” the Kindly Man replied. “Ah, what did the texts say again? Magic. Only those with magical blood could survive the immense power that lay in the Westernmost. I am presuming they used their enchanted beasts, as one can only reach it through flight—and there, they may have thrived and let their wounds heal after the Doom, coexisted with their fellow creatures of rune, since the lords cannot subdue them. If you were nothing more than a plain mortal, and by every and all impossibilities you have succeeded in even catching sight of the lands, you will not die, no. You will be obliterated to your final shreds—mortal frame, spirit, soul, to the very last scintilla.” The Elder shook his head in astonishment. “The gods are partial to those that carry in them divine blood.”

“Such as your Chosen Child?” Nestoris asked, still sardonic.

“Yes, and the other Stark children,” the Kindly Man answered, ignoring the banklord’s
derisive tone. “West of Westeros is said to be timeless and boundless—the natural laws governing the Known and Unknown Worlds are said to be meaningless in that place. It may be, that the creatures that reside there cannot be bent by Death itself.”

“For sakes, immortal? In the truest sense?”

“That is safe to say, yes,” the Elder confirmed. “Even Death has its limits, I’m afraid—certain…confinesto it could not reach, it knew nothing of. And these Valyrian captors—the creatures of rune saw them worthy perchance, and granted their desire. The child said that one cannot enter West of Westeros unless invited. And they knew who she was—but of course, she’s a descendant of the old gods. And even in that generous invitation, reaching the place is not a thing assured.”

“Of course, brother. You just mentioned you need dragons or any other flying creature to get there,” Nestoris responded.

“Yes, indeed…indeed,” the Elder was contemplative. “However, you also have to enter a great tempest’s eye—be in the lawlessness of it and in the calm at the same time. This, the child has said. Tell me, brother, which beings in this world could possibly do such a thing—collide intentionally with a great, unrelenting storm, reach a magical dimension, survive, and plan to return to the other side of that same tempest? Which beings, do tell, but those that carry magic?”

The banklord was speechless. He merely gawked at his goblet and traced the rim, his thoughts riddled with the six million gold dragons the Lannisters still owed the bank, loans to the vassal lords of the Vale, a war in the North, and…this looming, seemingly formidable threat to the Secret City.

“The dragonlords are coming, more powerful than ever before, possibly with gifts of sorcery from the Westernmost,” the Kindly Man finished for him.

The banklord was now shaken beyond explication. A small trace of hopeless belief seeped through his skepticism and he exhaled loudly. He stood, but collapsed on the chair once more, for even his knees and all his physicality have succumbed to the shock. “Please convince me brother, that we’re only dealing with these dragonlords at the present.”

“Dragonlords only? Let us hope, then.” the Elder replied, tapping his fingers calmly on the oaken desk—and in all manners, he was the inverse of the thoroughly dispirited banklord. “And as if we do not have any more problems, some locals in the Silty Town have complained of twelve missing children. The Sealord must know about these things, and of the others, as well.”

“This is all, all insane…”

“Insane yes, though insanity doesn’t make these all untrue. As you have said, Winter has come in the North and nights will be long. Rivers in Essos have frozen before. All prophecies are intertwined.”

The banklord scoffed. “The Westerosi are a superstitious lot. Thousands of years since their walkers, as they claimed, have treaded their terrain. Thousands of impossible years and they still fool their children with their idiotic bedtime tales.”

The Elder only smiled in response. “Your Winter Wolf is a deceiver then? You now believe in the existence of winged enchanters, but not of an army of the dead?”

The man did not answer.

“We must not worry, brother,” Tycho Nestoris assured the Elder after some time of restive
musing, but then realized that he was actually convincing himself more. “The Titan has never been breached, our combat forces and the Arsenal are most formidable.”

“Just so,” the Elder nodded. He stood up calmly, as if what they spoke of was nothing but the weather, and he thus concluded their discussion. “But Braavos has never dealt with dragons before. Thanks to the gods we have a Stark.”

They say that a seeing doubt is better than a blind faith. Doubt will save him here. No man should be forced to cast himself into full belief without considering even a faint outline of reason. The Elder turned the ornate key that would lead him to the five-fingered passages of the House of Black and White. No, not yet, Nestoris thought.

“Brother.”

The Kindly Man turned to him.

“Four hundred years,” he began with tremble, managing to stand, though not without the help of his oaken. “Four hundred years—they could not have multiplied themselves and their dragons over the course of that time. No, no.” He shook his head. “They could not have.”

As if to a child frightened by mere imaginary hobgoblins, the Kindly Man smiled with benevolent understanding. “Did you leave your ears with Stannis Baratheon, brother? Our concept of time does not exist West of Westeros. Four hundred years may well be—four years, four days, four seconds in that land, yes? Fooled us—the canons seemed to have done this.” The Elder chuckled, seemingly beguiled. “History must be rewritten with enlightened ink—the dragonlords of Valyria never really perished in the Doom.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey awesome guys! Thank you for all your support (in various forms: comments, kudos, bookmarks, hits). Hope you like this one. Let me know what you think! ;D Much love.

*This is fanfiction only. GRRM is the sole author and owner of characters and base plots.
“Although foreknowledge is a valuable sense, its imperfections lie on its own usefulness.

She who has it will find herself ahead of her own time,

She will sense death before it happens, and witness life before it is born.

The future may be full of promises and threats, and these, she would see.

The flaw in foreknowledge is this: she who has it will have the power to change fate

Or worse, create it.

She who has it will be in danger of robbing others of their choices, and in turn, of themselves.

“Concerning the Use of Sense Faculties”, Methods of the Faceless Men

West of Westeros.

Its thaumaturgy, the beholding beauty, its dark secrets and allurements—these visions of the supernatural have taken up residence on her soul, her being.

Evil, evil.

But someone needed to tell these tales. Those who were gifted with the wisdom of dragonglass candles must take it upon themselves to ensure that these tales, from the mundane to the most profound, are not locked in the chasms, lest these tellings overwhelm the crevasse—spilling doom, with no one the wiser.

And magic, too.

Magic must exist, yes? If it would not, faith will be impossible for everything will be factual, and if all things are factual, there will only be a single truth.

And what is the use of a single truth? Of one truth being true for all others? Magic is evil because it is good.

Without faith, there won’t be hope, either. And hope is the very magic Braavos needs right now.

Arya Stark sat on the window seat of her small bedchamber. The distant lights in the Purple Harbor shone more incandescently from where she was, and she could not help but wonder what the Braavosi were occupied with at that very moment. Perhaps, the new Sealdor is now redecorating the palace, considering that the late Ferego Antaryon’s taste in furnishings was too Westerosi. Braavosi noblemen and women, dressed in elegant garbs, might be heading to either the Dome or The Blue Lantern for the latest mummer’s play. Better ones than Izembaro’s. She could almost see lovers on top of the Bridge of Eyes, where the expanse of the great city could be seen, including the Titan and mercantile ships docking in the Chequy Port. She could conjure in her mind a scene where some Bravos are dueling with swords beside the Moon Pool.
All of them were oblivious to the powers that lay waiting in the Westernmost, way past the Sunset Sea.

Countless thoughts vexed her that night. Doubtful she was not anymore, that her senses were actually enhanced by the obsidian palantir. She never believed the texts which spoke of the rare ability to see beyond, but experiencing what she just had, she was not so sure what to believe anymore. More than this, she almost wished that the splendor and horrors that lay West of Westeros had not revealed themselves to her.

She is the Electi.

All she ever wanted was to avenge her family, and to cleanse the ground of people who have wronged her. She wanted to prove herself worthy to be a Faceless Man, and serve Him of Many Faces. She merely desired to be…next to him.

These personal wants that had once mattered the whole universe to her suddenly became inconsequential. What does being the Electi actually entail? Having read all the texts, she knew the answer.

Self-sacrifice.

Dragons, Jaqen. A dragon took me West of Westeros.

And now the expansive wings of these fire beasts will darken the eastern and western skies of the Known and Unknown Worlds, such as what was writ in the prophecies. Inconceivable powers pulsed and continue to pulse in the Westernmost—powers that were captivating and daunting beyond comprehension, more frightening than crossing the distance between East and West so a gifted girl could slaughter and feed on men, and revel in their blood through a marriage of spirits with her direwolf.

How many gods are there again? The girl had already lost count.

It’s all the same to Him of Many Faces. He is everyone of these, and No One of these.

The gods. What genre of delight do they gain out of their cyvasse games in the perfect cosmos with humans as pawns?

Evil, evil.

Prophecies are mystifying things. Believers would say they came from the gods, yet they leave it open to any interpretation. They say that even the wisest of the wise cannot see the end of it all, so if such is the truth, why must we even believe in prophecies?

And the Titan of Braavos, it collapsed in my dream.

Perchance, prophecies were built to make people act on the chain of events that lead to the fulfillment of such prophecies. In such case, they can then be used to delude people by making them anticipate a future that may or may not happen, she thought.

“Prophecies make things work. The founding of Braavos, the conquer of Slaver’s Bay by the Dragon Queen, even your War of the Five Kings and may the heavens forbid, the Army of the Dead, all of these were born out of prophecies, so do not speak ill of them,” Jaqen had once told her in the Temple of the Moonsingers.

Three knocks on the door roused her from her contemplations.
“Is a girl well?” she heard him say when she opened the door. She bit her lip and nodded, though unsure. Jaqen gently pushed the door and invited himself in. She went back to the window seat and stared at the distant lights. Arya heard her master shut the door gently and set a chair close to where she sat.

“I still could not believe that Syrio Forel was a Faceless Man,” Arya whispered. “He sacrificed his life so I could escape. I wonder where he is now, or if he’s…happy.” Thoughts of Ned and Cat and Robb tortured her, and she questioned herself if there was any sort of happiness obtainable when Death was, on you, forced rather than willingly gifted.

Jaqen settled himself and replied, “He swore an oath to the Order, to Him of Many Faces. He had to keep you safe. We had to.” The girl let his words linger in her. The guilt—it was still there, it never went away. Her dancing master, whose lips always spoke of eluding Death with his words of “Not today”, who taught her how all humans are made of water and are thus conquerable, who acted as human stronghold against Meryn Trant and four others so she may run for dire life—faceless, like her Lorathi.

*They kept me safe. And for what now?*

“What would happen to Braavos, Jaqen?” she asked, dismissing the unwelcome contemplations, not taking her eyes from the harbor.

The Lorathi sighed. “If these are dragonlords we are talking about, then a man supposes you already have a clear picture of what could happen.”

She faced him. “But why Braavos?”

For a few seconds, he only gazed at her lovely face. Her dark brown hair had grown past her shoulders, and he loved it when she would brush its strands off her face during combat. One time, she bound her hair in a long tail, trailing at her back, waving as she walked. Arya Stark appeared… too prim with such look, and no—his lovely girl was never prim. Hot-blooded, impassioned in both ways good and evil, and consistently truculent; never prim. The Lorathi smiled as he recalled how he pulled the knot that bound her hair without her knowing at first—as if it bound her spirit as well—and so mad she was when he told her, “Wear your hair that way, loose.”

*If only a man could take you away from all these…but whereto?*

There was nothing to do but to at least shed her some light. This is her life after all, they must let her in on it. “Braavos is a threat to any civilization that would seek to reestablish itself through tyranny. It is wealthiest, most powerful, most influential, and it is safe to say that it is the only true free city of all the Free Cities. Although we must not be too hasty to conclude that the other cities and kingdoms will be spared from the wrath of the dragonlords, should another dance of dragons come to pass, another Doom, and they emerge victorious in the end—may the gods forbid.”

Arya remembered the first law of Braavos carved out in the arch by the Long Canal. Braavos detests slavery strongly, and unlike the other Free Cities wherein the ratio of slaves to master ranges from two-to-five is to one, Braavos has written laws enforced to not only protect its own citizens from bondage, but to ensure that no citizen will take slaves from other cities or from the Bay. *No man, woman, child will ever be a slave, thrall, or bondsman*—such is etched in not only the the Braavosi arch, but in the Braavosi spirit.

“This city was never part of the Freehold, it was founded by slaves,” Jaqen continued. “The very existence of Braavos and its core ideals are simply antithetical to the inexorable foundations upon which the Valyrian Empire was built.”
Understanding seeped in, and Arya finished Jaqen’s sentences. “Dragonlords will seek to annihilate the descendants of their slaves, who thrived and built a city now unparalleled by any in all aspects.”

“Just so, but these assumptions of yours are too fundamental. Valyrian expansion—this may well be the precise portrayal of that which we are all preparing for,” Jaqen said, rubbing his thumb against his lower lip. Arya had to swallow hard at the sight. “And revenge, indeed. To the Moonsingers who have seized the slave ships to Sothoryos and slaughtered the masters, and to Faceless Men who generously bestowed the gift from Him of Many Faces to the slavelords and the sorcerers preventing the Fourteen Flames from flaring up.”

Her mouth fell open. She swung her feet from the window seat so she could face him fully. “The Faceless Men caused the Doom of Valyria?”

Jaqen looked at her wide-eyed in stupefaction. All of a sudden, he burst out in rich laughter much to Arya’s exasperation. She folded both arms on her chest, as if such gesture could silence her master,unknowing of her displeasure. His fingers spontaneously brushed his red-and-white of hair and Arya could not help but marvel at the effect these little acts of him could have on her. He answered her in the middle of his suddenly charming chuckles. “Do not let the Elder hear that, lovely girl, or he would no doubt hit you again with a stick. No, no… the Faceless Men did not cause the Doom. The Valyrians knew what was coming for them, this was why they mobilized their sorcerers in the first place. The Faceless Men, well, they just catalyzed the whole thing.”

“Oh, is that so?” she raised one brow, playing the part of the unconvinced.

“Of course. Why else do you think would the dragonlords seek reckoning against them?”

Jaqen was still grinning, and for seconds there, they just gazed softly at each other and relished the silence. There was a certain truth to it, that if men abstain from speaking once in a while, a lot more could be said and heard. It was she who broke the quiet.

“West of Westeros is mystical, Jaqen,” the girl said, then stared at the chamber’s ceiling with dreamy eyes. “It was...ah, what did the Elder say again? Timeless and boundless. I was a child back then, and despite my protestations, I was forced to learn the territories, and their lords and sigils, their threadbare, characterless histories even.” Characterless, except that of Rhaegar and Lyanna. “The maps begin with the Iron Islands and end with the Shadowlands, and the dragonglass candle—it made me realize how we are not alone. The maps are mere fragments; there are other realms, and... it’s a thing more terrifying than being alone. Indescribable it was, glorious. I wish you could have seen it.”

Jaqen gazed at his lovely girl and smiled. “No doubt it was all of those things. But please, Arya Stark, never tell a man that you plan to sail across the Sunset Sea to reach that...very well, otherworldly place.”

She laughed softly and returned his gaze—silently delighting herself in the sight of him. Never in her wildest mirages had she seen anything at all that could even be close to the Lorathi in mysticism and otherworldliness. Oh, West of Westeros, forgive me, but you’re second only to Jaqen H’ghar.

“Is it good or evil?”

“Neither.”

The Lorathi narrowed his eyes. “Twofoldness, lovely girl. Polarity balances out all elements
—natural and supernatural, ordinary and magical. Even in the prophecies, only fire can subdue ice, as ice can subdue fire. Which is West of Westeros, then? Good or evil?"

Arya Stark only smiled at him. _How can a girl tell a man this?_ And she laughed at herself quietly, at her pathetic attempt to emulate his speech, when he is caught in the complexity of having to provide explanations. “Neither, Jaqen, really. These creatures of runes, they are not even in the middle of it all—they possess no conception of twofoldness, much less the gray area of it. Even I could not…understand how they have existed—when they knew no time, when they knew no beginning and end. No Death. So, how could they distinguish between good and evil? It cannot be described in the concept of twofoldness—it is, possibly, a whole infinite spectrum.”

The Lorathi nodded, gaining a mere silhouette of understanding in her pronouncements. “Too complex, it is.” He sighed, then raised his brows in good humor. “Well then, a man will choose to stay in Braavos and chain his lovely girl on both posts of her featherbed, so she may not think of things foolish—such as venturing in that mystical place that is not in the maps.”

The girl laughed softly.

“Your name day is in four days. As is your initiation to the Order,” He yawned and flexed his arms upwards. “A man wonders what he can give you that you do not already have.” Then with a frolicsome wink, added. “Powerful, chosen child.”

_Winterfell._

_And you, _Arya Stark screamed inside. She bit her lip hard till it hurt and stared down at both of her feet to hide the anguish that abruptly gripped her. She had to wake up. If there is one thing she knew about Jaqen H’ghar, it was the fact that no one in this world is ever allowed to own him. Not even Him of Many Faces, perhaps.

“You don’t have to get me anything, Jaqen. I mean, you have already done a lot.”

Jaqen H’ghar just smiled. _The moon, perhaps? _he thought, then laughed inwardly at the idea and mocked himself. _Even if it was possible in another universe to get her the moon, what would she do with it? Play with it? Use it to light her bedchamber?_

If only Arya Stark could read contemplations that reside in the minds of men, for she could not yet, she would have heard him say this, and she would have laughed with him at the silliness of it. And then, she would have held him tight and kissed him, for she would find it all romantic.

“We will return to the Moonsingers on the morrow, lovely girl.” He stood up and settled the chair he used next to the small bedside table. “The High Priestess expressed her intention of helping you unlock one more gift.”

“Foresight?”

He nodded and headed for the door.

“Please don’t go, Jaqen.”

Those words stopped the Lorathi from taking one more step. When was the last time he has heard them?

Why, of course, underneath the cells of that towering, spectre-riddled castle, after that relentless massacre that was no doubt an aversion to the faith and all the codes—after the coin, after some Valyrian words so she might find him again.
He had to leave her that night, frightened though she was, for even the Electi must be given the choice to either shun or fulfill a possible fate. And now after many, many moons, he heard that plea from her again.

Jaqen H’ghar heard her rise from the window seat and walk towards him. The Lorathi was still facing the door, and was about to turn to her when he felt both of her hands sliding on his waist, her arms encircling his torso.

She had embraced him from behind.

Arya Stark pressed her soft cheeks against Jaqen’s back.

“Please don’t go. I…I will not ask you for anything more at all, I promise.”

When she heard her beg and even offer a compromise, Jaqen H’ghar thought that he could give his lovely girl whatever it was that she would ask for—be it every damnable scum on her kill list, or the Iron Throne. Hells, if she asks for the life of Ned and Catelyn and Robb, he would venture to darkest Asshai and ask that they be given a second.

Or dragons, so she could see her otherworldly place.

He softly caressed both of her hands clasped on his torso, and she held him tighter, misconstruing his touch as an effort to drive her away.

Why, lovely girl? Why would you even want to be with me tonight? Do tell.

“Y-you can say no…but please, think about it,” she implored in an unsteady voice.

She had never felt so, so alone. For the longest time she had burned with longing for him and with something more profound than simple want, and for the longest time, she had punished herself by being silent about all of it. She convinced herself that night that if she would remain quiet about it now, she might as well tear her own wretched self into bloodied fragments.

Witless though it was, she was prepared to give up her birthright, all her gifts from the old gods, the vision of the West that had changed her life, her sublime place in the Songs, everything—every damned thing, just so he would stay with her for a night.

To just stay, nothing more.

Arya Stark felt the Lorathi pulling her hands off of him, very slowly, so she shut her eyes tight to keep the heartbreak from overtaking her.

Drowning in the Sunset Sea might be less of a torment, she thought.

She slowly let her hands fall to her sides. She curled them into fists and opened them again, just to be assured that she still had some form of discipline over her crumbling self. Hands, unseeable, clawed at her heart in all madness—and she was sure those hands were slicing through her core with poisoned knives because her chest felt so, so painful.

You never learn, Arya, do you?

She was no direwolf, not at that moment for she was not in a state of trance, but her soul howled in inescapable woe. As if she could handle any more aching, she started cursing herself and her lunacy over the man in eight various languages.
And her facelessness tortured her. *To him, you are No One. No One.*

Heaving a sigh, she finally turned her back from him and walked away.

Her hopes were lost, until she felt her wrist being pulled and her frame being lifted by Jaqen H’ghar’s strong arms from the floor. She gasped at the unexpected and instinctively placed her arms around his neck. He moved her legs so they wrapped around his waist, and he carried her towards the bed. Jaqen sat on the edge face to face with Arya on his lap. His lovely girl’s eyes were misty, but at least, she was smiling.

“A man will stay,” Jaqen whispered. “But please, Arya Stark, no toying with his belt.”

She nodded and grinned.

Jaqen slowly lifted her right hand to his lips and kissed each knuckle, one by one.

The girl drew a long, deep breath and let herself immerse in a sea of electrifying sensations that cascaded from the tip of her fingers to her small toes. He never took his eyes off her face, and though she knew that her cheeks were flushed, she could not bear to look away. The girl let the fingers of her left hand slide through Jaqen’s white streaks.

And it may be, that Jaqen has other women—it is not impossible, seeing how beautiful he is, should one truly ponder about it. They are faceless—but they are also men; and the practice, perhaps, is this: ‘rid of the lust from your innermost, and return to serve Him of Many Faces’. Inconsistent with the Creeds, still, there it was.

It may also be that he merely relented to her whims that he stayed in order to alleviate himself of the guilt brought by their altercation in the combat room. To comfort her, perchance? The dragonglass candle was not merciful, after all. It may be…it may be that for him, all these were close to nothing.

*Why must it matter how he sees all these? Here he is, and tomorrow, maybe I could die.*

“What would the Elder say,” he humored. “A man must be in his bedchamber right now.”

Arya exhaled and Jaqen smiled at her berry-scented breath. “What will he do if he discovers us? Kill us both?”

He only chuckled.

They both stretched their exhausted bodies on the featherbed. Arya’s head rested on her Lorathi’s chest, as he held her in a tight embrace. His fingers gently traced patterns across her arm until her eyes could not fend off the drowsy feeling any longer.

“Sleep, sweet Arya…Jaqen will stay.”

Arya laughed softly. *Still, he treats me like a child.* She inhaled the scent of him which she loved too much, and drifted off, in the complete absence of the glass candle’s charm—off to Winterfell, where Ned and Catelyn held hands as they watched Bran and Rickon sing an old Northern ballad off-key; where Robb teased Sansa about the stableboy that apparently fancied her; where Jon patted her head full of thick, disheveled hair, as she smoothed Nymeria’s ruffled coat. They were all in the great hall, *a family*, enjoying the familiar warmth coming from the large hearth, and there was laughter.
Jaqen sat at the edge of the bed and brushed away the locks hiding her face. She was already slumbering. A solitary teardrop rolled down her rosy cheek, without her knowing. A dream, perhaps? Was she dreaming of something so sorrowful, so despairing? Should he awaken her so she may rouse from it? Or should he leave her to herself?

As the recesses of his mind deliberated on what he must do, his heart, none the wiser, urged him to fill up that yearning he had buried deep at the back of his consciousness.

He gently lifted her face and kissed her on the lips.

It was not a very long kiss, but it was enough to taste her, relish her, delight in her.

Absurdity. Of course, it was not enough.

Never will it be.

*Cast me not, Him of Many Faces.*

He lowered his face upon her, and the tender sound and soft force of their breaths collided. *Strong...so strong,* Jaqen H’ghar thought. From his partly opened mouth, he inhaled the trace of air that came out of her. He felt himself tremble slightly.

His mind was in complete anarchy—and this, he had never gone through in his then structured and undeviating life as a Faceless.

And he kissed her again.

This time, his lips lingered in hers; he realized...she was...

*Soft sweet succulent.*

He found himself gently nipping her lips, sucking them, like a babe whose source of sustenance was his childbearer’s milk.

The Lorathi did not anymore know for how long he was kissing her. His awareness focused only on one thing—savoring the flavor of her wildberry lips. Was this her magic possessing him? Dear gods, she’s so lovely and luscious, a well-seasoned wine fit for kings and princes. He was neither of these, but that did not stop him from sipping the sweetness from her mouth.

*Arya.*

Yes, she is Ice, but the wintriness of her person did nothing to quench his Fire.

Whilst pleasuring himself with her lips, his thumb gently moved to her chin, so he could part her mouth some more and he could go deeper.

And for real, he kissed her deeper. Sounds of his desire came out of his throat.

*Oh, Arya...*

She moaned.

Then, she moved a little.
He slowly let go.

_A man must leave this place._ He breathed in unsteady rhythms. The Lorathi could hear the beating of his own heart, seemingly earnest to get out of his chest, pumping scarlet to his _every_ part, and the loudness of it might awaken her. Very gently, he moved her head from his chest to the feather pillow, stood up, and left the chamber.

“No, sweet child. Foreknowledge, not foreseeing,” the High Priestess corrected her.

They were in the Temple of the Moonsingers. The High Priestess donned her usual immaculate white robe and reassuring smile. The girl was cognizant of how very patient the High Priestess was with her despite her seemingly endless string of questions, and it made her appreciate the older woman more—even the girl was getting tired of her own asking.

She woke up that morning without Jaqen by her side, and she realized that she had been curled up against her soft yet lifeless pillow for what could have been hours. _Was it all just a dream?_ She asked herself. _Impossible._ She let her eyes roam around her bedchamber for any signs that he was with her last night but could not find any. She hurriedly dressed up and proceeded to the common hall where masters and acolytes gather to break their fast, and she saw him—speaking with the Stern-faced Man on the far end of the long table. Since he was not rewarding her even a quick glance, she decided to approach him after the breaking of bread.

“Jaqen,” she called him as members of the Order rose from the table to perform their various duties. He turned around to face her, his expression blank. “Uh, this morning…” she began, but then realized that she could not continue. What was she to say? Why did she wake up without him on her bed? She was…not his bride or his betrothed, hells, she was not even sure _what_ she was to him.

All she saw in his face was cluelessness. It might be that it never really happened and her constant unrelenting imaginings only played tricks with her.

_Oh, it was all a dream, then._

Arya Stark sighed, and ignored the sudden pain from unseeable poisoned knives that clenched her chest.

“Nevermind.”

She turned to walk away, but felt his hand gripping her wrist. When she looked at him again, the corners of his lips played the hint of a smile.

“A man had early duties, lovely girl,” the Lorathi purred. “He didn’t wish to wake you up.”

Jaqen stroked her wrist lightly and she beamed.

“Oh dear gods, a man and a girl,” the Handsome Man interrupted their wordless exchange. He was the very last one to stand from the table and by the looks of it, he had been observing them. “How very _poetic._”

The Lorathi shot him a displeased glare and the comely master left the common hall, seemingly delighted with himself.

Arya Stark tried to devote her fullest attention to the High Priestess. They sat face to face on
built-in marble chairs while Jaqen settled himself on a cushioned bench at the side. “Are they not the same gifts? Foresight and foreknowledge?”

“In concept, but not in essence,” the High Priestess replied. “Seeing is not knowing. Consider this: two priests from different cities were gifted the same vision by the gods. Beside a waterless river, they both envisioned a vastly green field lavished with bountiful crops, ready to be harvested. One priest told his city magistrate to encourage the influx of mercantile ships from other cities and begin an open trade, for the city’s plenty awaited them. The other priest spoke to his city’s ruler about setting up a large storehouse where harvested crops could be kept as they wait for famine. What do you think will happen to each city?”

Arya Stark considered the elements of the vision. “The first city will starve and the second will thrive.”

“What made you say so?”

“There will be plenty, this is true,” the girl said, ignoring Jaqen H’ghar who was biting his thumb and watching her intently. “But not for long. The bountiful field was beside a waterless river, and presumably, that river dried up because the cities have not had rain for a very long time. The first city will trade their crops for silk and pelt and metals and other things that cannot be at all consumed, while the second city will store food to sustain themselves should the famine strike at the most unexpected time.”

The High Priestess gave her a satisfied smile. “Very good. The first is foresight and the second, foreknowledge. What does the latter have that the former does not?”

“A lot of things, perhaps,” the girl reflected. “I could name one, though—higher truth, a certainty that is beyond what appears. You cannot get that if you’re short-sighted.” She studied the Priestess’ beautiful visage and wondered how many men had tried and failed to persuade her to leave a sacred life of celibacy. Even in the absence of hair, even with her pointed skull, she still looked exquisite. She shoved the unnecessary thoughts away. “So, I will be gifted with foreknowledge?”

“No, Arya Stark,” the High Priestess laughed her dainty laugh. “You are a daughter of the North, and you descended from the First Men who communed with the faceless, nameless old gods. You were born with the gift. And I, a lowly priestess, just happened to know how to unseal that gift.”

“A girl is ready.”

They held hands. She waited in the stillness.

True enough, a flash of visions saturated her suddenly cleared head.

_Blood in the snow…_  
_Urkon._  
_Ajax._

The woods witch spoke to her.

_With my own two eyes, I see you wolf child. Blood child. You smell of nothing but death! Are you punishing me, that you had to carry yourself to my hill? I am in no need of your grief… Depart from here, dark heart. Begone! Die!_
By the God’s eye, The red-haired Lady Harrenhal will weep.

Heraxos. Varathis.

Bael’s infant—he shall succeed the Lord Stark, but the lady of wrath will have his crown.

The Wolf girl...she will bring him four fire-beasts...the night will be long.

Beware, beware. Wolf girl, beware of the third dragonhead.

Swear to the greenseers, by the Isle of Faces. Never will we part, beloved. Swear it by ice and fire!

Find us, sweet child. Ride your dragons.

The tempest is not that great...

And you have magic in you.

Pained resonances came out of Arya Stark’s lips, as she threw her head back. The screams grew louder—it was as if a hundred tortured souls finally found their release. It was through her, and it was evil as it was good.

“Arya!” she heard a man call. The High Priestess was quick—she released the girl’s hands and cupped her face, and with soothing sounds, she calmed her.

“Sweet child.”

The girl held the Priestess’ hands that were covering her cheeks, her eyes riddled with perplexity and a hint of dread. When she was but a child of twelve, all she ever needed was Needle and Jaqen’s courage—these and she will be assured that she can trample men underfoot, reduce them to lifelessness and hurl them in the abyss, prove their mortality. And in all manners, be at peace and in the graciousness of Him of Many Faces.

How can I battle against all these?

“What did you see, my sweet child?” the woman asked.

Blur and riddles. Unfathomable complexities.

How can she even tell her?

The girl shook her head gently. “N-nothing…” she lied.

This, and the woman pressed her lips against the girl’s temple. “You may not know what you have seen. But you have seen things.”

“Nothing, by the gods I swear.”

“Lovely girl,” she heard the Lorathi speak in a quiet tone. “Do not swear falsely in front of the Priestess, please.”

“I am not bearing falsehood!”

“Shush, shush,” the Priestess becalmed her once more. “Sweet child. Keep them to yourself. But when you must, use them. Promise me this.”
Arya Stark gently pulled the woman’s hands away from her face, impatience registered on her countenance. “Forgive me, but how can I make such a promise if I never caught sight of anything at all? Oblivion. There, that’s what I saw.”

The Priestess nodded meekly.

“White and silver…white and gray…” the woman whispered. “Arya Stark, you now have the sight of the forest.” She held out a metal basin of clear potion in front of her.

Arya looked at her own reflection in the clarity of the liquid.

Both of her eyes, from gray, were now green.

The girl’s visions through the dragonglass candle showed what was in the West seven moons past.

The man had green eyes, like hers. And the girl must be careful, for if she does not handle her contemplations well, he could know every single thing—strengths, fears, plans, gifts. If he gains passage through her, it would all be…

Too easy.

*Powerful, yes. A child nevertheless.*

The man threw a seared flesh the size of a whole arm, high up in the air, and the beast with wings lunged headfirst to catch the flesh with its fanged, fire-breathing mouth. Oh, how it loved the taste of magisters. It flew against the wind that pushed the red hulls of the ship.

He looked at the expansive waters of the Narrow. Tired he was, of seas.

Two days. The man will for the first time, behold the Great Titan of the Secret City—a behemothic statue grasping a broken Valyrian sword, a symbol of breaking away from the Freehold.

*The first daughter of Valyria had been faithful, even after four centuries. Reward will be upon them.*

The beast’s terrifying cry shattered the silence of that very night.
After being subjected to a tedious process of surreal envisioning and potion-drinking, the girl left the Temple of the Moonsingers with the Faceless Master.

“Too cumbersome, master,” Arya complained. They were walking along the cobblestoned pathway leading to the western side of the Long Canal; a boat waits for them there to bring them to the isolated location of the House of Black and White. “These visions—they haunt me in my sleep. They’re vague and kind of...shadowy, you know, in an eerie sort of way.” She wiped the sweat off the priestess’ face that she wore. When one grew up in the North, everywhere else is warm and humid. “But truly, I saw nothing.”

“During your initiation to the Order, you will be allowed to choose,” Jaqen said, who in turn, wore the same face of a *jhat* as in their first visit in the Moonsingers. “You can either accept or refuse the task, with no consequences on your part.”

The words had her confused. Being allowed a choice is one antithesis to the selfless state all Faceless Men seek to reach; and so she paused with her steps and pulled his arm so he could face her. “We are allowed to choose? Are we speaking of different temples, perhaps? This is the House of Black and White we are talking about, is it not?”

“Yes, no, and yes to your three questions,” he replied, and she laughed at his japing. “The same way that you were granted the choice to use that iron coin and to join the Ordained. The Order allows us a certain, albeit strict kind of freedom. If one is not given freedom to choose actions or make decisions, then how can one be held accountable for them?”

“Does it matter to you, Jaqen?” Arya asked. “I mean, this whole thing with Braavos, does it matter to you?”

He tucked some loose hair behind his lovely girl’s ears. “Of course. Braavos is my home.”

Arya Stark smiled and nodded. Her choices were verily dependent on countless things, considerations. However, when it comes to *him*, all considerations are compromised, if not regarded as worthless as suddenly. “Braavos is *our* home.” And just like that, she had decided even before she was requested to do so.

It was almost dark when they have reached the secluded bank of the canal that would lead...
them to the temple. It was as if the Braavosi had this hidden consensus to not use that side of the canal should they wish to visit the Isle of the Gods; for the longest time now, only the Faceless Men have access to this part. A tall, gangly acolyte of the temple who was given a task near the Drowned Town was waiting for them in the boat. He gently removed the mask he wore which was that of a fishmonger, and nodded at the Lorathi and his apprentice.

“Everything went according to plan?” the Lorathi asked the acolyte in Braavosi. He ran his palm across his face and the jhat was Jaqen again. The acolyte just stared at the Lorathi master with awe and Arya had to cover her mouth with her hand to keep herself from giggling at the lad’s reaction. She removed the priestess’ face and carefully placed in the boat seat a small sack of potions she obtained from the Moonsingers. They both removed the jhat-and-priestess adornments until what remained of their clothing were tunic and breeches for Jaqen, and a flowing robe for her. They now appeared like ordinary Braavosi.

“Most definitely, ser,” Kael the acolyte answered after recovering from a few seconds of being dumbstruck. “The Norvosi trader was given the gift. Non-locals had lots of stories to tell. It seems that the Dragon Queen had set her sails five nights ago, and she caught everyone off his guard because she was not expected to leave Slaver’s Ba—Dragons’ Bay that early.”

So, I heard misleading information in The Gate? Arya asked herself. She told the Kindly Man that the Targaryen queen will not sail for Dragonstone until tomorrow. As it appears, she has been traversing the seas for almost a week now.

“Another thing,” the acolyte continued, untying the knot on the thick rope that held the boat. “There are rumors of another Targaryen—one in Dorne, they say, currently in hiding in Tyrosh with an army of sellswords. Ten and nine of age, I have heard.”

The Lorathi narrowed his eyes at the news. Who was it, again? Ah, yes. Sixth of his Name, as they call him. At the nethermost of all their concerns, this is where he would be. “The Westerosi Mad King and his kin fathered a lot of bastards during their reign. This is no surprise. Targaryen legitimacy is as rare as their dragon gold.”

“He’s a bastard then?” Arya confirmed. “A false claimant? Wonder who the mother is. I have a bastard brother—”

Her words were cut as Jaqen H’ghar stood frozen.

“Jaqen, is everything fi—”

“Silent,” he cut her.

The Lorathi closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. For a moment there, not one of them said a word. Something—something was amiss, and before she could ask him anything at all, he had opened his eyes and looked at her and the acolyte in naked alarm.

“Stay here, the both of you,” he ordered. “A man will be back.” He gave her a meaningful look as if emphasizing that it was a stern command, specifically directed to her, and that it must not be disobeyed.

When Jaqen was a little out of their line of sight, Arya rose. “Wait here brother, I’m going after him.”

“But the Lorathi master told us to stay,” the acolyte said, a tinge of fear evident in his voice. “Please, sister. If he discovers I let you go—”
Whatever the rest of the acolyte’s sentence was, Arya had no clue. She dashed from the bank of the canal towards Moonsinger lane, as her eyes quickly scoured the place for any signs of Jaqen.

Her footsteps were quick and sure as she traversed the path that led to the poorly-lit vicinity in the Ragman Lane. She was quite close to the Happy Port when she saw her Lorathi master glancing behind him to make sure he was not being followed, as he walked guardedly inside…Satin Palace?

She knew this place from her previous task as Blind Beth, she had begged here before. This brothel masquerading as a winehouse smelled of perfume and was full of annoying girls who knew nothing but to whisper endearments, giggle, sway their silky skirts to catch the attention of men. Her footsteps stopped when she reached a narrow, darkened passageway by the side of the brothel, and she surveyed its interior through its satin-curtained window.

True enough, three ladies stood from their seats and approached Jaqen H’ghar. Their hands were suddenly all over him—shoulders, sinewy arms, chest, waist, hips, hells…one hand was even on his buttocks! Arya Stark gritted her teeth when her Lorathi master whispered something that made the three ladies giggle. They led him to a seat by the corner and the girl realized that the Lorathi wore a different albeit handsome face.

*He asked us to stay in the boat so he could go for a quick visit to a brothel?* Arya Stark seethed.

She was so, so exhausted of his frolics!

Upon close scrutiny of the master’s face though, she quickly realized that his actions were nothing but feint in front of the ladies. He was discreetly spying on someone.

The girl followed the Lorathi’s line of vision and saw two men in charcoal-gray Volantene robes seated opposite each other on the far, concealed end of the house. To the untrained eye, they were nothing but ordinary winehouse patrons, but this is the Satin Palace, which meant that no one merely ‘chances’ upon it or visits it for mere purpose of intoxicating oneself with women and wine both. No man would just sit and discourse with another in this place—the ladies in silken gowns that touch various parts at one’s asking, that expertly lavish one with flummeries well-rehearsed, all these are just fronts to truthful negotiations that reach conclusion in that place.

She could not make out the face of the first man whose back was towards her, but she could tell that he was tall and lean; and he somewhat had an air of aristocracy about him. Even though he covered his head with a dark hood that did not seem to complement his robes, Arya could be sure that the man was extremely alluring, because most if not all of the ladies were stealing glances at him even when they were engaged with other patrons. The second man was the obverse of the first, she could tell. He was a balding, plump man with an oversized, deflated nose and thick lips darkened by too much ale.

Panic swept over the girl when the first man sharply turned his head to the window from where Arya Stark was watching.

*Seven hells.*

The girl swiftly backed away from the window and leaned against the wall of that darkened passage, to avoid being seen. Her back stiffened, and for a moment there, she almost wished that she had obeyed Jaqen and stayed in the boat.

*His eyes were glowing green and angry,* she shuddered. *His hair underneath the hood—*
platinum white. And he sensed me…I don't know how but he knew I was here.

Arya Stark had never felt this much fretfulness before, not even when she was at Harrenhal wherein torture was the way of life and any day could be their last. ‘Valar Morghulis’ had become the honey of her mouth, and Death, her close comrade. However, that man…

About him, there was something inexplicably sinister and doomful, something shadier than the act itself of dealing demise on others. Who is he? What did Jaqen H’ghar feel in his bones and faceless senses for him to venture this way and spy on that man and his companion?

Small steps…her footing was now wary, unsure. She slowly took one last peek inside and when she did, the man and his companion had already stood up and had taken a hurried exit from the winehouse.

The fierce eyes of the first man darted from left to right, as if scouring the place for a specific infiltrator. And she knew, he was looking for her. Fear cuts deeper than swords, she told herself, keep calm, you are faceless. She held the hilt of her dagger as she scrambled for a place to conceal herself. She cautiously walked to her left.

The passageway was a dead-end. She assessed the other side whence she entered, and walked briskly there, until she saw eight Volantene slave-soldiers with jade-green tiger stripes on their faces heeding the orders of the plump man. Disorientation threatened to consume every last bit of logic and sense that she had.

A strong hand suddenly covered Arya Stark’s mouth and pinned her against the cobbled wall of that passageway, knocking air out of her chest. She was about to draw her dagger and stab the aggressor bloody when she saw the persona’s familiar features.

“Jaqen, I—”

“Shush,” he tightened his hand on her mouth, pushing himself against her more. He towered over her so she had to look up to see his face. He was still, and very silent, listening intently for signs of imminent peril. His head was tilted to his left, studying the sounds. The air smelled of sea and of danger. Then, shadows drew closer to where they stood.

I should have stayed in the boat…I should have.

Swords and spears were drawn. Heads turned here and there. Perhaps, perhaps…they planned to locate them and then charge. The Lorathi gently removed his hand that covered her mouth and reached for something in his breech pocket—he carried nothing but a dagger. There were more than ten of them, which meant only one thing—this will be suicide in the name of Him of Many Faces.

“Jaqen…”

“I said quiet!”

“But Jaqen—”

He drowned her outcry by crushing his lips against hers…

In bewilderment at the unexpected, Arya Stark’s mouth dropped open, and Jaqen H’ghar took this as a welcoming gesture—he ravaged and plundered her lips, invading it with his tongue, taking little, painful, yet luscious nips of it through his teeth.

A Lorathi kiss.
The Volantenes! The subconscious part of her screamed, but her flesh was powerless to do any other thing but marvel at his kisses and his touch…

In the corner of her eye, Arya saw the men, still searching for her calmly yet obsessively. They walked closer towards the passageway where the Lorathi and his apprentice stood pecking at each other and she immediately realized in their expressions that they were suspicious of them both.

*Play the part,* she urged herself.

Arya regarded them as nuisance, her lips suddenly pillaging Jaqen’s, her hand sliding down the soft of his thigh, rubbing him there. She suckled his lower lip, and upon hearing him groan with what may be make-believe pleasure, she instinctively tore the front part of her garment to reveal a fraction of her breasts’ snowy-white skin.

“You are ravishing…I certainly got my coin’s worth on you,” she heard Jaqen H’ghar moan in Braavosi tongue against her lips. He pulled her the closest to him, and she felt his firmness against her. “Oh…yes, yes…” Sounds of desire were coming out of his throat and Arya…she couldn’t breathe. She silently clamored for air, inhaling the slightest trace of it if the Lorathi would even allow her to. If Jaqen was sucking spirit out of her mortal frame, then he was certainly victorious at doing it.

*Rough…too rough, Master.*

It might have been that Jaqen heard her inner protestation, for gradually, his lips went delicate on her. Yes, he bit her lips, but his teeth were more pleasing than punishing. And he tickled her lips with his tongue—made sure they were wet and coated and thoroughly gratified. His hands traveled to massage her hips, cruising…cruising to squeeze her behind.

His breathing was in fits and starts. Almost…

*Ravenous.*

“We must have a room to ourselves, yes, my sweet?” He murmured again in Braavosi, placing light kisses upon her jaw. His warm, wet mouth moved to her neck, licking and nipping, and in every sensual act of his, she gasped and sighed and moaned. The girl almost squealed when she felt the Lorathi grinding himself against her, in repetitive motions, pinning her helplessly against the cobbled wall, as the not-so-thick fabric of her gown scraped roughly on its exterior.

“Yes m’lord. I cannot…ah! U-undress for you here…” she replied in the midst of those gasps and sighs and moans, then giggled coyly. Jaqen’s lips and tongue were at her collarbones, close…close to the flesh of her now womanly bosoms. He nipped her skin. “Oh! M’lord…c-calm down—the night is long…”

“And what more do you want *me* to do to you?” the Lorathi purred, moving his lips once more to her neck.

She shut her eyes as he planted kiss marks all over her shoulders. Sighed, this time, deeper. “Oh, many, many things, m’lord…Should you wish, I could mount you—I rode horses, whipped them and they obeyed. And oh yes, I ride fast—very fast. Does the master want it wild? Rough? I’m gifted at many things, m’lord.”

“Oh, dear gods…” Jaqen groaned.

“Is it true, m’lord?” the girl asked, in the midst of nipping his ear. Her mouth formed a soundless ‘Oh’ as Jaqen suckled a bit of her neck’s flesh. There was the rousing feel of his teeth that
suffused every pore of her skin—filling the want that cannot any longer be concealed, and all acts of his were so, so maddening.

“True?”

“That men—they’re much more delightful to mount than horses?”

Jaqen H’ghar thrice whispered that one curse in Lorathi as he felt all his blood descend to that part between his legs.

It may be that there was something in her feigned coquettishness that further awakened the Lorathi, for he pulled her to him as if their bodies could get any more closer, then returned to owning her lips, forcing her mouth to open for him in the most impassioned manner. Arya drowned in Jaquen’s kisses, but it seemed that he had no intention of tempering himself.

There was absolutely nothing the girl could do but hold on to his strong arms, for if she would not, she might completely surrender herself to unexplored nirvana.

Drowning…drowning in him, his kisses.

Sweet heavens…

Jaqen.

Convinced by their show, the two men and their slave-swords trotted away and continued searching some place else, with one muttering something about perverted Braavosi men desecrating girls anywhere.

The shadows ebbed away.

Jaqen released her lips and placed his forehead against hers. His eyes were tightly shut, his breathing, frenzied. His every exhale, she breathed in—and it was like communing with his spirit. If this be the truth, Arya Stark thought, I will call Death to anyone who would pinch me and tell me otherwise.

“Have they gone away?” he asked, breathing still uneven.

She nodded, panting.

Thereupon, reality settled in. He took a step back to look at her with those blazing, ferocious eyes. The enchantment, like candlelight, was vanquished by the cold wind. Gone were the passion and the dream-like sensuality, the sweet talks that spoke of beautiful collisions in time forthcoming. He spoke with carefully controlled rage that may explode at any moment.

“Why, in the name of Him of Many Faces are you here, insubordinate girl?!”

The Lorathi recounted what he had witnessed at Ragman’s that same night in the gathering of the masters.

“Those bastards,” the Handsome Man said through clenched teeth. “The nerve of them to think that they have the right to bring slave-soldiers to Braavos!”

“The curious thing is, why were they allowed to pass through Chequy Port?” the Fat Fellow
offered. “Did the Sealord’s custom officers not realize that they were bringing in slaves? This is impossible.”

The master with a plagued face interjected. “That is the problem. We know very little about the new Sealord. Have you spoken with Nestoris, Elder?”

The Kindly Man heaved a sigh. The Lorathi had never seen the Elder this exhausted before. “I have spoken with him, yes. He was a little…hesitant at first to raise our matters of concern to the new Sealord. I was able to persuade him, and now everything is the hands of Him of Many Faces. May the Sealord take these concerns seriously. I am afraid that people of today ‘treat religion as an enemy of progress’.”

“As if we do not have any more concerns, three Braavosi mercantile ships were reported to have gone missing near Tyrosh,” offered the master with the plagued face. “Our ships and hulls are strong, only a tempest of great magnitude could sink them, and there were absolutely no storms at sea these moons past!”

Jaqen H’ghar was silent but his thoughts were troubled, and they wandered.

That man, he thought to himself, he had such a forceful aura that I was able to detect his presence at Ragman’s from the Long Canal.

He knew the man was not from Volantis. His features were too exotic—savage, green eyes that seemed to read through men’s intentions, platinum-white hair, pointed nose. He spoke High Valyrian with such sophistication that it was almost regal. If he was not from Volantis, what was he doing then with one of Volantis’s former triarchs?

No one would suspect them at Ragman’s. The harbor was open to all non-local ships from all over Essos and Westeros. If they were indeed plotting something, then they were wise to do it in Satin Palace—after all, men visit that very place because of the ladies. Jaqen H’ghar was sure that the man almost saw through his facelessness, but he was very skilled at concealment that the man dismissed the possibility of Jaqen being faceless the moment he saw him. But he had sensed Arya Stark.

This is the problem when one person with magical blood gets close to another. Even magic heeds dualities—the evil in it will know if its dark essence is being contradicted, and the awareness usually springs up from the strength of the other side. Like oil and water that cannot mix, one repelling the nature of the other.

And that man for sure, was here because of one powerful child.

She had summoned him in Braavos without her own knowledge of it. Her power is stupendous, if even the word could do it justice, and she must learn how to contain it, control it, cast it when necessary. Without learning all these, her metaphysical faculty may either allow others to disconnect her from it, or it may well consume her whole.

Jaqen sighed at the complexity of his apprentice’s situation.

His apprentice. Arya’s blatant disregard for his orders almost harmed her; and Jaqen had given her such terrible scolding that he was sure she was now sharpening her daggers and plotting an elaborate scheme to murder him. This unadulterated anger he felt sprang up from worriment and fear of what might have happened, in an alternate sequence of events, had he not arrived at her side in time.
There were only ten of them, it would have been too easy, Jaqen thought. It is known that one Faceless is equivalent to twenty men in combat, but he knew he could not attack those Volantenes—not while their motives for visiting Braavos are unknown. Not to mention that there were other non-locals at Ragman’s; and he needed to hide Arya from those men, which was why they played the role of client and courtesan. His actions were justified, were they not?

He smirked at himself because he knew that his reasons were utterly self-serving and foolish. No damnable regrets there however, and may Him of Many Faces grant him a reprieve.

Oh, Arya.

Such dauntlessness on his part, that was—kissing her. And sweet, gracious heavens, was she responsive! He felt somehow guilty—though not, with what he did but how could he ever fight his mortal urges back there in that passageway? How can even the most pious of men remain firm and not even desire at the least to kiss her?

Very well, he did more than just kiss her. He made love to her lips in high hopes that he could own, for a moment, a speck of her soul. It wasn't just the lips...hells, no. He traced and touched and stroked and squeezed and...she giggled the whole time.

Oh, please. A lovely girl liked it all.

Jaqen even noticed right after their shared kisses that her lower lip was swollen and bleeding a little. A man bit and sucked too hard. He should have been more gentle.

Gentle? The girl's a wolf.

Teach her the hard way, this a man will do.

Ah, what were her utterances again?

I rode horses m'lord—whipped them and they obeyed.

The Lorathi bit his thumb and tried to recall if there were any whips in the combat room’s armory. There were none, for whips were associated with lords and slaves. The temple has very thin sticks though, less painful for sure than the thicker training sticks acolytes use during combat instruction. He clicked his tongue, as if remembering an important consideration all of a sudden. Oh, but Arya’s skin is snow-white, even the thin sticks would no doubt find their marks in her. And he doesn’t want marks all over his lovely girl, except if the marks were those of his kisses.

And yes, I ride fast—very fast. Men are better mount than horses...

Seven hells. Where did she even learn to say these things?

His inner soul spoke on his behalf to Him of Many Faces, pleading that the god heaves him not from his circle of devouts. He is deity, Jaqen is human; faceless yes, but human still. And for human persons, the flesh is weak. He uttered a short prayer, so his god would pull him back from the abyss.

“We cannot just drive the Volantenes out of the city. The Unmasking is in two days and it has been a tradition in Braavos to invite citizens from the other Free Cities in the festivities,” he heard the Waif say. Jaqen turned his attention back to the gathering and chanced upon his Tyroshi brother, the Handsome Man as his lovely girl calls him. He was eyeing the Waif with interested eyes. When he met the Lorathi’s gaze, the latter was almost sure that the comely one had given him a wink.

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“Just so,” the Kindly Man agreed. “Volantis may be the First Daughter of Valyria before, but its history of failing to rebuild the Freehold should teach it a lesson. The citizens are not witless enough to clamor for another century of blood. What information do we have on the new Sealord?”
“Ah, the great Tormo Fregar,” the Handsome Man said, rubbing his palms together. “He is highly suspicious of everyone, even of his First Sword. I could not get too close to him, Elder, forgive me. However, he has a weakness; and if we are determined to find out what his intentions are, we must use this weakness to our advantage.”

“And the weakness being?” the Stern-faced Master asked.

“Beautiful maidens.”

The Kindly Man wasted no time at all in planning for the next task. “Very well. We will send Arya Stark to Bellegere Otherys to be trained as courtesan right after her name day. She will then offer her services to the Sealord himself. Use her gifts, her facelessness.”

Jaqen H’ghar felt the whole weight of the world upon him that precise moment.

“Elder…” he whispered, shaking his head and imploring, though in the absence of exact words, that the ‘Kindly Man’ retracts his decision. “Arya Stark?”

“For Him of Many Faces, yes. Arya Stark.”

It was pure torture unlike any he had ever experienced. Jaqen exhaled sharply and ran his fingers slowly through his hair, shaking his head all the while. *No, no, not Arya.* “Did you even tell her about this? She’s…she’s a mere child.”

*A mere child whose lips a man had kissed and whose body he had touched beyond what was necessary.*

*Yes, a mere child. Yet a man almost planned to hit her with a thin stick to not punish, but to pleasure.*

The Handsome Man, appearing to be pleased with his Lorathi brother’s tormented state, replied, “Oh, dear brother, tried though we failed. She insisted on not being treated like a ‘mere child’. But of course, she will be of age in no time now. Not to mention, it was your ‘lovely girl’ who volunteered to the task.”

“Your wise decision, and nothing else, or they will have your head.”

The magister’s words sounded and reflected erudition. *Tough choices, and how to make these with the harvest moon approaching?*

The Prince of Pentos fought against his unstable innards. Never had he seen such kind of bestiality before. And oh, what a ‘perfect’ way to finish one sensual night of deflowering the maiden of the fields. They will never give the Free Cities rest, these undying bastards. The Prince folded his arms against his chest and surveyed the expanse of the Narrow Sea from the open esplanade of the bricked palace—a palace located at a most vulnerable position in the Pentoshi peninsula.

The night was beyond splendid until *this*, such he thought, as his gaze moved to the figure of the sleeping maiden on his bed—her nakedness partly covered with transparent silk, and drops of her maiden blood still adorned the bedlinens. Every year as the ceremonies would dictate, he must bed two maidens—one of the fields and one of the sea, so the year will be bestowed with bounty by the gods. *A most convenient tradition,* he smiled at himself.
The maiden moaned and moved a little, and in her motion she had her legs partly opened, revealing her innocent feminine slit he had claimed mere minutes ago. He felt himself grow hard once more at the sight, but nay, he could not take her a fourth time—there are far more pressing matters at the moment.

“We have a pact with Braavos,” the Prince replied. “I can daresay that makes the whole process of arbitration all the more easy.” The somewhat icy winds that the Shivering had blown towards the Narrow kissed his skin, and he shuddered slightly. The knot of his princely satin robe toyed with the stroke of air too, and he tied it, to protect himself from the sudden cold.

“Perhaps,” the magister replied, regarding the sickening sight in front of them in feigned emotionlessness. “Perhaps not. Four in six wars, Braavos had defeated Pentos. The Secret City freed our bondservants and forced us to enter into this so-called pact of theirs, and it was a filthy spit on our pride as Pentoshi. Why in the world would it not be? They were born out of Valyrian slaves, and we were seafarers, merchants, traders in the Freehold. Braavos has risen to power from its then labyrinthine swamp—”

“And now, it has authority over Pentos to the point that it allowed our city no slaves, and warships of no more than twenty,” the Prince said, eyes narrowing in contemplation. “Still, it is a more merciful brother than Volantis.”

The magister walked to the marmoreal stone railing, hands behind him. The Prince only followed him with a blank gaze. “With that, I would have to agree.” Then, turning to the ceremonial monarch, he added. “But the First Daughter of Valyria now houses the fire beasts of Old.”

“Braavos has the Isle of the Gods.”

“Ah! What are these faiths should unrelenting fire wreak havoc?”

“What of the prophecies then?”

“The prophecies,” the magister replied, forefinger raised as in a pedagogical monologue. “And the Silver Queen.”

The Prince chuckled. His maiden had awakened to the sound. “My lord?” she called to him, and he rushed to her side, and he kissed her on the lips, the neck, touched her in between the legs, and whispered that she returned to repose. A year after this, if such a time would even come, he would have another maiden of fields on his bed, and so he must not endeavor to have any sort of bond with the one with him now.

Walking back to the magister, he said. “Did you not give her those eggs from Asshai? Take them back, and with the dragons full grown—this is your plan?”

“Oh, my boy,” the magister answered him, seemingly amused at his youth and innocence. He will lose this city without the magisters at his side. “They never belonged to her. Those eggs—those dragons, are Rhaegar Targaryen’s.”

Silence.

And the Prince understood.

“Only women from pure Valyrian bloodline can hatch dragons.”

“Indeed. And now that the magical beasts are hatched, we must obtain them for their rightful owner.”
“The son? Where is he?”

“Tyrosh.”

The Prince nodded. Despite himself, he turned his eyes onto the far end of that esplanade, and blew air from his mouth in revulsion. He pinched the bridge of his nose. The sight and the stench—both horrifying. “Get me the men,” he ordered one serf standing beside the pillar. “Wrap those in white silken cloths and place them in caskets. The envoy to Braavos will bring them in ships. Ten chests of dragon gold, fifty alabaster jars of rosewood incense, and our deepest condolences.”

The serf bowed and left.

They were severed heads, hands, feet—all parched by magical fire from the beasts of Old. “Sweet heavens,” the Prince whispered. The blood had not completely dried up, and it mingled with the flesh and bones, profaned in the most grotesque manner. Bones were dislocated, eyes were ruthlessly torn out of small sockets, teeth were pulled from innocent mouths, their own flesh fed on themselves till they choked. He could almost hear them screaming in a thousand painful ululations. They tortured them before they burned them.

Even dead wolves granted with breathing by the Heart of Winter will not dare consume the sickening carcass.

Twelve Braavosi children.

And on the neck of one, whose head was missing, was a slave chain used to strangle the child till the last of his…or her breath. The chain had a pendant, with encrusted Valyrian glyphs:

“A merciful gift from the lords to their slaves. A gift to those who believe that fighting back is wise.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey there, awesome people! Chapter was for all of you. I sincerely hope you liked it. :D I would love to hear your thoughts and as always, thank you so much for supporting us (writers) and the Jaqen and Arya game. Don't let it die in you. :D (Hugs and love!)
“Where will they bring us, Mother?

In the far south, child.

When will we get there?

Dear child, we will never get there.

For instead of south, we will head north,

And there in the north we will uncloak ourselves

Once the dragonlords have been erased from this world.”

Chronicles of Bondage, Chapter Thirty

The moon shied behind the night cirrus that cloaked it, as the direwolf let her paws feel the
dank grass that carpeted the banks of the Green Fork. The smell had clung to the moist, and it was of
the woods. This dream, she had traversed this path prior, and the wraith of the scornful lady would
still be there. The direwolf placed her snout on the ground and looked for any trace of any creature
foolish enough to wander in this place in this time of night. The wind whispered, but in truth it was
only the creature’s private musings.

The streaming of water, seemed to be carrying…awash the tide...

Food! Flesh and blood.

But the rush.

Strong…impossible to defeat.

The direwolf leaned closer to the water, drank from it, eyes alert for any signs of prey. This
phantasm in her subconscious was old yet new, as a body of a woman emerged from the rush. The
furred beast quickly leaped to the shallow waters and dragged the soggy, completely naked, white
corpse to the bank. It was chilly and the direwolf’s coat had gone wet. Winter blew mercilessly, and
it has reached even the trident.

She circled around the body whose face was on the ground…dead for a day and a night. The
direwolf smelled a whiff of cadaverous decay mixed with the neutral odor of the rivers.

There was something else though…not death, no. It was grim immortality.

The creature turned the body over with her paws and she saw the corpse’s features—long,
auburn hair atop a scalded scalp, fair skin, and dead, blue eyes that were open but not seeing. The
woman’s face was full of bloodied lacerations, her skin shredding itself, as if she clawed her face
with her own fingers; and her neck had an angry slash from one ear to the other.
Not my son, no! It seemed to roar. But it was only an odd illusion of hers, not even the slightest semblance of speech or sound could be perceived then.

Without warning, the corpse gasped aloud and its dead eyes opened wider. The direwolf ran away swift as the wind when she saw what were contained in those eyes.

Hatred and damnation.

*The flame of life passed from him to her, and she rose...dear gods...she rose.*

Arya Stark woke from that terrible dream that has been hounding her since she came to the House of Black and White. She spoke to no one of it, not only because it was horribly bleary, but because she knew very well whose corpse that was—it was the corpse of Catelyn Stark, wife of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell.

It was her dear mother’s corpse.

*The flame of life passed from him to her, and she rose...dear gods...she rose.*

A man’s voice would always speak those words after her cruel delusion. It could only mean one thing—reawakening—and although it was a possibility, people do not merely return to life without the powers of the gods which they entrusted to a chosen few. Arya Stark had met one before, Thorsos of Myr, and he had already claimed that he does not possess any authority over death and he cannot bring back any man without a head.

Her Kindly Man said it was an abomination—mother, and half-brother.

*Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei, Walder Frey. Valar Morghulis.*

After all these years, she has not given up on her list. She merely tweaked it, taking out a name or two who in her assessment did not completely wrong her, but she still kept the significant names close.

*Ser Ilyn for Eddard Stark.*

*Ser Meryn for Syrio Forel.*

*Walder Frey for Robb Stark and Catelyn Stark.*

*And Queen Cersei for goddamn everything else.*

But there were other dreams, and names of gold, cerulean, dark silver, shining vermilion. One woman spoke to her, someone beyond the great tempest, in the suspended terrains of the Westernmost, farther, even; and she was a thing of utter beauty but not merciful. With eyes of loathing, she looked at her, and opened her mouth. Her voice was not hers, but that of a beast.

"*Aid to the lightbringer—die.*"

Still, there were others, this dragon with purple eyes that seemed to know her very core, the soul of her soul. He was once a part of her. He was once in her, once attained singleness with her body; and though they were not kin, reversals in fact, they have created one that was a kin to them both. She loved him, left for the sake of him everything she ever knew and believed in. A fateful day, and his rubies bathed the Trident. She had made her brother promise on her death bed—her father?
From the gorge, her dragon will transcend end and return to the beginning of it all.

And he had vowed he would return for her. By ice and fire, he swore it, with the seers of the forest witnessing such pact. And one cannot perjure himself in front of a weirwood, it is not a thing that would please the gods.

Arya Stark trembled upon recalling these ciphers of dreams.

A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts. An acolyte was waiting for her outside her bedchamber.

“It is almost midnight, sister,” he said. “You are summoned downstairs, to the Hall of Faces to begin your initiation rites.”

The acolyte left and so she hurriedly removed her nightgown, dressed into her own black and white acolyte’s robe, and descended to the Hall of Faces. Any moment now, the soft chime of midnight will be heard in the temple halls and she will be six and ten by then. Arya Stark traversed the hallway that led to the inner sanctum, inhaling and exhaling every now and then to contain both her feelings of disquietude and enthusiasm for what is to come. Finally, she will be Faceless in the truest, purest sense of the word. She will be No One and Anyone, and she will exact revenge so brutal, that the four names on her list would plead that the mountains cover them with rocks and dirt when they see her shadow.

She finally reached the double doors that led to the Hall of Faces. The girl rapped on the threshold knockers and heard the Kindly Man’s voice from the other side.

“Who is it that wishes to make a sacrifice to Him of Many Faces?”

“Arya of House Stark,” she replied calmly.

“And who is Arya of House Stark?”

She rummaged through her musings. Who is she? Who must she be after all the moons she had spent under the tutelage of the great Faceless Masters? What purpose does she serve in the Order, and for Him of Many Faces?

The Imp was a knower, of this she was sure. He spoke of many great things to Jon Snow before the latter departed for the celibate, almost ostracized life-vocation in the Wall.

“Never forget who you are. Make it your strength. Armor yourself with it and it will never be used to hurt you.”

But he was a dwarf unwanted and abhorred, and her brother was a bastard. Their stories are from genres that inspire tears; and as such, the sweet tragedy of it all could allow them to move in order to justify the worth of their existence. Songs and the stories love tales of men who rose from the pits to possible glory—infamous yet gratifying exile for one, resurrection for another.

But her memoirs will be different; its pages will be empty.

She is No One.

Her face is nothing but mimicry of all other dead faces, in every task according to their code of ‘All men must die’. Her core has been concealed in layers upon layers of other personas, and she was sure that at a certain point, she had lost all conception of self and selflessness. The line between the two had not only presented itself as a blur to her, it simply was gone.
And who is Arya Stark, child? She heard the Kindly Man pierce through her thoughts.

She was all and none. The intricacies of her ‘self’ were the elaborate fabrication of all other people that had carved her out of plain boulder, and without these people that poured out fractions of their own selves upon her, the vessel of her person will remain unfilled. And she would be nothing.

Ned, Cat, her brothers and her sister.

The Lannisters and the Freys, the Boltons and the traitorous Northmen.

The Brotherhood and the Hound. Gendry.

Syrio Forel, the Faceless Men.

Jaqen.

And who is Arya Stark, child?

Not just the daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn Stark of Winterfell, no.

Finally, she answered. “Electi, House of Black and White.”

It was half-acceptance.

The double doors opened, and she was escorted by the comely master who was then awaiting her entrance, to the lower platform where the floor-to-ceiling repository of faces stood towering all others. The other ten masters wore gray hooded robes and were standing on a semi-circle around a tall, narrow circular table made of silver. Atop the table was a single goblet made of gold adorned with scarlet gemstones, beside it, the Songs. On that silver table’s left and right, were two full-length, ellipsoidal mirrors.

She walked closer, wary. The Kindly Man held his right hand up, signaling that she must walk no further. She obeyed him, curious eyes directed towards the golden goblet. On her left, then her right; and she examined these mirrors standing in front of each other, both of them reflecting her image’s reflection—such that what appeared was a neverending parallel abstraction of many selves in one.

The Allegory of Many Faces.

The chime of midnight disturbed her introspection.

In a euphonious yet authoritative voice, the Kindly Man spoke to her. “Now that you are of age, Arya of House Stark, will you accept your anointing as written in the Prophecies and the Songs?”

There it was—the choice. It was true, what the Songs mentioned about fate, that it is not from stars and seers but from the self; it is not an immovable thing. With the choice she is being given right now, she realized that she could do anything, be anyone, and choose freely to be with someone. She could desert the temple and its many confusing faiths, never look back, deal demise on the damnable people on her death list, and return to Winterfell.

After all, this is her life, and the masters must not find any fault in her desire to aspire for a better life for herself.

This liberty, it may not come to pass again.
But then, beside the Kindly Man and right in front of her, was *Jaqen*.

When she had asked him after the Moonsingers, if the whole thing about Braavos mattered to him, he had told her yes. *Braavos is my home*, he had said. And Jaqen…he had made her realize that she was worthy of another human being’s affection when he acted as her honorable sword, as a valorous seraph of the death god. He did not take her back to Winterfell, but his revelations were these: that there is indeed more to this world than Winterfell, and more to herself than her blind want for revenge. Jaqen H’ghar had taught Arya Stark that she was meant to live her life for a purpose that is more than merely surviving.

If she chooses to leave, she could rebuild the North. She could persuade Jon to hang those Stark banners upon the walls of their home again—revive it, just as he was able to revive himself. They would find Sansa, and Bran, and Rickon, and carry on the legacy of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn Stark, and their heir, Robb who was once King. Altogether, they could slaughter the breathing snakes masquerading as vassal lords and nobles who betrayed their family with the faithful Northmen by their side. They could break away from the rule of the South and declare a Kingdom in the North.

*If the day comes when you must find me again…*

But should she leave, will she ever find him again? If the prophecies were true, and she had seen bewitching things herself West of Westeros, Braavos might as well wipe its own territories out of the maps of the Known World. If she chooses to walk away from all of these…

*Take me to the Wall*, Arya had told Ternesio Terys many moons back. The Titan’s Daughter was about to leave the Pans. Her bastard brother will take her in, must. The Night’s Watch pledged loyalty to the realm, and she is part of it.

The captain was amused at her audacity—a girl, giving the captain orders? *Not to the Wall, no. This ship is bound for home.*

*And where is home?*

*Braavos.*

There is one and only one truth in her damned life that could outweigh endless possible choices she could make as regards this. And what really is that truth?

But, of course.

It may be, that she *cannot* live without Jaqen.

*Home is where the heart is.*

*Winterfell.*

*Braavos.*

*Jaqen.*

*Jaqen is…home?*

Arya Stark bit her lower lip as she fought against her own tears. Her eyes were on him and him only, and seven hells, she could die just staring at that face and be fulfilled with it. *How can one simple feeling be sweeter and more beautiful than vengeance?* She asked herself in astonishment.
That precise moment, and in all its counterparts in eternity, Arya Stark did not care, will not care if Jaqen H’ghar would feel the same or if he would even acknowledge her most profound affections for him. The Lorathi held her in a passionate and gentle gaze and Arya Stark realized that if he would ask her to warg into all dragons—born and unborn, she would do it for him.

The girl took a deep breath, eyes on him; and gave her answer. “Yes, I accept.”

For Jaqen.

For home.

The Elder smiled at her, motioned for Jaqen H’ghar to remove his hood. His red and white of hair seemed to gleam in the candlelight when he did. He walked towards the silver table and nodded at Arya for her to do the same. Now, they stood opposite each other, facing the goblet that contained the ceremonial liquid the both of them would partake. Arya felt her cheeks flush at Jaqen’s enigmatic stare, and when he gave her a small wink to reassure her, she had to bite the inside of her cheek to suppress a laugh.

“Who is the Guardian to the Electi?” The Kindly Man asked.


Arya felt a sudden pleasurable thrill—as if she was being delighted by ghost touches all over. Why does it feel like…like…she’s being wed to Jaqen? The idea made her snort, and she had to cover her mouth to keep herself from giggling. Jaqen admonished her with a quick and silent, “shush”, but his own eyes were laughing.

“What must the Guardian give her?”

“Devotion.”

This time, Arya had to conceal her whole face with her hands.

Must you be all atingled in the most girlish fashion like Sansa? And gods, because of a boy? Well, a man?

Her shoulders were shaking with soft yet persistent laughters she cannot anymore contain. Oblivious to what reactions the other masters might have, she whispered, “Oh gods, Jaqen,” in the middle of her irrepressible shortles. She took a quick peek at the Lorathi through her fingers and realized that he was already grinning and shaking his head at her. She exhaled and shook her hands to rid herself of the sudden gaiety, though a repressed smile was still plastered upon her face.

The Handsome Man only rolled his eyes because of utter boredom and annoyance at their juvenile display, all the while adjusting his hood lethargically. The Waif’s attention was directed to them both, and her smile was soft and carried in it a hint of amusement.

The Kindly Man chose to ignore their childish antics. “What will relieve the Guardian of his duties to her?”

“Only Death,” Jaqen answered, biting his lower lip to keep himself from being carried in laughter away by his lovely girl’s headstrong disregard for decorum.

Arya’s feelings of hilarity had died down, thanks to the Stern-faced Man who gawked at her with strong disapproval all throughout the rites, and to two other masters who were shaking their heads in objection. The rites are sacred, and must not be taken lightly. The Fat Fellow held with
both hands a dagger with a thin blade, which he gave to the Lorathi.

Jaqen used the dagger to make a small incision from his forefinger, enough to draw a drop of blood. Upon the tip of the blade he let the droplet settle, then dipped it in the goblet so the globule and the liquid could bond.

“This blood is Shield,” he recited. “The Guardian will bleed before she does.” He turned his eyes on her, his stare powerful and seeping through the marrows of her very bones, and gave her the same dagger.

Arya imitated the Lorathi’s actions and took a drop of her own blood. Exhales from the mouth. Unsure of the words, she stammered. “This blood is…” Then heard the Waif supplying for her the words. She glanced at the woman with grateful eyes. “This blood is Sanction. The Electi… the Electi…will honor him and…and his fealty.”

He licked his lips and nodded, whispered, “That’s my girl. Very good.” She rolled her eyes.

Jaqen then held up the goblet laden with stones, that which contained liquid infused with their shared blood, and drank slowly from it. The Lorathi handed it to her; she took it, lightly brushing her fingers against his own, and then tipped the rim to her lips. The liquid was sweet and a little intoxicating, like it had been squeezed out from wild winter berries from Ibben.

_Blood of my blood. Not a thing only for the Dothraki._

And with all these, the sacred confluence of the Electi and her Guardian was formed, as was written in the Songs.

The codex’s thick pages rustled on their own as a sudden to reveal the forty-fourth.

(The girl’s mouth fell open, the Lorathi smirked at her awe.)

Two entities that were the subjects of it have been conceived into life through the mating of words on the pages—him and her, face to face. The gradual consummation of the prophecies has begun.

It was a union that was above all—for her “Self” is him, and though one is the total obverse of the other, their forces unseen which the gods have gifted them do not clash, but rather, complement. Two is not two, but One. And in the twofoldness, the dualism that is, and the other elements that lay within and beyond it, is a coming together that is all-good, all-powerful.

And if they would not succumb to one weakness—and that weakness being each other—nothing at all that was created by the gods could conquer them both.

The Songs were clear.

_He will be Shield to her Sword, the Shadow to her Being, the Summer to her Winter._

_Among others, she is greater. Only Death, unless she conquers it, would be higher and above her._

_Death cannot claim her while her Shield lives, for he would bleed before she does, and will take the last of his breath before she takes the last of hers._

_Impetuxe et Praesidium. Power and Protection._
Arya and Jaqen.

The girl sighed, dreamy. *Oh, Songs of the Faceless…my story of love.*

The rites concluded with the final ritual of ‘wearing the face’.

The Waif held out a steel platter, with a transparent mask floating atop it. Its almost crystalline color danced with the hues released by the iridescent candlelight. The Lorathi held out the palm of his right and allowed the supple and almost formless mask drift to him and hover above his hand, and the girl tried to conceal her awe as she turned to face the ellipsoid mirror to her right.

“Straighten your back, lovely girl,” Jaqen whispered, positioning himself behind her. “Eyes tight, for a while.”

She did as she was ordered and closed her eyes. The Lorathi carefully slid the transparent mask upon her face and allowed it to couple itself with her flesh and blood. “This face will be as real as the one you were born with, and will allow you to change your visage without taking anything from the Hall of Faces. You will use the faces only as guide.”

“Like you?” Arya asked excitedly.

“Yes, lovely girl. Like a man,” he answered in chuckles. “Done.”

The girl then opened her eyes and gazed at her reflection. She still wore the face of Arya Stark, much to her disappointment.

Except that she did not.

For when Jaqen held her chin and slowly turned her face to the left, then gently once more to the right, thus spanning the mirror’s panorama, she noticed the reflected spectrum of various faces unraveling themselves through her own face in different angles—faces old and young, dark and fair, male and female, with eyes of blue, brown, black, purple. They too had their histories, and they had dreams, before Death summoned them towards the eternal.

“Seven hells,” she muttered.

The Lorathi smiled at her through the mirror. “Do you like it?”

Arya nodded and smiled back.

It was as if her face absorbed the mask, for when she touched herself, she could not feel the transparent face. There was however, a certain sense of clandestineness on her part—a feeling of being veiled and protected from unknown elements that lurked yonder. Finally, the ceremony reached its end and the Kindly Man concluded the rites with the usual phrases.

Jaqen held her shoulder and turned her body to face the mirror on her left. And there, by the name of all that is mystical, her reflection was gone. Her eyes widened, narrowed, then widened again.

“Magic, lovely girl,” the Lorathi teased her.

Then, the Kindly Man spoke in his usual pleasant tone. “Ordinary mirrors cannot grasp the reflections of Faceless Men, dear child, as ordinary light could not cast their shadows.”

“Oh,” was the only word the girl had managed to say.
The Kindly Man nodded and gave her his most jovial smile. He then brought the rites to conclusion.

“Arya of House Stark, now you are Faceless, and forever you will be.”

The masters of the House of Black and White were not fond of name day celebrations. These kinds of observances promote selfhood instead of selflessness, and such is against the Creed of the Order. This goes without saying that after the simple initiation rites, it was safe to say that her name day celebration was done for the year.

But the Waif had other plans.

Arya was surprised when the Waif had told her that they would visit the Purple Harbor. It was three hours past midnight and most of the masters have retired to their respective bedchambers. The woman said that her name day would not be complete if she would not witness the preparations being done for the Unmasking.

“You missed the Unmasking last year. When you arrived in the temple, the festivities were over,” the Waif said, holding her hand and leading her to the boat that would take them to the other side. She was stunned by the Waif’s gestures—even Arya Stark’s sister, Sansa never held her hand like that. The act made her feel as if they were not faceless assassins, but two ordinary ladies headed to some secret place of merriment.

They both got in the boat. The Waif paddled on the right, and she, on the left. “I know some things about the Unmasking of Uthero—it is held every year to commemorate the founding of Braavos,” Arya said. “People wear masks to symbolize how Braavos began as a secret city in order for the former slaves to evade recapture by the dragonlords. They take the masks off in the tenth day to signify the announcement of Braavos’s existence to the rest of the world.”

The Waif laughed softly. “Then, you know very little about the Unmasking of Uthero.” Her eyes flew to the Purple Harbor across the distance, and Arya Stark followed her gaze. “See those lights? At this moment, the Braavosi are setting up for a ten-day celebration of masks and revelry unlike anything you have ever seen. Food, wine, dancing, mummer’s plays, diversions, pyromancy—name it, and the Unmasking has it all. People from all over Essos and some from Westeros witness this event year after year.”

“It definitely sounds lovely,” Arya said, and she was not lying. Apart from the usual gatherings in Winterfell which only the adults seemed to enjoy, she has never been in any other type of celebration. “So the other Braavosi, they are awake at this time of the morning?”

“Yes,” the Waif answered. “They—well, we will all be waiting for the first light. The Sealord will then blow the shophar at first sight of the rising sun and the merriment begins.”

They reached the bank of the Green Canal beside the Palace of Truth. Before disembarking from the boat, the Waif handed her a glittering silver mask which was meant to cover only the eyes. “Wear this at all times for ten days when visiting this side of the city.” The Waif put on a bright, red mask to cover half of her face.

They walked through the streets of the Purple Harbor and reached a bustling area near the Moon Pool. True enough, Braavosi men and women in masks were putting on brightly colored streamers on the roofs of houses and establishments. Some were already setting up stalls of various
shapes and sizes, selling all kinds of commodities—silk from Lys, jewelry from Qarth, exotic fruits from the Summer Isles, vintage collections of wine and other spirits from Dorne, even strange-looking stone charms from the Vaes. Arya smiled when she saw one particular stall that sells ‘love potions’, and laughed when a large group of young Braavosi ladies rushed to it. She let her eyes and ears feast on the sights and sounds. There were colors, lights, and laughter. Arya wanted to thank the Waif for bringing her to the harbor. It was as if the whole of Braavos was celebrating her name day with her, unbeknownst to them.

The conversations enchanted her.

“Uncloaking—nasty business with the pyromancers, I heard. Iron Bank’s got to spend for the festivities, and the Sealord wants it all lavish. I’ll pay good money to witness Nestoris and Fregar wrestle in mud over the gold.”

“…and he never misses a year, the beauteous Pentoshi Prince. And his emissaries are all quite handsome men—most of them unmarried!”

“Everyone. And by everyone we mean monarchs, and nobles, and peasants. Alchemists and necromancers, too. Farcicality, this is.”

“I’m afraid I have to leave you here,” the Waif told Arya, much to the latter’s confusion. “We were tasked to observe, you might as well do it, as we are expecting an influx of people from the Free Cities. I’ll see you in the temple. Valar dohaeris.” She walked away, approached someone who was assaying some bottles in the stall selling potions. He was the only man in there, surrounded by a large group of ladies that all appeared to be interested in him. When he turned to face the Waif, he was unmistakable even with the glittering black mask that he wore.

The Handsome Man.

Arya was not one who was quick to jump to conclusions, but the actions, his smile, and the Waif deliberately ignoring his…advances?

And he had told her things the previous night.

“Your overly protective master will question your capacities as faceless and convince you to abandon the courtesan task at any time. Prove him wrong, and recite the tenets of ‘Valar Dohaeris’ on his Lorathi face. He must learn how to respect the newly Ordained especially the one he had trained. You’re not a little girl anymore, Arya Stark, yes?”

After being kissed and touched all over by Jaqen H’ghar?

Hells, no.

“You could ask your Potions Master about these things, should you wish. She was trained by the first Black Pearl on matters of courtesanship. Not to mention, I taught her some.”

The Waif? No way.

Shameless lies and conceit. And the Handsome Man was full of this.

Jaqen warned her not to trust him. However, the task was given by the Kindly Man, as was made clear by the comely master, and though she did not take it upon free will, she cannot refuse. Valar Dohaeris.

She let her eyes roam around the vicinity. She saw familiar faces.
So all the masters are here. The Fat Fellow, the Stern-faced Master, the Squinter, the one with a Plagued Face, the Lordling, all wearing masks and disguises, of course. They were all assigned to keep an eye on the harbor, but why?

Her mind brought her back to the incident at Ragman’s—to the plump man, the slave-soldiers, and the flaxen-crowned man with green eyes. She once again felt that same anxiety, this foreboding she could not explain. Jaqen had confirmed that they were all Volantenes, except for one; and their motives for visiting Braavos were still unknown to the Order. Indeed, the Ragman harbor is open to ships from the Free Cities and Westeros, but then, Volantis usually does its trading in the Slaver’s Bay and in Dorne. That, and the fact that Volantis and Braavos were not exactly in good terms, as Jaqen had explained.

Jaqen.

Arya Stark would be lying if she would say that she had forgotten about how her Lorathi master had torridly and savagely kissed her in that passageway. Yes, torrid and savage, but she could not have dreamed of a better first kiss. Oh, and his many, many touches on her skin and body that reflected nothing but raw wantonness!

She was so caught up in the clouds after that kiss, even after her master had hysterically reprimanded her for not following his directions. The acolyte that paddled the boat to the temple was flinching all throughout the ride because of how Jaqen furiously berated her; but she…she only stared at his dreamy, dreamy lips. They were soft, and red, and wet, and minty…and oh, was he beyond her wildest imaginings! When she recalled how the Lorathi had nipped her neck and squeezed her buttocks with his able hands, she giggled unawares in the midst of his angry admonitions, her eyes locked helplessly upon his features, much to the acolyte’s and her master’s surprise.

“Oh gods, Arya Stark!” he had said, shaking his head in exasperation. “You never take anything seriously, do you?!” The whole fifteen minutes of their ride back to the temple, the girl struggled to contain the bursting, pleasurable thrill of simply remembering what her master did to her in that darkened alley.

She pursed her lips to contain her giggles, lest others see her laughing to herself and brand her insane. The Moon Pool was full of people, and the Braavosi lot were observant and always suspicious—a trait which flowed through blood and veins of slave descendants. They have since stopped looking behind, the lords were gone, or so they think. However, they never forgot, will never forget.

He was so, so lost with her innocently concocted analogies of men and horses! Oh, my poor master. And she had never seen him in any state of helpless disorientation—it was beautiful as it was heartbreaking. My sweet master, what have I done to him? In the beginning was the guilt, then the artful plan worthy of an ovation.

It may really be, Arya Stark thought, that she has this immense power they spoke of and a magical blood, for her simple acts to yield such denouement to a Faceless. She decided that night, in the midst of the celebratory preparations for the Uncloaking of Uthero, that she will harness this newfound power of hers—verily bend creatures to her will, including and especially, one Faceless Man. And yes, she would make him do things, force him to beg and kneel before her, make him kiss the ground she treads upon.

Never will she stop, until she is assured that he cries out her name every high midnight in his reveries, or until he pleasures his own self with his own hands with thoughts and memories of her—or with a mere glance of the shadow of her silhouette. And this very thing he must do—desire her
more than he would ever desire his death god.

Offer her the grandest of the grandest of gifts—himself.

She will make him go consummately mad.

Lost of self, not for Him of Many Faces, but for Arya Stark. The death god would be thoroughly displeased, but crimes and punishments are for latter days.

*Cast us not, Him of Many Faces.*

A sinister cackle. Her toes curled automatically at the master plan, as the evil child within her that was never gone despite her coming of age, and that which Jaqen himself had named, applauded at the background.

*Is it even right to feel this way about my own Master? My Guardian?* Arya Stark asked herself.

*Oh, seven hells. I don’t care one bit.*

She walked around the streets some more, admiring the spectacle and running her hands through some of the satin dresses in one of the stalls, testing the weight of daggers in another, when she heard someone call her name.

“Arya.”

She smiled and turned around to face him.

“Jaqen.”

The Lorathis walked towards her, all smiles. “Come with *me.*”

“Whereto?”

He scanned the whole Moon Pool. *Too crowded.* “A…secluded place.” He tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ears. Then, with a mischievous smirk, added, “*We need to talk.*”

*Oh, Jaqen H’ghar.* She laughed inwardly. *You’re ‘a man’ possessed.*

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*Blood of traitors—Braavos, Lorath, Pentos.*

If the First Daughter had not remained faithful, then Lys would have broken away from the Freehold as well. Four hundred years—how quickly they have wiped such dark yet boundless history from their memories! As if fire and torment and bashed skulls and slaughtered bastards were not sufficient a lesson for them all.

Ah, where has the gratitude gone?

The Century of Blood was conceived, and it could have been magnificent—a grand metaphor of preparing the great way for the lords. How very fast they have forgotten. It pained the childbearer, how the daughters beloved by her had forsaken her bosoms of milk when they all have learned to fly on their own. And the Bastard Daughter of Valyria led her sisters to deception and desertion.
And now, in the Isle of the Gods, they have dared consummate the inviolable mergence of the Chosen and her Shield. They truly seek battle, despite the twelve Braavosi babes.

The Valyrian betrayer—Aegon Targaryen whom they called The Conqueror. He had intervened in the great scheme and now, the Free Cities rule the lands of the Freehold with their magisters, and princes, and damnable sealords. The Targaryens may have broken their faith, and their children may be betrayers in essence as well, but blood is thicker than water—dragonlord bloodlines most of all.

A coming together. The Silver Queen, the Sixth of his Name, the returning Dragonlords.

He could almost see the parapets of the Freehold once more—clearer now than ever.

Aurion watched with delight at the spectacle laid in front of him—the Norvosi of the Hills have honored him too much, too much. And with Norvos’s loyalty is Qohor’s, a thing assured, for they are twins born of the same womb.

The slave woman whimpered in pain, the Norvosi masters have taken turns and she is now on her third. The bestial growls of one master mixed with the woman’s pleading, and the flaxen-haired lord chuckled. Slaves are not humans—they are objects, assets, properties.

Such great price they had to pay the creatures of rune West of Westeros, and for the sake of rebuilding what was lost. Not gold, not dragon eggs, they have no need for these things. The enchanters have no need of anything, they have no concept of it—of desire. Still, he could not comprehend how they could live without these notions humans find essential—lust, vengeance, glory, death, bloodbath. But from you they must ask one great thing, just so they could witness how much a beggar such as yourself is willing to sacrifice for one request.

As for Aurion and the others, it was the smallest shred of humanity left in them which the folks of magic have demanded.

He chuckled once more when his eyes chanced upon the serfs and their sickened expressions. After this most amusing exhibition, he will have their heads just for the sake of having them. The masters were not enough for his amusement—bring back the Old Valyrian tradition of having slaves mate with wild dogs and bears!

He tipped the goblet and drank the sanguine fluid in it.

Slaves’ blood.

The creatures of rune took away even their appetite for wine and fruits. Appetite is for the weak, the lord convinced himself. And henceforth, to prolong life in themselves, they must consume the blood of slaves they have slain until their very last day—if ever it comes. More blood meant more slaves, and this is why Valyrian expansion is a brilliant masterpiece.

A day, thirteen goblets. A day, a slave.

These slaves must procreate, for not only will they serve their returning lords—their blood will serve as the very sustenance for their returning lords.

However, vicissitudes have shown themselves, and the hindrance to their plans is almost formidable.

In the white wastes of Westeros are the Wolves that can control their fire beasts.
One of them though, is cradled by the Bastard Daughter. He has caught glimpse of the child, and her power was indeed overwhelming. But she is gradually being weakened by her own subconscious. Her innocent lust, emotion overtaking mindfulness, weak mind, weak… and how the lord desired to break every bit of bone in her body and skin her living, consume her flesh and drink scarlet from her veins.

And this, he will do no matter the cost.

It is said that the blood of Wolves born in Winter is cool to the taste. It seemed as if he never lost his appetite after all, it merely got…fastidious for exotic consumables.

The tradition of their kin from the North—of flaying them living, wearing their skin so they may harness the powers of the owners—it was a tradition most true. She must be with them, therefore, in them.

The Heart of Winter is worry for another day. The knowledge of Valyria have returned with them—forging of the steel and dragonglass. It is not known if Winter can walk across the expanse of seas. The lords will have slaves to offer by then—after all, this is a world of Ice and Fire, they must all learn to co-exist.

And should the Heart of Winter grow discontented with their offers of slaves, then there is Stygai.

Westeros is lost cause, and if the Silver Queen is any wiser, she will ally herself with the lords before her useless realm is devoured by its legendary walkers. Let them have it, then. The lords will already have Valyria. Ulthos will come to their aid. What more would they ever need?

Even the Warrior of Light is nothing but lunacy—a convenient invention of weak faiths to protect themselves from the Unknown, to continue obsessing with their worthless concepts of hope and salvation. The red god, the many-faced god, the seven new gods, and the old gods are mere figments in the minds of men below the caste—those who do not possess magic in their blood. Pathetic beings, pathetic souls.

West of Westeros had made the lords forsake their faith of the gods—gods are all dead, if even they existed in the first place.

“We are the gods now, mercy or wrath will be from us,” Aurion whispered to himself.

Very well then. First, eliminate the powerful child whose name is Stark. Feast upon her flesh and blood—magic will flow from her and reside in the core of the great lords.

And for that, spirits and souls beneath the crypts, and a Shadowbinder.

Chapter End Notes

Hey again, awesome guys and ladies in the comments! ;D I hope you liked this chapter. As always, I would love to hear what you think. More mush, less smut today.

Arya has come of age here, I'd like to point out that in this setting, 16 is equivalent to 21 in our contemporary era (Westeros, Essos are located in a sphere inside a different cosmic system. Their sphere moves around its star in an orbit larger than the Earth's so
it's kind of behind by five years. But this is just so Arya and Jaqen could do more to each other, eh? ;D). So, she is technically an adult already--in the physical and intellectual sense.

Thank you for supporting J/A writers. Hugs and love. :D
Chapter Notes

Chapter for all of you, beautiful J/A people!

Inspired: "I've been feeling everything--from hate to lust, from lust to love, from love to truth, I guess that's how I know you."

Have a great weekend, guys. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Temptations of selfhood will be strongest,
As will the want for things a Faceless must choose not to want—
Power, Riches, Glory, Self-preservation, Beauty, Passion.
If one seeks true Facelessness, these things for him must be trifling.”

Faceless Creed; 9th leaf

“Jaqen, hold up!”

He was holding Arya Stark’s hand, leading her past the Moon Pool towards a small bridge near the Sweetwater River. With footsteps sure and quick, he pulled her, and what with her skirt, she had difficulty keeping up with his strides. Despite her pleas, he seemed to have no impulsion of slowing down. Finally, they stopped at the bridge’s foot.

Arya had never been in that bridge before. Branches from either side spread out over the bridge and meet, forming a lovely canopy of leaves and pink flower blossoms, extending from end to end. Thin, soft vines dangled from the umbrella of branches and florals, creating a magnificent illusion of rain. The faint sound of the slowly rushing water could be heard distinctly, as only a few people were in the bridge that moment, and most of them were already leaving. The locals called it Bridge of Lights, and for a very good reason. The bridge itself was not lit, but the canopy was naturally aglow because of numerous fireflies that floated all over and around it.

It was a sight to behold, but before the girl could say anything, she was once again led by the Lorathi to the middlemost part of the bridge. It was elevated that one could see the Sealord’s Palace and Canal of Heroes from a distance. Upon reaching the center of the bridge, Jaqen leaned against the stone parapet and watched Arya survey the canopy and touch the dangling small vines with amazement. She followed with her eyes the flight of a lone firefly and laughed.

“This is…just wonderful,” the girl sighed. Surprised she was, that beauty was not lost in her, despite the fact that all she had ever dealt with in life were swords, scarlet, screams prior to damnation. Despite the demise of more than ten men in my own hands, still, some humanity was left in me, she realized. Preserved by the red god. Thank you, thank you. Fireflies—fascinating creatures,
in that they carry flame within them to emit incandescence that was nothing but beauteous, not to
burn anyone who might be drawn to the light. Beauty must be its own reason for existing.

“Come here, Faceless,” Jaqen ordered her.

She turned her attention to him and smiled. She stood beside him, as she rested both elbows
on top of the bridge’s stone barrier. Jaqen silently removed the golden mask he wore, and Arya
removed hers.

“A man has something…a name day present for a girl,” he began.

“Oh,” Arya exclaimed. “I thought we were not for the celebration of name days.”

“Just so. But we are not in the temple, are we?”

The Lorathi fished for something in his breech pocket, and from it, he pulled out a long case
covered in red velvet. He unlocked the case, and it contained a necklace, with chain made of
glittering Valyrian rose gold, and the pendant, a large, circular gemstone of fiery red that seemed to
contain flame inside it at first glance.

Most ladies would fall head over heels at such a present. It was imperial and no doubt, very
costly. But then, she is Arya Stark, and Arya Stark’s first thoughts would be on why Jaqen H’ghar
would spend so much for a useless piece of ornament for her, and what the Lorathi was thinking
when he bought it. She glanced at her Lorathi’s expectant face and instead of expressing gratitude,
she let out a spontaneous burst of laughter at the gift.

“Oh heavens, Jaqen!” she managed to say in her fits of laughter. “What is this? I mean, what
is this even for? You perfectly know I do not wear ornaments like this!” She lifted the necklace and
examined it closely in utter amusement. “Oh, no…how could I even efficiently deal a Death hit with
this swinging most inconveniently around my neck?”

The Lorathi only scoffed at the girl’s reaction. “Does a girl even know what that is?”

She pursed her lips to contain what may be an insulting chortle at his romanticisms.

“Fine, Master,” she replied with a japing tone, then dangled the chain in front of his face.
“Surprise me.”

The Lorathi did not look pleased. He shook his head with dismay at the girl but replied
anyway. “That, ungrateful girl, is a Queller. Only two are presumed to exist in the Known World,
and one is in the depths of the Smoking Sea. So that means—”

“That this is the other one,” the girl’s mocking expression was suddenly replaced with awe,
as she intently examined the bejeweled ornament asudden. “Seven hells.”

She had heard about Dragon Quellers before—anyone who wears it could call and dragons
will come to his aid. To fully own the dragon even without the smallest iota of Valyrian blood, one
must bond with it; and tellings of old say that the Queller is the first of the many steps to accomplish
such feat.

Unlike the mythical Dragonbinder that weighed a ton and could slowly kill anyone who
even attempts to sound it with his bare lips, the Dragon Queller as they say, is more benevolent to
mortals. However, very few people, if any at all, could actually connect with the powers of a
Queller. The gods are partial to those that carry in them magic—a higher truth, but there is still one
that is highest. And if in all improbabilities magic is not sufficient, then the wearer’s soul from a prior
or a destined life must possess strong conflux with one who had the pure blood of Valyria.

The faiths are all mystifying and erratic. The only truth is the daunting majesty of the Queller’s almost endless endowments.

“How did you get one?” the girl asked the Lorathi who only shrugged his shoulders.

“That has been in the family for centuries.”

Arya Stark hid her shock at Jaqen H’ghar’s sudden revelation. He had never spoken a single thing about himself, until now. Dragon Queller—a family heirloom? How could a Lorathi family even possess a relic like this?

Who are you, Jaqen H’ghar?

So many questions, and so little time. “If this has been in your family for centuries, why would you give it to me?” She asked.

The Lorathi did not answer. He merely gazed at the girl most ardently and let his inner thoughts speak to her. How can a man tell a girl this? Hells, it may be that a man intends to make a girl his family so this heirloom stays ‘in the family’ for a century more.

“Here, let me,” he said in a voice above the whisper. The Lorathi took the necklace from her fingers. Arya Stark slowly turned her back on him and brushed her hair aside so he may clasp it on her neck. His light touch sent shivers down her spine, and she had to let some wind out from her lips to calm herself. When the Queller’s pendant finally came in contact with the skin of her chest, she felt inexplicable warmth course through her veins—she felt its power. Valyrian cuneiform glowed on the pendant’s surface, and the girl, who was gifted with languages, read the inscription.

“Regency over the magic of Old.”

“Would this even work?” Arya Stark asked, facing him. The pulse of her blood collided with the pendant, as she traced it with her forefinger. And though it went for her unnoticed, the red pendant radiated a sudden translucent glimmer.

Jaqen’s eyes caught sight of it, squinted; and he sighed, astonished. The Lorathi had never seen the Queller light up even with mere reflected light before—only now, plain seconds after Arya Stark had worn it around her neck, plain seconds after it had meshed with the throb of her heart.

Powerful, Chosen Child. Favored by the cardinal god.

He felt himself grow against his own breeches. He cursed inwardly once more. He has been cursing far more than was necessary these days past.

She gave the Lorathi a sincere and gratified smile. “Jaqen, thank you for this. It’s lovely, well, now that I know it actually serves some purpose. Really.”

With a haughty smirk, he replied. “It’s a Queller. How can it not be lovely?”

Arya Stark’s mouth fell agape at her master’s sudden ostentatious display. “Very well,” she said, her voice playful and with a hint of mischief. “You have given me your first present.”

“First present?” the Lorathi’s brows shot up.

“You owe me two more.”
Jaqen H’ghar laughed, and the fireflies all over the bridge seemed to be dazzled by the sound of his rich chuckles that they flew agitatedly in different directions, causing a splendid display of lights. Arya Stark had to conceal wonderment at the effect her Lorathi master’s laugh could have on... *every damned thing.*

“A girl is greedy. She had been given one and she wants more?”

Arya Stark walked closer to him and in a hushed tone, stated the Kindly Man’s words during the ritual. “What must the Guardian give the Electi?”

Jaqen H’ghar was appalled with the way his lovely girl was challenging him, he responded nonetheless to play along. “Devotion.” He leaned casually against the barrier.

“Devotion, it is,” Arya Stark nodded, her fingers toying with the pendant of the Queller. The Lorathi took his eyes away from the sight and licked his lips—those small actions the girl did seem to mesmerize him. “The second gift you will give me is your full permission and support to my task as courtesan so I may spy on the Sealord.”

He was for nights, shaken by distressing thoughts about the girl’s imminent task. The truth is this: he does not have the authority to choose tasks for her. *Valar Dohaeris,* and no Faceless is an exception. To establish her possession of needed skills for the duty and to protect her from risks—first as Master, second as Guardian. In no wise pages of the Creed did it say that refusal to fulfill a task is a thing acceptable, nor is it a choice.

He heaved a sigh and pursed his lips. “Fine. But if a man in his assay of the task finds it too perilous, then you must leave it.” She nodded her head. “And the third?” he asked.

Arya Stark was so close to him now, but she kept on taking small strides to get to him even closer. The Lorathi’s eyes narrowed as the girl lifted her hand to touch the collar of his tunic. She rubbed the fabric with her thumb and forefinger, her eyes upon his face all the while.

“I will demand for my third in a while. But first, tell me something true, Jaqen,” The girl said. One hand fiddled with the pendant, and the man once again, found the act in itself enchanting. “Something true about this Queller.”

Jaqen laughed softly.

“Very well,” he replied. “However, a man must do the telling in Ancient Essoan. If a man recounts the tale in Braavosi or in varieties of the Valyrian tongue, much—great things—will be lost in translation.”

The Lorathi was teasing her—Essoan is the language of lovers.

Its lexicon is rich with concepts and parlance of intimacies, consummations, merging in each and every sense. Even its phonology resonated sensation—with guttural articulations, raspy, breathy sounds that can at times, be mistaken for moans of pleasure. The elocutions of it were as deep as, if not deeper than, his already deep Lorathi purr.

It was the comely master who taught Arya Stark the essentials of the language. It was hypnosis—what the master did to her, even without him knowing, but he did warn her. ‘This language is not for the weak,’ he had said. ‘Know this, I do not want you falling into my arms in the middle of instruction.’

She only laughed at the absurdity of his pronouncements. She wished she had not.
The language was indeed moving, expressive. The comely master would utter sentences, she would repeat them, he would construe their meaning.

‘Let us play in the fields, my goddess. May the Night conceal us, may the Wind carry us both, may the Grasses clothe us.’

‘Warmth. Your flesh is flame, the mountains of Essos are in you, none can fathom the depths of the seas you conceal.’

‘Water from me to you; water from you to me…’

Had she really learned the lingua at all? She is gifted in languages, so perhaps. Her tongue would allow the phrases to run, her voice would give them life. But her thoughts—oh, her thoughts during those moments were on her Lorathi master, and how she prayed earnestly to the death god to lead him home from the Citadel, so she may share those intimate phrases with him. For seven days she had studied phrases with the comely one, and for seven nights she had succumbed to the temptations of touching herself and uttering his name.

Jaqen.

‘Tell us who that boy is, Cat, and why he makes you touch yourself at night!’ Brea had asked her once.

“Ancient Essoan, it is,” Arya said, raising an eyebrow. She licked her lips. “Mind yourself, Master. The rudiments of that language are complex.”

The Lorathi chuckled. “A man is most amused to hear a girl speak of its rudiments. Your Handsome Man has mentioned to a man once that you were unspeakably terrible with the language.”

She scoffed, rolled her eyes. “He holds everyone, even himself, in impossibly high standards.” She kept on toying with his collar. “Well then, Master. Begin.”

*Begin making love to me in Ancient Essoan.*

The Lorathi recounted the tale, as his thumb brushed the girl’s lower lip the whole time. Their gazes locked, and their breathing was in perfect sync. His voice, mixed with the ancient tongue, was pure magnetite—even the strongest Valyrian steel would be at its mercy.

*His name was Haresh, son and heir to the Freehold’s first archon. He was a gifted dragonrider.*

*Archons oversaw colonies, drafted laws, made decisions. During the Freehold’s beginnings, archonship was a position for the elected, but course of time had allowed it to be passed to the first-born son, as in a monarchy.*

*Haresh fell in love with a slave.*

At this, the Lorathi leaned closer to her and breathed against her mouth. She gasped, and thus breathed in the air he expelled from his mint lips. She felt like being carried by petals in wind. Her toes curled, her belly was filled with flutters. She whimpered.

“Jaqen…”

“*You want a man to stop?***
“N-no, please…”

To him, she was the most beautiful thing—more beautiful than the flaxen-haired, purple-eyed Valyrian maidens of his time. Her hair was chestnut, her eyes gray-hued, and though she was a slave, she was undaunted as ice, fearless as fire—and this fierce spirit of hers captivated him.

He proceeded to court her, in secret. She, he treated like a goddess—he adorned the footpath by her slave-chamber with petals of blue winter roses, he wrote her poetry, he played the harp and sang verses to her while she laid bowls of fruit on his bedside table. ‘My warrior bride,’ he would call her, and though she tried and prayed, he was still too inviting.

On and on it went. Until she too, fell for him.

Jaqen gently guided Arya to lean against the bridge’s barrier. She was already spellbound, he could tell. Control is simply lost on her part—and he was to blame. Mere moments ago, he had sworn that he would protect her from forces seen and unseen. Not in the slightest did it occur to him that perhaps, he most needed to protect the girl from himself.

He tilted his head so he could look at her lovely face, as his finger moved to trace patterns across her left arm. She flinched at his touch—it was flame through her skin, pleasurable flame. She held his sleeves tight with both hands for fear of falling. She was breathing through her mouth.

The Lorathi smirked. Spoke in a damnable seductive undertone. “Let’s stop with the lore…”

She pulled him to her. “Finish it.”

“You’re dying, lovely girl…”

“Let me die, then. The death god takes what is his in time.”

“A man will weep. A man will lose his only friend.”

She pulled him again, closer. She felt him against her. The language, the tale, were simply arousing.

“You won’t lose me.”

So they could speak without anyone else ever understanding them, they created their own language of love. Whilst pleasuring each other, communing in body and spirit, he would recite his sonnets and odes to her. And the verses mated with her groans:

‘Let us play in the fields, my goddess. May the Night conceal us, may the Wind carry us both, may the Grasses clothe us.’

Many moons passed and she carried within her his child.

Arya Stark’s arms wrapped themselves around her Lorathi’s waist, made sure that there was not the slightest distance between their wanting bodies. He chuckled softly, beguiled, yet he embraced her too. He gently stroked her chestnut of hair, smelled its fragrance, kissed it softly.

“Arya?”

“Closer to me, Jaqen.”

Soft pants escaped from her mouth. There, her face was buried against his chest. She placed soft kisses on the fabric of his tunic. He gently caressed the nape of her neck…and his hands moved
to massage her shoulders.

“Closer.”

He obeyed, then fondled the small of her back. She sighed deeply. Tiptoed, so she could kiss his collarbone.

“More?”

“More.”

_The Valyrian lords were always known to be unforgiving—especially regarding matters of bloodline and keeping it pure. He knew he had to keep her safe._

‘Regency over the magic of Old. Wear this, and Heraxos will come to you.’

‘Warrior bride, may the red god preserve you. May the death god claim you only when it is time.’

She evaded capture. He was executed through dragonfire, after they bathed his white locks with his own scarlet.

_Half a century, and Valyrian scholars have discovered the scrolls containing the dragonrider’s writings. Its characters and orthography were in a tongue undocumented at that time. Came the close studies, and they called it the language of lovers._

_The rest was history._

They were silent for a few moments.

The girl spoke. “It’s beautiful, Jaqen.”

“It is. Tragic too.”

“Is it true?”

“No One knows.”

“Kiss me again.”

The Lorathi felt an invisible boulder hammer his chest, robbing him of his own breath. He tilted his head to one side, feigning confusion, for it might be that he heard her incorrectly.

“Oh gods, stop with your pretensions and kiss me, Jaqen,” she whispered, eyes on him now, her fingers once more fiddling with the soft material of his shirt. “That’s my third. You may have kissed a thousand lips before, yes. I don’t care. I demand to be your thousand and one.”

To hear those words come from his lovely girl’s lips was pure ecstasy. It would not be their first, nay, but it would be different from the first should he decide to succumb to her orders. They would share that kiss not because they needed to escape from a desperate and dangerous circumstance, much like in that passageway. It will be those kisses shared out of pure and simple want for each other.

Sweet heavens, she does want him.

_The temptations of selfhood will be the strongest…_
Jaqen H’ghar held her hand that toyed with his tunic. “If a man does this thing,” he purred. “A girl must realize that there might be no going back.”

*Only a fool would want to go back,* Arya Stark thought.

“A girl knows this.”

That was all he needed to hear.

Arya Stark gasped as Jaqen H’ghar lifted her through the waist and seated her on the bridge’s stone parapet, their faces now leveled with each other. Jaqen’s lips spoke against her ears. “As always…a girl has more courage than sense.” Soft laughter from her lips, as she let her arms wrap themselves around his shoulders. Heat, a pleasurable wave of physical sensations gradually yet urgently overpowered her—in her chest, breasts, belly, the soft of her thigh. Like quicksand pulling her so deep, with her attempting not a single thing to salvage herself. She felt like living and dying and living again, and every sound of his breath gave thrilling prickles to each pore of her skin—responding though in the absence of intellect. The world around her seemed to crumble to pieces.

She was falling, literally, headfirst to the Sweetwater River but Jaqen was quick and he caught her with both hands through the small of her back. Her hands automatically tightened around his neck and he chuckled, most beguiled. “Thoughtfulness, lovely girl,” he murmured against her neck. “A man would hate it if he would have to jump in the river to save you when you fall.”

*Oh but Jaqen H’ghar, might you not know that I have fallen already?*

He held up her left hand and kissed each finger. And every time his soft, damp lips touched the tips, Arya would bite her lip, or smile, sigh. “Oh!” came out of her lips, as the Lorathi buried his teeth in her forefinger, and gently suckled it.

“Rule your face,” he teased her. “Too transparent.”

And with the fireflies and gods as witness, with Him of Many Faces looking down from the infinite cosmos, he began pleasuring her.

Arya Stark shut her eyes as Jaqen’s lips teased her neck, but no, he did not kiss her there. He merely grazed his lips across the skin, as if testing its smoothness, its scent, its flavor perhaps. Very slowly, his lips moved to kiss her forehead, then her eyelids, then her nose. In each kiss, he uttered her name. “Arya…Arya…” he would whisper, like mantra, in a ritual of veneration, in romantic, erotic worship. She was the powerful Chosen in the Songs, yet that moment had rendered her powerless, that all she managed to do was to hold her breath; for if she did breathe, it would still be his scent of cloves and ginger and petals she would smell. Wind blew from the Shivering Sea, but she was in heat.

*Master, more of you. Don’t fail me, don’t.*

That exact point in the clock, neither one of them remembered, cared even that they were both ordained Faceless priests of Death of the Black and White.

Damn the Creeds and the Methods, their spirits seemed to cry out in unison—an antiphon even, one sentiment echoing the other. The Songs were glorious but they could wait. Duties, loyalties, facelessness, codes, faiths, gods—forgotten for the sake of a whimsical night of nights.

‘No One’ was not even in that bridge. The person, the concept, the state—it just was *not* there.
For there, in the Lights by the Sweetwater, were the two subjects of the Songs—and although the prophecies neither required nor willed them to endeavor possessing such bond with each other, their wanting souls chose to have it anyway.

Or perchance, they were just too powerless to subjugate their one weakness as was writ in the pages—the other one.

One could only be as strong or as weak as the other.

It was not fallacy either, the texts were not deceiving sophists. The bond between them is sacred contract, and there are boundaries to that contract—their articles of faith, self-abnegation, celibacy for utmost service to the death god.

Neither of them cared.

For perhaps, for one, she had become his; and for another, he had become everything.

Jaqen listlessly dragged his lips from her nose to her cheek, nipping at it gently, and Arya had to part her own lips for dire air. The Lorathi’s lips were moist and soft, and they continued exploring other parts of her face save for her parted mouth. This time, she felt them along the length of her jaw where they lingered. He kissed it and gently, brushed his tongue on it, left it with damp trails. Every part of her quivered with want, and he further intensified the sensations engulfing her—scraping his teeth along the line of her jaw, caressing it with his mouth afterwards. His hands travelled freely to her sides and stroked her hips in the gentlest of ways.

“Oh, Jaqen…love.”

She felt like surrendering and drifting away, her cares suspended. Here is a man whose person she does not fully know, yet here is a man she trusted with all her heart.

He then lazily slid his lips from her jaw to the side of her mouth, leaving feathery kisses along the way. His tongue tickled the thin line dividing her lips.

*Kiss me, deep,* Arya urged him in her thoughts, *please…*like any other creature she could demand surrender from, he obeyed.

He kissed her, and she responded.

His kisses were tame and sweet-tempered, very much unlike what they have shared in that darkened alley. Those kisses made her feel as if he was sipping sweet honey from her mouth, at the same time, he seemed to be *shielding* her from his very self.

But his kisses were too…*polite.*

An impatient whimper escaped from her throat as she pulled him closer to her, dissolving any hesitation on his part. She ravished his lips—biting his lower lip, sucking his upper, forcing both lips to part with her tongue. Fiery and thoughtless, without style and sense—yet the Lorathi loved it so, so much. The creature in her was voracious and he wolfed his mouth…growling, growling low in her insatiable hunger for him, and so he tore himself from her, surprise evident on his features.

“Arya, what—”

“Quiet.”

She pulled him to her once more and now it was he who covered her lips with his own. He
slowly forced his tongue inside her mouth, as his groans filled Arya’s ears. She flinched when he bit her lip, and she silently begged him to make her bleed, so he could *taste* her.

*Drink, drink*, the wolf spoke. *Drink from his generous mouth.*

Finesse thrown without caution, and she gratified herself, quenched her thirst through the wetness of his mouth, drinking and swallowing—a Bedouin, she was, gaining sight of the first Oasis after a sandstorm.

Her Oasis groaned, arousing her beyond comprehension.

*‘Water from me to you; water from you to me…’*

The girl ran her fingers in his thick, wavy hair and held tight to a fistful of it. The Lorathi stroked her hips in a manner more intense, and so Arya gasped, with her lips against his; and her berry breath inside his mouth was like an impetuous sorceress that stole his own capacity to inhale. *Inhale, he must, yes*—so that in the midst of this fire which they shared, he may survive.

It was utter madness.

Jaqen’s hands instinctively reached inside her skirt and kneaded her bare legs, all the while, invading her mouth wantonly, desperately even—as if he was drowning and she was his much needed breath of air, as if he could get any more closer to her, as if letting go of her lips meant the very end of him. Arya buried her fingernails against his back, moaning passionately the whole time against Jaqen’s mouth. And she noticed that every time her sounds of pleasure coincided with Jaqen’s, the Queller’s pendant seemed to emit a quick yet lucid glow.

He broke away from the kiss, his breathing, convulsive.

*“Jaqen!”*

*“L-let a man breathe, please…oh, sweet Arya,”* the Lorathi gasped, as he buried his face in her neck.

The girl clicked her tongue impatiently. A second…two. Three.

*“Done catching your breath?”*

He was dying. *“N-not yet.”*

*“Oh gods, are you really an assassin? This, and you’re breathless like that?!”*

*“Hells…”* he exhaled heavily through his mouth. *“You are an evil, cruel girl, Arya Stark…”* he murmured, kissing her neck once more. *“And hear me now, a man will *punish* you for this. A man will beat a girl so hard she would clamor for more…”*

At his words, she shuddered.

*Pleasurably.*

His tongue brushed her collarbone, tamed now, rough thereafter. And in the midst of what may have been infinite *‘Oh’s’* from her mouth, her hands as if with will of their own, travelled inside his tunic, to his well-chiseled back, and she stroked him there. The Lorathi pulled her closer; instinctively, her legs wrapped around his frame—confining him to her alone. His obsessive moans were the many melodies of harps to her, and she reveled in them.
Jaqen owned her mouth once more, Arya met his ardent acts by kissing him deep. Their teeth clashed, she bit his tongue, he consumed her lips till they ached and grew tender. Her lips will bleed again, no doubt, but not without his lips bleeding first—after all, both Ice and Fire could burn. Seconds have turned to long minutes, and they still pleasured each other with careless abandon. Oh, how they indulged themselves!—and their total surrender was good beyond the greatest utterances of the royal Valyrian tongue.

The sound of shophar stirred their impassioned exchange, and they hastily broke away from each other’s embrace. Their attention turned to the Sealord’s Palace as they tried to catch their breaths.

It was too much, too much...her mind a blank slate—almost, and it was he alone that filled it. Her senses whirled uncontrollably. Drunkenness, for she drank a lot from his intoxicating Lorathi mouth.

And she fell onto the Sweetwater…

Four seconds, and her body touched the river’s surface, as the waters engulfed her, pushing her deep into the wet abysm. She was from the old gods, and water is a friend, and so instead of it drowning her already Lorathi-drowned mind and spirit, it cleansed her.

Suffused her with its healing.

Calmed her fiery spirit.

His strong arms pulled her upwards, so she may breathe in the surface. He had fallen with her.

He had fallen by accident, or maybe...he merely chose to fall.

Or perhaps...there was no other choice but to fall.

Their heads emerged from the surface and they gasped in unison, brushing their faces with their palms to rid them of water. When their eyes chanced upon each other, they laughed. The laughers were long and rich, and the echoes reached the bridge’s canopy. This is romance, this is silliness.

And when the laughter died down, she kissed him again. He kissed her. There, they kissed, afloat, a man, his girl—their bodies shivering because of the looming Dark Winter, and burning because of the other—for a while forgetting the threat of lords and fire beasts.

Soft kisses. Wild kisses. In her mind, she ranked the things in her world that were most riveting.


In the midst of their hunger for the other, they understood why the river was called \textit{Sweetwater}. Or perhaps, it was only because of their mouths communing. He would place light kisses on her lips one time, then ravage them in another. She would do the same, however she was more ardent. She held his face with both hands and pushed her tongue inside his minty lips.

He felt the girl’s legs wading gently in the water. \textit{Her feet...they cannot reach the bottom yet.} And so, he pulled both legs and wrapped them once more around his waist, securing her with him. His hands moved to stroke her behind—she giggled in the middle of their mouths caressing. \textit{She likes it...she likes it so very much.}
Suddenly, she freed herself from his grasp, swam away to the deeper part of the Sweetwater. Her lovely face, her smile, carried mischief.

As if one with the river, she submerged herself beneath the waters, emerged to the surface afterwards—throwing her head back, creating a display of drizzles and drops from her chestnut of hair. She smiled at him seductively—there she was, the Storm King’s beauteous siren of the seas, Elenei; and she enticed her Lorathi, drew him to her…

He shook his head in amazement, for gods, she is so beautiful.

And yes, for her he would declare war against the gods of sea and wind that gave birth to her, challenge them to bring on the storm.

“Come here, Faceless,” she teased, then swam farther from him. “Come.”

The Lorathi chuckled. “If a man catches you…oh, you willful girl. Seek aid from Him of Many Faces, now.”

Arya splashed him with water on the face. “Catch me first, then. If you do, I will beseech the death god’s deliverance.”

She waded further, and when she saw Jaqen taking a dive then materializing from beneath a few feet away from her, she squealed in both panic and exhilaration. The death god’s deliverance—she might need it sooner rather than later.

“Come now, Arya,” Jaqen called to her in a sing-song. He rested on the water, stayed afloat in the same place so his lovely girl could swim away and at least stand a chance against him. “Come, come to your Lorathi…”

The gentle torrents carried her off, and farther from him. Not enough. Perhaps, she can speak to the serene water and ask it to let her drift from her Lorathi quicker, so he would fail to catch her, for if he does…if he does…

She was underneath, and how the rivulet renewed her spirit—as if the undertaking she will have to bear is none too great. It was a fresh breath of life that animated her in levels she could not quite explain—soothing, pacifying her inner tempests.

His hand grabbed her by the ankle, and she may have muttered curses beneath the water. Quick! And she freed herself once more. But he was persistent—taking hold of her feet, touching her legs, grasping her hand, yet in vain.

Surrender to him now. So he may show you mercy.

Arya Stark chortled inwardly at the thought. Her Lorathi master is never merciful—sweet yes, but not merciful.

Finally, he caught her by the waist.

Arya struggled from his grasp, moved her body in serpentine motions—an elusive snake in water. His arms were resilient and they held her tight, pulled her, forced her to face him.

And beneath the healing depths of the stream, he kissed her once more.

They both held their breath as they let their lips performed their own intercourse. At times, they would exhale, and soft bubbles would embellish their exchange. It was euphoria unlike any.
They touched each other, and if only the sounds of their erotic respirations, their glorious moans and sighs could find their way from the river to its surface, then perhaps the Braavosi by the Moon Pool would proceed to the Sweetwater to find the mysterious source of such resonances.

The water carried them both. They drowned—not in the water, no—they drowned in each other.

Their lips were still locked even when they emerged from beneath. Air was plentiful all over, yet they chose to inhale it from each other’s open mouth.

The action has reached its falling, and they slowly broke away from the kiss. Soft pants, sound of the ripples. It was music they heard.

It was almost sunrise. The sun was still shying away from the earth, yet it seemed like the most beautiful first blush of day she had ever seen since she left Winterfell. Arya Stark gazed fondly at Jaqen’s face. Then she rested her temple against his as her hand stroked his right cheek.

*I think I…love you,* her consciousness screamed in anguish. *To tell you is…to ruin everything.*

“Has a man paid his due?” he asked her good-humoredly.

She just smiled quietly and nodded.

“Then, we must head back,” he said, pulling her to the shallow surface. He was too casual about what happened a few seconds ago. No wistful after-feeling, no affectionate concluding words—nothing. It was as if he merely fulfilled his end of the agreement; and she felt like a capricious young girl who fooled him into obeying her whims.

She bit her lip and swam with him to the bank.

To her surprise, Jaqen turned around and hooked both of her legs in his arms so he could carry her on his back. Arya intuitively held on to his shoulders in order not to fall. Their clothes were wet, yet his feel against her gave her warmth and comfort. He glanced at her sideways.

“A lovely girl thinks too much,” Jaqen said. “Don’t.” He tilted his head a little to the back so he could look at her. “Here, kiss me again,” he ordered her, and so she grinned and planted two light kisses on his lips, then buried her face in his wet hair of red and white.

They left the Bridge of Lights and headed back to the Moon Pool, with Arya still on Jaqen’s back. The vicinity was now teeming with people in masks—Braavosi and others. Children ran around the streets playing games of catching chickens and tossing eggs. A small mummers’ play was currently entertaining the folks by the side street. Lads and ladies walked hand in hand and bought flowers and ate some sweets. The girl’s eyes feasted on the sights until they caught the face of a familiar person trotting down the streets with knights whose sigil bore a white falcon beside a crescent moon. The person of interest and the knights seemed to be heading to the Magisters’ by the Sealord’s Peninsula.

“It can’t be…”

“What is it, lovely girl?” Jaqen asked, sensing her alarm. Her arms tightened around Jaqen’s shoulders.

She was brought back to that shadowy dream…with white falcons swooping down, attacking him whose body contained not an inch of skin—its flesh and blood grotesquely exposed. Wild hounds licked the putrid, sickening carcass.
An immediate conflagration. The body turned to cinders then smoke. In seconds, the vapor was gone.

The crescent moon waxed, its surface devouring the sun’s light until the moon shone at its fullest—at its brightest. The wolves started howling from hill to hill, in a glorious yet frightening antiphon.

*The red-haired lady Harrenhal will weep.*

“Arya…”

“Littlefinger.”

“It was an elaborate plan—very Braavosi.”

“Not Master of Coin anymore, no. Lord of Harrenhal.”

The eunuch who once travelled with the mummers had always said this about him:

‘Only the gods know what game the Littlefinger is playing. He’s one who could watch his country burn without flinching, so long as he could be King of its ashes.’

“Beggared the realm, the Lions are slowly losing power, money, allies. The Vale needed loans too, and your Nestoris was nothing but generous, but he called back the loans. With the crown six million gold dragons in debt to the Iron Bank, I had to pull out coins from my own breech pockets—and how they laughed at me prior, with my brothels and whores.”

“Look at you now—Harrenhal, the Vale.”

“Winterfell.”

“You are greedy.”

“Sansa Stark—my red-haired maiden, will make things happen for me. Catelyn is dead. I need whatever is in the Crypts.”

“Forgetfulness, this is what the lot of us suffer from. The Silver Queen, my friend. Three full-grown dragons. And Aegon, Sixth of his Name—stronger claim, stronger army. Ah, need not tell you, he’s a very gifted dragonrider.”

“Stannis Baratheon is the only man with a legitimate claim. And tell me, against the Lords of Old Valyria? In what universe will these damnable Targaryens triumph? Unless they gather sense and either surrender to the lords or ally themselves with the Starks, nothing—that is what they will be. Even the latter option is a death wish.”

“Ah, the Westerosi and their magical bloodlines. How grandiose.”

“With the Heart of Winter coming for all, magic is the only thing that could combat magic. Fools, this is what I call them, Maesters. Harrenhal had not, will not stand against dragonfire. But with the sacred pact made at the Isle, it’s one of the few places impenetrable by Winter, apart from Stygai.”

“West of Westeros?”
“That too, but tell me—aside from the Lords, who could even reach that place?”

“No one would have pegged you to be a man of belief.”

“I’m a crook, not an idiot. I was raised a ward of the Tullys, I know my tales. I know of the gods.”

“The return of the Lords of Valyria was more a blessing than a curse, after all.”

“And your true-born Braavosi are utterly witless to think otherwise. The eldest surviving Stark himself has mentioned—dragons, obsidian glasses. The night will be long.”

“Yes, and the Sweetwater has frozen before, the texts have claimed this. The Others could turn water to ice and tread upon it, and we thought bed tales were for babes.”

The Littlefinger smirked at the man. “No one is safe. All must be wise—let Valyria take over, before Winter consumes us all. These kings and lords and vassals should save their childish game of thrones for another day. If not, we’ll all die. This is not a battle between evil and good. The clash is between two evils—one greater and the other lesser.”

“But you do not truly care about that, do you?”

“I have Harrenhal in my hands.”

“And what of your other plan, then?”

“The eunuch will heed my wisdom, no doubt. With the Targaryen Queen and her dragons, the lad who they claim to be the rightful heir will never see even the shores of King’s Landing. Their only allies are from the South—Dorne. They cannot have the West—Casterly Rock is still with the Lannisters even with the Lion dead. East, the Vale, is willing to make negotiations, thanks in large part to me. Ah, but the North.”

“I have perceived you to be the greatest matchmaker—with the Tyrells and Lannisters, the Young Falcon and your Sansa Stark.”

“Not Sansa Stark, this time. Arya Stark.”

“With your eunuch’s Aegon the Sixth?”

“It has happened before—a Stark and a Targaryen, spawning a rebellion and a great alliance. Another rebellion, another war is necessary for the bigger plans.”

“Tired not of the Five Kings?”

“I have learned this from the most detestable woman in the whole Known World—power is power.”

“Know this, the lords of Old may have other plans for the youngest Stark daughter.”

“Yes, yes. But they would not be able to resist my offer. Leave the orchestration to me.”
Hey, awesome guys! I hope you liked this chapter. Would love to know what you think on the J/A development. Thanks to the Faye/Liza-inspired Baelish. This is how he's going to be in this universe. Thank you for supporting the writers. You're all so great! :D
“A Black Dream

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The courtesans of Braavos were famed across the world. Singers sang of them, goldsmiths and jewelers showered them with gifts, craftsmen begged for the honor of their custom, merchant princes paid royal ransoms to have them on their arms at balls and feasts and mummer shows, and bravos slew each other in their names.”

-On Courtesans; Stories from Braavos

“They are creatures prepossessed—they obsess over these more than they do their swords and their selection of wine and ale.”

“Their minds which are an extension of their loins in truth, are occupied in claiming these more than they are in claiming armies in stallions and kingdoms and cities.”

“These great men are far from fools!—they are aware and educated of the veracity that their two hands cannot claim the whole world.”

“The world is one of the million things their hands cannot hold. Ah, but these...these, they can fit in the palm of their hands, can they not?”

Arya Stark heaved a sigh as she watched the Black Pearl with her usual enthused declamations.

They were speaking of women’s breasts.

The girl has been under the tutelage of Bellegere Otherys for the third day now, and although she questioned the superficiality of all the little details they put into their ‘craft’, there was not much protest she could do. This was not one of those tasks wherein she could merely threaten the subject with a dagger against the soft of the throat to obtain any material truth she needed, not that it was a choice. The Faceless Men pride themselves on being discreet yet exceedingly efficient. If she desired to get close to the Sealord, she must toil in order for him to notice her.

Arya Stark began loathing the rigidity of it all the moment she stepped into the world of trained courtesans. She has already received swift instruction in various areas necessary to be the epitome of an ideal paramour—dance, etiquette, art of pleasuring, even argumentation and poetry. Courtesans believe that their craft involves engaging the mind, for a woman must “not only stimulate the loins, but the intellect of her male consort.”

The words of the Kindly Man echoed in her ears.

“You will sleep on rose petals and wear silken skirts that rustle when you walk, and great lords will beggar themselves for your maiden’s blood.”

“A coin for your musings?”

Bellegere Otherys’s voice pulled her back from her deep thoughts. Arya blinked twice and
turned her attention back to what the woman was saying.

“I-if you would be so kind to repeat your question,” Arya stuttered.

The woman raised one perfect brow in displeasure. Sometimes, the girl would find herself lost in the woman’s goddess-like features—impeccable oval face, alluring eyes, prominent nose, thin, seductive lips, sparkling light-brown complexion. Her built was so flawless she often questioned if the woman perhaps came from another realm. Even candle flames seem to shine brighter whenever she passes by.

“Why, please tell, is there a need for you to conceal your face with a silken veil in front of your male consort during your first three encounters?”

“So he could see only your eyes.”

“And why must this be so?”

“Revealing your whole face to a man signifies revealing your soul to him,” Arya Stark shuddered at the thought. “It is equal to your preparedness to engage in intimacy. A courtesan must wait until at least the third encounter as it is only proper to make a man wait as well.”

“They are wretched creatures,” the courtesan paced, and it was truly more of a gracious drifting atop the barge’s wooden deck than a walk. “Nay, never let them in—unless you can be assured of the nature of their seat of affections. After they bathe us with fragrances and gold coins and carnal froth, they leave. And they always do, hence never let them take you with them. You’d go demented in this life and in the next if you do.”

_Valar Dohaeris._

She despised the satin dresses, the lavish ornaments, the dainty behind-the-fan rehearsed giggles, the facial hues, the way men stared with unparalleled wanton whenever she walked with Otherys on the high streets of the Purple Harbor. She itched to return to the House of Black and White and practice with daggers and swords and poisons. She missed the feel of the rough fabric of her acolyte’s robe; and although they were required to wear skirted ones, at least the skirts were unlike what she wore now. The skirt was long but made out of very thin chiffon, and it was almost transparent from the thighs to the feet. The only agreeable things in the apprenticeship were the scented featherbed and the assortment of savory eatables in Otherys’s barge. Three days, and she was already fatigued. How much more of this could she possibly endure?

Not to mention, she missed Jaqen.

The last time he had kissed her was on the Bridge of Lights. And the last time she saw him was when he brought her to Otherys for her apprenticeship. The Kindly Man had ordered her to use artifice in order to conceal some of her facial features, but not all, because she ‘already has a pretty face’, according to the Elder.

Arya and Jaqen reached Bellegere Otherys’s barge, and forthwith she had noticed how the courtesan’s eyes lit up upon seeing the Lorathi. Yes, Otherys may have kissed Arya on the side of the lips, and whispered rousing things on her ear, and at one time even touched the side of her breasts, but all these she did while gazing at Jaqen. The girl is Faceless, and can thus unlock concealed motives. To Otherys, she was an erotic plaything whose primal function is to serve as the courtesan’s passage to the Lorathi’s carnal sensibilities.

The worst thing in the girl’s thought, was this: Jaqen stared intensely at her the whole time
Otherys was doing those sensual acts to her body—as if utterly and profoundly curious of the girl’s reactions. When Otherys traced the roundness of the girl’s now womanly breasts, Jaqen had bitten his lip and breathed deeply.

She could tell.

_Pleased._ Her Faceless Master was as clear as day, very pleased.

Their exchanges…

_Tell me, Lorathi. How many times?_ 

_One._ 

_You lie. One, in a previous life perhaps?_ 

_What’s the difference? And why must it matter?_ 

_How can you even be styled a master with ‘One’? Ah, such fraud, you are._ 

_A man is not claiming that he is any good. You are the one whom they call the ‘Black Pearl’. You know things._ 

_Oh, many, many things. Do you have any idea at all?_ 

_Yes. Some say this—the cost of a whole Myrish palace._ 

_Two Myrish palaces. Ah, but what are these really, but trifling things?_ 

_That is true._ 

_A second then. Nothing at all. Let us show the girl the works—she has come of age, yes?_ 

_A master must not do such things in front of the newly-ordained._ 

_Very well. Include the girl—reasonable enough arrangement._ 

_A man and a girl both serve the many-faced god._ 

_Even the gods are lustful. Read your texts._ 

_They are. How can humans be if the gods are not?_ 

_And you’re serving the most lustful of them all. The most possessive of them all, in fact. Ah, such pity._ 

_Indeed. However, it is not in our place to question the divine._ 

_Inspired. What do you say of it then? A quick taste of that divine?_ 

_A man is a man, not a god._ 

_The likes of us can make gods out of men, Lorathi._ 

_No doubt._
And I gather you want to be a made a god?

Jaqen H’ghar only chuckled, eyes fixated on the girl. “Forgive a man, he is unworthy of the honor.”

The first decision is usually the wiser one. Arya Stark should not have opened her mouth.

“We cannot make gods. In Braavosi, *quattuorverbis*—to cause to become—this is who they are.”

It was then Othereys’s turn to laugh. It was not a rehearsed one, still, it made the hairs on the girl’s neck stand as if they were being fondled by seductive wind. She heard her say the words, *such innocence!*

**Innocent? The ghost of Harrenhal? Far, too far, courtesan.**

“Oh, sweet girl,” the courtesan murmured in between fits of giggles that were nothing short of enticing. With nails of sparkling burgundy, she traced the girl’s lips, then kissed them. The courtesan’s tongue slightly touched the line of her lips, and she gasped. As if by instinct, the girl hastily turned to her master—and whether to seek confirmation on matters of ethics, or to simply entreat saving from unchartered waters as this, she did not know.

No, this is not Harrenhal. Her Faceless Master had absolutely no intentions of emancipating her from it all. Why must he now? It was she who asked for his generosity to be allowed to perform such task.

The bastard was rubbing his smirking lips—this, he did as the women’s lips made sweet contact.

He was punishing her for it.

A courtesan’s laugh—men speak of it as if it is even lovelier than a thousand harps playing simultaneously, or the songs of hummingbirds near-dawn. Arya was irritated.

“Ah, but where did you find her?” the courtesan further remarked. “She is too precious!”

The Lorathi sighed, shaking his head. “Indeed, she is.”

He had told her before they parted that he would sail for Lorath for a task that could not be delayed, and that he will return to Braavos in two days. He warned her still about the Sealord.

*I promise to forget about his frolics, make him come back the soonest.* This, she implored from Him of Many Faces.

These frolics of his happened in the temple. A day before her task, he had pulled her to the corridor that led to the Hall of Masters. He pinned her against the wall, brushed her hair with his fingers, smelled the scent of her neck. The acts were all too fast—a single blink meant the indolent movement of clouds.

“Arya…”

Again, he had mercilessly robbed her of the reflex to even breathe. Her quivers from crown to sole may have been brought by the complete absence of distance between their bodies. Slowly, he
lifted his face to hers… and his lips gently blew air inside her partly opened mouth. *He will kiss me… in the temple.* Arya Stark’s heart flew with delight. She closed her eyes and gripped the collar of his tunic, so that in their impassioned exchange which she was anticipating, she can keep herself upright to meet his ardor. This may be bequeathed by the gods…

“Jaqen…”

She was already panting…and he has not even kissed her yet. She felt his lips almost touch hers…

Quiet chuckles slightly engulfed the previously still corridor. He spoke in an undertone.

“Oh gods, Arya Stark. We are in the temple. Obsessed much?”

Her eyes flew open with irk.

He walked away, still chuckling.

_Damn this,_ she had remember herself saying. Immature masters must be taught their lessons as well. They must swallow their own brilliant pedagogies. Inculcation is for unlearned minds, and such is his. She quickly picked up her sandal from the floor and threw it at him. The footwear hit him straight on his back.

Fate was neither clement nor sympathetic towards her that very day, for after she had hurled the sandal at her Lorathi master, her Kindly Man had just come out from one of the chambers. It was a grand conspiracy of both time and universe, as the Elder saw the sandal land on the floor after colliding with Jaqen’s back. He looked at the sandal, at the Lorathi, then at her.

His brows shot up, regarding the Lorathi with an inquisitive look, as if questioning the why of the whole ordeal. Jaqen H’ghar shrugged his shoulders casually. The Elder then motioned that they approach her.

“Oh, dear child,” the Kindly Man spoke to her whilst they walked. His voice was half-euphonious, half-reprimanding. “Yes, you are now an ordained Faceless, very good! Yet, all Faceless Men must respect each other, yes?”

Well of course, this will again be her fault. She clenched her teeth at the fact that she could not explain the context of that situation to the Elder. Nay, she cannot tell him, ‘He tried to kiss me; and I was anticipating the kiss so very much for I find him too, too beguiling; but all I received from him was an insensitive insinuation of how obsessed I am about him!’

She clenched her teeth even more when she saw her Lorathi shaking his head at her in feigned disappointment, donning that damnable face of innocence—as if she was the culprit and he had nothing to do at all with it, as if he had not taught her well during her days as an acolyte.

“I was immature,” Arya Stark hissed as she explained, her eyes on her Lorathi. “I acted with evil intentions, with mockery. Forgive me, Elder.”

The Kindly Man tilted his head to the side to signal that the apology is for the Lorathi master.

Forgive me, Master,” she managed to tell Jaqen in the midst of her suppressed fury. _Forgive me, I might slit your throat tonight._

He sighed, innocence and hurt still displayed upon his visage. “Very well, you are forgiven, Arya Stark. A man is for mercy and second chances.”
“Thank you.” Loathsome undertone in each word.

“For what?” the Lorathi urged.

“For your clemency.” I will skin you and pour the Waif’s new concoction on your exposed flesh. It will be the melodies of your ear-shattering screams against my singing voice.

“And where must a girl’s sandal stay?”

“On her damned foot.” Rest tonight with an eye open, it will be my blade against your right eye. I will scatter your innards on my bed, and sleep on them. Valar—

“Very good, Faceless.”

He nodded at the old man, signaling that the moral had been elicited from the misbehaving child. The Elder smiled at her, patted her on the head, walked away.

Jaqen only smirked, traced a finger in between her breasts before sauntering off. She hated him for it.

Yet now, she kept on beseeching the same from her death god.

Lead him to me sooner than the soonest time. I will forgive him and his antics...

She must be able to gather valuable information about the Sealord before the tenth day of the Unmasking. The Order’s concerns about the Volantenes seemed to grow by the day, and there was the question about Littlefinger’s presence in Braavos with some Knights of the Vale. Constant cryptic nightmares consumed her—corpse of the wrathful lady, the raven with third sight, dragonlords. Last night, she dreamed of how the Green-eyed Man she saw at Satin’s Palace suddenly had scales for skin and fire for breath.

There was another dragon.

The dragon had purple eyes. It was beautiful. And she loved him.

And last night, too, she had dreamed of her bastard brother. He had opened one of the catacombs beneath their castle in the North. A shadow…from this he had received command, but he was not himself. Surely he must know things—that opening catacombs would disturb the peace of the departed, lay unwanted chaos upon their souls.

As soon as he opened that one tomb, he was not himself any longer. His old self was false, and the girl cried at the dream, for she could not understand a thing of it.

There is a monster in the Crypts of Winterfell.

“We have reached the third night,” Bellegere Otherys said, completely naked in front of her yet unashamed. She was in front of the mirror, with a lady-in-waiting brushing her ebony-colored locks. “You have proven yourself fit to be a courtesan, sweet girl. You have earned your right to a name.”

Arya Stark thought of the names used by other known and cultured courtesans in Braavos. Bellegere Otherys calls herself the Black Pearl, a name she had inherited from her mother, Bellonara. There was the Black Swan, the Nightingale, the Daughter of the Dusk, the Poetess, the Merling Queen, the Moonshadow…
“So, what would it be?” Bellegere said, looking at her through the mirror while examining her bare breasts with her hands.

“Winter Maiden,” Arya Stark answered.

Bellegere Otherys regarded Arya Stark with genuine interest. “Winter Maiden. How mystifying! She was born from snow, and she is an impregnable wall of ice. She is cold and cruel, thousands of winter storms had wrapped her, yet in it you cannot find fault—it is a virtue. Only fiery passion and intense ardor could melt her frozen heart.”

Arya Stark was amazed at how the Black Pearl could quickly come up with an elaborate description about her…beginnings.

“Indeed,” the girl replied, then with added with a humorous tone, “Frost and ice heed my commands, such is my divine gift.”

The woman smiled and walked to the bed where Arya sat, her ebony curls toying with her erect nipples. “Men love innocence, they are slaves to women and tabula rasa. Use it as a gift, and men will destroy empires in your name.”

Silence. It was the only fitting response to such claim.

The courtesan seated herself beside her. “I will make you the greatest courtesan in all of Braavos. Captains will sell their ships for mere hours of your company, kings will renounce their thrones in your name, songs will be sung of your beauty, and men from all over will bid gold and silver and gemstones for your maidenhood. Yes, Winter Maiden, I will make sure that the Sealord himself begs for your company during the Unmasking.”

Arya did not know what to say. She merely stared at herself in the mirror as Otherys fiddled with her brown hair. Then, she placed her lips against Arya’s ears and whispered, “And I will teach you how to please your Lorathi.”

Arya Stark gasped and stared wide-eyed at the courtesan. She let out a nervous laugh and replied, “He’s a Faceless Man. You must know this.”

“Oh yes, sweet girl, he is a Faceless Man,” Otherys chuckled most entrancingly. “But no man in this world, faceless or not, could ever, ever resist us.”

Otherys sat behind Arya, and the courtesan’s hands moved slowly…to stroke Arya’s waist, hips, her long legs. She felt a dizzying and uncomfortable sensation bordering on disgust. The courtesan asked her in a tone that seemed to fade in the wind, “Has he touched you in these parts before?”

“No.”

“You lie,” she replied. “You neither flinched nor batted an eyelash when I placed my hands on those parts.”

Arya Stark’s breathing grew frenzied. No, she was not aroused, she was utterly confused and repulsed by what the courtesan was doing to her. Is this how they do things? She thought to herself. If so, is this how I will do things?

“And here?”

She gasped aloud when all of a sudden, Otherys’s hands went from her legs to both of her
breasts, massaging them gently, her thumb slightly flicking her nipples. Arya Stark cursed the very thin robe she wore that evening, however, she could not take her eyes away from the mirror that reflected the both of them.

*Even the gods are lustful. Read your texts.*

The girl’s mind drifted to the exchange her Lorathi had with the courtesan.

*The death god is the most lustful of all.*

She is a servant. She is not allowed to question.

The girl willed herself to possess this eager desire to learn as much as possible from the Black Pearl. *For the task, she convinced herself, for Him of Many Faces.*

She scoffed at her own fabrication, for she knew the undisputed truth that as Otherys was touching her there, she could not stop hearing that deep, enigmatic voice calling her, naming her.

*Lovely girl…*

All she felt that time was an unexplainable yearning. She could not bear to look away from her own reflection, because she knew that she was not at all seeing an ebony-haired courtesan stroking her, but a red-and-white-haired handsome Lorathi.

*Her Lorathi.*

Jaqen purred.

*Arya Stark…look at you now. A woman…So, so precious. Enamoring.*

He continued stroking her breasts. Her breathing had gone wild, spasmodic. In another dimension, her subconscious uttered his name repeatedly, possibly endlessly…And he would speak to her of his plans.

*Claim you…claim…*

*Make you moan until you lose your voice in the night…*

*Complete you…*

*Fill you with my seed…*

*Sheath myself in you—twilight, midnight, daylight…*

“Stop!” Arya Stark forcefully removed Otherys’s hands away from her breasts.

She covered her face with both of her hands and exhaled sharply. Strength—she implored this from anyone who would even listen, as her entirety trembled with both loss and want.

The courtesan laughed at the girl’s virtuousness. Still, her chortles were magnetic. “Seven days from now, wealthy men will throw gold at your feet, and the one with the most gold to offer will claim your maiden’s blood. When the time comes, you must honor the agreement.”
Arya Stark knew about this when she accepted the task. There were always risks—if Otherys proves true to her promises, she would have to spend an inordinate amount of time with the Sealord, and only the heavens know what he will do to her before the bidding itself takes place. Her previous belief about a woman’s maidenhood is this: that it is as futile as it is enslaving. Apart from its shallow function of ensuring the perfect match for a highborn woman, she could not see any other possible purpose it might serve. A woman’s worth especially in Westeros was always equated with physical chastity—not with her wits, not with her capabilities.

She never thought of virginity as valuable, until now.

Until...him?

“Valar dohaeris,” Arya Stark whispered to herself.

Bellegere Otherys donned her silken light blue gown and her usual luxurious adornments. She then handed Arya a pair of large ruby earrings and eleven bracelets of gold laden with jade to match the fiery red pendant of her Queller.

“Rise, sweet girl, it is time,” the courtesan told her. “Beginning tonight, you are the Winter Maiden.”

The Sealord’s Palace is a majestic structure of white and bronze, its expanse stretched across the far eastern end of the Purple Harbor. It stood on an artificially formed peninsula, with its domes and pinnacles visible from as far as the Canal of Heroes. Before reaching the palace itself, one has to tread on a far-reaching walkway of slate and quartzite leading to a chateau where the city magisters hold office. On both sides of the walkway were six pillars of white feldspar which all seemed to glow naturally in the moonlight.

A golden thunderbolt was turned on the palace’s spire.

The Black Pearl and Winter Maiden glided through the covered parapet walk with two maidservants and four cloaked escorts carrying two ornamented wooden chests. The festivities had started an hour ago.

“Make them wait, make them crave,” the courtesan had told her. “Lions neither look for nor chase after fawns that are not in hiding. Always make a late entrance.”

For the sake of tradition, they both wore glittering eye masks that complemented their gowns, but the girl had to wear her silken veil to cover herself from the nose to the chin. The whole of Braavos must wear masks all day until the Uncloaking which would happen on the midnight of the tenth day. They have finally reached the double doors of the great hall, and the Winter Maiden marveled at the elaborate design of the doors’ sidelites.

The doors opened. The girl saw grand chandeliers, heard music and laughter. The hall was splendid beyond description. When they stepped in, time seemed to have stopped as all eyes moved to them both.

There had been tellings circulating in the higher ranks of the Free Cities, of the Black Pearl introducing to the Braavosi society an exotic virginal courtesan by the name of Winter Maiden. Stories were that the maiden had just flowered a year ago and that she descended from the blood of the old lords of the North. Her coming to Braavos was an act of rebellion against her noble upbringing—as she is not a big believer of arranged marriages. In truth, no one is expected to believe
these embellished tales about courtesans; it is known that these are fictional, meant to intrigue and to draw more and more men to them. No one cared either—for all any man would truly care about is the smell of maiden’s blood. The irony was that her background story happened to be true, to a certain extent.

Men of all shapes, sizes, and age wasted no time in indirectly acquainting themselves to the new maiden. Even in matters involving courtesans, there are customs that must be observed. The men could not directly speak to the new maiden unless spoken to, as such would be considered a discourteous act. They must only speak of themselves through the maiden’s ‘older sister’, her pedagogue if you will, and so it was only the Black Pearl whom they could directly address. Most importantly, a suitor cannot merely engage in any sort of casual conversation with the two women without first offering them a few luxuriant gifts.

“I have heard tales of the Winter Maiden’s beauty,” one copper-skinned nobleman from the Summer Isles said. His eyes were on the girl’s covered face. “My most exquisite Black Pearl, from which circle of heaven did you find such woman of resplendence? If the Titan of Braavos could speak, I am most assured that his first words would be of our maiden’s unparalleled radiance.”

Arya Stark felt that she may vomit.

These men were nothing but revolting creatures, hiding their truthful intentions and primal desires beneath honeyed words and lavish presents. This Summer Islander for instance, seemed to have swallowed a whole book of poetry to be able to come up with endless synonyms for the word “beautiful”. Before leaving, he had given the Winter Maiden a crystal tiara, his words were these: “she stands like a queen, and a queen must be crowned.”

The girl noticed how the previously empty wooden chests were now full of gifts, and the Black Pearl herself was surprised at the outpouring, since the night was far from over.

“Look, sweet girl,” she whispered to her. “We should have brought five chests. And they are not even bidding for your maidenhood yet.”

The girl was not impressed with the presents; rather, she was impressed with how the Black Pearl had managed to turn her into an object of lust in the minds of all these men. Even the other courtesans were craning their necks to get a view of her. That night, she realized that the whole idea of the courtesan culture is the worst thing to ever exist in Braavos.

*Even worse than murdering people in cold blood and getting paid for it?* A tiny voice questioned her. She scolded herself for such thoughts. *All men must serve, Faceless Men most of all.*

The Winter Maiden was not obligated to respond to any question or any form of verbal adulation. When she does respond to a man, however, it would only mean that she is interested in being his consort; and should he possess the required gold, he may claim her maiden’s blood. The Winter Maiden planned to respond to one and one man only.

The Sealord of Braavos.

She smiled to herself when she saw him finally walking to where they sat. People all over seemed to deliberately give him the right of way.

The girl and the courtesan were surprised when the Sealord removed his mask.

“Ah, my most magnificent Black Pearl,” the Sealord began. “I am not worthy, I may never be worthy. But please, do accept my present of gold for the beauteous Winter Maiden.” His lips spoke
to the courtesan but his eyes never left the girl.

*This is the Sealord?* Arya Stark thought. *But he is...so young.*

Tormo Fregar donned his hair of midnight black that shimmered in the bright lights. His eyebrows were thick, his eyes deep set, his jaw looked perfectly chiseled. His choice of accoutrement was high-collared, and it revealed a portion of his chest laden with thin ebony hair. He had a single hooked earring on his right ear. And he looked...no older than Jaqen.

“Forgive me, my ladies,” Tormo Fregar continued, dipping his head in a bow. “I am not a large fanatic of the rhetorics of love and beauty. I am not a man of eloquence either. I do not wish to add to the weariness our captivating Winter Maiden might already be feeling right now, considering she has already listened to a hundred men speak of her grace and loveliness. Men are cruel creatures at times, forgive them.”

The Black Pearl chuckled richly at the Sealord’s japing. Her laughter was sweet melody to men’s ears. “Oh, my lord, if all men would ask forgiveness on behalf of his own kind the way you do, then the world might indeed turn to be a better place.”

Arya Stark regarded the Sealord under scrutiny.


Tormo Fregar’s eyes cruised across the Winter Maiden’s form, beginning with her neck, to her breasts, down to her thighs partially revealed through the thin fabric. It was neither interest nor fascination she saw in his eyes, it was lustful obsession.

Arya Stark did not need to persuade herself that she has the Sealord in the palm of her hands.

“To forgive is one thing, to desire to be forgiven is another,” the Winter Maiden spoke, for the first time that night. Some of the men who showered her gifts discreetly watched the exchange with envious glances. The maiden speaking to the Sealord meant only one thing—she desired to consort with him. “Perhaps these men are not aware of the mistakes they have been making the whole night. If one does not know of his errors, how could he possibly think about asking for a reprieve?”

The Sealord smiled at the girl’s witty claims, and turned his attention to the Black Pearl. He was all the while stealing glances of the Winter Maiden, though. All of a sudden, Arya Stark felt her chest grow heavy.

At the corner of her eye, was the plump Volantene man who was at Satin Palace days ago. He entered the hall through a side entrance, and seated himself beside some Lyseni magisters. Younger courtesans entertained them and most of their faces were already flushed because of too much wine. The Volantene—he seemed to be leading the conversation most enthusiastically. She immediately let her eyes roam around the vicinity to look for the silver-haired, green-eyed man who was with him at Ragman’s.

No sign of him at all.

Braavos and Volantis are oil and water, as Jaqen had said. Why then?

Drown out all other sounds, she urged herself. She listened intently to what the Volantene’s words. They were at the other end of the hall, three tens of feet from where they sat. Heightened senses—she has proven her possession of it countless of times, and now a situation has presented itself. The girl decided, if gifts are given, then gifts are used.
Slowly, she closed her eyes and let her senses permeate the conversation.

They were speaking to one another in very faint tones, Ghiscari Valyrian; and she was merely catching an incoherent string of words.

*Sorcerers... Imperial sigils...*

*Third dragonhead... dragonrider...*

*Lost heir.*

*Lands...*

*Hounds...*

*The Emperor...Targaryens...*

*Westeros.*

*North. Wall.*

*Stark remnants.*

The girl’s eyes flew open in shock.

“Is everything fine, my dear maiden?” the Sealord asked her softly. “Do tell, is everything according to your satisfaction?”

The Winter Maiden’s manipulations melded perfectly with No One.

“No.”

The Black Pearl was surprised at the girl’s response. She looked at her with a quizzical brow, silently admonishing her to mind her words. This is the Sealord, he is above others as the King is in Westeros. Arya Stark ignored Othereys’s warning glances.

“I have spent the whole evening patiently listening to words full of pretentiousness, accepting gifts half of which I could not even make use of,” she told the Sealord in a faint yet inviting tone. “Not one man in this hall asked me what it is that I truly want.”

Tormo Fregar’s brows shot up. Leaning closer to her, he whispered in an equally magnetic tone, “And what is it that the Winter Maiden truly wants, if I may ask?”

Time is running out. Revelations upon revelations are massing up right in front of her. About the Sealord is a particular mystery, his affairs with Volantis, and the green-eyed one, these new details she was able to unearth. The mention of Starks.

A hasty yet calculated decision.

Winter Maiden gently removed the silken veil that covered half of her face. All eyes turned to look, the hall was at a standstill. The Black Pearl assessed her through narrowed eyes, though in the midst of the girl’s cryptic actions, she could not do anything. It is the maiden’s decision to reveal herself in
front of a man she wants to temporarily consort with, until the bid for her blood.

Only the eye mask remained on her face.

“Companionship, my lord. Yours, to be exact.”

Tormo Fregar wet his lower lips and shook his head gently in utter satisfaction.

Lyanna.

My sweet love…

You look more beautiful now, carrying my seed.

They will be born from me.

In fire and ice, yes.

This is sin.

Love is a sin?

It may be, if it was conceived out of hurting others.

Lyanna…do you wish to return to Winterfell?

No, beloved. Not right now.

The Isle?

It’s lost on me. Do return, beloved. Or they will kill them.

Arya Stark was delirious.

Soft moans escaped from her lips, as her hands moved freely all over her nudity. The Lorathi was stark naked, and his lips were teasing her neck and her collarbone, his movement against her body spawned friction and smolders. It was a night of games, and they were playing ships and seas.

The Lorathi’s mind was inspired, and it remained so despite years of being a Faceless Man. There were those intricate yet soft traces from the tips of his fingers along her skin—script brushes that maesters and scholars use to draw maps. The eruditions brought about by maestership had made him a more adroit faceless. Very good, Master.

Brush then moist paint. Fingertips and feathery kisses. His deep Lorathi purr named every territory.

Qarth.

Butterfly touch upon her pelvis. She heard herself giggle.

His lips sailed to her side, kissing it, sucking on its flesh. Twice, she gasped, and the Lorathi chuckled. No, not Qarth—the masked woman was last seen here. And she had spoken to the girl many times in her dreams—Aid to the Warrior, she called her. Bringer of four.
The script brush moved to her belly.

Yunkai.

His hot mouth trailed burning kisses along it. Whimpers of pleasure, and how he enslaved her so... take me away, the girl urged him, for if they remained in Yunkai she will be forever his slave. And the lords of Old have retaken the Bay. They cannot... must not remain, or they will know of his life within the fire beast—a cyclic existence.

Dothraki Sea.

Navel, and his script brush traced the orifice in circles. The palette poured paint all over it—licks, nips. A pleasurable ache filled the soft part in between her legs. The sea is deep and hides its own secrets—yet days are long and delayed gratification is always beautiful.

Nay, not here either. Here, the Silver Queen was captured. And the lords of Old are now slaughtering mighty khals and their khaleesis—to look for her, whose son they named the Stallion.

The map was slowly taking form.

Her erect nipples, he then rubbed in circles—lightly, erotically. Nerves exploded inside in each contact. Chilly wind blew into her skin, yet her entirety was aflame. Sea waves are difficult to still, and even the usually tranquil Shivering Sea had lost it. She felt like breaking violently into bits and pieces, felt so very weak in the middle of her convulsive shudders.

Braavos...

“Jaqen...oh, Jaqen...”

Lovely girl...

Braavos will fall.

She moaned again, louder this time. Her fingers caught his thick, wavy hair and she tugged at it, until she felt his lips against hers. She drank from his open mouth and tasted the cool pond by the godswood. It is the pond that never dries. Winter, she thought. She stuck out her tongue to savor the snow falling from the clouds of frost; her Lorathi continued to please her bosoms. North, she urged her Lorathi. Take me North.

Winterfell.

He suckled her lips. She is a woman now—his woman. Unwritten consent has been granted, and she could now allow him to use her in manners both imaginable and unimaginable. He massaged her bosoms, and they were clay in his hand of a skillful potter—shaping her, softening her hardened exteriors with his manly waters, completing her...

“Jaqen...more.”

She slowly opened her eyes.

Her Lorathi is Tormo Fregar.

Arya Stark woke up with a scream. Breathless and thoroughly distraught, she removed her right hand that had wandered inside her blouse. The girl rose to splash cool water on her face covered with dream-induced sweat, all the while shaking her head vehemently.
Help me, Master.

Sleep eluded her when she went back to her featherbed.

Desert the task!—the scream of her inner, but she swore to accomplish it by the weirwood of the old gods. To break sacred vows is a curse. The comely master had made it clear—it was the Elder’s decision, and all his decisions originate from the sacred ruling of Him of Many Faces. Arya Stark could not give up on it—not now that she was so close to unraveling the truth, not now that she could almost see how to contain the tumultuous events that threatened to not only challenge the Secret City, but possibly conquer it.

Not now that Valyrian Expansion is slowly taking shape, like a slithering snake threatening to cross the Narrow to Westeros. And the matter with the Starks—with the remnants of the Starks, that is, whatever it may be, she had to unlock all sealed chests with regard to it all. The raven with the third sight had spoken—he needed rescuing. The Children were not to be trusted. Heart of Winter, Heart of Darkness. A terrifying thing beneath the Wall…

All prophecies are intertwined.

A few breaths, in and out, to quiet her inner storm. Then, like a prayer, she repeatedly uttered that precept which governed the purposes of Faceless Men.

“Valar Dohaeris, valar dohaeris, valar dohaeris, valar dohaeris…”

Chapter End Notes

Hi, awesome guys! I hope you liked this chapter. Let me know what you think. ;D You guys are the best! Hugs and much love to you. Have a great weekend. ;D
“The Nine Free Cities are daughters of Valyria that was, but Braavos is the bastard child that ran away from home.”

The Kindly Man

“And in this order, a Faceless Man must serve:

To Him of Many Faces,

To the Secret City that nurtured him,

To Men that paid the price, with the exception of the Self.”

Faceless Creed; 11th leaf

He came back from Lorath, in time to keep close watch of the Winter Maiden during her first appearance in the gathering at the Sealord’s. Complications were things present in any faceless task, service to the death god may at times involve staring at the visage of Death itself, for they are one. And this cloaked figure is a great equalizer, it is known. Valar Morghulis, men and faceless men alike.

Two other masters were sent with him to assist in the guardianship.

Entering the Sealord’s Palace required no elaborate tricks, not that they had to use such. They were always welcome during council gatherings and in other city-related functions. Apart from the sworn Braavosi soldiers and members of the Arsenal, Faceless Men are under oath as protectors of Braavos and of the interests of the Iron Bank. All were born out of slavery, willing in all intents and purposes to uphold common good—though death be part of it, whatever their opposing or parallel concepts of ‘all-encompassing good’ may be. From their shared history, they have formed their concept of equality, and this did not remain a mere concept for the people of Braavos—it had evolved into a necessity for them, like breathe of air, like life.

But the new Sealord was a person of mystery. Faceless Men had to test the waters in his turf in order to find out if they could safely swim with him in it.

That night, curtains will be drawn, as in a mummer’s play. Characters, lines, feigned emotions will be served to spectators in platters of concealment, and people would be persuaded as always, for they are fanatics of illusion. Of the many endowments of the Gods, theatrics is what the Faceless is most gifted at.

Thus, there was the wealthy Myrish nobleman rumored to be the only surviving descendant of the House Darklyn of Duskendale. With him was an equally well-off Lyseni tradesman.

An exotic courtesan who has earned the name ‘Lady Enchantress’, walked towards them. One Pentoshi caught her by the wrist, but she gently pulled away. “I am spoken for,” she whispered to him, and signaled to the two patrons three tables away from the Black Pearl. He was insistent, told her he could offer her more gold than what four or five nobles could grant. A few seconds ticked, and the Pentoshi hastily freed her from his grasp. There was something about the way she stared at
The courtesan reached that one table, and before seating herself, ran her hands through the Lyseni’s nape-long hair of midnight. The man caught her playful hand and kissed it. She giggled. She never giggles—especially since what she had dealt with all her life were poisons and miasma.

A whisper to her ear. A sigh. The Lyseni was even more skilled than the courtesan herself. Such truth carried no surprise—seduction has always been his flair; Essoan, his language. The death god grants gifts—and the deity had bequeathed him with hypnosis, an endowment so apt. Her lips moved, and from them came a provocative parlance concealing a stern warning to not overdo it. This is not the place for blandishments and heartbreaks. The death god sees it all.

The Lyseni responded to her admonitions with a quiet laughter.

“I’d be damned,” the Lyseni tradesman exclaimed. Beneath the face is the comely one. “I have lost count of the number of perverted men who had approached the Winter Maiden. And hells, look at those gifts. The girl could already build an Iron Bank of her own. I wonder what creative ploy Nestoris would pull should he see this—for sure, he would drag himself by the knees to reach the Black and White and beg the Elder for commission.”

The courtesan smiled. “For them, she is one enthralling thing. They say that the strength of bottled *amortentia* increases the longer it is kept. So dangerous it becomes, that a mere whiff could make the victim kiss the dirt the feet of the subject walks on; and no, the effect is not coercive. The Black Pearl herself is pleasantly surprised. Perhaps, even she had not received these many gifts during her own first appearance.” Years in poison and potion concoction had made the Enchantress a knower of such things.

The Myrish, who in truth was a Lorathi by birth, was silently learning by rote the face of each man approaching the Winter Maiden. He could not clearly hear their words to her, but he is very good at reading lips—better at reading intentions. Ah, but a Faceless Man must—what is the use if not? They have not said anything offensive so far, it was all merely a collection of quixotic lines meant for women of beauty. They could not make physical advances, not yet, for this was a first appearance, and his girl has not removed her veil for any of them.

The only thing he was most sure about is that all of these men, whether directly or indirectly, have expressed their desire to bid on her maiden’s blood.

*Filthy bastards*, he seethed inwardly.

The death god may have bestowed the Lorathi with a thoroughly creative mind, for he had already forged in his imaginings various methods on dealing demise to each cursed man, depending on the extent of their ‘offense’, with himself as judge:

*Pentoshi magister*—venom dart.

*Qarthian lord*—dagger to the soft of the throat.

*Lyseni noble*—disembowelment.

*Tyroshi commandant*—strangulation.

*Prince of the Summer Isles*—sword to the head.
Nothing.

There was nothing at all that he could do but harden his jaw, narrow his eyes, run his fingers through his hair in silent fury. He expelled air from his mouth and quietly cursed the Elder—his splendid plan was ruining him little by little, fanged worms ate at his apple heart. He wanted the taste of blood that night, even in the absence of their imperative and ritualistic black and white slip, and it was treachery to Him of Many Faces.

*Treachery? Far from it perhaps.*

For if one truly knew the death god the way the Lorathi knew her, then they would be sure to conclude that *she* is the most demise-salacious of the lot of them. Never will the deity consider such decision a betrayal—she will bask in the act.

Such brilliance it was, for the first Faceless Men to write the texts of the Order in High Valyrian. Their sagacity had led to a most perfect obscuration of the many-faced deity they called ‘Him’.

*My goddess, damn this.*

And if such title was for the death god or the concealed persona of Arya Stark beneath the Winter Maiden, he did not know.

He almost wished he had ravished Arya’s lips in the temple, and to hell with the Elder if he sees them both. He was *starving*, and the last time he had tasted her was in the Lights by the Sweetwater. Torture—this is what it is. Ah, the holy texts sang of truth only, therefore, ‘A faceless man will suffer from the throes of his own doing.’

He exhaled once more. His pondering was disturbed by a wine goblet pushed in front of him.

The comely one spoke. “For your nerves,” then smirked. “You have sighed irritably for the twenty-fourth time tonight.”

The Lorathi smirked back. “You were keeping count? What of your task to survey then?”

“I can perform multiple tasks, thank you very much,” he replied arrogantly. “The Sealord seems indifferent,” the Handsome Man observed. “Will he approach her?”

The Waif scoffed at him. “He would be a fool not to.” The woman jumped up asudden from her seat, to the Lorathi’s surprise. She then regarded the comely one with a venomous expression, a hiss escaping from clenched teeth. “What in the seven hells are you doing?”

The Handsome Man merely stared at her with a blank expression. His lip tipped up, a slight betrayal of his hidden intents. “Sit down, Lady Enchantress. It was merely a light touch on the soft of your thigh. Are you not a courtesan?”

The Lorathi rolled his eyes at another one of their usual altercation.

“Is it not enough that you have been holding my hand the whole time like a babe afraid of losing his mother?” the woman asked in a furious yet hushed tone. She moved her chair a bit farther from the offender and sank to it. “Perchance, you are playing your part over the top, *brother*. Even the Elder—”
“I take my profession seriously,” he interrupted her, forcefully pulling the cushioned seat so she sat very close in front of him. “You should, too.” He gently traced her almost bare shoulders, eyes surveying the hall. The woman flinched. “And I beg you, sister. Dare you not say that I am playing the part a little too much. If I am, I would be carrying you out of this place before the gathering even reaches half its conclusion. But of course I would not do that, would I?”

How he managed to utter every word with a damnable undercurrent of lust, the woman could only guess.

The Waif glanced around and noticed some people regarding them with a deadly combination of curiosity and suspicion. Her brother made a perfectly reasonable point, no courtesan would cringe from a mere touch on the thigh. She breathed heavily and gave him a nasty retort, for this was all she could do. “You don’t have honor in you. You’re revolting and you’re a swine.”

“A man could not hear anything, be quiet, you both,” the Lorathi told the two masters. This was not the first time, either.

Slowly, the Handsome Man rubbed his lips against the Waif’s shoulder, deaf and blind to everything else. “Wrong,” he whispered against her ear. “I am No One. We all are.” A chuckle. “Say not that you are affected by all these feigned acts of ours. Sixteenth leaf, or it’s the Elder’s training stick once more against your sweet, fair flesh—after what? A decade? Faceless Men are not supposed to feel, remember? We must only think and do.”

“Indeed,” the Waif said, her jaws hardening in pure spite, trying yet failing to not wince at the feel of the comely one’s lips against her skin. “And right now, I’m thinking of poisoning you in your sleep and I’m considering doing it tonight.”

“Very well. I will leave the door of my chamber open for you. Should be easy, too—pouring your fancy chemistry on my bare skin, considering I hate sleeping with clothes on.”

The Lorathi snorted with amusement. “Oh, gods…”

It was a murderous stare the woman hurled at him. The Lorathi’s amused smirk faded from his visage, and he rewarded her viciousness with an apologetic glance.

Beknownst to but a few—the Tyroshi, the Braavosi woman.

They all commenced with their training in the Order when they were mere children—no more than ten and three years of age. The cleansing, the wiping of corpses, burial duties—these were the easiest of all the tasks. Combat training was a little more challenging, bearable nevertheless. Then, came the close observations and spying.

Afterwards, the assassinations.

The only difficult thing about being a Faceless Man that is bordering on impossibility, is the complete denial of self. More impossible perhaps, than attempting to light dragonglass candles as a final step towards maestership.

The Kindly Man had told him this once: ‘Being No One is not learned, it is realized.’

Apart from the Elder, the Lorathi had never encountered any other master who he could say had fully attained self-abnegation. Most masters still spoke of their previous lives, of a possible future once they retire from the Order—impossible, for once faceless, forever faceless—and of fears, inhibitions, of things that make them happy. All these ultimately point back to at least a grain of selfhood.
At times, they harbor ill feelings towards others, they seemed to be repulsed by certain people—and the Lorathi’s relationship with the Tyroshi can attest to this.

And at times, they fall.

The Lorathi shook his head at a sudden memory of the Elder hitting his then fifteen-year-old Tyroshi brother with his undying training stick. The old man had discovered much—a single-stemmed rose each morn, in front of the Waif’s bedchamber door. The Tyroshi thought it wise enough to conceal the flora through a method they called ‘cloaking’; however, traces of sorcery, no matter how harmless, are a thing detectable and at times categorically detestable in the Black and White.

“Mindlessness! What were you even thinking? That Faceless Men may be granted liberty to possess such emotions?!” the Elder had berated the boy. “Have you no honor and shame? Pray that the death god casts you not!”

This fragment of a memory, and the Lorathi once again began questioning the faith. He’s been doing this more often now than before, and he began with all these queries after the bleeding star had revealed her to him.

What kind of god would not allow you to love but embolden you to kill? The Lorathi asked himself for the millionth time. Valar Morghulis. ‘All men must die,’ and we must be the dealers of death. But only a chosen few could be allowed to love? Where is justice in that?

Before Arya, the tenets were as clear as black and white.

‘Purpose creates the Self, but the Self’s purpose must be to annihilate its essence. For one who is Faceless, existence must not ‘be’, but must be derived—from the abandonment of all wants, all hatred, all feelings, all hopes. The Self then must be unfilled, so that it is not visible but it is present. The Self, the Soul, the Heart, must allow No One to exist.’

No One must exist? The Lorathi chuckled inwardly. Even the phrasing was problematic—it contradicts itself. And this was the first time he had thought of it.

Where is justice in allowing only a few to love?

Justice is blind, of course he knows this. Beggar or king, Dothraki or Yitish, righteous or corrupt—everyone is subjected to blind justice. The Blind God of Lorath had always regarded every person equally—no slaves, men and women share the same state. Death is the true blind god, for it takes everyone in its own time.

But love…love.

They say it is the most confusing concept of all. It is the only universal principle without any universal explication. She is confusing, the Lorathi thought, eyes on the Winter Maiden. That means, confusing is…beautiful?

Poems have been written about the subject, and poets spoke of it as the most splendored of all things. If it is, why are the devout servants of Him of Many Faces, they who have offered their wholeness for the god’s purposes alone, not allowed to experience even a morsel of it?

And they say that the death god equalizes. In what sense? the Lorathi thought. She is too hard even and especially, towards her own servants. Does the death god love? If gods created men, does it mean they needed men to exist in a realm inferior as compared to their own? If the truth is the opposite, why create at all?
Deities have needs, then, if this be the case. If they have needs, might it be that they are incomplete? And if they are incomplete, how can they even be gods in the first place?

*Does the death god feel joy? Loneliness? Does she love?*

*There’s the lore.*

*But then, she never taught us the concept, all Faceless, so perhaps...she has no notion of it.*

*Still, there’s the death god and a man.*

That precise moment, the Lorathi felt an inexplicable feeling of pity and empathy towards his brother. There are certain things you cannot will yourself to ignore, this he knew. If it is truly ‘love’ his brother felt for the woman, which may well be a possibility out of ten thousand, then the man had chosen for himself a life of tragedy. *Servisux ad Mortelum*—for the Faceless Men, the only purpose of life is to serve Death.

The Lorathi gazed at the Winter Maiden once more.

*And what about Jaqen H’ghar?*

Could he say he *loves* her? Hells, he did not even know what the absolute meaning of the word is! Does he delight himself in her? Yes. Does he think about her every waking second of his life? Of course. Does he want her safe, sheltered, happy? Certainly.

So does a man love Arya Stark?

*Cast me not. A man has sworn himself to you. We all did.*

His usual musings were disrupted by hushed yet sudden whispers in the great hall. When the Lorathi looked up, he saw the Sealord walking towards the Winter Maiden. All attention was on them, as each person in the hall waited for what may be an interesting exchange. This is despite the fact that more than half of the hall may not even be able to hear anything, what with the music and the noise all over the place. When the Sealord removed his mask, gasps and giggles from both highborn ladies and courtesans filled the hall.

The Handsome Man chuckled and turned to the Lorathi. “No surprise there, but the Sealord sure has pleasing looks, I’ll give him that. Let’s hope the Winter Maiden could handle him objectively.”

The Lorathi ignored his brother’s provocative remarks and observed his lovely girl with Tormo Fregar. By the looks of it, the Sealord was japing with the two ladies, for the Black Pearl was laughing with beguilement. Then, he saw the Winter Maiden speak with the Sealord, much to the latter’s delight.

A few more minutes, and the Winter Maiden removed her veil, to everyone’s astoundment.

Jaqen H’ghar suddenly winced and sat upright.

“Well, that was rather quick,” the Handsome Man remarked with sarcastic fascination at the Winter Maiden.

“She’s a very witty girl, leave her be,” the Waif replied.

*Something’s wrong,* the Lorathi thought. *What would make her yield to the Sealord that*
easy? He rose abruptly and scoured the entire hall. Far right! The Volantene at Satin’s was there, leading one serious conversation.

The Lorathi closed his eyes, inhaled deeply, trying to sense the aura of one other man—the one with platinum-white hair and seemingly magical blood.

*He’s here.*

Not in the Sealord’s Palace. He’s here in *Braavos.*

The Lorathi rushed to the great hall’s back doors and sped to where the man is. He was too strong…too strong, that Jaqen H’ghar was able to once again sense his presence from the *other* side of the city.

It was too risky to head to him alone, especially since the Lorathi has but a faint idea of the kind of power the man could wield, but it left him with no other choice. And now more than ever, he knew who he is.

He ran the fastest he could—*fleeted* and *breezed.* A reckless decision, to use his skill of transporting himself from one place to another by consciously skipping physical distances. It was plain mockery to limitations, but the Lorathi’s limitations are in themselves, limited. The Unmasking is at its height, and for sure a large number of Braavosi would be all over the place. Anyone could notice him running, disappearing, running again, this time two tens to three tens of feet from where he originally was. It was subconscious spanning, decussion—the Magisters’ walkway, a rustle to the Moon Pool where a large crowd had gathered for the fire display—past the Iron Bank—past the Blue Lantern—onto the Canal of Heroes. In a single dash, he traversed the canal’s bridge from end to end, whisked to Brusco’s up to the Bloody Bridge.

*Show yourself,* the Lorathi thought with blazing fury. *I’m exhausted of your games.*

Finally, he reached the Outcast Inn at Ragman’s Harbor. The area was surprisingly dark, silent, and empty, but then he quickly realized that most of the non-locals might be at The Gate for the evening festivities. He walked towards the port slowly and let his eyes roam around the place.

*There he is.*

No One against five.

Two Volantene slave-soldiers assailed from behind but the Lorathi swiftly turned and silenced them both with one quick slash, straight across the two men’s throats. Three more charged towards him. One drew his rapier to give him a deep stab. His thwart of the assault was an insult; he blocked the rapier with his blade, disarming the man. His fingers wrapped around the blade’s hilt, used the sharpness to pierce its owner. Assailants’ swords charged from both sides. The Faceless dodged. A stab on the belly, another on the heart. Their dead bodies collapsed to the ground in a seemingly theatric simultaneity.

There they were against the dust—a collective sacred offer.

The Faceless did not even sweat a drop.

The Lorathi leaned and calmly wiped his bloody dagger on one slave-soldier’s inner tunic. He rose and slowly walked towards a large boat where the platinum-haired man stood, twenty-five more slave-soldiers with him, swords and spears drawn to protect their lord. They would not anymore fight unless provoked.
The man spoke, and his voice was a low growl.

“I did not know that Myrish noblemen could fight like that. But who are we fooling here? We both are aware, that is not who you are. Light casts not your shadow. Betrayers are shadowless…”

The Lorathi studied the man’s features—his face was undeniably comely, but that is expected of a person such himself. His green eyes were unmistakable.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the Lorathi replied in a quiet voice. “Go back to wherever you came from.”

The man laughed, but the sound that came out from his throat was more of a chilling roar.

“And where is that?”

“West of Westeros.”

Another roaring laughter, like it was conceived from spirits in the darkest soul-bastilles. “Oh, but we are from Old Valyria. With your Songs and senseless texts and pitiful utterances to your gods, you were aware of this happening. And you are hiding something of ours—a very powerful child. Your imperial—ours now. What you have surrendered, you cannot take back.”

“You own nothing,” the Lorathi seethed. “You lost everything during the Doom.”

The man seemed amused. Green eyes glowed for a split-second. He then replied with a sinister tone, “We will all take back what is ours. Dare you not act with weak righteousness, betrayer. Your death god sees everything. The detestable gods know of it all.”

He threw it upon the Lorathi’s feet—the severed head of Aeneas Pultos, captain of three missing Braavosi trade ships. Blood was drained from his flesh, his skin, full of brutal lacerations. Eyes ripped out, mouth agape in a most horrific fashion—as if the last thing he was permitted to do for himself was scream for the slightest mercy from the lords. His own fingers were fed to him—all ten of them. It may be, that his own flesh gasped for breath seconds before his damnation.

The Lorathi was enraged at the dreadful sight.

What happened to more than a hundred others? And the twelve…the twelve from Silty Town—they were mere babes, and had nothing to do with the ancient conflicts with Valyria. The lords spared them not, and even before the blood of children could permeate the pores of the lords’ skin, even before the scarlet could dry, here yet is another.

And it will never stop.

*Your aid, Him of Many Faces.*

The Lorathi hurled his dagger at the man. The throw was imponderably skillful—as one was to expect from a Faceless Master. The steel flew faster than the eye could blink, more rapid and intense than lightning touching the ground—and the steel’s energy was fixated only on the mysterious man’s temple.

As it appeared, Faceless Men were not the only ones in possession of heightened senses.

Dexterous. As if he did nothing but flip his hair and let it toy with the gentle winds. The man slightly tilted his head to avoid the dagger’s blow. The tip touched his left cheek gently, and blood trickled from it in very small amounts. He smirked and faced the Lorathi once more, wiping the
blood with his fore and middle fingers, licking it, as if it was a taste of a most expensive merlot.

The dagger went back to the Lorathi’s hand, which owned it. He caught it by the hilt, and smelled the blood from the blade. *Filthy blood.*

*The bastard has been drinking blood of humans.*

“Brother!”

It was the Handsome Man. He dashed towards the Lorathi—the death god had sent him.

Spears began flying onto their direction.

There was absolutely no attempt on the part of two Faceless Masters to lay low and avoid the throws.

Instead, the comely one ran swiftly towards the boat, unsheathed his weapon. His was defense. Oblique wields, and his longsword blocked the horizontal deluge of blades with it, rendering the spears useless. “Brother, now!” he called to him. And so, the Lorathi with a deft curved hurl, let two of his daggers find their way across and through the foes’ mortal frames. And the blades, as if with minds of their own, slashed and pierced and carved and severed. The men choked on their own blood, an abundance of scarlet sprayed all over, and they fell onto the dark waters, now bereft of breath, with the swiftness of it all denying them of even a nanosecond to keen over their pitiful selves.

Blood sprayed in a dozen places from their ravaged miens.

Five, six…nine Volantene slave-soldiers succumbed to Death that fateful night.

Wind from the Shivering Sea blew, aiding the boat away from the harbor, leading it towards a large Volantene ship with red hulls and sails. The Lorathi did not take his eyes away from the white-haired man, while the Tyroshi panted beside him. One battle a day—it was enough bloodbath for an evening.

“What was that?” the Handsome Man asked in perplexity and alarm. “Is that…”

The Lorathi finished the sentence for him.

“A dragonlord, yes.”

“The Empress.”

Long fingers touched the deck of lacquered wooden cards. Her hands were trembling as she semi-shuffled the rest—the uncontrollable response as they say, was due to the magic held by the wood itself, and the carvings that were touched by hallowed entities. The deck was trimmed, set on the tabletop. She pulled out a second. Smiled. The lady patron shifted in her seat, leaned towards her, awaited two more of her judgments. Tonight, she holds all of their fates in suspension. A read is never wrong, and a foreshadow of the future is a weapon against the unforeseen. The unforeseen must materialize, must be dealt with.

“Lovers.”

Two lady companions held back the sound of coy squeals. Lady patron rubbed both palms
together, though the air was a little warmer than the usual cold, agreeable even. Wetting her lips, she silently demanded for her third.

“Seven of Cups.”

The interiors of the Reader’s tent were filled with hysterical yet inspired screams. The combinations were third best, but the wooden cards totaled seventy-eight, and the odds that the third finest could even appear in a night in a first reading is nothing short of mystical.

“On your reactions, I gather you ladies to be well-versed with the annotations of these?” the Reader asked.

One of them spoke, as if an expert on the matter. “Oh, yes! Empress—fruitful mother of ten thousands! A regency over harvested things. Fertility, growth. One wondrous forthcoming!” She looked to the other lady companion, and both of them sang, “Lovers!” with their too-delicate, too-feminine, too-hopeful voices. “She’s going to have a man!”

The second needed no further explication—a choice may be offered, two. It’s either acceptance or rejection. It is usually the former that most people resort to. Partnerships, alliances, marriages, intercourse of the body and the soul. What is the difference, truly?

“And the Seven—”

“A lot of things,” the Reader interrupted the patron. She seemed too pleased to notice. “Companionship, desire, power, wealth, victory, honor, self-illumination.” The woman smiled, flashing one gold tooth out of white others in front of the gathered youth. She held the patron’s cheek with hands whose fingers wore an assortment of ringlets. “The gods have been generous to you, waste not the generosity, for it shall not come to pass once more.”

Arya Stark rolled her eyes at the Reader’s smoke and mirrors. She was seated at one corner of the tent.

The Unmasking had allowed the display of a repertoire of things absurd and laughable, such as this. If not for Bellegere Otherys, she would not let even the dark silhouette of her foot land twenty steps from the tent’s flap. The affairs of the day exhausted her, and that night, she wanted a marriage with her featherbed more than she wanted a night of toss and turns with Jaqen. His deep Lorathi voice, his chuckles unhinging her mind, permeated her senses now numbed by exhaustion. “You must, sweet girl,” the Black Pearl had told her. “Readings have guided me throughout my existence as chatelaine to lords and princes. I insist, and I will cover the expense.”

The girl did not notice the three ladies taking an exeunt from the tent, and the Reader’s voice:

“Come now, great doubter.”

Candles inside the tent seemed to die then light up through the force of invisible air. The girl turned to the Black Pearl, did not bother hiding her irritation. The courtesan ignored her, handed the Reader a gold coin.

“Three tellings for the girl,” her thumb and fore held the payment, the rest of her fingers she held up with paramour flair. “Be nice.”

“Three gold coins.”

“For this farce?” Arya spat, brows raised in disbelief. “Forget the whole thing.”
The girl turned her back towards the fake sibyl and pulled Otherys by the wrist.

The Reader chuckled. “Nymeria, I see a lot in you. I did not even have to look at the cards. Tragic.”

At these words, the girl paused.

She turned, regarded the woman with narrowed eyes, formulated in her thoughts endless elucidations on why a Qohoric soothsayer would come to know the name of her direwolf. Warhammers battered her chest—she had not dreamed through Nymeria for the longest time now. All things past and present and to come—all through the raven with the third sight. Demon hands crushed her heart.

A small pouch containing sixteen gold coins from various perverted men at the Sealord’s landed with a soft thud in front of the Reader. The girl nodded her assent.

“Go on.”

The woman repeated the rituals—shuffles, breaks, trims, fancy handiwork, a sudden tabletop thwack. She held out the deck to Arya through open palm.

“Pick a first.”

There were seventy-eight, the first was atop, the last was at the base. The girl had chosen sixty-fourth. Gently, she held it in front of her face, studied the impression upon the wood.

A crowned figure, winged, atop a carriage pulled by four creatures of lions and eagles. His face is obscured by mist. The figure carried two great swords, an ethereal chain around his waist. He was human, and draconian. Black and white drifted into the wood’s empty darkness.

“The Chariot.”

“What does it mean?”

“Meaning I did not expect that to come at all,” the Reader replied, hint of displeasure evident in her voice. “Twenty years in this craft, probabilities are untrue, inaccurate. But the Chariot as a first —”

“What does it mean?” Arya hissed.

The old woman smirked. “A man granted a divine nature—no, he’s not a god. He will never be, and may no one find fault in it; it’s difficult to understand the Absolute, so who could blame him? He’s pure, and impure. The latter state is because of you, and the pureness in him was thus compromised when you came.”

Bellegere Otherys laughed. The candlelights dimmed, they could not compete with her. “Why of course, she’s the Winter Maiden! Every man’s pureness becomes a thing questionable should she—”

“Shut up, Bellegere,” the girl snapped without glancing at her. She smelled dusk and ashes. *Forgive me, but stop talking for once.* “Impure in whose sense?” Arya asked.

“His god.”

She heaved an ambiguous sigh. “What more?”
The Reader leaned her body against the table, raised a brow. “Are you mad?”

“Maybe, I am,” Arya seethed. “I could pay you more.” At this, the seer smiled.

“The soul has its limitations, however, his has reached the domain of the transcendental, but not without difficulties. He chose to reach it, but a complication has presented itself—he cannot fully hold the state, because his self instead of one, became two. There was a first, then a second. It was the latter which he elected for himself,” the Reader was studying her colored fingernails. “You Faceless Men are hypocrites. You call yourselves No One, but you point your fores to the concept and say ‘this is myself’. Tricks, lies. And to you, audacity.”

“Audacity?”

“To dare to be a rival of a god.”

The girl scoffed. “I work for the gods.” Her hands touched the deck once more, her fingers pulled from the center. Twelfth. She studied it, narrowed her eyes in her assay, said nothing, for the obscurity to it was as clear as the Braavosi skies after the uncloaking.

“You think you do,” the Reader replied. “Show me.”

“I know I do.” The girl flipped the wooden card to the other side, revealing the figure of what seemed to be a pontiff—right hand holding a scepter that appeared more to be a giant key. Nine nails were affixed upon the oriel atop her head, and the light that shone through the window reflected thirst of the spiritual seeker. Upon her bosom is a five pointed star—to know, to dare, to will, to keep silent, to go. She was the golden ratio, she was beauty and power.

In four corners of the card, seemingly hovering around the figure, were four faces of deities—the old and wise, the unnamed, the light, the anarchy.

The Reader shook her head in utter disdain. “You should not have entered my tent. You’re a plague.”

Bellegere Otherys opened her mouth in protest, but Arya silenced her with one finger held up. “Yet here I am, and unless you can go back in time, you have to tell me this.”

“I don’t need any more of your gold.”

“But you need to live.”

“Just so.”

“Talk, then.”

“Hierophant.”

“Builder of the bridge?”

“Between gods and humans, yes. Prophecies have spoken of her, and the one Promised whom she would aid—a useless battle, if you ask me,” the Reader stood, as if wanting nothing more of the exchange, as if wishing that may her ‘craft’ be nothing but buffoonery. Gold had certainly poured in, and may she be forgiven, she had indeed fooled a lot others. In those cases however, she was the one pulling the cards out from the deck of seventy-eight, and her finger had grown accustomed to the feel of the wood that had all the fine cards. This is different.
The seer merely wanted to ascertain if she still possessed the gift. A test with a skeptic—nothing to lose. And now she wished she had never laid eyes even on the shadow of this one girl’s shadow.

“The link to the gods,” Arya Stark said, ignoring the million slashes through her heart, the causes of which remained unknown to her. “It does not sound foreboding. At all.”

“Perhaps it is nothing,” Otherys said. “We courtesans are known to give men a taste of the Realm Unseen.”

The Reader smirked and walked to the girl, and the latter asked what she had actually done to receive this aversion from the woman. “It means nothing to you because you are holding it upside-down. It’s the Hierophant Reversed.”

Arya Stark overturned the card.

“You’re trapped, girl,” the Reader said. “You had followed their doctrine blindly, without questioning its desideratum, the design. Only one of the many in that House of yours sees the faith for what it truly is—conscious influences. Who do you truly serve? Ah, tell me not. I don’t care.” She held out her hand to the girl. “Hand me back my deck and get the bloody hell out of here.”

Surprised though she was at the woman’s interpretations, Arya did as she was told. Blind faith—of this she was sure, for her primary intents prior to joining the Order was to exact vengeance on the names she still recited in her subliminals, and when the Lorathi had shown her a taste of that power, the intent had changed. She sailed to Braavos for those names, and for him. If there was anything blinder than this blindness, to her, such is unknown.

The woman went back behind her table with layers of Qohoric naperies of garnet and amethyst. She sat and eyed both women with raised brows. “Did I not speak in Braavosi? I said leave.”

“You owe us one more.”

“I owe you nothing.”

_Sleight of hand._

The girl threw one wooden card left at the palm of her hand onto the table. It was betrayal, the girl had but a look at it, the card was the last—the seventy-eighth.

_Tower._

It stood like an impenetrable fortress atop a toothed mountain. Lightning struck the structure, setting it ablaze—truth versus ignorance, spirit to material. Magic has indeed entered the realms, despite influential entities and men of reason saying otherwise, and there was more to it than Ice and Fire. Flames leaped out of the tower’s windows, as men and women fell headfirst from it to escape from the chaos. Dark clouds hung overhead.

War. Destruction. Pandemonium on so many levels.

_A mighty structure will fall; and then, Death to all men living. Valar Morghulis._

At this, the Reader stood, picked up the pouch of gold, and hurled it in all violence towards the girl. Gold coins bathed the floor, its shimmers fighting and meshing with the flickering candlelight. Otherys finally voiced out her protest.
It was of no use—the Reader was now enraged. Her voice was a collective shriek of what may have been a hundred evil *djinns*, but beneath the terrifying holler, was the sound of fear more than that of anger. One only needs to listen so, so closely.

“Get out! OUT! NOW!” She viciously tore the tablelinens, threw at them whatever her hands may touch—a repertoire of ornaments, wooden cards, fragile crystal spheres, even silver, even gold. Arya Stark held up her arms to block a thick collection of soothsaying scrolls the woman hurled at her. “Dark child! Begone! I need you not in my tent!”

“What does the third mean?!” The girl screamed back at the woman. “Honor the agreement—you said three!” She began pulling her dagger from beneath her silken skirt. Might must be used, she needed answers. Almost, Arya Stark was assured that the Reader had some knowledge. She is a seer after all, and not all possessed such gift.

Otherys had forcefully pulled Arya on the wrist, out of the tent. “Unsound mind! Oh, sweet girl, we should not have come!”

Two armed escorts of the Black Pearl positioned themselves on either side of the women. Threats, dangers, were plenteous for the likes of them. They all began walking briskly to the other side of the Purple Harbor, towards Otherys’s barge. The girl gritted her teeth—the courtesan had ruined her plan to force out answers from the Reader. Options were scanty though, and it was the wisest—for the Reader was about to hurl one large silvery five-sconce, unconcerned of the possible repercussions of burning her whole tent with it, setting herself ablaze, and them, too.

Not an act of one with unsound mind, but an act of one thoroughly horrified. What had the Reader seen in those three wooden, to make her decide that to desert life through self-immolation was even a choice?

The girl looked back at the tent. It still stood. The woman had calmed.

*Answers, answers. The girl’s heavy heart wept.* *Answers, Jaqen H’ghar.*

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*They are intent on taking her.*

No text, in its understandable limitations, can possibly document motives and inner thoughts, and only when faced with the fulfillment of prophecies little by little could such motives unravel. The dragonlords never planned to defeat the Chosen.

They plan to make her *one* with them—in the literal, take her piece by piece, so that her blood and bones, her thews and her every corpuscle, they can consume; for every fragment of her contained magic. The aftermath is grandiose in the most sickening sense. Arya Stark will give them balance—their powers of Fire will meld with her powers of Ice, she will be gone for she will be a mere part of their innermost, and they will triumph.

*Your aid, Him of Many Faces. Hide her under your powerful cloak. A man is Shield but a mortal Shield nonetheless, and the undertaking is too great.*

He had said many more words that night, and it was the night when he had uttered the longest of all his prayers.

*Arya.*
Jaqen laid himself on the featherbed and closed his eyes. She’s safe with Otherys in the barge, two other Faceless were with her, and she herself is one. *Sleep*, he urged himself.

Faceless Men do not dream.

The door to his chamber opened then closed. Bolted. He kept his eyes shut.

The Lorathi knew sounds and manners of footsteps—as if they were fingerprints and eye hues, as if they themselves were a parcel of the owner’s identity. The footsteps were not calm, nor were they commanding—not the Elder’s. Not self-assured—not the Tyroshi’s. Not cautious and gentle—not the Waif’s.

The footsteps were quiet, yet very, very impatient. It might be that the footsteps possessed a mind of their own, and that the owner is merely a follower of their whims to traverse distances.

He smirked, utterly pleased.

*Clever girls go barefoot.*

Very slowly, she walked to the bed. Before the Lorathi could open his eyes, she was already atop him.

“Arya, why are y—”

One deep kiss from her consumed whatever questions he may have.

Her hands roamed to touch his naked chest, and with the tips of her fingers, she caressed him there. Her touches were light, but his bareness in contact with her tips sent minuscule conflagrations in him—and every inch of his skin marveled at the warm scintillation of it.

*Magic,* he thought.

The Lorathi sat upright and pulled her closer, rewarding her berry mouth with kisses deeper than the one she was granting him. It was a generous exchange of breaths, moans, fluids.

There she was, the Wolf again—growling low with unquenchable desire for him, biting his lips in a manner that was more than necessary, wanting him to bleed profusely for her. Their gasps and soundless outcries for gracious air reverberated in the master’s chamber.

Sounds of yearning from one further aroused the other.

His hands wrapped around her hips, suggesting. Then, demanding and controlling. As if she could read his contemplations, and perchance she can already, she began moving on top of him.

Animalism took over, she was one beast that bit and suckled his lips. And beneath her is the mummer—a full knower of dance and many acts, and so like snake in water, she glissaded and slithered atop him, enthusing him, stirring his already stirred manly passions.

*Does the Master want it wild? Rough?*

He groaned and groaned, it was all he could do in his pitiful state of helplessness. Oh gods, she is just too powerful…cruel…powerfully cruel. And she’s killing him.

*A girl is gifted at many things, Master.*

*Men and horses.*
As if he could do any more to help her, he guided her hips in soft, calming motions. *Let the Master*, his subconscious spoke. The Wolf is arrogance, and she knew what she was doing. She ignored his calm and went on with her tempest of movements. She stroked herself against him, very fast—like a mysterious knight atop his steed in a tourney.

Her slit beneath her smallclothes rubbed deliciously against his nakedness. The act gratified him, little by little. Small acts however, lead to climactic ones. There it was again, the proverbial cliff. When was the last time?

He felt that distantly familiar physical thrill. Pleasurable sensations kissed his belly, the soft of his thigh, intensifying in the middle of his legs. The Lorathi’s mind succumbed to an interstice of nothingness. The death god is overtaking him indeed, and his lovely girl was giggling at his plea for sanity, and so he prayed instead to the red god so he may keep his mindfulness, his morals. He wanted her so desperately; he wanted to be *one* with her beautiful self.

*How do you want me?*

“Arya!”

The Lorathi was dying indeed. There was only continuity.

“Oh, gods!”

She kept grinding, stroking. *Shush...let me please you, Master.*

“Move like that, and I’m going to put a child in you…” His words screamed of pure phonematic energy.

*Like this?* She pressed against him harder. Moved north, south.

“Yes, like that.” And his language has ruptured, the real signification of the words was gone. “No, no…not a child. *Children.* I will fill your belly with children…ah…ah…”

She giggled. *Oh, Master...too playful.*

He chuckled, whilst he ravished the flesh of her bosoms. “I will take you with such violence, you’ll pray to the death god for release—that would be the only way…”

It was the only oddity in the midst of perfection.

The death god indeed showed a glimpse of her face to him. The face—utter *wrath.*

She will destroy him—an assemblage of traitorous souls, and the Lorathi will be part of it.

Jaqen H’ghar knew the god, even before his life as Faceless—and the texts perhaps were counterfactual and fallacious, or intentionally misleading for purposes unknown. Yet the Lorathi knew in his core essence that she is never forgiving, especially of mortals who boldly bargained with her and showed signs of the inability to fulfill their end of it.

He turned a blind eye. The god can wait, she holds time in the palm of her hands.

Ah, this is glorious, glorious torment!
She kept moving, caressing, and from the Lorathi’s mouth were infinite ‘Ah’s…’.

He shuddered, buried his nails against her hips. Cursed.

The Wolf was merciful. The waves have calmed, and now she gazed at her Master’s face with lovingkindness, with immaculateness even—oh no, she did nothing wrong. She’s but a lovely girl, a sweet girl, yes? Even her Lorathi holds on to this belief and his beliefs are always steadfast and true.

Be still, Master, the girl seemed to say, as she kissed him ardently on the forehead. She brushed his white locks gently, tilted her head so she could look at him. Be still. You are shaking...

The Lorathi’s face was then buried in his lovely girl’s snow-white neck.

“Wonderful, wonderful.”

Where is the gold, Master?

Jaqen H’ghar slowly placed his forehead against her temple. He smiled lovingly at her. “Gold?”

For the Winter Maiden’s blood.

He flinched, moved away from her just a little, narrowed his eyes. “What—”

Oh, Master. If you do not have the gold, then you cannot have me first. Another man—he who has it, will claim me before you will be allowed to.

“Arya…”

Help me, Master.

The Lorathi woke up asudden.

Faceless Men do not dream.

Tired eyes scoured the expanse and corners of his bedchamber. A thing became clearer to him now. The Wolf, the mummer, the snake in water, the sweet, lovely girl, was not there—never there. He surveyed himself, cursed as he hastily removed his right hand that suddenly decided to roam inside his night breeches. Another curse, as he realized that he had to wash off the manly wetness that clung onto the palm of that hand.

He stood, walked to the corner where the basin was. In the midst of cleansing himself, he still cursed.

Oh, Master. If you do not have the gold, then you cannot have me first.

Help me.

Jaqen H’ghar sighed and shut his eyes tight. Even with the gold, he is not allowed to bid.

He is faceless, she is faceless. This is a task for Him of Many Faces. Personal motivations have no place in the service to the Order.

‘The Self, the Soul, the Heart, must allow No One to exist.’

And thou shalt not displease the death god.

With a forceful throw, he sent the basin flying against the wall. It shattered into thick shards, spilling
water on the cold stone floor. He ran his fingers through his red-and-white of hair, whispered her name over and over.

*Not enough.*

The Lorathi walked towards the broken basin, picked up a thick shard. He needed to drown his inner pains with a physical one. He crushed the shard with his bare hand and felt harrowing gratification. Blood trickled down his palm.

Torture against torture, or else, he might in his state of wretchedness, endeavor himself to slaughter every single person who had taken part in the decision to allow *his* girl to perform the task on courtesanship.

*Your aid, Him of Many Faces.*

*Cast me not so I may keep my oath.*

*Find me, I'm lost.*

*Comfort me.*

*Deny me of myself.*

*I am Faceless.*

*I am No One.*
"Is there truth at all about the binder, Mother?"

No one had used it against the beasts and lived, Child.

Its voice is bight and baneful—the hell's horn.

A thousand souls screaming in pure anguish.

Perhaps, a thousand men tried to sound it before.

Yes Child, perhaps.

Yet dragons still roam the sky to this day."

Chronicles of Bondage; Chapter Thirty-two

Two days, and the Sealord was still an unbreakable stronghold of secrets.

It was not that the Winter Maiden's skills on matters of courtesanship were questionable—oh, but three Bravos have already succumbed prematurely to their last of days in a series of bloody duels, merely to prove themselves worthy of her attention; and their scarlet still bathed and adorned the stones of the Moon Pool.

There was absolutely not a thing that Arya Stark could do but curse the dead men at their dissipations fueled by her, though not with conscious intention, and utter a prayer to the death god for their peaceful repose.

No doubt it was too, that obscenely affluent and perverted men of rank and status, with their means and wants, were little by little acquiring gold from various repositories for the bid five days from this day.

It is one thing that is most understandable though, for gain he will not the Sealordship if he was an open book—the mystery and underlying substance of the title of the Secret City will be lost if he would be the most congenial of persons. The Sealord must always be shrouded with enigma—this will be his primary defense.

Secrets. The Sealord. Littlefinger.

The maiden has heard news of the Littlefinger marrying Arya Stark's aunt, Lysa Arryn a couple of years ago. That would explain why he was accompanied by Knights of the Vale in Braavos. He was now in full control—Lord of Harrenhal, Lord Protector of the Eyrie and the Vale and Warden of the East, until Sweetrobin comes of age. Arya Stark had never seen Sweetrobin in the life of her, mere stories connected them; and Lady Catelyn used to laugh at her account of the boy—he would always dream of flying with giant falcons, their sigil. The maiden could not be entirely sure of the accuracy, after all, the tellings came from Westerosi commoners along the Happy Port; but it appeared as if the vassals of the Vale owed the Iron Bank tremendous amount of gold. And with the Silver Queen occupying Dragonstone, alliances equal ataxia.
And Sansa Stark is in the Vale, concealed in the designated style of Alayne Stone, and now betrothed to the Young Falcon whose true name is Harrold Hardyng. And rumors were that this Young Falcon has already fathered at least one bastard son.

Bastards are more decent than the swines that father them. Still, the Falcon is better than Joffrey. Might be as good as the Imp.

Sansa.

Arya Stark had dreamed of her who was once her sister—her scarlet of hair concealed by dark blankets of the night, her eyes glowing with rage. She spoke to her, but her voice was from the Crypts, from one of the caves near the forks where the direwolf used to seek shelter from the now looming Winter.

 Stranger, she called her. Come, carry with you your divine entropy.

That voice was Catelyn's.

The matter regarding the Volantenes was most disquieting, though.

The Maiden knew what she had heard that night at the Sealord's gathering. She had relayed her discoveries to the Elder and some masters, and the pieces all fell into place.

The lords were slaughtering Braavosi and betrayers from the other Free Cities by the hundreds. They have retaken Dragons' Bay, even the warlocks of Qarth and two from its Thirteen were said to have pledged allegiance. Dothraki khalasars were not heard from in the nearby lands of Lhazar and Bhonash, and the tidings were that they have retreated to the Vaes to evade the lords, and will remain there until the emergence of another shierak qiya. Still, there were those who were not gifted by their gods to think beyond the ambiguities, and so they dismiss the tellings about the great lords as hearsay.

The lords of Old were reclaiming their hour of blood, recreating their savage history to tip the scales of retaliation in their favor.

And the Starks of the North somehow fit in all these.

 Five more days before the Grand Unmasking. Time is not a friend.

She had to get to the Sealord's inner circle, and there is one effective way for her to infiltrate this circle without him growing suspicious of her.

The Winter Maiden now had a barge of her own, much to the Black Pearl's astonishment. It was a gift from one noble from the Summer Isles, the same one who gave her the crystal tiara. It was highly-elegant, ostentatious—six ladies-in-waiting, expensive wardrobe, a grandiose feathery bed that could accommodate four sleepers, lavish furnishings, with an abundance of exotic fruits and other eatables from the Free Cities.

"My sweet, sweet Winter Maiden," the Black Pearl had told her one evening. They were dining in the maiden's barge, and the Sealord had sent a quartet to play for the two courtesans. "Do you know when I got myself a barge, sweet girl? A year after the bid for my maiden's blood! Look at you, ah, dearest novice," the Black Pearl made a series of exaggerated gestures to show that she was in the verge of tears of overjoy. "You are the truly becoming a legend among courtesans. I could be nothing but delighted…"

"Yes, though it was all the making of the Black Pearl," the Winter Maiden replied with gratefulness.
"But I am still in need of your help. I need the Sealord to...really yearn for my company. I have to be with him everywhere he goes, if possible."

The Black Pearl chuckled and kissed the Winter Maiden on the lips. "Am I the greatest courtesan or am I not?"

"You are."

She kissed her once more, and her lips lingered upon the girl's.

Otherys slowly broke away and smiled at her lustfully. "I could kiss you forever—your lips taste of the Lorathi." She brushed the girl's lips with her thumb. Whispered. "I could see him, smell him, savor him even, in you. Fortuitous girl, he is well-seasoned and palatable—should he wish, I could run my tongue in his whole enticing sweet and spice. Make him pull my midnight hair, make him push himself into me morn and night, and without him throwing me a single Braavosi bronze coin. Oh, but he has eyes only for the Winter Maiden...how thoroughly distraught he must be now that the bidding is fast approaching. May his god grant him mercy. His longing for you is strong, strong! It will drown him even in his waking hours..."

"He's a Faceless Man," the girl said, in an effort to convince the courtesan that it was not like 'that' between them.

She only dismissed her with a graceful wave of the hand. The courtesan then assessed her with narrowed eyes, and her gaze lingered upon the girl's breasts. Arya Stark ignored her and drank from her night goblet. The woman spoke.

"It would certainly be sublime—the three of us."

The girl choked on the liquid. Wine spilled from both her mouth and the goblet, ruining the table linen. "Sweet heavens..." The courtesan did not seem to mind, for she went on.

"We used to play this lovely game, we call it 'Captives and Chainers'. Oh well, this is why the men lavish us with gold and barges, after all," Otherys chuckled.

Arya Stark wiped her mouth, tried to conceal her disgust. Curiosity was there, nevertheless, facelessness was stronger. "That is most amusing."

"Ah, but of course!" the courtesan rose from her seat and paced, her fingers performing elegant flicks as she recalled the diversion's mechanics. "Four goblets of strong spirit should do it. He drinks, we whisper things upon things on both of his ears—indecencies, the more corrupt, the better. Sighs and giggles and ear-nips, oh, will I not pay good money to see us do such things! In drunkenness, he would then be oblivious to everything else. The feathery bed awaits him, the blindfold. Our hands are chains—his wrists and feet are captives. You will explore North, I will do South—"

"And why must you be South?" the girl asked, tone innocent yet provoking.

The Black Pearl stared at the Winter Maiden with raised brows. "Why must I not be? Do tell, sweet girl—do you even have the slightest idea what mysteries lie in the South of men?"

Arya Stark scoffed, challenging the lodestar. "Not South of men, no. South of a Lorathi."

Her rich laughter was like a crawling harlot. It was all too confusing for the girl, however, she must play with the Black Pearl's fantasies in order for her to obtain the courtesan's aid.

You deceiver of your own self, a tiny voice taunted her. You merely wanted to play with your own
Hilarity gradually left. The Black Pearl's eyes were now fixated on her, and these showed emotion akin to pity.

"Remind me again how it feels, sweet girl."

The girl narrowed her eyes. "How it feels?"

"To be madly in love."

Wind died down Arya Stark's chest. It was as if virulent darts found their way in her young heart and twisted their own pointed tips against the flesh of it. *To be madly in love? Was I truly that transparent?*

"Tell me," The Black Pearl urged her. "Our beauties are contrived. We somehow forget what the true charms in life are, once we become overwhelmed by these useless pursuits."

She smiled at the courtesan softly. To be madly in love.

"Have you ever met someone in your life whom you have held at such high regard, to the point that in your mind you have built for him a plinth to stand on; and over and over you tell yourself, 'Ah, all men pale in comparison to him?" the girl began, struggling against her tempest.

"I have." The courtesan returned her smile.

Arya Stark felt her eyes burn. She heaved a sigh, forced herself to contain the maelstrom within her. If she would not empty herself now, tonight, she may die in her sleep. "Whenever you see something...anything at all that is beautiful, you smile and whisper to yourself, "This is he...this is he..."

Bellegere sat in front of her and gently brushed the girl's hairlocks with her long fingers. Her eyes were kind, understanding. "Go on."

Her voice broke. "And...and when you thought you've lost all, then he comes like a deliverer from the gods, promising you many things—"You can offer the names on your lips one by one,' 'It will be no harder than taking a name, if you know the way,'—and realized that he had deceived you all along, for truly, you cannot do any of these. Somehow, you felt as if he was merely using you for some...higher purpose written in a holy text, and that is your one and *only* true value to him. And yet...and yet...you chose to stay with him, and started doing things *all for him*—have you...have you ever had that?" The girl was quick. She had wiped the tears even before they could leave her ducts.

The courtesan only nodded.

"Y-You chose to stay, even if you know he would never return to you anything, because his duties are more important, his sacred vows to his god?" Arya Stark thought of the Reader. *Pure and impure—the latter state was because of you.* "He tells you nothing at all—though you know there is something between him and that god. Yet, all these you have come to love, too...because all these point to him?"

Bellegere cupped Arya's cheek. "Yes to all."
"Good," the girl smiled sadly. "That is how I feel about him." The girl laughed softly, and the laughter was inspired, yet cheerless. "Whenever I see him, I feel like…I could love every single blade of grass in the whole world."

They both laughed at the girl's words.

Then, silence.

"Tomorrow, you will visit the Sealord in his own palace. And he will wish for you to stay there until the bidding. Accept or reject his offer, whichever decision you find suitable. He will want. This, I assure you," Bellegere Otherys finally said.

The following morn, the Winter Maiden went to Tormo Fregar donning a most beautiful gown of merlot. Its silk-chiffon fabric flowed from her breasts to her feet, its haltered top was tied at the back of her neck, revealing a portion of her chest cleavage. The slit went from her soles to half of her thigh, and it exposed her back part completely. Around her neck was the Queller, and the Black Pearl adorned her with a simple set of gold bracelets and earrings. She instructed the Maiden to wear her chestnut curls lose.

"No flamboyant ornaments—we want him to see you," the courtesan had told her. "And your curls must be unbound because men love to touch and pull women's hair."

Arya Stark had to calm the tempest inside her. She repeatedly convinced herself that this task was nothing. How many scums has she trounced at her tender age? Twelve? Thirteen? And these numbers excluded men whom she had killed indirectly through Jaqen H'ghar.

And in the phantom-riddled castle by the God's Eye, people spoke of her in hushed tones. She was the object of their midnight tellings, the cause of their intensified fears. Their souls wailed even in sleep, "A ghost," they would whisper to each other. "The ghost of Harrenhal." Even without her lifting a single finger, people were dying around her.

This is nothing.

A painful lump formed in her throat.

I cannot fail.

"The Sealord will see the Lady Winter Maiden now," a short manservant who attended the door told her. She instructed her escorts to wait for her outside the Sealord's function chamber.

Finally, Arya Stark entered the room.

She saw Tormo Fregar seated behind a large oaken desk, scribbling what may be messages or official papers. He was closely being guarded by the First, Second, and Third Swords of Braavos. The eyes of the Second and Third seemed to sparkle at the sight of the courtesan. The First was dispassionate, as was expected of a First.

The Sealord did not look up.

The Maiden waited for what might have been a whole minute. Still, the Sealord was indifferent to her presence. She counted the times when the man would dip his quill in ink and turn his attention back to his parchments. The Winter Maiden walked closer to the oaken desk. She stopped in the middle of the room and spoke in the most come-hither yet innocent, sweet voice.

"If my lord would honor me with his attention."
The Sealord, as if drawn by that voice, instantly stopped writing.

He unhurriedly returned the quill pen he was holding into the ink container and very slowly, rewarded the Winter Maiden with an enigmatic stare. Tormo Fregar drew a sharp breath at the sight of her as his eyes travelled from her face to her feet.

At long last, he smiled, enraptured by her.

"Leave us," the Sealord commanded the Swords without taking his eyes from the Maiden. Only the Third and Second Swords promptly exited the room. The Sealord then gave the First Sword a vicious stare and so he too, walked out of the chamber.

Tormo Fregar stood, crossed the distance between him and the Winter Maiden in a few quick and eager strides.

"My lord—"

He pulled her to him, held her tight.

He whispered against her ear. "Don't speak. You don't have to speak at all."

*Your aid, Him of Many Faces. Your demands are too much.*

The Sealord let his hands touch Winter Maiden's blushed cheeks, her naked arms, her exposed and very smooth back. These he continued to do whilst smelling her curls. Arya Stark's fingers gently felt the dagger hidden beneath the thick fabric wrapped around her waist, and calculated the force she must exert against the speed of her thrust should she decide to bury the blade in his neck pulse.

He is too trusting, sent his Swords away for a few minutes of gratifying his sexual perversions, Arya Stark thought in utter disgust. *But what does he know, really? He's young.* She moved her hands away from the weapon.

"So beautiful…so, so beautiful," he continued whispering.

Arya Stark had to force the Winter Maiden to bury her face in the Sealord's neck to feign affection. She caressed his muscled arms, and so pleased he was by the courtesan's small actions. "Is the Black Pearl taking good care of you? Is your every need met in your barge? Speak and you will have a whole chamber to yourself in this palace."

She struggled to contain her repugnance. This cannot be ruined now. "No, not a chamber, my lord, although I would not dare refuse should you insist," the Winter Maiden spoke against his neck. "I have spoken of my desires prior, I am in dire need of your company. I…I desire to know who the Sealord is—his musings, his manners, what upsets him, what pleases him—so I may serve him better."

"My sweet Maiden thinks about me too much."

"She dreams about the Sealord too much," she replied, giggling coyly. She was not lying either, 'dreams' are euphemisms of 'nightmares', and it was verily the latter that was more accurate.

Thoroughly pleased with her coquettish words, the Sealord abruptly cradled the Winter Maiden in his arms and led her to the velveteen couch beside the oaken desk. He set her on his lap and chuckled as he trailed the tips of his fingers along the length of her thighs. Arya Stark tried not to flinch at his touch. "What is it really, that you want?"
"If I may be allowed to spend my waking hours with the Sealord before the Grand Unmasking."

Tormo Fregar burst out in rich laughter and regarded her with amusement. "The Winter Maiden wants to be present at the Sealord's council meetings? As much as I want her by my side, it is not allowed, my love."

The Winter Maiden giggled and traced the Sealord's jaw with her forefinger. "Absolutely not, my lord! Oh, but I detest gatherings about matters of governance. Should you wish, we could engage in political discourse after each long day, but I do not desire to tire you." She sighed against the Sealord's ears, who grinned. "Mostly, I just want to be with you...and talk, and talk, and talk..."

"If it is your melody of a voice I would be hearing after a taxing day, then why not?" the Sealord replied, kissing the back of her hand. "Will you view the play at The Dome with me tomorrow night? A hundred dragon gold."

The Winter Maiden's mouth fell open in awe. "A hundred? But that is too much, my lord. The play is for a mere two hours."

"Accept this gift, and I will do whatever it is that you ask of me," the Sealord assured her.

Arya Stark's heart leaped in pure mirth. Finally, she is getting somewhere. The Sealord offered her something more than his gold, his quartet, or his palace chamber. He somehow granted her access to his affairs, unknowingly, he gave her his blind trust—and in glasses of wine, he would carelessly share with her his events of the day, as any man would do to a beautiful, unsuspected courtesan.

Valar dohaeris.

The talks with Tycho Nestoris were not as productive, however. There was the politics on one side, and prophecies on the other. They will never marry, for the first is antipodal to the second, and they have inherited their semantics from the separation of two irrenconcilable structures of faith and governance.

This, despite Braavosi and non-Braavosi dying by the hundreds.

"He said that?" the Handsome Man uttered in disbelief. "How short-sighted could Nestoris be? We could not get any support from a questionable Sealord for the time being, and now we cannot even get the Iron Bank to believe us regarding this growing concern? We have seen the dragonlord with our own eyes! No man could have survived that deluge of weapons; thanks to the death god we're Faceless."

The three masters were standing in the atrium, directly underneath the Lion of the Night. The Elder muttered a silent prayer for the deity to spare them from another wroth, for men have once again gone wicked. Blood betrayals are transpiring at each turn of every mortal eye. And the gods see it all.

A thousand more years, do not let the sun hide its face from us.

Four people were being assisted by the acolytes to the pool in the center of the hall. Three more knelt in front of the Mother and offered their supplication. The silence of the temple was partially disturbed by the Tyroshi's outburst.

"Did Nestoris explicitly express his disbelief?" the Lorathi asked calmly. "A man thought the Elder had spoken to him before, and this reaction from him is most unexpected."

The Kindly Man removed his spectacles and wiped them with his robe. "Persuading him was no
difficult task. Nestoris has mentioned that the Iron Bank will extend its full support in strengthening the Arsenal, with or without the Sealord's accession. It is its own institution after all." His feet led him away from the statue, as if by pure compulsion, and the two trailed behind. "The problem lies with both Nestoris and Fregar. Civil talks between the banklord and the Sealord are rarer than Targaryen coins. It is for them, a foreign idea, though they are both Braavosi."

"Another thing, Elder," the Lorathi said. "Arya Stark spotted the Westerosi Baelish heading to the Sealord's Peninsula four days ago. Forgive a man for not telling you sooner. The lord is of Braavosi descent after all, and that usually eliminates him from any form of suspicion."

"Speaking of Westeros," the Handsome Man interjected. "I believe you have sent two masters for a task there. May we ask what the nature of the task is?"

"Acquisition. The fleet has moved—Iron Islands to Meereen, and now to Dragonstone."

"Yes, but from whom?"

"Victarion Greyjoy."

The two younger masters looked at each other in confusion. "One of the claimers to the Salt Throne?" the Lorathi asked. "Twelve moons ago, one other Greyjoy paid for the assassination of the seated Salt King. What to acquire and who paid for it?"

"Apparently, tellings all around were truthful," the Elder replied, in a more silent tone that usual. "This Euron Greyjoy claimed to have sailed all over Essos, might be true then that he had visited the ruins during his exile. A weapon. Victarion Greyjoy—now a 'supporter' of the Silver Queen's cause, a cause stronger now, with half the Iron Fleet behind him. He is in current possession of it. Solicitor is Illyrio Mopatis, Pentos."

The Handsome Man smirked. "Westerosi families and politics are a mess." He shook his head in disbelief. "And what is this weapon, if I may ask?"

"Dragonbinder."

Silence ensued for a good minute. The three masters walked from the atrium to the temple's garden overlooking the rest of the Isle of the Gods.

"Victarion Greyjoy plans to betray the Targaryen Queen, I suppose? Control her dragons, retake the Islands?" asked the comely one.

"Of his hidden intents, we know nothing," the Kindly Man replied. "All we must know is that the younger Greyjoy must not be allowed to possess this Binder. He who has it holds the fire beasts in his mercy. And now, we're not merely speaking of three full-grown, Targaryen-hatched beasts. More beasts have found their way back to the Known."

"What does the Pentoshi magister want with the weapon then? Pentos, in its vulnerability, plans to restrain all the beasts, perhaps?" the Lorathi.

"Idiocy," the comely one suggested.

"Ownership of the dragons is a thing unclear, as I have understood," the Kindly Man answered. "Who truly owns the fire-beasts—the one who inherited the eggs from birth, or the one who hatched them?" The old man's attention was once more on the Lorathi, eyes lingering on his white locks. The latter kept his silence. "Pentos is endorsing a claimer, Sixth of his Name, they call him—the Binder in the wrong hands is an impediment to their plans. Whatever their elaborate schemes on true
possession of the beasts may be, as it appears, we too, are in need of that weapon."

The Lorathi was unable to contain his doubt. "Binders are mythical weapons. They existed only in stories of old, meant to make the slaves believe that dragonlords are not the only ones who could control and ride their fire-breathing beasts. A man finds it difficult to believe that this Greyjoy would even possess a single part of the binder."

The Handsome Man scoffed. "Or perhaps he's just one conceited. I've heard some stories from Westerosi sailors once about that same Greyjoy forging an alliance through marriage with the Targaryen Queen. 'The kraken and the dragon' they called it. I believe he said he'd offer her his big cock."

The Lorathi snorted. "Euron Greyjoy's cock is slightly larger than that of the Silver Queen's late Dothraki husband, perhaps?"

"Oh, that's a good one," The Handsome Man replied with a laugh at his brother's japing. "Ah, I feel for the Silver Queen, all of a sudden—forced to wed a warlord, bedded by a sellsword, entered into a second marriage with a Meereenese noble. Who knows who else she's going to marry to secure that seat? Quest and feat for power and stature are filthy business. I wonder if she is harvesting any form of joy from all these conquests of hers."

The Lorathi smirked. "And now you are concerned about whether or not the Silver Queen is happy? Might I dare ask if you plan to offer your services to her?"

A scoff. "Oh, please. First, she cannot afford me—I'm Faceless. Second, I'm not into Valyrians."

"But of course," the Lorathi replied with a tease. "You're into Braavosi women who could poison your stark naked body in the midst of your pretense at sleep."

"Ah!" the comely one chuckled. "Got the dry ice in her melting, did I not?"

"You wish."

"I see the both of you have finally found a topic of common interest, I'm glad," the Kindly Man remarked in a tone that was anything but glad. The Lorathi stared at his feet in embarrassment while the Handsome Man did not bother hiding his amusement. "As it appears, Dragonbinders exist in the world, as do Dragon Quellers." At the mention of the last words, the Kindly Man glanced at the Lorathi who seemed to avoid the Elder's gaze. "Should the possibility of an alliance with the Silver Queen happen, we are in need of that Binder, as two massive aurelian and cerulean dragons were spotted near the Slaver's Bay."

"Daenerys Targaryen's, perhaps?"

"She does not have dragons of those colors," the Elder countered patiently. "Do you know what some tradesmen have discovered in the skirts of the Disputed Lands?"

Silence was a wise decision.

"A heap of scorched helms, greaves, breastplates, and once stalwart banners of the elite swords of Tyrosh. Two thousand men," the Elder said. "The bodies were, needless to say, missing. A severed, burnt body had been found lying near the straits, turned to embers at the slightest human touch. If these atrocities are not scattered remains of dark sorcery, then may the death god take away my breath for good. Even Asshai will hide itself underneath the shadows in shame—it was too much. It is not however, the regiments one must weep for, but the blood of children who cannot and will not be spared. A grandiose structure—a balance between Winter and Dragonbreath."
Stillness registered. The gods seemed to have given them wisdom. In whispers of wind, they have uttered their guidance: acceptance is sagacity. Fire beasts have indeed crossed both Sunset and Narrow Seas and settled near Volantis. The series of events were all mentally reeling—the matter with Braavos, and now, the glacial dump of burnt iron of supposedly unconquerable warriors in the Disputed. More than eight thousand years, and the tales of the Wights, the frozen River of Rhoyne during the great darkness still haunt the men of the present whose souls are as old as these legends. More than eight thousand years and very few still believed.

Old Valyria was ruthlessness. Winter is malevolence. A co-existence of both—wrath of the gods. Eliminate one and you nip catastrophe in the bud.

"Should we find ourselves in a situation wherein we have to use the weapon," the Handsome Man said, attempting to ignore horrible news from home. "Who would even dare put his lips against the Dragonbinder's mouth and blow it? It could burn lungs of mortals, for sakes."

The Elder only sighed; he has not gotten that far yet. "A Valyrian—pure blooded. Binders are always at their lords' mercy. We will cross that bridge once we obtain the weapon, if we are to even use it." Turning back to the Lorathi, he asked. "When will this acquaintance of yours from Asshai arrive? Your sister is in need of ash residue and dark grass for the poison."

"Tomorrow, Elder."

"Very well. Obtain what must be and cut all ties with her."

"Of course."

"For clarity, we do not work with shadows," the old man warned. With a change of tone, he moved to newer subjects. "News are scant nowadays, though I have heard that the Winter Maiden will be with the Sealord tomorrow night at The Dome. Fourteen days, we have waited, and here we are—with eyes and ears on the Sealord's affairs. Well done, for getting her this far."

The Lorathi shrugged. "It was all the girl's doing, really. And if a man's brother had not discovered the Sealord's preferences, we would not have accomplished this much."

"Just so," the Elder agreed. "Tormo Fregar is most interested with our Arya Stark. He dotes on her, truly. We must hope, no one in the whole of Essos could bid more gold than him for her maidenhood. Though, I pray she obtains all information before this bidding happens."

Jaqen did not answer. The Handsome Man kept his mouth shut and did not add insult to his brother's injury for the first time.

"Whatever chivalrous plans you may have regarding this," the Elder pierced through the Lorathi's thoughts. "I do not want complications."

The Lorathi inhaled deeply and pursed his lips. He did not quite know how to respond to the Elder.

His lovely girl's views about maidenhood were made clear to him—she did not care about such an inconsequential aspect of her person. If at all, she was actually relieved to have found an opportunity to rid herself of it, and this was the rebelliousness in her speaking. So, why in the world should it bother him at all? Why should it be so damn precious to Jaqen H'ghar?

For nights, he had constantly felt this invisible hand savagely tearing his heart from his chest. He had planned to get the girl out of the barge, bring her home, and lock her in her chamber so no man, even an outline of a shadow of a man, could come near her. For nights, he had spoken to her in his
thoughts.

*Unravel what you have to about the Sealord and get out of there, Arya.*

But she had spoken to him as well. That other night, when he was so consumed by loving thoughts of her that he had whispered her name with the grandest of adulations, touched himself, and felt her against him in so doing. His lovely girl had asked him for the gold on the Winter Maiden's bidding, and she had implored him for aid.

*Help me, Master.*

It may be that her cherished maidenhood and matters of it are precious to them *both.*

Dissonant—the Songs and the Creed. Folly is what these are! He swore with his own scarlet that he would bleed before she does, yet the codes allowed him not to intervene with a task that would demand that she *actually* bleeds. If he could not protect Arya Stark from lowlives that only seek to grant her the first taste of womanhood, then what is his damnable use as a Guardian?

*The Mother, the Maiden, the Crone.*

*The Father, the Warrior, the Smith.*

*The Stranger.*

*Him of Many Faces.*

The godhead in the six thousand year-old faith which others called the 'new', represented 'him' and 'her' in equal aspects. But gods are not immune to fluidities and fluctuations. In specific epochs, the pendulum fluctuates to 'her'.

This is one of those epochs—the time when the sacred feminine must triumph. And may the death god be merciful to Arya Stark. May the deity not let her be defiled by anyone.

"A last." The old man had started walking away from the two younger masters, but stopped and returned a few paces to where they stood. His tone demanded fullest attention. "There were sightings of a small fleet of Volantene flagships heading to the ruins from Ulthos."

Both masters glanced at each other in confusion. "Ulthos is a land unexplored. We could only wonder what valuable objects the Volantenes may have acquired there—slaves for sure, but they have plenty at the Basilisk Isles. How is this a concern?" the Lorathi asked.

"Sorcerers—terraformers," the Elder replied, and in his mind was wonderment at lords' ingenuity. They did not depart from West of Westeros without their intricate schemes for expansion. "The catastrophic Doom swallowed the greatness of Old Valyria in a single day, laying total waste on the peninsula. They will recover the lands beneath the Smoking Sea, and these terraformers will aid them in creating new ones. Terrible greatness! Ritualistic slaughter of men, women, babes—all to pacify the gods' anger at dark sorcery, not that the lords are believers, their sorcerers are. Many more will die. This is only the beginning."

Every word from the comely one reeked of sarcasm and subtle blasphemy. "And the gods will never intervene on behalf of those who believe? What are they now, craddlers of the lords? All-benevolence, or are the texts perjurers in favor of gods who are indifferent?"

"Brother!" the Lorathi admonished him.
The Kindly Man raised his brows at the Tyroshi. "Mock not the gods, my child. This is why we have the Songs. This is why Asshaii priestesses speak of their Promised. What in your years in this House would make you think that the gods will leave us defeated even before this battle begins?"

"With all due respect, Elder," the comely one hissed. "They sanctioned the existence of those creatures of ice. Men are pawns—and woe be on the Starks and their chosen blood. Woe be on us who are caught in the middle of these deities' games. West of Westeros is an illusion. And the gods have their own conflicts with Stygia in the Realm Unseen—"

"I will hear no more of this!"

The Lorathi placed a heavy hand on the Tyroshi's shoulder, calming him. The latter only nodded, hardening his jaw in repressed rage. The questioner swallowed the bile of all his objections.

It was the Elder's forefinger in front of his comely face. "Commit sacrilege, and you know what will come to you in the justice of the death god. You are too audacious for your own good, are you not?" he shook his head slowly. "All men must serve—Faceless Men most of all. Think not that your knowledge of all these is better than that of the gods."

Shared understanding permeated in each one of them.

"The restoration of Old Valyria has commenced," the Elder concluded, walking away. "Let us not grow weary, my sons. A battle a day for Braavos. We win this, and we win other battles for other realms. Valar Dohaeris."

Prophecies and visions in the Undying call him the third.

The Free Cities, which in truth were the daughters of Old Valyria had been his home for many, many years now; and although the rich history of his lineage branded him Westerosi by citizenship, he was Valyrian by blood. The Nine's straits and borders, the culture and people, antiquities and accomplishments, he knew the same way he knew his true name, his line of descent, his claim.

He was taken in by a loyalist, a close friend of his late father, whom they called 'The Griff'. The wise Lannister Imp had mentioned this—that the lad's eyes were dark blue at first glance, midnight black in lamplight, yet purple at dusk. "The Silver Queen's eyes are purple, so were those of her brothers," the magister had told him.

Tired he was, of concealing himself beneath a blue-dyed hair and a Tyroshi accent.

Gifted in languages, a knower of songs, skilled in battle, more learned that half the lords in Westeros. Ah, Westeros! In that land, they had thought him dead, they thought that one infant's bashed skull was his, they thought that the Silver Queen was the last in the bloodline.

They thought the fire beasts were hers.

*Let them think, then. Let them think of many falsehoods. The dawn is fast approaching—truth.*

The sons of the first must be seated before the second son, or the third daughter. "Let her come to me," he had told the Griff in clenched teeth. "My claim is better than hers, I will not run after her like some beggar. I am the son, legitimacy is mine."

The man asked him about the dragons. This was his reply:

"One call. And they will fly here in Pentos."
The older man was doubtful.

The lad had only whispered a name—that which was closest to his heart. He had only waited a full day and a half. He felt its nearness, and so he asked the Griff to meet him at the shores by midnight. Stars blanketed the entire nightsky, and so the older man saw them in all their magnificence—the lad; and beside him, with eyes glowing like polished bronze shields, was a full-grown, fire-breathing, jade-green dragon.

The Griff had dropped to his knees in front of the lad, and at the sight of him stroking the beast's scales. And the prince uttered its name.

"Rhaegal."

Proclamation sprang out of the Griff's mouth, as he kissed the damp ground.

"My lord, my king! Aegon, Sixth of his Name!"

The lad's fingers fiddled with the strings of the harp. Soft melodies cloaked the stillness of the Pentoshi magister's esplanade overlooking the eastern part of the Narrow. Winds have gone cold. Winter is coming. And as if that was a doomful event insufficient in itself, Valyria has come.

Westeros is part of a larger sphere, and he cannot isolate his realm from the rest of the Known World. The threats which may present themselves as opportunities have crystallized faster than the icicles of the North. This, he realized whilst the former Master of Whisperers read for him the contents of the scroll—a message from the lords of Old.

"...that Valyrians will remain Valyrians despite irreconcilable ideologies and practices. The Known World bending the knee to all of us is a Known World saved from the Long Night. We urge you to join the noble cause."

Prince Aegon VI Targaryen paused with the strings and chuckled at the words. Two maidservants assigned to assist him that day giggled at the sound of his gentle laughter, with one even accidentally spilling wine on the tablelinen. She turned a frightened eye towards the Prince, and the latter shook his head and smiled at her benevolently, erasing her worries. Not a serious thing, winestains can be washed off, his kind eyes seemed to say.

"My Prince…"

"Nay, I will not soil my hands by participating in their carnage," the Prince said quietly, yet the tone was firm. "I am Valyrian, indeed, but my blood is not the blood of demons. There are a thousand ways to conquer the dead."

The eunuch smiled at the Prince's words. A king must put his people first.

The Iron Throne was within their grasp, however, with a Baratheon, a Lannister, and a Greyjoy plotting against each other for it, not to mention a 'littlefinger' on the side, the reality seemed to fade slightly away in their sight.

But these are Targaryens, he second-thought. The blood of dragons is the blood of conquerors.

"I have to say I agree with you on that, my Prince," the eunuch assented. "Still, we are in need of the support of the Targaryen who calls herself Queen, your kin, who had now settled in Dragonstone—"

"I am a Targaryen and a Martell. I have allies in the South. The wise Lannister will be back any time now from the Stone. Surely, Daenerys Targaryen has some patience, yes? She could not move to
battle with foreigners behind her, not with our forces on Storm's End and a legitimate Westerosi army from Dorne. The Reach is vulnerable, yet she does not know the land. Everything is laid out."

"Indeed. Yet, Westeros is spread across four cardinal directions," the eunuch replied. "An acquaintance of mine during the reign of King Robert had mentioned the willingness of the East to make negotiations, as he is Lord Protector of it now. I will never trust him, but his judgments are with reason. An alliance with the North, my Prince, is necessary."

The Prince scoffed, and even that act of his, was beauteous beyond words. "With the Starks? Forgive me, my dear friend, but have you not read the canons—the Rebellion and the Trident? What kind of a ruler will I be if I ally myself with traitors that have slaughtered my own family?"

"Starks are not Lannisters, my Prince."

"Your grace. Starks, Baratheons, Tullys, Arryns, Lannisters—they are all the same to me. Usurpers are what they are."

"The honorable Ned Stark is dead. The vassal houses are reestablishing the sub-supremacy of Winterfell through the liege lordship of any surviving Stark child. The remnants are innocent of these, my Prince," the eunuch implored, in a manner indirect.

"Rhaenys Targaryen was innocent—a mere babe. That did not give the usurpers half a second thought to drag her from the bed and murder her. Elia Martell—also innocent. Yet, they violated her. Whether they did this before or after they had claimed her life, I cannot anymore tell," the Prince hissed, the eunuch shuddered secretly. To anger a Targaryen is to beseech the gods for a tragic end to one's dire life.

Without courage however, salvation is lost. The eunuch spoke once more, jumped to the cliff in so doing.

"An old saying—we make peace not with out friends, but with our enemies. Hear me out, your grace. Do speak of your plans. The lords of Old will not take your refusal lightly. It will be your fire beasts against their own. And they have four—all imperial ones."

Prince Aegon blew air from his mouth. "How is this even possible?" he whispered.

Imperial dragons were known to be behemothic and powerful; mere breath from their nostrils sent out flame. Writings mentioned these creatures to be obsessed with dealing death, evil-tempered, avaricious. Such species were used before for imperial expansion, thus the name. The Old Empire of Ghis was one of the first to experience the wrath of these creatures—a single breath of fire from one imperial sent two hundred Ghiscarins into total annihilation; it was both massacre and cremation, in that the ashes of the dead enmeshed themselves perfectly with the dust.

Only commanding archons and dragonriders can control them, as the creatures bonded merely with those whose blood held the same form of immense power.

Archons, dragonriders, those with magic.


"Victory surrenders itself to the wise, your grace," the eunuch pierced through his thoughts. "Starks are said to possess magical blood. Marry the youngest Stark daughter and not only will you gain the North, you will have by your side a powerful skinchanger who could command dragons. These are mere rumors of course, but then so were the stories about the return of the lords."
It hammered him, it came as a shock. He concealed the trustworthy, instinctive response nevertheless.

The Prince must keep his calm. Skinchanger? If this be true, sweet heavens… Swallowing the bitterness of righteous pride—one of the most painful. Yet, his realm, his people, must be spared from both the lords of Old and Winter. If he will rule, then he must rule with best judgment, and for the sake of all. Old wounds will never heal, but these trifling things are for latter days. What matters is what is good.

"Arianne Martell?"

"Prince Doran has other plans. You—a legitimate Martell in the seat, are sufficient for the time being."

"Very good," the lad replied. "I'm starting to hate her obsession with Queen Nymeria. Find the Stark, then, my good friend. And I will let you know of my decision."

The eunuch bowed with his usual elegance. "If there is nothing more you wish to confide with me —"

"That would be all, I think. For now."

Another bow, and the eunuch left the esplanade.

There were many things he wished to tell him, but he knew not how. His fingers resumed to artfully flicking the strings, hence creating harmony in the midst of impending anarchy. He has not even won a battle yet for the disputed throne, and here comes another battle—one that has more horrendous repercussions.

And the Wolf. The beautiful Wolf in his dreams.

"Who are you, lovely girl?" the Prince whispered to himself.

He had been dreaming about her for many nights now, and so mystifying it was, for in his unconscious fantasies, she was calling him by his father's name.

Rhaegar, beloved.

They have spoken of infinite things—joys, sorrows, love, children, the isle, ice, fire. And though he 'knew' her name, he was most assured that he did not.

For her name is not Lyanna.

His dreams of her…

Lyanna…

Rhaegar, beloved.

Lyanna.

My sweet love…

You look more beautiful now, carrying my seed.
They will be born from me.

In fire and ice, yes.

This is sin.

Love is a sin?

The Griff had spoken of a Stark woman who was once his departed father's most beloved mistress. Old stories sang of it as well—the reason for the rebellion, albeit the Prince could not persuade his mind to reconcile with what may be a possible truth behind it. Histories are written by victors after all, and for questionable victors as the Baratheons and the others, the defeated is always the anti-hero.

No, my father had loved that woman.

"Have you ever loved before?" the Prince had asked the Imp once.

The half-man chuckled. "Oh, my Prince. Despite myself, I did not just appear in this world through some kind of miraculous afterglow. I had a mother. I have a sister, a brother. A father, too—had. I suppose at one point, I have loved them all."

"I know that," the Prince replied. "What I meant is have you ever loved…a woman before?"

"I have."

"You never spoke of her."

"She died in my hands."

The Prince's eyes grew with disbelief. "Do tell that this is one of those many amusing jests of yours."

"I wish it was," the Imp had said, his expression, his voice, suddenly sorrowful. "Ah, what was it again that I kept telling myself? I'm free of Tysha now. Half my life, she has haunted me. I have no more need of her and of cruel memories of her. I have Shae now. Shae."

"I betrayed her, in that I pretended I could not do anything but marry the oldest Stark daughter—a response to a noble duty. And she betrayed me because...because I deserved it."

"You killed the woman you loved?"

"Yes," said he, his voice unsteady. "I loved her too much that I had to kill her."

Still, the Prince was doubtful of the Imp's telling. "But, this Shae, have you...seen her?"

The Imp's brows furrowed in confusion. Always, he had thought the Prince to be an erudite, and their conversations would mostly consist of the faiths, the realms, the ancient philosophies. He wondered if this was one of the Prince's valuations of him—a test to see if the Imp really 'knows things'.

"I have slept with her many times, so...yes?"

These words, and the Prince looked out into the insula's outline, breathed slowly through his mouth. "I must be going mad."

"Tell me," the Imp urged.

And he told him.
What passed may have been a full hour of silence between them. The Imp sighed, shook his head.

"You know her, but you don't. You have never met her, except in these dreams?" the half-man held up a forefinger. "Perhaps the essence the magister has given you for sleep induces such dreams—"

"I never took a drop of that essence."

It was the Imp's turn to exhale from the mouth.

He spoke, cautiously. "I am not a believer of the alternative, my Prince, forgive me."

"Speak, I beg of you."

The desperation in that utterance puzzled Tyrion Lannister. Of the many moons spent with Aegon VI Targaryen, of the fifty cyvasse games, of the hundred gatherings he had with him concerning the retaking of Westeros, he had never heard the lad beg, or even recognize the idea of begging—not even when the full repossess of his dragons was at stake, not even when the lords of Old have called for a great Valyrian confederacy and made open threats should they refuse.

And now, he's begging—to understand the mysteries shrouding some…girl?

"Very well," he finally said. "Followers of the red god adhere to certain concepts. They have their own chronicles, and you know the saga that is most preeminent in their faith."

"Azor Ahai reborn," the Prince answered.

"Reborn, yes." The Imp stood to pour them both a goblet. "Cyclic existence, re-infiltration of souls to the flesh. They believe in these as strongly as they believe in the capacity of the red god to resurrect people from the dead."

"But why would this…cyclic existence even happen?"

"Ah," the Imp smiled. "Why of course, the gods are bored. They probably are too perfect, they know not what more to do with themselves. On a serious note, it happens when souls were taken from the bodies before their time, as they say. Some…unfinished business of old souls. Folly, if you ask me."

The Prince chuckled, still amused. "I've known her in a prior life? Not only that—we were…we were…"

"Go on," the Imp urged.

"We were married," the Prince said, breathing the words out. "Hells, we shared the same bed…and in my dreams, I could always hear the sound of…infants crying. Are you saying—"

"That I am not a fanatic of inanities as this," the Imp finished for him. "As I am not a fanatic of the word you use to capture the emotions you think you possess for this girl."

The Prince chuckled. "You don't believe in love?"

"I believe that love is shit."

It isn't, the Prince thought. *For the first time, the wise Lannister has erred.*

And this lovely, lovely girl that had so relentlessly plagued his dreams, and blithely blessed them at the same time, she had become such a fascination to him…perchance, an obsession, even. And though in all vehemence he may deny the fact, it was all within his comprehensions. Why else would
he stare, as if lost, at the canopy of his four-poster after being roused from such reverie? Why else would he run his long fingers through the bedlinens, hoping for even the smallest trace of her presence that previous night? Why else would he utter phrases upon phrases in Ancient Essoan, sigh helplessly, write odes to her, while tugging his hair of silver-beneath-the blue in pure, romantic melancholy?

Even the enchanting euphonies his harp was playing speak of her loveliness. The Prince had memorized her every detail. Snowskin, a crown of chestnut, gray-hued eyes. Beautiful.

Fierceness and gentleness. Savagery and kindheartedness. Ice and Fire. She is all these things.

And he had realized much, that should they meet, though he knew her not in the fullest sense, he would will himself to tame her. Surely, she cannot be more intense than his dragons, yes?

But she is wild. So wild. In his dreams, they had done...things to each other. Many things. Beautiful things.

He loves her. She loves him. And this of love of theirs bore fruits.

He could almost hear her pleas:

Rhaegar, beloved. I need you, my dragon.

"Who are you, lovely girl?"

He heaved a sigh and rose.

Rulership and the plans. A dialogue with Connington at once. In a few days, they will sail for Braavos. Gold is needed for Griffin's Roost, and for the twenty-five thousand Golden. With the current situation, the banklord will surely heed and grant their requests and conditions. There are still the plans for Crow's Nest and Rain House, afterwards, the Stormlands expansion.

An alliance with the Targaryen kin.

Westeros that was stolen from the Targaryens will be his once more—an act of tribute to the bold Prince whose rubies bathed the Trident.

The allegiance of the lords in the whole South will be his...

And the powerful Stark girl.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys!

A few notes: since this fic is following the book plot more than the series plot.

1.) Sansa Stark is still in the Vale at the start of the Winds of Winter, and is betrothed to a possible Falcon heir. But her plot in WoW predictions will blow brains. ;D  
2.) Victarion Greyjoy is with Dany, Euron is in the Iron Islands, Asha and Theon are still in the North (semi-captives).  
3.) Stannis Baratheon is alive in the books, so he is here. Plus, we love him, the book
version, i.e. (or maybe it's just me).
4.) Aegon the VI Targaryen has started with his conquest, and in the books, Tyrion is with him as adviser; though he had followed Dany all over Essos to forge alliance.
5.) This fic endorses the theory that Aegon VI is Elia and Rhaegar's trueborn son. Let's just explore possibilities! Wouldn't hurt. ;D

So, that was a chapter for all of you. I hope you liked it! Would love to hear what you guys think, especially on Aegon/Arya/Jaqen. ;D Thanks to all of you J/A shippers. You're awesome.
The Tainted

Chapter Notes

Inspired by these words (going on in the head):

"Tonight it's only you, me, and our silhouette
There's no space between us
Tonight we'll be seamless
Painting perfect pictures of what's going on...
Insatiable shadows revealed by the candles." (Jordin S.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“To understand power is to die.

Command over the ancients,

Favor of those above men.

However, a weakness—

A fervent spirit.”

Songs of the Faceless; XXIII

"Eternal truth and ultimate reality. What is the difference? The gods are all-pervasive."

"He had a man almost convinced—Aegeus. He has…ways of knowing things. A man cannot be fully sure of it, but it seemed to me that he too, can see visions through obsidian candles."

"Maybe he can, maybe he cannot. Who can be assured of what he says? We all had instruction on blood magic in Asshai after all. When did the dreams stop?"

"Three years ago. It crushed us, almost. The blood mages almost gave up on us too—resisting the dreams of the faces, it wasn't fair to the dead. They needed their histories heard by anyone who would listen. To wear the faces and conceal their chronicles through sorcery is just detestable; in a man's opinion, at least. And the souls of most of the departed whose faces we have donned—they are undead, in the spiritual sense. Most of them have not yet spanned the realm between, and it has been centuries since the Doom. They forbid it, that their faces be used to conceal the intent of slaying men—"

"Attack of conscience? You worry yourself too much. Detach, brother. When did the dreams return?"

"Three nights ago."
"Are you sure about the things you've seen?"

"Yes."

"Then, the god is conveying messages straight to you. The texts are not enough, it seems. Not all men can read between lines. Not all men do read."

Late afternoon, and the setting sun's warm rays penetrated the small window in the Waif's workroom—a panoply of petals and peril. There was still the faint glimmer, candles might be for a later time. The mild incandescence was all the natural light she needed in order to perfect the concoction. Ash residue and dark grass from the Lorathi's acquaintance—a female in lacquered mask made of starlight. They met her near The Gate, and the Waif had learned that she is one of the few who worked with shadows. Her lips were riddled with riddles, and it seemed as if only the Lorathi could unlock her cipher of phrases. Yes, that woman had aided them in obtaining the last essentials, even so, the Waif was indecisive on matters of trust. It was true that Faceless Men use certain enchantments to carry out tasks, but the likes of her are dark sorcerers said to be without limits.

Yet her tongue kept on uttering the words, with calm madness and obsession: "I am No One, but she is the Mother of Dragons."

"Do tell that you possess no plans of introducing the Asshaii priestess to the girl, brother," the Waif had told the Lorathi once they were out of the woman's earshot. "You know how enthusiastic the girl could be when it comes to charms and runes. She practically revered you for all eternity when you showed her your magic tricks."

The Lorathi smirked. "A man doubts that a girl would have the need to meet one from the Shadows. No, a man does not plan for them to even lay eyes on each other."

And it was true. In the Lorathi's memories were the girl's dreams of a masked woman with a voice that seemed to be whispers of stars—one who was warning her of a looming threat. *Bringer of four, Bringer of Four*, the mask itself had named the girl. He cannot dismiss these threats as all-mundane; there is pitfall in every corner where there is air, now that the lords of Old have returned with their plans for the Winter. Shadowbinders are known to have hidden intents—exclusivists, as the servants of the red god name all other gods demons. He spoke with the masked woman, and only the gods knew how he toiled to keep his ruminations concealed so she may not gain access to them.

There were still bigger worries.

Eight thousand years, four centuries—the Long Night, the Doom. Now, various faiths are naming their own chosen ones—and confusion comes when elucidation is necessary, for most of the texts were written in High Valyrian.

What is happening in the past right now? The Lorathi thought. Do wise men even know how their acts in their own time affect us all? The eons are victims, and are thus subjected to circuitous series, such that what had happened before is bound to happen once more. Or perhaps, everything happens simultaneously. Saviors with swords are being reborn everywhere, and all matters of faith are slowly becoming farce.

The Waif added the dark grass onto the concoction, and it easily dissolved into the mixture. The Lorathi sat beside her, watching the process. Suddenly, he spoke to her in a quiet yet seemingly tortured voice.

"It cannot happen, sister. It must not happen."
The Waif kept her eyes on the now boiling poison. She knew very well what the Lorathi was telling her.

"Of course, in your judgment it must not, brother," she replied. "But are you allowed to do anything about it?"

The woman noticed how tormented the Lorathi was, albeit she could do nothing except to watch him despair and offer a listening ear to ease his grief. A few moments passed without them uttering a word. The woman continued adding the grass onto the mixture until it achieved a thick consistency of chartreuse hue.

One more ingredient and the Death of Dragons will be complete.

The comely one entered the chamber as if he owned the temple. "Please, do not let my entrance interfere with your discussion. I just need a large table." In his hands was a large scroll containing the mapped out lands of the Known. With style, he slammed it onto the hard wood and unscrolled it.

"You wish to travel for a task?" the Waif asked the man.

"Will you be warming my cabin bed should I decide to?"

"No."

"Then, I do not wish to travel."

_So bold, _the woman thought. _To jape in such a way, unmindful of substances I have in my hands._

At the corner of her eyes, she watched the Lorathi sit sullenly beside her. He brusquely rubbed his handsome face with his hands and to her, he appeared unfathomably hurt.

"A girl does not even know what she is doing," the Lorathi said monotonously in an effort to conceal his sentiments. "She does have a very progressive mindset, but she is a child. What does she truly know about it? Our methods are incongruent with the codes—chastity is a must for priests as ourselves. We must revisit the Ways, realign it with the Creed. Inconsistencies, too much! How can the Masters not have seen through it during the turn of the first moon? Tasks such as Arya Stark's must not be commissioned in the future."

The Waif tried hard not to laugh. But the Lorathi noticed her lip tip up. "Speak, if you must," he told her.

"Our affinity, our brotherhood is more meaningful for me to just throw in the wind by speaking my thoughts," the woman replied. "Pardon me, but I cannot indulge you with my opinions today."

"Please do, a man will take no offense."

"Very well," she slowly placed the glass vial on the table, deliberating how she will utter the words. "Three things, brother. First, she is not a child anymore—you, of all people, should know this." The Lorathi gave his sister a questioning look which she rewarded with a meaningful smile. "Second, 'chastity' was operationally defined in the Creed—it's the purity of intent to which it refers, and will always refer. Chastity is beyond physical—it is transcending notions on physical virtue so the pureness of all motives and purposes for the death god triumphs over all others. Valar Dohaeris."

"Yes, Valar dohaeris," the Lorathi agreed. "But—"

"Third," the woman said, ignoring the Lorathi. "It certainly cannot happen between the both of you
no matter what your tight, bulging breeches might will you to believe."

"Damn right," the comely one offered, 'full' focus on the mapped out lands still. "Damn right."

The Lorathi was dumbstruck, his expression that of denial. "A man never said it must happen between the two of us. She is Chosen. We are Faceless."

"You did not have to say anything. Tell me, why was chastity not an issue for you when one of our own offered to warm Daenerys Targaryen's bed to act as the Order's sleuth?" The Waif wiped her hands with stained cloth. Years of toil in this chamber of miasma had burned and calloused her hands. Now, her fingers, in contrast with the rest of her, appeared pruny and worn.

"Acting as male paramour was his personal decision," the Lorathi replied. "He had rubbed himself with filth a hundred times. What is the difference?"

"A thousand times," the Waif corrected him. "This was what he always says—'a thousand women in my bed, never a dragon'. Seems it had changed."

"He was merely tasked to take the face of a Stormcrow, gather information." the Lorathi. "The Elder refuses to believe he had gone rogue, seeing though that he's running the Meereenese show on behalf of the Silver Queen, who's to say he's still with us?"

"New information is passed on to the Elder about the Bay at each turn of the moon. He's still with the Order," the Waif said. "Give him due credit, he had persuaded the Stormcrows and the faithful Meereenese nobles to endorse the Silver Queen—a brilliant tactic, should anyone ask."

"Knowing him, he's not one to stay in Meereen for long."

"Of course," the Waif smiled. "The name he chose for himself, the name of that face—Daario. To possess. To possess his own life in this world, despite all improbabilities as clear as day in the Creed; to possess not only the Silver Queen's trust, but her affections, too—again, an excellent maneuver expected of a Faceless. Expect him to sail for Dragonstone in a month."

"Indeed, he has lost it."

"Not as much as you did."

Awkward silence enveloped the work chamber. The Waif took the vial of obsidian containing ash residue and placed the ingredient on a thick, iron plate. The ash seemed to sear through the plate, but the Waif was quick in pouring liquid neutralizer to slightly weaken the reaction.

"Do me a favor. Wear those cloth gauntlets and pour this residue into the concoction. Practice care, don't let even a single drop of that touch your skin or you'll be looking at your own seared flesh." The Lorathi did what was requested. "Soon, you would have to bring her back to Winterfell," the Waif said, as if the Lorathi could bear any more agony. "There will be endless talks about it all—the other prophecies and the great darkness, she must learn of all these."

"I know these things," Jaqen H'ghar answered in a weak voice that was verily unlike him. In small amounts, he poured the drops of the now liquefied residue into the poison mixture.

"You carry this syndrome—the childbearer and the whore," was the Waif's admonishment. "You think of her weak, unable. Why, brother? Because she is female? She's Faceless, might I remind you? Nay, unnecessary for you to act as if the only role she can fulfill is that of an infant-cradling mother to be kept inside safe chambers. No soul is asking you to rescue her from the evening, like some gallant knight to a harlot. We are No One."
The Lorathi did not answer.

The Waif regarded her brother with pity. "What has she done to you, brother? Really?" She softly asked, careful so the other will not hear them.

Jaqen shook his head in pure desperation.

"I was dead, may the death god forgive me," he began. "The girl infused flesh to my bones," he said, eyes fixed on the iron plate. "A man knows nothing of it all, but it may also be, that she breathed spirit into that flesh. How did she even—I don't know…I don't know. Please, do not ask me these things. To speak of all these is to sin."

The Waif only smiled and thought of the beauty in her brother's words. It has become a pattern—apparent slip in the Lorathi's speech. It was as if asuddenly, Jaqen H'ghar was indeed coming to life right before her very eyes, and even though such a state was a bitter and abominable paradox to every creed and code the Faceless Men believe in, to witness it was nevertheless breathtaking.

Jaqen is existing.

The woman's life had been nothing but servitude—at a very young age she was offered by her lord father to the temple to keep her safe from her stepmother's ploys. She knew the temple's simplicities and complexities, mastered the creeds and methods by heart, selflessly obeyed and surrendered her life to Him of Many Faces.

And she was so tired of it all.

Certain ideologies, though believed by most to be true, do not necessarily make a person better.

If she would be true to herself, and she owed herself some form of it as she would believe, what made her stay in the temple was the kinship, especially with the Lorathi and the Tyroshi. Like many others, she was a child forsaken by her own kin and accepted into the temple. However, it did not accept her for who she was. It made her desert her own self—a prerequisite, a payment for a roof above the head and food for the starved belly. And most of the time, being No One is too arduous to the point of death.

Wouldn't death be sweeter? She thought.

The Lorathi was thoroughly losing himself fragment by fragment and he must not.

The death god never forgives. And he or she—whoever the deity may be, is a rapacious one. Lukewarm submission is aversion to the eyes, it must be and only be total surrender.

Being Faceless was never about selfhood against self-abnegation. Such a choice was never given.

If one bargains with the death god, the price is high, hence explicating the seemingly extortionate cost of an assassination request from the Black and White. For those who make direct deals however, such as themselves, expectations from the god are way higher.

People never speak of it, writings seemed to have dismissed it from its pages. Why wouldn't they now? It is a thing even more doomful than Doom, possibly as infernal as the Heart of Darkness. It is the torture that awaits traitorous souls, and the Lorathi may be in danger of being one of them.

The 'Pass'.

I want to meet this death god, the Waif decided.
The Lorathi might think her the vilest of all persons, but he had to be stopped from foolishly creating his self-indulgent castles in the air. They all had to be stopped.

"You do not have the right to Arya Stark, brother. Nobody does. Except for Him of Many Faces. We don't have the right to one another in this place and in this life."

Jaqen recoiled at her words but kept his silence.

"What have you given up to be Faceless?" the Waif asked. "What did the god demand from you upon your return?"

"A man had surrendered many things," the Lorathi then spoke, smiled bitterly. "Believe a man now, you will detest him in this life and the next if he speaks more of it all. A man would never wish for that to happen."

"Tell me. I want to understand. No judgments."

"Of the seven facets, six," the Lorathi confessed. The Waif tried to hide her shock. Extreme responses to revelations will not aid, but hinder. Corpus, animus, arbitrio, memoriae, veritus, impetus. Too much, the woman thought. The Lorathi had allowed the death god to fully consume him—almost. They are humans, and servants more than this, existing in space and time, subjected to action and non-action. To give up too many of one's facets, despite one being faceless; to give up on the bearings themselves that make men who they are…

*It must have been a truly costly bargain. And he's not getting the better end of it. The death god wears many faces, the deity is a deceptive one.*

"I have none of those now," he explained. "Essen—substance, that is what I have left. And I cannot lose even this—how would I exist if I do?"

After the surrender, the Lorathi had become nothing but an entity suffused with life force—a shell. Such state leaves one defenseless. This is a world of the material and the immaterial, and if the substance that was left in the person is not resilient enough, immaterial entities will battle against one another to occupy that self.

An abomination.

The Lorathi had reached a state of total emptiness, the state where there is simply nothing to hold on to anymore.

*Until the confluence. Until Arya Stark.*

It seemed as if Syrio Forel had died for a reason. He should have been Guardian had he not died. The woman thought of the Songs and its many verses. One had stuck to mind.

' For her Self is him.' *Arya Stark had become Jaqen H'ghar's causal being after his renunciation of himself, when they drank their own scarlet.*

How powerful is this girl, or whatever it is that now binds the Lorathi to herself, for her to unconsciously assume the role of the god's rival in the latter's claiming? The texts—the marriage of words in its old yet astute pages seemed to tip the balance towards Arya Stark, such that through her, the Lorathi is gradually reacquiring all of his lost facets. All these now point to the girl, especially *impetus*—his purpose.

The woman smiled softly at the grand thought.
The girl is like a little god—'Live,' she might have told Jaqen H'ghar. 'Breathe,' and he did.  

'Abide in me.'

"Beautiful," the woman had whispered.

"What is?"

"Nothing," she lied. "All men must serve, brother, but yours is a sacrifice the likes of which I have never heard before. Do you wish to succeed the Elder of this House?" she japed. "Have you no other choice?"

"No other."

"You must have truly loved that woman."

"To the point of death, yes."

"When will you tell the girl about her?"

"Soon."

_No judgments_. It was never their prerogative to judge.

The Waif looked at the Lorathi, therefore, with kind understanding. She rose and embraced him from behind—a consoling gesture, and placed her chin atop his head. Both of her arms wrapped themselves around his sinewy frame—loose enough to not overwhelm him, tight enough to provide him solace, to strengthen him.

"We will win this, brother. Worry not." She kissed his hair gently enough so he would not feel her lips against the locks. "We will prevail."

It was dark epiphany.

The comely one smiled upon completing his conjectural mapping of the Unknown from the Known. One master—the Lordling, as the girl so aptly named him, had given him the almost-mangled fragments of the scrolls containing what were so far discovered by a few bold expeditioners. The sanctum had its secrets, and perhaps the Elder knew not of the other maps.

_Who to fool? The Elder knows all things. He discloses not a thing, and these are different._

No One knows what lies in the City of Night that is spread out in all directions upon Ash, past the Shadowlands. No One knows what truly lies West of Westeros, except for what is shown by obsidian candles, which in themselves, are influenced by holders of magic. It is said that to map the Unknown is to challenge the deities, but the comely one is not a fanatic of superstition.

_Playground of the gods_, he whispered, shaking his head. _The bastards._

Those who work with shadows must surely know of this, but all fear to speak. Prophetic visions are for believers and for those favored, and it is impossible for the red god to not grant its servants with even the smallest of apparitions.

It may be that the gods are at war.

_And they're twisting everyone's subconscious—that one host of blind faith._
He turned to the two other masters, they must know it somehow. His knowledge is limited, but there is some truth to it.

"We will win this, brother. Worry not. We will prevail."

The woman had her arms wrapped around the Lorathi, and upon his crown of scarlet-and-ivory, she had planted two feathery kisses.

The comely one's jaw hardened by reflex.

*Playground of the gods, indeed.*

"Brother, we must go," he said, interrupting their melancholic exchange. "The play begins in an hour."

The interior of The Dome was an impressive arrangement of scarlet cushioned seats, silver draperies, and some other elaborate adornments. The theatron could comfortably seat as much as a thousand spectators, but the venue itself only reaches such number of attendees during special events such as the ten-day Unmasking. Unlike the mummers' at The Gate, plays in The Dome and in the nearby Blue Lantern are more sophisticated; and only highborns and the very wealthy populace frequent the place.

They donned the same disguise as in the Sealord's gathering. The lower mezzanine was perfect, as it was near enough to the orchestra where the Sealord and the Winter Maiden will be sitting. The skene was covered with a gigantic stage curtain of silver and gold, and a large crowd of men and women can be seen walking to their respective sections of seating. The Dome will be presenting Phaedron's *Libretux uel Mortelum*—'Freedom or Death', a depiction of the founding of Braavos by escaped slaves from the Valyrian Freehold.

It was listlessness the Lorathi felt whilst awaiting the play's commencement. There had been various versions of this play before, and he was somehow required by the Order to see them every year. Significant people marked for death grace the event, and the Faceless had to be there to observe them before taking the hit.

"I have to say, brother," the Handsome Man spoke, echoing his hidden sentiments. "These events are usually nothing but disentrancing in my view—almost like a ritual. But then…" he paused, his attention caught by something. The Lorathi followed the trail of his gaze and his heart sank upon seeing the Sealord enter with the Winter Maiden in his arms. "But then the Sealord and the Winter Maiden are way too interesting to leave alone."

*The Elder was precise in his assumptions, the Sealord does dote on her,* Jaqen H'ghar thought.

The Sealord's arms were wrapped around the Winter Maiden's waist, and the man did not take his arms off of her almost bare shoulders even when they were already seated. Jaqen H'ghar thought of how perfectly Arya Stark played her part—she laughed at the man's japing, spoke in hushed tones against his ear, allowed him to inhale the scent of her neck. Such public display is frowned upon even in the free city of Braavos, but this was the Sealord and as what follows, he somehow possessed a certain form of immunity to these codes of conduct.

The curtains were drawn and hidden in the left and right wings of the platform. Applause filled the Dome as the thespians for the first act appeared—shrill yet rough tones, the sound of dried leaves against combat boots—and they unnerved the Lorathi. *Freed from the Freehold, t'is the gift.* Songs, lines, movements breathed life to the stage. All eyes were there hence, except for those of the Sealord.
and the Winter Maiden, who both seemed to obsess over each other with childish enthusiasm that was nothing but irritating.

Jaqen H'ghar was sure that they spoke of many, many things, for their lips never stopped moving and sighing and laughing.

The Lorathi must be, tonight, a mere passive observer.

She has grown—so, so much…and he was slowly losing her from his grasp. It may be true that the girl had hugged him one night in her chamber and begged him to not leave, or that she had tugged at his belt, or giggled at his kisses at Satin’s, even asked him for a most arousing kiss at the Bridge of Lights. Surely, for her, these could not mean anything consequential.

She’s a woman now—women find romance in everything. They are verily fond of infatuations. They confuse fascinations towards men with something else that is more than what it is. Perchance, it was only confusion she felt for him. Ah, but did he not toil so that their want for each other would not evolve into something else that is more beautiful than it already was? The Braavosi woman spoke of truth only. He does not have the right to her.

She was lonely, that is all. The Lorathi was aware that her thoughts and high hopes have always been about Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn, Robb. The girl merely needed someone to sympathize and somehow…care. And perhaps, a man is the closest to a family that she has.

Arya Stark, bold as fire though she is, was terrified that night at the godswood in Harrenhal. Jaqen H’ghar had heard her pray. "Make me a water dancer and a wolf and not afraid again, ever." His heart broke into a thousand shards with those words, and so he vowed to kill for her one last name. He swore it to the gods—old and new, and to all the gods and their incarnations in the whole of Westeros and Essos, that whatever name she speaks, he will erase from the earth.

A girl whispers if she fears to speak aloud. Whisper it now. Is it Joffrey?

She shook her head.

'Is it Jaqen H'ghar.'

Would he die for her?

For all certainty.

The Guardian would be relieved from his duties to the Chosen only after Death had claimed him.

But he could not die that night at Harrenhal, even when she spoke his name. He did not wish to die for he had done it before and it was exhausting, may the death god grant him pardon. He persuaded himself that Jaqen still had to perform his duty to her should she decide to use that iron coin. If he had died that night, how would he be able to teach her what he knows? Or witness the divine fulfillment of the Songs through her? How in the world would he be able to see her face again in his decades of wandering from a body to the next, and share his days and laughters with her, short they may be?

What would become of his will to come back to her if he had died?

Sweet girl, kind and gentle. Unsay one name and say another and cast this mad dream aside.

Faceless—crafty and wise. They never rush into any kill without closely observing those marked for death for a long time, and with painstaking endurance—without getting into the marked man’s skin,
Into his deepest musings if possible. They were supposedly insusceptible to emotions and irrationality. The Self in them is gone, only the duty of Death remains. And why should he care if Jaqen dies? Jaqen is already dead.

No, lovely girl. A man will not sleep unless you unsay a certain name. Now, evil child.

Fine periwinkle scents wafted through the air surrounding that burnt castle when that lovely yet devious girl agreed to unsay his name under specific conditions. The conditions were of no consequence to him. Jaqen H'ghar was so possessed by all that is Arya Stark one eventful night that he went rogue killing all those guards for her using nothing but soup. Such recklessness he had never seen in his own self prior to laying his eyes on her.

In what manner has she conquered him? Not by her scheming attitude but...by her outburst of spirit. Did they not say, that which we lack captivates us? And he felt that for her, he was in lack of innumerable qualities. Nay, he cannot offer her much, and since she deserved all or none at all, to grant her anything that was ill-befitting is a sin, a fatal flaw.

Imperceptible, savage hands clawed at his heart. The hands were merciless, for they belonged to Misery. He thought that night was going to be his last.

The death god is all-present, and so he spoke to the deity.

Forgive me. It may be that in my limited understanding of it, I...love Arya Stark. Spare me from your wrath...

Would Jaqen H'ghar die for Arya Stark if she says his name a second time?

His eyes instantly dropped to the ground at the sight of the Sealord smelling Arya Stark's hair, and Arya Stark burying her face against the Sealord's chest.

She doesn't have to say a man's name a second time. She's killing him already.

He heaved a sigh to empty his heart of some heaviness and aching. "Is the play almost finished?"

Jaqen asked the Handsome Man.

The comely one shot him a confused stare. "We're not even half-way, brother."

The Lorathí just nodded and tried to persuade himself to perform his duties and be done with it for the day. He ignored every fanciful act the Sealord and the Winter Maiden rewarded each other, as he forced himself to survey the Dome for any sign of the Volantenes, or the Littlefinger, or the flaxen-haired, green-eyed lord. Perchance, they have had enough the night before, he doubts if they would come back to Braavos this soon.

The Winter Maiden giggled at another one of the Sealord's jests.

Jaqen expelled air from his mouth and cursed.

This is going to be such a long night.

It was near the peak of nightfall.

Weakly, he removed his garments, including the chain around his waist. Recollections of the dragonlord that had so boldly entered the city a second time plagued him. He gently tossed the chain to the built-in stone seat where his other clothes lay in a heap.
Jaqen H'ghar closed his eyes, rested his head upon the edge of the wooden tub as he bathed himself in lukewarm water. So exhausted he was—curious, for he did not really do anything physical that day. The Lorathi pushed all unwanted thoughts, attempted to summon in him some mental clarity. He waited for the Waif who would once again dye his hair scarlet. Fourteen days had gone by so quickly, and he was surprised at how rarely he noticed the time and days recently.

The Elder had mentioned that he will be assigned a very important kill. As he was adept at reading words beyond what they meant, he sensed that the task would be the assassination of one of the leaders of the nine Free Cities. Might be, member of a triarch, a magister, a prince.

"What was the price?" He had asked the Elder.

"A very precious life," the Kindly Man replied. "The beseecher wanted to be given the gift; at the same time, she wanted this one man dead. We will speak of the finalities in the next gathering of the masters."

The Lorathi was sure he had detected a hint of sorrow in the Kindly Man's eyes. The old man rarely—no, he never showed open emotions when speaking of tasks as this one. "The beseecher is a woman?" He further asked.

"Yes," was the Elder's answer. He walked away from the Lorathi, as if indicating that he did not wish to divulge any more information.

He heard the door of the bath chamber open then close gently. Sleep for a while, he ordered himself. A full hour with the dyeing, and he badly wanted to rest. His eyes he kept closed, and let the Waif run the dye through his strands. Hands were lighter than usual, she was unsure of wanting to deliver the favor.

Stillness was slightly shattered by the tabby cat's soft yet half-persistent moans. She had let the little critter inside the bathchamber.

Something was amiss.

"Are you wearing perfume?" Jaqen asked the woman with amusement. She was never too vain on herself, so it was a wonder that she was even wearing fragrance and that it smelled undoubtedly expensive.

Her voice was immaculately devious. She was a walking paradox of traits and motives.

"Yes. Bellegere Othereys gave me some bottled ones."

Jaqen H'ghar's eyes flew open.

His lovely girl was very gentle as she applied dye on the Lorathi's strands. She combed his hair with her fingers, and made sure that every lock was coated. These, she did in total silence. Slowly, she massaged his scalp, then ran her fingers along his wavy hair now wet with scarlet tint. Her fingers would unintentionally touch his ear, the nape of his neck, his broad shoulders. Lightly, she tugged at a fistful of his hair to squeeze out excess dye from it. Arya Stark then gently pushed Jaqen's head back on the tub's edge so he may rest it there.

"My Master seems tired," she whispered in his ears then sighed. Jaqen gasped then cursed himself inwardly for being too transparent. Suddenly, he felt the tips of Arya Stark's fingers in soft contact with the damp skin of his shoulders, arms, his naked upper back. His body was not his at all—the hair on his neck stood with her fondling despite his most vehement inner protestations. Arya went on and on, fully aware of the impact her manipulative touches were having on her Lorathi master.
Then, she laughed softly.

She laughed for she had heard his inner meditations—wallowing in the greatest of all conflicts for him. He was reciting the fourth leaf of the Creed in his mind.

Her fingers were soft flutters of hummingbird wings. Her eyes were fascination itself—they resembled a child earnest for an understanding that is beyond her age, encountering for the first time the pure delights of learnedness; and she desired to educate herself about all things Lorathi, all things Jaqen. He was a canon to her, an analect that must be granted the greatest of aforethoughts, for to her he is all-beholding. She tilted her head, discovered his contours as if he was one marbled statue from a great civilization that was lost. He is beautiful…beautiful…

"Beautiful," she whispered.

A girl truly wants a man dead.

"How were you able to convince the Waif to do the dyeing yourself?" Jaqen asked in an attempt to take control of the situation.

Creed precepts doctrines methods.

Your aid, Him of Many Faces. Dare you not let a man die tonight.

"I asked her nicely," Arya replied in an innocent tone. "I can be very persuasive. And she thinks me a mere child—sweet, harmless."

Jaqen smiled at the girl's response. "And a man supposes a girl has questions regarding the strange color of his hair?" He sat a little straighter but he kept his back on her.

"Yes." She brushed his red and white of hair to his left shoulder. Two of her fingers traced his spine, and the Lorathi shut his eyes at the sensation the touch brought in the wholeness of him. "A lot of questions—hair, faiths, intents. But then, the days will be long. The dyeing only lasts for an hour. We cannot afford to raise anyone's suspicions. We will have time for senseless questions in the days forthcoming, Jaqen."

At this, Arya slightly dipped her head and kissed Jaqen's neck.

"Arya…"

The girl only ignored the Lorathi. She continued to lightly drag her lips across his neck, her tongue brushing, her teeth nipping. Jaqen exhaled sharply, could not ask her to stop—she had robbed him of all his sense faculties. He tightly gripped the sides of the wooden tub to keep himself from trembling. Arya's lips cruised to his right shoulder. Drops of water played all over that damp part, and so Arya mildly nipped his flesh to drain it of those drops.

It was a wellspring she was drinking from, and the water was sweet, and so athirst she was that she would swallow audibly after sipping wetness from his skin.

She then gently traced his nape with the tip of her tongue, causing the Lorathi's breathlessness. Every contact of her lips against his skin set him afire. This is Doom, this is Doom…and he felt helplessly shattered yet awakened.

"Lovely…Arya…we must not—"

"Please, Jaqen. We could do this without talking."
What in the hells has gotten into her? Sanity was scarce, and he was slowly losing it even in the
dearth, but his lovely girl was far from done.

Arya stood and walked to the tub's other side, so she could face him. She wore a very, very thin
nightgown, its fabric translucent, and her entire form was almost visible that Jaqen asked himself
why she even bothered wearing any clothes. The gown was without sleeves, and it covered her from
the shoulders to the knees. Its soft fabric revealed the contours of her waist and hips, and the perfect
curves of her now womanly breasts. Her pink-colored nipples stood erect against the fabric, signaling
her apparent arousal. Around her neck was the Queller which he gave her; its rich color of blood
glistened then calmed. Jaqen's eyes squinted at the irregular emergence of the Queller's light.

The Lorathi could do nothing but stare with his mouth slightly parted, his eyes wide. Has he died
without knowing he did? For he was almost sure that he was already in the infinite cosmos and that
she was a beauteous deity.

West of Westeros...an otherworldly place. Elenei—my sweet siren. Mother Rhoyne. Arya—my
goddess.

He suddenly shook his head in feigned confusion and waved his forefinger at the gown. "Where did
a girl get these clothes?"

She did not answer. Instead, she regarded him with narrowed eyes to show her plain and clear
irritation. She knew he was stalling and possibly, thinking of some shrewd rhetoric to get himself out
of this situation. Cyvasse games are exhausting beyond words, Jaqen, Arya Stark grimaced. She
lifted her right foot slowly and dipped her toe in the soapy water. Sensing that it was still lukewarm,
not that she cared if it had gone cold, she submerged one foot after the other in it. The hem of her
night gown had gone wet.

Jaqen lurched back and quickly turned his head to the door. Understanding swept over him. She
planned this? She locked the damn door when she entered?

He turned back to her. "Arya Stark, stop this, right this instant..." the master in him ordered in a
hushed yet firm tone. "We are inside the temple, damn it!"

Ned-cat only mewed softly, as it walked in circles around the tub. Finally, it settled in one good
spot, gray eyes on the both of them.

He's the master here, and he must take responsibility, must he not? Arya Stark had terribly gone out
of her way with this whole act of hers and she must be reprimanded severely. When will she ever
learn how to act with propriety and show esteem to the temple's—hells, even he did not want to
believe his own 'honorable' thoughts anymore!

The girl only shook her head and bent to place a forefinger against the Lorathi's lips.

"Shut up, Jaqen..." she whispered. "Shut up, or I will kill you. I promise you this."

Arya carefully sat on the tub with her eyes fixed on his face, then straddled Jaqen's wholly naked
body. She paid them no mind—the suds that were now in her clothes, the warm water that drenched
her gown, its thin fabric clinging to her body like a second skin, vividly showing each curvature,
each mold and outline of her feminine built. Her breasts, her bodily contours were now more visible
than before. The Lorathi could not help but swallow at the ravishing sight right in front of him...on
top of him.

Still, despite the utter futility of the act, Jaqen H'ghar had to try and restrain her primal urges—their.
"A man is beginning to think that sending a girl to be trained by the Black Pearl was nothing but a horrible idea."

Arya Stark stared at him with hungry eyes and smiled. "Did a man not teach a girl before to use every learning she has acquired to serve Him of Many Faces?"

The Lorathi smirked despite the deafening pounding inside his chest. "And how is this a service to Him of Many Faces?" He felt his body tremble as the girl placed all her weight on his legs, her smallclothes coming in slight contact with the virility between them. Licking her lips, she bent her body forward and leaned her arms on both sides of the wooden tub, such that her hands were on top of his. The girl had constrained him—space and movement, and the only escape possible was plain and simple surrender to her whims.

He was once again a captive. And this time, unlike in the Black Cells and that dispiriting cage with two monsters of men, he would not be able to liberate himself from this.

Evil child…she brought it here from Harrenhal.

"It isn't, Jaqen…" she said, grazing her nose against the rough stubble on his cheek. "But let us not play the part of fools. We really don't care about Him of Many Faces right now, do we?" Her berry lips dampened his perfect jawline. "Turn a blind eye for once and forget about your death god. You're mine tonight."

Perhaps it is this: that no man must be seen devoted enough, great enough, to be bound to celibacy, he mused.

At the thought, Jaqen lovingly stroked Arya's hair, closed his eyes just so he could feel more of her. Passions burned with unadulterated want and possibly, with something that might transcend that want. Souls suffered and grieved at the truth that every touch and kiss and whisper of tenderness, fondness for each other were nothing but forbidden.

The Lorathi held the girl's chin and tilted her head so she could look at his eyes. "Arya Stark, you don't know what you are asking from a man, do you?"

"Oh, but I do," she said in faked innocence, eyes immaculate, both hands on his chest. "More than I know myself, more than I could ever possibly know myself, Jaqen."

The Lorathi sighed. To hell with all the consequences.

His mouth closed in on hers.

She kissed him back with equal passion. It was a competition on the aspect of who could give the other one more ardent kisses. Lorathi hunger is insatiable—it is not to be mocked or toyed with, treated with nonchalance, and fulfillment is almost impossible once voracity has been uncaged. He sucked her lower lips, she whimpered in pleasure. Bellegere, you are a knower of many things. Arya Stark mused, but my Lorathi is a 'master' of all things known. Acts and responses are the way, and so she did to him every single thing he did to her—she suckled and bit, and played with his tongue, and drank from his mouth.

The moon was at its full.

Candles in sconces were creators for the night, as the light cast their shadows against the cobbled wall—two, then one. The flames danced as did these forms derived from the beings of them; and this creature named Ned acted as witness. Its eyes were transfixed on their graceful movements that were
so alike those seen in a promenade.

It was deep.

The Wolf-girl was snarling low once more, and it was scarlet from his lips again that she needed. They are assassins, and blood is like water—only better. *Bleed for me, Jaqen...* she bit hard and he winced. *Bleed, bleed, bleed.* She was sadist, he, masochist, and they would play the role of the other. At times, roles would reflect balance and symphony with their wild and their tamed, storm and still, dominance and submission. At times, they would clash.

*Balance is good. Clash is brilliant.*

"Arya...sweet girl," she heard Jaqen moan. His hands were already on both of her hips, massaging them in a thoroughly erotic fashion. The girl led her Lorathi master's hands to her buttocks, guided the movement of his hands so he would know what it is that would please her. The Lorathi obeyed and gently kneaded her there.

They touched and moved and pulled and lurched until water from the tub started spilling onto the floor. The Lorathi smirked in the midst of their exchange—excellent, his lovely girl had the better sense to secure the latch. His hot mouth moved to the flesh of her bosom, planting petal kisses, savoring her.

"I love the feel of you, Jaqen...I'd love to feel you more."

"Dear gods...Arya. Don't say that, don't..."

Time was at a standstill. It was delirium at its finest.

"Hah...Jaqen," she murmured in the midst of kisses. "Jaqen, love..."

It was enough to send the Lorathi falling deep, without the hopes of ever climbing back up. His lovely girl had stripped herself of her nobility to join the Order, had thrown all caution in the wind to be with him, had broken rules upon rules, just so she could call him 'Jaqen, love.'

*Forget the gods. Forget Death. Forget every damned thing.*

"Arya...sweetheart."

It couldn't have been his voice but it was. How many tenets and articles of faith had he abandoned that night with every kiss and every word? Years and years of training in the House of Black and White, thoughtlessly forsaken for an hour in a night with her...

*And in which text was it written that pursuit of happiness is not a right?*

Arya Stark broke away from Jaqen's kisses. The Lorathi struggled to catch his breath. She took his hands once more and guided them to various parts of her, as if she was the master and he was the apprentice.

"Here, Jaqen..."

The girl ushered the Lorathi's hands to touch the side of her breasts. She held his fingers as they both traced the curves of her bosom. The wet gown had stuck to her skin, and she appeared practically naked but not quite. Arya rotated her hips gently against Jaqen's lower torso and the Lorathi gasped. She laughed softly and kept rotating her hips in sensual circles—teasing, provoking. The Lorathi began breathing from his mouth. The girl laughed her evil laugh.
"I thought you were a score and three? Why then—it's as if you've never been with a woman?"

"Sweetheart, Arya…please. Stop with the teasing…"

"Oh, sweet Jaqen. Look at you, now. You're not an assassin—you're a green boy!"

"Arya…"

She moved faster. Glissading snake in water—finally, here it was.

"Arya! Oh, heavens and hells…"

As if hearing nothing, she held both of his thumbs and guided them to her nipples. The Lorathi gently rubbed her there, and the girl's eyes grew wide with wonderment at the unexpected sensation brought by his touch. A first, a first, she thought. Glorious sensation…Master…Master.

Whimpers. Stifled moans. His touch was wildfire—consuming her, killing her.

Rekindling her. Inspiring. Setting her ablaze.

He stroked her faster, until his whole hands covered her breasts. She arched her back, then fell into his arms, as he continued to pleasure her. Arya embraced Jaqen as tight as she could.

"Oh, Jaqen…this is so much better than in my dreams…"

A bittersweet taste of her own cruelty, the Lorathi decided.

He gently pushed the girl, his hands never leaving her bosoms. Jaqen tilted his head to the side, observed her, marveled at her articulate microexpressions—responses to his touch. The sweet formations from her berry mouth compensated for the silent verbalizations her closed eyes could not give him:

Caress—a soundless 'Oh'.

Gentle rubs—teeth buried in her lips.

Light pinches on her nipples—audible gasps and moans.

His masterful fingers rubbed more circles on her nipples, his hips met her movement with ardor. He pushed her down to him.

The girl was breathless…gasping…gasping…

"Jaqen H'ghaaaaaar!" Arya Stark screamed in pure passion. "Ah! Jaqen H'ghar! I will not let you out of this bathchamber! I will stab you bloody if you stop! Ah! Jaqen! Jaqen!"

The Lorathi's rich laughter saturated every corner, fingers skillfully massaging her still. "Shush, shush…" A playful whisper afterwards. "Shush! We're in the temple…have you no shame at all?"

His many caresses on her breasts intensified, testing her discipline, mocking it even. "The other masters might be asleep at this time of night! And here you are with your desperate outbursts! Has a man been such a terrible master that you have not learned anything of consequence from him?"

"Damn you!" the girl cried, and pulled his hair repeatedly. She moaned as Jaqen began kissing and nipping at the exposed flesh of her breasts. He lightly bit one aroused tip, suckled it against the fabric for a couple of seconds, teasing. "I hate you! You magnificent beast, you sweet, sweet bastard!"
Those words…and Jaqen H'ghar realized that he was completely lost. Never again, would he find himself.

"Drink from my bosoms, Jaqen…please!"

_Damn, damn, damn._

He found her lips and attacked them, robbing her of air. He touched her some and kissed her some more, and in the midst of their fondling each other, the Queller around Arya's neck emitted a lustrous glow that surrounded the bath chamber to its very last corner. The two assassins were blind to the striking display of red light—their awareness fixed only on each other.

The chain atop Jaqen's garment—the ethereal chain on his chariot which he wore around his waist, glowed with the Queller.

Ned-cat still watched their shadows by the wall.

Arya Stark's shoulders were shaking.

Sounds were coming out of her throat—but they were not anymore sounds of gratification but of… desolation.

His lovely girl was sobbing.

As if her flesh was afire, Jaqen quickly removed his hands from her bosom. He broke away from the kiss and gently held her chin. True enough, tears were coming out of her eyes.

"Jaqen…purge me of him, please…cleanse. I need…"

"Arya, sweetheart…" he wiped the outpour of tears, placed a deep kiss upon her lips. The Lorathi brushed her hair with his fingers and held her tight. "What's wrong?"

"I need you…his touch, his kisses—ghosting all over me, Jaqen," Arya said in between sobs. "His mouth—the Sealord's mouth…it's on my neck, and my cheeks, my ears. And I couldn't kill him because I needed his confessions. I needed anything he could tell me. I wanted to slit his throat and castrate him, I can't! I had to whore myself for him before he gave me anything! I'm filthy… detestable…"

She was hurting herself—clawing at her skin with her fingers, as if wanting the layers to wither away, or better yet vanish. The Lorathi held his lovely girl tight, calmed her, whispered her name, reminded her how very precious she was to him.

Jaqen was dumbfounded. Rage enveloped him. "Arya, a man will speak with the Elder about—"

She shook her head vehemently, looked at Jaqen, dark hatred visible in her eyes. "I will kill that damnable bastard after I kill his Swords. I will murder him with my own two hands—strangle him and watch him cling to his life and slowly lose his breath by the second," Arya claimed through clenched teeth. "I will skin him as he pleads for air. That demonic schemer! And that damned Littlefinger was with him and his ploys—and he has Sansa."

There was but a single explication. The Winter Maiden was able to somehow extract information from the Sealord, as nobody would suspect the intents of a young, beautiful courtesan. Mostly, they are hired to listen to their male consorts' tales, pour them wine, and 'keep them company' in various manners.
But then, would a Sealord be as careless with his affairs to dare tell a single soul about them? It didn’t seem to fit. Even the Tyroshi had claimed that the Sealord’s cryptic motives were impossible to decode. The Lorathi doubted if the greatest feeling of obsession could lead men to rashly share critical political matters with mere courtesans.

"Did he speak of his intents to you? Where?" The Lorathi prodded gently. He still held the girl tightly around the shoulders, his hands caressing her back in a comforting manner. The girl buried her face on her Lorathi’s naked chest.

"He did not speak of his intents. He *thought* about them."

It was awe the Lorathi felt with what she did to get through the man. She read his inner thoughts, with the Sealord none the wiser.

*A girl has many gifts.*

*Has she read a man's contemplations as well? The reason perhaps, why she is here with me?*

Jaqen wanted to ask her how she did it, what she felt, what she has gathered. The gods have been truly, unboundlessly gracious to her. And the great deities have been gracious to Jaqen as well, for giving her to him. His pupils dilated at the thought—it was wild arousal he once more felt. The Faceless Master delighted himself with his private fantasies.

*Teleesthesia.*

*Thought transference.*

*Oh, Arya...you're inconceivable. Should we have children, they will all be very—*

The girl sneezed. Onto more pressing matters, then.

She was shaking her head.

"Who built this temple, Jaqen? Who wrote the Songs?"

"Arya..."

"Answer me. I've been having dreams, Jaqen. They're...killing me."

He tilted her face towards him and kissed her deeply. Then, he let go.

"We'll discuss everything in your chamber," he told her calmly. "But first, let us get you out of these wet clothes."

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! A chapter for all of you--hope you liked it! Let me know what you guys think. Thanks a whole lot for reading and giving lovely feedback. ;D

Yes, there are hundreds of bath scenes in various J/A fics and their AUs, this is one of those that have it. The sweet bath scene was a key setting in ACoK and so, here we are. ;D
In her dreams, he was being dragged by three others across the shimmering sands of what was now lost. Betrayer, and they had brutally christened him. Prior to this, the wooden windlass carried him inverted for all to see—a threat to others who would, at the slightest, dare to act as righteous saviors of those slaves whose 'undeserved humanities' the ruthless ones had stolen. In her dreams, they had asked him about those Valyrian relics that had mysteriously vanished. He was a fire-sorcerer, but so were they. He never gave a word away.

In her dreams, those atrocious beasts of men had forced responses out of him in the midst of unimaginable torture. There were names; there were plans, conspiracies, too. He never besought their mercy for dire life.

"Where is the enchantress?!"

Secrets were buried with what remained of him, deep in his grave. One lamentable evening, drops of his precious scarlet adorned the sand like glittering rubies amidst a sea of gold.

She heard her own voice in the midst of it all, rubbing salt to his already deep wounds:

You are in love with a memory.
When the phantasmic abstractions would half-consume her every night—and she was being plagued by these more often now that she carried the pendant whose color is that of blood—there were only two hues.

Gold. Silver.

Once, there were two moons in the sky, but one silver moon wandered too close to the golden sun and cracked from the heat. A thousand, thousand dragons poured forth, drank fire from the sun.

Then, there would be mist in her eyes and the mist's obscuration was intentional. She saw the temple being built by two crimson hands, bloodsoaked. The scarlet stains acted as the temple stones' consecrator—enshrining it in front of the death god. The many-faced deity had ordered one man to hallow her in the Isle of the Gods through this sacrifice—a payment for the cycles, for the grace of continuance. He should have been dead, but here he was, breathing.

But he had fooled the deity in so many ways.

He collected those faces of the dead and placed them in the sanctum. It was never sanctioned by the many-faced god. Faceless Men must remain faceless; they were never truly allowed to don those many visages. It was mere interpretation that led them to the practice of taking the faces of the dead.

Weak assurance was all the Lorathi could offer the girl. Better this than nothing. "Dreams are by nature surreal, they are mere succession of events that had never transpired, will never."

The girl shook her head in frustration. "No, Jaqen. Dreams are a whole realm! Don't you dismiss this, I know what I saw! I was there!"

His own dreams have once more started three days ago, after three full years of a successful series of subliminal battles against them. For others who lead lives devoid of the darkest of sufferings, dreams are a gift.

For them who deal with death and prophecies that promise unsure deliverance, dreams are a scourge.

"A man is not dismissing anything, sweet—"

"Yes, you are."

"Shall we speak of these all in another time? The Sealord matter is more urgent," he said.

The girl sighed. "He's Braavosi, and Volantene."

"And does he have current connection with the triarchs of Volantis?"

"Yes."

"In what aspects?"

"Slavery—the twelve missing children in Silty Town—Volantenes took them right after the Sealord assumed position. He is connected with an underground league of slave traders inside Braavos that was conceived after Antaryon died."

"They remorselessly mutilated those innocent babes to the point of death, fed them parts of their own selves, scorched them with dragon fire—a prelude to something grander. The bastards. What else?"

"He is working to weaken the strongholds of this city—the ships will pass through the Sealord's Peninsula. The Volantenes and their allies in the Slaver's Bay plan to wage open war against
Braavos. The Great Masters, the Wise Masters—Astapor and Yunkai, they have made their pledge. Mereen remains faithful to Daenerys Targaryen—unless she decides to endorse the lords, the city will remain neutral. The eight other Free Cities are now casting votes on which city to support. The Volantenes—they cannot charge right away."

"Why is this?"

"Still waiting."

"Waiting for…"

"The other dragonlords. Two more, one of them a woman—hatcher. They are still in the West. But we cannot rely on obsidian candles anymore. I only see…shadows in them."

The Lorathi shut his eyes and heaved a deep sigh at his lovely girl's revelations. Suspicions were on point all along—Tormo Fregar, the Sealord of Braavos who was expected to preserve the city, uphold its longstanding ideals against unjust subjugation, was indeed orchestrating intricate plans to disestablish it. If that is his intent, the Lorathi thought. He seemed to want Braavos to be obliterated for good, for all we know. Under his breath, he cursed the traitor, the Volantenes, the lords. He almost blasphemed himself with thoughts of profaning the name of the Many Faces. Where is the god now in their time of need?

They were in Arya Stark's bedchamber. The girl sat on the edge of her bed, he sat on a chair opposite her. Their knees were touching, and the Lorathi could still sense her soft and ravishing body in his arms, the taste of her wine-savory mouth, the dainty feel of her innocence against his own manliness. Even with the suds, the tips of her breasts uselessly concealed by the thin fabric were honey to his wanting tongue. Lustful plans, and these could have enhanced the theatrics—even now he desired to rip her clothes and consume her bosoms till they hurt, touch her core below and allow his masterful fingers inside her—north and south, till she begs for the feel of him against the tight walls of her.

Forgiveness, but to lie is also to sin. Therefore, a confession.

The whole truth is he had wanted to claim her savagely in the temple's bathchamber; and nay, he didn't care if she bled for him in floods and streams. The waters of the tub will cleanse her anyway. He wanted to shove himself in her in the deepest, most gratifying way possible. He will heal her from the inside, and in every push it will be solace for her, not pain.

Then, he will take her every single hour of her every waking day after that. The temple has its many dreamy places—she loves blood, yet she loves romance, too. The beautiful irony of it.

Atop the weirwood table in the Hall of Masters.

Underneath the statue of the Maiden, by the poison pool.

Against the thick pillars leading to the inner sanctum.

Inside the sanctum itself, with thousands of faces as great beholders.

Her impassioned screams will wake the dead in the Hall of Faces.

He cursed in Lorathi.

Damn it. To hear her bless a man with ten thousand Jaqens from her luscious mouth.
He quickly shoved such thoughts away. His lovely girl looked at her own feet, then turned her eyes to him. More to say, and what?

"Speak, Arya."

She shook her head. "Tormo Fregar did not win the Sealordship. The magisters were supposed to name Aristide Antaryon as Sealord, but two magisters that were said to cast the winning votes on Antaryon had been discovered missing for weeks. And this…whatever this is…they plan to bring it to Westeros. Their horrendous plans for the Stark remnants—my brothers…another pact, a compromise…"

Jaqen stood. "A man must go to the Elder at once. We might call for a gathering of the masters so we could all sort everything out." Just when he was about to walk to the door, Arya caught his wrist. He turned to her—saw how full her expression was of uncertainty. The girl carried the weight of all these confessions for days, and perchance could not bear that weight any longer. He gently lifted her to stand, wrapped her frame in his sinewy arms.

"Arya…" It was all he could say against her sweet-smelling, chestnut-hued hair.

It was the last autumn season before another Long Night when the bleeding star appeared. When she appeared. It was only a cup of water he had asked from her. Now, his desires for her have evolved to the point that the waters of the Narrow, the Summer, the Sunset, the Jade could not quench them. Another human being, closer to him than his own flesh and marrows were, closer to him than the death god that owned his person ever was.

"One more thing, Jaqen," she spoke against his chest. She lifted her face so she could look him in the eyes. "I saw a black and white slip on the Sealord's oaken desk one time when we were having private luncheon. Our black and white slip."

The Lorathi held his breath. A lot of things certainly, that the Elder is not telling a man. He attempted to control his uproar at being left out regarding such matter of importance. "He came to the House of Black and White and gave a name for a hit." The girl nodded at his statement. "Whose name was it?

"He never spoke of the name, and his particular thought on that name seemed to be too well-protected to be read," Arya replied. "But he gave the temple the dragon gold twoscore moons ago, which meant he was not yet Sealord at that time."

"Apparently," the Lorathi said. "Nothing at all? Hints? Surely, he might have uttered some details unintentionally—"

"He merely thought this: the name belonged to the greatest enemy of Braavosi rebirth," she responded quietly. Arya buried her face in Jaqen's chest once again. "Come back for me, will you, Jaqen? After the gathering of the masters."

Jaqen lifted Arya's face and kissed her long and deep. She sighed when he let her go. "Of course."

He walked to the door, turned back to her before opening it, as if recalling something of significance. "The Tenth Day of the Unmasking is in the morn. Will the Winter Maiden have any tasks then?"

The bidding for…the Winter Maiden's blood will be after the Grand Unmasking. Arya shook her head. "No."

Jaqen smiled. "Very good. A man would like to take Arya Stark out on the morrow."

She nodded. "Be safe, Jaqen."
His brows formed a crease.

"There is a traitor in the Order."

Jaqen H'ghar reached the Hall of Masters. Almost all of them were already seated around the weirwood table. Three more chairs were added beside the Elder's usual place and on these seats sat Tycho Nestoris of the Iron Bank, Lucio Haldon of the Arsenal, and another man whose face the Lorathi could not put a name into.

"Take a seat, brother," the Elder commanded. The Lorathi did as he was told whilst his eyes surveyed the faces inside the hall. Three masters tasked for acquisition in Dragonstone were in absentia, as was the handsome Tyroshi.

He tried to catch the Waif's eyes to non-verbally demand for an explanation. The Waif could certainly communicate more things with him by mere look or a gesture, she will enlighten him then. The woman appeared to him to be spell-bound—she only stared at the middle of the round table where the title of the Faceless Men was carved out. And she seemed…

Thoroughly exhausted. A little bereaved, yet peaceful.

"Masters, no introductions necessary for Tycho Nestoris and Lucio Haldon," the Elder began, motioning to his left, and the masters nodded their agreement to his words. He then motioned his hand to his right. "Aristide Antaryon, grandson to the late Ferrego, and rightful Sealord of Braavos."

Hushed whispers from those apparently unaware cloaked the entire hall. The Lorathi smiled at the Kindly Man's efficiency concerning matters of the city. The Elder returned his smile, as if to say that he was informed of this concern from the beginning.

The room fell into stillness as the Kindly Man explained every detail—the Sealord and the Volantenes, ties with the Valyrian lords, two magisters—fragments of their anatomy scattered along the straits of Norvos, the twelve Braavosi children, three trade ships commanded by Pultos, and a hundred and sixty seven Braavosi crew now bereft of life, acting as spiritless heralds of impending war along the Bridge by the Rhoyne River. Their maimed bodies were skewered along the embankment in a fashion that would sicken even the most brutal of Dothraki warlords—mouths open in prior-to-death excruciation, defaced, flesh and bones torn and mangled. They were all drained of their precious slaves' blood—food for the lords.

"This is beyond diabolic!"

"Eye for an eye, let him suffer the same fate as the ones he betrayed."

"Death to Fregar. Never in the history of Braavos had this happened!"

The Lorathi was silent. Long time. Why wait before revealing this knowledge?

He had so many things to ask him, and to begin when he was unsure even of what to ask is torture in itself. He was roused from his state of contemplation by the Kindly Man himself, who queried about what Arya had gathered from her task as courtesan to the Sealord.

"He has already weakened the defenses of the Sealord's Peninsula," the Lorathi said in his most straightforward manner. The information garnered another set of violent reactions from the assemblage, Nestoris and Antaryon included. "The usurper obviously has not only connections, but birth ties to the Volantenes."
The Elder held up a hand to silence the other masters. "When?"

"As soon as two other lords and their fire beasts arrive from the Westernmost. Death is the only thing that is certain, the time is not. Could be anytime then, any second."

Both the Elder and the Lorathi held each other's eyes, as if measuring each other's thoughts and intents. Both of them were for a moment, incognizant of the seeming chaos created by this alarming telling. Pocket discussions, for the masters were gifted with stratagems. Feasible, effective plans to thwart a possible attack from the First Daughter.

Aristide was listening.

"Speak to the commandant. Fortify the Titan, half a thousand more archers."

"Diversion in front of the Arsenal—sink their ships, then close the Chequy."

"Why in the name of Him of Many Faces would we even let them reach the Arsenal?"

"Forget you not the Sealord's Peninsula. The bastards may and could march on land to Braavos through the City of Corpses. Warn the High Magister, then."

"Illyion of Norvos? What in the Known World would make you think that the city would ally itself with us?"

The Stern-faced Master spoke to Haldon. "What exactly do we have in the Arsenal? Would the weapons be sufficient?"

"We do not disclose these things to people outside the Arsenal itself," the commandant replied. "Too risky."

"We are at war here. Or perhaps, you have forgotten to clean your ears before coming in?"

The commandant scoffed. "Unlike you faceless lot who conceal yourselves behind the faces you wear, we soldiers of this city work with what we have—no glamours, no pretensions. We put ourselves in front of battles and we do not sneak around murdering people and making the act look like tragedy. So straightaway I will say this: you cannot ask what is inside the Arsenal."

"You have certainly made excellent suggestions," the Stern-faced replied with a smirk. "I may sneak around and demand answers when you least expect me to, murder you, make it look like tragedy."

"You bastard."

"I will ask this a last time: how strong is the Arsenal?"

Aristide Antaryon's voice cut through the stream of words coming from all parts of the weirwood table. "If I may. Prior to plans of defense, the best option we have as of the time being is to expose Tormo Fregar for the bastard that he is, sentence him to die, afterwards. Unless we can uproot the scallywag from the palace, no compelling leadership could possibly lead Braavos out of this misrule, and out of this...bedlam of a war, should it be proven true."

The Elder responded. "On behalf of the Order, I would have to give my assent." He took a deep breath, as if calming himself—curious for no one had known the Elder to be this much affected by anything. "Tormo Fregar must die, as willed by Him of Many Faces. I have spoken to you about this task," the Elder spoke directly to the Lorathi. "Carry it out in any manner you see befitting."
Jaqen H'ghar remembered it quite well. *One of the leaders of the Nine Free Cities. Tormo Fregar, Sealord of Braavos—a counterfeit.*

"A man knows his name," the Lorathi said. "This cannot be done."

"Have you any personal attachments to the man?" the Elder queried.

"None."

"Then, you do not know him at all. Proceed with the hit. Even a king dies, if he must," the Elder replied. "Our knowledge of names must never protect those who have reveled in their debauchery, otherwise, fairness in the face of Death will not have any value."

The Lorathi nodded.

Faceless assignments were strictly confidential, and must be known only within the circle of eleven masters.

Confidentiality seemed to be at the nethermost of everyone's concerns that night. Braavos is under attack, and all men must serve—rightful sealords, banklords, and Faceless Men most of all.

"When?" the Lorathi asked.

"After the bidding."

Jaqen H'ghar stood from his seat and laughed sourly at the Elder's words, silencing thus the other masters.

"Are you telling a man that you will let Arya Stark peddle herself to the highest bidder, who may well be this Sealord we are speaking of, before we could proceed with the kill? What do you have to gain from the bid on her maiden's blood? She has already disclosed to us every single thing she knows! Arya Stark is Chosen, not a pawn in your games!" Jaqen slammed both of his hands on the weirwood table at the last word.

An utterly objectionable outburst—Faceless Men pride themselves on being serene, composed in the face of any arduous task. Despite this, no soul in the room dared chastise the Lorathi whose lips were now tightly pursed with rage.

The 'Kindly Man' merely looked at him with disappointed eyes.

"Brother," the Waif spoke for the first time that evening. "Do calm down and listen. Please."

Jaqen rubbed his face with his hands and sat down once more. He then beheld the Elder with pleading eyes. "What more do you need from her?" In a voice broken.

"A name," the Elder replied.

"What name?"

"The name on Tormo Fregar's black and white slip. The importance of that name cannot be denied—he paid a whole fortune for it years ago. He insisted however, on revealing the name only after the Grand Unmasking. Whoever the owner of that name is, he must die. Tenets are tenets—even traitors have the right to seek for Death's aid."

The Lorathi scoffed and shook his head with disbelief at the arrangement. They have had tasks such as this one, wherein the beseecher could request for an opportune time to reveal names depending on
the weight of gold paid. Creeds become inconsistent when the faith is sworn to protect the interests of the city's treasury. The Elder continued; his voice seemed to wane. "No sacrifice for Him of Many Faces is too small, but I can assure you that one of our own had also sacrificed greatly in order to beseech the traitor's death."

One of our own?

The Lorathi tried to recollect the conversation he had with the Kindly Man about the kill. The beseecher is a woman?

Jaqen surveyed the hall once more. His Tyroshi brother was not in the gathering. Suddenly, as if understanding dawned upon him right that instant, his eyes landed on one face.

But of course.

The Waif's expression was serene, as if the sacrifice she would make would be none too great. The woman gazed at the Lorathi without any trace of regret on her face. How many times had she spoken to him of her enervations and how she desired merely to commune with the many-faced god?

My sister...a decade it has been, and now...

"There must be another way?" the Lorathi whispered, his sorrow suddenly uncontainable.

It was she who replied.

"Perhaps there is another; but respect for the beseecher's decision to be given the gift—this is prudent. We must honor her desire for repose, as we must her desire for the good."

That, and the Lorathi was then oblivious to everything else that proceeded in that gathering.

Too great—this battle, that a Faceless Man's blood must pay the ransom.

"A Dance of Dragons, a truly awe-inspiring tale," Nestoris said, devoid of understanding of other matters. "Ah, to witness one in this epoch! If the Targaryen Queen agrees with the terms, the Iron Bank will cancel half the debt of the Westerosi Throne should she be successful in claiming it. And we have one key to her realm's North—a Stark. The Targaryen Queen's claim as of present is questionable even, what with...what is the name?"

"Aegon, Sixth."

"Precisely. Alliance is food, and a queen needs to feed herself, yes? If she truly is the Breaker of Chains, she must declare herself and her dominion against the lords of Old. Forget Stannis Baratheon and the Lannisters—they are useless pieces of filth."

Aristide Antaryon interjected. "Let Baratheon aid the Stark remnants in rebuilding the North first, before dismissing him from the plans—what of our loans, then?"

"Let me worry about the fiscal matters, will you? Take back the damnable Palace. Then, we will talk," spat the banklord.

If only the Lorathi's thoughtfulness was directed at the present, he would have laughed at the politics of all things—the truth is, the city of Braavos has become the supremacy. Its wealth, its influence, its great history dating back eight centuries, had placed it at the political zenith of the Known World—with other cities, and realms, and kingdoms at the mercy of its repository of, as hearsays would claim, limitless gold. The bureaucratic structures of the city were thoroughly versant of matters of
politics in most corners of the East and the West—they must be, as every one is indebted to the Secret City.

Except for the lords of Old Valyria.

Farce. Aristide has not even taken seat yet, and Nestoris was already engaged in a debate with him about gold and loans. Might be, that they will slaughter each other in front of the sacred weirwood before they agree to execute the seated traitor.

No, he did not hear a single thing. Did not desire to.

All of Jaqen H'ghar's thoughts went to his sister, who, at any time now, might be prompted to drink from the poisoned water of the temple to pay for the death of one man. Disheartening—that she just decided to take the gift without even speaking a word of it to him.

And Arya Stark.

It might be that the death god had willed for the Lorathi to seep through her motivations, for he suddenly realized that Arya's decision to accept the great undertaking was not brought by the shortsighted truth that it was somehow written in the leaves of her destiny.

No. Arya Stark would carve her own fate upon the stars.

It may be that she welcomed it and sought to fulfill it because he had told her that…it mattered to him. It mattered to him for one reason beyond the Faceless Order, and the reason was deeply rooted.

How many deserts and storms and winds? Thousands of battles at his right, ten thousand perished bodies at his left, and in the midst of many years of both sorrow and regalement he had thought of nothing else.

And the price he had to pay—for only death may pay for life.

Before he had ever laid eyes on her, had spoken with her, she was nothing more than one Chosen, whose myth was conceived through plume and words on the papers of a thick book—their Songs. Who is she now, truly?

A distant persona spoke on his behalf.

Veritus—a man's reality, impetus—his purpose.

Memoriae. Nothing in years upon years of circuitous breaths in different bodies, only memories of her. Laying eyes upon her again. How long is a century? Four? Ten?

Body, soul, will, substance.

All.

Decisions.

Go against the prophecies, against their sacred vows and be cursed? Run to Unknown Sothoryos and abandon all hope that the realms could possibly triumph against Fire and Ice?

"Valar Morghulis. If this will not suffice, may the death god take us away for eternity."

The surviving Starks.
What do the lords need from them?

And the nightmares have taken their toll on her already distraught mental state. Too much—everything is.

Yondersight is a useful gift, and a frightening one to possess too. There is wisdom in the decision of the deities to not grant all men with such capacity. Knowledge of what lay beyond—horrors and sublimity alike—may unhinge any gifted's mind, if he or she is not too careful.

Bran has been communicating with her through dreams. Their connectedness—one powerful warg to another—is more than filial. It is an elaborate interweaving of sense and spirit, its antecedents traceable to the old gods.

*Heart of Winter. Heart of Darkness.* These are things which he had said. Arya Stark has no understanding of these things. What of these?

*The Children are not to be trusted. The Wall is crumbling. Living Ice—blue diamonds, breath of winter. Wings made of crystal snow. Beneath the Wall.*

She sat on the edge of her bed, recalled and committed to memory all knowledge she has so far about her fellow Stark remnants.

"Sansa is in the Vale. Bran—beyond the Wall. Rickon, in Skagos. Jon…to Winterfell?"

And her dear mother might truly be alive. Not in the truest sense, but still.

The door of her chamber opened. Her heart soared. She leaped from the bed and threw herself into his arms. Her Lorathi was not anticipating the act, she could tell, but his sure arms caught her anyway in a cradle. Always, she felt safe...she *is* safe with him. To her, he is boldness in the face of fear, truth in uncertainty.

*Fear is lost in you.*

"Jaqen!" She began kissing his neck.

"What the hell?!!"

Not a deep Lorathi purr, not calm. Not his voice, hence. She lifted her face and realized that the hair is midnight black—not scarlet and ivory. Not his hair, then.

*A whiff of...scented primrose. Not ginger and cloves and petals.*

*Your aid, Him of Many Faces.*

The man cradling her, she realized, was not Jaqen. It was the comely master.

Arya hastily freed herself from the master's grasp. Both her feet landed on the stone floor, as she walked back a few paces. "Forgive me," the girl calmly said, in the midst of embarrassment she might not be able to recover from. "I thought you were my Lorathi Master."

The comely one's face reflected disgust springing from an apparently vain character. With the back of his hand, he wiped his neck that was moistened by the girl's kisses and shuddered, eyes locked upon her face.

A face of innocence.
"Where is he?" the Handsome Man queried, still shaken by her prior act that was nothing but accidental. The girl clenched her teeth at the master's antipathy towards her. *Must he really show his revulsion with such clarity?* "I thought he might be here, he's not in his bedchamber."

"Gathering of the Masters. Were you not there?"

The Handsome Man regarded her with narrowed eyes. "Are you fooling me, Arya Stark? Need I say that I just woke up from a dreadful sleep and I am in no mood for senseless japes?"

The girl scoffed. "You were not informed of the gathering then. All of them are in the Hall—"

"Damn it!"

The comely one marched his exeunt to the door, but paused, as if recalling something. He faced her once more, assessed her from crown to sole, his smirk suddenly unnerving. He pointed a fore at her, half-questioning, half-chastising.

"You were expecting your Lorathi master, were you not?"

Arya donned a blank expression. Her heart raced. "No."

The comely one chuckled. "You excellent teller of tall tales." He walked closer to her. "I will speak of what I think, I'd be most delighted. You were waiting for him, only the gods know why. But your sultry kisses on my neck before you realized I was not him, made me think of what his actual intentions might be of visiting you in your chamber in this time of night."

"Intentions?"

"You have been doing things to each other, have you not?"

"T-things?"

She prayed so she may disintegrate.  

He has his special ways of knowing what is hidden. Were they not too careful with their passionate exchanges in the temple—Jaqen and her? Ah, but she had helplessly screamed his name in the bathchamber a while ago. Problems have been hounding her, and here comes another one. It was a cage where escape is impossible and the repercussions, unthinkable. And there was truth to it—that he who is Faceless will suffer the throes of his own doing.

"Where have you been, brother?"

It was Jaqen's voice. *Shield*, the girl thought. Her beautiful Aegis, and he has come to save her once more.

The comely one faced the Lorathi, in his countenance was repressed rage, though not for him. His Lorathi brother had done nothing, surely.

"Where is she?"

"She?"

"Sabine, brother. Where is she?!"

The Lorathi gazed gently at Arya, who was then a mirror of confusion. Too early, he decided, and he began speaking to the Tyroshi in Ancient Rhoynar. Only the masters know of the language,
which meant that the subject of their discussion, whatever it may be, was not meant for the ear of a plainly ordained Faceless such as herself. Even the privileges of the Chosen are with limitations.

The comely one was now in open rage.

There were perhaps many things—embedded, concealed in utterances she could not apprehend despite her intellect, and so she decided to use her gift and saturate herself with their ruminations.

*Nothing! You did absolutely nothing to stop this obliquity!*

*A man does not have the right to overturn the decision of one Faceless.*

*Did the death god not give you that right?! The deity has given you all, but this?!*

*Don't speak of the god that way, brother.*

*Why must I not? Your god is taking every damned thing that matters to me!*

"Arya!" her Lorathi master called to her in a voice of anger. "Stop with your folly now!"

The girl immediately left their consciousness. Her master was astute—sterling indeed with concealment that she could not read him—almost. And he knew she was trying to permeate through the both of them.

The comely one rushed to the door, the Lorathi caught him by the arm as if to stop him.

"Oh, gods!" Arya exclaimed, when she saw the Handsome Man's fist land upon Jaqen's jaw.

The Lorathi grabbed his brother, constrained him with a strong arm around his neck, as his hand cuffed both the comely one's wrist to his back. The latter writhed.

"Let me go, damn it, Jaqen!"

A first—he had spoken his brother's name openly. *What is this?*

"You will *not* go to her, now," the Lorathi seethed, emphasis one each word. "Leave her be." He tightened his grip on the comely one's neck, demanding his assent.

It was an almost infinite struggle, one master against another. "Stop it!" Arya screamed at the both of them. "Stop, please! Stop!" Still, they went on. But the Lorathi was too strong, and so the impending brawl died like candle vanquished by the wind.

"Brother, please..." the comely one pleaded—again, a first. "I must speak with her. I must..."

Where has the self-assurance gone? Where is it now, the arrogance that never faltered, the overwhelmingly imposing character?

*Where is the Handsome Man, and who is this man with Jaqen?*

"You will proceed straight to your chamber," the Lorathi replied in a now calmer tone, once more tightening his grip, conveying how serious the command is. "And you will speak with her in the morn."

He was shattered, the comely one. His eyes have gone scarlet, perhaps because of that dreadful sleep he had complained about earlier; perhaps, because of...something else. He nodded at his brother's stern instructions.
Slowly, Jaqen let him go.

The comely one expelled air from his mouth, fixed the collar of his tunic, straightened his back. Without a second glance at the Lorathi and the girl, he stormed out of the chamber.

The Lorathi closed the door gently, then rubbed his face with his hands. Tugged a fistful of his own hair.

Lost. Distraught. It was as if his heart was almost…

*Keening.*

"Jaqen…"

The girl crossed the distance between them slowly, unsure of her master's state of emotions. She reached out for his hand, stroked it in a manner that was most comforting. No, she could not ask him of it at all. The fact that they spoke in a tongue that was only for them meant that she must acquiesce to the secrecy of whatever it is they have discussed.

Still, a lot of mysteries.

*Sabine?*

*Why fight?*

*The comely one, what has happened to him?*

Jaqen pulled Arya close, kissed her hair. She embraced him, uttered his name repeatedly, in high hopes that she could at least be his temporary calm. *Let me be Shield to him now. Let me take away his burdens,* she implored Him of Many Faces. *Empower me, so I may heal him, take away his hurt even if…even if I do not know what had caused it.*

"Do you know how precious you are to a man, Arya Stark?"

She held him closer. His voice sounded like shattered glass. It was…not like him.

*Why, Master? What has happened truly? Do tell.*

"And do you know how dear you are to a girl, Jaqen H'ghar?"

He laughed softly. *There! I made him laugh a little.*

Jaqen carried her to the bed, seated her on his lap, gazed at her with fondness. She gently touched his lower lip—it bled just a tiny bit, and she kissed it, licked the blood off it.

"You taste good, Master."

He laughed. Whispered to her. "You taste better."

They kissed. Lovingly, she smiled at him. "Jaqen, is there…anything at all that I can do? Whatever it is, tell me what I must do for you—ease you, appease you, please you—"

His rich laughter cut her romanticisms. "A lovely girl is getting better with rhymes."

"It's because a man is *fond* of rhymes and rhythms."
He nodded at her, doting. "Just so."

Oh yes, Jaqen had laughed. He was smiling still at her. But his eyes…they were languishing. His beauteous eyes of a usual sparkling brown were at the moment…almost lifeless.

"Jaqen, please…"

"*Just stay with me*, Arya Stark," he finally said. "That is all. Stay with a man tonight."

She held him tighter, prayed for another gift despite her senses of eight—restoration. In her silence and in his, she summoned all the power she still has left for that one bequest from the old gods who have been nothing to her but gracious. The girl was not used to her master being weak, and it frightened her. She was but a wounded healer, more shattered in the core perhaps than her Lorathi, and to will herself to take away all that encumbered him might leave her on the perishing side. Still…

"Take all of my strength, Jaqen. Keep it."

He planted kisses of dandelion seeds upon her cheek.

"My strength is sitting on my lap right now."

She giggled.

"Let's go out," she finally said.

Narrowed eyes—beautiful, despite his troubles. "Where to?"

"I know a place."

High night is approaching. The Waif’s work chambers reflected perfect serenity.

That was prior to the comely one slamming the door open and rushing inside.

"You placed essence in my wine goblet at dinner, did you not?!" He accused her through gritted teeth. There were the Lorathi’s warnings earlier, but the comely one listens to no one but himself. Morn is still moments away, and he neither has the time nor the endurance to wait upon it.

The Waif continued replacing the glass vials inside the potion chest without so much as glancing at the Handsome Man’s direction. "I did."

Calm. Stormless as gentle ripples of water.

He shook his head with incredulity and utter hurt. "Why?"

The Waif lingered in the silence for a few seconds, almost choosing to ignore the Tyroshi’s senseless questions. She placed the potions chest carefully inside the depository which was built against the wall. She examined a slightly larger container that held the sample of Death of Dragons.

Early that morn, she showed Arya Stark some poison methods. The girl was very pleased at having discovered that the three gemstones which adorned the hilt of her Valyrian blades actually had concealed poison compartments. Whenever she would find the need to use her blades, she need not dip them in poison anymore. The hilt will automatically transfer the poison to the blade from the inside. Her Lorathi brother had it especially made in Qohor for the girl.

"The Elder might not be able to handle outbursts from two masters—were you there at the gathering earlier, you would have wasted no time expressing your self-serving outrage. I do not wish for the Elder to kill you and the Lorathi in front of the other masters and the guests," the Waif finally replied.
"So it's true," the Handsome Man said in a disconsolate yet wrathful undertone. "You paid for the death of the traitorous Sealord."

The Waif exhaled in weariness and convinced herself that she was not required at all to offer anyone any justifications. She had started walking towards the door when all of a sudden, the comely one grabbed her wrist and pulled her to him. The woman struggled against his grasp so he pinned her against the wall, placed his forehead against hers.

He closed his eyes.

"Don't do this to me."

His whisper was woeful.

He pounded his fist violently against the solid wall supporting the woman's back. She did not wince. "Don't do this, Sabine…” The woman gasped at the sound of her own name. The Tyroshi—he had lost all sense of facelessness, for him to utter her name without a stammer.

The Waif beseeched her death god for aid.

He slowly slid down the palm of his right hand across the woman's face, thus revealing another.

The Waif’s true face had round, misty eyes with long lashes, small nose, and thin, pink lips that seemed to speak to men without them expressing a single pronouncement. The Tyroshi brushed her long hair with his fingers—then, black; now, gold with soft curls at the tips.

My little nymph, her lord father used to call her. Of all the daughters of all the lords of Braavos, she was the most beautiful. A tender age of ten, yet she had to suffer the sadistic schemes of the second woman her father had married. An only child, an object of her lord father's affections, his most cherished one—all these led the woman she was forced to call her 'mother' to nurture within and without her this seed of pure envy and contempt for the then young girl. The woman was destructive and narcissistic, and potions were to her, endowments. And it was amortentia—love potion—that led her to the featherbed of the Waif's lord father in the first place.

Venin in the girl's food, her clothing, the water she uses to bathe herself.

The gods do have a sense of humor, as the Elder would steadfastly claim, for even when she was continuously being poisoned, she only grew stronger and lovelier than when she was still safe. It was apparent as well that the death god may have for her an even more grandiose set of plans, for the blight of poison that was meant to lead her to the last of her breath had become her very own gift.

She had become the master of it.

The last time she wore her real face was at the age of ten and five. The Elder had ordered her to don a completely different visage in order for her not to become too much of a distraction for the Tyroshi. A face that lingered, they called it. The Waif had suffered much underneath the skin of that face for it had the most persistent and the worst of all dreams and fears. For nights she would be roused from slumber to battle against inner and outer demons that had once associated themselves with its dead possessor. 'Hide not from the death god with my face!' the screams of it would say. All things, she kept within herself.

A servant must not ask questions.

All this time, the Elder thought that a mere change in the Braavosi woman's face could quell the comely one's ardent feelings. The old man had never been so, so wrong. On matters of sentiments
and deep-seated infatuations—things that make true men out of men—the House of Black and White was a total failure.

He gave her one deep kiss.

"Let me go, Aegeus," the woman calmly demanded when he released her lips. "And give me back my face."

As if hearing nothing, the Handsome Man buried his own face against the woman's golden locks. "This is you," he whispered. "And you do not owe this city, this temple anything. The death god doesn't own us. Sabine, I beg of you…"

"Listen to yourself," she spat in feigned disdain. "Who are you to say we do not owe this temple anything? When are you going to stop thinking about your own sake? Years of training towards mastership and you still possess your usual egocentrism. And to speak of the death god that way!"

The Handsome Man gazed back at the Waif with misty, imploring eyes. "This is not what you want."

"How would you even know of my wants, if I do have any?" she asked him firmly. "You and Jaqen, you pledge your life to the Order and then you question its tenets in between your utterances of 'all men must serve'. Have you no shame? All the two of you ever think about is how the universe and everything in it should revolve around your personal happiness! How can you live knowing that you have very little, if at all, concept about righteous surrender? And you dare call yourselves Faceless Men! Tell me, if Braavos and realms fail to defend themselves, how will your personal hopes have any value?"

"I will speak with the Elder," he told the woman in his state of desperation. "The Order needs you now more than ever. Those dragons must die, and only your poisons are potent enough—"

"I have finished concocting Death of Dragons," the woman interjected. "I have given the infusion to the Elder and whatever the Order plans to do with it is none of my concern. I am collapsing—I know it."

The man could not do anything but temporarily surrender his case. She spoke forth. "My entire anatomy is slowly being gorged by poison, and I have been feeling pangs and pricks all over me. I get awakened in the dead of the night by tormenting pains inside my belly, my chest, my head—everywhere, because of all those years in this damned work chamber. It's agony—it is…I just want to…I just want to get away from all these. For good."

"You have nothing in your head but death," the Tyroshi's expression was replaced with that of loathing—for the Order, himself, her selfishness…hells, he even felt a strong sense of profane hatred for Him of Many Faces. 'Kill them all', this may well be what the god kept on telling its disputably righteous self, if indeed it had one. It wants us all to perish—this god of death. It wants us to take part in its glorified misery, the cursed bastard! "You do not know anything apart from death, and your meaningless notions about sacrifice."

The woman gently lifted the Tyroshi's right hand and let his palm slide from her forehead to her chin. Her face was gradually replaced once more, by that of the Waif. She then let his hand fall freely to his side.

"To the best of my capacities as Faceless, I already did what I came here to do," she calmly answered. "Without dying, how can I ever know that I have actually lived? How can I truly know that you are real, or that Jaqen is? If I somehow persuade myself to walk away from this desire to be
given the gift, how else can I go back to my true self?"

The Tyroshi shook his head once more and tugged at his hair roughly, deciding which words were best to say to her, so he may talk into her some sense. Yes, she's in pain...but are we not all? "And how in this world and in another will dying let you know all of these things?"

He was shattered, the woman knew this, but everything must come to pass.

"I am not truly sure if dying would let me know anything at all. I have not really died in the truest sense of the word, brother. I have questions—only the god can answer them."

"Questions? What the hell?"

"About the faces in the sanctum. They were not meant for assassinations."

"I do not bloody care what they are meant for! This sacrifice you will make?! You will die for it, but dying for it does not necessarily make anything true!"

"But of course, you now know what is true and what is not. You think yourself greater than Him of Many Faces now, do you? Let go." She pulled her arm from the comely one's grasp. "Valar Morghulis. We will all proceed one day to the Realm Unseen, brother. I merely chose to go there ahead of all of you."

These words from her, and the Tyroshi dashed to the work table and swiped everything laid atop it onto the stone floor—steel smalldishes and urns crashed, glass rods and vials broke to pieces, spilling concoctions. He then turned to the woman, pointed a finger at her.

"No second thoughts! But if it were Jaqen who would ask that you stay, and ask you for anything at all—"

"Don't you dare say another word."

She uttered it in a most temperate manner, yet it conquered the comely one to the point of silence.

"Never speak of Jaqen in that manner. You have no idea at all what he had been through. Six cycles." She strode to the door then stopped to glance back at the Tyroshi. "Clean up the mess you have made, brother. Valar dohaeris." She walked away.

The man remained in the Waif's work chamber for what seemed to be hours, his eyes on the floor, his being all torn up. In his mind were things unthinkable. Grief consumed him, and the curious thing is this: that grief was supposed to destroy, not create a person—not to give him embodiment, that is, and a character alive. Yet, grief did the latter.

No One is gone. The anarchical questioner is left, and the questioner was a righteous demon.

Love strongly, despair greatly. Weep not.

He thought of it. Yes, it must be done, he persuaded himself. It was anathema to the House of Black and White, yet it was the only way.

Curse be on me.

Cast me if you must, but I must do these things.

Detestable, yes—necessary.
At the eastern side of the Purple Harbor were barges with floating candle lanterns, incandescence of gold, sapphire, and old rose. Well-off patrons had named it Alasee—Felicity, in the Common Tongue. It was a place where the winds whisper, where beautiful women sing melodies in consonance with harp strings and wooden flutes, where men recite poesy and even engage in intellectual and artistic battles against each other for the arbitrary title of great lyricist, or most inspired sonnetist, even for a mere sprightly night.

The moon was a waxing crescent, and Braavosi anthems that spoke of romantic nostalgias, love's tragedy, and flights of fancy are crowned in here, with unseen yearning souls as witnesses.

The waters by the harbor were in a state of usual calm, and the movement of these large yet sophisticated boats was one sweet babe's cradle—back and forth, serene amidst the haste and noise of the rest of Braavos and its preparations for the Grand Unmasking. Scents permeated the place, and the fragrance wove itself with the sea's aroma and its sonorous echoes.

There were no seats—cushioned or otherwise, no tables. They sat on Pentoshi carpets of exploding colors and soft feels, bowls of fruit and bread and meat in front of them, goblets of weak white wine on their hands.

Eyes on each other.

"You're so lovely," Jaqen said.

"I know," Arya replied coyly.

He smiled.

His eyes roamed around Felicity, clearly impressed. "Despite the elegance of this, a man still holds his ground. Your courtesan task is the worst thing that has ever happened to him."

"Careful, Faceless," Arya teased. "You might swallow your own words in mere minutes."

He gently traced the line of her jaw, the skin between her breasts. Such acts of affection are allowed in that place, though there are boundaries. Nevertheless, in this place, to love is to celebrate.

"Assassins in a romantic rendezvous?" Jaqen asked. "We are making history Arya Stark, and a man does not speak only of the fulfillment of the Songs."

"Game of faces, Jaqen H'ghar," she replied. On the soft of his thigh, her forefinger created lazy patterns. He loved it, she could tell. "Yes, you wear glamour now, so do I. But we can see each other's true faces beneath all these, yes? Your hair of scarlet and ivory is still visible to me. But for one night, let's be someone else."

"Someone else?"

"Ourselves."

"I like that."

"Speech slip—I love it, Lorathi."

He bent over and kissed her. "And who are we, now?"

"Lovers in Braavos."

The music of the strings enmeshed itself in all perfection with the voice of one man. Murmurs of
praise, nods of high regard. It was not mere amusement, it was the bold setting of a sensitive mood before passions engulf each tender spirit in that place. Instead of applause, the clinking of crystal goblets against the silverware signaled the end of another quixotic canticle. Clouds above gave way to stars which looked down upon all of them with tidings of blessings and answered entreaties.

The keeper of ceremonies spoke.

"Another canticle, another verse, if you please!"

Arya Stark was quick. Her forefinger that had earlier teased his flesh had now betrayed his confidence in the literal sense.

"Right here!"

All eyes turned to Jaqen H'ghar.

"Warm welcome to another lyricist!" The keeper announced. Soft cheers, curious eyes, open ears. The girl laughed her evil laugh, as the Lorathi regarded her narrowly.

"Arya Stark of Winterfell," he managed to utter in clenched teeth, with a tone that was half-threatening, half-pleading. "This is utter lunacy."

"Yes!" Arya laughed, clapped gleefully. "This is romance!" She stood up from the carpet where they sat and held out her hand. "Come, Faceless. Sing a song for your sweet girl. Maquen, lissi. Please, love."

He shook his head, his eyes those of a beseecher of mercy from her who was once called Mother Rhoyne. "Don't do this to me."

Three men proceeded to their carpet and lifted Jaqen H'ghar to stand, despite his strong protests. Arya laughed, as did the other women. "Don't make the ladies wait. Rudeness is not for the likes of us," one of the men whispered, as they dragged him to the center of the barge. "A canticle, anything at all that comes to mind, and be done with it."

"Y-you don't understand," Jaqen explained. His emotions were now a maelstrom of irritation and embarrassment. "A man—I don't sing!"

"Neither do we," was the reply. "Do it for the lady."

He stood in the midst of all, with no one but the harp beside him that was then prime for fiddling. The musician began plucking the strings. A Braavosi ode.

*Your aid, Him of Many Faces.*

He looked at her. Exhaled.

His lovely girl wore in her face a familiar expression he had not seen for a very long time. The last of it was when they were in Harrenhal. He had roused her, and asked for three. He had kissed her hair, 'You may ponder,' he had told her. 'But not too long.'

Her face—glorious anticipation.

That offer had allowed her to taste power over the lives of men, with him as her personal archangel of death. Howls of a hundred spectres of burnt bodies from the fires of Balerion the Dread—all these mattered not that night, for when the Lorathi looked at the girl who was then at a tender age of
eleven, he was transfigured from crown to sole.

She looked at me that night as if I had wings, as if I could fly her off to Winterfell.

"Come now!" was the call of an impatient patron.

Others followed suit, chanted. "Ode, ode, ode!"

The Lorathi heaved one full sigh and commenced, his tongue allowing Braavosi verses to flow out.

'Beneath your face, the moon finds its life…'

Amused snorts pierced through the silent air.

'Your form—petals and marbles, suffocating snow, ice burns like knife…'

Giggles, small laughter. Polite mockeries. The Lorathi shut his eyes tight and pinched the bridge of his nose. Humiliation is what this is. Even more so when one patron spoke:

"Dear heavens, this is Doom…"

One man was in silent vexation, shaking his head at the woman he was with, tossing bread back onto the platter as if appetite was lost on him. Another man gripped his grease knife tightly; as if to hurl it to the Lorathi in the event of one more lyric from him. A couple rose from their carpet and within their better judgment, left the place to hear no more. The keeper of ceremonies seemed to want to hide his face at having called this man.

The Lorathi was to the core, altogether terrible.

Air escaped from his lips.

Arya still smiled. Her eyes were on him, and she was nodding gently, as if telling him to will his focus on her and not them, carry on, and recall the fields where they used to play—the Maiden Goddess and her Lover God.

"Give the poor fellow some support, clink your crystals!" One considerate patron had stood and offered. "Come on, folks!" Sounds of encouraging accolades replaced the cruel jests, tinkles of glass goblets mingled with the ovations.

The feared Lorathi assassin bit his lip in pure awkwardness. Nevertheless, he pressed on.

'Mate with my verses, pour your fragrance upon me like oil.

Make me lie down, even in high noon.

Offer me the spheres of your candles, dark and lovely, mysterious rune…

Run with me to the vineyards, let it flow—the nectar of your toil.

Arise and come away with me, recall…

Where your earth meets my ocean,

Calyx holding blossoms, in breaths of wind, love to my soul—pure potion
I am live coal, mist, a smoking remnant...to surrender to you, to fall.

Her eyes had gone misty—the bloodthirsty Wolf, the Ghost of Harrenhal, one Chosen of the death god. She had loved it beyond the most beauteous of utterances. Consummation—her fantasies of him, which were antitheses to the being she once had. Yes, listening to his Lorathi purr within melodies was like dragging oneself facedown in sweltering ground. Listening to his dreadful singing voice was equal to scourging one's own flesh with Dothraki-forged whips.

But the words were lovely.

And so was he.

He continued, and those who mocked now applauded, and sang with him.

"I isil na-tare vana yare tye risum...an lissi, care- vamme nurt- tyer anta o'mefil."

More beautiful is the moon when you smile. So, hide not your face from me, beloved.

Genuine laudation came from every person present in that barge. Witnesses, the girl had named them, as her eyes wandered to each face with delight. The Lorathi gazed at her fondly. This is their city, this is their home.

And in their home, they make the rules.

Past had dawned on him, as his expression had changed—his soft smile was gradually drowned out by inexplicable unease. Slowly, he shut his eyes. Recognition seeped in.

He is here.

It cannot be.

All of a sudden, the Queller the girl wore lit up. It was enough to confirm his suspicions.

A beast. A seven-clawed, colossal, imperial fire beast.

Gone were those soft sussurations of romance, as what may have been a fierce vortex of winds collided with the stillness of the sea. Dark Aurelian defeated high night—its scales were shimmering, and its full nakedness covered the crescent moon and perhaps, even a thousand suns that hid themselves behind the shadows.

Black and gold connected then exploded. Light ceased to reflect anything. Shadows ceased existing. Zones and ranges were deformed, as the beast challenged finite space.

It will appear, then disappear.

The beast can hide itself from perceptible sphere—even its outlines disappear from moon's light.

The movement of its wings was deafening, even the resilient winds meant by the gods to aid it in its flight seemed to succumb to its strength—they have died down. Its cry was the cry of children and their silent screams of suffering; yet beneath all those was a song that had responded to the primal touch of a voice it had heard.

In all its glory it circled around the harbor, and its expanse was that of the entire Sealord's peninsula.
Dragon.

People scampered in all directions to conceal themselves. Frightened bellows and screeches, vociferations. Water may hide them from fire, though such assumption is inaccurate, even so, some leaped from the barge onto the wet. Clouds spread out as if to give way, fragmenting until the vapor that held their essences together dissipated completely in the midst of a night that terrified.

The caterwaul of horror can be heard even from as far as the Canal of Heroes.

The beast still cried, as if lost. Its mere breath was fire.

A beholding sight, and men fear what is truly beautiful. The girl held the Queller, wrapped her fingers around it, as she stared at the behemoth creature. It was profound chaos all over her, and she was the calm at the center of it, the tempest's eye. It was divine response from the old gods which she had summoned, so the beast's outer force may become one with her inner—they are both creatures of them who are higher after all. And though it is the red god that had bequeathed the beast with the flame it now carried within the recesses of its magnific self, the energies of the earthly and cosmic truths that govern all things created are one and the same.

The creature's wings blew forceful winds enough to make seas swallow the largest of Braavosi ships.

She still stood.

Its eyes captured hers in one instant, as it flew. She spoke to it, she sought to tame it, to bond with it. She cannot, for it was in the situation where surrendering meets resisting—a thin line.

With a quick descent, one movement faster than half a blink, it rushed compellingly to where she stood.

Air howled as the expansive wings of that fire-breathing creature sliced through it. The flap of its wings were the sound of a ten thousand lashes, and it surged downwards, ready for the kill.

Its screech would frighten even Death.

"Arya!"

She was unhearing, unmoving. The beast's outcry was stronger than all others. Its eyes were a sparkling brown, and it only possessed but a single emotion:

Fury.

Nigh…it plummeted towards her, its large orifice prepared to dispense flame…

Its flight accelerated, and the winds impelled it as it fled. Instantaneous, and even time was at the mercy of its momentum…

Close…

Hair's breadth…

And death will claim her tonight.

She closed her eyes and beseeched the gods for aid.

Abide in me.
Nearer...she shuddered at its power, and her heart escaped from her chest. Soft whimper
s were in her precious lips, as she fought against her fear of looming demise.

A quarter of a cubit from her face, and it ceased moving as if spellbound. Its wings still flapped and
the sound was stupendous. It remained suspended midair.

Gray-and-green against sparkling brown—the girl beheld it as it beheld her. Their eyes seemed to
know each other from time before. The beast tilted its head, growled low as if to speak. The girl
breathed through her mouth. Here they were, face-to-face, as the Queller that she wore emitted
lustrous colours of untamed flames.

Wind from the creature's nostrils gently blew wind to those chestnut-hued hairlocks of hers, and she
would blink at its low breathing that kissed her cheeks. In the creature's throat was a soft sigh—
hidden lamentations, memories, reconciliations.

Uncertainties.

In passing, she was able to hurl one behest unto the skies that carried the beast.

*Tell me your name.*

It answered from its innermost. A mere whisper.

*I have none but the name I am given.*

*Speak, I shall destroy.*

"Arya!"

That call, and the firebeast rushed upwards.

The Lorathi had dragged her out of the barge, and they both darted from the Purple Harbor to the
Moon Pool. From a distance, the Titan thrice roared, the Arsenal was then equipped with necessities.
Pandemonium, but Braavos will not be Braavos if it is unprepared. Eight hundred years and with the
thick fog gone in their legendary lagoon that had once concealed them from flames, it may be that the
city had become vulnerable to an extent. The Titan's strength will then be tested.

Poisoned arrows as thick as trunks of black spruce flew from the Titan's bronze breastplate of arrow
slits towards the creature's direction. Its half-helm split to reveal a hidden chamber that contained
catapults—colossal trapchains coated in plasmic liquid flames, a hundred times stronger than a
thousand barrels of wildfire. Trapchains will not only capture, but subdue. Death of Dragons must
*kill* the beast, not merely weaken it.

This was only a taste of all, for after the Century of Blood, no brave city had ever dared to awaken
the Titan's wrath.

It was mere testing of defenses. More will come.

Arya Stark and Jaqen H'ghar watched the majestic onslaught from a safe distance. The girl had heard
her Lorathi's silent wishes amidst the anarchy all over—High Valyrian.

*Be gentle, be gentle with it.*

He was entranced, as he took small steps forward, eyes set on the beast. His next words were
perplexity—and these words were *not* meant for the able men within the hidden chambers of the
Titan.

"Jaqen!"

She had pulled his arm to awaken him from his abrupt state of trance. He looked at her with eyes unseeing, then turned his attention back to the clash.

All weapons and attacks had gone futile. The firebeast would rush and glide in speed and slow to avoid the blitz from the gigantic statue, would render itself *unseeable* momentarily, before reappearing at a certain distance. It would breathe, and from its nostrils, blue-hued flames would emanate. At times, it would fly in magnificent spirals like one glorious mistral, perform descents and ascents, thus evoking both terror and veneration.

It was merely *playing* with the Titan's wroth.

_The beast had a name. Someone had named it._

Another ear-shattering screech—the sonance of it was last heard in the heart of Old Valyria. Four centuries, perhaps more, for dragons are almost immortal. Now it has returned.

However, it did not wish to set the city ablaze.

Not today.

A blink of an eye, and the fire beast was gone. Spheres and spaces were reformed as it disappeared. Its 'voice' remained in the intense, shivery air that wrapped around Arya Stark's frame. It left her but a single word, the referent of which is unknown:

_Master._
Old Friends

Chapter Notes

Inspired (I do NOT own the video):

'Thought you saw me wink, no. I've been on the brink so tell me what you want to hear...'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Once faceless, faceless thereon.

Age may render him incapable of fulfilling the call.

The gift, thus, for to walk away is unhallowed.

If inevitable, reminiscences must be taken from him."

Methods of the Faceless Men, 21st leaf

It is said that fire-beasts outlive their masters, and that it is possible for them to never cease living. If turned over to another lord—children or children's children—who can harness the magic they held, they are unconquerable. The beasts are fire made flesh after all, majestic creations to act as perfect counterbalancers to the legendary, winged creatures of ice spawned by the Heart of Winter.

However, in West of Westeros, time ceases to operate. The fire-beast knew not that it had been more than four centuries since its scaled wings had spanned the skies of the Known. Valyrian expansion was at its height, magical battles and conquests were in every intermediate direction, and those were the days of glory.

Those golden eyes were witnesses to the glittering days of yore, which writings had pronounced to be 'bestial ruthlessness beyond what the mind of men can ever contain.'

Power and subjugation. Callousness unmoved by the sorrows of those that Valyria had conquered. Men existed and belonged to denominations subjected to twofoldness: the free man, the slave. That time, men were disembodied minds and souls, at the mercy and dominance of beast-controlling lords that carried magic in their veins.

The beast's horrendously beautiful cry meshed with the rising and setting sun by the west of Essos.

The seven-clawed imperial renewed in its reminiscences the last of the wars fought against Rhoyne a thousand years ago. That time when magic was at its peak, dragons ruled the realms Known. However, powers from the red god shaped through fire and blood were never the only rune in existence during that time.

The old gods had their water enchanter.

There was the Prince of Chroyane and the Princess of Ny Sar, she who was then called the 'water witch'. It was even said that she was Mother Rhoyne, the goddess of the rivers incarnated. It was the
Prince's quarter of a million against three dragons. The Rhoynish triumphed at first with their enchantments from the old and the wise, and the waters flooded Volon Therys. Valyria returned for rampage with three hundred dragons.

The dark aurelian fire-beast was one of those three hundred sent.

Sunset was glistening marigold—a sight to behold. The dusk though was overpowered by far-reaching wings that unlit the skies, followed by a blinding aurora of dragonfire.

The flames came from all directions.

Bodies were scorched, spirits howled, souls were set loose. Memories stayed, but were reduced to mere fragments.

Upon the lips of the captured Prince of Chroyane was a curse that led to the Sorrows.

And this fire-beast remembered it well—how the First Archon's son-heir that rode it to the wars brought the Princess of Ny Sar home to Valyria as a slave, a lover. It knew a lot, remembered a lot.

A place they had named Braavos—the fire-beast had been here before. On his back were the Archon-heir and the slave princess, and they had surveyed the expanse of that lagoon by a wall of pine-clad hills.

Prophecies from Jogos Nhai priestesses—home. The old gods had concealed it with the blessing of fog. This is where they must go.

This is too close to the Freehold. It is safer there, back in the Plains of the Jogos Nhai.

Too far. And they have seen things. The Wall in the easternmost will fall—the other Wall.

Five Forts by the Grey Waste? Demons beyond that shivering desert are a myth.

East meets West, always.

And you?

I will stay, for now. Ships to Westeros, perhaps. I need your aid, beloved.

When the Archon-heir was killed by his own kin, the dragon was lost, even after being tamed and claimed by other dragonriders. Close to a whole millenium, yet it knew one and only one master. Then came Daenys the Dreamer, whose visions forewarned about a Doom; and this Doom had happened for all certainty a decade and two years later.

To be alive for so long, and to witness it all was wearying, even for the strongest of all known beasts.

A splendorous return! The fire beast's outcry was proclamation.

Indeed, the cycles have begun once more.

The Tenth Day of the Unmasking was pure revelry.

It was a most agreeable evening, as the Statue of Uthero stood proud beside the Moon Pool, embellished with petals of evening primroses and flora graeca. A plate of gold was affixed against its pedestal, with the carved words, "Uthero, Sealord; Uncloaked the Secret City of Braavos to the rest of the Known World."
People from all over the east and the west took part in the festivities—their faces covered with masks of crimson, azure, saffron. The usual Braavosi attires of charcoal black and dark gray were replaced with apparels bursting with a riot of various colors, as tongues of the Free Cities and their varieties could be heard at each and every turn. Along the streets of the Purple Harbor were vibrant kiosks manned by small merchants calling the attention of passers-by; selling, arguing with unreasonably frugal buyers.

"Jewels from the great Qarth!"

"For three-quarters of the price. Bastard Valyrian daggers—forged in the Free Cities."

"Pastries! Prime type of flour found only in the Summer Isles. Fresh and flavorsome, a taste…"

"Are you mad? Who pays two silver coins for a bottle of Dornish this good? If yeh not buying them for what they worth, get outta here!"

In the cobbled pathway leading to the Blue Lantern, shophars and other instruments played for a large parade of nobles donning traditional Braavosi robes. They all held torches that magnificently accentuated the hues and spectacles already visible in that living, breathing city. At the climax of that parade will be a long march to the harbor, where a replica of a Valyrian galley will be set ablaze, symbolizing the Sothoryos-bound slaveships seized by founders of Braavos. Purple-hulled Braavosi ships carried pyromancers placed in charge of sky-fire displays once high midnight greets the city.

Despite the dark aurelian fire-beast that served as the city's unwelcome visitor the previous night, the festivities still went on. Tycho Nestoris had made it clear—not a single Braavosi iron coin to be wasted. Plans are plans, and the bank had paid for them—mummers, traders' bid, exhibits, consumables. Carry on, and let the Titan and the Arsenal worry about the beast—stratagems had been laid out, and history would attest to the fact that Braavos had never failed in war.

The shimmers of gold can blind the eyes, especially a banklord's. There and then, his short-sight was undiscerning of everything else.

So were those people in celebratory mood—a million dragons will never stop the Uncloaking from happening.

Eight hundred years of existence translated to a rich and captivating culture, and the Braavosi were nothing but honored to show their humble beginnings to the rest of the former Valyrian colonies. Slaves have successfully eluded dragonlords and their beasts of fire made flesh, and Braavos now stands—most powerful, most wealthy of the Free Cities, with its Iron Bank more gold-and-coin-loaded than all the banks and trading cartels of the eight other cities combined. Arguments, as they cannot be helped, were always present—that Braavos is wealthier than Qarth despite the latter's sculpted triple walls that were nothing but a façade of limited wealth.

In the Blue Lantern was a play on the life of former Sealord, Uthero Zalyne. Races of horses and boats had just concluded, and the victors collected their winnings from the organizing merchants. Mummers strolled in spectacular yet ludicrous costumes, earning jeers from some Braavosi children. Wrestling matches in mud were at their full intensity at the harbors of Ragman, and local and foreign coins were being tossed onto the sodden pit and at times, humorously yet shamelessly hurled at the struggling wrestlers themselves.

Sounds of fanaticism.

"Pull him down now, oy! Mud in the face!"
"Torin, Torin, Torin!"

"Swift blow should do the thing, 'nough wit not to crack his neck! Paid good coin for a bet, damn, don't lose it!"

Some people danced to the tune of wooden flutes, like demented men on the streets. Everyone awaited the traditional Uncloaking at Midnight, when they could finally 'unmask' themselves, and feast and drink and dance till morning.

A man and a girl stopped at one of the kiosks.

"I want…this," the girl said, pointing at a rosewood-colored sweet. "No, on second thought…I'll have this one." She took a large cup full of butterscotch-hued confection and turned to her companion. The girl tilted her head slightly to the expectant merchant, signaling to the man to pay for what she had gotten for herself.

A soft smile played on the man's lips, and he promptly handed the seller a Braavosi coin of tenth value. He then held the girl's other hand that was empty of sweets and pulled her away from the stall, purposely ignoring the merchant's call that they take their change of seven coins.

Earlier that night, they had discovered the colorful wonders of one diversion the Braavosi had named Yuranis Tox, War of Rainbows.

"Come now, Arya…come, sweet girl…don't be shy…"

The girl only giggled. Shy? Oh, Jaqen. She was hiding inside a wooden-walled labyrinth that had been graciously bathed with rainbows. Powders of various hue may have clung to it—no doubt, a hundred hands had thrown colored talc and spilled liquids of blue, yellow, and red to the wood. She had to conceal herself, for if the Lorathi catches her, he will fancifully, albeit mercilessly bathe her with his own powder and she will lose.

Sounds of frolic were all over the place outside that maze. Without even having to look, the girl knew that other participants in the Yuranis Tox were now a canvas of multiple shades and blush.

"Arya…? A man will be gentle with you. Come out now…"

She covered her persistent giggles with her right palm, as her left held a small satchel that contained some colored talc. Slowly, she took a quick peek to the other side of the wood, left hand at the ready. One swift toss, and the Lorathi will be staring at his own polychromatous face. Not there.

Strong arms caught her waist and pinned her steady to the ground. Arya squealed and struggled, attempted to raise her left hand to scour him with colors, but his manly strength held it tight. His weight was upon her.

Jaqen's left hand moved and smeared her face and neck with his rainbow talc, rich laughter escaping from his minty lips. She too, was laughing, but her green-gray eyes were closed for them to avoid the dust. Her pleas of "Stop!" were intentionally ignored by him, as his right hand further traveled to massage her bosoms, daubing it with powdered paint.

His fingers toyed with her tips. His eyes stared at her with passion and power. He was wanting, lusting. And it was the raging harvest of her that had allowed him to feel famished to the point of seventh death.
“Sunbeams hide when her face shows.”

“Ooh gods, Jaqen…” Arya gasped. “This isn’t part of the game, love. Ah!”

“Let’s change the rules, then.”

“Ah…oh, dear heavens, Jaqen…”

He kissed her deep, as his right hand moved inside her shift. Thoroughly, lovingly, he stroked her. They were alone in the center of that labyrinth anyway, and its walls were high—a blessing. Only the gods will witness. *And let them*, he thought; these deities were sophists on matters of love and lust, and roses and thorns. They teach, men learn. For what is life without learning how to touch and kiss and make sweet love?

“L-let’s get back to the temple, Jaqen…” she panted as he lightly rubbed circles. “Please…”

“We’re not finished playing, sweet girl.”

“We’ll play some more in there, I p-promise…” Jaqen hastened his stroking, he was moaning helplessly. "Oh! Jaqen, please! I'll do whatever you want…just—”

“Shush…”

“I want you…”

“Me too.”

“Y-you don’t understand…I want you.”

“A man does understand.”

“Words, Jaqen.”

“I love the feel of your tips against my fingers…” He moved against her, forward and back. His hardness touched her very core and the small flesh that is in it. This, despite the fabric of their clothing that separated them. She spoke.

“When you touch me, and plant on me kisses all over, and move your beautiful self against me…”

“Your saccharine breasts.”

“Your hair.”

“Hair?”

“I haven't seen much of you. You never let me.”

“And what do you want to see, sweet Arya?”

“All. Not just see—touch, taste, drink, swallow and squander…sweeter than berry wine, than honey, yes?”

*Damn, damn, damn.*

“You want me to take you here?”

“Over and over.”
He stopped abruptly with his fondling, to the girl's dismay.

"Jaqen! What in the world—"

He rose and pulled her up. "Footsteps, towards us...we must leave." He smirked. "This labyrinth is for use of other Braavosi as well, lovely girl."

They washed their faces, strolled along the merry streets—past the crowd of people serving as audience in a show of fire-dancing, past men cheering in a farcical swordfight between two huge, pompous Bravos, towards the Canal of Heroes. Similar with some others who were probably drained with the festivities, they decided to sit on a wooden bench overlooking the dazzling sight of the canal. Kaleidoscopic boats transported people from the Purple Harbor to Ragman's and back across the water with floating petals of iris and alstroemeria. The whole canal was lit with bright, floating candles.

The man looked at his companion. The girl kept on popping sweets in her mouth, as her eyes wandered leisurely across the expanse of the canal.

She held out a piece of sweet to his lips. He took the butterscotch with his mouth, suckled the girl's forefinger to scrape the sweet's residue off it. She giggled. He smiled.

"Let's go," the girl stood up and pulled his hand.

"Where to?"

"Boats."

Both of them embarked. They sat very close, face to face. Jaqen paddled, Arya let the tips of her fingers touch the soft waters. Gentle ripples fought weakly against the boat's languid movement, and petals gave way for them to pass. She picked up one iris blossom that was afloat and smelled it, gazed at him fondly.

"Do you know what scent is more sweet-smelling than iris, Lorathi?"

He smiled. "No. What is?"

"Ginger and cloves."

His soft laugh coupled with amused eyes made her grin. Maddening.

They rode in silence.

"The bidding is tomorrow," Jaqen suddenly told her in a quiet voice. She merely nodded, as if such an event was none too ordinary. He continued. "A girl must be careful. She must obtain the name from the Sealord, whether through his verbal confession or otherwise, before he...does anything untoward. You can walk away from the arrangement as soon as the name is said. We are not in need of his gold."

"A girl knows these things," she replied with irritation. "And I am also aware of the second plan should I find it difficult to trick him into confession." The girl silently implored the death god to make the first work to perfection, for if it would not, she would be forced to surrender herself to the Sealord—literally. She dared not glance at her Guardian, who no doubt was being crushed into pieces as they speak.

Awkward silence enshrouded the both of them. They let themselves drift into their own private
thoughts and quiet prayers amidst the cacophony of laughter and music.

"Who are you, Jaqen?"

The Lorathi hid his surprise at the girl's question. Who is he? Why was she asking him this, as if unaware of his person?

"A man is a girl's Faceless Master and her Guardian. What more does she need to know?"

Arya Stark shifted in her seat so she could better look at him. Jaqen glanced at her then turned his eyes back to the canal. A Braavosi gentleman and a lady caught his attention. They were in a purple-colored boat, laughing richly without any care in the world—unmindful of the weight the very city they were in was carrying at that precise moment.

The girl spoke. "A lot of things." She gently touched the white streaks of his hair, making him gaze at her once more. "Why do you dye your hair red? Why do you have a Dragon Queller? Why did that dragon appear when you sang at the Alasee? Why…" she shook her head. Why did it seem to follow your commands in High Valyrian?

He smirked. "Which question would you like a man to answer first?"

She did not return his smile. Tonight, all that is hidden must be revealed—this is the essence of Uncloaking.

*Which question would you like a man to answer first?*

"Is your name really Jaqen H'ghar?"

The Lorathi did not bat an eyelash. "It is."

Arya nodded. "If it is, why did you give it to me when you asked for a drink on the way to the North?" She thought of Syrio Forel, and asked herself if that was indeed the name of her former dancing master. "You know that when a Faceless Man gives any person his true name, he becomes vulnerable to Death. He could inevitably be named by anyone who could pay the price in exchange for his life. So…why?"

Jaqen H'ghar directed his gaze back to the canal. "It's true. As long as a Faceless Man's name is concealed, he could evade Death, for Death knows us through our names."

"You have not answered my question."

*How can a man tell a girl this?* If he uncloaks himself to her now, he knew that not only will he be vulnerable to Death—such is bearable, no doubt. He would appear vulnerable to her. From the moment he knew who Arya Stark was, he had painted himself in front of her as someone who was almost invincible—simply because that time at Harrenhal, she needed a person who could convince her that she can conquer everything.

Oh, how he so desired for her to think that he can never be hurt.

But his name…why did he give her his name?

Jaqen spoke in his deep, enthralling voice. "Let's say you are Faceless, yet you want to know a person better. If you wish to get close to her and gain her trust, if you hope to get through who she is and perhaps…decide to be hers, what is the very first thing which you have that you could give her?"
The girl did not have to answer. Her master had taught her something merely by returning her own question so she may reflect on them.

This man has the honor to be Jaqen H'ghar, once from the free city of Lorath.

"As Faceless, you do not give her your opinions on matters of godliness," he continued. "You do not speak with her of your fears, or of your plans for the future. You give her your name—your character." He turned his sparkling brown eyes on her face. "For it may be that it is the first and the last thing she would remember about you—after all, we are all just layers of faces. We could have spoken with each other without us disclosing our identities, why must we? A man only asked for a drink. But how, Arya Stark, will you notice a man without him giving up the safe concealment of his persona in that one label?"

They stared at each other in stillness, and despite the masks obscuring half of their faces, loud intimations were there. Arya Stark felt her chest grow heavy, her heart, stirred. Only then did she understand how truly devoted Jaqen is to her, and his devotion was not one called for by his sworn Guardianship—this devotion was to such a point that he would recklessly throw away his assumed athanasia—his cloak from Death, just so he could get next to her, just so he could gain her confidence. It was a perilous move on his part as Faceless, to give her his name. Yet he did.

It was not at all difficult—falling for him. Of it, the girl had not told him yet, though perhaps he already knew, what with their shared morns and nights of kisses and touch and teases.

"Tell me more, Jaqen."

He sighed. "Where is Haresh in your memories?"

'Let us play in the fields, my goddess. May the Night conceal us, may the Wind carry us both, may the Grasses clothe us.'

She laughed softly. "How ever can I forget about Haresh?"

"Ancient Essoan—the language of lovers," he smiled.

That, and the Lorathi began pouring himself out to her.

Haresh loved his lady Nymeria. She was a slave, yes. Yet to his heart, she was queen—a goddess. She was his Warrior Bride, his Mother Rhoyne.

It happened during the last of the Rhoynish Wars—the Second Spice. Three dragonriders were sent by the First Archon to destroy the Sarhoy port. Valyria trembled at the Prince of Chroyane—Garin—a man who defeated those three fire beasts through an army of two-hundred fifty thousand and some Rhoynish water enchanters. Three hundred more dragons were sent to the Rivers. Garin spoke to Nymeria of Ny Sar.

They will make slaves of us! We must fight together to end this once and for all.

We cannot win this war. I will not risk my people. We need a lasting plan.

Garin's army was crushed. Queen Nymeria was taken captive.

A whole year she had spent in the Freehold, as a servant to Haresh, heir to archonship.

He proceeded to court her, in secret. She, he treated like a goddess—he adorned the footpath by her slave-chamber with petals of blue winter roses, he wrote her poetry, he played the harp and sang
verses to her while she laid bowls of fruit on his bedside table. 'My Warrior Bride,' he would call her, and though she tried to dismiss him in her musings, and prayed, he was still too inviting.

On and on it went. Until she too, fell for him.

Lore has it, that the once clashing lord of light and nameless elder gods have united in purpose through them. They were favored, and were both gifted with visions about the realms.

They celebrated love. Many moons passed and she carried within her his child—an dragonrider's bastard.

Violation of female slaves was a prevailing custom in the Freehold—and women were defiled in all manners bestial. The lords of Old never ran out of creativity in their besmirching—they lashed out on the slaves, dragonfire-forged whips in hand, suspended them inside vermin-ridden bastilles for days without water, tortured their tired bodies after intercourse.

Bastard sons were then born out of slave mothers at each turn of the moon.

The mass killing of infants began, systematically carried out by the dragonlords' Valyrian wives.

As a rule, though unwritten, Valyrians must not interbreed with non-Valyrians, in order to keep their bloodlines pure. Magic is one great thing that must not be shared. Nothing was said about not having carnal affairs with them, and murdering their offspring afterwards.

The lords of Old even had it written in the Freehold's canons—Bastards' Bloodshed. The abominable facts of it were described in a horrifyingly detailed fashion. Babes were mutilated before they were scorched to dragonfire; their innocent heads were ripped from their bodies and fed to the hounds.

Haresh loved his lady Nymeria.

But their lore was different. And it was perhaps the only beauteous tale in the center of all other horrendous tales that have since preserved the dark memories of Valyria.

Together, they searched for places where slaves could escape through ships. Those slaves who were once taken from the Plains of Jogos Nhai near the Great Empire of Yi Ti never wished to go back. And so there was Braavos, the place mentioned in the prophecies of the Moonsingers. In their search, they rode the Archon-heir's fire beast.

Soon enough, their plans were discovered.

'Regency from the magic of Old. Wear this, and Heraxos will come to you. Wear this and you can quell the beasts.'


She evaded re-capture, and organized ten thousand ships to send the remaining Rhoynar to Dorne, her female warriors had remained faithful. For the sake of the remnants, an alliance was forged with Prince Mors Martell, and the Warrior Queen Nymeria burned those ten thousand ships so no Rhoynar could ever sail back to the ruins by the River.

Haresh was executed through dragonfire, though not before they had bathed his white hairlocks with his own scarlet.

She named her son Damien—Tamer. He was banished, when the successors of Lord Mors Martell learned of his bastardy after Nymeria's death. The Queller he wore from infancy to adulthood; a
gracious gift from his father who renounced everything—archonship, loyalties, bloodline, ties, self, life—all for the sake of one slave-queen. He fled to Lorath, for he was after all, Essoan through and through.

Time, and the right to the Queller was passed down to the firstborn male. They became worshippers of the Blind God, whose tenets taught equality amongst all men. Lorath was isolated, almost beyond the reach of the lords of Old. Braavos had become Lorath's altruistic sister, concealing the latter with its gift of fog and mist from the old gods.

'Tis a place where the breath of fire could not reach. There we will find ourselves once more.

Jaqen spoke. "The former slaves had settled peacefully with the locals and had intermarried with them. As for Damien's descendants, well…"

Arya regarded him with a suddenly fascinated look. "Well?"

He exhaled slowly through his lips. The girl found what he did maddeningly beautiful. "Strength of a dragonrider's blood—it cannot be erased by centuries of intermarriage and interbreeding. The bastard had the same blood flowing in his very veins—his children, and his children's children—their crowns were all ivory-hued."

Arya Stark pursed her lips in order to keep herself from grinning again.

Jaqen—a descendant of the dragonrider Haresh and the warrior queen Nymeria. My Lorathi—he dyes his hair scarlet every fourteenth day of the month.

The Lorathi chanced upon his lovely girl's countenance. He narrowed his eyes at her. "You find all these amusing?"

She shook her head, her face bursting with redness. It was charmed delight she felt at his revelation. "S-so…why…" she patted her cheeks. "Why scarlet, Jaqen? I mean, apparently Damien's children and their children would wish to conceal their bastard ancestry from the rest of Lorath. But they could have used midnight or gold or…whatever hue."

Jaqen H'ghar gave her his usual Lorathi smirk. "A girl does not like a man's red hair?"

Arya Stark gave him a disapproving look. "No." Then, she beamed. "Yes, if it's red and white." Her eyes studied the Lorathi's hairlocks. "But still, scarlet is a strange color."

Jaqen smiled. "No it isn't. It's the color of a girl's most favored thing in the world."

"Oh?"

"Blood."

Arya laughed spiritedly. "I'm not that evil, Jaqen!" And it was true. Jaqen H'ghar had tempered her vicious, bloodthirsty nature through his valuable lessons of self-abnegation and forbearance—and through his other teachings too, which in his conscious mentalities, he might not remember having taught her. Raw passion and ardent kisses and…love. Scarlet, then. "So, you left Lorath to join the Faceless Men?"

"That was not really my initial intention. I was but a child when my parents perished at sea in the middle of a trade with Ibben. I rode a mercantile ship to Braavos when I realized that there must be more for me than just being a poet or a merchant. The Order took me in when the Elder found me pulling ropes to raise hulls at Ragman's. He mentioned then that I was too strong for my age," the
Lorathi recounted. Arya felt this sudden bliss at hearing Jaqen speak about his childhood. He had slipped—his speech had, to the first person. An intense sense of attachment, she felt this in his drowning sea of I's and me's, and it was one of the very few things Arya Stark had found almost mystical.

*Could he also ride dragons?*

"I named my direwolf after her. I loved her tale—Queen Nymeria; and I've always seen myself in her in a way. I never knew the whole thing about her story. I have read 'Ten Thousand Ships' many times, but the dragonrider was never mentioned," Arya said.

Jaqen smiled. "It was because that dragonrider was No One. Even if he was mentioned, who would ever believe that forbidden love would even happen in the dark days of Valyria?"

"I will."

The Lorathi sighed. *Of course you will, Warrior Queen. It's a story you've always known.*

"Is a girl ready?"

She gave him a confused look. "Hmmm?"

Jaqen turned his head to look at her straight in the eyes. "Winterfell. A moon from now."

Arya Stark's breathing was all of a sudden, spasmodic. She gently closed her lids and let the word seep through her consciousness. *Winterfell.* She thought of it all—the castle grounds, the godswood, the snow. *Home.* Ned, Catelyn, Robb and Jon, Bran and Rickon, Sansa.

_Come home, Arya._ A raven with third sight spoke in her fleeting reverie. _Come, come. We were broken. We must rebuild._

_Yes, Bran. I will come home._

She opened her eyes and saw the man beside her, for the very first time, in a different light.

_Jaqen._

She smiled. "Ready."

"Good."

The sound of shophar blown three times signaled the beginning of the Midnight Feast. Jubilant shouts and lovely sounds of music were heard from Ragman's to the Purple Harbor. The Titan of Braavos roared as the skies were filled with a magnificent display of pyroworks. Children and adults alike lit their sparklers and threw their colorful masks in the air.

"Braavos uncloaked!"

"All hail the Secret City!"

"Long live the Sealord!"

Braavosi and their guests proceeded to the Moon Pool for the feast while inns, alehouses, and brothels opened their doors wide for 'starving' patrons. Merchants started doling out eatables and other specialties so they may leave the kiosks empty and gather with the others in the center of festivities. Every single house, bridge, and structure began lighting luminescent candles until the
whole city of Braavos was enveloped in a most grandiose brilliance.

Gone were the fog and the mist.

Arya Stark and Jaqen H'ghar removed their masks. They disembarked from the boat and sat on one of the wooden benches by the Canal despite the gaiety all over. A girl placed her head once more on a man's shoulder; a man's chin, on her temple. They held hands and prayed for Him of Many Faces to shield Braavos and grant it a thousand more years of Uncloaking. They prayed for the other realms.

"Jaqen?"

"Yes."

The girl pondered. "I may sound a little obtuse for asking this, but if you were not a Faceless Man… would you still believe in Valar Morghulis?"

The Lorathi smiled. "Of course. But men must not stay dead."

The girl snickered. "You mean, their spirits must live on in the afterlife, if ever there is such a dimension?" She tried to contain the sudden wave of emotions threatening to explode out of her heart at any moment. Arya Stark had asked Thoros of Myr once about death, the possibility of another life after the conclusion of one's fate as a living being. Can you bring back a man without a head? Not six times, just once. The girl bit her lip as her mind drifted to a distant recollection of a great lord and his lady—Eddard of Winterfell and his wife, Catelyn.

A shudder. She remembered her bastard brother, Jon. He was in the Wall then, and spoke to her in a dream.

Somehow I know I have to go down there, but I don't want to. I'm afraid of what might be waiting for me.

He was speaking of the Crypts beneath Winterfell where the old Stark kings lay.

"There is such a dimension, lovely girl," the Lorathi assured her. "But a man does not speak only of spirits but of names."

"You seem too obsessed with the concept of names."

Jaqen H'ghar mildly chuckled. "Just so." He lifted her hand and planted a light kiss on it. "As long as you remember the names of those who have departed, they are never really gone from this world, are they? What is true death; is it death of the body, or one's name uttered by someone else for the very last time?"

They stared at each other. She kissed him deeply. When he started breaking away, Arya pulled his hair and ravished his lips, oblivious of the reactions of a few Braavosi by the Canal. Jaqen did not seem to mind either—he was already lost, and 'lost' was absolutely perfect.

He led her to stand, guided her so she sat on his lap. She did as she was bade, and laughed softly for they looked like ordinary Braavosi lovers. She proceeded to kiss him, guiding his mouth, tongue, teeth. Decent kisses, arousing kisses.

That night, Jaqen H'ghar had decided. In days succeeding, he would prepare his lovely girl for more intimate encounters with him. There were a lot he still desired to teach her—how to please herself whilst she pleases him, how to properly fondle, where to kiss and touch and stroke and suckle, what
the functions are of her wondrous body parts, and what the connections of these parts are to his own.

Arya had read her master's erotic fantasies, and she moaned against his lips. "I would love to learn of those things, Jaqen."

He only chuckled, and very slowly, he released her lips. She began protesting, but he shook his head. "More of these in the days to come. People are staring." He inclined his head to signal that they must proceed to the Moon Pool for the Feast. The girl rose from her Lorathi's lap, and pulled both of his arms so he could stand.

"That's very true, Jaqen. What you said about the names of the departed."

They walked away from the Canal of Heroes hand in hand. "It is. So if ever I die, never ever forget my name, Arya Stark."

"And if we refuse?" Tycho Nestoris asked.

"Simple. We will pledge loyalty to Lord Aurion and to Volantis," was the reply of the golden-haired. "We can obtain the Iron Throne with or without Braavos's aid, however, we desire less bloodshed; and we cannot discount the fact that the Iron Bank may well be the solution to our…fiscal concerns. Ours is a legitimate claim to the throne—more legitimate than that of Daenerys Targaryen."

The banklord betrayed no emotion, but it was a demanding feat not to worry. People of significance all over Essos were slowly gaining information about the planned unrest against the city; and now, others cannot dismiss such information as empty rumors spreading faster than wildfire.

An actual dragon had been seen in western harbor.

Nestoris glanced at the Elder who was silently appraising the three men seated across the long table with them.

The first was a half-man. In Westeros, they called him the Imp, and he now speaks on behalf of another claimant. It was truly curious why a Lannister would support the claim to the throne of someone who is not a fellow Lannister. The title to the seat of power in the West has been claimed by Queen Cersei as they speak, following the death of her son, King Tommen Baratheon. Tellings were that after the queen blew up the sept thus killing priests, commoners, and highborns including three Tyrells, she pushed her own son from the third tier of the keep so she herself could sit on the throne.

Kinslaying, but what can one expect from Lannisters? They are all incestuous and murderous, even this half-man who killed his own father.

The second man was tall and gray-haired, and the former Lord of Griffin's Roost, who was sent to exile in Essos after the fall of the Mad King. A most loyal supporter of the Targaryens, Jon Connington was said to have joined a company of sellswords during his exile.

The third man, more like a lad, had a lanky build, deep set purple eyes, and long eyelashes which anyone could mistake for a female's. It was apparent that he had dyed his hair blue to conceal its true color. His effortful attempts at a disguise suddenly became futile as he lifted his gaze from the wooden table to the banklord, then to the Elder. The lad's beautiful features were still evident despite the hidden indignation he may have felt when the banklord asked them, "How do we even know that the boy is who he claims to be?"

The Elder saw only two things in the lad's eyes.
**Fire and Blood.**

He spoke calmly in High Valyrian and his voice was firm and prepossessing. The banklord shuddered secretly.

"I have the Spymaster Varys and Illyrio Mopatis, Pentoshi magister to attest to my legitimacy. If that is not enough, then I will bring Targaryen dragons and Aurion's dragons here in Braavos as proof."

The Elder smiled. *This lad might truly be a Targaryen after all.*

Yes, Tycho Nestoris was shaken by the lad's threats. He was successful though, at keeping his reactions concealed.

"This is the Iron Bank and we need some form of insurance. Do you even have an army which you will bring with you? Who supports your claim in Westeros? Discounting Westerosi exiles, of course."

The half-man replied. "The Golden Company, twenty-five thousand strong, is already set for Greenstone." The banklord could not anymore hide his surprise at the claim, considering that the Golden Company is the largest and most expensive company of sellswords in the whole of Essos. "The plan is to expand from Storm's End within three moons, attack King's Landing from the south. As for allies, Tyrells, Blackmonts, Martells."

"Impressive," the Elder smiled at him. "It would seem as if you are in no need of us."

Aegon the Sixth returned the Elder's smile. "Wars are costly, as you may know; and Winter has arrived in Westeros. Soon, the fields will be carpeted with ice and no crops can be harvested. I would not want *my* people to starve after the war's conclusion. This is why we need the gold."

Indeed, the Prince had planned out how he would not only conquer, but rule the Seven Kingdoms while he was in hiding in Tyrosh. His manner of rulership will be shaped not by greed for power, the Elder mused, but out of his assumption that the seat was his by birthright, and that it was his duty to rule.

*Targaryens are not a religious lot, nonetheless, they are obsessed with prophecies.*

"Do you mean to say that you plan to go to war against Daenerys Targaryen for the claim to the throne? Are you aware that the Silver Queen has not only the Unsullied and the Dothraki army riding behind her? She also has three, full grown dragons—"

"Dragons that Braavos may need a few moons from now, am I right?" the Prince cut the Elder. "Let me worry about my father's sister. Give us the gold, and not only will I give you those dragons—if they are even hers. I will pay you four times as much as I would owe you once I reclaim the seat. I must tell you that it is not in our habits to disclose political plans with banklords; however, let us just say that, our envoy to Daenerys Targaryen was a persuasive one."

The Lannister only smiled, seemingly pleased with himself.

Accepting the proposition was a dangerous shot in the dark, but with Braavos's current situation, they all have to play the game of chances.

Tycho Nestoris and the Elder were silent for a few moments. Then, with a shared understanding, they signaled to each other.

"Very well," the banklord said. "The documents and the seal, to our agreement…"
"One more thing," the Prince interrupted. "We need the services of the Black and White to locate one lady. We plan to make an alliance with her House and its vassals to solidify our claim. A Stark."

The Elder regarded the Prince with narrowed eyes. "The eldest Stark daughter, I presume? She is currently in the Vale."

"As much as we desire to propose marriage to Sansa Stark, we cannot," the half-man replied promptly. "As you know, and as evidenced by the inaccurate plot of the mummers' play I've seen in the Unmasking recently, Sansa Stark is still married to me."

"Arya Stark," the Prince supplied, then bit his lower lip as if considering something. "The girl married by one Ramsay Bolton was an impostor, and the bastard is dead. The true Lady Arya was last seen more than a year ago, aboard the Titan's Daughter to Braavos. Whether or not she stayed in this city is unknown." He turned his head to the Elder, leaning his upper body against the wooden table, his fingers entwined on top of it, as if to convey his serious purposes. "I plan to find her, and I intend to marry her. The fact is this: I could scour the ends of the earth to claim the Lady Arya—and with recent developments in the North, the search would be a fruitful one—but it would certainly be less tedious with the services of the House of Black and White, yes?"

Facelessness.

The Elder made it look so simple. Without a single mouth twitch, or a sudden change in breathing, without a hint in the eyes. He betrayed no knowledge about Arya Stark's whereabouts.

_Ice and Fire—a beauteous confluence the gods must sanction._

"Find her for us, and Braavos will have the full support of the Targaryens," the Prince concluded.

One of the deities must preserve all realms—this is his-her function.

A confluence between the Electi and Valyria—the enemy of your enemy is your friend. And who could battle against the lords of Old but those that carry the same blood? Only magic can combat magic.

_all prophecies are intertwined_, the Elder mused. _Ah, the dreams are working. Very good._

It has happened prior—a Targaryen and a Stark. Thousands have died for it. And it was all for the sake of fulfilling the last dragon's prophetic vision of one Promised. And since all prophecies are from the gods, all aid must come from them as well. If not, Winter and Stygai; and these... these things must never come to pass.

_Thousands have died, yes. But hundreds of thousand more will die should a coming together as this be allowed to slip from dire grasp._

_Let the Valyrians fight their kin. A Great Alliance._

"Just so," the Elder assented. "We will see to that. I will inform you as soon as the Order and its masters agree to the task. Valar dohaeris."

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Even with the guise that was meant to conceal their true characters from prying mortal eyes, their auras were still unmistakable. They clothed themselves with accoutrements as those found in the Free Cities, but gifted sight is difficult to delude. The apparels were sorcery cloaks, and underneath them were robes of high midnight.
They have come for the Lorathi had *uncloaked* himself.

He had seen them scouring the Moon Pool in the midst of the carouse. The gaiety of the Uncloaking seemed to have embraced them, unmindful of their secrecy and dark intents. During these days, Braavos is a welcoming host to all people of the Known World.

There were four of them.

And their names—these were given to them *directly* by the death god. Not assumed identities, no, unlike what the Faceless Men use in order to carry out tasks for the deity and this deity's concepts of greater good, despite each concept being antithetical to all others. Incongruous teachings, these were. However, a man is a mere servant. A servant must never question.

Of course, they have found him, and though they knew him not, saw him in fact for the first time, he is *known* to the death god. Therefore, he will be known to them.

They walked towards where he stood, perfect reflections of disregard for the customs of merriment. Three men, a woman. The Lorathi looked around for any signs of his lovely girl. She had run away from him after he had reprimanded her for speaking to the Shadowbinder through her contemplations. Arya Stark must force herself to understand his ways—that his outburst was not out of true anger, but out of worriment.

Now, there they were. Face to face with him.

He caught the familiar whiff of old incense fused in perfection with hyacinth and hydrangea—funeral scents—the scent of *her*.

The Lorathi eyed them narrowly. He spoke to the tallest whose eyes mirrored foreboding.

"Must she really send all four of you?"

The tallest ignored his question. "The death god's temple?"

"West from here."

"There, we will meet and speak."

Without another utterance, they all departed, walked towards the shady part of the festivities' center and disappeared into the shadows.

Or perhaps, the Lorathi was mistaken. It cannot be them. Stygai is far from here, and the winds have not been agreeable these months past.

*They do not need ships pushed by sea winds. They appear from place to place like desert dust.*

To know for sure, he must set foot in the temple before they do.

He dashed past the crowd and left the eventful streets. He knew Braavos better than they do, and they may be charlatans. A boat to the Isle of the Gods awaited him at the western part of the Long Canal. The Lorathi embarked and paddled the fastest he could. The boat finally hit solid ground.

He ran to the steps leading to the ebony and weirwood doors of the temple.

The four were already there, now donning black hooded robes. This is truth, then. And there was no emancipation from the horrors of it.
For the first time in his life, Jaqen H'ghar realized what true fear meant.

They have now so generously revealed their true faces—pure white eyes, with thin lines for irises, black lips, skin whiter than the snows of the North. Funeral scents overwhelmed the smell of salt coming from the Shivering and the Narrow.

The tallest spoke once more. "Most agreeable location—isolated. We will be quick then."

They entered the temple and were welcomed by the atrium housing the poison pool and the statues of the death god's embodiments. Four pairs of eyes surveyed the hall, expressions blank. One of them clicked his tongue as if disappointed.

"All these fancy statues of your deities—not even close to her, not even close."

"Do tell of your purposes and be on your way," the Lorathi calmly said, hiding his unease.

One the size of two and a half bravos regarded him with a quizzical brow. "Patience, Jaqen H'ghar."

Jaqen scoffed, let out an embittered laugh. "A man is at a disadvantage. It seems to him that you know his name but he does not know yours."

The woman beckoned the other three and they all stood in front of the Lorathi. "Very well, then," turning to the tallest, she said. "Introductions, as they are necessary."

"Our names are from the deity, no tongue in both world Known and Unknown could offer our appellations a metaphor. Direct translations are as impossible as ravens turning gold." One by one, the tallest introduced the members of the death god's envoy. "These are rewordings—the nearest in the Common Tongue. Mistface, Silverwing, Tattershell, Overcast."

Jaqen H'ghar shuddered within. Those names are not names, but personifications, archetypes of Death.

One with a medium-built queried. "This is your last cycle, and we suppose you are well-acquainted as regards to who we are."

The Lorathi chuckled. "Why would a man not be? A man is most aware of the affairs of the death god. She claimed all of you from Lower Sothoryos and stationed you outside Stygai."

_Burners of the Pass._

At the event of death, souls traverse the path from the Realms of Men to the Realm Unseen. They do so through an ethereal bridge which sorcerers and blood mages call 'The Pass'.

Very few know of it. And fewer than few know of its guardians. The bridge is said to be in the outskirts of Stygai, the corpse city by the Vale of the Shadows, a place where little is known and where even Shadowbinders of the great Asshai dare not enter. Learned men dismiss the whole thing as mere myth—they think themselves wise in all things.

These beings have battled and triumphed over the demons of the shadows, such that their personas have become an amassment of spirits which their high magic has consumed.

_Burners_ are entrusted one rarefied weapon—warhammer on one side, death axe on the other. This weapon, the Bridgebreaker, can reduce to ashes the bridge connecting the two realms, to disallow _specific_ souls to cross, and rebuild it from ashes, should the souls grow weary of their attempt at migration. Once unable to traverse the Pass within a certain time, a soul will be left stranded on the
realm between, battle forever against other souls for survival and the chance to be allowed to cross—an impossibility, unless the death god wills it. It will be a million painful deaths that are in the absolute sense, infinite; and the excruciation will last eons.

For those who succeed in the battle of spirits, what awaits, if unworthy, is a cycle of aimless drifting.

And there was only one reason for the Burners to be speaking with him.

"Return to the death god, and tell her a man has not forgotten his word. He will keep it," Jaqen H'ghar said.

"The assurance?" Overcast, the tallest one replied. "You are a born betrayer—you betrayed your blood, your heirship, your duty. And now, because of one girl, Chosen though she may be, you are in the dangerous verge of betraying the death god."

Jaqen seethed. "A man is a servant, the same as the lot of you—"

"Halt," the woman, Mistface, interjected. "Faceless Men are servants, Burners of the Pass are heralds and right-hands. Faceless Men serve the death god food on the table, wash her scarlet-muddled bedlinens, perform for her the dirt. Burners dine with her and speak with her of the greater plans. Nay, not the same, Faceless."

The humongous one laughed hysterically.

"People," the one called Tattershell said in feigned admonishment. "Be nice."

The woman ignored his words, slowly walked around the Lorathi, as if evaluating every inch of him.

The Lorathi spoke, this time openly expressing his irritation. "If there is nothing more—"

"One last," the woman said. She stood in front of the Lorathi and assayed him from crown to sole. "Pretty. Take off your garments. I desire to know what is underneath all that. What the death god actually saw in you. What got her all Valyrian-Lorathi-mad, that she had to forage across all other realms to find you. Must be...too interesting to resist."

Another hysterical laughter from the mammoth one.

The ebony and weirwood doors opened to reveal the Elder and the Handsome Man.

The old man seemed to be in the middle of his reprehensions of the comely one, but stopped at the foot of the threshold upon laying eyes on the temple's unwanted visitors. His expression turned from a split-second of alarm to cold hatred.

With all the courage he could muster, he greeted them. "Friends, welcome. To what do we owe this pleasure?"

The comely one eyed them viciously, one hand on the hilt of his longsword—a useless act, and he knew it. He then turned his eyes on his Lorathi brother, a silent question emerging from his threatening glare.

Jaqen ignored him.

"Duties," the one called Tattershell answered. "For the death god, you understand."

"Why of course. All men must serve," the Elder responded, with an ominous tone. "Faceless Men most of all. Our devotion to Him of Many Faces is unparalleled. Forgive me, my friends. As much as
this temple desires to offer you its hospitality, we are as of the moment, occupied with our own duties. We lost a number of Braavosi these weeks past. Burial and rituals must be arranged. May the souls find true rest. Mundane existence in the realm between is exhausting."

"Ah, yes. We will bother you no longer," the one named Overcast answered. "We have accomplished what we came here to do, I believe. Valar dohaeris. That, to whichever god you serve."

"We serve only Him of Many Faces."

"That is what you would want to believe." He let his white eyes roam around the expanse of the temple's atrium once more. "Be free with your beliefs, then. Careful though, with your claims. Your Songs were never written by the deity's hands and you know it."

"Must it matter who wrote it?" the comely one interjected. "The god is the source."

The one named Overcast regarded the man with disinterest. "And who told you that?"

Jaqen H'ghar gritted his teeth. The Elder finally spoke.

"Take with you the dust of your sandals and leave this place. There are no bridges to burn in here."

"No bridges?" the one named Mistface answered. "And all the while we thought your temples connect you to your gods. Anyway…"

A nod from the tallest to his companions.

They left the atrium through the temple's double doors. In a blink of an eye, shadows of the night aided their disappearance.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Here's another chapter for all. Would love to hear what you think. And thank you, thank you to all the awesome people in the comments section, previous chapter: Jaqen/Rhaegar/Aragorn parallels--really good discussion! It's so funny, it's like you guys got together through portkey or something! Thanks for supporting the J/A fanfic collection! ;D
"In all aspects comes resilience—death is the trade.

Soundness in one's substance, coherence within the mind,

Spirit's totality. Self must be whole even as it is emptied of all.

Failure, and the dead will conquer him instead of the other way."

Methods of the Faceless Men, 6th leaf

Lyanna.

Beloved.

Promise to wait?

A few days from now, I will birth him. Don't open that door.

I must.

It wouldn't end...the searching...

The Undying. I shall come back for you.

You will leave me no reason to believe.

None but a pact. If not in this life, then in another.
You will swear and fail.

Not this time. When I return, you will know, and the choice won't be yours.

Cursed dreams, visions of blessing. Blight and absolution. The direwolf dreams from so long ago seemed to be more merciful than these phantasms contained in this lore of love that was never bound to end well.

Or so she thought.

There was the Feast of Midnight, and she recalled seeing the comely master with a woman in red, lacquered wooden mask by the far side of the Moon Pool. She was the only person who still kept herself masked even after the Uncloaking.

*How does a girl know which realities are false?*

He had used artifice to effectively conceal his face, but the girl is Faceless. Duplicities—one god, a million faces. Men are born to wear masks after all, not to conceal the self and deceive, but to preserve it. The god of death knows them through the countenance and the name; and either by some grand course of things or by mere whim, she may decide to steal a person away. It is her divine right, and no one must question—*Valar Morghulis*. However, walking a little out of the god's sight seemed to be the usual scheme done by those who are wiser than others.

Therefore, there were eyes of many colors and noses kissed by many lovers. There were cheeks touched by snow or sand or sea, there were lips that spoke of endless truths and lies, and bodies that have witnessed time and its many occurrences. There were feet that have walked the paths of Cinammon Straits and Leviathan Sound by the Thousand Islands, and there were those that remained at bay and waited…

The hiding will never end. Hence, the search, the hunt. One can only keep secrets from the deity and trick her knowing eyes for as long. All things concealed are revealed in her own time.

They stood side by side, surveying the center of festivities. Hushed tones and wary eyes. Intermittent breaths. The master's lips were slightly moving, the woman would listen and would then give him a faint nod.

Too much preoccupation, observing them both, that she lost awareness of the masked woman's eyes which were staring back at her for what may have been minutes. She remembered blinking thrice then looking away in embarrassment.

*It's not polite to stare.*

The girl pretended to busy herself with more sweets laid artistically on top of a long table the shape of a Braavosi boat. Her back was now turned to the masked woman, curiosity got the better of her; and so she closed her eyes, filtered through the noise, and listened specifically to those two voices.

*Do it…*

Anyone may return from the curtains, but may not recall what was on the other side.

I don't care. I could make her remember.
Your death god will have you for this.

The death god equalizes, the red god restores.

How do you restore she who desires to be lost more than anything?

Ask your lord of light. You have done this surely, thousands of times.

Such obsession. What will you get out of it?

Answers. Questions. Answers.

Souls rarely go back to the realms of men.

Rarely, yes. But they do. There's a path—pronged.

Hush...

What is it?

Someone…I could feel her get through me.

Who?

Bringer of four, Bringer of Four. Aid to the Promised.

Arya Stark, beware of the purple-eyed dragon.

Keep away from the third dragonhead.

Cloak yourself from Death.

She gasped as her eyes flew open. The girl froze on the spot, realizing how the cryptic woman had sensed her conscious eavesdropping. And she…spoke with her directly. Beware of the purple-eyed dragon. Jaqen appeared behind her without warning. She turned and lifted her face to look at him, even as she controlled the urge to glance at the mask. The Lorathi seemed to be fully aware of her offense—his countenance showed nothing but displeasure.

"What has a girl been doing?"

"N-nothing," she stammered, then began to walk to the table where a collection of ale was. The Lorathi pulled her arm and forced her to confront him.

"Were you communicating with the Shadowbinder?" he asked through clenched teeth.

The girl's expression was of utter denial. "I was not! She was communicating with me."

At this, she ran from Jaqen so he could not question and accuse her of nonsense any further. Surprised she was that the Lorathi did not run after her. Must you always desire that he chases you? Romance and humor must have their own time, she realized. Now, there is only forewarning, a harbinger of what is to come and what is to come is uncertain.

Arya Stark recalled reaching the steps of the Iron Bank. Fewer people stayed in this part of the city.
precisely because the bank is a place for all matters formal and political. The merriment was at the center, but it was as if her feet led her there.

Lyanna...

Beloved.

The front door of the Iron Bank opened slightly in order to let out some patrons. Even at midnight, even during the Unmasking itself, the bank treats business as business. It was true, what they always say about the banklords—they spend morn and night and morn once more with gold and coins lest death calls them the next day. "There is much sleeping to do once we die," is their self-imposed precept.

Two men emerged from the door and began walking down the steps. Arya Stark eyed them closely. All of a sudden, as if it was some sort of paranormal instinct dictating her sensibilities, she rushed behind one of the bank's giant pillars and hid.

With all the carefulness she could gather, she slowly tilted her head and took a glimpse of the two.

A gray-haired man. Unknown to her. But then…

The other was unmistakable—it was Tyrion Lannister who visited the Starks at Winterfell once with the King Robert's whole retinue. The Imp, as they call him, kept talking in his usual sagacity. Arya Stark's brows furrowed as she tried to think of plausible reasons for a Westerosi exile to have any business with the Iron Bank, any business at all from which the latter could profit.

The two were speaking animatedly with each other about seemingly grandiose plans. Heightened sense! but she felt herself being overtaken by a surge of force from someone…someone she knew but does not know.

Trailing behind the two men was a blue-haired lad, immersed in his pensive state. Then, as if stunned, he immediately ceased taking another step. Slowly, he lifted his head, straightened his back —feeling, sensing.

Lyanna.

She forgot how to breathe. Wide-eyed and entranced, she continued staring at him.

A blur of voices in her head confused her severely. Blood rushed through her chest. She had felt it—a spirit other than her own, and it was from the Crypts which her bastard brother had opened. It may be, that it had suffused itself with her being, merged with it; it is not an impossible thing after all. She had dreamed of all these in a prior time.

Jon! her subconscious seemed to scream. No, you should not have!

I shall come back for you.

A lad heaved a deep sigh. Slowly, he turned his face to his left. In the midst of them were spirits that longed and he saw her, just as she saw him. Eyes locked—and they had once again beheld the other's face after those many years. They never aged, they never changed. Their spirits recognized the other one, and it was as if Death had not claimed them both.

To wait is to crucify the self.

Promise me.
I promise. If not in this life, then in another.

A girl and a lad held each other's eyes—gray-and-green against purple—and not one of them seemed to want to look away. There were indeed universal rules governing time, and these seemed to have forgotten how to operate. At that exact point in eternity, everything else ceased to exist—it was only 'she and he'.

Swear it by the Isle of Faces, never will we part. Swear it!

A lad smiled softly and a girl found herself gasping in response.

Rhaegar, beloved.

He slowly walked to her. Her feet were firm, unmoving. And though she willed them to dash away, for this is most surely beyond what she can either fathom or contain, she could not.

Perpetuity—past present future. Song. Ice. Fire.

And they now stood face to face.

Winds of Winter were fierce, and it blew hard, thus erasing all doubts that this reconciliation of spirits is not meant to happen. All prophecies are intertwined. The pact made in the Isle is powerful—perhaps slightly more powerful than Death. The greenseers who were gifted with foreknowledge knew of this, prior to ruination taking them both.

Mortality is a mere concept.

He placed his hand atop hers that was holding the marbled pillar. Warmth coursed through them both and more than this, a recognition. And a sweet, sweet remembrance.

Queen of love. Queen of beauty. Blue winter roses. Let's run.

She knew him but did not. He had been the subject of her dreams—and he had promised her things, and made her promise to him as well. He was once inside her, once attained singleness with her body. And though they were not kin, they have created one that was kin to them both.

She spoke to her beloved.

Will you make a song for him?

He responded.

He has a song—ice and fire.

A girl felt a lad drawing his face closer to her. Love. And their temples connected, their breaths, old spirits made anew. Undercroft's of kings were perhaps opened, and this may well be the will of the gods—that they see the other once more. After all, they are gods, and they possess hence the power to allow souls to touch each other by the fingertips, or meet altogether. Many moons it had been, and their bodies have died. His rubies bathed the Trident, her blue winter roses were on her deathbed. Their souls lingered, surrendered not to the Realm Unseen, battled against the eternal, infinite cosmos snatching the both of them from each other's grasp of heart.

West of Westeros has in it birds reborn from fire and ashes.

A truth. Souls are reborn. A truth. What the Lorathi said—true death is this: when a person utters your name for the very last time.
A greater truth. Perhaps, the greatest:

He loved her. She loved him.

_Surely, something from our souls must remain when we leave this life?_

Their names were never lost in the lips of those they thought they have left.

Daenerys Targaryen had immortalized him—through her son, her dragon.

Jon Snow had revived her—Old Nan made sure he never forgot her tale. Ned spoke of the crypts.

Robert Baratheon never stopped uttering their names until his death—the name of one he would profane, the name of the other he would worship.

_In my dreams, I kill Rhaegar every night. A thousand deaths will still be less than he deserves._

_Lyanna—she should not be here, Ned. Too dark, these crypts of yours. Take her to the hill, with the sun and clouds above her, and rain to wash her clean._

Ah, no. They never truly died.

A girl spoke, a lad answered. It was a divine conversation of souls.

_Where have you been, beloved?_

_Waiting for you._

_How do you know I'd come this way?_

_After all the things you've seen, this is your question?_

_I gave up on life, after he was born from me. I made him promise—Ned._

_Is ours safe, alive?_

_Perhaps._

_Swear it by the Isle, never will we part again._

Her eyes were closed. Yet, she felt him drawing even closer…closer…

He kissed her on the side of her berry lips.

_Love is a sin?_

She gasped. He kissed her deeper, suckled her lower lip.

_Stop!_ Arya Stark screamed inside.

_I will kiss you with the kisses of your mouth_, Lyanna whispered.

He pulled her to him, and he tasted her—noticing has changed. She is the same woman he had
crowned, for whom he had abandoned all principles, hurling in the winds the dark possibility of a realm-wide bloodbath in so doing. She is the same woman whose body he had taken over and over in the Isle of Faces and the Tower of Joy; the same one whose womb bore him gifts of sun and snow—a bequeathment of the gods, the fulfillment of the Promised.

Kiss me back, beloved, Rhaegar implored her. Let me have you again.

Stop this! Arya Stark muttered against his soft lips.

Lovely girl…Aegon murmured back, in the midst of hot and sanity-robbing contact.

Steal wind from me, kiss me forever, Lyanna pleaded. Have me, have me, have me…

She felt her arms wrap around his neck, and his hands caress the soft of her back…

"My prince," the gray-haired man called, and a lad broke from the kiss and turned to the direction of the voice. The owner emerged from beneath the steps of the bank. No, he did not see them at all. "Is everything well?"

A lad nodded, though unsure.

"Forgive me, but Ragman Harbor is far from here, we must head back."

"Yes, of course. A second, if you please."

He quickly turned to her once more, but she was gone.

Soft clinking sounds of glass decanters coupled with a woman's hum. The last bitter hour is the first sweet hour, the unsung words would say. Breathless darkness to rest, a million songs of solitude…

She wiped her hands with stained cloth and proceeded to clearing her worktable. The last of the set substances were complete—higher elixir-vitae, poisons and panacea of various hues and consistencies. Enough for more than five hundred and sixty tasks. After the Titan's unexpected onslaught with the colossal fire-breather, the Waif had realized one thing, though she attempted to not sprawl her thoughts over the mysteries of it.

Death of Dragons was not conceived for killing the beasts. The substance was too weak, and the alchemical authors of it willed it to be so. The admiral keeper of the Titan had informed the commanding structures of the city that the fire-beast was wounded to near-fatality, but such claims cannot be at all confirmed. That dragon can render itself imperceptible. No witnessing soul is even certain that any of the poisoned spruce-arrows ever collided with the target.

She heaved a sigh at the profoundness of the whole conspiracy. Even the Order, with all its histories and codes and methods, lacks vanguards that are true to the faith's design. Disillusionment is the perfect feeling—indeed, to resort to acquiescence to one voice that whispers 'come hither' is the most sensible.

To lay with kings of ages past, the wise, the good, the strong, the bold. Withdraw, heed and take the hand of that lovely phantom…

Self-assured footsteps towards the work chamber. She smiled softly.

His arms gently coiled around her frame from behind, his comely face rested upon her shoulders.

"Supper?" a soft whisper to her ear. His fingers rubbed the fabric of her garment, teasing. She would
not stop him tonight, would let him indulge in the last of his fantasies. Weak or enduring, crowned heads or wayfarers, someone or No One—every man has the right to a faerie tale.

*Be soothed by that steadfast trust, when you are bid to come.*

"Not hungry." She was surprised at how calm her reply had been. Sabine pretended to busy herself with one small dish of scented talc, ignoring Aegeus and his sensational essence of evening primroses. *Not today, not today.* She spoke. "You want anything…fancy? Let me go tell Umma—"

"Not hungry," he replied, his gentle hold tightening. "Let's stay here."

Another sigh from her. When will she ever run out of breath?

"Very well."

Both of them remained in that position for gods know how long. The Waif had run out of vialled substances to occupy herself with. Certain things must be confronted before the pleasant dreams arrive—here he is, and chances such as this are scarce. A decade, had she been blinded by the faith that much? If only time can evaporate, if only it can cease…

"Tell me something," she said. "Something to bring with me when I get there."

It was cruelty, yet he could not deny her of this. Once more, he placed his lips against her ear, chuckled softly when she flinched just a little. "You are unfaltering, and delightful. Your heart is in the right place always. Beautiful, so, so beautiful…"

She bit her lip.

"More beautiful than sweet Death, than the interlude all men hope for—"

Sabine turned to face him, wrapped him in the tightest embrace. *How can I be your eyes, so I can see what you see?* His fingers brushed her hair, sounds of solace poured out from him to her. Better is this second than endless days with another. "Chain me in your remembrances if I try to escape, yes?" She implored, hated herself for teardrops bathed her face generously.

"Yes."

"Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive."

They spoke of many things.

The Winter Maiden slowly replaced the goblet on her bedside table, stood up to pace the room. *A name.* she needed that damn name so she could get away from this place and from this false identity of hers. Being courtesan was not only the most challenging, but the most corrupt persona she has ever assumed since her arrival at the House of Black and White. The plan she had wove in her mind was almost seamless—Winter Maiden had to thoroughly engross the Sealord with her usual enticing elegances, catch him off his guard, so he would leave his thoughts unprotected. Arya Stark could then seep through the man's thoughts and steal them. The task will see its end, and she could walk away without letting him defile her.

*But this would be an impossible feat.*

The Sealord seemed to know in all his depth that there was something terribly doubtful about the
Winter Maiden. After he caught her prying into the black and white slip in his function chamber, he had distanced himself from her emotionally, though he still kissed her on the neck and touched her on the hips.

*He's going to take whatever it is that he paid for. Only then will I be able to take the name from him and kill him. Or perhaps, he would never surrender that name.*

Her mind wandered back to the woman in mask—a Shadowbinder, from Jaqen's own words. They are pariah as far as the House of Black and White is concerned; it is rumored that Shadowbinders willingly deceive death for their own purposes and for the purpose of their questionable prophecies. A priestess of the red god with a priest of the death god—ruination, resurrection. End must not be reversed to create a beginning, it is known. Counterbalance loss with birth, not with rebirth. Yet, why?

*Beware of the purple-eyed dragon. Beware of the third dragonhead.*

"Who is that lad?" Arya Stark found herself speaking her thoughts aloud.

It was not the first time she had seen him, she knew him from before. During her states of erratic dreaming, she had beheld his face, and those dreams about him and her were the only ones she had never mentioned to Jaqen. Why would she? All the while she thought that the dreams did not concern her—she knew about her beloved Aunt Lyanna and the Silver Prince who abducted her, then the Battle of the Trident. However, in her dreams, they loved each other most earnestly, such that Arya Stark would find herself *dreamy* even after dreaming about them. It was pure romance that was beyond her simple comprehensions, yet it was not at all difficult to appreciate.

*Love is a sin?*

And they had a child.

When her eyes met those of the lad that very midnight, her lips unconsciously uttered his name. But it was not his name, no—the same way that Arya Stark's name is not Lyanna.

And by the gods, they had a pact.

May Jaqen forgive her—they *kissed*.

And may he not take her life with his own hands—she…adored the act.

*I cannot be a host to Lyanna's spirit, and he cannot be a host to Rhaegar's.*

For she knew, if even one of them acquiesced to the whims of the spirits of the dead and the past, then the dead would continue living and breathing through them. Should this happen, their bodies will be empty shells at the mercy of those spirits. Arya Stark will be gone, that blue-haired lad would be gone—and Lyanna and Rhaegar will transcend the impossibilities of time and mortality through the both of them. And yes, the both of them had been helpless when they saw each other—they were not themselves at all, for two others seemed to have forcefully overtaken them. They were weak, and this must not be.

*Beware of the purple-eyed dragon.*

To tell Jaqen…

A knock on the door startled her thoughts. One of the Winter Maiden's lady-in-waiting peered through it that was slightly ajar. "May I speak with my lady?"
"But of course," the Winter Maiden replied. She tightened the silken tie holding the robe that enveloped her naked body underneath, then expelled air through her pale lips.

The handmaiden entered and curtsied, her visage extremely placid in contrast with the maelstrom of sentiments threatening to drown Arya Stark. "The bidding has concluded. Her lord is outside the door, waiting for the Winter Maiden to receive him."

She took one last deep breath, hoping it will be the last she takes. Fate did not give her that. She rehearsed in her mind the thousand lessons she had learned on how to be the faultless courtesan. She prayed to the heavens for the ground to swallow her whole. To run away, to scream till her lungs burn and be reduced to dead embers in pure misery—if only she may be allowed to do all these.

"Call him in."

What has transpired earlier was less rueful.

Adulterated though the tradition was, these predatory men had decided to dismiss all cares in invisible wind. They were all marauders and defilers; and for them, the bidding is just another one of their many divertissements. One must throw in gold and sapphire for recreational pursuits such as this, and beautiful women are gifts from the gods—a blessing from them. To refuse the godsent therefore is to sin. Conscious blemishing of what is pure is an act of men anyway, and men are not gods whose restraint to these things is infallible.

The worth as of now—the cost of thirteen ships.

The Sealord was sweating cold, cursing, as he read the current value he had to outbid from a small parchment handed by one of the Black Pearl's bearers. They were all in the courtesan's barge, and the woman was bewitching the men gathered around her, as usual, with her lascivious and suggestive chuckles, white wine in hand for furtherance of the effect. A third of the earning from the bid to the Winter Maiden will go straight to the Pearl's fancy courtesan chest, no doubt.

For the Sealord, the bid was a political move. He cannot lose. The stakes have risen up to the impossible.

"Cost of twenty."

"Twenty ships, my lord?"

The Sealord regarded the bearer with narrowed eyes, apparently short on patience at the bearer's pretense at dimness. The bearer apologized, nodded her assent, and proceeded to where the Black Pearl sat. With an artful flick of the hand, she took the parchment and read the Sealord's offer. She smiled and surveyed the contents of all other parchments now laid in front of her. Indeed, cost of twenty is the highest. A quick nod to the Sealord, a coy wink. He grinned, for the first time that night, with utter pleasure.

No other parchments came.

She rose, chiffon gown flowing from elegant shoulders to similarly elegant feet, and began walking. The hem of the delicate fabric brushed against the wooden deck, graceful in the soft blows of the sea. Finally, the disclosure.

The bearer handed the Black Pearl another parchment.

Cost of fifty.
"A bid from?" the Black Pearl asked, examining the back part of the parchment for some indication of any trickery. Cost of fifty has never been achieved in the history of courtesanship since the ‘craft’ began in Braavos.

The bearer tilted her head to the direction of three noblemen donning Volantene accoutrements. The silver hair of the one that sat in the middle was unmistakable to the old souls that perhaps knew him once. The Pearl approached the triad, her opulence almost classic.

A seductive flutter of eyelash from her, yet the silver-haired was disinterested. "From Volantis?" the courtesan asked one of the men, the one who paid the cost, as she supposed.

"Old Valyria."

Percussive sounds hammered the courtesan's chest. She contained the tumult that threatened to break her from within. Old Valyria—Velaryon? Celtigar?

_Targaryen?_

Perhaps.

"Cost of fifty—this is not bidding, this is _owning_. Too lustful."

"Even the gods are lustful. How would men be if the gods are not?"

The courtesan's smile was devilish.

"The Sealord will not be too happy, my lord."

A smirk from the silver-haired. "He's at the nethermost of all my interests. If he surpasses the value, let him have the girl. Know this though, I can bid until the cost of a hundred and more, though I am not in the best of states for manipulations. If that would prove insufficient, I will draw my sword. _Fire and blood_—and I am not speaking of the maiden's."

Upon the lips of the courtesan were sounds of elation and flattery, and the stars glistened in harmony with them. "Desperate veneration breeds many a thing. Ah, fortuitous girl!"

"Honor us with the disclosure."

The Black Pearl's eyes never left the Valyrian's, as she gently tore the parchment with the cost of twenty, and let the fragments of it fall and adorn the deck.

"It is time."

She was led by the Black Pearl to the goddess pool, where she will have her very last bath as one maiden.

_Banishment. Purification. Immersion._

She drifted only, her feet unfeeling as she trailed the cold stone floor in barefoot. Pangs and pricks should have clawed their way through her flesh, but numbness was more powerful. Upon each breath absconding from her innocent lips was a single utterance that meant more than the lives of all the men and women she had ever known:

_Let this pass. And pass well._
Behind the grayish cobblestoned colonnade awaits the pool; and its gentle ripples brought by cascading waters from a fount were a complete contradiction of the surge of storms her heart owned. Red petals, the color of fire, were strewn all over the bath, as soft flares from candles cast beautiful shadows of women—three. There was the Pure, the Pedagogue, the Priestess. Arya Stark stepped on the velvety blossoms, and the soles of her feet found slight comfort from the feel.

A gossamer shroud the width of two outstretched arms separated the maiden from him who would claim her. Prior to his claiming of her, he must witness the rituals that would lead to her blossoming, her coming-of-age. His eyes will be the silent admirer of her before the taking—for if he would take her, he must see her. And to see is to know; to know is to comprehend; to comprehend is to appreciate.

This man who was behind that translucent veil watched with fascination as the Winter Maiden was unclothed by her Pedagogue. The light fabric of her silken robe dropped to her feet. With the desperation and want of one barely clinging on to his life, he inhaled the drifting cold air, and he derived warmth from it.

One crystal cup of essence was upon the Priestess' hands. Slowly, she walked behind the maiden, lifted her hands, bathed her with thick liquid fragrance from the crown. It was Banishment of innocence, and this was proven true by the Black Pearl's words:

*She will drain out her blood through this crystal chalice of intimacy. She will mingle her life with his, and she will not leave for herself a single drop.*

It was a million pronouncements of *Valar Dohaeris* upon Arya Stark's lips. She thought of him, and him only.

The chalice had gone empty.

Cascading waters invited her, and had it been any other time—a time that was not the host of this predicament of hers, she would have leaped onto the waters and placed her lovely face underneath the outpour. She would have marveled with laughter at its healing. Water is enchantment, as a distant voice within her would always say.

She walked towards it.

Her head was bowed in meekness underneath the downrush. Purification—the waters must cleanse her from other desires, apart from pleasing him who would perform the claiming.

He saw every beautiful detail—the flow of water from crown to sole was magnificent. Drops of it were small prisms refracting candlelight, shattering incandescence to form hues in her wet nudity, dispersing the radiance, angling it, deviating. Her moist flesh glowed, and so he licked his lips in order to dampen the drought. His struggles have been too great, yet this…this is the greatest of all.

He heard the Black Pearl speak once more.

*Her heart must not beat, her mind must cease to understand. It must only be the flesh, it must only be the body. Quenchless passion to the infinite, so life in her may be no more. Her faiths, to the abyss.*

Finally, she was led to the goddess pool.

Her entirety must be submerged within. She must be one with it. Gently, she descended to the pool, beneath the petal-laden water, and allowed it to overwhelm her wholly.

*This is the way between life and death, it is beyond love, and she will never know it.*
By the wrath of the deities it must be so.

By the grace of the deities it must be so.

Immersion—a mark of burying youthful virtue and emerging from the void, a new person.

Arya Stark gasped as she rose from the waters, and she came forth—a **woman**.

He who would claim her gazed at her perfect nakedness. He closed his eyes so the memory of it would stay with him beyond what time would allow.

Upon his lips—a soft smile.

Winter Maiden sat at the edge of her magnificent featherbed blanketed by white rose petals. **White, for the blood.** She wore nothing but that pure, silken robe, as she waited upon him patiently. Her hands reached for a goblet of strong Qarthian wine. Slowly, she tipped the rim to her pale lips to calm her nerves.

A knock startled her thoughts. One of the Winter Maiden’s lady-in-waiting peered through he door that was slightly ajar. "May I speak with my lady?"

"But of course," the Winter Maiden replied. She tightened the silken tie holding the robe that enveloped her naked body underneath, then expelled air through her pale lips.

"The rituals have been concluded. Her lord is outside the door, waiting for the Winter Maiden to receive him."

"Call him in."

The lady took another curtsy and promptly left the chamber.

Arya Stark turned her back on the door and poured some Qarthian into two ornamented goblets. **Valar dohaeris,** she whispered to herself. Her hands were shaking uncontrollably, and so the wine spilled onto the table’s satin cloth. She willed herself to overcome her irrational disquietude. In her hands, many men croaked as death stole their useless lives. She did not even blink or twitch or get haunted by cruel nightmares after the slaughter. Trouncing scums had become as natural for her as breathing itself. This…inconsequential thing must not hinder her from fulfilling a task for the death god.

She heard him enter and secure the latch.

Even without rewarding him a glance just yet, she knew by the sound of it that he had removed his undoubtedly luxurious coat and had thrown the damned thing on the featherbed.

She then heard him unlacing his breeches.

**Too forward, did not even waste a second. Abhorrent beast.**

She had hidden her two daggers earlier underneath the feather cushion. Sleight of hand is simple. One wrong move and the Sealord will be a man more dead than dead.

The Winter Maiden picked up those two goblets and with a long breath, turned to him with a pretentious smile.

The goblets slid from her hands and fell on the carpeted floor, spilling wine all over it.
He looked at her with sweet, sweet fondness and spoke in a voice deeper than the ritualistic abyss she had fallen off mere moments ago.

"A girl did beggar many men tonight with her maiden's blood."

The girl's eyes grew misty.

Irregular rhythms of breathing came out of her precious lips, as she shook her head gently and stared at his beautiful face with an affection that exceeded all understanding. She did not anymore care about that name. Arya Stark could force that name out of the Sealord's treacherous mouth at knifepoint whenever she liked. Her senses drifted away, and she was taken back to the rites held at the Hall of Faces, where he, the blood of her blood, offered her his sacred vows.

What is the Guardian to the Chosen?

Defense.

Clockwork seemed to have surrendered to motionlessness as the Winter Maiden died and was replaced by Arya Stark—the Lorathi's causal being, from body to core.

My Songs of love. Romantic redemption.

"Jaqen…"

The Lorathi smiled at the girl and teased. "You are very expensive, do you know that?"

She covered her face with her hands and laughed. Jaqen H'ghar, no doubt in an elaborate disguise, managed to throw in more gold than any other for her. Cost of fifty ships, and Bellegere had said that this was a first. Overjoy is a beautiful albeit punishing thing, for it denied her of the slightest strength to even ask him of how in this universe and in another had he acquired such horn of plenty.

Wealth—thou hast this, offer it to her. Bend thy knee and bring her gold and spices.

"A man had to return to Lorath for such purpose," he walked, set a reasonably-sized cushion chair in front of her and sat, crossing his legs in a most attractive manner. Then with a bantering stare, he added, "Please don't tell anyone."

It was a loving gaze from her to him, and with careless abandon, she had decided. She will keep her ritualistic vows by the goddess pool with the deities as witnesses—she will banish her innocence, purify herself of all things but him, immerse herself in his chambers of intimacy. With him, she will burn a hundred candles on both ends…

"Tell me that it isn't true, Jaqen. What the ladies say about you back at Harrenhal," she said in a voice above the whisper.

The Lorathi's brows creased. "A man never had the chance to listen to any ladies at all," he ran his fingers through his hair. "He was too busy killing some lowlives at the audacious orders of one lovely girl."

She did not answer, a soft smile still on her lips.

He returned her gaze then shrugged at her casually. "Why? What did they say about a man?"
Arya Stark slowly let her eyes drop to the silken robe she was wearing. Her fingers ruffled through its laces, until they reached the soft knot securing the garment as well as her own nakedness. She gently pulled the knot and felt the fabric of her robe ease against her skin.

"That Jaqen H'ghar is a demi-god who does not fall in love with mortals…"

Arya Stark let her silken robe fall softly on the floor. Unlike in their shared passion in the temple's bath chamber two nights ago where she donned one thin gown, unlike in the ritualistic pool where he watched her merely behind the shrouds, this time there was nothing, nothing at all that separated her from Jaqen's intense and penetrating stare. She laughed with delighted surprise when she heard his breathing change. She reveled in his gaze, delighted herself in his strong, manly presence as his eyes roamed unhurriedly to various parts of her—lingering in her face, her neck, her breasts, her femininity. Unconsciously, he wet his lips.

"You are so divine, Arya Stark…"

She took a step towards him, but he was quicker. He stood and crossed the space between them in a few strides and hastily picked up the silken robe from the floor. Gently, he covered Arya Stark's nakedness with it, going as far as tying the knot for her. He kissed her on the forehead, stared at her lovingly. The girl's confused expression was instantly replaced with disbelief, with a hint of indignation thereafter. The Lorathi just shook his head, as if willing her not to feel this way. In the gentlest of ways, he kissed her hair, her nose, her cheeks.

"Arya…my sweet girl."

The Lorathi let his mouth find hers, kissed her deeply there. She responded to those with insatiable hunger, as her hands forcefully tugged at the knot of her robe to get herself naked for him once more. Jaqen gripped both of her hands tight to keep her from doing such a thing. Indeed, he desired her more than anything in this life and the next. And perhaps, her existence prior to her gaining any essence at all, was the impetus of desire itself. He desires her, truly; but more than this, he respects her.

He must.

One's kiss was the total inverse of the other. His kisses were delicate, sweet-tempered—as if it was necessary for him to practice a certain form of restraint in order not to hurt her. Hers were ferocious, greedy, and so, so fervent. Her teeth clashed against his and her guttural pleads for him to open his mouth for her filled the Winter Maiden's room. She grabbed a fistful of his hair and he held her the closest to him, until the smallest of the space between them was no more.

Arya broke away from the kiss and buried her face against his chest in an effort to catch her breath. Her unsteady breathing was too audible, and the Lorathi bit his lower lip to keep himself from chuckling with amusement. She is as untamed as her direwolf. Hells, she can be wilder than that seven-clawed dragon itself when she wants to be.

"Am I not delightful enough for you, Jaqen?" he heard her say in between breaths.

The Lorathi's forehead crumpled at the query. This time, he could not hold back the rich laughter; it had so boldly escaped from his chest. "Would I even throw a single gold bar at your feet if I don't find you delightful?"

Arya Stark lifted her face to gaze at him. "Jaqen, please do not think ill of what I will say. By nature, bidding on someone's maidenhood is nothing but detestable…" she shook her head, as if unsure of how to proceed. "When you outbid the Sealion, a-and any other man out there so you could have
me, when you have watched me behind that gossamer fabric by the pool, when you decided to see
me…own me, you have made it incredibly clear that you want me."

"I do want you," he replied, his expression clearly entertained.

"Then, why won't you lay with me?"

Jaqen H'ghar held his breath.

Oh, so precious.

Why won't you lay with me? She asked this utterly sensitive question the same way a young girl
would ask why she was not allowed to play out in the rain. There was nothing else to do but
embrace her as tightly as he could and beseech Him of Many Faces to not take her away from him—
again.

He cupped her cheeks with his calloused hands, kissed her dainty nose. "A man does not have the
right to you, Arya Stark," he whispered, knives stabbing through his heart at every word. "No one
does."

At this, the girl's eyes widened.

"I don't understand you at all," Arya silently seethed. She gently pushed him away from her. "I don't
understand…this—whatever is going on between us, if even there is something going on. Or maybe
there isn't, at least for you."

"Lovely girl, don't say that…"

"What am I to you, Jaqen?" she asked, turning her back from him then shamelessly removing her
silken garment. The girl crumpled it and vigorously threw it on the bed. She opened the Winter
Maiden's wardrobe, and pulled some smallclothes and a decent set of clothing from it. She dressed
up. "A lovely girl to tease and kiss whenever you want? A sweet girl who would receive your gifts
of nice daggers and fancy necklaces?"

She knew she was being unreasonable. It should have been that damned Sealord standing inside her
bedchamber right now, but it was Jaqen. How could her thankless heart even ask more from this
man?

But he is Jaqen H'ghar. Only the hopelessly insane would want to settle and not ask him for more.
How many men out there could slaughter twenty in a single combat? How many of them could will
steel to move without conscious physical effort? How many could change places in the blink of an
eye and evade an attack or even the slightest discovery?

How many of them could command aurelian dragons to move in spirals in High Valyrian?

She regarded him with vicious yet pained eyes.

Lord Eddard Stark had once told his youngest daughter than when the proper time comes, she would
marry a great heir to a lordship, be a noble lady and through the union, bear strong and beautiful
offspring that would become their future heirs. Arya Stark had one and one answer only.

" No, I won't. That's not for me."

And standing right in front of her, hands folded across his chest, is the reason why.
No soul—mortal or immortal, could possibly make Arya Stark surrender herself to another. If ever her heart elects to desire to be with one man for the rest of her godforsaken life, she knew what type of a man he would be.

Xicarius mea…

An assassin.

A romantic assassin.

What a paradox he is.

"What more do you want from a man, Arya Stark?" he asked her softly and his voiced was pained. There it is—there's the question of the century.

She slammed the door of the Winter Maiden's wardrobe as ferociously as she could. "What more do I want?" Her flesh trembled with infuriation as she faced him. "What more do I want?! I want you, Jaqen. You, you, you! Do you not understand any damned thing at all?! I want all of you!"

She quickly dashed to the side of the featherbed and savagely threw all pillows onto the floor. Unsatisfied, she vehemently pulled the bedlinen, then lifted the cushion to retrieve her daggers and their sheaths by the bedside table.

"Arya, sweetheart...calm dow—"

"I love you!" She screamed at him tempestuously, her daggers clenched by tight fists on either side of her.

Arya Stark knew how loud her proclamation had been, for she heard faint sounds of giggles and 'Ooooh's' from the handmaidens stationed outside the door. The unexpected diversion was maybe too entertaining to even be real for the ladies, for some of them tried imitating her words in hushed tones. "How beautifully quixotic! Wild, climactic love..." were their words. Needless to say, the ladies were assuming that the Winter Maiden and her lord consort were in the middle of a most rapturous exchange—and that such orgasmic state had led them to say those foolish words to each other.

Jaqen merely...sighed. No words came out of his dreamy lips at all.

She angrily sat on the far edge of the bed, her back to him. The girl turned her attention to her daggers and tried sheathing them, frustrated sounds coming out of her throat. "Damn it!" she screamed once more when one dagger seemed to resist being sheathed. "Damn, damn!" came the angry words. More malicious giggles from the other side of the door tortured her already shattered heart.

At this, Jaqen calmly crossed the chamber and sat beside her. The Lorathi gently took the daggers from her hands then placed them inside their scabbards. The girl grabbed the daggers from him, still fuming.

I love you!

Love...

Love is a sin?
Bursting happiness. It was as if he never knew what it meant to really be alive until those words came out of Arya Stark's lips. It was true, what he told the Waif, that this girl had breathed spirit into his flesh. *Jaqen is not dead.* Oh, no…far from it in truth.

And perhaps, if she would keep on saying those words to him over and over and over and over, he would never die.

He rested his elbow upon his lap and rubbed his face with his hands. For the first time, he was at lost for words in front of this girl. As was his habit, he buried his teeth in his thumb and shook his head gently, deciding on how to best approach one girl's confession.

*Arya Stark.*

The Chosen and her Guardian. The Songs say they must be together, no matter the time, no matter what happens. They can only be as strong or as weak as the other when alone. But in their connectedness, the Songs have said the conquering them is impossible.

*He will be Shield to her Sword, the Shadow to her Being, the Summer to her Winter.*

They are binary oppositions; yet their motivations, thoughts, beliefs, gifts, powers—all these do not create discord but harmony, and this…and this always leads to consummation, in a way or another. And *consummation* is one of the Lorathi's favorite words.

One cannot conceivably live or even assume existence without the other—clarity was in the prophecies. Like Fire and Ice. Midnight and Dawn. Echoes and Stillness. Realities and Abstractions. Secrets and Truths.

*A man, a girl.*

Could it really be?  
*How and why could it not?*

It was as if Him of Many Faces, in all impossibilities, had generously granted him this sacred epiphany. Jaqen burst out in a mirthful laughter. Before his lovely girl could throw him another one of her smart retorts, he had mildly yet swiftly pushed her on the bed. The girl gasped as her back fell flat against the cushion and the Lorathi laid himself on top of her—his elbows on both sides of her head, their faces leveled perfectly with each other.

Jaqen smiled. He spoke with his lips a half inch from Arya Stark's. Whispered. "What did you say?"

Arya still wore that bitter expression. "Are you deaf?"

He kissed her on the nose. "Say it again, Arya Stark."

The girl's ire seemed to have faded away with his plea. Is there anything at all in this world that she could not give him? Even if she had maybe lost her own self, she would no doubt scour the whole universe to find it should he ask her for it. Or perhaps…perhaps she never had any real concept of a 'self' prior to finding him, and it was only now that her intellection of what it is was oh, so clearly revealed to her. *Yes, I am Arya Stark of Winterfell. But I can be more than just Arya Stark of Winterfell for Jaqen, could I?* When he looked at her once more, her eyes reflected nothing but the purest emotion of a girl who had absolutely, hopelessly fallen for a man.

She sighed. "I love you…"
Jaqen kissed her on the neck. "Again."

"I love you."

"Say my name." He kissed her chin.

"I love you, Jaqen."

"Again, Arya, don’t stop."

"I love you, Jaqen," She wrapped her arms around his neck, giggled when he gently sucked her lower lip. "I love you…I love you…I love you."

How powerful this triad of words is, to send him to not only a state of bliss, but that of arousal. The innocent voice absconding from his lovely girl's bloodthirsty mouth, the first utterance that was heightened and the last that seemed to fade in her lips—these were pure rhapsody to his already roused Lorathi instincts.

Jaqen savagely tore the front part of her garment, thus revealing her womanly bosoms. Arya gasped, as the Lorathi's mouth landed on the skin of her naked breasts, lavishing it with marks. Upon her bosoms, his teeth silently punished, his tongue mended, his lips, intensified.

"Hah…Jaqen…"

Deep Lorathi purr against her skin. "Arya Stark, words…"

"D-drink from me…be my mirth."

To please her, the Lorathi thought. Nothing more.

Jaqen moved his mouth from her cleavage, closed in upon her erect nipples. It was his blessing of rain all over her arid sierras. His Lorathi tongue touched the tips delicately, and gods, she tasted like eight heavens. Moans from her precious mouth escalated his passions, and so his tongue covered wider territories of her breasts. His hands gave soothing caresses to the tip of her other bosom. And he had blandished her so, so generously with his fondling, and his tongue against her tips was poetry—successions, transitions, iterations. This…this she will keep deep in her erotic memoirs.

"Ah! Jaqen H'ghar!" Her voice was a notch too loud, when the Lorathi ran his tongue against her nipple a little insistently than what was usual. Stifled giggles once more, from outside. Nay, she cared not anymore. Here he is—the whole of him, discovering her like she was one fine treasure from the Unknown; like she was one grand theorem the material proof of which had presented itself after full, fourscore eras; like she was…finally his.

Instruction, the girl thought. I must.

"Consume me, Jaqen…leave not a last drop."

Jaqen obeyed, suckled her breasts lustily—as if these were his only source of precious liquid in the midst of a generation of drought. A vagabond he was, catching sight of the first wellspring in his many moons of travel.

Arya ran her fingers through his hair, tugged at them violently. Her entirety was already afire—fourteen flames cannot compare at all, a little more…just a little, and she might surrender herself fully to his erotic energies. Jaqen's suckles were too audible—she could hear the contact and break-of-contact of his tongue and upper palate against the flesh of her bosom. Oh, I could hear even his
deprivation, my sweet Jaqen. Did I make him wait too long on me? She wanted more of him…

She pulled his face closer to her chest, and his mouth in response, savored her even more voraciously. He was starved…too starved, the girl observed. And yes, she planned to nourish him with all that she is.

Feed on me, my love. Sustain yourself. I would not mind.

His mouth wolfed her some more. "Ah!" the girl gasped. "Jaqen!"

Low growls of desire emerged from his throat. To contain the crumbling fragments of the self that had gone awry, that had been driven to the edge, simply impossible. He suckled and suckled until her lustful murmurs filled every corner of that chamber, until her whole anatomy had lost all memories of knowing how to function—about to fall unconscious, until her breasts ached and grew tender with his plundering.

He did not stop even after that.

"Let me do things to you too! J-Jaqen…please!" the girl pleaded.

"Oh, dear heavens! The Winter Maiden!" came the voices of the ladies-in-waiting by the door. They were not eavesdropping—far from it, in truth. It was merely, that the girl's impassioned yelps were uncontainable. And the ladies spoke with one another, curious to the point of death about this lord consort who seemed to possess more prowess in the petal-laden featherbed than a highly-trained courtesan. "Oh gods, what otherworldly things is the lord even doing to her?"

He was deaf to everything else but the sounds of his own yearning for her that engulfed him in various, infinite levels. Her other breast, he ravished with a want that was much, much stronger than what he had prior. He licked her, and bit her, and pulled her with his mouth. Her delighted gasps and desperate entreaties that she be allowed to take his wholeness in her mouth, and take him in her, he merely ignored. He will have her first…he will have her.

The clock ticked, and he still enraptured himself with her womanly curves.

There they were laid out in the perfect map of the continent that was her body—the whole of Essos. How long had it been since he had last tasted her? Or heard her roused moans and amorous sussurations?

So long. A whole lifetime, perhaps.

When was the last time, Warrior Bride?

And should the gods grant them babes once more, Jaqen H'ghar wondered how his beloved Arya Stark could possibly feed him and their children with her gracious bosoms. He will father these babes, for sure. He cannot be as selfish as to deprive them of their mother's breasts, yes?

He sustained himself, and he knew she was already hurting, for her tips had gone soft and pink. He could not help it…to resist her is to punish oneself unnecessarily.

The Lorathi stopped asudden.

He stopped, for his lovely girl's breathing had gone erratic, and the sound scared him.

"Arya…" he lifted his face to her, held her cheeks. He wiped his mouth. "Sweetheart…oh no, a man should not have…"
The girl drowned any more words from the Lorathi with a deep kiss. Gently, she broke away, breathing in fits. "D-don't say that, Jaqen…it was…oh, gods! I cannot…I cannot…"


"I love you."

"I know, Arya."

She buried her face against his neck. Spawned by his thoughts that had willingly poured themselves out for her to claim, her emotions had gone askew here and there. What to feel, what to think—she had surrendered all knowledge and capacities for such things. For in his unwritten memoirs were recollections of that woman whose voice the Waters of Rhoyne obeyed, and though she felt within her a thing akin to affinity, Arya Stark knew that she cannot continue to live a ghost of that woman, even for the sake of him.

His past was consuming him, the aura of his lifespan had lengthened into centuries, a millennium even.

And she saw him in those other realms. These realms had their faces and bodies, their memories and motivations and fates; and at a certain point in space and time, they connect and disconnect.

In all realms however, he belonged with her, not with her.

The persona residing within the Lorathi, the one who was before he had become Jaqen H'ghar had revealed to her though not with intent, his magical signature.

She held the pendant of her Queller tight.

*You are in love with a memory, Jaqen.*

The featureless expanse of the Straits of Tyrosh offered a strategic harbor for ships to traverse the sea's path from Lys to Volantis, from Volantis to Valyria. Best avoid the Titan; after all, plans for battle must be allowed to ripen. Only then could the harvest be truly abounding and the fruits of it, the sweetest.

It was circumnavigation, longer days of journeying, hence. Dragons could not be brought for rampage yet, for the Sealord that Volantis had seated in the Secret City had sent a message. The Titan had managed to inflict injury upon the fire-beast that had boldly revealed itself in Braavos for everyone to see. It was the rogue one, and only its true rider could reclaim, re-tame it. That stronghold of a statue had proven itself to be any fire-beast's worthy opponent.

Three lords survived the Doom and crossed infinite space to this sphere, as did four dragons.

Those two ships docked on the northern side of the outermost Valyrian Insula. Boats will carry them who wished to enter the Freehold from the fourth lighthouse in the east. The plan was hatched, the plan was carried out.

The Littlefinger disembarked from the boat before the base of it even made contact with solid ground. He surveyed what was left of Old Valyria from a distance, or rather, what was *rebuilt* so far from the ruins.

He trembled at the sight.
Archaic yet grand torches burned in dark resplendence around an acropolis. At the summit of it is an expansive alcazar with topless towers and high walls, whose gigantic flambeaus hurled wavering shadows across pavestones. Nightwind, wind of looming wintertide swept in from Shivering Sea, but these were hastily tamed by the Summer waters. Even the sound of rustling leaves terrified, as silhouettes all over seemed to dance around them like devilkin.

Slaves had called it the Tyrant's Hill.

It stood like majestic moon, a shimmering cloak of dark jewels, casting into the night sky a spectrum of lights that aided the dark instead of banishing it. Still, the sky is always red above Valyria, as if the shierak qiya had chosen to reside close by. Here and there was the emanation of high sorcery. Magic after all, is ambrosia to the lords, a mystical privilege from the gods, though they are all too arrogant to kneel down in the face of any faith. Mage faculties could give you that.

He walked towards the fortress, accompanied by two of his own hired swords and six slave soldiers that had awaited him at the eastern lighthouse. He knew very little about the capacities of those sorcerers from Ulthos, but the fragments of the Freehold, the cinders of it from the Doom were slowly reforming themselves into their original configurations.

The Littlefinger sang to himself to summon within him some calm.

'They held each other close and turned their backs upon the end. The hills that split asunder and the black that ate the skies…'

The Freehold was breathing, and its breath was deeper than the bellows of the dead four centuries ago. Upon the afterfire-glistened cobbled path are small cracks where flowing liquid obsidian could be seen. The high ridges of the fourteen flames had come back to life, though not fully.

'The flames that shot so high and hot that even dragons burned, would never be the final sights that fell upon their eyes…'

There were those horrifying groans that seemed to suffuse themselves in his very flesh, as if the blood of a living being can once more animate the scorched bodies of those that now lay wasted underneath the caverns. Whispers of incantations, the thaumaturgy is petrifying.

'The city of a thousand years and all that men had learned, the Doom consumed it all alike and neither of them turned…'

Finally, there he stood, in front of the rough-hewn gate of the dragonlord's manse. He was led to the keep.

Pain lanced him as blood pounded on his head. He curled his fist to steady himself, as incandescent spheres of light suspended from the hall's ceiling glowed then dimmed. Even luminescence must tremble. A dark figure emerged from the shadows.

The lord-emperor stood seven-feet tall, his mane of flowing silver. Strapped to his broad back were two Valyrian swords whose pommels and crosshilts had the carvings of a black, four-headed dragonskull. Power shaped various holders of it differently. Anyone who would see him would know that he had absolute control of it—he had shaped power to obey him. His eyes were glowing green, hating. Every breath reeked of fresh blood.

Two other Valyrians materialized.

One was a beautiful female of slender built, and even in his state of fear, the Littlefinger had thought of the gold that would pour in should such a beauty be the center of attraction in one of his brothels.
He swallowed audibly at the sight. The woman's hair was tied back, but she had allowed the whole silver length of it to slither freely on the glistening floor. She sat beside the lord-emperor.

The other was a man whose stance commanded esteem. His silver hair was braided in separate locks, running past his shoulders to his waist. He smirked upon seeing the Littlefinger's pale face. He remained standing, legs slightly apart, arms folded. His scent—all of their scents—smelled of antiquity.

Aurion, Daxen, Lathos. Dragonriders of Old.

"Who was it?" was Lord Aurion's query. The voice generated by his throat was akin to chilling reverberations against stalagmites in caves unlit. The Littlefinger shuddered, as did his Swords.

"Valyrian as they have said, my lord." Even as former Master of Coin, keeper of finest brothels, with the Iron Bank as monetary ally without the repository being fully aware of it, cost of fifty ships is impossible to outbid.

"The Targaryen Prince?"

"Not the Sixth. He had sailed for Pentos two nights ago."

Lord Aurion roared in an almost delirious laughter. The Littlefinger closed his eyes at the sound that horrified. Such reaction was unexpected for someone whose plans were thwarted.

There were other plans though, and other plans after that. Schemes are like plenteous green grass. Therefore, he would reward himself with this one amusement.

That bastard Archon-heir of the Esdraelon still breathes the air of the Known. The second dragonrider had never died.

And despite the greatest of runes he had laid eyes on West of Westeros, he still could not find any coherent explication as to how one burnt, dead, and buried could possibly re-exist in another cycle. The fire-beast had sensed it as well. After all, the blood bond between a dragon and its master is as deep as that of a mother and her babe.

And the enchantress?

Perhaps, she is here. Had she crossed prior life as well, or permeated the spheres, and in which forms, faces, and names? Why must it matter? She's plague to the great plots, and if the possibility of her existing in her imperishable virginal body be proven true, then the plots were in danger of being stonewalled once more.

The Long Night cannot happen a second time with all of them defenseless and at the losing side of things. Co-existence. This is cruelty, yet this is the greater and the only good.

The woman, Daxen, spoke. "The Queller is indeed with the girl?"

"Yes, my lady. Tormo Fregar had claimed seeing it worn by Arya Stark."

The one called Lathos chuckled richly. His braided locks swayed gently as he paced the hall. "Hah! He's doing it all over again—the sacred confluence, the gift. Beseeching three warring gods to become allies to them both. His whore had turned him into an imbecilic superstitious," he turned to the woman. "Haresh has always had this soft spot for those slaves, the softest spot for their queen enchantress. If only he had the courage to return the obsessive love of one Valyrian, and kept his bulge for that whore concealed in his breeches—"
"Apparently, he has poor taste in women," Daxen shot back. "Pity. I've always enjoyed our wild intimacies in the Archon's tower. I couldn't fit him in my mouth, he used to rob me of dire breath as I choked on his length. I didn't care. But to scorn the blood by handing ancient rune down to a Rhoynish adversary—unpardonable."

"Unpardonable?" Lathos smirked. "We'll see to that. Might be that when you lay eyes on that traitor once more, a single second won't be wasted and you'll go crawling and kissing his feet."

The woman smiled. "Damn you. Keep an eye open tonight, I will kill you—"

"Silence!" Aurion boomed. "Silence, or I will strangle you both with your own nonesense."

Thirty thousand Qohorik colonists rode with him to reclaim what remained of Valyria, with the other two faithful riders by his side. In that realm, Valyria was never meant to rise once more, their fate was to lose. There were mistakes. However, it was one thing to make them, and another to keep making them. The creatures who the men call 'gods' kept on committing them, though—in manners endless in fact; hence, the cycles, the varying spheres, West of Westeros, prophecies. All these do nothing but rectify the falsehoods and faults of them named 'gods' by some sightless believers.

The strongest may be weakened and the wisest might err.

Now, men must rely on their flawed selves to create their own fate, alter it if not. Men tend to act as if the future had been set, they follow its light but take not the courage to examine how this fate had formed them.

These priests of the gods and their faiths teach men of an ultimate reality.

There is no such thing. Realities are infinite.

"The name?" Lord Aurion finally asked.

"Written in the slip, handed over. The House cannot desert the agreement or it's their own art against each one of them. The way I have been made to comprehend, their Creed carries power of its own; its pages cannot be dismissed or it will be sacrilege to their guild's divinity. Dragon gold was paid and they have their tenets. Insider was most effective—knows the primary matters of it all. The mark, then a most assured death," the Littlefinger explained.

The bond must be broken, Aurion thought.

"Very well," the lord replied, rising from the velveteen cushion. "Proceed. Be wise and keep your head with you."

A deep bow, and he departed.

He traversed that horrifying yet all-beholding path once more. In the midst of steps sure and unsure, he began weighing his options the way he weighed his gold, the way he assayed every man that graced the lascivious alcoves of his den of whores. Only this time, the balance is an invisible one.

Four dragons hatched from the days when Valyria still stood as a mighty obelisk of grandeur. All these, against two Targaryens and their three fire-beasts. The side of victors is clear.

But then, there were the skinchanging Starks, and one dragonrider whom they have named 'betrayer'. One of the beasts had gone rogue, it was heedless of the lord-emperor's call. The coin never stops spinning, and he could hear the sound of nickel against metal. No, the side of victors is unclear. He would not leap onto the unsure.
Therefore, machinations and a cabal of one side versus the other, with the Littlefinger in the middle.

*To Pentos,* he thought. *I must speak with the eunuch at once.*

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Here's a chapter for all of you. Thank you for reading the story and for your lovely comments. I'm sorry, but I'll be a bit demanding in this update. Please leave a quick comment--I would love to hear what you think of the Aegon-Arya/Rhaegar-Lyanna ship in this fic, and the J/A/A triangle. If you want, we could have a poll right here on who should get Arya--Jaqen or Aegon. Really, your feedback! XD

Seriously, thank you all. And let's continue reading J/A. And writing, too. Thicken the collection. ;D Happy weekend!

For: K
"It is not brand seared through flesh but a permanent imprint

On the face and its name and its characters within.

Marked and dead

Unless the dead defeats he who is Faceless.

One who conquers Death becomes it."

Faceless Creed; 37th leaf

"Love is madness and lust is poison," the wise Lannister would always tell him. "Pray tell. Where do whores go when they depart from this world?"

"Why are you even speaking of whores? I am speaking with you of this girl—"

"Girls, women, whores," Tyrion Lannister emptied his goblet in a single gulp, turned to Aegon the Sixth. "Forgive me for being a repulsive, wretched creature. I am no better than worms that feed on the flesh of dead men, after all. The only part in them that must interest you is that which they have between their legs, nothing more. My whole life since I've learned how to fornicate, I've lain with corpses—"

"Women who can't feel, yes. Very well, let us stop this," Aegon chuckled uneasily. He now wore his silver hair that fell perfectly past the nape of his neck. No concealment necessary, the Known must know his pure dragon's blood, time is nigh, let it not pass as they say.

"Ah, but if you would be king, you must have a whore to rule by your side," Tyrion replied. "You need the same whore to mate with you morn to night on that kingly carpet of yours while you vomit the excess of wine you've had. That whore must wait for you abed, legs wide open to receive you—believe me, the small council is more exhausting than a journey to the Wall in the fiercest of winters." He poured himself another goblet. "And you need that whore to further the lineage, and gift this world with more whores and more men that would sleep with them."

The Imp had finished a whole bottle. There were others though in the manse's cellar, but the Prince was quick to lay a hand upon his arm, commanding him through mere gesture that he remained where he is. There was drunkenness to the intoxicating nectar of grapefruits; there was this drunkenness too, to the equally rousing nectar pouring graciously out of a woman's core when urged. The wise Lannister was inebriated beyond control with both.

"The best to love—they are gifted at concealing their own shattered hearts," the Imp claimed. "Even if you do grace their dinner tables and return after six crescent moons, they will not compete against the sea for your affections. To be granted such liberty from emotions, perfect detachment. Oh, how I'd shoot my lord father's chest with quarrels over and again for that gift."

"You sound too exhausted," the Prince observed.
"Oh, not at all, my Prince," Tyrion stood and patted the lad's shoulder. "Not at all."

"What is it with you and women?" Aegon inquired. "Not every woman is Shae, my friend."

The Imp chuckled as he regarded the Prince. *A mere boy,* he thought. *Comely lad, rebel Prince, a damnable dragonrider. Of course, he would think of things ideal.* "No, not every woman is Shae, very good! Some women," he raised a forefinger to emphasize a point. "Some women are Sansa Stark."

"That is one other you have not mentioned."

"So I may not despoil her name," he said. "The schemer. Shae is... Shae is that woman who knows you're grotesque, dismisses it, because her cunt is as deprived as her pockets and coin satchels. To her, you are not a man—you are fine liqueur and lavish food for the starving belly, satin fabric, golden necklaces, a featherbed with drapes. Gaomagon, as the Valyrians would say, after eleven minutes of ecstasy and bursting carnal froth, done. True whore. Same as any other."

The Prince nodded with sympathy. "Even the most depraved of women can become mothers..."

"The disillusioned," the Imp cut him. "Sansa Stark—a maiden who once dreamt of a Knight of Flowers who would claim her, ended up instead with a degenerate king whose purpose in life is to inflict torture and wreak catastrophe, run from the cap-sheaf of battles and gain glory for himself when those battles are won. Caught in the middle of sadistic schemes, married off to a dwarf whose kin slaughtered her family in a wedding, no less. Still, she stands, collecting the fragments of what was lost, rebuilding."

"A Stark in the Vale, a Tully quite close to the Riverlands," the Prince mused. "She's gold in any conquest. How very serendipitous that she is married to you."

"By paper, not by blood," the Imp replied. "Never got to consummate the marriage, never wanted to. Ah, but how she managed to run the Vale, with a sickly young boy and a wily brothelkeeper turned lord, beyond me. A mere child then, but her skin of porcelain urn had turned to ivory tusk, had turned to Valyrian steel."

Don't lie, Sansa. I am malformed, scarred, small, but blow out the candles and I am no worse than other men.

Tyrion sighed.

I could even be... good to you.

Tysha. She is to blame in all these.

Where do whores go when they depart from this world?

"Mothers and mistresses," Aegon continued the trail he had left. "One time you bed her, another time she gives you little ones. They are beautiful creatures. How can you even be this bitter about all of them? It's as if you have never had a mother who cradled you—"

"Accurate," the Imp answered. "I killed her too."

The Prince raised his brows in surprise.

"Then, I rest my case."
Aegon the Sixth rose and surveyed the stretch of the insula by the covered upper promenade. Melodious descant of harps and hearts echoed in his ears. Finally, the lovely Wolf in his dreams. Powerless, he mused. *How can surrendering oneself to another's unknown person make so much sense?* In this realm he had fought battles, lost some yet conquered more. Night of all nights, he had called it. Not only was her face revealed to him, but her seat of affections that surpassed all limits and spells and chances, and her devotion to him that never faltered, even after their years of seeking their soul's other half.

*Return, or leave me here dying…*

If it so happened that they had named each other dragon and direwolf from time past, such for him is inconsequential.

*I can't even blink. There was the quick flutter of my lids when wintertide blew, and the Griff's voice calling for me. A second later, gone.*

Aegon the Sixth decided.

*We cannot be mere subjects in a dream realm. Too perilous, this cannot be.*

He rubbed his lips, contemplated. "Volantene history—you were right. Dragons are needed for conquest."

"Of course, I was right," Tyrion replied. "When you took heed of my proposal and set out for the Stormlands yourself without any fire-beast's aid, you have embraced your fate as the begotten scion of your great house. In all my confabulations with Daenerys Targaryen, she had nothing but questions about you. How did you manage the twenty-five thousand strong? What were your stratagems upon sight of Shipbreaker's Bay? Where does the conquest proceed from here—north to the Straits of Tarth or northwest to Kingswood? Who were your envoys to Dorne and the Reach? When will you set out for the Crownlands?"

Aegon smiled, humbled. "And what did you tell her, if I may be allowed to ask?"

"Nothing," Tyrion shrugged. "Nothing but this—that it is you who have raised the dragon's sigil in Westeros once more, and that her arrival to Dragonstone was a little delayed. As it is, you have besieged a quarter of the Stormlands. She had laid siege on naught, even with those beasts of hers."

"Forget you not, she had warred against the Great Masters and the Wise Masters, freed slaves by the thousands," the Prince countered.

"Conquering the bay of slaves is different from conquering seven whole kingdoms with castle strongholds housing liege lords and their vassals, marchers, entire armies," Tyrion dismissed the lad's feigned modesty with a hand flick. "Indeed, she is Aegon the Conqueror with breasts, but you are Aegon the Conqueror in the flesh. The Targaryen sigil has three dragonheads—you are her kin and together you form the two. Targaryens must set this straight once and for all, show the lords. This is the whole point of conquest."

The Prince turned to the Imp, amused. "Aegon the Conqueror with teats? Ah! How fortunate you are to return to Pentos unscathed by dragonfire despite your audacity."

Tyrion scoffed. "Let us not fool ourselves, my Prince. Those dragons are here in Essos—mating with your call. Daenerys Targaryen cannot proceed yet from the Stone, her dragons had gone defiant. I read quite a lot, still I could not understand a thing about dragon ownership."

"Summerhall," Aegon replied. He walked to where the Imp was, expression of melancholy and
passivity. "Perchance, that tragedy had brought quiet laughters to critics of dragonspawning. Aegon the Fifth died in the fire along with a few others. Despite the blaze, those three eggs never hatched. They found those unborn beasts when flames died down—Jaehaerys then Aerys the Mad. From kings to princes, and Rhaegar inherited them, passed them onto me."

"But only females can hatch dragons," the Imp concluded. "Ill-luck you have a cock instead of a cunt."

"Ill-luck, indeed," Aegon smiled. "Still, they fascinate me—women. How they could spawn life from seed, form such life and give it breath from within them, birth it into the world? Even dragons follow this unwrit course."

"And now that girl had planted in you an obsession for babes that shatter quiet nights, I suppose."

"Perhaps."

"Good."

"Why is that?"

"You need heirs. Daenerys Targeryen cannot bear children."

The Prince met revelation with silence.

Without heirs, she cannot hope to rule for long. Dragons are creatures of magic; they can outlive the lords that hold domination over them. The lord dies, the beast prevails. Another lord of apocryphal motives may emerge from the proverbial crevasse and decide to hold purse strings over it. Anarchy.

Is this why she came to my aid faster than the wind could carry her?

"Speaking of women and heirs, the House of Black and White has sent us this," Tyrion informed him. From his breastpocket, he took a scrolled parchment, laid it on the table. "Might be about the Lady Arya. Forgive me, I am a knower of intoxications and all that come with it, but I know little about tongues."

The seal of the guild was concealed in layers of dried stamps formed from signets of Essosi noble houses unknown. Such seal is not perpetually used, as it varies from agreement to agreement. There was the hand that paid for the gift and his eyes, and between the House and him is the exclusive ratification of a pact. Once unsealed, the trace to its source vanishes.

The seal was broken. Aegon didn't mind.

"Where is she?"

"Braavos."

He read the contents.

The entire message was three paragraphs in length, enshrined in an unsystematic yet methodical comingling of derivative tongues of three—Valyrian, Lhazareen, Qartheen. Thirty characters glowed from various words in various phrases and sentences sprawled across the parchment. His eyes were quick, and they must be, for after those letters showed themselves in gleam, they vanished from the thin paper—ink, speck, shadow.

Any man gifted in tongues—from Common to Asshaii—would not be able to decipher the cryptic
tidings. It was only meant for the eyes of the beseecher.

'Naejot aōha āeksion, naejot īlva sŷz.'

'To your gold, to our gain.'

Dragons must not make slaves out of free men but free men out of slaves.

Aegon the Sixth rolled the parchment once more. A nod to Tyrion Lannister. "Found."

"Next course of action?" the Imp asked.

The Targaryen smiled disarmingly.

"Play the game of thrones."

The death god's eyes were upon them both, as they walked hand in hand to the House of Black and White.

The divine adumbration that the connection between the Chosen and her Shield was other than what is in the Songs was only the Lorathi's conception. It never came from the god. Men merely choose what they want to believe, on the basis of what they needed to preserve within themselves.

And the deity can feel—ah, but gods created sense, did they not? She felt him, in slow, painstaking progression, turning his back from her, from his oath. And yes, the oath is not the oath of one Faceless.

Such a pact was conceived between them both before he had ever laid eyes on the House of Black and White—centuries, centuries for mortals.

It has not been that long for the death god. For her, in all her celestial capacities and essences, the pact was made and it matters not when. The gods do not live in time, time lives in them.

A man and a girl entered the weirwood and ebony doors of the temple and proceeded straight to the atrium. By the poison pool, the Kindly Man awaited them. His eyes immediately darted from the blissful faces of his two assassins, to their hands clasped together. As if their hands caught scorching fire, the girl immediately let go of the Lorathi.

Jaqen H'ghar motioned for Arya to stay where she is, as he approached the Elder with arms held out in an effort to explain.

"Elder, a man will obtain the name from the Sealord, please," he began, but the Kindly Man held out a hand to signal that he must do no further explaining.

"We have the name."

The Lorathi's brows arched in surprise. "W-we do?"

"Indeed," the Kindly Man replied, his expression blank. He then gestured for the girl to come to him and she did as she was ordered. "Arya Stark, welcome home." He patted her head with the fondness of a father to a doted child. A tone mellifluous. "You have concluded the task as Winter Maiden exceptionally well. Sights of blessing look down upon you. There you have unearthed the Sealord's most intricate plans, and now Braavos is no longer on the blind side of things."

Arya Stark breathed her relief. She almost thought that the Kindly Man would strike them both with
his undying training stick at having seen their entwined fingers. "I owe it to this temple," she replied. "I did not get the name, but apparently, someone else from the Order did. Whoever carried out the task on my behalf, and the manner by which he or she carried out that task must not matter, since we already have what was desired."

The Kindly Man smiled. "Very well," he paused, seemingly irresolute on how to continue. "A child must rest. She no doubt had a truly...sensational yet exhausting evening." Then, turning to the Lorathi, he said, "Proceed to the Hall of Masters at once. Valar dohaeris." At this, the Elder walked away, leaving two Faceless in the atrium.

Upon gaining certainty that the Elder was out of sight and out of earshot, Arya opened her mouth. Jaqen placed one forefinger against her lips to block out any words from her.

"Go to your bedchamber," he said quietly. "A man will come to you as soon as the gathering concludes."

The girl gently held her master's finger which silenced her lips. She kissed it then pulled it a little to her lower lip. Then, delicately, she buried her teeth against it, teasing him.

The Lorathi's eyes widened with beguilement, then chuckled. "Arya, please..."

"Fine..." the girl coyly replied, swayed her hips as she walked away. The Lorathi just bit his lip, smiled. She paused to look back at him. "Please Master, if I am already asleep upon your return, wake me up, yes?"

"Fine..." was his reply.

His impassioned eyes followed her out of the atrium.

The Lorathi walked unhurriedly towards the Hall of Masters, replaying in his contemplations the fanciful exchange they had mere minutes ago. Her words still stirred his heart.

*I love you, Jaqen.*

High spirits—such that he had never felt, engulfed him. Suddenly, everything in the entire world seemed altogether trifling. Only she remained.

A man must decide what the next course of actions must be.

Once faceless, faceless thereon. Such is written in the Creed. One of the vows of a Faceless Man is to remain celibate for their god. Essentially and ultimately, Faceless Men are *priests* of death; and their ordinance requires the fullest loyalty only to the precepts and calling of the House—they must not engage in any form of lasting relationship with another. They must cut ties with their families, they must not marry. This must be, in order for them to keep their dispassion—to carry out tasks without burden, without connection to their inherently biased selves.

However, the ritual by the goddess pool may have overturned all these for her.

Aegeus had planned this all along—the courtesan task and the enchantress proclaimed.

'Water from me to you, water from you to me.'

It was banishment, purification, immersion. When Arya Stark rose from the waters of that great bath, she had accepted that aspect of herself that was lost in her memories. As Faceless, she is unknown through her many guises, but as Arya Stark, she embodied one universal divinity. The enchantment
that had been unleashed that whimsical night was enough to fray the fabric among the different realms.

Concession is wise.

*She is Queen Nymeria of Ny Sar and Arya Stark of Winterfell. Not two selves but one.*

It is neither rebirth nor re-entering the flesh, unlike what most would understand, for men believe that souls aspire for freedom while their bodies hold them prisoner.

It is a cycle of ascending spirals. She carried the same face, same spirit, same essence. Different name. There are many versions of the self that connect and disconnect in various realms, it does not mean that these versions cannot unite to form the person. It serves a whole purpose after all—restore previous existence, connect it with the self that exists in the now, shape an existence that is newfangled and unique. If she accepts all versions of self, she can harness the powers she did not even know she possessed.

*By the wrath of the deities it must be so.*

*By the grace of the deities it must be so.*

Not two selves but one—in the sacred confluence where they drank their own blood, her Self is 'him'. No one can say that the self that existed in the past is gone; and that only the other self that exists in the present must matter. If there is one thing that Aegeus had unraveled through obsidian candles and unfinished mapping of the Known and Unknown, it is this: that time does not move in a manner straightforward, like an arrow that was released by the bowstring that held it.

Anomalies of time—tomorrow can exist in yesterday. This is the true rune West of Westeros. If men possess *true* knowledge about reality around them, it would matter not if time was in a state of disarray. And these overlapping realities of selves within selves ungoverned by time is beyond what the death god can understand, because gods have no concept of clocks, chronologies, inconsistencies. They live in infinities.

From the most mundane to the most profound, all tales must be told.

A coming together that is all-good, all-powerful. Back in the days of Valyria and Rhoyne, fire and water in all its forms had united.

Altogether, they are going to defeat the Old, and with it, Winter.

On matters more personal, why did he even risk obtaining his dragon gold from the mazes of Lorath?

It might be that he did it in order to protect her, though she neither demanded nor expressed the need for it. He is her Guardian after all. Oh, but there was surely more to it. The Lorathi battled against the desperate cries of his affections.

The more he thought about this almost irresistible impulse, and her…the more he felt himself exploding like alchemy gone awry.

So trusting and innocent the girl was, to undress herself in front of him.

To let him taste her, delight himself in her nakedness, her wonderful mounds.

*Arya.*
Jaqen H'ghar knew that it was not only temporary warmth with her that could quench his feelings of unrest.

*Something...something eternal.*

*Something deathless.*

Finally, he reached the Hall of Masters. The Lorathi entered but was surprised that except for the Elder who knelt in front of Him of Many Faces, there was no one else in that chamber.

The man stayed beside the door. The Elder who no doubt sensed his presence, spoke to him.

"Sit."

The Lorathi sat on his usual seat behind the weirwood. By chance, he already had an inkling of what the Elder might tell him, and he had rehearsed in his mind countless upon countless of times his explications. He is a Faceless Man, yet he is Guardian, as well. As sworn, the Guardian must in all aspects preserve she that was chosen and she that was sent. Had he not done that—

"Such encumbrance, the Many Faced One had bestowed upon me," the Elder stood and turned to him calmly. His voice was firm and foreboding. He slowly walked from his god's statue and sat opposite the Lorathi. "The burden of having to run a House full of willfully rebellious children. One was seen bargaining with a Shadowbinder, and another was seen taking active part in the Winter Maiden's bidding, despite the Burners of the Pass giving him stern warning in this very temple. Made the bid in his true face, no less."

"Elder, if I may—"

"No, you may not!"

Jaqen was dumbfounded at the response. For the first time, the Elder had expressed his absolute lack of intent to listen to him. The Lorathi was one of his most trusted, someone whose words he never had to take under advisement—as if his words were wise enough, or perhaps wiser, to even be questioned. Gatherings would not be concluded without him having some final say to the Order's courses of action. Had he truly done something so unforgivable this time?

"You will not open your mouth, for once," the Elder said calmly, though it was beyond obvious that he was containing the anger underneath. "You will not lend me your ears, you will surrender them to me fully."

The Lorathi expelled air from his mouth and nodded.

"I have mentioned before how I detest having to deal with complications when carrying out tasks," he began. "But you intentionally disregarded my words. Even without you saying a thing, you have questioned my insights and decisions about matters concerning the Winter Maiden."

The Lorathi's face betrayed no emotion as he listened to the Kindly Man.

"You participated in the bidding," the Elder continued. The Lorathi scoffed, as if saying that it was not that big of a deal. "And it was crystal-clear, a response to your personal motivations. Faceless Men do not engage themselves in concerns that promote nothing but individual vainglory."

This time, the Lorathi did not anymore bother hiding his thoughts. "With all due respect Elder, you have the name. Why must it matter still that Arya Stark got out of the Winter Maiden's barge uncorrupted? Why must it matter that a man saw to it that she remained chaste?"
All of a sudden, the Elder rose to his seat and crossed the distance between him and the Lorathi. Upon reaching his seat, he slammed his right hand forcefully against the weirwood table, leaving atop it a black and white slip containing the name.

The skies and the earth beneath seemed to have overturned themselves on Jaqen H'ghar. As he took the slip in his fingers and stared at the name, he realized the irreversibility of what was done.

Shame, for time could not reverse itself that fast.

**Facelessness.**

This was entirely why dealers of death must act only with objectivity. One wrong judgment and consequences may indeed be severe. Servants perform for the death god the dirt, soil their hands with blood of other men—righteous, contemptuous—but they do not decide who must die.

**Arya Stark.**

The Elder shook his head in disappointment. "Had you let the Sealord win the bid, he would have gone to the Winter Maiden. Arya Stark would have so easily pried on his thoughts and learned that it was she he would name. Arya Stark would have carried out the supplication of your beloved sister in the Order and murdered the Sealord that instant." The Lorathi covered his hands with his face, then brushed his hair despairingly with his fingers. "Right after the bid, Tormo Fregar gave the temple the name."

"How can he even know about the Winter Maiden's persona? How can the lords know?"

"Through a traitor in the Order. A master."

The impact of those words registered on the Lorathi. Certainly no soul could betray the Faceless Men and live to brag about the act—either the masters could smell the betrayer within the temple, or kill him before he even makes any attempt. How good was this conspirator, that he was able to conceal his intents from ten others?

"Who?" the Lorathi asked through clenched teeth.

"That is what I am trying to discover," the Elder answered. "The only thing I am most sure about is that it could not be you, as you are apparently..." he chose to leave the words in the air. He shook his head.

The Lorathi laughed bitterly. "This cannot be," he replied, then eyed the Elder intently. "How can anyone name the Electi? She is *No One*. We all are. Death requires a *real* name—one with existent identity."

"She is faceless and nameless; but beyond these, she wears Arya Stark's face and carries Arya Stark's name and bears Arya Stark's gifts from the old gods. Why do you think would the temple conceal her identity to the point of one faceless man's death? She had to be faceless *and* a Stark, and that latter state of hers is most necessary, despite it being a possible cause for her downfall. Heavens, even I am getting enervated of hearing my own words over and again," the Elder explained, albeit heatedly. "The price has been paid and all men must die. Even the Chosen, when named."

"A Faceless Man cannot kill anyone whose name he knows."

"The agreement with Fregar was twoscore moons ago, prior to Arya Stark's arrival in the temple. Not a soul in the temple could have known her by then, the *shierak qiya* had not yet appeared, as prophecies said it would. Your Braavosi brother had waited for the astrography of the Moonsingers..."
and the reader of this temple before he could confirm the girl's identity. Agreements must be honored, or the death god will have all of our heads."

"The death god will never do such thing," the Lorathi replied.

The Elder laughed bitterly. "The death god favors certain persons, yes—a reason why you are as bold as you are. But for the lot of us who are mere servants, following the Creed is higher than the highest of obligations. War against the Creed is war against the god—it is not a war of flesh and bones, but of souls. No one wins but the one who is higher."

"And Braavos?" the Lorathi retorted for lack of a better argument. He hastily rose from his seat. "What about your cyvasse games with Volantis and the dragonlords? And the realms, too! A man supposes you will just let them claim victory now, yes? I suppose you have no need of Arya Stark now?" Jaqen angrily stood, rushed to the wooden shelf on the far corner of the room and rummaged through it, intentionally dropping books on the floor. "There must be certain exceptions in the Creed." He said, his voice breaking. Jaqen pulled from the shelf a massive, worn out book and slammed it on the table. He began flipping through the pages. "Damn it!"

The Elder only regarded his Jaqen with the pity a father would feel for a son. Forbidden, he thought, so young and pure.

He should not, but the only thing he could give the almost crestfallen Lorathi was a glimmer of hope. "Thirty-seven."

Jaqen glanced sideways at the Elder then quickly turned to that leaf. He let his fingers run through the page and paused when he found one particular verse. It was not much but supplicants cannot have too many choices.

The Lorathi pinched the bridge of his nose, shut his eyes tight. The Elder spoke.

"We cannot challenge the deity on this."

"A man knows."

"How well did you train your apprentice?"

"Well enough," he exhaled.

"Then, may the old gods grant her power. May the red god preserve her and may the death god take her not before her time," the Elder said. "You are Guardian, take the task now—defeat the threats, surrender yourself if you must. I will not delegate one specific Faceless Man for this, my boy. You will."

The deliberation was the most difficult. Boundaries must not be crossed, especially those drawn by Him of Many Faces. How can one Chosen be ensconced from pitfalls if the Guardian will capitulate?

Questioning the subject of Death—a curse. Valar Morghulis.

Still, there are those boundaries that must be spanned for the sake of one beloved. Hood's breath will be upon all of them, for the death god despises being bypassed.

To hell with them. A man will cross all damnable boundaries!

"She who conquers Death becomes it. Go," the Elder ordered him. "She must die tonight."
Lyanna…

Rhaegar, beloved.

Our fruits, my love?

You never came back. You swore, you failed. A full moon had passed…

Oh, but I will breathe. Be enkindled.

When? Where?

Before a Doom ends.

Rhaegar, beloved…I need you, my dragon.

A girl had fallen asleep while waiting upon her master's return. Tightly, she gripped the bedlinens as she helplessly relented to her usual dream state. She was running…away and far from the Forks, where she discovered a mutilated, fully naked corpse of one woman.

Her eyes opened…and they saw her.

She sprang forward—past the water's edge, past the thickets. Past a hill. I see darkness in you. Atop the funereal night was a full blood moon, left solitary by the usual scintillating auroras. She howled through her tragic soul.

The flame of life passed from him to her…and by gods, she rose.

Strong winds blew relentlessly on her fur, and she felt cold. Her beastly courage, replaced by one direwolf's woebegone spirit. Weep, weep. Escape was impossible, salvation comes only through lamentations. She called out many names—three, ten. No one replied.

Kill and eat.

A direwolf found shelter in a desolate cave. The howls were replaced by whimpers of anguish. The direwolf's nose touched the dank soil. Stench of decay, of life adulterated. Pitch-black darkness whispered wretchedness in her ears. Bats screeched and soared in all and opposing directions. She waited for the blackness to ebb away.

The woman's flesh was pudding soft, her skin whiter than snow yet putrescent. Half-bald, distorted visage. Her fingernails carried the flesh from where she had clawed her own face.

But her eyes were the most horrifying.

Her eyes saw her, and they hated.

The direwolf whimpered and wailed in the night.

Catelyn.

Lady Catelyn Stark.

Mother.

She spoke. Her voice was petrifying, hollow—as if it came from the depths of the ground of those
deceased. Those bereft of life for all eternity would arise if summoned by that voice. She does not belong here. The Elder had claimed how her undeath was an abomination.

There were five names on her dear mother's lips. She spoke of these names to a lady whose capable hands wielded Ice which the Lions have melted.

*Find my strong, sweet Maiden, find my Stranger that was lost.*

*Bring me the Valonqar, the Lord of Crossings. The Mockingbird is mine to slay.*

The direwolf walked closer to her, eyes misty because of the chill of Winter and the chill of Death that had failed to claim. The direwolf's vision was blurred as it silently wept, as it mourned and rejoiced at the same time.

*Mother, what have they done to you?*

*Are you Lannister? Are you Frey?*

*No, mother.*

*Who are you?*

*Arya.*

*Are you Lannister? Frey?*

*No…*

*Then, I do not know who you are.*

The direwolf howled its loudest during that full blood moon.

That full blood moon had transfigured itself to reveal its crescent form, its shape of a sickle slicing its way into the skies and the clouds that floated upon it, like a scimitar from the heavens.

Old Valyria, with its arched gables, roofless towers, high-rising belfries. Even the sun seemed to shy away from a distance. The Freehold stood with such chaotic profusion, and it showed itself to all beholders with dreadful classicism. Thunderclaps sounded in the Old, but it is not the foreboding sound of tempest, but the sound of the distant flames—all fourteen of them. The chill and damp of the night clung to each and every soul that suffered and reveled.

In all its terrible greatness, there was the redeeming sight of those winged creatures.

Some drifted through the skies and frolicked with the harsh winds, and these winds, they tamed. Some waited on the majestic rooftops of their lords and masters, wings splayed out, prepared for flight. And they flew—it was a chimera of shimmers and colors.

The imperial ones were most feared. Most powerful, most precise. Of their one thousand and sixty-seven glistening scales, five hundred thirty-four are virtue, five hundred and thirty-three are vile.

Their strong movement as they sailed through the sky formed thick hazes of soft-surging waters—for even as they passed through the rivers leading to the Summer Sea and the now Gulf of Grief, rivulets and grand watercourses obeyed them.

And this was because of this water enchantress one Valyrian had brought to the Freehold.
I can teach him, beloved.

Dragons cannot breathe underwater, my sweet.

Not if they resist. Calm as still water—he can and he will.

Such gift would render him unstoppable. Even Urkon…

Yes, and he can hide himself in space through vapor. Let me teach him, Haresh.

The red god through fire, the old gods through water.

Indeed, let them unite.

Of the many offenses men could commit, rebellion is the most detestable in the eyes of Valyrians.

Arya Stark was awoken by the feel of cold steel against her neck. She kept her eyes shut.

Facelessness.

She continued her pretense of sleep. Slowly yet surely, her hands moved beneath her pillow to retrieve her daggers. Her chest seemed to forget how to breathe, but her senses were still alert. In her mind, she rehearsed various manners on how, when, and where to attack this most unwelcome guest. Despite the questions on the assassin’s intent flooding her mind that instant, she was able to will herself to channel all of her thoughts and energies to the looming bloodshed. The aura of one who is faceless was unmistakable—the assailant is a woman.

A stab to the heart?

A throat slit, from ear to ear?

A fatal pierce through the eye?

"No need for that, Arya Stark," she heard the Waif say. "Acknowledge your mortality and succumb peacefully to your ruin. Valar Morghulis."

At these words, Arya Stark swiftly grabbed the Waif's dagger by the blade, drawing fresh blood from the palm of her right hand. She threw it forcefully and it landed near the open threshold. A quick head-to-head strike and the Waif fell hard from the featherbed to the stone floor. Arya retrieved her daggers from beneath her pillow and attempted to stab the woman on the stomach, enough to immobilize her for minutes. The Waif was quicker both in motion and thought—she was on her feet within seconds. She skillfully seized Arya’s wrist and twisted her arms backwards.

The viscous blood in the girl's palms and the excruciating stretch of both her muscles and bones were enough for the girl to unwillingly surrender her daggers to the cold ground. The woman continued pulling her arms in agonizing angles, and the girl writhed and screamed in pain. The woman gripped the girl's body tight, confining the movement of her limbs to almost nothing. She pressed another blade against the girl's neck, and this time, it went deeper—cutting an inch of her flesh near her very pulse.

The girl could feel the trickle of blood.

Arya gasped for dire air. "Who sent you?!"

"Your Faceless Master."
Her eyes widened and for a painful fraction of a second, Arya Stark lost all the will to live.

Jaqen?

My Jaqen?

"You lie!" The girl struggled against the Waif's tight hold. Her voice broke.

The woman placed her lips against her right ear, whispered. "If after this you are still breathing, you could ask him." Gradually, the Waif released her hold of Arya, much to the girl's surprise. The woman grabbed her hair and spoke once more to her. "I will let you reclaim your fancy daggers from the floor. You may run away from the temple, if you wish. Twenty seconds, and I will chase you to the ends of Braavos."

There were two and only two options.

Either she faces the Waif—a full-fledged Faceless Master of the House of Black and White, and beseech Him of Many Faces or whoever gods were listening for an impossible victory against her; or as she had suggested, run and use the twenty-second window to plan a more effective counterattack.

In the midst of her quick weaving of plans for her own survival, she strained yet failed to brush aside the Waif's words about who ordered the hit on her name.

Realization collapsed upon her like colossal rocks from the sky—it may truly be that she was double-crossed by someone in the Order. However, she could not force what she had heard from the woman to coincide with what she believes—that Jaqen... he... he will not do this to her. She endeavored this: to not let herself be defeated by hopelessness, despite the truth that her spirit was slowly being crushed, and that she was falling apart.

I cannot fall. I'm a Wolf.

I am a Stark.

I am Arya Stark.

The Waif pushed her away, and Arya acted in haste.

She picked up her daggers that were strewn on the floor.

Then in the cold, punishing night, she ran.

The girl paddled the boat away from the temple as quick as she could, fighting against the unexpectedly strong current of the canal, enduring the sweltering pain of her left-hand palm. Her wound roughly brushed against the splinter of the paddle, widening the cut and intensifying her agony. She brushed the blood softly trickling down her neck with the back of her hand. It was too dark—the Unmasking is over and most of Braavos is asleep. Her eyes struggled to see beyond the blackness and she caught sight of the bank of the Long Canal. She rowed towards its direction. The boat finally hit solid ground; she rapidly disembarked and whisked away.

There was only one place to go.

Moonsingers.

She dashed across the labyrinthine streets of Braavos. A few locals were still up and about, concluding their business for that day, as ladies awaited in brothels and ship folks entered some
serving alehouses. In her state of urgency, she accidentally bumped against some drunken small merchants, thus sending their bottled suds flying in the air or crashing on the ground. The girl tripped on one sailor's leg, and when she hoisted herself up, she inadvertently held the man's trousers, smearing it with blood.

"What in the hells are yeh doin?!"

"That bitch, runnin' 'round over there! Knocking over bottles on purpose!"

Some men walked hastily to her direction, and one grabbed her by the sleeve. "Oy! Stop righ' there and pay for these shite!" Arya struggled out of the man's grasp, but his hold was resilient.

She quickly pulled out her dagger and slashed through the sleeve, freeing herself in the process.

She darted away.

Her chest was exploding, her breathing, sporadic. If the reason was exhaustion, or her multiple lacerations, or the aching inside her heart that convinced her to not give up on her blind faith in her Lorathi, she was not anymore sure.

She kept on running as if chased by unforgiving shadows of high midnight.

*Jaqen... Where are you?*

*Help, Jaqen.*

*Defense, devotion, your vows. Be Shield to my Sword...*

*Jaqen?*

This was not Harrenhal.

No Lorathi could act as a valorous seraph for the bold Wolf that was a lost sheep that was a terrified mouse. Arya Stark was not asleep in one room in a spectre-riddled castle scorched by dragonfire ages ago, to be woken up by him—he who was sent by the gods—in order to claim three deaths in place of three lives.

One girl could not whisper names in his ear in the bath, catch a whiff of his ginger and cloves, so she could be spared from a painful beating.

And she could not hope that he would come to her whilst she prayed in the godswood for wings, to demand for one last name that became ten and twenty due to his relenting and to her insistence.

She reached the marbled steps of the immaculate Temple of the Moonsingers.

Monsters were in her head. When had the last time been? *Fierce as a wolverine.* So like a mummer, like one astute of acts and concealments, Arya Stark pretended once more—pretended that in the dark, Ned Stark was with her, Syrio Forel and Yoren, and Jon, and...Jaqen.

*Jaqen is dead.*

*Jaqen wants her dead.*

Arya took staggered strides, whimpering in pain as her hands landed onto the cold metamorphics in her effort to keep herself upright. She could barely carry her own body broken by a possible truth of a treachery. The sanguine fluid from her palm left a trail of rich scarlet on the otherwise taintless,
ivory-hued steps, defiling them. The moon was full, but at that moment, she was not an undauntable direwolf. She was only Arya. Despite the strongest of urges, she could not howl the pangs and the pain away.

Perhaps tonight, like the wolves in her pack, she too will be taken and slain and skinned. They were all wrong—Starks are not impossible to kill. A mere thought of her Lorathi and she felt like dying for the hundred thousandth time.

A voice in anguish wailed fleetingly through her already muddled thoughts. It was the cry she would never resort to, but she did, out of utter desperation.

*Rhaegar, beloved…I need you, my dragon. Whoever you are, purple-eyed in my dreams…save me.*

It was folly—Arya Stark never needed saving. But it was despondency, a mental suffering impossible to subdue, and she needed someone to hold; for her Lorathi, her most beloved, had let go of her hand and allowed her to fall off that declivitous cliff.

Wind blew and strands of hair stuck against her bloodied neck. She reached the temple's double threshold.

*Swift as a deer, quiet as a shadow, quick as a snake, calm as still water, fear cuts deeper than swords. The man who fears losing has already lost. Not today.*

She lifted her eyes to the temple's thresholds.

The Waif was already there.

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Only the gentle sound of a man's robe against the paved floor—only this could be heard in all the stillness that wrapped what they called their place of worship. *Quiet as a shadow,* for one does not know who or what lurks a few steps forth.

Perchance, it was her blood that desecrated the ground.

He uttered a short prayer to Him of Many Faces. The god will listen. A man has been a truly devoted servant. He drew the deepest and sharpest of all breaths. It was all he could do for him not to rush to the Hall of Faces so this agony of not knowing what fate she has either conquered or suffered could cease. A man had taught a girl well, had he not?

The trail of blood led him to the hall. He took a few more steps. Calm, quiet. His eyes began to burn, his blood seemed to want to escape from his flesh, as his heart throbbed in unrecognizably unpleasant rhythms. As he reached the first pillar where the faces of the departed were arrayed, his eyes met the very face he had wanted to see.

Drenched in metallic-smelling blood, its contorted features a reflection of what could have been an utter excruciation, displayed in the most horrific fashion, was her face.

*The Waif’s face.*

It took all the courage a man could muster to stay composed—to not give away anything. Truth is, he had never been so overjoyed, not since he had met that girl on the exhausting way to the North, not since he had received one message from his Kindly Man saying that the same girl had showed up on their doorstep clutching the coin he gave her.

Not since she had told him she loves him.
Well done, lovely girl.

He was there, at the Moonsingers. He saw everything.

One Faceless had succumbed to death so the other may live, it was a sacrifice done for the first time in the Order. And it was not only the looming battle that led the woman to do it, as it was not merely her desire for repose that served as her driving force. She knew who Arya Stark is to him.

The Lorathi, despite their years together, did not honor the Waif with the one last thing he could give her prior to her self-inflicted demise—his trust.

She had told him yes, Arya Stark will not fall. And she was truest to her word.

Guilt—it was all he felt for questioning the motivations of his most beloved sister.

I'll do it, but you must bleed before she does.

They drew it together using the woman's blade—a straight laceration, from his forearm to his wrist, close to the pulse. Less than half an inch, a slight miscalculation of the gashing, and he would have breathed his last.

Had she done anything at all, to make Arya Stark bleed more than what was necessary, he would have rescinded all precepts and concepts of kinship, and without half a first thought, he would have hurled a dagger straight on the Waif's temple. To hell with all of them! And should the Elder find out about his desertion of the agreement, the Lorathi would kill him too, and peel off his face. And may the Father of all Faceless forgive him in the afterlife. He would take back his imperial beast, and go past the Sunset Sea with the girl, for perhaps, West of Westeros is beyond the death god's sight.

He uttered the longest of prayers so he would not be faced with the decision to perform such an act.

For this is the truth—that between the Order and Arya, he would always choose Arya.

And between the death god and Arya…

Forgive a man, you know who he would choose. Condone me not, mercy. Arya Stark. Always, always.

The relief was short-lived though, for when he turned, he came face to face with Arya Stark's Needle—its pointy end prepared to stab him in his insides.

A man gently stared at his lovely girl's countenance, as if such a gaze could will her to understand.

"You betrayed me," she said, her voice clearly sounding utter hurt. "You told her to kill me."

He walked closer until his chest touched the tip of the sword. "Yes," was all he could say. "But here you are. And there she is."

"Why?" she whispered, shaking her head. Perhaps, she was hoping, praying that this was all a cruel delusion and that she would wake from it any second. Her self, if ever she still possessed any, bruised and battered beyond comprehension.

"How can a man tell a girl this?" he began, as he grasped the blade with his bare hands and pulled it away from him. The sharpness of its edges drew blood from his hand, but a man must be bloody too, for this was all his work. He walked closer to her as she dropped Needle to the ground. "How can he tell her this in a way she would understand? It was never in a man's intention that she suffers any of
Tears streamed down her lovely face. Roughly, she wiped them away with the back of her hand. *Tears are a weakness*, she told herself, *he was a weakness*. She should have realized this sooner.

Silence ensued between them so she spoke. "I will never understand, but I have the right to know!" She seethed and quickly tried to grab the steel from the floor but he was a man, he was faster and more sinewy. Even before her forefinger could touch the steel’s hilt, he had already pulled her down the floor with him, her back against his chest, her whole body enveloped in his strong arms.

Wretchedness howled, anguish burned, spirits suffered. She felt the weight of the world upon her that instant, the stench of betrayal, and she wept.

"Hush…please, sweet Arya," his mouth whispered against her ear. She felt his breath, warm and damp and soft-sounding.

"Tell me, Jaqen. You owe me at least that," she continued through gritted teeth. "Tell me why you have decided to desert me and relinquish your vow to the many-faced god!"

He held her tighter, closer, as he buried his face against her hair. "Look at me," he told her. She only gave him one disdained look; it scorched him, he felt pained. Solitary tear, and the Lorathi wiped it from her face.

"A girl has been marked for death."

She shook her head in disbelief.

"No person on the face of this earth could possibly mark me for death. I am Faceless. I am Nameless."

His expression softened and he nodded. "No person could name anyone stripped off of her identity for the many-faced god. No person can recognize the existence of nothingness, and seek to annihilate that existence. But they can name Arya Stark of Winterfell, and this they did."

"Arya Stark is No One."

"Oh, Arya Stark," the Lorathi sighed with woe. "She had transcended that state through the Songs. And they knew that the Songs spoke about Arya Stark two centuries after the Doom. The name on the Sealord's slip is yours, and he paid the price." His arms wrapped around her gentle frame once more, this time tighter, as if he could defend her from what is to come, as if all that he felt and all that he is could serve as her rampart against the gloomy skirts of the future. "They knew about it all along, despite all this House's efforts to keep it hidden until we can uncloak the truth."

"The Waif…she let me thrust my poisoned dagger in her heart—thrice," Arya said. "Why?"

Jaqen rose and gently lifted the girl to stand. His eyes traveled to Arya's bloody palm and neck and he gently traced his fingers there. *Not deep at all, my sister had been truly gentle*. He traced the lacerations some more, and she winced. His forehead was heavily creased; his eyes were misty, as he shook his head in utter remorse. *It was the only way to keep her alive without breaking the Creed, without challenging the death god's edicts. If not, the death god—she will have her still, in a manner unthinkable."

All of a sudden, Jaqen covered Arya's lips with his.

*Arya...*
She did not kiss him back.

Reluctantly, heartbroken, he slowly released her.

"Why?" the girl prodded silently.

A despondent sigh, he answered. "She named the traitorous Sealord. And she named three others. The life of one Faceless Man is that of six kings."

Arya nodded. "And the dead man who conquers one that is Faceless evades Death?"

"Yes."

"You sent a Faceless with a death wish to kill me, so she may concede to her own death and I may live."

He merely nodded.

*Jaqen. Tell me…*

*She's been named.*

*And…you will act as the faceless that she must quell?*

*Yes.*

*Veiling—it's dangerous. The death god will—*

*Let the deity do whatever she wants with me.*

*I fear for you.*

*Don't. Arya—I…I…*

*You're Guardian. Forfeiting yourself so she gains the veil—this act is a desertion of two full vows. You cannot forsake your task now. The undertaking is beyond what she can endure. You cannot surrender yourself.*

*Choices. A man doesn't even have a second.*

*I'll do it. But you must bleed before she does.*

*Please, don't…*

*Valar Morghulis. What is the difference between now and a few days? What is the difference between the liquid of death and sharp steel?*

*Not you, Sabine. No…no.*

*No, Jaqen. Not you. The realms, Jaqen. Both Walls will fall—the Moonsingers have claimed this.*

Battles, arguments, and persuasions—both sound and unsound, cloaked emotions within disconsolate utterances, embraces and releases. Voices were high and loud that night; rage and remorse overpowered all sense of logic. She had assured him of her plans, and that this will not be the end of it all. She had asked him not to weep for her, for there are secrets that must be unraveled. Only when she enters the dark, uncertain curtains could she unmask them—and the death god too.
A concession.

*Don't let her suffer.*

*She won't fall, I promise you this.*

The girl gazed at the Lorathi. She must understand, that the temple did what it had to do in order to honor an agreement *and* keep the Chosen safe. Otherwise, vows will be thrown uselessly in the wind and foundations upon which the Faceless Men were built will not only disintegrate, but will be completely lost.

*And the death god will have all of our heads.*

However, more than all these, with the Lorathi's manipulations of the Creed and the Elder's sagacious schemes, she has been given something that no person, faceless or not, must be granted. A *veil*—a cloak.

Arya Stark was marked, and Death should have claimed her. Another intervened—a *Faceless*.

That Faceless was without name and identity, and her rejection of Self was flawless and uncompromising. Without a *designation*, the temporal and divine laws governing Death will be nullified, for it needs both appellation and appearance. And that Faceless was supposed to be the *dealer* of it, yet in that function, she failed.

*Chose to fail.*

When that Faceless succumbed to her ruination, the true marked gained power over Death which that Faceless had to deal. Circumvention—and this Death, instead of claiming Arya Stark, *enveloped* her like a protective Shield.

A *veil*—a cloak.

This veil is spiritual skin, and she will wear it henceforth, so that whenever the death god bids her 'Come', she could politely refuse. It was a privilege from the deity, a grant to whoever has conquered a possible quietus. And this privilege, the death god *resents* yielding to mortals.

All for the sake of *her*, the Lorathi had cheated his god. Nothing will ever be the same between them.

Still, her heart ached terribly as she looked at him. Her mind was riddled with thoughts of this one elaborate arrangement.

The lords of Old were determined to eliminate her, she realized. In West of Westeros they have stayed, but not before entrusting the First Daughter with the task of rebuilding the Freehold until they return—thus, the Century of Blood. Two hundred years, and the Moonsingers and the Faceless Men were granted their prophetic visions of one Chosen—aid to the Promised, the Warrior. The name was not known then, but they have orchestrated one plan to murder her from the very beginning—long, long before—with the House of Black and White none the wiser.

The extrapolations were too accurate, too perfect. What better way to slaughter the enemy than to infiltrate the House where she belongs? A betrayer in the Order, it was the sole convincing reason.

The Lorathi placed his forehead against her own, his sensibilities one with a girl's, as a trace of his soul mingled with a trace of hers. In her eyes were tears and something else—something dark and
shuddersome.

Fear turned to cold-blooded hatred. With no regard for consequences.

"I will kill every last one of them," she uttered in a whisper, but with unparalleled conviction nonetheless.

He could not fail her, never again. Not when she has pledged her whole life to the Order as if it meant everything to her. Certainly not when she had willingly accepted a fate of self-sacrifice for a city he calls home, not for the Songs, but for him. He gave her his word.

"No, lovely girl. We will kill every last one of them."

Within her, a familiar voice spoke. It was the same voice that had contemptuously decided, though it was not a prerogative of it, that lives be taken before their rightful time. The sound of that voice escaped out of one girl's sweet cords, her precious lips, conceived out of tribulation caused by foes and friends alike. The voice was promulgation itself in front of all souls, both nomadic and settled, of the names who in her sight had infallibly lost their simple right to breathe their next.

Names of degenerate manslaughterers, brilliant saboteurs, traitors.

*Ser Ilyn. Ser Meryn.*

*Walder Frey. Queen Cersei.*

*Betrayers.*

*Lords of Old.*

*Jaqen H'ghar.*

*Valar Morghulis.*

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! Here's a chapter for all of you. This time, I can't say my usual "I hope you like it." XD

Thank you for visiting the comments section in the previous chapter and relenting to my wishes on the polls. ;D Means a lot! I'd leave a question here, as it will be quite a while before I could post another chapter (life and work caught up, finally). Tension is advantageous at times, so I would love to hear your thoughts and answers:

Did Jaqen H'ghar 'betray' Arya Stark?

Just leave your quick thoughts and sentiments. Thank you, and have a happy week ahead! ;D Much love.
"Chosen though she is,

Death is above.

In grand course, it must have its due—

To step down among men and women,

To spill her life.

Though by way of her Shadow,

She will prevail."

_Songs of the Faceless, XIII_

"Arya Stark was named and she must die," the Waif had told her. "But the Chosen must not."

"I am both! You damn made sure of that in your fancy confluence!" Arya screamed at her viciously. She pulled both daggers out of their sheaths, held them in a throwing stance. "What would it be now?! Because I do not have the slightest intention to fall—not in your filthy hands!"

The Waif's smile was not a product of mockery or disdain. It was not at all threatening. Rather, it was serene and accepting, as if in the subliminals of her that fused themselves with dark intentions, there was some form of quiet atonement the source of which the girl knew not. The Waif crossed the distance between them with painstaking slowness, and the girl, overpowered by hostile emotions could not find the strength to hurl the daggers towards the woman. Suspended mid-air, it was as if her arms were being restrained by invisible clutches, rendering her motionless.

Searing pain.

_Jaqen!

The Waif's dagger that had wounded her carried fatal venin; and it was tearing the girl's sinews from her very core apart. Arya writhed, screamed until voice gave up on her, as pain wailed louder than
her sudden cries for deliverance. That moment, all forms of belief to the many-faced god were cast aside. There was the verbosity of the Songs, which in the course of her passage towards facelessness she had kept close to heart, but when the death god gives up on that which he or she had chosen, sends servants to silence that subject for good, where must one stand as far as Valar Dohaeris is concerned?

**Jaqen…**

Silent lamentations will get her killed, and though basking in the painful glory of betrayal may be a form of art to understand for some, she cannot punish herself any further by unrelenting thoughts of him, embedded in hopes that this is nothing but mere caper, or a final test towards full ordinance as one Faceless, or a weighing of loyalties…

**Abandon hope.**

Decisions. She implored the old gods for the winds to be merciful and rush to her aid compellingly so she could be freed from this imperceptible hold. She prayed for the High Priestess of the Jogos Nhai to burst out of the temple's double-threshold, and run to her rescue.

*Give me wings, make me a Wolf. Fly me back to Winterfell.*

The old gods did not heed her. The winds blew unkindly, enveloping her in an almost fatal coldness, leaving her shivering from flesh to marrow. The double threshold remained shut.

Her desperate cries were discordant to the state of self she held, but the will to live was unbending.

*Rhaegar, beloved… I need you, my dragon.*

Voices belonged to archfiends…

*I am in no need of your grief… Depart from here, dark heart. Begone! Die!*

*And to you, audacity. To dare to be the rival of a god.*

….to fall is to sin to oneself. In suffering comes survival, and to live is an act of courage in itself.

"Arya Stark," the Waif spoke, walking closer to her. "When you return, warn Aegeus about the Shadowbinder."

"What the hell are you even talking about?! Release me!"

"Time, sweet girl. That dagger which drew fresh scarlet from your flesh was earlier coated with Viperidae. Your blood had mingled with the elements of the liquid. Poison holds you, I do not."

She was reaching denouement, as her body slowly collapsed onto the marmoreal steps. **Mind over matter.** For a Faceless Man, both instinct and intellect must be allowed to triumph over the assumed aftermath of toxin. In the core of every assassin is the psyche, the consciousness that must shape and dictate how flesh and blood should respond in the face of threats turned to concrete peril—to succumb or to develop resistance, to die or to live. All must be at the mercy of the power of a Faceless Man's mindwork.

**Folly.**

The Waif kept on traversing the marbled steps, narrowing their proximity from each other. "You must ponder Arya Stark, but not very long, or I will claim your life. The poison's aftereffects will
weaken, then you may use your limbs and your blades to accomplish whatever you need to in order to survive. Within that small frame of time, be wise enough to pierce one dagger to my heart—thrice. The Long Farewell in your dagger's hilt will take effect as soon as the tip of your blade touches the skin of my chest."

"That, I will do and more!" Arya Stark spat. "I will scalp you and peel out your treacherous face, and hang it bloody in your damnable Hall of Faces! I will drag your body to the temple face-down, and throw it on Jaqen H'ghar's feet, that traitorous bastard. Then, I will cut all of his hair and slaughter him!"

With those words, her heart only keened.

At the end of all things, men will betray and kill the thing they loved or pretended to have loved; the coward with the cruelty of flattery and kisses, the brave with the mercy of the sword. Jaqen H'ghar did both.

The Waif laughed softly, and it was as murderous as the rupture that the poison was bringing her very corpuscles. "You are as fierce as your direwolf, fierier than your Lorathi's rogue dragon. But no, sweet girl...you cannot kill Jaqen H'ghar. You will weep. You will lose your only friend."

Yet in the recesses of her, no matter the depth of the misdeed and the treachery, that infallible trust on him still existed, albeit in a different form. Heartlessly, Jaqen H'ghar had shattered Arya Stark's loving faith in him with his bare hands, yet the shards of it—instead of wounding him fatally for his falseness, the shards of it clung to him still, endurably in fact. It was as if that blind faith trusted him more than it trusted her, and it so desired to break, but it never wanted to collapse completely. The soul mourned for itself—how can she not even give up on that faith, that love, even in the face of her own demise brought by him?

She screamed in woe, tears bathed her face profusely. What came out of her throat was a screech, and it contained the words to her own elegy.

"You would never kill a friend!" Another scream—sorrowful rage. "All he does is manipulate, withdraw. He made me rescind myself for him, and now he wanted me obliterated for good so he sent you! He was never my friend! Damn you both!"

In the woman's face was calm amusement. "No, he was never a mere friend to a girl. Shield, Summer, Shadow—killing him is killing her defense; killing her defense is killing herself. It is a curse for a Faceless Man to kill herself—her soul will meander endlessly in the realm between and not rest. She will be denied entry to that ethereal bridge and will battle against other souls for eons and eons for the simple entreaty of being allowed within the death god's courts."

"Shut up! Do not confuse me with your senseless rhetorics! Fight like a true Faceless! Close combat, poison is gutlessness, even for a Faceless Man!" Arya Stark screamed. Cold sweat, scorching tears suffused her generously, and she retched, but nothing came out. There was only the desire for discontinuity, but she cannot die.

Not today, I cannot. Not ever.

Finally, the Waif stood right in front of her, such that the distance between them was nothing more than hair's breadth. She spoke. "Fulfill the prophecy, run back to your Guardian, beware of the shadows. "The woman knelt on one knee so she could reach the girl, and she kissed her on the forehead—a final farewell. "Don't forget my name, Arya Stark—Sabine. And don't let me suffer."

The strength of that invisible grip was fading...
Then it was gone.

Haste. She forcefully thrust one dagger straight to the woman's heart. The girl heard her breathing change in a horrible, deathly rhythm. With an ear-shattering scream, the girl stabbed her a second time, a third. The woman's head slowly bowed as she stared at her own pierced chest. She trembled slightly, then weakly raised her eyes to look at the girl, whispering a final entreaty. The woman's supplication stunned her.

*Find out the secrets behind the faces.*

The Waif fell on the marbled floor, her metallic-smelling, richly-colored blood generously bathed the marmoreal ground. With a forceful last breath, she withdrew.

*Commune with Death's lovely faces. Be with the meadows, the rocks, the waters. Be one with the hearts of men in mighty sepulchers. This is the only way to live without living.*

Kneeling down, Arya pulled her dagger from the woman's chest and without wiping off the bloodsmear, sheathed it. As she stared at the Waif's face, her contempt for her that almost reached the far firmaments a moment ago ebbed away. The woman's eyes, nose, and mouth bled profusely in response to the Long Farewell.

*Her face.*

Arya covered the Waif's face with her left palm, and gradually, she let her hands travel down to the woman's chin.

Her true face. It was eloquently beautiful, peaceful in death. There existed in her a healing sympathy of one who endured much so others may not endure them any longer. Her visage reflected one that had married poetic harmony with Him of Many Faces; and in her surprisingly beatific countenance, Arya sensed where her spirit will venture—not in a place of breathless darkness, not in a place of sorrow or solitude or of...nothingness.

*Somewhere...timeless. All-beholding and undying.*

"*Valar Morghulis,*" the girl whispered, as she hoisted the woman's body upon her exhausted shoulders and dragged themselves back to the temple. *Transcend ages and go to that abode.*

And she would go to him, thrust him with the sword they made her give up. The many-faced god can claim all, save this. That sword was Winterfell, it was Ned and Cat and Robb, Bran and Rickon, even Sansa. It was Old Nan's stories, the heart tree, the summer snows. It was Jon Snow's smile.

And with all these in a single sword, she will kill him.

Love for him had lashed her, mistakes must not be repeated.

*Die, Faceless Master. Die, Jaqen.*

He sloshed the blood-soaked washcloth on a glass basin, picked up a vial that contained cure.

Arya winced as Jaqen gently swabbed healing cream onto her slightly gashed neck.

They were in her bedchamber. She sat with her back against the wooden board and the Lorathi sat on the edge of the bed, facing her. The girl's eyes looked past the Lorathi and lingered on the hard,
timber chair on the foot of her bed, where the Lorathi's gray master's robe, Needle, and her two Valyrian daggers lay.

*Kill him,* the Voice in her whispered. *He speared you in the back.*

*And weep?* She questioned the dark, poisonous, insistent One. *And lose myself? And die again and again, this time for good?*

*Surrender trust,* the unrelenting hellion went on. *He, who wants nothing to do with the likes of you, will pierce your heart with your own sword when you're in the midst of your helpless dreaming. This man will be a looming specter of your dark past and a forlorn forthcoming. It's now or never.*

*I was 'cloaked' because of his doing.* She argued. *A Faceless had to die for it—death was assured, she gave me her name. The 'gift' is beneath me now.*

*An act the death god despises. Kill and eat.*

*Kill and eat,* her inner self conceded. With eyes overwhelming with raw enmity, he regarded him. *A quick passing, then the poisoned daggers will consume his treacherous heart.*

*Stab him with a pointy end.*

A prayer for forgiveness. She must put an end to his schemes of claiming souls before they claimed him. He has to face his own self, whatever form that self might take, concealed in his darkest of hearts.

"*Quit from moving too much, Arya. The liniment needs to stay on this part of your neck,"* the Lorathi gently admonished her. "*There.*" He tipped his head and kissed her cheek.

*Say it now, lovely girl. Is it Joffrey?*

*No. It's Jaqen H'ghar.*

Arya Stark's heart ached. Who was it truly, that proclaimed those capricious words of betrayal?

In matters of betrayal, the one from whose lips came forth the name is the perpetrator—the blame must neither be on the god nor on the Faceless. It is the *intent* to steal a person's right to breathe, indirect or otherwise, that would draw the line between the *true* murderer, and the tool used for the kill. The beseecher is the former, the Faceless is the latter. Even in some faiths whose precepts are purer, to stare at a brother with contempt is tantamount to killing him.

The death god is the insinuator, feeder of men's ambitions for other men's demise. The god must do this, for her concept of immortality survives only as long as people possess belief in *Valar Morghulis,* as long as people believe that the concept of Death does exist in the empirical sense.

If there was a single entity in the vastness of all time and spaces who the man has betrayed, it was not her. He betrayed the many-faced god.

*Chosen though she is, Death is above. Death must have its due.*

Was she not the one who had barefacedly named him for death before, despite his selfless acquiescence to her bloodthirsty nature? Did she not maliciously exploit the power he gave her over lives of men, useless they may be, and who was she to even decide about their worth?

*I can understand Death, but not betrayal. Winking eyes, crossed fingers, stars that hide their fire. But*
what does one know about betraying another, truly? What constitutes treachery?

Jaqen H’ghar is not Him of Many Faces. He is not a god. Quattuorverbis—to cause to become. Jaqen, Arya, the Order, kings, fools, believers and blasphemers all—results of them who caused and who are prime causes in their divine right and powers that are both metaphysical yet as material as the realities men perceive.

He is nothing more than a beseecher, for her life to be spared; and a dealer of perpetual quietus who rebelled against the Creed and metaphorically spat on the face of the god, for Arya Stark to be defended from peril. He is nothing more than Death's servant who almost abandoned everything he had ever known and believed to be true about himself for one faultfinding, unappreciative, full-of-discontent, lovely girl.

There are things one must give up to become Faceless, and the manner of surrender is not allegorical. It is beyond what the girl knew and understood, for she is still young, and for the longest time she had hindered certain memories from seeping through her because of fear of time past. Time is not an infinitesimal singularity and the god has an infinitely lustful appetite. Perchance, in lives Jaqen had led in various realities, he had given up so much and he had saved her countless of times. And he will continue pulling her out of fire, if need be.

"Arya, sweetheart."

The Lorathi held her chin and tried to plant a kiss on her lips. The girl turned her head away.

"Arya, please…"

He kissed her again, she turned away, and his lips only lightly touched the side of her mouth. She pushed him infuriatedly and slapped his face with all the raw force she could muster, which was not much, considering her arduous struggle mere hours ago. The crisp sound of her palm against his cheek reverberated in the chamber, insulting—provoking.

The Lorathi's jaw hardened, his eyes reflected a sudden surge of aching, turned to pleading, to irritation. Jaqen held her face once more, this time in a manner more firm, and forced Arya's face to meet his own. His lips savagely plundered hers, sounds of rough and naked desire for her playing on his throat.

Arya tried to break from Jaqen's grasp but he was an unyielding fortress. She pursed her lips tightly, denying the Lorathi herself—and Arya laughed inwardly at the thought, for it was like denying Jaqen of what essentially belonged to him even before he had claimed it his own. Her not allowing him to fully ravage her mouth only inflamed the Lorathi—and in the midst of his pure libidinous rapture, he shook her forcibly, then sucked her lower lip.

Arya moaned.

"Open your mouth," Jaqen ordered her whilst he suckled her lips.

Arya turned her head from side to side violently. "Let me go, you cruel monster!"

Words and acts enraged him. He broke from the kiss, grabbed Arya's legs and pulled her down ruthlessly. Her head landed on the pillow as her back fell flat on the bed. He laid himself atop her as she writhed underneath. The man had constrained her from head to foot, and the wolf in her wanted to spring away from his trap…

"Get away from me, Jaqen!"
Rage engulfed her as he started ravenously nipping at her jaw, her ear, collarbone, the flesh of her now womanly breasts; and in all that she is, she realized that Jaqen had no intentions of lovingly possessing her.

He was hell-bent, beyond persuaded in his desire, in a bestial need to ravish her.

And her instincts may not be at all mistaken, for he began grinding his hips against hers, rumbling intensely in so doing. "I want you, Arya," he whispered as he lavished scarlet kiss marks all over the flesh of her bosom, as if marking his property. "So, so much." His right hand moved to part her legs and he kept on moving in sensual rhythms against her. "Please…I want to be inside you. Let me be in you."

His words after the ritual by the goddess pool rang in her ears, torturing her already mangled heart, crucifying her further. That once-regarded romantic gesture of freeing her from the snare of having to surrender herself to carnalities of men with fat purses turned into ridicule. Those words that warmed her heart prior taunted her now.

"A girl did beggar many men today with her maiden's blood."

"You are very expensive, do you know that?"

"Would I even throw a single gold bar at your feet if I do not find you delightful?"

She fought against tears threatening to swallow her whole. The bid was literal for him.

Why, of course. It was a cost of fifty ships in exchange for her sinless blood, and the Lorathi was no fool—he would claim her; and by all conventions he is allowed to. When she undertook that courtesan task, her state was objectified—reduced to that of mere commodity. The man who threw in gold of the highest value gains that entitlement to own her, to turn her into nothing but his possession. He may do whatever it is that he pleases, thrust inside her whatever it is that he possessed or could possibly lay his hands on, use her in ways unthinkable.

Bastard.

Beast.

Fight with the self as weapon, the girl thought. Let him stroke the core, where there is nothing but lust and rapture and surrender. This is beyond and beneath love, he will never know it.

Play courtesan with me.

Arya Stark sought the wisdom of the Winter Maiden. She heard the Black Pearl whisper in the wind, her own words: I will teach you how to please your Lorathi. Men are bestowed pleasure, they are dispossessed; and when they are dispossessed, they capitulate to anything without them knowing. The Sealord proved this true during luncheons and wine goblets at night; he left his thoughts completely unprotected—open for any gifted one to read because of his submission to the Winter Maiden's ministrations.

And for the first time she understood Bellegere's words—'That there is a difference between a prince and a murderer is false. At day's end, they need women whose clothes they could take off and whose bodies they could take over and again. One may claim you on petal-strewn cushion and the other with a knife pointing at your vulnerable heart—both pillage and leave none.'

You want me to whore myself?
She began tugging at Jaqen's hair, as if willing him to kiss deeper, to nip harder. "Jaqen…" she whispered, faking arousal though not, and his name on her lips drove him to the edge. He lifted himself, and when his face leveled with hers, he smothered her mouth with his own as if she was the last woman in the expanse of the Known and Unknown Worlds.

"Open."

"No."

"Open, damn it!"

Obediently, she received his mouth, pleasing him by playing, waltzing with his tongue, as her hands reached down and stroked his hardness with all the world's lustfulness. Jaqen groaned against her lips—the want was too deep, that he almost succumbed to the interstice of it. "Arya…sweetheart…y-yes please," were his words.

Arya Stark must let the scheming Winter Maiden take over, for if the former gained the upper hand, Jaqen would win. She knew in the very essence of her humanity that she desired this man more than anything, yet, she must not submit to his hedonistic whims. Clothe the self with deception and lies—this is the only way to continue surviving.

Wear your many faces.

She shoved him, an invitation to sit. He relented and she straddled him, wrapping her legs around his waist. Her fingers combed through his locks of scarlet and ivory, their temples connected. She blew soft, sweet air upon his lips. He inhaled her scent and tried to reach her open mouth. The girl withdrew from him a little—testing, teasing. Whispered. "I don't quite know why, but your hair of ice and fire makes me a little too responsive, Jaqen H'ghar."

"Here," the Lorathi guided her hand so she could caress in a way that was to him most erotically satisfying. She felt his strong hands engulfing her own, and her delicate palm rubbing his firmness.

"Guide me, yes?" she asked with the sweet innocence of Mercedene and ciceronian capacities of the Maiden. A few strokes here and there, and in ways opposing—tame then wild, storm then calm, ardent all the way. Her touch was wanton, lingering.

Jaqen looked at her with eyes of rhapsody—opened his mouth, closed it, lost for words. This, and he was already exploding. He bit his lower lip hard to hold back a groan.

He ruthlessly ripped the front part of her garment. The girl gasped, as her cool wind kissed the skin of her bosoms. Despite her loathing, her tips were aroused simply by Jaqen's kisses. He had keyed her up, of this he was aware, and so he suckled her breasts with want, intensifying their fleshly ritual. 

"Jaqen…'' She muttered. Her hands moved to massage him faster against the fabric of his breeches. "Do you prefer things this way?"

"Yes, sweetheart, exactly that..." he murmured against her breasts in Lorathi. "Ah…my sweet girl…she's very good…very good..."

Arya laughed at him inwardly. Easy. So lost, he is. "Bellegere had said this before, that even the most gifted of mummers could not fake an arousal," she recounted in a mellifluous tone. Inner
laughter. An evil cackle, in fact. "Ah!" Jaqen had bitten her. "N-not entirely sure if I agree on one other assumption of hers, that we can please ourselves without men? Wrong, so wrong," she said, placing emphasis on each word by squeezing him playfully.

"Shush…don't speak. You're driving a man defenselessly mad…"

The Winter Maiden knew in all her expertise what men wanted, and Jaqen was no exception. Mercedene gave the Maiden an irresistibly innocent character—beguiling him, entrancing him, imprisoning him in an abyss of nothing and everything.

A chortle—provocation. "Minds and hearts of men, they both lie on the same place—here."

Slowly yet skillfully, she unlaced him, let her hand move freely inside his breeches, and controlled herself, even as her jaw fell; though every pore in the physical, and every sense in the intellectual were eratically stupefied at how so, so enormous Jaqen's is.

"Gods!" Jaqen moaned as her skin and his skin made contact.

At the back of Arya Stark's head, she contemplated how, should she surrender herself to him—and she truly planned to—would he fit himself in her. Pain, excruciation no doubt, prior to gratification. 

Jaqen.

The gods favor some men more than others. What unprincipled deities we have.

Perchance, in tasks that required you to use yourself, you have driven queens and paramours mad. You are one lover they would never be able to hold.

As always, in their lives, you come and go as you please. And perhaps, you kill them after the taking. Like what you did to me, almost.

For her, it was an attempt at self-preservation. She stroked him—back and forth in manner unrestrained—devil-may-care; tight, her fingers closing in on his hard member, with her own lustful yearning overtaking her. Facelessness. Temperance. Her ears were filled with primal sounds of his groaning and his words of "Dear heavens…Arya..." And how she gathered all the self-restraint of the greatest of men—dead and alive—to not surrender to him!

It was an undertaking too, to contain the physical to the realm of extension where it belonged; to use antipathy to envelop both the self and the other. First instinct is to live, second is to fight. She hardened her heart, acted as if the flesh is disconnected altogether with consciousness and instincts, with sentence and all emotions that lie therein.

She was thrown abed. Her head landed with a soft thud, strands strewn on the pillow. The hard cushion yielded at the force and sank, forming a hollow cast that had shaped itself after her frame. How to vanish? How to break away from the self? She felt the Lorathi's weight upon her once more. His hands traveled to her tips, rubbed her there, as he tasted the flesh of her breasts bit by bit. Arya Stark gasped as her Lorathi ran his tongue on both of her breasts—his kisses were sweltering and punishing, but there was her subjective interpretation of it all. He stroked her faster so she stroked him faster, and her hand had gone wet and sticky with his nectar. Her thumb rubbed his tip, he shuddered.

How to kill innocence?

He kissed her all over her face.
"Keep going…w-we're *almost* there, Arya," he uttered, then went back to pillaging her mouth.

"More?"

"Yes, yes. More. Oh, I'm going to do *things* to you, Arya, I swear by the seven new gods and the old gods beyond counting…"

She laughed coyly. He groaned at the sound.

"Things? Speak of them."

He spoke against her mouth, his words were to her a fleeting reverie. She had heard those phrases before from his own tongue—wishes forthcoming, carried by wind and dreams and knees on the ground, and here they are.

*Force myself inside you, while I ravish your breasts.*

*Make you lose your voice in the night. Claim you…claim.*

*Fill you with my seed, till you bless me with babes.*

*Twilight, midnight, daylight.*

*You will beseech the death god for a man to never, ever stop—in your every waking second you will beg a man for it; and your want of it will be so much more than your want for life.*

He pressed on. "I will do these things, Arya…and you won't be able to walk for days, I swear this by the weirwood with the gods as witnesses…"

Speech-slip. The Lorathi was slowly abnegating his self-abnegation.

*It's now or never.*

*Kill and eat.*

Sexual drunkenness. Arya bit his lip hard, drawing blood from it, letting the Lorathi plummet into an insufferable anticlimax.

"Damn it, Arya!"

With the swiftness of the Cat, she lunged at him and violently shoved him out of the bed, freeing herself in the process. The Lorathi's back hit the stone-cold floor and muttered curses under his breath. He stayed flat on his back for a moment, then slowly lifted himself to sit and stare at her face—wounded, the bastard, as if she was the one who sanctioned one other Faceless to kill him.

Death is beneath. The unCat was truthful in naming her—*Stranger that was lost.*

Arya was swift, as both impulse and instinct overwhelmed her restraint. She was already at the foot of the bed, hastily grabbing both daggers.

"Damn it, Arya!"

The girl hurled one dagger after the other at him. Wind aided the blades' momentum, no escaping it, for the steel's energy always seeks for hypnotic properties of blood with which it can commune itself.

An expert Faceless—she never misses. Of a hundred throws, she always manages to land a hundred and seven.
The sound of blade sliced through space.

Don't die.

The Lorathi tilted his head effortlessly to dodge one and used his right hand to sweep the other away. Both daggers fell uselessly on the floor, as the sound of what should have been deadly blades against the stone was reduced by the Lorathi to what seemed to be a dainty tinkle of harmless bells.

With an embittered laugh, Arya Stark sank on the floor—partly astonished at Jaqen H'ghar being damned breathtaking at every damned thing, and partly enraged at the fact that the Lorathi had merely insulted her dagger-throwing despite her being an ordained Faceless. She gently shook her head at him, still laughing rancorously.

Moments later, she screamed in frustration. Her cries intensified…and in the midst of the raging reverberations of it, the clay basin formed small fissures turned to large cracks, shattering into fine smithereens at the mercy of the water's sheer strength. Some shards of it flew to the Lorathi, as heavy waterdrops slightly tainted by blood drawn from her spilled and scattered in the air, soaking bedlinens and staining walls and floors of that chamber.

In the atrium, poisoned water from the pool stirred, formed ripples even in the absence of disturbance. It moved in an upsurge asudden, as if its center was disrupted by one massive object, the summit of its particles reaching the ceiling before descending with velocious force. Water flooded the stone tier, sprayed in all directions, as the atrium was engorged by pure hue and cry from those who besought mercy that night and knelt on the images of their gods.

The Shivering Sea went still, as if in so doing it could tender one act of veneration.

Jaqen slowly licked his lips and tasted blood. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, surveyed the uproar's aftermath.

With a sinking heart, he ran both hands through his red-and-white of hair and shut his eyes tight.

A girl was bloody, a man must be too.

Arya Stark walked hastily and stood towering above his slumped figure, Needle in hand. If all of the world's women took the path of men, the world will be one huge brothel without whores. Take the woman's path then, whore yourself in front of him, use yourself as weapon. Get yourself shattered enough to the breaking point, give up all—when you have nothing, nothing will be taken away from you anymore.

And this is when fear is truly lost.

To slay him is impossible, to punish him is not.

She stared at him with a harsh smirk. Using Needle's tip, she lifted his chin so he could look at her. The sword's tip made contact with the soft of his throat. He can't kill me, he 'veiled' me from Death. "Any last words, you bastard?"

Jaqen shook his head gently, eyes on her. His forehead was creased though not with the fury of one who wanted to wreak pain. Jaqen H'ghar appeared to her like a damaged man—battered by her wicked actions, unfeeling words that brutally drilled themselves into his person.

His tone was quiet. "Had I known that your faith in me will fade because of one consequence of that bid, I would not have made it—I have no knowledge about the Sealord's intent, the ploys against you. I have revealed myself unnecessarily, reneged against the Elder's clear commands, drafted my
own rules, acted against better judgment. Forgive me. Perhaps, I should have trusted your capacities; you are Faceless after all. Yes, when it comes to you I am too possessive and bedeviled." He stopped, and his voice broke. "Pray tell. What would you think of me had I not shown up on the Winter Maiden's doorstep at all? How would you see me if I decide to lose you—to another man, to Death? In both decisions, I am bound to lose your faith."

Arya was dark and cold, unaffected. There were demons hiding inside every man, and she is slowly allowing herself to be taken to an inescapable chasm where all are meaningless, except for scarlet and retribution. In this state, sense of order comes when there is blood in the hands and the mouth, when suffering is accompanied by loud sounds and screeches. He had seen the evil, stygian shadow of that depth before—partly concealed in her eyes that feared on their way to the North. He had seen the same murk in the core of himself, when he gave up all except one to become Faceless.

The line between escaping Death and befriending it is obscure, and the Lorathi now saw the consequence of that Veiling.

_She who conquers Death becomes it._

Jaqen's heart stopped. A wall—she's gradually building it, and that fortress will shut him out.

She's letting him go.

_Do not undo all these, Arya Stark._

_I ransomed you with my soul. I traded all to have you again._

Slowly, she pushed Needle's tip against him, even as her spirit howled its lamentations.

_Act now, Jaqen. Don't die._

This is naught compared to death he had dealt others in various manners. He could navigate his way in an ocean of impending demise, overturn it. The way of the Faceless Man is the way of subterfuge, and Valyrian steel, any steel acquiesce to his commands. If he is wise enough, he could countermand her.

Still, he does nothing. The tip dug deeper into his skin, scarlet liquid revealed itself from pores slightly slit open. Arya Stark shook her head in despondence. _Stop me, please,_ were the thoughts she fed his subliminals. He received them, yet acted not. His eyes were fondness, all unspoken words speak of submission and cherished remembrances—no other way but this. Within him was an invitation: _You have breathed spirit to my flesh. Take it away if you must, you are entitled to it. It is the law of life renewed, your law of renaming._

_Pierce deeper…_

_Blood in the skin…pores…_

_Thick liquid—only wolves drink of it._

_To die is to gain._

_And mercy is for weaklings and fools._

_Die._

_Stop breathing…stop._
Die!

She drew the blade away.

"Arya…"

Who are you, Lorathi?

With abandon, she dropped the steel on the floor, its metallic clang sending jarring echoes in the now becalmed room. She dashed to the door and unlocked it, traversed the corridors in haste, deaf to the Lorathi's call. When he had stared at her eyes, he had allowed her though briefly, inside the darkest abyss within him—remembrances he never wanted to recapture, yet he did. Come, be my witness, Jaqen had bid her.

Impossible. How can I have given form and life to something that did not, does not yet exist?

The corridor that led to the atrium seems to be ever-expanding, and the more she attempted to reach the end of it, the more it appeared elusive to her. Quicker darts, longer strides, in between spasmodic breaths and breathlessness are incoherent voices that riddled through those pronouncements which the Lorathi had revealed to her moments ago. How to comprehend all these, if even such a thing was possible?

Arya!

She reached the temple's main chamber, shut her eyes as she felt all the eyes of the god's images riveting to her, questioning her presence in the House, the circumvention undertaken by all Faceless for her preservation, her existence even, in this particular realm. The Songs were never from the deity's hands and you know it.

The now overflowing poison pool flooded the paths. Her feet sent water splashing in intermediate courses, nay, she cannot stop. She must reach it before the Lorathi does.

She rushed—she must—to that one place. The Crux that lay in the inner sanctum, deep in that darkened five-pronged passage with one leading to where thousands of faces lie, to the Iron Bank, to the catacombs and the chamber of bones, to concealed passages leading to other concealments.

The Crux is where the core memories of all Faceless Men are kept.

Who are you, Lorathi? What are you?

For the Faceless, No One-ness as a state is not complete nullification of the Self. Rather, it is mere dissimulation of it. Facelessness is mere equivocation, a distortion of what others see.

In all things that exist, there must always be the fundamental—the essence, the innate. Otherwise, even the state of being No One will disintegrate; for if the state seeks to shroud the Self, and temporarily break away from it, then it must fully understand in all truths the Self which it needs to provide camouflage to. One cannot perceive by plain sense the roots of the Weirwood, for it is concealed underneath, and it is the source of the tree's anchorage, stability, nourishment. In the state of being No One, the Weirwood is the many carved faceless faces, the Self is the root. What divides them is the ground—a metaphorical demarcation created by the death god, so that one is concealed, the other is revealed. No One cannot gain full existence and functionality as a state directly apart from the Self—for the former state was consciously created by the latter. The latter chose to be the former.

Hence, there is that chamber forgathering ten-year, fifty-two, even eight hundred-year old memories.
Dig the roots, forage…and find out how far they spread out.

She dashed past the darkened passage and reached the five fingers, adjusted her eyes in the eclipse of it. Not even faint light from the other halls bore traces. The cave-like channel smelled of damp stalactites, ruins, antiquity. With steps unsure, she entered the passage that led to the fifth prong, stretched her hands and allowed her palm to feel the coldness of the steel threshold. She is now ordained, she can enter portals locked—magical or otherwise.

"Do you really wish to open that door?"

It was Jaqen's voice.

How quickly she had forgotten—he can always appear from nowhere.

She turned to the source. Those silver locks somehow provided that hatchway some incandescence. "Why would I not?" With silent orders, she unlatched the door from the inside. "Afraid of who you are?"

Jaqen crossed the distance between them in slow strides. "Dead-scared of who you might think I am. Afraid of who we are—and what may happen once you learn once more what was unlearned."

"Oh?" was her response. "Riddles. This is why we Faceless lot are damn good with our games of truths and lies." The steel door yielded to her push. "I need to understand the very groundwork on why that hit was ordered on my name."

"Unearth all," Jaqen replied. "There is no going back once you do this. So, allow me to beg."

"Only a fool would want to go back."

With that, she entered the passage in a run, with Jaqen trailing behind. Arya! but she rejected his pleas. She leaped, whisked past arrayed candles that lit upon sensing the windgusts from her movements—presence of a Faceless. She ran to the chamber's core.

In the center of it was a huge fount of memories safekept within alchemical stones, drifting in concentric motions; and the force that emanates from each ore is unique to each Faceless—each memory a realm of its own, its secrets shielded from material and immaterial influences that seek to alter it.

Their arduous process of erasing memories stems from both magic and logical erudition—traces of Valyrian enlightenment. The centerpoint is alchemy, the neverending saga of humanistic attempts to achieve perfection of the body and the soul. As if suffused with elixir, those memories are immortalized within the parent rocks and metals that held them.

The game of faces was meant to target specific memories for ablation.

Chridhe memoriae—within glissading antimony, platinum, bismuth…

Essences. Bay laurels, evening primroses, geranium, dianthus. Snow, snow…

Ginger. Cloves.

She traced the scent of him, walked to the edge of the fount whose crevasse emitted a faint luster. Scintillation intensified as the fount interacted with her the faintest of her breaths and pulses—life. Memories are triggered by consciousness that lie within living men. Jaqen…Jaqen. There were only two hues in her dreams—dragon scales glistening against the grand hues of sunlight, direwolves
howling in the melancholic hues of moonlight.

Gold and silver.

She stretched out her hand, as if to summon the elements. One contact with her breathing skin and she will unravel all tangles.

Arya!

Her hands caught the ore, she gripped them tightly. He reached her, pulled her from the fount.

Resistance was on the Lorathi’s part, yet the girl drew him forcefully in his own ideations with her. Dark spirals, downwards, and they both descended into it. Jaqen! His hands reached her, their fingers intertwined. Hold my hand, he whispered as they both plummeted in the center of him.

Y mie sa antuulien, a herenya ami hyanda, verie, losse—a yu varyas…

Touch my soul.

They fell away to the Ostium—a portal, a means to travel to the path of memories, a source of power. It was one door to other realms which mages have unlocked through their gained wisdom of how spheres, turfs work and interact. Sorcery had a magical signature, and not every person is gifted the capacity to gain passage through certain types of Ostiae, the portal respects only those with blood of magic. There were greater and lesser Ostiae, and if a traveler’s core is an anathema to the portal’s source, she will remain trapped within the very remembrances she tried to access.

In that imprisonment, the traveler may reform the memories in an attempt to escape, and will destroy the holder of those memories in the process.

In the chaotic hold of it, she felt herself drift.

She was water; and she was strong enough to overwhelm him, gentle enough to redeem him. His scent of ginger and cloves wafted all over like a bold splurge of petals. His voice soothed her—it was in all corners and radii. She ran across the dark crepuscule, tried to find him, but there was No One. She turned her head in all directions. Any trace of him…any trace at all.

Jaqen?

It was all a vanishing span. There were flashes from the time past and time forthcoming. She drowned in a sea of scenarios and sequences and sagas untold.

A proposal—we must learn Rhoniar to understand our subjects. Torture, dragonfire—blood brothers, the gods did not create us demons…

Speak, goddess. The conclave will hear you.

I don’t know…I may have fallen for an enemy.

She saw him in different forms, and in every surrender he loses fragments of himself.

Corpus, animus, arbitrio, memoriae, veritus, impetus.

Body, soul, will, memory, reality, purpose.

The voice of a woman reverberated within the closed walls of his core being. Arya shivered at the sound, for it spoke of only one thing—Stygai.
Spirit spouse, let us wake the sleeping Night.

Unmistakable—it was the death god's voice.

His words were a response, an acceptance.

Find me my Warrior Bride, and I will surrender my name.

Essen—substance. It is the only facet of him that was materially constant. He held on to it—his essence of what to him is absolute, essence of his liberation, essence of all his truths.

I traded all to have you again.

And if he loses this too, he would cease to exist.

In that darkness of him, Arya Stark saw only herself. It may be that within the Lorathi's crux are a million seeing glasses, for as her eyes roamed unhurriedly to his core, she saw only her face in various likenesses and impressions, in numberless mirrors of congruous and incongruous shapes and shards.

Her many selves.

In each shard, a series of smaller and smaller reflections of her appear to recede in distances infinite, and the depth of each is like tunnels carrying only that face, as the heart whispered but a single name.

Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya…

Causal being: she is his prime mover, the genesis of him. In the days of Valyria and Rhoyne, she had named him. Without that ritualistic naming that made him one with her and her kin, he would not have come to life at all.

Accept your rebirth. Henceforth, you will be called Jaqen H'ghar—sent by the gods. From them, to us.

Hence, if she lets him go, he will fall apart.

Slowly, he draws her back, reached out for her so she may return from the heart of that spiral where they both fell.

She gasped, let herself collapse. She knelt, weakened by all these.

Tears fell in small droplets upon the stone tier.

"Why me? Jaqen, why did you do it all?"

He knelt in front of her, cupped her cheeks. His thumb brushed salt's rain from her eyes.

"What else must a man do for you, Arya?" he spoke, his anguished voice, his desperation slashing at her soul. He gazed at her and the girl almost broke at the sight of his bereavement. "Please, do tell. Do you wish for a man to kill the Elder? And the other nine masters? He has allowed you to kill one, anyway. Still, it seems as if for you nothing is enough." He tugged at his hair, thoroughly dejected. In his strong arms he imprisoned her asudden. Jaqen whispered against her ears. "Does a girl want the useless lives of the scums on her kill list? Does the Wolf want the Lioness? Or maybe, she wants him to help her renounce her duties, and renounce his too? Dragons, perhaps? Winterfell? Please… tell a man. Anything at all. Just…just…"
Arya Stark buried her face in his locks, sobbed quietly.

"Just don't hide, don't run away from me."

It made perfect sense.

After Ned's death, the wolf-girl had done nothing but run. She had become so masterful at running and concealing herself that she was sure her fur had already turned into scaled chameleon's skin. Then came the brutal slaying of Cat and Robb. By this, a girl concealed her true character behind a mask of fear turned to profound hatred—wrapping herself with the dark blankets of derision, acting as a punisher of men, claiming their lives as if she was some kind of god higher than the cardinal one and all the others. But mostly, she ran.

She ran away from the Hound who begged for the mercy of her steel; she ran from Westeros to lick her wounds and let them heal whilst she planned ways on how to wolf down the Lions and they who are in the Twins. When she ran from the Waif, despite the latter's noble death wish, she seriously considered running away from all of it—Braavos, the Faceless Order…

**Him.**

And her feet, they too, get enervated. As does her heart.

"Please say something," he whispered in desolation.

Puppets danced beneath hands masterful. The gods and men. Their movements were unbidden. In the midst of the marionettes' hysterical pirouette, a man without a face severs the puppet strings with his firesword. The string snaps.

The ones that held those severed strings began the almost ageless realm to realm chase of that man who caused the dissociation. Dreams, the voice from the Weirwood, killing her.

*There are more, Jaqen—the god, the faces, the lords and you. Death. In that ore were certain memories only, not all. Very well, I yield. Know this though, I will uncloak every mystery you have under your skin, my love. Pray that I do not detest what I see. And the Waif—Sabine…her supplications…*  

She looked at his face. "What would the realms look like if all Shadows disappeared? The absence of shadows somehow means absence of light, yes?"

"Arya…"

"Faceless Men are said to be shadowless. In realities seen, yes. In realities hidden, no. Tell me, Jaqen. If light casts itself upon the body, and creates that dark form beneath it, can the Being be separated at all from its Shadow? Can the Being run away, without the Shadow chasing it?"

The Lorathi smiled softly. "Never."

"Then what would you think that I will and can run away from you?"

He kissed her. She tasted blood from his lips.

"Death will run after us both," he murmured. "Take the risk with me?"

The girl embraced him tight, swallowed the bitter lump that had formed in her throat. "Your decisions, your acts are idiotic most of the time. Ten mistakes. A hundred, a thousand. Still, I will
throw love in your face, and stab you with it, choke and smother you with it, strangle you even. I will *kill* you with it, because you are so precious to me."

*These I will do, until you learn how to give love back without glancing over your shoulder in fear of the death god.*

"Forgive me, for all."

"Forgiven." She kissed his cheek with lips quivering, her tears had bathed even his face. "Thank you, Jaqen. For the rescue."

They shared kisses. He is slowly reaching her—reaching that part of herself where even she dared not enter, for it was a place of obscurities and uncertainties. Obsidian candles had revealed to her not only West of Westeros, but a self long forgotten, and despite her inner protestations, she knew she could not hide from herself and from him that long.

*Let us play in the fields, my goddess.*

She welcomed him, only in accepting can concealments be further unlocked.

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Aegeus stood solitary in the middle of the Hall of Faces—looking at one particular face that hung in there, though without truly seeing it.

The man's comely face reflected an expression that was more blank than nothing, as if life and soul were mercilessly sucked of his mortal body.

His silence and passiveness were the complete obverse of what he held inside that precise moment.

It was only blood that he saw, and shadows, and the spine-chilling wailing of souls. He was blind except for his sight of one thing, and this which he had to endure had turned him into an anarchical questioner.

He knew in the essence of his being faceless that he can survive without belief—a state incongruent with his supposed character as a priest of death, as a servant to Him of Many Faces. Albeit, it was the only truth in him, that he can exist without believing in anything…

*Anyone may return from the curtains, but may not recall what was on the other side.*

"I don't care," he spoke to himself. "I can make her remember."

He heard footsteps—one step heavier than another, but he was too occupied wallowing in his own muck to even pay it any mind.

"Just one question, and answer it truthfully," the voice of a man said. "Was it you with the Sealord?"

Aegeus still stared at that one face. "No."

"Who was it, then?"

The Tyroshi laughed bitterly, then glanced sideways at his Lorathi brother, most amused. "Remind me again why I should care?"

The Lorathi shook his head gently. *A man cannot lose his sister, and his brother too.* "You should,
because if you will not, then Sabine had died in vain."

At those words, the Tyroshi regarded his brother with deep moroseness. "Had she not, already?"

"She must not, brother."

Aegeus scoffed and turned his attention back to her face. Stillness seemed to have found its home in that hall, for neither of them breathed a sound. Finally, a revelation from the comely one.

"She loved you, you know?"

The Lorathi heaved a sigh.

He had never regarded Sabine as someone who was more than kin to him. He had cared for her deeply. Somehow, he felt protective of her even, despite knowing that she could well defend her own self, what with her poisons and her gift of paralyzing foes with an unseeable force only she possessed. Perhaps, those protective instincts sprang from the Lorathi's thoughts of how fragile and precious women and girls are. He thought of Arya Stark, and her Needle against his chest and throat, her wolf teeth against his lips, her unthinkable power bestowed upon her by the old gods—and laughed inwardly at his prior sentiments. Women are precious, yes, but definitely not fragile.

Aegeus was smiling softly. "I was invited to the temple, we were no more than ten and four. I had this singular goal with me at that time—become an assassin for the Order. The life of a Tyroshi sellsword was never for me, will never be for me. Morn and night I spent perusing the Creed and Methods, fulfilling those damnable burial duties, training for combat. I committed myself only to Him of Many Faces. Oh, how I revered that god."

Jaqen was silent.

The Tyroshi spoke forth. "Then came the first acolytes' trials. They called you first for the one-to-one with a broadsword, and everyone laughed at how very little you were compared to the boar of a lad paired with you. How they swallowed their own banters when they saw you wield that broadsword! And hells brother, you were so good with your blade." Aegeus glanced at Jaqen who only smiled at him. "Yes, too good that I studied your techniques—attacks and defenses, stance and stops. I was bent on committing to memory how you did things. But then two acolytes away from me, a golden-haired girl sighed, and from that moment I was…I was distracted."

"Sabine adored you, brother," Jaqen assured him in the midst of his brother's embittered state.

"Oh, yes she most certainly did," Aegeus replied, chuckling at the thought. He looked at Jaqen from head to foot, though not with hostility. "But, she worshipped you. She was just truly gifted at being faceless that she was able to conceal it for a whole excruciating decade."

His chest was suddenly filled with inexplicable heaviness, aching. Sabine. Even with Death lurking behind her, despite her noble thirst to end it all and commune only with the god, she still graciously fulfilled for him and for Arya Stark a last favor. Uprightness, unswerving facelessness—this was how the Lorathi knew the Braavosi woman. It was all for the Order, the faith. What used to lie within the mind of her? How can he not have come to know this?

The poison pool was more merciful than the poisoned blade, yet she chose the latter.

"In the middle of mixing potions, she would utter your name. 'Jaqen' she would say, careful so no soul may hear her naming you—it was after you had rescued her from one task that almost led to her demise. But I heard everything, saw everything—her fascination, the heavy breathing when you're near, the helpless sighs when you're far; and her eyes, they were...celestial. For years it had been like
that for her, and it ruined me beyond comprehension, brother, it did," Aegeus rubbed his face, eyes shut to contain himself. Estrangement slowly enveloped him, he kept his voice firm. "She stayed in your chamber dawn to midnight till you awoke from that long stupor. We were six and ten. We thought that illness would claim you, but so wrong we were, because she knows her cures and potions—holy hells, she's a breathing elixir!" The comely one chuckled, the Lorathi smiled. "I had told her, 'Go sleep, I will watch over him.' She refused. She thought I'd kill you in your vegetative state. Oh no, brother, I would never do that to her—take you away. I will kill myself first before I place her in such misery."

He paused.

"But what shattered me more was the fact that you were oblivious to everything."

"Brother," Jaqen spoke in a peaceful, comforting tone. "First, you are mistaken—she never felt that way about me. Second, even if a man did notice her affections, if there were any at all, it cannot happen amongst Faceless Men."

"Ah, yes," Aegeus said, laughing sourly. "But that did not stop you from helplessly falling for Arya Stark."

The Lorathi's jaw hardened, but could not at all respond. For it may be true, what his brother said. He had asked himself in the form of a million songs to his heart if he had loved her merely because she was Chosen—after all, some people fall in love with the idea of a person, not with the person herself.

But Arya Stark—fiery, dark, bloodthirsty; and sweet, loving, gentle all at the same time. So, so powerful, then and now. She's past and she's present.

"I cannot understand still the dynamics of your souls were in your cycles prior, your mutual madness for each other is clarity enough," the comely one threw the Lorathi an aggrieved glare. "This insanity of yours over the Chosen, and the Elder's obsession over prophecies and faiths—these are lethal. Circumvention, hoodwinking the god, using another Faceless for such a purpose. There is the Creed on one side and hypocrisy on the other. The gods and men, the neverending chronicles of death and rebirth. Ah, brother! How can we all live with ourselves? Why the hell are we even here?"

Jaqen was silent in his many pondering. What truly is the grand scheme of life? He would never know, for perhaps, the answer is subjective. And for Faceless Men, subjectivity must not triumph.

For Faceless Men, the grand scheme of life, however beautiful it may be, cannot and must not be realized. They don't have the right to it.

Aegeus still looked at Sabine's false face now cleansed of blood.

Jaqen's eyes riveted to that face too, then to his brother's. "Sabine used to say this, 'I hate it whenever Aegeus comes home from his amusing escapades as male harlot for the House. Useless tasks. I hate it!' Hah!" The comely one snorted at Jaqen's pathetic attempt to imitate the woman's speech. "Morn to night, she would voice out her rage on assignments where sex is necessary for either the information or the kill. However, she only had issues when you had to do them."

'To crawl in mud once or twice for the Order is service, and all men must serve. But why must it always be Aegeus? Can you not don faces for such abhorrent tasks as well?'

'Come now, Sabine. It's fair mummer's farce. Bodies, sweat, and heat? Surely, these tasks cannot be more abhorrent than slaughtering the innocent. Not to mention, our brother can enhance the faces
according to the target's preferences—his true face seems to be crafted for such purpose, meld perfectly with any mask and embellish it with long lashes or full lips or a strong jawline. Full artifice is a gift from the god. A man is not gifted with hypnosis either—'

'He certainly likes it. The women, the bathing, and…the gods know what else!

'And the sucks and deep thrusts and tongue in between the ladies' legs? What man wouldn't? Valar dohaeris, and you can always ask him.'

'I'd rather poison myself.'

The comely one exhaled dejectedly at the Lorathi's recount. "I never asked questions, brother. It was all amusing at first, but then you start claiming secrets, gaining access to the most twisted of minds—more contorted than ours, believe me—admiring the struggles and the pains for some. Sexual climax is one of the purest states there is, you are simply gorged by passion on one side and affection on the other—no judgments, wrath ceases, even hopes. The zenith of the encounter closes your consciousness to everything else, a little death as they say, a preparation for real Death that is to come. On and on it goes—a sickening routine. They're of various shapes, stenches, sexes too; and flesh had become their life. The erotic flow becomes mechanical, the thrills become mere seizures. It was too much."

"Too much? It's like swallowing the gods, you mean."

He shook his head. "A lewd Pentoshi lord for a week's task. You wouldn't believe how the bastard pulled me with his mouth and teeth every damned time he would see me. Almost thought I'd lose myself with the pain and the revulsion—literally, I thought my cock would detach itself from my frame," the comely one confessed. Jaqen smiled with empathy. "After every encounter, I would vomit and bathe myself till my pores bleed. I savored the kill, brother. Ah, it was without finesse, nevertheless that bastard's blood all over his private chambers was art from my virtuosity. Did not even pray, or utter Valar Morghulis. Anticipation was there, to sail home. I came through the double doors and there she was by the poison pool—Sabine. When she turned to me, her countenance was with complete distaste, and I remember how she averted her eyes," he sighed. "That very stare shamed me from shadow to core, and so I could not bear hand her that one present I brought from the task, left the thing on her bedside. Might be that she threw it without even having a look."

"Yes," Jaqen nodded, tone reassuring. "The whitegold necklace she always wore around her neck, the one with the flora graeca pendant."

The comely one turned to him asudden. "She kept it?"

"Cherished it."

The comely one nodded, his smile was melancholic.

In the calmness, the faces seemed to speak with them, as if to plead.

"Forgiveness, brother. May you find it in your heart," Aegeus went on. "I had sought to ruin your bond with the girl, almost hindered the sacred confluence from happening, charged her that courtesan task. It was all for a purpose, believe me. The ritual by the goddess pool was derived from Rhoyne—Arya had to come of age."

He sat on the stone floor, legs crossed. Jaqen sat beside him. In the faint light of votive candles, the faces arrayed in the hall's ceiling-to-ceiling repository shone in an afterglow—a reaction to the phosphorescence. The faces almost appeared as if they contained warmth emanating from life, an
illusion no better than transparent clock dials that seemed to move without moving. The Order is as old as the city—eight centuries, and in those years there were scums and kings, betrayers and faithful ones, mothers to babes and warriors to empires, sinful men and their sinless young, that were all executed in exchange for either coin or precious life. "The Creed, the holy texts," they would utter in order to explain the rationale of such acts. Blame it all on the pages. Blame it all on the many-faced god who sanctions. Do the tattooed traces of the dead matter, or their tales of old wounds and quiet laughters, before their lives are claimed prior to time designed? No. Valar Morghulis, and the Order gets to decide when. The disparity between what is preached and what is practiced is too great.

A name and a face—the first is prerequisite, the second is keepsake. Without fail, they fool believers with tenets and precepts dating back to the terrible grandiosity of Old Valyria—using literature of the oppressed as justification. But Faceless Men are men with either blameworthy or blameless blood in their hands; and they call themselves assassins, a euphemism for slaughterers and wreckers of lives. They perform murder and name it 'craft'. They peel off the faces of the dead, wear them to conceal their dark intents, and label the act 'method'. They poison, asphyxiate, slay men by the dagger and the sword, and call it 'religion'.

"Ah, that purpose," Jaqen was somber. "Spill me all, brother. Before I get exhausted of butchering men and collecting their faces."

Aegeus turned to Jaqen, very amused. "By the name of the gods. Since when did you start feeling remorseful after a kill? Since when did you realize that the death game and chase do get dead-tiring?"

*Every morn, in the death god's cruel womb, an assassin is born.*

He cast out the warning of the Burners. It was full admission, it was the only truth.

"Since Arya Stark." The Lorathi smiled sadly, eyes riveting to each pillar of faces. "Time will come, and one autumn morn you will sit with your child under the weirwood by the cold pond. Leaves fall, beauteous sight, and there are the sounds of white ravens' wings frolicking gently with the winds. He stutters, as he struggles with the words on the pages of his book, you help him with the phrases. Slowly you read them, and he mimics you: 'Winterfell is the home of Stark kings.' Your child then says, 'Again, you will be away. When will you come home?' You tell him, after the task is done—time is never certain, even life's continuance. 'What is the task?' he probes further," the Lorathi exhales deeply, morosely. His melancholic eyes cruised to Aegeus's face. "Tell me, how will you answer that?"

The Tyroshi only nodded. "Have not thought that far, honestly. You cannot tell the child that you carry out guileful, silent carnage for a living—and that it's the bloodbath that puts food on the table."

Jaqen H'ghar laughed, and perchance in that confused laughter, dead faces in that very sanctum were stirred. They carried on though, dead and dreaming. Iron Islanders may be bearers of falsehoods—what is dead can never rise again. But what does anyone know about the other side, truly? "To even think of children! I must be going insane!"

Aegeus placed one hand lightly on Jaqen's shoulder. "I beg to differ. It is only now that you are finding your sanity. Very good, Faceless."

Within the sanctum, there was only stillness coupled with lovely hopes contrary to reason, that the day will come when they could wash scarlet off their murderous hands and start anew.

*This time, to create life, not take it away.*

"Forgiveness too, brother," Jaqen said quietly.
Aegeus scoffed. "Three hundred dragons," he said, turning to the Lorathi. "Really, brother? You thought me that strong?"

"Arya was with you," Jaqen answered. "It was madness in the Freehold. Your damnable enchantments killed three imperial dragonriders. All lords were called to gather; and voices were one during the Archon's conclave—overkill. If there was one thing you Rhoynish lot have taught those pompous Valyrians, it is to erase from their minds and tongues the term 'underestimate'."

"Still, you have reduced my palace of love to a palace of sorrows." Nostalgia seeped through his contemplations, but the invasion was most welcome. He smirked. "Ah! How I prayed morn and night before my surrender: may Arya bring the Freehold unthinkable quagmire—especially you."

"She was too bold, too defiant," Jaqen said. "It was a battle of water and flames in my tower every single day the deities have created. We almost caused the other's downfall. So much power—never seen anything like it, despite Valyria being a haven of incomparable thaumaturgy that time past, the way Darkest Asshai is now. The curious thing is this: the magic that she held was all-good. It was something my blood could not comprehend, I have been taught that the sole purpose of magic is to subdue, not nourish."

"And so over and over, the bulge in your breeches grew and you fell hard and deep. Over and over, you have scoured the realms in search of her," Aegeus supplied for him. "The child?"

"Never saw him. She carried him in her womb to Westeros, married a Martell."

"There are certain things that must be done for one's survival and those of others," Aegeus said in defense. "For the sake of alliance, no emotions involved. And you were killed, anyway."

"That doesn't mean I died."

True. Direct descendants of the red god are almost invulnerable to dragonfire. There's the death god too, offering a bargain three seconds before damnation.

"A different conclusion to the cycles, a different ending," the comely one said. "We are fools to think we can change the destiny shaped by the gods. If so, then I desire to be a fool for the rest of my life." Two candles flickered, one died. He rose and lit three new ones, retrieved something from below one of the graystone pilasters. Gentle luminescence bathed the sanctum once more. "You never got to the North. You never killed Bloodraven. Citadel, then Braavos—you changed your route on purpose, and with it, the Order's objective on why you were in Westeros in the first place."

The Lorathi turned to the comely one, alarmed. "How do you even know this?"

"Calm, brother. I'm with you on this. Quaithe—Seastar. Those lover-siblings know everything, it seems," Aegeus replied. He walked to Jaqen and sat once more, handed him a goblet with strong Dornish. Jaqen's brows creased, then he chuckled. "What? I drink here. Faces are as good a company as any."

Jaqen sighed, accepted a glassful. "I cannot kill the only link we have to all Weirwood, unless we see what truly is West of Westeros. Good decision, it seems. As it appears, realms and time will disintegrate if he dies. He holds it all under higher influence."

"Oh," Aegeus teased, tipping the goblet's rim to drink. He smacked his lips at the intoxication's aftertaste, studied the goblet's ornate design. "You knew all long. Arya Stark saw nothing but illusions when she unlocked that obsidian candle of yours. Someone has been messing with her yondersight. I wonder who he is."
"Promise me," Jaqen turned to Aegeus, urgency in his voice. "Never tell her a thing about what lies past the Sunset." The comely's response was an insouciant shrug. "Aegeus..." Jaqen implored him.

Obsidian candles are benediction—it can allow men to reconnect with versions of themselves as true as the ones they have now. However, there is time for all forms of revelation.

"Fine." A temporary yield. "Three conditions."

"You do not demand."

"Neither do you."

Jaqen gritted his teeth, irritated apparently, though not provoked. He emptied the goblet with two hasty swallows, coughed at the aftereffects of the alky's intense taste. "One."

"Three. I need information, not favor."

"Go on, then."

"What is it truly, between you and the death god?"

Jaqen held his breath. "Anything but that."

"I will find out soon enough, brother."

"Then why ask?"

Aegeus took his sweet time with his cupful. "No judgments, we all made bargains which is why we are all here," he faced the Lorathi and shrugged with nonchalance, as if the latter emptying himself out is a feat none too serious. "Simple—renounce your old gods, she had told me. Sever all forms of coherence with them, Valar dohaeris. It was that, or a most assured death without the chance to wish for the dragonlords' comeuppance. Hopeless nightfall, but then I felt her cold lips against my own. When I awoke, I only saw sorrows, stonemen, and my reflection in the water—faceless and shrouded."

It started out as an embittered laugh. "That's it?" the Lorathi asked. Heartless, spiteful deity. His laughter had gone rancorous—madness ate him, as he pondered on his own misery. A lesson: never bargain with a god who dons many faces. "A damnable kiss!"

Aegeus lifted his goblet, as if to acknowledge his brother's rightful insults. "Yours?" He washed the bitter bile that had formed in his tongue with the bittersweetness of the Dornish. More, more—his goblet had gone full again. Carry on, act as if the godawful covenant with the salacious deity never happened.

"Don't hate me, brother."

The comely one choked on his wine. His eyes riveted to the Lorathi.

"You did not!"

Jaqen smiled dismally. "Forsake the red god—and many other things. Truly, a man has forgotten all other demands, brother."

It's all between me and the god.

Aegeus chuckled with amusement. "And I thought I was this Order's manwhore! You are too
obsessed with Arya Stark, brother, for you to yield that much."

Jaqen ignored him. "What's your second?"

"Tell me about your firesword."

A thousand-year recollection. He told him.

Aegeus nodded, visage that of the unconvinced. "Third, then," he pointed to the pillars. "What do we do with all these faces?"


Jaqen H’ghar’s contemplations were dragged as sudden to that canyon’s pit in his memories. Three seconds, two. Blood from his scorched skin blessed the golden sands of Old. The death god’s voice was insistent, to resist is to die. Once, he had this discussion with a brother whose face was now that of a Stormcrow, whose name was that of one Daario Naharis—a dead man. "She shows her face through our dreams, this death god. Oh yes, we Faceless lot are not allowed to dream unless the subject of that reverie is her. Normally, I would not have the slightest problem with it, she’s damn beautiful, and she must be. How else can she lure men to becoming faceless if she is not? But every night, the obsession grows and it consumes you—and you find yourself losing even the nothingness that you have left, why of course she would claim from you even that. Then only, would you realize how disgustingly horrifying she truly is."

Every single time they wear those masks of skin and flesh, there were the voices of those dead warring against their No One state:

Hide not from the death god. Hide not underneath me!

What Sabine had said rang truth to it, the faces were not solely meant for assassinations; and they have not discovered the fullness of the purposes yet of the faces in the sanctum. Only this—that they use it to conceal themselves from the death god’s eyes, for the deity's reckoning is always nigh. Bargains made must be paid.

Death needs both appellation and appearance—without these, tracery is as improbable as an arrow released from its nock over blindfold. Shiera Seastar who was said to bathe herself in blood to keep her youth, had concealed herself beneath her lacquered mask and the label 'Quaithe'. Melony of Old Valyria had been masquerading for centuries as one shadowbinder, using glamour to enshroud herself, claiming to carry out holy tasks for the red god under the guise 'Melisandre' of Asshai. Valar Morghulis is a universal precept, yet no one wants to die—even Faceless Men.

And when the reckoning comes, the faces must be returned to the souls to which they belong.

Sabine.

'I have questions, only the god can answer them.'

Jaqen rose, decided. "The faces will stay here."

Aegeus stared at him with incredulity. He too, stood up. "Brother, you know naught about what is happening in Asshai, do you? You think yourself too sophisticated to even be speaking with shadowbinders! Very well then, this is what Seastar had told me in the Unmasking—she fled from the Shadowlands for good. Death needs both name and face. The souls of men we have killed still roam the paths of the Vale of Shadows—the threshold, that damnable bridge to the death god’s courts was locked, denying them entry because they cannot be recognized at all—their faces are here.
in the sanctum. There are not enough shadowbinders to contain those raging spirits. We cannot have them taking an exeunt from the Ash in the form of demons, and wreak cataclysm in the realms Known in search for those masks we have peeled from their bodies. We cannot defeat raving souls and Dark Valyria and Winter all at the same time. See reason, for once! Think me half-witted, but I cannot blame myself for the death of both men and their souls. For sakes, it is not worth keeping those faces!"

The Lorathi walked calmly to one of the pillars, touched the face of one young.

Might be, that when life still breathed itself into her, her eyes had smiled at the sight of blooming flora and the still sea in crisp, summer air. There was youthful bliss, childish escapades, tomfoolery that either made her snicker or sob. Dandelion seeds may have kissed her nosetip, and snow her cheeks of rose. Upon the warm shore she might have walked barefoot. Upon grassy meadows she might have danced and leaped in mirth.

A coin ended it all.

*Does Death come only for the wicked and leave the decent behind?*

No. Hence, she must die. Price was paid, servants must not ask questions.

Now, there were only songs unsung in both her lips and her heart. She had died in the Lorathi's hands. No One will ever know her tale—for Faceless Men, tales untold never mattered in the first place.

*She is not one traitorous Sealord, or a dragonriding slaver. She's just a child.*

And this child's soul is slowly being gorged by unrest, gradually turning into an irredeemable incubus, battling against all others to gain an impossible pass to the Realm Unseen. The masters are getting hints—the nightmares the faces contained are almost impossible to subdue now. With the dreams are the memories—both evil and good.

And for Faceless Men who had known nothing but Cimmerian shades and sad quietus, good memories are priceless gifts. One Braavosi brother admitted to wearing one face for three full nights—a seafarer's face. From the face's cherished recollections, he had learned that within a moon the mariner will be wed to his beloved. In tones of bliss, he spoke of his plans to quit from sea and settle with his fair-haired. There was the trade, and he was gifted at it—his maiden need not compete with the unmerciful ocean for his devotion. A reasonably-sized summerhouse with yellow daffodils and larkspur by the front, scents of roasts and cakes from the window, small feet hopscotching by the cobbled walkway, his cherub's laughter—all these.

That night, he died through poisoned water. He was too upright to even drink ale.

The beseecher—the father of his beloved.

His reminiscences were too lovely. Perchance, his beloved still gazed at the sea's horizon, waiting for the ship that would bring him home to her. He would never come back. And who is to blame—the beseecher, or the executioner?

Some stories were never bound to end well.

Those memories bless them blithely, and plague them with guilt. This is why most of the Faceless Men are slowly resorting to basic artifice—a weak method; so that stolen stories, beautiful stories will not take toll on their shattered selves and broken minds.
Jaqen shook his head remorsefully. *The Sealord, the dragonlords, and let me be done.* "The faces stay here." He ignored Aegeus's raging stare. He met his brother's eyes, beckoned in him some form of understanding. "For now."

The Lorathi threw him one glass vial. It was empty. Aegeus caught it, read the vial's marker.

*Revixit coile-tare.*

His eyes narrowed, grew. Indignation suddenly transformed into youthful anticipation. False hope is enough. Winter may claim petals of all flowers known, but Spring will always come, no matter the length of cold nights and solstices. He shook his head, breathed in soft convulsions. "Sabine could not have concocted this," Aegeus muttered in exhalation. Jaqen just smiled—a confirmation. It should have been enough, yet it was not. "This is a mythical substance, Jaqen."

The Lorathi chuckled. "You've said it yourself. She's a breathing elixir. Patience, dear brother. We wait for her."

Aegeus grinned and nodded back to the Lorathi. "Walk with me to the Hall of Masters. I'm kind of thirsty for one Sealord's blood."

Chapter End Notes

(Thanks, hugs, love to Kitty's_World for the chapter titles)

Hey guys! Hope you liked this chapter. Please leave comments, I would love to know what you think. It's all hazy and yes, the chapter is built that way. Thanks as always for the comments and kudos. Have a great week ahead. ;D Much love.

Guys! Check this out: (How Arya entered Jaqen's memories)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dZhC1igM7ew
Acquisition was carried out. The fabled Dragonbinder sat beside the marbled statue of the many-faced god. A scream of a thousand souls—this was how witnesses pronounced its deadly sonance. A rune merciless to lips that were not carved by the ancestry of dragons and their human kin, a murderer hellhorn as lore would claim—Blood for fire, fire for blood; for if one must seek to gain a firebeast's deference, one must be willing to sacrifice life for it. Its Valyrian glyphs glowed faintly against the candlelight; and whenever wind blew softly, the glyphs would cast sun-hued embers that would set the whole horn aglow.

Many leagues away, Victarion Greyjoy was roaring his lungs out at the loss of an inestimable weapon. Stratagems on forging an alliance with the Silver Queen against another Greyjoy kin must be rethought. The Ironborn carried no aces. His priest of the red god had left him and rejoined the god's descendants in the ruins of Old.

Along the Narrow Sea to the south of Braavos is a dragonrider born out of a convergence of fire, blood, and sunspear—Sixth of his Name, the surviving son of the would-be king that perished in the rebellion. He, who was said to be the rightful owner of the firebeasts as the unwrit rule for heirship of dragonspawns would dictate, is now ahead of all the others in the game. Through new 'allies' he has found her—the youngest Stark daughter.

In the reformed terrains of Dark Valyria is the lord emperor who kept an eye on all things through an ancient dragonglass candle. Visions were clear before, but in days past shadows seemed to have obscured from his sight certain places, particularly that of the Isle of the Gods. Magical umbra may be protecting the temples, and the source of the shadows is unknown. After a moon, the red priest Moqorro who had once aided the Greyjoy arrived, unlocked through the flames the face of the shadows' source. "A woman in a mask of red, consort to the Weirwood," the red priest had claimed. "She has conjured her wraiths from the Ash. Higher plans, perchance. The Weirwood is known to whisper things, and that Stark enchantress seemed to have gained the favor of both the red god and..."
the old gods. Quaithe and the Black Raven are preserving her, for reasons still unknown." The lord emperor had then queried about the Chosen, her Shield, the confluence—how strong is the connection between their bloods? Did the death mark on the Stark girl's name accomplish the intent? "The bond between them is still strong," the red priest had told them. "But very shatterable. Indeed, the death mark had worked. Trust was restored between the two, but the seed of doubt was planted."

"Excellent," was Aurion's response. The ritualistic black and white slip was not for the purpose of destroying the girl—as of now she is too powerful to contain. A fissure must therefore be created, a breach to their link. The cycles must repeat, mistakes must not.

In the Hall of Masters, there were only Arya Stark and her Kindly Man.

"Personal reasons," the girl told the old man. "I am not a child, I swore a sacred, binding vow. A direwolf never withdraws from the face of peril. Starks never forsake covenants, even if all others around them do."

"Just so," the Kindly Man replied.

"You will tell me about this god and more. Your instruction lacked numerous teachings."

"Ah, but child, there are things that must not be revealed to us; for if they are revealed, we may resort to unnecessary questioning," the old man responded. "Your Faceless Master knows of the god more than the rest of us combined do. If there is one person who can provide you with the answers you seek, it is he."

"There is certainly more to this than Winter and Dragonfire."

"How did you come by such a conclusion?"

"A Reader. A dream."

Before the Waif's dagger against her throat that fateful night, she had seen it again—the Chariot in the Reader's wooden cards.

Only that the figure's face was not anymore obscured by mist. The face of it, was as clear as crystal, that of a Faceless Man.

Jaqen's.

She knew the annotations the moment she beheld the impression of the wooden. It was her Lorathi, and the seer was clear about it too, that he had compromised many a thing for her sake, and that the death god is displeased. As to the extent of the compromise, or that of the deity's displeasure, she knew little.

And this, this recent act of his, the Veiling. A nagging thought persisted in Arya, and the utterances of the Reader before she had succumbed to monstrosity in that tent:

Who do you truly serve? Ah, tell me not. I don't care.

Death is a gift from the many-faced god, it is one of the prime movers of things, a living entity. Death is not a mere concept—it is a being that consumes mortal frames and reduce them to mere spirits in the Unseen. And when this gift of Death is rejected by one who is cloaked from it, then the many-faced god must intervene to sustain balance between the living and the dead.

Though not before the prophecies are fulfilled.
Arya Stark shuddered at the visions.

The death god donned the face of the most beautiful woman.

And that woman had touched and kissed her Lorathi in many places even she had not explored yet.

_Answers, Jaqen H'ghar._

"Once it all happens, we will all know, I suppose. Finish off my list, this I will do, then to service of Him of Many Faces." She picked up the black and white slip that contained her name and tore it, letting the fragments fall freely from her fingers. "One more thing."

"Very well."

"After all these, relieve him from his duties as Faceless."

"Once Faceless, forever Faceless, child. I do not hold the decision."

"But I am one higher than Death speaking to you, Elder."

The Kindly Man only exhaled, though his inner spirits were filled with dark veneration for the child. The Creed was not outright about the thirty-seventh leaf. What they did, what she did was absolute deception to the god, and this was not the first time she had done it either. She had named one before—a Faceless who almost burned inside a cage, then unnamed him, obtained eight other lives in return, and a favor that had absolutely nothing to do with the gift. Now, she was named then unnamed by circumventing her own downfall, and is once again collecting the favors due her.

The forty-fourth cleared all their doubts.

_Death, unless she conquers it, would be higher and above her._

And she has conquered it. Magnificently, in fact. And now, unless she desired that it happens, it may be truly be difficult to quell her. That is, if one is not the many-faced god.

They need her more than she needs them. And it seems as if the god was on the girl's very side, relenting to her every impulsive caprice. _As if she was the apple of the death god's eyes, as if she is the only mortal safe from the god's claws. Curious, for she had tricked the deity in countless ways._ The Elder could not decide whether the god consenting to his select few of favored earthlings is a thing beneficial to the Order and the City. But then, no one could ever truly know what lies within the recesses of the death god's conscious thoughts. The deity is known to be the greatest deceiver of all the gods, thus, the many faces.

"If he lives after." It was a safe answer. "All are in the hands of the divine."

"He will."

_"Valar Morghulis, sweet child."

"Yes, Valar Morghulis—but we say not today to the god of death, do we not? Valar Morghulis—though not for the time being. Not for a very long time.""

"Be at liberty then, with your beliefs, Arya Stark. However, as long as you are servants of this temple, as long as Death has not claimed the both of you yet, you will obey. Clear, I hope."

"Like crystal."
Silence enveloped the hall. It was the Kindly Man who broke it.

"A Master and an Ordained," the old man clicked his tongue. "Within three years and three moons, the both of you have violated more rules than what one Faceless Man can do in a century and a score." His tone was calm, his expression was severe. "Only Masters are allowed inside the Crux. You have invited yourself in, infiltrated the memories of one. Not only was this an unacceptable act—it was perilous for the both of you."

"He was a dragonrider," Arya Stark ignored the Elder's admonition. "You never told me."

"It is none of your concern," the Elder waved a hand. "Even if it is, it must be concealed, and for a very good reason. You are no doubt a clever girl."

"He will never retrogress to that state, Elder. He is No One, and his loyalty is to the many-faced god. Faceless Men possess control over forms of selves that are either theirs or others'. The tenets of the Faceless and the laws of Braavos are coherent—the practice of siring slaves derived from twisted Valyrian ideologies of a superior race must be put to an end."

The old man smiled. "That is easy to say. We have never seen a Faceless Man retrogress before—fully. What we do hold are mere assumptions. No One as a state is camouflage to the core self. To remove that shroud is to remove concealment, expose oneself to all things vile that await the Faceless Man's murderous soul. The fundamental tenet is Valar Morghulis, Arya Stark. We kill people. Of course, there will be consequences, sanctions to all these, though the act is holy offering as far as our opinions as Faceless Men are concerned. The many-faced god is not the only god there is. Might be that for the other gods, what we do is plain and simple transgression. The deities have varying notions of what constitutes a transgression—we cannot reduce them to the twofoldness of evil and good after all. Killing may be service, it may also be sin."

"The faiths are too confusing."

"The gods are confusing—history would prove that they never verily got along."

Arya sighed, looked fixatedly at the old man's face. "What may be the worst that could happen to him?"

The Kindly Man stood up, paced the hall. "Tell me child, can a direwolf ever be a lion?"

Arya scoffed. "Never." The idea itself was at the least, sickening. Direwolves were decent and therefore essentially illiterate in games concerning crowns and scepters, that is, until the Lions began hunting them and deciding on creative plots that would lead to their downfall. "A direwolf may wear a lion's face, imitate a lion's acts, and roar the way a lion does. At the end of the day, the direwolf will always reunite with the pack and head home."

"Most sterling," the Kindly Man remarked. "If the case is such, then dragons will always be dragons."

Arya clenched her teeth, fought against windstorms that threatened to consume her from the inside. "The blood of our covenant is thicker than the water of the womb that bore him, Elder."

A smile. "As you would so think. Haresh Esdraelon was renamed. His loyalties and philosophies may have been reshaped by this renaissance of his orchestrated by the Rhoynar ten centuries back. However in Ancient Valyria, there is the bond of kinship—a bond forged on blood same as what was done in your sacred covenant with him as your Guardian. Valyria was not built in a day, the roots are too strong and too deep. The mother freehold will reclaim her descendants, no matter
"Valyria was not built in a day, but it burned in one."

The old man chuckled. *Witty, I would give her that.*

"How very true! Yet Valyrians had managed to rebuild somehow, did they not?"

Arya Stark shook her head. *Oh, Jaqen…*

The consequences of her unlocking his concealed memories were clarity enough. During the Second Spice War, there were four imperial dragonriders that commanded three hundred firebeasts which wiped out the Rhoyne. Haresh Esdraelon was one of those four.

There was the oath—a battlecry, which would spring out from the mouths of invaders before any war, conquest, or pillaging:

'Mirre syt se sŷz hen Valyria, īlva Muña.'

*All for the good of Valyria, our Mother.*

Flashes of it permeated Arya Stark's recollections—the bloodbath, the soot, the caterwaul. She was there, or at least a *version* of her self, but her enchantments from the old gods were insufficient. The second dragonrider of the Esdraelon held immeasurable power the likes of which she had never encountered.

It was a decisive Valyrian victory. Rhoynish warriors and subjects perished by the hundred thousand.

Cycles—they were called such because they are bound to repeat. *Not two selves but one.* If Jaqen H'ghar finds and accepts his link with an old self that is Haresh Esdraelon, Valyria may repossess him. And the ruins are now breathing, rebuilt from both fire and blood, with whispers of 'Come hither' to all scattered descendants. Which bond is stronger, truly—kinship or that with one Chosen who was once an enemy?

"What must be done?" Her tone was quiet, with total assent.

"To preserve him, we must make sacrifices within the boundaries of what is rational," the Elder replied. "Save for your confluence as Chosen and Guardian, sever *all* forms of ties with him. The more complex the link is between the two of you, the more your past will consume you both and allow you to act according to the selves you once held."

"What more?" Arya Stark's voice broke.

"A grand task for the city and the Order—a great alliance. House Stark, House Targaryen."

"With the Silver Queen, yes? I know of this."

"Not only with the Silver Queen."

"She's the only surviving Targaryen, Elder."

"Inaccurate."

The approaching sounds of seemingly drifting footsteps and flutter of gray robes interrupted their religious colloquy. Two masters entered the hall, carrying a chestload of what she was supposing
were weapons, and one of the masters made Arya Stark hold her lungs hostage.

Damn it, Jaqen H'ghar.

He was severe in his musings—listening to his Tyroshi brother's propositions and caveats, however his eyes chanced upon her, and so the corners of his lips formed an almost imperceptible grin. He folded both arms in his chest and let his eyes cruise to her left hand—that evil left hand that proficiently wielded his 'sword' last night like an expert Faceless. The left hand formed a fist as if by reflex, and the Lorathi's grin widened as he assayed her flushed face.

The Handsome Man was in the middle of his monologue. "...Antaryon takes the Sealordship as soon as we finish with that bastard Fregar. And yes, Elder. We intend in every aspect to go all Valar Morghulis on him."

The girl snorted at the comely master's expression, but he only regarded her with a displeased look, an eyebrow raised. She bowed her head, feigning guilt at her immature actions. Whilst the Elder and Jaqen spoke of other things, the Handsome Man assessed Arya Stark with narrowed eyes—his gaze intent upon her neck which was then covered with blots of red, there in specific parts where the Lorathi had torridly kissed her. He walked towards the girl and held her chin, lifted her head, so he could survey her more. Realizing the questioning gawk of the comely master upon her, his gaze she met with hers, challenging him, provoking his thoughts.

A malicious smile from the comely one—and Arya had to swallow hard, though she cared not about what his speculations were. *It was all between me and my Faceless Master—instruction, that was it.* The girl once again mocked herself, for the instruction was on an entirely different type of weapon—not one weapon for Death—no, but one weapon for matters of pleasing.

Temporarily withdrawing from his thoughts about what his Lorathi brother had done to the—*his* girl, the comely one then walked towards the chest containing *real* weapons, and unsheathed a gleaming broadsword.

"A man would have to agree, Elder," Jaqen spoke. "Though we have to force some answers out of him before he can be granted the gift. Things will be, needless to say," the Lorathi licked his lips. "Messy."

"I think," the Elder began. "Messy will be excellent."

Arya Stark's heart danced at the Elder's words.

Faceless Men—secrecy is their method; and the gift must be bestowed in a manner cloaked with ambiguity. Seamless, neat as a pin, decent. But the Order has lost one Faceless, and the city, betrayed. All things decent must now be hurled to the winds, as all things noble and ethical. The pages of the Creed were set aside and with eyes blinded by rage and hatred, the Order will deliver its vengeance.

The Handsome Man spoke in the midst of his obsessive assessment of his broadsword. "Oh Elder, it would truly break my heart if I would hear but a single name from your lips. The fake Sealord has a full regiment of swords."

Jaqen was silent, though his eyes were hopeful.

"Not a single name, no," the Elder decided. At this, the two masters smiled at each other, eyes displaying unquenchable voracity for bloodshed. "Slaughter all traitors in the Sealord's Palace, in the name of the Secret City, by the justice of Him of Many Faces. Two magisters, twelve innocent
children, a hundred and sixty-seven Braavosi in the missing ships, one Faceless, two almost—these are the people they have relentlessly executed." Then with a grave tone, he added. "Kill every single one that gets in your way."

Arya Stark's flesh was pulsating with sinister excitement—she knew her spirit was soaring to heights. Oh, Weasel soup, she sighed, recalling Jaqen H'ghar's romantic gesture.

Jaqen let his dagger dance around his fingers, teasing her. "We must proceed, then."

The Elder held his hand up. "How many other masters with you?"

"None," the Handsome Man replied with a smirk. "We prefer working in pairs."

"Triads," Arya interjected. "I'm coming with you."

The Handsome Man shrugged. "In triads, then."

The girl turned her eyes to her master. Jaqen was amused. His smile…

Unnerving.

Unhinging her.

She shuddered at his seductive playfulness in the face of a suicidal assassination task. As if this would be nothing but foreplay prior to an orgasmic encounter.

Damn it, Jaqen H'ghar.

In a melodious tone, the Elder sent them away. "The Palace is your canvas and scarlet, your paint. I want a most grandiose artwork of blood in the Sealord's."

One man named Lothar yawned, scratched the nape of his neck in listlessness. One simple altercation—verbal at that, and his companion was ignoring him as if he was one man who had violated and murdered the pretty girls by the skirts of Silty Town.

The companion must not blame him for favoring the Targaryen queen over the Lannister, and for many reasons. The known fact is that, both Targaryens and Lannisters were incestuous, and if the Silver Queen had not been wed off to one Dothraki warlord, she would no doubt marry her brother and further the lineage. But the dragons, and the enchantments of it—the hatching, the riding, the governing—ah, of course the great news of her victory over the slavemasters at Dragon Bay had reached the Secret City. And now, she is in the West, settled in Dragonstone, with an army of Unsullied, Sellswords, and Dothraki rallying behind her. The Mother of Dragons. Hells, who needs Westerosi allies? Stannis Baratheon, the rightful heir as Lannister haters would claim, seemed to have made the wrong decision of charging to King's Landing from the North, leaving Dragonstone defenseless. Victorious though he was against the Bolton traitors, and perchance his plans were that of greatness, still—Dragonstone is closer to the Iron Throne. The Fat Usurper's rightful heir, he is on the wrong side of battle.

And there was still the matter with Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of his Name.

Westeros is doomed.

Child's play though, Lothar thought. What is the Iron Throne compared to a risen Dark Valyria?
Great days have come. Oh, indeed, indeed.

His eyes caught sight of a paramour in white silken robe. Three hours before daylight, and the timing, hers that is, was nothing but perfect.

"Manage here, can you?" he asked his companion. "Going for a quick trot. No threats anywhere, can assure you that. Everyone o’ them's scared shit of the Sealord."

His companion's eyes were alert, danger never announces itself when it decides to pounce on the unprepared. "Go, if you must. I will not be answerable should they inquire where you have gone." The companion looked at Lothar with unclouded annoyance. "Our task—watch over the double doors, then bed the ladies after. Or have you forgotten the sequence?"

The man did not even let him finish speaking, as he was already feet away from him, languid in his steps yet determined, as he approached the paramour.

Not very pretty, but she will do. Cunt is cunt.

"Seven or eight Braavosi coins, that between your legs, girl?"

It was an insult. Had she been a more lovely girl though, the man could have offered her a little less than fifty coins. And that, for a mere touch on the breasts. Oh, costly now, they were. But most men have the appetite of a swine, and pockets full of gold—either earned or stolen, mostly the latter if there was any difference between the two.

The girl giggled. Hells, crooked teeth. Must be painful when I put myself in her mouth, eh?

She spoke, and her voice was high-pitched, that it was more of an ear-piercing screech. "But m’lord…that is too much payment for one girl. You honor me with the offer…I must bestow upon you a great, great gift."

The man called Lothar creased his brows.

Too late, he has realized, as he watched the paramour slide her palm down her face to reveal the face of one lovely girl—dark brown of hair, skin of snow, eyes of odium and sadism.

"Valar Morghulis."

Lothar drew his sword, but lost all strength in a flash. Piercing, hell-agonizing pain—in his belly. The girl, cursed may she be by the deities, had stabbed him there with a dagger adorned with a triad of stones. His innards spilled blood, and it clothed her. She wore silken white and so the hue melded perfectly with the fabric. She was far from finished, though. The girl slowly dragged the dagger down to his lower abdominals, letting his liquid scarlet drizzle upon her, moisten her skin, fill her every pore—as if her flesh was alive and it needs to feed on the blood of traitors. And by gods, she relished it.

The sound of dying escaped from the man's throat. Demon. He was being drawn to Him of Many Faces, and damn the god, for death has been more merciful to his companion.

Poisoned darts found their way on the nape, eye, throat, chest of ten other Swords.

In his near death, he saw two men approach the companion—one with hair the color of high midnight, another, scarlet-and-ivory. They did not bother hiding their faces anymore, the betrayers!

"You Volantene?" the man of midnight spoke.
"Y-yes! Mercy, m'lords…I am nothing but a sworn sword!"

"That," Midnight pointed one finger at the man called Lothar, bloodied and knocking at Death's door. "Is mercy."

Lothar groaned as he felt his own life ebbing away from him—his mortality vanishing, and in the hands of a fiend masquerading as one sweet, lovely girl. Scarlet-and-ivory grabbed his companion by the collar and whispered in his ear with a tone more ominous than Apocalypse.

"Sail to Volantis aboard the fastest ship at Ragman's, and tell your damnable slavemasters and the Valyrian lords that their Sealord is dead. And their lives we will take, one by one."

The sworn sword nodded his agreement frantically. "T-this message is f-from whom, m'lords?"

"Faceless Men."

Lothar gasped out the last of his breath.

It was a matchless opera of steels, shouts, and suffering.

The theatrics began with the comely master opening the double-doors of the Sealord's Palace with a mere wave of the hand.

*Faceless Men and their enchantments.*

The sound of the doors bursting open was deafening, as if the almost impenetrable wood was knocked down by a battering ram, and the strength of it even unhinged one door half way.

Debris fell from the ceiling as the door collided against the stone floor with an ear-crashing thud.

Already approaching them with calculated haste, and as prepared as they are to deliver the gift in a most unbearable manner, were five and twenty highly-skilled swordsmen.

Three faceless assassins advanced to meet the looming bloodbath.

Aegeus turned his head towards Jaqen, and the Lorathi nodded, as if the game plan was made clear by mere stares and minute gestures. Aegeus gracefully unsheathed his two broadswords, and Jaqen toyed with his daggers—three in each hand—and the blades were hovering atop his palms, as if one invisible, magical force willed them to glissade like that.

Arya Stark gripped her Valyrian tighter, blew air from her lips, and willed herself to commit her focus, her center to the task. *For the Order. For the Secret City.* Her steamy Lorathi could wait.

In one precise blink, three daggers from him landed straight to six swordsmen—accurate points on the eye, the chest, the temple. The now scarlet-muddled daggers flew back to the Lorathi's hands.

With cries mirroring that of a great battle among liege lords and their traitor vassals, the remaining charged forth. Two spears flew past Aegeus and Jaqen, towards Arya; the girl blocked them with her Valyrian and so the weapons fell on the ground like lifeless training sticks. She swiftly hurled one poisoned blade at the thrower and he gasped as the sharpness of it landed on the vulnerable base of his throat. A plethora of rich blood from four had generously bathed the immaculate marbled flooring.
The feud had reached its rising.

Aegeus clashed two of his steels with five others—beheading four with a quick slash, and bestially cleaving one other, commencing at the man's hair of bronze. The Tyroshi's blade lingered on the man's body, as he dragged the steel from north to south in painstaking slowness, his mouth partly open, as if silently rejoicing at the leisurely torture brought by his weapon is the purpose of his life as Faceless. Blood bespattered Aegeus's limbs and face, and he gently closed his eyes and sharply inhaled the intoxicating essence of Death.

A quick, forceful downward slash, and the man was split by the comely one's sword in half. Innards scattered. A quiet chuckle escaped from Aegeus's lips as he wiped them.

Jaqen then drew his own sword and with dexterity and calmness, blocked blades from all sides and angles, all the while delivering bittersweet fatal blows to temporal and mortal frames. Steel against steel, steel against thews and bones and marrows, deathly sounds of the same steel coalesced with paradoxically symphonious screams of men dying. It was pure craftsmanship, what he did, as liquid sangria sprayed all over and embellished the white walls and framed arts and lavish tapestries with ingenious, abstract patterns.

As he gave one man's heart a final thrust, he uttered a short prayer.

The Lorathi then gently pulled his sword out of the man's lifeless body. He ran his fingers through his red and white locks and turned his head to his lovely girl, who then stood up after a dagger pierce at one man's eye and a hurl at another.

He crossed the distance that separated him from her, as their gazes locked. He reached her.

Then gently, he wiped his blade of blood and flesh against the white of her robe, as if she was one goddess to whom a lasting oblation is due. The scarlet mixed with the ivory—like fire and ice.

The girl only stared at the blade slowly gliding against the fabric of her garment, savoring it, relishing her Lorathi's act of worship. The blade gently touched the tips of her bosoms, and her smirking Lorathi did this on purpose. She quivered with pleasure. And when she looked up to meet his impassioned gaze, he uttered the words in a whisper.

*A girl must be bloody too, this is her work.*

She bit her lip seductively, touched her bosom with blood plenteous, and let the molecules of the thick fluid cling to the skin of her palm. Then, she reached out her hand and placed it atop her Lorathi's chest—so that her fingers imprinted themselves rich red on his tunic.

*A girl is bloody, a man must be too.*

Vendetta was far from over.

Shadowless, faceless men walked to the end of the palace's corridor, towards the Sealord's function chamber.

The Third and Second Swords of Braavos awaited them.

"Aristide Antaryon must choose the best Swords once he takes the seat," Aegeus said, wiping his blade with the dead Second Sword's tunic. "These men are absolute losers."
The Lorathi chuckled. "Must you be this cruel as to insult the departed, brother?" He spanned the entire corridor with a quick eye survey—no other threats by far. The function chamber was at the endmost. "Arya, you will stay behind my back when we enter the Sealord's chamber, yes?"

The girl's brow creased, insulted. "The Sealord is mine to kill, Jaqen," she seethed. "Of what use would I be standing behind you like a useless damsel that needs protection?"

"Quiet," he replied, in the admonishing tone of a Faceless Master. They all walked towards the function.

"Questioning my capacities as Faceless. This is not fair at all!"

"A man said quiet, Arya."

"What is the purpose then, of my being an Ordained, if you will keep on—"

The Lorathi made her swallow any more phrases as he pinned her against the heavily-draped wall, kissing her deep. Her face, lips still bore a trace of Lothar's blood, and that of the others. He did not seem to mind—as he ravished her lips with want, soft grunts emerging from his throat.

Arya's eyes widened at the unexpected.

They widened even more when she saw the comely one rubbing his lower lip at the sudden spectacle, with an expression of amusement and approval. The bastard irked her further, with his soft chuckles. Perhaps, she thought, after they have finished with the Sealord, she will add the comely one's name to her list. She knows his name now, after all.

Jaqen released her lips.

"That should quiet you."

He then bit her lower lip, suckled it a last time, and turned to walk towards the other master.

The comely one shook his head at her in feigned disappointment, clicked his tongue. "A girl must have more sense than courage, or she will anger the Lorathi."

She clenched her teeth at them both. They were far from done with their playful ploys, she could tell, for they spoke to each other whilst they walked in Ancient Rhoynar—the only one language she cannot and is not allowed to understand. The comely one was still chuckling.

And they were unthinking, for though she spoke not a word of Rhoynar, she can unlock hidden thoughts. And so she began reading the two masters. Her Lorathi was speaking at the moment.

...most effective in silencing acolytes, well...the newly Ordained ones too. Sometimes, they do forget what their place is.

And that, is putting them in their proper place? Oh, please brother. 

Tell a man though, did it not work?

It most certainly did.

You should do it then.

With my humongous, bearded acolyte? No, thank you.
He can't be that bad.

Oh, brother. How you love to live dangerously. Forget you not the death god.

Must you really mention her in the midst of all these, as if she is not here already, savoring the massacre?

Indeed, she is here. Might be that she saw you worshipping the girl with blood from the dead. She will no doubt asphyxiate you in your sleep for that. Or assume her usual succubus form and taste you while you dream.

Arya Stark held back the sound of gasping.

Stop now, Arya's listening.

They have reached the door to the Sealord's function.

It was locked heavily from the inside. But Faceless Men could enter dungeons and bastilles and inner sanctums without actually entering them. They would invite themselves in, and may the Sealord welcome them all in a custom most appropriate.

Blood of traitors, Jaqen thought, as he gently placed the tips of his fingers against the heavy cedar door. The steel deadbolt securing the threshold capitulated to the Lorathi's silent command. The steel acquiesced and with a slightly emphatic metal sound, signaled the threshold's acceptance of their shameless behest to be let in.

The door opened with a creak.

And there, behind the large oaken desk that had served as lectern of the Secret City's noble lords for eight centuries, there he sat—the traitorous Sealord—the greatest slaver of them all.

Beside him is his First Sword.

Tormo Fregar held out both arms and spoke.

"Welcome, Faceless Men."

The Lorathi was the first to step into the chamber. His steps were not wary, despite the presence of the First Sword. However, his senses were alert—eyes surveying every corner, as if his range of view allowed him to penetrate walls and perceive what lurked yonder. And perchance, he truly can. The comely one and the girl stepped in after him, sensing that the chamber was relatively secure.

"Ran out of Swords, a man sees."

The traitor dismissed his sarcasm with a wave of hand. "Worthless pieces of filth. How many were they, again? Matters not, does it? Ah! If it isn't the Winter Maiden! Surely, my sweet, you thought not that your Sealord could not see through your artifice?"

"Thought you asinine, that's why," Arya Stark replied viciously. "Not only are you so, I realized. With your demonic machinations, you are even more repulsive that your lords of Old!"

"There, there, my sweet," the traitor mocked her. "Never did I hear those words from your luscious lips when I kissed them and touched you all over."

"You vile bastard," Jaqen raved.
A scoff from the comely one. "Are you truly witless enough to even presume at the slightest that a mere Sword could stand a chance against two Faceless? Three?"

The traitor raised his brows. "Yes."

At this, the First Sword lifted a palm to his face, slid it down.

The Stern-faced Man.

Betrayer to the Order.

And the traitorous Sealord only chuckled his amusement.

The comely one spoke through clenched teeth. "You cursed crook. Deserted your vows to the death god for those demonic slavelords of yours?! I will slaughter you to the last inch!" He drew out both broadswords.

"Nay, he does not deserve the gift, will never," Jaqen said in calm, though enmity gorged his heart. He tightened his hold on the hilt of his steel. "Soul-wandering, without the seraphs of death retrieving his soul from outside the gates of the Realm Unseen. He must never be allowed rest."

The Stern-faced Man laughed at both masters. "Here you speak again, of your senseless faiths and codes and vows. Short-sighted—all Faceless Men are. Fools! The battle against the lords of Old is already lost even before it begins. Act wise—Winter is coming for all. East meets West always. Atonement is necessary to suppress the impending—slaves, and a grandiose co-existence with the creatures of the Long Night."

"You twisted animal," the comely one seethed. "You're the short-sighted one, to think that there is no other way to conquer Winter but to surrender to the slavelords!"

"This is a battle for the deities, not us. Men must only succumb to greater forces that are of their own, let the gods fight their war—they have toyed with the lot of us for far too long." He paced the chamber. "They cannot contain the Anarchy of their own doing, and they're using humans as pawns—naming them chosen, reborn. If the gods truly all-benevolent, how would you explain Winter and Stygai? Valar Morghulis, slaves first, lords afterwards."

The Lorathi replied. "Dare you not question the gods. For fourscore centuries they have chained Stygai. Tell us now, if this is their war, why let us survive all this time?"

"Simply because their tolerance of humans is high," the Stern-faced laughed softly. "Farce! Ask your Elder what the Songs of the Faceless is truly about—eleven leaves are missing in the last surviving copy in that accursed temple. He's tricking you all. Word of advice: redeclare your vows to the gods you have served before you became Faceless."

"Shameless filth," the comely one hissed. "You will pay dearly for all your ploys."

"Enough, I'm getting tired of this," the Sealord cut their exchange. "Kill them now."

Seven daggers from the Stern-faced Man flew towards Arya Stark's direction.

Her Shield was swift, dashed, bypassing laws on physical distances, mocking them even; and faster than her pulse could beat, he was there in front of her. The Lorathi wielded his steel in serpentine motions, blocked each dagger; and the force of contact—one steel against others—formed minute yet violent scintillations. Five of the blades fell on the metamorphic tier, two came in contact with his skin, cutting through his flesh, as if it had drawing power that steels seek.
Scarlet trickled from the Lorathi's left arm and right shoulder. Not from mere flesh wounds, no. The cuts were deep, and a few, uncalculated attacks from him, a slight failure to defend himself and his Chosen, may subjugate him altogether. He bled liberally, and this must be, for he will always bleed before she does.

"Jaqen!" the girl exclaimed.

"Stay behind, Arya."

The Stern-faced Man had a purview of the Lorathi's maneuver, for he too is one Faceless—was, and he knew even in the Lorathi's fleeting, velocious movements where precisely he would situate himself and which stratagem he would exploit.

He had trained him.

He had trained both masters. Every single thing they know in combat was from him.

And he did not teach them everything he knows.

The traitorous Sealord laughed once more, entertained by the spectacle. "Ah! Faceless against faceless. Thespians, the stage is all yours."

"Bastard," the comely one muttered. He whisked towards the Stern-faced, fingers tight around his blades. The older master unsheathed two broadswords of his own, flexed his neck.

The Lorathi whispered instructions to the girl, then darted towards the looming onslaught, nodded at the comely one. The unspoken plan: sword to the front, and to the back. Intercept, assail, charge forth—quick yet careful. Calculate, evade the attacks as much as necessary, as often as possible.

For the truth is this—the older master is equivalent to three Swords of the Morning. A rusting saber can be the ancestral greatsword Dawn in his capable hands.

They circled the Stern-faced, as the latter's arms were outstretched, swords at the ready.

Once more, it was a clash of six steels—a royal battle of swords.

Every gyrating charge, each labyrinthine assault, was thwarted by the older master's graceful and calm wields. The Stern-faced, as the girl assayed him closely, was not truly engaged in any violent altercation leading to a possible bloodbath, a probable death of two other Faceless Masters. He was all rhythm and blithe, his assaults that were more of an animated waltz of arms, were nothing short of aesthetic. And the girl knew all these by heart.

Water dancing.

It was all elegance and style.

Six steels connected at the tips, and the older master with well-angled movements, managed to disentangle the blades and deliver a quick blow to the Lorathi. The latter dodged the attack.

"His steel, brother!" the comely one called to him in the midst of the ear-splitting collision of metals. "Make the steel heed you!"

"I cannot!" the Lorathi replied. "He's repelling it! He's too fast! Disengaging is impossible!"

All of a sudden, as if enervated by his almost poetic movements, the Stern-faced made a slashing movement on the direction of the comely one. His steel made contact with the skin of the master's
back. The latter dropped one sword. Scarlet sprayed abundantly on the tiled floor, watering it lavishly.

"Brother!"

Another blow to the comely one, and the blade sliced through the length of his leg.

"Ah!"

The girl hurled one dagger to the Stern-faced. It contained the poison still. Heightened sense rendered the throw almost useless—the blade connected slightly with the older master right-sword arm, ripping the fabric and wounding him a little. It was as if he had one mind split into seven continuums of thoughtfulness and consciousness. Prior to it coming to pass, he already knew. And he was a thousand steps ahead of all of them.

Blood bespattered the expanse of the chamber, and the sangria sprang out only from the two younger masters.

The Stern-faced one is a god with swords.

And it may be that at the sight of him, all the finest knights of the bloodline Dayne, with their greatswords forged out of fallen stars, might rise from their graves and pay him homage.

Arya Stark could hear their bellows of agony. She could not proceed to their aid. Jaqen was clear that she had to stay where she was—not a drop of blood from her. Not yet.

We know not what the many-faced god's decision would be on your life, Arya.

Knowledge dawned upon her too. Her Lorathi is the most gifted in combat, however, he could not fixate himself on the clash, for his attention was generously divided—to the Stern-faced, the comely one, the Sealord.

To her.

Jaqen. Aegeus.

Aid us, old gods, red god, Him of Many Faces.

Ned, help.

And still, she heard their hollers. The sounds tortured her.

"I'm falling!"

"Use your other arm!"

"His steels, both first-borns..."

"Charge, thwart. A man will be behind you!"

The Sealord chuckled in the midst of it all—reveled in the glory of the mêlée.

Arya Stark clenched her teeth, threw him a dagger. The blade came in contact with the skin of his cheek, drawing blood from it. She cannot put the blade through his eyes, they still had much telling to extract from his treacherous mouth. But the Long Farewell should take effect after hours, and she merely desired to see some scarlet flow from his flesh as well.
With two fingers, he wiped the blood, ran his scarlet-tinted fingers against the Sealord's oaken desk, as if creating a lasting monument of what may transpire that fateful night. The traitor only smirked at her, then turned his attention once more to the dramaturgy of his own initiation.

She tried to not wince at the combined torturous sounds of colliding iron blades and hysterical laughter. Vicious, loathing eyes still upon the traitor, the girl decided the best course of action.

Arya Stark shut her eyes slowly.

She willed herself to leave herself. She drifted to her subconscious, warged into the enemy.

It was highly perilous. Yet, there were very few choices. Death is looming.

Warging would render the soul of one formless and unbound—its liberty is like wind that can be felt but cannot be touched. Once liberty of the soul is attained, it becomes distinctionless; and in the process of it wandering from one being to another, if the soul is not resilient, it may never find back its origin. Direwolves are easy, humans are much more strong-willed, resistant.

She did not anymore hear her Lorathi commanding her to stop.

Arya Stark collapsed on the floor, screamed and writhed in agony, as she beheld the intricacies of darkness that was the soul of the Stern-faced one. It was unanticipated, and the older master had a split-second loss of focus, allowing the two younger ones to launch. The Lorathi took a quick slash at the master's shoulder, wounding him severely.

"Arya! Desert him now! You cannot be in him when he dies!"

She cannot so easily desert him.

His soul scourged hers with whips unseen, tore it with clawed hands, tried to feed on it. It was intent on annihilating her, on not allowing her to return to herself. The soul of the Stern-faced had traversed the physical realm far longer than hers had, and it had its share of ethereal conflicts thus giving it strength. He is a full-fledged faceless, and his absence of self had permitted him to become a host to dark others. Arya Stark's soul to him, was a mere child.

"Arya!"

The traitorous Sealord rose with a dagger in hand. He walked to her, blade at the ready.

_She got through_, the Lorathi realized, as the Stern-faced one showed signs of suspended focus. With that small window of a chance, he moved and thrusted the blade into his heart. The older master stared at one of his apprentices from long ago, in wide-eyed stupefaction.

"Valar Morghulis," were the Lorathi's last words to him, as the comely one wielded his own sword to decapitate the dying.

The tip of the traitor's blade was now touching Arya Stark's neck pulse. He pushes it in, deepens the tip against the skin just a little bit, and trickles oozed from the cut. Her soul was still yonder. The girl lay on the floor, catatonic.

"Arya!" the Lorathi shouted, as if physical sounds could will the girl's spirit back to her mortal frame.

_Arya...come back._

_Come back to me._
The Guardian rushed. He must not let her fall, his Self is her.

In a flash, he was beside her almost lifeless body. He raised his sword to cleave the traitor in half.

A sharp intake of air. The girl was quicker, and in her dexterity as Faceless, she drew the last and third dagger and stabbed the traitor in the eye. Tormented screams reverberated, veiled the chamber, as the girl twisted the blade to inflict more agony. Scarlet sprayed all across the girl's face; she licked her lips, glorifying in the traitor's gradual ruination. The death god will have the due of it.

In every twist, a dedication.

"Twelve children."

"Two magisters."

"Hundred sixty-seven Braavosi."

"Sabine."

A final wrench, and the life of the traitor was no more.

Bottled poisons and elements were all arranged in a neat array atop the Waif's work table.

An inexplicable sense of hollowness enveloped the girl as she silently retrieved a small container of healing salve from one of the cupboards. Now, even with her eyes closed, she can name the substances each glass vial contained by mere whiff—there was the Strangler, the Wolfsbane, Basilisk's Blood. Tears of Lys is a favored weapon among the Faceless Men, but the punishing gentleness of one called Essence of Nightshade must not at all be dismissed.

*The Long Farewell.*

An old Braavosi saying: "There are those poisons that take away your sight, and those poisons that allow you to see."

She stitched his leg that was almost wholly severed by the Stern-faced's sword. The wide wounds will heal, and fast. This will not be the result of her stitching, though. The potions that heal in the Waif's agglomeration of chemistry will perform the mending. There were potions for greater and lesser healing, for restoration, for conservation and calming. There were higher potions too, which only the master in her knew about—and had she been alive, she would have passed on such knowledge to the girl. *Afaciemwineo, Sensu-fericulum, Oblitusem*—potions that allow one to change faces without source, substances that heighten dangersense, liquids that take away a Faceless Man's reminiscences.

One thick axenic needle pierced through his flesh, and the suture moved with it, in and out of his bloodied skin.

He cursed in Tyroshi.

"Damn it! Your hands are too heavy!" The comely one bit his knuckles hard, holding back the sound of louder screams. "Ah! Your stitching tortures me more than this goddamn laceration!"

Arya kept her silence and carried on with the procedure as the master carried on too, with his bitter, ungrateful remonstrance. Struggled, in order to let her hands flow in mild motions—calm as still
water.

"Careful, will you? That will scar! Oh gods! Where is Sabine when you need her?"

_Sabine._

_Gone._

_I killed her._

"I should not have…"

The comely one's brows formed heavy creases. "You should not have what? Decided to stitch me up in the first place? With the 'Waif' gone, there's no other person in this godforsaken temple who could perform the mending." The needle gently drilled itself through his skin. The comely one let out an undeniably tormented bellow. "Utterly terrible! You have absolutely no skill in this with those merciless hands of yours! How do you even use those hands with Jaqen—"

A vicious pull on the suture—instructive.

Vociferations from the comely one, more cursing.

More grievance and lamentations with the Waif's true name as subject.

"Forgive me, Aegeus."

No response. His heavy breathing rang decibels in that workchamber.

"I took her away. Did not have the right to it, yet I did."

Silence.

She pressed on, calmly.

"I have been this temple's bane," Arya Stark claimed. "I can almost hear the masters—'perhaps, the Songs are misconstrued.' Might be, that they were untrue from the beginning. Whoever wrote it may have had in his mind a different configuration of one Chosen."

"It doesn't matter who wrote it," the comely one replied. "The god is the source."

"It holds truth, then."

A scoff. "All intellections we have—axioms, notions on the divine, all these are mere impression to, of, and oftentimes, _from_ the gods. Does it hold truth? Who knows? We do not possess the same thoughts as they do. It may even be that _nothing_ is true around here. Our reality now can't be the only reality there is."

"This is why I never found much joy speaking with you, even in Ancient Essoan."

"And this is why I sought to train you hard—your loving master has protected you too much. You know nothing except for his lustful whispers in your ear," he exhaled, as she pulled the suture a last time. "Ah, of course. There's the scraping feel of his teeth against your skin as well. And who knows what else?"

"His mouth and his tongue on my breasts," she replied monotonously.
The comely's eyes widened at her reveal. He blinked thrice, face blushed.

"You know things. I saw you looking intently at the obsidian candle many times. You're reading it." Arya rose and replaced the vials in their respective chests. She turned to him, intent on gaining answers. "I saw one of your maps. What things can you see? Have you seen?"

"Nothing that you do not already know."

"You've said it. I know nothing."

"Maybe a little," the comely one replied, adjusting himself with much difficulty. "Hidden realms."

Arya turned to him. "You mean the Realm Unseen?"

He shook his head, impatient. Arya Stark grimaced. The comely one pressed on, uncaring of having offended her. "No one can see what's meant to be Unseen. But through certain gifts, some may be able to unlock what is Hidden. This realm is part of it, we are hidden from other Hidden realms, as they are hidden from us."

"Dreams…"

"That too," he looked at her intently. "Tell me, Stark, what do you know of the realms of men? Are the realms all that exist? Or are they all that we can perceive?"

She walked, sat opposite him. The healing salve suffused its warmth on his tight stitches. He winced, cursed. "I'm not sure what you're saying. You're riddling me again," the girl said.

"In Yi Ti, there was this last ruler of the Great Empire. They called him Bloodstone," he recounted. "His betrayal of his own kin, necromancy, casting down of the gods led to the Long Night—a punishment from the Lion of Night, for men have gone cruel. There was one promised, who they have named Yin Tar—Savior. In the lore, he carried his flaming sword and defeated the Others."

"I know this tale," Arya replied. "There are many versions recounting why the first Long Night happened."

"Versions, yes. Of the legends, of the realms."

Arya paused with her application, stared fixedly at his face. "Versions of realms?"

"Versions of realms," he answered. "What would you do if I tell you that in another realm-form, one that is hidden from us, your lord father had not yet died?"

"That's impossible."

"In this realm, yes."

"Lunacy. Might be that your lacerations were infected." The girl snorted as she carried on. "The Stern-faced one left his ruminations and theories on gods-conspiracy within you before he died?"

"Listen to me, and listen well," the comely one whispered, then looked around warily. "There are realms where the lords of Old did not make their way back. I know little of it, but the canons have written that the Targaryen conquerors were the only Valyrians to have survived the Doom. How can Aurion and two others have found their way here if not for a forking path that would lead them to this particular realm?"

Arya Stark smiled softly. He is very much like a child. Much like Jaqen at times, with his own
fantasia. She continued applying salve, until even the skin surrounding his stitches was covered.
"And where is this forking path?"

"West of Westeros, of course."

She tried to hide her shock as she wiped the excess of liniment from his skin with sterile cloth. Visions from the obsidian candle that she managed to unlock moons ago saturated her recollections once more.

_In West of Westeros, time ceases to operate. Natural laws are verily different from what is usual, such that isles are suspended mid-air, and waters cascade from them, filling all seas in the world Known._

In West of Westeros, there is no twofoldness—only forms and concepts in limitless spectra. These are impossible to classify. Binary oppositions were simplistic, and only in the realms of men could it be understood—ignorance and wisdom, man and woman, virtue and vile.

West of Westeros is not a mere realm of enchantments—it is a gateway to others.

The comely one, sensing her temporary acquiescence to his discoveries, spoke forth.

"There is a realm where the Silver Queen did not leave Mereen and kept watch over the Five Forts—the Wall of Essos; and there is a realm where your Wall in the North was not yet built. In one realm, you left your vow, took off to Winterfell after threatening Jaqen with your play-sword. In another realm, Jaqen had not met you at all, and this Order's concept of the many-faced god is different. Still in another, the eldest Stark son had won the War of Five Kings, and so you never chose to use that iron coin and proceed to Braavos—"

"And in another realm, Sabine is alive," Arya completed the trail of thoughts for him. "It's the Shadowbinder's work. As Faceless, you should have been more careful. Before her death, she asked me to warn you about this." She rose from her seat.

The comely one grabbed her by the wrist. In clenched his teeth, he continued. "Forget Sabine for a second. She's gone from this particular sphere and no damned soul knows where she actually went." He shook his head. "Do yourself a favor and get the silver vial from the repository. Get me a thin parchment as well."

She exhaled and retrieved the items, gasped when she saw the silver vial's ornate label.

"Give them here," the master ordered.

"Why are you asking me for this potion?! You cannot be planning what I think you are!"

"Calm, Stark," the comely one hissed. "That vial is empty. I will not use that to revive anyone. And that is not the use of that specific potion, anyway."

_Revixit coile-tare—who can restore one from eternal sleep._

Arya uncorked the vial and examined the inside. True enough, it contained naught.

"Who...how..."

"Sabine. Prior to you thrusting your fancy daggers onto her precious chest, she consumed all of that," the comely one replied. He exhaled through the mouth, grinned like an infatuated boy. He turned to her, still smiling. "Your potions master is damned good."
Arya smiled back.

For moments there, they just grinned at each other.

She resumed sitting beside the comely one, right hand under her chin as she looked at him with eyes bearing slight tease. "And how very delighted you must be! Ah, Sabine…when can I hold her once more? And kiss her?"

Delighted with what? With her ten years of madness over Jaqen H'ghar? The master thought. He shook his head, serious asudden. "Hand me the parchment. And your thick needle over there. Wipe it, my blood's all over the length."

Brows creased, she did as she was ordered. He scrunched the parchment into a ball and held it out for her to see. "This is West of Westeros." She nodded. "Needle."

Arya pierced the crumpled paper with it—end to end. The master asked her to pull it out. She did.

Aegeus then smoothed the parchment onto the table. Holes from Arya's mending needle were now visible on the paper's two-dimensional surface. "This now, is the map of the Known. The holes made by your needle in the crumpled paper are entrance and escape points to and from the other Hidden realms. West of Westeros allows creatures of rune, magical beings to traverse turfs and spans of time."

It was confoundment she felt, and awareness that a certain truth might be present in it as well, for she has seen things herself through that glass candle. The comely one spoke forth.

"Know this, Stark. Our reality is an infinite static of materials, messages, eruditions. And in different realities, all probabilities would exist and these probabilities are based on the littlest of choices we make. In one realm, Aenar Targaryen refused to believe Daenys's visions that the Doom will happen, dismissed the vision as a child's fantasy. Targaryens did not settle in Dragonstone. Predict the aftermath, you're a witty girl."

"All dragonlords and their firebeasts will perish in the Doom in that particular realm, Targaryens included," Arya replied. "No dragons, no dragonglass, Winter wins."

"Exactly. See how much power the smallest of choices could make?"

"West of Westeros is distorted time and space?" she queried.

"Yes and no," the comely one clicked his tongue, impatience registering on his face once more. "Space is mere concept. Time has no real existence—we merely perceive it and assume that it moves in a straight line. We name time past, now, forthcoming based only on our desire for continuity. In truth, time is inconsistent and random—it may be that tomorrow already happened in another realm or perhaps we are already in the morrow itself. The reason to the repeating cycles. This is why Haresh Esdraelon was killed but never died, and why Jaqen H'ghar found you here. Time is a space we can actually go to."

Arya shook her head in disbelief. Spanning distorted spaces and time to find one girl? Losing fragments of himself for it? "How do you know all these?"

"You unlocked West of Westeros through that obsidian candle. I knew it too, through another realm that the gods cannot penetrate—dreams."

It may be that the gods can grant men with visions, and incubate a 'seed' within the reverie, so prophecies may be spawned and thus fulfilled. But dreams are interpenetrating dimensions—a
collection of unconscious thoughts and hopes from men, colliding with experiences unique to one. The deities may have been aware of the probable effects when they created dreams in men, but these successions in the mind had become so personal that even the all-powerful gods cannot fully invade them.

*Unless the dreamer is part of a Weirwood, and attached to it for life.*

"Aegeus, if this be true..."

"Then it opens us all to a lot of majestic yet perilous possibilities," the comely one supplied. "If men learned of these things—and only those gifted with magic can venture West of Westeros—then every single person will try and hatch dragons, or proceed to the Shadowlands and learn thaumaturgy and mage and unthinkable kinds of sorcery. All these, so they may pass through that path. Tell me, Stark, who would not want to witness their dead beloved ones alive once more in a different realm? Rebuild lost kingdoms and empires? Win wars again? Who would not want to alter life and right the wrongs? Change the whole course?"

Arya Stark swallowed hard. *Ned, Cat, Robb.*

Winterfell.

"Don't tell Jaqen I told you about these. He will kill me if you do. He's convinced you would go there and retrieve the slain Wolves, relive it all over again."

"But..." she began. "Why would the gods even allow such a thing to exist? A misshapen forked path? And...and if you see yourself in another realm, what would happen?"

Footsteps interrupted their exchange.

It was Jaqen.

Unlike Aegeus, he did not sustain any near-fatal wounds that night. Arya had earlier stitched the laceration on his shoulder brought by the Stern-faced's daggers. For unknown reasons, his wounds seemed to heal faster than that of any other Faceless.

"What are you two discussing?" Jaqen asked, eyes darting from her to him.

Arya Stark stole a glance of the comely one, but his expression was unreadable.

*West of Westeros—it opens us all to a lot of majestic yet perilous possibilities...* 

*Find us, sweet child. Stolen lives—anything at all.*

*The tempest is not that great...* 

*There is magic in you.*

"Nothing, Jaqen," she answered.

He nodded, held out his hand to her. "Come now, Faceless." She thus rose and walked to him, caught his hand.

The comely's eyes narrowed. "Come where?"

Jaqen turned to Aegeus and with a dishonorable smile, replied. "None of your business, brother." Tone—melodious.
"Hah!" Aegeus chuckled. "Valar dohaeris, then."

Chapter End Notes

Here's a chapter for you, guys! Please leave comments, would really love to know what you think. Great weekend to all and Happy Holidays! ;D

Thank you for the hits, comments, kudos. Let's stay with J/A, read the works, write one shots (or a whole fic) to thicken the collection. Much love.
Shadows Leave

Chapter Notes

Inspired (I do NOT own the vid):

'How many times till I get this one right?'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Rubies flew like drops of blood from the chest of a dying prince.

He sank his knees in the water,

And with his last breath, murmured a woman's name."

A Song of Ice and Fire

"Oh, my bloody Lorathi…"

Arya sat astride him.

She scooped up some water with her left palm and gently poured it upon Jaqen's freshly-stitched shoulder. The Lorathi gazed at her fervently, whilst she removed the scarlet that had dried upon his skin. The girl let another palmful of soapy liquid flow and wash him; and as she was intent in purging him of the blood of traitors and foes, she did not anymore notice herself biting her lower lip as she did the scrubbing. Her fingers were light, and they delighted him more than they cleansed him. She spoke in her immaculate, innocent voice:

"Water from me to you, water from you to me."

The Lorathi inhaled sharply. The Warrior Queen—she always has this talent with language. Even in their madness in the fields, Essoan the tongue, their shared rapture which they concealed from the eyes of their warring clans back in the days of Valyria and Rhoyne, she had always sparked within him the most pleasurable of outbursts.

And even now, the utterance was too suggestive.

This is not cleansing. This is fondling.

He pulled her to him, ravished her lips.

They were once more in the bath chamber—he was naked, and only the soapsuds hid his nudity; while she donned the gown that was a gift from Bellegere Otherys, the one with a very thin fabric. It clung to her skin with the wet, revealing her curvatures, as it previously had. Despite her insistence that she too, must be naked for she will bathe him, the Lorathi demanded that she wears clothes, no
matter how uselessly they concealed her womanly frame. "Don't play the part of the temptress," the Lorathi had told her. "The night will be long." The girl thought that perhaps, the gown she wore was not for the night after all, but for soaking in the bath, for it served her that better purpose for the second time now.

The Lorathi forced his tongue inside her mouth. She suckled it, swallowed his succulence. In the chamber were moans and sighs and insistent want; silent screams and pleas for completions and summits. The Lorathi kneaded her behind, she altered her position a little so she could meet him. Undulating motions, and her body's voyages on top of him were gentle oscillations of calm waves—the still tempests of Rhoyne and its prismatic waters. It has always been like this, as if the river was a grand orchestrator of a union between dragons and direwolves. The maiden goddess, her lover god. Ice and fire. She derived pleasure from it, with the soft flesh inside her slit caressing him—and she felt so, so close to the man that she was almost sure they would then, in the literal sense of it all, border to the oneness the Songs spoke of. Please, the girl beseeched any god, make it happen.

He fondled her breasts, toyed with the crystal-like tips of it.

A thousand 'Oh, Jaqen…' found their way from her mouth to the wind. Her mistral of groans interfused with the stone walls of that chamber, and the walls kept their secrets within their chasms.

It was as if the death god had not orchestrated through them a sickening carnage mere hours ago. The bloodbath was then a thing forgotten, what remained were their bodies, bereft of the fulfillment only the other one could grant.

"Make me bleed, Jaqen…" She murmured against his lips.

He only laughed quietly.

She broke away.

"Stop laughing at me and make me bleed. I know…that with this beautiful thing that you have, you can and will make me bleed every single day," she touched the tip of his now erect shaft. Her hands closed in on it, very tight; and she rollicked with him north to south in a manner intense, unrestrained. Her heart leaped at the sound of his suddenly fitful breathing, but direwolves are known to be merciless. She hastened her strokes. "You can draw scarlet from me forever till blood runs dry, till I have no more; I will wash the bedlinens myself, scrub them taintless. I don't care."

Jaqen moaned. "Ah…ah…" He regarded her with narrowed eyes, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. "Not enough blood for the night?"

He guided her hands, taught her the proper way of pleasuring him. The water was foamy, and it aided them quite well with their shared art. "Enough of theirs. Ah!" His tongue rubbed her bosom tips in soft circles. "I-I'm speaking about mine, my love."

My love.

Does the death god love?

"Arya Stark, nothing about you is meant to be rushed."

She kissed him. "What of the things you told me the previous night then? 'Force myself in you, make you lose your voice, fill you with my Lorathi seed'? I have been promised incapacity to walk for days."

His laughter was rich, bestrewn in every witnessing corner, and thought the girl shrewd in matters
concerning making him lose himself. "If we do this thing, you very well know the consequences. The goddess pool had made a woman out of you—"

"You're damn scared of babes, their innocence, their tenderness?" Arya queried, as she fondled him faster. The Lorathi began breathing through his mouth, his stares were ravenous. The girl had become bolder and insubmissive, and she stared back at him with equal voracity. "Your swords and daggers had calloused your hands too much, that you cannot dare cradle anything soft and pure in your arms? Your fingertips will shatter their fragile bodies, is that it?"

The Lorathi jaws hardened. "Yes to all."

At these words, the girl roughly removed her hands from his shaft.

"To create life is to sin, Arya," Jaqen explained. "We vowed to steal lives, not spawn them."

"Are you not yet exhausted of all these, Jaqen?" She ran both hands along her hairlocks. "Your reservations and uncertainties, your too irrational fear of the god? I'm sick of this!"

"Oh, come now, Arya."

There was only his lust for her sweet, young body before. Yet seeds grow to saplings and saplings to trees, and once leaves fall to the ground helplessly and by nature's course, there is no putting them back up in their branches. Over and over, he had fallen far and deep.

The gods know how he sought to triumph over the arduous internal battle to not want her in these ways. Successful he was, at first. Oh gods, and who was he fooling? He had already declared to Aegeus his love for her, despite his very limited understanding of its many abstractions.

In line with the events that had transpired these days past—his bidding for her, her confession to him, he had realized much.

Perhaps, to love is to desire for a person to be happy, without you being the necessary cause of that happiness.

Jaqen H'ghar wanted her safe, clothed in protection that was both physical and eternal, and these silent supplications of his, in view of her sublime place in the Songs, might be altogether difficult if not impossible to attain, despite her conquering Death.

He had spoken to the death god once, and for the first time in his woe, tears came out of his bronze eyes. Thorns found home in his heart, and in his declaration he had thought of dying…

"Do you know of love? Forgive me, because I...love her. And though she chose this one fate over endless others, I still wish for her a lifetime of bliss. There may be many things I cannot give her, for you have stripped me of all things I once possessed. Still, let me offer to her whatever it is that you have not yet taken away from me."

"Do you love me, Jaqen?"

One second, two.

She waved her hand, as if to dismiss her question. "Do not answer that one, the hell I care. There are things one cannot simply force—such as one's self on someone else. I could love you enough for the both of us, you don't have to feel a tiny speck of it if you don't want."

She rose from the wooden tub, despite her Lorathi's protests. She turned once more to him, forefinger
raised to make a point.

"Every night, I thank the gods—for the Songs," she smiled bitterly, and her voice was trembling. "The prophecies in it led you to me. Forgive me, Jaqen, but I was glad that you were left with no other choice but to be a Guardian—it is a burdensome drudgery. If not for the Songs, oh then, there would absolutely be no reason at all to bind us together. Forgive me, love...for my selfishness, for basking in your misery of not being able to decide for a life you may want for yourself—"

"This is the life a man wants for himself, Arya," Jaqen replied. "In this life and in all possible others, a man will embrace this one choice the Order has made for him. No regrets—I would not be able to dream of a better this." He shook his head. "One behest lovely girl, please, do not ask a man to choose between you and the death god."

An embittered laugh escaped from Arya's lips. She covered her mouth with one hand and the hand was quivering. "Oh, my love. I'm not asking you to choose! I know...I'm never going to win against that death god of yours—ours now, for I embraced the god too, for you." A solitary teardrop. Arya wiped it away. "She is a god, and though I was Chosen, how in this world and in another would I be able to compete against her for your devotedness?"

Imperceptible hands stole wind from Jaqen. He sat upright. "How did you know this about the death god, Arya? What more do you know?"

"You gave her away, when you spoke with Aegeus. And...nothing." Arya let out a despondent sigh. She had shed tears once more, and she hated herself for it. "I know nothing but this: there is something between you and her that I am not allowed to question. I cannot be jealous of her, I cannot profane her name, or forsake my vows to her, for if I do...I would lose you. And I am not one to force out answers from you, love. I may weep at your response should I ask you to choose."

"Come to me, Arya," the Lorathi bade her. She shook her head. "You know that a man had chosen you over and over in countless plights—"

"But she owns you, Jaqen. Not just in the way that she would own a Faceless. More...more than that."

Jaqen H'ghar closed his eyes. No argument with that. He ran his fingers through his hair and cursed himself repeatedly. That bargain truly had its cost—an unreasonable one. But he needed to do it.

"Keep her—your god," Arya Stark smiled, despite the tears. "Keep me, too. And nay, do not speak of the vows: 'A man must keep you, he swore it in front of ten more Faceless'. Keep me the way you would keep something of yours, Jaqen, not the way you would keep a chosen child in your holy texts. You surrendered to the death god everything, we all did. Withhold me this time, keep me for yourself, love. Own me, Jaqen. Since I lost them, and Winterfell, I have never been owned by anyone, not in a very long time."

You came, Arya. Everything about a man started falling apart. Piece by piece you picked me up and formed me again. What is a man without you, do tell?

If that is not love...

The Lorathi's soul screamed, yet with a calm exterior, he stood up and beckoned her. "Come, my sweet. Let us rest."

Arya ignored her and stepped out of the wooden tub, lifted a thick cloth to wipe herself dry. "I am aware of your plans." She faced him. "You have intentions of summoning that firebeast and facing
those three Valyrian kin of yours. I forbid it, Jaqen. We did not orchestrate this whole alliance with Daenerys Targaryen just so you could play all dragonrider in warfare again."

The Lorathi walked to the girl. He held both of her shoulders, embraced her from behind. He kissed her cheeks. "And I forbid you to question my decisions on these matters."

"Do you hear her voice at times, Jaqen?" Arya asked him. "The Mother Freehold?"

Jaqen sighed. "Every night."

"Yes," Her smile was pained. "She's restoring herself, and repossessing her Valyrian descendants. The diaspora must end, and it will. Renewing your bond with that firebeast is clear response to the mother's call. You are not Chosen, my love. I am; and this is not your battle."

He grabbed her by the arm and growled his admonitions. "You impertinent woman! If you think that I would let your warg into all those dragons for the sake of fulfilling the pages in that twisted prophecy, then think again."

"Hah!" She tried to break away from his grasp—a useless struggle. "When did you realize that the Songs were not crafted by the death god's hands? Who's fooling us all in this accursed temple, pray tell? Faceless Men are the greatest of all deceivers; they even hornswoggle one another because of what? Clashing faiths? Let go of me!"

Jaqen was unheeding. He pulled her, locked her in a tight embrace. "A powerful high mage from the Shadows, enslaved by the Freehold centuries ago. His fingers inked the pages of that prophecy; it was written two hundred years after the Doom here in the Isle of the Gods. Unless we discover who drafted the words on its leaves and what the true intents of these are, certain recourses must be explored."

"You will NOT reclaim that beast!" Arya was hysterical. She writhed underneath Jaqen's strong arms, thrashed against him. "They will kill you! Do you not understand any damned thing at all?! Jaqen!" Fists of her landed on his chest; pain carved its shape within souls that plead for emancipation. "Don't you dare, Jaqen!"

He shook her forcibly and willed her to understand. "If I die, I die. You will not take that hood's path, not while a man is breathing."

"You will not take that path for me! We took that vow, Jaqen. Aōha ānogar, ŋuha ānogar—blood of my blood, we are both sworn to that sacred oath—"

"And a man intends to keep that oath, Arya. The verses of the Songs may be incongruent with the death god's edicts, but they are as clear as daylight to me. 'He will take the last of his breath before she takes the last of hers.' And even without the condemned prophecy and this temple, a man will choose to honor that covenant of ours. He held her once more; and if only loving embraces could crush mortal bodies, then Arya Stark could have died in his arms. "I love you..." He crushed her lips with his, and with ardent murmurs declared his emotions for her again and again. "I love you...dear gods, Arya."

"Jaqen..." she muttered. "Please...don't do it..."

She met the soft love and wild passions of his kisses—they were sweet, if not for her tears that mingled with their communing lips.

"Four days. Three, if the winds are agreeable."
"Very well. On behalf of the House, I extend the warmest felicitations to him—may he be victorious in his conquest."

"Oh, he will be. The blood of dragons is the blood of conquerors. Might I dare say though, that his approaches to conquest are not entirely Valyrian. The lad-king is a merciful one; his Westerosi half-lineage saw to that."

"Just so."

There were two of them—the Elder, the Master of Whisperers from the time of the Stag of the great rebellion, up to the time of the dead king's bastard sons' reign.

What they were discussing was one great correspondence—an alliance between what remained of the Free Cities and the Seven Kingdoms. Both men were gifted contrivers, and many had died and survived because of their noble conspiracies. All of these collusions were for a thing and one thing only—service to the realms.

The eunuch once spoke with the great Eddard Stark in the latter's murky bastille many moons ago. The imprisoned lord had asked him that question:

*Varys, who do you truly serve?*

*I serve the realm, my lord. Someone must.*

And Queen Cersei's misrule cannot be undone by one other Lannister. For the sake of the realm, the eunuch had shot Kevan with a crossbow, and to the dying man, he spoke of the rightful heir. If there is one truth he must carry with him to the pearly gates, this is it:

*Sixth of his Name.*

'Since you do not deserve to die on your own on a cold night as this, I will give you this hope, my lord—Aegon has been shaped for rule before he could walk. And yes, he is alive.'

The third dragonhead will complete the sigil.

The wise Lannister, the one called the Imp, had traveled once more to Dragonstone, acting as an envoy. Greyjoys are difficult to deal with—reavers and rapers, what form of civility would one expect from their lot? Ah, but the Imp possessed a gift with words, with persuasion. Victarion will drown himself with his drowned god once he hears of the Imp's astute plans laid down in his usual eloquence. He who led the defense of the Blackwater Bay will never be forgotten. The Silver Queen, the second dragonhead, had graciously accepted him into her courts once again. Suspicious though she was, she cannot dismiss a possible fact of a surviving kin.

The matter with the first.

Whoever the first head might be, he must be located at the soonest possible time. The hourglass is slowly losing grains on one side, and preservation of the realms is paramount—against Dark Valyria, against Winter.

*Three dragonriders against four. Not entirely impossible.*

Footsteps towards the Hall disturbed his contemplations. He turned his head to get a look at the newcomers.

Two Faceless Men—crowns of high midnight, scarlet-and-ivory. The latter gave him chills. Perfectly
understandable, for assassins were created to make the teeth chatter, to force one to wish he had eyes at the back of his head, to persuade one to pray to the gods for death to be tenderhearted and pass over to the next one for the time being.

"Elder," the comely one acknowledged the older one. Scarlet-and-ivory followed suit. Both of them sat opposite the eunuch. The long-haired eyed him narrowly, and he struggled to contain the turbulence within—should be easy, he had traveled and toiled with mummers. Was he seeing death in the face? He laughed inwardly. But of course—this house is the house of Death.

"Where is she?" the Elder asked.

The Lorathi looked away from the eunuch, turned to the Elder. He tilted his head to the open threshold.

*There she is,* the eunuch sighed. The Black and White is truly an efficacious Order.

"Come, Arya Stark of Winterfell," the Elder beckoned.

The girl stood paralyzed in the entrance, her gaze locked upon that one familiar face. Her countenance was unreadable, yet her gray-green eyes unveiled nothing but raw hatred.

Varys stood from his seat and walked a few steps towards the girl. A bow, then he spoke to her. "I am unworthy of the honor of meeting you again, my lady of Stark. You were presumed dead by everyone."

"What is he doing here?" was her cold reply.

"Sit down, child."

The girl did as she was told, her wary eyes never leaving the eunuch. It was not that she was affrighted by his presence in the House—no harm can be done to her now, as she is now a dealer of the greatest of all harms and gifts. Of his intentions, his ploys, and his connections to the realm West from here, she was mistrustful.

The Elder began. "This is—"

"I know who he is," she dismissed the words. Although he pleaded to the bastard king that her father's life be spared from his own ancestral greatsword, to her, he was still a Lannister's ally. *And all Lannisters must die. The Imp too, if not for Sansa.* For the sake of gutless survival, he had allowed things to happen before his very eyes. He never took sides in the game of thrones—he avoided it altogether for some useless will to live. A silent whisperer. What does he want now?

"Again," the eunuch said. "I am honored that your reminiscences would even include me. Your father was a great man—most noble in all of Westeros. Even more noble than Rhaegar Targaryen himself."

A scoff. "You called my father a traitor, had him decapitated. Tell me now, do you find it righteous to falsely brand noble men betrayers, and let them go through the agonies the causes of which were not their own doing?" Every word reeked of pure venom.

"My lady of Stark, your father's death was an act of injustice. It was a transgression the bastard king had already paid for." The eunuch was the obverse, he was calm in the face of her fury. "And of all these, I cleanse my hands. In the small council, I have persuaded the queen mother and the bastard king to spare Ned Stark's life and send him instead to the Wall—"
"And I suppose you came here to declare that my father was right with his decisions all along?" Arya Stark seethed. "You traveled all this way to surrender fealty to the rightful heir, the one my father had named as heirship laws would dictate, Stannis Baratheon?" She shook her head. "A little too late."

The eunuch smiled. "I shall do the first, yes. But never will I surrender fealty to Stannis. The throne is not his. Neither does it belong to the Lannisters."

Scarlet-and-ivory interjected. "You have sworn fealty to the Targaryen Queen."

"No."

"With all due respect, stop wasting our time," the comely one hissed. "Get on with it."

The Elder held up one finger to demand calm from the two masters. He turned his attention to Arya Stark, and spoke in his euphonious voice. "Starks never forsake covenants, even if all those around them do."

"You don't have to hurl my own words back at me, Elder," the girl spat. "I know of vows, I know of the gods."

"Aegon the Sixth Targaryen," the eunuch interrupted their exchange, albeit with fashion. "Only surviving child of Elia Martell and Rhaegar Targaryen. Rightful king, owner of three fire-breathing beasts hatched merely by the Targaryen who calls herself queen. A proposition for House Stark. We desire for our houses to unite during the conquest, not remain as enemies. Unless, you find it befitting for the Lannisters to stay in the seat of power, the same Lions who have claimed the life of not one, but three Wolves." The eunuch produced from his breastpocket a scrolled message. He placed it on the center of the weirwood, the seal of House Targaryen imprinted upon the rolled parchment. "Dark Valyria, the Long Night. The realms of men cannot deal with all these when divided. An offer—a marriage offer."

Jaqen H'ghar was quick.

He seized the scroll before Arya Stark could even gasp at the reveal, unscrolled it, and read through the contents. He stood, so that the now frantic girl who was reaching for the message intended for her would not lay her precious hands on it and thus be given the opportunity to the closest thing there is to a decision.

His eyes traveled east to west of the paper. The expression—prophetically ominous. The eunuch could not anymore contain his inner convulsive shudders. Who is this man?

"Give it here, Jaqen!" Arya demanded, reaching desperately for the parchment.

The Lorathi's jaw hardened. He thought of tearing the parchment to shreds but thought better. His attention flew to the Kindly Man. "Elder…" he muttered, shaking his head. It was merely a couple of syllables, but the Lorathi's rage seemed to have penetrated every stone upon which that temple was built. Even the waters in the poison pool formed ripples.

The Elder eyed him with a blank expression, shook his head back at him. No, dare you not question me on this, or Him of Many Faces.

It was a staring game between the two masters. The comely one expelled air from his mouth—he wanted to flee from the Hall and avoid what may be a sickening scenario.

The girl had finally gotten hold of the message. She skimmed through the words.
To the Lady Arya of House Stark,  

Seat of Winterfell, North of the Seven Kingdoms:

I hope that this letter reaches you in the best of your health.

It is most fortuitous that our allies from the House of Black and White have located you without much difficulty. I have sent one trusted emissary to Braavos to speak with you of our proposition. For the full sake of the realm and its people, we believe strongly that an alliance between our noble houses is necessary. The seat of the North awaits the Starks, and we offer you the assurance of fully reacquiring it. To justice, we will bring the traitors that have murdered your family, and pardon shall be granted to the Stark name for its participation in the Usurper's Rebellion.

You may wish to reject this proposal, though if you do so without deliberation on your part, we will be forced to consider you, your House, and your vassal lords as enemies to the throne.

You may wish to discuss the matter with me. A ship awaits to bring you here in Pentos.

Ponder if you must, but not too long. For as the words of your House say, 'Winter is Coming'. Your words ring truth. To the wise, this is more than a mere political alliance.

To delay is to perish.

Yours,

Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of his Name  
King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, the First Men  
Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, Protector of the Realm  

Arya Stark gritted her teeth. Leaving me with very few options, I see.

"You must be truly mad to think that I will yield to this ludicrous arrangement," the girl hissed. "Do you not know anything about me at all? I could sail to Pentos with no one the wiser, sneak in his bedchamber, and gut him, this Aegon of yours!"

The comely one spoke, in an effort to create diversion, plant a seed of doubt on the character. "This Aegon Targaryen—he is legitimate, yes? No misgivings at all about his bloodline?"

"A legitimate child of a Targaryen and a Martell, indeed," the eunuch replied. "We consume these apprehensions whenever we break our fast, believe me on this, you are not the first to raise question on his legitimacy." He held out his arms, an inviting gesture. "Which is why, I urge you to see him for your own selves and then decide."

"Must it matter if he's legitimate or not?" the Lorathi raved. "Elder, this is an outrageous proposition. Are we really this desperate, for us to resolve to heave ourselves blindly to such a compromise?"
The Elder's eyes never left the Lorathi, whose arms were folded in his chest, with the glare of a serpent threatening to strike. *Mindlessness,* the older man thought. *His impetuosity, his rash actions had almost revealed Arya Stark's identity as a Faceless to this stranger.* Serenely, he spoke to the comely one instead. "Do assist our guest to the atrium. You will be informed of the Lady Arya's decision in a while."

They stood and left the Hall.

The old man's tone was ill-boding as he addressed the Lorathi and the girl.

"Enough now, of everyone's follies and indiscretions in this sacred temple." His focus was now on Arya Stark. "All men must serve—Faceless Men most of all. The three of you will sail to Pentos and speak with the Targaryen claimant on behalf of this House. Onto the North afterwards, we have discussed extensively the plans."

The Lorathi wasted no time in voicing out his protest. "Elder, in my capacities as Guardian, I disapprove of this—mere hours ago we have thwarted the conspirators' murderous plans against her. Another hasty act will place Arya Stark's life in peril—"

"How in this universe and in another will marrying a Targaryen cause more peril than good?" the Elder replied. "And your deceiving tongue, in your 'capacities as Guardian'? Since when did you act as mere Guardian to the Chosen, son?" He stood, pointed a fore at them both. "You are servants of the temple and of this great city. It was your own globule of scarlet which you partook that night of the confluence—ten Faceless and the gods witnessed it all. You cannot abandon your sacred vows and run hand in hand in high hopes that the gods will grant you both peace." He then turned to the Lorathi. "Especially you."

Arya Stark's heart keened.

"You may choose to run from all these, Arya Stark," the Elder offered. "This House will not hold it against you, you have my word on this. However, should the Targaryen's conquest proceed, should he and his kin decide to ravage the entire realm with dragonfire, including your ancestral seat in the North with your surviving family and the vassals and their innocent children, then you are on your own. Abandon us, if you must. You are anyway gifted at escaping, at concealing yourself. Hide forever from the fate—it is yours, after all. Dark Valyria will take over, or Winter, or both. Ah, what is the use? It is easier to utter the words *Valar Morghulis,* than to honor a duty, or to make sacrifices," he smiled bitterly. "Decide, Arya Stark. Pray that your decisions are for the good rather than for the self."

A life devoid of choices—this was what she had elected for herself.

She felt her fist close, and travel to her heart.

*Sabine, how did you do it? Sacrifice?*

It was a grueling struggle to keep herself from weeping—for her wretched life, for the Waif, who she realized was nothing but a true friend, a truest sister even. For Braavos, she had named the traitorous Sealord with her own life as payment, chose the brutality of the poisoned blade over the gentleness of the poison pool so Arya Stark's life may be spared. The Waif had kissed her head before she succumbed to nothingness, as a final goodbye. 'Don't let me suffer,' her request before one last.

And from Aegeus, she had recently learned that the three others the Waif had named were the three on her list.
Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Walder Frey.

The girl remembered her first few nights in the temple. The Waif had coaxed her gently, "Do tell about this interesting list of yours, the names you utter every night like a prayer." They were mixing potions. She had shared with her everything—Jaqen was in the Citadel, and there was no one at all with whom she could unburden herself. "You know what we say about Death," the woman had told her after that depressing narration. "It is certain, though time is not. In a way or another, these men who have slaughtered every person you once held dear will all die."

Sabine. Teach me now how to be you. I need to be you right now.

The threats were clearer than newly-formed icicles: 'Reject…and we will be forced to deal with you, your House, and your vassal lords as enemies to the throne.'

It was the Lorathi's enraged voice against the Elder's calm. 'To use her as pawn!', 'It was a roundtable vote—the other masters have decided.', 'Without me? Without us?', 'Your verdicts are inconsequential in this context. You are Guardian.', 'And what of my position as Master? What of my right to elect?', 'Eight against two masters? I hope you are not this dim. She must decide, for a second time. Don't rob her of this.'

The betrayer to the Order had been slain, and her Kindly Man was stupefied at the turn of the name. The Stern-faced had been in service to the temple of the death god for almost as long as the Elder was. Time will never put a right to the twisted, it seemed. For him, perfect dystopia was the way—a mockery to the higher thoughts of the gods. Decades in the House, yet his astuteness in the faith had consumed him whole rather than made him a better servant.

They had burned his face.

And the Sealord.

Arya had told the Elder that in order to save herself, she had to kill him before she could elicit answers from him. "I learned nothing from the traitor, Elder," the girl had lied.

Prior to his last breath though, the Sealord had unwillingly allowed Arya Stark to permeate through his perceptions. All she saw was the Littlefinger and his atrocious schemes which were beyond words.

However, her dear mother's voice was there—comforting her even in her undead state.

She spoke to one lady knight, and upon the latter's hand was Ice reforged. The lady knight still donned the bruises and slight lacerations from when she was almost sentenced to die by hanging, until she uttered 'Sword,' and swore allegiance to the lady's heart of stone. There were five names that came out of the corpse-white lips of the un-Cat: "Get me the Valonqar. Find me my sweet Maiden and my Stranger who was lost. I will deal with the Lord of the Crossings myself. Don't touch the Mockingbird—he's mine to slay."

Stranger.

Her dear mother had called her a Stranger.

Who am I? came her unwelcome contemplations.

Bear Island, Dreadfort, Hornwood, Torrhen’s Square, The Last Hearth, the Wall.

Winterfell—silence of the godswood, the beauteous glass garden with its hot springs and sustenance from the soil for the longest of winters, the secrets in the keeps and under the crypts, the snow that melts when it touches the cheeks, the lashes. The snow—it does not chill. Rather, it warms not just the skin, but the heart and the heart of Winterfell is the godswood calling her back. Calling her home.

Visions of Sansa blessed her—at the Eyrie, she was rebuilding their ancestral castle using nothing but her gifted hands and the snow. ’Don't break it,’ she had warned the Littlefinger when he asked her if he may enter the fortress. ’Don't you dare.’

’Winterfell belongs to the old gods,’ Jon had whispered in Arya's dreams. ’Starks have their blood, but I am not a Stark, I cannot save it.’ Bran spoke—a response to him. ’The stone is strong, the roots of the trees go deep. The great kings sit on their thrones beneath the crypts. Winterfell is not dead—it is only broken.’

And Eddard.

’You are Arya Stark of Winterfell, daughter of the North. You have the wolf blood in you.’

I am alone, Father.

’When the snows fall and the white winds blow, the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives.’

Yes, I am Arya, daughter of the North’s liege lord, Eddard and her wife, Catelyn.

My duty is to the Order; my duty is to the North.

To the pack. A lone wolf must return to the pack. All other choices are immaterial. I can't let even the surviving wolves be slain.

My duty is to Jaqen H'ghar.

I cannot let him wage war against the lords of Old for my sake.

She clutched her hurting chest, looked at Jaqen. He was very still, shaking his head gently. For the first time—he was willing her to choose for herself or perhaps for a history lost, forget every other damned thing in so doing. So, so unlike him—oh, how she had changed him!

Was it not he who taught her bliss, and fervor, and purpose, and…love?

With all that she has left, she wanted to cry out to him.

I love you.

Fear cuts deeper than swords.

But fear is lost in all you that you are.

Arya Stark prayed to any god for redemption from this, a thing she knew was impossible to even touch with her fingertips. Right now, all she needed was Jaqen H’ghar—the name, the face, the person. To run back in time is contrary to reason, but here she was with her useless pleas for the distant reminiscences of one dispiriting cage with him in it, for ghost-riddled Harrenhal and its concealed magic, for the saving grace of the coin after he had bathed her with scarlet and thews from
his own sword. Anywhere, anywhere but here, her heart keened. Anything but this suffering, this soft kiss in the wind that sang of 'farewell'.

Forgiveness, forgiveness. In another realm, perhaps this story may happen once more.

For now, the Songs. For now, Winterfell.

For now, you, Jaqen. To keep you safe.

She still gazed at his beautiful, beautiful face even as she spoke. "We will sail to Pentos, then. I will hear what Aegon VI Targaryen has to say."

Cheese pie, lobster, roasted mutton, ale for the night. Fruits from the Free Cities were the cherries on top of the meal. The lower deck of Illyrio Mopatis's ship was plush with its ornate candelabra that hung listlessly yet grandiosely on the ceiling, toying with the gentle waves of the then still-than-usual Narrow Sea. No sarcasms tonight—the captain and the crew will hear no sea muses singing their ominous songs, will not have their lungs burned by the salty waters should the upsurge tease them 'a little'. The ship merely glided through the waters, as if blessed by ones higher and above it, higher and above the men who steered it from Braavos to south where Pentos awaits. The oaken tables were polished to perfection, with the cushioned seats and the silverware too prodigal, as the glass windows of the dining quarters displayed the distant moon hiding behind a shadow.

Arya Stark hid the hollowness she felt deep within her.

She would leave home again—Braavos. And though it was to her a mere second abode, the Bastard Daughter had cradled her when she was herself a lost child, restored her to heights even she could not believe reaching at all, allowed her to see her fate, choose it, use it even for good.

Braavos. The sketches and the panoramas, the constant silent strife between summer and winter against her skin, the sounds of the harbors and the canals, the riot of colors, the peninsula.

She will return in time, after the task in Westeros. Her return will not be marked with gladness, though. Battles must be fought and won. May the Titan not fall, may the Isle of the Gods shield the free men. Westerosi by birth and heart, Braavosi in spirit.

Many places, a myriad of things. Countless people.

She will long for all these, for all of them.

In her mind was the House of Black and White where she trained; and the Temple of the Moonsingers where her higher senses were unlocked, where the handwriting on the wall of her life was revealed. Ragman's, the Purple Harbor, the Gate, where she begged and toiled. The Bridge of Lights by the Sweetwater, and here, her Lorathi had kissed her with passion she never knew could even exist in this world, gave her the Queller, spoke of the lore in Essoan. She recalled the Canal of Heroes where he uncloaked himself to her—the secrets behind his name, his ancestry, a forbidden confluence of souls and hearts between the warrior queen Nymeria of Ny Sar and the dragonrider Haresh of Old Valyria.

The names, too. Brusco, Brea, Talea. Izembaro, Lady Storke, Daena, Bobono. The Priestess. Bellegere. The Waif whose true name was Sabine. She was soft clay in their able hands, and with their own sweat and tears they have formed her. Now, she will venture to darker uncharted corners and spaces, and carry them with her. Their words and memories will act as her weapon to greater threats that lay ahead.
In the midst of anguish, she still managed to heave an irritated sigh.

_The damnable Lorathi sure is loquacious tonight._

They were seated altogether on the table closest to the Great Cabin—a place of honor, not that formalities were required at sea. It is unwrit, nevertheless, it is practiced that high envoys from the Free Cities be shown the best of Pentoshi hospitality. The eunuch sat with the captain and a fourth magister in a nearby table, eyes darting towards them unobtrusively.

Arya Stark tried to swallow a mouthful of mutton. She has been ignoring the Lorathi's utterances of resentment the whole time during dinner. He was speaking with the comely one, and to them she was a spectre, a mist.

"…all women, no exceptions," Jaqen said. He drank from his goblet and settled it on the table in a manner a little too forceful than was necessary. "They may know how to wield swords, and yes, they may delude you into thinking that they do not belong to the characterless archetypes of these sweet, fragile ladies in long satin dresses, with the fancy hairlocks and irksome giggles. In truth," he scoffed. "They desire _nothing_ but to marry princes and bear sons for them."

"Burn," the comely one agreed, shaking his head.

"Burn?" the Lorathi smirked. "Scorched is the better word. Absurdity. Yet many, if not all women fall into the trap! Or perhaps, they wanted to be trapped in the first place—decided for themselves a foredestined life, fooling all others with their feigned desires to be seen as men's equals by learning about weapons and combat. They are impressive at first—with their acts that challenge conventions, but in reality, their hopes are no different from all other dames whose purpose in life is to prepare their lord spouses' bread on the table."

The comely one said nothing, merely clicked his tongue in what may have been disappointment. He plucked out a grapefruit and ate it.

Arya kept on chewing silently. She reached for her own goblet and drank from it, struggling against the painful lump in her throat at every swallow.

"The worst thing is," the Lorathi seethed. "They play fire with you to amuse themselves before the perpetual bondage in their lord husbands' featherbed!" Aegeus laughed softly at the statement. Jaqen continued. "You know what a man thinks this is?"

"A mere fancy?"

"No," the Lorathi's next words reeked of pure sarcasm. "A _rehearsal_. For the real thing."

A thousand spears plunged themselves in Arya's heart.

The comely one let out a thoroughly amused chuckle. "And you were saying this…_girl_ used you as a what? A plaything? A rehearsal puppet? Oh, come now, brother. Surely, this girl could have not been that wicked!"

Arya calmly replaced her drink on the table, focused once more on her plated food. She heaved a sigh, calmed herself. _Don't take me away tonight_, she prayed.

"Well, nowadays, you cannot trust people for their intents anymore," Jaqen replied bitterly. "And you think just because you're Faceless, no one can play games with you and win. Ah, so wrong."

"Maybe you were not _skilled_ enough, brother."
Another scoff from the Lorathi. "Not skilled enough? With her lustful screams in the bath and the barge that may have awakened the whole of Braavos? Those screams of hers kept on reminding a man what his name is—"

A knife found its way between Jaqen's fore and middle fingers, the tip of its blade buried on their oaken table covered by azure table linen. The Lorathi did not even flinch the slightest. Rather, he eyed the knife that had almost drawn blood from his skin, smirked. Slowly, his eyes wandered to the left, landed on the face of the impetuous girl that had expertly commanded the blade. Their gazes locked upon each other—rage and rage.

"Yes?" the Lorathi asked sardonically.

She was holding back the sound of wailing. Here he was, her Lorathi, speaking about her with contempt as if she desired for all these to happen. There was no decision yet to be made, she had not spoken to the Targaryen Prince, had not weighed the soundness of his propositions, or offered a compromise. Hells, she had not even laid eyes on the man yet! And here he was, her Lorathi, with his words that pierced through her like merciless poisoned daggers, as if she had already shared the marriage bed with Aegon the Sixth.

"A word," Arya replied. She stood from the table, and threw one disdained look at the comely one, who seemed to revel in their altercation. Warn Aegeus about the Shadowbinder. This was Sabine's last request, and she must fulfill it for her sake, not for his. Warn him about himself, Arya thought, I see nothing but bound shadows lurking behind him whenever he walks—hood's breath. Jaqen seemed to have found quite a suitable role for him, though—a confidante, an ally in matters of insulting her decisions of heeding the Elder's advice. The comely one is duplicitous, and the proof of this was the courtesan task which he had orchestrated, and the fact that she saw him speaking with an Asshaii priestess during the Uncloaking.

She waited for him in an isolated corner of the upper deck, and so tight was her grip on the wooden railing that her knuckles had turned white and her palms had lost all sensation. The calm sea was a mockery of all that she felt—how dare it succumb to stillness when she was in her tempest!—the old gods were to blame for this. The gentleness of the wind that pushed the hulls to Pentos, the cloudless skies, these were all harbingers of them who are higher. Carry on, they seemed to say.

"What do you want, Arya?" the Lorathi broke through her musings. She turned to face him and noticed asudden that his face was all flushed, though not merely with anger, but also with too much wine. It was only then that she had understood it—she was too preoccupied wallowing in self-pity to actually realize it.

He is drunk.

"Are you done with your amusing exchanges with Aegeus, with myself as topic?" Arya demanded.

Jaqen strode towards her calmly, stopped when the distance between them was no more. Arya exhaled from her open mouth, Jaqen tilted his head to better look at her face. Slowly, he lifted his hand and let his forefinger trace the roundness of her right breast.

"My lovely girl," he whispered, then chuckled.

"Stop it."

He continued tracing her contours, so lightly with his fingertips, biting his lip whilst he observed her reactions. She struggled to show him nothing but passivity. "I said stop it, Jaqen."
"Oh," he said, sarcastic. "Now, the little princess had become untouchable. Wonderful turn of events." His thumb began rubbing her tip, she gasped, he laughed softly. His lips cruised to her neck.

And his other hand moved to touch her lightly between the legs.

"J-Jaqen, stop," the girl demanded, though all she wanted to do was to undress for him and take him there and then. Beyond the wooden railing was the Narrow Sea, and the waves and depths of it are more unforgiving than the Sweetwater. She cannot fall a second time, she's done with falling for the time being. Romance is silliness, Essoan is a tongue of falsehoods. Lores of love are for babes.

Acts betrayed her utterances; for even as her lips were telling him to let go, her hands were tightly gripping both sleeves of his tunic. He continued to lightly stroke her in between, avoiding her innocent slit. His deep Lorathi purr unhinged her already rampant mind:

"A man wonders what the Targaryen Prince would say, should he find out about an assassin touching his lustful lady wife-to-be in this manner," he spoke in an undertone. "Or perhaps, a man could offer him a few pieces of advice, yes? A man can very well show him, and he can get an eyeful of it all—how his princess is gifted at many things."

A solid slap landed on his face.

The Lorathi's jaw hardened.

Attachment is nothing but bone, he thought. And to think that you have almost given up on the god. Antecedents cannot happen in the 'now', no matter how hard one may wish for them to. One cannot recreate what was in the past, one cannot restore the lost. In the turn of events, as willed by those higher, those who won in times forgotten will still win in times unfolding.

I will lose her once more, and to a damnable Martell, no less. Again and again. Serendipity.

"No decision has been made yet, you bastard," Arya whispered. "Dare you not make it appear as if I wanted this to happen. I didn't have a choice."

Jaqen shook his head. Still, she had learned naught. The iron coin, the confluence, acceptance of the fate—how can she even utter such lie? "You did. I did. And here we are."

"Yes, and you chose her over me, didn't you? Your god." Arya laughed bitterly. "If the choice was made by Jaqen H'ghar, then no one must find fault in it. It is all-noble. I am not questioning it, what is my right?" She turned her back from him, hid her face. The waves have grown. Sight of land in the stretches of the Narrow is lost, and the water was fathomless, downreaching; and how she wished to be one with the imperial seas. "But Jaqen H'ghar, do you have the slightest notion at all of what you have done to me? Yes, I have become No One. You have mercilessly allowed me to... lose myself in all that you are."

"Deceiver," Jaqen hissed. "Bellegere Otherys had trained you well. Sabine too, with your games of faces and truths and untruths. The Elder, most especially. You brilliant mummer. You're one greater Faceless than all ten surviving masters combined. Lies—your gift."

A caterwaul of outrage ate her heart, she fought against it. No, I cannot lose him more than I already have, she reminded herself. I cannot lose the pack, too. Great ravens flung themselves into her, and the wingspan of these ravens was even greater than those which she had seen when Ned Stark died. Her grip tightened upon the wooden railing.

"Yes, Jaqen," Arya Stark said, facing him once more. "Lies are my gift. You trained me well."
"A man will honor the sacred confluence—we swore by blood, this cannot be undone," Jaqen said. "Your Shield, your Shadow, nothing more. Let us both give up on this lunacy."

Arya bit her lip and tasted blood. There was no pain in the act.

Pain had become her, demarcation was simply lost.

She whispered her assent.

"Stop with the lunacy. Sword, Being. Nothing more."

He began to turn his back from her.

"You're in love with a memory, Jaqen."

The Lorathi paused. Then, he walked away, his steps fading into the cruel night.

Winds howled, and once more, Winter was in her heart.

Braavos to Pentos in two days. The winds were acquiescent, despite Arya Stark's selfish entreaties for seastorms and krakens, or the Old Men of the River Rhyne. She shook her head at the madness which was her own doing—she had almost wished for the Long Night to come to pass so the waters of the Narrow Sea would turn solid.

_Sinking. May the gods consent to this._

Anything at all, to delay her meeting with Aegon the Sixth.

She would pass the Lorathi by the deck, and he would sally forth, without rewarding her the closest thing there is to a glance. From the breaking of fast, to midday, to supper, he would speak with the comely one about various matters—the House, the gods, plans, lords, diversions, women; and he would pay her no mind. For two days it had been like this for Arya Stark—she was, to him, a mere vapor.

Except for that one night.

She was blessed by another dream, and in that dream she was being claimed by one silver-haired who spoke to her in Essoan. Verses of his odes coupled with her groans, as petals of blue winter roses bathed the fields where they both lay. He was golden-eyed.

Skies carried them, and she could hear the sound of wings that connected wholly with the being's songs and shrills. Those wings carried them farther east—past North Valyria and Old Ghis, past to what is now called the Empire of Yi Ti.

The masked one's voice: _To go west, you must travel east._

But way past the Shadowlands and the Five Forts, underneath this 'heart', was one beautiful woman's call in the darkness. The death god's voice:

_Spirit spouse. Let us wake Stygai. Surrender your substance, you have lost her anyway._

And beyond the Grey Waste, that freezing desert south of the Limit of Permanent Ices, was the Weirwood by the gods' pool where Lord Eddard used to hone his greatsword.

It had rained relentlessly that night, the girl could recall. Still, she arose and stormed out of her cabin,
leaving the traces of her dreams there. Wet winds lashed out on her face, and she wiped the outpour away so she may see. Her treacherous feet had led her in front of the Lorathi’s door. Even then, the rains whispered that she must accept this painful cessation with grace. The advice was strong and sensible—she must leave at least a shred of herself to herself.

For what may have been an endless moment she merely stood there, allowed herself to be drenched in the downpour. Hot tears meshed perfectly with the torrents—there she was, lost and forsaken. And then, as if by some form of divine intercession, the door to Jaqen’s chamber opened.

He saw her, thoroughly soused, head bowed in utter wretchedness.

She uttered only two words in Braavosi.

"Xicarius mea…"

My assassin…

And for that night, it was enough.

Arya Stark reminisced how Jaqen H’ghar had pulled her out of the rain and into his cabin. As soon as he shut the door, he began undressing her with haste and reckless abandon. It was a punishing night, she was a yielding blade of grass in the dusty autumn wind, as she allowed him to do whatever it is that he so desired, despite their agreement that to one, the other must be ‘nothing more’. Why must this be, when the truth is he is the cause…he is the cause of her soul?

Her wet clothing fell soundlessly on the cabin floor, and he carried her to his bed.

She couldn’t read him, for his very thoughts were in Ancient Rhoynar.

Yu-ri ami enyalie—en yaavieree, en narqelion, en lasselanta... Ami Iluuvatarie, ami Raana Varati, Melisse un ami Tavash…

He lavished and ravished her nakedness, and how she had struggled to contain her whimpers and moans—languishing, intensifying. Detach, she had told herself. Harden your heart…only quenchless passion to the infinite. This is beyond life and love, and the latter is untrue, and the latter you must never know. The merciless aching she felt within her chest was healed ephemerally by the ardent kisses of his lips, the generous touches of his tongue. In her, he had created vacillations that were out of her comprehensions. Simply tragic, compellingly beautiful.

There was the sound of his thoughts.

Mie sa yaara undume, ami Aini miire—pella iluuve y quentalah, a-wit am lana ti raamaloke laurea en luuz.

Two fingers of him touched her innocent slit…

A knower. How can he even—

His caresses intensified. The girl was being pulled into that glorious ravine once more. She pulled him by the hair and led his mouth to cover hers—she had to contain the sound of desperate gasping. Leave a thing to the self at least, this was her persuasion. Nay, he cannot know how irrecoverably lost you are in him. Too much, and if only the hurting heart could smash its owner’s body to smithereens, then Arya Stark’s person perhaps would be reduced to mere cinders…

He continued to stroke her core. They moaned against each other’s mouth. Her woebegone heart just
mourned.

Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen…

To scream his name to the ones who raised the heavens, to cry out how much she loved him with all that she has left, to not be able to do any of these—it was tribulation.

His thoughts were empty after the last of his proclamations.

_Y mie sa antuulien, a herenya ami hyanda, verie, losse—a yu varyas._

How many lives must she live before she learns? Her deepest spirit wailed in both torment and relish—a swan song, as he squandered her completely, consumed her fully. He let his fingers linger upon the softness and wetness of her, he was merciful enough to allow her to savor his art. He pleased her bosoms with his tongue, suckled them until they hurt, as he carried on…carried on with his fingers north and south of her—encompassing, ensphering. Her breaths had turned spasmodic, and she was dying… Finally, there was the zenith of it—shaped by his erotic touches, and she had tasted it. It was _bittersweet._

Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen…!

Soft shudders…

_Ceri-hafe_, he thought in Rhoynish tongue.

_Done._

No further utterances—thought and said. He stood from the bed and silently pulled out a nightshirt from his temporary wardrobe. Wordlessly, he handed it to her. The girl took it from him, brought it to her nose, inhaled the scent of it—the scent she favored, she worshipped.

_Ginger. Cloves._

She let the fabric touch her eyes. Rain cannot fall from those gray-green eyes as well; it must not.

For a few seconds, he merely stared at her. Then, as if the mellifluous lover-sounds of that distant trance never happened, he left her in his cabin.

Whether or not he came back, and slept with his arms wrapped around her, and whispered her name, or plainly _thought_ about her name after that amorous encounter, she cannot anymore tell. Her slumber had been deep and she thought that from it, she would never wake up.

Yet, she did. She did wake up—on an empty bed. Indeed, the gods are cruel.

_Jaqen, love._ She would embed the message through his subconscious, speak not anymore to him with reason, but with intuition. _Let us talk, please._ The girl knew that the Lorathi had received her many intimations of love and hate, but there was no reciprocity in the dynamics she sought to rebuild with him.

He was _casting out_ her messages of reconciliation.

Arya Stark slowly rose from the breakfast table when the comely one began speaking to the Lorathi about some beautiful Pentoshi courtesans aboard ship. "Not maidens, but we are beggars aboard ship, dear brother." She heard Jaqen's rich laughter at the comely's jests even as she walked away. Air escaped from her lips, as she ran her fingers across her hair, tugged at it a little too hard, so she
could summon at least some hidden sanity.

The eunuch stood in front her, blocking her path. "Walk with me, Lady Arya," he invited her. There was nothing else to do—she cannot commit suicide by listening further to the Tyroshi and the Lorathil's plans of possibly inviting women to soil their bedlinens tonight. The thought of Jaqen H'ghar bedding another woman will be the collapse of her. The thought of him running his fingers and lips and tongue across someone else's body, the idea of him groaning as he is pleasured by another will just tear her to shreds. The thought of him possessing someone else…

She must therefore, cease to think. The girl nodded and they headed to the upper deck.

The eunuch glanced at the sea's vista. Distant shouts of the ship's captain. "Steer your rudders! Steady as she goes, Pentos in one full turn!"

"You seem restive, Lady Arya."

"Must I be?"

"Cannot pinpoint a reason why."

Her jaws hardened. "I have agreed to meet with your Aegon the Sixth. Nothing further. I am a Stark, and Starks act with reason. However, if I do not find his terms acceptable, I shall sail back to the North and rebuild our ancestral seat with the remnants despite his threats."

The eunuch's expression was somber. A mummer's face, he called it, and was he good with manipulations. All for the realm, he would convince himself. "Desperate times, desperate measures. Do understand that the Prince desires only to preserve the kingdoms, the North included. Your honorable father, bless his soul, would no doubt do the same had he not been betrayed by the Lannisters."

"You seem to know my father well, ser?" Arya asked sardonically.

He only smiled. "Well enough to know that House Stark is the only one that could act with reason in the midst of these tumultuous times—your own words."

"Lord Eddard pledged his life and honor for Stannis Baratheon—the only rightful. Targaryens have lost their claim after the rebellion happened," Arya answered, facing him. "It's a perfectly legitimate way to take the throne."

"It was, indeed, for the Baratheons and their loyalists have successfully conquered the kingdoms from the ruling dragons," the eunuch assented. "Taking the throne back through another rebellion, therefore, another conquest, is perfectly legitimate as well, don't you think?"

She scoffed, then laughed bitterly. Such plans.

"How do you live with yourselves?" She spat.

"Day to day," the eunuch replied. There was only the sound of rushing waters and the captain's stern commands. The ship is close to land. "Pray tell, though Stannis is indeed the rightful, how can he hope to deliver the realm from the Long Night? Forgive me, Lady Arya, but I do not recall the Baratheons ever commanding magical stag-beasts whose antlers could reduce the dead to embers and grimes. Of all the Stark children, I have always found you the most astute, most reasonable. You were young then, however I am not blind. But perhaps," he sighed, shaking his head. "I am mistaken. Humans—they are susceptible to this."
"Must be convenient, being a Prince," she finally spoke after lingering silence. "And a dragonriding Targaryen at that. Power, loyalties, resources—he's hoarding them all, and the Silver Queen too. Slaves and swords at their command. They speak and the world must follow, or it's the wroth of their firebeasts against even the mightiest strongholds of those who will refuse. They evoke but a single thing—blind faith. Test a man's character by giving him power, they say. Ask me, and I will say this: no man should possess power over another man."

The eunuch smiled. Without knowledge of him, yet here comes her judgment. "Very Braavosi. However, I cannot blame the Westerosi insinuation that shows itself in those words of yours. It seems to me, that you were shaped in the North to think that power is not a means to an end, but an end itself."

She smirked as she regarded him. "And you're telling me that the Targaryens do not desire to make it an end? Folly. I would believe that if they would give up on their dragons and Westeros both."

"Know this, my lady, that power does not corrupt—but the irrational fear of it," the eunuch replied. "I have said this before, and will say it again. Prince Aegon had lived with the common men—fisherfolks. He mended nets with his own hands, washed his own clothes and linen. He can spearfish, cook, treat wounds. He knew it all—hunger, threat, adversity. He had led the life of a drifter, a wanderer. From place to place he had traveled and but never settled, as his entire family was slaughtered during the rebellion. Joffrey, Tommen—both of them were taught that kingship is their right. To Aegon, kingship is a duty. He possessed no power before those dragons were hatched, yet his men respected him, loved him. To himself, he is not ruler in essence, only in title. The truth he holds is that he is one with the men, an equal to them. This, Lady Arya, is true power."

No response.

"Lower your anchors! And, dock! Pull down the sails!"

Pentos.

The peninsula with its walled manses and dome-shaped gables greeted the ship's arrival. Trader ships have landed on the waterfront as well, and so an assortment of colored fabric, exotic fruits and wine, and chests of jewelry had found their way from the barges to the ports. The bustle of trade had dwindled significantly after Pentos had pledged allegiance to Braavos and Tyrosh against the lords of Old. Spice traders have ceased traveling to this area, although food was still plentiful, for the city was by-the-sea, and has expansive fields for crops.

Not enough, when Winter comes for all.

Arya Stark left the eunuch without another word and headed straight to her cabin to retrieve her belongings. Not much is there. She smirked at the thought of meeting Aegon the Sixth wearing nothing but her stained tunic, rough Braavosi breeches, and combat boots. Smirk turned to laughter as she envisioned the horrified reactions of him should she challenge him for a sword or dagger duel. She never had any manners on the table, either; and to her, all Princes are royal brats.

Might be, that he would tear his offer letter right in front of my face.

But is it true that he had lived a life nothing short of ordinary?

An interesting character. That message of his commanded surrender, yet the way the eunuch spoke about his modesty and his noble dealings with others, his honorable pursuits even, made her think of her very own bastard brother.
And if any person at all, even through mere stories concerning him, reminded her of Jon Snow whether in visage, or in the manner of conducting the self, or the naivete in speech and the childlike guilelessness in beliefs, and the boldness that comes with all of these, the principled acts as well, then perchance this person might be worthy of her considerations.

The eunuch's words rang softly in her ears.

Your father was an honorable man.

From Eddard is Jon. From Rhaegar is Aegon. The Usurper's Rebellion gave birth to two upright young men, then?

Too early to say.

She reached her cabin and stopped at the threshold.

There on her featherbed, was Jaqen's nightshirt.

REFERENCES:

Jaqen's Rhoynish pronouncements (derived from Sindarin/Quenya languages; I do not own anything.)

Yu-ri ami enyalie—en yaavierre, en nargelion, en lasselanta... Ami Iluuvatarie, ami Raana Varati, Melisse un ami Tavash...

(You are my memory—in the autumn's equinox, in the autumn's fading sun, in the autumn late. My Goddess, my Warrior Queen, Lover of my Ancient Spirit.)

Mie sa yaara undume, ami Aini miire—pella iluuve y quentalah, a-wit am lana ti raamaloke laurea en luuz.

Mie sa ma Ankalu, y yu-ri ami Isilme... Yumi miruvoore—y es alashee...

(Old abyssm. There I was, my precious Bride—beyond the borders of this universe and the histories of men, with my aurelian dragon in the skies. I was your Sunlight, and you were my Moonlight. We drank with the gods—and it was bliss.)

Y mie sa antuulien, a herenya ami hyanda, verie, losse—a yu varyas. Ami tavali y ami ooren heru yu-re paluure y hwesta...y mie sa otorno pa laisi y faire, pa sonos ami nandelle, mie san vorongandele en urwa y helke. Yu-ri ami marquiyah, vene a ami yaavan-dolcis. Ami melisse...

(And I have returned, in the sacrifice of my blade, my bond, my blood—to defend you. My soul and heart revere your heart and your every breath...and I have vowed by life and death, by the songs of my harp, I will live another cycle through fire and ice. You are my fate, the vessel of my sweet harvest. My Lover...)
Hey guys!

Here's a chapter for all of you. I would love to know what you think, especially on the Jaqen-Aegon meet-up-slash-man-clash. I hope you guys are excited and strong enough because this will be really painful. XD Let's all test the turfs and see if J/A shippers are really that strong, eh (especially since Gendry will be back in the show, S7). XD We've reached the turning point a couple of chapters ago. Hugs!!! J/A is awesome. Enough said.
Crows and Daggers

Chapter Notes

(I do NOT own the vid below)

"I broke a thousand hearts,
Before I met you."
Assassin Versus Prince

"I've been really tryin', baby
Tryin' to hold back these feeling for so long."
Comely's Secret

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"In histories, they were writ large—
Trace of their tale formed tracks of old wounds.
That ethereal span became past, their future,
A thousand stories that drowned in the river whose name was lost.

An Old Saga, I

Bathed in almost-winter sun's rays, the whole Pentoshi harbor was astir with countless trades of ornate gemstones, saffron spice, and fake dragonbones brought by restless traders from the Free Cities and Southern Westeros. Ships bearing sigils of minor Dornish houses—Santagar, Yronwood, were docked in close to brightly-coloured belvederes housing the city's bazaar. From King's Landing was the Storm Dancer galley, bearing wine, steel, copper from the Crownlands. Merchanty is more multifarious than that of Braavos since Pentos allows trade with other Free Cities that still owned slaveships to this day—a silent contumacy to the treaty that was signed after the War over disputed waters.

Sounds of Bastard Valyrian filled the thick air that were a mismatch to the looming Winter.

Arya Stark disembarked from ship and was greeted by the stinking smell of fish and Dothraki pelt—a contrast to the high-walled bricked manses that were located in layers of small rockhills. Centuries-old spruce encircled the layers of the hillocks, with stone-strewn pathways winding upwards. Jaqen and Aegeus trotted at her front, while she walked with the eunuch. Soon enough, her eyes caught sight of a blue-haired, smooth-skinned man, bearing a Dothraki arakh on the left hip and a Myrish stiletto on the right. A Tyroshi, stylishly wrapped with leather-against-metal suit akin to that of a sellsword commander. Daario Naharis cared not if the Daenerys Targaryen would see his recalcitrant act of leaving Meereen a form of poetic obsession of one sworn sword to a queen, an impulsive act of a fawning man, or a clear and simple defiance.
Aegeus beamed at the man that was to receive them.

"Ah! Brother!" the comely one called to what may be one of the city's hosts, arms outstretched. She chanced upon Jaqen rolling his eyes at the show of affection from the other.

The one called 'brother' strode to meet them all. A warm embrace to Aegeus, a curt nod to Jaqen, which the latter returned in a manner more curt. "How was the journey?" He asked them, slipping one gloved hand unto the hilt of the arakh. A glance down the stilleto's cross guard reassured him, not that he needed reassurance. As was his habit, his thumb tapped listlessly on the sword's pommel.

"Most agreeable," replied Aegeus. "Three days. Seems that Winter has its use after all."

He nodded. "In its own way. Winter is still godsent; at least the air doesn't taste of carcass yet." A quick survey of the harbor. "And the Electi?" he inquired in Rhoynish tongue.

Jaqen's head turned to Arya, who was then exchanging courtesies with two Pentoshi high magisters. "The eunuch is with her, keep your story straight, Stormcrow."

He scoffed at Jaqen's words, then regarded Arya Stark narrowly. Disbelief. A miscalculation, perhaps. "That's the Chosen?"

"Yes."

The Stormcrow's eyes moved from the girl's face to her breasts. "I may have despised close study of the Creed, but certainly, I have more sense and knowledge with the Songs—it is prophetic credendum after all, and the likes of it, you must shove down your throat with grateful submission. Of the verses, I am more than familiar. And that, brothers," a sigh. "Is not a child."

Aegeus chuckled. "Oh, brother. She was, believe me." A hasty glimpse at the girl. "Until Jaqen here. The Lorathi in him was most instructive. No deceptive mazes; and perchance, the Blind God saw everything—"

"Ah," the Stormcrow nodded his understanding. A battle of stares with the Lorathi ensued. "Finally, the great Jaqen H'ghar had erred! With a girl? To live to witness it. Now, Death may claim me."

Jaqen smirked. "A man wishes he could say the same for you. However, the notoriety you have earned for yourself from Yunkai to Meereen may do all the proclamation, it seems."

"The gap in years?"

"Not as much as yours and Daenerys Targaryen's."

Daario Naharis stroked his three-pronged beard thoughtfully, a derisive sneer upon the corners of his mouth—a usual expression next to those that show his impulsive temperaments. "Attracted to younger, lovely girls. Both of us. Only that mine has three dragons."

Jaqen was amused. "Oh? Dragons that mine can control?"

"Yours will soon be married to the Targaryen Prince, I'm afraid. If she has the slightest bit of sense, she'll agree to the terms," Daario replied in mock sympathy. "Ah, better to have loved and lost…"

"Should a man wish, he could erase Aegon the Sixth eternally from the picture—can't be that hard with that pampered, princely neck of his, can it?" Jaqen answered with nonchalance, studying the rough-hew of his dagger hilt. "Tell me though, can you erase one great Dothraki Khal from the Targaryen Queen's most cherished remembrances?"
Daario appeared as if he was slapped.

Jaqen smiled at him most charmingly.

Aegeus looked at Jaqen, then at Daario, clearly deriving entertainment from the exchange.

"Greetings, comrade," the eunuch spoke directly to Daario, moving closer to the group with Arya whilst in the middle of his usual courtesies. "Pentos receives you, and well we hope. I don't believe we have met, but please, the city will oblige itself with whatever pursuits you may have, granted they are born out of good intents."

"They are," Daario replied, eyes fixated upon Arya. The girl frowned at his assessment of her. "I have been received though, no formalities necessary." He tilted his head to the wooden palanquin with ornate carvings. A small threshold covered with flowing Pentoshi drapes of rose-colour concealed the royal that it contained. "Your Prince."

Arya Stark gritted her teeth. *Lived the life of a commoner? Yet he allows himself to be carried from place to place like some worthless cripple.*

The small door of the palanquin opened, soft hands parted the curtains.

The Prince stepped out of the carrier, eyes scouring the harbor. With him were four Swords, and when he saw the envoy gathered by the port, he walked to them. His stance, mannerisms, countenance—all undeniably regal.

It was utter repulsion that Arya Stark tasted and swallowed like bile in the throat upon laying eyes on the royalty.

He spoke, and his eloquence embedded in words was that of a rhetorician; it was not riddled with verbosity though, for each utterance was with purpose, unstudied, and spawned out of sincerity.

"Brothers from the Secret City," the Prince began, "Mazōregon bisa oktion-es dārōñe. The seas and fields of Pentos are yours, common blood, common bourn." He held out his right in an effort to offer an armshake. To Aegeus, then to Jaqen who eyed the Prince with eyes devoid of emotion, with an expression ambiguous. The Prince turned to Arya, unsheathed his sword, and knelt with the weapon's tip touching the ground. "Lady Arya of House Stark. Lysander, Free City of Pentos."

Arya exhaled. *Not the dragonriding, coercing, scheming Targaryen Prince, then.*

She met his formalities with a cold tone. "Where is Aegon the Sixth?"

The Pentoshi Prince looked up and smiled disarmingly, rose. "Forthright, I see. Not many women abandon conventionalities and proceed straight to matters." He turned to the others, unoffended. "There is the palace by the spruce hill, horses await. Aegon extends his apologies for his absence as he had gathered emissaries from Tyrosh and Lys. Explications are unnecessary as you are all well-acquainted of the situation."

"Shall we proceed, then?" Jaqen replied in a monotone.

"We must," the Pentoshi said. "I suppose you have made acquaintance with one from Daenerys Targaryen's court in Meereen—"

"Yes, yes," Daario dismissed further introductions with a wave of the hand.

The Pentoshi nodded with grace expected of him. "Follow me."
After several years, the manse's hall had once again opened its doors wide to functions as this one. Upon the thirteen cubit-long oaken table was the carved map of the nine Free Cities, and its hollowed etches had resembled mold fossils filled with casts of hardened dust. After four defeats from Braavos during the Wars on Slave Trade, Pentos had become silent on matters of political and economic strife, maintaining neutral ground; although this neutrality bends towards undying loyalty to Braavos more often than not.

Cycles, and the Century of Blood is history winding back and progressing to the times of now. Argilac Durrandon from the Stormlands came to Pentos's aid with Aegon the Conqueror carried by his fire-beast the Black Dread, destroyed the Volantene's fleet and laid waste on the disputed lands, freeing Tyrosh and Lys.

Volantis and Valyria, and the stakes are higher this time.

The Long Night.

Hope must not be shunned; fear must be cast aside. Survival, survival—the words of the former colonies, the words of the realms.

The gods have bequeathed them with another emancipator, from the lineage of the Conqueror himself—another Aegon, Sixth of his Name.

Patiently, he awaited the arrival of the Braavosi emissaries, with two legates for the Tyroshi archon and two Lysene low magisters on either side of his head seat. Thoughts that beleaguer, they cannot be helped. The task set upon his shoulders was too great, and though he wished to fall upon his knees, he could not. Conflicts were not merely on matters of empires, kingdoms, sovereigns. The impending warfare is against one's own kin, against the dead that breathed, against conscious influences from either the gods or the mortal servants they ordained. It was all a war of flesh and dark shadows residing within men, and he doesn't know where to begin.

Two nights ago, he had summoned his three dragons. The Jade-green and White responded, mated with his call.

The Winged Shadow did not.

*Daenerys's bond with Drogon is too strong. I cannot break through it.*

To appear undaunted in the face of all these quandaries is but a thing of ease. To truly be undaunted is another matter though.

*Kings must not be mere prisoners of history. This is no cyvasse game, kings cannot always be saved by their queens.*

Lost in his abysm of thoughts once more. The manservant announced the arrival of the envoys from the Secret City.

*But even kings are just men.*

"Send them in, please. Many thanks, comrade."

*Titles are hollow and crowns are worthless. But things must be done for the good of all. Sacrifice—the cruelest of all words ever conceived.*

The one named Daario Naharis, intermediary from the Queen's courts in Meereen, entered with a
black-haired comely-faced emissary. Two longswords were sheathed on both sides of his hipbelt, and immediately, Aegon detested the way the man appraised him. Crown to sole he assayed the lad Prince, and an arrogant smirk formed at the corners of his lips, then disappeared asudden. Aegon eyed him narrowly and exhaled with concealed irritation.

Another emissary entered the double doors.

Aegon the Sixth felt the wroth of fourteen flames in his Targaryen blood.

Never had he set eyes on this man before; he was gifted with names and faces and this man had no place in his immediate recollections. The scarlet-and-ivory locks of his toyed with the winter-crisp yet gentle winds that reached them through the open upper esplanade, walked as if he had claimed in his previous conquests half of the Free Cities' disputed territories. The man stopped at the center of that hall, eyes locked upon Aegon's face; and in his every breath, contempt.

Aegon smiled bitterly and shook his head.

"Perfect. Trained killers as legates. Bearers of daggers, crossbows, poisons. The Secret City and its perplexing ploys—the new Sealdor is mistrustful."

The Prince stood and set aside all irrational thoughts, donned the most convincing affectation. Wars must be won. The realms come first, the pride comes after. He rose and offered his right.

"Sīrī rytāri naejot ao. Well-being," were his words. The black-haired accepted his salutations with an armshake. The red-haired's arms were folded on his chest—a clear sign. He decided against formalities. "The winds and waters were obliging, I presume? I do hope the ship's necessities were to your satisfaction. Welcome. Aegon VI Targaryen, Westeros."

"Delightful journey, yes," the comely one replied with a soft smile. "Aegeus Ionnanou, Braavos-Tyrosh."

Aegon nodded at the introduction, then turned to the red-haired.

"Jaquen H'ghar, Braavos-Lorath."

Aegon smiled at the introduction, then turned to the red-haired.

"Jaquen H'ghar, Braavos-Lorath."

"It was the Prince's purple eyes against the Assassin's bronze."

"Same height, same reach. Same wants. Same dragon's blood."

They assayed each other with calm tension that inundated the hall's ambience with portents and seeds of greater discord. This, despite the ulterior motive of an alliance between the Free Cities and Westeros. The other four emissaries eyed one another in naked alarm—something was amiss and awfully wrong, they cannot tell in all their sagacity what. Curiously, the two other envoys from Braavos and Meereen seemed to be amused with the silent hostility.

There were summons from within them to contest the other, hurl words of vile, draw their weapons, slaughter each other, flay the corpse after the kill. Jaquen H'ghar was aware of the sources and causes of this bad blood with Aegon the Sixth Targaryen, the latter has not the slightest idea. Nevertheless, they both reveled at the thought of a looming fray, as if proving who holds the stronger machismo is the purpose of imperative existence.

The Lorathi assassin tilted his head, allowed his eyes to cruise through Aegon the Sixth's every feature. Silver-haired, cunning Targaryen. Ten and nine? A score? Ah, what does he know, truly? Arya will slash his gut open the moment that milk-suckling mouth of his mentions his accursed plans for the North. Occasionally, he would slowly shake his head, as if in his evaluation, he had
unraveled many a thing about Aegon the Sixth that were either critically erroneous or inadequate. The Prince's brows raised at the sound of the Lorathi's tongue clicking athrice—an emphatic resonance of the latter's disapproval. Jaqen's lips tipped up as he met the Prince's narrowed eyes with a pompous stare of his own.

The Targaryen Prince struggled to keep a passive, congenial expression. *There are kings that smile and kings that conquer. I must be both, I suppose.* Tempted though he was, he restrained himself from appraising the Lorathi from north to south. *Trust no one,* the Imp had once told him, *even your Grifft.* The assassin's overbearing countenance provoked him in levels immeasurable, and only the gods knew the forbearance he carried to not haul the smirking bastard outside and end this curious strife between them once and for all with his hand-and-a-half longsword.

Aegon the Sixth chuckled asudden, incredulous, at the Lorathi's next words:

"Oh, no. Wrong. So wrong."

"Forgive me," the Prince began, meeting the Lorathi's discourtesy with a hard expression, though he was smiling. "But we have not spoken of any battle plans yet for you to give your premature assessment." Aegon maintained civility. "Lady Arya?"

The Lorathi did not answer.

"Here."

She materialized by the threshold with angry, urgent footsteps.

"The contents of that letter were ungracious," she began. "To speak of your catastrophic plans in the North, with vassal houses as targets, and without terms set prior! This is how you dragonriding bastards negotiate?"

She had other countless things to say to him, but all words vanished upon seeing the face of Aegon the Sixth.

Her fury was replaced by abashment. Her eyelashes fluttered incessantly for a while there, her cheeks blushed. Wild breathing escaped from her lips, as Arya Stark stared at his face.

There was but a single word.

"You."

The bitterness sparked by one quiet exchange with Jaqen H'ghar was replaced with charmed rapture, as Aegon the Sixth realized: in time, what was unfinished could witness completion.

Life after life, age after age—souls do have a way of going to the path called home, and home is that one other person. Souls worn by bodies of many forms, sung in many songs, but they stay as they are—bound forever to another.

Love lost and love found cannot be undone.

Aegon smiled. "You."

They stood, enchanted gazes upon each other's features—and the face of one, the other had always known. Things that have always mattered had suddenly turned mundane.

*Harrenhal, Isle of Faces, Tower of Joy.*
An ancient tale of being together, being apart, being together...

It was true that the connection between souls is more ancient and lasting than the universe the gods have created. For them, it mattered not how old the souls were, why must it? One half had found the other, one is the lover of the other's youth, her spirit, her very substance. *Cause of my joy,* Aegon thought. For her, he had rescinded all without care. Blood is thicker than water, the greatest of all duties is to serve; but she was life to him, and if men would not cling to life, then what would become of them?

*Once, a Dragon had loved a Wolf, and thousands have died for it.*

*Even as the Dragon's rubies bathed the Trident upon his death, with his dying breath, he had murmured the Wolf's name.*

Arya Stark knew this man from her unrelenting dreams each forlorn night, and he confused her so, to the point of madness she thought she cannot liberate herself from. Those dreams, that kiss, this exchange—reminiscences, they were sweet ones.

_Beloved…_

One to love, one to share your soul with. What is the difference?

She turned her glassy eyes on Jaqen. *One to love…this one you can choose.*

Her eyes, to Aegon. *One to share your soul with…*_

An admission from her.

*This one, you cannot. It is known.*

It is inescapable. Divine will, as believers would call it. To choose who to love is of no consequence, choices are immaterial when the predestined was already set long before the bodies that would host these souls were born in flesh.

Arya Stark shook her head in confoundment, "But…but…"

Aegon rushed to her, cupped her cheeks, brushed his long fingers through her hair of chestnut. "Yes, yes…I know…" He smiled, rested his forehead against hers. "Words are finite, beloved."

Jaqen's jaw dropped.

Aegeus turned to Daario, brows creased. The latter shrugged his shoulders and chuckled.

"Your grace."

It was the eunuch with two Pentoshi magisters and Jon Connington. With them were envoys from Houses Martell and Tyrell, with their respective retinues of sufficient number—noble houses Altyrion and Blackmont of Dorne, Ashford and Redwyne of the Reach.

Arya hastily pulled herself away from Aegon's grasp in embarrassment. It was her venomous stare against the Prince's eyes full of inexplicable lovesickness, and her attention darted quickly to Jaqen, who was now a mirror of one who was about to set cataclysm loose in that very hall. Arya shuddered; such rage she had never seen in him. She seeped through his consciousness—to learn of his meditations, or to assure him of her own.
"May we proceed now that the Braavosi emissaries are present, your grace?" Connington offered.

"We may," Aegon replied, eyes still fixated upon Arya's face, entranced. Recovering, he motioned for everyone to be seated. All took their places around the oaken table. Introductions were done away with. A large cloth map of both Essos and Westeros were laid out, with small wooden effigies positioned in various territories. Developments in the conquest were discussed first.

"Harry Strickland?" Aegon asked.

"Griffin's Roost, your grace. Crow's Nest is besieged," a sellsword, Tristan Rivers.

"Rain House, as well. Your grace's acquisition of Blackhaven and Grandview was most opportune," Laswell Peake conveyed. "Cleared the path for further move from the Stormlands. Stannis Baratheon is still in the North, crushed the Boltons and traitor houses though not without losing quite a number of his own. With Dragonstone under the Daenerys Targaryen, there is no place for him to proceed but the Crownlands. The Lannisters are enraged."

"Besiege, but no casualties on the part of women and children. Strict orders—have an emissary sent to warn the marcher lords and noble houses. No innocent blood in anyone's hands," Aegon said. *Truly, I do not wish to use dragonfire.* He sighed at the complications of it all.

"Done, your grace."

"How is the North?" Arya queried publicly.

Peake turned his attention towards Arya, then to Aegon, as if asking for permission to divulge. The Prince nodded. It was Paxter Redwyne who answered. "Winterfell is reclaimed, my lady. Stannis Baratheon holds it as we speak. News is scant but we have been informed of...certain developments."

Arya stood upright. "What of these?"

Aegon rubbed his lips as he pondered whether or not to tell. He decided on the former. "Ravens have been reaching Hightower, Lady Arya. Stannis Baratheon had placed Robb Stark's heir as liege lord to Winterfell before he left for the Crownlands. One Lord Wyman Manderly holds the proclamation in Robb Stark's own handwriting—"

"Heir?" Arya queried. *Bran has been rescued? Rickon has been found?*

"A Jon Snow," Aegon the Sixth said. "Half-brother yours, I believe?"

Arya nodded. *Why of course.* "Jon." She gave the Prince a leveled gaze. "Legitimized by Robb as a Stark, I am assuming, when he was declared King in the North before the...his demise."

*Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn, Queen Cersei, Walder Frey. Ser Ilyn, Ser Meryn—*

"This Jon Snow's being legitimized is not a matter of contention, as far as I am concerned," Aegon replied. "The laws dictate that only seated kings possess the right to legalize a bastard's claim to heirship of title, heraldry, lands—"

"Robb Stark was king, in his own right," Arya seethed. "He therefore carried the prerogative to make
a Stark out of a Snow. With due respect to you, when the rebellion happened, you were all over Essos."

Without their knowledge of it, the vassal lords and hill clansmen of the North had played the game of grand conspiracies—Baratheon against the Boltons, in which the former emerged victorious though not for long, with murder ploy of Freys on the side. The winning faction takes the Crownlands, the least of the vassal lords' concerns, for they do not wish to intervene with strifes in the South. Restore Starks to power, declare another King in the North, liberation.

A grand conspiracy which Aegon the Sixth must not know.

An affectionate gaze. "Ah, but Lady Arya, I am not questioning Robb Stark's decisions on your half-brother's legitimacy. Neither will I overturn it after the conclusion of this conquest. Worry not, I beg of you." He leaned closer to Arya who was on his right. "Unless you wish that Winterfell be named after you or your eldest sister. Always, true-borns before legitimized kin, does not matter if they are female."

"Can't speak for Sansa. I do not wish to take over ladyship of Winterfell as of the moment."

"Very well, then."

"Looks like the Baratheon claimer has been doing most of the work for you, your grace," Jaqen H'ghar interjected, mock emphasis on the last word. "He had successfully purged your North of traitor houses, named a new warden, and is now on his way to the capital to begin his rampage against the Lannisters." He smirked. "Imagine what more he can do had he been a gifted with fire-beasts during birth. Ah, but what are the battle plans, truly? Recreate the Blackwater, weaken both warring sides then charge, correct? Why wait, when you claim to have three dragons?"

The Prince was calm. It was a patient smile he gave the Lorathi. "Weaken both sides, yes. Set the stag loose against the lion. The aim of conquest is to plunder, but that is not the course that will be taken by this cause of ours." Aegon's eyes were locked upon Jaqen's, as if explaining the rules of gracious invasion to one who has no notion of it. "Targaryens are Westerosi first, Valyrians last. Resorting to dragonfire to claim territories when alternatives to war are presented is resorting to unnecessary, unmerciful carnage of our own people. Westeros is not Valyria, Jaqen H'ghar. Our blood is not the blood of demon dragonriders of Old."

"Plans well-thought out, I must say," Jaqen's lip tipped up on one corner once more, a hint of venom on every word. He ran one hand through his locks, gave the Prince a nasty, nasty leer. "With a Lannister envoy to the Targaryen queen? Have you no other, that you would resort to suicide? Will he not weaken this cause's position, confuse Daenerys Targaryen, make her question where exactly you stand with respect to the ones seated in the capital, who incidentally, are Lannisters as well?"

Aegon still smiled good-naturedly. His eyes slowly cruised to Arya Stark's face, lingered there with fondness. The girl kept her expression neutral. "That Lannister is one of the few I trust. An asset, too—conquest will proceed from the Stormlands to the Westernlands from the Oak to Crakehall. Tyrion knows Casterly Rock more than anyone here and he is married to the oldest Stark daughter. Game of embittered allies." He turned back to Jaqen H'ghar, waved a hand in dismissal. "These are matters for us Westerosi. As such—"

"The agreement set with the Free Cities was clear. We will all be informed of matters concerning the planned Targaryen conquest. We need assurance with those dragons you claim are yours; proceed without saying, we need assurance that the Targaryen queen will indeed cooperate," Jaqen shot back. "In times as these, demarcations between Westerosi and Essosi must be effaced."
"Not effaced entirely," Aegon replied. "Set aside is the proper term, I believe. We will remain allies to Braavos, this should be clear. Onto matters then, Essos."

"About time," Daario Naharis said, tapping both hands on the table. "Astapor, Yunkai, Qarth, to the lords. Meereen, to Daenerys Targaryen. The lords have gained allies from the Bay, four of the nine Free Cities."

Aegeus spoke too. "Whether or not they plan to wage war against you Targaryen lot in Westeros is unknown, though likely. Plans against Braavos are most assured—it will be dragonfire stealing innocent breaths once more, just like in the sweet, old days."

"That will not happen in our watch," Aegon replied.

"Damn right, it won't," Jaqen said, and for the first time, one Prince and one Assassin had reached specific consensus on one matter.

Arya smiled tacitly. Part of the tension is gone, and perhaps she may be allowed to breathe. There were greater plans that must not be spurned by swollen egos on both sides.

She listened to every proposition and argument, assessed injunctions even in her own silence. Mostly, she observed them both, as they spoke of tactics.

Jaqen is rage and passion, Aegon is calm and refinement. Jaqen is rough, Aegon is regal. Jaqen's rhetoric commanded reverence from all those seated, by mere tone of voice or a little more than this, and the obeisance from those that listened was born out of undefinable fear of him, though they knew him not at all. Aegon's grandiloquence elicited esteem from those others, born out of their appreciation for him, from their unwavering trust and constancy.

Aegon Targaryen was gracious enough to acknowledge the Lorathi's proposals, would even nod and request that he elaborated on his proffered strategems. He would extrapolate scenarios based on the status quo, recommendations from other legates, and Jaqen's conjectures. He would make considerations, remain contemplative for long as if weighing all sides, then decide.

Jaqen H'ghar never gave heed to any proposal. And although all would admit in their own selves that the tactics he presented on the table may well be the best there are, his serious ardency bordering on compulsive daunted the other envoys. There is quite a difference between one who knew what plans are advantageous, and one who can recognize which plans are obtainable.

"This is war," Jaqen concluded. "The dead must be on both sides."

Arya could not help herself.

"Have you no other plan apart from wrecking Myr and Volantis by dragonfire? What are emissaries for but to persuade them to alter their beliefs, and their allegiance after this?" She scoffed. "We deal death for justice and for the good, not death for its own sake."

Ah, Esdraelon of Valyria. You never have tamed your bloodthirsty nature.

Jaqen regarded Arya narrowly.

And still, you question my judgments on matters of importance, Āria of the Rhoyne. Back to the Old, are we now?

Their affinity had regressed to nothing and had transcended everything all at the same time. Now that they have left Braavos where the Isle of the Gods was, the kindredship between Master and
Ordained had wavered significantly. There were of course antecedents to this weakening—she is Westerosi, he is Essosi; and though both are Faceless, their motives and loyalties are bifurcated. There was the duty to the temple and the Secret City for them both, and there was the calling to the seat in the North for her. Even in their prior cycles, they belonged to clans that were archfoes of each other. There were conscious influences coming from deities that desired to either put them asunder or reunite them, based on these deities’ motivations.

Only the covenant of blood held them together. And perhaps, there still existed the remnants of sacred love and bond they have shared which nullified the enmity between Rhoyn and Valyria.

However, Valyria is nigh—the crux of his person. He is slowly being drawn back to its gorge.

The many faces he wore cannot conceal that gist of himself, the same way that even the highest magic cannot provide camouflage to an imperial, dark aurelian dragon. It is his *essen*—substance, he cannot hide from it for long. And she…she must remember him, revive him from her own recollections which she had burned along with those ten thousand ships.

Arya Stark must accept her persona’s substratum, so she can act according to limitless possibilities and infinite decisions each version of the self could offer her. Only then, could a culmination be reached; and in this culmination is triumph over the lords and their plans for the Long Night.

Aegon the Sixth smiled softly as he stared at the old map of the Known. *This girl could surely silence the hot-blooded Lorathi, as she can all other men.* His smile grew at Jaqen H'ghar's next words, as did his admiration of her.

"What is it that you propose, Arya Stark?"

She tipped the goblet to her lips, attempted to beckon in herself some stillness.

The tension between Jaqen H'ghar and Aegon the Sixth never subsided, unlike what Arya had assumed earlier. Neutral tempers escalated to surliness, and if this antagonism will continue, repressed ire might intensify to a most dramatic outburst from both men.

She almost laughed aloud at her own ludicrous plan—silence them both with two quick dagger hurls, make sure that the first blade narrowly escapes Aegon's fair cheek and the second blade cuts a few strands of Jaqen's pretty hair.

The emissaries had left, and seated with them were Daario, Aegeus, Varys, Illyrio. The eunuch and the magister seemed to be having some sort of conference of their own—the state of Pentos to receive migrators and exiles from the other Free Cities is certainly a matter to consider. Westeros cannot offer its shores to these escapees, unless the Targaryen conquest had already progressed significantly.

Aegeus and Daario spoke to each other about affairs concerning the Order, at times in undertones, and in Rhoynar no less.

"If there is one person in the House who can render herself deathless, it’s Sabine," Daario claimed, a hint of reassurance. "I would not blindly believe in that farewell one bit, forgive me. It's all farcicality! Have you seen the madness of her collections in that workchamber? She can even *create* a person out of temple dust should she wish."

Aegeus heaved a sigh and nodded. "Yes, but…where in this realm could we even find that woman?"

"Wrong question. Where in this realm could she find us? It's her decision, ultimately," Daario
shrugged.

"Surely, when she unravels these things..."

"What if she didn't like what she discovers? What if every damned thing in that godforsaken temple is a lie? The gods, the Songs?"

"And all this time I thought I was the radical one." Aegeus shook his head in disbelief. "Indeed, you have gone rogue."

"Not quite," Daario replied in nonchalance. "My loyalties are to the Order and Daenerys Targaryen—not necessarily to the death god. That deity may claim me now for my heresy, but my heart is steadfast. *Valar Morghulis* is shite. When I traversed the Bay with the dragon queen, when I saw her liberate those people, reclaimed for them lost lives and humanness itself that those slavemasters rode roughshod over, I realized that there is more to this life than serving death. To die is to gain, but to live is enough."

"I spoke with the masked woman during the Uncloaking."

"So?"

"Jaqen disapproved."

"Of course he will," Daario scoffed. "He does not wish for the girl to untangle the secrecy between Seastar and that brother-lover of hers imprisoned in the Weirwood. Can't blame him, he's sworn Shield to that girl. Defense first, all other things afterwards."

The comely one exhaled from his mouth. He had already unlocked the secrets of the Weirwood somehow, and divulged what he knew to Arya Stark.

*Jaqen cannot hide those parallel realms from her. She must decide how to harness such revelation.*

A silent prayer—may Arya find it in herself to accept that the three elder Wolves that were slain cannot be retrieved from realm versions West of Westeros. A clash between spaces and varying time, beings and spirits. He cursed the gods for creating such unnecessary intricacies. He never finished his discussion with Arya Stark in Sabine's workchamber—Jaqen had interrupted their exchange.

*Multiple timelines in some higher dimension. Nuances and shadows. The gods are truly bored.*

*Blackraven is still in the weirwood, collecting dreams. Jaqen was supposed to kill him, he never got to the North. Plans have changed.*

Discussions were cut by Aegon's slightly provoking words towards Jaqen.

"Please will yourself to consider that we cannot charge right away, my friend," the Prince sighed irritably, placing silverware down with usual calmness despite. "I can see that you Braavosi lot despise the idea of fire-beasts and lords that ride them. It makes perfect sense—your history is that of the troubled for all. I apologize on behalf of those that carry in them the blood of dragons, but as I have said, I am Westerosi. Unless there is a sufficient collection of battleplans, we cannot proceed to war against four *imperial* dragons with our three. Imperial, meaning—"

"That these dragons were the ones used for expansion and wars, correct?" Jaqen cut him, his expression that of lethargy. "Pray tell, what do you *truly* know about these types of dragons? What do your Valyrian lores tell about the beasts?"
Aegon scoffed with disbelief, shook his head. "Very well, I will play."

Jaqen gave him a quick nod.

"There are four. Urkon is to Aurion, Ajax to Lathos, Varathis to Daxen," the Prince paused, assaying what is hidden beneath the Lorathi's passivity. "Heraxos is to Haresh Esdraelon. Truly, I do not wish to be offensive, but I do not understand how dragonlore could possibly aid us in all these. The situation is quite simple here."

"Of their one thousand and sixty-seven glistening scales, five hundred thirty-four are virtue, five hundred and thirty-three are vile," Jaqen replied. Daario choked on his wine, Aegeus laughed softly, Arya rolled her eyes in silent vexation at her Lorathi's too adolescent display. The eunuch and the magister were confounded.

Aegon narrowed his eyes and sat upright. He spoke.

"Urkon is strong-willed, combative, ruthless. He is said to be strongest of the four, but I contend the dragonlore on this—fiery and unbending are more accurate descriptions, these do not necessarily mean strength. Lord Aurion had to use mage-forged blazing chains to temper that beast, to show him who is lord," Aegon's smile carried a hint of dare towards the Lorathi. "For seven days he chained Urkon, with nothing but the sound of his voice as the beast's companion. Eighth day showed itself, and he surrendered to the lord-emperor's call. Urkon can take flight against the strongest of tempests, can even break through storm's eye."

Jaqen met Aegon's challenging smile with his own. "Of course, the lores would claim that the first dragonrider's beast is the strongest. Literary and archival consistencies—war riders would never heed orders from a commanding rider if his beast's stalwartness is questionable. Therefore, the canons would say that Urkon is the empire-builder, Ajax is the extroverted and antagonistic, mirroring its rider. Varathis is wise, more reflective, diplomatic, a contrast to the Valyrian woman who rides her if you asked me."

It was clear engrossment on the faces of those around them, all were immersed with the exchange. The intoxicating wonders of liqueur were then forgotten. There were the civet of hare, a quarter of a stag a whole night in salt and spices, minced loin of veal covered in saffron and cloves, sugarplums, white cheese—trifling, for the starving, intrigued minds of them have decided that dragon meat is more palatable than all that are laid in any kingly banquet.

Aegon's forehead creased heavily. "Where did you say you were from again? Braavos-Lorath?"

"Yes."

"Ah," Aegon nodded, rested his back against the splat of his cushioned seat. "You Braavosi lot know your dragonlore."

"We must," Jaqen shrugged, a sly smile. "You Valyrian lot made sure we never forgot the threat of beasts."

The Prince ignored the shades of his insinuation that they argue. "Heraxos."

The Assassin raised his brows, amused. "What of him?" He turned his attention towards Arya Stark, who remained passive. His eyes sparkled at the sight of her face. She merely ignored his intimations.

"Fearless, yet logical," Aegon contemplated. "Skilled at concealing his domination, deceitful, such that the other dragons see him not as a threat. He's effective at hiding his motivations, even the lores say that the beast is...too complex to even describe, much less to fully comprehend."
"Truly?" the Lorathi queried, gaze still locked upon Arya's face. "Unlike some women I know, Heraxos is not at all difficult to spell out. He can just at will, hide himself from perceptible space, breathe fire underwater, lie dormant for centuries and emerge stronger." The Lorathi smirked. "Nothing special about that dragon, really."

Aegon chuckled at Jaqen's expositions.

"That aurelian beast returned with the lords from West of Westeros. Shame, the dragonrider that commanded him was scorched a thousand years ago for those traitorous acts of his," the Prince shook his head. "For a noble cause he died, and I daresay I agree. Ah, but I would surrender half of the seven kingdoms to see Haresh Esdraelon and forge conjunction with him, offer him terms to a treaty, beg on my knees that he rides with us on that imperial, enchanted fire-beast of his. Not for conquest or any other self-centered intents, but for plain survival."

Jaqen caught Arya's eye and winked at her. She responded to his arrogance and flirtations with four words.

"Haresh Esdraelon is dead."

That pronouncement wiped the smirk off the Lorathi's face.

"Indeed, he is," Aegon replied good-humoredly. "That point had been made clear earlier, Lady Arya."

The Winter Maiden took over for she must. The Lorathi must be pulled back to the realm of the real.

She tucked some loose hair behind her ear, much to Aegeus and Jaqen's surprise. Her eyes were on Aegon, even as she felt the Lorathi's scorching stare brought by her shameless innuendos intended for the Prince. The girl's smile was an allusion of things greater and deeper-seated, at the very least; and her small acts of tracing her forefinger across the rim of her goblet, of closing her lids as if to blink a little too slowly, and tilting her head the other way as if to study him, was met by Aegon with a thoroughly amused stare.

"I have been listening to you, Aegon the Sixth," Arya said, her voice silky. "Why of course, you have mentioned about that dragonrider's demise. But do you think he has forgotten that he's dead already?"

Jaqen H'ghar clenched his teeth. No person on that table had heard the eunuch and the magister pay their concluding respects and depart.

Aegon rubbed his lips, spoke in an undertone. "Interesting. Are you saying that death is mere trickery?"

Daario chimed in. "What if they are indeed realities? No one had really penetrated the memories and dreams of another, correct?"
"It is possible," Aegeus replied. "We define memories as the antecedents and dreams as the forthcoming. Arrogance of men, I call it. We define time as continuous, unswerving. If minds of men contain experiences either past or hoped for, then it wouldn't matter if time is scattered. Memories may be the future of one man and dreams may be the past of another."

Arya exhaled irritatedly. Just like that, the Lorathi had gathered for himself a couple of mouthpieces.

Aegon leaned forward, hands clasped atop the table. They were engaging him, the girl thought. And for what? An impossible accord with a mythical second dragonrider? He spoke. "Where have you been all this time, Braavosi comrades? For many moons, my suppers consisted of tasteless consumables and empty discussions, these all except if the Lannister is here."

"I am afraid your supper still consists of such kind, Aegon," Arya replied, admonishing eyes on Aegeus. "These are all senseless riddles meant to amuse."

"Time anomalies?" Daario said in defense. "Not meant to amuse, I beg to disagree. Free men and slaves alike saw Haresh killed but no one saw him die."

"He was scorched by dragonfire," Arya seethed. "Must the lore spell all things out for the likes of you?"

"Much speculation on this," Aegon countered. "Might be that he indeed got burnt, might also be that he is invulnerable to fire. After all, they say that dragonrider is a descendant of the red god."

_The red god takes what is his, lovely girl._

The subject of it all was seated at Aegon the Sixth's left, donning that face of haughty lassitude, as if enervated of being placed over and over again at some damnable plinth that does not even materially exist. Jaqen H'ghar knew how to play, but this was all a game of treacheries and uncertainties. Arya Stark is aware of the layers of the self as written in their holy texts, but the version of self he may recoil to should necessity demand it is too close to the foe's turf.

And there was the matter with the death god. She had pried through the musings of Aegeus and she saw them—the four Burners of the ethereal bridge they called the 'Pass'. Err in decision and she will lose her Lorathi in all realms and realities. Acceptance is this: that she cannot have him fully, but she cannot let him fall into that chasm of old self.

_But which self counts truly, the past, the present, the future? All?_  

Plans must advance.

"Tomorrow, we must talk, Aegon."

The Prince stopped mid-sentence with his current discourse with Jaqen. He turned to her, his smile was not forced upon him.

Arya spoke again. "Your proposal."

She felt the flesh of her skin burn at the drastic change in the ambience that was earlier congenial. There was sour acrimony once more, between the Westerosi and the Lorathi. Three-way stares might at any moment explode into a riotous exchange of baleful words and raging acts.

Aegon nodded, appeased. "Of course."

"I agree to nothing as of yet," Arya clarified. "Your terms, my terms. Considerations for both
Westeros and Essos, with the plans for the North as priority. Thereon, we will see to certain points of agreement, how to carry these out with least complications."

Jaqen’s expression was hellish. Winter has come in the North, and now apocalypse is sitting right in front of her, embodied perfectly by him.

"I pray that you sleep well tonight, Lady Arya," Aegon the Sixth concluded. "On the morrow, may your decisions on all matters come from wisdom only."

She dared not look at Jaqen a second time.

They all departed for the night.

For three straight days, she had eluded Aegon the Sixth. The agreement during their first night in Pentos regarding a highly-wrought dialogue on the Targaryen’s proposal had been placed at the nethermost of all her concernments. The Prince was gracious enough to leave her to herself, to allow her all the time she could possibly need. During luncheons and suppers, he would raise not a word about the planned conquest in order to not burden her, left such matters in the manse’s function hall where all gatherings are held. He would speak of blithesome tales about his travels in Essos, his instruction from the half-maester, his purviews on subjects of gods and faiths. Arya would find herself smiling at the lad’s accounts and at the way he was engaging both Aegeus and Daario. "Too modest, this Aegon the Sixth," the Stormcrow had one night told the comely one. "The Order should have endorsed Daenerys Targaryen as claimant—she may have had serious lapses in her rule in Meereen, but she has the experience, no contest on that. A soft-spoken, unostentatious, probably even merciful king? Never heard of it." The comely chuckled at the commentary. "Might be that he was god-sent? Ah! Forgetfulness, pardon me. The gods are cruel." She would then quickly glance at the Lorathi, and find him in an overly-pensive state, a total regression from his usual acts of provoking the Targaryen Prince and tossing him his usual undertones of mockery.

That third night, she had noticed how horrible Jaqen appeared—as if drained of strength these days past, with his eyes devoid of any expression saved for melancholy, hair unkempt, with rough stubbles along his cheeks and jawline. In the midst of mirthful exchanges, he only stared softly at whoever led the colloquy, forced his attention back to his food and toyed with it, exhaled sharply, as if despairing.

_Another one of his many faces_, the girl convinced herself. _Another one of his games._

"…and Aristide Antaryon would keep the practice of burning Valyrian galleys to mark the Uncloaking, I suppose?" Aegon the Sixth asked Jaqen.

The comely one had to elbow the Lorathi who was then lost with his musings.

"Yes, as was the tradition from the time of a hundred and eleven years," the Lorathi answered in a monotone after a few seconds of languor. He sighed. "Forgive me, comrades, but I must retire for the night." He stood, and without providing any more explications, left the supper table.

They all departed one by one. Now, Arya Stark sat at the edge of her bed, attention directed towards the open double threshold made of glass, leading to one of the manse’s linear terraces. The straightforward message of that letter containing Aegon the Sixth’s proposal created confusion within her. Those words written—threatening, sinister—seemed to be incongruous with the Targaryen Prince’s amiable persona.

_I wonder who wrote that letter for him._
Too quick to conclude. As they say, kings must be butchers or meat. He may have inked that letter with his own hands; it was apparent that he's one gifted with machinations and with silently terrorizing men into submission. He need not raise his voice or convey much, bore listeners with usual kingly declarations. All envoys, Westerosi or Essosi, knew who he is, and what he can possibly do. His choice of allies was most curious though—of course there was Dorne and the Reach, strongest in the South. But why take in his courts a Lannister exile and a highborn lady of a broken greathouse in the North? Not to mention intermediaries from a land essentially unconcerned with his conquest if not for the threats of Old Valyria?

*Indeed, the Targaryen Prince knows all, knows what he is doing. He knows that men cannot emancipate themselves from kings as much as they cannot free themselves from their gods.*

Those four days aboard the ship bound for Pentos had been surprisingly long for her, and despite the shattering heartbreak she had endured, caused by that damnable Lorathi as was the usual, she had shaped in her mind the perfect scheme on how to secure Aegon the Sixth for Braavos and retake their ancestral seat in the North. The Umbers and the Karstarks were dealt with by the Baratheon claimer, and Jon was declared liege lord.

Starks as kings—no fealty at all to the ones seated in the Crownlands. But to obtain this with two Targaryens seeking to sustain all seven realms in one kingdom is bordering on the absurd.

The latch that secured her door clicked open.

*Intruder,* her instinct warned her.

Before she could unsheath one of her daggers, Jaqen H'ghar had already invited himself in.

"What is it with you Faceless Men and knocking?" she stood and spat with clear irritation. It was a defensive wall to safeguard herself too; the Lorathi will no doubt abrade her again with his classic words of contempt. In the cruelest tones she could gather, she proceeded with her tirade. "We are not in Braavos anymore, for you to behave in a manner uncultivated and enter chambers uninvited, Jaqen H'ghar. Ah! But what is new? You are known to be coarse anyway. Had you knocked, I would have been quick to conclude that you were nothing but a face—the true Jaqen H'ghar would always remain boorish in demeanor."

Gently, he closed the door and turned to her, with an expression more downcast than when Sabine had left all of them for good.

His eyes, oh, those beauteous bronze irises were morose, as if a wellsprings of tears had just revealed itself in the deserts of these, wiped by the back of calloused, blood-dried, unmerciful assassin hands. *Might be that he's drunk again; explains the misty eyes.* The sight staggered her—he was biting his lower lip hard, running one hand in his hairlocks, staring at her like one woebegone whelp. The baleful, taunting, disparaging lion of a Lorathi these days past, and in all other days at that, now stood in front of her—a lost, grief-stricken cub.

Rather quick shift—this man is too erratic!

This time though, he was far from drunk; he was merely godforsaken.

"Arya…"

"Get back to your chamber, Jaqen."

"Arya Stark…"
She turned her back to him, began spreading the bedlinen. "If you would not be persuaded to leave, then do remain here and sleep. I will find another chamber."

With quick strides, he crossed the distance between them, embraced her tightly from behind.

The girl cursed.

He's smashing her resolve to pieces and wounding her with the shards as if the act was not enough! He would take her apart fragment by fragment, and form her back again and again—his expertise. Jaqen was not the one gifted by the old gods with the capacity to read minds, she was. How could he have read her deepest yearning of just having him by her side, with his strength that had been her own, with just a little of who he is that had become all of her? How dare he undo her days' worth of crystallizing herself so she may not desire him anymore in impossible ways!

However, when he held her, she did not anymore resist—possessed neither the will nor the want to. **What is the use? No escape—this is the way of assassins. They take no pride in fighting the fair game.**

Silently, she laughed at those immortal gods—should they have themselves, and their hearts crushed like this, could they pray for their own death so they may cease to feel?

Jaqen's arms tightened around her. "Arya…"

**Probably not.**

Is it acceptable to leave? To stop fighting for all these?

**Probably not.**

Jaqen H'ghar should not have done those things, should not have wanted her too much. The moment he declared to her that ceaseless want of his was the precise moment she had started wanting herself as well, appreciating herself; as if it was only his concurrence that mattered, his approval, his regard of her.

It is never fair.

"Say what you need Jaqen, and be done with it."

She felt him kissing her hair, inhaling the snow-scent that had clung to it—crisp and bright and cold for some, salvation and healing for him. He whispered, with false calm. "Truths. Lies."

"Folly. When do we stop playing, Jaqen H'ghar?"

He ignored her, and spoke.

"That iron coin led you to Braavos. That coin did not draft a possible future for you, you built a future around it. Choices, and even entire universes cannot hinder your right to a free will—a fundamental law."

She clenched her teeth. Very well, then. After this, he might immediately leave.

"Truth."

He rested his chin on her head. Pained respiration escaped from his mouth. And when he spoke, Arya gasped at the sound of his breaking voice. "In the godswood, do you remember? You were then a small child, a man even had to bend on one knee so you could reach and whisper to him the
name of the last you wanted killed. A girl gave a man his own name, declared her power over him—'Die,' she had told him. 'Your life is not yours, but mine…' and from that point, a man's soul had clung to her, his entirety began needing her, like some useless mortal in need of the saving grace of a god—"

"Lie," she murmured. Too much! The girl tried to break free, but he still held her, as if she was his last, most precious thing. "Let go, Jaqen. You've had more than enough of your diversions! I'm sleepy!"

Jaqen pressed his lips against her ear. His whispers were desolate.

"A man is so weak, but he cannot appear vulnerable in front of you, can he? He must be a warrior, weapon…a…a rampart, in order for you not to fall. As all Faceless would say—wear your many faces served in platters of concealment, draw the curtains for the first act and the second, the third. Arya Stark, I…I'm tripping and stumbling, but I cannot succumb to pieces, so to appear fragile is…just unwelcome. This whole arrangement is just tearing me apart to damnable shreds! At times the shadows of fate are too cruel and they suffocate me so, and I wanted to just fall on my knees and tug at my hair and scream and cry, but…but…"

"All lies."

Arya Stark knew that she had killed herself with her own words.

Jaqen's confession frightened her—never had she seen him this frail and powerless.

_Weakness is a right of all men, as is fear._ Can a man still be strong if he is already wavering? Can a man still be brave if he's afraid? 'Yes,' Ned Stark would have told her. 'These are the only times when a man can be strong and brave.' But no, no—Jaqen can't be weak and vulnerable, he can't stagger, he can't fail! She needed him strong, he must be strong for her!

_No, Jaqen. You are not weak. You can't be, I forbid you to have the right to it._

She faced him, pulled the collar of his tunic roughly, until she felt his temple pressed against hers, his seemingly dying exhales mingling with her own fluctuant ones. Her gray-and-green locked upon his bronze that turned gold in a certain moonlight's angle. Arya shook her head vehemently, panic-stricken at Jaqen's strengthless state.

"All lies!" she shouted. "All lies! You are Jaqen H'ghar and Jaqen H'ghar smirks at fear and commands it to move aside, laughs at weakness with disdain! Jaqen H'ghar mocks fallen swords and useless scums claimed rashly by the god of death—'Those who cannot defend their own lives possess not the right to breathe the air with the rest of us,' he would say. Jaqen!" She yanked him harder upon seeing his eyes well up. "Jaqen! Don't you dare do this in front of me! Here!—" she grabbed both of his hands and placed them on her heart. She gasped, desperation enveloping her mercilessly. "Here! Take all that I have left—there must be some damnable enchantment you Faceless Masters can perform to steal away the strength of another. I don't need mine, take it! I just need you to be strong…strong—damn it, I can't do this alone! Jaqen!" She flailed about violently as he pulled her to him and buried his eyes upon her right shoulder. "Mount your high horse now and ride around with your usual cavalier—I don't need this right now!"

She thrashed against him, even as the Lorathi pulled her on the floor with him, seated her astride on his lap. He rested his face once more in between her bosoms, caressed the small of her back to calm her. "What have you done to me, Arya Stark, what have you done?" he whispered weakly. "You have robbed me of myself, and I thought I had none, Arya…what did you even do to a man?" His arms coiled around her waist, his hands gripped the side fabric of her tunic, as if allowing the tiniest
of spaces between them meant the very demise of him. "You're killing me every damned second, and 
breathing life back into my frame—do you know the kind of excruciation that brings me? Oh, 
Arya…"

She heard it from his lips—her name, being uttered over and over as if it was his lifeline, his only 
rescue. Had it been a thousand times? She had not counted, so she would never know. The same 
way that she would never know the sound of a heart when it breaks.

Let me be Shield to him now.

"Jaqen!" the girl ran her fingers through his hair, planted small kisses on it. "Let us draw it from each 
other, yes? Those pages in the temple—Two is not Two but One. We are each other's strength and 
weakness. We are each other. In the coming together that is all-powerful, nothing can conquer us 
both if we will not cave in helplessly to all these without a proper fight. There are wars to win, Jaqen 
—you have Braavos, I have Winterfell. We will then see, after all these, if there is…a life for us both. 
I promise. I promise."

"I love you," Jaqen whispered against her chest. His heart bleeds. She felt the soft fabric of her shift 
moistened by salty rain from his eyes. He weeps. And since Faceless Men rarely weep, they suffer 
more than all others. It cannot be helped; only in weeping can souls truly speak.

Arya felt her own eyes burn, and swallowed hard to hinder the tears. May the gods shatter the roofs 
of this manse and let rain through, so no one would see the waters of our mourning.

Neither was surrendering his or her hold of the other one. A few seconds of his heart and her heart 
speaking in the stillness of that wistful night might heal them both. But if wounds hide themselves, 
what is there to even heal?

I love you too.

Truth.

How many eyes does the Bloodraven have?

A thousand and one.

Aegeus locked the door to his assigned bedchamber, exhaled exhaustively. His room was adjacent to 
Jaqen's on the left and Daario's on the other side. Arya Stark’s chamber was located in the manse's 
other wing—curious, though not curious, that she would be at close quarters with Aegon the Sixth. 
The Prince is honorable, of this the comely one was most assured, more honorable than Jaqen if he 
would be truthful. Lock the Stark girl up in the same chamber with Aegon the Sixth and she'll 
emerge more blameless than when she had entered the threshold.

Aegeus chuckled.

Lock her up with Jaqen—hah! Magic, if she gets out with all her clothes still in one piece. That 
Lorathi makes his own breeches appear thin at the sight of that girl's shadow.

It was not the proximity between the Stark girl and the Targaryen Prince that brought upon him 
worry though, but Jaqen's temperamental state and probable discernments about it all. A whole night 
is long enough, emotions can drown sound judgment. Facelessness, if not, the Lorathi might 
eviscerate Aegon the sixth with nothing but his slaughter-itching fingers.

Much to be considered.
Circle-top windows feature the Narrow Sea in between traceries of its stained glasses. Nights have grown darker, colder. There were times like this, when he wondered where he went wrong, why the Sorrows had to happen. Aegeus had heard the Prince and the one who he named the Griff speaking of their travels aboard the Shy Maid, with the Lannister Imp many moons back. They had traversed the path of the Sorrows, and had mentioned that stone men still inhabited it beneath the fog. A smirk formed in his lips when they spoke in hushed tones of the Shrouded Lord.

The smile faded.

jon connington is infected with grayscale.

The Griff is key to the plans, he is Aegon the Sixth's hand. Losing him is like losing a whole squadron of able archers. The comely one clicked his tongue. He saw how widespread the infection was already. Scalding hot baths and mustard poultices will not work; neither would an array of sacrifice by the incense, as maesters and septons would claim. If only Sabine were here...

The nightshirt he wore was of thin fabric, but he was from the river. Cold can do him little harm. He laid himself, brushed his comely face with both hands, did not even bother to pray as sleep stole his consciousness after a few minutes of gazing at the posterbed's drapes of morracon and delaine.

He was dead to his dreams, completely unaware of the lock being opened from the outside, through some form of enchantment.

The oaken door opened and closed without the faintest creak.

Those footsteps were light, as if the owner could glissade into transparent vapor. A pair of deprived eyes stared at the sleeping figure. Closer now…closer. She paused, surveyed the chamber, sensed signs of other presences. None.

Feet settled on the softness of that featherbed. Still, he was unfeeling of that company unwished-for that was now above him. That guest that had invited herself in his bedchamber, though the welcoming was not an entitlement of hers, lowered her face a little, and it was now close to his own. She tilted her head to hold him under scrutiny with much diligence.

Still comely, she thought. But of course. It's only been a week or so.

She settled herself on his lap. Soft golden curls tickled his cheek. His eyes slowly opened—a spectre, his subconscious whispered. Sleep, she is gone. Chose downfall over continuance. In a whole other realm…in a reality different from what is here, yet congruent…identical…and…

Parallel…?

Once more, his heavy lids hid his eyes as he carried on with his dream state.

Her able hands stroked him between the legs—gentle at first, fervent as she progressed. His eyes flew open, and he saw that one lovely face he had wanted to gaze at for days and nights gone cruel and disparaging. Aegeus sat upright asudden, ran his fingers through her pretty locks of gold, untangling the strands and ends.

This isn't a dream at all.

He gasped. "How did you—"

Ardent kisses overwhelmed all other utterances. Shameless, starved. And she made her sensual sentiments apparent as she devoured the wholeness of his mouth, as she drank from him. She pushed
her tongue inside, let it waltz with his—their watery lips blessed each other with lust unthinkable, as their teeth played their own erotic melee.

"Hah…sweet heavens…" he moaned in between breaths and breathlessness.

How fast is one second? A fraction? How far apart are two hemispheres? Nay, she was not even willing at the slightest to release him and have him recover from his fits and starts! His hands found her buttocks and kneyed her most sensually there, as she continued to touch him.

*Questions. Answers. Questions.*

"S-sabine…" he managed to murmur in the midst of kisses that kill. Done she was with his lips for the time being, and so her fiery feathery kisses moved to his neck, as her fingers began unlacing his breeches. "H-how did you…gods!" he felt her bare hands against the bare skin of his hardened manliness. Her hands gripped him tight, rollicking north and south, luxuriating in the flexible flesh and the taut muscles of him. She ran her tongue across the skin of his shoulder. "How did…how did you get in?

She fondled him some more, her caresses had gone faster. "Stupid question, Aegeus."

Hasty, athirst, he began unbuttoning her blouse. Though days were not years in length, this fact did nothing to quell his voracity. *Come on, come on…* Unfastening her in the conventional manner was too time-consuming, and so he threw all acts of bedchamber ‘proprieties’ in that metaphorical chasm that waited. Buttons flew here, there, as he pulled both sides of the garment apart.

Impatient groans absconded from his throat upon seeing Sabine's chemise still covering her nakedness.

"How did you know we're in Pentos?"

He tore the undergarment with one quick maneuver.

"Stupid question," she replied, then gasped as his mouth closed in on her bosoms and he fed himself from their generous bounty. The woman ran her fingers though his locks of high midnight, reveled in his intoxicating scent of evening primroses. She inhaled deeply as she heard him suckle. *Brother…her silent gasps. Aegeus…*

One bosom after the other—the Tyroshi made sure that both were given equal consideration. Her tips had gone hard-rock, a response to his moist tongue that bathed them thoroughly. Waterfalls descended to rivers and rivers to bays.

Thrill, bizarre yet pleasurable hysteria in between her legs.

Aegeus had so brazenly reached for her core, rubbed her there intensely, his primal moans and incomprehensible murmurs filling every corner of that chamber, pervading every single iota of amorous air. His words were sibylline of things to come—not things dissentient to their shared carnalities, but things that heighten these.

Sabine spoke in between his romantic touches and loving suckles. "H-how long have you…ah! Have you been here?"

Aegeus replied. "Stupid question." He felt her shudder, and so instead of pausing with his strokes, he pushed two fingers inside her. There, he toyed with her inner walls in motions rising, falling, undulating, resembling an undaunted seafarer desirous of learnedness in waters still uncharted. Silent, delighted chuckles. "You're so damp, Sabine…oh, yes…"
It was as if air was scarce when she took it in.

"Undress for me, brother…"

As he was bid, he unclothed himself, pulled his tunic off his head and violently threw it on the carpeted floor as Sabine undid his breeches. Their lips never broke contact.

"I will give you so much happiness tonight, I promise you this…" Aegeus muttered against her lips. Sabine breathed into his mouth, giggled, as her fingers curled the sparse hair of his chest playfully; and so aroused he was with those soft sounds from her that he forcefully drew her nigh and began suckling her breasts once more like one babe clamoring for dire sustenance, for life itself.

"Aegeus! Oh, dear one…"

Naked, the comely one thought. Almost.

"I want you!" Sabine screamed. "I want you inside of me!"

"Damn it!" his impatient response.

He pulled her smallclothes down and away from her long legs. Naked, the comely one thought. Almost.

"I want you!" Sabine screamed. "I want you inside of me!"

"Damn it!" his impatient response.

He pulled and she pushed. Restraint, they both said in the bedlam of their consciousness; but they were drowning…drowning in undercurrents of hates, lust, love. Onto the bed, he shoved her so she lay flat on her back. He lifted her skirt and parted her legs and buried his face in between them, devoured her with gentle passion—cloudbursts and downpours.

Ambrosia…sweet, sweet wine. Saccharine nectar from the sex-wanton gods.

He teased and licked. He sipped luscious liquid from her. Damn it, woman, you're too perfect…

Her legs wrapped around his shoulders, her toes curled with delights she cannot anymore repress. Sabine's erratic breathing, brought by every contact of his tongue and lips against the heart of her enkindled the man's fervor in incessant levels. His romancing escalated and consumed her pore after pore.

She broke away from Aegeus, knelt on the bed and pushed him back. Velvety pillows and dainty feathers welcomed his body. Sabine straddled him, hungry eyes fixated on his. Three words from her:

"You're mine, brother."

The comely one nodded, mouth agape, short-winded.

In slow progression, she lowered herself against him, allowed him to penetrate her. Three words from him:

"Oh! Sabine, baby…"

Pointy ends and fluids. Swords and Potions—two masters. One guided the other as the other taught. Both of them were, in simultaneous and orchestrated states, amateurs and pedagogues, as they unlocked each other's skillfulness or lack thereof. His hands grasped her hips, directed them in vertical motions…waters by the Palace of Love, his silent ministrations seemed to say.

She moved faster and listened not.

"Again…" Aegeus whispered, as she lifted herself, lowered herself. "Again…" Two thrusts per
second—effects supertemporal. *Too fast*, he thought. "Slow down, damn it! I want to *relish* this… stay with me!"

Upon her immaculate visage was sweet, childlike agony. She wrapped her arms around him, buried her face against his neck. "It's painful! Burning…inside…"

Aegeus sat upright, kissed her deeply. She planted more kisses on the side of his lips as she softly, repeatedly uttered his name. "Aegeus, brother mine…oh, how you hurt me so…"

He consoled her. "Serene motions, Sabine…" He held her down and began instructing and demonstrating, moving underneath to meet her. "This is not hurting you, this is *loving* you, my sweet…" The woman winced. "Be still, my love…" he ordered. She nodded, eyes misty. He buried himself deep, spoke comforting lyrics, lascivious flatteries in Ancient Rhoynar, cursed—cannot be helped. It was a divine rendezvous of their wanting bodies and so please let this not end!

"Aegeus…"

"Sabine…"

"Aegeus!"

From northern pillar to southern post, he moved with her and in her. "Shush, shush…my sweet duchess…" were his words that calmed her whimpers in the midst of her pained writhes. His worshipful kisses rendered pain subservient. Their motions complemented, and pure harmony was hence born out of such union—a symbiosis.

*Rúth I deitui, im wot ú- dab cin glenn—*

*Darn the gods, I will not let you go…*

Intoxicating, metallic scent of sinless sangria. Aegeus looked down upon himself and her that coupled then uncoupled and saw her bleeding. Then, came his silent, delighted laughter. First claim —his.

Last claim—his.

Their movements grew more urgent, forceful. Quakes shatter but intensity as this is unparalleled. Words in all goddess pools in the whole world—quenchless passion to the infinite, love and all its truths are gifts from those who are higher. He thrust himself the deepest for what may have been a hundred times, cared not anymore if she was hurting—mindful only of his own pleasure.

He filled her.

"Hah…"

In all spaces were the sounds of their intermittent breaths.

He closed his eyes and prayed for total suspension of this moment, leaned his head back against the bed's headframe. "Sabine…"

Slowly, she pulled herself from him, with her own scarlet and his froth dripping from her legs. On her right hand—a poisoned dagger. She pressed the blade against the pulse of his neck.

His eyes, he kept closed. A soft smile formed in his lips, even as that blade's miasma bathed his nose, even when the tip of the blade could render him lifeless within seconds.
"She truly has returned."

"Garin of Chroyane," the Waif seethed. "You deceiving, shameless bastards." She pressed the blade closer to his skin and a tiny gash had formed upon it. "Where is that damnable dragonrider?!"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you! Much love. ;D

*Comely Man is Garin the Great in this fic, the Chroyanean Prince from Rhoyne who defeated Volantis and three Valyrian dragons during the Second Spice War. When three hundred firebeasts were sent by Valyria to exact revenge, he was captured, but his curse led to the Sorrows that now inflict men with grayscale/greyscale. So he had a long history with both Arya and Jaqen. More of these in the next chapters.
"Cause you make the darkness less dark,
You make the edges less sharp,
You make the winter feel warmer.
You make my weakness less weak,
You make the bottom less deep
You make the waiting feel shorter..."
(J. Ruben)

The Prince and the Assassin-Princess

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Chronicles of love—their lives remade like old songs turned anew

The gods have said this:

Let them live forevermore

Breathe, unbreathe

Unite, disunite

Die, undie."

An Old Saga XIV

"Get up."

The merciless blade now touched the soft of his throat. For now, dominance was hers and he could not dare question her on this. In a matter of days, she has returned from the Realm Unseen, from any one of the hidden realms, perhaps. It was transcendence unheard of. Who is to know? What has she seen?

Souls struggling to reach the light beyond a dissimulation of a billion deaths and rebirths. They are tired, tired.

Amusement was evident upon his features as he regarded her, half-naked, claimed mere seconds ago. Lightly, he traced her legs that were exquisitely painted with her virginal blood and their fleshly nectar that blended perfectly. She tightened her grip on the dagger's hilt, narrowed the already narrow distance between the blade and his skin; already, she had wounded him. With much vehemence, the woman pushed his hand away that touched her.

Very well, let's play, the comely one mused.
He motioned for her to stand for she still straddled him. Warily, she let both feet touch the carpeted tier, first dagger still upon him. She drew a second, to be assured that he will not do anything foolish. His gift of hypnosis will not lure her, never—she had grown quite invulnerable to it, after many years of him attempting to gain her affections.

A command—hands up in a manner of acquiescence. The woman moved behind him, aimed the steel's tip on his back. Wrong move, and it's that fatal venin that will commingle with his marrows and sinews.

"Open that door," Sabine ordered. "We will wait for Jaqen in the hallway."

Aegeus chuckled. "Must we not clothe ourselves decently before we do leave this chamber? You're bleeding, my love…ah!" A spirited tone, a tease, despite this precarious position he had inadvertently placed himself into. "We should perhaps have another bout of that intimate pursuit. My impassioned blood for you has not gone down at the slightest."

He was the only one unclothed. Her blouse was torn and her skirts were bloody to the hem, but they were intact, her clothes still efficiently concealed her nakedness beneath.

"Open that damned door," she commanded him once more, ignoring his intimations. "No enchantments."

The comely one shrugged with nonchalance. He walked to the wooden threshold, turned the knob and with self-assured steps, took an exeunt from the chamber with the woman still behind him.

"Tell me, though," the words escaped from his smirking lips as they walked towards Jaqen's adjacent bedchamber. "Was the whole encounter within your expectations?"

Oh, beyond!

"Close your obnoxious mouth or I will let this skean sketch blood-spattered art upon your lean back," Sabine said, fuming. "The poison will seep through your flesh easier than a stab at that."

"Insolent woman," he remarked in the midst of thrilled chuckles. "I was merely asking for harmless assessment—should I have pushed deeper? If so, how deep? Were my releases against the tightness of your walls altogether fine? My tongue on your very core, how was it? Which cadence do you prefer—velocious-emphatic, or nice and slow and easy?"

"I was right, damn you," the woman hissed. "You're a swine—"

"—and fantastic as hell abed. I know these things, believe me. They did not call me the Order's manwhore for nothing," the man replied. Too magnetic, and he still enticed her. "Commentaries as these are as usual as bread in the morn for me."

The quaintness of his mellifluous lover-tone awakened her passions once more, but the Creed must be stronger in both judgment and act; and so despite his provocations that sent the womanness in her aflutter, despite her falling in that abyssal state of glorious animalism, she held her ground. Righteous surrender, she convinced herself. Had I not succumbed to his manly dictates and robbed him of focus and mindfulness, I would not have been able to draw even a fraction of my dagger.

Questions and answers—the perpetual cycle of mysteries.

Very well, an admission. To taste him, too, before I kill him. Should it come to that. I believe I am allowed to satisfy my curiosities.
They stopped at Jaqen's door. Sabine pushed the skan's tip more forcefully, imperious. He must be wise enough to predict the sequence of what she wanted accomplished.

Aegeus knocked athr'ice. "Oh, brother!" he called to the Lorathi, in a frolicsome tone.

Footsteps from the threshold's other side. The Lorathi was too prompt. He opened the door and came face-to-face with an entirely naked, in-between-the-legs bloody Aegeus.

"What the hell?!" Jaqen exclaimed, horrified at the sight.

A quick dart flew past him. It was almost imperceptible, and it drew fresh scarlet from a shallow flesh wound it had formed on the right side of his face. Blood trickled in small amounts down his cream-hued nightshirt.

Smirking, he wiped his bloodied cheek with the back of his hand, smelled the sanguine fluid. A-"iomhaigelise—potion that incapacitates. Slowly, the Lorathi tilted his head to look at the source of the dart. She emerged from behind the naked Tyroshi, donning that mien of one misled, of one rapacious for both explications and bloodshed.

"Sabine," Jaqen smiled. "Beloved sist—"

"Shut up!"

Another door opened. It was Daario's.

"What is this unnecessary commotion in the middle of the night?" he asked, smoothing his hair. He stopped in betwixt footsteps towards Jaqen's chamber and surveyed the disturbance—a naked Tyroshi, a bleeding Lorathi, a murderous Braavosi.

Daario struggled to regain composure—he must. With arms wide open, he offered his salutations whilst he sauntered towards three other Faceless. In good humor, he spoke. "Ah! Sabine! How were your voyages to realms extramundane? All hail your return!"

She rewarded his sincere greetings with a dagger throw. He was quick to evade the near-fatal horizontal motion of it, but the hurl was simply quicker. The blade came in contact with his shoulder, and it slashed through the soft fabric and the skin underneath it. The blade fell on the floor with a soft clatter, as Daario's blood drops bedecked the marmoreal tier. Dagger heaves were one thing, poisoned dagger heaves were another.

"An hour," Sabine said. "Before ruselii-extracted venin attacks your synapses and sentences you deceiving bastards with motionlessness, that is, before death greets you all. Answers for antidotes. Everybody inside!"

Three men and one woman locked themselves up in the Lorathi's bedchamber.

Jaqen H'ghar sat on the edge of the bed, attempted to divert the possible course of their dialogue. He smiled disarmingly at her, a visual accompaniment to his usual sweet talk. "Arya will be so elated to see you alive, Sabine."

"Keep your trap shut," the woman spat, slow strides across the room. When you have traversed the forking paths to other realms, intrepidity becomes void, ceases to exist even as a concept or an appellation to the concept. The three faceless could not kill her then and there—she holds the only counteractant to the toxin that was no doubt butchering their insides by the second. "No one will speak unless spoken to."
"A query," Daario began, assaying her bloodstained skirt and Aegeus's still upright maleness. He waved his forefinger at the both of them. "Did something happen?"

Aegeus just smiled dishonorably and folded his hands across his chest, completely unembarrassed of his nudity. Sabine gritted her teeth in wrath. There he stands, with the arrogance of some marbled sculpture. As if his nakedness is a creation of all the deities' geniuses combined.

With brute force, Jaqen pulled his bedlinen, crumpled it and heaved it emphatically to the unclothed. "For the love of the gods, put some damnable clothes on!"

With grace he caught the wrinkled linen, met Sabine's venomous stare with a sensuous one. Aegeus took his time wrapping himself from the waist down, apparently leaving his upper torso for further display. He secured the last of his elaborate knots in place, spoke in an undertone afterwards. "You can breathe now, woman."

"Fuck you."

"Language," Daario's admonition. "Please, Sabine. Your return is common understanding. Spill your discoveries and provide us with antivenin."

Her face was the perfect impression of one bruised. Pained doe-eyes cruised from Daario to Aegeus, to Jaqen. "What a remarkable concept of brotherhood we all have—let everyone in on the greater plans except for the girl—leave her behind with her fancy chemistry set. She's going to die anyway."

Tears bathed her cheeks profusely. Despite this, her loveliness was undiminished, and was rather magnified by her sudden show of vulnerability. She turned to Daario. "What do you know about all these?"

"Very little," he replied, and it was the truth.

Her eyes moved accusingly to the Lorathi and the comely one. "Grand orchestrators. Bastards of all bastards. And you're using the Stark girl to further your schemes."

"Careful, that Stark girl matters the world to a man," Jaqen warned her. "The gods are using us all. Pawns, marionettes—men are instruments for their lofty diversions."

The woman scoffed. "And wouldn't that be the most favorable explication? Blame it all on the gods! Your decisions are yours, not theirs. We may have been influenced to act according to prophecies and mistakes of time past, but we were never forced."

Aegeus spoke, provoking. "Is there a question in there somewhere?" He stood and strode closer to her. "I thought you needed answers. We're dying here."

With pure displeasure she shook her head, sheathed her daggers. Let them strangle her to death—she had gone once to that unquestioned void, the unlit, the desolate. Fear is lost—mortality is after all, a mere notion. Death is created by consciousness of men, by their collective recognition that there must be an end for there was once a beginning. Poor souls, poor unknowing souls.

"Much to ask," she began, meeting the comely's gaze with equal nerve. "Why did you not tell me?"

A shrug came from Aegeus—partial response. "Simple. You were too close to the Elder. His roots trace back to Dark Valyria. Yet, he favors one particular dragon's blood over others. Explains why we are all here, under Aegon the Sixth's turf. Holy texts and wedding bells—"

"Not happening," Jaqen cut him in a severe tone.
"Reasonable, if you ask me," Daario said, ignoring the two. "The two Targaryens have embraced their Westerosi descent, a derivation from their conquering ancestors. Valyrian by blood, slave-freers by culture. When we all arrive to matters concerning masterful plots, contrivances, trust the Elder to accomplish the thinking." The Stormcrow chuckled, directed his next words to the woman. "He couldn't possibly know that you're alive and here though, can he? Unless you decided to announce your resurgence to the whole of Braavos first."

"You know naught, do you?" Sabine spat the words at Daario. "Of course, the Elder knows every damned thing! He performs the mindwipe; he's fully aware if certain memories in the Crux are lost or regained. Has your obsession for the Targaryen Queen stolen your capacities to think?" Rancorous eyes of her darted to the two others. "Thanks to you bastards, I had to prepare all before departing from Braavos. Do you know that creating that decoy of my own body in those accursed crypts almost sapped the life out of me a second time? Count a moon or less, before the Elder realizes my actual absence in that temple."

Aegeus paced the room and flexed his arms upwards, feigning resilience, even as each of them were feeling the after-effects of the poison. "If like you, I'd die tonight, I'll take you with me, Sabine. I need you there. Oh, don't expect me to fleet aimlessly in the Realm Unseen alone—"

"I didn't die—the mechanisms of my body were merely suspended, wise one," Sabine interrupted, with a tone still acrimonious. "Tangible flesh exists in space and time, the soul does not, it is in superposition—a formless existence in all states, an existence nevertheless. My soul was everywhere, and everywhere is a single place. The soul transcends breadths, turfs, spheres. Explains too, how I learned of your treachery. Those faces you stole, you used in order to hide from the god." She scoffed, embittered. "My soul existed in all the states it could possibly be in, since no one sees it; meaning, I was in the Hall of Faces with you and Jaqen before the massacre at the Sealord's."

Daario whistled. "You were all-present when you died? Like the wind? Like time?"

"By course of nature, all souls must be, unless they're summoned somewhere," Jaqen answered while in contemplation. Stygai, he thought. The shadows are as ubiquitous as the souls. He rushed to Sabine all of a sudden, cupped her face and placed a light kiss on her temple. "Tell us all, Sabine. What have you unearthed? Please."

A decisive push. She broke away from Jaqen's hold and shook her head in utter resentment. "And how you must need me now, brother. Questions, answers. What are your plans?!

Aegeus sneered at the demand. "And what are the Elder's, pray tell? You cannot expect us to throw away all unless we reach some form of concurrence, can you now?" Jaqen held a hand up to silence the comely one,

"I know nothing of his ploys," the woman replied. "This is what I do know. The Elder was a firemage during the Second Spice War. He wrote the Songs two centuries after the Doom. The verses were in High Valyrian. Āria Stārke se iderēbagon—Arya Stark, chosen. Arya is Nymeria of the Rhoyne, mother of the Rhoynar."

Aegeus smiled softly. "Most interesting. From the red god, to the death god. He's juggling his loyalties, and for what? Such fluctuations! Arya Stark—child, woman, mother. It all fits, as if she had shaped that prophecy instead of it shaping her. The Elder is truly astute."

"He sure is, trust me," Sabine responded sourly. "Our brother, the one whose name and face was Syrio Forel. A Faceless Man, subdued by five Lannister guards? He's a water dancer! Only fools would believe a lie that he could be defeated in sword combat by a Westerosi knight, and we were fools."
"What are you implying?"

This time, she could not anymore conceal her gale of emotions. Tears of one betrayed formed within the corners of her doe-eyes. She covered her mouth with one hand, shook her head. She finally spoke with a voice unsteady. "It was an assassination directive straight from the Order that led to his death. I knew something was off when I was tending to his corpse in the crypts—his usual scent of germanium...there was a hint of white myrtle in it."

The three other Faceless eyed one another.

"Iason Phile—the one the girl had named the Stern-faced Man," Aegeus spoke through clenched jaws. "Makes damn perfect sense. A water dancer can be defeated only by another water dancer. He wore the knight's face, murdered our brother? Why?!!"

The woman walked weakly towards the bed, sat on the edge of it. She tried to calm herself, to contain her slight shudders. "Our brother had to...be disposed. The other masters set it up, so another Faceless may be appointed as Guardian." Her eyes were fixated upon Jaqen's face. "You, brother. You specifically. Don't ask me why, I don't have the answers."

Daario chuckled richly. "Ah! The old man sure has style. A trap, brother—he knows that forsaking vows carries a curse. Any other Faceless can be deemed both worthy and capable of the task. Why, of all Faceless Masters, must Jaqen H'ghar be the Guardian?"

"The Elder sure is a scheming one," Aegeus paced once more, this time agitatedly. "A great conspiracy within the Order, and without our knowledge? I'm sick of this! Tell her, Jaqen."

Jaqen sighed, melancholic eyes on Sabine. "West of Westeros, you know about the hidden realms?" The woman nodded, waved her hand impatiently for him to proceed. "Arya's visions when West of Westeros was unlocked, do recall them."

"Waters of silver, trees glowing and undying. The wind speaks. It knew my name—by gods, it knew. Rapids cascaded from the floating terrains to the Great Sea—and it may be that the waters of the ocean, of all seas—Sunset, Shivering, Summer, Jade—came from these immense falls. They never run out. They never dry. And the sun never sets. The moon is beside it and the moon, it never disintegrates in the sun's flames—it tempered it. I...I have dreamed of this before. Sweet child... Gold, sapphire. The shimmers. The ground is of these. Resplendence, Elder...unlike anything, anything at all. It is impossible to reach, unless through self-annihilation. And they knew one and only one language. Magic."

"Arya's visions were allegorical," Jaqen continued. "They all point to one thing of a thousand years in the past. Sun—the fires of Valyria, Moon—the waters of Rhoyne."

"The Moon is goddess, the wife of the Sun," Daario chimed in, then shrugged his shoulders. "I've
been with the *khaleesi* for many moons, I know my Dothraki lore. But the Moon tempering the Sun? In the lore, the Moon cracked because of the Sun’s heat and gave birth to dragons."

"That’s the Qartheen one, brother," Aegeus corrected him. "Gold, sapphire—these point to Valyrian mines. Birds that rise from the ashes…phoenixes, phoenixes…"

"Rebirth," Jaqen supplied. "Rebirth of whom? And the winged sylph she saw West of Westeros was not a sylph at all, but a boy. Blue-eyed. He cannot walk, but he can fly—a powerful warg, a greenseer."

*Bran Stark.*

"It’s all a haze, Sabine," Aegeus explained. "Which is why we have to unlock what’s past, go back to it if possible, unravel the groundwork on Arya’s being named as chosen."

"And succumb to the demons of your old selves, is that it?! You and Jaqen, you wish to slaughter each other once more, relive the days when you were still foes? Forget the whole thing! And what is this madness over Aegon the Sixth?" Sabine asked suddenly, almost hysterical. "Sweet heavens…such inanity! Has the Elder no other shrewd plan apart from assuming the role of a cursed father, and present Arya Stark’s hand to the Targaryen Prince in marriage?"

Aegeus replied. "The Prince has three dragons. The Elder’s schemes do not accurately reflect ours. As it is, the Songs are missing a whole *chapter* towards the end. Arya Stark must be aid to the Promised, and must bring him *four*. I am assuming—"

"She will bring whoever was Promised four dragons for the Long Night, obviously," Sabine rolled her eyes. "That explains all the gifts, her senses of eight."

Daario probed. "A whole chapter is around eleven pages. A lot may be lost. Might be, the last chapter was concealed on purpose?” He stroked his pronged beard. "Who is the Promised?"

"That is the question," Aegeus responded. "Stannis Baratheon? Daenerys Targaryen?"

"Aegon the Sixth?" Daario offered.

His insinuations were met with stillness. However, the name, the intriguing cabal being arranged by the Elder, the purpose of why they were in Pentos to begin with, seem to point to Daario’s conclusion.

Jaqen stood from the bed, paced the room. "There is certainly more to the Elder’s plans, this is not mere alliance through union of two houses. She had yielded temporarily to Aegon the Sixth’s conditions because of his threats to the North should she refuse. The Targaryen *knows* she is a skinchanger. He even *seems* to know that she is one of the House’s ordained. Ah! If only a man could gain access to the Elder’s thoughts!" The Lorathi tugged at his hair in anguish. "May a man not be damned for this, the plan is simple: abandon the prophecy—Arya is not a dragonslayer, for sakes!"

"If she must be," Aegeus offered. "Then she should recognize fully how to harness all scales of power she has and used to have. Half of Braavos saw her subdue that dragon before the Unmasking.” He turned his attention to the Lorathi. "And I am not speaking only of the Queller. That firebeast recognized who she *is*, Jaqen."

Daario raised a hand, as if to demand a pause. "The rogue one, you mean? That is the dead dragonrider’s fire-beast."

Yes, my firebeast.

The revelation hit the Stormcrow like colossal boulders from the heavens. Tales are both arduous and senseless. His gaze cruised to each one of the three Faceless, as he aspired for the statement to be nothing but harmless buffoonery. Expressions reflected knowledge of such proclamation. It was not the Braavosi woman who was entirely left in matters of importance, it was him.

However, to witness is to accept.

"Yours, indeed," Daario chuckled with sarcasm. "And Daenerys Targaryen will fall madly in love with me, once she learns that I acted in opposition to her orders and left Mereen for Dragonstone."

It was a test of stares between the Lorathi and the Tyroshi. Jaqen kept his mouth closed.

"Feed my eyes, and my belief is yours, my deference too," the Stormcrow declared. Then with a smirk, added, "A taste of lady luck with the impossible. Mind you, in this life I have seen three full-grown fire-breathers."

"This is not some grim feint. Your unbelief will not change this one fact," Aegeus replied in defense of the Lorathi. He spoke to Jaqen. "Show him, brother."

Jaqen smiled. "Ah, dragons. Pursued by many who thirst for their scorching kisses."

There was that almost ethereal chain which the Lorathi had always worn around his waist—the same rarefied one that the Reader had proclaimed the half-draconian charioteer possessed. On the bedside table it laid calmly, masquerading as some ordinary adornment. The enchantment it held remained underneath a shroud, and will show itself only when called forth by one blood-worthy. The Lorathi's eyes riveted to it.

The chain glowed asudden, casting luminescence in that chamber, despite the moonlight hiding behind thick clouds of that wintertide's night.

It moved with a metallic rattle against the wood. Tales are indeed arduous.

Across the air it flew with imponderable momentum, and Jaqen H'ghar caught it with his right hand. The glow intensified when the metal's ore came in contact with his skin that carried flowing scarlet. Fire and blood commingled in one ephemeral state. With both hands he stretched the chain to its full span, and it released erubescent embers that neither burned nor harmed—glowing cinders bathed the chamber with red phosphorescence.

Connected breaths and essences—the dragon and its rider will have their magnific convocation.

He proceeded to open the glass doors leading to the manse's expansive balustrade.

"No!" Sabine countered insistently, pulling Jaqen's shirt. "You will not summon that dragon, Jaqen. You will not relive those days gone and stolen! The other dragonlords cannot know you are here with the Stark girl. Summoning leaves traces, you've said that before. Don't compromise our position because of one half-witted request. This plan of yours is suicide!" She turned to Daario. "I will kill you."

Aegeus spoke, pulling the woman away from the Lorathi. "Leave him be, Sabine. He should start reclaiming that beast—we need as many as we can get, and an imperial at that. Think you that the lords are that idiotic? They know that Haresh lives, and Nymeria—"
"Iāqaen, Āria," the Lorathi corrected him. "Our names."

The woman writhed out of the comely one's hold, forced Jaqen to face her. "Conjuring your ancient rune? Returning to that fire and brimstone will do more harm than good. There is this bond you share not only with your fire-beast, but with other dragonriders, too. If they pull you back to Dark Valyria, what would become of you, then? This undertaking is too perilous even for words!"

"Faceless Men possess authority over multiple selves," Jaqen replied calmly. "A man will not retrogress to being a dragonriding slaver just because of one beckoning."

Daario seemed amused at the exchange. He strode languidly towards the outer gallery, and spoke.

"Very well, indulge me with your fantasies another time. Sabine had just returned from the dark chasms we hypocrites call 'glorious'. Let us all relent to her wishes."

The comely one tightened the fabric's hold upon his waist, eyes directed towards night's orb. *Full blood moon.* He walked briskly towards the outer court, allowing both hands to rest upon the thick, stone balustrade. The arrival of the *shierak qiya* is nigh once more, and since the orb's refugence originates from the stars—bleeding or otherwise, this was nothing but clear harbinger.

Bleeding stars will appear once more in the realm Known.

"Too late," Aegeus finally said. Three others ambled to where he was, their sights and senses latched onto the augury of that evening enchanted. "A fire-beast has been charged right here."

"And whence came your awareness?" asked Daario.

Aegeus sighed in response.

It was ages and ages past. He had ruled Chroyane, christened the festival city.

The lords of fire and their Volantene hounds had him placed in an aureate corral, hung him for all Rhoynish captured slaves to see. "Here goes your ruler, who you name 'The Great'," were the dragonriders' disparagement. "A palace of gold to his own like the old times, and underneath the waters of the goddess you call Mother, let's see if his lungs could save him. You lot believe that water has air, anyway." Aegeus who was then named Garin beseeched the mercy of the water goddess. The Ny Sari Queen Nymeria was taken captive by a second dragonrider, whose fire-beast burnt a good ten thousand men in his army. Despite the odds, Rhoyne cannot *completely* fall without claiming some sort of reprisal.

The goddess had answered. That night whilst he slept on his enclosure, endless curses escaped from his weary lips—the same lips that had given all those commands when those beasts brought fire's rampage. He cursed them for their treachery, their bestiality. It was their persecution that allowed heartlessness in the syntax of every woeful utterance. Fateful night, and the rivers rose to drown both lords and hounds, and souls of the fallen vanquishers nourished the waters, creating the fog and the mist that concealed and revealed the stone men.

There was a reason why Aegeus did not drown with the bastards, and it was *not* because the cage of gold where he was confined was suspended beyond what the rivers could reach. A woman, a deity had turned him into one statue of solid water, covered him with a *shroud.*

He had heard the Rolly knight recounting the tale earlier to the Targaryen Prince, whilst they honed their steels. "Mere version, your grace," the sworn sword had said. "That the first shrouded lord was then a statue, but this grey woman from the fog kissed it to life with her frozen lips. He lived and ruled the Sorrows, and when he got tired, he passed the title and rule on to other men."
Aegeus knew those lips that had kissed him and brought him back—they were the lips of that deity that created the Heart of Winter. He had recounted that tale to his Lorathi brother before.

_The death god's lips._

Kill the Valyrian subduers, this was the bargain he had dealt with the deceiving god. _Very well,_ was the deity's assent, _with all other bargainers, give up on the old gods and your Mother Rhoyne and surrender your face to me._

And so he did.

Now he stands in this particular realm, gaining back lost memories and making choices once more, so the pains of the past will not recur. Now he stands, plotting to relinquish his vows divine and pledge allegiance to any other god who could decide that allowing men to _live_ their lives is not a matter of contention.

_If despite your truthful service a god wants you dead in the end, and all men with you, would you still serve?_

Nearer to the truth, and he planned to tell all these to Jaqen—shed him light in exchange of the secrets the Lorathi held that concerned the many-faced one.

Finally, Aegeus replied. "Indeed, you have seen the Targaryen's three dragons. With two hundred and fifty thousand men I have marched and _conquered_ three. A few days passed, and my eyes almost lost sight in the blinding blaze brought by three hundred more. It was conflagration worse than hell itself, and our men and women were all mercilessly torched—you cannot even find your kin after the battles for all around you were cinders and ashes, and it might be that their scorched bodies were blown off in the wind. If such fails to educate you about beasts of fire, then I do not now what will."

Jaqen walked to him, placed a hand upon his shoulder. "Brother," were his words, in an effort to make reparations, to atone for what his kindred had done a thousand of years ago.

Aegeus shrugged. "Done is done, brother. That is now a problem for another realm."

Daario's eyes were on the comely one's face. The Stormcrow requited him with understanding that only a few shared. "No judgments," he said. "We are all bargainers. Curious though, that we all chose to present our most desperate supplications to the one god who's mad about both men and their mortalities."

"Quiet, you three!" Sabine's urgent voice shattered their exchanges. She stared fixedly at the shores of the Narrow. There on the sea's margin was Aegon the Sixth, barefoot, silently reveling on the feel of water and sand against his soles.

Jaqen H'ghar cursed.

Arya Stark stood beside the Targaryen.

"Tell me it was you who performed the summoning, brother," Aegeus said in a weak voice.

The Lorathi shook his head. "It was that damnable Prince. He's going to call for his firebeasts."
She couldn't sleep.

*Water...the water is calling me.*

The ostentatious featherbed will not offer her the solace she needed for the night, it seems. Entrance and exit to the manse is a task effortless to any Faceless Man, anyway. The glassdoor by the anterior of her bedchamber led to the mezzanine guarded by balustrades, and she was one Cat before who was used to climbing down heights and climbing back up with ease. A few minutes of her feet against the fine grains of moist sand wouldn't hurt—Jaqen doesn't have to know.

There were those thick vines that twined their way up against individual pilasters that served as vertical trellis. Arya tested the firmness of each, gripped the pliant yet dependable stem, and used it as a rope to aid her descent. Her feet finally hit solid ground.

Her eyes cautiously darted to the upper terrace that led to the Lorathi's chamber. *Voices—two.* She heard the man's voice, and with it, his provoking utterance:

*You can breathe now, woman.*

Arya Stark clenched her teeth, as her hands curled into tight fists. "Damn you, Jaqen H'ghar," she seethed. "We have not resolved a thing yet, and you already have a paramour in your bed."

Not a tear, she convinced herself. It was Ned's own ancestral greatsword against his noble head, and Sansa's loud yet despaired pleas, yet she never cried. Might be that the great ravens carried her tears away as they flew from the sept to the towers where they roosted. Greywind's head was sewn on Robb's mutilated frame, and the mockeries in the Crossings resounded, 'the young wolf, the king who lost the North'. Still, it played in her head. Cat clawed the skin of her own face when the Stark heir was slain, with her naked corpse awashed by the rivers after the massacre—and Arya had cried in her dreams, yet whenever she would rouse herself from sleep's torment, she would soon learn that her cheeks had been dry the whole night.

Winterfell was sacked by the Ironborn, and with it came the telling that Bran and Rickon were torched to soot. Though she carried within her the hope that her brothers may still be alive, the wait and uncertainty were torture.

Despite all these, she never shed a tear. Was she too young to understand death before? Or perchance, she had merely allowed herself to be impenetrable to the point that the heart and senses of her had become *more* benumbed than the hands she used to wield swords, carry the departed to the temple's catacombs, scrub the death god's many faces.

Crystal raindrops do fall from one's eyes when dejected and abandoned. The only moment she recollected having spilled a tear for the first time was when she had assumed that Jaqen had been sharing the bathchamber with Sabine in the temple. The waterworks of sorrow never stopped after that. In her every worthless lamentation, her heart would play provocateur: *This is all the doing of the Lorathi. The Lorathi knew nothing but worship vanity with that damnable hair and make you weep.*

*Sabine.*

She brushed the thoughts of her aside, even as she so desired to weep once more.

Her feet led her to the shores of the Narrow. The harbors that receive trading ships were on the other side of the city, so very few ships if at all pass through this part of the seafront. Illyrio's manse is at the very center of the bay, surrounded by high walls that appear as impassable wardens, concealing the free city's true points of vulnerability. The Velvet Hills could be sighted in the east, leading to the
arcs of sunrise that serve as gateway to the Rhoyne. Surrounding the ancient river are ruins of Chroyane, Ny Sar—the Sorrows, yet pirates and traders still roam the stretch of the seemingly enchanted waterway to this day.

It is said that influential structures in Pentos are placed at the heart of its bay—needless to say, Illyrio’s manse is at the axis of it.

Arya removed her sandals, hid them behind one of the achromatic pillars. She trailed the path to the beach in barefoot, sensing through her soles the coarse-grained sand and the small seastones that lay on the damp ground. She picked up pebbles along the way, blew dust off, smoothed them with her shift. Two…five…eight. Her pockets were filled with various sizes, hues, textures of them.

If I fill my pockets with enough pebbles, I can whelm myself underneath the sea's deluge, and stay underneath it…never rise from it again. The weight of the pebbles will aid the ocean to make me disappear forever.

Water meets terrain. Their turfs were imprecise—each one usurping the other's enclave in silent rivalry, the spaces overlap. Arya reveled in the calm dissension, as if the encounter is gift and conflict is an illusion. After all, the waves break and surrender once they hit the beach, and terrains give way to deep waters as one explores further the vastness of the sea. Conflict and complementation.

Waves reached her ankles, washing in gentle tides the grains that clung to her toes. Sea is a little warm tonight. Her eyes surveyed the horizon, hoping for at least the smallest hint of the borders of Westeros.

Plop.

A part of the sea had suddenly become very, very, very calm. Waves seemed to cease.

Plop. Plop.

She turned to her left.

Aegon the Sixth’s breeches were more threadbare than those owned by some local fisherfolks Arya had seen in the port a day before. The bottom hems of his trousers were folded till they reached his knees, and his sleeves too, their pleats resting on his elbows. If not for his gleaming silver hair that ran past the nape of his neck or his beautiful features accentuated by lavender eyes, he would be thought of as some attendant to a drunken seafarer with tradeship loanables. Waves toyed with his feet, blessing them with remains of droplet kisses.

His pockets were full of pebbles.

Plop. Plop.

He threw one pebble after the other in smooth motions, and the stones bounced two, three times against the water's surface in response. All soon settled on the sea's bottom.

The sea soothes, Arya thought. Might be, that his undertaking is also too much to bear?

Skipping stones wouldn't hurt.

Arya fished for a pebble from her breech pocket, smoothed it with her thumb. It was gray-hued and fit perfectly in her palm, and in the light of the moon it seemed to emit a gentle color of silver. With an eye, she studied the chaotic patterns on the stone's surface. The form of it is balanced by its weight—heavy enough to not be affected by small waves and turbulence, light enough to leap across the
waters.

She bent her wrist, snapped it forward to flick the pebble on the water's surface.


Aegon the Sixth straightened his back, turned to that unexpected company. His brows crinkled, a countenance of both curiosity and amusement, as if asking in silence the 'how' of the _five_ skips.

Arya shrugged, smiled at him congenially.

The Prince grinned back—dazzling, regal, yet genuine. Slowly, he crossed the distance between them. "Ah!" His voice was an assonant evening's chant, his eyes were too kind. "But you must _teach_ me how to do that." It was all so natural: his voice rhythmical that flowed from his pretty mouth, the august stance and movement, the way he took her in his eyes. He was unknowing of the loveliness of these, and so the loveliness intensified.

He was nigh, but he confined himself to the boundaries that existed between them yet did not. Arya caught a whiff of his essence, and she cursed herself for being drawn to it for a second there.

Fragrance jewels and vanilla.

*Scents as delightful as ginger and cloves, I'm afraid.*

Arya's eyes riveted to the sea. "No skill required, truly." She looked back at him. "Just…the right pebble."

"And if I do not find the right pebble, pray tell?"

"Then the waves will swallow the stone and win."

The Prince nodded, still enraptured for reasons unknown even to him. He shook his head gently, as if clearing his contemplations of thoughts unwelcome. A useless query, for lack of subjects to discuss. "The North is carpeted with frost. How did you—"

"Braavos," Arya replied, and in her reminiscences were those places and faces and names once more. "Rivers, canals, pools of the gods. A home—memory is more of it."

Aegon nodded, stared at his feet. "Home speaks to us from a distance and if we listen, we would know the truth." He lifted his face to the heavens, as if to count the stars. Moonlight waltzed with his face. "There are men who are consumed by wanderlust—they desire to roam and sail and unravel, so they may say at the end of their vagabond days, 'I have foraged the world's circumference, I am learned.' This, for the life of me, is something that I will _never_ understand."

The girl sighed. "Some men leave home, some men seek them."

"True," Aegon replied. He gazed at her softly. "Which are you?"

"Both."

There must be musical carillon beneath the waters—a whole realm? The voices of the sea seemed to whisper chants and lyrics in her; perchance the drowned god lived with his flute, and played it in melancholic moments such as this. Is each tintinnabulation an accompaniment to a sad tale?

Not the soft sound of bells. It was Aegon the Sixth's humming voice.
Kostagon aōha sỳndor dōrī qrimbughegon va se embar…

May your silhouette never dissolve in the seas…

She felt her throat constrict. Instinctively, she curled her toes, caught between them granules of wet sand. *This is snow under your feet,* she convinced herself. The breeze carried with it moist from the ocean, bathing her face with soft humidity. *These are snowflakes brought by snowfall.* Almost, she could taste the descending snow—and if only she would stick her tongue out, the sweetness of it will be as true as the sensation of sand underneath her feet. Arya caught sight of the glistening impression of the blood moon upon the moving waves, and the impression danced with these. *Snow crystals…*

She spoke. "Done with running and hiding, I suppose?"

He answered. "We both are."

Truth.

"Forgiveness, Lady Arya."

Her smile was wistful. *Forgiveness.* As if offenses were nothing but playful banter amongst children. "For which many acts of yours, exactly? For the unmannerly letter you sent me through the House of Black and White? For the unorthodox marriage proposal that left me no damn choice at all?" She let the sting of her words linger. Aegon was silent, absorbing the vile of each utterance. "For your outrageous threats, shameless menace of using dragonfire against the Northerners to assure yourself of my acquiescence?"

"For none of those," Aegon replied. He eyed one pebble that was on his palm, then hurled it to the ocean—as far as his sight can go. The stone landed on the surface soundlessly. He looked at Arya, and there was nothing but melancholy in him. "Forgiveness, for needing you in this battle. For wanting to restore from ashes and dust both the dragon's sigil and the direwolf's, for the instinctive want for justice, reparation. For acting on the irrational concept of birthright and desiring to preserve the realm left to us, Westerosi scions. Forgive me for the unreasonable means I had to take to consummate an end that I believe is good."

"And must marriage be a requisite?"

"It shouldn't be," Aegon sighed. "Options are there—less favorable ones. I realized that I needed to get you here, to just listen to me, so…I wrote to you, in that manner." His chuckles contained both humor and slight bitterness. "Tyron Lannister—the contents were his idea. I made my protests clear, told him that such tactic is not courtship at the very least. His exact words: 'The only way to court Arya Stark is to disremember every thing you know about courtship—flirtations, enchantments, fanciful narratives. Infuriate her, and you might get her attention.' He had met you long before, described you as ferocious, anarchistic." The Prince smiled. "I asked him if he had any interest at all in the Iron Throne. 'Tyron, you truly despise me that much to hope for my demise at the hands of my own wife, should she grant me her impossible assent?' Told him, but he never listens—it's your sword in my eye should you set foot in Pentos, I was convinced. He's really good—you're indeed here and I am still breathing."

Arya eyed Aegon the Sixth with mild disbelief.

She snorted.

"Oh, gods…"

Her mirthful giggles enmeshed themselves perfectly with the breaking waves. *She laughs,* the Prince
thought, too unreal…but the laughter comforts me, what is this?—and it was as if the whole of Pentos suddenly transfigured itself to a city of songs, her laughter, its lyrics. She never covered her mouth, unlike what most highborn ladies do when japed with. There was something in him that she found entertaining, and she was not shamed at all to show what she thought of it.

The Prince was carried away, laughed with her.

*Courtesy is a turncoat, be real for once.*

"They say this—a thousand avenues, captured in a thousand different ways," Aegon said. "And that is only for wooing the heart of one woman. I admire them lovers of songs and composers of verses, whence they obtain encouragements to capture and create? Ask me how to use the sunsppear against a broadsword, or summon firebeasts—never ask me a thing about courtship. Hells, ask me how to gut a fish and charcoal-escallop it, and I can offer you much knowledge on the subject!"

When laughter died down, Arya Stark just gazed at Aegon the Sixth's countenance that was nothing short of amiable. At the back of her musings was the Usurper's Rebellion, and the unkind aftermath of it to him. Rhaegar and Lyanna brought it upon the realm, enmity should not have sparked between the Starks and Targaryens at all. This impetus of this forbidden union was still unknown to them, and lore varied from mouth to mouth; the characters of subduers and subdued, hero and anti-hero are very much dependent on the voices that read the narrative aloud to heeding ears. Strife will continue and the crops of seeds sown will be the moon's harvest of their children's children, unless foes find a way to cast old conflicts aside—acrimonies conceived when they were still innocent babes, or were carried asleep by the womb.

"Walk with me, Aegon."

He turned to her, nodded.

Their bare feet traversed the sea's frontier, as side by side they walked. Words are beautiful but unnecessary. There was between them, an understanding that was mutual—after all, both are children of a realm whose politics is a disease that creates decayed corpses at each turn of day, and there were common enemies to defeat, mortals and others.

*The hour of silence, the girl thought. The sea breathes, we do. Transfix all things, except friendship.*

Within were the spirits of the dragon and direwolf long dead, and these conversed through them; and though both lad and girl are resolute to build an imperceptible garrison to protect the helpless shells of them from the specters of the past, the battle is too great, and the story was too beautiful.

*Lyanna…*

*Rhaegar, beloved.*

Voices were ignored, though not entirely.

*Lovely, my sweet, as always. See how the full moon hides?*

*Flatteries, confections. Feed me too much and I might fall straight into your arms.*

*Fingertips…just a feel of it.*

*Beg…*

*Please…*
Arya's left hand formed a fist, then eased, expectant of the slightest sensation of a touch. Wind coursed through her sweaty palm, then warmth.

Aegon the Sixth had held her hand.

_Fingertips, you said…you're owning me._

_Owning? Not even close._

His fingers entwined with hers, tight. She let him indulge a little in his whimsical acts, for reasons unknown they pleased her, frightened her at the same time. It may be that her disquietude trailed the paths from him to her, Aegon may have felt it, for he held her tighter.

_It's just me, my love. Fear not. Water was by the borders of the Isle, we will not drown._

_Hold me, I may fleet away... _

With his thumb, he caressed her skin. Arya inhaled sharply, but to gather will and ask him to stop is utter nonsense. She responded to his caresses by tracing the sensitive, nerve-wired part of his palm—provoking and testing his restraint. The Prince bit his lower lip, heaved a sigh.

_The sea won't drown me, my sweet. You will._

_We have drowned in each other before, have we not? _

_Over and over—toss and turns on the marriage bed, the happiest of days._

_Your palm on my cheeks, my naked shoulders, my breasts. Your fingers and your self were against me, inside me—dancing._

_Fondling, lovemaking—terrifying pursuits. Might forget which turfs of your lovely built are yours, which are mine._

_All turfs are ours._

The girl giggled at the words, the lad smiled. They gazed at each other, and as they walked their gazes were fixated. Thousands have died for that love, but deeper than that love is a prophecy that must be consummated. Without this soulful concurrence of firebeasts and wolves from prior and present, it will be anarchy over the calm.

The voices were more insistent now, addling their vulnerable thoughts both. Intimate, too intimate! Seductive whisper of souls, yearning unquenchable, burning passions and breathy sighs, raspy breaths and warm air from one's open mouth to the other.

_Rhaegar, Rhaegar, Rhaegar... _

_Escape from time, the voices seemed to say. Touch eternity, the infinite possibility for once. Lives of two could be led simultaneous and in lovely cadences as the life of one. Merge with the other and embody the many charms and bliss of a love long forgotten... _

_Many selves vibrate within and without us, and there is always a sacred connection amongst souls._

The Prince flinched asudden, as if roused from exquisite nightmare. He pulled Arya's hand gently yet in a manner forceful, as if to raise her awareness of the perils of their kin possessing their very selves. It was deep, and the valleys had shadows in them. Illusions are designed to fool the mind that what is
unreal is real and beautiful. And this...and this is becoming too real that they could almost touch it.

He called to her.

"Arya, we must not—"

She placed a finger to quiet him, tilted her head to immerse herself in his subtle yet elegant countenance. "Shush, Aegon..." she drew her face closer to his. "Let them speak. Years, and no one has ever bothered listening to their side of the lore. Judgments are for latter days, fears too. This time we will witness, yes?"

Arya caressed his lower lip so, so lightly with her fingertip. It was damp and cherry-ish, and may the gods forgive her, how she so wanted to press her lips against his and have a taste for they say that carmine lips are sweet. Her finger moved to trace his chiseled jaw, the rose cheeks, the delicate nose, as if her tip was stencil and the gentle traces could do his features justice or could breathe life to the outlines created by her. Too lovely, for a man. Why are the dreams too relentless? Who holds us both?

"Something that you wish to learn?" Aegon asked quietly, gripping Arya's hand tight. Stop—a plea. Your touches are driving me mad. "Too dangerous, Arya. We do not carouse with the unseen, we don't know their intents and capacities, we cannot lose ourselves and you know it."

"The dreams will never stop unless we unearth the source of these," Arya replied. "Souls are with stories—let the unknown reveal itself. In revelations, realms move and directions change." She pulled her hand away from his grasp. "You wish to be at the mercy of these souls whilst you breathe? Do you want to be plagued with visions of blight every sleeping and waking hour, without knowing what these visions mean? Blindness—a thing of yours? The whispers will remain ceaseless unless heard."

Aegon scoffed. "If Rhaegar does things to Lyanna..."

"Then you must do those things to me."

He swallowed audibly. "Absurdity."

"Yes," Arya nodded, her tone firm. "Higher influence—we must unravel the antecedents. Who is the prime mover of these? The souls are mere tools. We are tools."

Aegon exhaled, tugged at his hair. "Self within a self. If I fall to the trap?"

"You will not," Arya assured him. "I will pull you back from the gorge."

Facelessness. The state allows one to have dominion over assumed selves; for when they wear faces or use the masks as guide to change the mien fully, the face's history, prior consciousness, understanding of occurrences, experiences become part of the core self, in a manner that does not subjugate it. A tangle—similar to butterflies turned to amber fossil. The amber tree resin holds the butterfly tight within it, stable, unmoving. Layers upon layers coat the core, shielding it, preserving, so the core self would not disintegrate.

For the sake of untangling the mysteries of it, she would venture into the perils of consciously opening the portals of her self to the dead direwolf's spirit, with Aegon the Sixth.

"What do you say, Rhaegar?" Arya asked, challenging him.

Aegon was silent. A few seconds of deliberation, then he nodded.
"Very well, but first let me do one thing."

"One thing?"

"This."

Aegon the Sixth pressed his lips against Arya's.

Like one dying, he inhaled air that escaped from her berry mouth with greed and want, willed her to open her mouth for him, through insistent kisses. When she partly received him, he pushed his tongue inside and allowed their breaths to commune.

Waves broke upon reaching the shores, bathing his feet that were firm against the sand and hers whose toes curled—a reflexive reaction to his sweet plundering.

He knew the faiths. There are gods that punish and bless, and it may be that the all the gods have conspired so he may have both. Punishment, first. His dreams of one lovely Wolf had made him restless for nights and moons, and the thought of possessing her only in his state of erratic dreaming consumed him with grief. The eunuch spoke of one Arya Stark, a viable consort for a Targaryen would-be-king, a skinchanger as tellings would say and key to the North. With this he abandoned the Wolf, sought to quell his dreams, so he may not obsess any further.

Blessing, second. He saw the lovely Wolf behind one of the pillars of the bank in Braavos. And their connection was from time before—it was a planned meeting of souls.

Punishment, first. The House of Black and White had found the lady. Alliances—a letter carrying a marriage proposal and a threat.

Blessing, second. Arya Stark arrived in Pentos, raving at his tactics of intimidation. What are the odds that she and the lovely Wolf that bore him babes were one and the same?

*If such is not higher will, then I don't know what is.*

He fondled the soft of her back and she moaned, tried to break away from the kiss. Choice was not hers though, but his. Aegon pulled Arya to him, held the nape of her neck firm so that their mouths remained in luscious contact. The girl gripped the sleeves of his tunic to hold herself up.

"Arya…" he moaned in between kisses.

"Let me breathe, your grace," she implored.

"That's not my name."

"Aegon…"

"Very good."

He released her lips, though not fully. Still he planted small pecks at the side of her mouth, waiting till her sporadic breathing gains its normal rhythms. A chuckle—so, he does affect her that much.

She pushed him, and he fell on the sand. It was Lyanna's voice he heard from her smiling lips.

*Come now, Rhaegar. Let's run.*

He grinned back, rose slowly from the damp ground.
Run, and I will run with you.

Their footprints were etched upon the shores of Essos, bearers of a story renewed, though in the mortal bodies of others. Their prints carved history upon Harrenhal, the Isle, the realms of Westeros whose lords and their armies marched against a single event the cause of which they understood not. As easily as they have inscribed those prints on the sand, the waves had washed them away so the traces are gone and prying eyes may not hinder the hidden, blossoming affair.

She teased him as they dashed along the beach. Clouds concealed the full blood moon partly, casting shadows through the distant iridescence. Years ago, her footprints in the snow had led her to his wildfire.

You’re too slow, beloved Prince. Even with horses. Remember when you were unseated by one mystery knight?

Hah! I yielded on purpose—the bout was not counted in the tourney, anyway. I cannot break that mystery knight's heart. Made her swoon with the winter roses and the crown, did I not?

Made me swoon even more with your harp at dinner—made me weep. Brandon laughed at me. Ned too!

And the marriage at the Isle?

Second most beautiful memory.

The first?

Jon.

Lyanna's voice in the last of her pronouncements was overwhelmed by the soft howl of winds. A soundless revelation.

Her giggles were euphoric as her feet led her to the shallow waters. The waves rolled against her feet's motions, like wet hands that held her feet back from flux and she saw him gaining on her. The sea soured her breeches as sprays of water from the surge dampened her shift. Repeatedly he called to her, but she continued with her movements of rush, fought against the billows.

Where is he, beloved?

Strong currents engulfed her, and her balance was lost in the sea's playful undulations. Oh!—her mouth had formed it inaudibly, startled by the sea's puissance against her own defiance. She was collapsing…but strong arms caught her by the waist, secured her against an equally strong frame. Careful, his voice had said, always, you desire to fall and hope for me to catch you. His fingers smoothed her dewy face, removed the strands of chestnut that clung to it. Waves made contact with their wanting bodies in the gentlest of collisions. Lovingly, his lips brushed her eyes, nose.

He kissed her deep.

When he released her, Aegon the Sixth appeared alarmed. Secrets within those spirits were finally revealed and by the looks of it, he resented one truth he had learned when the both of them performed the hosting of those lover souls. He clenched his teeth for a while there, and spoke.

"They had a bastard."

Through Arya Stark's lips, Lyanna had uttered the name of that misbegotten, and the bastard was
next to Arya Stark's own heart—his face cannot be denied. But of course, in her dreams his visage had always appeared as clear as daylight, voicing out his inexplicable fear of the Winterfell crypts, opening one of the catacombs nonetheless. The half-Stark, half-Targaryen offspring is her brother Jon, and though no reminiscences of him existed in Rhaegar's seat of memories for he died before the boy was birthed, one cannot dismiss the possibility of Aegon the Sixth's reactions to such revelation.

He is a claimant to the throne, and all would-be-kings seemed to possess blood-drinking creatures within their very pores when birthright is threatened by the existence of another kin that may question it.

"A bastard child, Arya."

"A bastard, exactly. Not a threat to the crown."

"Forget the crown," Aegon the Sixth replied. He held Arya's hand and pulled her out of the water, turned to her when they reached the shore. His expression was vague. "I have a brother."

"You may," Arya answered, forming in her mind a series of harmless ploys on how to protect Lyanna's memory of the child. "We do not know if he is alive or dead, if he even survived after the Rebellion. Do you seriously think that the Baratheon King would be left out of such an important discovery? His belief was Rhaegar abducted Lyanna and raped her; and a bastard would be a painful, insulting reminder of that violation. Being the slaughterous sort of man that he is, he may have murdered the child and burned the body to ashes for all we know."

"You said you desired to learn things," Aegon was calm, though a little provoked. "Yet you are too hasty to conclude and dismiss. What of the other possibility, then? If he lives, then there will be three surviving Targaryens."

"Three, ten—what does it matter?"

"Our sigil is that of a dragon with three heads, Arya Stark," the Prince was suddenly charged with thrill inspired. "Firebeasts need riders. It is easier to break the bond between a master and a dragon if the beast does not carry in its back a breathing dragon's blood, the flesh and bone of it. May the gods forbid it, but should a Dance of the Dragons come to pass, we cannot afford dragons flying around and heeding orders only in High Valyrian. Dragons and dragonriders both are needed too, for the Long Night."

The aurelian firebeast that had stirred pandemonium in Braavos was once again in Arya's recollections. *Dragon to Haresh, Heraxos*. The beast had no rider, yet it had responded to the power of her Queller. Or perchance, it was because it had heard Jaqen's voice. Whatever the explications are, in the realms known as Jaqen had recounted, there are two Quellers and one is beneath the ruins of Old Valyria.

The ruins were slowly being rebuilt. It is only a matter of time before the lords of Old would discover that other object of rune, if indeed it exists. Dance of the Dragons laid waste on the realms one hundred and thirty years after Aegon's Conquest, and the conflict stemmed from rivalry between Aegon II and Rhaenyra over the Iron Throne—a strife based on opposing claims by bloodright. The Free City of Lys even took part in the battle. Arya Stark was never gifted with stitching, but she was one erudite with ancient lore and the canons. Forget all the factions of blood and green, forget the Battles of Tumbleton and the God's Eye, the dead dragons and their riders.

The fall of the Stormlands, Crownlands, the Vale and other smaller realms, the struggle for restoration. The wailing souls of the dead scorched by dragonfire, collateral damage. Ash, remains, ruins. The casualties—women, innocent children. These are images that must be locked away safely
in one's memoirs. The writings of Grand Maesters Munkun and Orwyle glorified the names of the Targaryens and Velaryons that perished at the hands of each other, but the names of those other who suffered too, and died—the non-Valyrians, they have reduced to mere *numbers* in their archives—the death toll.

Jon Snow may possess in his veins some trace of dragon's blood, but he will *never* be a full-blooded dragonrider. He is a *dragonseed*, yes, a Targaryen bastard; however, the Stark blood in him is stronger as clearly proven by his distinctive features that were of the North, and his warging abilities that can be traced back to the time of Stark kings. Dragonseeds were ordered by Prince Jacaerys to master dragonbonding and dragonriding during the Dance, and there were numerous names—Ulf the White who bonded with Silverwing, Hugh Hammer to Vermithor, and Addam of Hull legitimized who bonded with Seasmoke. Very few candidates were successful, most were devoured by dragonflames or were consumed alive, literally.

Successful ones who have bonded were killed in the Dance.

No, Not Jon. *The Starks have been through too much. Leave the remnants alone.*

*Not Jaqen.*

Decisions.

"Valyrian blood is not a prerequisite to bonding with and riding dragons, your grace," Arya Stark spoke finally. "Magic is."

"The magic of dragons is *always* linked with blood, my sweet Princess."

"Inaccurate."

Aegon the Sixth smiled, enchanted at her words. "Ah, of course! Skinchanging." He bent, picked up his thick overcoat from the dry patch of sand. He moved behind Arya and draped the coat to her shoulders, stroked them with both hands gently. He brushed the wet hair aside, spoke against her right ear. "But that gift will allow you not to control, but *be* the dragon. During skinchanging, you cannot keep your consciousness functioning, once you enter the being's frame, you are practically dead to the world. In a battle of firebeasts, one needs to possess mindfulness. And what if your mortal frame dies in the middle of skinchanging? Riders are the best of options."

Arya smiled. *Why, of course he would know of that gift of mine. Therefore, the proposal. Oh, wise king.* She faced him, spoke in an inviting undertone. "Skinchanging, and ancient rune. Dragonriders are not necessary. Tell me, your grace. Of your three dragons, who is the most burdensome to call, the rebellious one, if you will?"

A week after Aegon the Sixth's call, and still no trace of him had appeared.

The Prince sighed, playful smile on the lips. "Drogon."

Arya cupped his cheek, nodded. "Summon him."

Embedded in Arya Stark's soft command was an allure so absolute and pure, compelling him beyond his comprehensions. He had summoned the largest of the three many incidents prior, but the beast was *resisting* his orders. The trace of Daenerys Targaryen is strongest in it, and perchance it was because of the name the Silver Queen had attached to it—a name most dear to her that fire and blood had to be paid for its conception. A dead king lives within its glistening scales.

"Come now, Aegon," Arya teased. "Don't be scared. It's just a dragon."
Aegon the Sixth’s smile widened, as he brushed his lips against the palm of her hand that still held his face. *Arya Stark, spirited girl. You desire to kill us both?*

"If I fail?"

"It's my dagger against your throat."

"Option—I'll call the jade green and the ivory ones."

"Summon the willful one, no other options."

"If I do succeed by some intervention from the gods, that hawkish firebeast will smolder us to soot, lovely girl."

"Dragons can be quelled, fair one."

The Prince smirked, spoke.

"Māzigon, zaldrīzes."

*Come, firebeast.*

A sigh escaped from his lips. *Utter lunacy,* he seemed to say. Arya looked at him reassuringly. *Faith.*

"Obūljarion."

*Surrender.*

A second turned to three, four.

Winds blew fierce from the now tempestuous sea, sending strong billows that reached their thighs. Both shivered, laughed. She still held his face, and he still held her hand.

Sixteen seconds, twenty.

"Did I not say it with enough certainty, Arya Stark?" Aegon said in the midst of chortles. "That firebeast is too defiant! We will be awashed by the strong tides, rot undersea, before we could even hear the faintest cry from him."

"Giving up that easy?" Arya replied. "This is not the way to charm a woman."

"How to properly woo, pray tell?"

"You say the words, and wait for the response."

A minute had passed.

Nothing but their two souls and the now restless ocean.

Blaring silence.

A screech broke the stillness, fought against the tempest of waves.

Slashing through the air was the strong sound of expansive wings, thrashing and playing simultaneously with the breathing stratos. It glided then swooped. Its scales were the color of midnight, but the glimmering scarlet than ran from its frilled back to its tail frolicked with the blood moon that acted as herald to its coming. Orange-red eyes scoured the sea and frontier for the source
of the call.

*The Winged Shadow.*

Aegon the Sixth released her, walked closer to the frontier. Upon his lips were sounds of mirth, disbelief, charmed reverberations. *Might be a dream?* He shook his head. *Whence came that assent to my call?*

Only that it wasn't a dream. The firebeast was approaching them; and now it was so nigh. The movement was nothing but a reflection of obedience, and unlike what most men who had seen it would claim, there was no trace of violence or belligerence to it.

He laughed with both relish and rapture, turned to the girl.

"Hah! Arya…it's him!" He uttered in excitation, walked as if clouds carried him within their damp haze, as if mere feet could take flight. His voice fought against the sonance of the dragon's wings. "Lastborn of the three, Drogon. It's him!"

Arya Stark laughed with amusement at the Prince's childlikeness. "Indeed, it is him! The wait was good, was it not?"

"Yes!" Aegon the Sixth held out his arms, strode to her. "Yes!" Arya squealed as she felt her feet being lifted from the soft ground, and her body spinning in the air in gentle motions. Aegon had lifted her, and with her in his arms he waltzed and did pirouettes, sending both their bodies in an almost dreamy, almost illusory ballet. He reveled in that precise moment—with him were his firebeast and his lovely Wolf, and can any other moment at all in this life and the next be better than this?

*If the songs of firebeasts be the melodies of love, then play on. Play ceaselessly.*

The dragon's outcry was a response to the Prince's sentiments, and its eyes saw them both, twirling in the madness of some romance that had just begun. The firebeast descended and as if drawn by their gyrating motions, circled them both in its flight, remained aloft near them. Windgusts brought by the flapping of its scaly wings blew her crown of chestnut and his locks of silver, as her giggles meshed with his delighted laughter.

"Drogon!" the Prince called to the beast. "Where have you been all this time, old friend?!"

Another outcry—a response.

"Hah! You headstrong one! Seven days—enervated finally, with your wayfaring?"

Another cry. From the Prince's mouth were convulsed laughters.

"Ŷdra daor ao geron qrîdrughagon hen nyke arîl!"

*Don't you walk away from me again!*

Arya snorted. "Sôvegon, jorrâelagon dârilros," *Fly, dear Prince.* "Your words were wrong—tell him, don't you fly away from me again."

He nodded, grinning. In an instant, stupefaction replaced that beaming countenance. The Prince sighed, as confusion settled, and queries with it. The eunuch had disclosed only so much, and more must be unraveled. The dreams too, the ones from the straits of Braavos by the Isle of the Gods. Her heart…her heart.
The Queller showed its usual splendid refulgence.

Slowly, he set her down, his sight engaged profoundly upon the relic she wore on her neck. Old Valyrian augury, an artifact more powerful yet more benevolent than the fabled dragonhorn. He traced the outline of the Queller’s pendant, eyes squinting from the effulgence emitted by it. He exhaled, incredulous yet astounded. A warg, a skinchanger, a keeper of one Valyrian magic source forbidden and thought lost.

Their temples connected. **Who are you, lovely Wolf? No soul must be given power immense enough to possess gifts from both the red god and the old gods—the lore was definite, for in a prior time, one was the immemorial nemesis of the other.**

All of a sudden, Drogon flew away. Both heads turned to the direction of its flight, till the horizons and the mists afar hid its frame. It can be summoned at any time now, it had conceded through Aegon the Sixth’s commands and the bond had been established and in turn, strengthened. Its connection with Daenerys Targaryen cannot be entirely erased from its core and scales, but at least it can be challenged. Unnecessary, because Tyrion Lannister is a sagacious tactician, and all the queen’s dragons seemed to have been sworn and sacrificed upon birth for a cause that was wholly opposite that of the Dothraki—dragons not to subdue men, but to free them. To preserve that freedom, and call war against the lords of Old who would say otherwise.

The chimera for the night was enough. More days, more dragons to summon should the great plans work.

**Ah, someone else is here. He sees, he hears, he knows. Was he once more sent by the gods to addle my mind?**

Arya Stark smiled at the scent that suddenly drifted across the air. Heightened sense, or she could have missed it—the essence was subtle, yet it was her most favored. In a blindfold of ebony, in the darkest of darks, she would always be able to tell that very fragrance apart from a sea of all others.

The Winged Shadow had flown away because of the command of another. And though she was to the heart stupefied at the kind of regency the source of that command wielded within him, she had to conceal the sudden veneration she so desired to show him.

The order was given out through that other dragonrider’s mind, transferred to the dragon’s consciousness. The beast obeyed, though he heard not a sound it. The force of that source was enough for the beast to acquiesce; it was as if by the bones and blood of it, it somehow knew how much power the order carried.

**All riderless firebeasts follow the commands of imperial dragonriders, and Haresh Esdraelon is one, though his name is now Jaqen H’ghar.**

The silent charge: *Henujagon, jikagon arlī naejot aōha āeksio.*

**Leave, go back to your hatcher.**

He walked closer in heavy, enraged breaths. In her every fragment she felt his fury, and may the gods help her, she felt aroused. Toes curled once more and there were belly flutters, and wetness too, from within her to the smallclothes that secured her feminine secrets—and these seemed to only want to reveal themselves to him. His covetousness, his possessiveness of her would no doubt yield complications, but this dissension she has orchestrated has a direct, beneficial purpose. It was all for him, for his preservation.
The girl tightened her arms that were coiled around Aegon the Sixth's neck.

*Oh gods, the Lorathi is going to strangle me to death tonight.*

She turned her head towards the man. Aegon the Sixth's brow creased heavily, apparently curious at the cause of the Braavosi-Lorathi's fuming expression, and his devilish eyes had cruised to the Prince's arms around the girl's waist.

"Arya Stark," Jaqen H'ghar's malevolent stare was fixated still on the Targaryen's hold of her. His tone was surprisingly calm. "Remove your snake hands from the royal highness, now. Get inside the manse. A man would like to have a word with you."

Tried she did, to conceal her convulsive shudders. His thoughts…Jaqen's thoughts…he had allowed her in, he knew she could read him.

*Jaelā naejot tymagon?*

*You want to play?*

Brutal. Sadistic. A slaver's obsession—game of chains and cuffs and irons. Her recollections brought her back to Dark Valyria, where she heard her own screams of pain and moans of pleasure.

Jaqen H'ghar was indeed enraged beyond all control.

*Sýź, Āria. Se Valyrīha kessa tymagon lēda ao.*

*Very well, Arya. The Valyrian will play with you.*

Chapter End Notes

Clarifications:
1.) Waif was in suspended animation. She's back.
2.) Drogon was nearby, so he was summoned quickly.
3.) In real life, you cannot skip stones at sea—unless the sea is very, very calm, like in this fic.

Hello guys! I hope you liked this chapter. Jaqen/Arya/Aegon is a lot challenging to write, so I would love to know your thoughts on this, you know they matter a lot to me. Thanks for reading and have an awesome weekend! Hugs and much love to each of you. ;D
"Both hands tied behind my back for nothing,
These times when we climb so fast to fall again
Why we gotta fall for it now?"
Arya's stream of thoughts

"Tell me where is that taking me,
Just a great figure eight or a tiny infinity?"
Jaqen's stream of thoughts

See the end of the chapter for more notes

" In her surrender is a sacrifice too honorable,
Great power comes with it, life, blood.
That steel will not shatter,
For it is the heart of her that will form it,
Her heart will grant it light and fire."

Songs of the Faceless, XXXVIII (Lost leaf)

" Counteract now, or a man will kill that damnable Prince."

" Calm, brother. You have erased that dragon's trace. The act yielded some good, too. This was the first time he had summoned it. That beast was simply not heeding orders."

" I don't care even if he summons demons from the Ash, brother. He used Arya in the beckoning, that is a man's issue here."

" Seems to me that Arya insisted that the call be made. Objectivity, brother. Question her of her purposes."

The Lorathi's words to the Handsome Man were in Ancient Rhoynar—useless now, with her telepathy. Even messages conveyed and concealed through newly-conceived tongues will be at the mercy of her gift, for she could unlock them all as long as she knew the speakers' mother language. From it springs the base of all thoughts, claims and their meanings that are merely expressed in another system of either sensible or senseless jargons.

Their urgent footsteps echoed through the empty halls. The Lorathi's exhalations were too desultory; he had felt rage before, but not like this. The connection, the familiarity between the girl and that
Prince was something that was altogether difficult to dismiss. To not ask Arya about the intimacy and whence it sprung is to torture himself with dragon-forged whips, and nay, he cannot use his own weapon against himself.

There was beguilement at Jaqen H'ghar's reaction towards the Prince's body entwined with hers, the dragon that was summoned, and the thaumaturgy of Old that sanctioned the act. She bit her lip to keep herself from scoffing and laughing too audibly, for although her ploy involving Aegon the Sixth was no doubt an honorable one—a means to safeguard all those around her especially the Lorathi, still she could not help but feel atingled at his show of obsession. At times the woman wins, at times the girl.

And now the Valyrian is a slave to the Rhoynar. Too much, even for him—if I cut his tongue he would still speak of my name, and if I carve his heart out, his brain will start beating only for me.

Aegon the Sixth was confrontational that night, did not make it too easy for the Lorathi.

"Dragons do seem too ordinary for you Braavosi lot, these days past."

"We had one half a moon ago, angering the Titan. Of course, you will get used to the sight."

"Forgiveness, comrade," the Prince's arms eased from Arya's frame. Gently, he released her. "The Lady Arya and I have certain matters to discuss. Might be wise to head back to the manse on your own."

"Matters to discuss?" Jaqen's teeth were clenched tightly. "In the midst of a foxtrot of tongues and a caper of lips? This is how you Westerosi lot deal with paramount situations?" He reached for Arya's arm and pulled her to him, the girl resisted but Jaqen's grip was unyielding. "A dragon in Pentos! Think you that the lords cannot track and chase down the source of the call, and the trace of the beast? The whole summoning was juvenile diversion for the both of you, a man supposes?"

"Jaqen H'ghar," Aegon the Sixth was the face of calm. "If we must go to war, we cannot interminably hide from the threats of other dragons. Hear me loud and clear, the more the summoning is delayed, the more the firebeast slips from dire grasp. A hatcher's influence is as strong as that of the possessor. Even for hatchers, dragonbond takes months, even years to fully master," the Prince shrugged. "We do not know how long it would take for a partial-blooded."

"He's Targaryen," Arya claimed in his defense. "And a Martell. Daenerys is a hatcher and a full-blooded Valyrian."

"Yes, Tyrion Lannister's convocations with Daenerys may have turned the odds over to our favor," Aegon added, eyes on Arya. "Still, the matter on bonding and taming cannot be risked. She has years ahead of me, and it took her a couple of years after the hatching to fully say that the dragons were brought to heel. The jade green and ivory ones responded to my call even after the bond with her was forged. Who is to say that that will not happen once three imperial dragonriders gain access to them?" An exhale came out of the Prince's mouth. "Might be decades then, for me."

"False. You can bond with the dragon within seven days through imprinting."

Part of her wanted to marvel at the intricacies of the magic enfolding a rider and its firebeast, and at Jaqen H'ghar's seemingly boundless comprehensions of it. Yet a part of her—a stronger, more rational one—wanted to forfend the conversation. The scarlet hue of his locks was slowly fading, and the ivory is showing itself in all clarity on this tenth day of the month. With the entire morass concerning lords and beasts comes Jaqen's defenselessness—a truth that might lead him to succumb to the hail of his dark Valyrian ancestry.
Arya spoke. "Jaqen, Aegon, to the manse if you please—"

"Dragonhorns," Aegon cut her, narrowing his eyes in assessment of the Lorathi. He gestured for them to walk. "Your scholarship on dragonspawning seems to surpass that of any learned maester or lore adept. What can this…imprinting of yours do to the beast which the tempering dragonhorn cannot?"

Jaqen walked in his usual Lorathi sashay. "The 'Rogue Prince' is a truly good read—Targaryen heritage, especially writings have their merits. Those three Velaryon boys were presented those eggs in their very cradles, and concealed ridicules were ever present, that Rhaenyra's sons were not fathered by a Valyrian. Those dragons hatched—Vermax first, Arrax, then Tyraxes. They bound the dragons through sorcery and horns, a method no doubt inherited from dragonlord families numbering more than a twoscore." Jaqen paused with his strides, faced Aegon. "Imprinting is different."

"A sharing of blood and flesh, yes," Aegon replied. "A concurrence of life such that the firebeast and the rider are one. How is it done, do tell?"

"Utterly unnecessary," Arya interjected, inserting herself to them both. "We have summoned that dragon! Bond with it the conventional way. These…these ancient Valyrian methods have no place in taming dragons hatched after the Doom."

Jaqen smirked. "Hush, Nyhmēria hen Rhoyne. Let the Valyrian Prince speak."

She eyed him viciously.

Aegon had noticed the naming, chose to ignore it. "This is what I do know. It was a practice done by four of Valyria's most powerful families: Archestrad, Esdraelon, Hadervaren, Ophistor. Fundamentally, it is tormenting yourself inside the dragon's pit."

"Starving yourself, inflicting torture upon both yourself and the dragon," Jaqen replied with nonchalance, as if the design of the rites was nothing but child's play. "Defeating it, forcing it to affirm without perturbation who's lord," his eyes cruised to Arya's Stark's face. "Seven days."

"Hah!" the Prince said, delighted. "Such a feat! First blood must come from the claiming rider, drawn from dragonfire. The pit is the stade; the beast and the lord are the actors."

"You carry nothing but your Valyrian birthchain. This is the only weapon you are allowed to use against the beast. The dragon would cast flame, you must be careful enough to expose yourself sufficiently to the fire for the mere sake of extracting blood from your flesh. If you burn completely, you die," Jaqen explained. "Imagine how many skulls of the dead adorn the pit and how many spirits haunt it. No wonder some beasts go mad and break away from their damnable manacles."

Aegon folded both arms across his chest. The interest was too apparent now. "After the first blood?"

"Find a way to draw second blood from the dragon, of course."

"Impossible."

"Doable."

Arya shook the Lorathi's arm. "Jaqen, please!" she hissed.

"Quiet, Arya."

"Doable?" Aegon said, holding one hand up to signal his assent to Jaqen's orders that she remained
silent. "How?"

"Instinct to survive," Jaqen said. "Trick the dragon, conceal yourself behind the shadows, create a diversion, anything. The objective must be clear to you—that your first blood must mingle with the dragon's second. Find a way to wound it, open its flesh from the hard scale, and pour your blood to the fresh piercing. Bind it through your chain around its neck, suffer with it, wait till it concedes."

In the Prince's eyes were many questions still, but his gaze was transfixed on Arya. It moved to the Queller she wore. "Impressive. This is why even in the event of death, the beast's loyalty remains with the rider that had imprinted himself in it. Blood against blood—the bond. Magic, relics."

Aegon's eyes riveted to Jaqen. "And what can you tell us about Lady Arya's curious ornament?"

Jaqen clenched his teeth, exhaled sharply. Outrage was welling up and it must be controlled. "Nothing but this," he answered. "Don't you include Arya in your accursed sport. Call the dragons if you must, but don't you put another one apart from your own self in peril. First rule of summoning."

Aegon the Sixth just smiled. You're neither Lorathi nor Braavosi, Jaqen H'ghar. "That's the Lady Arya's decision, comrade."

"And I say that I will offer my aid to whoever needs it," Arya said, ignoring Jaqen's raving stare. "I have duties, we all do. Do yours and I will do mine."

Jaqen scoffed, directed the next words to the Prince. "This is your brilliant way of charming a woman whose hand you are asking for in marriage? Have you no sense at all? Exposing her directly to the threat of firebeasts? What a truly shrewd one you must be!"

"Careful, Jaqen H'ghar," the Prince replied. "It is not in my habit to tell women what I want them to do. They are freethinking and capable, perhaps more than we men could ever be. Within the boundaries of safety and good will, she may do whatever she pleases or whatever she thinks is right. The Lady Arya is not a slave bound to me."

"Rhetorics," the Lorathi seethed. "Twisted mindset concealed in impossible beliefs."

"I'm going inside," Arya began treading towards the manse. She paused and turned to the two, hands on both sides of her waists. "Have your fistfight, draw your paramiers. I'm not interested."

"No swords will be drawn tonight," Aegon the Sixth replied. "And in days succeeding, let us hope."

He directed his eyes towards Jaqen, and in these, a hint of fury was already evident. "They say that even the greatest of men lose their composure and sense of diplomacy at certain points. And I am far from being great."

Jaqen only stared at him. His eyes were athirst for blood.

Arya recalled how she had hurled the last of her evening greetings to the both of them with all the bitterness she could gather. She had proceeded to the stone steps leading to the double doors afterwards, leaving them both to their own pompous selves.

The Lorathi had caught up with her once the Prince was out of sight. She had already reached the center of the receiving hall when she felt Jaqen's hand tightly gripping her left arm. He forced her to face him. There was the artfulness, the subtlety in dealing with matters as this, in order to do away with offending the other and expanding the chasms of hostility. However, now is not the time for courtly exchanges.

Arya was smirking.
The Lorathi's eyes widened at the girl's expression. Still, he tried to assume control, questioned her in between teeth clenched in rage. "Dragonlords, Arya. The threats are real, yet you have shown that your judgments, your decisions cannot at all be trusted. You left the safety of your chambers to act as one depraved vixen and flirt with Aegon the Sixth." He shook his head, held her firmly with his taut hands. "Tricked him too, so he could summon that dragon! What of these imbecilic ploys of yours?"

"None that concerns you, Jaqen H'ghar."

Viciously, he pulled her to him. "Everything about you is my concern, Arya Stark. I'm your Guardian!"

The comely one arrived. Needless to say, dialogue turned to disputation. A decision was thus reached.

"You will stay in my bedchamber, before you kill us all with your mindlessness!" Jaqen tightened his grip around her arm. The grip was too unbending that the girl was sure it had constricted bloodflow, and may have ruptured two of her veins. On the morrow, bruising. Marks of black and blue—Jaqen's love, Jaqen's obsession.

"Lock her up," the comely one voiced out his assent. "Too risky to have her staying alone in her own chamber; her recent acts have proven themselves too illogical." He began walking away, but turned his attention back to them as if recalling one other thing that must be pointed out. "We can't have her tiptoeing to the Prince's bedchamber this time, either. Only the gods know what would happen."

"I'm not a whore," Arya seethed.

"Then, do cease acting like one. Valar dohaeris."

Aegeus left.

Jaqen half-dragged, half-carried her towards the foot of the stairs. Arya struggled to not show the slightest hint of vexation at his rough acts, even as she desired to wound him severely for his half-witted decision to almost reveal himself to Aegon the Sixth. The real threat does not reside within the impending war with the lords of Old, but with Jaqen H'ghar surrendering his name, his resurgence a similar matter, so is his reverting to his Valyrian roots.

It is truthful that old powers one had possessed in a prior time can be harnessed once all versions of selves are embraced, but Jaqen had weakened himself significantly for yielding fragments and facets of himself to the death god. The extent of both his resilience and pliancy was unknown to Arya. The depthless matrix whence he emerged must not reclaim him, reinfuse in him its vibrant red.

For if it does, she would lose him. Perchance perpetually, may the gods forbid.

Let Aegon the Sixth call his dragon banners against the lords—he has three firebeasts. Not Jaqen, spare him from this. Even with Heraxos, he must not.

Decisions. A grand exhibit, so he may think twice about his own foolery.

Within the Lorathi's suddenly unfilled head was Arya's voice, robbing him of his thinking faculties, of his will that had toyed with the lives of men in able hands of a master puppeteer. A split-second. Consciousness was beneath him, as subliminal messages bestrewed themselves in the inner walls of his head and invaded his willfulness, his restraints and prerogatives. A blank slate—his mind succumbed to an interstice of void. Forthwith, he felt himself collapsing onto the mottled floor; and if not for both hands that buttressed him and broke the sudden fall, he would have keeled over face
down.

Only when he had regained fullest control did he realize what the girl had done.

Arya had warged into him in order to liberate herself from his implacable grasp.

He held nothing then but wind. The Wolf had disappeared into the manse's gallery.

"Arya Stark!"

With much haste he ran after her, clenching his teeth in wrath. A test, he was convinced. To know how deep I've fallen. Thrall—a game she wants to play, as if shackles are playthings and dragonflames are mere scintillations from fireflies.

Sea breeze moved liberally in and out of that gallery that was partly ensconced by gigantic pillars. Statues of quartzite and feldspar stood knowing, although all were asleep for it was evening's peak. Night was suddenly sultry and dark but the moon bathed the exposed parts of the gallery with its usual, steadfast incandescence. A collection of sculptures and paintings adorned the walls and plinths; in seasons as wintertide approaching, those lifeless pieces seemed to wail as if sensing beneath their skins the throes of death.

Raving eyes of him wandered through the chamber's far-reaching spaces, scouring every corner; and perchance his all-pervading sight can permeate through the ancient walls. There was decisiveness in him to conclude the night with a confrontation in all forms and manners—Arya had tested his limits, and she was verily triumphant at driving him over the edge of madness. Cliffs are precipitous, known fact, yet she had allowed herself to fall over the bedrock of these.

"Arya Stark!" His voice was ferocious; usual Faceless calm was slowly ebbing away and was gradually being consumed by one persona subdued by one renaming in the days of old.

Thereupon, Arya Stark emerged from behind one of the wide pilasters of opalite, hard stare upon the Lorathi.

His face was unforgiving, as he folded both arms across his chest. Wordlessly, he demanded explications from her.

However, she merely stood face to face with him, imitated his stance, as she too folded her arms. 'No explanations are required, neither will they be forced out from me,' her bold countenance seemed to silently exude.

For moments, they just stared at the other's face—resisting the urge to break before the other does, exacting the other's temperaments, calculating the depth of antagonism that had formed between them asudden. However, this antipathy had long since existed, even before they had lowered their sails in Pentos. Insignificant conflicts had escalated to far-reaching ones. Arya's heart broke. Were they slowly relinquishing their vows, the bond forged between them out of their own scarlet?

If the Songs were false, then the vows were null and void in the first place.

And if such be the case, what other reason would he even hold dearly for him to continue abiding in her?

It was she who spoke first, shattering the enmity to a degree, though she knew that the discord had clawed its roots and planted itself firm within the soil of their beings.

"Forget your plan of reclaiming your firebeast, Jaqen."
An arrogant smirk danced across his mien.

"A girl cannot tell a man what he must do and when exactly he must do a thing. Things happen on their own time—not before, certainly not after."

"You're regressing."

"Transcending, lovely girl. Not regressing."

"There's no difference."

Amusement replaced the Lorathi's storm. He regarded the girl from crown to sole, licked his lips as if his musings had suddenly hosted all sorts of dishonorable thoughts towards her. Still, resentment was there—she had almost placed herself in sure peril, the repercussions of which might be irreversible. She had allowed herself to be touched and kissed by another man; and though there was neither a fitting nor established appellation for the kind of relationship the Lorathi possessed with the girl, only one thing was as daylight, clear to him:

*I must be every damned thing she would ever need in her life.*

He raised his brows, challenging. "And what will you do should a man decide to act on the course which he thinks will be most beneficial to all of us, pray tell?"

Arya remained still.

Silence in that gallery was ruptured by the sonance of a statue exploding to fine smithereens.

The statue was that of a naked boy at the center of the fount situated outside the open gallery by the manse's patio. Upon the statue's hands was a vessel where water cascaded—or used to cascade, now that the sculpture was in fragments. The impact from the water's sheer force which Arya Stark had expertly commanded through mere intellective faculties fragmentized the once solid gypsum vessel that contained it.

If her purpose was to intimidate him of the powers she now has absolute control over, she had failed.

Jaqen was far from threatened. He exhaled, very, very pleased. His pleasure was further heightened by colossal waves that had suddenly formed in the Narrow.

"If you have any sense at all, Rhoynar, you will stop this nonsense," Jaqen warned her.

Arya shook her head, hurled a vicious stare towards the man. "You have neither the power nor the right to carry out any dictates, Valyrian."

"Ah," the one called Valyrian chuckled. "Such insolence—renaming a man ḫāqaṇ Haegār then stripping him off of the name merely because her imbecilic schemes have been discovered, her unmindful acts of exposing herself to the straight sight of foes." He clicked his tongue. "Very well, a foreshadowing, a few drops of what you will be facing should you keep on acting irrationally in the face of threats—seems like you have forgotten the sweet days of torment."

At this, Jaqen H'ghar drew out his draconian chain of rune, flung it upwards with velocious force.

It descended straight to his hands, now a pair of iron shackles transformed, with metal links connecting them both; and those fetters emitted an erubescent hue—the very hue those gray irises of her, along with her entirety, had always feared in unfathomable levels.
Rain fire!

Breath of chaos, Valyrians! Kill! Kill!

Trepidation the likes of which she never knew any heart could contain engulfed her. Emancipation—and there were but a few recourses.

She closed her eyes, summoned her gifts from the elder gods.

Iluvátar ingóle.

God-rune.

The waters from the sea rushed to her aid in a state of flux, as if under the influence of some higher enchantment. Torrents rose as high as half a manse, communed once more with the seas in a sudden downsurge, partially flooding a large fraction of the shore, including Illyrio’s garden of cherries, the tiled courtyard. The fount at the center was filled asudden with saltwater, and if the manse had not been in a place of higher ground, then the deluge may have reached the lower tier as well.

All these transpired without a single word escaping from Arya Stark's lips.

And now, it had invaded the pillared gallery where they both stood, with the horizontal rush knocking over sculptures from their pedestals in all violence, shattering the glass that preserved works of art conceived since the antiquities of Pentos, disgracing the chamber's immaculateness. Those torrents left cracks on the walls and pilasters. The surge overwhelmed Jaqen, but he stood his ground even as he was being gorged by wrath in each second. It was a whole alluvion—the rivers of Rhoynе mocking him and his kin, a bitter reminder of the Second Spice War, as the waters carried on with whelming and suffocating them both.

"Damn it, Arya," he spoke through clenched teeth, coughed, as he fought against the forceful inundation. He dragged his feet towards her, his wholeness soused and his lungs drowning as they fought against the currents. "Damn it, you will pay dearly for this!"

He battled against the animated force that enveloped him, moved both arms to cast his own rune and propel those Valyrian shackles towards the captive whose flowing scarlet they sought. With an emphatic throw, those manacles flew straight towards the bold one.

"Letagon!"

Bind!

Both cuffs closed in on both of her wrists.

"Jaqen H'ghaaar!" Arya screamed in anger. "Revoke this rune this instant!"

Jaqen only smirked, as he watched Arya being dragged backwards by those enchanted shackles towards the far end of that gallery, the soles of her feet brushing against the flooded stone floor.

Her spine hit the solid wall lightly. The manacles have attached themselves against that wall, and both of her arms were half-splayed. She could struggle and lose all her strength in the process should she desire so, however she knew that evasion is a thing impossible unless she can countermand the rune.

A different approach, then.
Soft laughter—provocative. The Lorathi is weak, so is the Valyrian. The weakness: Åria Stārke, Åria hen Rhoyne. There was no demarcation between these. Not two selves, but one. A come-hither phrase from her precious mouth, and Jaqen H'ghar will start crawling to her and kissing her feet, worshipping her for the naiad that she is.

She shifted her position though she was bound—suggestive, sexy. "Release me, lover," Arya's tone was melodious, silk against fine grains of sand. "Come now, handsome. Play fair."

All of a sudden, he disappeared; and materialized a second later right in front of her, his hot breath against the wet skin of her neck. His hands were against the wall, as his arms confined her and limited her spaces east and west.

Boundaries between them have shattered completely.

"Ah!" Jaqen exclaimed. His countenance was all flushed because of unexpected arousal—one that the girl had absolutely no real intentions of causing. "Rhoynish water enchantment—most amusing. Are we going to relive the battle now of all nights, Warrior Bride?" Jaqen drew himself closer to her, and their bodies touched. He pulled her the closest to him, bent over and kissed the side of her lips. "May a man remind you that as was writ in wiped out pages of history, you will only lose?"

Languidly, his scorching mouth traveled to the length of her neck. Soft, feathery kisses intensified as he began tasting her, nipping at her porcelain skin. His tongue left damp trails all over her collarbone; and the Lorathi was moaning, as if it was he who was being kissed all over by the girl. He cursed under his hot breath upon hearing the surge of the sea that was within their reach—almost. Jaqen felt Arya quivering against him, and with the forged connection between her and water in all its forms—her divine gift, her enkindled state caused by the caresses of his lips will no doubt be embodied by the water's animations. He was provoking her sexually, and so the waves cannot remain calm at all. All emotions, innermost and extreme, will act as dictators of the sea's state—rage and bliss and bereavement and feelings of eroticism.

"Arya…you're driving me so crazy…"

The shackles' strand teeth clicked open, the iron fell to the ground with a metallic jangle. Jaqen's hands replaced the cuffs and owned both of her wrists, his thumbs lovingly caressing the soft dents upon her skin no doubt caused by his impermanent binding of her.

Her intermittent exhalations resonated decibels in his chamber, as she began breathing through her wet mouth.

"My decision is steadfast, Jaqen," she had managed to say. "Only an enduring alliance with Aegon the Sixth will minimize the catastrophe to a degree higher than what we are expecting. Don't put yourself out there, I forbid it. If you do, I will be forced to drown that firebeast of yours when I see him."

He dragged her to one corner, lifted her asudden to sit on one wooden escritoire. A hung frame bearing an ornate oil painting fell on the floor. He tilted his head, stared at her with mad lust. "You are never contented with your collection of men. You've had a handful—a Lorathi assassin, a Braavosi Sealord," his right hand reached inside her breeches, and his fingers masterfully fondled her sex. He felt her innocence responding to his erotic touches, and so he crushed his lips against hers, spoke whilst he robbed her of wind. "And now, a Westerosi Prince."

"Jaqen…"

"Yes, please…" the Lorathi hastened his loving strokes. "Tell Jaqen that you desire him most of the
He laughed quietly in response. "You have been concealing a lot from me, woman. Since when have you been playing host to those departed spirits with that Prince? Who's the source of all these delusions of yours?" His palm cupped her underneath, and rubbed her in a manner almost raving and out of control. "So wet, the Lorathi thought, mere seconds, and this drenched already. "In your reveries, you utter that name without fail—'Rhaegar, beloved.' You have learned naught about spirits and their choice of empty carapaces? They are relentless. If those spirits got exhausted of their sojourns and inhabited your frail bodies for good, how will you reenter your own shells?" He smothered her lips. "Impetuous girl...you're squandering your capacities."

"T-the dreams, the hosting was arranged," Arya responded, though not without struggling. "Someone from...from the Order..." The Lorathi was overindulging himself with her lips, forcing her to open for him though wordlessly. His tongue had shamelessly invited itself inside her berry mouth, and his fragrance overwhelmed her in incessant heights. In the midst of hot-blooded kisses that stirred her much, she knew how profound the rage and manly urges were that consumed him little by little. "I will die tonight...the Lorathi was drowning her unnecessarily with his plundering.

"Qogralbar!" Jaqen cursed in High Valyrian. In overtones of obsessive love and loathing, he romanced her still, yet punished her too, with his utterances against her mouth. "Ao yknagon hen tolie vala, qrugh!"

You smell of another man, damn it!

In her many moons of training, Arya knew that Jaqen uses certain tongues for various intents and purposes—Common tongue for conversing with her in days ordinary, Braavosi during combat rehearsal, Lorathi and Essoan for whenever he felt like blandishing her with his usual seductions.

In her precise reminiscences, he had last used High Valyrian with her when she had murdered Dareon, a deserter of the Wall, outside the Order's directives.

High Valyrian is his tongue of authority—a system full of lexicon and significs on how no one must question his earned rank in the Order's stratum. He speaks in the language of dragons only when he needed to assert his unequivocal prerogatives as one Master.

Master. Lord. Slaver. All the same.

Savagery had engorged him.

His wanton kisses roughly scraped the skin of her neck, his coarse stubble delighted her, tormented her in simultaneous thrill and agony. He reached the collar of her buttoned tunic, and he so desired to get her stark naked that he started ferociously pulling the collar with his bare teeth. Not enough, the Lorathi thought, Never. In a swift, urgent maneuver, he yanked the tunic's front with his left hand, as his right stroked her on and on, recklessness bespoken through his every pleasing motion. Arya gasped at the force of the pull—the fabric's stretch had strained her skin. She threw her head back at the impact of his strokes that had sent her haywire.

Jaqen!

Sonances of her enraptured whimpers and his lustful moans merged with one another, as they both released their egos, willed themselves to move in consonance with their vibrating energies. Their mortal bodies were dispossessed by want that whelmed them both...
Words that came out from his lips were intimacies, concupiscence. Arya blushed despite herself, his utterances were consummately lecherous!

_Gevie, qogrenka, ao sagon verdagon nyke iōragon bē…_

_Beautiful, sexy, you're making me so, so hard…_

His hot mouth covered her breasts. For moments, he lingered there, then ran his tongue across every inch of snowy chest skin, as if hell-bent of cleansing her, purging her of Aegon the Sixth's regal fragrances of rare jewels and vanilla. These are not the scent of him—Arya Stark must smell only of snow, ginger, cloves.

_Bathe her with Lorathi essence…stifle her pleased groans with Lorathi kisses…fill her with Lorathi froth—satisfy her with all things Lorathi so she looks nowhere else._

"Jaqen…oh, gods!" Arya ran her fingers through his hair, tugged at a fistful of it. "Rest a little, please…" His strokes only intensified, smashing her own resolve mercilessly. "Jaqen…we cannot talk like this…"

Her next action was driven by instinct, and there was no intention to offend the Lorathi. She felt defenseless as he touched her core—sensations were now almost akin to glorious dissolution and she was being drawn to his canyons of pure wantonness, of sensual greed. _Magnetite—this is Jaqen H'ghar._ She closed her legs and trapped his hand to restrain his movements. There are many truths encompassing her Lorathi, but one of the greatest is this—he is insatiable, unsatisfiable. One of these days she might lovingly succumb to his voracities, and it might be that in her acquiescence, he will waste no breathing second claiming her over and again.

_A Valyrian trait—pillage and leave none._

"Arya Stark…" Jaqen H'ghar had lifted his face from her bosoms. His stare was starved, ominous. He tried parting her legs, she resisted. "Ivestragi nyke isse."

_Open your legs._

_Let me in._

She looked back at him with the same hell. "Keligon ziry, se ivestragi īlva īydragon…"

_Stop this now, and let us talk._

Without haste, he licked the side of her lips, spoke in a dammably seductive undertone. "_Pihtenkave, ūha jorrāelagon, kostilus…_" He lifted her asudden against the wall and the girl gasped a little too audibly; and by reflex, her legs enwrapped themselves around his frame. _Obedience, my love, please…_ Both hands traveled to his shoulders, nails buried themselves deep in his shift's fabric. She was slowly being reduced to bits and pieces by him, and it frightened her as much as it sent her spellbound. Nothing has changed—she still desired him in levels unfathomable, and the depth of her want had become an enslaving phantom haunting her even in her waking hours. Enlightened men would query of things echoing sagacity and learnedness—is magic vile? Will the existence of firebeasts in this realm be justified by the manner by which their lords use them? Is death real?

Damn these pretentious inquiries! In the midst of the Lorathi's addicting kisses on her jaw, there was only one question in Arya Stark's mind, and if it remained unanswered tonight, she might kill herself with her own Qohorik-forged daggers:

_How would it feel to be loved fully by Jaqen H'ghar?_
His sweet whispers fleeted in her ears, dwelled within her comprehensions. "Kosti ŷdragon se emagon qogror rŷ keskydoso jêda." Once more, he ravaged her lips. She felt her breeches being pulled from her legs and thrown recklessly on the floor. He pressed his firm manliness against her gossamer smallclothes, stroked himself against her, north to south, this hemisphere to that. Lightning shocks, conflagarations, charged forces within and without—all these devoured her.

We can talk and make love at the same time.

"Oh, Jaqen…" Arya moaned. "The matter with Aegon…" Jaqen exhaled against her mouth and she drew in the hot wind of his scenty breath. "It was all subliminal conditioning…" Their respirations had gone thoroughly erratic, their groaning voices that engulfed the stillness of that chamber—husky, sexy-rough. "Jaqen…please…"

"You're Faceless, you can do this," the Lorathi muttered. "Speak."

"You're chastising me…"

"Very good, Arya."

"I-I have no fault in all these, save for my simple want of being assured of your safety." She tried to set her feet down, break away from him. He held her firm against that heavily-draped wall. Jaqen's entire body was one slaver's chain that restrained her. Struggles, curses. He pushed her, ensnared her between his sinewy frame and the hard wall against her back.

"You phenomenal teller of tales. You've been caught, and still you are unwavering with your lies and denial. It's a wonder the red god had not burned your tongue yet. Falsehoods have replaced the flesh of it."

"I cannot force belief upon another, especially upon you. So what would it be now?!"

"A taste of what you'll be missing, should you decide to share the marriage bed with that damnable Prince."

He buried his face in her neck, ravished it, as he carried on with his serpentine movements against her. Despite her most vehement objections, the woman in her responded—reveled at his romancing, begged silently for gestures and pleasures, to be conquered and despoiled, to be used and misused.

"Hah!" she sharply drew air in as she felt him against the nub of her. A taste…a taste too good. What is this gift that seemed to be far greater than Death?

Arya Stark had realized much. If there was one great thing which the gods have taught men they bore, it is that loving intercourse is a deed of faith. It is one of those rare deeds that allow men to nullify separation and build connections through merging of bodies and spirits, thoughts and encounters.

However, the line dividing punishing and pleasuring is mere illusion to a lover who thinks himself betrayed by the other. Roots of all righteous considerations will be bypassed—should Jaqen decide to have her, he will prevail over walls and surmount strongholds that had kept her sinlessness guarded. In an ideal realm, there might be love to it; in a realistic one, there might not be. If she is not too careful, his every kiss and caress may forever take pieces of her self.

All cares were thrown aside. If one must surrender, then one must surrender fully.

"Iksan māzis isse, Āria, rūs…" His voice was more of a primal groan—raw breath from someone deprived for so long, and the fullness of the sound bade those Valyrian words to converge and
escalate their passionate indecencies.

*I'm coming in, Arya, baby…*

Arya gasped as the suddenness of it all—her smallclothes were efficiently ripped from her lower body by the Lorathi's able hands.

And perchance he had decided: tonight will be the whimsical night of sexual congress.

Gently, he allowed two fingers in and out of her beautiful depth in poetic rhythms—artistic measures and accents, as his thumb massaged her innocence like a symphonious canticle, mating with the resonance of his name upon her lips…

Her walls were taut, and the Lorathi's fondling was foreign to her, like first flame consuming thresholds upon thresholds of secrets. He chuckled quietly as the girl's eyes widened—he had buried both fingers deep in her, and let them linger there. It was warm and painful, rapturous nevertheless. He moved inside her once more, sweet and in slow progressions, hastening…hastening…

"Jaqen…!"

Her head was thrown aback, her legs tightened themselves around his waist. Arya buried her fingernails in Jaqen's scalp; oh, this is far from an escapist's fantasy constructed merely by her mind inspired by all things erotic. Yes, the Lorathi had enthused her in various ways, since their first meeting on the way to Harrenhal when he seemed to seduce her—speaking of his thirst, of how he had been so parched for a day and a night, of how the two of them can be 'friends'. She had been a child then, but that did not stop him from visiting her in Weese's chamber and kissing her hair, rubbing her lips with his thumb, breathing forcefully as if she was his source of wind, as if she had mercilessly denied him of it.

Or perhaps the attraction stemmed from the seed of their prior cycles, and from West of Westeros where in another sphere, they were madly in love.

*Boy. Girl. Woman.*

*Wife. Mother.*

*Arya.*

He proceeded moving in and out of her; her wetness clinging to his fingers, aiding him generously in his craftsmanship. And in his every finger-thrust that would go more forceful and urgent by the second, he would moan. "Ah…ah…ah…"—as if he was the one being pleasured by her.

She closed her eyes and inhaled sharply, as velveteen, gratified whimpers escaped from her throat. This is the lowest yet the highest of all desires, and she must relish each second of it, for each moment is unrepeatable.

Jaqen's left hand viciously pulled her locks of chestnut. "Laesi." He smothered her lips.

*Eyes.*

Arya shut her eyes tighter, shook her head. How can he even demand this? Cruelty—when he knew that the only damned thing he would see in her eyes is her utter yearning for him, and her obscene need for all that he is. Cruelty—to watch her dishonor herself helplessly in front of him.

He was insistent. He spoke against her open mouth.
"Jurnegon rỳ aōha vala, Jaesa." His thumb lovingly rubbed her core, as his fingers stirred her ardently, wantonly from the inside. "Hae ziry mazverdagon ao biare..."

A clear command. Obey or die.

**Look at your man, Goddess.**

**Look at your man as he indulges you.**

In between raspy breaths of fits and starts, she opened her eyes and beheld his face—eloquent yet delirious, affectionate yet lewd. She bit her lip, prayed for it to bleed profusely. On and on, and despite her thoroughly flushed face, she uttered his name in breathlessness as their gazes locked.

"Jaqen...Jaqen..."

"Jaqen...Jaqen..." the Lorathi mocked her, imitated her every amorous parlance. His stare at her was powerful and unyielding. He was aware of how he had weakened her, shattered her resolve, and he's now basking in the glory of her total dependence on him. "Oh, yes...Jaqen, don't stop, Jaqen...oh, you're so good with this, Jaqen..." His sneering lips continued to parrot her. Soft chuckles absconded from his lips as he buried his fingers deeper within her. Strokes quickened, like wildfire consuming dry grass.

Faster...faster...

As if life is a chase.

Harder...

Her inner walls trembled, so did the entirety of her...


Delirium.

Her moans were hoarse and gravelly yet high-pitched, otherworldly.

"Iāqaen Haegār! Dōna qogrur Jaes!"

Jaqen laughed luxuriously at her pronouncements—one revelation of his many natures. His laughter imprinted itself on the chamber's walls, merged perfectly with each particle of air, saturated every small shred of self Arya Stark still had in her. The Lorathi carried her, laid her gently on one velveteen settee, kissed her deep.

**Jaqen H'ghar! Sweet sex god!**

It was beautifully novel, a thing unexplored. And for a girl who had known nothing but swords and scarlet, precise methods and rigorous systems of codes and faiths on Death, the powerlessness she had felt under Jaqen's ministrations terrified her. Never in her life had she felt so, so defenseless and vulnerable; and though it was only for a mere twelve seconds, it felt like being subjected to sadistic destructiveness. Indeed, it had destroyed her, yet it had formed her too, only in a different way.

Jaqen had possessed her completely though not fully. And it may be that this possession had uncompromisingly buried its claws within her very person. She cannot escape now, and he will have full control—over her thoughts, decisions, will, purposes.

**A Valyrian trait—conquer to the last shred. Death too, with its arrogant acts of taking away**
everything.

His previous words visited her recollections.

And your want for it would be so much more than your want for life. In your every waking second you will beg a man for it...

Arya buried her face against Jaqen's nightshirt, sobbed quietly.

"I hate you."

Jaqen smiled softly, kissed her hair. "I know, Arya. You hate me because you need me."

"Damn you, Jaqen." she whispered.

"Damn me, yes," the Lorathi replied. He held her closer. "Damn me, because you have never needed anyone this much in your life. Damn me for making you realize that."

The Lorathi had used romance to punish her. There are things she must learn, and only in the most painful way can these things really ingrain themselves within.

Old love in countless forms and times, infinite meetings and farewells, souls that renew and renew.

She didn't want to need him, for needing means admitting to weakness, to the inevitability of completing what is incomplete. Needing him means not being able to live on her own, ever. Curious, for Arya Stark wasn't like that before she had met Jaqen H'ghar.

Yet needing him cannot be helped, it is as natural as breathing dire air.

"The Elder, Jaqen…" Arya's voice was broken.

He cupped her cheek, looked at her softly. "And?"

"He's planting dream seeds between me and Aegon the Sixth."

She woke up without Jaqen by her side.

The glass door leading to the balcony was slightly ajar, and morn winds toyed delicately with the almost transparent curtains. The seas had calmed. Sun's rays slightly pervaded the chamber, bathing it with hues of soft orange. Outside, the same rays danced with the quiet, prismatic waters. The trace of the firebeast that had been summoned the night prior had faded; and the large tides that had relentlessly invaded the manse's garden, an aftermath of the night's altercation with the Lorathi, had returned to the sea's precise turf.

Some birds of Pentos sang their usual lilt.

Arya sat up, rubbed her eyes, surveyed herself. She was in Jaqen's bedchamber now, wearing one of his shirts and a fresh set of smallclothes. Her previous set of clothing had been torn by him during their intimate exchange last night; perhaps he had changed her garments while she was asleep. The girl blushed at the thought. She would have felt his hands against her bare skin, but he's Faceless and so he can move in a manner close to unnoticeable. Seems to her that everything had been a wonderful yet melancholic dream...

Did we make love last night?
The girl surveyed the bedlinen—immaculate. She ran a finger through her slit, looked for traces of maiden's blood. She gazed at it afterwards.

Nothing.

A desolate sigh.

By the bedside table, a single-stemmed blue winter rose lay and with it, a note in Jaqen's handwriting.

'īlē rōvēgrie mōrī bantis, jorrāelagon.'

You were wonderful last night, love.

Where had he gone? She dashed to her bedchamber, retrieved a decent set of raiments, and dressed up. The manse's corridors were curiously quiet, save for some hushed conversations from maidservants about affairs of the day that must be set in order. A tide from the Narrow Sea had laid partial waste on the manse's lower tier the night prior--Moon's force was strongest, and so the gallery must be cleaned and the gardens, kept. An inventory of arts and sculptures destroyed was now being carried out. Curious, for the surge seemed to affect only the manse by the city's axis, no other damages were reported. Arya walked past Illyrio's grand hall, but was stopped by one manservant standing by the double doors.

"Prince Aegon awaits you at the pavilion for the breaking of your fast, m'lady."

The girl exhaled impatiently through her mouth. After the fanciful, capricious night she had shared with the Lorathi, she had realized how she does not wish to see any other man but him.

Courtesies, matters of diplomacy. There is a war that must be won.

"I will see him there, thank you."

Finding the pavilion was easy since a tiled walkway from the courtyard would directly lead one to it. Arya followed the path, ran her fingers through floras of aster and delphinium that adorned either side of the colonnade. She picked an aster from the bush. Maiden’s play—pretending that flowers hold all the answers concerning the deep-seated emotions of one beloved.

"What would it be, Jaqen H’ghar?" Arya Stark whispered to herself. She began plucking the petals one by one.

Love.

Lust.

She let the petals fall to the ground. She stepped on them as she walked.

Love.

Lust.

Arya Stark laughed. Folly, yet she needed the diversion.

Love.

Lust.
The pavilion was in sight, she took hasty steps, realizing how starved she was the whole time. Scents of lemon cakes, cheese, warm tea…

*Love.*

Aegon the Sixth stood with his back to her, eyes on the small pond that was at the colonnade's left end. The garments he donned were as plain as the ones he was wearing last night. As if sensing her presence, he turned, smiled disarmingly.

Arya Stark looked down at the aster she was still holding.

A single petal.

With a heavy sigh, she crushed what remained of the flower and without reluctance, allowed it to leave her hand.

Aegon walked towards her. "Apologies for the burdensome night."

Arya shrugged. "It wasn't your fault," she shook her left hand to get rid of the crushed petals that still remained in her palm. "It wasn't just your fault."

He motioned for them to proceed to the covered pavilion. "Have you been long-acquainted with the Lorathi?"

Arya smirked. *For ten centuries, and not merely acquainted.* Instead, she chose a different response. "Long enough." Aegon pulled a chair for her to sit on, and for a second there, Arya was surprised with the gesture. She took a seat. "Where are they anyway? The emissaries?"

"With the Prince of Pentos, overseeing the departure of legates from Tyrosh and Lys. They will be back any time now," Aegon replied, seating himself in front of her. He handed her a plate of sliced manchets. With bare hands, she took two slices, spread on them scant melted cheese, and ate without reservations. The Prince leaned back, contented himself with watching her dine. "The Lorathi likes you a lot."

Arya snorted. "You think so?"

"I know so." Aegon smiled, pleasantly occupied. "I have known danger all my life, Lady Arya. Evading real threats had been as ordinary as an eye-blink for me. I was young then, never quite understood the duty I must perform on my dead father's behalf, for the sake of the slowly crumbling Seven Kingdoms. I was unlearned on matters of politics and war, of the heirship of dragonspawn, of one surviving Targaryen kin—two, perchance. Now, I can daresay I am prepared to face all things necessary for the success of this conquest." He leaned against the table, caught Arya's eye. "I've known peril; became wiser due to it. And I know that we are not being completely honest with each other, especially as regards this Jaqen H'ghar."

The girl attempted her best to act and appear undaunted, though at the back of her mind, she has already cursed the Lorathi a hundred times for placing himself in this situation. "What do you want me to say, Aegon? That I find you more engaging than him and I find him more attractive than you?" She took a sip of tea, gaze locked upon Aegon's face. "How honest do you think must we be with each other? In the real sense, we only met five, six days ago."

This time, there was no hint of pleasantry upon the Prince's countenance. His face was blank, as he spoke in a tone ambiguous. "He is a great tactician, Lady Arya. You heard him speak during the gathering of emissaries, and surely you might have noticed something unusual about his propositions to warfare."
"Braavosi are excellent strategists in matters of warfare, Aegon," Arya countered. "It is known."

"Indeed," Aegon answered. "But not in matters of aerial warfare."

She held her lungs hostage, and since the Prince was astute, he noticed the slight change in her respirations. He remained still, allowed her to process the true message behind his insinuations. A brilliant, sarcastic response should do it—his thoughts must be deflected.

"Ah, I know! Perhaps, he is one noble masquerading as a Braavosi consul. His House has the great predator hawk as sigil. He rode giant birds, hence, the aerial tactics. We should ask him, we could use great hawks for battle—"

"With forty dragonlord families competing against each other for positions of power, we could only imagine the holy mess the Freehold had to witness for centuries," Aegon interrupted her sardonic responses, assumed his usual teller's air. "There is the ruling family from where the domain's first archon would be selected. Although ascendancy is similar to how kings pass the throne to their heirs, in Valyria, the claimant of first archonship must prove himself worthy to rule. Going through a storm's needle-eye, they called it."

Arya popped some wildberries into her mouth in a manner nonchalant, feigning indifference although in truth, she was dying to hear Aegon's narrations. "And how must the first archon claimant prove his worth?"

At her question, Aegon's lip tipped up. "Through a grand clash of firebeasts—Dance of the Dragons. And yes, that is from where the war of succession between Aegon II and Rhaenyra derived its name. Before the Doom, two families were in constant battle for the rulership of Valyria—Archestrad, Esdraelon. Workings were most riveting—the claimants of both houses must form a small squadron of seven dragonriders each, and proceed with aerial combat in neutral ground. Dragons against dragons, and the claimant whose squadron has the more number of survivors at the end of battle—riders and firebeasts both—will be named first archon's heir. Rulership will be till his last breath. This might intrigue you, Lady Arya, considering that he was the subject of our discussions three nights ago."

Arya heaved a sigh. Fluttering wings were suddenly within her belly, still she could not help but ask. "Intrigue me?"

"For centuries, archonship had remained with the Esdraelon's heirs and assigns—it was a whole dynasty with them," Aegon said, narrowing his eyes in close assessment of her reaction. "That is how strong that clan is."

That is how strong Jaqen's clan is.

Arya bit her lower lip, struggled to contain the thrill, the growing affection and worriment for Jaqen H'ghar—a lover, a gifted dragonrider, what more?

Aegon just stared at her in continued assay. "Haresh Esdraelon has defeated Aurion Archestrad in a series of battles. Had he not been executed for his traitorous acts, as Valyrian laws would so dictate, he would have assumed rulership as first archon."

Grace from the gods that he did not. He must not.

"And whence you obtained this knowledge?"

"Through Halfmaester Haldon, my instructor," Aegon replied. "You will be surprised at the collection of lost books Archmaester Marwyn has; fortunate, that he is a close friend of Haldon's. His
Book of Lost Books contains Daenys's visions about the Doom of Valyria. There were other pages too, ones unkept in the Citadel. Pages about Valyrian histories, epicycles, and prophecies on the warring gods.

"Very good," Arya answered in a flat tone, despite the last information that had bothered her asudden. "Seems like you have obtained the loyalty of some Citadel Maesters, might be useful in the conquest. Still," she leaned back, returned Aegon's hard stare. "I do not understand how all these point to the Lorathi."

"Offensive split."

"I beg your pardon?"

"A dragonrider's strategy—he mentioned it to me in the gathering."

"So?" Arya scoffed, showing open irritation now. "He's just pretending. He knows naught! You saw how very full he is of himself—"

"I have never ridden firebeasts for purposes of battle, Arya," Aegon said in clenched teeth, and he was now as irritated as she was. "But I do know of these tactics; I was born from dragons after all. Be wise and listen to me, these are Jaqen's own words. In combat involving firebeasts, there is the first rider—the lead, and the second rider—the wingman. They fly simultaneously; the lead will perform offense and the wingman will do defense. The aim is to overthrow the opponent's first rider, inflict harm on his firebeast; and to do this, they have to create flight diversion so that the enemy's lead and wingman may be forced to separate from each other. If the riders managed to separate the other two, the enemy's lead becomes vulnerable to attack, since his wingman will have to digress from him to avoid another possible attack. The enemies will go off on a tangent, and the two riders can now pursue the enemy's lead who's exposed and undefended. It will be two firebeasts against one, and greater numbers always wins. How can an ordinary Braavosi-Lorathi know of these things, pray tell?"

Arya forcefully replaced her teacup on the table, stood abruptly. Water spilled from a small decanter, wetting the linen. "Are we done here?" She gritted her teeth. "I'm getting exhausted of you boys playing around like this, scheming behind the curtains to gain my trust and to make me lose my faith on the other. If the two of you merely desire a most entertaining skirmish like street urchins, then say it now, so we can forget about all alliances with the Free Cities and I can go back to Winterfell."

She had started walking away when Aegon caught her wrist gently, and the lack of force, the touch that seemed to carry some sort of plea that she stays, made her face him once more.

"I told you all these not because I wish to break your faith in Jaqen H'ghar, Arya," the Prince explained calmly. He held both of her wrists now, and pulled her gently to him. "Need I say again, that I find you wise enough to know who to trust and who to distrust. It's all verily your choice though of course, I worry for you." His eyes darted to the pavilion's arched ceiling, as if in contemplation. "But his vast knowledge about dragonspawns, the bond, and now, dragonriding tactics! Arya..." he turned his attention back to her. "He might be a valuable asset."

No! her innermost protested. Arya broke away from Aegon's grasp. "Your three dragons cannot do it?"

The Prince grinned, seemingly amused at her naivete. "We're speaking of Valyrian warlords here, Arya."

"There's Daenerys," she replied, bent on persuading him to leave Jaqen H'ghar out of the plans.
"You've mentioned that the Lannister is a persuasive one. If he indeed is, he could convince her to ride with us. I can skinchange. I have warged into direwolves before, into a human. Yes, Aegon," the Prince was shocked, and so she placed emphasis upon her words by nodding at him, "Yes, I had to warg into a human to save myself and two others from clear demise. Firebeasts should be easy; warging into dragonlords might be an undertaking too great, not entirely impossible though."

He raised his brows. "Why this overly protective attitude towards Jaqen H'ghar?"

The Reversal of the Diaspora.

The Kindly Man had mentioned Daenys Targaryen's own handwriting, Signs and Portents. Not only was she gifted with prophetic visions about the Doom, she has had visions about Valyria's kith and kin actually escaping from the same Doom along with the Targaryens. The cataclysm four centuries ago had caused death and painful exodus, but time will come when the Freehold will restore itself through her surviving scions, exact vengeance upon slaves whose thaumaturgies led to the upheaval of the Fourteen Flames.

Indeed, time has come.

Jaqen H'ghar must not capitulate to this, consciously or otherwise.

"We're Westerosi, Aegon. He's not. We know nothing of his actual intents," Arya lied. "As of now, we must trust no one but ourselves. Should we put blind faith on people whose motivations are concealed from us, repercussions might be irreversible. We will heed his views on matters of warfare, we weigh the soundness of these. But that's it."

Aegon exhaled, nodded. "Very well, Warrior Queen." He said, pinching her chin. She scowled, though it was a good-humored tease. He only grinned in response to her grimace. "All surmises and plans of yours will be taken in each decision. Which reminds me of the purpose of this entire morning's repast."

He proceeded to the pavilion's far corner where a coffer of arm's length lay. Her gaze followed his movements—he knelt, opened the chest, and retrieved something from it.

A sword.

Except that when he took it out from its sheath, it was not just a sword.

Arya Stark gasped aloud in stupefaction.

All thoughts led her back to Harrenhal. Tywin Lannister had asked her about tales of conquest, and she had mentioned this very sword to him, and its wielder. "Visenya Targaryen was a great warrior," she had told the Lion. "Dark, passionate. She rode her dragon, Vhagar to each battle and made the Dornish suffer for the death of her sister, Rhaenys." All these bits of knowledge of Arya about the canons on Aegon I led Tywin Lannister to the conclusion that she is one high-born.

After the Rebellion, it was safekept in the ruins of Summerhall, retrieved by Aegor Rivers along with another hand-and-a-half Targaryen longsword. Staring at that sword that Aegon the Sixth held was like meeting Visenya, the Warrior Queen, face to face. The sword's grip and slender Valyrian blade were forged for a woman's hand; its pommel and swordguard bore the ornate design of gleaming dragonflame. Upon its quillon block is an encrusted ruby, and its rich scarlet color frolicked with the rays of morn—an illusion, remarkable nevertheless.

The steel seemed to glint.
She shook her head in disbelief, as Aegon the Sixth knelt on one knee in front of her, sword in hand. Its tip touched the marmoreal ground, and she laughed when the Prince rolled his eyes at her childish anticipation. "Yes, you will have your playsword, just you wait," he teased. "Formalities first, Arya."

With both hands, she tugged a fistful of her hair in excitement. "Be quick about it!"

Aegon sighed at her show of impatience, stayed in that kneeling position without breathing a single word. He merely observed her reactions, then smiled irresistibly. Arya groaned.

"You!" She grabbed him on both shoulders, shook him. He laughed. "You are sweet, sweet torment! I'm going to kill you and steal that sword! Utter those words now!"

"And here, I thought the Starks are honorable," he bantered. "Had I known—"

"Aegon the Sixth Targaryen!" Arya shouted, tightening the grip on both of his shoulders. In a manner half-serious, she tugged at his sleek silver locks. "Stop being such an arse!"

The Prince laughed with so much sprightliness at the girl, and surprised himself too, for never had he heard himself producing those sounds of mirth before. "Heartless!" he continued to tease her. "I kneel before you and offer you an ancestral sword. What do I obtain in return? A vicious pull on my hair and profanities in my name!"

Arya knelt in front of him, held out both hands as if to touch the sword with her palms. Fingers quivered as they felt the steel's nearness. Such force...this sword carved history itself. She whimpered in excitation, as her hands formed tight fists—she couldn't touch the blade even with her fingertips, for she was sure it would burst into magnificent fragments if she did. Any girl's lofty dream. "Please, please, please," she whispered, bit her knuckles, and her eyes were like those of a pleading child that the beauty of it broke Aegon's heart to pieces.

A fine work of fiction, the Prince uttered to himself. Wanderess—knows nothing about rules and bounds. Goes weak in the knees over swords. Perfect, too perfect.

He tilted his head to gaze at her more. "You're so lovely."

"Aegon!"

"What?"

"Oh, gods!"

"Fine, fine," he finally conceded. Aegon the Sixth spoke the words of bequeathment in his low genuflection—as an esteemed heirloom was turned over from one great house to another. With this, an alliance will be strengthened, an unbreakable friendship. "I, Aegon of House Targaryen, Sixth of his Name, bequeath to you, Arya of House Stark, this ancestral longsword wielded by the blood of dragon conquerors—a mark of our Houses' accord, for the realms and for all things honorable. Dark Sister is yours."

She tried to contain the sound of enthused screams.

"And I Arya of House Stark express my concurrence and my gratitude and accept your bequeathment," she replied without the slightest pause. "Give it here," she exhaled, and grabbed the sword's grip from him. She rose, balanced the sword through its chappe. It was impeccable. "Oh, oh!" were her delighted exclamations.
The girl held up the sword, surveyed it with fascination from pommel to point. Its haft fit perfectly in her fingers that wrapped themselves carefully around it, and she felt the grip's warmth, as if the steel's energy coalesced as sudden with her own. Her scarlet may have imbued in the steel some form of life, for she felt oneness with it, an undeniable synergy. Words of Syrio Forel rang in her already overwhelmed ruminations: "Boy, girl, you are a sword. That is all."

"Yes, I am a sword," Arya said. "I am the Dark Sister."

She ran to the colonnade, wielded the sword in graceful gyrating motions—men are made of water, and water dances. The heart lies and the head plays tricks with us. The sword's fuller gleamed as its silver hue collided with daylight. Look with your eyes. She listened to the slashing sound it made as it sliced through air, docile to her silent commands. Hear with your ears. There was the wind that sent damp kisses on the pores of her sword arm. Feel with your skin.

Then comes thinking afterwards, and in that way, knowing the truth.

Aegon the Sixth followed Arya Stark's movements with eyes enthralled.

"Look Aegon!" She threw the sword in the air, sent it in spinning motions. Arya caught it by its grip with her left sword arm, maneuvered the steel in labyrinthine sways and streams. "Dark Sister likes me."

"Impressive!" the Prince remarked with geniality. He proceeded once more to the coffer by the corner.

Arya carried on with her sword exhibitions. "This is a most perfect gift, my Prince," she said. "If only Dark Sister could clash its steel against Aegon I's sword, that would be epic!"

"Did you say something?" Aegon asked when he turned his attention back to her.

Already in his hand was that other ancestral sword, one with a pommel of scarlet sapphire and a crossguard of two dragonheads on both quillons. Its grandiose Valyrian steel carried elaborate, abstract engravings.

Blackfyre.

Aegon began wielding the sword in rhythmic motions, and having witnessed Faceless Masters handle steel in her many moons of training, she had to admit to herself that the Prince certainly knows how to use his blade.

"You!" Arya Stark began, beaming. "You have both Targaryen swords!"

"Inaccurate," Aegon replied. He walked closer to her, as he carried on with his demonstrations. "You have the other one now."

Arya laughed. "This only means one thing, Aegon!"

"Duel with you?" the Prince grinned.

Arya Stark shook her head.

"Dance with me."

Chapter End Notes
Guys! I hope you're all having a good one, and seriously hope you liked the chapter. Let me know what you think. If there are some passages unclear, kindly leave a note in here and I'll try my best to answer your queries. Just a few clarifications:

1.) For purposes of plot consistency, this fic subscribes to one theory that the Dark Sister was left at Summerhall. Blackfyre was with Aegon Targ the whole time, Bittersteel handed it over to the Golden Company which is now rallying behind Aegon.

2.) Check out Second Spice War, because we're getting there! The groundwork will become clearer now, and what the Songs are about. Hints are dropped in the verses at the start of each chapter.

3.) Jaqen's clan was the ruling Valyrian family way, way back--most powerful of the twoscore families. Aurion Archestrad is Lord Emperor Aurion, yep, he used sorcery to prolong his life after the Doom, plus he crossed turfs West of Westeros.

4.) J/A scene in here is tough love, okay? Jaqen's just teaching Arya, he thinks her decisions were irrational. He reminded her of how it would be should the dragonlords get to her. Arya is protecting Jaqen in turn. So there.

Thank you for reading, leaving comments, and the kudos. Much love. You guys are awesome. ;D
Conspiracies, Realms, Gods

Chapter Notes

"Praying like a fool who's been on the run,
But with you, I feel again..."
Aegon to Arya

"I keep on running, building bridges that I know you never wanted...
I want you to burn my bridges down..."
Jaqen to Arya

See the end of the chapter for more notes

" A child chosen—
Woman, Wife, Mother
She is all these things and none.
Let her offer her pure heart,
Forge the light to wipe out darkness.
In her sacrifice, Death will flee."

Songs of the Faceless, XXXIX (Lost leaf)

Do you like the moon, child?
Do you sing to the moon?
Do you howl to the moon when it is bright and full?

Immortality, infinitude, enlightenment. Soul's darkness, realm between the conscious and the unconscious. Moon goddess is the wife of the Sun god, as Qartheen lore would say; it is the symbol of the sacred feminine bathing with gentle luminescence the Queen of the Cities' triple walls embellished with sculpted abstractions—animalism in the form of sex and warfare. Unwrit words-of-the-mouth and writ pages of legends and sagas and mythos share a common thread—that behind every hero is a woman that must perform a sacrifice.

Her cry will leave a crack on the Moon's face. The Moon and she are one. The Moon's mien derives its light from the Sun—a consummation. Her vessel is gifted with seed from Him—a consummation.

She is the rhythm of time, she controls the tides, days, seasons. She controls water in all its forms. Nine moons, and new life is created within her and through her. And when they mate, the lover—the orb of day, and the beloved—the orb of night, eclipse occurs, an event of umbras and dark shadows, a preparation for great light that will come.
When the Moon is new an infant is born; in its crescent form, there is growth; in its full there is maturity; and in its waning, a passing. The Woman, the Moon, holds it all—those mysterious feminine cycles of passage from life to death and death to life.

*Child, woman, wife, mother.*

_This Woman is creator, the universe is her form._

_From her womb is the blood of dragons._

"Arya Stark."

The Elder's voice was calm yet faint tones of urgency were apparent beneath its sonances. In the days of Valyria and Rhoyne, and even in the event of the Doom spawning the Order of Faceless Men, his machinations and great cabals had brought either preservation or chaos to the realms, depending on whose lips might come the telling. Drafting of prophecies is one thing, such was done by the priestesses of the Jogos Nhai close to the founding of Braavos; obsession with prophecies is still another. As what comes out of the mouths of sages and produced by their hands that ink parchments of erudition, 'All excessive feelings and thoughts—all these ally themselves with madness.' Overindulgence intoxicates, matters not if it is of water or wine.

_If madness saves, then let me go mad, be mad, the Elder thought. Intoxicate me if it means preserving my own life and the lives besides mine._

"Two of her gifts we have unlocked, Akhrast," said the woman with the pointed skull, the Moonsinger priestess in the Isle of the Gods, whose name was Onathe. "Prior to us meeting, she was in possession of those gifts from her gods of old. Such power—four dragons might not be an impossible feat. Dark Winter—why four?"

They were in the Temple of the Moonsingers, facing the sculpted figure of the faceless deity standing on the summits of Valyria's string of Fourteen Flames. It was the old man's gaze that was locked upon the elements signified by that art. _Real foes hide their faces, like this god. The Heart of Winter is the womb, the Heart of Darkness that lies in Stygia is the seed. Winter, Darkness, Valyria. Ice and Fire are enemies of each other, both are enemies of the realms._ "All Faceless Men are sorcerers, possessors of blood-rune. Obsidian candles, Onathe. West of Westeros had revealed to us the intricacies of turfs and times. In various versions of realms we have thus seen, three Targaryen dragons did not and perchance will not suffice. We have laid sight on one realm that was totally devoured by the Night's creatures undead; not one soul lived. Even Winter can spawn dragons—larger than the firebeasts of Valyria, with breath of cold instead of flame. There is a reason why the gods have designed a forking path to the realms—for us to map out infinite possibilities for survival. This is their game. We cannot err the same way the other realms have, arrangements must be made, preparing the way for the fulfilment of prophecies. This is the only way to continuance."

The priestess nodded her understanding, smiled softly. _Chosen child._ In her not-so-distant recollections was Arya Stark: headstrong, shrewd, and secretive. She's had visions of truths forthcoming for sure, and the priestess had queried her of these.

"Nothing, and I'm not bearing false witness," the girl had told her. "Oblivion. That's what I saw."

"The Guardian," Onathe began. "A certain…connection is present, beyond their sacred confluence in your Songs."

"Iāqaen Haegār is from the blood of dragons," the Elder began pacing calmly, eyes still upon the deity's statue as if plotting the means to shatter it, as if smashing the metamorphic marble would
actually defeat the god. "Blood of Old Valyria, that is—a subject of the hero prophecy, yet he chose to abandon it for the sake of the one he called goddess of the Rhoyn. The same girl, same woman, Ária. The hosting, the arrangement and essentials for that specific prophecy did not reach completion, he was successful in thwarting it a thousand years ago."

"Neferion—kosh hen mele Jaes?"

"That prophecy," the Elder replied. "And so, he was named Guardian, following the death of one of ours—Syrio Forel's name, the face. The Guardian's duties are clear—first, ensure that the Chosen is out of Death's way before her time; second, hand her over to death when it is time. Her demise must not be in the hands of those accursed lords of Old. Arya Stark has a whole lore to her own, and this death of hers will breathe lives to those dying, will perpetuate the realms. Death in the hands of a beloved—she will forge light from utter darkness should this happen."

Onathe felt her chest constrict. Even in their succinct time together, she had always possessed a kind of emotion akin to fondness for the girl, a subtle sense of friendship even. She likes the Moon, she is the Moon. A Stark-Wolf, a Rhoynish queen. "Had you not named Jaqen H'ghar 'Guardian', he would have thwarted the prophecy a second time for her sake," she supplied the phrases for the Elder. "No sacred vows will bind him to her. Does he know of the second condition—that the Stark girl must die after all these?" The old man shook his head. "The dream seeds?"

"Working," the Elder motioned for them to proceed to the inner chambers. The remaining six of the eleven Faceless Masters will arrive soon, and righteous conspiracies must be drawn up. Time is nigh, and so he must reveal to them all the groundwork written in the 'lost' leaves of the Songs of the Faceless. Not reveal entirely, for it was a prophecy that predates the Doom though it was written two centuries after the cataclysm, and older than Valyria perchance. "Dreams are a whole realm. We have the Crux that can traverse realms of dreams and memories through the Ostium—a portal. No complications for Aegon the Sixth, one master had extracted his core memories—he had followed the Targaryen Prince for three full moons all over Essos, invaded the domains of his delta sleep, the deepest layer where dreaming happens. Mere subconscious suggestion was needed—Rhaegar Targaryen had planned this even before his demise, through his son." They reached the threshold to the Priestess' chamber. The woman turned the knob, entered. The Elder carried on with his recount. "The kernel was already present, the Prince is greatly prepossessed by the idea of reconquering a kingdom stolen through his redeemer's acts. Then, constructing the dream's scape, the setting. Much more complex process was required for the Stark girl."

A roundtable had been set up in the chamber, eight seats. Promptly, two healer priestesses left, carrying with them the trays of potions for higher healing. Devotees have started departing from the temple's atrium as well. "A Faceless Man was with Tycho Nestoris when he travelled to the North, you mean? You spoke about opened crypts and souls, what are you now—gifted with fire and the shadows?"

The old man chuckled at the observation. "Crypts, yes—Lyanna Stark's tomb was opened by her own son, a dragon's bastard. Therefore, a grand hosting of souls to condition the minds of both the Stark girl and the Targaryen Prince towards an unbreakable union, shape their emotions, be drawn fully to each other. The Targaryen's seed in the Stark's vessel, a Child must become a Woman, a Woman must become a Wife and a Mother. Preconditions for the prophecy, you understand. Not only the hosting of souls, game of faces, too. During her days as Blind Beth, memory interference was performed. Some memories of her were wiped out in order to implant others."

"You performed the mindwipe, Akhrast?"

"I taught just one other Faceless, and she was successful in doing it."
"Where is she?"

"Deceased, supposedly in the temple's crypts. Her blood tainted your marmoreal stairs out front, do you recall?" Onathe nodded. The Elder pressed on, seating himself with his usual calm. "The girl had to be cloaked from Death, or she will die before her time. Even the death god is after her. Some...labyrinthine conflict during her prior cycle."

The Priestess wrestled against torturous knives that flung themselves onto her chest asudden. The Faceless Men are running a whole helix of plots and counterplots, some known to others, some not. Acts of faith and faithlessness. Service to the death god is just a front to them, so is service to all other gods.

If there was one thing the Faceless Men have learned over the course of their simultaneous existence and nonexistence, it is that all men must serve themselves. The gods certainly cared very little whether men thrive or not, because men are dispensable.

And where is justice in that?

Onathe, along with the other descendants of the Jogos Nhai, was a slave in the mines of the Freehold before the second bout of battle between Rhoyne and Valyria—the War of Three Princes. Her eyes of wisdom and presage played witness to those days of yore, from the conflicts in the Conclave of dragonlords, to the mass escape of Rhoynish slaves orchestrated by Āria hen Rhoyne and the treachery of the Esdraelon heir, the taking of ships bound for Sothoryos, the founding of the Secret City. In all that she had seen and grasped, she had known Akhrast L'ris to be the greatest believer of the Warrior of Light. "All for the realms," he used to say, and still these words escape from his dark yet noble heart. "Matters not under which god the prophecy was forged. Valar Morghulis, though not today. Never, if possible, like those gods we claim we serve. Immortality must not be exclusive to them."

A priestess of the ritual opened the double doors and announced the arrival of the six.

"Show them in, please," she requested.

One by one, the assassins entered, seated themselves in that roundtable. The plagued face was gone, so was the face of the squinter, the lordling, the fat fellow, and all those other false miens. They now donned their true faces: conjurers and warlocks, high mages, sorcerers—former dragonslaves, prime movers of the Doom, the Diaspora.

The horrifying verses of the Doom's canticle seemed to resonate in the walls and corners of the Moonsinger's inner chambers:

Beyond death are the hosts amassed, like seed unfallen.

When darkness descends upon men, reason is enkindled.

In the midnight, we will not anymore shape barrows for ourselves and our kin.

Spilled lives on blood-soaked sands of gold.

Nevermore.
The Elder spoke to one Faceless whose true name was Cythnar Gyin—golden-haired, with thick brows that accentuated deep-set eyes. "The firesword?"

The one named Cythnar glanced at the other Faceless whose true name was Ieli Kyrad—copper-crowned and severe—as if to ask for confirmation. The latter nodded and so the one named Cythnar gave his response. "In the Crux, waiting."

The Elder smiled kindly, brought the gathering to a start.

"Order of business, brothers. The Titan, conclusion to the recent colloquy with the Head of the Arsenal—Braavos needs greater fortification, surveillance of four Faceless Men in Pentos—pray that none of them had gone rogue or we will be forced to act, two missing alchemical ores in the Crux: one gold and one silver, three missing faces in the Hall, the Songs. Arya Stark—the end game."

"My wife, of course."

"You must be utterly mad to think that I would agree to such conditions."

"Either that, or a Braavosi paramour I hid inside the hatch of the magister's ship for three full days. You choose."

There were only three horses—one for each man, and her arrival in Pentos was but an unexpected occurrence. The lack of mare and saddles proved to be more than agreeable for one of them, though.

After farewell formalities with the legates of Tyrosh and Lys, four Braavosi emissaries headed back to Illyrio's manse on steeds. Lysander of Pentos had gone back to his palanquin the moment the legates left the harbor's deck, and wasted no time returning to the comforts of his own manse. There was once again, his ritualistic mating with the maid of the sea to ensure that the waters will grant them with abundant catch before the long winter. "May famine not happen, and may the seas be generous with their bounty." The Pentoshi Prince had said.

"Must be truly satisfying, having two virginal consorts every twelve moons for the sake of keeping up with the shibboleths," Daario remarked sardonically.

"I wish that such is the case," the Prince replied, ignoring the other man's undertone of derision. "It's all a matter of luck—prosperity and victories in wars, it does not have at all to do with deflowering maidens. Surely, I do not wish for my throat to be slit and to be offered to the gods should the catch and the harvest for the next twelve moons turn out to be less than expected. Fate has been merciful; I am still speaking with you of these shortsighted conventionalisms."

The Prince had left them with a slight tilt of the head on the side—an adieux.

Jaqen and Daario rode side by side, atop one shire and one thoroughbred. The subject was Daenerys Targaryen and her recent besieging of both Cracklaw Point and Maiden Pool. "Tempered the Dothraki horde, too," Daario remarked. "No hoarding and raving during the conquest. Those horselords with their primitive mindset will only keep themselves at bay as long as Daenerys has her dragons around. Left alone, they cannot coexist with the Westerosi. For sakes, they're savages who shamelessly copulate with each other in front of whole khalasars; not to mention, they have no intentions of understanding the currency system. They butcher and ransack—where is honor in that?"
"No better than Ironborns, then," Jaqen noted.

"At least the Ironborns wear raiments and raise sails," was Daario's embittered reply. "With the Long Night coming, even the seas near Dorne and those surrounding the Summer Isles will freeze. 'Athvilajerar, hrazef, chiori'—wars, horses, women. These are the only things they know of. First blow of wintertide, and they will all freeze to death with their warbraids still uncut."

"Something tells a man that your distaste for the Dothraki is already bordering on personal," Jaqen replied. "The Targaryen Queen never mentioned anything yet about the mounters staying in Westeros once she or Aegon the Sixth takes the throne. Might be that she will send them back to the Vaes, reward them significantly for their service."

"I have nothing personal against the Dothraki. Everyone knows they're all degenerates."

"Daenerys Targaryen was khaleesi, brother."

Daario scoffed. "And that's because her accursed brother sold her to one child-perverted, nefarious warlord—"

"Ah! There it is," was Jaqen's amused response. "The reason for this acrimony. The great Khal is dead, brother. We do not speak ill of the departed."

The fake Stormcrow sighed.  
_When the sun rises in the West and sets in the East._

"How do you kill a memory, Jaqen?"

The Lorathi was taken aback. His jaw hardened; reply came nevertheless.

"Forget it, Daario."

The Stormcrow turned to his left to regard him fully. "Game of Faces. It targets specific memories for ablation." He glanced towards the back quickly, the two Faceless were then occupied. "The Elder taught Sabine the methods of memory interference."

"The memories of a Faceless Man," Jaqen replied firmly. "Not of a lover's, for the gods' sakes, brother. Annihilate the memory and you will unhinge her for good."

Daario turned his eyes back to the road. _Darts to the heart: 'Shekh ma shieraki anni', every damned time we lay with each other._

Their conversation was interrupted by a now heated argument between two other masters at their rear. The cause of dispute was too juvenile, yet here they were with their brawl of words.

"Claim that, and they will consider us sleeping in the same chambers!" Sabine seethed. She sat on the same steed, in front of the comely one who was holding the reins on one black-maned sorraia. "I am neither your wife nor your paid harlot, Aegeus."

The man sighed irritably. He maneuvered the steed's harness, directed the beast leftwards. He then pulled the reins a little to slow the horse. "You are becoming increasingly difficult, Sabine. You are neither of those, yes. To avoid unnecessary questions from the magister or the Prince or any other damnable person in that manse, you must act as if you are _either_ of those. Therefore, the choice."

"I will demand for a separate chamber."
"Too risky, Sabine." Daario admonished her, and at this, Aegeus's lip tipped up. "We understand your frustrations, but your actions last night were downright mental. Discernment, love. At this point, we cannot afford raising anyone's suspicions—women are seldom, if at all, sent as intermediaries. Wife and-or whore to Ioannanu here are verily your two reasonable options."

"And Aegeus will not do anything dishonorable," added Jaqen in assurance.

The comely one scoffed. "I cannot believe that I still possess the capacity to take offense at your words, brother. Truly, I do not appreciate getting seduced in my slumbering state, facing threat with a dagger dipped in higher poison, then being regarded as one depraved who has absolutely no control over his urges to take a woman. I was the victim last night, may I just remind all of you of the irony?"

Sabine fell silent.

A few seconds of that stillness passed. She spoke.

"Very well," her assent. "I will have linens on the floor then, some cushions. There, I will sleep."

"You will share the bed with me," Aegeus's tone was firm. "As was the case last night."

The woman hissed at him viciously. "I will not share any damned thing with you! Last night—"

"Was neither my idea, nor my doing," the comely one hissed back. "The first encounter, or the second."

"Ooh-hoo!" Daario hooted. Jaqen chuckled richly, threw them both a malicious stare, very amused. The two were obviously listening to the conversation despite hushed tones of the two others. "There was a second? Oh gods, Sabine! Seems like you robbed Ioannanu here of his much needed sleep."

The woman bit her lip, held back the sound of mad screams.

"This quilt I will place in the middle of the bed, to mark our bed turfs precisely," the Waif had told the Handsome Man the night prior. "I presume you would not want to be bothered by any movement whilst asleep—not that I am an agile sleeper. I can convince you, I am not," she had told him, in a manner so continuous that perhaps he was almost tempted to request that she slowed down.

His arms were folded across his chest. After she had finished setting the boundaries, she laid herself wordlessly with her back turned to him. Seconds later, she felt his weight on the featherbed.

There was nothing between them but quietude and secrecy, and for someone who had traversed the paths of forced silence and cloaks-and-daggers, of spirits as well, for someone who had just 'died' and was deprived of the slightest contact with another living soul, verbal or otherwise, it was torment. It was perhaps a mere week and a half since her death in Arya Stark's hands, but in another realm, it may have been torturous ages.

Sabine knew too, that for her, Aegeus is not just like any other living soul.

Resisting was akin to sinning against the self. Her flesh was not her own, much less her entire body, and it had moved without her willing it to do so. She turned to him slowly and gasped, for he lay there, watching her.

And he was shirtless.

She sat up. Mild exhales came forth from her mouth. Sabine had tried to form words—apologies for
her eventful return, countless questions about the grand schemes that might altogether be incongruous with the Songs, explanations…on why she had to entice him prior to her demand for answers.

What to say?

"Brother," she had whispered. "A-are you feeling…quite alright? The cure…"

"Working now," he whispered back. "The spasms from your poison are gone."

She nodded, gazed at him still. Curious, for she remembered tilting her head and letting her eyes cruise to every inch of him. For moments, their sights were in plain contact. No One breathed a word.

_Temptations of selfhood will be strongest_. Tens of leagues separated them from the Isle of the Gods, from the temple which houses the Creed that had become their bread and ale. There were no other Faceless Masters with prying eyes, no impressions of the many-faced god in thirteen statues, no trace of the poison pool, or even a single, ripped page of the codes.

_No One._

_No One but us._

Sabine had reached for the quilt that separated him from her, set it aside. She inched closer to him, though his face carried in it ambiguity. His breathing had changed, it whispered intimacies; and for her, this was more than enough.

"Do tell, brother," she muttered. "How exhausted are you tonight?"

She had used Rhoynar in her asking—a connotation that they were both thinking, rational Masters of the Order. They know the rules, and the cruel aftermath that comes hand in hand with blinding their own eyes so they could pretend that the codes are inconsequential.

_One pretense for one sprightly night._

Wrongful, illicit. But love is lust and lust is love, and even if they fight both, they would never win.

He sighed, replied in the same tongue. "What response are you expecting?"

She looked down, toyed with the quilt's soft ruffles. "That you are not tired at all?" she replied, trustful, unsure.

He sat up, held her chin. Then came his words and his words sent her short-winded heart aflutter:

"Then I am not tired at all."

One thing led to another that peak of the night.

A second intercourse? That midnight, yes. But if Aegeus and Sabine would be truthful about themselves, and they dared not be for Daario and Jaqen's hearing senses and skillful scrutiny of them had heightened asudden, then there was a third four hours past the peak of night and a fourth just this morning. Both of those transpired because of his provocative midnight whispers and too-inviting acts. "Do you wish for me to die in my sleep, Sabine?" How could she even say no to such an entreaty? A _given thing_. He _was trained in seduction_. And he had taught her many, many things too. Her protestations were in order for the both of them to abstain from a _fifth_.
We cannot. I am fertile. We should not have in the first place. All potions are in the temple—I cannot fend off the possible aftermath of these acts of ours. We must take lives and not spawn them.

To create life is to sin.

"Worry not, Sabine," Aegeus whispered. The two other Faceless had gained distance from them, no soul would hear them now. Lightly, he kissed the side of her mouth. "I won't touch you tonight or the nights after that."

"You never keep your word."

"It's because you never keep yours."

"You're deluding me every cursed second," the Waif's voice broke. With misty eyes she glared at him venomously. "Trapping me with your hypnosis. I'm not some task you have to bed and question and slay afterwards! If by either gift or wrath of the gods, I conceive life within my womb because of your deeds—"

"Three things," the comely one answered, eyes intent upon both Jaqen and Daario who were now occupied with their own discourse. "First, hypnosis doesn't work with Faceless Men. Surely you know this, what with your concocted potion that allows us all to resist mesmerism. Second, you are not a task, true. Third," he placed his hot mouth against her ear, spoke with his usual steamy innuendos. "If you do conceive, then that would be too damn perfect."

They disembarked from their steeds and left them to the hostlers. Altogether, they walked to pathway leading to Illyrio's courtyard, past one plump Unsullied and two other Astapori guards. At the center of the courtyard is a marble pool with one lithe, ornate statue bearing a Braavosi sword, a replacement to the sculpture of a naked boy that had been smashed by the tides. Cherry leaves from six trees adorned the tiled flooring. Fallen leaves had been swept, broken branches, severed.

The Lorathi was lost in his usual thought streams as they walked, reflected on the savagery he had shown Arya the night before. Realization collapsed upon him like a vortex of storms from the heavens. *Regressing? Perchance, a man really is.* He exhaled, utter remorse wolfing him in each step. *Such monstrosity. Arya deserved none of those—a man had been renamed, the Valyrian is dead.* Those acts, those words, the binding—hells! She needed to be chastised, but certainly not in that manner! If he wasn't too careful, he had realized, he would lose Arya Stark to that perfect and pure, bleating lamb of a prince.

Tyroshi are known to be excellent lovers, finer than the Lyseni as some would claim. The Lorathi knew this—there's Aegeus whose charm had hauled women and men alike to their absolute demise, and Daario who had captured the Targaryen who calls herself Queen.

"Roses," Aegeus had told Jaqen early that morn when he had asked. "Enough of sharp skeans and rapiers as gifts. Woo her like you would a woman. Tenderness, romance, worship. They are goddesses, brother." Arya was still asleep in his bedchamber that crack of dawn, clothed in his nightshirt. Jaqen resisted against the strong urges of rushing to her and just…imprisoning her delicate frame in his strong arms. He so desired to whisper in her ears the greatest of flatteries, beg for a reprieve like one vile sinner to a faultless god. The entire night he had contented himself with watching her slumber, and how he marveled at the rise and fall of her bosoms in calm breathing, the soft whimpering in the midst of her wistful dreams. He recalled how very gently he had brushed some strands that had covered her lovely face. *Arya...Arya...*within his frail, crushed spirit were murmurs of that name from which he gathered his very strength. *Lovely girl, a man is broken, very, very flawed...and completely undeserving of you. He knows not how to love, though it's all he could ever feel for you, so please,* he kissed her temple. *Don't leave him.*
"Roses?" Jaqen had confirmed in a tone crestfallen. "A man had shackled her against the gallery's wall, brother. She may have dreamed of the Spice War the same night, most cruel of her memories. I wanted to kill myself, truly. Roses? You know Arya, she is—"

"Madly in love with you?" Aegus interrupted him, shrugged his shoulders. The Lorathi shook his head, but the comely one ignored his remonstrance. "I know. But you may have offended her, yes? Leave a note too, we must leave for the harbor immediately. 'You are the most beautiful thing in the world.' Upon our return, kiss her feet. And this is not some act of folly. Do it."

Therefore, that blue winter rose by the bedside. Most beautiful thing in the world? the Lorathi thought. She might think a man obtained those lines from Prince Aegon the Charming. The note had been revised a little: 'You were wonderful last night, love.' She truly is—mortal frame, soul, enchantments.

"What?!" Aegus was now walking beside him, his reaction was somewhat terror-stricken. "Stupidity! You don't say that to women, Jaqen! What the hell is wrong with you?! Oh, gods…"

The Lorathi's eyes had widened in naked alarm. "But…but they mean the same, don't they? Beautiful, wonderful—"

"Yes, but the damned context! 'You were wonderful last night?' As if what you had with her was a mere nightfall of squirms and squiggles? Ugh!" Aegus shook his head, disgusted. "You're utterly hopeless, Jaqen. You never listen to me, so you know nought."

They reached the courtyard.

Jaqen cursed.

"Too fast!" Aegon the Sixth was chuckling in the midst of clashing his steel with Arya. "Ned Stark must have been a highly skilled swordsman himself." He was panting as he lunged and thwarted attacks from the Dark Sister with his Blackfyre. Metallic sounds from two Valyrian steels coupled with the gush of water from the statue to the pool. "Can't quite tell where the next blow's going to come."

"Enough with your charms, your grace," Arya replied. With winding motions, she charged towards the Prince, advanced. Aegon took graceful steps back, wielded his own blade to deflect her swings. "I have not even disarmed you yet."

"Disarm me?" the Prince teased. "Forgive me, Arya, but I do not remember handing you a cupful of wine this morning."

"Hah!" One, two, three, four blows—yet Aegon managed to ward off the attacks by maneuvering his sword left and right. Five. Six. The solid contact of one Valyrian steel to another sent out clanging resonances. "Might be that you're the one to need it after we dance. You're losing."

"Am I?" Aegon said. He parried another attack, blocked her steel horizontally. Top, side and side, assail. "Your charges have weakened, yet you're carrying lighter steel—a disadvantage."

"This is not about hacking and hammering. Effective attacks are swift and sudden, almost imperceptible, like water. Graceful and rhythmic, like dancing." With a quick angled thrust, she managed to send Blackfyre in the air. Aegon was fast; he caught the steel by the grip and deflected another blow from his right. "Qrugh!" Arya cursed in High Valyrian.
"Dancing, is it?" Aegon chuckled. The duel carried on with intensity. "What of your thoughts now? Satin gowns with elaborate adornments? Lady-like curtsies, whimsical melodies from the harp, and my arm around you? Never pegged you as one who finds dancing fanciful."

"Water dancing, your grace," Arya replied. "A ballet of swords and bodies, sways and swings that complement, quick thrusts and parries." She blocked a strike from Aegon, delivered a counterblow. "You're wise of your assessment of me—I do not find dancing in royal courts and grand halls fancy at all."

"Wild, spirited, strong," he remarked. "To shield her is to mock her."

"Very true," was Arya's response to his flatteries. "Now we are talking."

"A charmer of men, beguiling," the Prince continued. Despite the arduous duel, his tone still enticed. "She smiles, and the chrysanthemum forgets it's that time of the year to bloom already. A river of lovely faces and perfect forms…"

By some form of enchantment she could not name, her heart leaped. Arya Stark felt her wrist tremble slightly. The steel seemed to resist her wields when moments ago, she maneuvered it as if it was an extension of her very limb.

It only took Aegon three calm and casual blows to disarm her. Dark Sister fell on the tiled ground with a sonorous clang.

She tugged at her hair with both hands. "Damn it."

As was expected of him, Aegon was still in his usual august self. He bent to retrieve the sword and handed it back to her, blade on his palm, swordgrip facing the girl. "That was most sterling, Arya Stark. Never have I seen such fine skill in sword handling before."

If it were Jaqen who had disarmed her like this, he would have wasted no time berating her about her loss—'your angles were too extensive, you might as well drop your playsword and have yourself stabbed,' 'Your movements are too slow, too predictable. Oh, gods! Sword to the floor every two seconds!,' 'Are you going to do defense the whole time and not even attempt to lunge an attack?'

She took the sword from him and smiled. "Thank you. You are quite skillful yourself. A fair and square win."

"Indeed. And it's all because the pleasures of blandishments are more important than earned victories in a swordfight."

Both of them turned to the source of the voice. It was Jaqen H'ghar.

"It was a tactic. The Prince Charming was delighting you on purpose to take away your center from the combat." The Lorathi wore his scornful expression as he walked towards them. "And what have you to show for it? Excessive blinking, deep breaths, too indulgent smiles. This is no swordfighting Arya Stark, this is flirting. Ah! But what is new?"

Arya tightened her grip on the sword, clenched her teeth. "A pleasant morn to you too, Jaqen," she said.

The contempt in his countenance was now too apparent. His hands were on either side of his hips, and his eyes were disparagement in themselves.

Once more, the Lorathi had lost it. Every time the Targaryen and his Stark girl were together, he
dies.

Aegon spoke in order to lift the Lorathi's words to the girl. "It was true, what Jaqen H'ghar said about charming you, Lady Arya. Forgive me for resorting to such a lowly tactic. You were just too good, that is why. My disarming you could not have been your fault."

"Of course it was," Jaqen scoffed. He stood face to face with the now fuming girl. "The fault always lies on the one who gets disarmed, stabbed, killed in the process. Don't tell me that the blame must be on the victor. In battles, either you die or you live. No one must apologize for choosing life over death."

"It was just a duel of swords, Jaqen H'ghar."

"Duels are preparations for real combat," Jaqen replied sourly. "You lose now, you lose in the real thing. Nothing can be accomplished by succumbing to cajoleries."

"Qafat, anna okeo," Aegon said. He spoke in Dothraki tongue to confine the conversation between him and the Lorathi, and he knew not that Arya knows the language. The Prince glanced at the girl reassuringly, gave her a doting smile, then turned back to Jaqen with a stern expression. "Athchomar jin chiori."

Please, my friend. Show some respect to the lady.

"Tat vo astat anna she athchomar," Jaqen retorted. Don't you teach me about respect.

Enough of this, Arya sighed, spoke to Aegon the Sixth. "Me ki davra, yeri akka tat iffi. Your tactic, lowly or otherwise, worked for me, your grace. In combat which is a matter of life and death, we must use every known tactic to our disposal. A wise move." 

Arya smiled enticingly at the Prince. Her words were to Aegon but her eyes were on Jaqen. "And if you would keep on using that tactic in every sword duel, your grace, I might lose and lose and lose in combat. I might even lose myself in your words."

Jaqen's eyes widened, but he had run out of witty retorts. There was nothing he could do but harden his jaw and shake his head at the girl in silent vehemence.

"Arya!"

It was a woman's voice.

The girl knew it, dreamed of it every night even. Before sailing for Pentos, she had stayed in the woman's workchamber for three full hours, polished the vials and larger decanters, studied the scrolls for concoction, stared at the chamber's corners for perhaps, she might appear in one of them.

"Arya!"

Her eyes darted to the source of the call. There were Daario, and Aegeus, and…

The Waif.

The girl squealed, dropped Dark Sister on the tiled flooring. "Sabine!" She ran to the woman. "Sabine!" And she was unaware of the soft tears that had suddenly formed in her eyes.

What must be done? Ask for forgiveness? Demand for explications? It may be that the bond of their silent friendship had been that strong all along, that there was nothing else required in this
reconciliation but to cherish it.

She reached her, and they held each other tight. Arya sobbed. "F-forgive…forgive…"

"Hush, Arya," Sabine said, smoothing her hair. "Nothing at all to forgive. We did what we had to do."

"M-my fault…Sabine," she sobbed on, her face was now buried in the woman's blouse. "I thought Jaqen…"

"I know, my love," the woman comforted her. "It was all for good. Forgive us for leaving you out of the plan. It had to be that way, or the circumvention will not work."

It was a friendship renewed as they sobbed and laughed and embraced the other. They were a single soul dwelling in two bodies, unbound by blood, kindred nevertheless.

In the midst of that dramatic reunion, Aegeus yawned, flexed his arms upwards. Daario examined his fingernails intently, rubbed them against his tunic. Both were blasé, disinterested with the display of affections.

Aegon and Jaqen had both decided to suspend their earlier altercation. They proceeded to the envoy.

The Prince spoke to the woman. "I don't believe we have met. Nevertheless, biare naejot emagon ao kesīr. Very pleased to have you in Pentos. Aegon the Sixth Targaryen, Westeros."

The woman rose from being half-seated on the ground, whispered to the girl some last words of comfort, and assisted her upright. "Sabine…Ioannanu, Braavos," she replied, and held out her hand. The Prince shook it firmly—the chivalrous act of hand kissing is not a custom in the Free Cities.

There was Arya Stark's pronounced curiosity as was in her mien, the woman ignored it. "Iksan biare naejot sagon kesīr. I appreciate your warm hospitality, your grace."

"Ioannanu," the Prince's eyes cruised to Aegeus. "Patronym of yours?"

"Yes, your grace," the comely one answered. Arya Stark ruled her face, controlled herself from gasping when she saw Jaqen's conspiratorial stare. "My spouse arrived from Braavos just the night prior. Magister Illyrio was informed of her presence, as was Lysander of Pentos."

The Prince nodded, smiled convivially at the lady then gazed at Arya. The girl was wiping traces of tears with her sleeve fabric. Aegon took out a handkerchief from his breastpocket and handed it to her. The girl accepted it, her fingers slightly brushing Aegon's. She muttered her gratitude. "Quite a reunion that must be. Might have been such a while since you ladies last saw each other."

Jaqen rolled his eyes, muttered something to Aegeus in Rhoynar. Who keeps handkerchiefs ready for when ladies weep? Really?!

"A mere two weeks," Daario supplied, still occupied with his fingernails. He regarded the Prince genially and shrugged. "Women."

Further courtesies were delivered. Arya and Sabine left the men and headed inside the manse. Aegon the Sixth gestured for them all to walk to the pillared gallery.

"The Prince Lysander has informed us that you had ordered the construction of sixty battleships for Pentos seven moons ago, your grace," Daario began. "This is a direct violation of the treaty forged with Braavos through Narratys. This city is only allowed twenty ships; not to mention, no sellswords to aid Pentoshi military forces."
Aegon waited a good five seconds before responding. His gaze was directed to one oiled painting of a lemon tree in front of a red door. Dorne, he thought. "Not orders, mere suggestions. The Prince Lysander and his magisters could very well decide on their city's soldiery without my dictates. I do not rule Pentos."

"We're speaking not of your territorial regnancy here, but of your influence, your grace," Aegeus said. "The loyalties of Pentos have always sided with the Targaryens. Your insinuations are as good as commands."

The Prince faced the Tyroshi, smiled. "You honor me too much, Aegeus Ioannanu. Forgive me," he walked to survey one other art. "I find it curious how Braavos is allowed to possess a whole Arsenal and soldiery numbering a good forty thousand, a hundred and fifty battleships, and a colossal stronghold at its already impenetrable gates. All these, while Pentos is left vulnerable." He turned to the envoys. "The slave wars are over; and with the looming battle with the lords, Pentos will never renounce fealty to Braavos and resort to unnecessary and untimely mutiny."

Jaqen was at the far end of the gallery, listening to the exchange. He shook his head, as his lips snaked up a little.

Aegon raised his brows at the Lorathi's reaction. "Please, Jaqen H'ghar. Do humor us with your thoughts. Might be valuable, interesting even."

He sauntered towards the Prince. "Sixty more ships in Pentos will send the wrong message to both Aristide Antaryon and Daenerys Targaryen. The conditions drafted with the Iron Bank and the Council of Magisters were clear—they must aid you in locating Arya Stark for the alliance with the North which you are planning. Forming a fleet will lead the Seallord to conclude that you intend to withdraw from the agreement and leave Braavos unaided against the lords, maintain neutrality so they spare Westeros from dragonfire. A Pentoshi fleet sailing under your name will send the Silver Queen one severe message too—that you intend to carry on with your besieging on your own, without her aid, without confering with her. Might I remind you that she has half of the Iron Fleet behind her, all Westerosi mariners and combatants who know the land very well?"

"I was right," Aegon said calmly. "You are indeed gifted at weaving conspiracy theories—I am not quite done yet, Jaqen H'ghar," he pressed on, raising a forefinger to stop the Lorathi from interrupting. "Braavosi—your distrust for Targaryens will be the very demise of all of you. Very well, I will let all of you in on matters concerning Westeros. Daenerys Targaryen is slowly losing the Iron Fleet; tides have changed course. Moons ago, one Euron Greyjoy claimed to have found the fabled dragonhorn from the ruins of Valyria—a lie. It was given to him by the Volantenes, an ace against our three firebeasts, as Lord Emperor Aurion had planned. I had to act. The dragonhorn was acquired for us by the House of Black and White, and it is now in our possession." He let his eyes cruise from Daario, to Aegeus, back to Jaqen. "The Ironborn were never for the Targaryens, their fealty is and has always been, to the lords. Victarion Greyjoy had been aided by one red priest though in truth the priest works for Euron, and that same priest had been connected to the lords prior to the hatching of those three dragons. The reason too, why I sent Tyrion Lannister in haste to Dragonstone—we had to warn Daenerys. No Ironborn, no fleet—we know not of Victarion's extent of influence and command over those ships. This is why we had to build sixty more ships right here in Pentos. May the Braavosi take no offense, but survival is more important than diplomatic treaties."

"And what good will those ships yield, pray tell, apart from serving as replacements for Daenerys Targaryen's Iron Fleet?" Aegeus questioned him. His intents were clear in his asking—test him, he might slip. "Surely, you cannot expect that sixty Pentoshi warships can act as temporary bulwark to slow the Volantene fleet down should the city decide to attack Braavos?"
"A hundred and thirty of Volantis against eighty of ours?" Aegon the Sixth queried. "No, no Aegeus Ioannanu, the ships will not act as buffer. The Volantenes will crush the Pentoshi in a matter of hours should we use the ships as barricades."

"What would it be then?" Daario did not bother hiding his interest. "Daenerys Targaryen did most striking work in razing Astapori and Yunkish Fleets in the battle at the Dragon's Bay mere moons ago. However, back then, the other side did not have dragons."

It was a scheme among three Faceless in order to bring the Targaryen Prince into disrepute, to prove that he is nothing but a neophyte in matters of war. Jaqen attempted to rule his face as he caught Aegeus's eye. The latter winked. Both men were chuckling inside at the cross-examination of their own doing.

Daario still awaited the Prince's response.

Aegon the Sixth was not to be fooled with. "Moons from now, the Volantenes will raise their sails against Braavos and its ally cities. The next victim of schemes after wiping the city out will be Westeros, needless to say. What course then? This, my friends: allow the Volantenes to sail past the Disputed Lands, past Pentoshi Bay, towards the Straits. Enemy fleet must be situated at least a full league close to the Titan."

Jaqen snorted. "Then your ships are useless."

Aegon just smiled. "Did I say I was finished yet?"

"Let him talk, Jaqen," Daario admonished the Lorathi, arms folded to his chest, keen eyes on the Prince.

Aegon the Sixth continued. "About six leagues away from Braavos, Pentoshi and Tyroshi Fleets will move their hulls, sail behind. The Titan will obstruct the Volantenes, hinder them from entering the city. Let's be truthful though, the Titan could only hold the ships back for so long. Pentos and Tyrosh therefore, will provide necessary rear blockade, ambush Volantene ships from behind, trap it. There's nowhere else to go since two fleets will close in on their ships, and there's the Titan and the Arsenal to the front."

Aegeus nodded with approval, exhaled at the intricacies of Aegon's plans. Daario smiled, impressed.

Jaqen was unconvinced.

"One problem," the Lorathi said. "You may convince Daenerys about your motive for building an entire fleet, but Aristide Antaryon is another story. You're right, he does have difficulties trusting Targaryens—Valyrians in general, a given thing. The terms you set in the agreement consisted of a huge loan from the Iron Bank, and an arranged marriage alliance with Arya Stark to secure the North. Should the Lady Arya refuse—"

"Oh?" Aegon the Sixth was amused. "Should the Lady Arya refuse? Let me tell you one thing, Jaqen," the Prince stood right in front of the Lorathi, folded his arms on his chest. The stately, monarchical elegance was gone, replaced by pure and simple machismo. "Earlier today, she did warn me not to trust you."

The Lorathi's expression had turned hellish. The entire gallery suddenly reeked of blood and death.

Aegeus interjected. "Your proposals are excellent, your grace. We must all head back inside, best course."
His suggestion was ignored. Jaqen spoke with a tone ominous. "She said that?"

Aegon clicked his tongue, feigning guilt at having offended the Lorathi. "I'm afraid she did. I do have a better proposal though, my friend." The mocking tone and mien disappeared asudden, replaced by an expression of rationality. "You are an excellent strategist, and you know about how dragons move in battle. I need you."

The Lorathi chuckled. "That quick?"

"Yes," the Prince replied. "Swallow your damnable pride for the time being. Man to man. We could slaughter each other for the Lady Arya's affection after this war. Surely, we could set aside our hardened cocks for a while and conspire against Valyria for your Braavos and my Westeros."

Despite himself, Jaqen saw perfect reason in Aegon the Sixth's machinations. And if it would only be his obsession for Arya that would hinder him from collaborating with the Targaryen Prince, then he had learned naught in his decades of training from the House. And in this order, a Faceless Man must serve—to Him of Many Faces, to the Secret City that nurtured him, to Men that paid the price, with the exception of the Self. There was his contempt against a clearly strong rival for the Stark girl, his instinct to kill and taste blood, his bruised ego due to admission that the lad's plans may well be the most realistic and judicious as of the time being.

He heaved a sigh and concurred, though temporarily. "Realms first."

Aegon the Sixth Targaryen held out his arm. Jaqen H'ghar nodded, acknowledged it by extending his own.

"Careful though," Aegon said. "Speak to no one about all these. It is known that those Valyrian lords have eyes and ears everywhere."

The four spoke of other plans.

Supper consisted of almond soup, roasted lamb and sauce, leavened bread and a selection of other pastries, an assortment of cheese, ale. Conversations were generally congenial, the ambience, favorable. Even the Lorathi and the Targaryen who just had their verbal fracas earlier both seemed to be in the most pleasant of moods since the envoy's arrival in Pentos. They rarely spoke to each other, but hostility had faded significantly.

Arya Stark reveled silently in the temporary truce between the assassin and the prince.

Food was sumptuous but swallowing it was a struggle. Eyes of both men were fixated on her the whole time, and they watched her every breath and blink, unmindful of the unease she was already feeling. Fare was served minutes ago, yet their food remained untouched. As if she was bread and butter, as if absorbing themselves in all that she is would give them dire sustenance, they carried on with their ogling.

Aegon's stares were enraptured, too infatuated. Arya Stark was Valyrian steel to him—precious yet deadly, not to be manhandled, strong and striking. Dark Sister heeds her commands; she might be from the blood of Warrior Queens.

Jaqen's were reflective of obsessive love and wantonness, delusion. To his eyes, Arya Stark is that sublime marbled statue he had seen many times in Lys—a naked woman bathing, and the waters of the fount where she stood gushed all over her perfect nudity. On that same fount was another statue
of a naked woman nourishing her babe through her bosoms. *Dragons heed her very call. All Warrior Queens came from her womb.*

She cursed them for all their thoughts of her, and cursed herself too, for she could very clearly read them.

The clattering sound of silverware against porcelain disrupted repartees among those others seated. Arya Stark regarded both men with disdain, her eyes cruising from Aegon to Jaqen. "For sakes, let me eat in peace."

"Forgiveness," Aegon the Sixth murmured and began partaking in silence. Jaqen drank from his goblet, met Arya's hard stare. He leaned pompously against the seat's rest, with a corner of his mouth tipped up, as he surveyed the girl from crown to bosom.

After dinner, Arya headed to Sabine's chamber. The woman had just finished bathing, and was wearing a silken, tiffany robe when the girl entered. "I am not dressed decently," the woman had told her. Arya closed the door and secured the latch, waved her hand in dismissal. "I have seen Bellegere Otherys in the nude hundreds of times."

They sat in front of a mirrored chiffonier. The girl was braiding the woman's wavy locks. "Your hair strands are dainty, Sabine. Almost like spider's web, only gold."

The woman smiled. "The Black Pearl did quite a splendid job of training you. Now you know of plaits and styles—perfect ways to forget about the daggers and poisons for a while."

"Yes," the girl replied. She tightened the weave, made another pattern, this time a delicate knit. "Forgive me for being too forward, but I think Aegeus *likes* you. Too much." Arya snorted as if entertained, shook her head. "He might even be in love with you."

Sabine laughed softly. The erotic madness last night with the comely one surged through her recollections. "Is he now?"

"He never did shut up about you when you were...you know," Arya carried on with her grapevines. "He was too devastated when you were gone for a bit, but there was the draught of course, so that lessened his grief."

The woman smiled at Arya's words, thought it best to digress. "And Jaqen is too possessed by you, I believe."

A scoff. "Jaqen likes me, of course—he likes kissing me and touching me all over. He likes leaving me abed afterwards too, when he's done and I've already fallen asleep. And oh, did I mention that he also likes discomposing me in front of Aegon the Sixth? He likes to keep me in the dark about himself and that death god, he likes seeing me kill myself in worry that he might summon that firebeast of his any time."

The woman heaved a sigh. *Must be now. She is unraveling all little by little.*

"I have seen things, Arya." Sabine directed her gaze to the girl's reflection. Their eyes locked upon each other in that mirror. "They were all projections of the mind but those projections are inaccurate. Still, when you have unlocked hidden realms through that glass candle, you have allowed us all to understand the mechanics of time." The girl narrowed her eyes at her, nodded nevertheless. "These things I have divulged to the three just the night prior: the forking path, the temple and the Songs—"

"I know all about that forking path," Arya cut in. She pretended to occupy herself once more with her braiding. "Aegeus told me all about how it works. We don't quite know how it existed in the first
place, or why. He warned me to not tell Jaqen about my knowledge of it." Carefully, she tied one cerulean ribbon at the base of the braid to hold the locks together. "That's Aegeus though. If I may be allowed to ask, what would you have me do?"

Sabine sighed. "That depends. What do you plan to do with what you know?"

"I love Jaqen H'ghar, Sabine," Arya declared. Voices break like crystals colliding with huge stones, so she stilled herself. "It's breaking me apart, this love for him. There was the shierak qiya, and the pages too, the core memories in the Crux. When I gained access to Jaqen's memories, I saw him turning the realms upside down in search of me. There was our saga in the days of Valyria and Rhoyn, he was killed but they say he never died—a grace of the death god perchance, but even that is unclear. He sought me out, lived and relived Jaqen H'ghar's life since in every realm he somehow...loses me. Either I run from him, or I take a different course, or the conclusion in every damn tangle I'm in alters the possible life he desires for the both of us. Can you believe how many times I have thrown that iron coin which he has given me? And in different places at that? And so he tries again and again; and in every cycle he's giving up facets of his core being to the god." Arya wrapped her arms around the woman's frame, she needed to assuage herself. She rested her chin on Sabine's shoulder, held back her tears. The woman held the girl's hands tight. "I have loved him...even more because of what he did. But then, you have mentioned time in West of Westeros, its anomalies. The mind plays tricks, but assumptions cannot be helped, can they? Since Aegeus's revelations, I have asked myself these. If Jaqen had traversed the paths of the realms, did he know what was going to happen to me, to the Starks on the way to the North, and did not tell me or think to warn me about all of it? Were his decisions to hide my family's death influenced by his selfish want to be with me? Did the Elder know, too?"

Sabine stood up and walked behind Arya. Reassuringly, she embraced the girl from behind, kissed her hair softly. "Jaqen H'ghar is mad about you. You have questions, and you know that you can always ask him about these. Fear holds you back, you might not like the answers. Still," she combed the girl's hair with her fingers. "It is better than punishing yourself with cruel speculations. If you want my opinion, Arya, I don't think he had always known about what would happen to the Starks. He might have known about it once, but that is all. All Faceless Men's memories are excised and safekpt in the Crux once they are ordained—Game of Faces, sweet girl."

"How did the memories return to him then? It was prior to me entering the Crux."

"The memories, the dreams returned when the dragonlords have frayed the fabric separating this realm from the others. The obsidian palantir did that too. A most important query, you have been evading it," the woman said. "What do you plan to do with your knowledge of West of Westeros, Arya?"

The fear is not born out of a possible suffering. She had walked barefoot on the path of affliction before, and she had by some inexplicable favor from those who are higher, survived in a manner that was beyond her understanding. The fear stems from being forced to choose between two different paths. If she chooses one, she will lose the other. One choice may lead to a range of possible outcomes.

Her decision may be unbreakable.

"After all these, I want them back, the Starks," the girl said. She looked at the Waif from the mirror once more. "And I want Jaqen with me there."

The woman held her tighter, and her chin was now on the girl's crown. In Sabine's eyes were warmth and solace. Truth does not sting.
It wrecks.

"No, Arya. You cannot choose both. This is Jaqen H'ghar's last cycle."

Arya gasped. There are spaces between chaos and order—chances. And the girl knew it. If he fails in this realm, he fails. In all others. Or it might be, that in all other realms, he just does not exist anymore.

Jaqen...

"How?" she asked. Denial is the best course. "Versions of realms, versions of the Self, Sabine."

"You have mentioned it before; in every cycle, he surrenders a fragment of himself," the woman answered. "Tell me, Arya. If you see another you in this realm, face to face, what would be your initial thoughts? Acting by instinct is the purest form of response."

Arya did not have to think hard. "I know that I am who I am. I own my consciousness, my existence. I possess solid history, set of experiences, memories. I am Arya Stark. My Faceless instincts would dictate that the other one is merely wearing the face of Arya Stark. My face."

"Faceless instincts, very good," the Waif said. "Be consistent though, a Faceless Man would know if someone else is merely wearing his or her face. Not every person is Faceless, however. Other people may rely only on what they see. 'I am me, but there's that other one who is also me. I am looking in her eyes right now.' The assumption is you are aware, or were made to be aware, of the existence of another you, another Self—same yet different."

"Very well," Arya replied. "I know that I am who I am. I would think that the other person is a masquerader. No two Arya Starks can exist in the same realm. Or if she is my other Self, then she is in the wrong realm."

"That 'impostor', named so based on your own subjective thoughts, that other Self was indeed from another realm, traveled perhaps to be where you are and for purposes unknown to you," the Waif went on. "What would be your course of action?"

"Two," said she. "Dismiss the whole thing as an apparition. Speak with her," she shook her head, exhaled. "I cannot speak with myself about myself…"

"Why can't you? You already said that no two Arya Starks can exist in the same realm. If you found out that the other is not just a ghost of you, or a projection, but you you, would you still speak with her?" the girl nodded at the woman's query. "If so, you may decide to interrogate her, but I can only think of three questions: Who are you? Are you real? Why are you here?"

"The Self would say, 'I am Arya Stark,' and 'Yes, I am real,' and…" she stood and paced the room. "Why am I there with myself? What would lead me to want to meet my other Self?"

Sabine observed the girl as she traipsed back and forth, deeply addled. Better the pangs of truth than the comforts of a lie. For ages, there was the conspiracy of Faceless Men to be silent about the death god. Now there's this one truth that will ram all others. "To alter the course—your own words. You have succeeded in your transference from one realm to the next, but no one can have two versions of the Self in the same realm. One may challenge the other's existence, hinder the other's continuance, worst, completely transform the others personhood and everything within and beyond it. One does not even have the right to be there—it's usurpation. What would it mean for you, then?"

Arya Stark had stopped pacing the room. There was only one thing to do; and fools have said that it is a great consolation. There are many a shadowy night, and such an act would end the murk and
allow a silver lining through. The wise would say it is selfishness.

She looked at the Waif, and her lips were quivering. Her eyes burned, and repeatedly, she cursed herself.

"No…"

The woman smiled, albeit with melancholy. "Yes, Arya. He did it to himself."

The girl could almost hear him speaking:

Who are you?

No One.

You're not No One. You and I, 'we' are Jaqen H'ghar.

I am you, you are me. Indeed. 'We' are Jaqen.

Why are you here?

To right a wrong.

What wrong?

Don't ask, you will never know it.

This is what it meant to give up fragments of the self to the death god. Jaqen H'ghar had tried and failed to re-live the cycles, usurped the realms of his other selves, attempted to achieve an end which he had always hoped for. And since no two versions of selves can exist in the same realm, only one of them must survive.

Over and over, Jaqen had killed himself, his other selves to be exact—in the literal sense. Over and over, he had died.

To kill the Self to end the pain is cowardice. But to kill the Self to experience the pain time after time, and still live with hope that things will turn out differently?

For Arya Stark, this was courage—the darkest kind.

To be with me.

It was Jaqen's voice once more in the godswood.

Say it now, lovely girl. Is it Joffrey?

Tricked him, she did this. The name came forth from her lips with ease, 'Jaqen H'ghar', for only death may pay for life. He had his dagger ready when she uttered his name, but he had begged her too.

'Lovely girl, unsay my name and choose another, and let us cast this mad dream aside.'

Even as a young girl, Arya Stark had a very limited understanding of devotion. "…and if we go to war, the Manderlys, the Mormonts, the Glovers, the Reeds, all sworn houses will take up their arms and banners and fight with us?" she had asked Ned Stark once. They were in the gods' pool, and he was whetting the House's greatsword. "Yes," her lord father had answered. "That they will do, and
die with us, *for us*, should it come to that." Now, she had keener comprehension of what vows entail, and the honor that comes with it. But in wars where liege lords march with their vassals, the enemies are other Houses that bear a different sigil.

*Jaqen treated his own Self as enemy, saw it as a hindrance to his causes and hopes. Killed it, died. Repeatedly.*

Slowly, she walked to Sabine and sat on the carpeted floor nearest to her. Arya laid her cheek on the woman's lap, battled against gales of emotions that were threatening to rip her apart. She couldn't swallow, she couldn't breathe…

"Jaqen…" she whispered. "Jaqen…"

With much care, the woman stroked the girl's locks. "Yes, sweet girl. The man is so in love; it's just that he does have a terrible way of showing it. Oh, Arya Stark…you have named him, do you remember?"

"I do," Arya whispered, and now a solitary tear fell from her eye to the woman's skirt. "In Harrenhal, in Valyria."

"You have named him for death, then for life."

*I love him. So very much, Sabine."

"Of course, Arya," the woman held her chin, lifted her face so she could see her. "So never give him up to the death god that awaits him in hood's path. You have become his cause, you have earned the right to him. You cannot lose him this time. By some higher purpose, prophecies have brought you together, and we know that the Songs were not written by the death god's hands. They were from the hands of an Asshaii—a high mage."

"I-Is he in the temple?" Arya queried.

"Yes."

The girl nodded. In her dreams she would always see his facelessness—a gift so flawless that the death god cannot see through his glamour. Whatever plans he has for the Order, they must unlock these at the soonest.

*Akhrast L'ris. Slave. High mage to the lords of Valyria, and he betrayed them, catalyzed the Doom.*

*The Elder.*

"What are his plans, Sabine? Do you know?"

Sabine shook her head. "Not as of yet. What we do know is he is orchestrating, preparing the way for the Promised, the one that you will aid, Arya."

*The Promised.*

"The faces, Sabine…"

"Hush."

*Clang.*

Both of them stood.
The first metal bolt securing the door to their chamber had been opened from the outside. It was impossible of course, unless sorcery was used, for the inside locks do not require any sort of key. The sound of iron against wood was menacing.

Three seconds passed before the second bolt was opened.

"Get behind me," the Waif calmly said. She hastily pulled out two daggers from the sheaths attached to both of her legs. She tightened her grip on each hilt. "Don't move, unless I tell you otherwise."

"Who might be outside?" The girl asked in a hushed tone.

"I don't know. You have your daggers?"

"Yes."

"I'm here, Arya."

"I know."

The door's slow creak was agonizing. Both held their breaths. Where were the three other Faceless? Were they not guarding the manse at all? With the threats they are facing, one form of magic against another, no one can be that lenient over matters of safety.

Sabine held her daggers in a throwing stance, as light from outside crawled slowly into the relatively darker chamber. The door's opening widened another fraction, and even with incandescence from the hung sconces of candles in the hall, light was not able to cast the intruder's shadow.

Arya adjusted her position. She must be behind the woman as she was ordered, but within a certain angle she must be, so she could hurl her daggers to the unwelcomed guest at any time, and act as the Waif's buttress should it all come to close combat.

The threshold was now half-open. The wooden door creaked as its hinges moved.

A fraction wider.

Very slowly, the figure stepped into the room.

A Faceless Man.

It was Aegeus.

With a quick wave of his hand, the door shut itself, though it remained unlocked.

"Oh, gods!" Sabine exhaled in relief, as she placed the daggers down. "What is the matter with you men and knocking on doors before entering them?!"

The girl replaced her daggers in their scabbards and sighed irritatedly.

Aegeus's eyes were on Sabine only, as he hastily removed the strap that attached his swordbelt to his upper torso. He unlocked the belt's pop rivet, threw both longswords on the floor carelessly. Both swords landed with sonorous metallic jangles. It was as if Arya does not at all exist in that chamber, and she did ask herself if it was indeed the case, if not for the comely one's stern orders to her though his eyes he kept locked upon Sabine's face.

"Get out of our room, Stark. You've had your time with my wife." Arya cringed as he began untying the soft knots of his tunic. He removed the shirt and threw it on the floor, and the girl raised both
brows at the man's lean body and the sparse hair covering his chest. "We have obligations to each other."

His fingers were now unlacing his breeches.

Arya had started walking towards the door when Sabine caught her hand, as if ordering her to stay where she is. The woman stared back at the comely one, as she too, pulled the laced knot securing her robe.

The girl gasped as Sabine removed the robe unabashedly. Now, she stood there in front of Aegeus, naked as the day she was born.

*They have been sleeping with each other.*

The man's lip tipped up. There was lewdness in his eyes as he devoured the naked woman with his stares from crown to sole. Aegeus's mouth was partly open, and his tongue was toying with the inside of his cheeks. His exhalations were too audible.

"We're going out," the woman declared. She turned his back to him, walked to the wardrobe, and rummaged for some decent raiments. "There's the Festival of Flames in the capital today. I have not seen much of Pentos yet." She clothed herself with a soft gown of willowy skirts. "The night is long. I will fulfill my wifely obligations upon our return." She turned her head to the comely one, smiled coyly. "Yes, my lord husband?"

In three steps, he had crossed the distance between himself and the woman. He pinned her against the wardrobe, ravaged her lips with such wildness that the girl thought he was going to wolf down Sabine's whole face. His right hand massaged the woman's breast and its tip, as his lower body moved against her sensuously. Both were moaning against each other's mouth. Arya Stark's mouth fell open at the stirring display her two masters were putting on in front of her. *Too gentle,* the girl thought as he observed Aegeus's style. *Jaqen is always rough in romance. Ah, Sabine seems to like it anyway, so there's that.*

"Two hours," Aegeus whispered to Sabine. The woman only laughed. "And bring your daggers with you." He shifted his attention to Arya. "No shenanigans, Stark; or I'll tell your loving master."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Where is he anyway?"

"He has duties."

"Let's go, Arya," Sabine said, securing the last of her gown's laces and examining herself in the wardrobe's glass. She turned to Aegeus and planted a soft kiss on the side of his lips, spoke in Rhoynar. "Keep an eye on Jaqen, will you?"

He nodded. "Keep an eye on Arya."

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The Festival of Flames is celebrated once every four years in Pentos, roughly a week after the dawn of the first full blood in the night sky. Followers of the faith of the red god view the hunter's moon as prophetically ominous—a harbinger of looming war and bloodbath; and so flames are befriended, displayed, adulated in all manners in order to appease the god so he may deliver the city from unfavorable turn of events. Some Pentoshi, those whose ancestral roots can be deeply traced back to the Century of Blood, would observe the festival with a different aim in mind. To them, it is a form of open mockery to the then powerful Valyrian Freehold, the lords and their beasts—*We do not fear*
fire.’. In the writings of Gessio Haratis, the founding of Pentos predates the expansion of Valyrians, contrary to claims that it was discovered by dragonlords.

What Arya Stark saw was a sea of flames.

In the center, a giant torch was lit, bathing each intermediate direction with bright orange radiance. Nightfall was transformed to daylight, as large flambeaus adorned the city's brick walls. There were fire dancers with their flaming darts and fans and whips, performing graceful pirouettes in the midst of a celebratory crowd. Twirling fire staffs and devil sticks, dragon cuffs, flaming chains and snakes were all over the vicinity. A group of Pentoshi were gathered around a fireword exhibit amongst three, while some fire eaters served as divertissement to children as they put tips of flaming smalltorches in their mouths and produced large breaths of fire.

"Look, Arya!" Sabine had pulled her from the stands. The woman clapped her hands in childlike delight. "Flamethrowers!"

Large blazing hoops were artfully heaved ten to fifteen feet from the ground and caught by able hands, passed from one to another. Flames emitted vivid radiance of fiery red and luminous yellow, as glowing embers are blown from the hoops by the soft winds of approaching wintertide. The heat meshed with the chill.

People hooted and whistled at the splendorous display, and the festivity was verily an unparalleled craft in its own right.

For the girl, it was all din, ruckus, and blinding confusion.

Rain fire! Rain fire!

In her eyes, everything seemed to move infinitely slow. Was she being sucked into a void without her knowledge? Her senses detached themselves from her conscious thoughts as she only heard the sound of her own heavy respirations. Despite the wintry air, beads of sweat had formed on inches upon inches of her skin. Her gaze turned east…then west…and she shook her head, shut her eyes to get rid of the images. Conflagration…smoke…

Burning.

Hot spells.

Inferno—the world of dragons.

Jaqen H'ghar's world.

"Calm as still water," Arya Stark whispered to herself. "Ripples of the pool by the godswood, silent waves of the Rhoyn, snow…snow…"

She was deaf to everything else but to the hammers of her heart.

Flashes of it returned to her reminscences, like a sudden surge. Burnt bodies, soot, outrage, screaming spirits. The Second Spice War fought by Rhoyn against the firelords of Valyria.

The vision was so clear, the sounds were clarion and sharp and shrill. Memories are nothing but nightmares.

There was the voice of Haresh Esdraelon on the other side of the walls of water which she had built to defend her Rhoynish kin. His voice was hellborn and it spoke of doom. That night was the night
when the old gods and the red god battled through them.

*She has the blood of dragonriders in her hands, Aurion.*

... the wall is imperceptible, it's constructed through vapor. We cannot see the other side.

As soon as I figure out how to break through it, I will call death on that cursed water enchantress...

Arya Stark pulled her hair with both hands, as she tried to calm her now desultory breathing. *Haresh was supposed to kill Nymeria*...The girl slowly sank on the ground, weak and wretched. *I must go back to where it all began...I must.*

"Arya," Sabine called her. "You are not well." The woman helped her up, felt her neck's warmth through the back of her hand. "Your sweat is too cold. Come, let us head back to the manse."

She nodded and began walking away from the flaming displays and the pandemonium. Three steps, four. Something caught her eye.

*That tent.*

"No, Sabine," Arya said, gazing at the woman. "Not the manse. There." She pointed a finger to that familiar canvas.

*I see a lot in you, Nymeria. I didn't even have to look at the cards. Tragic.*

With quickened steps, she reached the tent. The flap was open, there was nobody else inside but one. Face to face, the girl saw her again—the Qohorik soothsayer. The *Reader*.

She was arranging her divination scrolls, and it seems as if she was done for the night. The wooden cards lay in a neat pile on top of her table of azure linen. The Reader was too occupied to even notice the presence of two others in her very tent.

When she looked up and recognized the girl's face, the old woman was filled with sudden horror. Frightened ululations escaped from her throat. This girl...this girl smelled of demise. Hood's breath, eternal nightfall, blood, the path of death—all these, all these.

"Y-you," the Reader began, and the tremble in her voice was too palpable that it made the girl shiver with quick terror. "You are cruel to have come into my tent! D-dark child! Depart from here, begone!"

"I will not leave until you tell me something I must know about those three cards. Your messages were obscured," Arya demanded through clenched teeth. "Your readings have enlightened me and ruined me all the same!"

"You will get nothing from me!"

Hastily, the Reader reached for a small chest. In her urgency, she dropped the box and from it came out a small throwing knife. *Kill her*, the old woman commanded herself. *Kill her if she cannot be forced to leave*...curses and profanities, as she scrambled to pick up the weapon.

One dagger whisked past the sibyl and landed solidly on the wooden repository that was behind her.

Drops of blood trickled from the old woman's cheek. The cut was no longer than an inch, and was not at all deep. Still, she shuddered at the dexterity of the thrower. Realization kicked in—either she succumbs to the girl's wishes, or she faces her own ruination.
"You are fortunate," the Waif spoke as she walked closer to the Reader. "That dagger from my hand was sterile, it was not dipped in poison. Still, daggers have sharp edges and pointy ends that kill. Forgive us. If you do not wish to breathe your last tonight, better listen to the girl."

The Reader did not have to think twice.

Sabine drew forth a globule of fresh blood from Arya's forefinger through her other dagger. From the knife's tip, the Reader took her taste of the girl's scarlet. Then, began the oracle.

"M—many things…many things…"

"It would be wise to start."

"T-the faces in that temple of yours," she began with a quivering voice. "T-they belong to dead souls in the Shadowlands, a-a-and they are necessary for those spirits to be stilled. They cannot enter the courts of your god; they roam around the Ash, and the high mages, shadowbinders cannot contain them all. The faces are being kept, concealed wrongly but for an end that is right. Your death god is displeased! Someone…someone of yours."

"Those faces must be returned to the dead," Arya Stark concluded with calm, though aghast she was at the revelation. "The Faceless Men are keeping those faces for a reason, not just to use them as masks for a kill?" The girl turned to the Waif. The latter only nodded her understanding. She shifted her attention back to the old woman. "What more can you see? Why is the Order creating an amassment of faces? Why do they take the faces of the dead?!"

The Reader sat on her cushioned chair weakly. She beheld the girl with fright. "I see shadows. I see spirits. I see Four—the gods. Old, red, many-faced, chaos." She shut her eyes, placed her trembling hands on her kept scrolls. "Hierophant, you are the Bringer of those Four. Through you and another, their war will be fueled. The faces…the faces must be kept, for if those spirits repossess their faces, then they will be allowed to pass through the gates of Stygai. And no, no, they must not."

"Why not?" Arya Stark took steps towards the woman. "Stop speaking in riddles."

The Reader opened her eyes once more, allowed them to cruise through the Waif's face, then the girl's. "Even the greatest thaumaturges do not speak of it. Shadowbinders dare not enter its gates for demons are said to dwell in there. Fourscore centuries ago, the old gods and the red god had… chained a deity inside Stygai. That deity brings Chaos…a spouse to Death. The creatures of the night were spawned through their union, thus, the very first Long Night." The shudders have not disappeared. She pressed on. "L-learned men dismiss lore and magic. Hearken this, now. Chaos feeds on spirits taken forcibly from their mortal bodies. The deity that lies in the heart of Stygai would reclaim power and unchain himself, take a host—a body. Spirits that are faceless cannot enter through the gates; Death needs both name and face."

'No One' knows what lies in the heart of Stygai.

"As long as the faces are kept in the sanctum, those spirits will not be able to fuel Stygai's energies," the Waif supplied. She exhaled in shock. "So this means that the Faceless Men are counteracting the dictates of the death god? The Order is moving against the true edicts of the deity? Their actions are dissonant with the Creed, except for assassinations."

A nod from the Reader. "For centuries, yes. The edicts of your god of death are…nothing but atrocious, after all."

Heart of Winter. Heart of Darkness.
Bran's messages through that raven with the third sight...in my dreams.

The Waif was now pacing in the tent, clutching her chest. The woman appeared betrayed. She had seen those visions when she ventured behind the curtains, but only now did those visions assume a more concrete form.

"The death god is the god of Winter," Arya Stark claimed through clenched teeth. Game of faces, truths and lies, rites, faiths, codes, texts—nothing is true inside that damned temple. *Even the Songs*...she thought. "The wights came from her womb, and from the seed of that chained god in Stygia. Horrendous."

*One behest, lovely girl. Do not make me choose between you and the death god.*

Arya took two strides to get to the Reader. Forcefully, she slammed her hand on the wooden table where the scrolls lay. The old woman almost cowered at the act. "What will happen if the mages of the Ash cannot contain those roaming faceless spirits anymore?"

"There is only one place for them to go, Arya. The demons and the wights," the Waif offered. "Realms of men."

"Who are the orchestrators? Who decided to keep those faces in the sanctum?" Arya hissed. "Who will be the *host* of that chained god?"

Arya found herself running past thickets, past a grove of willow trees. Darkness inhabited the woodlands in the outskirts of the city's eastern gates.

She willed her feet to move as fast as was humanly possible, though she felt her chest exploding. No time to pause to breathe to think…

*Hah...hah...*  

Sounds of sporadic inhales and exhales mingled with the sounds of broken twigs and crushed leaves beneath her feet. Her face and clothes were caught by the willows' dangling branches and leaves, as if mocking her precipitancy. She forcefully pushed them out of her way and sprang forth. It was as if her feet had wings, for she felt herself almost gliding in rush.

The girl took a sprint past one coppice to another, and her feet carried her to a shallow stream. There were large rocks scattered all over the rivulet for the crossing, but she chose to move against the soft gush, wetting her breeches and boots. She reached the edge, ran.

Before the Reader could answer her last queries, her Queller had lit up.

From the Reader's lips were horrified laments as her glassy eyes reflected the Queller's radiance. "Dark child, dark child..." were her pronouncements. Sabine looked at her with questioning eyes, and attempted to touch the Queller. The pendant came in contact with the woman's breathing skin.

She gasped, pulled her hand back asudden. The scarlet stone seemed to be afire from the inside and it scalded the Waif's skin.

"Arya...what is happening?" she had asked.

The girl shut her eyes, inhaled. Her fingers closed in on the pendant, and her pulsing blood
intensified its already vivid phosphorescence. There it was again—the commands of Aurion
Archestrad, cadre dragonrider of the Freehold's legion of three hundred firebeasts.

Rain fire! Rain fire!

Arya Stark shuddered at the forgotten chronicles.

"Imperial dragon, here in Pentos…"

"Jaqen's?"

"No."

The flames in the center may have drawn the beast in the city. Dragons are always attracted to fire,
the way prey is to a trap. Except that in this case, a colossal beast of fire made flesh is never the prey.
It is the one that hunts and kills, burns cities to the ground and annihilates people by the hundreds.

She had ignored the Waif's desperate, almost frantic call. "Arya, no!" The girl had already gone out
of the tent and had darted through the mayhem. The thick crowd and bedazzling albeit beclouding
display of fire had concealed her from the woman's eyes. She scampered in all directions till she
reached the backwoods.

Large prop roots that were aboveground caught her feet. She stumbled facedown against the damp
dirt. Arya struggled to lift herself up, and examined her left foot. "Ah!" she screamed in excruciation
as she tried to move it. A tear at the sinews, still she must proceed…she rose and found herself
plummeting down that declivitous terrain, rolling in descent, crashing hard against a large rock that
stood steadily by an oak, stealing wind from her lungs.

She coughed and retched, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Arya wrestled against the
ground, held on to that large rock that had earlier broken her fall, forced herself upright. Jaqen…
Jaqen…her heart wailed. The Queller is both conjurer and conjured and it possesses strong bond
with all firebeasts even in the presence of their riders, and it was leading her to one with glittering
cerulean scales—a dragon whose lord is also a hatcher. And perhaps, it is here.

Varathis.

Limping, she struggled with her best to move forward, deaf and blind to everything else except for
the commands of ancient rune from her pendant. Concealments must be unraveled, the diaspora of
Valyrian descendants will soon end, and if it happens before they have taken control of or defeated
fully the firebeasts of the lords of Old, regression will be irreversible.

Your name is Jaqen…you are Jaqen H'ghar.

Perchance it took her ages, but she had reached it finally—the eastern waterfront of the Narrow Sea
where few private ships sail. The harbor is almost unused, no doubt because of rumors that pirate
vessels navigate this part of the bay.

Most agreeable for some, especially for those who are planning illicit reconciliations.

Arya Stark hid behind a thick mass of overgrown shrubbery and saw Jaqen H'ghar.

His back was turned to her, but his locks of scarlet-and-ivory were unmistakable. Waves reached his
feet but he paid the surge no mind, and his eyes were directed towards the skies, as if anticipating an
arrival.
Cautiously, she took steps forward to reveal herself, to ask Jaqen about his presence in this isolated part of Pentos. Other questions—countless of these too, regarding the Reader's sibylline declarations about the Order and the gods.

Arya Stark forced herself to take a halt at the sound of frightful cries and wings slicing through the air like one giant cutlass. The glimmering scales were turquoise or indigo, depending on the angle of moonlight that hits them. It twice circled the heavens before descending upon the ground with a deafening thud. Its thunderous landing sent wild gusts of sandstorm in the air, as its seven claws anchored themselves deep in the dusty terrain.

Jaqen H'ghar was unperturbed.

Moments later, a woman dismounted herself from the beast with a graceful leap. Her lips formed a teasing smile upon seeing the Lorathi. She traipsed to where he stood, with her floor-length silver hair forming soft patterns upon the sand. An impeccable statuary, and Arya Stark had never beheld such kind of beauty prior to seeing that woman—brutal and hellish—as if she feeds on marrows of men to sustain herself; beauty nevertheless.

Her hips swayed, her lips moved in a manner seductive as they formed words in High Valyrian.

"Ilon rhaenagon arlì."

We meet again.

He faced the woman, replied in a tone amused:

"Daxen, se lensor hen Ophistor."

Arya Stark gasped. Daxen. The female dragonrider—hatcher of the four beasts, including Jaqen's.

The Valyrian woman's laughter was one crawling lady of the night. Her steps ensphered the Lorathi, and in close scrutiny, with self-indulgence even, she regarded him. Four breaths collided with bracing air as the gods observed that fateful reunion amongst a man, a woman, a beast, and the girl that acted as witness to it all.

Once more, she stood in front of Jaqen, brushed his hairlocks with bare fingers. The scarlet hue faded at her touch, as if her hands carried enchantments that purify. Ten centuries ago, the second dragonrider was executed through dragonfire for his treacherous acts against the Freehold, though not before his locks were bathed with his own Valyrian blood. He never died, the gods saw to that. And when the Mother Freehold calls, all descendants—faithful and traitors alike—must heed and obey.

What appeared to Arya Stark was a man with Jaqen's face, but with hair of silken silver.

Haresh Esdraelon.

The woman spoke whilst her forefinger traced his lower lip.

"Gevie hae va moriot, ah, ŋuha ojūdan jorrāelagon."

Jaqen H'ghar chuckled richly at the statement.

Beautiful as always, my lost love.

Arya Stark gripped the fabric of her breeches tight upon seeing the woman kiss Jaqen lightly on the
lips. Had she woken up and faced torment, or was she still dreaming? *Yes, you may kiss me and touch me and feel not a thing in your heart of stone,* the girl thought as she literally gasped for merciful wind for her lungs, as she struggled against dying. *But to break me again...when I have already shattered my own self for you...why? Why?*

A thousand blazes consumed the wholeness of her at Jaqen's next pronouncements:

"*Ao dōrī ojūdan nyke.*"

You never lost me.

She could remain there...and with her gifts, she could decipher much of the entanglements. Jaqen H'ghar—he was not in full command of his core being, his decisions, as there were dictates that are higher and stronger than one's own. The Lorathi is No One, and in this state of one's annihilation of the self, the person at times must desperately cling to an identity.

But to stay there and scourge herself with relentless whips of words and acts of them...to stay there may be the end of her.

Arya Stark stood abruptly and swallowed some more air. *Breathe, live...*she ordered herself. Within her, she held back the sound of agonized whimpers, as she took hasty steps, tried to break into a run.

Her foot was injured and so it failed her. She was collapsing once more...

Those strong arms were quicker than her fall. They caught her.

"Shush, Arya."

She buried her face in the soft, comforting fabric of his shirt. The girl latched on to his sleeves, drew herself the closest to him. Moments later, her arms were already coiled around him—*away with you, desolation,* her still sobs seemed to whisper. Arya Stark thought only of Jaqen H'ghar and his golden-bronze irises that had allowed her each and everytime to fall into the depths of his soul. Always, she plummets into the ambiguities of self-denial, and this she does with a trusting heart that Jaqen will be in the pit to save her.

Must she be the one to save him now?

Or did he not desire to be saved at all?

"Take me away...please..." she begged him.

"Hush, Arya. They are nigh. They will hear us."

Fragrance jewels and vanilla—she did not have to even look at his face. He is with her, and for the time being, that was *all* that mattered.

She whispered his name. "Aegon."

He locked her in the tightest embrace. "I'm here."

Slowly, she lifted her eyes to look at him. The Prince was listening to the two Valyrians, and shaking his head because he cannot make out half of their exchange. In Aegon the Sixth’s eyes were contempt at the scene he was witnessing, at the forerunners of it. His jaws were hard, as he gathered restraint in order to not act in rush.

Fate was less merciful to Arya, for she has heightened senses. Though they were a little far, her
Lorathi's words still rang in her ears like clarion harps, and they mangled her heart and mind, unceasing.

"Ivestragon Aurion bona ıksan kesîr."

Tell Aurion that I am here.

"Aegon…"

Arya Stark felt herself being lifted from the ground and carried to a white steed that awaits behind one huge water oak. Aegon the Sixth seated her on the packsaddle, mounted the horse, and settled behind her. He stroked the animal's mane and got a soft grunt in response. "Maghagon ilva naejot ǵhga dînagon," the Prince commanded the steed. Bring us to safety. She was bone-weary and beaten, unfeeling; she rested her head upon the Prince's shoulder and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Rest, Arya," she heard Aegon whisper. "You have been running the entire night."

She nodded, closed her eyes.

Aegon the Sixth kicked the horse's flank. "Hiya!"

Sounds of galloping hoops faded into the certain shadows of the dense woodlands.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! I really appreciate the comments especially in the last chapter (helps me know what you want, what works and what doesn't, how to improve, etc.). Just keep them coming, I love hearing from you. Hope you like this one! If there's anything unclear, leave them here in the comments section. ;D

1.) Okay, hints are dropped on the Songs, but if you already figured it out, sshhh. XD
2.) Clarifications on Jaqen's headsong. 'Burning bridges' here does not mean wanting out of a relationship. The bridge he had built for himself was symbolic of options, paths to take, products of uncertainty, finding sole purpose on Arya and Arya alone. It's a plea for rescue--I'm afraid of taking the first step, so can you please take a leap of faith for us both? Is Jaqen weak? Heavens, no. He had killed his other selves (himself, i.e) in various universes to be with Arya. <3 Anyway, more of those!

Thank you for reading. Much love!
"Even the best fall down sometimes...
Even the wrong words seem to rhyme...
Don't stop here, I lost my place."

When Love Becomes Too Much (Zefarisse Tree)

"Like the strongest of warriors, she must be,
If it is not time, she may keep her heart.
And it beats, it beats—
Thirty days, thirty nights.
Fifty, a hundred.
Water, beast.
Shattered steel.
Her heart."

Songs of the Faceless, XXXII (Lost leaf)

"Ao dōrī ojūdan nyke.

"You never lost me," Jaqen H'ghar had told the woman. "How can you lose someone you never had in the first place?"

The dragonrider raised her brows, smirked. "Your whore taught you to say that?"

"A man taught himself to say that," he replied, running his hand through his now silver hair. He examined its strands. "Another task a man must do—dye his hair scarlet once more. Silver locks, ah!" He gave the woman a mocking smile. "Not my style."

Daxen Ophistor folded her arms across her chest, scoured the Lorathi with a vile stare from head to foot. "You have no notion of it—style. Otherwise, you would have chosen to carry on the lineage with another Valyrian family instead of thrusting your hardened cock over and again into some Rhoynish queen's slave-cunt. Oh, Haresh dear, where is style in that?"

"Oh no, not Haresh Esdraelon," the Lorathi replied. "lāqaen Haegār. A man does not respond to Valyrian names anymore, especially to the name of one tortured and scorched to death." He narrowed his eyes as if recalling something. "Ah! Whether or not a person is styled or skilled is
verily dependent on the subjective observer, is it not? Take Āria for example—skilled in both magic and men; oh, you should have seen us in the old days, you could have learned a thing or two. You were skilled with dragons but never with riding dragonriders."

The woman laughed with amusement. "Oh, love! But do you not know that it is too difficult to please you with that pocket-sized cock of yours?"

"Curious," Jaqen H'ghar rubbed his lip with his thumb, shrugged. "You used to complain about how I always... what's the expression again? Ah, yes—'drown you to death' with my man-thing."

The woman smiled with derision. "Eat my cunt, lāqaen Haegār."

The Lorathi clicked his tongue in mock admonition. "Dirty mouth, as always. West of Westeros was warped but it did nothing to change at least a bit of you. Ivestragon Aurion ıksan kesīr. Tell your lord emperor that a man is here. Simple demand: temporary armistice for two moons. Within this period, a man will speak with him of possible terms to a treaty. Your supremacy to Valyria, leave Essos and Westeros to their rightful rulers. No dark mages, no slaves, no imperial expansion—"

"Drakarys naejot se embar," the woman said, cutting the Lorathi's exhortations.

At this command, the cerulean firebeast began spitting a whole deluge dragonfire onto the waters of the Narrow. In a matter of seconds, the flames had crawled and slithered along various directions and trajectories, as if the sea had allowed itself to be the fire's synergist. The waters were literally ablaze, and the strong currents of the Narrow did nothing to quell the sudden conflagration.

The command: dragonfire to the sea.

"You see, lāqaen Haegār," Daxen spoke, eyes riveted to the pyre that seemed to float on water. She smiled with contentment at the exhibit. "Imperial dragons cannot be so easily intimidated. During the days of Valyrian expansion, they set the terms and all others concede. True power lies in songs of fire, and a few chosen wielders of it."

"Your plans of rebuilding the Freehold and sacrificing slaves to Winter is utter shite," Jaqen said in response. "There are a thousand ways to conquer the Night and these courses are what a man wishes to discuss with Aurion Archestrad. This battle is greater than all of us; and unless the realms reach a concession that is beneficial to all, we will all be devoured by both Winter and Darkness," the Lorathi watched as the flames were slowly consumed by the waves, then turned his head back to the woman. "Valyria rebuilt included."

The woman's expression still reflected disparagement. "Your fault, Haresh Esdraelon. If only you have accepted your fate as was writ in the presages of L'ris the Firemage, then we could have ended Winter a thousand years ago, though I am far from a believer of it—it's all folly but it could have served the purposes of the Conclave. Neferion—kosh hen mele Jaes, still, you should have killed that whore. Instead, you acted as savior to that open-legged harlot of yours and her Rhynnish kin." She waved her hand, as if dismissing her earlier pronouncements. "What is the use? You always listen to that throbbing cock of yours anyway. And when you've had enough taste of your Valyrian women, you tiptoe to the slave shacks, and experiment with exotic cunts that are nothing but greasy and begrimed."

"You sound truly bitter, my love," Jaqen derided her.

A scoff, a disdainful glare from head to toe. "Slave women serve a single purpose—mating with animals in Gorgossos so the Freehold could be blessed with half-humans of immense power. This should have been the very role of your Nỳhmēria, Āria, your slut—whatever damnable name you
have for her. Interbreeding with a non-Valyrian. And I thought you could sink no lower."

"Better sink the lowest than find you on my bed every damned time," the Lorathi shrugged with nonchalance. He sighed. "Makes me want to blow grits."

The woman ignored his ridicule. "Aurion's demand: surrender and swear fealty to the Valyrian Empire, or Braavos, Lorath, Pentos, Tyrosh, Lys will be reduced to ashes. Five thousand slaves per city at the turn of the first moon. Trade, banks, merchantry, resources—two-thirds of acquired wealth will go straight to the Freehold. Abolish your military forces, slaveswords, sellswords, vassal armies, all. Persuade the Targaryens, too. This will not be some Century of Blood's child's play. We are speaking of great battles to come—Old Empire of Ghis, Rhoynish Wars, you know the works." The woman crossed the distance between her and the Lorathi and planted a soft kiss on his mouth. "And once we find that accursed whore of yours, we will break her precious bones to fragments, mutilate her in front of your treacherous face, and drink her blood."

At this, she turned her back to the Lorathi and mounted her firebeast.

"Sõvegon," came forth the dragonrider's command. The cerulean firebeast flapped its scaly wings and took off into the night sky.

Jaqen watched as the dragon Varathis disappeared into the horizon.

The lords will never accept any term set, this he knew. Their twisted minds were shaped by the slavers' ideologies dating five thousand years in the past. The roots sink deep, and deep roots as the wise would say, are never reached by either fire or frost. Reason is a concept that is beyond their understanding.

Recourse is necessary. The Mother Freehold's voice calls him home, and he cannot succumb to it. However, paths, even pronged ones, are limited and difficult to traverse. The only way to regain lost power is to reconnect with the old self that had once possessed it.

A summoning, a renewal of bond between firebeast and dragonrider.

Firmly, he held his Valyrian birthchain, stretched it to its full span. Its entire length was once more aglow upon contact with his pulsating flesh and blood alive, and bright embers flew forth from it, slightly subduing the shadows of evening's peak.

With one quick action, he lashed the air with the chain, as if it was whip in his hands. Its length that was then that of an outstretched arm was now, in feet, ten and eight. With dexterity, he swung it in gyrating motions to his east and west. During the imprinting of his blood upon that firebeast he had inherited from his clan, the chain he carried was his only weapon. The beast had then capitulated and bowed to his feet, though not without difficulty. He must do it once more.

Heraxos.

Jaqen H'ghar's still voice meshed with the now calm night. "Māzigon perzys dyni, aōha āeksio brōzas."

Come firebeast, your master calls.

He directed his gaze towards the firmaments and waited for that trace of gold.

A whole night—he would have to wait.
"Ah!"

"Forgive me."

"I-it's quite all right."

Arya Stark watched as Aegon the Sixth massaged her injured foot. He had placed healing salve on it, and the chrism had allowed his hands and fingers to perform smooth strokes on her horribly sprained ankle. "Tell me if it hurts when I knead it, yes?" He had told her.

Far from it.

The cream was cool to the skin, and for a while it had numbed the pain. His kneads were gentle and his touch was healing in itself.

They were in the manse of Prince Lysander of Pentos. Aegon thought it better to not head back to Illyrio's in light of what they have witnessed at the eastern bay. "That firebeast of ultramarine, Arya. I have seen it only in torn pages of 'Fires of the Freehold'. The maesters' copy lacked twenty-seven scrolls; only Targaryens have the complete set of Galendro's writings," Aegon had told her while helping her dismount from the horse earlier. The Prince carried her in a cradle from the manse's gates to the grand thresholds, and they were accompanied by four Astapori sellswords. They spoke to each other in High Valyrian in order to keep the contents of their conversation a secret. "Varathis—dragon of Daxen Ophistor. When she was three and ten, she hatched two other dragons, Ajax and Heraxos. She was kin to the Esdraelon clan and was supposed to marry Haresh, well…there were two other Valyrian women that dragonrider was supposed to wed of course, you know how their lot thought it fine to engage in polygamous relations."

Arya's jaw hardened. Great work, Jaqen. Three wives-to-be? A possible game of four in your marriage bed every damned night? And even with them you thought of taking in a Rhoynish slave concubine! She shook her head, exhaled emphatically. "Why do you think is she here?" the girl asked, though she was cognizant of the answer. "Why speak with Jaqen H'ghar at all?"

"That is what we must find out before we head back to Illyrio's and confront him," Aegon replied. "I have assumptions, and please do not think ill of what I will say."

"Speak."

Exchange of courtesies was carried out with the Prince Lysander, reasons—lies mostly—on why they cannot head back to Illyrio's for the time being. "Please," Lysander had told them. "No explanations necessary, your grace." They were led to the largest guestchamber, with complete provisions and other necessities. Servants were sent to attend to the Lady Arya's injury; Aegon dismissed them. "I will personally see to her needs, my ladies. Thank you." Arya smiled softly at the Prince's words. 'Lady', one title for a highborn, is now a designated style for all women, thanks to Aegon the Sixth.

When the servants were gone, he closed the door, turned to Arya who was then seated. "Bargaining for our cause," he said. The girl scoffed. "I know, Arya. Most of the time I rely on instincts—it is an untaught ability. At times you know what is true by the way it feels. This is what I feel," Aegon walked to her, held both of her hands. Their fingers intertwined. "I still trust Jaqen H'ghar."

"You are a fool, Aegon the Sixth," Arya said, breaking away from his grasp. "Blind too. That was not some apparition we saw! Jaqen was speaking to a living, breathing dragonrider, and you laid eyes on her gargantuan firebeast! How can you trust him even after all these?"
Aegon smiled softly. "All the while, you knew that Jaqen H'ghar is Haresh Esdraelon. You never told me." Arya gasped at the Prince's words. He stood, paced the room. "Yet, here I am with you, despite the incertitude I must expect myself to feel. Doubt is poison that kills, Arya. If we would keep on nurturing seeds of doubt and discord amongst one another, then we are never going to get ourselves anywhere. Doubt challenges faith and with that challenge faith grows."

"And let me tell you my assumptions," Arya said, gritting her teeth. "You plan to persuade Jaqen H'ghar to ride with us in battle? What would stop him from not declaring deference to his kin and turning his back on all of us? This is suicide, Aegon!"

"That is a risk we have to take—"

"We are not going to take any risk!" Arya slammed her hand forcefully on the wooden sidetable, knocking down some decanters. I am not going to risk losing Jaqen—to the lords, to death. "Aegon, please!"

"Impertinent girl!" Aegon rushed to her, pulled her to him. The Prince imprisoned her in a tight embrace, held her the closest to him, as if drawing strength from her. He must have her in his arms, he must. Fear is slowly taking shape—its outlines, its miens were showing themselves to him in his every cherished moment with the Stark girl. "The only risk we are not going to take is the risk of you warging into those beasts or the lords that ride them. If you think I am going to let you take any part at all in this, then you are verily mistaken." He kissed Arya's hair and stroked her back, then tightened his hold of her once more, for fear that she might vanish should he loosen his grip a little.

"I-I can't breathe, Aegon."

"I know, Arya," he buried his face in her locks. "I'm sorry, but I just…I need to hold you."

"Aegon…"

He held her face with both hands, placed his temple against hers. "Don't punish me like this, Arya Stark. Heed reason for once."

Arya nodded. "Forgive me, your grace."

They both decided to do away with the argument and speak instead of other matters. The Prince had insisted to tend to her injury. "Very well," Arya voiced out her assent. "Be gentle with me."

Strong Qartheen wine was there to numb the pain and to create a more serene ambience in that chamber. Both were now calm yet spirited, the earlier tension was fading. There were stories of his childhood—amusing ones too, and the girl found herself laughing blithely at his animated recollections.

"Poor you! A slap on your fair face," Arya had remarked in the midst of chortles. "Do you not know that 'intercourse' and 'business' are both 'commercium' in Bastard Valyrian? You used the translation for 'intercourse' in speaking with that lady?"

"As it appears, stress placement on each syllable is of utmost importance," Aegon replied. "I should have uttered 'cómmercium' instead of 'commércium'. Perhaps, I have forever given that Lyseni lady the impression that I am one perverted seafarer's aid, who pretends to be terrible at Bastard Valyrian so he can get women to warm his bed."

"She did not think you were pretty enough, perchance?"

"I did not actually get naked in front of her, Arya Stark. How could she have known?"
"Oh, gods!" Generous laughter escaped from the girl's lips.

There were others still, like the Targaryen ancestral sword, Blackfyre. "How very fateful that Aegon the Conqueror's sword must land in the hands of Aegon the Sixth, even when Citadel pages were sure the sword was lost forever," Arya said. "Something is horribly strange about that sword though, when I first saw you wield it."

"Horribly strange?"

Arya looked at him, absorbed. "Glorious. Sinister. But the mind plays tricks, and Valyrian steel swords were anyway forged in a place that was nothing short of glorious and sinister."

"Or perhaps," Aegon teased. "The thought came to you merely because you lost in that duel against me, even with Dark Sister in your hands."

The girl kicked the Prince lightly on the side of his thigh. "You raver! You were blandishing me with your romantic nonsense the whole time! That is far from the proper way to fight, your grace."

"Oh, come now. You liked it."

Arya just smiled.

Countless goblets were emptied, but there were more tales than bottles of liquor and the night was not yet that deep. There were stories of war and untimely death, conspiracies masquerading as noble causes that brought forth victories and debacles, and when is the perfect occasion to speak of these things but now?

"Must be truly difficult, growing up without your parents," Arya began. "Never quite knowing them, if not for accounts of others. Especially your father."

"Inaccurate accounts, at that," Aegon replied, tipping the goblet's rim to his lips. He was sitting on the carpeted floor, with Arya's foot on his lap. He resumed with his massaging. "There were critiques and loyalists, of course. There are those that would say they marched beside Rhaegar Targaryen, saw him bear arms and cross swords, witnessed him fight honorably. Few are truly steadfast in their faith in him—Connington is one, even up to now. The Martells rallied behind me for the sake of my mother, Elia. They have always despised Rhaegar, thought him bedding his abducted while the whole of the Seven Kingdoms fought in the war of his own doing. I am not one to dismiss stories and viewpoints just because these speak harshly of my father. Rhaegar wasn't a god. He was flawed; very flawed, actually." He shook his head, a melancholic smile forming upon his lips. "And so here I am, asking for forgiveness on his behalf—for Rickard and Brandon, for Lyanna."

Arya smiled. "You are neither the Mad King nor Rhaegar, Aegon. The stories of those Starks long dead, although tragic, are now a thing of the past. There are other wars we have to win." She winced as Aegon placed pressure on her heel. "No one's asking you to remain a prisoner of those mistakes you knew nothing about. You were dragged from your cradle when the rebellion reached its peak, don't wash the blood on everybody else's hands."

The Prince paused with his tending for a moment. He looked at her face, unsure of how to form his next words. "He left me with a broken kingdom to rule, Arya," he sighed, swallowed the painful lump that had formed in his throat. "Conquest before the throne, that too. Before, there were only the Lannisters, Baratheons, Starks—pardon me. Now there's Valyria, and the wights north of the Wall. Too much to bear, too much…" Arya rose from the chair, sat with him on the floor. She held both of his hands. "I wish I could talk to Rhaegar face to face, just so I could ask him what he would do, had he been in my place."
"You have done and will do far greater than he ever did, Aegon the Sixth."

Aegon lifted Arya's hand, kissed it. "I do not wish for Aegon the Conqueror's wrathful glory, Arya Stark. If choices were for the likes of us, I would trade all crowns and scepters—hells, all my dragons—so Elia and Rhaenys could breathe again. I would trade them all...for a home." He struggled against his own tempest. "Many times I have thought of just ravaging the capital with dragonfire to get rid of the Lannisters who ordered death on my family, yours too. But there are other times when I would merely content myself with cursing Rhaegar, it was that smallest action of his that led to my family's true demise. Was it that difficult for him to crown my mother in that tourney? He could at least have pretended in front of all those people that he had loved her. He was aware of Elia's delicate condition when it comes to childbearing. Could he not at least have waited for my mother to die before taking in Lyanna Stark?"

*West of Westeros, Arya Stark thought. Lives stolen—anything at all. A chance to right the wrongs.*

She dismissed it from her musings. "I mourn with you Aegon. I do not wish for you to throw them from your reminiscences, please don't. They must remain there perpetually. Forgive me for saying this though," she let her fingers intertwine with his. "Had those things not happened, Daenerys would not have fled from Westeros and stayed in Vaes Dothrak three and ten years after. Those dragon eggs would not have hatched at all. What chance will we have against all these, then?"

_She always knew the right things to say, the Prince spoke to himself. I am so lost. Where had she been all this time? Ten and nine years I have suffered, and now..._"This friendship that we have," Aegon offered. "Ah! But of course, the North is too far from the Crownlands."

Arya nodded, held his cheek. "That is, if you would settle in the capital. What if Elia decided that it's best for you and Rhaenys to settle in Dragonstone? Or Dorne? They're even farther from Winterfell than King's Landing is! Would you mount your steed and ride to the North for three moons just to meet with me?"

"I could ride my dragons."

"The dragons never hatched. This is our alternative scenario, sweet Prince."

Aegon's smile was a tease. "Must I ride all the way to the North to see you? You cannot ride and meet me half-way, say, in Harrenhal?"

Arya Stark's heart ached at the mention of the place. A rush of memories came back to her—the empty tankard of a man asking for a drink, the scarlet-and-ivory locks, the burning cage, the godswood, bath and ginger and cloves, the bloodied sword against her tunic. _Please don't go, Jaqen._ She bit her lip, struggled to keep her voice sprightly, good-humored. The pretense was killing her. "No! No one can persuade me to embark on a tiresome journey just so I could dilly-dally with a boy!"

"What if that boy wishes to meet with you so he could bequeath to you one Targaryen ancestral sword—"

"Then I would mount the first steed I see and gallop with it to Harrenhal without stopping."

Their symphonious laughter suffused the chamber with life. Aegon the Sixth ruffled Arya's hair, gazed at her with fondness in the midst of fits of mirth. _This is the privilege of friendship—to speak of nonsense and still find sense in every word._ To him, she represented a whole world, one that was
unborn until she arrived.

Truly, Rhaegar's treachery, Elia and Rhaneys's death, the rebellion, all these brought him the gift that is Arya Stark.

*Dear gods, what noble thing have I ever done in my life for you to bring her here, to me?*

"Be at peace with your father, Aegon the Sixth," Arya said. "People do things out of foolish reasons; and that is because we never choose who to love."

Can wrong choices truly lead men to the right places? There may be a million possible scenarios for every choice made, but what the girl said rang truth and truth only.

*We never choose who to love.*

Slowly, the Prince dipped his head, grazed his lips against the softness of the girl's cheek. His words were mere whispers. "No, we don't." A smile. "Which reminds me, I chose to tend to your foot and I'm not quite finished with it yet."

That night, Aegon the Sixth had decided.

*I want you, Arya Stark.*

*I want you in your best, I want you in your worst. I want you when you're sick and sweaty, and I want to be at your bedside, wipe your lovely face with damp cloth so the fever goes away. I want you in silken skirts and breeches and tunics. I want to see how you get irked when you lose countless of sword duels against me. I want you to laugh at every old-hat jape of mine. I want you to tell me, even in tears, if someone upsets you. I want you in my arms when I take that throne. I want you to know that I'm here and should you ask, I would never leave. I want you to choose to be with me, yet I also want you to choose happiness, whether or not I am part of it.*

*I want you. All of you.*

A thousand thorns may have pricked Arya's heart and found their dwelling there, for she was breaking at the sight of Aegon the Sixth. He had revealed much of himself to her that night—his apprehensions, sentiments long concealed about his dead father, his simple wants. She wanted to curse herself, for even those had not been enough for her.

Out of irrational qualms about his plans that may put Jaqen H'ghar in the face of peril, she had read the Prince.

She wished she had not.

It would be easier to accept his proposal that they be wed had there been nothing but untainted friendship between the two of them. A promise to herself—she would do whatever must be done to protect Jaqen. If she must lose the Lorathi in order not to lose him, then so be it.

Aegon's thoughts were pure, and his tenderness, his silent confession of ardency tore her very self in ways she could suddenly not fathom. A dangerous game—hurt one to keep the other.

*Forgiveness.*

He still held her.

And though she desired to heave the thought out of her already addled mind, his kneads and touches
were, to her, a little too sensual. *Stop,* she admonished herself. *He is now too occupied with kingly matters to be able to think of anything else.* Still, she could feel her pores and blood convulsing everytime his fingers and her sole would meet, and there was thrill too, whenever he soothes her foot with his soft rubs and squeezes. His strokes were mild yet steady—and she felt her skin being fondled by an invisible ocean of exultation, pleasure. She is from the old gods; and ocean is a friend, not foe.

May she not drown.

Just a few touches. The experience required no thinking, no comprehension of any sort. His skin against her skin, sensations of trance, the marvels of it. Oh, to be loved.

Aegon had gone silent and pensive.

"You are a connoisseur of feet," Arya remarked.

His eyes darted to her face asudden, laughed softly. "What?"

"I meant that you're very good…with feet."

The Prince raised his brows. "Thank you."

She smiled, leaned her head back, closed her eyes. In gentle motions, he began rotating her feet through the anklebone, mild and slow…and Arya Stark found herself gripping both arms of the cushioned chair tightly. Playful fingertips against her sole—petals frolicking with sensitive waters. Every grain of sand that falls in that hourglass is a second, and though time seemed to have suspended itself, no one can predict when the upsurge will come once waters were stirred.

"Aegon…" Arya whispered.

"Shush…"

Erratic breathing came forth from her lungs that seemed to have forgotten how to function.

The voice was insistent. Mere whispers have escalated into soft calls. Suddenly, his name was saccharine raspberry sap on her mouth.

"Aegon…Aegon…Aegon…"

The Prince chuckled quietly, spoke in an enticing undertone. "Arya, stop it…"

His hands moved to stroke her calf.

Ceasing is akin to hopelessness. To stifle it is to pretend. No one can be a master to any emotion, but to feel it, to witness it caused by another is the only thing that made sense at the moment.

*Aegon the Sixth Targaryen is a sorcerer. He makes me feel impossible things; he trifles with my brain, unlatches the locks, and I have no idea how he does it.*

*And gods, it's only my foot he's touching!*

"Arya…" the Prince's tongue lingered on every letter of her. His words were susurrations of one intoxicated by both the Qartheen and the Stark. "I'm already drunk."

"Yes…" she murmured. "We both are."
True. But even in that state of sweet inebriation, the direwolf knew what she was doing.

"Done," the Prince said. He picked up swaddles of cloth and wrapped her foot with these. "I will now carry you to your bed. You cannot properly walk, can you?"

She shook her head. "And where will you sleep?"

He ran his fingers through his silver locks, his eyes, languid. He yawned and flexed both arms upwards. "There is an adjacent bedchamber—"

Arya clicked her tongue to cut him. She spoke. "Is this chamber not large enough for you, your grace? Never pegged you as fastidious. I thought you liked things simple."

Aegon raised both brows in surprise. Her pronouncements were not anymore suggestive—she was making her intentions clear as crystal glass to him. He smiled disarmingly, though unaware he was of the charm. "Did I not tell you to stop, Arya Stark?"

The girl only laughed softly at his reactions. "Be a good prince and carry me to my bed, then."

"This is what happens to girls that carouse in the willow woods to go dragon-hunting," he teased. He lifted her, supported her back and thighs, grunted as if unable to lift her. "Pentoshi cuisine was most agreeable to your taste, apparently. More sword duels are necessary, it seems."

In a few steps, he brought her to the featherbed, laid her gently there. Aegon placed two pillows behind her, one on top of the other so she could half-seat herself, and another pillow to prop up her injured foot. Aegon sat on the edge of the bed and planted light kisses on Arya's temple. "Ēdrū sūrī, dōna dārilaros. Pendagon hen biare ra…" Fondly, he stroked her hair, willed her to rest.

_Sleep well, sweet princess, dream of happy dreams._

Arya's left hand cruised slowly to Aegon's shift. Slowly yet with urgency, she pulled his collar, drew him nigh her, and lifted her face such that their lips were mere inches away from each other. "You are one great pretender, Aegon the Sixth," she whispered. "How you so love to shield me from yourself. But you know what the wise would say," one finger traced his lower lip. Their breaths had collided, and despite her level-headedness, the girl shuddered pleasurably at the tease and their mouths' near-contact. "A man who teaches a woman how to defend her virtue usually seduces her away from it."

She traced the side of his lips gently with her tongue, fondled the nape of his neck. Arya giggled at Aegon's suddenly fitful respirations.

"Cruel," the Prince whispered back, inhaling the scent of her luscious mouth. "Very much like a child still, with her playful antics…"

"Seductions, you mean?" Arya spoke against his partly open mouth. Their breathing exchanges were akin to spirits communing, desirous. She lowered her lashes, raised them again…nice and slow, like theatre curtains at the Blue Lantern. Seven harps seemed to play melodies that intensified unsung emotions, and these tunes spoke to them both—_it is time, begin._ Their eyes were locked upon each other.

One wrong move, and all walls of limit will be irrecoverably shattered.

"One good reason, Arya Stark," Aegon said quietly. His breathing had gone so, so shallow. "One good reason why we must do this."
Arya began unlacing his tunic. Her fingertips sent warm scintillations on his skin, as they traveled inch per inch on his partly-exposed chest. Aegon's build is like Jaqen's built, she realized. His hair is very much like Jaqen's hair when undyed. His height is Jaqen's height, too. Like Jaqen, he loves endearing her—'lovely girl,' he would always say. He can summon firebeasts, bond with them, ride them to clouds and distances and horizons—very, very much like Jaqen.

Aegon the Sixth's voice is soft and soothing, unlike Jaqen's deep, Lorathi purr that kindles her, spurs her womanly sensibilities. His eyes were purple, and Jaqen's were bronze or gold depending on the angles of luminescence that play with it—either from sunrays, or moonlight, or candleflames. His eyes were not heavy-lidded, unlike Jaqen's; and his skin was fair, not tanned, unlike Jaqen's. He can wield swords and sunspears, but Jaqen can wield swords and sunspears and daggers and rapiers and arakhs. The Prince had carried her on his steed when she was about to fall, had given her one great ancestral sword though she was not kin to him, had thrown pebbles with her in the waters of the Narrow, had spoken of romance, played the harp, sang for her, made her laugh. The Assassin had carried her on his bed, fondled her incessantly and left her teary-eyed and dejected afterwards, had bound her with Valyrian chains to teach her a lesson, had given her perilous daggers and dragon quellers, taught her to kill, had kissed and touched her maliciously in the Sweetwater, had bid for her maiden's blood like one depraved, had sung for her in a voice that cannot even hit the notes right, causing his firebeast to appear out of gods-know-where and frighten half of Braavos. The Assassin had made her weep over and over, and he had died over and over too, just to be with her again.

I love you, Jaqen.

"Self-control is a worthless concept, Aegon Targaryen."

His mouth closed in on hers.

Chaos is in the portents and signs that were scattered all over time and space, and if one will only look closely, higher truths may reveal themselves to him.

The truth is this, that there will be a massive convergence of powerful forces—time is near, and the gods will once more descend slowly on the soils inhabited by mortals. The clash will be forged through flesh and bone, one chosen against the others, and the blood of thaumaturgy—both good and vile—will be born out of this inescapable battle.

The Lorathi straightened and rose on his saddle.

The summoning is done. May the death god grant a man her pardon.

He had almost died that night.

Dragons do not sleep in a bed of treasures, unlike what some fancy child's lore would say. They fleet around in the cosmic expanse, predators' eyes waiting for anyone they could slay and devour.

He had counted a good seven hours before the imperial firebeast rushed to mate with his call…

Its scales were glistening bronze-gold, and Jaqen H'ghar still knew the warmth and chill that emanated from its gem-skin—hearths of solid flame and sharp icicles both. The intense radiance that came out of its beastly orifice—its very own dragonflame—sent him spellbound. He shuddereded with both anxiety and excitation as the dragon drew nigh.
Fast...a compelling ball of fire...an entire powerhouse of enchantments...deadly.

A flying Armageddon.

And it was as furious as the tenth circle of hell. Jaqen's Valyrian birthchain did very much of the work—he heaved it towards the firebeast approaching in an impossible momentum, and bound it to him.

*Letagon!*

The chain coiled itself around the beast's neck.

Its cry was the wailing of a million men suffering, as it plunged itself emphatically onto the bay with velocious force. Half the beach had disappeared in the water as in a massive erosion. Its struggle against the birthchain that tightened around its neck was as perpetual and as colossal as its own self. Gigantic tides in the Narrow heightened the chaotic encounter, as they rose to break themselves against the thrashing beast.

Jaqen dashed, fleeted across space towards it.

He ran in various directions, in rises and falls, evading spews upon spews of fire from the beast. Flames beyond the intensities of ten thousandth heat melted sands and stones, reducing them to black glasslike mass. A gigantic orb of flame flew past him, burning the skin of his right arm.

Blood flowed from his flesh.

He kept on running.

Finally, he reached the beast, ascended through its still thrashing wings to its frilled back, gripping its chain tight. The beast flailed about in rage, attempted to throw its own rider to the seas.

"Damn it! Yield! Yield!" Jaqen recalled himself bellowing on top of the firebeast's hard spines as he pulled the birthchain with all the might he could muster. "Heraxos, yield!" The dragon was simply, inexorably strong, and it was flapping its expansive wings violently, tilting its head back and spitting spheres and surges of flame towards the dragonrider.

It started flying in rapid helixes.

Jaqen felt his world disintegrating—fierce winds cut against his skin like arrows, dragonflame in all courses suffocated him. He was drowning in the rush of the beast's impossible flight, as he struggled to unsheathe his dagger and draw first blood from it, so he could imprint within it his own scarlet.

*Just a drop...a drop of it.*

It thrashed, moved its neck here and there in order to be emancipated from the binding. Off it soared into the hills and spat merciless flames on the woodlands in rapid succession. The conflagration spread like serpents of wildfire.

Jaqen held on to the chain, lest he falls and gets charred in the sea of fire by the Velvet dunes. A quick slash across the scales...a bestial cry...a commingling of blood with fire between the dragon and its rider...

*Ceri-hafe.*

Done.
Heraxos descended, ascended in flight...began circling the heavens in controlled soars...

Now calm, now blood-bound.

There was no stone-paved road in the woodlands, however caravans of traveling merchants had mapped a rough road that ran from the center of Pentos to the almost unused eastern bay. Trade and merchantry had since died out in that particular harbor, the presence of pirate ships was to blame, but wheels of wagons and carts had left their mark.

He pulled the reins, forced the horse to a stop. A glinting, circular object caught his eye, and it was partly hidden by overgrown grass that accompanied the growth of willows. He disembarked, his feet landing on the soft ground. Jaqen bent to pick up the object and examined it, though in every sense of him he knew what it was and who owns it. The Lorathi knew it like the back of his hand.

An iron coin.

Arya was here last night.

With haste, he mounted the horse once more and sped with abandon to Illyrio's manse.

It was morn, and the center was bustling. "Out of the way!" he shouted as the steed darted past a row of brightly-dyed awnings. Merchants and patrons alike scrambled for cover, while loitering guards by the round street drew their swords asudden as a response to the unexpected commotion. He galloped—past goldsmith shops, iron grilles in front of storefronts here and there, knocking over wares and bottles of sweet spices. "Oy!" one of the storekeepers bellowed. "Get down from that bloody steed o' yours and bear the cost o' all these you've walloped!"

The Lorathi ignored the vociferation that was his own doing and headed straight to the front gate. He directed the horse towards the ramp that led to the higher estates where Illyrio's manse is.

Eight Astapori sellswords that guarded the ramp by the gate narrowed their eyes upon seeing the Lorathi—all bloodied, a portion of his flesh scorched, his raiments torn in various places, as if he had just emerged victorious from Mereneese fighting pits with lions and wild bears as opponents. They drew their spears and paramiers, for though he bore the face of one of the legates of Braavos who had been staying in the manse for more than a week now, he appeared to them, quite different.

He did not wish to engage in any form of brawl with them, as he just had one in the eastern bay with the red god as witness. "Comrades, a man understands your suspicions. Call for Daario Naharis, so a man's identity may be verified through him."

The chief sword uttered his commands without taking his appraising eyes from the Lorathi.

One of sellswords rushed to the manse. Minutes later, the Stormcrow was already with him. "...a week, and still you cannot identify the faces of the emissaries?" Daario was speaking irascibly as they both walked towards the estate's small portcullis. "You Astapori are a truly distrustful lot, and if I may be frank, we are offended with—" The words got caught in his throat, and he paused with his strides upon seeing the Lorathi. Wide-eyed, the Stormcrow assessed him from head to foot, attempting to make sense of what had possibly transpired the night prior. This is Jaqen H'ghar, but not quite, he told himself. He was brought back to the sack of Yunkai, where hundreds of freed slaves made their way out of the gates of the Wise Masters, with 'Mhysa'in their lips.

Daenērys Targārien—blood of Old Valyria.

Iāqaen Haegār—blood of dragons.
There was only one thing to say; and for brothers bound by blood as the Creed of Faceless Men
would so dictate, it was an acknowledgement of who the other is, a declaration.

Daario voiced out his acceptance.

"Nice hair."

The Lorathi rolled his eyes and gestured to the eight swords. "Tell them to let a man through."

The Stormcrow was quick—a plotter, a great teller of fictions and falsehoods. With a tongue adept at
uttering lies, he narrated what he thought were the accounts of last night in Astapori Valyrian.
"Forgive us, comrades. Despite it being a trading post, Pentos is a beauteous city. We do not wish to
offend Pentoshi hospitality by not exploring its every feature—notable and peculiar alike. You see,
he traipsed to Jaqen, motioned for the guards to lower their weapons. "Braavosi-Lorathi men think
that intoxication and fresh saffron-scented paramours are a combination difficult to resist after a
whole day of consular affairs."

"And how would you explain the blood?" The chief sword queried, still mistrustful. He tightened his
hold of his spear, pointy end directed towards the Lorathi. "His clothes in tatters, the burnt arm, too?
The hair?"

"Festival of Flames last night," the Lorathi shrugged. "Have you forgotten?"

Daario supplied the rest. "Braavosi-Lorathi are unorthodox lovers, comrades. I'm quite surprised
really, it seems that you know very little about the sexual appetites of these monsters." Jaqen H'ghar
exhaled with silent vexation as Daario Naharis pointed out the details of his made-up dalliance with
some Pentoshi courtisans the night before. "First, they let the women bathe them and dye their hair
in whichever hue—silver, he wants it. Then they proceed to this hedonic game of hunter and hunted,
daggers, candlewax, and goat's blood all, five women at least should do it—the details are nasty,
mind you. Explains the mutilated clothes and the scarlet—"

"Enough," the chief sword waved his hand, contained, though unsuccessfully his disgust. A nod to
the other seven. "Let these...men through."

The half-raised portcullis was opened to its full. The Lorathi disembarked from his steed upon
reaching the stables, left it for the keeper to tend. He ignored the man's complaints about the blood-
tainted saddle, from the seat all the way to the fender and stirrups. Jaqen turned to Daario. "Thank
you for creating a picture of one sick miscreant out of me, brother. Where is Arya?"

"Most welcome," Daario replied, ignoring the Lorathi's last query. "No apologies—it's either that or
a confession that you have wrestled against a gargantuan firebeast the whole night." The Stormcrow
glanced at the Lorathi. "You were successful, I am assuming?"

"Not without getting myself almost killed," he complained. "A man's utterly dismal state should give
you a hint. It was the imprinting over and again. The wait took me hours. I heard the beast's cry,
knew I had to get to higher ground. Hours of whipping and thrashing too, before a man managed to
bind him. Broke from the shackles twice, spewed orbs of flame on me, the bastard. We reached the
Velvet Hills, with him threshing here and there to throw me off. You should have seen what we did
to the eastern waterfront past the backwoods." The Lorathi heaved an exhausted sigh. "Half of the
bay is gone in that locking of horns—they should start remapping Pentos, if you ask me."

"They should," the Stormcrow answered, surveying the Lorathi with amusement. "You look like
shite. I wonder why Daenerys Targaryen never experienced the same complications when it came to
bonding with her dragons."
"Two things," Jaqen said. "One, she's a hatcher. A literal *mother* of dragons. Dragonbond will be Aegon the Sixth's problem now, because though he inherited the right to those spawns, the eggs were never with him before they hatched. Second, when she birthed those dragons, her name was and had always been 'Daenerys Targaryen'. It still is."

"The beast bows only to the name 'Esdraelon', you mean."

"That, and in this realm, a thousand years have passed since we last saw each other."

"Where is it now?"

"Near. It's going to come anytime when summoned." They reached the manse's garden. The Lorathi headed straight to the fount and began cleansing his blood-soaked face. "Brother, where is Arya?" he queried once more.

Before the Stormcrow could answer, a woman emerged from the double thresholds in hysterics.

"You scheming bastards! You never told us any damned thing about those faces! Where is Jaqen?!" Sabine ran towards the garden, Aegeus trailing behind him in hasty steps. "Damn you!" the woman screamed, and rushed to Jaqen. With violence, she pounded on the Lorathi's chest with her fists, clawed on his already blood-spattered skin. "All lies! Every accursed thing in that godforsaken temple!"

"Calm, Sabine!" the Lorathi growled, taking hold of both of her fists. She writhed out of his grasp, cursed him, assaulted him with either her head or foot. Three servants tending the nearby hothouse paused with their current occupations and headed to the garden. Daario motioned for them to return to their functions. "We cannot talk like this! Aegeus!" The Lorathi shouted.

The Tyroshi rushed to Jaqen's aid. He pulled Sabine off the Lorathi and carried her away. "Let me go!" The woman slapped the comely one repeatedly. "You planned this! All of you and the Elder!"

"Ioannanu," Daario called to Aegeus with surprising calmness. "Bind her into you, now." He scratched the nape of his neck listlessly, as if the woman's rage was nothing but childish agitation. He knew that it wasn't at all, and that Sabine never acted in such fit unless thoroughly provoked; but they cannot speak to one another about counterplots and connivance inside the temple unless they all maintained facelessness. "Partial bound, though. We need her speaking."

The woman turned to Aegeus with venomous eyes, shook her head with both vehemence and panic. "Don't you dare!"

"Forgive me, Sabine, but you're proving to be quite a challenge, my love." The woman was both storm and riot, as she thrashed to liberate herself from the comely one's grasp. With one hand, he held her face tight, ignored her frantic uproar. Aegeus pressed his lips against her open mouth, breathed into it some air and his words that would lull her in a calm state. All potions were in the temple, and he knew that the woman did not carry any counteractant to hypnosis. Even before the last syllable could roll out of the comely one's tongue, her overwrought movements, her resistance had died down. Breathing had steadied, the rush of blood and the fury that had earlier seeped through her flesh had calmed gradually. The woman's consciousness and judgment were unimpaired, all intellective and subliminal capacities too. Only the strength and will of her body were enfeebled.

Akin to a rag doll, she fell straight into the comely one's arms.

He carried her in a cradle to the pillared gallery with the Lorathi and the Stormcrow behind them. Aegeus laid the woman on one cushioned seat, clicked his tongue in worriment. "She will kill me in
my sleep once she escapes from this trance."

"Better sleep with poniards in both hands, then," Daario remarked, eyes riveting to the Lorathi. *Intricacies. A labyrinth of games with the death god. You never learn, Jaqen H'ghar. You are letting the Elder win with his schemes. "Your acts of subterfuge are becoming increasingly enervating, brothers."

Jaqen spoke. "Sabine, please. Where is Arya?"

The woman threw him a murderous stare, kept her mouth closed.

"Those faces, Sabine," the Lorathi began once more, seeing that he cannot extract answers from her unless he surrenders some of his own. "For now, they must be kept in the sanctum. If we burn them and the traces return to those faceless spirits—"

"Then, the energies they have left will fuel Stygai," Sabine finished the statement for him, albeit weakly. Tears bathed her face, as she hurled all words vile towards the comely one—hushed tones, soft mumbles, these were all she was capable of doing. "I carried no nullifier with me, brother. How heartless can you be, to steal away strength from me like this? My arms, my feet, I couldn't move them…"

Aegeus knelt in front of her, caressed her cheeks. "You were unheeding, Sabine."

"You are the most despicable person, Aegeus."

The comely one exhaled heavily and rose. Distraught, he tugged at his hair, turned to the Lorathi with clenched teeth. "Fix this, Jaqen. Most assuredly, you have discussed this matter with the Elder, with all other nine masters unknoing. I have advised you against it. Thousands of times I have told you about this, the fabric dividing the realms is a thin one. Shadows are the only things that obscure us from the forces of those in the heart of the Ash. There are not enough shadowbinders, even Seastar who was supposed to be one of the cadres fled from the Shadowlands already. Oh, gods, the aftermath when the wise fails to listen…"

"So, the faces were not just meant for assassination and espionage, for facial concealment? Who else know about this?" Daario queried. "You, Jaqen, the Eld—for sakes, let's stop with the bloody titles! You, Jaqen, Akhrast L'ris, who else?"

"Iason Phile, traitor to the Order and the city. His face was peeled then burned, his body fed to the eels," Jaqen answered. "Arya warged into him that night when the fake Sealord was executed; we don't know yet if she had gained access to some of his earlier recollections. Stygai consumes spirits of the dead, and those wraiths could pass through the Night's gates if they carried their faces with them. Death needs both appearance and appellation, brothers."

Daario scoffed. "Faces, the faith, the Songs, and you're asking why assassins go rogue and explore the other side. Your ploys will leave us all defenseless. What were the Masters thinking, orchestrating courses that would create foes on all sides of the map? West of Westeros, wights in the north, Valyria in the south—"

"East—chained god in Stygai," Aegeus answered. "For eight thousand years, the olds gods and the red god had dominated over chaos, Winter and Darkness have not mated for fourscore centuries, yet wights are born every turn of the moon. How is this even possible?"

"Wights are dead reanimated by the Walkers," Sabine struggled with the words. "Movers, these White Walkers are, and they don't have to be birthed by Winter—they were already born eight
thousand years ago. After the first Long Night, they were merely in postponed animation, waiting for a reckoning." Sabine's eyes cruised to each face. "The red god allows cyclic existence through his chosen reborn—Azor Ahai. The old gods create an illusion of death through the Weirwood; through warging where the dying can assume the form of and continue life through wolves and ravens. All these are abomination in the sight of the many-faced god." The woman held back the sound of sobs, a reaction to treachery. "The god of Winter is the death god. *Valar Morghulis*—a literal decretum, brothers. A massive, complete wipe-out of the human race. The real tenet is this: Faceless Men are supposed to impel Winter, by killing the Promised—whoever he or she may be; so that *all men must die*. The Elder is working against it."

Daario's laughter was both embittered and neurotic. "This is why I refused to be ordained a Master in that accursed temple. Conspiracies of the gods—complete hogwash, and we Faceless Men are with loyalties fluctuating to this god and that, depending on who does not see it a botheration that we remained alive, using faces of murdered mortals to hide ourselves from the real adversary." He paced in the gallery, shaking his head at the conviction they have to face. "These gods dispense torment without reason at all, without any other aim but to generate fear from men—the most sacrosanct of all emotions. The death god is deceitful, rapacious, and an absolute tramp. Whore of all whores, with her demands for candles and coins and offers of death for life and life for death. She is the only one that comes when you call, and she deals you demise."

"True gods require blood, brother. Blood is life, because even the gods *can* die," the Lorathi said. "Otherwise, they would not bother preparing for their own wars through their prophecies and their various impressions of chosens and champions. As it appears, for the latter part we have been acting against the death god's precepts. Those precepts are unmerciful to begin with—we kill people." He rubbed his face with both hands. "Wrong...so wrong."

Aegeus spoke. "This is what they do West of Westeros. They created men to become perceivers of reality which they have built. No perceivers, no believers. No believers, no gods. Yes, *quattuorverbis*—but without men, how would anyone of the gods know that they *do* exist? They need us to affirm their damnable existence, that's what. It's symbiosis, a sharing of power between creators and created." He knelt in front of the Waif, kissed the side of her mouth. "Can you still yourself now?" The woman nodded. "No thrashing once I repeal the rune, yes?" She nodded once more. The comely one then performed a series of countermeasures to his mesmerism. "For every different choice one man takes, a new realm-version is created for that man. The gods cannot make choices the way we do—they fearing having to make choices since they are aware of all possible consequences to each choice, they're all-knowing after all, meaning they already know the future. Men are their pieces, so that when one realm-version goes awry, other versions may right the wrongs according to these gods' ends. Folly."

"Eleven missing leaves in the Songs," Daario shook his head. "We're running out of time, Lorathi. What is old man Akhrast the Mage planning with that damned prophecy?"

"Show the Elder some respect, Stormcrow," Jaqen hissed. He walked to the Waif, held both of her hands and brought them to his lips. "Forgive us, Sabine. We thought it safe to conceal it until we come to this point. It's only now that we are becoming aware of the next courses of action." The Lorathi placed a soft kiss upon her cheek. "You have the ores from the Crux, yes? Please, where is Arya?"

Her eyes traveled to his bloodied arms, to the fresh burns on various parts of his skin, and ran her fingers through the Lorathi's silver hair. Such feat, yet in every triumphant exploit is a precious life in danger of being taken away. "I brought some cure. I can make the dye, Jaqen."

He shook his head. "She has to see a man like this."
"You're going to ruin her," the Waif whispered. "Nothing—she knew nothing about your plans. You're going to break her, Jaqen."

"A man must break her to pieces," the Lorathi replied. "It's the only way to form her again. I have to take her back to Valyria and Rhoyne."

The woman nodded her assent. Pretenders draw identity from adulations of others, from victories. Jaqen H'ghar derives his from she who caused it. Arya Stark must return to where it all began.

"Lysander of Pentos."

"Who is she with?"

"Aegon the Sixth Targaryen. He was there in the Festival," Sabine recounted. "He ran after Arya into the willow woods; she was heedless to any call. The pendant you gave her had lit up, she knew of the other firebeast that landed in the eastern bay. Jaqen. She might have seen that Valyrian woman—your hatcher. The Lorathi shut his eyes tight at the complication he must deal with. The woman continued. "Pray, brother. Pray that Aegon the Sixth saw nothing, or we would lose him. Arya too."

Tonight marked the second night of stay with Aegon the Sixth in Lysander's manse. Security is the tightest she had ever encountered in this part of Essos, with six guards stationed at each threshold and twenty guards by the portcullis.

The Prince's chateau was fourth from the summit of the Pentoshi higher estates. Its inner court concealed by high bricked walls was tangled with vines and hosted half-buried dolmiens dating back to the founding of the city. At the other side of its court stood ancient stones with cracks that served as latticework and rich, green moss that served as adornment. There was a circular belfry that stood at the court's side, reflecting the architectural styling of the whole manse that boasts of history and great men long dead. Marble pillars marked the corner of the high platforms that served as roofs. On this platform crouched an assassin with two daggers in hand.

_Fifteen feet, at the most._ The assassin leaped from the platform, transfixed two daggers onto ornately carved wooden columns. The daggers served as handholds to aid the assassin in descent. Agile movements, fast and imperceptible. Soles touched the balcony's handrail. _Eight feet._ With a quick glance at the sellswords by the front, the assassin jumped off from the balcony and onto the firm ground.

At the rear of the manse is a backwall with a small passage concealed by overgrown shrubs. The passage leads to the western bay of the city. The assassin took an exeunt to the other side.

_Swift as a deer, quiet as a shadow._

_Fear is lost._

She removed her mocassins and left them by the backwall, walked towards the waterfront. Aegon the Sixth's words the previous night still echoed in the walls of her head.

"A kiss, Arya Stark. Nothing more. You are beautiful...breathtaking. You do not need to use yourself as pawn just so you could hide the Lorathi beneath your skirts. You love him, you want him out of harm's way. Yet he must make his own decisions; you must as well."

Her feet were unfeeling, curious, for beneath them were not just fine grains of sand, but rough rocks and pebbles, shells washed by the waters to the shore, splintery sea glass that cut the skin.
She didn’t mind.

Her whole being had gone insensate.

_Fear cuts deeper than swords. But what if you have severed yourself into a million shreds already that there is nothing to cut anymore, yet, you still fear a lot?_

Arya Stark strolled, hummed. It was the whimsical canticle the Lorathi had sung at the Alasee. _I am live coal, mist, a smoking remnant…to surrender to you, to fall._ Soft chuckles, as she recalled how his terrible rendition woke the Titan’s wroth and beckoned that dragon without his intentions. She half-dragged her feet along the wet sand so her footprints would lingered there. If she must depart, a part of her must remain. _Make a mark._ But how? How?

_Die a little._

She ran, with the melody still in her lips. Her direction was against the wind, and the particles of it seemed to pierce her skin like icicles. She felt her chest exploding, yet she couldn’t stop…couldn’t stop…

_Carry me, Wind. Fly me back to Winterfell._

Weariness consumed her. Arya Stark collapsed on the wet sand, lay there, reveled in and languished at the ocean’s calm brutality, in its waves that lashed at her body as they broke into the shore. Deeply, she inhaled the smell of wet, of salt. The ocean had always filled her with longing she could not quite understand, and she knew that this longing will never find that which could possibly quench it.

She clutched the pendant of her Queller tight. Her heart throbbed with it.

_What lies in the heart of the Valyrian-Lorathi? Is it like the sea, perchance? With cruel depths and waves and tempests? Does it also have pearls and shells that sing?_

Fragrant breeze trailed along the sea, drifted to her nose. It toyed with her sensations. And she cursed it _aloud_ because that night, she didn’t want to smell, or see, or taste and hear, or think. She didn’t want to _feel._

_Drown me, flow in my veins._

She sat up, and with her forefinger, wrote on the sand the three things she wanted most out of life. These were old hopes that never perished, of course, and the mind knew it all—vengeance, the Starks, Winterfell.

It seems as if her finger had a will of its own. Or perhaps, it merely showed her deepest, most desperate want. Her griffonage was clear, as was the heart that guided it. Writings on the damp sand—and three hopes had become one.

Āria Stārke Haegār.

Āria Stārke Haegār.

Āria Stārke Haegār.

Waves came and claimed the sand, erased forever her written wish. Seconds later, the letters on dirt vanished. Oh, but she should have carved the name she wanted for herself upon rock, where water cannot wash it away.
Who are you?

No One.

No One but Jaqen's.

She felt her fingers close into fists, as she willed herself not to weep. Those fists gathered wet sand unknowingly, and if only the grains of it could further break, then the tightness of her clench could have exhausted each grain to the last scintilla.

Finally, she stood, pulled the Dragon Queller from her neck. The soft Valyrian chain snapped.

Without a second thought, Arya Stark threw it to the unforgiving seas.

A familiar voice. The sound of it made her gasp. In her vision were those ravens that flew overhead on the day of Ned Stark's death. But there was one raven that was unique in all the world—the raven that she had cradled in her arms when she traversed the snow's path beyond the Wall in her dreams. The raven that guided the Stranger, the raven that called the Direwolf home.

Impossible. There are no Weirwoods in Pentos.

It spoke to her through her deep-seated thoughts—the raven with the third sight.

*The strongest trees are rooted in the dark places of the earth. The Weirwood has its roots way underneath the depths of the Narrow Sea and all the seas.*

Bran.

Arya broke into a run. The shore was a neverending line, but her feet were unyielding. She dashed into the wild blue yonder.

A cavern.

She was only at the mouth of it, yet she knew how very dark it was inside. The raven in her waking vision spoke.

*Darkness will be your cloak, your shield, your mother's milk. Darkness will make you strong.*

There were secrets within it for sure, yet the urge was too strong. There was no other way but to enter it.

Her shadow disintegrated into the blackness as she walked to its heart. It smelled of mildew air mixed with scent of greenery. There was only the sound of dripping water, and the sound intensified as she went nigh. She walked further, and the sonance of disturbed stones beneath her feet sent mild echoes all over. Eyes adjusted into the murk, and she beheld it in its fullness.

Her eyes roamed, she took in the resplendence of that subterrane. Upon the ground stood formations of what may be wet limestone that glittered at the slightest blink, and its walls allowed gentle downpours of water against them. She raised her eyes—stalactites formed an impression of icicles upon the cavern's ceiling. Beneath her feet were translucent waters of turquoise, their hue playing with the faintest trace of moonlight. The prismatic waters seemed to be aglow—an illusion. Or perhaps they were not, for at the centermost part of the cave's ceiling was a large opening that allowed the moon's incandescence within; and when Arya looked up, she saw the stars blanketing the entire nightsky.
Flowers upon the edge...fluorescent.

And there it was, in the middle of the turquoise waters, standing on a small islet carpeted with lush grass and green, green moss.

*Zefarisse tree—from the Weirwood species south of the Wall.*

She crossed the blue waters and ran to it, as if entranced. The water was shallow and cool, very still. She reached the islet, and within a few quick strides she was in front of the tree.

With her fingertips, she touched its smooth, bone-white body almost obscured by the thin vines that grew around it. Five-pointed, blood-red leaves fell from its branches. She encircled it, brushed away cascading leaves from its boughs. The weirwood's sister has no carved face.

"You lost this."

She turned asudden to the direction of the voice.

*A man.*

His locks of scarlet and ivory were now full silver that glistened with the delicate luminosity from the cave's open ceiling. Lorathi eyes, Lorathi nose and lips, Lorathi voice. He raised his hand partly, and from his long fingers dangled the Valyrian chain with a fiery pendant she had thrown into the sea moments ago. Her *Queller.*

Gently, he heaved the necklace to her. She caught it with both hands. Their eyes locked.

The silver-haired Lorathi walked closer to her. He spoke, and his voice was breaking. "*Skori gaomagon ilon keligon dakogôre, Āria Stārke?*"

*When are we going to stop running away from each other, Arya Stark?*

Her back was against the Zefarisse tree, and there was no escaping this now. Jaqen reached her, held the nape of her neck. He lowered his face, and their lips touched. The Lorathi placed light kisses on Arya's mouth, her cheeks, her nose, her eyes. Days had been far too cruel, and worshipping her—every part of her and all of her—was long overdue. Slowly and in the midst of his tender kisses, he untied the soft knots of her tunic. He let the garment fall softly on the grass-carpeted ground. Her breeches, he unlaced next.

Delicate rain poured down on the both of them that night.

She undressed Jaqen. *No rush, we have the entire evening.* Moments later, they stood naked in front of each other, with their eyes that scream of blandishments and sweet talks in the silence of that cavern. Calm breaths turned to convulsive exhalations, as their fingers traced each other's built—roundness of her breasts, perfect shape of his navel, curves of her hips, taut muscles of his abdomen.

Jaqen sat on their heap of garments, pulled Arya to him. He leaned against the strong trunk of that tree, and she settled on top of him. There was his skin against her skin, her flesh upon his flesh, longing that overwhelmed all others, revealed hate and concealed love that defined transcendence itself. How can two beings carry in them this much?

An irreducible epiphany—no better way to capture it.

Her left hand moved to stroke his sex, gently and in soothing motions, and her head tilted sideways as she observed his reactions with so much, so much love. Half-whispers, half-groans escaped from
the Lorathi’s open mouth, meshing perfectly with the sound of spatters of soft rain against the turquoise waters near them. Ripples…ripples…like those in the River Rhoyne.

He shuddered under her ministrations, as her fingers brushed his tip, tightening themselves against him. Her scent of snow threw him mercilessly to a heady trance.

Ah…Arya…Arya…

Her right hand brushed his rain-drenched flaxen hair, erasing traces of silver and replacing these with scarlet—the shade of him she adored. Their temples connected, their breathing too, as droplets of soft monsoon descended upon their faces. Oneness, the Songs must happen, the girl thought. There was once a dragon who fell in love with a direwolf. The direwolf loved him back.

He was the Sun, and she, the Moon.

He was once the Warrior and she, the Woman.

No other words.

Her strokes had intensified, sending invisible sparks to them both. Their wanting bodies moistened by the rain rubbed against each other, but the cool precipitations did nothing to subdue their heat. She was in command this time, she thought, as the cadence of her fondling had gone devil-may-care. Oh, he was so very, very, very helpless…his head thrown back, his silent eyes pleading for completions, his breathing erratic…and how she prayed to the gods so he may explode beneath her—body, soul.

"Jaqen…"

"I-ivestragī nyke ģūrogon ao, ŋuha d-dāria," Jaqen H’ghar begged in fits and starts. Let me take you, my queen. His hot mouth closed in on her breasts and like a dying man suckled it with desperation. The soft tips of her bosoms had crystallized in response to his wet tongue, as he carried on flattering her with nips and licks and covetous suckles. Two fingers of him entered her, toyed with her feminine walls. He commenced with his fondling with gentleness, lovingkindness, then proceeded with wantonness, thirst, desire.

Chaotic respirations...a thousand winds blew into their skin, but they were both oblivious to everything else…

Slowly, she lowered herself and took the Lorathi inside her mouth.

"Arya!"

Let all pretenses and facades melt away…

She had known the Lorathi all her life, she realized. His body is as familiar to her as her own, she had long cherished and worshipped it, just as he had enshrined her in the distant days of their warring clans. His seed, my womb. Whilst she lavished Jaqen's shaft with loving suckles, whilst he delighted himself in Arya’s rhythmic movements, emotions had burst into raw, balletic intensities. Let us play in the fields, my goddess. May the Night conceal us, may the Wind carry us both, may the Grasses clothe us. Jaqen pulled Arya's hair tight, willed her in wordlessness to allow him to rest a little for he was already breaking and dying…but she carried on north and south of him—lips, tongue, teeth consuming his entirety, reducing him to almost imperceptible fragments.

She tasted his manly flavors—a graceful rush, arousing her more. Jaqen…Jaqen…her heart screamed as she ran her tongue across the length of him. You taste a thousand times better than a god.
"Aryaaa..." Jaqen was pleading for his own life. "I love you...you're killing me...when will I stop dying...when..."

The girl raised her immaculate eyes to the Lorathi, smiled. "You don't know death, Jaqen H'ghar."

She rose—her outlines and built that of a water naiad, the mortal goddess of Rhoyne, the greatest seductress of the Warrior. There were no birds that sang of erotic lilts, or flutes and harps that played, but as Jaqen ran his ravenous eyes to every part of her, all he heard was sweet music, strums and measures that mingled with their sultry, raspy breaths.

Once more, she settled on top of him, brushed her moist innocence against his sex. A prelude—a lovely, lovely overture.

Their gazes locked as she moved and allowed him inside her.

White-hot pain seared her womanly flesh in response to his sweet invasion, yet she never took her eyes off of him. Arya wanted to cry, needed to...she had known pain all her life but it was nothing at all like this—it was bittersweet, agonizing, divine. This is Jaqen, Arya stilled herself as her gaze bore into those familiar irises. He would hurt you of course, but he would love you all the same...

Her eyes began to well up, her lips started to quiver.

Chasteness must not be a measure of virtue, she spoke to herself. Let it be a shatterable wall—let this man break it so I may clearly see what I do not know.

And though she willed herself to be silent about her inner aching, soft whimpers still escaped from her.

"You can stop, Arya," Jaqen whispered, caressed her cheek.

Arya shook her head, kissed him and whispered back. "I love you."

Slowly, slowly, she moved against him...drawing strength from those eyes of his that warmed her, consoled her. She stroked him through her inside—rising and falling...crests...troughs...waves...over and over and over and over.

In every plunge and ascent, she murmured his name. "Jaqen...Jaqen..."

He held her hips, guided her movements, consumed her breasts so some of the pain may vanish. Words quickly turned to mere vapor, evanescing till they were no more, till all that communicated were the naked bodies of them.

The gleam in her irises of gray and green shone more intensely, or perchance it was brought by her tears unfallen. Jaqen pulled her to him, allowed her to move against him in her own rhythm. He buried his face in her hairlocks and spoke against her ears. "I love you...I love you, Arya...It's just me, lovely girl...your Jaqen..."

A sharp, metallic scent of blood wafted through the night air. The rain will wash it away...will mend their broken bodies...

They were mere dust, disappearing in every push and pull and stroke and suckle, imprinting themselves against the walls of that cavern, leaving traces in the air, with the Weirwood's sister as witness.

Pain left her, now there was only relish, static shocks and soft velvets of feelings. She wanted him...
all of him—all that he was and is and could be.

I am nothing…Arya thought as she tightened her walls around him. He gasped. Nothing but fragments of a strong tempest made of Jaqen. I am a swirl of petals made of Jaqen. I am a million kisses of memories made of Jaqen.

And that tempest—the gusts and the vortex of winds—those swirls and kisses, intensified, consuming her and dissolving her within.

Sighs came from his lips…silky groans…it was too much! She was too much…yet even as she quickened her plunges and even as he met these with the soft ramming of his hips against her, he begged the gods for the sands in the hourglass to cease.

Let me die tonight, he implored. Let me die in her…he shifted asudden so he lay on top of her, thrust himself in and out, feeling her, loving her. He felt his own emotions drowning him…

"J-Jaqen…" Arya panted, as she tugged his hair. "Fast, my love…deep…more…please…"

The Lorathi hissed, ravaged her lips and obeyed her. He buried himself the deepest, retreated… collided with all of her—like one galaxy entangling itself with another.

"Arya!" Jaqen moaned, as he was overtaken by a deluge of known and unknown emotions. Carry the blood of my blood, bless me with babes. His body was in pure paroxysm, and he felt her too—burying her fingernails deep against the skin of his back, shuddering uncontrollably beneath him. Her unearthly groans—Jaqen! Jaqen!—filled the cavern as they both plummeted into that celestial collapse, that unthinkable rapture.

He felt his seed filling her womb, yet he kept on waltzing within his beloved, as if wanting to empty all that he is for her.

She held him tight, calmed her desultory breaths. "I love you," he whispered—in Braavosi, Dothraki, Valyrian, Ghiscari, in Rhoynar, in Esssoan.

Moments later, they gazed at each other—now one, now unbreakable.

At the foot of the weirwood’s sister were their alchemical ores—gold and silver—conspiring with the forces of time to take them back.

The three-eyed raven whispered through the mouthless, faceless sister tree.

"Discover the groundwork that would save us—the cornerstone of the Woman that birthed the Warrior."
Chapter End Notes

*I do not own the above images.

Image 1: Jaqen's Firebeast, Heraxos (Arya's too, pet dragons are conjugal properties in this fic XD)
Image 2: Zefarissee Tree, Love in the Cavern

Hey guys! Thanks for reading. Hope you like this one, would love know what you think (Really, tried to be brave in writing the last scene)! Heads up: Valyria and Rhoyne next chapter and how it all connects to the Long Night (Canon Divergence, well...apparently).

Thank you, thank you for your comments and kudos. Much love and have a great one. ;D
"Grace in light
Somehow I found you here..."

I May Have Fallen for a Rhoynar

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There will come a day after a long summer when the stars bleed and the cold breath of darkness falls heavy on the world. In this dread hour, a warrior shall draw from the fire a burning sword. And that sword shall be Lightbringer, the Red Sword of Heroes, and he who clasps it shall be Azor Ahai come again, and the darkness shall flee before him."

A Song of Ice and Fire, The Jade Compendium

"On its own, a beggar's gold; en masse, it's king's folly."

"The Rhoynar have reclaimed Volon Therys, Selhorys, Valysar. They might rebuild the Sarhoi Port if we delay attack. Should they do, their ships can use the harbors, charge against the Volantene Fleet, and plan for a most efficient attack or escape."

"Travesty. Three imperial dragonriders, killed by damnable water sorcerers in a night?! Have they learned naught about warfare?!"

"Garin of Chroyane is a gifted commander, Aurion. As it appears, the river is aiding them in battle. Not to mention, the Queen of Ny Sar is said to be a powerful sorceress."

"We lost three good firebeasts to an accursed witch, is this what you are saying?"

"Careful. These are descendants of the old gods we are speaking of. The River Rhoyne comes alive when dragons spew fire. You know the lore."

"Very well, then. A hundred dragons to Rhoyne."

"Not a hundred."

All eyes turned to the source of the voice—Archon of the Valyrian Freehold, Kleitos Esdraelon.

The Empire's Conclave was in its usual climax. Heads of twoscore dragonlord families who have styled themselves 'Freeholders' were assembled in the Archon's hall, seated around an obsidian rectangular pool of tempered flame. The hall was expansive, as it hosted gathering for purposes as
these—discussions, disputations, battle stratagems necessary for the longstanding conflict against the Rhoynar and other resisting clans. Statues of former Valyrian archons were carved on marmoreal and ivory walls; and at the far center of the wall stood a grandiose sculpture of the red god, crowned with fourteen flames, its fullness carved from combined pyrope, spessartine garnet, and fire diamond obtained from the volcanic mines surrounding the peninsula. Sconces of five hundred candles hung on the dome-shaped ceiling, while torches were placed in all corners and spaces of the grand chamber.

The Archon's eyes cruised to each face gathered in that Conclave. "The vicissitudes of war must not be ignored," he spoke. "We cannot afford to lose anymore lords or beasts to those damned riverfolks with our futile tactics of sending one dragon after another. The plan—retake those cities, lay waste on Ar Noy and Ghoyan Drohe through Sarhoy. Surround the city and let the Volantene fleet block all points of escape." Marshalls, wing commanders, commodores all, Aurion Archestrad—first dragonrider, Lathos Hadervaren—third.

Qogralbar, Kleitos cursed. The second and the fourth are nowhere near this hall.

Sonance of rich, provocative laughter disturbed the colloquy from outside. There were two—a man and a woman. The threshold to that grand chamber was shut, but their lewd words were carried by mischievous wind to the very ears of those gathered. Silence cloaked the hall asudden as a man spoke in his usual deep purr. "Syluṭī orvorta...lēda naejos..."

One commodore cleared his throat at what may be his unsuccessful attempt at showing discretion. Six pairs of eyes occupied themselves with the small inferno by the black pool, while others did not bother hiding their displeasure. With persistent and offended glares, some demanded in the midst of wordlessness, an explanation from the Freehold's Archon himself.

Aurion Archestrad shook his head in controlled indignation. He expelled air from his mouth in ire.

Tasty cunt...luscious breasts...

The salacious exchanges carried on, and Lathos Hadervaren snorted at the next pronouncements, ran his hands through his dreadlocks of silver: ṁa oōha relog—as my cock in your mouth, wonderful, was it? Soft chuckles cannot be helped. "He's young, blood brothers," Lathos said in a tone amused. "A score and three? Come now, let him live."

"You too, are a score and three, Hadervaren, and I've never seen you act like that in all my years in the Conclave," Aurion seethed, and turned to the Archon. "Your son, Kleitos. His recent victory in the fighting stades must not provide justification for his coarse behavior."

Kleitos regarded the man with a blank expression. "This is an imperial gathering, Aurion. In such caucus, he must be dealt with in the same manner we deal with other members of the Conclave. No one is father, son, or brother to anyone else."

The threshold burst open to reveal two other dragonriders whose earlier vulgarities have spawned tension in that hall.

Daxen Ophistor sauntered through the chamber, her gown of chiffon a little torn in the front, exposing a small fraction of her chest cleavage. It was the usual sexual divertissement in the tower perchance that led to it; and despite the accusing gawks of what may be the entire Conclave, quiet questions too about her whereabouts though the matter was apparent, her expression remained insouciant. She took her usual seat beside Aurion, raised her brows at the sudden stillness in the chamber upon her arrival. "Carry on, blood brothers." She flicked her floor-length braided locks off of her shoulder, uncaring of the hiatus she had created with another. "Some critical matters I had to
attend to, explains my earlier absence. You do understand duties, I suppose."

Kleitos ignored the woman's explications, turned to the man who entered with her. "To your seat, Haresh." His tone and expression were severe. "Or have you also forgotten where to place your arse in this gathering?"

Haresh Esdraelon smirked. "Not at all." He sashayed across the isle, adjusted his earlier unlaced breeches, and took his place opposite Aurion. A devilish, lecherous stare at the woman he earlier had a most gratifying dalliance with, a dishonorable grin. Lathos Hadervaren elbowed him lightly, whispered. "Wipe your mouth, brother. Cunt sap right there."

He did as he was told, seemingly pleased with himself.

The gathering carried forward. It was the voice of Kleitos that rang echoes in the hall. "Three hundred dragons, Valyrians. An overkill."

"A most assured Rhoynish defeat."

"Risking three hundred firebeasts? Outrageous proposition!"

"Against marchers of two hundred and fifty thousand? It is a reasonable count."

Haresh raised a finger, queried. "Why the deluge of dragons? We have besieged Volaena and Selhoru, two thousand slaves were captured and deployed in the slave mines. Are we in desperate need of gold and gemstones? What are we now—entering merchantry with trinkets as trade?"

It was Aurion who responded, albeit with sarcasm. "Obviously, you know nothing about what had transpired these days past—occupied with making Valyrian women squeal and moan, perhaps?" The woman beside him regarded him with a disdainful look. "The Rhoynar had managed to reclaim three core cities near Chroyane, literally overthrew Volantene forces from the flagships. Their damnable thaumaturgy from the gods of the river led to the death of three of ours."

The heir sat upright, suddenly alarmed at the telling. "Three dragonriders? With their firebeasts?"

"Apparently."

"But those are imperial ones! Their riders too—"

"The Rhoynish clan, brother," Lathos spoke. "Sorcerers. I understand your sentiments—we have never lost in battle before even against the Ghiscari legions. Old gods against the red god this time around."

"Our brother, Galreos…"

"He's gone, Haresh."

"Lenaeris, Maelarr?"

"All gone."

The heir clenched his teeth in loathing. The desire for bloodbath was strong. "Who's commanding?"

"Prince Garin."

"Who else?"
"Nỳhmèria hen Ny Sar," Kleitos answered. "Ária se vîlibâzmio dâria, they call her—Warrior Queen. A water enchantress."

"Ária?" Haresh uttered the name with clear hatred, as if such cognomen is a poisonous goblet of Sarnori. He stood, made a decision on behalf of the other four commanding dragonriders. "Fire and blood, Valyrians. We will take Rhoyne, set the city ablaze after pillaging its gold and relics, scorch men to death in front of their wives and babes, drag them here in chains. An orchestra of screams and pleas. We want dragonflame in all directions, ash, death. Carry your fire-forged whips of thirteen thongs and falls, shackles, torture implements. Aerylon to first and second squadron by Volon Therys, Lucaedor, to third and fourth by Selhorys. We will take Ny Sar and Chroyane. We ride first thing on the morrow."

At these words, Kleitos Esdraelon rewarded Aurion with an ambiguous smile. The latter returned it with a sardonic smirk of his own. Echoes of battlecry concluded the gathering, with determined declarations on every part of the obsidian pool by the heart of the hall:

"Mirre syt se sỳź hen īlva Muña, Valyria."

All for the good of our Mother, Valyria.

Whispers used to be carried by the wind from one mystical Rhoynish city to another, and some of these murmurations spoke of the queen that ruled the City where the rivers Rhoyne the Mother, and Noyne the daughter converged in a single path:

Nỳhmèria—the river's goddess.

The Moon shows its full face, and each fortnight she bathes herself stark-naked in the waters of the Rhoyne.

Seven female warriors bear witness to her transfiguration—

Under the orb of nightfall, she transforms into a water wolf, and the sonances of her howls could be heard from Sarne to Selhoru.

In the final chapters of the Second Spice War, she had showed the Valyrians the wrath of her water's rune.

The first bout of battle had just ended.

"They will return, Arya. Those dragonlords are known to show their wroth and exact retribution a thousand times greater than what their foes have done to them. Kleitos Esdraelon is enraged, and he had recanted his earlier proclamations that Rhoyne must remain a neutral bulwark area for their expansion," Garin of Chroyane gathered scorched helms, breastplates, gorgets, and threw them onto a pile of others. Five thousand men perished in the first bout of warfare. Many more will be cloaked by demise tonight—a fate accepted when they have sworn to defend Rhoyne till their downfall. "As soon as those firebeasts arrive, build yourselves a Wall. Take the women and children with you."

"We can start conjuring up the barricade through the river's source. It will be huge enough to contain all of our forces," Arya replied, glancing at the children who were then warming themselves through a small bonfire. She had earlier recounted for them a tale, that of the Old Man of the River and the Crab King, and how the two warring gods reached a pact in order to defeat the Long Night through a canticle duet. Despite the aftermath of sadism all over them, the sweet babes had laughed at the
story, and had begged her for another one about Mother Rhoyne. She relented. Four old sagas she had told them that evening.

"Only at my signal will you start building the rampart. We cannot forever hide from those demonic Valyrians, can we? We need the watercourse too, some plans." Garin began shouting orders to one head marcher, who proceeded to marshal the regiments and gather artilleries. He summoned one cadre mage. "We need a whole brigade of your lot close to the port, you will serve as fortification. Half a thousand men with you, make sure you provide the necessary blockade while the battalion plans for an ambush." He turned to the woman. "See you on the other side—wherever that may be."

She fought against tears as she watched the Prince of Chroyane walk away and begin assembling Rhoynish troops.

There were verily two and two choices only—freedom or demise. This is a war we cannot hope to win, she thought to herself, Valyrians pillage and leave none.

She had seen the immediate results of it after the battle against three dragons and the Volantene fleet. Ny Sar was a city once alive with its songs and poems; it was a place of many fountains. Her once colossal palace of pink and green marble had collapsed in the river surge caused by the Rhoynish enchanters in order to attack those beasts; and now its domes, its broken spires, and ornately covered archways lay wasted beneath the alluvion of their own doing. As for Chroyane—the city of festivals, breathing water, and houses of gold—what remained were wrecked obelisks, broken spires and stairs, sunken statues and temples. All shrines built for Mother Rhoyne and the old gods that birthed her were reduced to ashes by the slavers.

The wise claim that wars are fought so great empires may rise; but in every empire built is a land lost—a whole history, a collection of hopes, men and their children whose dreams may never even make it to the night. Ambitions of beasts and phantoms—they know nothing but to assert dominion over other men, plague them with cuffs around their wrists and necks, brand them properties. They are the true slaves, Arya thought. They are slaves to the excess of power and liberty that they have.

Where will we go when we die, Mother? When all these are lost?

The question was from the lips of one child. Arya's heart broke at the sight of her, seven of age perhaps, and here she was contemplating about cessation and the afterlife, without witnessing the fullness of glorious existence yet.

Don't speak of death, dear child. If all these are lost, we would stand to rebuild.

And we, mother? Will we lose ourselves?

No child, as long as we do not forget.

To ashes they have weakened us, and from ashes we will rise.

A mother and her child spoke of many other things, and Arya just settled beside them, listened. She nourished her afflicted heart with their tales of old, their verses and chants, as they all awaited fate and its gracious and merciless countenance both.

Within the mother's words were falsehoods, but the child need not know these. Tonight, her voice, that lullaby—a promise of that thing with feathers, of the chance to breathe their next in the morn, of rapture and bliss after the darkest of darks.

"Hawi nin dilthen er na cin naneth naeha,
The Warrior Queen beseeched the old gods for aid: may this not be another chronicle of bondage.

Sleep, my little one, upon your mother's breast,

Tired you are, rest until sweet morn comes…

Three hours have passed before the resonance of the battle horn was heard, followed by a caterwaull of intense terror. The night orb concealed itself from the sky, as the whole of Chroyane and Ny Sar was wrapped with Cimmerian shades from where deliverance is a thing impossible.

A million echoes of wings sliced through every particle of air, like murderous sabers from the sky. Crimson clouds enshrouded the entirety of Rhoyn. Moments later, the clouds dispersed, fragmenting, and even in the obscuration of it all, she knew what she was seeing.

Dragons.

She shuddered, knelt to the ground and entreated all known gods—may they bring down their mighty sunspears to battle against all these on their behalf.

And now it begins—the darkest page in all the songs of men subdued.

The Valyrian slavers have arrived.

With the coming of the lords and their firebeasts, the tides have turned—three hundred is indeed a overwhelming count.

In all spaces, in every turn of the eye, was the blinding aurora of dragonflame.

Armed legions were swept under imperial fires and rivers like helpless arks. It was the night of the shattered moon, as howls from dying men reached the skies and frightened even the luminous spheres above, urging them to navigate the expansive celestials. Endless, kaleidoscopic spectra of conflagration—flames of bright orange, bleeding red, fiery blue. A cluster of stars that bore witness to the deathly rains of demonic flames and black-winged promises scattered all over the heavens, as if their eyes could not bear the sight.

Rain fire! Rain fire!

Claim your hour of blood, Valyrians!

It was all a blur from the other side, from where the Warrior Queen stood. Garin's instructions spoke only of clarity to her. Stay with the women and children. You have weakened yourself severely with the earlier bout of battle.

They were in all directions, with outcries that grew more defined by the second. Their thirty-feet wingspans caught the strong winds, as if commanding these to lift them high and above the plains of the city. The beasts launched waves upon waves of aureate flames on mortal bodies and the remains of the once grandiose Rhoyn, leaving bronze spumes and tongues of smoke.

Breath of chaos, Valyrians! Kill! Kill!

It was the voice of the first commanding dragonrider—Aurion Archestrad. The nefarious powers
held by those firebeasts were like flashes of cruel midnight that engulfed a myriad of men. The flames dissipated, and upon the ground laid strewn embers of flesh and bones.

*Show them the blood of dragons! Charge and thwart, burn!*

Vile sorcery from the red god himself.

It was total *holocaust*.

"Too much," the queen whispered.

To the dragons and the lords that commanded them, she appeared tiny in the whole edifice of war and demise. That illusion was about to be overturned. A channeling of her forces—she commanded the rivers to rise, and rain down upon the usurpers. The banks blighted as giant waves pulled down twelve firebeasts, swallowing them whole, imprisoning them beneath the then unmerciful waters. Their lungs will collapse, and their breaths will be one with the depths of the grand rivulets.

Surge from the watercourse flooded various directions.

Another wave, a whole writhing cyclone of it. With its velocious, sheer strength it claimed twenty more.

*You cursed enchantress!* came forth a shout.

From a distance, she saw one dragonrider rushing towards her in full speed, atop his aurelian, seven-clawed dragon. She felt his power even from afar, and his aura was unmistakable, so was his shuddersome rage at the quietus of almost an eighth of their throng of beasts.

Spheres of flame from his beast's mouth landed on the elevated ground where she was standing, sending fractions of that hill rolling down from the slopes. Sparks flew and consumed her, almost. *The bastard!* She cursed under her breath.

He was intent on purging her from this battle—for good.

*Mane of chaos. Archon-heir. Haresh Esdraelon—the devil himself.*

The Warrior Queen shut her eyes tight, conjured her elder sorcery, murmured chain words in between fits of breaths and breathlessness. *He's too fast, too fast…*

"*Gīda, iēdrosa, iēdar.*"

*Calm, still, water.*

Hair's breadth…

It was as if the old gods had stepped onto mortal ground, for seconds later, walls of water rose to act as one enchanted rampart, shielding her and the entire hillock with a multitude of horrified women and their babes. The aurelian dragon stopped asudden from its rush as if confronted by one precipice to canyons deeper than the underworld. *Breath of the gods,* she whispered, and in a blink, the walls of water were transformed into evanescent mist, concealing them all from the threat of beasts.

A thundering, victorious cry concluded the Second Spice War. From Arya's eyes fell tears of mourning.

*Rhoyne has fallen! Mirre sỳz hen ĭva muña Valyria!*
Stalwart banners of the Valyrian empire rose in a sea of scorched and dead, beneath the wings of hundreds of dragons.

*She has the blood of dragonriders in her hands, Aurion.*

... the wall is imperceptible. It's constructed through vapor. We cannot see the other side.

*As soon as I figure out how to break through it, I will call death on that cursed water goddess…* 

*How can you break through a vaporous wall that does not even materially exist?*

Arya stood in front of an unseeing Haresh who was at the other side of the mist. Pure enmity gorged her heart as she observed him pacing back and forth along the expanse of that invisible wall, slaver's obsession upon his ruthless visage. Though she can hear nothing, she knew that from his lips came forth macabre plans, as he ran his hands through the air, in high hopes of touching the smallest trace of that wall through the haze and dew.

His necklace with scarlet pendant glowed bright in the dawn's darkness.

Shivers ran down her spine—either from fear of this man, or from the chilly breeze that sang of the fall of Rhoyne, she cannot tell.

She turned her head to the women, who were then with dejection, witnessing the surviving Rhoynar being yanked to cages with heavy manacles on their hands and necks. Those who were thoroughly injured, and thus were assayed too weak to work in the volcanic mines, were burned to death. "The blow of air is wintry but we cannot light the smallest fire. The conjuration will fail if we do," she told them, smiled at them reassuringly. "Fear not; they will not break through something they cannot perceive."

"Where is the alchemist?" Haresh asked one marshall through gritted teeth. "Summon him; this is pure essence from their old gods—he knows how to countermand the rune."

Wind died down the queen's chest upon seeing the approaching mage. *Valyrian alchemist? The charge—well-planned. They knew the Rhoynar will be using water enchantments.*

"Aether—breath of the gods indeed," the alchemist said a few moments after he was summoned. As if trying to catch the mist with bare hands, he stretched out his arm. The thin film of cloudlike haze waltzed with his fingertips. "A fifth element, creates an illusion of transparency, a passive camouflage. Yes, the wall exists somewhere in a spectrum invisible to the human eye."

"Break it." The second dragonrider's tone was portentous.

"Only your solid Valyrian birthchains could do that, m'lord."

Aurion growled. "Fool! Has it not occurred to you that we have attempted such?" He motioned exaggeratedly to the fleeting mist. "There is nothing to *shatter* here!"

Haresh held up one hand to calm the lord. "The wall has to be perceived through visible turfs. How can this be done?"

"White light, m'lords," the alchemist answered, though his speech faltered with fear. "The first ray of sunrise emits such hue. If the mist is exposed to the sun's refulgence, the dew within it will scatter white light into various tints and shades. Dragonflame will then condense the cold vapor and liquefy it further. The iridescence from the prism dews and the water's translucence will allow you to
perceive what lies on the other side—outlines and full forms all, faces and frames. The denuded mist will then appear like a seeing glass—a transparent one."

"Very well, then," Haresh replied with a grin that was malevolence in itself. *Imperceptibility is not synonymous to inexistence*, he thought, and so his heavy-lidded eyes that spoke of omen he fixated on a specific area of that misty display. He folded both arms across his chest. *Sunrise is in a few moments, enchantress. I know you stand in there somewhere.*

Arya gasped. *Surely, he could not see me through the wall of rune?* She clenched her teeth at the manner by which the dragonrider 'stared' at her—murderous, lecherous. The queen tightened the knots that held her raiments in place, as if that Valyrian's hawkeye could undress her despite the façade that separated them. *Bastard, beast.*

A few moments, and the sun's first rays bathed the forlorn morning.

*Now, it begins.*

Haresh gripped tight his Valyrian chain, and in serpentine, maze-like motions, wielded it. He called forth his colossal firebeast, *"Heraxos!"* primed it for the reversal of the rune. In a safe distance, Aurion Archestrad and the alchemist waited…

"Stand back!" Arya commanded the others. "As far away from me as possible!" She extended both arms and held the wall, as if to fortify it. In the midst of waves of both trepidation and rage, even as her hands trembled incessantly at the looming clash, she still held her steadfast to her force. In Rhoynish tongue, she conjured her elder enchantments. "Rodīn, aen tur, -o iluvēntar."

*Strength, power, god-rune.*

A cancellation—as Haresh Esdraelon's lips spoke that one command that would shatter all fortitude and thaumaturgy to smithereens.

"Valyrīha dyni, drakarys."

White light from the morn's orb meshed with dragonfire. Prismatic hues scattered all over the hillock, as the mist fragmented and revealed the other side of that wall built from the rivulets.

The dragonrider smirked.

Āria, dāria hen Ny Sar.

In one velocious maneuver, he hurled the chain towards that expansive wall in horizontal motion, and it coursed with intensity from east to west, slicing through the water and smashing the particles of it like shards of vulnerable glass. Wild spatters of water flew relentlessly in all directions, surged downwards, its deluge almost whelming the hillock.

Arya collapsed to the flooded ground. The wall, like Rhoyne, had fallen.

It was all an infinite blur—sights and sound alike, as she saw Rhoynish women and children being captured by Aurion's forces, and Haresh walking towards her, Valyrian chain and shackles at the ready. All things seemed to move slowly…she gasped for air, as billows heartlessly cradled her exhausted frame. *Garin…Garin!* Struggling, she forced herself to rise from the ground.

Incantation from her—large beads of water formed from the deluge, rushed like bullets and knives towards the dragonrider.
He screamed in rage as those beads overwhelmed him—slashed through his flesh, wounding him with water-forged lacerations. "Qogralbar, Āria! Kesā addemmagon syt aōha gaomon!" he cursed with raving madness—Damn it, Arya! You will pay for these acts!—as those fierce globules slit the skin of his face, exposed arms, calves. The metal armour he wore did little to protect him.

The chain flew back to the dragonrider's hand, and in the midst of his curses and the waves that drowned him, he managed to heave it to the woman. It made its way across those large water beads, slicing them asunder.

The chain coiled itself around Arya's wrists, locked them together. Another chain tightened itself around her waist.

Enchantments ceased.

A quick pull. Haresh secured the chain with his sinewy arms, hauled the enchantress to him forcefully. She screamed as she struggled against the unseeable force that was dragging her towards the Valyrian. Blood on her wrists, at the side of her mouth. She squirmed in pain as searing flame emanating from the chain permeated her pores and veins, and screamed to the point of death at the torture. Arya collapsed to the ground, and she felt her body carving out dirt from the slope as she was being savagely hauled. "Eltehet mi-belmutrys!" were her screams in her own tongue—release me, slaver!—futile, unheeded. A cruel harbinger, she was plummeting into the hellish chasm of an empire cemented by mortars of blood.

And now, it ends...

Another compelling pull, and she felt herself being lifted from the ground through the chains that bound her entire frame...drifting...drifting...

Her fleeting body made a swift descent, as if controlled by consciousness other than her own. And she fell, straight into the arms of Haresh Esdraelon.

Tears, sweat, blood bathed her face profusely, as she beheld the face of her captor. Harsh winds blew the wispy strands of his silver hair. His eyes...his eyes...

What is this? The queen enchantress thought in her dying consciousness. Those sparkling bronze-gold irises and the countenance that spoke of prophetic Doom moments prior—swept away by some form of spell.

Those eyes of his roamed around her face with warmth and gentleness she never knew demonic Valyrians were capable of possessing.

"Issa gaomagon, Āria, dōna Jaesa," the dragonrider whispered. "Ao ojūdan se vīlībāzma."

She wept in utter wretchedness, even as she kept her eyes locked upon his face—the face of a clan which for centuries, had capitalized on weakness and silence, even resistance. Tyrants carrying the blood of devils, owning people—debasing them with their animalistic pursuits.

It is done, sweet goddess.

You've lost the war.

With a sharp breath, she succumbed to the interstice of oblivion.
She awoke at the sound of three women conversing in hushed tones.

Damp fabric touched delicately her wounded skin. There was only numbness, the memories of flame, blood, embers, remains of battle won and lost.

Sounds of ruination and capture, the wailing of the innocent. Ny Sar…Ny Sar...

She winced as the cloth came in heavy contact with her fresh lesions. One of the women muttered what may have been an apology in a tongue the slave-queen doesn't know.

With exhausted eyes, she studied the women's features—dark amber skin, wiry locks with slight hues of red. The phrases they spoke in what she was assuming was their mother tongue were syllabic in form and nasal in sound. Ghiscari slaves. Arya shut her eyes tight at the realization. Indeed, Rhoyne had fallen, and she may well be in the netherwold of fire and brimstone. She surveyed the room she was in.

Inside the bedchamber of Gehenna's overlord, no less.

The featherbed did much to assuage the horrible physical state she was in. Pillows in velveteen cases were strewn all over the cushion covered with thick eiderdown, while soft leopard skin served as blanket concealing her nakedness. The featherbed's ceiling was auburn-hued, too regal, and from its canopies hung gossamer rose curtains that toyed listlessly with the winds coming from the chamber's open balcony. A panoply of carved statues of dragon species was arrayed on marbled plinths, two in each corner; and upon the walls were banners of her captive house—Esdraelon, with words glimmering against the rays of afternoon sun.

Ērinagon, udrāzma.

Conquer, rule.

At the far side of the chamber is a small marmoreal pool of steamy waters, with unlit torches on all corners of it. The scent of it drifted to her nose, numbing her senses further—ginger, cloves.

She willed herself to not weep once more. Tears are a weakness—plans of exacting reckoning will be lost in an outpour of useless lamentations. She had bemoaned and mourned for the dead bodies of thousands of Rhoynar, ceri-hafe, done. Now, onto greater plots.

She struggled to sit, but one of the women pushed her down, as if insisting that she remained on the bed. Arya ignored the woman's instructions in Ghiscari tongue, forced herself upright. She gasped at the scorching pain that almost severed her lacerated wrists.

Shackles.

The Valyrian had bound both of her hands with dragonfire-forged manacles, and the chains were firmly attached to the sturdy wood of his posted featherbed.

"Release me!" She ordered the women.

"Enujagon, buzdarik."

Leave, slaves.

It was the deep voice of that man—her captor.

Haresh Esdraelon, devil incarnate.
The three women cowered at the command, carried with them their healing implements, and moved to leave the chamber without another sound.

"Don't leave!" Arya heard herself beg. "Please!"

Her request was neglected, as she heard the large oaken door of that chamber open and close. Venomous eyes of her turned to the figure that had just ordered the departure of the three Ghiscari.

"Where are the Rhoynish women and children?! Where did Aurion bring them?!!" she seethed, sat upright despite the burning sensation of the shackles against her wrists. "Release me now, or I will drown you, you can be damn sure of that!"

The Valyrian said nothing. He merely kept his eyes fixated on her visage, then unhurriedly, let them cruise to every inch of her. The leopard skin that had earlier covered her nude frame now exposed half of it, she realized, and she cursed inwardly—both legs were unconcealed, and arms were bare for the Valyrian to see. A slight change in position and he would no doubt lay his lewd eyes on her breasts and sex.

Haresh Esdraelon walked closer to her, whilst untangling the knots that held his robe in place.

The raiment was removed, dropped onto the tiled floor.

Arya swallowed audibly at the sight of him, shuddered at the prelude of what may be a sickening encounter with the slaver. As if accentuating his concupiscent countenance and disposition, the man stood directly in front of her in all his magnificence, with his sex firm and raging. Change of breathing—from calm and still, to deprived and malicious. He bit his lip...hard.

Closer, he walked to her, knelt on the cushion. Her back hit the solid board of that featherbed—a cyvasse stalemate when moves have been exhausted to the last piece, as she struggled to get herself as far away as possible from this man, without her own conscious intellections of it.

The more she retreated, the more he moved nigh; and in his nearness, Arya saw the lacerations formed by water enchantments of her all over his skin.

"Get away from me!" She hissed in Rhoynar.

He chuckled softly and held her foot. Slowly, he ran his fingers across its sole, caressing it, sending forth titillating sensations in the wholeness of her despite her emphatic loathing for the man. In a mellifluous tone, he spoke. "Nyke daor shifan ao Āria, ñuha Jaesa..."

I cannot understand you Arya, my goddess...

In five millennia of the Freehold's existence, Valyrians never sought to learn Andalii, Ghiscari, Rhoynish, or any other tongue. A clear position—all inferior clans must learn the language of the great empire if they seek to ally themselves with the slavers for temporary placidity, if they wish to enter into a treaty with them, the permanence of which is not a thing assured.

In every conquest, Valyrians would ravage cities, annihilate cherished days of yore and raze whole chronicles—writ and unwrit, with dragonflames that never run out, exterminate entire clans and races. They think themselves demi-gods, creatures formed by heavens' dust and by the hands of the lord of light himself; and so they see themselves fit to feast on the lowly blood of mortals. There are those who fear and worship, the queen enchantress thought. These create demi-gods out of plain men.

She fiercely pulled her foot away from the man's grasp, hurled vile words at him in Rhoynar. She
received nothing but smirks and teasing stares. Gently, he lowered himself and began licking Arya's inner thigh.

Shudders, whimper from her. His tongue expertly scoured her parched flesh, and in the midst of his taunting, provoking nips and kisses near her very core, he spoke to her in Valyrian tongue. "Issi ao mundagon nūmāzma aōha lenton? Iksā olvie sŷz isse vilbāzma..."

*Are you sad about your home? You are very skilled in combat...*

She screamed and flailed about violently. The battle the night prior had exhausted her beyond words, and so the outcry that came from her throat resembled the breaking of fragile chalice. "Let me go! Brute!" Her body was subjected to demoniac thrashes and recoils—nay, he cannot take Rhoynel, and take her too! The Valyrian was strong, and he managed to hold down both feet against the featherbed, and worried not about her manacled hands even when he saw her wrists bruised and marred by the tight metals around them.

An unfeeling rock, a vicious animal incapable of any form of virtue. Arya cursed him repeatedly in his response to her outbursts—"Keligon...gaomagon jaelā naejot rāenābagon lēda nyke?" were his damnable words—and by instinct, her eyes darted to the marmoreal pool with the vaporous scent of him.

Relax...do you want to bathe with me?

"Damn you! Damn you! Beast!"

The Valyrian's eyes glimmered at the sight of her—*beautiful, ferocious*. Every intrepid act of hers he interpreted as an exordium to one story that would only scream of wild, wild lust. He raised his brows and smiled, as if realizing what it was that the Rhoynar truly wanted.

"Ah! Jaelā naejot tymagon!"

*Oh! You want to play!*

He rose from the bed, reached for something underneath it.

*A slaver's whip.*

He held it, the thongs and falls coiled in his hands, as he toyed with its wrist loop with his left thumb. He grinned—infatuated, boyish—and laughed softly upon sensing the woman's suddenly convulsive breathing. He held the stock firm and straightened the whip.

*Crack!*

The falls and poppers hit the featherbed hard, as if testing its resilience.

A mere inch, and the whip could have left its playful, cruel mark upon her skin. Arya's jaw hardened with pure spite as Haresh Esdraelon tossed the whip to the side and teased her with his remarks.

"Iksā toli ēdrugī syt tymptir."

*You are too tired for games.*

"You demon! I will kill you!" She screamed on. "I will kill you the same way I killed those useless firebeasts of yours! Damn you!"

The Valyrian ignored her, sat on the bed and locked his hand tight upon the ankle of her right foot.
Softly, he lifted it to his lips, kissed every toe of it.

He lowered her foot, till the skin of it made sweet contact with his hardened member. In raw wantonness, he began fondling his shaft with her sole, all the while breathing through his mouth. His lustful eyes were on her, despite her protestations, and upon his lips was a single name.

"Āria…Āria…oh, Āria…"

The Valyrian continued stroking himself with her right foot, as his hand reached for the other. Arya gasped as she felt her toes being suckled by him, and he was groaning…groaning at the pleasure brought by his own salacious acts. On and on, he rubbed himself with her foot. "Ah…ah… Āria, rus…"

Fine scents of ginger and cloves wafted from the pool from the far side. Ancient rune, the queen enchantress thought. Emancipate yourself from this. She was bound to either post of the featherbed, but in every place is a trace of the elder gods. She commanded the waters.

Soft ripples and nothing more—this was the response to her conjuring.

What bound her were irons that inhibit magical capabilities of sorcerers and mages. She gripped the bed linen tight, hatred seeping through her every scintilla as she realized asudden the extent of the dragonrider's plans concerning her.

Another way…another.

Sculpted statues of dragons will bear witness.

With all the force she could gather, she kicked Haresh's groin.

His bellows were the bellows of one scourged with torture dragon-forged rawhides, as the growing sensual hype within him plummeted into a most painful descent. "Qrugh!" came his curses in his own tongue. He leaped from the bed and held himself, hellish gawks towards the woman.

"Unchain me! I want to see the Rhoynar! What have you demons done with them?! You have taken hold of Sarhoy and Ghoyan Drohe, more slaves than you would ever need! Release all the Ny Sari, now!" She screamed, though she was cognizant of how very fruitless her acts were—he is a slaver, and slavers did not elevate themselves to such status by heeding hysterical orders. "Haresh Esdraelon, you accursed degenerate!"

Words of pure rage absconded from his lips, and damn the bastard for acting like one betrayed. His exhalations were demented, and he ran his fingers through his silver locks, highlighting the extent of his anguish and fury for not being able to reach what may have been a glorious capsheaf.

He pointed a finger at her, spoke in Valyrian.

"You will never see anything but the walls of this chamber." And without another utterance, he left her, slamming the heavy oaken door behind him.

For seven days, she remained chained in the Archon-heir's tower.

Those Ghiscari slave-women would visit her every mom and midday, and eventide too, before the last blow of shophar marking sunset and moonrise. They carried with them their usual curative
potions, herbs, and implements; and would assay the conditions of her lacerations and fractures. They spoke with each other in their own tongue, and though Arya could not comprehend a single word and would rely merely on locutions to determine if the women were speaking of things blithesome, she still attempted to participate in their animated talks for the purpose of amusing herself. Everytime she does this, they would regard her with wary eyes and cease conversing, as if frightened of even the smallest of utterances though their subjects were no doubt harmless. Did Haresh forbid them to speak with me, perchance?

There was not a thing the slave-queen could do but to listen to their cheery voices, smile softly in the event of grins and giggles, observe their spirited reactions and delight herself with these. Once the tasks were done, they would leave her alone, and she would once again wallow in her usual pensiveness—bereft of any form of human contact apart from her own melancholic humming of one Ny Sari ballad.

The days were long and forlorn; in most hours she would occupy herself with listening to the distant sounds of some harps, or the cajoleries and palaver of some beneath the tower. Despite the daunting sonances of it, the descant cries of dragons toying with strong winds of summertide had been her company in some cruel late afternoons. She held on to her contempt of the beasts, though she could not hide the awe she felt whenever she would see them glissading through the skies from the tower’s open balcony.

*Here I am, a caged bird. There they are—free to roam the firmaments.*

*Do they not know that their lords have bound them too with magic?*

"Dragon road to Oros and Tyria, then onward to the Lands of the Long Summer, Mantarys to Rhoyne…"

Some hours she would spend planning for an effective escape, first from that lavish prison tower of hers, next from the Valyrian peninsula. Perhaps, Garin of Chroyane had survived the onslaught and is awaiting her by the Valyrian roads leading to the rivers. The slave-queen thought that she could bring women and children with her by the hundreds, and sail through the Sea of Sighs to home. All Rhoynar who were in the volcanic mines could be retrieved once the forces were reassembled.

*But the demonic slavers wiped Rhoyne out.*

At least, the Archon-heir had the better sense to clothe and feed her. The Ghiscari would arrive thrice every day with an assortment of fruits and greens, spice-roasted chicken or lamb, Sarnori wine, and a variety of tarts and other sweet courses. There was the gracious offer from her for the slaves to join her in her repast, but they would always politely refuse. Once more, they would leave her in solitary, and she would have her fill. Though chained, her hands could very well reach her mouth.

Haresh Esdraelon rarely came to his own bedchamber. Whenever he did, it was only for the purpose of having some change of garments or retrieving some implements. Her heart would leap at the sight of him—out of abhorrence no doubt, but there was also the repressed excitation of having someone else other than herself in that despairing tower. For two days, she had tried to capture his attention by screaming, heaving foul words at him, writhing violently in attempts to liberate herself. The Valyrian paid her no mind at all. To him she was nothing but one misty chimera—inexistent, unworthy of even the littlest attention.

On the fourth day, he had arrived once more; and by some humorous conspiracy of the gods, she had forgotten the enmity that existed between them. Curious, for she felt overjoyed when it was he who had materialized from the threshold. The previous days and nights have been disheartening, and how she longed for the voice of anyone who might desire to speak with her. The nightmares have been
cruel too, and the ruthless voice of Aurion Archestrad had played unceasingly in her mind these midnights past.

"Oh, Haresh!"

The words were out before she realized, delivered in a most thrilled voice, no less.

The dragonrider paused to look at her, brows raised in clear surprise. For seconds, they just gazed at each other, not quite knowing what to say. She spoke in Valyrian.

"Y-you're here."

Sarcasm played at the corners of his mouth. "This is my tower, is it not?"

She ignored the sour retort. "The puff pastry," she began, for lack of a thing to say. "It was…it was really nice. Did you have it in the morn—"

"I'm pleased that you liked it," he replied monotonously, rummaging through a chiffonier of trappings. After obtaining his necessities, he once again left.

For three days, he did not come to her.

Finally, seventh day had arrived.

_Rain fire! Rain fire!_

There were dreams of the Second Spice War that ended it all. In her visions, souls of perished Rhoynar whose mortal frames have been reduced to mere embers against the grime called out to her:

_Mother Rhoyne…deliverance!_

From those ashes, they have reformed themselves—carcasses assuming outlines and full forms, transforming themselves into breathing, moving dead by some form of dark thaumaturgy. Those bodies took two bifurcated paths—West and East.

_Heart of Winter. Heart of Darkness._

_You stole deaths from the red god. Only death may pay for life._

A firemage—Faceless. Upon his lips were shuddersome pronouncements about pages that would be written one thousand and two hundred years later, after a cataclysm that will consume one great empire and allow the fabric to be shredded amongst all hidden realms:

_A child chosen—woman, wife, mother. She is all these things and none._

_Let her offer her pure heart, forge the light to wipe out darkness. In her sacrifice, Death will flee._

Asshai-by-the-Shadow. Its dark and solemn appearance reflected the desolation of the slave-queen's heart. Visions of an endless sea of masks plagued her, palanquins of ebony and iron, chained slaves that carried these. Spellsingers, necromancers, warlocks, blood sacrifice. And in the heart of it lies Stygai and within it, a slave-god.

The tongue of the Shadows was a million soul-shattering ululations, and the chant the mages sang was the same chant that had defeated Winter eight thousand years ago.

_Neferion—kosh hen mele Jaes!_
The one called Neferion carried with him one great firesword, and the flames of it danced within his irises of bronze and gold.

Arya awoke with a scream.

Her eyes adjusted to the darkness. It was her mind playing with her, for all certainty—for the dead eyes of those sculpted statues of dragons seemed to glow in rufescent hue. She trembled. Midnight, and there was no one in that chamber but her. She wiped the tears that had formed in her eyes and prayed to the elder gods for redemption. "Grant me solace," she implored them. "I am alone in this battle, I have no one. Bring me Light. Send me a Warrior, so I may be cloaked from fear, so I may stop seeing shadows and learn what must be done, so I may know that you have not yet turned away from me…"

"Summer to my Winter, Shield to my Sword, Shadow to my Being."

Moments later, even as she fought against the strong tides of slumber, she succumbed once more to the realm of dreams.

The elder gods have responded to her plea.

"Āria…"

She was roused by the feel of her silken skirt being lifted, the sweet sound of her name in one man's deep purr, and gasped, as she felt something gentle and wet in between her legs…

"Āria, rus…"

"Ah! Haresh…"

His tongue was mildly tracing the lips of her sex, as if bathing it with healing kisses. Slowly, it flicked the engorged nub in between her, provoking her inner sensualities.

"Ah!"

Is this plague from the deities?

A scheme—intoxicate the Valyrian, claim from him what must be.

He groaned intensely upon hearing his name, and perhaps he had regarded it as an invitation that he must carry on with pleasuring her, for his tongue that had earlier teased her now claimed the wholeness of her privy part. The slave-queen moaned ardently, even as she tried with all impossible might to contain her sudden arousal triggered by the Valyrian. "Oh, dear gods…" she drew in a sharp breath; felt small ecstatic explosions crawling upon her thighs and her belly. Betrayer!—she silently expressed her antipathy towards the virginal part of her that seemed to accede and worse, respond to his very, very able ministrations. He's ruining her, slowly…with his sadistic, destructive eroticisms; and he was gradually reducing her entirety to shreds, to fragments, to iotas and infinitesimals.

The wetness of her may have been from her own feminine tendencies, or perhaps brought by the saccharine liquid of his mouth. She felt his tongue sliding in vacillating motions across her lips, her moist slit, her aroused core. And for the life of her, she could not figure out how he can still manage to blandish her so generously with his lascivious flummeries in High Valyrian, when his mouth was wholly occupied with her vanilla sex. "Arya…you taste divine...hmmm…Arya…"

"Oh…oh…" she exhaled and whimpered, gripped the chains that bound her as tight as she possibly
can, struggled against the ambrosial upsurge that was slowly building within her. *He's killing me... killing me...* a perfect contrast—his scorching, raving tongue against the cool, placid waters of her. Her waters though, had been stirred to the point of no return.

Did the elder gods just gift her with wings? Whence this feeling of fleeting came? She felt like dying, and living, and dying again! It might truly be, that the heir of the Esdraelon was one Valyrian demigod for him to evoke from her such an otherworldly experience...and he was far, too far from being done. She squealed when he began sucking her nub, carousing with it with both of his lips, as if the core of her contained all nectarous reserves of all floras in the Known. "S-stop!" she implored, and tugged his hair of silver. Treacherous hands, mouth, legs—this treacherous body of hers! Every word negated each act, her lips would say 'No!' but her entirety would beg in shouts and fits, a million 'Yes, please...'

He was moaning against her, and now his tongue was on her sweet opening, tormenting her... taunting her feigned reservations. *He is Valyrian, you are Rhoynar,* she berated herself vehemently. *His clan wiped out yours, took to the slave pits the remnants.* But to her, those deeds of him suddenly became acts of faith—as if there was a necessary connectedness that must be forged between them, and may all forces conspire to consummate it, despite their clans being archfoes of each other. *Slaver! A demonic slaver!* The outcries of the rational part of her reverberated within the walls of her mind, but he...he had emptied her of all thoughts, coherence, syllogisms. At that moment, she was one antithesis of all the painful struggles of Rhoyne, as she surrendered all hates and discovered the delights of his Valyrian-ness.

With his tongue, he began discovering her chasms, tried to enter her.

*No prejudice. Just our bodies, tonight.*

She had become multiple selves in one.

"Haresh...please..." The meaning of the entreaty was twofold. She coiled his silver strands around her fingers, pulled them hard. The man groaned once more. "Arya..." he went on stroking her with his wet tongue, fast—encompassing her wholeness. The slave-queen gasped.

He lifted himself, planted kisses upon her nose, jaw, her neck. The chains made a rattling, metallic sound as she buried her fingernails deep in the flesh of his back. He crushed his lips against hers, allowing her to taste both him and her—a shared handiwork. Arya licked his lips in response, drained them of frothy moist. He lowered his face, pulled her thin raiment down and suckled her breasts fiercely, helpless whimpers escaping from his throat.

This was one of those moments when egos and recesses of dark hearts must be hurled to the vanishing winds. Nothing else must matter but this merging with another.

She bit her lip—it may have bled, too—as she felt his hardness against her slit, teasing her core. She was still very much soused, and the smoothness of both their carnal froth within her feminine crevice aided him in his craft. He guided his sex north and south of her, pressing it hard whenever it came in contact with her aroused nub. He toyed with his and he toyed with hers, and within her already disintegrated, deeply tangled consciousness, she had realized that this slaver's cruelty was not all there was to him. This Valyrian was not all Fire and Blood—he knew how to *play* with his women.

He paused with his suckles for a while, whispered his query so she may take control of her own pleasures as well. The chains that enslaved her had become nothing but playthings.

"*Jaelā ziry qopsa? Adere? Šdargon, Āria...*"
You want me to go harder? Faster? Speak, Arya...

She pulled him to her and began ravishing his mouth. A desperate act—to consume him, as if he was
dire life she was clinging onto. What is this?! Rhoyne fell seven days ago, departed souls are asking
for a retribution! When she broke away from the kiss, there was only one plea from her: Freedom—a
sinful albeit beautiful kind.

"Ossēnagon nyke lēda aōha jorrāelagon…"

Kill me with your love…

Sweet, sweet slavery! Can she be forever caged in his arms?

He chuckled. "Gifted tongue, Ny Sari poetry?" Once more, he frolicked with her femininity, drove
himself against her with gentle force, stroked her faster. "Ah…ah…you're sending me tickles,
Arya…you're so good, so good, sweetheart…" These words, despite the fact that all she did was
spread her legs for him and allow him to perform his deeds of rapture.

She controlled herself in the midst of her convulsions, gasped for dire air, for life even. Death had
transfigured itself into a thousand tourbillions of fervor and thrills, she uttered his name repeatedly—
the name she had bequeathed him because of this beauty he was sharing with her. It was one climax
that was more cataclysmic than the heights of the Second Spice War, with the torrents of both
dragonflame and the rivers failing in comparison. And how very pleased he was as shown by his
sounds of mirth.

With the pinnacle of their shared passion was his name.

Iāqaen Haegār!

Her trembles had become more apparent, all over her were white-hot sensations and outpouring lust.
In her visions were summits of more picturesque vales she could only reach through communing
with him. Arya felt the tip of his shaft against her opening, and moaned.

She tugged at his hair of silver. His mouth was on her right breast once more, and her left breast he
massaged thoroughly with his free hand. How can the toils of captivity be this sublime?

He was provoking her only, encircling her sphere through his tip, moistening her further. "Just a
bit…" the bastard murmured against her breast. "Tease is good, yes?" On and on, he rubbed her
opening with the cap of his hardness. Slowly, he entered her only through his tip, denying her of
delightful completions. He moved in and out of her, yet his sweet invasion was too damn shallow,
left a whole damn lot to be desired.

Teasing thrusts...her walls quivered with deprivation.

Her slave's chain clattered against the wooden posts. She pulled his hair viciously so their eyes
would meet—with dilated pupils both—and found him heavy-lidded and close to full submission.
"Inside me, slaver," she ordered him through clenched teeth. "You have tormented me in various
ways, my kin as well. Dare you not torture me now! Pillage and leave none, take everything I have
left!"

He paused.

Fitful breathing pervaded the silence in that tower.

His eyes softened, cruised through every part of her lovely face. Gray eyes, button nose, berry lips,
flushed cheeks—immaculate, true.

What have I done? A beast I must be in the sight of her...

Gently, he kissed her temple, gazed at her once more. He shook his head, as if roused from hypnotic state. "I-I cannot..." he whispered. "No, no...forgiveness, Nymeria...Arya, rus..." He exhaled through his mouth, fought against the tides, against chaotic fractions of sentiments he could not name. Ecstasy was replaced with sorrow, as he beheld her innocence, and saw in it her hidden suffering, the anguish she desired to emancipate herself from, even in the hands of him—he, who had dragged her in rune-forged chains to Valyria, kept her shackled for seven days. Perchance, she saw his lustful fondling and tongue-strokes as flights of fancy, an overture to an impossible affair of the heart between captor and captive.

After all, both iron manacles and silken cords bind men and women. They all become beings of thrall to it.

From inside the ornate side table, he retrieved the key to the metal fetters that restrained her. Locks clicked open. *Let her use her enchantments if she so desires.* He removed the cuffs around her wrists, and inhaled sharply at the bloodsoaked skin that had mingled with the rust. He rushed to the pool and returned to the featherbed with a vessel of warm water on his hands. He cleansed her.

"My enchantments subdued thirty firebeasts and dragonriders of yours," she said, in an attempt to provoke his wrath. "Should I not be punished for that, Esdraelon?" He remained silent as he washed her, wiped her with damp cloth, rubbed upon her wounded wrists some cure. "When Kleitos dies, you will run this slavers' empire. Is this the proper way to treat us, wasted lot? With compassion? Oh, come now. You will be the bane of the Mother Freehold!"

He tended to her in calmness, even as she pressed on with her embittered insinuations. "I have never been taken before. Oh, your bedlinen will be one large canvas of rich scarlet should you thrust yourself in me! Wouldn't that gratify you more than our shared passion moments ago? You can make me writhe, and scream, and compel me to utter your damnable name till I breathe my last. You can scourge me too, should I displease you in any way, pull my hair, force yourself inside my mouth, call your hounds and have them mate with me as well. Stop it!" She thrashed against his grip and threw the vessel. It broke, and water spilled on the stone floor. She pummeled his chest with both fists. "Stop with your acts of mercy! I'm worthless! Fuck me, fuck me now! I'm a filthy slave!"

"Arya!" Haresh growled. "Enough!" He pulled her to him, imprisoned her in his arms. "Enough, I said!" Deeply, he kissed her, so he can drown out cries of rage from her lips. She flailed about, but he was stronger. Endearingly, he brushed his mouth against hers to at least provide her with the closest thing there is to solace—a useless act, after the genocide of half of Rhoyne in his hands and those of his Valyrian kin.

*Can dead men rise from the ashes?*

"You're not filthy," he said in a whisper when he released her. "You're not worthless."

He stood from the bed and retrieved his robe from the floor, began clothing himself.

Her next words shattered his heart. Curious, for he never remembered even having a heart.

"Please don't go, lāqaen."

*lāqaen.*

She was renaming him, and for anyone it was a precarious thing.
It is said that it is not what a man is called, but what he answers to that defines him. From birth to his age of a score and three, his appellation had immortalized two of the many foundations upon which the tyranny of Valyria was built: Haresh—destroyer, Esdraelon—despair. In his memories of yesteryears, he would always recall Kleitos's words embedded in his merciless whips that scathed his then young frame of six and ten. "You are this Freehold's heir! Let all realms with their dynasties and empires shudder at the mention of your name, have the greatest of men lick the dust off your sandals in fear, sacrifice their daughters for you to fuck, offer you even their wives! When they see the shadow of your firebeast, let them kneel and declare how they have been abandoned by their accursed gods! Dare you not act weak in my sight!"

His dear mother would rush to his aid and act as a stonewall, a cushion, and receive those whips on his behalf. "Kleitos, enough with your folly!" Her face and arms would catch the punishing thongs, and always, she would bleed for him. Death had claimed her many years ago, brought by incurable illness. Her strength had been the strength of his own heart, and even in her departure he never forgot her words. "Haresh Esdraelon—this is the name you have been given when you were but a babe, when you had absolutely no command over your own life yet. Do not confuse the name with the self—the latter has its own compelling sorcery that may or may not be influenced by the former. You are yet to be named, love. That name that you will have will be one that you have earned, not one that was given to you when you have not yet a choice."

"Īqaen Haegār," she still murmured.

Sent by the gods—an Ancient Valyrian phrase that had been adopted by the rudiments of Rhoynish tongue. What had he done for her to suddenly think of him in such way? And it was not like any other endearment, very much unlike plain branding. It came forth from Arya's lips as if it was some kind of sacred cognomen—a saving grace. Men act according to the moniker they are given, most would say, and so it was a fearsome thing to be labeled in any way by others. What belief in him has she, that she would spawn from him a righteous character that may mark the denouncement of his identity as Valyrian? Sent by the gods—even after claiming the blood of Rhoyne through a carnage more atrocious than what had transpired in the wars against the Ghiscari? Sent by the gods—even after hauling the last descendants to this infernal realm and breaking their hopes for liberation, their resolves? Sent by the gods—even after skylarking with her innocence?

"Oh, Āria…"

"Please don't go," she murmured the words, toiled so she may contain her woe. "The elder gods taught us to seek for aid when despairing over plights we have been dealt with. The nightmares…tormenting me…and Rhoyne—how I wish to return and rebuild, I long for it…home. For seven days, all I had for company were dreadful voices, the fearsome flight of dragons, emptiness of this tower. I thought of dying! I had but one entreaty—get through the night," she gripped the bedlinens tightly. "I prayed without cease. I was in the brink. And then…and then you came to me. I had no one else, and you came to me."

Valar Morgulis, he thought. All men must die, but even Death cannot kill their names.

That one phrase will become the symbol for his entire existence. Naming creates souls; renaming reshares them.

This cannot be.

"Unname me," he ordered her, albeit calmly. "Please." He rushed to her side and cupped her cheeks. "Unsay one name and say another and let us cast this mad dream aside."

"Jaqen…" she whispered, and caressed both hands of him that held her face. "Stay, Jaqen. Leave in
the morn, remain tonight. Tomorrow, we will renew the strife between our clans—you are heir to Valyria, I am queen to Rhoyne. Tomorrow, we will fight. Tomorrow, it will be my old gods against your lord of light. Tomorrow, you will carry on with your slavers' deeds and I will hatch my plans of liberating my people. Tomorrow, yes—we will cast this mad dream aside."

"Arya…"

"Jaqen…" she coiled her arms around his shoulders, buried her face in his neck. "I am alone…refuse to believe this if you must, but I have no one else. Damn it, I have no else but you right now."

What more harm can be done?

Merciless—all Valyrians are. But there are times when benevolence assumes its own existence even in the most sinister of hearts. An awareness sprang from his subconscious, a stern warning from his core as a slaver. Disintegration of the self—and it was coming to pass even without him noticing it. One night is of no consequence. Was it so? Truly, names carry a sorcery of their own, but baptism through the grace of the enemy gods is a thing that must not be taken lightly.

Should he accept, he will forge for himself a new identity; and with it, a new life.

The Valyrian laid her down on the bed, kissed her. "I will stay."

Nay, he did not take her that seventh night.

He held her, the tightest he could. He had brought her here; he must therefore oblige himself to provide her companionship, even for a mere nightfall. Her cheeks were against his bare chest, his hands were around her frame. He stroked her hair of chestnut, inhaled the scent of it. Water in all its forms—the oceans and seas, the rivers and streams, morning dew, mist, snow…

Ice.

A kiss on her forehead, nose. One deep kiss on her lips.

"Sleep, sweet Arya. Jaqen will stay."

Then, began his series of betrayals. With it would come two prophecies—one scorned and one honored, a coming-together of two warring deities, and a bargain with a god who would unleash cataclysm to a once illustrious empire and to the realms of all men.
Uhm...guys? Uh, okay. Yeah, I know what you all are thinking. It'll get better, promise! Thanks for reading, would love to know what you think. Thanks for the comments and kudos, I heart you guys. ;D

This is the chapter's context:

**Second Spice War from A World of Ice and Fire**

The Val-Rhoyne arc is a fanfic within a fanfic, exploring alternate events if Nymeria (Arya) was captured by Haresh (Jaqen) the dragonrider. It all connects to the Long Night through Rhoyne, and we get to know *who* Arya is in this U. Three more flashback chapters and then, Westeros. ;D
Implorations

Chapter Notes

"I'll put your poison in my veins... They say the best love is insane."

The Slaver Becomes the Slave

Below: Valyria (sort of)
I do NOT own the image.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

" Consort to a legend,

The screams of her sacrifice will leave cracks on the Moon's face.

Her soul, the steel of that sword.

Bringer of light, let her bare her breast."

Songs of the Faceless, XXXI (lost leaf)

Days turned to moons.

Valyria still stood in all its dark glory.
Arya directed her gaze towards that tower where she had spent her first seven days as the heir's personal captive. It was imposing, and undeniably the tallest, most grandiose of all that stood on the Tyrants' Hill. It challenged the mien of all other roofless towers surrounding it, with its peak almost reaching the clouds and serving as bacchanal to firebeasts and lord-riders alike—the zenith to be reached when honing their skills in dragonflight. The tower stared down at crouched estates on the lower hills with its saga-scarred face. Colossal gold-sculpted dragons stood majestically on top of orbs that glowed blue in the night, as if heralding the arrival of trading galleys from the west side of the peninsula. Grand aqueducts brought waters to distant towns of the Freehold, aiding them with their bathing necessities, with the gardens and the mining. To the right was a colosseum serving as fighting stade and a venue for other public spectacles. The stade could accommodate more than a hundred thousand spectators and host a tournament amongst over twenty dragons. Unnecessary luxuries such as jeweled founts, triumphal arches and obelisks built from precious stones, cisterns, canals, and bridges adorned the whole enclave.

Six moons it had been since she first arrived in the Freehold. Despite Valyria being the red god's turf, the conditions of slaves have increased significantly not just for the Rhoynish descendants of the old gods, but for the Ghiscari and a few Andals as well. The sky is always red in Valyria, yet it was said that when the slave-queen found her temporary dwelling there, rainbows had started reappearing even when there was no rain.

Six moons—more or less a hundred and eighty days with a Valyrian she had named Iāqaen Haegār.

Her intentions during the first seven days had been quite simple—seduce the heir and act as slave-consort, plan for elaborate machinations for an insurrection whilst allowing him to inebriate himself with her virginal body, slaughter him in his state of sexual drunkenness. With these, all slaves would realize that anyone can be killed, even lords masquerading as demi-gods. Indeed, he had been sent by the old gods in her darkest seventh night, and it may be that he was the blessed embodiment of her sought-after release; but even that grace she had cast aside, so she could carry out her ploys.

However, a complication had presented itself, and all ingenious schemes were therefore thrown to the pits.

The bastard had fallen in love with her.

Damn these jesting gods. How can they let me fall as well?

For the first moon, he had courted her in secret; but no concealment remained in Valyria for long.

He had grown bolder in the turn of the second and third moons—visiting the slave shacks with bouquets of blue winter roses and Sathari jewelries every morn. "Warrior bride…” he would endear her with a smitten, boyish grin.

"I have no need of these!" She would reject the gifts—courtship might ruin the plans altogether. "But you are queen, Arya,” he would always say. "A slave who was once queen, thanks in great part to you,” she would respond. "Stop with this foolishness!"

For weeks, he had begged on his knees. "Return with me to the Archon's tower, please…” She had refused, and with contempt, would always tell him that her place was with her people; that if they toil and suffer, then she must toil and suffer as well. "That is something an unhallowed slaver like you would never understand. And I am not your personal harlot!"
Still, the Valyrian was stubborn. He pressed on with his romantic gestures, even brought his accursed firebeast once in the mining pits to the horror of the other slaves. "Incineration, clansfolks! The demon-heir will burn us all!" were the terrified outcries of the men. She recalled how she had rushed to speak with him that day, how very offended she was at his daftness.

"Why did you bring that dragon here, Jaqen?!"

"Forgive me, Arya. I merely wanted to…"

"What?! Threaten us with dragonflame should we fail to dig up sufficient weight of gold?!"

"No…"

"What?!"

"A festival at Lys…twice I have been there, and it's really lovely. Mummers and feasts, jewels, diversions. Heraxos could fly us there—"

"What the hell?! A social engagement? You're asking me out?!"

"Well…yes."

"Forget it!"

Even before he could draft another plea, she had turned her back from him. The horrified expressions of those slaves who had witnessed the encounter were replaced with confoundment. One of them snorted at the humiliating rejection received by the Valyrian, leading to silent, scattered chuckles from others. 'Drakarys'—dragonfire, was a simple command, a spiteful warning to those who would dare insult a dragonlord. However, there was nothing more the feared Valyrian could do but to bite his lip and walk away in despondency, like some infatuated boy denied of the chance to gaze at his beloved hiding behind a draped window. His imperial firebeast trailed behind him, its head bowed, as if sharing its master's sorrow.

At the last week of the third moon, they had reached a concession.

"I will accept you in my courts and back to my bed under specific conditions," Arya told him while she tended to the injury of one lad from Selhoru, caused by an eruption in the volcanic mines. "Slaves deployed in Rhyos and Mhysa Faer work ten and eight hours every single day. Find a way in that cursed council of yours to reduce it to merely ten. Remove stocks of food for the thrallsmen from the granaries meant for animals. Add two kinds of meat to the provisions—six short tonnes each, half a thousand sacks of barley every moon, corn and other harvest fruits, legumes. Clean water, not those filtered from your filthy aqueducts. Children below ten of age, women beyond fifty must not be required to sweat like sows in the mines or in the fields. Lessen the weight of gold to be collected per day from a hundred and twenty imperial gallons to sixty-five."

Jaqen was biting his thumb and watching her intently like one lovesick fool. "That all, baby?"

"One more," Arya paused with her mending and looked at him with derisive eyes. "Stop calling me baby."

The process of enacting new statutes in the Freehold was not a simple one. Proposals must be presented to the lower council for consideration, and should the Conclave be called to gather, the motion must obtain votes amounting to at least two-thirds from twoscore ruling families. If the proponent obtains less than half the number desired, then he must resort to other means to achieve the objective—the same system that had aided Valyrians in identifying which dragonlord clan must act
as sovereign to the Freehold:

*Dance of the Dragons.*

There was no other course of action but to duel to death with one of the Conclave's chosen dragonriders; the demands of Queen Arya of the Rhoyne will never get past the lowest council.

Three days have passed with no news about the progress of her stipulations, until one morn when three Ny Sari girls of around four and ten of age dashed to her quarters bearing tidings. "Forgive us for our too audacious acts, our queen, but the tourney will commence in an hour!"

She was too occupied with honing her sunspier to actually listen to messages about Valyrian divertissements. "Tourney?" she had asked in nonchalance.

"Dragon tourney, my queen," one of them answered. "Raehelyx against Haresh—well, Iāqaen, the pretty Valyrian who comes in here a lot, the mad one who kisses the dirt you walk on." Charmed giggles escaped from the mouths of two others. "A bit creepy, that one, but he's absolutely besotted by you, isn't he? Will you not see him fight, my queen? They say it's for the Rhyos and Mhysa Faer proposal. Will you be there?"

She inhaled sharply. *He had resorted to killing himself, that fool?* She wanted to rush to the fighting stade and stop the whole inanity. It was clear that her demands had not made it to the Conclave for endorsement, still, he could have attempted to bid for a second gathering with the council, or a third, or a tenth! Why this tourney? To prove to her his manly valor and chivalry? What a detestable creature!

Still, she uttered a silent prayer to the old gods and even to the red god that had fueled these demonic Valyrians for over five thousand years. *Hide him under your powerful cloak, be his rampart, I implore you.* Her deeply concerned countenance may have been too transparent, for one of the girls had queried, "You worry for him, my queen?"

If he wins, the slaves will obtain their due. It was not at all a selfish petition. However, she had exposed him to the most perilous of situations.

If Jaqen dies in that tourney, would she be able to give herself a reprieve? She may die with him should that come to pass, and if by some form of beneficence from the gods she fails to do even that, then she would just stab her own innards with the sunspier she was honing.

"Why would I even concern myself with the fate of that slaver?" she lied, even as her heart was being twisted to ugly, painful knots. "If he dies in there, then good riddance to him."

For a whole torturous hour, she toiled to calm herself in her shed. Cheers and jeers in High Valyrian tormented her, escalated the guilt she felt at having made those impossible demands in the first place. *Ossēnagon! Kill! Kill!*

She drew in a sharp breath, stood and wore her cloak of russet.

Arya found herself walking briskly towards the stade. Calm yet quick strides had turned to a frantic rush, as she climbed on top of what may be three hundred and seventy-two steps to reach the vormitorium that would lead her to the slaves' seat at the topmost part. It was the most dangerous part of the stade, as it was elevated and prone to a deluge of dragonfire—makes sense because slaves are expendable. At least there were posts that held a whole velarium of shades to protect the spectators from the scorching sun.

She reached the summit of the colosseum still camouflaged by her cloak, and saw the Archon seated
in his own well-protected podium, twoscore members of the Valyrian Conclave behind him. His expression was nothing but neutral, a complete contrast to Aurion Archestrad's which in all transparency revealed his thirst for mangled bones and an outpour of blood plenteous. *Death*, Arya thought. *Of course, he wishes for the Archon-heir to fall in this battle.*

All her thoughts were stamped out upon seeing Jaqen on the other side of the arena, hellish eyes directed towards Raehelyx. In the face of all the tumult, he was calm; yet Arya could feel the infernal madness that was gorging him from the inside. Dance of the Dragons is a fight to death, and whoever prevails would earn the right to throw *any* demand to the Conclave.

She fought against invisible boulders crashing her hopes, warred against the tides that consumed her heart. The second bout of the Dance was to commence any moment, and the auxiliary was now putting a new set of pauldrons and braces onto the Valyrian armor Jaqen was wearing. She saw him—bloodied, combing his fingers through his hairlocks of silver, shutting his eyes tight, exhaling sharply; and he was already very, very, *very* exhausted.

Two dragons—aurelian and midnight—took their positions at the center of the stade. Arya held her breath as the two riders mounted their firebeasts and did the trappings and harnesses. "Skilled in riding I heard; he commanded the forces against Chroyane, that Esdraelon," one of the thrallsmen spoke to his companion. "But this Raehelyx was trained by Archestrad, they say—hauled legions of Ghiscari in this condemned place. No hope for the Rhyos and Mhysa Faer proposal, it seems…"

Protestations started coming out of Arya's lips, but these were quickly drowned by the scimitar sounds of dragonflight.

Mad cheers followed the blur of soaring beasts.

With those came the flashes of flame, the din of dragons colliding with force against pleistocene and volcanic rocks that formed the walls of the stade, vociferation that may have reached the far mountains of Gorgossos. *Jaqen…don't die,* came her supplication. *Don't die.* She gasped at the sound of falling debris from what she was guessing was travertine marble, with facades of statues and arches. Strong posts and railings collapsed with each collision and shock.

All over the slave-queen were confusing whorls and spirals of flight, one dragon against another.

The Archon still sat and witnessed the spectacle, expressionless.

Unable to bear the sight, she rushed out of the stade back to her own shack, fanged serpents wolfing her entirely.

Three hours. Finally, the farce with dragons had ended.

She dared not ask those returning from the fighting stades how it went. Although the tourney was for a motion brought by one queen to the Conclave, bound to slavery she may be, she cannot possibly give her kin any hints about the disquietude she felt caused by her worriment for the Valyrian.

"Careful, now—not through the limbs!" From the outside, she heard one Chroyanean bondsman bark orders to three others. "Steady, or he will lose extremities with your handling, no doubt! Bring the boy here." Reluctantly, he knocked at Arya's wooden door though it was open, proceeded with the usual salutations. "My queen, he insisted that he be brought here; said he needed to see you."

"Who?"

"The Lord Esdraelon, my queen."
Her jaws hardened with contempt. "Kleitos?"

"No, my queen. The son."

_Jaqen?_ She thrice exhaled through her mouth, overwhelmed by sudden relief. "H-he was declared victor in the tourney?" A painful lump formed in her throat, and how she wanted to weep with ecstasy at the aftermath of that fatal match the Valyrians regarded as mere sport, even with death as a possible fate for the bested; and death it was, for Raehelyx. At that instant, the proposal mattered not; and may that be the first and the last she makes! _He is safe_—this is the only meaningful thing. "Please, where is he?"

Three other bondsmen struggled to half-carry, half-drag him inside Arya's shack, and was she shattered at the sight of him—bloodsoaked, with scalded arms and neck, swollen in all parts. He lacked the strength to even open his heavy-lidded eyes fully, and the dragonrider's armor he donned had been damaged in various places, with its gorget and plackart askew in different directions.

Like one spellbound, Jaqen H'ghar grinned upon seeing her lovely face. "Ā-Ār...Āria, jorrāelagon…"

_Arya, my love…_

Her eyes flew to those four who had brought the Valyrian to her, and saw their amused stares at the man's endearing words. They knew him to be a suitor of hers of course, a thing unheard of in the many millennia of the Freehold's existence. Such courtship was an aversion to the eyes of Valyrians and their slaves alike, springing from longstanding hostility among the clans. Limping, he walked to her, ignored the dissuasion of the other men that he must consider his condition. She struggled to keep a straight face and responded to the man with the politesse and formality expected of her as legate to the Rhoynar. "Compliments on your victory, Lord Esdraelon. I suppose the proposal set with the coun—"

He pulled her to him, drowned out all other words of her with his ardent, desperate kisses.

"Mmmmph…” Arya whimpered in the midst of their communing mouths, cursed herself for not foreseeing his intents. Shame—for her to be seen by her kin having such dalliance with a slaver, and the slaver was even groaning against her lips!

A few more seconds of ravaging her mouth and he collapsed to the ground; his injuries have taken their toll on his combat-wasted body. "Jaqen!” She lifted him up, and three rushed to her aid. Slowly, they laid him on Arya's bedstead. "Please, I need some Ny Sari healers with me! This man needs immediate treatment."

They did as she had requested.

Jaqen was in a distressingly horrible shape—his right arm was thoroughly inflamed and calescent, and parts of it were seared revealing portions of charred flesh. He was feverish, and sounds of delirium came forth from his lips, but to her, those phrases uttered in his state of lunacy were the most beautiful.

"Ā-ria, nyke jiōraton aōha j-jaelagon…”

_Arya, I got your wish._

She laughed softly, stroked his temple. Never had she seen him this weak. Gods, never had she seen him weak _at all!_ What kind of grace is this, that he would suffer much for her sake? There was no existing affinity between them but that of an overlord and a human chattel!
She hastily fetched a damp washcloth and began cleansing his wounds. "Forgive me," she said, when she saw him wince with pain due to her tending. But her request for clemency was truly for the pitfall she had exposed him to, even without her conscious intentions.

For moons, he had tried; yet she had never nourished her inclinations to him with his bouquets and his presents and his sung canticles through the strings of his harp. On the contrary, the gestures starved away any sort of impossible affection she may have for the man.

*This is his manner of wooing? Committing suicide in the stades?*

Ah, what did the poets of Ny Sar use to say in their lyrics and odes?

'*Unless he chains you with him till you bleed and ache, and melt those same chains with the hidden warmth of his heart; unless he frightens the hells out of you, and comforts you with the promises of heavens nonetheless; unless he addles your mind till you go mad, and clear the labyrinth of it all the same; unless he allows you to see him at his strongest and at his weakest, then he is not the one you have been praying for.'*

"*Gevie riña, Āria...*" he murmured in his heartrending, broken state. "*Lovely girl...*"

"*Jaqen H'ghar,*" she responded with a deeply moved heart, and placed light kisses on his hair, his nose, his lips. "*Rest awhile, my god-sent, sweet, sweet lover...*"

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Three Ny Sari healers had just finished with their mending. Vials of herbs and balm, healing implements were safekept as the women prepared to depart from the slave-queen's shack. "Two to three days," one of the healers said. "Dragonfire against the skin and flesh is blight to the entire body; the flames were shaped by rune, it's a whole contagion. The wounds will heal provided that he contains his movements, he must stay here hence for the time being. Observe his humours—the biles, apply these spotted leaves soaked in concoction thrice each day, skullcap might work for the headpains; wine too, as counteractant to flesh decay."

Arya thanked the healers and bolted the door of her shack, glanced at the slumbering man. To the bedside, she carried a vessel of warm water with curing essences and took from it the sterile cloth, began wiping Jaqen's wasted body. Night had fallen perchance hours ago; she had already lost track of time.

*The promise of rest at eventide disrupts me, sleep eludes me. I thirst.*

Gently, she let the wet fabric run through his firm, sleek Valyrian built; she prayed to the elder gods to renew him, to let the water seep through his inmost marrows and heal him from within.

She tilted her head, gazed ardently at his face that had transfigured from a demon's mien to that of a valorous seraph. Her eyes slowly cruised to his well-chiseled shoulders, chest, abdomen. A thin coverlet concealed his nakedness from the waist down.

*Suddenly, I long for your savagery and tenderness. I hunger for the heat the source of which I just found.*

That moment, she owned nothing. Not even herself.

*A taste is a taste—it satisfies, it does no harm,* she convinced herself, as she lowered her head and kissed him on lips. Her hands traveled slowly...slowly to his sex, and she stroked him there with deep fondness; and though her hands were not at all knowing of things concerning men, she heard Jaqen groan at her sweet ministrations.
Your mouth, your voice, your hair.

You.

I never wished to fall for darkness, yet darkness caught me as I descended.

Darkness consumed me...

In it I found light.

Even in his feeble state, he managed to pull her to the bed, settled her on top of him. Jaqen held the nape of Arya’s neck, allowed her to rest her forehead against his. "Naughty hands, naughty lips," he whispered weakly, kissed her like one starving for moons. "Naughty feet…"

Arya smiled softly. "Naughty feet?"

He bit her lower lip. "Feet that wandered…” he murmured. "…and wandered…and wandered…and wandered…from Rhoyne to Valyria…feet that…found me."

"Oh, Jaqen."

He shifted his position, albeit with difficulty. And now he lay on top of her—his soul naked for her to see, his fountains of love bursting within him, like those in the grandiose palaces of Ny Sar by the waters.

He lifted her skirt, removed the undergarment separating her from him.

"What am I to do, Arya?" Jaqen said. "I’ve seen all things, touched them, tasted them. Nothing, jorrāelagon. I was nothing till you came. I have never wanted anyone this much in my life."

He moved in perfect sync, each one meeting the other. Parting flesh, communing flesh; their bodies were begging, their desire crawled to the summits of their thoughts that were then two, and were now one. His mouth was against hers, drowning their outcries of ecstasy. Blood, sweat, nectar of sweet toil—a galaxy of starbursts.

"Gūrogon nyke, lāqaen."

Take me Jaqen.

Lovingly, he sheathed himself in her, lingered inside for a moment, savored the pain in her countenance—a first claim.

They were now one. His mouth was against hers, drowning their outcries of ecstasy. Blood, sweat, nectar of sweet toil—a galaxy of starbursts.

"His seed. My womb."

"Ah...I love you, Arya."

"I know, Jaqen."

He exhaled, bathed her face with soft kisses. "No, you don’t. No soul can ever comprehend the love I have for you. Not even you."

Pure madness. Pure wisdom. Something happened with my soul…

I found it.
It had been three moons since his dauntless, self-destructive act in the fighting stade. The recovery from his injuries had turned out to be faster than expected. Why of course, the Ny Sari possess the gift of healing, and he himself was one endowed with magical blood. All forms of rune combine to shape greater sorcery; it matters not if these were bequeathed to men by gods that were once at war.

Resorting to that tourney was one half-witted decision. Howbeit, this deed of his garnered him the favor of most of the Rhoynar; and whenever he would pay the shanties a visit, no doubt to pursue his usual coquetry with her, men would urge him to join them in their late afternoon huddle with the ale and the malt, and women would make him delay his visit to her a little and have him taste their pies and sweet courses. "Jaqen!" some children would call to him—the name Esdraelon was a thing forgotten to them, and that quick too—they would rush to the man, ask him about his imperial beast, or beg so he may show them some fancy tricks with his Valyrian sword.

Arya would always be surprised to see Jaqen followed by a throng of little ones, one atop his shoulders gripping tightly his hair of silver, two dangling upon his strong arms like aerial thespians, five or six behind him, laughing at his pitiable renditions of some Rhoynish ballads. Altogether, they would reach the rivers by the west of Tyria, where dames did their linen washing and bathing. Thereafter, his eyes would lock upon Arya's, and a crazy-boy grin would send the dames giggling and whispering amongst each other—mostly at his curious penchant for the slave-queen.

More than the obeisance and the high esteem from the Rhoynish slaves was the fondness the clans felt for the Valyrian—a thing worthier than any form of public veneration. "The Ny Sari queen is truly a powerful enchantress," came the rumors. "For her to overturn the circumstance on our behalf, bind the Valyrian to her instead of the other way. Ah! Liberation, clansfolks. Time is nigh when all these will end—blood and toil. Have faith, we will live to see it."

Those blathers carried no truth in them, of course. Arya never enthralled Jaqen H'ghar with any rune—she carried no form of enchantment that could possibly enslave the Valyrian to her; in fact, she was almost sure that she was the one enraptured fully by the man, due to his many feats for the sake of her. And his recent acts have been matters of concern for her these moons past.

For nights, he had stayed in her shack, romanced her intellectualities with Essoan—an invented tongue of his, played fire with her virginal body either by the embankments of the rivers or in the fields of blooming dandelions and lavenders. "Ñuha jorrāelagon…Āria…"—'My love…Arya, mine…" had become the nectar of his mouth; yet after every loving parlance and climax, arguments would be there.

"Enough, Jaqen! You will not put yourself at risk in another tourney. It's now my place to make those demands directly to the Conclave," she had told him countless of times.

He would always counterargue. "And I will not let you put yourself at risk by making those demands yourself! Forgive me, Warrior Bride, but it is a man's place. Valyrians listen only to their demonic kin."

That the Conclave was very displeased with the recent acts of the Archon-heir was an understatement. All those seated in the higher council were enraged at the deeds which to them, were anathema to the core principles of the Freehold. There were endless proposals for assuagement of slaves and their descendants not only in the Peninsula but in the conquered cities by the Essosi straits and Old Ghiscari settlements. There was very little too, that the heads of the twoscore dragonlord clans could do but to declare veto on the propositions in the lower council and await the decision of the more supreme assemblage which is always a joust of firebeasts.

The traditional dragons' tournament had been reduced to mockery; and lords would scoff and spit at
the show of farce the second dragonrider of the House Esdraelon had been running over the past moons. Iāqaen—as those worthless filths had branded him—had emerged victorious in all duels, as if the first battle with Raehelyx had done nothing but infuse him with staggering strength. And in every victory, came novel, ludicrous enactments from Jaqen's treacherous Valyrian mouth:

"Revision of the slave codes—the laws are outdated. Five thousand years are long enough; we do not live in the past. Abolish the term 'slaves'; replace it with 'subjects'. All Valyrians must learn Ghiscari, Andali, Rhoynish tongues, so we may better understand our people."

"No mass execution of subjects through dragonfire unless a full legal proceeding had been granted to each one. The trial will follow the Freehold's system for all Valyrian-borns; all statutes will be applied to the fullest extent, no exceptions."

"Trading and military outposts in Pentos and Tyrosh will be allowed limited autonomy. Trade with the West will proceed through Myr while the galleys of Volantis are under repair; inform the lower archons of these changes."

"Nullify all atrocious laws enforced in settlements Ghozai and Ghardaq—humans are not food for our dragons, blood brothers. Discontinue the practice of having women subjects mate with beasts, enough of conquering territories beyond the Basilisk Isles; we do not have enough food for a thousand more bondsmen."

"Reparation for slave descendants is necessary. Subjects who are assayed too old to toil in the mines will not be coerced into labor, uncompensated at that. If deployed men are not enough for a particular season, the old ones may be encouraged to work granted that they are given bronze or land-based compensation."

In every gathering, knives and swords would be drawn, slander, profanities. "Preposterous! The Conclave must rethink the purposes of the Dance of Dragons—for identifying the ruling family, let that be it! Passing absurd slave-laws through combat? Stop spewing your cock sap on the face of the Mother Freehold, Haresh!"

As it is, the largest freehold lands belonged to the Esdraelon, passed on to heirs either of the body or the blood, and so after heated disputations, there was nothing more the other Conclave members could do but to accept the conditions set by the Archon-heir—achieved through the fairness of combat of course—and to remain silent once Kleitos Esdraelon raises a hand to signal both calm and assent to the enactments.

The blood of the covenant is truly thicker than the waters of the womb. To Kleitos however, Haresh Esdraelon is both blood brother and son—there was the forged connection amongst Valyrians as conceived through the roots of the Mother Freehold, there was also the bond between seed and and spawn. The link is multilayered and unbreakable.

To counter Haresh's propositions in front of the Conclave is to admit that the heir is indeed unfit to inherit and rule.

"Your son is going to cause the Doom of Valyria, Kleitos, I'm telling you," Aurion Archestrad had after one intense gathering. "The cursed child of the Mother Freehold. Ah, pity! Seems you have not done quite a decent job of raising him even with those lashes of yours. A few more string pulls from that Rhoynish queen and your son will turn himself into this Empire's treasonist. And if the visions of Akhrast the Mage are indeed from the red god, then we cannot dismiss your son's role in one other battle against the dead—and this is why we must keep those rituals of mating female slaves with animals in Gorgossos, we need those hybrid creatures. And your son would be needing a wife soon."
Arya was aware of the discord Jaqen was slowly creating in the Hill. Such dissension should please her. Finally, those dragonlord clans have reached a point of conflict with regard their slaving practices, with one from the ruling family speaking on behalf of those under their thrall. How can she bear rejoice though, when she knew that Jaqen had already amassed a collection of Valyrian adversaries, and therefore had managed to imperil himself?

And if they find out that there are no more gold left to dig in the fields of Aquos Dhaen, they would bring all slaves to the Fourteen Flames—women and children all. The slavers will allow us to burn to soot.

There was the last recourse.

The next morn, Arya donned her Ny Sari queen's robe of dark mauve, and proceeded by herself to the Tyrant's Hill.

Darkest Asshai was one of the realms the Valyrian lords left alone in their conquest. The land was neither foe nor ally to the Freehold, and its esoteric history consisting of dark rune and dragonlore garnered the esteem of magical-blooded, dragonriding slavers. There existed a form of mutual veneration between Valyria and Asshai, and it has been rumored that dragonlords took sojourns to the Shadows and returned to the Freehold carrying cabalistic learnings on conjury and the black arts. Upon their return, the lords brought with them the most gifted of sorcerers, soothsayers, and alchemists.

One such is Firemage Akhrast L'iris, or simply Akhrast the Elder Mage, a servant of the lord of light.

Firemages can conjure and control flames, and they are thus revered if not feared by the lords. A small flicker of light can become blazing red wildfire in their capable hands. Children know them to wake fire from obsidian glasses, walk on live coals or within flares and emerge unharmed, and make burning flora bloom in the wind. "Magic tricks," the adults would say. "You, young lot have no idea what a firemage could actually do."

If their spellcasting ran without interference, they can conjure arcane enchantments, summon bursts and torrents of fire, incinerate foes and set structures ablaze. Howbeit, they could only perform their rune if there are dragons that fuel the magic.

For a decade, Haresh Esdraelon had been in the firemage's tutelage. Instruction had been quite effective—the Valyrian's command of his firebeast and those of others had improved significantly. The gamut of magic he had mastered from the Elder was limitless: summoning firebeasts, controlling steel and flames, building physical resistance to dragonfire. "Gifts from the lord of light must be passed on to his very descendants," the mage would always say.

That morn, the Archon-heir took the liberty of inviting himself in the firemage's workchamber. The old man was then in the middle of mastering a specific incantation—one that would give flame the core substance for it to prevail over all forms of water, be it liquid, vapor, or ice. A weapon will be forged from it, a firesword—the Red Sword as the Elder Mages of Darkest Asshai adept with the long saga would call it. The sword prevented the opponent's use of dark magic, even plain access to it; and would allow its wielder to resist the rune altogether.

The incantation had done nothing but fail in the six moons of the firemage's labor.

The old man sighed at another unsuccessful attempt. "Ah! When will you old gods step down from
The one who was now named Jaqen H'ghar laughed softly, leaned against the table. "This whole feat of yours is useless. No conquests in realms near seas or rivers, we have postponed imperial expansion for latter days; might have placed an end to it for good. Why must we continue forging a water-and-ice-resisting sword? Rest awhile." His eyes riveted to the reddish ore in dust-form. "As you have so wished, I labored thirty days and fifty more to shape that weapon. Every damned time you tell me to drive the blade into something, it shatters. You know what this means? The Long Night is nothing but legend, Elder, tales to scare babes and have them fall to slumber early. And who would wield this against those mystical creatures of the night, pray tell?" The Valyrian smirked. "Aurion Archestrad?"

Akhrast beheld the man with inexplicable reverence. Not Archestrad, my boy.

The old man had only one answer to the younger man's monologue:

"Neferion. Kosh hen mele Jaes."

Neferion—champion of the red god.

For moments, there was nothing in that antechamber but quietude whose impact is even greater than the shrill outcries of those firebeasts that devoured Chroyane. Valyrians are not obsessed with the gods, they are obsessed with prophecies and the power men hold in choosing to fulfill it. The gods rely on us to fight their battles, Kleitos had told Haresh once. They would not wage it amongst themselves—why would they? There is no damnable thrill in fighting wars knowing that you cannot die or kill your foes.

Gods cannot die.

But what if one god calls itself Death? And if that god is Death, then who holds dominion over that god's Self?

"I am not he," was the only thing Jaqen could say in response. "Ridiculous."

"Is it?" A dulcet tone. "Ten years you have spent with me perusing the god analects. Pray tell, who has once defeated the very Heart of Winter fourscore centuries ago, through his direct descendant, the bringer of light?"

"According to those fictional sagas of yours? Very well, let's see…the Heart of Fire?" the Valyrian's tone carried a hint of mockery.

"Indeed," said the Elder, wiping the slightly derisive smile off the man's lips. "Only the Heart of Fire could consume the Heart of Winter. The god of flame and shadow—the red god, has conquered that whose name cannot be spoken."

"The Great Other," Jaqen supplied. "I know the analects. They're fictitious."

"Annals speak of it, dear boy," the mage replied, despite the old thoughts he was assured came from the lord of light himself. "There is another god out there—a very powerful one. If we wish for Valar Morghulis to not come to pass, then we must not speak ill of the chronicles. Find possible ways too, to appease these gods and implore for a convergence. For the time being he set aside the vials and collection of ore that were scattered all over the worktable, focused on the dragonsteel of rippled patterns. "Ten thousand deaths in every Valyrian conquest. This is not how it must be, son—using fire to kill. Deaths nourish Winter and Darkness both. A great thing, indeed that you saw through it, spoke to the Conclave about it, too—demise of ten thousand more will be postponed. No dead men,
no food for the death god. As for those surviving," he glanced at the Valyrian who was then a reflection of perturbation. "They must find ways to preserve themselves should the Dead wielding crystal swords and breathing frost return and ravage once more after fourscore centuries. One thing is clear in all these—Neferion, Eldric, Azor Ahai, the Promised, must come from the blood of dragon descendants of the red god himself."

The Valyrian chuckled. The sound was caused by both apparent amusement and alarm that he sought to conceal. "This is why I always seek you in my hours of solitude, Elder. You never fail to give me some good laughs. No offense, but you Asshaii lot are damn superstitious."

"Pray then, that Death casts not an eye on you. Pray that these are mere false beliefs. But know this; the Heart of Winter is a womb, and wombs birth children. A bigger complication if the god is a goddess in a specific eon—male gods can bear seeds, yes; but female gods can reproduce, create coils within coils." The mage began keeping all metallic implements inside their repositories. His eyes chanced upon the man's blithesome expression. The older one's brows furrowed, and with a chuckle queried. "A most fanciful night with the Ny Sari queen, I suppose?"

"Oh yes," Jaqen replied with a grin. Finally, a digression. Onto subjects that actually matter to him. "Will visit her in the morn, might be that she's killing herself now for not seeing this pretty face the entire day." The Elder sighed, shook his head at the man's hint of self-worship. "She will be very pleased at the turn of the Conclave's decision—all her requests in Oros and Mantarys were sanctioned by the members. She'll make a wonderful archoness don't you think?"

Ah yes, dear boy. A wonderful Nissa.

"Indeed." A challenge from the Mage. "But Valyrians cannot marry or interbreed with non-Valyrians, can they? This law is as old as the roots of the Mother Freehold, cannot be overturned by a series of Dances. Why of course, we are all victims of folly—we all know that your intents with the Rhoynish queen are not entirely sincere."

Jaqen was taken aback. After processing the mage's insinuations, he scoffed, intent of explaining himself. "Would I risk getting myself slaughtered by firebeasts in the stades four times if my motives are not at all genuine? Oh, come now, Elder. You do know that these acts of mine had resulted in complications in the Hill, yes? You are right, Valyrian blood must not be the blood of demons—there is more to this empire than pillaging and slave-hoarding. I never believed that shibboleth until Arya came along. That is far from insincerity."

"And just how far are you willing to go for that slave-queen, son?" The Elder was now eyeing the Valyrian intently. His tone was symphonious and mirthful, teasing even. "Discounting the farce with dragons in the fighting pits—you and I both know that you are almost immune to fire, and that you can revoke a dragonrider's command to his own beast, what with that fancy red pendant of yours. It was a rash decision to set those gifts aside and have yourself almost butchered in the stades. However, do admit to your intents in that first battle against Raehelyx—you merely wanted to obtain her seat of affections, wanted her healing hands all over your naked body. Ah, but of course—her mouth against your mouth, while she utters endless words of gratitude in your smirking face."

"Well, those too," the Valyrian admitted. "And if I have to place myself in the brink of death over and again for those rewards, then I'll ride in the fighting pits till breath fails me. But you don't believe that all those deeds were fueled only by lust, do you? This is…I don't know." He ran his hands through his hair, inhaled sharply. How to claim it? How can he declare himself a possessor of an emotion he does not even have the facility for? Valyrians are said to be heartless. If so, does it follow that they cannot love? An admission—perhaps, she had planted in him a seed of something that can only be described as virtuous and pure. "Maybe it was her enchantment. The Rhoynar believe her to
be Mother Rhoyne herself—the water goddess."

"That may be true, yet false," the Elder answered. "These realms of ours are mere footholds of the gods. Those deities do not descend to the spheres of men unless in the event of a divine clash. Explication is simple—you may have fallen for an enemy."

_Oh, she is much like a deity, indeed. With her powers and a façade of flawlessness, the fierceness in her that makes her untouchable and unbreakable, the way she would command men to kneel and bow. Fascinating. Forbidden._

"Yes," the Valyrian's voice was almost inaudible in his recognition. "I may have fallen for an enemy."

"And that same enemy is going to make you choose between herself and the Mother Freehold," the Elder stood once more, rummaged through his repositories and obtained from it a considerable stack of rolled parchments. He placed the sheaf on the table and unscrolled two, only to feign occupation in them. "But why must an enemy remain an enemy if a confluence can be drafted with the gods as witness?"

His expression reflected intrigue. "Confluence?"

The old man wiped beads of sweat from his forehead. Workchambers in the upper dungeons of Valyria were too close to the Fourteen Flames, which explains the warm, humid atmosphere in these places. "What constitutes your usual dalliance with the slave-queen? Rhetoric-riddled discussions about her bountiful breasts? You never asked her about Rhoynish tales on the lesser gods?"

Jaqen rolled his eyes. "We do talk about matters of faith, if you must know. And the lore on the lesser gods—River Rhoyne froze during the Long Night. The Crab King and the Old Man of the River who were then enemies cast their strife aside and allied themselves with each other against Winter."

"Exactly," the old man nodded, satisfied by the Valyrian's account. "Chronicles speak of it—warring gods uniting, driven by a single impetus. What are chronicles but reality preserved in pages? And this is now our reality, son: Winter is a thief that comes in the dead of the night. A thief does not announce its arrival since such would defeat its purpose of waylaying and stealing lives, of feeding on the carcasses of those once breathing with no one the wiser. The elder gods and the lord of light must set aside their differences born out of shallow reasons, the likes of which is a useless argument on who is cardinal between the two of them. The old gods, the red god. Rhoyne and Valyria. Water in all its forms—Ice therefore, and Fire. Indeed, a confluence."

"The saga never spoke of the old gods participating in the battle against the Long Night. How can any such confluence be forged?"

"Perhaps my instruction lacked numerous teachings, but the old gods are the only gods beyond that rampart the blood of the first men call the Wall," the Elder explained. "And Winter was born beyond that Wall during their Age of Heroes."

Jaqen began pacing the chamber, restlessness seeping through his pores asudden. He glanced at the Elder, then at the workchamber's ceiling, as if he could see the heavens from the dungeons. "A grand scheme, yet very, very treacherous. It is practically akin to having Valyria withdraw its hold over Rhoyne in order to appease these old gods, and..." he blew air from his mouth, as he saw the Elder's countenance, which was then a clear picture of confirmation. "A...a marriage between a Valyrian and a Rhoynar, yes? A marriage in all and every aspect—body, soul, will, purpose, realities, recollections, substance. This is the kind of convergence you are speaking of?" the Elder nodded,
smiled reassuringly. "You're asking me to betray my own scion's blood! And open the hell gates of Valyria to free all Rhoynar!"

The Elder held up one hand to still the man. "Just how do you woo a woman, pray tell?"

Jaqen shrugged with insouciance. "By acceding to her demands."

A finger was raised to acknowledge and make a point. "How very true! Let us not speak of love as if your Valyrian mind could comprehend it, forthrightness is a virtue after all. Yes—make her fall by proving that for her, you can conquer and surmount anything. The gods have their own version of wooing the other—divine courtship. Soothe their swollen egos, sweeten the offerings. What could be most soothing, what could be the sweetest than a coming together that is all-good, all-powerful? A coming together of two descendants for the intention of purging the realms of a much darker god?"

Soft chuckles. "And the rituals? Please tell me that you do not plan to recreate the lore on the Ghiscari maiden who invoked all known gods through a papyrus in a box." He did his best imitation of a female's voice. "I summon you divinities, may my beloved be bound to me, be my escort for as long as I want, obey no one save me…' Ludicrous!"

"And that beloved fell straight into the maiden's arms, did he not? Seems that you do not have genuine interest in the Rhoynish queen apart from bedding her."

Jaqen's lip tipped up. "Believe me Elder, I'm thoroughly obsessed with the idea of taking Arya as a wife; and should she demand that I take in no other wives but her, I would gladly concede. In fact, I never wish to have any one else in my bed but her. But to scorn the empire by liberating Rhoynish subjects? This is utter suicide. Not to mention, she knows her limits as queen—she cannot demand for total emancipation. Even if I ride in a million Dances in those fighting pits, there is no way the Conclave is going to fold. Freeing slaves has not happened in the five thousand years of Valyria's existence."

"It has not," the Elder nodded. His voice suddenly sounded weary, as if conveying that for the time being, he had run out of words to lengthen their discourse, seeing that the Valyrian was not an easy one to persuade. "I have made my points clear, though: there is a battle that is greater than Valyria's desire for wrathful glory. You cannot have the Mother Freehold and Mother Rhoyne both." He placed the sheaf of scrolls back to the repository and dismissed the man. "Do think about all these, will you? And may the Rhoynish queen speak of wisdom only in the coming days. Once the gods have talked some sense to you son, return to me. I am always in these dungeons."

Glorious screech of dragons bathed the after-morn skies—a hassle of sonance in perfect contrast to the listless, fragmenting clouds that seemed to prepare the way of the bleeding star, as the Freehold's astrographers would so claim. The shierak qiya comes and goes, and its arrival is blessing or bane for various clans, depending on which gods they call out to for aid.

Fear was lost on Arya. She was used to, and perchance had grown to appreciate in time, the sound of their outcries and their expansive wings threshing mightily in her six moons of stay in the outskirts of the Tyrant's Hill. Their glistening scales with hues reflected both harmony and lawlessness of colors of bastard amber, rusty falu, incarnadine, pervenche, red zaffre; and if gods do look down on the realm, then they would find the riot of shades and sparkles of dragons a sight to keep in their cherished remembrances.

*Dragons are slaves to their dragonriders too. They would not spew flame unless they hear 'drakarys', none of these could have been the sole fault of these tamed yet untamed beasts.*
She spanned the bridge connecting two steep cliffs, a pathway from the slave pits to the hill of slavers. The bridge was built from combined stones of gneiss, porphyry, and crystallized limestone. Aging two thousand years, the viaduct was in a condition of serious decay, and the lords had done nothing to see to its repair. But of course, the slavers had winged beasts that could fly them to the shacks if need be; the bridge was used mainly by slaves to gain passage to the hill on very rare occasions. And should the bridge's collapse cause the untimely demise of thrallsmen who might be crossing, then scorching liquid obsidian from below will snatch their mortal frames, have these coalesce with the unmerciful grandeur of the fourteen flames. Waters from channels made from the canyons cascade to a river of flowing magma a hundred feet in depth.

Finally, she had reached the open dome with ornate carvings, located in a hillock high enough to provide a clear view of the Summer Sea.

A hundred more steps to the Archon's tower. A hundred more breaths before facing those silver-haired slavers seated in the Conclave.

Unbeknownst to the slave-queen, the gathered members of the Conclave are in the middle of a heated disputation on the recent requests made by her, especially on matters concerning Sothoryos and the cities along the straits of Pentos to Myr.

"...to delay the ships bound for the Basilisk Isles, until we have sent an emissary from the lower council to evaluate the suitabili—presposterous demands," Aurion Archestrad spat sourly. He crumpled the letter written by Arya's hands and hurled it to burn on the obsidian pool of flames. "We should have killed that whore when we had the chance; Valyrian chains bind magic, and she was bound!"

"The question is," Lathos Hadervaren spoke, assessing a braid of his dreadlocks a little too obsessively. "Why wasn't that slave-enchantress slaughtered the very second you broke through her wall of mist? And now she's becoming a real thorn on the Mother Freehold's side, scorning slave laws drafted before any of us seated here were even born."

"A question to the Archon," one of the members offered.

"Hah!" Aurion scoffed. "And how can we obtain decent answers from one who was not even present at the height of the Second Spice? Forgive me for my untoward manner, Kleitos, but this is a matter to be addressed in the presence of your honorable son—he shackled that whore in his Valyrian bed for seven days and now he's gotten himself drunk with that whore's cunt sap he can't anymore tell where his loyalties lie!"

Kleitos was clenching his jaw in repressed fury. Where is that ungracious boy, he queried himself. I will smother him to death with all this nonsense of his. His dark eyes riveted to Aurion's face flushed with rage, spoke with false calm. "Indeed, that enchantress should have been mangled to death before any of the Rhoynar scums were hauled in here," he leaned forward, conveying serious-mindedness, behind which is a tactic to overturn the blame from their House to another. "So as commanding dragonrider, Archestrad, why did you not carry out execution through dragonfire? Must you wait for your deputy to accomplish it for you? Is that not clear disregard of your fundamental duty as commander to the war?"

Murmurs of agreement emanated from the hall. Aurion Archestrad kept his silence, though his countenance remained ferocious. As first rider, he was charged with the task of executing chiefs from the opposing side—a common-sensical tactic to keep rulers apart from their former subjects, and thus thwart the possibility of insurgence in the Freehold when slaves are deployed.

"Commanding dragonrider or not, if the Archon-heir declares his desire to bring that cursed..."
"Rhoynish slut in here so he could have some foul cunt to thrust his cock in, who would dare say no?" It was the female dragonrider from Ophistor who answered on his behalf. "A disgrace! If the Esdraelon cannot find a way to have its heir honor the marriage agreement with our House, then count our dragons out should the Conclave decide to pursue another conquest—all our hundred and seven will remain here in events of battle."

"Truly?" Lathos smirked, then flexed his arms upwards. "I thought that agreement was nullified after the Salt Wars, when none of your dragons came to aid the Volantenes in the attack at Sarhoy? Or are you still living in your usual fantasía that Haresh's pursuits with you go beyond the typical bed-soiling? His obsession for the Rhoynish queen—"

"Keep your trap shut, Hadervaren," the woman hissed. "You know nothing. Your pardon, Kleitos," she turned to the Archon who was now assessing the worsening situation. He donned the darkest expression but the woman seemed unaffected by this. "Two riders have flown to the ruins of Rhoyne two nights ago. We left threescore firebeasts and their riders south of Dagger Lake, in the stretch of the River Rhoyne near Chroyane. They were all gone, perhaps consumed by the fog and mist," she paused, allowed the alarming weight of the revelation to seep through their comprehensions. After achieving the desired effect, she pressed on. "What they found beneath are men made of stone and scales, with faces of our lost blood-brothers. Their old gods have exacted their wrath upon us, and I daresay we face this equal resolve. If Haresh wants a dirt-crawling harlot to bear him begrimed offsprings, then so be it. Let us not play the part of fools here—perhaps a third of you Valyrian men may have had or may still have a bastard or two with those animal-exotic slave women of yours. I suggest that you start feeding those useless babes to the hounds as is the practice, before the bleeding star makes an appearance. A deed of sacrifice too—the soils of the mines by the Fourteen Flames must be bathed with young's blood, less and less gold is gathered in each turn of the moon. We do not wish to displease the red god, and enough of your acts of derision against Valyria!"

The double doors burst open to reveal a fuming Jaqen H'ghar. He stood in the middle of the gathering, regarded each seated Valyrian with clear disgust. Those seated around the obsidian pool of flame were defeated by quietude, and there was a certain deference that he commanded from mere stance, or from a little more than this, such that no soul, not even Aurion himself, dared speak a phoneme.

His blazing eyes then remained fixated upon Daxen's face.

"You accursed woman," he seethed. "Blood sacrifice of innocent babes? Having them fed to the hounds? If not for our own lechery, those bastards would not have been birthed by those slaves your Valyrian cocks have violated! This gruesome practice is unsanctioned by the slave laws as redrafted!"

"Sit down."

It was Kleitos. Haresh pointed a finger at the woman in the midst of enraged exhalations. "I will break your neck if you open that damned mouth of yours again." He took his usual place in the Conclave and met Aurion's stare with a vicious one.

Kleitos struggled to contain the vortex of ugly emotions within him. For five centuries, the tower had housed only Esdraelon blood and kin. Its ancient corners and walls had become witnesses to the birth of Esdraelon descendants, to the relegation of power and authority from fathers to first-borns, to sagacious plans that had shaped Valyria to its paramountcy. Their clan had been the Freehold's diadem in more than a hundred thousand glorious days.
Now, because of his own son's anarchistic acts, their House is on the verge of losing the Freehold from dire grasp.

What is a son but an extension of the father?

Haresh Esdraelon may be the most gifted of all dragonriders in their Conclave of two scores, but whether or not he can be deemed fit to rule is entirely another story.

A weakling. Both of them are. How could he have raised a son without an inch of Valyrian spine in him, a son who knew nothing but benevolence and magnanimity, slave-compassion and mercy? Aurion Archestrad might have spoken the truth only, that with Haresh Esdraelon, he had failed at being a patriarch.

It can't be the slave-queen's enchantments overpowering him. The old gods possess neither power nor ascendancy in the lord of light's domain.

But there are greater wars to fight. Unfortunately, the Valyrians are not superstitious.

'Nock one arrow, release it. Hit two marks—even gods concede to the pleas of descendants,' was the advice of the Akhrast the Mage. 'We need a soul to combine with the steel of the blade, a bare breast of a wife to plunge the steel in, or the sword will never bring forth light. A union between two gods is one mark, the creation of a Nissa is another.'

This will only work if Haresh is Neferion,' the Archon had argued.

'He must be. In half a millennium, only now did the Esdraelon give birth to a single scion. 'Monogenes', Kleitos—begotten descendant that could raise dragons from stone. Haresh is this age's Promised.'

'It will put this House's archonship into peril.'

'We are all in peril now. Act wise.'

Nay, he cannot miscarry his duties as Archon too.

Neferion—champion of the red god.

Rulership, prophecies, gods. Aurion Archestrad had mentioned that the heir needed a wife, but little does he know that the wife Kleitos and the Mage had in mind is a non-Valyrian, a woman whose wolf-howl can crack the face of the full moon so that from it, thousands upon thousands of dragons may pour out, as in the tales of the Essosi.

"The slave-queen's demand concerning the Basilisk Isles is dismissed," the Archon declared. "No appeals, no overrules, no contest will be accepted from any House."

"Father——" Haresh began.

"No exceptions."

Three knocks on the double doors of alder interrupted the colloquium. An armed great officer entered the threshold. In the hall were brows raised, hushed tones, and eyes cruising to the chamber's expanse.

All seats were already filled. All the legates from forty dragonlord families were present in that gathering.
The Archon raised one hand to demand for calm. He then directed his attention to the great officer. "Order of precedence. Where are the armed guards?"

"With the guest, my lord. She needed to be fettered before the Conclave. Best course of action as far as my duties would dictate," the officer said, unsure of how to proceed. An exhale. "Nîhmēria hen Rhoyne."

The earlier faint and inarticulate tones were replaced by those of outrage and utter disdain, as if Doom was upon Valyria even though the Targaryen prophetess who spoke of it had not been born yet.

"Travesty!"

"Discourteous chattel! And what does she hope to achieve with her useless audacity in these courts?!"

"Her unhallowed acts have scorned the Freehold repeatedly, Kleitos. Execution through dragonfire, she came in here uninvited—an unlawful act."

It was Daxen Ophistor's hysteric screams that heightened the turmoil. With exaggerated gestures, she voiced out her indignation. "Damn it! This is all your fault, Haresh! Now that slave-cunt of yours thinks she can stain the floors of this tower with her filthy self! All your fault, damn you!"

It was as if the gods have intervened and blessed each soul in that hall with unexpected placidness—a collective reaction to the red-and-blue flames in the onyx pool that died all of a sudden.

The chamber was filled with the smell of incense.

Jaqen H'ghar didn't bother hiding his smile at the effect her mere entrance had in that hall of silver-haired fire descendants. From the pool now empty of dancing blazes, he turned his fullest thoughts, all considerations, to her and her only.

There she is.

Damn it, she's beautiful.

Queenly stance, divine countenance; and the resplendent power within and around her was a thing unexpected of a slave whose home was wiped out and whose race was almost annihilated. She stood there like one mighty tower, a remnant of a history obliterated; and she faced all those who had, with their hands once and forever bloodsoaked, erased the chronicles of her from old papyri. She was on her feet with the fortitude of one who was never truly conquered and broken by that war. All these, despite the fact that her wrists were bound by manacles.

Her sure steps led her to the center of that hall, with eyes of dragons as witnesses. The sound of her footsteps was the only audible thing in the stillness.

And when she spoke, the walls allowed the euphonic sound of her voice to reverberate in their steadfastness, as in an act of reverence.

"Kleitos Esdraelon, Conclave," she smiled charmingly, and Jaqen found himself grinning with inexplicable obsession. "īāqaen Haegār."

Gasps echoed through the hall—offended, livid. All were aware of the byname Haresh Esdraelon had obtained for himself through his witless, slave-indulgent acts these moons past. The sickening screams of Rhoynish thrallsmen and women alike had filled the whole fighting stade in the latest
Dance like an aggravating buzz of flies—sent by the gods! were their words.

To name the Valyrian, rename him rather, in front of blood brothers and the sacred flame itself that had bound them with him and him with the rest of them, is nothing but an act of provocation—a summon to contest that Valyrian’s very root.

"Praxis of this Freehold," the one who was named Jaqen H’ghar leaped from his seat in the midst of commotion, in order to thwart any foul plan against the Rhoynish queen.

To all except the Archon’s surprise, the man removed his Valyrian birthchain from his waist, held it out to its full span. The queen’s shackles snapped open, then flew and attached themselves to the chain Jaqen held. It is according to the dictates of the Freehold that any man or woman will be received by the Conclave should a Valyrian of pure blood grant him or her fullest recognition. When Haresh Esdraelon removed his birthchain and unshackled the slave-queen, he had nullified the existing gap between their caste, and regarded her as an equal.

With calm fascination, he assessed the queen’s every feature. *Mauve works like a charm with her skin colour. Look at those soulful eyes…ah, yes, those naughty, naughty lips. Breasts…oh, blessed babes. And what treasures wait beneath those garments? All…all of her.* For moments there, they merely stared at each other, oblivious of the tempest threatening to boil over. Her smile widened when Jaqen winked. "Speak goddess, the Conclave will hear you."

"My gratitude," she placed the tips of her fingers upon her lips, kissed them, held them out to the Valyrian. She then rewarded Daxen’s spiteful stare with a passive one—a sign of the woman’s insignificance as far as Arya was concerned. Her gray eyes cruised back to Jaqen. "The recent Dance at the stade, you honored me; you honored us."

"Honor is long overdue," was the man’s too enticing response.

The Archon interrupted the exchange. "Āria hen Rhoyne, the Conclave has decided to enact your recent demands as conventions would dictate except for two—reparation for slave descendants and postponement of ships bound for Sothoryos—"

"Not your choice to make," Arya cut in. "When a Dance is won in favor of slave demands, your only duty is to inform the members of the Conclave of these, proceed with your legislative nonsense, implement. Valyrians do honor agreements without unnecessary preconditions, do they not?"

The hall was in an uproar.

Aurion Archestrad rose from his seat abruptly, pointed a finger at the slave queen. "Outrageous! Valyria is not some stinking niche of fish-smelling, moss-eating Rhoynar! One decision from this Conclave and the entire system of Dance of the Dragons will be overturned, we carry the authority here, you do not!"

"Archestrad!" Jaqen boomed.

"Of course! The honorable Esdraelon would defend that fetid Rhoynish slut of his," Daxen interjected, then spat directly at Arya. "What have you fed the Archon-heir, you bitch? Your squid-flavoured slave cunt?"

"I will scorch you with my own chains!" Jaqen rushed to the woman, pure rage consuming his person. The strong flames of the center pool flared up asudden, the height almost reaching the arched ceiling of that hall in a blue streak. Those Valyrians that were gathered around it jumped from their seats to avoid that spontaneous blaze, with one catching fire on his raiments, and the others rushing
to put it out—most Valyrians have learned how to tame *carriers* of fire meaning their beasts, but not fire itself. Their struggle in order not to be swallowed by the raving flames heightened as Daxen Ophistor braced herself for what may be a sure, dramatic onslaught from Haresh Esdraelon, clasping her own chain with both hands. Mad sparks emanated from the metal as a response to a looming melee. Never will she back down without a fight.

Small debris and stone dregs began falling from the ceiling, as the substances of two Valyrian birthchains which were supposed to fulfill singularity were in peril of clashing against one another.

"Jaqen!" Arya called out.

The one called Jaqen paused, as if subdued by a force unseeable. He stood there, lethal eyes upon the female dragonrider, almost shaking in fury. He gripped the chain tight until the incalescence of it almost scalded his hands. Almost—to fire, he is immune.

Calmness was upon all though breaths were still intermittent and eyes were both raging and wary.

"Drop the chain," Arya continued. She looked at Aurion, then Kleitos who were then in stances prepared to contain the emerging fray. "I do not intend to witness the farce you run in your council, so the dust of my sandals I will carry with me as soon as I make the last of the demands due me. Apparently, this is how you deal with matters concerning different opinions as to what constitutes honoring agreements. Treaty is treaty—matters not if the one who entered it with another is a free man or a slave." She smiled, embittered, glanced at Jaqen with gratitude tinted with consternation. The man is truly willing to slaughter his own kin, for him to react that unrestrainedly just because of some vile words she did not even take any offense in receiving. Ferocity does not breed amity, *Jaqen*, the slave-queen thought. *Temper your ways, you are more than a murderous slaver.* She spoke to Aurion. "You are bold, to even imply that the Conclave must take steps to change the thousand-year old system of your Dance of the Dragons. If you do this, it will be akin to challenging the very position of archonship held by the ruling House of Esdraelon—they have obtained and sustained supremacy through victories in the fighting stade. Do you wish to have another batch of your beloved firebeasts turned to soot, have House Archestrad suffer another humiliating defeat for your threats of invalidating the scheme? I am the exact opposite of what a Valyrian must be; however it doesn't take a wise man to read through the plans embedded in your utterances. You want to rule the Freehold."

Aurion's face appeared as if it was about to explode. His every exhale seemed to slice through her flesh and draw liquid blood from it.

"House Archestrad will never resort to such acts of lunacy," Kleitos replied on the commander's behalf, though in his tone was a sharp hint of warning to Aurion. "Despite what the Valyrians may have done to Rhoyne, we do honor precedence here, traditions, laws, ethics—oh, yes Arya of the Rhoyne, we do possess a certain form of virtue the likes of you non-Valyrian will never understand. And nay, I do not find fault in your lack of understanding, we are from different gods after all. Despite your wise words concerning the Dance however, I must say that blood is an unbreakable bond. No reparations, no further delay for slave-ships to Sothoryos. Onto your *last* demand, and make reasonable ones."

Arya laughed softly. "We might have disparate notions on the term 'reasonable', Lord Archon. Pardon me, but for the lot of you, reason is a confining force and emotions are null. Three hundred dragons are a *reasonable* enough number to burn hundreds of thousands—one more or one less firebeast will ruin the syllogistics of your murderous conquests. For us, it is simple," Arya paced through the chamber, tranquil and forthright even in the face of sure peril in a chamber full of foes twoscore in number.
She continued. "You live, we live. We let each other thrive in our own abodes. Carry on with your glorious expansion of the Mother Freehold, as if it still isn't enough. Allow us to return to our fish-stinking, moss-riddled niches where we belong and where we are blissful and content. Valyria has nothing to prove, this empire is now a breathing immortal; and from the Ghis to the Isles you have squandered and in your squandering the greatest of all kingdoms have cowered at your feet. You have watered the soils of the Mother Freehold with the blood of your slaves and their children; you have erased histories, rewrote them even; you have stepped on and spat on the dead faces of monarchs and shahs. Illustrious is Valyria! Exalted of all is the blood of dragons! Now, please," Arya paused in front of Kleitos Esdraelon, gazed at every face with both the sincerity and command of a female sovereign. "Release us all. Valyria can verily exist on its own now, and you don't need any of us. The last of my demands—ten thousand ships, and an open gate out of the Freehold for all freed men and women."

It was once more pure hue and cry in the gathering, with the flames accentuating the heightened emotions. "Shackle that whore again, Esdraelon," Lathos Hadervaren spoke to Jaqen with calm contempt. "Before they fuck her bloody and feed her to the dragons afterwards."

"I will rape and slaughter all of you first before that happens," Jaqen answered hotly.

"Silence!"

The din of outcries dissipated with Kleitos's booming voice. A quick decision must be made. The climax of the series of wars between Valyria and Rhoyne had reached its rising only during the Second Spice. Only now is the true summit of it approaching.

He spoke, a closing act to all the theatrics that had transpired in that gathering. "Allow the Conclave to convene, Arya of the Rhoyne. Do not raise your hopes, however. Not one slave has been freed ever since the conception of this great empire. These are formalities in order not to add insult to your injury of wasting your precious time coming in here."

"That's as good as a veto, is it not?" Jaqen stood up, enraged. "Without even half a second thought, father? This is how you run the Freehold—with impulsive decisions and caprices, whichever suits the mood of the gathered slavers?!"

The Archon stood as well, met the dragonrider's stare levelly. At times, the line existing between his being a father and an authority to Haresh Esdraelon is effaced, especially recently with matters concerning the slave-queen.

"Dare you not question me on this, Haresh."

Before he could finish the last of his statement, Jaqen had stormed out of the chamber, towing Arya with him.

The Archon was one grand schemer though, and he was fully aware of the heir's irreversible obsession towards Arya of the Rhoyne. A wife, a bare breast, a scream that will form a crack on the face of the moon. A thousand, thousand dragons. A firesword that could save us all. A reactance is needed, a strategy of limiting the heir's choices—make him believe that he cannot have the slave-queen so he acts otherwise to disprove the suggestion.

A conditioning. Neferion. The champion of the red god must be born out of his acceptance of the fate, and preparing the essentials for him to be so.

From the slave-queen's virginal body, Nissa Nissa will rise.
Hey guys! Thanks for reading and leaving comments in the previous chapter. Would love to hear from you on this one.

Roughly a thousand years before Aegon's conquest, an Asshaii Mage and a Valyrian Archon orchestrated the creation of the Warrior and his Nissa to prepare for the battle against Winter. This is their story. :D (Which is why this fic dealt a lot with the 'Woman' and the mortal goddess. Plus, I do think that the Nissa is sooo underrated in Asoiaf--there won't be any Warrior of Light without her, hello!) XD
Chapter Notes

Arya: Mortal Goddess of Rhoyne, Nissa
(T. Bergersen, the whole arrangement is perfect. This chapter is too mushy and smutty, have to warn you.)

Below: How I imagine River Krylst

I do NOT own the image.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"A hundred days and a hundred nights he labored on the third blade, and as it glowed white-hot in the sacred fires, he summoned his wife. 'Nissa Nissa,' he said to her, for that was her name, 'Bare your breast, and know that I love you best of all that is in this world.' She did this thing, why I cannot say, and Azor Ahai thrust the smoking sword through her living heart. It is said that her cry of anguish and ecstasy left a crack across the face of the moon, but her blood and her soul and her strength and her courage all went into the steel. Such is the tale of the forging of Lightbringer, the Red Sword of Heroes."

Salladhor Saan, A Song of Ice and Fire

Thirty days and thirty nights, he labored on it, and tempered it through the waters fetched from the
seas of the Summer. The sword broke.

*The Elder mage's rune is insufficient*, the Valyrian thought.

Fifty days and fifty nights. Beneath the fighting stades is a collection of cages of alligators, bears, and ravenous hounds kept for purposes of combat entertainment, with slave-*bestiarii* forced to battle to the point of death against the beasts. "A large feline, I need," the firemage had told one keeper. "The strongest of your lions."

It was brought to them, though not without complications—a Qohorik slave was devoured by the beast, six others were summoned to drag it from the pit and have it brought to the dungeons. The forging of that firesword and the preconditions for its full creation and tempering must not be revealed to anyone outside the conspiratorial circle.

The one renamed *lāqaen Haegār* laughed at the mage's orders. "You want me to thrust this sword into that lion's heart? Whence did you obtain these methods, Elder? I thought animals expire when they step on the soils of Asshai—you could not have learned how to use beasts in your practice of rune in the Shadows, could you?" Despite his tones of jeer, he still did as he was ordered.

The sword broke a second time.

"Forge it again, a hundred days. I will strengthen it with fire magic," the Elder urged him.

And so, he did. Now, the sword lay waiting inside the dungeons, waiting for a woman's breast to be plunged into.

Finally, the bleeding star had shown itself upon the skies after a hundred days. However, scarlet is not the only hue of Valyria's firmament. There is the golden sun in the morn, the silver moon in the eventide and at night's peak too.

Moon is goddess, wife of the Sun. It is known.

The silver Moon drew too close to the golden Sun, out of love. The Sun's fire was too ferocious, and so the Moon cracked from his heat, and from her came forth a thousand, thousand dragons. And these dragons which were sources of magic, and magic in their own right and selves, will thwart the evils of a Night; for when it comes, neither Sun nor Moon would show their faces upon the realms.

It all fits perfectly—Sun as the flames of Valyria, Moon as the waters and icicles of Rhoyne. Gold, silver. Fire and Ice. And the fortuitous renaming that seemed to be heralded by the deities: *lāqaen*—sent by the gods; *Āria*—his warrior bride, aid to the Promised.

The Elder ran his fingers through the steel, he was alone in that dungeon. He smiled placidly. *If time would allow it, may I be able to ink some pages and write the Songs—their story of love.*

He stood, prepared for a most quick visit to the Archon. The confluence was indeed a tricky one to orchestrate, reversed conditioning must be done in order for the Esdraelon heir to perform actions opposite to what he is being commanded to do. It's all a diversion of the mind, a subliminal redirection of it.

A few days and the secret union between Valyrian and Rhoynar will commence, and with it, a convergence of two warring gods. The ritual by the goddess pool will seal it—a marriage of souls and the flesh that carried them. For the Promised to be reborn and for the great firesword to be
forged, the Nissa must die.

That which must be declared will be declared, and that which must be denied will be denied.

These shall be drowned in the deep-seated waters and burnt in the outer fire.

He shall offer up a sacrifice so vast, and like a god he will lick the flame of her altar.

She, he must stretch forth upon that altar, awake her into death, urge her into life,

And he shall appear as he should appear—in all his glory.

His Beloved shall abide with Him.

Darkness bathed the dungeons as the threshold closed upon the Mage's departure.

A few moments after, Aurion Archestrad entered the dungeons, departed with a scroll in hand.

"Slow down, Jaqen!"

"Hasten up, Arya."

He was leading her to the Eglije—Valyria's highest point.

As they approached the peak of the cliff, the air had started reeking of soot mingled with the scent of damp moss. Immediately, she broke away from his grasp and retched. Arya held her belly while Jaqen stroked her back. "I cannot bear the smell, my love," she said. "Forgiveness. And the height! Look at that canyon down there! One wrong move and the rift will swallow us; and I do not wish to elaborate on what the pointed rocks beneath could do to us both, though the waters below are too lovely."

Jaqen assisted her as she straightened herself, and when her eyes chanced upon his countenance, she saw in it what could have been a blend of worriment and repressed excitation. He spoke. "Do you know what I have noticed these days past?"

"What?"

A tempting hand of his lifted her skirt's willowy fabric. Arya inhaled sharply as she felt his fingers reaching for her already moist sex. "Jaqen! This cliff is too steep! We may fall—" He cut any more protestation by hastily pinning her against the bouldered wall of that winding, god-made ridge. Hot mouth upon her neck, hardened shaft against her inner thigh, two teasing fingers inside her—frolicking, dancing to the tune and hum of their sweet breathing that coalesced. "Oh...sweet heavens, Jaqen..." A splurge of hues, as the Valyrian thrilled her aroused nub with soft motions of his arrow-finger. She threw her head back by reflex; the steps were narrow, and both of them were literally on the edge of the rocky crag. One arm coiled itself around Jaqen's waist, her hand gripped his raiment tightly, lest he plummets beneath; and another hand grasped any stone protruding outwards.

"I want to take you right here, damn it," Jaqen murmured hoarsely.

Arya swallowed, filled her perishing lungs with dire air. "T-there are better places, my love...we need not die in the middle of pleasuring each other. Must we be on two brinks at once?"

From where they were, they could see the expanse of the Summer Sea and the whole of Valyria, from the high-reaching Archon's tower, to the Hill, to the grand obelisks and domes and the colossal
stade, to the slave mines by the flames.

He chuckled against the skin of her neck, and the warm wind from his mouth intoxicated her further. Through the smallest of things, his artful self can carve within her an explosion of lustful fervor, charming perturbations. *Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen.* Do her lips know any other enchanting name apart from his?

"Very well, goddess," Jaqen said, smiling. "One brink at a time." Softly, he kissed her, and caressed her belly. Within his surreal imaginings, grandest of all, were soft, mirthful sounds, tiny hands, tender and fragile skin, a coo. "Beautiful changes, Arya. From your berry lips, the words will sound darling. Tell me something true—make me the happiest man."

Arya laughed softly, leaned against the boulder. She touched his cheek. "Twelve moons of being together, my love. What do you know?"

Jaqen held her face, gazed at her with heaven-reaching fondness. He kissed her deeply. "Oh, Arya..." he moaned, licking her lips, biting them softly. He released her—a difficult feat, and he found himself stealing soft kisses and nips from the side of her mouth. Jaqen's lids covered his irises of bronze and gold, and his forehead he placed against hers. He spoke. "Each morn, you rise from the bed and head straight to the water basins to throw up. Spiced mutton, white cheese—you used to love the scent of these when cooked in low fire; yet now you despise even a mere whiff." He pulled her to him, as one hand roamed audaciously to cup her right breast. She gasped, as his hand teased her now overly sensitive nipple. "I have mastered your contours, lovely girl—every curve of you, angle, shade. Your shadow at a certain height of incandescence, your beautiful silhouette provoking my sensualities every damned time. These bosoms that I so obsess over, they grow more and taste more luscious, sweeter at each turn of night and day. And you're already the most beautiful thing in the whole world yet you still manage to bloom lovelier than blue roses every time the moon changes it shape."

She delighted herself in him—his every feature, the once-demonic countenance that had now transformed itself to nothing short of archangelic. His body that had been both her pleasure and her strength, his voice that had served as the soothing song to her most restless of nights. "Oh, Jaqen. Why do I love you this much, do tell?" She held both of his hands that cupped her cheeks. "Such deep, deep love, to the point that with you I was able to spawn within me another you—with your eyes, perhaps, your nose, your lips, your hair."

Silence befell upon them both. There were only the faint cry of firebeasts and the huge waves of the Summer Sea breaking themselves through the canyon's bottom.

Thereupon, rapture showed itself upon Jaqen's visage. He laughed with pure rhapsody and kissed her once more on the lips and lifted her from the ground and spinned her in a fanciful ballet like one mad and dreamy. "Truly, my love?! Truly?!"

"Yes!" Arya laughed, and squealed when Jaqen ran with her in his arms towards the edge of that precipice. "Contain your joy! Too much happiness can kill!"

"DEAR GODS!" He screamed exultantly, and laughed upon hearing his voice's echo within the closed walls of the canyon's bottom. "I love her, I love her, I love her!"

"Oh, Jaqen," Arya endeared him, teary-eyed, very much moved by the man's reaction. *Even if I do live a thousand lives, breathe and cease to breathe and breathe again, I would never, ever be worthy of you, would I?*

She wrapped her legs around his waist to steady herself, lowered her face so their temples connected.
Her arms she coiled around his neck. He spoke to her, calm now yet ecstasy was still in every
utterance. "Amazing, amazing you. Your body, Arya—it toils, it pleasures and delights, it tires, it
fantasizes, and now it creates. Your breasts will grow more beautiful, your feminine secrets will
swell for me and for our babe, your flesh will throb and your heart will beat for a life that is ours…
oh, Arya…Arya…" His eyes began to well up, still he was smiling. He shook his head gently, as if
witnessing the grandest of blessings in Valyria's Cimmerian days. "Amazing…"

Certainties. Dancing joy of life—babes. Pure love between enemies can create a breathing miracle
after all. "You have given me all that I could ever want, Jaqen," Arya said. "Everything that had
mattered to me suddenly mattered to you—the Rhoynar, the people of Ghis and the Isles of similar
plight, a place to belong. I feel as if…I am taking you away from your kin, from home. Oh no,
Jaqen, you're the amazing one. You're saving me every second."

Jaqen's smile was suddenly melancholic. "I wrecked your home, Arya. I am merely correcting the
schemes and deeds I have caused along with others. Still, I could not quite understand whence this
loving kindness of yours came—for you to forgive me after all those, love me even." He kissed her.
"Bequeath me with an heir, flesh of my flesh…oh, Arya…you're just uncontainable. How can I
even…gods, how can I even love you enough?"

She slowly released herself from Jaqen's hold, settled both feet on the ground. In her voice was a hint
of woe. "I used to fear for one, but now I fear for two. I have dragged you unnecessarily to my own
beliefs and principles, and I have planted this seed of discord between you and your father, your very
clan. Repercussions, Jaqen. Valyrians are known to deliver ten counterblows for every one offense.
If only I have sufficient strength to shield you and our little one… I would die if something happens
to you both…" She threw herself once more in his arms, her place of solace. "Our actions were too
pronounced, only fools and blind men would claim that nothing is happening between us. They
cannot know that I am with child. And perhaps you must discontinue visiting the shacks."

"Are you mad?" Jaqen chuckled. "A request to quit from seeing you, now of all days, when I have
learned of the babe? It's either you move in with me to the tower or I move in with you to the huts.
Plans must be long-term, of course; which means that we must marry—"

"Marry?!" Arya gasped. Soft laughter escaped from her thereafter. "Might be that you're the
deranged one! Were you too inebriated with bliss a mere while ago? Bastard babes are common,
bleed marriage is not. Valyrian and Rhoynar? Such union will defile your dragon's blood. I am
unworthy of you, Jaqen; we cannot."

Jaqen scoffed. "And who decides the worth a person might have with respect to one dragon-
blooded? Valyrians as well? Please, Arya, you know that these dictates are arbitrary, they carry no
real meaning. Halt right there," he raised a finger to make a point, his expression a little plagued.
"You wish to deny me of my right to you and our child? I hope not."

"Oh, far from that, Jaqen," she countered. Arya led one hand of his to her cheek, and rubbed her lips
against his palm. "Believe me, I wish we could have met under different circumstances—if only
there was a forked path which we could traverse just so we could re-live all these and set these right,
bring to life once more those turned to ashes by dragonbreath, rebuild Rhoynoe, prevent the enmity
between flames and the waters, if only. I would have seen you still for who you truly are, and this is
you, Jaqen. You are tender and chivalrous and enchanting, far from the bloodthirsty, bestial,
merciless slaver that I saw during the heights of the Second Spice. You're the worst and the best
thing that has ever happened to me, my curse and my blessing both. How can I deny you of this little
one we both have authored? How can I deny you of myself when every shred of me had merged
itself with every one of yours? But to marry you is to ask you to scorn your blood directly, rescind
all, expose yourself to threats. I have demanded much, you have yielded much. If not for this child I
don't care if I die, but they will *kill you.*"

"Marry me, Arya."

"Jaqen, please..."

He broke away from her, slightly dejected. He walked to the edge of the precipice, exhaling audibly. The skies were crystal-clear, yet the howling winds seemed to be coming from a vortex of two tempests. The gusts toyed roughly with his ivory-hued hairlocks, the whistling sounds of it an accompaniment to the strong break of waves below. He faced her once more.

"Marry me or I'll jump."

Arya's eyes widened, shrieked in response. "Jaqen!"

"I am not playing, Arya."

"Oh gods! Stop being such a child!" She rushed to him, gasped as he took a step back. Arya remained rooted on the spot. Small rocks fell from the protruding scarp as a response to his step, straight to the sharp boulders beneath the cliff. "Get back in here, Jaqen!"

He shook his head, a teasing smile playing at the corners of his lips.

With clenched teeth, she held out her hand to him. "Come now, we can talk about it. This frivolity, Jaqen! Coercing me for a quick assent to your demands? I should be allowed time to think! The decision is not on matters of what to cook for an evening's repast—this is blood magic we're talking about!"

Another smirk. Another step back. Two. Three.

Larger rocks broke away from the crag's edge and plummeted velociously onto the merciless bottom. The sound of falling metamorphics hitting larger boulders made Arya's heart escape from her chest.

"Dīnagon nyke, Āria," Jaqen whispered. "Marry me. I want to see your loveliness every waking hour of mine."

"Get back in here right this instant, Jaqen H'ghar!"

A step. Both his feet were now flat on the edge. "Toss and turn with me on the bed forever. My mouth on your breasts, my fingers against your wet innocence, my shaft inside your beautiful sex, inside and out till night's peak and first blush of day."

"We are practically sharing the marriage bed, Jaqen! For the last time, come here!"

Another step, a deadly descent was at the tips of his foot arch.

"I want a home with you. A *real* home."

"Makes two of us! A proper talk, Jaq—heavens, no!"

Now, the bastard was standing on tiptoe at the very brink of the precipice.

"Last chance, Arya. Don't be coy, love. Simple—say yes and marry Jaqen."

"You idiot!"
Jaqen just smiled softly.

She should not have said those words.

Before the last of her syllables could even abscond from her mouth, the man had allowed himself to be carried by the wind. He threw his head back, and his body followed the rhythm of it, as he willingly, gracefully plunged over the cliff, down to the abyssal sea that waits.

Arya screamed his name like she had never before, hot tears forming at the side of her eyes. *Jaqen! Yes, please!* However, her acquiescence to his plea was now nothing short of futile—he had released himself from her, and as she rushed with the smallest of hopes so she may catch his hand and pull him back up, she had realized how very steep the canyon was, and how very deep his fall could possibly be. She sank on both knees, helpless, desolate.

*Arya!* She heard him shout, as he continued descending to the bottom.

*Jaqen!* She wailed at the sound of his voice and her voice being tossed across the solid walls of the cliff, being drowned by the waves beneath. *Water…water…how can I command the sea to save him?*

The Summer Sea. It was a whole deluge at the bottom, and the waves were too strong.

Truly, the gods are jesting ones—the edge of that cliff where she was kneeling gave out, with huge masses of rocks collapsing to the bottom. Arya fell from the summit with a scream.

*Fall with him.*

*Fall, fall, fall.*

*And if in falling you see the sun and moon and stars and everything in between them, and death claims you both, at least it's with him, in him…that you chose to fall.*

*Let the gods do the rest.*

Arya felt her lungs exploding, collapsing, as the wholeness of her frame fought against the invisible billows of windgusts. If she was screaming or thrashing or crying, she cannot anymore tell. The rush of spans as she descended overwhelmed her incessantly, tight knots formed and twisted themselves within her, as her entirety lurched, resisted, clashed against the space that threatened to swallow every bit of fragment she had left after taking the fall.

*Charge the waves,* she persuaded herself. A sure, sudden surge will swallow him temporarily and spew him onto the shore. *Drown him a little, save him.* Silently, she commanded the waters. Gigantic waves moved in an upsurge, then died like crystals fragmentized by the strong winds.

Not enough.

*Jaqen!* Her heart screamed. She saw him, his necklace of scarlet pendant glowing as he plummeted…close! Close to the pointed, sea-honed sharp rocks that await…

She shut her eyes, prayed to all the gods for redemption from this, even as she felt every pore of her bleed at the impact of the strong blast of air against her skin.

*Old gods, red god, all gods that aid the realms of men.*

A response.
Her body landed feebly upon that firm yet gentle frame, glass chalice to a bed of petals, and even with her eyes closed, she recognized the opalescence possessed only by that creature which now carried her to heights. The sun's dancing rays were toying animatedly with its glistening built, sending patterns of hues and shades all over the expanse of that declivitous canyon.

Gold.

He's saving me every second.

In the midst of the soft mistral of wild breeze and sea sprays, Arya heard Jaqen's sweet chuckles. Tears bathed her cheeks profusely, even as her eyes were tightly shut. She wept audibly, cursed him. The sensation of falling was gone, replaced by another—a kind of liberation that defies all laws physical, transcends them.

This feeling, sublime. Like a voyage to turfs unknown.

He pulled her to him, and she buried her face against the fabric of his tunic—scent of ginger, cloves. The comfort…the shelter that is Jaqen warmed her heart, stilled her petrified spirit.

"Arya?" he whispered against her right ear, and how his soft purr calmed her unseen maelstroms. "Arya..." he murmured her name once more, kissed her hair ardently. "Look, lovely girl. We're flying."

Heraxos screeched as he hovered near the firmaments, its bronze eyes that were also the color of Jaqen's eyes scoured the immensity of Valyria, carrying within its thousand-year-old irises an infinite pool of wisdom from histories told and untold. Arya felt its scales against the bare skin of her leg—piercing-cold as icicles as if within it lay rime, yet there was a certain warmth emanating from it: blood, fire, life.

Slowly, she opened her eyes and lifted them to gaze at Jaqen. She inhaled sharply, gripped tightly his sleeves as she felt the dragon's slightly erratic yet calculated ascents and descents, its mighty wings scaling the wind's domain that was also the gods', its scales reacting magnificently with the refulgence of morn orb's light.

It was her beloved's voice commanding the imperial firebeast in High Valyrian—where to turn and when, the heights that must be reached, the speed of flight and the patterns, the cadence of it.


Slow down, Heraxos. You are giving your queen a fright.

Arya smiled softly, directed her gaze towards the beast's aurelian scales. Slowly, she ran her fingers through those—smooth, splendorous. It glimmers, Arya thought. Perhaps in the dragonpits, its bed is made of shining stones and gems wrought and unwrought. Beautiful...her eyes riveted once more to Jaqen's face. He looked down at her and smiled. Dear gods, almost as beautiful as Jaqen.

"Eyes, Arya," he told her. "Look at the realms, love."

She did.

There was Valyria, with its topless towers and shimmers and hundreds of dragons in flight. It was cloaked in shining scarlet—an effect of the liquid obsidian that flowed from the fourteen flames. The wind suddenly smelled of faint lavender in the high noon, as the horizon where the seas meet the other isles steadied itself on all sides. Far off to her left was the highest peak whence they fell, its summit glittering like gold. And if only Heraxos could take flight high enough, and her eyes could
see yonder, there she will set sight on Rhoyne—home.

She feasted her eyes on the scenes, laughed as if enraptured, threw both hands up to touch every beautiful particle of wind.

"Splendid!" she screamed in excitement. "Splendid, Jaqen!"

"Indeed!" he screamed back, his voice battling against the strong sonances of the dragon's wings. "And you said 'yes' to marrying me! Splendid!"

"Schemer!" She laughed. "We could have died had Heraxos not arrived!"

He smiled. "He cannot not arrive. He is bonded to us both." He held the scarlet pendant of his Valyrian necklace, then took the whole chain off. "My Dragon Queller—yours now." In the midst of flight, her hair of chestnut was being blown off by the rapid winds. Still, he brushed the strands that clung to her nape, and clasped the Queller around her neck. "Wear this, and Heraxos will come to you. Wear this, and you can quell the beasts."

Valyrian cuneiform glowed from within the pendant: *Udrāzma toliot se rune hen Uēpa.*

*Regency over the magic of Old.*

She felt its power course through every vein of her that carried blood. At that exact point in time, an unbreakable connection existed amongst them—man, woman, dragon.

"It's lovely, Jaqen," Arya's hands closed in on the pendant. She gasped, then laughed at the phosphorescence of it that glowed and died. She looked at him, pressed her lips against his. "A wonderful gift. And to you, I must bequeath one as well. I can teach him, beloved."

Jaqen smiled, pinched her nose gently. "What, with your water enchantments, again? Dragons cannot breathe underwater my sweet."

"Not if they resist. Calm as still water—he can and he will."

"Such gift would render him unstoppable. Even Urkon…"

"Yes, and he can hide himself in space through vapor. Let me teach him, Jaqen."

*A confluence.* Did the Elder Mage not show him the signs? The red god through fire, the old gods through water—in all its forms.

*Indeed, let them unite.*

"Very well," he nodded his assent. "But first, a marriage gift."

Her brows creased. She grinned. "Another one?"

Jaqen grinned back, impelled the dragon to hasten its flight. "Your demands on those slaveships bound for Sothoryos. I remembered when you told me about the visions of the Jhogos Nhai priestesses—that place with pine-clad hills concealed by fog from the old gods?"

*Braavos.*

"Oh, Jaqen…"

"I found it. There, we will go; see if in that abode, they can thrive: climate, condition of the terrain,
coasts, all. Dragons do not venture that far, the low clouds and mist will conceal them should they
decide to settle," he explained. "I have spoken with Ulric, second mate to the Mele Lōgor sailing
south. Tactics—they must take over the ship before it crosses the Isle of Cedars by the gulf. Five
thousand men, women, and children will be in ten ships, should be enough to overpower the crew.
Risks are there, but there is no other option."

Arya gazed at him fondly as he carried on with his plans. Sent by the gods. Oh, Valyrian slave-
emancipator, breaker of chains, lover of my body, worshipper of my ancient soul...

Rebirth, a higher plane of existence.

For I have written my love on the walls of his heart, I have claimed the core of his soul, named him
mine?

"Did you even hear me, goddess?" Jaqen broke through her thoughts.

"H-huh?" Arya stammered, blinked athrice. "Most unsure, my love," she smiled, licked and suckled
his lips. She reached beneath his breeches and stroked his manhood that had been one with her
feminine self-countless of times and in countless of ways, that which had gifted her with this little
darling she now carried within her. "What is it again? I lost you there—you're damn irresistible."

He trembled with pleasure, spoke against her lips, and his next words made her decide:

Yours, yours forever, Jaqen.

"Āria hen Rhoyne," he said. "I have built for you ten thousand ships."

It was at this time that Valyria was at the height of its power, stretching over most of Essos, to the
fallen Empire of Ghis by the Bone Mountains. Although all the lord freeholders possess both
authority and right to decide on matters of governance, twoscore rival families of great wealth, high
birth, and strong sorcerous ability still contested for power in the highest seat of Archonship. The
number of strongest clans could be narrowed down to four—the upper echelon.

There were lost pages of Galendro's writings, Fires of the Freehold; however, in those days when
first hand accounts and eyewitnesses still existed in both print and flesh, it is known that the four
most powerful can be further narrowed down to only two: House Archestrad, House Esdraelon.

Aurion Archestrad was first commanding dragonrider—a rank second to the Head Archon.

Power resides only where men believe it resides.

The first dragonrider knew that the quest for power never stops. Place a man in a position of prestige
and reputation, and he will waste no time crushing those who may threaten his hold of it, question his
possession of it, steal it. Time, and he will finish laying waste on those who might summon to contest
that prominence of his, whether earned or sacked; however, the zenith of power will be a thing
unreachable. Always, enemies will be born out of wombs. Always, higher powers will rise and
overshadow that which he had already achieved.

"...damnable conspiracy between the Archon and that Elder Mage of his. I have not been a believer
of any god, even of that lord of light which those hypocrites we call kin bow and kneel before." He
was in the middle of his usual bitter monologue, with the third and fourth commanding dragonriders
seated in front of him. The gathering was a secret, sanctioned neither by the Conclave nor the lower
council. He tipped his goblet of Sarnori to his lips, spat the contents out. Now all wine presses taste
sour, thanks to that slave-cunt they call queen enchantress. "However, I have taken flight to as far as
Hardhome, blood brothers. There are slaves in all places where there are breathing humans, after all. Tamed slaves, wild slaves—what is the difference? There," he pressed on, eyes upon his Valyrian birthchain that lay on the center table. "There I saw with my own eyes the dead that walk and breathe. The lore thousands of years old holds truth to it, as much as I wanted to deny the fact with much vehemence."

"This is the great cabal? A prophetic fulfillment of the one they call the Promised—*kosh hen mele Jaes*?" Lathos Hadervaren replied, leaning against the cushioned chair's splat. "Haresh? Oh, come now. He knows nothing but fly and fuck. Isn't that right, Ophistor?"

Daxen eyed him viciously, though a sarcastic smile had formed on her lips. "True. However, if you do not wish for me to cut your diminutive cock and feed it to you with Moraqi spice, I suggest you keep that hole you call a mouth tightly shut." The man only smirked at the remark, clearly amused. "Everyone knows there are forces out there, Aurion. I may believe in the existence of gods, but my loyalty is to none of them. Yin Tar, Azor Ahai, Neferion, these are all spawns of apocalypse-obsessed minds. Winter is as true as Darkness, yes—I have been to the Shadows to 'invite' some of the mages here, seen for myself the gates which they call Stygai. Sinister. But one Promised from the blood of dragons? Only fools would put their beliefs in such."

"Valyria *is* the Promised," Aurion replied. "The Mother Freehold, its descendants. Fire against Ice—foils, antitheses, law of opposites. The realms need nothing but dragons and dragonglass. Those filthy Rhoynar and Ghiscari should be kissing the dung on our feet for having been hauled in here. They would not last a night should their rivers and deserts start freezing. As for the Andals," he chuckled, shook his head. "Total muttonheads for resisting capture and invading Westeros where the seat of Winter is."

Lathos stood, paced the chamber. "Scorning the Freehold, this Haresh. Pity, he's a gifted dragonrider. Most excellent with aerial tactics, never lost a battle in the stade. Might be that his dragon is stronger than yours, Archestrad." He waved a hand, as if to dismiss the last of his pronouncements. The gesture was made quickly, in order not to anger the commanding rider. "What are the plans?"

*Nock one arrow, hit two marks.*

Aurion smiled malevolently. "Kleitos had erred much because of that accursed son of his, and perchance his eruditions concerning running the Freehold had abandoned his sappy brains for good." He stood and walked to a wall-attached Valyrian escritoire, opened one of the casings and retrieved from it a thin scroll which he had stolen from the dungeons of the Elder Mage. He handed the scroll to Lathos Hadervaren, and the latter skimmed through it. "The plans are simple—eliminate the Esdraelons, but not before *they* eliminate Arya of the Rhoyne."

"*Mazverdagon se Nissa.* This scroll—the Creation of the Nissa?" Lathos said, handing the same rolled parchment to the woman who hastily perused through the contents. "Kleitos and the Mage want the enchantress dead, in Haresh's own hands?"

"That damned Archon thinks he can save his Valyrian rank and the realms by naming his slave-cunt-licking son Promised, and arranging the preconditions for the prophecy," Daxen concluded with much bitterness. "I say let them proceed with their ploys first, carve the heart out of that Rhoynish tart. Then, we charge and get rid of Kleitos—dragonfire should do it, leaves not a trace. The pits are almost always empty during the third hour past the peak of night."

"None of those plans, they present complications," Aurion's tone was firm. "Let them fight amongst themselves. The heir knows naught about these scrolls, and he must not learn of these prematurely. The only soul who must know of this is the subject—Nymeria of the Rhoyne, their Nissa incarnate.
Expect a deluge of conflicts; the Rhoynish are known to take loyalty seriously. Triangulations: Kleitos against Nymeria, Nymeria against Haresh, Haresh against Kleitos, all without us soiling our hands. We await the finale. Whichever way, we eradicate those traitors, throw in their kin up to the third degree of consanguinity—all with forenames and middle names Esdraelon."

The woman was taken aback. She shook her head, a little panic-stricken, though command over her flood of emotions was still present. "Surely, you do not mean including Haresh, Aurion. He's the Archon-heir! Who is to rule the Freehold after we dispose of his useless patriarch?"

Aurion regarded the woman with repulsion. From crown to sole he scoured her with his eyes, spat the bile that had formed in his throat—he had been spitting too much these days past, as if the air he was breathing had started reeking of night soil. "Thirty-nine families, Ophistor. That number, even after House Esdraelon’s extinction. A witless query—or has that traitor sucked your brains out of your cunt as well?"

"Not at all," replied the woman. "A confluence? Practically a marriage! Beseeching two warring gods to become allies to their direct descendants. It is known that rune heightens during gods-union—they might become too unconquerable after this transpires."

"I thought you to be the greatest scoffer of all faiths."

"I am, but Haresh…he might be more useful to us alive than dead. A warning to traitors—"

"Useful?" Lathos Hadervaren's reply. "I'll tell you what Haresh's use is as far as this Freehold is concerned—a subject of diversion in the fighting pits, a farcical aerosaltant serving as entertainment for the slaves. Distraction is good at times, takes the minds of those filthy thrallsfolks away from wreaking catastrophe, gives them hope that things are going to get better. Plans for revolt may be postponed for a moon or two, or a little more than that. Other than all these, he's as useless as cock sap spewed on the bedlinen."

The woman thought better than responding at the man's tirade.

"That slave-drunk dragonrider knows nothing," Aurion concluded before dismissing them. "Seven days, plans of both causes must advance. Theirs is the blind side. The shierak qiya is nigh, falling stars will bathe the realms once more. A cruciation unheard of—this is what we will deal him, and that whore of his."

It was the moon of the water goddess, and so all the Rhoynar were gathered in the shore of the Summer Sea by the Gulf of Ghiscar, east of Oros.

Rhoynish women sang their canticles from the lost cities of Ny Sar and Chroyane, in harmony with percussions and strings played by the men, while children danced by the seaside, their small feet etching transient marks upon the golden sand. Laughter was carried by every particle of air, swaying all those present to join in the euphoria. Verses thought lost were sung once more in beauteous voices, for Rhoyne had always been a land alive with serenades.

"Within the waters there lived yet an echo of melodies

The secrets of the oceans are in a single drop of it.

The children of the Rhoyne hearken still their Mother's voice,

That the river is everywhere at the same time."
The chants were not only to please the elder gods, but to express indebtedness as well, for it was said that by the isle of Velos very close to the gulf, ships numbering ten thousand will find their way to the shores of Valyria within three nights. "Despite the Conclave’s protests, the Archon-heir pursued the queen’s demands still," were the words of one of the men, and he had to raise his voice so his companions may hear him in that sea of celebratory moods. "We have dreamed of liberation, here it is now." They were then occupied with the beats of their chalice-shaped tribal drums. The deep bass tones of those percussions sent some of the Rhoynish maidens dancing around their choices of lads, blue ribbons of satin in hand. With grace, they frolicked with the ribbons in flicks and circles, snakes and spirals and throws, imitating the crests and troughs of the waters through those movements. "Let us beseech the gods for aid," the man continued. "The Valyrian lords will never let us leave this place without a fight. There's Iāqaen, though—which means we might actually stand a chance…"

Arya had ended her rhetorics in front of the Rhoynar earlier that night, and with it, an acceptance to the clan of one who was once foe to them. "And henceforth you shall be Jaqen H'ghar—sent by the gods. From them, to us..." She was now sitting beside Jaqen, and both of them beheld the sight of the clan in the midst of that blissful festivity. There was no need to light the smallest fire; the Moon seemed to have defied the laws of orbits and coursed closer to all of them, as if it desired to be part of the celebration as well. "Well done, Ada! Well done, Usenni!" Arya clapped as two girls of around eight years performed balletic twirls in consonance with the sounds of the strings, chortling the whole time. Jaqen's gaze traveled to Arya's face that was then filled with so much mirth, and he smiled softly. He was convinced now more than ever, that there was absolutely nothing he would not do for her.

The matter with those ten thousand ships may send a clear message—that he planned to wage war against his Valyrian kin. Let them think whatever they wish to think, he thought to himself. Arya is all that matters now. Our little one. Gently, he smelled her hair and kissed it, unmindful of the giggles from the Rhoynish maidens observing them both with fanciful stares.

Small, plump hands covered his eyes from behind. Jaqen laughed as his fingers traced those hands, spoke in a playful tone. "Oh! Now, who could this be?" He heard Arya's conspiratorial laugh. "Aha! Maiike?"

Charming giggles escaped from the lips of the owner. "No…"

"Iesha?"

More giggles. "No, lāqaen! Think, think!" the voice was that of a girl, dragged to the Freehold when she was then five of age. That night she had turned six; but even with a year added, her very young mind still could not comprehend the cruel aftermath of the Second Spice. Her father was one of the Rhoynish commanders, lost during the war. Her mother had died resisting capture, burned to soot by Aurion's firebeast.

Jaqen bit his lip and cursed himself over and over for the fate that child had to suffer because of him and his kin. Despite the brutality she had been dealt with, the child still felt a curious sense of fondness for the Valyrian, no doubt influenced by the slave-queen, without the latter's conscious intentions.

"I give up!" Jaqen said, holding both hands up in a gesture of surrender. "I wonder who this girl might be…I have no idea at all—"

"It's Febe!" the girl screamed excitedly, removing her hands from the Valyrian's eyes. The girl coiled both arms around Jaqen's shoulders. "How come you couldn't tell? I always do that to you, and you're never able to guess!"
"It's because Febe is very good at hiding herself from Jaqen," was Arya's sweet reply. The girl laughed. "She could follow Jaqen all day and he wouldn't even know!"

"He's terrible with games!" the child said. She combed Jaqen's silver strands with her plump fingers. "Your hair is very pretty, Iāqaen."

Jaqen chuckled richly. "You like it?"

"Oh, yes. Very much," was the child's delighted response. "When Āria bears for you a babe—" Her last words were cut off by her sister lifting her from the ground. "Pardon, my queen, my lord," the older girl apologized to them both, abashed. "Febe's mouth, gods. I might gag her tonight, she's been disturbing everyone since the beginning of the festivities."

Jaqen smiled. "Worry not. It's quite all right." The child was then carried away, thrashing against her sister's grasp. The Valyrian's chest grew heavy with aching for both of them. He felt Arya's fingers entwining themselves with his. She kissed him on the lips, whispered. "Rid yourself of the guilt, Jaqen. It won't be long, those plans for which you have toiled will change everything for that Rhoynish child."

At this, he nodded, and stared at her lovely face with so much love. Arya. My voice of ceaseless Becoming. My voice of being. For others, water may be an accomplice to the restlessness men feel. For him, water is Arya and Arya is calm and life.

Slowly and because of her, he is learning how to forgive himself. He allowed himself to drift into the beautiful verses of that Rhoynish chant:

The rivers dance and sing, slake thirst.

The ocean beckons, seduces, consumes.

Two nights had passed. Jaqen H'ghar traversed the bridge of gneiss and limestone that connected the Hill to the shacks. A Rhoynish ritual? High midnight, firebeasts and lords were no doubt in their usual slumber in their murky pits and roofless towers. "Charge of the deities, the maiden and the lover—a matter of importance," Arya had told him earlier that day. "To delay is to perish."

His footsteps were quick and impatient as they led him to the rivers by the eastern side of Tyria, and for a while there he had regretted not riding on his imperial. The improvement on the bridge's once dilapidated condition did nothing to stifle his restiveness, as he half-walked, half-ran across the paths of filmy, translucent fog.

The moonsinger priestesses of the Jogos Nhai enthralled him; their visions of pine-clad hills northwest of the land of the east carried truth in them, so were the promises of a safe abode, and an isle where the gods would convene. The entire peninsula was generously cloaked by mist from the old gods, and the obscurcation of it would conceal any settlement from dragons flying to as far as Hardhome and Ibben.

The clan did not wish to return to the Bone Mountains for fear of what their visions have forewarned regarding the collapse of an eastern Wall they call the Five Forts.

Arya could hardly contain her bliss at having located the place. Such great mirth it was that she felt, that she wasted no time pulling him to her as soon as Heraxos descended to the peninsula. Jaqen chuckled as flashes of that encounter played asudden in his recollections.

Never had he seen her in such state of wantonness before. Hastily, she had removed his raiments and
hers too, and he could still feel her hot, wet mouth sliding north and south of his hardened sex. Wolf's pearly whites, he thought. She must learn how to control her urges. It was both thrill and ache he felt as Arya teased and sucked and gripped his shaft with her teeth; and he was groaning helplessly the whole time, with simultaneous pleas and urges for her to either pause awhile for she was already hurting him, or carry on with her pleasuring for it felt damn heavenly.

Oh yes, his sex had throbbed the whole time inside her sweet mouth—delightful punishment, he called it. And after tasting every last bit of him, consuming every drop of his manly essence, she had sheathed him inside her lovely self, in and out and in—thoroughly and completely.

Intensely.

He remembered her moving on top of him, tightening her inner walls on purpose so his delights could reach impossible heights, her eyes not leaving his for one moment. Hot wind was coming out of her mouth, as she romanced him with the lewdest of utterances in both Essoan and High Valyrian.

Heraxos did not move an inch—his breathing seemed to have steadied in very calm rhythms, as his shimmers bathed the whole encounter. The firebeast was fully aware of what the dragonrider and his queen enchantress were doing to each other right on top of him.

Ah, my turn tonight, the sex-god in Jaqen spoke. Arya's lustful howls will crack the face of the Moon, and from it will pour a thousand dragons.

Finally, the River Krylst south of Valyria.

Its turquoise-blue rivulets were as clear as ever even during the peak of night. He surveyed the skies. Full blood moon, the hour of the goddess, the man thought, as he reveled at the way the watercourse wound its sensual paths towards the Summer Sea. Rocks carpeted the banks and whisked about in the undercurrents, creating an illusion of prismatic—red jasper, green quartz, sodalite, snowflake obsidian. The water seemed fragile, with its soft ripples and currents that played with the night's orb like a million diamonds of icy-fire. Rivers were the lifeblood of Rhoyne, and perchance in this part of the peninsula, the rune of water enchanters are strongest.

A whole star-cluster of evening dragonflies hovered around the river that was aglow, before plummeting to the shadowy depths of the water. The calm ebb and flow were humming faintly.

Voices.

Jaqen walked closer to the source, brushed aside the dangling leaves of the weeping willow that obscured his vision. He felt the wet upon his toes—he was at the edge.

They were partly concealed by tall rocks that stood at the bank, so he strode closer. Arya might already be there. He caught sight of the small crowd of around seven. Their delighted laughters in the midst of the storytelling of one meshed with the river's soft sounds.

Rhoynish women with sunspears.

All stark naked.

Their perfect forms blanketed by skin of bronze-and-silver glistened in the borrowed refulgence of old moon, acting as translucent gems that shattered light into a spectrum of variegated hues.

He inhaled sharply at the sight, exhaled very, very slowly, lest they hear him.

Not wanting to be seen, Jaqen turned around and quietly walked to where he came. His steps were
light and sure. Those women will never notice his intrusive presence.

Crack.

Qogralbar, he cursed, clenching his jaw and shutting his eyes tight. He had stepped on a fallen branch.

Gasps and soft laughters came forth from the lips of the seven.

He was caught peeking, though that was not in the slightest, his intention. Propriety—he must rectify actions done. He faced the Rhoynish women, held up both hands in sincere apology, and his eyes were everywhere but on those naked bodies. "F-forgiveness, my ladies," he stammered. "Uhm, Arya…s-she… I was told…this is…"

"Iāqaen!" one of the women called to him. The one called Shivalhen rose from the smooth stone boulder where she sat, and Jaqen exhaled at the way the water drops fiddled with her ivory-and-olive skin, with her nude wholeness. Rhoynish women were indeed beautiful, their queen enchantress, most especially. "Indeed, Āria had asked us to receive you. Come here, Valyrian renamed." She glanced quickly at the six others who were marveling at the slaver's seemingly boyish diffidence. "Don't be shy."

Gleeful chortles, straight from the lips of those nymphs.

Masculinity is indeed deceptive and elusive. Always, a woman already is, but a man must become.

The one named Iāqaen knew that his whole face was flushed, no doubt defeating the shades of river pebbles that glistened a whole lot like scarlet diamonds. A trap? Arya will drown me if she discovers me here. The man acted according to best judgment, spoke. "Your generous pardon, once more. I am as good as a married man—"

A raised forefinger silenced him. The one called Shivalhen nodded at those six others. They all stood, and like wingless river sylphs walked in motions fleeting, and headed towards the Valyrian. "The river awaits, lover. So does the river's naiad—maiden goddess, now childbearer."

Protestations had turned futile.

Quicker than the most hasty of reactions, the nymphs have pulled him towards the currents. Upon their lips was his name, over and over—the name which the very quintessence of thrall's blood and toil had bequeathed him, a name divine: grace of the gods, the sent, liberator.

This is a most surreal Rhoynish ritual, Jaqen thought. A little creepy too.

The rush was now upon his feet and it seemed to carry him away, but their grip of him was stronger. The nymphs were the versifiers of that sprightly night, as they sang of chapters and ballads that for them were sacred salvation: worship offerings to a queen, a mortal goddess of many guises and one divinity.

Āria hen Rhoyne, riña, ābra, ābrazŷrys, muña…

Arya of the Rhoyne, child, woman, wife, mother…

The confluence was not a thing solely from the inceptions of the Elder Mage. There was the convergence of the maiden goddess and her lover god, the charge, which according to Rhoynish lore will disenthral descendants of the river from the bondage of fire. The unshackling however will not bring forth bloodshed, but will be carved instead in peace out of the blood of the partakers—scions
of water in all its forms, therefore Ice and its binary opposite and complement, Fire.

In this secret marriage of opposing essentialities, there are two—the Man, the Woman, and all the archetypes that come with them: Sun and Moon, vessel and seed, the chalice and the dagger. That night when heavenly spheres were all drawn, both of them will be the fleshy incarnations of the old gods and the red god, in a coming together that is all-good, all-powerful.

"You must walk, Valyrian renamed," one called Veri'el teased, as she continued leading him to the river's center. "We are seven, but you are a man. Surely, you do not desire for us to carry you to the embankments?" More chortles.

The provocation did nothing to assuage his abashment. In fact, it had heightened it. Hands towed his arms, pushed him towards the ritual's venue. Here he was, a dragonriding slaver drawn helplessly to the same waters that had caused the demise of his blood brothers. And now, he will leave it all without as much as a second glance, for one woman.

Blood of my blood. Within her is a flesh of my own.

Finally, they have reached the middle. It was all a mellow of harmony, the currents and the strange fragrance of willows and wet stones, as the placid waters moved to commune with the sea south of Valyria. The cool of it kissed his skin through the thin fabric of his breeches. White crescents of light bathed the waters, an illumination from the moon. His bronze-gold eyes caressed the dapples that had emerged from their movements.

"A few moments, and Āria will be here," one called Niamh announced. "Needless to say, we must prepare you for her arrival. 'For even as you are bathed with the scarlet blood of those that have died in your hands, you shall be as immaculate as the clear rain.' A cleansing, Iāqaen, before the communing of your flesh and spirits. The rivulets will do it."

Without warning, four pairs of hands began unlacing his tunic and breeches.

"Woah! A moment, please," Jaqen half-pleaded. Nymph fingers were enchanted as they say, quick and with movements indiscernible. Faster than he could utter another one of his remonstrance, his shift had been removed from his upper body, his breeches pulled down to his ankles. It was a blessing that he was actually wearing undergarments, though. "Please, ladies! This is utterly inappropriate!" The women ignored him, as they carried on with their undressing. Both eyes of the one called Shivalhen assayed him from crown to sole, sunspear in hand with its base dipped in the waters, as if deciding his worth; and her countenance reflected nothing but seriousness.

"Silence, Iāqaen," the woman admonished him. "Once the ritual commences, you will be standing on sacred ground. Decide if you wish to pursue this, there is no going back once you have agreed. We do not desire for blood to flow in here, and for you to smite our altar with your Valyrian scourge. A marriage, Iāqaen Haegār, with an enemy."

A choice, after they have stripped me off of my garments?

Space is always interwoven with time in a single continuum, inseparable. And in a universe as complex as that where both Valyria and Rhoyne existed and continued to exist, there are a thousand possibilities bifurcating from a single choice. He must choose wise and consider all—the lore, the gods, her.

Still, the Elder Mage's concept of a sacred confluence confounded him. Why truly must one commune with another that may well be his nemesis? For a union against adversaries more vile than the Empire's rampage? If the Heart of Winter is the womb and the Heart of Darkness is the seed, and
what both of them spawned are dead men that breathe, does it mean that only a living seed could cause these foes' downfall?

A child, a woman, a wife, a mother. Nissa, as they call her. One beloved to the Promised.

\textbf{Iāqaen Haegār} had no knowledge of those inner ploys.

"Not an enemy," Jaqen declared. "Blood of my blood, a wife even before both Valyria and Rhoyne were birthed by the gods, bearer of my seed, my core—without her, \textbf{Iāqaen Haegār} will not exist. She who had named him had created and breathed life within him. This is the sorcery of naming."

He smirked, pleased with his own eloquence.

A soft smile danced around the woman's face. "Well said. We shall perform the ceremonies thereon. \textit{Thy beloved will abide with thee, and thou with her. Thou shalt not reveal the universe interior of these rituals to any soul, for you to not be declared an averse to us.' Man, do you concur?}"

Jaqen nodded, regaining confidence and machismo that were lost. "I concur."

With this response, the one called Shivalhen raised her sunspear and tore with its keen-edged blade what remained of the Valyrian's clothing.

\textit{Qrugh}, he cursed once more, as he felt the last of his garments fall softly upon the rivers and carried away by the currents.

They were now in equal stances and situations—wearing nothing but the fibers of their being. Except that the women seemed completely unabashed by their nakedness, while he wanted to summon Heraxos to salvage him from this humiliating plight. And he was literally at the center of it all, with seven around him like garrisons, seven pairs of eyes scouring him from flesh to marrows.

\textit{Truly, Arya? To delay is to perish?}

The woman drew forth fresh blood from his forearm, caught a tiny globule through the spear's tip. The one called Thilhalaeth held out a goblet of gold and rimestones, received from Shivalhen's blade that drop of Valyrian blood. It combined with the essences of Rhoynish liquefied spirits; finally, here it was. A \textit{sacred confluence of breathing scarlet}. "Go deep," Shivalhen ordered. Jaqen shrugged his shoulders in an effort at nonchalance, and swam towards the pool's center, then ran his fingers across his flaxen hair to still himself upon reaching it. The woman motioned for him to sit on one of the boulders, half concealed by the currents. He obeyed.

A silhouette emerged from the enthralling darkness on the other side of the embankment. \textit{A Water Wolf}. The untamed outlines of her form were illuminated by moon's incandescence, as the shadow of her face showed itself to souls who will bear witness.

Slowly, the Wolf's form ebbed away as it came into view, replaced by that of a Woman.

The mortal goddess who will charge—\textit{Āria hen Rhoyne}.

Voices of them seemed to float languidly within the enchanted confines of that river. Arya drew closer, materializing from the darkness of the wildwoods in all her resplendence. A gossamer fabric covered her nakedness, and the faint light of the moon partly revealed her contours and all her other secrets. She walked on effortlessly, as if her very feet had goddess wings. The enchantress was far from beautiful in the classical way, for her beauty was fierceness and strength and passion, a stare is a command. \textit{The gods are real}, Jaqen thought as he took her in his eyes. \textit{This woman is their craft, or perchance it is her beauty that shaped the existence of the gods}. 
Shivalhen's voice continued to mate with the night.

*Ten thousandfold a human, one divine. Man is seed, Woman is vessel—empty the chalice of gold and intimacies, so the genitor and his genetrix, creators of life and preservers of it, may experience the other one.*

*And he will slay her innocence upon the altar of waters, and cover it with fragrance as of blue roses.*

*In this death of her sinlessness is a life born.*

*By the wrath of the deities it must be so.*

*By the grace of the deities it must be so.*

His mad eyes were upon her devious yet immaculate visage, drinking every feature of her in. The Man in him shuddered at the sight of her—a perfect hourglass, a being of calm that had brought upon him chaos which he regretted not, the stirrer of his infinite lusts and love. *Fear not,* the Rhoynish recited the words. *Thou shalt renew scarlet from your veins with this goblet from the heavens.* When Arya had reached the embankment, she paused, dipped her dainty foot in the water. Their eyes never broke contact; the ambiguous intensity of their irises stripping the other of all resolves was too invasive, making them both vulnerable to the other.

Words suddenly became unnecessary.

The one called Shivalhen acted as priestess to the ritual. Atop one smooth river rock that served as plinth, she stayed, while two others proceeded to the riverside towards the Woman. Slowly, they removed the translucent garment that separated Him from Her. The silken robe fell on the wet ground, its soundless descent coupling with Jaqen's heavy respirations. Why so? Hundreds of nights he had seen her naked body, claimed it, allowed it to possess him too; but why is it that whenever she does undrape herself, he seems to be seeing her always and in every way for the first time?

All perfect—the snowskin that fought with against the olive, the soft strands that fell below her shoulders, touching and tickling the nipples of her perfect breasts, her feminine gems. She is flowing silk over glass, flawless. However, nothing compared to the almost visible roundness of her belly—it was still quite small, and untrained eyes would miss it; but for those obsessed with the fantasy that *is* her it meant only one thing: budding life, angel's breath.

She submerged into the waters, ripples had become one with her. She allowed her body to be carried by the torrents, and in the blur of the waters that trapped her beneath, the Wolf's form revealed itself—a gray storm, a great madness swirling about. The Wolf swam in elegant circles, like one spirit moving across turfs. Her secrets were unlocked—and Jaqen realized as his eyes worshipped her that all men had once belonged to her in truth, had once belonged to the water in her womb.


She rose up to the surface, now a water nymph transformed—dangerous and addicting.

All over her were fractals of glistening drops of water, fleeting, angling, bursting, descending upon her beauteous face like rain.

Jaqen began breathing once more through his open mouth. "Arya..." he groaned, pleading for dire sanity, for fruitions and peaks only sweet synthesis with her could provide. *Dear gods, your water rune is making me so hard. Must this dannable ritual be a prerequisite? Let me love you now...*

Arya just gazed at him with desirous eyes, and the Man marveled at how she kept herself in control...
—everything, in fact. Even the rivers obeyed her calm ministrations, for the ripples have softened and the strong currents have ceased. All that were left were the shimmers of river pebbles beneath. She smiled softly at the way the Valyrian's eyes worshipped every inch of her form, "Be not with fright, Man," Arya spoke, smiling lips a tease. "It's just me."

A sharp exhalation escaped from him.

*For there are two glories in manifold. Both will be a secret, a fear to forces unknown that lay yonder.*

She sat on one of the boulders on the river's other side, and now they were face to face with all desires suspended yet heightened. Passion is quenchless and infinite, and this was proven true by the goddess pool. The river's ebb and flow communed with her skin, and the wetness in every part of her which he so wanted to taste and lick and sip intensified his frustrations. He tugged at his flaxen hair —*Qogralbar*, a curse had been the honey of his mouth, as he shook his head at the way she was tempting him though not with her conscious intents. The rituals must be treated with veneration, and so he could not leap onto the other side and snatch her and sheath himself into every beautiful hole of her.

"Bathe yourself," Arya ordered him. "No one will do it for you here."

He nodded, obedient. A palmful of water moistened his locks of silver, his face, neck.

*They shall be very nigh to death, but they shall fear with the fear of love, and through it shall they overcome.*

A moment between a glance and a kiss, between a kiss and the sex. Jaqen wanted to erase those moments perhaps etched on stone with nothing but his bare hands and proceed to the summit of it all. One who was called Ianthine sat beside Arya, brushed away the wet strands that had clung to her neck. She whispered something to the queen's ears—delicious provocations, and Ianthine's lips seemed to caress Arya's lobe; while Arya's mouth was partly open, as if silently infusing herself with wind. Their eyes never left Jaqen's face, and their enticing smiles whilst they exchanged those amorous parlances which no doubt was about him bewitched the Valyrian so. Ianthine's forefinger moved to trace Arya's naked shoulder, cruised through the sea of droplets, descending...descending to trace the roundness of her left bosom. The queen's breast tips had now grown crystal-hard. They did these things, all the while observing the Man's responses.

Jaqen clenched his teeth with thrill at the utter beauty of that display, though his heart was being gorged too by silent resentment of not being allowed yet to touch her, much less take her.

*They will destroy each other in their own lust.*

Very gently, the one called Ianthine made a small incision upon Arya's forearm, enough for a drop of scarlet to escape from the veins. The blood mingled with his in the same goblet, with sounds of effervescence, as if inspired by the holiest of all incantations.

The Woman tipped the goblet to her lips, drank the combined blood of them.

One called Wen'ra took the goblet from her, swam to the other end and handed it over to the Man. He partook.

*They shall mingle their lives. He will not tear her from his dire heart.*

One called Niamh and another called Pherenice swam towards the queen like two sirens of the seas. Soft hands of them poured palmfuls of water unto Arya's skin, and with still reverence they cleansed
her, stroked her. Fingers lightly touched her inner thighs, the arcs of her waist, and the soft curves of her belly that carried Jaqen's child. Ianthine's hands moved languidly from Arya's back to the flesh of her full breasts, imbathing them. The woman brushed her fingers gently upon Arya's nipples. Too much! "Åria …" Jaqen begged once more, biting his own knuckles hard. "Kostillus, rūs. Ivestragī nyke gūrogon ao…"

Arya…please baby, let me take you now…

The women only laughed richly at his words as they carried on with bathing her. "Poor soul," Pherenice had said. "My queen, perhaps we can allow him with us? Look at him, he's about to shatter into smithereens."

"Shush," Niamh allowed waterdrops to cascade from her fingertips to Arya's nipples. She stroked them gently. "This here is sacred. Banishment, purification, immersion."

"Indeed," Arya answered, gray eyes fixated on the man. "Let him feast on the sight."

Arya's smile was devilish, tormenting. Jaqen hissed with utter grievance—the battles in the fighting stade should have inflicted upon him worse torture so he could have grown immune to all forms of it, such as this agony. Traded all for you, and still you delight in seeing me suffer, beloved. Pherenice's hands sailed towards the queen's sex, rubbed it gently. Arya's mouth formed a soundless 'Oh' at the deed, and only the living gods knew how Jaqen tried to summon the restraint of the greatest of men in order to not rush to her and push himself inside her while he pulled her chestnut hairlocks.


And there shall be no sonance heard but the cry of dragons, the wolf's howl that will crack the moon.

Jaqen watched as the women performed their ritualistic cleansing, as they touched and stroked and kissed his beloved all over in their worship, brushed their lips upon her ears and laughed with their enticing provocations. Arya's head was tilted to the side, observing him, tormenting his already tormented soul and sensibilities.

Slowly, he reached for his hardened sex, frolicked with it, as he immersed himself in that ambrosial display. He ignored their mocking giggles and focused instead on delighting himself through his Arya-fantasies. In his mind, he replaced the characters—Shivalhen is Jaqen, Ve'riel is Jaqen, so is Ianthine, and Pherenice, and Niamh, and Wen'ra and Thilhalaeth.

He closed his eyes.

All Jaqen…Jaqen…Jaqen…

When he opened them, the reverie had turned real.

Now, there were seven Jaqens all over one Arya.

And since reality and the absolute limit the mind, he constructed a whole dreamscape, a whole sweet, delusional realm where his seven selves could blandish her with his amaranthine sexual prowess.

Every single act of romance was transpiring simultaneously with all others.

A vision from the gods—seven forking paths to seven various realities. Seven facets of the Self.
And so, it was his hot mouth that was now nipping on the dew-blessed skin of her leg—drinking from it, his fiery tongue against the crystal-hardness of her right nipple, his playful finger toying with the left. Another mouth of his suckled her dainty toes, and still another whispered lustful phrases and sentiments, and chuckled quietly at her moans and groans and beautiful exhales. Another one of his mouths nourished itself with the soft flesh between her now frothy sex, and she was seated atop his own hardness; and anytime he wished, he could thrust himself inside her feminine cavern, and her rear too—alternate pushes, in sync and concurrent.

He does want to do it.

He saw one Jaqen lifting himself up with serpent's grace and lithe, meeting her face. He quenched his athirst self with her lips as he toyed with her sex using his own, teasing, testing her restraints. Carillon to his ears—her primal gasps with his name as subject…endless and endless, mating with the soft currents of the Krylst. The other Jaqen, the one on whose legs Arya sat and nestled herself, began sipping droplets of water from the flesh of her neck, whilst pleasuring her bosoms with both hands. He was about to explode…and he cannot yet. He must only burst with love and passion inside her soul, while he is one with it—spaceless, mingling with the sounds and moments of actions and stillness.

*Enough of the fondling. Bodies were made to dance.*

"Āria," he heard himself say in that erotic trance. He stroked his sex against hers and allowed the natural rhythm of it to send her body into unthinkable paroxysm. She was already shuddering a little, breathing heavily. "Ivestragī nyke jorrāelagon ao trūmirī…"

*Let me love you deeply.*

She nodded, kissed him and sucked his lower lip.

He began thrusting himself inside her sex, while his other shaft, he pushed inside the lair of her behind.

Jaqen began loving her, claiming her in a manner so reckless. Both of them were utterly drunk with love and lechery, 'Jaqen…' was escaping from her raspy breaths, and 'Arya' from his…as he kept on shoving himself in—plunging himself the deepest to her so no one can take her away. His thrusts mirrored oscillating movements, both holes of her he filled, and he gratified her, consumed her fully, did not allow any split-second of dissatisfaction or torturous pause as he moved in and out of her in steady measures and accents, staccatos...

She tugged at his flaxen hair, led his face to her bosoms, as he carried on with his starved thrusts. Voraciously, he wolfed her down—one breast after the other, and prayed to the gods so nectary liquid meant for babes would bless him in his plundering. "Jaqen, my love!" were Arya’s throaty moans, and despite her now spasmodic breathing, he never stopped. Slowly, she reached for her nub and began rubbing it, accentuating the forceful yet loving pushes and pulls. Oh, how suffused she was of all things Jaqen, the Valyrian thought—there he was in front of her, behind her, all over her. She turned her head to the back and met his hot mouth, while enrapturing herself with his many other deeds of love throughout the entirety of her body.

"Hah…” he breathed upon his release, trembled slightly.

Chortles. The Rhoynish women were amused by the aftermath of his wanton acts, by his total weakness in the face of their slave-queen. It was he who was in true shackles, matters not if these are fetters unseen. It was he who was bound, enslaved by her.
The spell had vanished, and still he desired her so much, as if that climactic overture did not at all happen.

"Arya…" he still begged, even as his manly froth was being waltzed away by the river's currents. "Commingling of our blood is not enough for a union, love."

The one called Thilhalaeth spoke, concerned. "My queen, you should not have allowed him to please himself. He had wasted his seed, we are in need of consummation, are we not?"

Arya only smiled and rose from the boulder-plinth. With suppleness, she leaped onto the waters and began swimming towards Jaqen. Upon reaching the center of that watercourse, she turned to the women. "Seed never runs dry." She waded once more to him, ravenous gray irises upon his whole form. "All acts of love and pleasure are our rituals, Jaqen, beloved."

Jaqen swallowed audibly, fought against his reflexive tremors. "Oh, Arya…" he breathed in delight, he began descending from the boulder to the waters to meet her. She was quick. In a flash, she was already in front of him, gripping his still very aroused sex. "Stay here, Man, you will not move unless I tell you to," Arya whispered, as her hand fondled his shaft in movements north and south. "Or it's the sun spear against your throat." She suckled his nipples, ran her tongue through the muscles of his chest and belly, his sinewy arms and firm legs. He tasted sweet—the river's flavor had meshed itself perfectly with the spices of his manliness. "You taste wonderful…" she spoke in between suckles and nips. "Jaqen H'ghar, you magnificent animal…"

"Let me fuck you now, Arya…"

"Not yet, Jaqen."

"Please, damn it…I want to ram myself against you, in you."

"Not yet."

"Let me push my sex deep, I want it to reach your womb, love."

"Not yet."

Her mouth closed in on his firm member. The melodies of his thrilled groans, curses, lustful words entangled themselves with the whistle of the pristine waters, and he cared not anymore if there were seven witnesses to their shared life and love that night. Earlier, he had touched upon sexual meridian through mere fantasies of her, and never had he thought it possible to taste it once more that quick. But Arya was good—very good. "Ah, so good…so very good…ah…" Jaqen gasped; he pulled her hair and guided her as she devoured his wet sex. Jaqen was wincing in both relish and torment, and he was bursting…bursting into fine grains of dust akin to those along the banks of the River Krylst.

She tightened her mouth around him, her tongue toyed with his tip. Shock waves enveloped him; he must…he must take her now, or for sure he will perish in the slightest touch of her fingertips and gentlest kiss of her berry lips.

Jaqen lifted Arya, seated her astride him and squandered her naughty mouth, unrestrained, as he savored his own salty wetness from her tongue. He pushed two fingers inside her, flirted with her taut walls and he felt them opening, welcoming him, pleading for summits that only he can bequeath her.

*Man, surrender yourself to her silver vessel of fornications.*

The Valyrian renamed was famished beyond all comprehensions. He shifted, and pinned her down
upon the boulder-plinth, kissed her life-laden belly, buried his face against her core. His whole
tongue was all over its lips, its slit, its soft flesh, its moist orifice. He held both of his beloved's legs
down, splayed them, suckled and nipped—pleasing and punishing, as he reveled in her murmurs and
shudders. In passionate response, she moved her hips to and fro against his face and allowed his
mouth to taste her fully. *Arya, my goddess...*

"Jaqen, inside me...Jaqen..." she begged.

He need not be told twice.

With dragon's elegance, he hoisted himself and met her face to face. Her throaty breaths intensified
his voracity, and so he wasted not a single moment and entered her.

Jaqen's respirations were resonant of one man drowning in the strong surges of rivulets. In every
thrust, he uttered her name: *Arya...Arya...* and cupped her buttocks so he may plunge himself into the
most abstract depths of her. Space is a waste of continuum, time must be in a state of absolute
suspension. In matters of existence, there must only be them—him and her, and their bodies colliding
outside the confines of material and immaterial laws.

He rocked against her mildly, then emphatically—statics and currents. She felt the skin of her back
scraping against the boulder, and the roughness of it hurt her a little. But then there was Jaqen and his
loving strokes and kisses and heaves, and she realized how very whelmed she was by the overflow
that came from the rivers of him.

His pushes and pulls have hastened. "Aryaaa..." he moaned helplessly. "Damn, damn, damn it!" he
pressed on with his ascents and descents, allowed Arya to lift herself a little so she could meet him
and emboss their union. Their bodies performed their own prances and promenades.

"Jaqen!" Arya tightened her legs around his waist. She had climaxed, her groans had gone
otherwordly. "Jaqen! Sweet Jaqen...spouse..."

Flare-up. His eroticisms, his passions escalated upon hearing her defenseless murmurs. Her body had
eased a little upon reaching that glorious capsheaf, but Jaqen too, had to scale those heights with her.
Faster...faster thrusts...more forceful...completions and surrenders.

He gripped her hair tight, as her name came forth from his mouth in a gratified whisper. He filled her
generously with his warm seed, and even after that, he did not stop moving inside of her. He kept on
plunging himself within, as if he could not get any closer to her.

"I love you, Arya...I love you."

Measureless epiphanies. To love is one thing, to make love is another. But to be in both states at once
and do both acts ensemble, with the balancing of bliss and melancholies, battles and surrenders,
compromises and dissensions—to love, be loved: the the truest, purest of all human experiences.

*Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya...*

*I love you.*

Thereupon, he sensed against his neck the sharpness of Shivalhen's sunspear.

The edge of it was now pressed more insistently against his skin. That all-consuming fervor and
manic obsession for their queen enchantress still enslaved him in sweet brutality, and he knew not
what response they were now expecting from him. Warily, he turned his eyes at the bearer of the
weapon, rose to seat himself. Six more sunspears found their edges against his arms, legs, spine.
He smiled at the theatrics, gazed at Arya with his usual fascination. "A ritualistic segment, I suppose?"

Wrong.

The one called Niamh tossed Arya a silver dagger. The queen caught it, pressed the tip gently against the soft of his throat. "You may want to think a hundred times before summoning your firebeast, Jaqen. Forget you not that he listens also to me, what with that fancy Queller of yours."

Contempt was in her eyes.

It broke him, not merely because of the sudden vicissitudes of their sublime exchange, or their whimsical game of maiden goddess and lover god, or the charge—a whole act of worship. It broke him for he knew not the source of that loathing that slashed at the core of who he is now, as he was renamed. From her he had derived his animation, the substance of him; and he never knew who he was until Arya, his causal being.

And how he loved her so.

Yet here she is now, regarding him as if he was the same demonic Valyrian slaver she had laid eyes on during the Second Spice, as if she had never shared nights with him, or carried the blood of his blood within her.

"Arya…"

She struggled against her fragile voice that threatened to break at any moment. Arya shook her head, and though she felt forsaken and fragmentized by his betrayal, she carried on with her planned hell. "Valyrian orchestrators. Haresh Esdraelon, you devil-made-flesh. You're using me to prepare Neferion's way, Azor Ahai, your damnable Warrior of Light. You used me to prepare your path to this age."

"Arya, what are you even—"

The one called Wen'ra handed Arya the thick scroll, one that was found lying upon the bed in her shack. Arya lifted it for Jaqen to see, then scrunched it, hurled it forcefully to his face.

The man unscrolled it, read the scrawlings.

*Mazverdagon se Nissa—creation of the Nissa.*

Arya saw it on her bedside table early that morn, obviously placed in there by someone who wanted her life spared.

She pushed the silver skean deeper into his throat, wounding a fraction of it. Sanguine fluid from his Valyrian veins began trickling liberally.

The red god and old gods have responded to the call of their covenant.

Lightning struck through the mating of clouds in all its brilliance, forking a thousandfold onto the ground, tracing fire through the riverfront. A thunderclap voiced out its warning a second after, accentuating the fiery lightning's undying flashes of radiance.

Rain poured in chaotic drops, the gusting winds from the Summer Sea carrying them in wild vortices.
Ceri-hafe.

It is done.

Shivalhen's final pronouncements concluded the ritualistic charge, the marriage.

*And in the aeons, you will be forgotten—dust lost in dust.*

Chapter End Notes

(Clarification: The seven thingy in here is symbolic—illusions of an obsessed man XD)
A chapter for all of you guys! ;D Hope you like it. Thank you for reading, for the comments and kudos. Let me know what you think of this one. It might take me a real while before the next update, will be inactive for a few weeks (life caught up, yuck). Heart you, guys! ;D Have a great one.
Illusions of Permanence

Chapter Notes

When Dragons Fight

"How could I face the faceless days if I should lose you now? Let's go on dreaming though we know we are So close and still so far..."

Words of a Dying Lover: The Sun chases the Moon, and the Moon runs after the Sun; they will never meet, not even in an eclipse.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

_Thousands of years ago, the warrior queen Nymeria crossed into Dorne from Essos, fleeing the dragonlords of Valyria. After she landed, she burned her ships, all ten thousand of them so no cowards could slink home._

" _That is Nymeria's star, burning bright, and that milky band behind her, those are ten thousand ships. She burned as bright as any man._"

_A Song of Ice and Fire_

"Arya, please!"

Hurriedly, she waded to the Krylst's embankments and donned her raiments, her angst, her anger and aching pouring upon her face like literal rainfall. She brushed the drops away.

Despite their strongest remonstrance, the Rhoynish women were dismissed by the queen, and so they aborted the scheme to slay the Valyrian before he slays her.

The Woman denounced her decisions.

_Foolishness! A quick throat-slash, no rune called for at all. What good had the Man done for you to spare him?_

Arya justified the acts.
'Mazverdagon se Nissa,' the Woman spoke once more. A firesword to your breast. Soul and steel, anguish and ecstasy. What have you learned, Woman? A Man is not to be trusted. Love leads to ruination.

The lifting of the thrall, his betrayal of his blood-brothers, scorning the womb of the Mother Freehold, ten thousand ships—all these for the sake of me, she thought.

The Woman in her scoffed. A great charade, that is what! Valyrians are known for this. Empty promises. In truth—a shattering and a reforming, the death of one woman for the spawning of another. Tearing of the body and rebuilding it from the fragments. Loss of self.

Arya shook her head.

I love him.

"Arya!" Jaqen had emerged from the river, clothed himself with whatever garments he had left. He rushed to her, chained her in his arms. "Please, please..." he was collapsing—his voice was that of breaking crystal. "I know nothing of these, goddess mine. It was only now, and from your lips that I heard of it."

She flailed about ferociously, hell-bent on freeing herself from his grasp. This fall...this fall was the greatest that she had ever known. Defenselessly and with the innocence of her trusting heart, she had abandoned what is real and right and reasonable, smashed the strongholds she had built around herself, allowed all that she is to plummet into the nebulous chasms of him, as if the darkest of his darks is the only light she would ever know in her damned life. She was sobbing, clutching her chest lest the shards of her heart fall to the waters and get carried by the torrents. "You...you should have killed...killed me in Rhoyne..." she choked in her own words. "Made me love you...so much. Then, take away my breath with your own hands? And let your tempered sword swallow the whole of me...and my child...my dear child..."

Jaqen held her face firmly and kissed it all over. He beseeched all known gods, though he was not at all a man of faith, but a scorner of beliefs in fact. This is the woman I cannot breathe without, don't let her hide from me. Let her not undo all these. "Our child, Arya. It's ours. Nothing, jorræælogan, I will allow nothing to happen to you both! I should have known, should have...no, beloved." There was nothing in his desperate recollections but the Elder Mage who had spoken endless of times about that red sword of heroes, a forbidden marriage between Valyrian and Rhoynar. He clenched his teeth in rage, tightened his hold of her. "We are each other—you are the cause of me, Arya. How can I kill the one who had breathed in me life, do tell? How ever can I kill my own self—you, you? This is a ploy from those enemies of ours, to put us asunder. See reason, my love—"

"Let go of me!" She thrashed against him, clawed his face with her bare hands. Under her fingernails, she felt his flesh and smelled metallic blood from the skin she had scraped. "You demonic beast! I am exhausted of you ruthless, sickening slavers! Your arrogance, defining time through your dragons that eat their own tails, your perpetual cycle of cruelty and redemption that would justify your animalisms! You magnify yourselves, connive against your fellow men, and for what? To defeat Winter and save us all when you have stolen more lives than those wights ever had? Let go!"

She broke away, ran to the willows...away, away, away from him. Away from his cruel promise of Death. Away from his heartless deeds of forging a sword shaped in fire and covered in her own blood, the blood of his Nissa—woman, wife, mother.
To him, I am nothing but an instrument, a tool for furtherance of his personal gains, and those of his Valyrian kith.

Her feet got caught by thick roots, causing her collapse. It was the sodden ground that met her face. With much difficulty, she lifted herself from the dirt, fell once more. Torrential rains mocked her strengthless state.

Still, I love him.

Oh, I love him so.

I love you, Jaqen.

By some mercy of the gods, she was able to hoist herself up. Arya! She heard him call, and ignored it though there was nothing in all the world she desired to do but throw herself into Jaqen's arms so he may kiss the pangs away, calm her perturbations and maelstroms, assure her that it was all a lie. She ran, splashing wet all over the paths, praying to the ones higher—may she be denied of wind in her lungs so she may pass away and not leave this realm with her liquid scarlet in her beloved's hands.

Perhaps, he had never loved me…I am just a Rhoynish slut after all. The words of those lords at the Conclave were true. I'm just another one of that Valyrian's many whores.

A realization—once a Valyrian had set his mind to kill you, then you are as good as dead.

If he wishes that I die for him, I would...

She held her belly as she rushed farther.

But our little angel…what would become of it if I allowed myself to be killed by Jaqen?

Strong hands caught her, and they both descended to the ground with him taking the fall and shielding her from hurt. His mouth closed in on hers, the sweetness of it mingling with the saltiness of rain. "Arya…Arya, my wife. I love you, please…heed me, goddess, please…" He never released her lips whilst he spoke. Wordlessly, he sent the rains his gratitude—the downpour was then one with his own tears. "Don't leave like this, Arya…I know nothing."

"Let me go," she whispered as she rose. He was unyielding, he pulled her to him so she sat astride his lap. She slapped him repeatedly, yanked his rain-soused hair, removing some of it from his crown forcefully. "I'm nothing to you, Jaqen! A fish-stinking, squid-smelling harlot, there, that's what I am! I do not expect you to preserve my life or whatever shred of honor I still have left—I'm chattel, a property. I can offer you nothing now, I'm with child and my body will swell unceasingly in the moons forthcoming; I will be far from that beauteous river nymph that amused you the first time you laid eyes on her! Let me go!" He was too strong, and he still held her, calmed her through his whispers of tenderness. "Let me toil in your mines in the morn like all thrallsmen do, and fuck me at night should you find me still enticing, but spare me! I beg not for myself but for my child…" she sobbed on, buried her face in his wet hairlocks of ivory and cursed herself for her inevitable weakness in the face of him. "My people need me and…my child, Jaqen…my little one."

"Ours," Jaqen stroked her hair, pressed his lips over and over upon her bare shoulder. His voice was shattered. "Ours, ours, ours, Arya…don't strip me of my right to that child, it is from us—my seed and your womb both. You have awakened a god out of me when you first spoke of our young one; to create something so beautiful with you, Arya, it's just beyond me yet here it is now in you, greatest of all gifts, though so, so unworthy I am of it." He held her close, kissed the side of her mouth that the soft floods of her tears have reached, smelled her divine scent meshed with the gentle
petrichor and soaked grass. His fingertips caressed her belly—babe's alcove, and he lowered his face to kiss it too. "I do not possess the knowledge of deities, my judgments are not always the wisest, my truths do not always resemble good, my utterances are perhaps far from being just, as I am far from being perfect. What I do know is this: I broke through your wall of rune in the heights of the war, we dueled in Ice and Fire by the sight of the gods," Jaqen shook his head, rested his temple against hers. "I've realized much—years of plundering, sacking cities through dragonfire, and bedding the maidens of those ruins, all these had been me. Years, Arya. But mere seconds, I beheld your face after hauling you to me through my slaver's chain, you were bloodied and broken. You...you were the purest, most absolute thing I have ever seen in all the world. Nothing mattered—none at all. Not my kith and kin, the empire, the archonship. Not even my own life or all other lives besides mine. You transfigured me, gave me a name I do not even deserve, surrendered to me all of you. Dear gods...after all these, how do you even think would I possess the slightest will to to lose you? I knew nothing, and forgive me for that—"

"Take me to the shacks," her tone was firm, unaffected by all his declarations. "That's where I belong. A Rhoynish slave, a Valyrian lord—this is nothing but a sickening farce for your lot. Let us stop this, Jaqen."

"Arya..."

"I cannot walk. I have injured myself trying to save my own life. You must carry me there. I leave it to the will of the gods should I die tonight in your dragonlord's hands."

He shook her out of desperation, unashamed of the tears that bathed his cheeks, though heaven's waterworks concealed them. He buried his face in between her bosoms and keened silently.

*Is there a chalice that can transform tears into pearls, as in the old Ghiscari lore?* The Valyrian thought. *If so, I can weep forever so I can bathe her with the beauty of pearls that will arise out of the deepest of our pains.*

"Why," Jaqen whispered, voice drained out from him. "Why perform the charge with me, your Rhoynish marriage rituals?" He lifted his face, and his eyes that beheld her were with hues of dying flames. "Some...some sacred act of summoning your god-rune, making a descendant of Fire bow before you, surrender himself so you can reclaim your gifts? A tactic of yours, to ensure that I will not turn my back against my own pronouncements concerning the slaves? So low, your impression of me, Warrior Bride."

She broke away from his grasp, tried to stand once more. She could not, for her feet had been severely hurt by her earlier collapse. Jaqen caught her. "The confluence?" Arya smiled bitterly, as she brushed his hand away. "Simple, Jaqen. I'm mad and stupid and..." she gazed at him—a riot of emotions in her bloodshot eyes. "...and I'm so in love with you, and I needed to feel, even for a moment, how to...to be truly owned by the man who had fathered my child. Like you though, I have realized much—I cannot desire for freedom and desire to be yours at the same time. I must choose."

"And you choose freedom over me?" he asked in between clenched teeth.

"Freedom over Death, yes," she replied. "You cannot tell me: 'bare your breast, know that I love you in all the world,' and thrust your Valyrian steel against my beating heart, then pray that your sword casts out darkness once it's forged with fire and blood. Whether or not you know of the arranged prophecies is not the case. Your blood brothers may have conspired against us both—this is greater than all of us, and perchance the end they seek is all-good, all-evil. Matters not. This babe I carry within me, he has seen none of this world, I cannot deny him of life when he has not taken his first breath yet. I will kill every damned person for the sake my child, Jaqen," she declared. "And hear me loud and clear—you own neither of us. You Valyrians should cease with your beliefs that you can
own another human being."

Truth is the noblest of all languages, but to hear it come from her mouth, and see it reflected in her face that had been the subject of his many, many dreams and hopes, springing perhaps from her heart that was also his heart, to read the finality that was behind each utterance—all these were beyond what he can endure.

His mind had suddenly become the host of all thoughts baneful. Heinous ploys against them all played in his now malevolent head—against Aurion and the Conclave, that damnable firemage.

His father, Kleitos Esdraelon.

All those with the blood of dragons.

"I love you, Arya," Jaqen stared at her, an anarchy of emotions consuming his very person: rage, despair, obsession unlike any. "I love you, damn it. I will kill them all, kill them…"

"Don't Jaqen," Arya said, her tone resolute. "Even if you do, it will not change anything. My decision is steadfast. Grant me my liberty, as well as that of my people. Don't bind me in your schemes of creating a Nissa—I am not her."

*Woman is the creator, the universe, her form.*

*Nissa—woman, wife, mother.*

*Yes, Arya. You are 'you'.*

Jaqen stood, cradled her weak form in his arms and began traversing the paths to the slave shacks. In the heart of that eventide soaked by rains and tides the Moon controls, there was nothing the both of them could do but weep in silence, allow the keening to suffuse itself within them so they may be convinced that feeling had not escaped from their souls and bodies yet. A prophecy will be scorned, a prophecy will be fulfilled. She holds time in her hands.

He must place himself in the depths of her, shatter time and its many abstractions.

As she had requested, he brought her to the shacks, mended her feet with Ny Sari healing salve he had obtained from the one called Ianthine. The Rhoynish female warriors never left her side, despite her direct orders that they take rest and that she be left alone with Jaqen H'ghar. Four stationed themselves outside the door, three were inside. "Wisest move, Dārilaros Nyūhmēria," the one called Shivalhen spoke to her earlier in Rhoynar. "All Valyrians are known to be the greatest deserters of their own words. If you do recall, the Conclave had vowed to leave Rhoyne alone, proceed to conquest against the Andals. A few moons passed and the Volantenes began building outposts in Sar Mell, and that was after our priests had accepted these disgusting animals into the Mother Rhoyne's bounty."

"Hush, warrior!" the one called Pherenice said in admonition, perturbed glance towards Arya who was then drowning herself in woefulness. "The Valyrian speaks our tongue and…he's still the queen's beloved. It is unacceptable to insult him in such a way. He is nothing like those flaxen-crowned swines."

"What does it matter?" the one called Niamh answered on Shivalhen's behalf. "We are from the old gods. The likes of them demons should mate only with their demonic kin."

Jaqen kept his mouth shut the entire time and allowed the vile of those utterances plunge itself to him.
Now, his gold irises were on Arya, his gaze of fondness guarding her whilst she slumbered, delighting himself with the soft rise and fall of her chest. The night was calm now, and may it remain so.

Sleep is a slice of death. Jaqen feared for her. They say that dreams are a whole realm, that of chaos with territories, characters, forces that are extramundane, unpredictable. "They are mirrors of the Material, without actual boundaries," the Elder Mage had once told him. "Dreams have infinite turfs, and are very, very dangerous. If sleep is a little death, then dreams are the paths to reach it."

Arya moaned softly, Jaqen stroked her hair and kissed her on the lips. "Arya, sweetheart," he called to her so she may be roused. A night of sleep may result to a thousand and one, or more than these if the dreamer is not too careful. When a man dies in his sleep, it is because he was already excised from reality—a product of the sequences that had happened in his sleep. He may have been killed or had chosen to remain in that dream-realm.

*Please,* he implored the gods. *Let her dream of things mirthful, may nothing plague her in her slumber.*

He pressed his lips against her belly, spoke to the little one who might be listening though life had not fully formed him yet. "I..." he began, unsure of how to proceed. "I haven't laid eyes on you yet. You are beautiful, no doubt like the woman bearing you. Know that I love you, as I love the woman bearing you."

Thought streams rushed to his consciousness, as he dissected the grand conspiracy ran by the Elder Mage with some chosen blood-brothers, he supposes. The old man is one bedeviled by prophetic completions and his accursed Asshaii lore on the Warrior of Light. The orchestration proceeded through mere insinuations from the Elder to him; though he was a rebellious questioner on matters of faith, the old man had managed to implant in his mentalities the configuration of one Promised—with his instructions on the annals of Winter and Darkness, the forging of that firesword, the confluence with the Rhoynish queen of the old gods, his beloved. His mistake sprang forth not from belief, but from *unbelief* and dismissal of the aftermath of that repudiation.

And the three commanding dragonriders? Aurion Archestrad?

The Archon?

*Friend to maidens and slaves, goddess of children and waters and magic? Why must the Nissa die for the sword of light to be forged and for darkness to flee?*

A solitary tear fell from Arya's lovely face. Jaqen was quick to brush it away, was quick to plant a deep kiss upon her lips for perchance, her struggles in the dream-realm were too difficult. His kiss will seep through all marrows of her consciousness and become part of her dreams.

*The Nissa's quietus will be what will give the lightbringer its own animation.*

*It must be coated with fire, blood, magical soul of her.*

*Damn that Mage.*

In his mind, he had drafted counterploys in order to keep his wife and child safe.

Those ten thousand ships must leave Valyria before the hatching of the dragonlords' plans could come to pass. The threat to Arya's life had been a constant source of torment for him, and he cannot allow her to put her life in greater peril. South to the Summer Sea is Sothoryos, and though strong influence of the Freehold's culture of thrall was present there, the rulers will be forced to receive them
should he send a missive to them in his own handwriting—they all knew the name Esdraelon and
fear it. The Basilisk Point hosts the isles that were once colonies of the Ghiscari, Zamettar and Yeen
are said to have good lands, spices, and fruits. A temporary home, the Valyrian thought. Till I rebuild
for her Rhoyne, Ny Sar—her city of poetry. If she finds the peninsula and the isles too lacking for her
taste, there is always the Summer Isles past Naath, center of breathing trade. There she must wait,
until he exacts revenge upon the demons of the Freehold and their cursed scions, slaughter with his
own hands the grand orchestrators of the creation of the Nissa.

"Arya…Arya…Arya…" Her name flowed out from his tongue like healing nectar. He kissed her
nose, pressed his lips firmly against her temple. It was not enough, so he suckled her lips with sweet
abandon, ignored the disapproving stares of the three Rhoynar who were standing on the corners of
the slave-abode. What to do? He's a man possessed. He spoke. "I love you so much, forgiveness…
please."

Despite those fervent acts of his, she did not wake that night.

Pardon. I did not mean to interrupt.

Winter's wind was frozen silken lace upon Arya's skin. It was the dawn, and the sky was awashed
with faint, prismatic light illuminating the thick snow upon her feet, bathing it with the illusion of
hues.

She was in the limit of permanent ices, beyond what the Northerners called the Wall.

There was a voice, that of a raven with the third sight, who from a previous cycle was named King
of Winter, the Builder—a moniker passed on from the mouths of mothers to the mouths of babes,
along with other sobriquets: the Clever, the Greenhand, the Godsgrief, figures in the west during the
age of heroes.

Bran the Builder, the Raven spoke:

The Dead never interrupt. They just arrive.

Practice care, Nissa Nissa.

There is a more powerful god out there, one whose womb has birthed the dead.

She is Death as Nissa is Life.

Her eyes wandered through the expanse of the land of always winter. She felt herself fleeting, far
from the icy stronghold and beyond. My spirit is unfooted, was her scream to the Raven. It is neither
on earth nor stone. The blue-eyed Raven flew away, leaving her in the core of wintertide, with the
promises of returning and a voice she will always hear.

True enough, nothing grew in this place, except for the weirwoods and direwolves and the children
of the forest. She beheld the soft snow upon the ground that had now formed into thick mirrors of
crystal ice sheets, then knelt to touch these with her fingertips. They burn, she said. Both Ice and Fire
scorch the skin.

Upon the now glassy ground of ice was her reflection and that only. She lifted her eyes to the
firmaments. Curious, for the Raven flew overhead in its departure, yet light did not seem to ricochet
from its dark form to the looking glasses made of clear frost, leaving it reflectionless.

Slowly, she redirected her focus on her mirrored image.
The crystal ice sheet broke into shards of impossible forms and shapes.

Snow…snow…crystal waters of Rhoyne and the seas.

Winter is supposed to be immaculate, yet there is nothing in it but blood.

Where is the mason who carved prophecies out of stone in high shadows of the long night?

In here, light must not come—the dead cannot withstand the Sun's bones.

A voice, more of a hollow and unhallowed series of echoes permeated through her mind. It was a thousand antiphons of frightening reverberations, more chilling than the howls of a perishing direwolf, the cry of a dragon lost.

It spoke. Aid to the Lightbringer—die.

The words came from a woman. All men seek her gift, or perchance, she had forced them to, since dying men make bargains for the sake of continuance. There was no one there but herself and the million reflections of her upon the ground's shattered mirrors of ice, the giant stones bejewelled with frost, and trees stripped naked by winter's breath. This is not just a land of ice, the Nissa thought.

This is a graveyard.

Beyond the curtain of light lies the Heart of Winter.

It was once more the voice of the Raven, as if its sight and speech can permeate turfs where he must not be, time when he must not exist.

Practice care, Nissa Nissa.

Do not let the spires of ice impale your body containing your own heart.

We are not your enemies Woman, but your friends.

We are a wooden face, a corpse white, a thousand red eyes…

And a boy with a wolf's head.

The shattered looking glasses of ice had turned into floes, and were now drifting away from one another. She stood cautiously, limiting her movements in order to not be carried away by the floating ice that hosted her. Winter howled through the desolate marsh of white and its winds were fierce. The ice sheet that acted as her island in the midst of freezing waters drifted…drifted to that far-off cave that was beyond the aurora. She carried no enchantment in the dream realm, and Mother Rhoyne was too far.

God-rune, she prayed. Old gods, they say that you are the only gods beyond this Wall. Hide me, I need your protection.

Perhaps the gods are sleeping.

The sheet of floating ice that carried her began forming small crevices asudden. Smaller and smaller floes were created by larger ones, and these could not hold her any longer. Beneath the glassy cold crystals is the winter water's turf.

A soft sound of breaking ice.
Arya felt herself descending…descending to the chilly, penetrating waters of always winter.

Iāqaen Haegār!

Fatal coldness of the water enveloped her entire frame, and like spikes and spears pierced both flesh and bones of her mercilessly. She thrashed against the deluge of the numbing waters, the cold that pierces and scalds. To open the eyes is to blind oneself, to breathe is to die. The Valyrian shackles with perpetual heat that draws blood and infects the flesh seemed to be all-merciful compared to the pangs of winter's water. She felt herself being carried away by the currents, with the chilling waters suffocating her breathing orifices and burning her lungs. A soundless scream absconded from her—soundless for though the scream may be with sound, not a living soul would hear. The surface seemed eons away, but she tried to bring herself to the surface for dire air. The waters seemed to be pulling her to their abysms. Every corpuscle of her body screamed for wind for her dying lungs.

The currents rushed as if they owned her.

She fought against the unforgiving flow till she was about to explode. There were illusions of survival, but every second beneath the cruel coldness may be lightyears in truth; the will to live was gradually leaving her.

Arya descended once more—further and further to the darkness of winter.

Heartbeats will cease…

Icicles came rushing to her direction horizontally. Their sharp tips and edges came in contact with her now pruny and feeble skin, drawing blood from her.

Arms, legs, face.

Arya gasped in pain and filled her lungs with winter's water unintentionally. Her eyes flew open and she saw the wielders of those weapons of ice—cold, dead things, scorners of flowing blood and life. They are inhuman, elegant, and dangerous. Seven, eight of them! They made their way through the water, towards her in graceful magnificence, with their skin as pale as the moon and their eyes as blue as stars.

Shadows with teeth…so cold it hurts to breathe…like knives inside your chest…

How do you kill what is already dead?

She flailed about, struggled to liberate herself from the waters whose particles fettered her. Death is the only language that they know, concealed in tongues and utterances whose sound was similar to the cracking of ice. With them were their swords so clear, the blades were almost as blue as the waters; and the shades of these lingered though the abyss that contained not the slightest amount of light. The Sun had hidden itself from her.

Water is friend, not foe. There are traces of the old gods in everything. Water, rocks, trees, wind.

One of the Others raised its sword of ice, prepared to deliver a blow that would sever her head from her frame. She tried to swim away but she was unable, frozen and manacled by the winter water's enchantments.

She heard the sword of ice slicing through the water's particles. Anguish had taken rule of her heart, as she continued descending…descending…her feet hitting the sea's frozen floor. Shockwaves enveloped her entirety, life slowly ebbed away, never to come back. Strength to cling to it had simply…vanished.
But she is the Moon, wife of the Sun. Her womb will be the sacred alcove of dragons a thousand years from now.

In a vanishing span, in a future memory, another great Raven with a thousand and one eyes, whose body had become part of the Weirwood spoke in her rampant mind.

*Your body is married to the Moon's creature, Wolf-girl.*

All of a sudden, a gigantic animal of gray and white plunged itself onto the chilly waters, warding off the humans made of ice for a hasty second. *Direwolf,* Arya thought, though she could not remember having any recollection of interacting with one. It broke through the imprisoning waters and rushed to the depths where she was. Sharp icicles and weapons spawned by Winter found their way through the direwolf’s body, and its blood mingled with the currents.

It howled in pain.

Still, the direwolf hauled her out of that void and onto the surface where life awaits. Arya felt herself ascending, though her body had almost given up to quietus. Her consciousness faltered as hues of dark indigo was replaced with clear cerulean. Survival was nigh, but could she reach it?

*Hah!*

A strong gasp filled her half-dead mortal frame with wind. Fractals of light from the sky bathed her face, as she felt herself being dragged to the icy shores. The Sun has returned, warming her through its rays—a reflection of its heart of fire that broke her and formed her in simultaneous successions. Its magical energy intertwined with the Moon that is her, weaving the very universe with their duality, their twin thread.

Once more, an illusion. The Sun never shows its face in the limit of permanent ices.

Upon reaching the shore, the direwolf collapsed and breathed its last. Its body disintegrated to fragments and was carried of the wind like perceptible mist. But since all lives are interconnected, the life of the Warg and the Wolf are one, and as long as the Warg lives, so does the Wolf.

She struggled to stand, and realized where she was as the beginning of snowstorm whistled messages in the Old Tongue.

*The Heart of Winter.*

It was the cavern that she had seen from a distance, and it reeked of breathing dead ones; and whoever resided in it has her heart wrapped in crystal ice—unmoving, unfeeling. *Die, Woman*—these are her words.

Arya shuddered as she stood in the mouth of the cave, and the soft windstorms growing more forceful by the second intensified her inexplicable fears.

*This is the Womb that births death.*

It was almost leviathan, and perchance able to swallow a hundred in a single scream of wintertide. All over its threshold were brinicles of sharp edges—ice stalactites and stalagmites protruding in various directions like giant brambles and thorns.

A thousand whispers and raspy breaths and hisses seemed to emanate from the interiors of the icy cavern.
She succumbed to temporary blindness and allowed her mind's eyes to discover what lies beneath the chasms…

*Hashalleath…Hochlodwimi'nahghlorodisqo'qun.*

It was Death's tongue that she heard. *All men must die for men are not gods*, the voice said.

And who is the god of death?

There she sits on her majestic throne of ice—naked, with legs splayed as if awaiting the seed that comes from the Heart of Darkness, a nefarious god chained in Stygai that is in need of an animate host. And as long as her feminine crevasse is open to receive the chaos deity's spore, the procreation of walkers will never cease; they will all hatch from her dark soul faster than the Nissa could hatch her dragonspawns that would cause their downfall. There she is, with the animated creatures of Winter at her feet, all as statuesque as a god must be. Her body is of glass, but not the kind that shatters. Her entirety is a mirror of ice—one that reflects the faces of all men in all realms, and endless versions of all these. Within her are their histories and futures of those mortal beings, yet all these she would devour in the end—*Valar Morghulis*.

She is the Many-faced god.

Death wears many faces, all of them beautiful, in order for men to be lured to her trap.

And since she is all—impressions, shadows, echoes of all men, they see themselves in her, identify themselves in her, find purpose in her.

Like the Nissa, the Universe is her form. She had created it along with the Nissa, for men were dead billions and billions of moons before they were born. Death comes before life; and death comes after life.

Time must only be measured against Death, and all faiths have it as their fundament. Men are nothing but breathing dust and a shadow of reality.

*All with flowing scarlet will share her destiny, all that has breath.*

The old gods and the red god, with the roots of their weirwood and conception of cycles of continuance are ruining the balance between life and death, they regard the latter as mere illusion through that forking path they have created.

'*There is only one god', all will declare; 'And her name is Death.'"

Arya Stark screamed in utter horror as she witnessed the wights crawl out of the death god's feminine orifice, their movements erratic, their screeches murderous, their forms horrendously beautiful.

They slithered out of her womb and dragged themselves towards her…and in the Winter they will lurk…cold mist…lingering…the world is their grave…their dominion…and her wails will feed their soulless bodies…

Ugly susurrations of winds…eerie, raspy voices…moaning…spiritless beings…

The dead lives…

The hallowed Moon hid its face from the realms.

Five, ten of them in each second. And their blue eyes bore into the very flesh of her, their stares
seemed to rip her soul out of her mortal frame.

Arya continued howling in horror.

The great cabal had revealed itself to Jaqen when Arya woke up from that nightmare, screaming like armageddon had arrived without prior portents that would herald its occurrence. She had told him everything—the allusions in those dreams were altogether difficult to unlock, if they could be at all unlocked; however, a thing was clear in all of it.

The Nissa against the death god.

*A battle of goddesses? Damn that Mage, I'm going to scorch his body to soot and blow the fragments of him to the Summer Sea. That is if Heraxos doesn't beg me so it could feed on him alive!*

"Was there anyone with you in the dream realm?" Jaqen had asked her. It was a senseless question. It matters not whether another character was with her in that turf—the whole dreamscape is a reflection of the material realm, and in the former scape, *any* damned thing can happen and anyone can exist and not exist in it at the same time. The realm of dreams is a mirror that distorts everything its opaqueness consumes, such that nothing ever remains the same when one sojourns in it in another opportunity.

"A great Raven," she had told him, her lips quivering. She did not pull her hand away from his grasp, found comfort in the act instead. Jaqen kissed her temple, then her lips. "I cannot remember all, but time had shown itself in chaotic glimpses. That Raven was a subject in the age of heroes fourscore centuries ago—Bran the Builder they called him. He was with me, his voice and words were my guide yet…his existence was *prior* to mine, and *after* mine. I saw flashes of events forthcoming, and a thousand years from now that Raven will assume its existence *simultaneous* with mine, albeit we will be in different forms—we will be brother and sister…I don't know…it was all a blur…makes no sense at all, these anomalies."

"Stay here with your warriors, Arya," the Valyrian had told her. He knew not a thing about the great Raven she spoke of, its intents, its antecedents. All matters must therefore be resolved with everyone on similar footing. "I must proceed at once to the Hill, speak with Kleitos and that Mage. These were all products of their mindwork, those bastards. I will return; but if speaking with them would require more time on my part, I will send one trusted of mine—Veldahar. Through him you will be informed of our succeeding actions."

"The Rhoynar, Jaqen," Arya had voiced out her irrepressible qualms. "Now, we have children numbering more than two hundred thousand. The lords will soon find out that all ore reserves in both Tyria and the straits of Senthyril had been digged up, and you know what that means—"

"Deployment of all slaves to the Fourteen Flames," Jaqen completed her pronunciation in gritted teeth. "The young ones will perish instantaneously at the foot of those volcanic mines; even the strongest Ghiscari men who were once part of the old legions have perished in there by the hundreds. The Conclave is done listening." He held Arya's face, gazed at it with fondness and worriment, then wolfed down her mouth akin to one starved and desperate—proof of his obsessive passions and love for the woman. She whimpered against his sweet plundering. "Oh, Arya..." he breathed. "I must leave for now. Ten thousand ships await by the Gulf of Grief. Gather your men—Orin, Mes'ard, Eritai, your most trusted. Have them form a small phalanx of message-bearers. Women and children first to eight thousand ships, the remainder of the men in the two thousand. Those ships were equipped with necessities for eight straight moons of seafaring. You will pass through the paths of Celbhar—dragonlords do not venture that way since it's practically a wasteland. Bring what you must, but do not overburden yourselves. The evening is still young, you must all be in the gulf by
midnight."

"Forgive me for all. Come with us, Jaqen."

"Not until I have spoken with those accursed plotters. My own father! If Aurion Archestrad is at all part of the entire scheme, I will feed his treacherous face to my firebeast."

"It is much to ask," Arya implored, gripping the fabric of his tunic tight. Firsthand she had witnessed the cruel aftermath of the Second Spice, and the coins have but two faces—victory or downfall. One is as probable as the other, and Jaqen must not be exposed to either states while the coin is spinning. "Much to ask, to leave the Mother Freehold for my sake, and for the sake of what is ours," she led Jaqen's hand to stroke her belly, as if infusing life to the babe that was within her through mere touch. "I want you both with me, Jaqen. Please...I lost Ny Sar and Rhoyn, more than a hundred thousand men in battle. Don't make me lose this family. Relinquish your rule of Valyria, we don't need the Freehold! Let Archestrad take over after Lord Kleitos—"

"Aurion will never leave us alone even if we settle in the Grey Waste, Arya," Jaqen cut her. "This diabolical Empire will be worse than what it already is if I allow the Archestrads to assume rulership. He will waste no time ravaging unmapped cities and hauling slaves in the mines. He was the proponent of the statutes of Gorgossos—forcing slave women to mate with beasts in order to spawn half-breeds. Mass executions, all other horrendous enactments. What more can he do with the archonship on the palm of his hands?"

Arya shook her head, threw herself in Jaqen's arms. "He will kill you, Jaqen."

"Not before I kill him."

"He has the whole Conclave behind him."

"I have you."

Jaqen H'ghar rushed to the dungeons where the Elder Mage's workchamber was. Adamant about obtaining answers, he opened the Mage's iron door with a forceful push once he reached it.

Empty.

Scrolls were at a disarray—some strewn on the floor and some half-consumed by either fire or concoctions gone awry. Vials were all broken, iron and copper implements were scattered in various directions. A faint whiff of smoke glissaded in the chamber.

The Mage is gone. Did he flee? Was he captured and killed?

_The firesword._

_Blackfyre is missing._

He scoured the entire room, turned over wooden lockers and repositories, hurled objects here and there. It was nowhere to be found.

Jaqen took a hasty exeunt from the dungeons and dashed to the upper towers where Kleitos Esdraelon's inner chamber was. "Father!" he called to the Archon. "Father! We need talk!" He dashed through the cloister, reached the threshold to the Archon's function and turned the knob. The Esdraelon patriarch was not there.

A distant cry made him run out of the chamber and survey the skies from the topmost cloister.
Lethrax—the Archon's firebeast.

Its glistening scales of bronze and silver toyed with the break of light as the Moon started departing. It circled the firmaments, its wings splayed as if commanding the then fierce winds to aid it in its flight. Every flap of its scaled limbs resonated mightily in the Tyrant's Hill, and from each breath of it came forth recalescent blue flames.

Upon its back was Kleitos.

In front of the Archon and his firebeast, and as prepared as they were in an unsanctioned duel of fire, was Aurion Archestrad upon Urkon's spinal plates.

It was an attack of conscience; more than this, a father's devotion. Kleitos had learned of Aurion's convoluted ploys—at the last minute he had banished the Elder Mage to the Fourteen Flames, had him fettered in Valyrian manacles that withhold rune. "Killing that Rhoynar is forsaking my loyalties to my own heir," Kleitos had told the Mage. "Persuade me to abandon all but the blood of my blood." Aurion Archestrad was enraged at the Esdraelon patriarch's decision of sparing the Rhoynar and her kin for the thousandth time.

There was only one way to settle the great discord—challenge the archonship.

The Conclave would be dealt with after the clash.

All the other dragons seemed to shy away, with some settling themselves on the apexes of the Hill's roofless towers, riveted by the scene, and others flying straight to the dragonpits in horror. Very few screeched at the two imperial firebeasts in their flight, intensifying the looming fray—of course, dragons do know how to mock their kin.

Upon Kleitos's lips were two commands that should be uttered only in the fighting stades and during conquests, not in an offstage, unlawful battle of fire and blood against one's kith.

Rhaenagon. Drakarys.

Begin. Dragonfire.

A dance between two dragons commenced its magnific display.

Surges and spheres of flame pervaded expanses and breadths, bathing the whole Tyrants' Hill with mortiferous flames. Lethrax flew in helixes and thwarted the deadly flames dispensed by Urkon, before blasting it with fire and smoke from its own orifices. Aurion's firebeast swooped asudden to avoid the flames, though not without its scaled wings catching some of it.

Kleitos's firebeast continued spewing orbs upon orbs of dragonfire unto Aurion's while glissading across aerial turfs in pirouettes, as if merely frolicking with the opponent dragon's offenses and defenses. The Archon is the Archon for such a reason; and none dared challenge him or his dynasty for half a millennium because writ chronicles have identified the Esdraelons as a clan almost unconquerable.

Scarlet and black smoke followed both dragons in their flight.

Lethrax continued owning the firmaments, gliding east and west to fend off attacks, and charging with a sea of flames ten times stronger than what the foe had dealt him with. Debris from the Hill's towers—collateral to the combat—fell with an ear-crashing thud, destroying centuries-old obelisks and sculpted quartzite that had once witnessed the Freehold's wrathful grandiosity.
Kleitos is most skilled in aerial combat and warfare, but Aurion never plays fair.

Nigh—three firebeasts of one other Valyrian greathouse, led by Lathos Hadervaren.

"Father!" Jaqen heard himself screaming. It was a futile act, for the deafening sound of dragonwings against space had consumed all other sonances. He saw the Hadervaren dragonrider's firebeast darting towards the unsuspecting Kleitos. Hair's breadth, and Lethrax will be devoured by flames from its defenseless rear. "Father!" He still called. "Digress! Ajax, behind!"

Come, firebeast, came forth Jaqen's summoning. Heraxos.

All of a sudden, he leaped from the topmost cloister and allowed himself to descend to the unsure depths a thousand feet from the Archon's roofless tower.

Cruel winds seemed to slice through his flesh as he plummeted, heightening all emotions—suspense, worriment, thirst for both blood and fire.

Two seconds of descent…three.

Heraxos sped to his aid. Jaqen landed on the beast's spine in his usual dragonrider's rhythm, bent on one knee. He settled on the dragon's back, did the fastenings and flank billets, locks and clasps in haste. "Ille najeot vilibāzma," he ordered the imperial—straight to combat.

Heraxos rushed in flight to the center of battle. Rain fire! was Aurion Archestrad's usual command. Shades and merciless dragonflames were now bathing Lethrax in various directions, as both Ajax and Urkon took turns in spewing fire orbs to it and its rider.

Jaqen maneuvered the beast in horizontal flight, breaking the triad of dragons. Two other Hadervaren firebeasts took off in opposite courses upon seeing Heraxos approaching with force that was unparalled by any other in Mother Valyria's cradle.

Lethrax took a quick descent, weakened by those traitorous attacks from its sides and rears. Urkon followed its flight.

Heraxos collided head on against Ajax, ramming its chest velociously, forcefully against the other firebeast. "Nābēmagon!" Jaqen screamed in utter wrath—Attack! Hammer him! Ajax was unheeding of its rider's command, mindful only of the physical torment inflicted by its foe. It was forced backwards, as Heraxos continued spitting fire on its face and wounding its neck with its merciless fangs.

Ajax's spine crashed severely against one of the towers, sending colossal fragments of metamorphic stones in the air and to the ground. Lathos Hadervaren fell—all bloodied, unconscious, injured to near fatality; but the dragon was quick as it caught its lord upon its back, and sped away in erratic flight.

Jaqen surveyed the expanse for signs of Kleitos. "Father! Where are you?!!"

The Archon lay on the ground, crushed under the scarlet-soaked frame of its imperial dragon. Both were reflections of each other—torn limbs, mangled bones, bodies half-scorched.

"Father…"

Urkon's victorious screech echoed in Jaqen's ears which were then drowned by sounds of keening trumpets. Dragons are the wind of morn, and skies dream of them, many long for their scorching kisses with profound desire. Winged crafts—this is what they are. They do not wield magic, they are...
magic.

And now, one of the Freehold's greatest dragons is dead—Kleitos Esdraelon, Archon.

Jaqen struggled against weeping. Let me mourn when it is time.

"Sövegon!" was his order. Heraxos obeyed, chased Urkon who was now heading towards Celbhar near the Gulf of Grief where ten thousand ships await.

Arya...Jaqen's mad heart whispered.

"Come now, Child."

"What is it, Mother?"

"Signs have shown themselves. The day is here—when all these will end. The sweat and toil, the blood and the misery."

"Will we leave the Freehold? When? Whereto?"

"Now, Child. Northwest of the land of the east—this is where we will find our abode."

"Will we live to see it, Mother?"

"Have faith, Child. We will."

Arya smiled as she witnessed the great liberation of her people.

They were now in the paths of Celbhar leading to the gulf eastward from the Freehold. Now, they stand at the summit of that proverbial mountain, hands spread out—celebrating oneness with the wind's whispers and the leaves' rustles, with the quiet murmurs of the rivers and the strong cries of the seas.

Ceri-hafe.

It is finished.

They were all bodies and spirits at the end of the quest for sweet emancipation. Now, they needed no sanction for being. They now belonged to no one but themselves. "The gods have sent that man, truly," she heard one of the thrallsmen declare to four others. "Valyrians are all purple-eyed—hue of bruises and broken bones, of blood that doesn't flow. Īaqaen Haegār's irises are gold—like the Sun, the spouse of the Moon that is Mother Rhoyn. Light, new morn. Ten thousand ships! The maiden goddess whispered, and the lover god obeyed."

Men hoisted sacks of provisions upon their backs as they marched in blithe to the bay. Women carried upon their heads baskets of clothing and healing implements, with their babes strapped securely to their bosoms. Ever since the redrafting of the laws, slaves were allowed to own cattle and fowls of certain numbers, and these too they brought with them, herded by their youth of ten and three to ten and five. The old who were too weak to walk were transported to the gulf by colt-drawn wagons. Fathers carried their children upon their shoulders, lit torches in hand; and mothers watched as sons and daughters ran around and hopped buoyantly atop fallen monuments of that wasteland east of Valyria.

"A boy!" cried one of the men. His wife had just given birth in one of the enclosed wagons in the midst of their short journey. "By the gods, it's a boy!"
Sounds of mirth suffused every soul. There was nothing in the air but lightheartedness, blessedness— the nightmare that is Valyria will be a thing forgotten.

But it was in the nightmare that my most beautiful dreams were built, Arya thought, caressing her babe's alcove. Worry not, my dear one. Your father will soon be with us.

A small girl sang her canticle of worship, hopscotching through the carpets of grass in bare feet. Her voice was the sound of tinkling bells and birds' lilt.

'Ni indóe líre- ana Rhoyne i amil an se tûre -o ulcu-
-Esse your mel tye tulime- i nórë tye salce.'

I will sing to Mother Rhoyne for she has triumphed,

In her love, she led the people she has redeemed.

Arya stroked the girl's crown of chestnut and smiled at her softly as the child looked up to her. "Yes, Mother Rhoyne had been truly gracious."

They reached the gulf by midnight. The skies were clear and cloudless, and the Moon's face looked down upon each of them. The waters of the Summer Sea were calm and obliging, unsselfish; reflecting the stars and their patterns that will serve as their celestial guides in their seafaring.

Sails were raised, women and children embarked on the ships.

All of a sudden, an ocean of blaze started devouring twelve of the vessels. The flames were from Varathis, firebeast of the fourth dragonrider. With her were two other dragons of the Valyrian greathouse Ophistor.

Daxen's screams were those of one unhinged as she continued ravaging the water vessels with Drakarys upon her lips. "Burn them all! All of them!" Sails were reduced to ashes, wooden foremasts, shrouds, hulls and bowsprits all. The wreckage was swallowed by the sea's depths.

The Rhoynar started scampering in all directions, and some who had embarked on the ships leaped onto the wet and swam frantically to the shore. "Mother Rhoyne, save us!" was their cry. The firebeasts scorched eight men to death, fed on their carcasses afterwards. One boy of seven years was paddling in haste to the sea's front, its movement attracting the beast's sight. With its leviathan mouth and deadly dragon's fangs it wolfed down the boy—the sound of cracking bones and the shade of scarlet flowing from his young frame intensifying the caterwaul and blur.

The dragon spat out what remained of the boy onto the sands—half-burnt flesh, bloody sinews, skeletal remnants.

Fright was lost at the demonic act. Arya was enraged at the sight.

An outraged cry escaped from the lips of the water enchantress, her voice thus forming colossal waves from the Summer Sea. There were flashes of fiery red against the silver shades of the waters, as ships and their sails were tossed from east to west like playthings; still, they were undamaged, as if the water's crests were thinking beings that knew friend from foe.

In front of the Rhoynar, the sea rose like great mountains—wrath in the form of water, thunderous and remorseless.

Darkness prevailed as those wave alps rose to highest of heights, covering the skies and the celestial
spheres above them. Two dragons were swallowed by that mighty swelling of the ocean, their flames
annihilated like mere candlefire under breeze's moist. One dragon communed with the depths, while
the other was tossed by the gigantic surge against a large searock, severing both wings from its body.
Varathis flew higher to evade the attack.

Arya collapsed to the ground, weakened by her own rune. Something warm came from between her
legs, its scent metallic and with vile pungence. She touched her inner thigh and gasped with horror at
what she saw upon her fingertips—blood.

**Blood from my womb.**

*Jaqen, beloved...where are you?*

Ny Sari healers rushed to her aid. The waves have ceased.

"To the ships!" she heard Orin carrying out orders. "Leave the sacks! Carry the children, the elder
ones!"

At this, the Rhoynar began rushing once more to the sea vessels still undamaged by dragonfire. All
belongings were abandoned—one must carry only oneself if one would seek righteous continuance.

Another dragon's screech. Aurion Archestrad had arrived.

The dragon queller Arya wore around her neck had lit up at the appearance of another imperial. Ny
Sari healers voiced out their fear at the sight—blinding, phosphorescent light, and within its scarlet
pendant, Valyrian glyphs. *Regency over the magic of Old*, the words seemed to whisper. She could
hold the dragons back, though not for long.

*Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen...*

The great Raven with the third sight she had seen in the limit of permanent ices spoke to her—he
was seven thousand years before her, and a thousand years after.

'İksa Āria Stārke. Ňellyartinio ezımagon se zaldrīzes...'

*You are Arya Stark. Warg into the dragon...*

*You can wear the skin of any beast that can swim or walk or soar. You can look through the eyes of
a Weirwood, and see the truth that lies beneath the world.*

It was an ancient gift from the old gods she didn't even know she possessed. With her eyes shut, she
infiltrated the beast's consciousness—intents and desires, inner wonders and workings.

She felt herself being torn in an infinitely expanding and evolving realm, with its chaotic fractals of
blurs and clarities. Arya tried to scream at the orderlessness she was witnessing, but what came out of
her lips was a beast's cry, and she was...flying.

With her eagle-eyes from the sky's vantage, she saw the Rhoynar running in haste to the ships; and
she was there by the shore—unconscious, with the Ny Sari healers still around her. One thing
became clearer to her as she glided in magnificence through the ethereal spaces—she was wearing
Varathis's sapphire-hued scales, seeing through Varathis's midnight eyes, soaring through Varathis's
wings.

*I am a dragon, Arya thought.*
She rushed to Urkon who was then about to spew dragonfire onto ten more ships filled with women and children. With velocious force, she rammed herself against the dragon, and the strength of the impact sent both of them plummeting and crashing onto the unforgiving waters of the Summer.

She felt her scales bleed, as the waters reacted by forming an upsurge, flooding the decks of the fifty ships.

Urkon was still within the depths. With much struggle, she lifted herself, threshed against the currents and soared once more to the skies. There was another dragon's cry—and that cry was closest to her heart.

*Heraxos. Jaqen.*

Slowly, she felt herself leaving the dragon's frame and succumbing to powerlessness. Her feeble frame convulsed violently as she regained her human's consciousness. She was then lifted from the sands by a strong pair of arms, and rushed to one of the ships. Most of the sea vessels had started moving. Arya hoisted herself from the wooden deck and lifted her eyes to the heavens where the dance of three dragons continued.

It was Jaqen against two other imperial firebeasts, and she could hear his shouts of command. "*Vīlībagon, Heraxos! SŶz, sŶz!*" Arya called out to him: *Jaqen!*—useless, with the din and upheaval all over her. Both dragons disgorged balls and surges of flame from their bestial orifices, but Heraxos eluded the fiery charges with its movements of whorls, and in flight it carried a hellish vortex of wind and water. Even the seas obeyed it.

With ferocity, it spewed billows upon billows of flame towards two other firebeasts, as it soared and plunged and sailed in the skies in intricate, convoluted movements. Urkon and Varathis retreated for the time being so their lords could design and calculate attacks. Heraxos flew to the vessel where Arya was. "Go! Leave!" Jaqen shouted his orders. "Aurion is near, he withdrew for a while but he's coming back!"

"I won't leave Valyria without you, Jaqen!"

"Don't disobey me, wife. You will sail without me! Worry not. *I will find you wherever you are.*"

The dragon flailed its wings, sending gusts of strong wind that pushed the sails and allowed the hulls to be carried by the sea's currents. In a matter of seconds, the ships have already moved half a league from the gulf. The firebeast sped away for another bout of colliding fires.

Perchance, the gods are truly asleep that night, for even as what remained of those ten thousand ships navigated their ways across the murky, unsure waters towards the thresholds of emancipation, three other dragonriders have entered the scene of fray, casting Valyrian dragonchains to bind the Archon-heir's firebeast.

The dragon's tormented cries as it wrestled against those behemothich manacles pervaded in that horrifying evening's peak.

Her strength was failing her, and she might die tonight. Still, she uttered those words: *-o iluvēstar ingole.*

*God-rune.*

Mist from the old gods enshrouded those ships, concealing the Rhoynar until nothing more was seen apart from the sea's haze.
Iaqen Haegār felt himself being hauled facedown by three others across the sparkling sands of Mother Valyria's bosoms. Flowing scarlet from his defeated mortal frame adorned the dust of the earth like scarlet-hued jasper. Declarations, victorious outcries:

*Mirre syt se sỳz hen Muña Valyria!*

*All for the good of the Mother Valyria!*

In the distance was the screech of his imperial firebeast, still locking horns against those chains of rune that tortured it with static shocks, ones that were built in those manacles by higher Valyrian enchantments.

That lamentable evening, even as his marred and burnt flesh scraped against soil and stones thus intensifying his agony, even as his Valyrian kin spat on his face and locks of silver, even as they towed his already mangled limbs with wrathful force and brutality to his place of torment, he drew impossible strength from that one name whose bearer had christened him with an appellation he never deserved, who had gifted him with his own life and with his babe's life that would carry his blood over the ages.

*Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya...*

His face had gone bloodied-red and blistering, one eye blinded because of traces of flames and first twenty lashes of dragon-forged whips. Hair strands began falling from his crown in dainty clusters. His body was more broken than broken—they had to cripple him, had to shatter the bones of his shoulders and ribs and knees through their torture hammers.

*Where is that damnable enchantress?! The relics?!*

He never gave a word away.

Yet, anguished cries escaped from his chest like treacherous sounds, revealing his inner weakness to his foes. His voice twisted into raspy, agonized moans, and the sounds grated hellishly against his scarlet-soaked lips.

What he saw was a blur of emotionless faces and affliction. The gods have abandoned him.

The merciless winds ate away at his nerves, feasted on his scorched flesh. Its searing laughter pulsed around his open wounds, jarring and intense. He was convulsing uncontrollably, yet what he obtained in response to his reflexive fits was a painful blow on the chest, robbing him of dire breath, smashing some more of his bones. He was scattered, utterly fragmented, and he was too weak to even weep at the excruciation that was stealing life away from him in painstaking slowness.

His consciousness ebbed away, as dark fogs coiled themselves around the edges of his empty mind. He prayed for oblivion, sweet death.

Mercy never came.

*There are no heroes in the face of hellish pain.*

Darkness peered as dreams vanished. The Valyrians needed one word—a place where the Rhoynar will go.

Jaqen H'ghar was unbreakable.

Two voices in a sea of a hundred others rang in his ears. One of them was Aurion Archestrad's.
Not a word?

Not a word. This betrayer is a great rampart of secrets, my lord.

Very well, thirty more lashes. Use the thirteen-tailed torture implement, ten spikes on each thong.

He felt himself being dragged by the hairlocks to a place of higher ground. "Damnable treasonist! Your hair can't even stay on your head!" spat the one who was hauling him, shaking from his hands thick strands that were yanked out of Jaqen’s scalp. His seizures were now completely irrepressible, and in his every retch, thick, rancid blood would come out of his mouth. Whence he lay, he beheld the faces of his blood brothers, and there was nothing in their countenance but abhorrence and loud demands of a most painful demise.

End the dynasty! they screamed. This heir is last of their blood! All others are out of the way!

A series of sweltering pain sent more spasms to his already broken body. He inhaled sharply at the unbearable throe, hissed…gasped…as violent shudders took hold of his entirety.

Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya Arya...

The flogging was too severe—the torturous iron thorns cut deep through inches of his skin. His raw flesh stuck to the metal spikes; and in the scourging, fragments of his thews and drops of his blood bathed all spaces and faces.

The executioner spat out a bit of Jaqen’s bloodied flesh that had landed upon the side of his mouth.

"Hāre ampā! Izula ampā!"

Thirteen! Fourteen!

The flagellation carried on with intense brutality. Aurion had ordered thirty lashes.

A dreamscape. A realm where he would see her lovely, lovely face once more. Jaqen H'ghar willed himself to cast aside the fetters of breathing life, to feel the firm clasps and sweet kisses of the future, to just…forget about demons and gods and paint instead a beauteous scape of days forthcoming with her.

Arya...

Aurion held a hand up for the flogging to be paused awhile. The dragonlord wiped his own blood-spattered face with the fabric of his raiment, chuckled softly. He ran his palms through Jaqen’s sanguine fluid-soaked frame, allowing every molecule of the traitor's blood to cling to his hands.

He brushed his bloodied fingers through Jaqen's silver hairstrands, dyeing them scarlet, leaving just a few traces of ivory in them—a mark of his treachery.

"Where is your whore?" the dragonlord asked calmly.

"Fuck you."

Aurion smiled as he rose, spat on Jaqen's face. All of a sudden, his hard fist landed solidly upon Jaqen's belly, and the impact of that hit sent the Archon-heir regurgitating thick blood in liberal amounts. The ruthless dragonlord nodded to the one holding the torture implements.

"Lantēpsa tōma! Lantēpsa bŷre! Ŷdragon, nāpăstre!"
Twenty-five! Twenty-six! Speak, betrayer!

The wooden windlass carried him inverted for all to see—a threat to others who would, at the slightest, dare to act as righteous saviors of those slaves whose 'undeserved humanities' the ruthless ones had stolen.

Jaqen heard nothing but the rhythmic dancing of his fearless heart, saw nothing but Arya's goddess-like smile, desired nothing but to be with her again, and to be with the babe he had created out of shared love with her.

He perceived nothing else—not even Aurion's voice and his command of 'dragonfire'. He felt nothing else, too—not even the flames that consumed all of him, from skin, to sinews, to soul; or the waves of the saltwater that engulfed him whole when his body was thrown at sea.

Escape from time. Touch eternity.

He drew his last breath.

And when Jaqen H'ghar could once more see, he beheld her—the death god that awaits at hood's path, the greatest enemy of his Nissa.

It is said that no one can frolic with time without distorting eternity. The Warrior chose the Woman over the Sword, the firemage thought. In the end, he had lost all three.

Akhrast L'ris was no coward, yet after the death of the second rider of the Esdraelon he had to conceal his intents and wait for the most opportune time to carry out his schemes once more. Better to wait than to err, let them sneer and assume that you are nothing but one gutless. Death gets the last laugh.

Kleitos had sent the wrong man to be imprisoned beneath Fourteen Flames; but of course, Akhrast can never be captured.

For centuries, he hid his face through glamour and witnessed what was left of the wretched slaves from the Old Ghis and the Isles, toiling in the deep mines beneath the Fourteen Flames that lit the dark nights of the Freehold.

Death is food for Winter and for the god that impels it. Slaves are dying by the hundreds per day, and the working conditions have worsened now that the statutes ratified during the series of Dance of the Dragons were overturned by the ruling House Archestrad.

House Esdraelon was history.

"All gods have their instruments. There are men and women who serve them and work their will on earth," were the firemage's words to the Targaryen maiden, daughter of Aenar, who was now under his tutelage. "Those chosen by the gods first get separated from other living mortals through treachery; their spirits' blood get stolen. Their families die—a price they have to pay for the power the gods bequeathed them though they asked not for it."

"And when your spirits' lifeblood gets sucked out of you, you shatter," Daenys offered her purview.

"No," the Elder replied. "You grow stronger. Indeed, you grow stronger through tribulation and the gods smile and nod at you, because you finally become what they seek."

Daenys narrowed her eyes at the mage's words. "How do you avoid all these?"
The Elder smiled.

"Never get noticed by the gods."

The Targaryen maiden exhaled, worriment evident upon her features. "I've been having dreams, Elder, ever since you made me drink the shade of the evening. Much has been unlocked as far as my intellections are concerned." She stood up and paced the room. "I dreamed of a great cataclysm—dragons dying, ash, smoke, fire. There were quakes, and molten rocks a thousand feet to the air, red clouds raining down dragonglass. I saw…I saw Velos and Ghozai being swallowed whole by hell; and though I know that you are not a believer of the Seven for your faith and your heart has been and will always be with the lord of light, I think you may find this most unusual." She paused with her pacing and sat opposite the mage. "I have seen the Stranger's face—a woman. And I have seen the one who would conquer her—also a woman."

The Elder only smiled. "You've been having visions about the fall of Valyria—"

"Doom of Valyria," Daenys corrected him. "Fall is too merciful a word."

_The flames that shot so high that even dragons burned…_

_A fly upon the wall, the waves and sea wind whipped and churned._

"You believe it to be true?" the mage asked with a knowing smile.

"Yes."

"Then, you must tell your beloved father about these dreams of yours," he stood up, prepared to conclude instruction for that day. "Dreams are a whole realm, and mayhap you have sojourned in one."

"You mean," Daenys spoke, her eyes wide and horrified. "Such unthinkable tragedy may come to pass?"

"No, no—you don't say it _may_ come to pass," the Elder chuckled. "It _will._"
Hey guys! Thanks for reading. Let me know what you think, and I hope you liked this chapter. It's a lot angsty, but J/A is like that, we all know this fact. XD

Top: elements in Arya's dream (I do not own the pictures)

1.) White Walkers, as they were described in the books.  
GRRM's words: "They (Others) are strange, beautiful...think, oh...the Sidhe made of ice, something like that...a different sort of life...inhuman, elegant, dangerous." (A bit different from the show portrayal of them)

2.) How I imagine the death god(dess)/Great Other

Have a nice weekend! Much love.
Wreath of Time

Chapter Notes

A Bargain with Death

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*The Warrior cannot be without the Sword,*

*And the Sword cannot be without the Wife.*

**Songs of the Faceless, XXXI (Lost leaf)**

“They held each other close and turned their backs upon the end.

*The hills that split asunder and the black that ate the skies;*

*The flames that shot so high and hot that even dragons burned;*

*Would never be the final sights that fell upon their eyes.*

**A Song of Ice and Fire**

It was a great collapse.

He was dead, yet undead.

*Who are you?*

The Valyrian had passed away, yet blessed continuance seemed to have found him. When he opened his eyes, there was only a blinding flash of white light, but the source of the light is a pellucid being, her translucence absorbing all forms of warmth. There he was, hanging reversed in that windlass in front of the god of death, and he was then a subject of dark poetry, the verses of which are written in blood and recited by lips frozen and perishing.

There were spirits and forlorn images and unsparing agony and pall, and all these elements converged in an act of worship to one whose name men do not speak of.

*You wish to kill me, Warrior?*

Her lips were lurid blue, her form pale and glassy; and if ever she wept, her tears would most likely be in the form of crystal ice. But the god of death never weeps, for she is the source of emotions and entanglements that impel the very act—she had to be outside of that which she had 'created'; and it is not that she does not have the capacity to weep, she is a god after all, and gods can do almost anything.

The death god never weeps because she has no notion of mirth, and for one to understand sorrow, one must know what it is not. She does not and will never possess the reason either, to be compelled
to shed tears. The deity understands but a few phrases in their fullest sense: mortality, downfall, annihilation.

All others, to her, were inconsequential.

Who are you?

Her feet were not rooted upon the ground of glassy ice. She glissaded around him, ensphered his feeble frame, suspended herself upside down in front of him so she could observe his handsome face. The same query from her rang in his ears like persistent hisses and murmurs. She spoke in a language he does not know, but a language all men understand.

The Old Tongue. The tongue of Death.

He answered weakly.

"Jaqen H'ghar."

She replied, soft laughter upon her lips.

Jaqen is dead.

But does he know what it truly means to die?

The one called Jaqen H’ghar gazed at the god's face—facelessness rather. She is Winter, and her heart was the source of vile coldness that brings forth cessation of life—a contrast to the heart of fire that warms and preserves all those that have breath. Her entire mien, the wholeness of her appeared to be mirrors of infinite faces, some true and some false, her core a perpetual visual tunnel of all men that had accepted quietus and had become a part of her.

She is Death, without commencements and completions. She is a cycle, for men were long dead before they are born and will die after they are born.

"When life ends, death begins,” he replied hoarsely. "I died in the hands of my kin, I know what it means to die."

Beginnings and endings, said the god. You speak of time, and time confines you.

What if Death is outside of time?

What if immortality is not perpetual existence in time, but a state beyond time itself?

Riddles. They say that the god of death hides her true intentions in her facelessness and her many faces. The most possessive of all gods, the wise would say, as if breath and warmth of life are blasphemies in her name. Men must be fallen sparks and fragments of shattered vessels, men must not be here at all.

"Time is not an illusion," Jaqen said. "It cannot be. What of the past, and my memories of it? Reality had to happen for past to exist and in turn, for memories to be created. Time is the core element."

Ah, the past, the deity said. The now, the forthcoming. No wonder why you men cannot be gods. You measure your realities against the arrow of time.

What if the only reality that exists is the 'Now'? An infinitude of it?

What if those other gods, as they have created you men, have created memories in you as well?
Memories of time that never actually happened?

Jaqen shook his head, spoke once more though his lips were quivering. "Memories could not have been planted within us by the gods. I felt those lashes against my body, tasted the blood and the dust, saw dragonfire that consumed me, heard my kin screaming for my execution—no…" Arya cannot be just a created memory. "My realities are not false ones."

The deity smiled. And how do you measure falsehood?

You wish to kill me, Warrior?

She continued ensphering him, hissing angrily and with unthinkable hatred, her movements blowing gusts of winter's wind that sent shudders in his wholeness. Her formless form had coiled around him, like frozen strong silk that suffocates. The Valyrian renamed felt fear coursing through every part of him.

She was then mist transformed, invading his body by entering through his mouth, possessing him, tormenting his inner person, then departing from his frame by breaking through his every orifice, like a million spirits in a single host.

"Aaaaaaaarghhhh!" Jaqen howled in excruciation. Where is true death that allows escape from pain?

Black blood trickled from his nose, eyes, mouth, ears, pores…

You wish to kill what is already dead? That is nothing but paradox.

Then, she was gone. Her voice filled his ears, and it was coming from all and every direction and space.

You may kill me, for gods can die just as they can be reborn.

Apparition…she materialized…waned…emerged and faded…a whole evanescence…a beautiful, horrifying one.

He felt her lips so close to his own.

It was the Great Other's seduction of the Warrior of Light.

You can kill me, but not before you kill your Nissa. That is the precondition set in the prophecies.

He had seen it—the darkness that is the Heart of Winter, the wights that feed on the flesh of living men, the act of prolonging suffering by creating the undead out of the dead, holocaust through winter's breath.

See those Undead? They have perished but they are alive.

Death is a cycle. Nothing more.

Why do men fear repetitions? Why do men fear Death?

The prophecy was arranged by the Elder Mage for a purpose perchance that is all-good, yet the great sacrifice was beyond the comprehensions of his mind that reasons and his heart that loves.

Kill her, kill me.

Save me, save her.
"I'm not a hero, to do the saving," Jaqen murmured feebly. There was but a single thing he understood about the Warrior of Light—it is a lore riddled with plots of unnecessary sacrifice. A whole lunacy. As for Jaqen H'ghar, one thing and one thing only mattered and made sense. "But I want her—Nymeria, Arya, Nissa—whatever she is. I want her back."

It was the response the god of death desired more than any.

The Nissa is her obverse—life versus death, virtue versus vile. And though the gods cannot be reduced to such twofoldness, the concept of twofoldness is still a fraction of the infinite spectrum of essences and eruditions the gods possess.

The Warrior cannot be without the Sword, and the Sword cannot be without the Wife.

**What would you give for another life and death with her? A whole other cycle?**

The deity's question was wrong though, for there was absolutely **nothing** Jaqen H'ghar would not give for another life with Arya of the Rhoyne. He cast aside all thoughts and visions of blight, of the long winter that will ravage the realms of men. *Let another Warrior emerge from another age,* the Valyrian renamed was uncompromising in his obsession. *I am far from a hero, I am nothing without her.*

"What would you have me give?"

The deity smiled once more, bent over to kiss him on the lips. The contact was painful, sweltering.

*Breaker of chains, freer of slaves.*

**One thing.**

*You.*

*Your life will be mine, and so shall your death be.*

The bargain was too simple—one man's devil may be another man's god. This god of death may host in her all manners and forms of darkness, but who is to decide if she is evil or good? The Mage and his Asshaii lore? The endless versions of the Warrior's saga? And don't gods create men as men create gods—destroy each other even, albeit in different ways? *All these are senseless queries,* Jaqen thought as his heart broke, even in his supposed death. *The one thing more important to me than all gods and men combined is Arya.*

The death god continued with her demands.

*Breaker of Chains, freer of slaves.*

*A god needs you.*

*A chained god. A slave god.*

*Time will come and you must free him,*

*The same way that you have freed your Nissa's riverkin.*

"How do you free a chained god?" the Valyrian asked.

There was nothing but a labyrinth of mysteries in the death god's pronouncements. The verses of her poesy were both vague and evil:
Infinite realm-forms, seven facets of the Self.

Body, soul, will, memories, realities, purpose…

Substance.

Live, die, live, die.

In the end—your mortal shell.

In the end—you and that god.

In the end—a coming together.

Who are you?

"Jaqen H'ghar."

The death god hissed angrily, encircled him once more.

Jaqen is dead!

She ceased moving and drifted in front of him, pressed her face against his.

Who are you?

He understood nothing of the death god's demands. His response came with certitude, nonetheless.

"No One."

The dragonlords of Valyria who still lived half a millennium after the Second Spice War and those ten thousand ships branded Aenar Targaryen the greatest of all cowards. It was roughly a century before the blood of dragon conquerors when the Targaryen lord sold all of his holdings in the Long Summer and in the Freehold. "A cockless exile, that's who Aenar is," the members of the Conclave had said. "To flee from the Mother's bosoms because of a maiden's dragon dream? Targaryens are damn superstitious. Let them go—we have enough firebeasts than we would ever need; and it's the year of slave-breeding anyway, no conquests for the next twelve moons."

Hence, the Conclave did not object. A citadel had been established west of the Narrow Sea in Dragonstone, as the lords of Blackwater Bay had finally stopped resisting. Aenar Targaryen took with him five dragons, one being Balerion which would later be called the Black Dread, though imperial dragons dwarfed it in size in fact, and in abilities in flight and combat. With him were Daenys the Dreamer and Gaemon the Glorious. Three days after Aenar had set sail, the Velaryons and the Celtigars rowed their ships from Valyria to Dragonmont.

Valar Morghulis was how they said it in Old Valyria—all men must die. And thus, it was proven true twelve years after the maiden had revealed her dragon dreams to her Targaryen lord-father. From the topmost cloisters of their castle in Dragonstone, they saw how that string of fourteen volcanoes west of Tyria had devoured the Freehold from lands to remote straits, sending molten rocks a thousand feet up in the air, causing great tides to engulf the east and the Isle of Cedars that lay close. Lords and slaves, even dragons were said to have perished during that Doom.

Still, the causes of it were unknown. Did the lords perchance dig too deep such that they have
touched upon the seventh hell? Was it the curse of Garin of Chroyane who was conquered yet unconquered during the Second Spice? Or the wrath of R'hlloer because of the lords' unsanctioned genocidal acts using firebeasts?

Was it spurred by a phalanx of fire mages assassinating slaves and lords alike with the promise of death as gift, so Valyria may fall—its material existence, its memories?

"A present from the Elder mage before we departed, father," Gaemon had told Aenar three nights after the Doom. He unsheathed the Valyrian steel from its scabbard. "A firesword—Blackfyre, he calls it. He said it was forged originally for the Archon-heir from the greathouse Esdraelon, but the heir refused to wield it. It came with another sword for Daenys—the one with the slender blade."

"Akhrast L’ris?" Aenar paused from his usual musings and sat upright asudden. He placed both of his hands on the Painted Table that contained the carved map of Westeros. "The same mage who told me about those dragon dreams, yes?"

"That is he, father."

"He spoke of a throne," Aenar replied, pensive. He may drown himself underneath the convolutions of his own thoughts, yet he knew that the cataclysm he just witnessed, that one which took the lives of his kin, would haunt him till the last of his days. "A throne forged by dragon's breath."

Gaemon chuckled, then examined the patterns of the sword obsessively. The crossguard contained two dragonheads on both sides, and the tip of its handle held a glistening ruby, very much alike those Quellers worn by Archons and their heirs. "The Elder spoke of a lot of things, father, and bless him for doing so. I have persuaded him to sail with us here, yet he rejected my offer. I thought he planned to return to the Shadowlands, yet he remained in the Freehold and now…" the Targaryen lad shook his head, and slowly darted his eyes east where the Doom still ruled through flame and ash over the ruins. "And now, he may have perished with the rest of them."

"Show me the sword," Aenar ordered, and Gaemon promptly handed it to him. With his long fingers, he assayed the steel, the abstract patterns upon the blade, the resilience of it, the magic within. "This is not just any sword." He concluded. "This sword was forged and tempered for over a hundred days."

"Infused with rune, perhaps?" the lad asked.

"For sure, it is." He attempted to balance the sword on his palm through its crossguard and grip. "I see fire in this sword, blood—"

"A Warrior's sword, he named it," Gaemon cut him. "Why do you think would he give it to us, Targaryens? If this was created for the heir, then it should have been passed on to whoever the ruling clan in the Freehold is, and that was House Archestrad."

Aenar Targaryen heaved a sigh, eyes still fixated upon Blackfyre's glistening fuller. He ran his forefinger across its quillons of dragonheads. "Only the gods know what that Elder mage was thinking."

Five full years since he had been in that memory last, but Bran Stark could still smell the moistness of near-winter drizzle and the soft kiss of cold he had known all his young life. The weirwood's blood-red leaves and sap have their distinct scent, though a little subtle in that autumn's season. He had just departed from Maester Luwin's turret—cluttered as in its usual state, with parchments and writing
implements on this oaken table and that. Done he was with sums and letters for the day under the maester's instructions. His feet...he remembered his feet itching that day, and so he took off his boots to scratch his bare soles, but the scratching did not help one bit.

Eddard was then on his mount, with Robb and Uncle Benjen behind. The Baratheon king needed to be accompanied in his usual sport, as if beasts were plentiful and the North was the most prime place for hunting. Ned saw him, smiled. He recalled grinning back before his direwolf began tugging at the low of his breeches, snarling a little impatiently. "Come on, then," he had told the pup—he still hasn't named him yet, none of the name he tried to give it seemed to fit.

*The crows*, he thought. *Might be that they are starving now.* His father had caught him sleeping on the tallest tree by the grove many days back, and was amused that he had managed to climb that high. "Like a raven roosting up on hidden branches," Ned had remarked. "Never let your mother know."

*To King's Landing in a few days*, he spoke to himself with excitation. *On a real horse. Face to face with Ser Barristan the Bold, nigh him whilst he wields and hammers his steel.*

He shouldn't climb, Catelyn and the Maester had warned him about climbing. "See this clay, boy?" Maester Luwin had told him before hurling the clay with force against the wall. It smashed to ugly pieces. "Falling can do that to you. You will never fall; unless you insist on climbing and acting as if you could fly." *I'm not a clay boy though*, he countered. *And I never fall.* Old Nan had told him about one child who was struck by lightning at the highest turret, and his eyes eaten by crows. *Crows don't seem to be interested in eating my eyes,* he had told the old woman.

The direwolf was howling, but it was still too young and its voice so soft-pitched that Bran was sure that no soul would hear its protestations. The crows always awaited him by the Broken Tower close to the parapets, and it was easier to scale that part because of the jutted stones upon the walls for the feet and the hands. The stones were slippery, and there was moss too, but he had wiped his palms against the fabric of his tunic.

He remembered being so close to the First Keep.

The pup continued to howl.

Voices.

'*... and Robert treats him like a brother. A Stark as hand?*

'*Better than Robert's brothers or the Littlefinger, love...'*

'*... and Lysa Arryn might know.*'

'*She might, but where's the proof?*

The events that had transpired were far from merciful. He was young then, but he had seen them—the queen and his brother, wrestling, nude. They saw him, and so they paused awhile with their lewd acts. The queen's words were a blur, clashing its sonances against the yelps of the direwolf below the keep. The brother had queried him of his age. "Seven," Bran had told him.

Seconds later, he felt himself descending...and he recalled praying for wings, or for the wind to break his fall.

Those words rang over and over and over in his ears.
Things…I…do…for…love…

The fall had crippled him.

It wasn't Jaime Lannister's doing.

There was a warning—a message that had invaded his consciousness even as he closed it from outside significances. The source of the message was Bran Stark, suspended in the notion of time, and though he understood not a thing of the mechanisms of it for he was then young, he had to act based on the wisdom of his own self.

He had wararded into Jaime Lannister, urged him subliminally to push him out of the keep's window.

And now Bran Stark recalled the repercussions of acting upon the forewarnings and presages of his own self located somewhere in the past or the future. The last greenseer knew all along the cataclysms that will be born out of conspiracies of gods and men alike.

Had I not wararded into the queen's brother, had I not been pushed out of the window, I would have been able to walk still. I would have gone with Arya and Sansa to the capital. I would have met Ser Barristan and the kingsguard. I would have been trained in swordfight; I would have ridden horses and become a knight and courted the ladies.

Had I not been crippled by that fall though, I would not have reached the Weirwood.

You will never walk again, the Bloodraven had told him. But you will fly.

There were dragon dreams for those with the blood of dragons—Daenys the dreamer had them, and Daemon, and Daeron. As dreams are, the visions are riddled with complexities and endless metaphors, but most of them do transpire in time forthcoming. Only after the dreams have permeated the realm of the real do men believe.

Bran possessed the blood of the old gods, and he was wiser. Dreams are a whole realm. A dream is a glimpse of other hidden realms West of Westeros. Moons ago, the Bloodraven had asked him to look beyond the curtains of light. It was a terrified cry that came from his lips. Heart of Winter and Darkness. Some realms have already been wiped out by the reemergence of the Long Night. Mistakes cannot be repeated in realms still surviving, even with the notion of cycles, even as the god of death is slowly wiping out the turfs she could get her hands on. Bran had lived for eight thousand years, had witnessed it all as it came and went—the breathing undead and the horrid conspiracy, the genocide of men, a new race that will be created—creatures of the night.

And so, he had built the Wall. And so, he had built Winterfell.

The Great Other's aim is to rule all existing realms. The prophecies were twisted—this is not the red god's battle against the unnamed. The war is between men and preternatural forces, between mortals and those they perceive to be immortal. The last greenseer looked into all the realms through the heart of the weirwood, and saw him in all names and states—Azor Ahai, Neferion, the Shadowchaser, the Champion, the Warrior, failing to preserve the realms in the reemergence of the second winter. In these spheres, all men had died as they must.

Men must not keep on dying.

Time past and time forthcoming are places, and the Bloodraven had told him that one cannot change the former. However, if time is in a state of disarray then the best course is to change the past of the future, and that is the now.
'For men, time is a river. We are trapped in its flow, hurtling from past to present, always in the same direction. The lives of trees are different. They root and grow and die in one place, and that river does not move them. The oak is the acorn, the acorn is the oak. And the weirwood ... a thousand human years are a moment to a weirwood, and through such gates you and I may gaze into the past.'

And so, he had to be pushed and be crippled by that fall; all things had to happen as they did—the enmity between the Starks and the Lannisters that went beyond Jon Arryn's death, Eddard's execution, the War of the Five Kings.

Catelyn's death, Robb's.

Jon's.

The burning of Winterfell by the invading Ironborns, the 'death' of the northern greathouse Stark.

*I could only set the precursor, I cannot control the paths the antecedents would take though I knew it would come to those, and I told no one. Even the wisest cannot see all ends.*

*Arya.*

The subject of all these is Arya Stark. She had to be separated from the rest of the Wolves for a time, draft a path of her own. There may be some virtue existing somewhere in the minds of those other gods who are allies to men, because the subject of one hero prophecy a thousand years ago—the one she had renamed lāqaen—had spanned the limitations of turfs and chronologies, chose to situate himself in that particular realm so he could find one soul lost to him in eons forgotten. The Doom had obliterated all traces of him and of his dragonkin, and so he had lived the life of false identities and annihilated selves.

*The Nissa is the Mother, through her the universe is created.*

Jaqen H'ghar—repudiator of the prophecy of the Warrior of Light during the days of Valyria and Rhoyne. He chose to spare his Nissa Nissa, and to find her too, by slaughtering what was left of his human self over and again, re-entering the cycles of rebirth and infinite deaths.

But she is not mere prophecy, no man can create a Nissa out of a woman, just as no one can create the Moon out of dust, or the River Rhoyne out of tears. The Nissa is independent of any prophecy, independent of the existence of the Azor Ahai, or whatever damnable name the Ashaii, the Yi Tish, or the Patrimony of Hyrkoon may give him. She cannot be led to the process of 'becoming'; she already 'is'.

As she had birthed dragons from her womb, it is the Nissa that creates the Warrior of Light, not the other way around.

The capacity to create life from within her womb is what sets the Nissa apart from the goddess of death.

*Āria Stārke, Nāyhēria hen Rhoyne, Nissa.*

*She is who she is.*

Bran Stark slowly released his tight grip of the roots of the weirwood. Consciousness had returned to its lucid state, and Valyria had disappeared from the convoluted spans of his mindwork. The heart of the weirwood was a place of warmth and assurance, even with its grotesque guise of protrusions and asymmetry. Murky smell pervaded the place, and many a thing had happened here though not in
actuality—visions of the past and the forthcoming, some with grace and most with woe.

"Where is she in your third sight, greenseer?" the Bloodraven asked him.

Bran looked at him and smiled.

"Sailing home."

Her lips and tongue were still against his, even at the completion of that sweet remembrance of their days a millennium past. Arya sat astride Jaqen, and he was still inside her; she never allowed him to leave her womb, for that is his place—within her and through her. Her movements were in slow waltzes coinciding with gentle showers of rain, and she felt the wholeness of him against her quivering walls, sensed the warmth of his man-seed still pouring out within the core of her. Seed never runs dry, Arya thought. Jaqen's seed, even after his dissolution within me, he still has so much left to give.

"Oh, Jaqen H'ghar," Arya said in between kisses. Her movements were now in ripples and vacillations both, one with him, one; and no mortal and immortal soul can put them asunder now, she was convinced. The powers of the universe and the realms within its membranes are simply not strong enough. "You should have just told me, when your dragon dreams came back after the sacred confluence and the fray of realms, in the Sweetwater River where we fell—you gave me the Queller and spoke to me about the origins of Essoan, the tongue; and our lore, too! How could I have been so narrow as to have missed it?" She carried on with her movements like mad, forced him in and out of her though she was still bleeding a little. Jaqen's sex was still in arousal, even as he had climaxed inside her once or twice. She revealed at the sound of his sharp gasps as she tensed her inner walls around for him, just so the smallest of space that separated them within could cease to exist. "The goddess pool, my preparation for womanhood. Your witnessing of the ritual like one lover god—all those pointed to me, to us," She kissed him on the side of the lips and paused with her movements for she suddenly felt pity for him. Jaqen was shuddering under her, as if unable to contain who she is, as if she was a majestic amassment of powers and rune that threatened to consume him to the last iota of his being; though she was just Arya—his Arya.

"I love you, gods," he spoke in the midst of quivers that sent him to near-fatality. "I…I could not tell you a thing. We had to find ourselves, who we are and where we are in time. And the creation of the Nissa—my specific memory of that was wiped out of my system entirely. We...ah!" Arya had started moving again, pushing him to the edge of cruel surrender. His body was failing him—she was too strong, too compelling. "...had to recapture the intricacies of that thousand-year plot. The Elder is working on his ploys again...Arya, please...gods!" Wind had abandoned him, and under her ministrations he had been reduced to nothing but a collection of abstractions—rapture and weakness, love and awe.

Jaqen held her hips firmly, ordered her though in the absence of words to cease with her movements; but she was too willful, too rebellious, she would not be Arya if she wasn't all of those things. Jaqen's otherworldly moans stirred the petals of the Zefarisse. His woman, his wife was possessing him completely and was leaving not the tiniest speck of his own self to him. He climaxed, again and again and she was laughing softly at his powerlessness, not out of mockery but out of delight and fascination. She loves him...she wanted to be his source of mirth every second.

Arya tilted her head to look at Jaqen, pressed both palms on his naked, rain-soaked chest. His wild breathing had calmed, but soft shudders continued to enslave him still. "I can recall it all now, Jaqen. A hundred ships sank in the first sea storm, some went back out of fear of the waters. They were
distrustful of Mother Rhoyne even after she had fed them all from her bosoms for countless moons. It was the Basilisk Isles which we found first; the rulers attacked us, sent forty ships on fire; said they will allow us to settle in one of the isles in exchange for thirty virgin girls and boys every twelfth moon."

"Merciless, Valyrian-spawned minds," Jaqen said. He buried his face in between her bosoms. "You sailed away from Basilisk Point, did you find any dwelling before Dorne?"

"Zamettar and Yeen," she replied, stroking his hairlocks. "Abandoned colonies, with fruits and pelt and gold. The Rhoynar couldn't handle the sweltering heat and the flies—they have toiled in the mines and had suffered for it, you cannot expect them to suffer more. Illnesses too, green fever, blood boils; waters were infested. It was a whole year, but we had to leave," she held Jaqen's face, led his mouth to her right breast. He licked and suckled, obedient. Arya gripped his hairlocks tight, drew strength from the act. "Three years—there was the Isle of Butterflies, the…the Isle of Women, poor conditions in the Summer Isles. The soil would not bless us with crops. We had to try again, there was no other way. Until we landed near the River Greenblood, what remained of us did, at least. Ah…you're so good, Jaqen…"

Jaqen paused with his suckles and sighed, embittered. "Thus, the romance with Mors Martell," he shook his head. "There was a part in you that somehow whispered of my death? And true it was, I was slaughtered. But a Martell then, and a Martell now—only that the Martell now is half-Targaryen."

"You know that I did what I had to do for the Rhoynar, some choices are forced upon us. And I cannot marry Aegon the Sixth, Jaqen," Arya declared. "I cannot and I do not wish to. I am married to you, and you never died. How can I abandon the blood of my blood? How can I betray you when you have given up so much for my sake?" She kissed him, smiled. "I gave birth to Damien during the first year at sea, Jaqen. You should have seen him, his hair of silver. Of course, he looked quite like you."

The Lorathi smirked. "My son looked damned good then?"

She ignored his arrogance, ran her fingers through his hair, kissed him deep. "Oh, he was the loveliest thing in the world. All the while I thought I've reached completion because of you, I just…I never thought I still had that empty part until Damien came along. I used to look at him in slumbers and laughter, I witnessed him walk his first steps on the shipdecks cradled here and there, and he would never fall, Jaqen. It's almost as if..." she gazed at the heavens, and drops of rain and soft petals fell upon her face. "Almost as if he can fly."

"His father was a dragonrider and his mother, a skinchanger. How can he not know how to fly?"

"Iāqaen, adar, jorrāelagon," Arya said, grinning. "His first words. Jaqen, father, love."

The Lorathi laughed richly. "I should have been there with you both! There are just lots of things I could have taught him—High Valyrian, the lore, dragons," he stroked Arya's cheeks. "Us."

"We are in a loop, Jaqen H'ghar," Arya whispered in a manner seductive. "A time paradox where everything is a cycle unless we choose to break away from its shackles. Bran and that three-eyed raven made me understand time, or at least some mechanics of it—no one could fully grasp it after all. Remember during the Unmasking, when you told me about your Lorathi descent?"

"What about it?" Jaqen asked, her tone enkindling his passions once more. He reached for her left breast and cupped it, stroked and squeezed it gently. "I told you truth and truth only, Arya. Though I could not understand it, I am a descendant of Damien's blood, as Damien is a descendant of my
"How?" Arya supplied the query for him. Her breathing had changed with his fondling, like desultory gusts of wind. She looked down to their then uncoupled selves and saw his seed mingled with her maiden's blood, like art devoid of figure but full of purpose, nonetheless. "I had to conceal our son's identity as a dragonrider's bastard—very well, a dragonrider's legitimate son. He's heir to Valyria, because you were heir to it through your Esdraelon lineage. To protect him, I had to dye his hair scarlet, you ransomed him through your own blood after all; and I had to leave some of his ivory locks un-hued so a trace of you could still be present in him. He carried the name H'ghar, and in the event of my death as was writ, he left Dorne and settled in Lorath. Thus, began his genealogy, of you being born in Damien's blood after a thousand years—cyclic existence, love. Over and over you have killed yourself in various realms, so you had to start over as well. It traces back to Damien, and Damien traces back to me, Nymeria, and to you, Haresh renamed. I am your Nissa, Jaqen. Your wife, yet you came from my womb. I am the Moon, and I kissed you, the Sun. I cracked from your heat and so from my vessel poured forth the blood of dragons."

The Lorathi smiled.

_The Woman is the beginning, everything that breathes, even those that do not—woven by and interwoven in her body, her divine rune._

_Maiden, Mother, Crone._

_Feminine force behind all nature and life._

_A mortal goddess, creator._

"So that goes to say," Jaqen teased. "That Aegon the Sixth came from your womb as well, a thousand years or so before?"

Arya giggled. "Through Nymeria and Mors Martell, yes."

"Time is mad."

"Madness is the most appropriate response at times. I pity those who do not go mad—over a canticle, or a beloved, or a child. What wretched lives they must have."

"Then, as what the Elder used to say—let me go mad, be mad," Jaqen kissed her, then gazed at her face with fondness. "The Songs, Arya. The lost leaves of the Songs spoke of the Nissa two hundred years after the Doom. She will aid the Warrior but she has to..." he shook his head vehemently, cupped her cheeks. "Sacrifice means nothing, men should not be prisoners to prophecies. The death god granted me life so I may save you from all these—you are the inverse of the goddess who calls herself the Great Other, albeit her parallel. You live, she lives; you die, she dies. The deity is a most rapacious deceiver. She desires that the Nissa dies not in the Warrior's hands, but in hers," Jaqen's voice broke a little. "I...should not have bargained with her, I know. But how in this universe and in another could I ever find you again had I not accepted her offer? Still, it's all a riddle to me, I recall nothing of what the bargain is."

"Damn her," Arya replied calmly, stroking Jaqen's hair so he may possess in him some quietude as well. "When I murdered Sabine with my own hands, she had veiled me from Death. It is beneath me now, thanks to her and to you. Only the death god can force demise upon me should she wish, but I will not go down without a grand fight, Jaqen." She ravaged his lips with so much love and want. "The Warrior of Light from the days of Valyria and Rhoyn may have been beguiled by the Great Other, and so he chose to submit to her; but that is because he was too possessed by his Nissa, yes?
She never owned you, Jaqen. You have been mine—in various turfs and time, love."

The Lorathi planted feathery kisses upon the side of her mouth, her nose, her temple. *Naked brilliance*, he thought. *Stars die and become dwarves in the midnight, yet she will live on and on and on*. All of a sudden, his countenance of sweet reverie was replaced with a severe one. "And you have been mine, Arya. I have lost you in various realms and countless of times I have died because of it. I am done with killing myself; now I will call death on anyone who wishes to undo everything."

"No one will steal me away—"


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*And it is the mortal goddess that gave form to the story of the Man, the hero.*

In Aegon the Sixth's dreams were perpetual statics of celestial catastrophes.

It had been countless of days since those visions had started besieging him, and they pursued him still relentlessly; they all seemed to be portrayals of a magical fallout of comets and suns and moons. There were scattered fragments of those visions even during hours of his wakefulness, but in the recesses of his mind, he knew that those blights had heavily embedded significances and that they spoke of one thing: origin of dragons and wights.

"Dragon is the time," he recalled Arianne Martell's words. "It has no beginning and ending—it chases its tail, so what happens in time goes around again."

If so, the Targaryen conquest must triumph like in the age of Aegon I and his sister wives; and it will. Now is the time of dragons. All sigils must bend the knee to fire and blood, to the firebeast thrice-headed, red on black.

*Fire and blood, indeed—the shierak qiya, the dragonbinder, the firesword, the Valyrian queller's rune.*

Still, there was more to this. In his dreams, Aegon the Sixth had seen himself in Arya Stark's bedside, and she was giving birth to their child. The Moon was full that night, but its light was waning significantly every time Arya breathes, as if its light was dependent upon the Wolf-girl's inner workings. There was the voice of the maester urging her to take strength and birth the babe into the world. She suffered and toiled and screamed, until the sound of the babe's cry rang like a thousand carillons in that chamber.

Aegon the Sixth saw himself cradling the babe—his cause of happiness. He beheld it with eyes welling up and saw that the babe's face was aglow; and that auroral mien overwhelmed him with awe. With his fingertips, he touched the babe's skin that was wrapped in layers of its own fur and silver scales. *Blood of my blood*, he heard himself saying. *My song of ice and fire.*

It was a million fragments that flew in all spaces and directions when Aegon looked down upon Arya. Her body had exploded, and so had her soul, but not before her cry of anguish had left a rift on the full moon's face. He watched as smithereens of her ebbed away, evanesced into unseen realms.

Aegon the Sixth's eyes cruised to the babe in his arms, and realized that it was not a child he was holding at all.
It was a flaming sword.

Blackfyre.

He shook his head to rid himself of those unwanted phantasms, ran his fingers through his locks of silver.

He was back in Illyrio's manse, in one of the upper balconies, with morning's repast served, and had some talks with the eunuch and the emissary named Daario Naharis regarding the proceedings of the conquest during the breaking of fast. It is common knowledge now that Jon Connington is infected with greyscale—wise too, to warn men about such condition of the Hand lest they find themselves rubbing elbows with him and inflicting themselves with the disease. Though Aegeus Ioanannu's wife had managed to cook up some healing potion that would slow down the plague's effect, the infected part still remained cracked and flaking. Sabine had promised the Prince a more efficacious cure, and had given the halfmaester a list of elements she would need for the concoction. Half of the integrants in the list can either be retrieved from the Great Moraq or the Marahi—a whole moon of travel to obtain those ingredients is time they do not have in their hands at the moment.

The Lannister envoy had sent a message from Daenerys Targaryen as well—conquest will proceed from Bronze Gate to Stone Dance close to the Blackwater in two moons. The condition: Aegon must bring with him his ships and soldiery, his drafted battleplans and those of his legion commanders, and genuine relics that would prove his legitimacy as Targaryen; though he was aware that the latter was intended for mere formalities. The Targaryen Queen had apparently admitted to the fact that she possessed shared ownership of those three dragons with Aegon the Sixth Targaryen, dragonkin of hers, son of Rhaegar.

Stannis Baratheon is now close to Raventree Hall. It is a battle tactic too, Aegon thought, to take advantage of the enemy's harvested victories, sackings, and waylayings, then proceed when opposing forces have weakened themselves significantly. He is a proudful man, this heir of the Usurper, and he would rather see himself slaughtered by Lannister forces than bend the knee to the Targaryen conquerors and rightfuls. The Baratheon sent a message to Tyrion Lannister—a response to the latter's claims and demands: 'Let those dragons come to me so I could stab their eyes with my own sword; and I am not speaking merely of the beasts.'

Rightful heirship to the throne is still a matter Daenerys and Aegon the Sixth must discuss with each other.

The conquest seemed all-inconsequential for him at that moment, however. He needed to see Arya and tell her about all those frightful nights of his, about how he's been losing against those fitful, disquieting nightmares, how he's been losing her too. She was last seen last night with the Lorathi by the hill, he recalled, and the thought lessened his worries. He trusted Jaqen H'ghar, curiously.

Perchance, half of the success of his conquest of lands close to Cape Wrath may be attributed to the halfmaester's seemingly accurate interpretations of his dreams; he had always been precise with his readings. "Dark fantasies, your grace," the halfmaester had told him earlier that morning. "A reflection of your deepest wants. Quite apparent—you wish for your heir to be birthed by that direwolf. Prior to the spawning of your scion needless to say, you desire for the coupling of your dragon's blood with hers."

He remembered himself blushing at Haldon's words. Sex? The Prince thought. With Arya?

Don't be a fool. You cannot have heirs without having sex.

He did not wish to disclose the other dimensions of his dreamscapes to anyone—they were his
vulnerabilities, and nay he cannot be vulnerable in the face of conquest. Not a manly or kingly thing too, to speak of deep-seated affections and obsessions. Yes, he had dreamed of taking Arya Stark's body over and again till the first blush of dawn, and staying with her on the featherbed the entire day even after countless raptures caused by her unorthodox charm the night prior. Yes, he desired even in his hours of restlessness, even in his brief moments with her, to run his tongue across every inch of her Northern princess-body, discover those dunes and caverns and taste her skin of snow. And yes, in his sleepless peaks of eventide he would always succumb to those dark fantasies the halfmaester had spoken of—darker fantasies even, of burying himself deep within her and ramming himself forcefully against her till he hears nothing but the sounds of her enraptured moans. Yes, Aegon the Sixth had prayed to the gods for him to be blessed with at least a nightfall of enchantments with Arya Stark, so he could fill and bathe her with his Targaryen seed.

An insistent fear would beleaguer him in the midst of those delusions, and that frightfulness was born out of guilt.

In every capsheaf of their sweet exchange, he would always see himself plunging his ancestral sword deep into her heart, purest of pure.

The halfmaester's next words had hammered him. "And for some reason, you wish for her to...die in your hands; though of course, I may be wrong about all these. Layers of context and semantics, a single allusion of a dream may speak of ten thousand meanings. Might be that it merely signifies the direwolf's sigil surrendering to the dragon's reign, nothing more."

No. The halfmaester had never been wrong in his deciphering. But why in the world would he even desire to kill the woman he had learned to love?

_Truly, I must speak with her. Those dreams, they might be someone else's invading mine. We both have become hosts of souls. This cannot carry on._

Aegon the Sixth was now fully aware of Arya's inclinations towards the Lorathi, and though it did so much as shatter his heart, he still kept his marriage proposal on the table—her choices may change, her emotions too. One thing he had learned: no one can force the Lady Arya to a course of action unless the Starks and the North are at stake, and this filial devotion is both her strength and weakness. Aegon the Sixth is far from being merciless and a fool; and right now, he cared not about Tyrion Lannister's forthcoming criticisms, for the Prince was not one to waste away the connection he had labored to form with that Stark girl. Should he force Arya to a marriage for the damned sake of securing the seat of the North, then he may truly gain the North and its sworn houses, but lose her. Most of the time, their friendship felt so much akin to running in aimless circles and falling over cliffs and drowning in sands and seas but these had never mattered to him, as long as their fingertips would touch in their wayfaring; just...as long as she's there.

Better all these aimless drifting than none of Arya at all.

He was roused asudden from his musings by a wrathful voice from below the manse.

"Aegon!"

He sighed, as he stood to survey the courtyard though he knew the source of the call.

"Aegon!"

It was Jaqen H'ghar.

The Lorathi was pacing, raging eyes directed towards the pillared mezzanine where Aegon the Sixth
was. The Prince looked at him calmly, albeit he clicked his tongue with resentment at the Lorathi's display that would no doubt turn itself into another holy mess.

"Come down and let's talk, Aegon the Sixth," the Lorathi called to him in between his teeth.

All of a sudden, eight guards had gathered around Jaqen H'ghar, with some unsheathing their swords from their scabbards, and some flexing their limbs for what may be an unpleasant encounter. "What would you have us do with the pretty redhead, your grace?" a hulk of a man, Ser Franklyn Flowers asked Aegon, in the middle of his assessment of his broadsword. "Get you some laurels by cutting some of them wavy locks, or a memento of his head on one of Mopatis's crystal platters?"

The Prince raised his right hand to signal that they lowered their weapons. All of them obeyed the unspoken command except for Flowers. "You too, Ser," Aegon the Sixth spoke to the sworn knight directly. "Nothing but colloquy, this one; I can assure you." He struggled to pacify himself as he descended from the balcony to the tiled courtyard. "Jaqen H'ghar," came his greetings. "To the function chambers if you please—proper venue for all and every discussion."

"We will speak here," the Lorathi demanded. "We might need witnesses to your damnable treachery, your secret dealings with the House of Black and White."

With his usual august mannerisms, he tilted his head to the side, confusion apparent in his visage. "Treachery? What accursed child's sport is this again, Jaqen H'ghar? Brawls do seem to amuse you a whole damned lot," Aegon's tone had turned malicious, provoking. "It's almost as if you will die without a good day's dogfight. Ah! But what can anyone expect from Valyrian slavers?"

Disorientation settled in the brows of those eight gathered.

The Lorathi's lip tipped up in a sardonic smile, though he still regarded the Prince with pure antipathy. "Valyrian slaver's blood runs in your princely veins, may I just remind you of that truth? You can scour yourself clean till your pores bleed black and dye your hair with roses and violets but you're Valyrian, Aegon. You are no better than those lords of Old, as am I. Dare you not act righteous in front of your kingsguards now. Spill the truth of your perfidy."

"Jaqen! Aegon!" It was Arya. She was running furiously towards them. These damnable men! When the hell are they going to stop with all their nonsense?! She spoke in a stern tone upon reaching them. "Inside the manse, right now. This is no place for your disputations!"

The commotion may have caught the attention of others, for more people gathered by the courtyard—three servants, and Sabine who was shaking her head in both alarm and utter frustration.

"I have made that sensible suggestion earlier, Lady Arya," Aegon the Sixth said, as he kept his eyes locked on the Lorathi's face. "But the Valyrian here refused. He might have plans beyond the usual conversation, it seems. The function room is carpeted and heavily-draped—it is hardly the perfect place for a bloody skirmish."

"Aegon! Oh, gods!" Arya screamed at him. "I'm going to kill you both!"

The Lorathi scoffed. "Might be wise, Arya Stark, before Aegon the Sixth here draws his ancestral sword and slay you before you could unsheathe your own poisoned skeans."

"Jaqen! He wasn't himself, I have told you about this!" Arya looked around frantically for any signs of Aegeus or Daario. Sabine came rushing to her aid.

"Your grace," Ser Franklyn called to the Prince, as if asking for permission to deal demise on the Lorathi. "This is clear treason, matters not if he is Essosi or...otherwise. The Free Cities have
pledged fealty to House Targaryen and its rightful claim to the Crownlands and its tributary kingdoms. Unless the alliance is effaced, these acts and words are downright unacceptable."

"No, Ser," Aegon folded his arms across his chest, allowed his eyes to cruise from north to south of the Lorathi. "Let him speak—this man is most excellent with conspiracy theories and senseless paranoia. Please, Jaqen H'ghar," he gestured for the Lorathi to continue. "What of this treachery, if you will?

Jaqen walked closer to Aegon, his face a few inches away from the Prince's. "That you have spoken with Nestoris and the House Elder of the Order, that you have planned all along to propose marriage to the Lady Arya not merely to obtain the North's seat and have her birth you some heirs," the Lorathi's next words were delivered in a softer, albeit more enraged, more derisive tone. "But to forge through her your legendary sword and act like one damnable crazy-savior to your crumbling seven kingdoms. You bastard."

It was as if boulders had pummeled his chest at the Lorathi's pronouncements. How could Jaqen H'ghar have known about those dreams? Explications would be futile now as it appears, for no one would believe his helplessness in the face of those dreams that seemed to have been implanted deep into his subconscious by forces unknown. They have unlocked the secrecy of his midnight-hallucinations even before he could understand a thing of it.

Aegon kept his mouth shut and ignored Ser Franklyn's prompts. He needed to speak with Arya.

"Jaqen," Sabine walked to them both, stayed within a safe distance. "These are assumptions. We must deal with all these in objective light; internal matters as far as the House of Black and White is concerned." Her eyes cruised to the eight swords that were then preparing themselves should riot arise, and spoke in Rhoynar. "The forces in the Order might be behind all these and you know it."

Jaqen ignored Sabine's implorations. "In your honor as Targaryen and as king; swear that this isn't true," he urged Aegon in a whisper. It is simple to put the blame on the Elder and the Masters, but it is improbable that Aegon knew nothing about the schemes. He was in Braavos during the Unmasking, this could have been a product of his Targaryen-based obsession towards prophecies—a trait he had inherited from his father, the great fool.

On the other hand, how can the Prince admit to or disavow the truth of something he does not have full knowledge about?

"I have mentioned before that I am far from being great, Jaqen H'ghar," the Prince replied. He nodded to one of the swords who threw him one Dome-forged Martell sunspear. Dexterously, he caught it with his right hand, ignored the aggravated protests from both Arya and Sabine. One of the servants had the better sense to call for the two other emissaries. "I took these words from Tyrion Lannister: to govern the self is to govern others. However, at this precise moment, I have no wish to be a gracious king—not when you are accusing me of treachery against the Lady Arya when it is you who's been receiving late night visits from one Valyrian dragonrider by the east bay of Pentos."

"Breach of faith!" exclaimed one of the swords, gaining agreement of the others. An ugly interfusion of hoots and jeers pervaded the whole courtyard. Even the wintry air smelled of metallic sangria, of bad omens and keening ravens.

"All will stay where they are, this fight is ours," was Aegon's stern command. His once purple eyes were now bloodshot, his almost-bursting fury was nothing but palpable.

"Damn you both! You senseless creatures! Is this the alliance you were so keen on building?!" Arya screamed frantically, and started drawing her own skeans in a throwing stance. Sabine signaled for
Arya to put them down. "You might hurt them both in a fatal way, Arya. There's no stopping them," the woman said. "Where the hell are Aegeus and Daario?" Sabine ran asudden to the manse to summon the two others.

Reveling at the looming fray, the Lorathi smirked and unsheathed the longsword attached to his hip. He threw the scabbard to the ground. "You are truly witless to pray for you own downfall this early, Aegon the Sixth."

Aegon shrugged, as they began encircling each other. "Maybe I am," he said, wielding the sunspear in graceful, gyrating motions. In his mind, he recalled what Oberyn Martell used to say about duels between spears and swords: 'Dance around the foe till your dynamics exhaust him, then thrust the spear on his back. There are no real rules in a fight, saved for winning.' Yes, he will remain with that piece of advice, carry it with him. One thing though, he reminded himself. *I will keep my mouth shut in the middle of the fight if I want to keep my eyes and skull intact.*

Arya gasped at the sudden darkness within Aegon's thoughts. *He is intent on killing Jaqen...he would only kill himself.* "Aegon, I order you to stop! Jaqen, please!" she marched resolutely to the two imbeciles, but strong hands of Ser Franklyn held her arms firmly. "Let me go, Ser," Arya commanded him.

"Pardon, my Lady of Stark," he replied. "Merely pulling you away from danger, following orders, too. These men will have it to death, you would not want to be in the middle of it."

The hulk-man's hands were unyielding. "If you do not allow me to go and stop them, your silver-haired king will die!"

"I beg to differ. It's the pretty redhead who will."

Both eyes of them darted to the two combatants at the first sound of clashing metals.

The Prince advanced smoothly towards the Assassin, jabbed him with his spear's pointed tip after a series of spiral wields. The Lorathi blocked the assault with the edge of his longsword—flashing with the rays, as he performed some labyrinthine twists in order to disarm the Prince in the first three seconds of the fight.


The sunspear flew to the air.

Aegon slid past the Lorathi, spun and retrieved the spear by its longhandle as it plummeted back from its highest point. With precise velocity, he hurled the spear towards Jaqen in a straight horizontal.

It sliced through space towards its target, rotating, increasing its momentum.

With controlled downward rhythm, Jaqen's sword hacked the sunspear into two parts, sending one half to the ground and the other half flying in helixes to the fount.

One of the swords threw Aegon a second sunspear. The two men walked around each other, intimidating the other one of their adroitness, their artistry. The Prince carried on with his elaborate mazes of motion with his sunspear, while Jaqen wielded his longsword in pirouettes east to west.

"Yield now and confess," Jaqen's tone was grim, yet a provoking sneer was upon his visage. "I do not wish to soil my hands with dragon's blood today."
Aegon chuckled. "Are we going to talk or fight, Jaqen H'ghar? Mind you, I prefer deeds over words."

"Then do," Jaqen hissed, sarcastic. "Your fighting style is boring me to death. Had you made it clear at the start that all you wanted was child's play, I could have allowed you to keep your first spear quite a bit longer."

"Forget the first spear," Aegon said, a tinge of arrogance already evident in his speech. "I was merely testing your defenses. I found them…very flawed."

At this, the Prince began performing a series of thrusts and darts. The Lorathi evaded them, slashed at the metal tip with his sword, sending the spear in rotating stirs. Jaqen's sword lanced in just above the Prince's shoulder, cutting a few inches of his silken shift. Aegon was quick and parried a second attack, wielded the sunspear like dragon's tongue flickering in and out, attempting to pierce through the Lorathi's sides, limbs, chest. Aegon's spear never landed on skin and flesh, but neither did Jaqen's sword.

It was a caterwaul of metal against metal.

From pillar to post they moved across the expanse of that courtyard, and their feet seemed to both be gifted with wings as they fleeted and breezed past each other. Jaqen's lunges were in various angles—precise, calculated advances and strikes, almost absolute and algorithmic. Aegon's assaults were well-cadenced and balletic, as if regal elegance is a thing necessary even in combat. Scintillations were created by colliding steels, as stannic sonances inundated that once still garden of cherries.

_Scheming, demonic Prince_, the Lorathi spoke to himself as he proceeded with his attacks. _Marriage and murder go hand in hand for you. No honor; no honor at all._

_I should not have brought Arya here; should have voiced out my firm disapproval to the Elder right from the beginning._

The Lorathi's next blows had become twice as solid and forceful, intensified by his prior thoughts about the Prince's hidden intents, as his suspicions would dictate.

Iron-sounding clangs, frictions, statics, velocious forces. Assails and evasions had become imperceptible at the rate of hammers and thrusts the Prince and the Assassin were dealing each other. The almost endless episodes of strikes and charges had served as amusement for the men, and the combatants had no intentions of yielding.

_How could I have succumbed to his mad provocations?_ Aegon cursed himself. _I should have acted according to better judgment. This fight will yield naught—will only add insult to the dissension we already have._

_How to practice restraint? If I did not challenge him to a duel, he would be convinced of his wrong assumptions._

_I do not want Arya killed._

_I...love her._

A whole blitzkrieg of sword attacks came from Jaqen, but Aegon eluded these through quick movements and counters. It was all rush and raid, and the witnesses feasted on the sight.

Suddenly, Aegon hissed—Jaqen's sword had lanced through his right arm. Blood trickled from his skin in small amounts, but he carried on with his charges, ignoring the Lorathi's smirking face.
Arya clenched her teeth, for she knew better than what the visuals of the combat were presenting her. *Jaqen, you arrogant beast. You're merely toying with Aegon the Sixth! Lorathi bastard!*

They proceeded with their duel, oblivious of the cheers and roars from the sworn swords, of Arya's frantic screams of "Stop!", of the drops of rich scarlet that had bathed the tiled courtyard, of the shouts coming from three others who had rushed to end their mindless tussle.

Jaqen had wounded Aegon, but they carried on with their onslaught. As if the act itself of proving who the better man is, was the only honorable thing.

Jarring, ear-splitting sounds of sword against sword and sword against metal spearhead placed that clash of steels in an abrupt change of course. Two other men had joined the melee, hell-bent on driving the two combatants away from one another.

Aegeus locked Aegon the Sixth's spearhead on the ground with the tips of his two longswords, as Daario delivered counterblows to Jaqen's still enraged assaults. "Enough, Jaqen! Enough!" the Stormcrow bellowed, before delivering a sequence of sword blasts head on with the Lorathi's weapon in order to disarm him. The Lorathi was as good as he is in swordwork—the steel remained with him, as Daario struggled to deal him with controlled attacks.

Jaqen's stares at the Stormcrow were murderous. "Step away, Daario! Stop being a babysitter to your Targaryen lover's nephew!"

It was as if poisoned darts plunged themselves deep in the Stormcrow's chest at his brother's derisive words. He roared with whelming fury, hammered his steel against the Lorathi with all the might he could muster. "I said ENOUGH!" Daario yelled. A few more lunges, and strength had escaped from the Stormcrow asudden. Weakly, he dropped his longsword to the tiled ground and pulled Jaqen's nape, rested his temple against the Lorathi's, recited the vows of the Order's unbreakable brotherhood in Ancient Rhoynar. "Enough, Jaqen," Daario whispered. "Brother mine…"

Unless in the face of irrevocable betrayal, the connection amongst Faceless Men must not falter.

It must not remain a poet's dream—true brotherhood that would transcend the dictates of the Order, of the House of Black and White where they were raised and fed and clothed. Men may scour the realms and still they will not find a perfect family, for fathers and mothers will have their fools and sages, saints and sinners. No shared connection between and amongst men—faceless or not—must be rendered too faultless to not be shaken by the throes of cruel life.

It is in the imperfection that the essence of needing someone becomes an unequivocal truth.

Most of the time, covenants are never honored. There was no blood that would bind them with each other, only memories and dreams—mutual ones: sad, hopeful, true.

"Brother…brother…” Daario's whispers continued, akin to desperate beseeching. "Brother…”

"The Order, brother," Jaqen whispered back in Rhoynar, his eyes shut, his voice broken and despairing. "The Masters, the Elder. All of them…they want Arya killed. The matter with Braavos—the Order needed her against the lords, but the whole treacherous plan of those Masters go beyond that. Tell me, brother…had it been Daenerys, would you not have listened to your instinct to protect her? Forget the codes, would you not forsake everything, take up the gauntlets and wage war for her sake? What greater love is there but that? Daario…”

For Daario Naharis, the answer is simple.

*I will do whatever is humanly possible to protect the ones I love.*
The Stormcrow nodded against the Lorathi's forehead, stroked his hairlocks gently in order to still him. "I will do more. I will burn that damnable temple and everyone in it," Daario declared. "But Jaqen, Aegon is not the enemy here. Those dragonlords, those undead—they are the true foes. If this be the game of thrones of those who are higher and we are the pawns, this is exactly what they would wish to happen—that we turn against each other and forget why the hell we are here in this particular realm."

Aegeus and Ser Franklyn assisted the bleeding Prince inside the manse, with Sabine behind them to tend to his lacerations. Arya stayed with Jaqen and Daario, her heart breaking at their attempts to keep even a shred of what they have believed to be true in the tenets of the Faceless Men alive. She blamed herself, the accursed prophecies in the Songs of the Faceless that spoke of its Chosen Child. She cursed the death god and all other gods for having brought this upon them. *Brotherhood of men under the parenthood of the gods?* Arya thought to herself. *There are gods that care and gods that do not. We must be one another's keeper—all men must serve each other.*

"Arya…"

"I know, brother," Daario said. "We will all proceed inside the manse, and work out the game plan before we proceed to Westeros—the conquest, Valyria, Winter, Stygai. We are not gods, Jaqen. Still, unless old age or unforeseen catastrophe would claim us in this realm, then I daresay no man must die."

"Dreams."

"And what are the contents of these dreams?"

They were all settled around the grand table in Illyrio's function hall. Sabine was sitting on Aegon's right, asking questions so she may access the Prince's repressed recollections and those planted perhaps by someone with whom he had spent much time for three moons.

Aegon the Sixth left nothing hidden. In all honesty he answered Sabine's questions, and the master did not even have to use a single drop of truth potion on the Prince. Of course, they could tell if he was lying—a mere twitch of the lip or a flicker of the eye would sell one out. They were assassins, and the game of pretense is their craft.

"There was no way to stop those dreams, and many times I have tried and failed to evade sleep just so those dreams would not come," he told Sabine while rubbing both hands across his face. "The subjects of the earlier ones were Rhaegar and Lyanna, yet they were in our forms—Arya's and mine. I… I could not quite understand how their remembrances could enter ours, how they could even communicate through us."

"Memory manipulation," Aegeus spoke to Sabine in Rhoynar. The latter nodded. "Soul hosting, too. The Elder could have sent Hud for the task," he turned to Arya. "Your plague-faced master is one of the gifted ones, Stark."

"He could have worn the face of your half-maester, for all we know," Daario offered. "Or the face of one of your most trusted."

Jaqen was clenching his fist and teeth, and if not for Arya's hand that held and calmed him, he could have once more unsheathed his longsword and carried on with hacking Aegon the Sixth into pieces. He knew he was acting irrationally; the more Sabine queried, the more the Lorathi realized that the
Prince was a victim like Arya is, like the rest of them are.

It could have been simpler for the Lorathi had Aegon known about the conspiracy from the very beginning. Without remorse, Jaqen H'ghar could exact sweet revenge and excise him from the whole picture. Despite Arya's resolute declaration that he cannot marry the Prince, the Lorathi assassin was aware of how strong her link is with Aegon—Nymeria's blood is inevitably in him; and in her false memories, they were married in the Isle of Faces and even had a child.

"Memories are malleable, Aegon," Sabine said. "They can be written and rewritten. There are potions that do the work, of course—and you may not notice it in what you eat or take in, in what you smell. In your deepest level of dream state, someone may have been with you in the dream realm—there are gifted men that could traverse turfs after all. He may have invaded your subconscious, conditioned you to forget certain memories and retain others. In your case and Arya's, it may have been Rhaegar and Lyanna's recollections that were seeded within you both."

Aegon shook his head, scoffed bitterly. "Why would they even do such a thing to us? To what end, pray tell?"

"That is what we are trying to discover," Jaqen replied. "Apparently, you have some important role to play in the prophetic mindset of one twisted order of priests."

Sabine threw Jaqen a murderous stare, the latter merely shrugged his shoulders. They could not tell what they do know: that Aegon the Sixth from the blood of dragon conquerors that survived in the Doom fit the Elder's framework of the Prince that was Promised. It was a condition arranged and rearranged even before the cataclysm, and how very fortuitous that Arya Stark re-entered her cycles in the same era—the Elder may be more persuaded now than ever that the Warrior and the Nissa were indeed destined to meet in this age.

"Can the memories be ablated?" Aegon the Sixth asked Sabine, but his eyes were upon Arya Stark. He knew that erasing Rhaegar's recollections of Lyanna would affect his connection with Arya Stark significantly; the link between them may disintegrate even, in such process. However, he cannot continue being a threat to her.

"Yes," was Sabine's thrifty answer.

"Then, please do it," Aegon sighed, turning his attention to the woman. "And after all these are done, set sail and bring Arya to Westeros. I..." he exhaled once more. "I want her safe from those conspirators. I want her safe from me."

Arya smiled as she beheld the Prince. "You are no peril to me, Aegon the Sixth. Do not think of yourself that way, please. This was something that had happened beyond our control."

The Prince's lip tipped up, his expression was melancholic. "Forgive me, Princess." *For falling for you this hard and this deep*, he thought, then brushed the persistent voice aside. *In moons forthcoming, I promise, we will meet again. Not as hosts to departed souls, I can assure you—but as you and me.* He smiled and took every feature of her in, locked them in the depths of his cherished remembrances. "For now, you must leave. Go, Arya Stark. Rebuild the North, retake your ancestral seat, deal justice to those that have wronged your family. Go," he said. "My loyalty is still yours, and I will come when you call."

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the delayed update guys. Hope you like this chapter. Thanks for the comments and kudos! Feedback helps a lot with the writing. Westeros after this. :D
"I'd give anything to hear you say it one more time
That the universe was made just to be seen by my eyes..."

_Nissa, in the eyes of the Warrior_ 

_Best Sansa-Tyrion fanvid, from Ivana Cincur_

'It _when the red star bleeds and the darkness gathers, Azor Ahai shall be born again amidst smoke and salt to wake dragons out of stone._'

_Melisandre to Jon Snow, A Song of Ice and Fire_

It did not take long for Sweetrobin Arryn to fall into slumber after a short reading of the Winged Knight. He had grown so accustomed to not taking Sweetsleep; and the Lord Protector's bastard was to be thanked largely for the little lord's recovery. "Less seizures now. The essence is fatal if taken in higher doses, and he is but a child," Maester Colemon had told Baelish's bastard daughter two nights after the tourney at the Eyrie. "Your lullabies and stories did the lot, though the little lord still complains of his usual maimed Marillion and…" the maester paused.

"Carry on, please," the bastard daughter urged him.

"Voices. From a three eyed-raven residing in a Weirwood," the maester said, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "The voice seems to be sending him messages, ones he did not wish to disclose even to me. Enchantments that lie within Weirwoods are myths, of course. You will be surprised with the little lord, my lady. Mere boy, yes. Excellent mindwork, though—memory, grasp of novel learning. Just…the fits. We do get tired, but his health is on the mend most assuredly."

Alayne Stone thanked the maester. The latter departed for the night.

She had already ordered the old man to stop using Sweetsleep to tend to the boy's convulsions. "Keep it between us. Never tell a soul, especially the Lord Baelish," were her words before the maester's retirement. "We must explore…possible recourses. The little lord will recuperate even without the draught."

Softly, she closed the door, recited her usual chant to calm herself. _I was porcelain and ivory. Now, I am steel._

When thresholds are shut tight and spectators' eyes were nowhere near, Alayne Stone fades away from one side of the heavy drapes and reemerges from the other side as the oldest daughter of the North's liege lord, Eddard—Sansa Stark.
Sansa held her skirt as she walked to the now slumbering little lord. By his bedside she sat, and stroked the child's hair of brown while humming one melodious Vale-berceuse. *Sleep, young lord,* she spoke to him for she was sure that even in the distant dream-realm where his consciousness lay, he would still be able to hear her. *Sleep awhile, wait till home is nigh.*

Those words were not entirely for the reposed Robert 'Sweetrobin' Arryn, though, but for another boy whose face Sansa barely remembered, though he had been a sojourner to many of her dreams in the recent moons.

*Bran.*

On matters of power and endless games, Sansa was mentored by two of the most twisted minds in Westeros—a devious brothelkeeper turned Master of Coin turned Lord Paramount of the expansive east and protector of the greathouse Arryn of the Eyrie; and a depraved, ruthless queen-gone-mad who calls herself great lioness, now seated on the Iron Throne.

*A woman's life is nine parts mess and one part magic*—these disillusioning words of Cersei Lannister held truth for her, what with Sansa's misplaced quixotic madness over the queen's monster of a son in the morbid past, her horrors of losing her kin and the greathouse that carried her patronym, her fate of being married off to this noble heir and that, her being declared treasonist for a murder she knew nothing about.

*Always keep your foes confused,* the Littlefinger would always tell her. *If you cannot fight them, then fuck them. And clean hands, Sansa. Whatever you do, make sure that your hands are clean.*

Wash the filth off, keep your enemies in the fog.

*How do you confound an enemy that is as sly as you are?* Sansa thought to herself.

For Joffrey, it could have been damn simple: kill them.

"*Ah, but death is far too extreme,*" Tyrion Lannister had told her once. *"Fear of death however…"*

"*And how should we punish those who are laughing at us, our marriage? Lord Eldrick Sarsfield and Lord Desmond Crakehall?*" she remembered asking him during that long walk in the estate's hothouse.

*Tyrion was pensive, she had recalled. His lip tipped up before he spoke. "I could speak to Lord Varys and learn about their perversions. Anyone named Crakehall must be a pervert."*

*That rich laughter was still within her reminiscences—it was the only true one she has had ever since Lord Eddard's execution, her family's ruin. Good humor does cure a multitude of ills, laughter being the soul's wine. She whispered conspiratorially at the Imp. "Or we could put sheep dung on his bed. Arya used to do that when she's angry with me."

"*Lady Sansa!*" Tyrion had said in mock admonition, clicking his tongue. *"You are evil."

"*Well, you asked me!*" she had replied, to which he chuckled.

Laughter is poison to fear.

Sansa Stark shook her head to get rid of those unwelcome thoughts.

She had unraveled much. First—the Littlefinger has been poisoning Sweetrobin Arryn through Sweetsleep so that in the event of death of the Vale's heir apparent, the heir presumptive Harrold of
House Hardyng could take over. Sweetrobin is a frail boy, albeit an astute one. "I hate that Harry," the boy would always tell Sansa. "He calls me cousin but he's just waiting for me to die so he can take the Eyrie." Sansa used to laugh at the young lord's elaborate conspiracy theories yet all circumstances seemed to point to it all. The Littlefinger had planned her betrothal to Harrold Hardyng but needless to say, the latter was not impressed one bit with the idea of being wed to the Lord Protector's bastard. In fact, he felt insulted.

_Curious._ Sansa thought. Harrold had called her bastard daughter in front of three Waynwoods when he had arrived at the Eyrie, yet the night of the gathering, he had asked her to dance with him, requested that he wore her favor during the tourney. Sansa had expressed her refusal—coy, manipulative. "I will be the only spice you will need," she had told the handsome heir as she ran her finger down his cheek. "But I am promised to another."

*The Littlefinger must have told Harry the Heir that I am a Stark; explains the change in behavior, his sudden obsession.*

She clenched her teeth in repressed fury.

_Petyr wants both the Eyrie through Alayne Stone—legitimized bastard daughter, and Winterfell through Sansa Stark._

Second—Stannis Baratheon had legitimized Jon, given him the Stark name and installed him as liege lord to Winterfell. The earlier declaration of naming the heir as King of the North was nullified.

With Bran and Rickon presumably slaughtered by the Ironborns, Robb Stark had named Jon Snow heir to the seat of the North in the last of his will. Stannis carried out the will delivered to him by Lord Glover and Lady Mormont whose houses had feigned support to the now defeated Boltons. They had knelt to support Stannis's claim after clarifying that Davos Seaworth was not executed, but was rather sent to Skagos to retrieve the youngest Stark son.

She wanted to be in Winterfell, _needed_ to be in Winterfell. She was strongest within its walls.

And though she should feel deceived in line with the arrangements made in the North, considering that Bran and Rickon may still be breathing somewhere, she felt relieved. Jon and she had never been particularly close, yet she knew how very devoted Robb was to him; and may the dead forgive her, there were times when she saw more of Eddard in Jon than in Robb. Winterfell is his home—it is theirs. He would never let it fall a second time.

For moons, she thought that he was the only brother left to her. Oh, it would be so nice to him again. Bran, Rickon, too—if ever they are truly alive. Arya…

*I'm a bastard now, just like Jon,* Sansa thought.

"Ignore those who laugh. You are a Lannister," she had told Tyrion. "I, on the other hand, am the disgraced daughter of the traitor Ned Stark."

"You, the disgraced daughter and I, the demon monkey," he replied, then japed. "Ah, then we are perfect for each other."

She had received conflicting tidings these moons past about Jon—that he was relieved of his duties from the Night's Watch, that he had died, and was resurrected. Sansa would have laughed, slapped her knee at such tidings. She had been a devout believer of the gods, and in her limited eruditions of them she was assured that no god can wake men from death.

Or so she thought.
She had recently learned the third—Catelyn Stark lives.

A mysterious message was sent to her through the hands of Lord Yohn Royce, member of the Lords Declarant opposed to the Littlefinger being seated as Protector of the Vale. Royce had spoken with her three nights prior to the tourney. "Pardon me, Sansa of House Stark. Oh, yes, my lady," he had said. "I am one of those few who are aware of who you are. You are here under circumstances beyond your control and you know it." The lord handed her a scrolled message. "From Ser Brynden Tully of the Riverlands. Might be best if you read the contents behind bolted doors."

She had rushed to her own chamber and unscrolled the message in haste. He knew the Blackfish only through his short visit to the North many years back, and he was one of the few who had escaped from the massacre at the Twins. She skimmed through the message. "…Edmure's wedding…sacked the greathouse Tully—now with Emmon Frey…siege of Raventree by the Lannisters…Lady Catelyn and myself in Hag's Mire, band of outlaws…as soon as possible, from the Eyrie to the Sevenstreams…"

Her dear mother is alive, had survived the massacre somehow though the particulars of the whole thing were still unclear to her. Why must they matter? Sansa scolded herself. She must proceed to the Mire at once, learn of the truth. Sweetrobin's condition, Petyr and the Hardyg's schemes must be revealed to the Lords Declarant; and she would ask them for aid too, for her to be escorted to the outskirts of the Forks. Petyr rode to the capital and will not return for a whole moon.

Sansa Stark stood, planted a soft kiss upon Sweetrobin's forehead. The window north of his bedstead allowed moon's light to pass through, and Sweetrobin loved the Moon. She adjusted the drapes, made sure that the luminescence that bathed his face was just the right amount.

The queen might learn of all these—telling have wings swifter than white ravens, and she has eyes and ears even in the murkiest of caverns. The North was broken, and it must remain so.

 Fuck the queen, Sansa thought.

The Starks—she would gather them all and proceed to the North.

If they must rebuild, they would need allies. The Knights of the Vale could come anytime to her aid, but the extent of their loyalty is a thing limited—they cannot be persuaded to leave the greathouse whilst the young lord is ill, and her conscience would never allow her to persuade them otherwise. Not to mention that what she is hatching may be seen as a treasonous act, something the Lords Declarant would never participate in.

The Northmen, vassals.

Stannis Baratheon? He has his own battles to fight. One Aegon the Sixth had taken Storm's End—a nigh-impregnable stronghold, and Stannis's ancestral seat.

Sansa knew naught about battles, much less their purpose apart from having to seat someone's arse on some useless chair in the capital. Eddard's death had been because of his decision to declare for Stannis, and Sansa asked herself if the Baratheon claimant could really take back Storm's End.

Stannis won back Winterfell largely through the Northern houses that bent the knee, but he lost in the Blackwater. Tyrion led the assault at the bay with only half the original six thousand—the wildfire, that mouth of hell weakened Stannis's forces at the start of war. Tyrion orchestrated the ambush through the Tyrell alliance, planned for Tywin Lannister's arrival on the northern side—

Tyrion.
"…the exiled Lannister Imp, marching across Griffin's under the dragon's banner, they say," Sansa had overheard Lord Horton Redfort during the gathering a night prior to the tourney. His face was flushed, inebriated with Dornish and spitting the words out at Ser Symond. "I heard he's in Dragonstone now, with one other Targaryen claimant—Danira, Darynes, I don't know. If only Tywin could see how his damned children are faring after his death, he would no doubt rise from his own crypts, behead that half-man and those lecherous twins of his. If the dragons be true, then we are all looking at another sigil in the Crownlands—best bend the knee than get scorched, if you ask me. The Vale has women and children, and too many wars have been fought."

Tyrion—rallying behind Aegon the Sixth Targaryen with a whole army of twenty-five thousand strong, turning his back from his own kin who wanted nothing but to see his head on a spike.

Sansa Stark closed the door gently behind her.

*A Lannister always pays his debts.*

*And I am married to one.*

Quiet as a shadow, she walked to her own chambers. She could always ask Mya Stone about the ravens.

*I need a quill…some parchments…*

"Why not place the dead in the crypts?"

"Winter breathes life to the dead, boy. You have been told about the Walkers north of the Wall?"

"By Old Nan, yes. Why…why burn them?"

"Same reason—we don't want them reanimated, do we? What good would these corpses be if they're not burnt? When the longest winter thaws, direwolves would need meat. You have to cook meat. Makes sense too, they must get used to the taste of the dead. The wolves would be battling against breathing corpses not long from now."

The Stark boy of nine stroked the fur of his direwolf he had named Shaggydog, watched as three other wolves feasted on the charred flesh of two Skagosi dead. Both have died of illness; and since Winter's pangs are sharper, more ruthless this time around, even folks from the dreaded island who were used to the cold cannot battle against their own weakened bodies. It was almost as if the illness plaguing the clan was brought by forces unseen.

"Best head back, boy," Alret Magnar of the Kingshouse patted the boy's shoulder and rose. "Soup, wild horse's meat, lemon cakes tonight."

"Unicorn's meat, you mean?"

Alret Magnar roared out in laughter. "For speculative folks living outside Skagos, unicorn's meat, yes. If by the will of the old gods you get to return to Winterfell, do tell the mainland Northerners you've managed to taste some, and that the horned horses have wings," the man winked at him. "Let them carry on with their thoughts that Skagos is nothing but an island of mystery."

Rickon smiled. "I might stay outside for a bit. I like the cold."

The man directed his eyes towards the sunset, nodded. "Keep that direwolf of yours close, then." He descended from the narrow parapet walk and headed inside the keep.
"It might be true," Rickon Stark heard himself respond to the fleeting message. "This is an island of wargs."

The Skagosi are not cannibals, nor are they untamed barbarians born out of half-giants, living in mountains and feeding on the raw, bloodied flesh of beasts and men alike. They are not cursed children of the First Men, unlike what the tales of Old Nan would say, unlike the prevailing impression the other Northern folks may have about them. The maester during Osric Stark’s time as lord commander of the Night’s Watch wrote the Skagosi, portrayed them as the vilest, most grotesque of all people, and Skagos, an island of monsters. It was farthest from truth, as far as young Rickon could tell.

*Maester Luwin would not have asked Osha to bring me here, had he believed that the Skagosi were savages.*

What more is, the Starks in the matrilineal side have some kin residing in the island. Houses Crowl, Magnar, and Stane of Driftwood Hall are still sworn to the Starks. At first, they mistrusted the contents of the scrolled message in Osha’s hand, from Maester Luwin’s own writing, and thought it to be a ruse from the Boltons. The gods were good—Shaggydog had started attacking one of the armed men who held Rickon by the collar, but the boy was quick to penetrate into the direwolf’s consciousness in order to calm him.

"A warg…" Leuric Crowl had said after seeing the boy's gentle tremors and the white sclera that came with it. "A Stark warg."

The warg clans of Skagos that intermarried with the Flints, lineage of Ned Stark’s mother, had trained Rickon Stark for twelve full moons. His hold on his own direwolf was still unstable when he arrived in the island—he was around seven years of age, then. However, the seeds of the gift were already present, and so the remaining thing that must be done is to teach the boy the discipline over the force—when to enter and leave the being’s conscious intellection, how to rule the creature’s will from one’s own mindwork, the ethics.

"Never mate with another wolf," Ryon Stane, a lad of four and ten had told Rickon. The boy asked him what exactly he meant by 'mating'. Osha interjected.

"Meaning, do not go anywhere near a female wolf." Rickon saw the Stane lad roll his eyes at Osha's explications.

"Magic, Rickon thought. *This one I understand.*

And he was all the more convinced with rune’s existence a moon ago, when he touched the face of one Weirwood.

A vanishing span of memories rushed to him—Winterfell…the Wall…beyond the Wall…the Starks…

*Bran.*
Rickon doesn't know what is happening, he heard Robb tell Catelyn many, many moons back.

"I do know," Rickon muttered to himself. "I know that Winter has come, and three of the Wolves are dead, never to come back. I know about the wights."

And Jon Snow.

"He's not dead," he persuaded himself.

An urgent voice pierced through his thoughts. "Lord Rickon!" It was Ryon. "My lord, you are summoned inside by Lord Alret."

"I am not hungry," the boy replied.

"For sure, my lord," Ryon nodded, rested both hands on his knees, still panting. He straightened up. "Someone from the mainlands. Says he was sent by the Manderlys to retrieve you; he even showed us Wyman Manderly's..." Ryon snorted, as if amused by what follows. "...ancestral trident. I thought it was funny, but the lords didn't laugh one bit. Three landed knights of White Harbor are with him, and a marcher vassal."

Rickon wanted to tell Ryon that the Manderlys' house sigil is that of a white merman with a black trident, which explains the ancestral heirloom, but all other thoughts were drowned by sudden excitation. Who may have come for me? Jon? Theon? I will order Shaggydog to tear the man to pieces if he's Theon.

He arrived in the great hall, and was greeted by the vassal lords of Kingshouse and Driftwood Hall. With them was a man of brown hair and eyes, and beard peppered with gray. He wore a simple brown, and green wool mantle; and the fingerjoints of his left hand seemed to have been severed.

The man bowed to him in deference and spoke, "Young lord, Rickon of House Stark. My name is Davos Seaworth, Lord of the Rainwood, and Hand of the rightful king of the Seven Kingdoms, Stannis Baratheon. I am here to retrieve you and take you back to Winterfell..."

"Ghost."

For three days and nights, he had roamed beyond the Wall within the direwolf's body after being stabbed in a mutiny led by Bowen Marsh, the lord steward. Aimless, fleeting like purposeless desert dust, like snow that will melt as soon as spring arrives with its lukewarmth—all these. I am nothing, the bastard thought. As I have been. The words still danced around his mind like mad swirls of throe, and felt his body being emptied of flowing scarlet in every painful thrust. For the watch...for the watch...for the watch...

Stop! Every corpuscle of him had screamed, but on and on the acts of virulence went—without cease, relentless and unforgiving.

In the point of near-oblivion, Jon Snow almost thought of taking over the body of another man—one black brother—in order to continue living through another human host. "Once a horse is broken to the saddle, any man can mount him. The joining works both ways, warg," were Varamyr's words prior to his demise. Jon knew not the extent of his capacities, but he knew that taking over the mortal shell of another breathing human for the sake of senseless continuance, or that of serving a noble yet impermanent purpose, was a violation of the ethics of warging.

No one has the right to rule over the will of another man. We must not be slaves to our brothers.
And what is the use of continuance?

Never had he done it prior to that fateful night—not with his direwolf, much less with ravens and shadowcats and winter bears. With Ghost, it was nothing but an act of faith, a whole leap with eyes blindfolded. The bond between wolf and master is that of an unbreakable marriage as they say—no man can truly tame a wolf unless he and that wolf are one.

It was a painful process, transcending turfs, entering a warped realm so misshapen and nefarious, with constitutions so complex and so different from the material. Humans have souls, animals have spirits; and if one man would seek to preserve himself by filling the host with all that he is—histories and dreams, with his fears and dauntlessness, revealed virtues and concealed faults all—then he must drive out the animation that used to reside that body, prior to him entering it. The battle between noumena and secret selves is utter torment; for as one tries to cast out the other, the other would always resist and seek to dispel the one that sought to seize it.

It was, plain and simple, usurpation of the other creature's volition, desire, character.

Wrong yet to an end that is right. All men must die, but where is justice in death if the fate of dying was forced upon you?

What truly is the use of continuance?

Had he not warged into his direwolf, his soul would have drifted off to two places that both contained horrors inconceivable—Winter and Darkness. A most beautiful god sat waiting at hood's path, where there was nothing but coldness and a state worse than perishing.

But there were other realms too, and he had caught a dissipating sight of them.

In those realms, none of these had happened yet; none of these had happened at all. In those realms, the choices that he had made were wrong, so he never died.

He recalled entering one of the Weirwood caverns beyond the Wall, and saw a face with a thousand and one eyes who is able to transform his visage at every turn of the second; and within his body that had become part of the Weirwood's roots were impressions of gaunt gray wolves and a carrion of ravens.

He is a seer like us, Jon. The voice of a boy said. He is all creatures and none. He dreams and holds the realms in his mind. He knows time is a place, and death may well be an illusion.

Ghost growled, recognized the owner of the voice who was standing just behind him.

Bran.

Words resounded in that cavern underneath the Weirwood, though the boy's mouth remained closed. He smiled softly. You must return and rebuild, Stark.

Winterfell belongs to the old gods, Jon replied, and felt heavy rocks within Ghost's faithful heart. Starks have their blood, but I am not a true Stark, I cannot save it.

Bran spoke—a response to him. The stone is strong, the roots of the trees go deep. The great kings sit on their thrones beneath the crypts. Winterfell is not dead—it is only broken.

Thereupon, visions upon visions overwhelmed him like a surge of snowstorm, but one of those he held dear to his heart: a younger Eddard praying in the godswood. "...let them grow up close as brothers, with only love between them, and let my lady wife find it in her heart to forgive. He has the
blood of both wolf and dragon; and he is of my blood."

_Warrior of Light. The Promised._ Bran had named him, and he remembered drifting away from the boy turned great raven…returning to the other side of the Wall though not through his own will. In his distant reminiscences, there was fire in the midst of snow—his body was being burned, for it had been three days and Winter can wake the dead. Through another's eyes he saw the red priestess, Lady Selyse and Shireen, Dolorous Edd, Alys Karstark and her husband the Sigorn of Thenn, the wildling princess Val, Mully, Tormund Giantsbane, all gathered around his corpse.

The fire had died down, yet he still bled. The wildling princess rushed to his body unburnt, held his face with both of her hands. _My Lord Crow?_ He had heard her call.

Or perchance, it was only through the direwolf's eyes that he could see, and through the direwolf's ears that he could hear.

But is it also through the direwolf's beating heart that he could feel?

Val's voice as she spoke to the still dead Jon was not hers, but Ygritte's.

_You're mine. Mine, as I'm yours. And if we die, we die. All men must die, Jon Snow. But first we'll live._

A tear fell down his right cheek.

Afterwards, he gasped his first breath.

Jon Snow had died, but had lived once more through salt and smoke.

Now, he stood in the middle of the Starks' great hall that still reeked of scalped corpses. _A naked man has few secrets, a flayed man, none—words that will never be spoken in the North again._ With nothing but a hired company of sellswords and a few wildling clans of questionable loyalty, Stannis Baratheon had managed to defeat the Bolton army of six thousand strong—two thousand cavalrymen and four thousand in the infantry, despite the latter's pincer battle maneuvers and shield phalanxes. Jon fought with him on the side, his fear of death and dying vanishing in each slash and stab and outcry, relentless in his intents of purging Winterfell of vassal despots, reavers and rapers. The snow was deep on the paths of Deepwood Motte leading to Winterfell, and winter was the harshest all of them had ever encountered. Two-thirds of Stannis' men died in battle, as half of the men were not used to fighting in the cold. The aftermath—extinction of House Bolton, imprisonment and planned execution of four-hundred and fifty Karstark men and Umbers of the same number, if not for the pleas of Lord Mors.

In his recollections was the exchange with Stannis prior to the latter riding south.

"I would honor Robb Stark's decision of naming you as heir to the seat of the North, _legitimizing_ you as a Stark," Stannis had told him. He had settled himself on the lord's chair where the eldest Stark used to sit. "Eddard was an honorable man, so am I. You Northerners may keep your faiths to your gods of old, but know that the lord of light had led us all to this victory and summoned you back from the curtains. Robb Stark had declared himself King in the North before, and should you wish, you may style yourself as one—mere titleship, no lawful claim. Styled king or liege lord though, you will swear fealty to the Iron Throne, recite the same vows Eddard Stark did when Robert Baratheon was king."

"Should you not wait till you have assembled an army of sufficient number, your grace?" Jon had asked him, ignoring the rest of Stannis's pronouncements. Voices rang outside but he tried to ignore
all, especially the stench of scarlet mixed with carcasses dragged out in the snow. The outer ward leading to the eastern gate had a pyre set up at the center where casualties will be burned. There were others beyond the shut portcullis—some dead bodies from Houses Ryswell and Locke. "You do know that the mountain clans cannot ride south, the Wulls and the Flints might be more of a liability with their wounded. The Boltons have wiped out a good number of the Glovers, and the seat would need the Lord Wyman and Lady Maege since we have Ironborn hostages, one of them a claimant—"

"Twenty thousand more sellswords in the harbor by the Fingers half a moon's ride from now—I've made my instructions clear to Massey, worry not. I will ride south within the fortnight, leave the Queen Selyse and Princess Shireen here. Ah!" he twice-tapped the great table, recalling something of importance. "Eddison Tollet, appointed lord commander of the Night's Watch as your…death had relieved you of your duties. Demise and the lord of light dealt with you well—you can inherit lands now, have heirs. Bowen Marsh and his companions have all been executed, but concerns regarding the wildlings persist. You," the King's eyes bore into his, as his fingers toyed with one of the wooden battle markers. "You will settle the disputes, and the course to such is an easy one—marry."

Jon smiled softly—Stannis had a way of making complications appear damned simple.

Marry.

Marry the wildling princess—Val, who rode as if she had been born on horseback. A warrior, unlike those maidens who wait atop towers with their hair unbound, waiting for knights to rescue them.

A warrior princess.

Jon smiled.

So much, so much like…

Arya...

"The easiest course, not that it ever truly solved anything," Jon's smile was suddenly with deep melancholy. "The conflicts are never gone, the bad blood—they're still there even after our children's children are birthed, just pushed under the throw rugs."

"That is true," Stannis said, suddenly contemplative. I held Storm's End and starved, got nothing from my own brother. All thanks he had given to Ned Stark for lifting the siege. He has not forgiven Robert, not fully. Death cannot change things. Marriage cannot change things. "However, such deed could pacify the Watch, the Northerners. Their high regard for the fallen Eddard is undisputed, so it mattered little if you were mere bastard—the heir apparent declared you no different from the trueborns before the carnage at the Freys. That, they can never contest. My declaration that the will be carried out was for mere formality's sake. Most of the lords are still blind to truths. Common enemies, boy—demons made out ice. The wildlings must not be forced back beyond the Wall."

An armed guard announced one messenger's arrival from Stannis's infantry. "Ravens have arrived, your grace." He handed that secured parchment to Stannis and departed as soon as he had arrived.

His eyes darted from left to right of the parchment, his forehead creasing heavily by the second. "Suspicions from Justin Massey's informants were confirmed—Daenerys Targaryen at the seat of Baratheons in Dragonstone, and an Aegon the Sixth Targaryen at ancestral Storm's End. Ironborn Fleet last sighted at Dragonstone—what is this?! An overturn of Robert's Rebellion and a repeat of the Greyjoys?!" In rage, he scrunched the paper and hurled it onto the hearth. "And dragons?!" He began pacing throughout the chamber. "Those Targaryen claimants will make me look like one great fool—reconquering the North, then losing the very foothold of the Baratheons in the south so close
to the Crownlands. *Bend the knee,* they are demanding. Damn it…"

A single thing imprinted itself upon Jon Snow's mind that precise moment.

*Dragons.*

"Is it true, your grace?" he had asked. "The return of the lords of Valyria?"

The king stared at Jon for a second's fraction, scoffed. "I have laid eyes on those creatures of winter, Stark; thanks to you," he replied. "Those demons shattered every ounce of disbelief I might still have underneath my very skin. If things like them could exist in this world, then dragons must, too. You spoke of the Night King—the commander of the undead. The realms have their mysteries, and I daresay the return of those dragonlords from god-knows-where is not entirely impossible. We have believed in worse."

"Bran the Shipwright," Jon began, voicing out his skepticism. "He traveled West of Westeros, was never heard of again."

"Precisely. Something higher exists in that place. Eight thousand years, boy. Who would ever think that those White Walkers were not spooky characters in some maester's fiction?" Stannis retorted. "Wights, dragons, rune, gods—all of these coexist, concur. Unless those lords express any interest in Westeros though, they are the least of our concernments. A battle, a victory each day."

Jon only nodded in understanding. "Whereto, your grace, after gathering your twenty thousand by the Fingers? Samwell Tarly is in the Citadel, time is not with us." His right hand formed a fist. *Would never hurt to advise.* "Dragonglass, Valyrian blades, we need all these. They say that the swords are spellforged through ancient rune and dragonfire—"

"You are sharper than I thought you were," Stannis remarked, studying the hearth that now bore no traces of the parchment. He gave Jon a quick glance, smirked. "Believe me, even before this message confirming the besieging of Storm's End, I have considered that very arrangement. In the face of all these, I have sought to be objective. The red priestess was sure useful with her visions, most of those visions led battles to victories more often than not—the attack against Mance Rayder, the reconquering of Deepwood, this recent battle in front of the grand keeps of Winterfell. I could have won Blackwater too, if not for Tywin Lannister; the man is a god in warfare, I'll give him that."

Jon only smiled at Stannis's recollections. "After the Fingers, Dragonstone then? The Stormlands? Facing those dragonriding Targaryens head-on before facing the Lannisters?"

"No better plan," Stannis replied. "If it is only time you worry about, there are large deposits of dragonglass in Dragonstone. We reclaim the island, we get your obsidian."

Jon nodded. "I know very little about tactics in siege; but I do know that lions chase and dragons breathe fire. The whole South is rallying behind this Aegon the Sixth—Martells, Tyrells; so attempting to reconquer Storm's End at this point may be equal to walking to your own funeral pyre, your grace. Daenerys Targaryen has three dragons as you've said, obtaining that obsidian might be quite a complication at this point," Jon paused, cleared his throat. "I was young then, around nine, when I heard *that* story from my father. He said that it started out as a fact turned to a speculation turned to a myth. I have recently received a message from Samwell; he confirmed that one story."

"Which story?" Stannis queried.

*The wise have said this,* were Eddard Stark's words, in Jon's fond remembrances. *The darkest of nights give birth to the brightest of orbs and stars. The deeper the darkness, the closer the gods are*
to us.

Even the Long Night is a prelude to rebirth.

Thousands of years since it first happened—the longer it took for the cycles to reemerge, the more people dismissed the Night as nothing but lore. The Targaryens settled in Dragonstone twelve years before the Doom because of the visions of one maiden dreamer. Of course, they may have carried with them those ageless Valyrian eruditions—obsidian and steel magic. Valyria will not expand as one great empire if they know naught about the gods and the enchantments within these realms the gods have created.

There were those who claimed that there was something more to Aegon the Conqueror's charge of having the defeated lords surrender their swords to forge the Iron Throne. The surrender of those swords was never symbolic.

It was practical.

"Hah!" Stannis chuckled at Jon's recount. "Practical? Have you ever set eyes on the Iron Throne, boy? Jagged ends of swords, ribbons of twisted steel, barbs along the back. Aegon the Conqueror forged it that way; in his belief, 'kings must never sit comfortably'. Aerys the Mad wounded himself several times by sitting on that damned throne we all rave about so much, and the devil-seat even murdered Maegor the Cruel. Practical?" He motioned for one of the serfs carrying aged ale and two tankards to approach. Stannis gestured Jon to sit, poured his tankard till it was full to the rim. "Far from it."

Jon sat, rubbed the handle of his tankard gently, watched as Stannis half-emptied his. "The highest of thrones are warmed by arses of men—matters not if they are great. Perchance, that throne is not only meant for sitting, your grace."

"What more purpose could it serve, pray tell?"

A thousand blades. Massive, ugly, assymetric. This is the Iron Throne.

The forging took fifty-nine days. Liquid scarlet suffused the steel—blood of hundreds of smiths pierced by those swords. Before a king could sit, he must ascend through the iron steps, a series of twisted steels wrenched from the hands of the defeated. At the summit of it, the seated king could see all, as he is tens of flights higher than everyone else.

The creation of it could not have been possible if not for Balerion the Dread breathing dragonfire to those blades, and if not for ancient Valyrian rune that coalesced with the flames. A score of kings—dragons and usurpers both—had sat on it, tormenting themselves on purpose with its spikes.

Within and upon that throne of swords were fire from dragons and blood of kings.

"Go straight to the point," Stannis spat impatiently. He smacked his lips at the taste of ale. "You still have to attend to some wildling business, pacify the lords. If this is some ploy to advise me against riding out to Dragonstone and the Stormlands, then you are doing a horrible job at persuading me. I like you—see myself in you even, but I am now your King, Stark."

Jon directed his gaze to the large windows of the grand hall that showed the fall of snow in its immaculate resplendence. White ravens, winter has come. Worst of all—winter is supposed to be magnificent, but it only smells of the undead and wrath of the gods. "When I think of how the greatest of men had suffered just so they could crawl to that throne, hold on to the spikes till they bleed as they reach the peak of it, I am amazed beyond words. Wasted lives—my father's and that of
his lady wife's, Robb's." Jon thrice-blinked and heaved a sigh to still himself. "My loyalty had always been to Winterfell, even when I vowed to forsake all for the Watch. I must be unbiased, yet I despise them robed and crowned, standing on the dust of their altars of the Seven. To kill those many lives and to plan to kill more, for the sake of that seat they know not the true purpose of," he turned back to Stannis. "If you give up on the Iron Throne and sit instead on a royal chair of cushion and gemstones, would it make you less of a king?"

Stannis half-choked on his ale, his laughter was almost delirious. The hard, commanding, unbreakable façade evanesced for a second. "The ruler of the Seven Kingdoms sits on the Iron Throne, Stark. It had been that way since the time of dragon conquers. Better a thousand swords against my back than the comforts of feathers and velvet. Baratheons are not Dornish princes that sit under fancy sunshades and wield pretty spears that do nothing but masquerade as weapons. The Iron Throne is the king."

"There will be no king, no kingdom, no realms east and west if that throne is not torn down, your grace," Jon declared. "All of these will be lost if those swords are not taken apart from one another."

Stannis began opening his mouth to counterargue, but thought better.

The Stag fell silent.

Falsehood—that the throne must remain where it was created. Aegon the Conqueror knew about the Long Night, prepared for it three hundred years ago.

"You believe in that myth about the throne, Stark?" Stannis asked quietly.

"Myths are facts the ignorant wanted buried and forgotten, your grace," Jon replied. A sad smile played across his features. "A thousand swords, as you have said. A thousand swords transformed into a seat of power through dragonfire and Valyrian sorcery, through the liquid scarlet that once flowed in the vein of kings. A thousand Valyrian steel swords that could fight Winter, Stannis. All of those swords make up the Iron Throne."

The Baratheon king was no fool. While Lannisters and Greyjoys and Targaryens are planning to either keep the throne, steal it, reclaim it, Stannis knew that the real nemesis of the realm does not bear any greathouse's sigil. The greatest adversary that would eventually take possession of the kingdom and the lives of men and babes in it, is not one made out of flesh and bones. This was why he had instructed Rolland Storm to begin mining obsidian in Dragonstone.

The Night King—a demon who can shatter weapons, cause quakes, raise wights, and mark a person so he could follow him to the ends of the realms, the king thought.

"You sound so much like Davos," Stannis said, pouring himself a full tankard of ale. "Very well, I will heed your advice. Besieging King's Landing is certainly easier than riding South or setting sail to the Stones, not with our forces and those fire-breathing beasts of theirs. Kevan Lannister is dead, Jaime Lannister is in the Riverlands besieging Pennytree as we speak. The capital is vulnerable, with a worthless cunt sitting on the throne. Much of the population of gold cloaks in the city had either died in the Blackwater or the great wildfire in the sept, some folks said the fire reached as far as Cobbler's Square. The walls are not manned by the number of soldiery we are expecting. An attack to the harbor or the bay would be anticipated by those inside, best approach the capital through Rosby's Road and charge through the Iron Gate. If the tunnels in the dragonpits they spoke of would even carry any hint of truth, then Dragon's gate might be another good option."

"Pardon me, your grace," was Jon's response. "I have never set foot on the capital, I could not offer you much advice on the subject. However, if you have retaken a Northern castle twice as big as the
Red Keep in the center of a snowstorm's eye, then King's Landing might indeed be a feat far from burdensome." He took a gulp from his own tankard, set it on the table. "And I am very sorry about Ser Davos."

The king's eyes were on Jon's face, narrowed, as if weighing his succeeding words. His snort turned to rich laughter, and his shoulders were shaking uncontrollably. The lad's brows raised by reflex at the king's reaction. *Is this how Stannis Baratheon weeps?* Jon thought. *He had just lost his Hand, why the amusement? Drunkenness, perhaps? Full ale is not that much.*

The king spoke. "I've had a talk with Lord Manderly regarding the plans. Your favored onion knight is in Skagos, boy."

"Skagos?" Jon queried, apparently at a loss. "Pardon me, your grace. Davos Seaworth is in Skagos?"

"He was never executed," Stannis replied. "Glover and Manderly have spoken; information came from Wex Pyke—the boy was not at all unintelligent, as it appears," he rested his back against the wooden seat's splat, waved his hand as if impatient to proceed straight to real matters. "It was Ramsay Bolton who burned a good fraction of Winterfell's keep, not Theon Greyjoy. Also, those burnt bodies were not those of the Stark boys. We are looking at the possibility that Bran Stark and Rickon Stark may still be alive. The youngest is in Skagos."

Jon Stark felt his breathing change drastically after the telling.

Ostracized life in the Wall had been too harrowing, and he had to admit that it had disillusioned him in more ways than one. There was nowhere else to go—he was a Snow, and though the Imp had once told him to wear the metal armor of his bastardy in the face of spears and daggers of aversion from others, he never wanted to remain one misbegotten, the albino pup in the pack of great Wolves; and so, he carved a life out for himself and took the Black.

*... my watch begins, and it shall not end until my death.*

He had always wanted to be a Stark, desired to inherit Winterfell through some impossible assent of the gods.

*...no lands...no crowns...no glory...*

When he had learned of Bran and Rickon's supposed death that acted as a merciless reminder of Robb's own—his brother, his own blood, and Ned Stark's as well, there were only in his heart of hearts bereavement and self-condemnation. Thereon, he had ceased hoping and dreaming for his own dire self, prayed for time's reversal, so he may have the Starks again—his sweet, wild Arya, even Sansa and the Lady Catelyn. He would always to tell Samwell during late evenings at old Flint Barracks, "We never should have left Winterfell."

*... fire that burns against the cold...horn that wakes the sleepers...*

All things must come to pass as they should. Visions of Bran had made him realize that evil must befall upon even the most virtuous of men to give way to greater good. The fall from the Broken Tower, the journey to the Crownlands, the ugly throes of war against four and the demise at every turn of the raven's eye—all these had transpired to lay the whole groundwork of greater battles they must all face.

*... shield that guards the realms of men...for all nights...*

Men are not alone in the realms they have claimed to be their own—this is a more terrifying fact.
What lies beyond the Wall would strip any man off his depthless ambitions for vainglory, acknowledgment, exaltation. All men must die, perchance, but not in the sickening, horrifying way he had laid eyes on, past the safety of the castle-by-the-wall many moons ago—the Undead feasting on the living.

_Snows fall...white winds blow...lone wolf dies...pack survives._

"I must find my brothers, my sisters," Jon declared, eyes intent upon Stannis. "The Stark remnants, your grace. All of us must be here, you know what approaches the lot of us. I will hold the North for you whilst you battle for the throne in South. Pray, that to my best may I be able to contain the unrest between the lords and the wildlings. Common foe beyond the Wall, with attestation coming from the Night's Watch—this should make the arrangements less arduous. I want the Starks here, I need them here. I...I cannot do this alone."

Stannis Baratheon chuckled at the lad's pronouncements. "Such a remarkable concept of brotherhood. Hah! Things would make you ponder, at times—had Renly acted on his better wits and rallied behind me instead of stealing support from the Stormlands to the Reach, he would still be alive. Are you not affrighted, Jon Stark? I would gladly aid you in locating the remnants. However, if the Northern lords obtain confirmation about Bran or Rickon's survival, you might lose your claim to Winterfell."

"I would give up on the claim, then."

Upon the king's countenance was high regard for the lad. "Reports say that Sansa Stark is in the Eyrie. Quite a challenge to have her here, if you ask me; she's married to a Lannister. As for Arya Stark—"

"I do not worry at all for Arya," Jon said.

Bottles and tankards have dried up.

Yes, it had shattered them all—being apart. There was the torment of being left in the dark as to how a sister is faring in a pit of snakes, or if a brother would make it through the night of blood and war. Leave-taking is one of life's most cruel, but reconciliations might even be worse. Unambiguous shadows have been cast upon a person's absence, and to fill and fix the rift created by such absence might be a thing impossible. Far distances and lost time may blur the connections once held very, very dear.

_Arya..._

He missed her more than he could ever miss Robb. Arya—skinny little thing.

Scraped knees, tangled hair, torn clothes, fierce, willful.

_She never seemed to fit anywhere, no more than I had._

_Arya...Arya..._

Oh, what more could he give just to see his lovely girl and muss her hair once more?

Jon smiled. "Arya Stark, your grace—we need not find her. _She will find us._"

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Eight days aboard ship, from the Pentos to Gulltown, southeast of the Vale of Arryn.
Despite the tempestuous waves of the Narrow that slapped and mocked that Old Maid of the Sea, Arya Stark was in the highest of spirits. The mercantile ship was not as not as lavish as Illyrio's had been—faded hulls and sails of cerulean and cream, twenty-seven oars on both sides instead of thirty, thus relying more on fickle wind at times for propulsion. The Old Maid appeared grandiose before leaving the berths of Pentos, but as it sailed on and thus frolicked with the colossal surges a hundred leagues away from land, it appeared, from bird's eye view, merely a child's plaything.

*Water is a friend. It teases us only, it will not wreck this ship.*

For years, she had steered her own course, allowed others to set sail and ride with her in the storm and the calm, in doldrums and bliss. The wanderlust is over, it was time to return home.

Sounds of cutlery and conversations alive amongst seafarers could be heard in the nearby mess quarters. Scents of steamed prawns and mussels, eel pies meshed themselves with the faint reek of fishnets and wet salt. Jaqen was with her on the deck, both eyes of them fixated upon the endless stretch of seawater. Harsh, wintry wind blew her hairlocks of chestnut, partly covering her face. Softly, he brushed the strands away from her lovely visage; she turned her head to the right and looked up to him, smiled. His arms then moved to coil themselves around her frame in response. "Hungry?" he whispered his query against her ear, and chuckled when she winced a little at the feel of his hot breath. He still thrilled her in ways she could not quite explain. "For you?" Arya teased. "Oh, so much."

A few hours more before moonrise.

The first three nights in their shared cabin had been nothing but wild tosses and turns and touches, helpless sighs, erotic sussurations, moans. For moons past, there were only concealments and an infinitude of vagueness between the two of them—facelessness, ciphers of emotions and words of pretense, the Creed and the texts that hinder them both from truly owning the other one, the god.

*Forget the codes. Forget death. Forget every damned thing.*

Not that they would abandon all. The Order had taught them to serve, and serve they must. Sworn vows must never be broken—the sacred confluence most especially, because the magic that is suffused within oaths will chase oathkeepers and oathbreakers both to the end of all realms.

Jaqen remembered how very exhausted he was that first night at sea. From sunset to the peak of eventide they have extensively discoursed on the plans—two assassination tasks await the Handsome Man and the Waif in the capital: the death of those two knights was paid for by one Faceless Man's life a whole moon ago. The Stormcrow, the Lorathi, the Stark girl would proceed to the Eyrie to retrieve Sansa Stark. They would all ride for the North afterwards and communicate with Aegon the Sixth from there.

Jaqen trapped his lower lip with his teeth, smiled softly as he remembered that lustful night. Never in the life of him had he seen Arya Stark so intense, so commanding.

After their tiring confabulation that first night at ship, the three other Faceless departed to their own chambers; while the girl had wasted no nanosecond pulling him from the mess quarters towards her cabin. The door was then shut tight, bolted. With thoughtlessness, she unlaced his shift and breeches, undressed him fully. The Lorathi was at first stupefied with the quickness of the girl's movements; and not until he had actually felt her fondling his sex in the midst of her usual flummeries, and suckling him with soft snarls escaping from her throat did he completely realize what it was that she so desired that bewitching hour.

"Ah!" he flinched.
Arya stopped asudden, looked up. "Oh, gods! Did I hurt you, Jaqen?"


Her smile was suddenly kittenish, with a hint of mockery along the edges of it. "And here I thought the Lorathi assassin could handle anything. A girl's teeth and he's cringing like that?" She straightened up, traced the perfect, taut contours of his right arm. Her eyes locked upon his. "Dainty man, so delicate…"

Jaqen H'ghar scoffed with surprise and irritation. "Excuse me?"

Arya planted a light kiss upon the side of his mouth, whispered. "Can you give me what I want, Jaqen?" She thrice-clicked her tongue, testing his restraint, challenging his machismo. She smiled sweetly. "Do you even know at all what I want?"

The Lorathi's jaw hardened, and with narrow eyes he assayed the girl's provocative countenance, and the too-inviting parlances that came with it. "You want a rough game?"

Arya laughed softly against Jaqen's mouth. "Rough game? What the hell am I to do with a damnable rough game, Lorathi? You know nothing." She gripped his raging manhood tight, stroked it in wild motions. "I want a brutal game, Man. One that could shatter me—"

"You dragon-seducer, you," the Lorathi growled, lifting her from the floor and forcefully throwing her on the bed. She landed with a hard thud—mayhaps, the sound of it may have reached as far as the captain's cabin. Her hair was messily bestrewn all over the pillows, and her laughter had gone hysterical, harassing. Those mirthful sounds were taunting him too much, too much. "You'll be damned sorry for this, Arya Stark."

A fierce pull of her breeches, a quick tear of her tunic. He saw the faint cerise marks left by the rough contact of her raiments against her ivory skin. With starving eyes, he scoured her nudity—the flawlessness and exquisiteness of it—so, so ripe for the taking. The cabin had suddenly transfigured itself into an inferno of lust, urges, mad delights. That precise moment, Jaqen H'ghar wanted to hurt Arya Stark, and love her the hardest he could.

Her eyes were gleaming with fascination as she ran them leisurely across her Lorathi's built. "You're so hard, Jaqen," she licked her lips, tilted her head to the side—a seductive gesture. "I mean, all of you."

The Lorathi lunged to her. Voraciously, he suckled her left bosom and pleased her down there; while his low gnarls interlocked impeccably with the wet sounds of his loving suckles, finger push-and-pulls. How he took delight in the fact that she was now writhing underneath him, apparently aroused and aching.

He buried his fingers more, discovered her feminine depth that had always been his.

"This is it?" Arya panted. She pulled his hair, carried on with her provocations. "Y-you can do better than this, Jaqen, surely."

Damn it, Arya Stark.

He lifted himself and crushed her lips with his in order to drown her teasing giggles. With a swift maneuver, he half-lifted her, altered her position so she was now on all fours. The Lorathi yanked her hair, murmured his threatening caveats in her ear. "Last chance, wife. Close your naughty mouth or a man will punish you for your offensive words."
A coquettish smile. A response delivered in feigned, childlike tone. "Oh, the Faceless Master now wants to educate a girl about punishments?"

The Lorathi smirked. Your choice, he thought, as he pushed her once more on the bed. Her face was now against the pillow, her bottom was facing him. He sheathed himself in, and with thrusts forceful, claimed her again and again. Sex with a goddess, he smiled and closed his eyes, as he threw his head back and ran his fingers through his long hairlocks. Air was scarce, and so he began breathing through his mouth to save himself from perishing. What great distraction, what an erotic fellowship this is. He buried himself deeper, channeling all his rage and want onto every compelling shove. The girl was stubborn, even as she was gripping the bedlinens so tightly to contain her outbursts. She just could not keep quiet. "You climax first, you lose," she said. "Winner gets three demands."

The Lorathi let out one sharp exhale as he carried on with his thrusts. "Fair enough." Immense pleasure embosomed him—communing with her was akin to possessing power over all magnificent forces on earth. He moaned intensely. "Holy shit, Arya…ah…ah…"

"C-can the Lorathi get any slower with that?" She teased, arching her back to meet him more. "Oh!" Arya squealed as Jaqen reached out for her nub and rubbed it intensely. He bit her earlobe, her shoulders, the skin of her snowy back—lavishing these with cruel marks of his teeth and his kisses. "T-that's the deepest the Lorathi could go?"

"Shut up, Woman," Jaqen twice spanked her bottom, ignoring her protestations. His left hand pulled her hair once more, while his right held her waist tight, and with sweet brutality guided her movements so they could be enlaced with the riotous rhythms of his own. There were sounds of their naked bodies colliding with each other, and sounds of her—laughing like mad at his desperate obsession. "Just shut up Arya, damn it!"

He rammed himself against her, coming on stronger with each push, hardening his jaw, hissing in his attempts to take charge—a useless act. How to own her completely? Even in the death of all men she could verily exist on her own, and birth these men from her precious frame. Jaqen plunged himself within her, velocious, merciless—denying her of even the fraction of a second to breathe. His thrusts have gone as deep as his Lorathi purr, that he was almost sure he could feel the tip of his sex making love to her very womb. Even in the midst of her tourbillion of moans, she seemed to still be in control, as she tightened her quivering walls and received him fully.

In their coupling, he saw her bleeding, and smiled as he recalled the girl's words moons ago in the temple's bathchamber: Make me bleed every night…I will wash the bedlinens myself, scrub them taintless.

One thing all men must learn—when a man consumes a goddess, the goddess consumes him.

I am entrapped within all that she is. I could not even begin to understand her even in my most complex intellections.

And his name in her immaculate voice did nothing to temper his passionate storms.

"Jaqen…Jaqen…"

He cursed repeatedly as he felt his body entering those glorious chasms, falling apart, disintegrating. The gods may truly be gracious to allow him to take her without dying after the sweet deed.

"Aryaaa…"

He felt his warm seed filling her womb, heard her beautiful, victorious laughter, tasted the lush of her
temples and treasures.

Jaqen collapsed on the bed, locked her tight within his arms. Still, he was shuddering. "Damn it," he cursed once more under his scattered breathing, as he buried his face between her bosoms. "Ah… that was so good, baby…"

"You just lost, my love," Arya teased him, as she ran her fingers through his wavy locks. "Am I really that irresistible that you weren't able to hold it back?"

Jaqen lifted his face from her bosoms and smirked haughtily at her words. "Stop with your mockeries, will you? If you haven't noticed, you were bleeding the whole time. A man has taken you before yet you still bleed for him. Do you know what that means, lovely girl? Or does a man have to spell it out for you?"

Arya's insolent grin disappeared from her face. She rolled her eyes. "You so love pointing that out, don't you, Jaqen? That…thing of yours. Why are you so obsessed with your own equipment?"

"Oh, come now," it was Jaqen's turn to tease. "You said you wanted to be shattered, didn't you? Don't worry," the Lorathi's smirk had gone wider. "A man will break you every time we do it."

She shifted her position to face him, and brushed his strands away from his face. "Whatever, Jaqen. You still lost," she replied and kissed him on the forehead. "Now onto my first demand."

"Anything." Jaqen purred. "A man should not have acquiesced to such conditions in the middle of intimacies."

Arya smiled, and with her forefinger traced his jaw. "All of time and all turfs are ours. All your truths, Jaqen—your dreams, your memories. When we reach Winterfell, we will ask Sabine to reverse the mindwipe. We need to know what that bargain with the death god was about."

He had expressed his assent.

Jaqen forced his thoughts back to that fourth night with Arya. The winds have calmed yet he still held her, fueling her body with the warmth of his own. The waves rocked the Old Maid gently—perchance, the ship had finally gained the sea's veneration. The full moon's imperfect mien was visible from the deck, even to the naked eye.

"Faceless Men," the Stormcrow called to them both. Behind him were the Handsome Man and the Waif. "Gather around—second captain's function cabin."

They all proceeded to the mentioned quarters. Daario shut the door and settled himself on the quadrate table's head seat. As was his habit, he tapped his fingers listlessly on the seat's armrest and surveyed all those gathered. "What do we do with Bloodraven, comrades?"

"Why would the Faceless Men even want to kill Bloodraven?" Arya asked asudden. "The assassination was a straight directive from the Masters, price had been paid of course, but not by anyone outside the Order." She turned to the Lorathi. "After your task at Harrenhal, after the Citadel, you never went North."

"Curious that the Elder never knew about this violation, brother," Aegeus remarked.

"Nothing escapes the Elder's knowledge, for the thousandth time, Aegeus," Sabine retorted. "The real question is why did he choose to ignore this clear infraction of yours, Jaqen."
Jaqen heaved a sigh. "What do you even know about the Bloodraven, Arya? Well, apart from your visions of him and of Bran Stark—those of time, past and forthcoming?"

"A lot," she replied, assessing the reactions of each one gathered. "My knowledge of him came from my own, and Bran Stark's. Bloodraven sent us those direwolves, and he can warg into cats—he had warged into Balerion back in King’s Landing; I remembered following that feline beneath the Red Keep and overhearing Varys and Illyrio plotting for a Targaryen restoration in Westeros. And..." she paused. "I was pretty sure he had warged into Ned as well, the chartreux cat in the temple, the one with us when we were both soaking in the bathchamber, Jaqen," she went on, oblivious of the effect her words might have to the three other Faceless, not that her affair with the Lorathi was still a secret. Sabine bit her lower lip to conceal a guilty smile, while Daario and Aegeus stared at a blushing Jaqen with taunting eyes. "Ned led me to the five-pronged sanctum, I learned of Rickon and Jon through the banklord and the Elder. I learned about the Crux."

"Free Cities' conspiracy," Daario said. "Braavos and Pentos wanted Aegon the Sixth seated on that pile of jagged swords you call a throne, but for the Order, the intention is much more than mere rulership. The Elder and the Masters are arranging the preconditions for Aegon the Sixth to assume the role of the Prince that was Promised. Bloodraven has another one in mind—his...machinations are clashing against the Order's."

"Aegon the Sixth is not the Promised," Sabine scoffed. "He can never be, unless he dies and gets resurrected. Azor Ahai must be reborn out of salt and smoke. The renamed Haresh Esdraelon a thousand years ago fits the description perfectly, should you ponder about it; death of the Nissa was the only thing missing."

Arya gazed at Jaqen and smiled, interlocked her fingers with his.

"Unless there is already an assassination plot against Aegon the Sixth, so they could resurrect him," Aegeus shrugged. "Those Masters were Asshaii sorcerers during the age of the Second Spice—the Age of the Great Bargaining, mind you. They were in Valyria until the Doom, spawned the concept of the many-faced god. In truth, we know the House of Black and White to be a front—the house wants to defeat Winter and the god that causes it, as if the latter could be done. Noble ends, dark means. Justified, if you ask me. It's all deception—facelessness, the faiths, the codes. What better way to learn about the god than to feign service to her?"

"The Order would never resort to killing Aegon the Sixth just so a rekindling could happen—restoring someone from a dead state is a precarious process, it's almost never successful," was Jaqen's response. "They need his dragons against the lords, or Braavos would fall. If Braavos falls, so would the Isle of the Gods, and that is where they do most of their plotting."

Sabine's expression was severe. "The Isle of the Gods must never be razed by dragonfire, brothers. Any form of flame must not touch it. Forgiveness for these words—let the dragonlords burn the Arsenal and the Titan, the Sealord's Palace, the Iron Bank too, but never the House of Black and White," her eyes settled upon Jaqen. "I cannot even emphasize enough how important those faces are—they must stay in the sanctum for the time being, unburnt. Otherwise, the embers will fly away like spirits' dust to the Ash."

Jaqen returned Sabine's stare. What do you know? Jaqen seemed to ask. How much of my ablated memories did the Elder reveal to you, when he taught you the fundaments of the game of faces?

Those spirits in the Ash are screaming for their faces to be returned.

Thousands of faces—most of which were those of slaves slain during the Spice War, up to the time of the Doom.
Deep in his unconscious, the death god still spoke, like the ticking of the sand dunes of time—a countdown.

*Live, die. Live, die.*

Daario's fingertips have become more insistent, rousing the Lorathi from his contemplations. "A question still remains," he said. "Who is the Promised—in the truest sense, Azor Ahai in the core, discounting all prophecies and preconditions? Who is this age's Warrior?"

His query was met with silence. A structure of belief sifts chaos into order, and without belief that this one Promised actually exists in this realm and in this age, there is no way to conquer the greatest of all their battles. Prophecies were not entirely from the gods, but from belief of men with visions broader than others, with hearts more hopeful and with minds more astute.

"The Promised is only half of it. The Order wanted Bloodraven killed since he holds all realm-versions West of Westeros in his consciousness through the Weirwood," Jaqen declared, shook his head at the Elder's convoluted cabals. "They wanted West of Westeros closed to this realm for good so no one could traverse turfs—otherwise, catastrophes are bound to repeat. The shrewd ones will no doubt learn about that pronged path in no time, and to enter other realms, magic is needed, dragons. The rebirth of firebeasts is the rebirth of Valyria, and the Faceless Men are thwarting Fire and Ice both. The Order will still come after Bloodraven, or whoever his successor is."

Aegeus nodded. "And with Bloodraven's death is the death of the one he named Promised—whoever he may be, the Masters will scour the realms to find him and kill him."

Outside the gates of Stygia where the chained god lay waiting, four names have received direct command from their god of death:

*It is time. Vanquish the sanctum of many faces that is in the Isle of the Gods. Those faces must return to the roaming spirits—they have grown more resilient and vicious. Allow them to pass through the gates, so they may sustain the enslaved one.*

*The possessor of that mortal shell is slipping away—the slave-god must be roused from slumber.*

*Now is the eon of mating.*

*Now is the time of Winter and Darkness.*

They have been to the Isle of Gods before, when the Lorathi-Valyrian had uncloaked himself the same night the Secret City of Braavos was commemorating its own unmasking, those four whose names were archetypes of death: Mistface, Tattershell, Silverwing, Overcast. They are the Burners of the Pass that serve the death god in the Unseen.

They have threatened him severely, warned him for his own good but he was unheeding. His loyalty to the death god that had gifted him with cyclic existence was conquered by his undying devotion for his Nissa.

And through this Nissa of his, he had reacquired the facets of his Self that were lost. He had found himself once more, and this must not be—his body must be emptied of all things as the essence of No-Oneness would dictate, or his mortal frame would be rendered useless to the greater plans. No One is a cloak to the Self, it is true; but for the death god it must be the complete annihilation and dispossession of it.

Bargains must be paid, and the death god must have her due.
And now, akin to wilderness dust that fleeted, they would return once more to the Isle where the House of traitor assassins stands—the Black and White. The ember traces of those faces that are to be burned will fuel that who is chained, incite him and animate him, so he may continue spawning with Winter those creatures Undead for the next thousand years.

The death god whispers to men who have bargained—unceasing reminders, innuendos. A harbinger of cruel things to pass in the now crumbling age of men.

The words of the death god still remained.

*Your body is not yours anymore, but mine; as is your life.*

*Live, die, live, die.*

*Now is the time of Winter and Darkness…*

*Now is the time, Jaqen H'ghar.*

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Chapter End Notes

Above: I do NOT own anything

Image: The closest depiction of the Iron Throne (with 1000+ swords), in GRRM's imagination, not the teeny-tiny one in the series. (Source: BI)

Happy weekend, guys. Please leave comments after reading! :D I hope you liked the forgathering of the Stark remnants (I extrapolated from the books and theories, Skagos is the most interesting thing that has happened to Rickon Stark, how can they just decide to kill him? Aaaargh!), and the plans of Jon Snow and Stannis 'the Mannis' Baratheon, one true king of Westeros. Thanks for the kudos and feedback. Hearts!
Awakening

Chapter Notes

"I want to feel burning flames when you say my name
Want to feel passion flow into my bones like blood through my veins,
But I don't want to fall in love..."

The Potions Master's Plea to the Swordsmaster: The Handsome Man and the Waif

"Feeling your touch all around
Peacefully hearing the sound
Of silence around us
I'm so glad we found us this way..."

Arya vanquishes Jaqen's Stygian dreams

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Death, think not that you are august.
Faced with Her, you are nothing
Your art is close to done, your claws are close to empty
Your treacherous webs will be broken."

Death and the Nissa, Songs of the Faceless (Lost leaf; XLI)

No One wearing the face of a brothel whore navigated her way throughout the most downtrodden part of King's Landing. She had arrived by quay and entered through the River Gate to fulfill a task paid for by her own life, before she had succumbed to suspended animation of her own doing. Valar dohaeris, she thought to herself. The girl must be veiled from Death so she may conquer the source of it. Not that Death is the most terrible of things. It is after all a father, a mother, a brother, a sister. A home. A peaceful repose. That is, if the death god they have blindly served for most of their lives wasn't such a rapacious tramp—with her now revealed intents of wiping out the race, so Valar Morghulis may reach completion, so the most sacrosanct of all emotions as the Stormcrow had said, fear, may nourish belief and thus, the death god's very existence.

We must die not as young men, we must die only when it is time.
We must not die in the hands of the Undead.
Unjust death must have no dominion—though men go mad, they shall be well; though a lover loses
the other, love shall not be lost.

Her skirts of silk were light but they seemed to weigh her down as she traversed the labyrinth of twisty, unpaved alleys leading to Fishmonger's Square. Even outside the gates and the high brick walls that served as the capital's bulwark, the stench of fish and pigsties, unswept stables, burnt metalworks, winesinks and whorehouses danced around the olfactories like cursed miasma. The Flea Bottom was far from this side, yet the smell of 'bowls o' brown' with rat meat and flesh of men long dead bathed the entire vicinity, accentuating the ugly array of inns and merchant stalls and taverns. Ramshackles were built against the walls, and within the shacks were laughters of those inebriated swines of men and the sickening moans of paramours.

Inside shanties were the cries of babes. Mayhaps, the bosoms of their mothers had run out of milk to sustain them as there was naught to be eaten.

It was a total contrast to the manses with lavish arbors by the Hill of Rhaenys, where the richest of residents lived.

And what would become of these impoverished, should the war for the throne happen—with thousands of Dothraki and sellsword mouths to feed?

What would become of men when the Long Night befalls upon all?

"Oy!"

The Waif disguised as a brothel whore ignored the call and kept on walking.

"Oy, I said!" the call was persistent. She was close to the Street of Steel, and her peripherals had caught sight of him. A smith. The man was as obnoxious as he was burly, with begrimed, crooked teeth and a distinct malodor one could only get from the smells of scorched iron mixed with pelt and animal dung. "Yeh seem lost, eh? This isn't the place for you fancy lot—this is far from Silk Street, m'love. Yeh one of Chataya's?" The man had gained on her despite her swift movements, and with the thick crowd that surpassed that of twelve Silty Towns in Braavos, there was no other resort but to play along with caution or to risk being trapped.

She faced the man, gave him an elegant wave of the hand to dismiss his assumptions. "Far from lost, m'lord," she replied. "Took the harbor to get in here, cannot pass through the Old Gate, you understand? Too…conspicuous." She gave the man one of her charming smiles and turned her back towards him, carried on walking.

"Stop righ' there," the smith growled, yanking her through the arm towards him. "Yeh that costly, eh? Your keeper forbids you to open your mouth saved for a few words? Why, that's hardly the way to run the cunt business!"

"I am spoken for, m'lord," the Waif disguised responded, albeit in a tone slightly irritated. "Should you wish, you can visit me near the Hill—no talks necessary, straight to the 'cunt business', as long as you have coin of sufficient value. Mind you, I charge more than either Alayaya or Marei."

The man smiled hellishly, tightened his grip around the woman's arm. A display such as this is nothing sort of novel, and is thus nearly ignored in this despairing part of the capital. Bodies turn up dead in the Muddy Way and Pisswater Bend both, either through causes natural or otherwise; so, no starving soul would care one bit about a smith harassing a paid bedcrawler. "If I drag you outta here, force your legs open for my mancock in one of them squalid passages, and slit your pretty neck, I hardly think sufficient coin would be a problem, wouldn't yeh think?"
"Unhand the woman."

Both eyes of them darted to that commanding voice. Vylarr—captain of the redcloak guards. The Waif cursed in Rhoynar under her breath. Such vanity! This man cannot be trusted to wear just any face!

He does appear like six hundred gold dragons, complete with plate armor, a milder horse for daily riding, two longswords and a shield, a lance with a metal handle. A poleaxe and a war scythe? As if these are even Lannister combat implements! The woman clenched her teeth, shook her head in utter irritation—the man is more of a liability than an asset!

The smith spat, sneered most arrogantly at the knight. "The lot of you are gutsy only on horseback. Stripped o' your toys yeh all nothin' but a bunch o' boys that would pee your breeches wet when madmen like the damnable lords you serve sack the city."

"Walk away," was the knight's thrifty response.

The burly smith spat again, strode off, still muttering to himself.

The brothel whore faced her rescuing knight, both hands on either side of her waist, and regarded him with disdain. Even in wordlessness, she demanded for plausible explication for his ostentatious appearance.

"Not here," Vylarr said, kicking the horse's girth. Before the woman could voice out the closest thing there is to a protest, the knight had scooped her up effortlessly from the ground and settled her in front of him. The horse galloped past Tobho Mott's and the Guildhall, stopping at the Street of Silks where most upscale brothels were, including the one frequented by the marked man on Arya Stark's kill list.

The horse stopped at an abandoned spot underneath a drystone bridge northwest of the Dragonpit. The knight dismounted and the woman followed suit. All of a sudden, the one wearing Vylarr's face pinned the woman against the bridge's barrel and began wolfing down her mouth like one deprived for nights. His naughty hands traveled all over the woman's built—discovering unwrought gems beneath her underskirts and brassiere, as if he had not memorized every last bit of these yet. "I've missed you so," the knight murmured in the midst of kisses that trailed down the woman's collarbone, breasts.

Labored breaths escaped from the woman's mouth even as she tried to resist that whelming thrill only that man could incite within her. "We were apart only for half a moon, brother," she replied. "And must you really wear that knight's face in King's Landing, of all places? You know how swift ravens are in here; might be that a handful of redcloaks saw you already, and in a few days the queen will learn of Vylarr's death at Riverrun. You could have worn any hedge knight's face, for sakes! Must you really carry with you all those fancy toys of lances and swords?"

The Handsome Man carried on with his shameless romancing, spoke against the Waif's neck. "What fool would believe that a mere hedge knight could afford the cost of women in the Littlefinger's brothel?" He nipped the skin of her neck, suckled a bit of it. "Oh, come now, Faceless. After those fanciful nights in Pentos, it seems to me that you have thrown all methods carelessly to the wind."

The woman ignored his taunting, pushed him slightly away from her. "Ilyn Payne?"

"Dead, thanks to me," the man replied, leading the woman's hand between his legs. "He was with Jaime Lannister during the siege, but the queen's brother is missing. Conflicting reports—he was last seen on horseback with a band of outlaws, fatally wounded, they say. Some of the men spoke of one
Mother Merciless ordering the abduction."

"We must hurry," the Waif said, fixing her raiments that were brazenly manhandled by the Handsome Man. "I saw around five longships near the bay by Rosby—krakens for sigils. We still have a queen to kill."

They had reached the brothel in no time, the one with a mockingbird sigil in the entrance. "...caters to sheer range of penchants, this one," they heard one stocky man tell his companion, head gesturing towards the brothel while sauntering towards the Street of the Sisters. "Little boys and girls, I heard; that is if the lord client could bear the cost. Sick bastards even demand for amputees, as some prattles going on would say..."

"Wait here for a while, I need to make a quick survey," Sabine instructed Aegeus. She stepped into the establishment and was greeted by the scent of women's fragrances and the stench of faint smoke mixed with sweat. There were lascivious descants this way and that, rehearsed moans and feigned exotic Summer Isle accents mingling with the soft tunes of harps. Fine food and wine were served in low tables at the center of the brothel's common room.

"Where have you been the whole afternoon, Mirelle?" The majordomo made her way towards the receiving hall lavished with ornate tapestries and artworks of vivid hues. Age of twoscore and one, yet the sway of her hips was more inviting than the Fat King's favored. Her eyes were on the Waif's face. "A quarter of an hour and the red-bearded ser would be here. Take the second chamber to the left—the droopy-eyed doesn't want harpers so tell them to stay away. Have a look too, if the bottles from the Arbor have arrived."

The Waif wearing Mirelle's face nodded, removed the silken knot that bound her hair. "Second chamber it is. Should the Lord Baelish ask—" Sounds of giggles and soft squeals pervaded the common room and cut her in the middle of speech, as three paramours leaped from the cushioned settee and headed towards a patron that had just arrived. The Waif turned her head to the source of furor, sucked in wind irritably upon seeing him again—the Handsome Man wearing Vylarr's face being touched and stroked all over by those courtesans.

Vylarr's eyes were locked upon Mirelle's, basking in the sudden shift of her dispositions and in the attention he was getting. He chuckled. "Might I take the adjacent chamber, the third?" he asked the majordomo without taking his eyes away from the one wearing Mirelle's face.

"By all means, Ser!" was the reply. "Genna with you, or Daisy? Both skilled with delicate pleasuring. Ah, Kayla can perform the Meereenese knot for the lord, should he wish."

Vylarr's lip tipped up. He tilted his head to the side and raked Mirelle's whole form with his racy eyes from crown to sole, his tongue toying with the inside of his cheek. "What about her?" he said, head motioning to the Waif. "Looks delectable. Might taste divine, too, this charmer."

Damn you, Aegeus, the Waif thought to herself, struggling against the strongest urge to take out her daggers and hurl it to the man. I'll kill you after I finish with the droopy-eyed knight. All these mindless acts of yours would yield nothing of consequence to the task.

"Ah!" the majordomo exclaimed. "You certainly know your women, Ser! Indeed, Mirelle is one of our finest in this sweet den. 'Wild and hot,' as the good gentlemen would so claim—an animal when she lets her hair down, comes on strong."

"Oh?" Vylarr raised his brows, amused. Very slowly, he crossed the distance between him and the woman, ensphered her, as if assaying her full worth in dragon gold. He mildly traced the outlines of her shoulders and naked back with a forefinger. The Waif gasped asuddenly as she felt the Handsome
Man's perverted hand slapping her behind, and grabbing one cheek of her arse tight. "Wild and hot, is it?" His warm, wet mouth moved to speak in her left ear. "Does she know how to do 'reverse mounting'? You know, woman-on-top, spine-towards-the-man, and reckless, rocking motions?"

In between clenched teeth, the Waif replied. "Done it many, many times m'lord. What's grand about such style is that you can hit the right places every damned time, and you can always look back," She tried not to flinch as the Handsome Man began nipping her ear, toiled to ignore the other whores' utterances of mush and pretty speeches within squeals—'Oh, Mirelle, you naughty one!' were their words. "Oh, but I detest such position on the featherbed, m'lord! Thrust-and-lust, wraparound, carpet burn—now, these arts excite me more than I could ever tell."

She sensed the sudden change in the comely one's breathing—sounds of lustfulness in every suck of air, and she cursed him repeatedly in silent vexation. In the middle of an important task, he was luring her to turfs they should be exploring only in privacy; but he knew that there was no other choice on her part but to play-act once curtains were drawn. Stagecraft does have its place in any faceless task, it is even considered a prologue to a brutal killing; however, as always, the Handsome Man was performing the footlights a lot over the top, and he would shamelessly seize any chance there might be in order to get under the woman's skin—as if in so doing he could shackle her entirely with the fetters of his seductions.

And the bastard's enjoying it, no doubt.

"And what's your favorite?" the Handsome Man whispered his query in between licks on her ears. "Any style that I should know of?"

The Waif smiled most enticingly at the man. Very well thespian, play, she told herself. "Oh, I suppose you know it too well, m'lord," she replied with an equally magnetic tone. "I want it really deep and playful, right angles, hard thrusts, and very, very savage. I want to be broken and misused, damn it. What I want..." she smiled most disarmingly. "Is brutal lap love with a bit of sultry saddle."

Annoying, coquettish screams erupted throughout the common hall from the lips of those gathered women, disrupting the harpers for a moment there. 'Oh, Mirelle, but that won't let you walk for days!' were their pronouncements. Vylarr buried his face helplessly in Mirelle's neck, apparently sexually stirred—'Damn, woman...damn...' came forth from his mouth, as he ran his hands across Mirelle's naked arms; and the majordomo smiled, utterly pleased with the show the courtesan was putting on for the knight. After the tragic death by wildfire of the High Septon and his sparrows—men who were nothing but great pretenders on matters of what is sacred and what is not, the brothels in the Streets of Silk had commenced once more with their usual craft in the open. The flocking of starved patrons had been much slower than expected; not that the unhallowed men in that stinking capital had developed some sort of moral conscience. In King's Landing, no soul is righteous, not even those who claim to call to the Seven. Most of the knights are with Jaime Lannister in the Riverlands—explains the lack of customers; and if not for the redcloaks and the goldcloaks frequenting the dens, the chambers would remain empty for most of the day.

Gently, Mirelle pushed the knight away from her. "As much as I do desire to linger awhile and continue this lovely discourse, I'm afraid a patron awaits me," she turned her back to the man and glided away, her perfect hips a pendulum, accentuating the soft, seductive flutter of her silken skirt. She paused, looked back at him and uttered those succeeding words to remind him of the weight of their undertaking. Her expression had gone severe. "Tasks first, mad fantasies afterwards. All men must serve, yes, m'lord?"

Vylarr grinned, flaunting the charms of his dimpled visage—and those dimples he has even in his
real face. "All men must be served," and without taking his eyes off of her, he spoke to the majordomo. "I'll take all these three dreamboats in my bed."

At his words, the three other courtesans rushed to the knight and led him towards the double doors of the third chamber, occupying themselves and the man with their enthused, rehearsed exclamations. The Waif struggled to keep a straight face, even as her heart was being gorged by possessiveness, by jealousy she could not quite name the source of. Despite the conflicting doctrines of the Creed and the gods, they are still No One as far as the sacred, binding vows made through drops of their precious scarlet were concerned. Blood magic is not one sorcery to be scorned—broken oaths chase those that fail to keep them to the ends of all realms and in various versions of these. For one who is Faceless, existence must not 'be', but must be derived—from the abandonment of all wants, all hatred, all feelings, all hopes.

She swallowed the painful lump that had formed in her throat, and headed to the adjacent room. This task is for greater plans, for the days forthcoming, she calmed herself. And I do not own Aegeus.

Mirelle opened the double doors and secured the latch. With the flair expected of a courtesan, she walked to the edge of the featherbed with gossamer satin drapes of crimson. There lay Meryn Trant, the knight whose face Iason Phile, the one Arya Stark named Stern-faced, wore in order to murder Syrio Forel.

A simple process.

The pendant of her necklace is a vial containing potion with miasma that wraps around the synapses, urging the target to recall and divulge specific information through trigger queries. The target's consciousness, his volition and his natural prerogative to withhold his knowledge from anyone will be at the sheer mercy of the draught's effect.

Mirelle held the pendant, removed the cork from the small vial.

"Remove your raiments, love," Meryn Trant said, pulling her the closest to him. "We can fuck even with that fancy ornament of yours around your neck; that's the least of our problems."

The courtesan smiled and began unlacing her blouse, taking her time with the laces and soft trappings, as if the hourglass does cease to function in that particular chamber.

One.

"Can't get any slower with that?" the red-bearded complained, speech now slurring. "You need Alayaya to help you out with the ribbons? Hasten up, woman—you wouldn't want the Lord Baelish's whip against your flesh should you fail to deliver, would you?" He moved to rise from the featherbed, and grabbed Mirelle's skirt. His hands grasped naught, and he felt himself being overcome by inexplicable lightheadedness. Curious, for he never took a sip of that Arbor-pressed wine by the bedside. He hates grapes from the Arbor—yet Dornish bottled ones are hard to come by these days; trading galleys had stopped traveling to the far south when news about one Sixth of his Name broke out, for fear that the greathouse allies of the Targaryen claimant would seize the ships if not turn them to soot.

Two.

The courtesan tilted her head, fiddled with the rest of her trappings without untangling any more knots. "Patience m'lord. The man speaks, the woman listens. Would you not want to discuss your usual enervating duties in the keep? I would love to hear about them. I am owed some very important details, I believe."
"What the hell?!" was the red-bearded's response. "I did not drag my cock all the way here to tal—"

Three.

The droopy-eyed knight had finally succumbed to the interstice, now half-conscious—toiling within a state that was akin to hypnosis. His back hit the bed with a soft thud, his mouth agape and quivering, his irises glassy. The Self had disowned the body, and it had become a subject to a kind of rune-induced thrall from which escape and counteraction are impossible feats.

The woman straddled him. Their faces were leveled, and her eyes pierced through his. In every snap of the Waif's finger was a query:

Tell me about Robert Strong...

The knight answered, albeit weakly. He had become an empty shell whose only function was to regurgitate needed earfuls. Disconnected mental pathways had converged to form memories—either absolute ones or obscured, and from these sprang forth an amassment of information ranging from mere clues to whole confessions.

Another finger snap.

What is Qyburn up to?

Answers. A click of the thumb and the fore.

What are the Queen's plans? How are the Ironborns involved? The dragonlords?

It was a whole antiphon of interrogations and elucidations.

At the end of the questioning, the Waif could do nothing but tremble, shake her head at the shuddersome, abominable plots. She looked at Meryn Trant, still consumed by his now discomposed subliminals.

This one wears the white cloak for the mere privilege of doing whatever he fancies. This one preys on the weak, and this one had blindly followed his young king's orders, and those of his young king's mother. This one knew of the sickening connivance yet chose to wallow in the mud of it all.

No blood—Aegeus had made it clear. Blood is sacred, and henceforth it must not be spilled even for purposes of greater good, no matter what an assassin's conception of it might be.

The potion had decayed Meryn Trant's brain, with all its recollections, capacities. The Waif's contemptuous eyes were upon him, as he took the last of his breath.

Valar Morghulis.

Calmly, she took an exit from the second chamber and headed to the third where Aegeus was.

For any man's eyes, the sight was a feast.

Byrēpsa vōre, in Bastard Valyrian—congress of a crow. There are always three, with one voicing out commands and two performing these. Those lascivious articulations from the one named Genna pervaded every corner of the chamber's walls—those words of craft and instruction derived from the Littlefinger's own expert mouth. You can't fool them—they know who you are. "Ah, but Kayla tastes like seven arcadias, does she not?" she spoke, eyed locked upon Vylarr who was watching the whole scene between two women from across the room. "And Daisy...ah, sweet Daisy! What lies
within the very core of an innocent goddess but honey from those heights azure?" The two women were lying down in inverted position, with the head of one facing the sex of the other, their mouths on each other's feminine pearls. 'Mutual pleasuring', as the Littlefinger would call it.

*Those men know it's all just an act. Your job is to make them forget what they know.*

Indeed, Vylarr's attention seemed to be fixated upon the lewd yet riveting act, but to his eyes, the performance was nothing but an illusion, like in an abstract artform—blurred forms and faces and flowing movements. And though the echoes of those moans of feigned pleasure were clarion to his ears, the words to him, appeared to be nothing but mere ambiguous sounds.

*Sensu-fericulum—potion that heightens a Faceless Man's sense perceptions.*

In truth, his entire system was mindful only of the secret colloquy between the Littlefinger and one other—the Crow’s Eye as the Ironborns call him. They were speaking in almost inaudible tones in the fourth chamber adjacent to his, but their words were as clear as raven's cry to the Handsome Man.

He clenched his teeth to stifle his rage, even as those emotions consumed him, those that scream of the nostalgic sufferings during the Second Spice War, when he led the Rhoynish troops towards their demise at Chroyane by the grand watercourse. It was then in a realm whose name was a thousand years, but the sickening connivance rubbed the fatal wounds he thought had healed in time.

*The blood of demons never die.*

The fourth chamber was one of the largest in the brothel—a turret room with a great canopied bed, erotic carvings, and stained glass of indefinite diamond patterns. By the lavish wardrobe, a black panel contained a secret passageway to a slanting, earthen tunnel, whose other side leads directly to the Hand's tower.

"Taxing brothels is a good place for revenue," Petyr walked to the ornate table where Euron Grejoy was sitting, poured him a goblet. "Explains why this establishment remains open even after the hiatus created by the High Sparrow."

The Greyjoy's garments were of rough cloth and dark-russet leather, and it stank of the Sunset Sea and sour sweat of rapers. Cersei Lannister had accepted him into her courts to honor the Littlefinger's earnest request, not that she was obliged to do so, or may at all be persuaded to the arrangement unless she sees in it some logic that would work for her own objectives. She had spoken with the Ironborn, though not without complication arising from the Small Council, not without Ser Robert Strong and the queensguards by the foot of the throne, and not without two hundred goldcloaks guarding the gates of the Red Keep. Disdain was upon the Queen's face the moment the Ironborn's shadow cast itself upon the throne room's walls and floors a couple of days ago. The man was dressed like a foul-smelling kraken; however, it was as if the Drowned God who had taught men to reave and rape had materialized asudden in that chamber full of southrons. War is their trade, as knowers of them would say. *Ironborns carve out kingdoms, ink their names on stones—in fire, blood, stone.*

"You are doomed, Cersei Lannister," were Euron Greyjoy's words in front of all that bore witness, without salutations expected from one summoned to the queen's courts. "You have naught for allies but those from your crumbling Westerlands, and even with your dear brother's besieging of Riverrun, those folks will never bow to this throne after what the lot of you have done with the Tullys. The Valemen will never leave the Vale, and Dorne wants retribution for Elia and her children, for Oberyn. You have two Targaryens in Dragonstone and the Stormlands to worry about, and a Baratheon riding from the North. Count three moons, and this capital would be nothing but grime
and grit. And you," Greyjoy raked her whole form with eyes derisive, spat. "You will be nothing but one fuck-thing to mounters and sellswords once they sack this city."

Cersei Lannister was not to be fooled with. *Everyone who isn't us is an enemy*—and by 'us' she meant those who knew power and sought to have it. *Your enemies today will become your allies on the morrow. Here stands one man.*

Forthrightness is a virtue. There was no time to waste, and the threats of siege all over Westeros had already created restlessness in the capital. Noble houses in the Crownlands were demanding for comprehensive, writ plans should those dragons and the stag proceed with their plans of sacking King's Landing. Jaime Lannister was nowhere near the capital.

"What do you want, Greyjoy?" she had asked him, and surprised herself in so doing, for this was how her brother Tyrion manipulate men with the palm of his hand—ask them what they want, make them believe that what they want is what you want. *With this cursed, fetid kraken is two hundred thousand Ironborns. He is one man, yes. But one times two hundred thousand is still two hundred thousand—all those, for allies.*

Euron's demand was simple.

"Slaves."

He had traveled to the coasts of Essos for such purpose, used those thousand longships to scour the coasts and borders of the Slaver's Bay, selling young girls from the Free Cities and the Isles of around eight of age to serve as bedslaves to Yunkai's Wise Masters and to whomsoever would purchase them for their blossoming, virginal bodies; while the boys he would auction off to the Good Masters to produce more desexed, torture-resisting Unsullied. The Gods of the Ghis breathe still in those strong yellow and red cities; and from this Old Empire of the Harpy did the dragonriding Valyrians learn the craft that is slavehoarding. The lords have promised much, and he had promised it too, to the Ironborns. "I shall give you Lannisport, the Highgarden, the Arbor, Old Town. The Riverlands and the Reach, Dorne and the marches, the Vale—I say we take it all! All of Westeros!"

Krakens will then rule the Seven Kingdoms; the soils of it will be their seafloor and those highlords that don their clothings through the price of gold will be the sea monster's sustenance. Beware they must, for if the krakens grow to the size of twelve fathoms, then those 'unnumber'd, enormous polypi' will exact wroth upon all after their ancient sleep.

Petyr Baelish chuckled. "Cersei Lannister may have given her assent and may be discussing the whole matter with her council, but practice care. She's maddest of them all, which is why she now sits on that throne." He tipped the goblet to his lips, stared at the Greyjoy intently. *Dress an ironman in velvets and teach him the ways of the noble,* the Littlefinger mused. *But in his eye is the sea—cold, gray, cruel.* "But who can resist a thousand ships from a clan of fearsome reputation, pray tell?"

Euron Greyjoy smirked, turned his attention to the brothelkeeper turned lord, and knew that even in the man's calmness, there remained within the recesses of his person an inexplicable sense of disquiet, no doubt caused by him. "And lords of Valyria as allies? I daresay no one *would* resist. She walked me through the plans of his Hand—yes, that bloody maester; he showed me the dungeons. Grand work—with that Senelle and the Lady Stokeworth, and those female mummers. The torture chambers were gloriously *magnificent.* Opening the bodies of the living to study death, such gifted, gifted mind. Black magic, necromancy—no soul can exhaust the array of dark rune Asshai has to offer."

*Blood of monsters,* the Littlefinger once more thought. *And here, I thought I was already twisted and corrupt. Human slaves as offering for Winter—a slaver's empire of Fire and Ice—this is what they
Some men are more fortunate than others. To survive, one must know how to dance underneath the puppet strings.

"That Qyburn has close to a whole brigade of mutilated bodies in the dungeons," Littlefinger said. "Surely, you have noticed that Robert Strong of the kingsguard, yes? I spoke with Meryn Trant once; he claimed that the humongous knight took neither food nor drink, and never had he gone to the privy, not once. No one knows if the knight beneath that armor of white is a living man—never did the other members of the kingsguard see him take off his visor." Or if Robert Strong is truly the undead Gregor Clegane.

"An unfeeling, moving corpse then?" Euron said, rubbing his bearded chin. "If there is any truth to the brigade of dead bodies underneath the Keep, then we might be looking at a whole army of undead deceased. Hah! That queen of yours has wits, as it appears—shame that she has to be disposed of soon. Imagine having soldiers to ride for you in battle, dispossessed of the capacity to get enervated after a long bout; soldiers who can never get hurt, soldiers who need not be fed, soldiers who cannot die because they are already dead. I wonder how the great Stannis Baratheon would react should he find his way near the Crownlands—an army of the dead awaiting him at the capital, just when he had left an army of the dead in the North."

Littlefinger's smile was twisted. "As the Ironborn would say—"

"What is dead may never die."

Both men uttered the kraken's adage at the same time, leading them to mad, cruel fits of chuckles. When the hilarity had died down, Euron's countenance had gone severe and menacing once more.

"Another task for the lords."

"Task?"

Euron emptied his goblet, hurled it emphatically towards the lit hearth. The Littlefinger struggled to contain his shock at the act—that goblet of pure silver and select Lhazareen jewels was expensive; and one whore's revenue for a full moon would not suffice to purchase even a quarter of a portion of it. The Crow's Eye regarded the lord with congenial sarcasm, snorted at the man's overt concern for useless, fancy things. Ah, but what can one expect from a mockingbird weakling who knows nothing but imitate the words and acts of those around him? Ironborns take what they wanted by right of strength, mockingbirds peck at the chattels gained by others. The Greyjoy shook his head, "If you would become Hand of the King, you must get used to me throwing all your embellished shit."

Baelish's lips snaked up. "Why of course, your grace."

"Very good," Euron replied, setting his begrimed boots atop the plush table, thus soiling served fruits and other eatables. "A marriage alliance with the Silver Queen will not work any longer, and Victarion need not pretend that he still works for my cause when all thinking men know that he wants the Iron Islands for himself. Those Targaryens have unearthed the ploys—we have underestimated them. They have allied themselves with the Free Cities and took possession of the dragonhorn through the Faceless Men. Those assassins have been working for the interests of their own Order and for those only, as I have deduced. The horn is as good as gone to us now, however, the lords are missing one other Valyrian relic."

"The Dragon Queller that is with Arya Stark," Baelish supplied.
Euron was pensive, his eyes fixated upon the now melted goblet of silver. "We must obtain that Queller at all costs. And the lords want them dead—the Stark wargs. Of course, we cannot proceed with the plans if there are complications up North," he said, then faced the Littlefinger. "Except for Arya Stark. They need her magical blood—every last drop of it."

Petyr Baelish struggled against those thousand rapiers that plunged themselves deep in his chest. The Starks, he thought. Sansa Stark included.

Always keep your foes confused—this is the way to play the game. Hence, there was nothing more to do but to give the Crow’s Eyes a theatrical response, and pray to the gods that the Ironborn may be convinced by his affectations.

"Why, of course. All men must die."

When Jaqen H’ghar woke up, he was in chains.

The abyss was eternal, and those manacles that bound him were verily unlike the Valyrian rune-forged ones that he and his kin had once used against the Ghiscari and the Rhoynar in unthinkable, shameless bestiality.

The air in that hole was scarce, yet it scorched and chilled him; and he felt his teeth chattering at the dark sensations that seemed to gorge his entirety in every breath. He was on divine ground of both fire and ice, this he knew, as he felt the fetters tightening around his wrists, ankles, neck; like serpents camouflaging as enchanted metals, coiling around flesh and fragile bones to render a most painful kill.

He was on a frozen lake of flames.

Drops of his blood bathed the soil of that diabolic ground, feeding those nefarious forces that grew out of it. Maggots and grubs and leeches fed on the flesh of his feet, drank scarlet from him, reveled and feasted on the putrid pus that came out of his pores. There was only pitch-blackness all over him, and the sound of a thousand souls seeking to gain passage to a realm they were disallowed to enter.

A name, a face. Ash runs howling.

It was not only spiritual stagnation, but total spiritual abandonment that he had fallen into.

His eyes roamed around the pit, seeking for signs of life and any other force apart from his own and of that infernal place. There were only walls—an endless stretch of heavily ridged, grotesquely-formed walls on all sides. A faint glimmer of light, akin to a trace of the quickest flash emanated from the top. The very place where the abyss lies is perpetually cloaked by night, and only during the zenith of midday would the sun show its face for the briefest of moments.

The farther from it one goes, the more twisted the creatures become.

He raised his head to the only opening that may lead out of that bottomless pit, but it was to him, farther than the the realms he had once navigated. It was simply unreachable.

He was at the center of that hell. Stygai, the Heart of Darkness.

Spirit spouse…came those words from the death god's lips at the Heart of Winter.

Your seed, my womb.
And there he knelt, awaiting deliverance that would only be granted through feeding on those faceless spirits whose breaths he had stolen during his days as one wrecker of lives. *Once the sanctum that holds all those faces burns, their ashes will fly to the Ash. Faces will be reunited with the souls that owned them, and they would then be allowed to enter the death god's courts.*

For centuries, the assassin-mages from the Isle of the Gods, those hiding behind their doors of black and white had sought to stop all these from happening. At the expense of those faceless souls, the faces *must* stay in the sanctum. The souls suffer in the realm between but they will suffer more in the realm unseen—breaking into Death's merciful gates is falling into the death god's trap.

Lost souls *fuel* that chained god in Stygai. Lost souls *animate* the wights birthed by the death god's womb, as they travel past the Five Forts, from the Grey Waste to the Land of Always Winter, for east always meets west.

But upon his body too were those faces which the Faceless Men had peeled off and amassed, and upon those faces were eyes and those eyes were ones that truly *see*.

And so, through those many eyes he saw what lies within the Heart of Stygai—chasms leading to other chasms, circles of damnation, colossal wells with poisoned slime for water, with tired, tired souls battling against each other upon its surface, with those defeated lying in the marsh serving as sustenance for demons of the Ash that found their dwelling beneath those dark pools.

There were of course others that would survive, but not for long. Upon emergence to the surface, they would then be devoured by harpies similar to the symbols of the gods of Old Ghis—hideous clawed birds with the face of women. Soul is not flesh yet it bleeds because the throe it had to endure was one too great, that not even the gods who have implanted the concept of the greatest of torments upon men could fathom it.

It was all a great assemblage of putrefaction.

As his many eyes roamed around the corpse city, he beheld all the horrors of it; no wonder why Shadowbinders dare not enter its gates. Skulls were bestrewn all over the decaying grounds, their mouths opening, closing in soundless screams. Spirits thousands of years of age, a century, a score or less than all these were drowning…drowning in a lake of boiling blood, clawing their way out only to be swept back in. All over were flaming pits and icy rains and Jaqen saw them all—the guiltless damned, the innocent, the heretics and seducers, the sorcerers and rational unbelievers of magic, sowers of discord and sowers of peace, the thieves and the ones honorable, the virtuous and the vile. *Valar Morghulis. Valar Dohaeris.*

*It is time*…the death god had said.

Jaqen H'ghar screamed in utter anguish at those infinite souls entering his apotheotic frame—breaking him, fueling Stygai.

Those hellish chains that bound him clicked open, and there he was—

A slave-god *freed.*

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*Jaqen…*

She called him, and with that one act, she had shattered all of his nightmares and fears.
Drift with the waves, dream of bliss, forget the gods.

In years of their separations and reunions, she has always been his grace—with her sacred voice that had named him in their sweetest days of Old, branded him 'Beloved'. From her and in her, he had found the core of his very existence. "Nothing, jorräelagon," he had told her this countless of times. "I am nothing without you."

His true Self is her—all other identities of him were just illusions.

There were spiritual highs and tenets that speak of those who are greater; there was the Order that taught them both the dark yet noble purpose of service; there were creeds and codes that bound them and identified for them the bases of what is sin and what is not. Despite all these, they cannot just shroud the Self, much less surrender it to No Oneness as some twisted religion would have them do—the whole concept as they have realized, is utterly stupid to put simply.

Faceless Men draw identity from denial of the Self. They have betrayed their own skin and soul for far too long, then. No one can be No One. No one has to be No One.

Surrender your hopes and dreams, your loves and hates, your eyes, your nose, your lips, your sex to the god, surrender—this is the fundamental requirement for all assassins.

In all forms of existence, there might be same faces but different names, same paths but different journey's end. Yet in all these similarities and differences, a thing remains—that the Self that counts could reclaim its identity only through belovedness.

If a man does not know how to love, and did not desire to learn how to, then he would truly be No One—and No One as a state is as good as nothing. Shit is better than nothing. Men were not designed to butcher others, to hide underneath the shadows and steal lives like cowardly thieves in the peak of night, to plan for the demise of others on a roundtable, to utter the hypocritical phrase "All men must die and serve!" afterwards. Men did not exist to serve Death—whatever it may be, whoever it may embody.

It is her undying love, nothing more. She has burned me, and formed me.

She is my life's ode, the anthem of it…

Because of her, death had become an illusion.

Her voice.

"Jaqen."

Joyous springs…place for the soul…she is real worship.

"Arya, sweetheart."

"I'm here, Jaqen. I'm with you."

"A man knows."

"I love you, Jaqen."

"I love you, too."

She felt her warm lips against his own, blessing him with those kisses that had made him immortal. There were many versions of that too—the very first was by the narrow passage towards Satin's
Palace where they had performed their charade of courtesan and lord, where she had to stand on tiptoe for she couldn't quite reach him, and he had to lift her against the rough, cobbled wall in order for their starving mouths to meet. What counts as a first kiss, truly? The one at the Bridge of Lights? Or a thousand years prior to all these, when that midnight he had come to romance her in his tower in Valyria, that same night when she had named him 'sent by the gods'?

If only he would pay attention to the syntax of all things existing, then one would realize that a thousand years, a whole eternity with her is never, will never be enough.

He opened his eyes, smiled. "What a lovely way to wake up."

She held his cheek, planted soft kisses all over his face. "Hmmm…" she murmured her agreement.

"The ways of the Order are unrighteous," he whispered. "Men are not murderers, and may any god who is just wash the blood off of my hands and on my behalf, ask forgiveness from those lives I have stolen. Be that as it may, I will still kill anyone who would even think of taking you away from me."

"As I will," Arya replied, and laughed as Jaqen began nipping at the skin of her neck and undressing her. Thrice they made love the previous night at the River Inn, the same place where three had met their ruin at Arya Stark's then young hands—the Tickler, Polliver, the squire that asked for the mercy of Needle against his heart. With Valar Morghulis on her lips, she had given him the gift. The Hound was there, wounded to the point of almost-death, and he too had asked for mercy, but she left him and rode for the Saltpans to Braavos. The once called Old Inn had been for years, more than a place where royal retinue would water their horses and rest their travel-weary selves, and for years it had been more than just a silent bystander. It was an active witness to some events that connected and disconnected in Arya's distant memories before and after she took possession of that iron coin that led her back to Jaqen. Near that inn is the Ruby Ford where dreams had once taken her—with faint whispers of 'Rhaegar, beloved' beneath the crystal waters as he murmured the Wolf's name for the last time, where Mycah was slain by the Hound through the bastard prince's orders, where Jory had helped her chase Nymeria away with rocks so its life may be spared from the queen's wrath.

She shoved the thoughts away as she met Jaqen's impassioned movements with her own. To be owned, to be loved—what greater thing is there?

Arya wrapped her legs around his waist, altered her body's angles so she may fully receive him within her. Jaqen's plunges went deeper in response, so were his Lorathi purr that had always enthused her. "Arya…Arya…" he groaned, as he kept on pushing, fine-tuning his progressions inside her perfect form. "I would never tire of you, Arya…" Her back arched as he thrust harder; oh, the feel of his skin against hers, the inseparability, the seeming deferral of time…he belonged with her, in her.

He poured all of him into the deep well of her womb, creating, nourishing within it a precious thing that is alive and breathing.

Moments later, they lay side by side in the midst of desultory breaths and soft laughters and groans that were the after-effects of their shared passions.

"Heghlu'meH QaQjajvam…" Jaqen muttered, half-japing, his eyes locking upon hers.

Arya laughed. "Oh, yes."

*Today is a good day to die.*
He stood up from the bed and walked to the table opposite the window. Faint light imbathed the small chamber, and since morn is yet to come at its full, they still have perhaps an hour to spare before the early meal. Jaqen flexed his arms upwards, smiled softly as he picked up the implements he would need—sharp obsidian the shape of long laurels, ink combs for making thick and thin lines and patterns, a clay vessel that contains the dye. "Are you sure about this?" the Lorathi asked her. He turned to her, his movements untamed yet very calm, his berry lips with a teasing smile. "Most of the inn-dwellers are still asleep. Your whimpers, lovely girl."

Arya was lying flat on her stomach. She raised one leg up, rested her chin on one hand as she observed him. "I'm your canvas today, Jaqen. My arms, my neck, my feet—"

"A man would have duties in a while," Jaqen cut her. He settled in front of her and placed a light kiss on the side of her mouth. "So would you. We have to be done with this within an hour at the most."

"Well then, we should begin, shouldn't we?" Arya teased him back. She licked her lips, and that passing act of her—very natural and almost insignificant—made the Lorathi grin from ear to ear. 

"You want to be damaged," he remarked in an amused tone.

"Bruised, bloodsoaked, inked, war-painted," she replied. "Whatever you want to call it, Lorathi."

He chuckled richly, shook his head at her insistence. "Where do you want it?"

Arya looked over her shoulder to the base of her spine, her lower back—that erotic, sensitive area that the Lorathi loved to touch and lick and kiss. With the back of her forefinger, she traced it.

"Right here."

Jaqen exhaled sharply from his mouth, as if the favor asked was one too great. He ran his fingers through his hairlocks, calming himself, assaying if he indeed has full control over his hands. "Very well, lie still," was his command, as he picked up the thin obsidian that would create patterns on her skin. Purple marks, rich scarlet would no doubt adorn her Northern-princess body of taintless white. Jaqen had refused, but Arya just loves frolicking with delicate turfs. He pressed the stone upon her skin, deepened it just a little, and drew fresh blood from her. Arya winced at the sudden pain, then giggled. "Let me see…" the Lorathi purred against her ear. "Valar Morghulis on your skin?"

"No!" Arya protested, staring at Jaqen's reflection from the seeing glass in front of them both. "Try again."

"The Winter Maiden?"

"Oh gods!" Arya laughed. "Again, and let this guess be the last you'll take."

Jaqen stared back at Arya from the mirror, his forehead creasing heavily by the second. He smiled, brushed away the strands that covered her face. "Iäqaen, jorräelagon."

Arya smiled back.

Jaqen, love.

"Perfect."

And so, from the mirror she watched him paint those words upon her skin, savoring the pains outside that drowned those ones inside. The Kindly Man had told her before that ordinary mirrors do not cast
a Faceless Man's reflection. *I can see me,* Arya thought. *I can see him.*

*We're no longer Faceless.*

His hands moved instinctively to the right spots, piercing and wounding. Those wounds would turn to scars, she knew, and those scars would forever tell the story of him—her favorite story, one of the few stories that mattered in her life. She could almost read the reflections of his own mind, and she marveled at how, at that precise moment, he looked like one creator carving out entire histories upon her body.

His hands were gentle, such that the sharp obsidian, those needles that traced and outlined and shaded felt like maester's brush upon her skin—stroking mildly, or the flutters of butterfly wings—tickling, building within her waves upon waves of sensation.

And with awe she stared at him, his full focus upon her skin.

She smiled at his smallest expressions, at the rawness of the language of his body. At times, his brows would crease heavily in his assessment of her skin's ink, then he would continue creating those patterns and blessing her skin with cool air from his lips to let the ink dry and to ease the pain, too. In his fixation, he would hardly give any thought to his white-streaked hairlocks blocking partly his eyes, or to the fact that he was already wetting his lip and trapping it with his teeth. His lips would curl a little after a letter is formed, or two, or three.

"Everything fine, sweetheart?" he purred, glancing at her quickly from the mirror, then turning his attention back to inking her.

"Everything feels amazing."

Jaqen ran his forefinger gently through the patterns, lessening thus her pain.

"Done."

Arya sat up, surveyed the base of her spine through the seeing glass. *The work of a connoisseur,* she smiled. *Now, I have inked my skin with his name, as I have my heart.*

*And this is not just any delicate ink. This will last more than all scrolls in the realms combined.*

'*Iāqaen, jorrāelagon...'*

"It's beautiful," she whispered, then faced the Lorathi. "Thank you, Jaqen."

The remaining half-hour they spent tossing and turning on the bed, owning the other as if tomorrow was never conceived by the gods.

"Daario must be waiting for us already," Arya had the better sense to say after another intimate encounter, and so they left the bed, dressed up, and packed their scant belongings.

True enough, the Stormcrow was already waiting for them at the foot of the stairs, his thumb restlessly tapping at the short pommel of his Myrish stiletto, as habit would have him do. Not Westerosi for sure, as the trained eyes of innkeepers and guests alike could tell—might be Braavosi, Meereenese. Why the Dothraki arakh at the hipbelt, though? Common travelers shrugged their shoulders in dismissal, "Some business in the Vale mayhaps, heard the Lords Declarant have some nasty business with the Braavosi bankers. Some matters on loans." Hedge knights and swords were more suspicious. "Keep an eye on them Essosi lot," one of them had told Jeyne Heddle who runs the inn. Discreetly, they would glance at the Stormcrow and return to their bread and salt. "You have
orphans in here, most of them girls. Saw that man treading in here with another of scarlet-and-ivory hair, Westerosi girl of around sixteen or seventeen in tow—appears to be a Northerner."

"Guest right is guest right, for commonborns and nobles alike," Long Jeyne had replied. "That damnable Red Wedding would never change that, or it's the wrath of the gods upon us all. Provisions, a pillow to lay their head on, as ancient laws of hospitality would so dictate. No unsheathed swords across anyone's knees, please. Should things get a bit complicated, the Brotherhood is always nearby. Just chew in peace and leave those men alone." There was something about that blue-haired Tyroshi that enraptured her so—which was why she took heed of one request of his before she began preparing with the orphaned ones that morning's repast.

Arya descended from the stairs with Jaqen trailing behind. The girl's brows creased at the Stormcrow's severe expression. "To the Heddles' private chambers," Daario had told them both in Braavosi. "The innkeeper may have something for us."

"We tended to them—one large lady knight, her squire, and a dismissed sword from House Tarly," Jeyne recounted once they were all seated inside the private chambers of the innkeepers. The door was bolted, not that the act was necessary, what with three Faceless Men in the room. "The lady knight had killed two from the Brave Companions in this very inn. They were trotting around the riverlands, raping and murdering. I saw the bodies, one of them was bulky, noseless. The other one was bald, with crooked teeth—he chewed on the cheek of that lady knight, the flesh could have been infected if not for Willow's cure."

_Those men, Rorge and Biter_, Jaqen thought. _Without sorcery that binds, those monsters would do whatsoever they please. _"Where are they now?" he asked. "The lady knight and the others. What brought them here in the Crossroads?"

"They said they were looking for Sansa Stark," Jeyne replied, throwing Daario just a quick glance. "You see, this is the riverlands, and no matter, our loyalty is to the lords of the riverfolks. The lady knight and the two she was with were clearly working for House Lannister; so as soon as they we had dressed up their wounds, we turned them over to the Brotherhood."

Arya felt her heart leap at the mention of Sansa's name. Her _sister_, but they were far from close. Their connection was more of estrangement, their conversations never consisted of half-sentences that need not be completed because the other would always know what the succeeding words would be. There were no daydreams and shared fancies, late-night huddles. They were just too different. Still, the thought that Lannister swords may be pursuing another one from the pack nourished her protective instincts. "And where is Sansa Stark?" she asked. "We proceeded straight to the Eyrie from Gulltown. We were informed by Lord Royce that she rode with Brynden Tully to the riverlands—explains why we are here. They might have paid the inn a visit, the high road to Riverrun is a long ride from the Vale."

_I have called Sabine 'sister', though she is not kin to me. The blood in my veins is the same as Sansa's blood._

_The lone wolf dies, the pack survives._

Jeyne looked around the chamber warily, for fear that the wrong ears might hear the telling, though the door was tightly shut. It was morn too, which means that sojourners from the previous night will now mount their saddles and traverse the kingsroad from mid-north to south or the other way "Indeed, m'lady. Lady Sansa and the Lord Tully took their night's tarriance in here, two days after the Brotherhood took the lady knight and her companions." The innkeeper's eyes cruised to each face, settling upon Arya's. "Mother Merciless, the one leading the Brotherhood, ordered the seizing of all Lannisters and Freys—matters not if they are women or children. Sansa Stark and the Lord
Tully are on their way to the Hollow Hill to meet with her."

Arya's eyes narrowed. Might it be that the innkeeper is lying? Five years ago, she and Sansa had stayed in that very inn along with Eddard, as part of Robert Baratheon's royal retinue. Masha ran the inn at that time; and surely, this Long Jeyne could not have possessed such sterling memory as to recognize Sansa Stark after those many years. But there was no reason to lie, considering how very effective Daario's persuasion tactics were. Jeyne Heddle could have made the choice of not incriminating herself, of revealing her position as one collaborator to the Brotherhood without Banners; though perchance she had realized upon their arrival that she would be dealing not with ordinary Essosi but with men gifted with the 'gift'.

*What face of death had this woman seen? She appears to know that we wash our hands with the blood of our enemies.*

"Mother Merciless?" Daario spoke, and Long Jeyne's eyes sparkled at the sound of the man's voice. "The one leading the Brotherhood is a woman?"

"You have a problem with that, Daario?" Jaqen queried, tilting his head towards a now pensive Arya.

"Not at all. Just...last time I heard, it was the Lord Dondarrion who commanded these outlaws. Who is this Mother Merciless?" he asked. "Highborn? Commonborn—"

"Catelyn Stark."

Arya sat upright asudden, as her eyes bore into Long Jeyne's. "Pardon me?"

"She lives, m'lady," the innkeeper confirmed her earlier pronouncements. "The Red Wedding did nothing to shatter her strength. And she's running the games here in the riverlands."

The sounds of horses' gallops could be heard from those departing from the Crossroads Inn.

"Below High Heart," Long Jeyne had said. "There you will find the cavern where the Brotherhood stays. The Hollow Hill is unmistakable—there is a thick growth of Weirwood in there. Almost a whole day's ride without stopping should do it. Be careful. There are Lannister soldiers besieging the towns close to Riverrun."

The three then set out and left that inn by the Trident. Two horses—Daario on one, Jaqen and Arya on the other. The road to Hollow Hill will be rough as it deviates from the kingsroad and from all other main routes. Still, they mounted the horses in speed, with the reins cracking against the back of those steeds. *Catelyn Stark,* Arya thought, her heart leaping in both excitation and disquietude. *She had been there in my wolf dreams, I saw her through someone else's eyes. By the mercy of the gods, she lives.*

They took the river road during the first few hours of travel, stopping only to water the horses in the nearby Red Fork. Arya leaped from the saddle and half-ran to the river's embankment, kneeling on the soft grass, smelling it. *This river's sister. That is where I found Catelyn—in the Green Fork.* She touched the water's surface with her fingertips, and inhaled sharply as the watercourse responded weakly to her silent charge; giant ripples formed from where she had dipped her arrow finger. *Winter has come, snow will soon carpet even the riverlands. My old rune is weak here.* A whisper then came from distant Rhoyne, for all the tributaries in the Trident that run in forks over the land—red, green, blue—flow into the Bay of Crabs where they meet with the great River Rhoyne in both the Narrow and Summer Seas. *Follow the course,* the soft voice of the water said. *To the hallowed hill*
that holds all the answers.

Arya shuddered at the sudden vision of the ghost that lives in the hill. The girl had been there before with Lemoncloak, Sevenstreams, and the priest of Myr, where the ghost that was gifted by the old gods with yondersight and foreknowledge had prophesied of deaths and betrayals, and many other tragedies.

*A woman that was a fish…a wolf howling in the rain….drums and horns and pipes and screams…

*A maid with purple serpents in her hair…and she will slay the giant in that castle of snow.

*A man without a face…a drowned crow…

*A dark child.

She knew that the first prophecy spoke of the members of her family prior to their demise—Catelyn and Robb during the massacre at the Freys'. The second was a most ambiguous presage about Sansa who was lost to her. The third—a man without a face—is Jaqen.

*Drowned crow,* Arya thought. *Crows have eyes everywhere.* A dreadful thought invaded Arya’s mind asudden. That Drowned Crow smelled of lap of the gods, a whole cataclysm. The Elder had once mentioned an essential task carried out in Westeros many moons ago, an assassination of the iron king from the line of Greyjoys; this, at the order of a crow with seaweed hanging from his wings.

A dark child. A dark sister—Arya Stark herself.

"We go south from here," she said, lifting herself up. "We will reach High Heart before sunset, and from there we will ask about the Brotherhood's hideaway."

They mounted their horses once more.

From a distance, they heard the sound of troops approaching them from north of the Red Fork, from the road leading to Pennytree that was recently besieged. Daario's steed neighed, galloped in place uncontrollably. "Ho!" he tried to calm the beast. "Ho! Jaqen! A whole cavalry! This is an open area we're in—more than two hundred riders, we must find a place to conceal ourselves for a while!"

"We are in the embankments," Jaqen replied calmly. "No trees in here, no caves, far from the woodlands. Mummer's show, brother. We are travelers headed for the Saltpans."

Arya's heightened sense warned her of danger. *Blood, ripped flesh, bones torn from mortal frames. I see it in eyes which are not at all mine.* "Daario is right, Jaqen. We cannot stay here, we must head back to Lord Harroway's or…or hasten up south to the hill."

"We will not be able to outrun a whole cavalry, Arya," was the Lorathi's response. "Running south or back to kingsroad in full speed will make us look suspicious."

"They're near, Jaqen," Daario said, pulling the reins of his steed roughly. "We're assassins, but we're talking about a whole squadron here. We should head east, back to where we came from, wait for them to depart."

Jaqen smirked. "Arya could easily command the rivers—"

"Rune from the old gods is insufficient here, Jaqen," Arya cut him, irritated. "We are too far from Rhoyne, the old gods are not the only ones with dominion over this realm. Winter overwhelms all
other enchantments, and we cannot reveal who we are to these men. We don't know how fast your firebeast would respond to the beckoning."

Daario cursed. "They're here. Lions on crimson fields for sigils."

"Lannisters?" Arya gasped, darkest enmity consuming her heart as sudden.

The mounters came into view, full-armored, with commanders and bannermen leading the entire battalion in a sea of gold and red. They moved as if from the brainwork of a single man, though they were numbering more than two hundred. A small-sized infantry of around twenty men trailed behind; with arm swords, shields, battleaxes, and bows displayed most ostentatiously—evidences of limitless gold in the mountains of Casterly Rock.

Some of the horses crossed the narrow part of the river, leaving the rest of the cavalry on the other side, and headed to where the three Faceless and their mounts were. The three were then surrounded by a sea of steeds and riders of glistening metallic armors, and they all appeared in a riotous blur in Arya's sight, meshing with the voices of mercenaries and brays of their beasts. One of the men, Harry of House Merrell of the westerlands spoke in a mocking tone. "Tyrosh is far from here, comrade," he said, eyes scouring Daario Naharis from crown to sole. "Better head back to the Crabs, we are not in need of sellswords." Rich laughter erupted from the men. Merrell then turned his eyes to the Lorathi and to the girl seated in front of him. "Didn't know that Northern whores now cater to Essosi straits-born redheads as well, eh?" He spat. "Crossed the Narrow to have themselves some Westerosi cunt? You lot could not afford the good Lyseni ones, it seems?"

Jaqen H'ghar clenched his teeth, summoned in him some calm nevertheless. "We're headed to the Saltpans. Best proceed east while the sun is still up, comrades. We wish to fare well—"

"Deceiving tongue, this one," Kennos of Kayce remarked, right hand upon the crossguard of his broadsword. "Think you that we did not see you heading south to Acorn Hall? Now, I am far from a fanatic of trickery, though craft be wise; so, I am going to ask this one time and one time only. What is your business here in the riverlands?"

"You've said it," Daario shrugged. "Westerosi cunt. As much as we want to chew the fat with you all and wish you luck in both war and besieging, we really must depart. Crossroads is far from here, and they serve free ale in there every fifth day of the week or so, do they not?" The Stormcrow had started kicking the horse's girth lightly when around fourteen swords were drawn on all sides and angles, surrounding the three Faceless with blade edges and tips that had slain hundreds and mayhaps will slay a hundred more.

"Spies," Harry Merrell said. "Essosi spies for the Targaryen claimant. Who else could they be?"

Daario exhaled heavily, turned his head to Jaqen and marveled too, at how very calm he appeared; though he knew that every inch of him screamed of his want to protect Arya Stark and liberate her from the plight—as if the girl actually needed protecting. Jaqen glanced back at him, and in wordlessness, clued the Stormcrow in about the game plan.

Arya spoke, drawing stratagem from ploys unsaid. She had read them and thought it best to interject. "Oh, m'lords! But I must return to the Lord Paramount unharmed!" Upon the girl's eyes was fear, but there was a certain form of knowledge in them as well, for those called lords knew not that her panic was nothing but feigned. "He would not like it if he sees me even with the littlest scratch on my small toes."

Ser Kennos blinked, taken aback. "You're one of Lord Baelish's girls?"
Poisoned darts found their way to the throats of six men wielding longswords in front of them, even before Arya could answer. Furor arose from the others as the men fell from their mounts, now bereft of life, a bluish hue crawling upon every inch of their suddenly pale skins.

"Who was that?!" Merrell growled, scouring the vicinity. "Soldiers! Survey the immediate area now!"

A detachment of twenty-five men rode to the various points and inspected the environs, weapons and shields at the ready. "There are outlaws everywhere, keep an eye!" Ser Kennos said as he tried to ignore the now frantic horses. "Ho! Damn it!" He steered his own horse but it was resisting his rough, commanding pulls.

Ten more poisoned darts flew and pierced more Lannister men—drilling eyes, throats, chests. One of the soldiers exhaled sharply at the sight of one dart twisting itself deep into his belly, as if controlled by some form of unseen force. A grieving sound escaped from the man's mouth as the small albeit fatal weapon found its way inside the flesh of his abdomen. He too, tumbled to the ground, lifeless like those nine others.

"Sorcerers!" Ser Kennos exclaimed. "Swords! Kill them!"

With those words, the three Faceless drew their own weapons, prepared themselves for the looming fray. Daario's steed galloped like mad, breaking the sphere of gathered men, scattering them. With one quick maneuver, he had severed the crowns of three and gutted two—a longsword on one hand and an arakh on the other, all the while evading a rain of arrows and thwarting deadly slashes of swords. "This is suicide, Jaqen!" Daario bellowed. "Your plan will kill us!"

"Head south!" The Lorathi shouted back at the Stormcrow, as he blocked an assault from his left and rear, stabbing and slashing in all and opposing directions. In his peripherals, he saw more soldiers coming in their way from the other side of the Red Fork. "Drop down, Arya!" he growled, and intercepted a direct attack. Arya dodged the assault and plunged Dark Sister to the attacker, and almost retched as the man's innards scattered all over the ground with blood plenteous.

There were too many of them, and it would not take the wisest to say that the feat of escaping from the cavalry, much less conquering it, is impossible.

At the center of that anarchy, and as Arya toiled to deliver blows upon blows through her own weapon, Death screamed what it thought of her: you will never be able to withstand this storm.

To it, Arya whispered back: I am the storm.

A sudden realization hit her, and with it, an inexplicable thrill. A friend. From her lips came the charge, calling forth a part of herself that was lost many moons ago.

Come, come.

Your aid, tamed being.

Hunt your enemies.

Thereupon, a hundred howls interrupted the bloody melee.

They came in scores, and their sizes were those of the very mounts the soldiers rode. Wild growls and snarls resounded along the expanse of that Fork, as the rivercourse was disrupted by those creatures that leaped from it towards the cavalry of soldiers, sending their horses in hysterics and uproars. To Arya Stark, those creatures that have responded to her call appeared to be no more than
enchanted silhouettes, their movements wild yet graceful, their countenance wrathful yet gentle. One led them—a direwolf of gray fur and raging eyes, its thirst for blood of lion foes insatiable.

Clockwork seemed to suspend itself as their eyes met, gray upon gray and green, a girl and her wolf—not two selves but one.

_The hour of the wolf has come, nevermore will it howl to the Moon as if lost—for the Moon has come to it, and with it, the Moon had merged herself._

_The wolf fears not the lion. In its eyes, lions and sheep are no different._

Nymeria turned her mighty gaze from Arya Stark to the fray, and darted to join her kin in the battle, its razor teeth prepared for a hundred kills. _Once, I lost her—the Wolf that is also the Self in this time and in all others, the girl thought._ And _she came back to me, leading the whole pack._

What transpired was a blinding snowstorm of weapons and wolves, as sonorous screams of dying men blended with howls and fatal ravings. Pained whimpers came from some in the pack as their bodies received deadly stabs from swords and lethal poisoned arrow pierces.

Still, the pack is stronger than a multitude of cowards hiding behind their golden armors. The beasts gnashed and ripped and fed on those they have killed, as if the morrow will never show its face in all the realms and this, and this may be the last day of hunting.

Commands of Ser Merrell and Ser Kennos were drowned by the outcry of their men. It was a whole spectacle of slaughter and suffering, and so those who wished not to risk their lives anymore galloped towards far kingsroad, while the Lorathi and the Stormcrow wasted no time clearing their way of more soldiers.

The embankments of the Red Fork, the grass and the soil were watered with liquid scarlet; and the river found its name fitting, as sanguine fluid from Lannister dead scattered all over tainted the clear waters with rich crimson. _Retribution_, the rivulets seemed to hiss softly. And now, this very watercourse will share with its sisters the blessing and blight of that wolf-caused massacre, so that the Trident carried not only the memories of rubies, but those of the blood of lions that caused the death of the wolf's kin.

Arya heard the whimpers and low snarls coming from the other wounded beasts, and the howls of those that mourned for their dead kith. Her eyes roamed around the vicinity, scouring the miens of those wild beasts, looking for that one with whom she had shared her Self for many nights in the realm of dreams. "Nymeria!" she called, ignoring Jaqen's protests, dismounting from the steed. She ran to the center of the bloodbath now concluded, head turning in all directions. "Nymeria!"

A soft beast's moan came from behind, and so she darted her head to its source.

Arya Stark smiled as she stood face to face with her.

_"Meam RézƐǣ_," she whispered in Rhoynar.

_My Wolf, my lost Self._

The direwolf drew closer, pressed her nose against the blood-damp ground as if offering one goddess a deserved veneration. When she was nigh, she knelt in front of Arya Stark, closed her eyes as the girl stroked her fur of dark silver. "My love, Nymeria," Arya said, and laughed as the direwolf whimpered in response. "A long time it had been...oh, thank you, thank you. You have saved us, did you know that?"
The wolf lifted her head and gazed at the girl with glistening eyes. Now, loneliness will ebb away; sleepless nights will be no more, since all selves will now connect to the turfs of the real. Nymeria walked closer still, and lifted both forefeet to touch her face. Arya Stark laughed once more, and embraced her as tight as she could.

Time is a strange beast, unruled by logic despite men's effort to contain it in their conceptions of order. In her cyclic existence, she was a water wolf and a direwolf—the bodies and souls of these—and the Moon to which these creatures call.

Nymeria was staring at Jaqen.

"You remember him?" Arya asked. "You remember īaqāen?"

Jaqen walked closer to the two. "Nīhmēria," he called her. The direwolf only whimpered, closed her eyes upon feeling Jaqen's strokes.

"Do you know where she is, Nymeria?" Arya whispered, face buried against the creature's fur. "You found her floating along the Green, and pulled her from the course. And you saw the corpse of her live and breathe again, did you not?" The wolf growled low, as if to respond. "Good…good…" Arya spoke in a voice broken, as she recalled that dream.

Are you Lannister? Are you Frey?

No, mother. I am Arya.

Are you Lannister, Frey?

No—

Then, I do not know who you are.

Tried she did to contain the sudden burst of her emotions. Whatever awaits her in the Hollow Hill, she must have the courage to accept. Calmly, I will endure. Wordlessly, I will suffer, she convinced herself.

Death changes people; and to what extent Catelyn Stark had changed, this is one thing that Arya does not know.

"Nymeria," she said, rising with a now unbreakable resolve. "Lead me to her."

After a quarter of a day's ride, Harwin and Lem Lemoncloak reached the Hollow Hill north of Acorn Hall. It was the lesser road from Pennytree leading to High Heart which they took, and with them was Brienne of Tarth, the lady knight whose life was spared by Mother Merciless who was also called Stoneheart, on the condition that a specific hostage be brought to the cavern. Hyle Hunt was hanged first and is now dead—a man innocent of the massacre at the Freys though not entirely innocent of the war. He had no choice but ally himself with the Lannisters, and a disgraced knight he remained until the last of his days. But Podrick Payne was just a boy; a stumbletongue, yes, but a boy blameless of any crime. Pod sought the lady knight for moons, traveled with her in the harshest of conditions, hoping that her search for Sansa Stark would lead him back to Tyrion Lannister for whom he had squired once.

Snow had once again fallen in the Riverlands, and this has not happened in over a thousand years.

"I know what I saw," Harwin said, tightening his green cloak around his frame. "A whole pack,
tearing bodies like mad. In the center of that carnage were three, and I cannot be mistaken. I have served the Starks for most of my life—"

"And here, I thought the brotherhood has hardened you," Lem remarked. "Once you have witnessed the Lady Stark return from the dead; but it doesn't follow that Eddard Stark will too, or Robb Stark—hells, both men's heads were severed from their bodies, and who could have resurrected them, pray tell?"

Brienne of Tarth was riding at the back and silently listening to their exchange; however, her eyes were fixed upon their captive whose head was then covered with a reeking sack. Both hands were tied to his front, and the other end of the thick rope that bound him was secured around Lem's waist. All the way from Red Fork to High Heart, the captive walked behind the horses, unseeing. Twice, the mounts have galloped in full speed when the two members of the brotherhood caught sight of a small Lannister group; and so twice, the captive was dragged across the dirt, his wasted body racking up injuries.

"You never pay attention, do you?" was Harwin's reply. He glanced at the back, assaying the lady knight, and carried on when she appeared indifferent. "That lady those wolves have aided, Lem. I cannot be wrong. She's Lyanna Stark, presumed dead by all, but I saw her with my own two unfailing eyes. The river is part of the Trident, she mourns for the dead Targaryen prince, perchance. Retribution against the Lannisters who took part in the rebellion—"

His words were cut by the captive's derisive laughter. His words were as clear as day though his face was hidden behind the sack. "Mayhaps, she is unaware that her own family members were forerunners of that rebellion as well, and that the Lannisters joined only after the battle of the Trident?"

"Shut your piehole," Lem shot back. "The Lannisters beheaded her brother and nephew during the war; we all know that Joffrey boy who ordered never had a drop of Baratheon blood in that foul body of his. You didn't let Harwin finish, you idiot."

They reached the cavern, dismounted and entered. Notch and Dennet were by the mouth, guarding. "Didn't take long, eh? How'd you find this one?" Dennet asked, adjusting the string of his bow.

"Wolves," Harwin replied. "Butchered the Lannister cavalry. Diversion, and he did not have too many men with him."

They dragged the captive inside with the lady knight trailing behind them. In the center of that murky cavern was a misshapen boulder, and there sat Lady Stoneheart, her face mutilated, her skin the hue of curdled milk.

In her presence, hopes fade—only fear remains. All men have the tendency to some particular evil, yet they are also capable still of some form of mercy, but Lady Stoneheart was different. Her concept of benevolence was snatched away by death—hers and her husband's and her children mayhaps; and her notion of justice was entirely twisted. Hatred had sculpted her, wielded her, cradled her.

Hatred had strengthened her.

Others may think her cruel, selfish. How could she not be if all had been taken away from her? Illusion is the root of evil, and she is the epitome of all disillusioned. She thrives in loathing and antipathy, as if without these, her marred being would cease once more to live.

The knights of the Hollow Hill still serve, for there was Thoros of Myr by her side. And justice, no matter how degrading the form of it is and how twisted it may be, is better than none.
There was something pleasantly different with the Lady Stonheart that night, however.

"She seems peaceful," Lem remarked quietly, and Harwin nodded. "A little…tolerant? Ah, this cripple might survive the evening then."

One of the knights stepped forward, nodded at the newcomers. "We have company," the one called Ser Gendry announced in a faint tone, gesturing towards two who were with the Lady and Thoros. "Brynden Tully, the Lady Catelyn's brother. He had survived the besieging at Riverrun, escaped he said. Lord Emmon holds it now. And—"

"Lady Sansa!" Brienne of Tarth exclaimed, and started rushing to her. She stopped upon seeing Luke unsheathing his broadsword, signaling that she could go no further. Brienne raised both of her hands and backed a couple of steps away, her eyes upon the Oathkeeper that lay beside the living corpse. "My Lady Sansa," she continued nonetheless, wary. "Pod and I—we have searched for you all over; and I implore that you place your confidence in my words. I swore it with your father's sword, to bring you to the Lady Catelyn safe."

Silence…the Lady Stonheart hissed, struggling with the words. You are sworn only to me. She closed her eyes, exhaled heavily, as if speaking relived her days of cruciation in the Forks. I have spared the boy's life…now, where is that captive?

Sansa Stark was sitting by her mother's feet, struggling against tears unfallen. She had already shed tears of blithe and anguish upon their reunion, and shed more she may. Her eyes cruised to her mother's face, now a perfect reflection of wrath—breathing yet dead. Mother, come back, she implored, and may the roots of the weirwoods by the hill carry her supplication to the gods.

"Mother," Sansa held her hand, squeezed it gently. "Tire not yourself. Be calm."

The Lady Stonheart beheld her daughter's visage—with eyes and hair that were her own, with the snowskin the North, wolf's blood. Sansa…she endeared her. Beloved Sansa…weariness fades when I see your face. At these words, Sansa laughed softly, and the Lady Stonheart smiled.

Thoros of Myr raised his brows at the scene he was witnessing. Lem and Harwin exchanged bewildered glances, turned to Ser Gendry who was watching the whole exchange quietly.

"Who is this woman and what had she done to Mother Merciless?" Luke whispered to Dennet, who elbowed him slightly.

Sansa Stark was a child then, and to her young eyes, Catelyn Stark was a goddess. She can be both glorious and severe, generous and demanding, loving and wrathful.

The Brotherhood said death had changed her. They have so claimed this for perhaps, they know her not for who she truly is.

Only a child would know her mother. And only the mother would know her child.

The lady's heart of stone had started breaking to pieces the moment she had laid eyes upon her eldest daughter.

The desire for revenge was still strong—but the Lady Stonheart intends to deliver it in a manner that is righteous. Let the gods do the rest, if they may be done with her after all these. Sansa is here, she thought. And perhaps Arya is alive, and Bran, Rickon. And Ned's boy—Jon?

"We will find them, mother," Sansa said, as if hearing Catelyn's sentiments. She turned to Brienne of Tarth, stood like she was the one in command. "Who do you have for us, Lady Brienne, as you have sworn in front of the Brotherhood and the gods? Is this your expression of contempt, is this your
manner of scorning us, claiming that you have no other object but to rescue me; yet you carried my dead father's reforged sword, accepted it from the hands of our very enemies?"

"Lady Sansa…" Brienne began in a tone that sought to explain. "Hearken this, I was once sworn to the Lady Catelyn Stark, and forever I shall be. I am a woman of my word—I have vowed to shield her back, I swore it by the old gods and the new. And she vowed too, that I shall always have a place in her home. Now, I request that you heed me—this man you are about to execute desired nothing but to keep you safe from the queen, and your father's ancestral sword he wished to be returned to the Starks."

Thoros of Myr scoffed. "Empty vows are useless in hallowed grounds where the lord of light is." He nodded to Ser Gendry. "Remove the sack."

The knight did as he was told.

His flashing, cat-green eyes were unmistakeable, and so was his curled hair the color of beaten-gold very much alike those found in Casterly Rock.

Jaime Lannister…Lady Stoneheart's smile was foreboding, and laughed hysterically at the man's shock, at the undeniable horror in his eyes. Yes, I have ascended from hell and I stand once more before you.

Yes. We meet again.

A pack of around thirty wolves rushed with them from the Fork now infested with Lannister dead towards the Hill serving as the Brotherhood's abode. Anyone who would tread the paths of the riverroad to Pinkmaiden towards the South would be greeted by blood, skin, and bones; and a whole watercourse tinted with the red of these cadavers who once breathed. Those rivermen who have prayed for comeuppance would no doubt rejoice at the sight—Lannisters always pay their debts; and paid dearly they did, as they owed the realm the lives of Northerners and Riverfolks who remained loyal to Robb Stark's cause.

They have reached the Hollow Hill at moonrise.

"You should keep that wolf of yours in a tight leash, Stark. I have witnessed wars fought in Essos, some against the Dothraki, mind you, but not like the carnage earlier. You are sure this is the place?" Daario asked Arya, as he eyed the exteriors of the cave, with rocks and mass of dirt interrupted by large weirwood roots. He dismounted, picked up a small sandal with a severed toe strap. "There are children in that cave. Women too."

"Yes, there are," Arya confirmed. "I have stayed here for quite a time after…after Jaqen went away."

"This place had appeared in your dreams?" Jaqen asked. "Nymeria seems to be too familiar with it."

Arya nodded. "I have dreamed through her," she said, then pointed to the weirwoods. "And through those too. All things I have learned, I knew of, they all came from the eyes of the direwolf and the heart trees."

Jaqen leaped from the horse's saddle, held out a hand to assist his wife. Arya shook her head, disembarked from the mount on her own. "We must get in, snow's getting thick," Daario announced. "Weapons at the ready, we know not if they could still recognize you after all these years, Arya Stark."

"They must."
With a forefinger, Jaqen brushed a snowflake that had descended upon Arya's nose. "Yes, they must," he smiled. "A man does not want complications when he meets a girl's mother and her sister."

Arya smiled back though her face reflected worriment.

"What's wrong, lovely girl?" the Lorathi asked.

She shook her head, exhaled. "Death," Arya replied. "The weirwood speaks. Someone will die soon."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, it took me a while to post this update. Been really busy. Thanks for reading guys, and I hope you liked this chapter. Please leave your thoughts, I'd love to have them. Happy weekend (almost)! Go, J/A! ;D
"Hold, hold on, hold on to me
'Cause I'm a little unsteady..."

Reunion with the unCat and 'Their Women Keep Them Sane': exact thoughts of the lost men in this chapter (Jaquen, Aegeus, Daario, Jaime)

For she is ice and fire, calm and rage;
She is of yore and forever.
She sits not at the center of time for she is Time.
The Moon, the Seasons, the Tides...
The turn of the Universe."

Death and the Nissa; Songs of the Faceless (Lost leaf, XLIV)

From the Gulf of Grief to the Slaver's Bay they flew, landed on Yunkai, and gathered their forces there.

The plan—a third siege of Meereen.

Now that the Silver Queen had sailed for Westeros, the strongholds of the once slaver's city have weakened. The bastions and defensive walls will not suffice for an offensive launch from nearby Yunkai and Astapor, and already some of those residing in that place of pyramids were infected by pale mare, and are slowly being gorged by an illness of fever, hemorrhages, and flux. During the second siege, Yunkish forces have flung hundreds of diseased corpses past the city's gates using their trebuchets of six. Now, the plague had spread throughout most of the city and since such contagion is far from fastidious, it had corrupted the Meereenese from their hovels and brothels to their manses and palaces.

In Meereen's defenses were the Stormcrows now led by the Widower and Jokin, second in command to Daario Naharis. It was Barristan Selmy's stratagem which the city had employed for battle, and so all those freedmen loyal to Daenerys Targaryen have sworn to protect the city till strength fails them. Tol Toraq assembled the Brazen Beasts and Stalwart Shields by the city's walls and the eastern gates; and Marselen, a Naathi and brother to Missandei of the queen's courts, gathered the Mother's Men and the Free Brothers by the south and northern gates.

Jorah Mormont was at the city's watchtower, surveying the main gates by the Khyzai Pass, one of the city's most vulnerable points. He had earlier ordered the Meereenese fleet to provide blockade by the western walls, and organized the commanders in various stations.
"Outnumbered! Greatly outnumbered!" Jorah exclaimed to Symon Stripeback. "My advice to the queen was to leave Barristan here, they cannot besiege Westeros yet; the conflicts here in the bay have not subsided at the slightest. She listened more to her distrust of me, and to that cursed sellswor —how can we hold the city's gates against a hundred war elephants?"

"The Second Sons are in the fortifications, and the Windblown," replied Stripeback. "We have won the second siege with less men, Commander Mormont."

Ghiscari, Yunkish and Astapori legions—traces of the old harpy—have assembled at the bay with their ships numbering a hundred and thirty. The trebuchets began catapulting balls of flame onto the great pyramids, while a batallion of men were now descending from the ships, carrying ladders and preparing to sack the city.

"No Unsullied, no Dothraki, no Ironborn," Jorah said. "And no dragons! Half of our fleet will ambush the legions from the rear, let us hope that the city's walls are strong enough. Dear gods!" he bellowed, as a mass of fiery coal flew past them, damaging the watchtower's annex severely. "We must return to the main gates, Tumco Lho needs aid with the arrow loops. If we die, we die. But we do not let the slavers take control of the city."

Thereupon, the shrill cry of three firebeasts erupted in the midst of battle.

Roars of triumph from the Meereenese freedmen and queen's loyalists were heard suddenly in all spaces of the capital. "The Mhysa! She has come with her dragons! Rescuer—the queen of Meereen has arrived!" It was as if stoutheartedness had graciously invaded the frames of those fighting for the last bastion of liberated men in that bay of slaves. The Meereenese and their allies fought back with their own catapults, held the giant bolts, nocked flaming arrows and released them to attackers, blocked points of entry with the strength of a hundred thousand, though their number was far from this.

"Mhysa! Mhysa!" cried the soldiers as they carried on with defenses and assaults.

"The old gods of Ghis cower!" Symon Stripeback yelled in exuberance. "The dragon queen is here! We have won the war, Commander Mormont!"

Jorah's brows were heavily creased. Even after the Yunkish slavers have burned his face with their demon mask, his eyes had never failed him. His stare was fixated on those beasts that the Meereenese claimed were the queen's.

Those dragons—cerulean, dark amethyst, sparkling blood.

Daenerys's dragons were the color of jade, ivory, and midnight.

Those cerulean and dark amethyst dragons circled the bay and began spewing fire on the Meereenese fleet, burning sails and hulls and men. Burnt wood and carcasses meshed with the salt of the Summer Sea.

The dragon whose color is that of sparkling blood rushed in flight towards the city, evading the arrows and spears thrown in its way, fleeting and dispensing deadly dragonflame from its large orifices to the attackers.

Within seconds, a quarter of the city of Meereen was devoured by fire in all directions.

War dragons—Valyria aiding its colony of Old Harpy. Dragonlords.

Jorah gripped the railings of the watchtower tight, as he watched the gates of the city fall.
Forgive me, Daenerys.

I have failed.

For a city of scattered islands north of the Stepstones, it was once more the Century of Blood.

All that had transpired were chronicled through the innocent eyes of a Tyroshi girl, who was then frolicking with the other young near the Fountain of the Drunken God. Animated exchanges in corrupted High Valyrian enlivened the still air that had gone wintry: Here is a pear brandy; some cinnamon, saffron, all from the straits; armorsmiths are right off the square, turn left from the fount.

The girl's eyes feasted on the sights. The city was in its usual dynamics and colors, and with the recent pact signed with Braavos, the nobles of Tyrosh were slowly purging the system of slavery from their city's soil.

Deafening sounds of warhorns were heard asudden from the Bleeding Tower that overlooked the harbor of the free city, followed by a whorl of unthinkable panic. The girl turned her head to the sound, but before her eyes could make out the source of uproar, a mighty blaze had swallowed the nearby Temple of Trios and the statue of the three-headed god.

Mere two days have passed since the sack of Meereen, and now, the lords of Valyria have turned their unsparring eyes towards Tyrosh, a most loyal ally to the Braavosi. Its high walls and fortresses that had protected the city for much of its existence will do it no good now that dragonfire will wreak catastrophe. Even the city's inner walls made of dragonstone will melt at the touch of those inexorable flames, matters not if those stones are more resilient than the strongest of steels or the hardest of diamonds.

Helpless whimpers escaped from the child's throat; her eyes burned with tears.

The last thing she heard was the cry of beasts, along with the slicing of their wings through air. She closed her eyes and knelt, as a deluge of fire surged to where she was and swallowed her whole.

Dragonmont, the 'damp and dreary' as those residing in Dragonstone would call it, reeked of its usual volcanic brimstone and sulfur, its low growls reaching the peaceful Sea Dragon Tower of gargoyles and black iron gates. Beneath it are green, red, and purple obsidian—dragonglass, according to old pages inked by the hands of maesters. The entire castle that was once the stronghold of the Baratheons is now held by one from the blood of dragon conquerors—a female Targaryen, from the very clan purged from the kingdoms during the rebellion.

It was recounted by some who had witnessed the besieging that the Stone Drum at the center keep kept on pounding the whole night even in the absence of storms. The last time it had released such hammering sound was during the Dance of the Dragons, when firebeasts still roamed the skies of the Stone, and when Rhaenerys still held the seat.

Some rumors even went so far as the awakening of the army of the grotesque—the sculpted designs of the castle's towers consisting of demons, griffins, hellhounds, and minotaurs. It seemed as if the structure began breathing once more when those three firebeasts landed upon the shores of the island.

Maester Pylos never believed Cressen's tale of those gargantuan statues of manticores and wyverns coming to life, but when the one they call the Mother of Dragons reclaimed the castle where she was born, bringing with her a whole army of Essosi and an Ironborn Fleet, the creepy statues' eyes by the Great Hall seemed to glow, and their mouths appeared to be opening and closing in joyous laughter.
Another maester has come to offer services to the dragon queen—Marwyn the Mage, the Citadel's greatest believer of magic.

Now, Daenerys Targaryen sat at the raised seat of the Painted Table with a carved-out detailed map of the Seven Kingdoms.

There was Barristan Selmy on her right, and Greyworm on her left. Beside the Unsullied commander was Qharo, second in command to the perished Jhaqo of the Dothraki, and in front of them, surveying the map and moving the markers in various locations in the Reach and the Crownlands, were Paxter Redwyne of the Arbor who was once at the courts of Aegon the Sixth in Pentos, and Victarion Greyjoy.

Discussions about conquest had turned to sour disputations—Redwyne was lord admiral to Tommen I Baratheon before he defected to the Targaryen claimants, and such position he did not obtain by listening to propositions from bastards and squids, castrated soldiers, barbarian mounters. "I have sent two of my men to the capital, and just last night the ravens have returned according to Maester Pylos. A hundred ships were docked in the port of Rosby close to the Blackwater, with krakens painted on the hulls, sigils as well. That is clarity enough," he turned his head to Victarion who was then silently listening to his rants, expressionless; then, to a stern-faced Daenerys. "Either the position of the Ironborn as regards this conquest is divided, or this Greyjoy here plans to mislead the Targaryens. As it is, the Redwyne Fleet had already lost a number of its ships because of the Ironborn's taking of the Shield Islands!"

Victarion chuckled and shook his head. "I thought you folks from the Reach are more learned than most considering how close you are to the Citadel," he replied, leaning forward onto the Painted Table. "Would I risk an entire fleet against hundreds of ships in the Slaver's Bay if our desire for alliance with the Targaryens is far from genuine?"

"We owe you that, indeed," Barristan said. "Do enlighten us about those ships in the capital. We do not wish to question your intents any further."

"I want Euron out of the seat in the Iron Islands," Victarion's response was firm. "The kingsmoot was lawful but the results were folly. Letting my treacherous crow of a brother take over the Pyke is exposing Targaryen rule to possible collapse even before half the conquest takes its shape. The Ironborn will never benefit from Euron's rule. I did not follow the queen all over to just stab her in the back afterwards—I'm not the kind to waste my time. Pray, what would I get after knifing the queen?" He smirked. "Her dragons that obey nobody else but her?"

Daenerys merely stared at every face, assessing the motives of each one, the games they play, the end which they seek. These men have pledged their loyalty to her, some have fought with her, yet Viserys's words rang clear in her ears and clung to her heart like it was uttered just yesterday:

*Trust no one.*

She sighed. *One voice may speak you false but there is always truth to be found.*

She had never known youth and the bliss of it, she was sold to a clan of warlords who despise weakness; hence, to show fierceness is as imperative as breathing. People think her proud. How would they not? There was nothing left in her but pride. The half-man knew it too, that had she been weak or at the slightest, capitulating, she would have died with her brother. Rather than destroying her, the throes of her life had formed her—she had survived the grief of losing a husband and a child, assassins and sorcerers, a whole war against slavers. She had walked into fire and emerged with three dragons and a few burns. From then on and even prior to that, her intents were set on Westeros.
The rage was strongest during the days of Astapor and Yunkai, and had waivered significantly during her reigning days in Meereen. Those were the days when her dragons had gone defiant, Drogon especially, as if questioning her ownership of him as her spawned. Viserion and Rhaegal could have followed suit had they not been shackled in the dragonpits under the great pyramid.

*If that Aegon Targaryen claimant is a charlatan, then why would his dragon's blood be that strong as to challenge my hold of the firebeasts I have birthed in the pyre?*

The Silver Queen used to be one of those who dismissed the return of the lords of Valyria as nothing other than a canard meant to amuse. She had heard accounts, even the Greyjoy seemed to believe in the telling, and even went so far as to inform her that his brother is collaborating with them. Those riders were once imperial warlords, and it is said that *all* dragons obey their call.

Now, she is one of the strong believers of it.

Their end game was clear—bondage of an unthinkable kind, the very concept and system the Silver Queen sought to crush in the Slaver's Bay.

It had been a week since she last received the dreadful news about the fall of Meereen. The second siege had weakened the city's garrisons, and a third attack was more than what it could endure. Meereen's forces were only twenty thousand strong—Unsullied and ones in-training, Stormcrows and Windblown, the Second Sons. With them were the freedmen companies and some pit fighters. A very small number compared to thirty-seven commanders, legions of New Ghis, the Qartheen Fleet, Tolos and Elyria, sellsword companies, Mantarys, Volantis.

And three dragons.

*An overkill,* Daenerys Targaryen clenched her teeth at the thought. *The Valyrian way—very much like what they did to Old Ghis, the Free Cities, Rhoyne.*

How Shavepate of Meereen's city watch escaped from the war and the horrors of it, and managed to sail from the Gulf of Grief to Sunspear was beyond Daenerys. He reached Dragonstone in tattered raiments and an almost wretched state, for days he had survived with a few nuts for sustenance. Then, Boneway to kingsroad to Dragonstone. A few fishers brought him to the harbor of the Stone after declaring that he is from the queen's courts in Meereen, and then he collapsed facedown to the dockside afterwards. He was brought to the castle and was instantly recognized by the commander of the Unsullied.

"The young ones they gave to the sellswords to serve as bedslaves, some they sold to the wealthy settlers in New Ghis. Those they failed to sear to death, they dragged in chains to Yunkai," he had told the queen after being fed and tended to. "From there, they would sail to Valyria. I was once noble, and I know my stories of antiquity. Now that the Fourteen Flames are once more breathing, bondage will witness its own rebirth."

The mother in her wanted to weep. Meereen was a city of strange men with strange hair and even stranger gods; it was never her home. Yet only in her short rule did those people regain a glimpse of lost abodes and histories once more, and liberty—an abstract concept—they had almost 'touched with their bare fingers' as she heard them say when she came. Weeping would solve nothing.

*I cannot do this alone,* she thought, and felt her heart being twisted to painful knots.

"Where was Daario during the battle?" She asked, and struggled to keep her expression neutral.

Shavepate's eyes widened for a fraction of a second, apparently surprised with her query. "Before the
third siege he sailed for Westeros. I thought he is here with you, my queen—"

"Jorah?" she asked, and cursed inwardly for hearing her voice break.

Shavepate bowed, shook his head. "He was at the watchtower when the dragons came, my queen. The tower was torched by th—"

"Rest, Skahaz mo Kandaq," Daenerys cut him, not wanting to hear any more of the fates of her most trusted two. She struggled against howling in utter woe. Had Daario betrayed her? Is Jorah still alive, escaped mayhap somewhere?

Those dragonlords have reclaimed the Slaver's Bay, built from the ashes of the Old Ghis which Valyria had once crushed. The harpies taught the dragons the ways of slavers, the dragons then enslaved the harpies. The opulent luxury, the culture of floating on pleasure barges and hosting ostentatious gatherings, the tongue peppered with slaver's argot—all these they sought to regain by allying themselves with each other.

_Their grand scheme is to repeat history, and rewrite it with themselves as victors._

It's only a matter of time before they turn their eyes on Westeros.

Disputation to full-blown dissension. Daenerys was then brought back to the present. Now, the members of the queen's council in her seat at Dragonstone and the envoys were hurling vile words at each other, hammering their fists against the Painted Table, sending markers flying to this direction and that, prompting three Unsullied stationed at the eastern threshold to tighten their hold of their spears.

"Enough."

One word from Daenerys salvaged all from the brink of a possible bloody conflict.

Her eyes once more roamed unhurriedly to those present, settling upon Victarion Greyjoy's face. "To your aid in Meereen, we are most grateful. However, conquest cannot survive on indebtedness alone, much should be considered. Necessity would certainly make allies out of enemies, but the smallest of things could make enemies out of allies," the Targaryen Queen shifted her hard-line gaze towards Paxter and the envoy from House Velaryon. "Fighting with us doesn't mean fighting for us. We know the stench of double-dealers—a hint of treachery and I would not think twice about turning the Redwyne and Ironborn Fleet to soot. Ships are replaceable. You may wish to place yourselves on the other side of battle, no one will stop you." She sat upright, raised her chin just a little and spoke to Victarion. "Now, the Shield Islands were taken by the Ironborns from the opposing faction. They are as prepared as we are in besieging the Reach. Euron Greyjoy is in King's Landing, no doubt courting the Iron Throne's council. As we speak, they may be planning to haul Westerosi commoners by the hundreds to be sold as slaves to Essos. We cannot delay this any further; I say we proceed straight to the capital through the Blackwater—"

"The very strategy they would expect you to adopt," a voice from the western threshold said. All heads turned to the source—Tyrion Lannister. He walked to the gathering and seated himself beside Barristan Selmy, but the queen didn't seem to mind because the halfman was welcomed numerous times in her courts and has provided excellent advice on various matters. "Believe me, the Royal Fleet and Euron's will burn all our ships with wildfire the moment we're eighth of a league from the shores of the capital. Been there, done that. Stannis lost his ships because of those alchemists. Ah! Dragons, you say? Euron Greyjoy does have the support of the lords of Valyria—your kin, pardon me."
Daenerys did not bother hiding her amusement. *Always an entrance,* she thought. She cleared her throat, raised her brows at the Imp. "I believe he would be arriving tomorrow night from Pentos?"

Another voice was heard in that chamber. "Sailed a week early, rode a day early."

His arms were folded across his chest, his right shoulder was leaning against the steel door's mullpost. Despite his casual stance and simple accoutrement, the regal air about him was undeniable. Wrap a Targaryen conqueror with sackcloth and he will wear it like king's robe.

Barristan Selmy stood abruptly, then placed his hand on the edge of the Painted Table to keep himself from falling. His eyes were agog. "Dear heavens," he whispered. "*He does look like his father…*"

Rhaegar's scion smiled at the old man kindly. "Ser Barristan," he inclined his head to the side. "A pleasure."

The old knight just swallowed and tightened his hold of the table's edge, lest he collapses. There is no weapon stronger than flame, and a human soul worthy enough to carry it. *Two souls,* Ser Barristan thought to himself. *Here with me are two souls afire—from the blood of Aegon the Conqueror himself.*

"*Gentlemen,*" Tyrion Lannister spoke. "Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of his Name—besieged the Stormlands, obtained by birthright the fealty of Dorne, secured alliances with the Free Cities. As his personal mouthpiece, let me tell you all," he smirked, bowed. "*You are very much welcome.*"

Daenerys Targaryen regarded Aegon the Sixth with a passive expression, even as the thick blood in her veins was screaming of recognition and acceptance. May the gods forgive her, but the depth of this feeling of kindredship she never experienced even with Viserys, with whom she had spent almost her entire life. It was as if a thousand fibers connected her with this lad, like unbreakable threads of affinity. *I cannot do this alone,* she voiced out that truth once more. *Even Aegon the Conqueror had Rhaenys and Visenya by his side.* The linkage between them springs from roots that have gone deep in the soils of the land where dragon conquerors have settled, such that the mightiest frost could not reach them. What existed between her and this Aegon the Sixth is one inescapable garment of fate.

Those visions in the House of the Undying played once more in her head. *The third,* a voice hissed in her ears. *Trueborn.*

Now, dragon dreams come to her even in her state of sleeplessness. Here is the one whose act of summoning her dragons obey, as if such call was from her, the mother that bore them from fire and blood.

Aegon the Sixth walked closer to the Painted Table, stood face to face with the Silver Queen who rose from her seat. "Daenerys Targaryen," he said with his usual eloquence. His bearing was commanding yet his countenance was sincere. "*Kith and kin.*"

She smiled. "*The blade that was broken shall be reforged; the dead, reborn.*"

He laughed softly, nodded his agreement to Daenerys's words. "*And the crownless shall once more be crowned.*"

Daenerys held out her hand, as if to bid Aegon the Sixth to her. "Welcome home, Aegon the Sixth Targaryen."

The lad clasped the woman's hand with both of his, brought it to his lips—a sign of appreciation, of
reverence and acknowledgment. Their tapestry of being is one; and it would take more than the strongest of unbelief, a seed of doubt that had turned into a full-grown hardwood, more than wandering dragon's wings to release one from the bonds and duties of kinship.

"Yes, Daenerys," he replied. "Home. And this home is in serious peril."

They were received by Dennett and Notch, who were assigned to keep watch that night. "Hold it right there," Notch said, gesturing with his left hand. His fingers tightened their grip on his sword's handle, as his eyes assayed the Lorathi and the Stormcrow, lingering on the girl's face. "Call Harwin and the pretty knight here," he ordered a lad who was keeping watch with them.

"Pretty knight?" Arya asked him with a good-humored tone. "You have a new recruit? A hedge knight, perchance? Lord Beric hates any man whose face is closest to that of the knight of flowers." She smiled congenially. "Much have changed about me, I suppose. No recollections? At all? I was here when the Hound was given trial by combat."

"You seem to know a lot about the internal affairs of the brotherhood, lady," Dennett remarked, walking closer to the three. His eyes narrowed, his brows creased in his assessment of her. "Yet, I could not dare say that I remember you at all."

Before Arya could answer, the lad had returned, and with him were Harwin and Lem. "The Lady Stoneheart?" Harwin asked the lad as they walked towards the mouth of the cave. "Why would these men even need to see the Lady Stoneheart? Must be mad! These are not riverfolks, otherwise they would know she's now a ghoul." He looked up, paused with his steps. Darkness had enveloped the outside, and only moonrise and torchlight from within the cavern illumined the mouth of hard stones and dirt faintly, allowing him to see the faces of those uninvited three. The howling of wolves nearby sent chills to his marrows, as his memories went back to the resurrection of Mother Merciless by the Fork. That very night stole all his will to sleep and dream.

Harwin narrowed his eyes as he walked closer, and in only a matter of seconds, recognition dawned on him. "You," he trod to the cavern's mouth despite the warnings of his comrades. Snow had fallen hard and beasts lurked closer when there is no fire. His face cast back images of shock, denial, then acceptance. "You're Arya Stark! You're Lady Ary—Notch, call the Blackfish in here, quick!" he barked out the orders, then turned his attention back to her. "Not Lyanna—Arya Stark! You weren't lost at all, never died…the Hound—"

"He did nothing to me apart from holding me hostage," Arya replied, relieved that Harwin still knew her. Years it had been since they both traveled to the capital from Winterfell, as he was one of the House Stark's retinues. Years too, since they last saw each other in that very cavern. "I was not raped. And as you can see, I am very much alive."

"Harwin, my good friend, let us in please," Jaqen requested, spoke as if he had fought numerous battles with the man for years. The Lorathi walked closer and some of the brothers backed off a few steps, a trace of alarm upon their faces, an unidentifiable fear seeping through their bones akin to the trepidation they felt when Catelyn Stark rose. "Winter air blows harshly, we need the warmth of your cave. We have traveled far from Essos," he gestured to Daario. "We came here at the Lady Arya's behest."

"Lady Catelyn Stark," Daario was straightforward. "She's alive?"

Harwin's eyes moved to Lem, then to Arya. Her expression was hopeful, and none can blame her—in any state she must see the unCat, and maybe only then could the rancor and vengefulness of the woman's character reborn be redirected to a path that is evenhanded. But even the Lady Arya is a
work of antipathy, Harwin thought. Eddard Stark's death saw to that.

He nodded. "See her for yourself."

Dennett and the other brothers moved aside and allowed them in. Their shadows created by moonlight dissolved as they entered the crevice. The tunnel that leads to the heart of the cavern was dank, and smelled of bat roost. It was as she had remembered it—ovoid, with rough ridges for walls, large rocks littering the floor of thick soil. Even their steps echoed against the stone walls, bouncing before being swallowed by the overgrown roots of heart trees.

They were led to the second opening. Two brothers entered the cavern's heart to request audience with the Lady. They all stood waiting at the mouth of the cranny and there stood Dennett's pretty knight. Arya Stark gasped as she beheld his face.

"Gendry!"

The knight was equally astounded. She lives, he thought as his heart leaped. Like the Lady Catelyn, she has returned. Arya Stark gasped as she beheld his face.

"Arya Stark."

A rarity was brought to him by the gods—she grinned back.

"Ah well, you're not mad anymore, are you?" Gendry teased, as he strode closer to her. He ruffled her hair, and evaded a slap on his hand.

"Hey!" the girl protested, fixed her hair and glanced quickly to the redhead, whose mouth now formed a thin line. Gendry raised his brows in surprise at Arya's mindfulness over her own appearance in front of the man. "Mad at you? Of course, I still am. You bailed out on me," she retorted, though her voice was with certain lightness.

"It had to be that way—"

"I know," Arya cut him, her soft gaze reassuring, forgiving. "Naught to worry about—we all had to go on our own separate ways. I had my own path to take and you had yours, it was unfair of me to pull you to an end that you would not have wanted for yourself—I'm just glad you did not come with me to the Twins, Hot Pie too; you could have died. We all could have."

The lad nodded as relief flooded his heart. "Where have you been all this time? The Hound—"

"Braavos," she replied thriftily, then glanced back once more to the two men. "Daario Naharis, Stormcrow. And you know Jaqen H'ghar," she paused and considered appropriate entitlements—Lorathi assassin, archon-heir of Valyria, descendant of the lord of light? All of those, and this too. She smiled. "My spouse."
Ser Gendry's eyes grew as he chuckled in amusement. "You're married!" A Lorathi criminal, too.
More than her now womanly appearance, it was the core of her that proved to Gendry that the one
standing before him is Arya Stark, for had it been a woman with her face accompanied by a noble-
on-steed, he would not have believed it was she.

But a Lorathi criminal she had saved from a burning cage? The lad knew about Arya Stark's
obsession of the man. In all days at Harrenhal she would look for him and turn the whole castle
upside down in her search:

"Where's Jaqen?"

"Have you seen Jaqen?"

"Jaqen can get us out Harrenhal."

Jaqen, Jaqen, Jaqen.

Jaqen here and there.

Only the gods knew how Gendry struggled to not blow lemon cake grits everytime he would hear
that name rolling out of her tongue like tasty, spicy soup. It was not that he minded Arya's curious
penchant for the man, it was only that he was worried especially when after the Tickler's death,
Amory Lorch had ordered the inquisition of men who may be involved, and some were either
tortured to death or hanged. "That man is dangerous, Arya," Gendry had told her numerous times
when they had the chance to be alone in Weese's kitchen. The girl was too stubborn. "Dangerous?
How could you call a man whispering things in your ear and kissing you gently on the hair
'dangerous'?"

"He kissed you?!"

"Yes," Arya shrugged, feigning indifference. "He's actually sweeter than he likes to let on, you
know?"

"Ugh!" was Gendry's response. "He's calling you lovely girl, he's kissing you, he vows to kill men
for you—his intentions are clear. He's fond of young girls on his bed!"

He remembered Arya hitting his head with a cleave's handle after those words. "I'm not that young
and he's not that old! You look so much older than he does! And Jaqen is not like that!"

Hell, yes, Gendry laughed inwardly at the thought of them being married. Jaqen is not like that.

Arya also laughed congenially; without her intentions she had read the knight, and found his
thoughts quite diverting. "I must marry for me to have a spouse, yes?" It was true. In all times and
turfs she and Jaqen are married, in all frameworks of the word union—a consortium of the woman
and the man, a covenant between two gods through their progenies. The bond is unbreakable; it was
conceived even before their present bodies were born out of dust and the breath of deities.

Jaqen H'ghar walked to Gendry, extended a hand and smiled warmly. "Long time. By the looks of
you a man daresays you can still recall him?"

Ser Gendry accepted his convivial gesture. "Indeed, ser." He strained against the contact of their
skins, as if some life force of inexplicable kind emanated from the man. "On behalf of the
brotherhood, I welcome you." The knight walked to Daario and extended his greetings.

Harwin returned from the tunnel that led to the center of the cavern with two others. Arya Stark
cannot recognize the man clothed with raiments seen worn by most riverfolks. Blackfish Tully perchance, her uncle. She had heard Harwin's orders to the lad before they were let in.

However, the other one…

If in ages you have not seen her, and you have dismissed all possibilities and impossibilities of ever seeing her again, would you stop saying that she is kin to you?

No…no…

The weirwoods spoke in a coaxing whisper, and the mouth of the cave allowed the echoes of it within the burrows where forgotten men find their dwelling. Blood of my blood, not a thing only for the Dothraki, she thought. Mayhaps, the waters of the Trident now lick the embankments, and with their soft, admonishing roars speak of how all must be cast aside in the name of kinship, in the name of family.

"Arya…"

They had very little in common, if at all, even before the both of them had agreed to differ. This cannot be helped. In their being apart and in their differences they had found exactly that which they lacked. Invisible threads connected one wolf to another—the lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. This connection is one of those the greatest lunacy of this world cannot touch, much less ride roughshod over.

"Did you know that one time I thought of kissing you and begging your pardons like a proper lady?" Arya said upon laying eyes on Sansa. Her smiling lips were trembling, but she spoke nevertheless. "You would like that, I am well convinced."

Sansa laughed, shook her head and fought against crying.

She was still horrible at containing herself, but seeing her close to tears without holding any resentment towards her made Arya’s already overwhelmed emotions escalate once more to heights. "I would very much like that," her sister said. "But I would still prefer the usual horseplay—spiked chamomile tea, and your ghoulish threat that I might die of poison before the night ends. Then, I would sneak into your chambers and hold your hand and beg that I be allowed to sleep beside you. The mad giggles afterwards."

Arya’s rich chortles shook the bats out of their roosts, and they flew all over the cavern's ceiling before entering another one of the crannies. "And the sheep dung in your bedlinen?"

"That too," Sansa replied in between fits of giggles. "Had my revenge, though. I hid your collection of threads underneath my skirts the next morn; Septa Mordane made you do three extra crochets that time."

Her eyes widened at the confession. "Hah! That was you? Poor Rickon—I blamed him for the most of it!"

"Why would Rickon even be interested with rose-colored threads, Arya?" Sansa still smiled, as she held her longskirts and walked to where she was standing.

Arya too, slowly crossed the distance between them. "To make a ball of yarn out of it, perchance? He always thought of Shaggydog as a furry cat."

Both of them laughed and laughed as if it was the only cure for a multitude of hurts, as if to do it is to be alone with the gods and experience the connection of all men through that isolation. They locked
each other in a tight embrace, and they still laughed—loud and deep, erasing all hurts from the past, forgetting all blames.

The men watched as the two murmured their sincere words of reparations, forgiveness. Arya thought of the safety she always felt when Jaqen was with her, but the warmth of her sister's arms around her gave her a certain form of invulnerability, a boldness even, and a thirst to do anything within what her strength would allow so they could never once more part. All her life she thought their connection to be nothing more than their bedchambers' shared wall back in Winterfell—no mutual love or fondness of the simplest kind.

Yet now, Arya thought, she would scour the realms to find Sansa's princely knight—the most handsome and gallant and tenderhearted of them all. Should that princely knight refuse, she would threaten him with a quick dagger-slash on the throat, and let Jaqen in on her plans too, just to be sure. *Sansa is my sister; mine to torment and mine to defend.* Arya giggled as Sansa cupped her cheeks and placed light kisses upon her forehead. "Sweet Arya," she heard her sister say. *I could wear ridiculous corsets and bodices and stupid skirts should Sansa wish. We could talk about embroideries till blush of day. We could ask one of the Northern bards to sing—she could dance all evening and I could watch her.*

Arya never needed to explain anything to her. She never told Sansa her hopes and desires and the depths of these, but somehow, her sister knows. *She had always known.*

"Mother…" Arya whispered against Sansa's chest. "She is here?"

"Yes."

"Good," Arya looked up and smiled. "I have so much to tell you." Her eyes slowly cruised to the red-haired man who was now engaged in a casual conversation with the unusually animated Lem and Harwin. "And there's someone I want you both to meet."

The comely one wearing Vylarr's face cursed at the last of Euron Greyjoy's words. He stood abruptly and exited the room, leaving the three courtesans dumbfounded. "M'lord!" Genna called out to him, putting on her robe in haste. "Oh, but were you not pleased with the act?" She ran towards the hall to follow the knight. "We could commence with pleasuring you, you need only say!" Genna knew that should they fail to entice a patron and lose him in the middle of the art, they would all be denied of a full evening's repast, and their services for the entire day would not be paid. "M'lord, please!"

Vylarr turned back to her and fished something from his breech pocket. The satchel could very well fit in his hand; nonetheless, it was considerably heavy and full of Westerosi coins sufficient for a moon's decent meal for three, payment for around a week's stay in any inn. He tossed it to Genna who caught it with both hands. "Ride towards the South—Stormlands or Dorne. Take Daisy and Kayla with you. Trust me, it's only a matter of time before they haul you all to Essos."

"M'lord, what are you even—"

"Let's go, brother," the Waif wearing Mirelle's face emerged from the adjacent chamber, locked it, and walked towards the common hall. Less complications now—she hid Meryn Trant's body inside one of the larger wardrobes, and liberally poured one ensorcelled concoction all over it that would veil it from plain sight. The days have gone cold because of the looming winter, the chamber would start reeking of cadaver by then and the incantation would lose its effect. It would be a whole day
before the majordomo and the brothelkeeper himself would realize the droopy-eyed knight's quiet
demise; the two Faceless would be halfway towards the riverlands should that discovery happen. She
paused with her steps when she heard Vylarr walking towards the opposite direction—towards the
fourth chamber where Littlefinger and Greyjoy were. "Aegeus?" she called. "Aegeus!"

The man was unheeding, and the Waif knew that any time now those conspirators would walk out of
the room. Aegeus's fingers were now touching the crossguard of his longsword, traveling up to its
grip. His wrathful breathing thickened the dank air of the brothel.

Somehow, the Waif knew that Garin the Great had overtaken the Handsome Man's facelessness.

"Get inside the chamber, Genna," the face of Mirelle spoke.

"What is happening?"

"Now!"

The courtesan obeyed and pushed the two others inside, secured the latch. Despite that submission,
her eyes had found their way to the door's small rectangular slit that served as the Littlefinger's
viewer.

The Waif grabbed the Handsome Man by the arm and forced him to turn to her. "Aegeus!" Despite
her firm grip, her forceful pulls, he was still unyielding. "Information, the Elder's orders were clear.
Nothing more."

"That's because he knows nothing yet of the information!" Aegeus seethed. "A slaver's empire,
Sabine, east to west. The Elder would not object to us ending two of the monster's seven snake heads
once and for all."

"We cannot!" Sabine whispered her fury. "As soon as those dragonlords learn about the death of two
of their ringleaders here in Westeros, they will no doubt bring their dragons to Braavos and set the
Isle of the Gods ablaze faster than we could sail back. The temple must not burn," She pulled him to
her with all the force she could gather, held his face with both hands. "The Second Spice War is
over, and Valyria won. This is not Chroyane and your life as Garin is done; don't make the same
mistake twice. If we act without thinking—Aegeus!" she hissed as the comely one started breaking
away from her hold.

The door opened to reveal the Littlefinger and Euron.

Damn this, she cursed. Standing here like sleuthhounds caught in the act is not only suspicious—it's
a call for suicide.

There were very few options.

Sabine leaped onto Aegeus and pinned him against the wall opposite the third chamber. She
wrapped her legs around the man's waist and crushed her lips against his, pushed her tongue inside
his mouth, as her right hand reached for the thick needle placed in her skirt pocket. Aegeus held her
wrist firmly—that needle should not at the slightest, come in contact with his skin. He was adept of
the woman's poison techniques, that needle was no doubt dipped in lower Viperidae—the same
poison she had used against them in Pentos. The concoction was diluted with neutral liquid
perchance, and so the effects of it would be far from fatal. Still, the poison calms and benumbs.

The Handsome Man growled as he struggled to free himself from the woman's unswayable grasp,
careful not to inflict upon her any sort of pain—nay, he could never hurt Sabine; and he toiled too, in
order to repress the lust that was slowly building within him, no doubt evoked so efficiently by the
woman. The Black Pearl had trained her; he had trained her. "Damn it!" the man cursed as the face of Mirelle bit his lower lip. They both heard the Littlefinger chuckle with delight.

"Ah, I can see the lord knight is enjoying our Mirelle," the brothelkeeper remarked, observing the amorous exchange. "But where are our manners?" He slapped the courtesan's behind. "We have chambers for this purpose, my love!"

Mirelle broke away from the kiss, giggled and untangled herself from Vylarr, who was able to successfully obtain the needle from her through sleight of hand. "Oh! Pardon me, m'lord. I must have forgotten!" She moved and gently yanked the knight's hand; however, he did not bend to her commanding acts. Instead, he stared at Petyr Baelish with deep loathing, and turned his malevolent glare towards Euron Greyjoy.

The Ironborn angled his head to the side and raked the two with a malicious stare. His left eye that used to be patched was then uncovered. "Have you been to Qarth, my friend?" he asked Vylarr.

Despite himself, the Handsome Man managed to respond in carefully controlled rage. "I'm afraid I have never had that privilege. I am but a sworn knight—meaning I stay where my liege lord stays."

"They would not call Qarth the queen of cities for nothing," the face of Mirelle offered, caressing Vylarr's cheek and planting a light kiss at the side of his mouth. "Wonders made by men—"

"Beautiful things, beautiful," Euron interrupted, his eyes never leaving the knight's face. He allowed his gaze to shamelessly linger on the man's brows, his eyes, nose, lips. "Triple-sculpted walls, colorful harbors, marble bathing pools, scrying towers and mazes." Euron walked closer to Mirelle and ran two fingers across the woman's cleavage. Very slowly, he traced the roundness of the woman's breast. Euron's lip tipped up as he observed the knight exhaling in ire. "Best of all—warlocks."

"Hands off," the Handsome Man ordered. "You didn't pay for this one."

The Littlefinger nodded to one sentry standing by the common hall. At the brothelkeeper's silent command, the sentry departed to summon Greyjoy's Ironborn escorts.

"True, I did not," Euron smirked. "Neither did you." At this, he pulled Mirelle to him, ignoring how aghast the courtesan was at such gesture, for he knew it was all feigned. He ran his calloused fingers through the woman's locks, smelled them as if they were bathed with sea and salt, and of the seed of kraken reavers. "You see, when I was trading with the merchants of Qarth the warlocks made me drink this goblet of thick, blue wine that was said to wash the caul from off my eyes so I may see higher truths."

The Handsome Man stiffened at Euron Greyjoy's revelation, and he thought that he would break his teeth from gritting them too hard.

Shade of the evening.

"I dragged four of those warlocks to my ship—fed one to the rest just for the sake of it," he continued, cold laughter escaping from his pale, blue lips. He inhaled the scent of Mirelle's neck, ran his tongue along the skin of it. His inexorable eyes bore on Vylarr's fake face once more. "And the other three that were left, I ate."

At these words, the Handsome Man roared his rampage and drew out his daggers. Euron's hysterical laughter meshed with the outcry of the courtesans and their patrons by the grand chamber, as eight Ironborns appeared at the other end of the hallway carrying longspears, poleaxes, and halberds.
"Aegeus," Sabine spoke calmly in Rhoynar, struggling against Euron's relentless hold. "He can see through our faces. He carries the rune of those warlocks he feasted on. Shade of the evening—clearer apperceptions, visions. He has all these."

"You twisted animal," the Handsome Man seethed. "I will cut you into damnable pieces!"

Sabine threw her head back and it landed solidly on Euron's face. She attempted to unsheathe her daggers but he was quick, beating her thin blades aside and bringing the edge of his own rapier to play.

Daggers flew from Aegeus's grip and landed solidly on the base of the throat of three. A longspear flew to him, which he evaded but not without the blade of it pushing through the links of his hauberk, injuring his right arm. Angered by the wound, he unsheathed his sword and hammered it against the man's chest until the latter spat out blood, before dissevering the man's head from his body.

The dead sprawled back, headless and akin to a limp doll.

He heard Sabine scream in pain as a quarrel hit her straight in the shoulder. She had withstood the impact, he could tell, but the thumping pulse of his heart warned him of the clacking sound of a crossbow being cocked from the other end of the hall.

She collapsed on the floor.

What was left of the armed men charged forward from the other side. Euron straddled her and held Sabine's head with both hands, in an attempt to bash her skull.

Shade of the evening had gifted him with heightened sense. The Crow's Eye looked back and in time evaded a downward slash from the Aegeus's longsword. He fended off the attack with his own rapier and rolled to the side with nothing but a gash on his battle-scarred face. The Ironborn was back on his feet in less than a second, and delivered a series of harsh counterblows through his thick, lochaber axe.

"Aegeus!" Sabine called, as the man's back collided hard against the wall. The axe was too heavy for the longsword to thwart. *Such adroitness,* the woman thought. *This Greyjoy stinks of black magic, he's able to anticipate a Faceless Man's assails.* "No!" she shrieked as Euron Greyjoy struck Aegeus hard with the thick blade straight on the chest.

Blood came out in wild spatters from the comely one's mouth. His wasted body sank onto the floor, his breathing came in violent gasps.

A poniard found its way from Sabine's hand to Euron's back, stealing his focus away. The man bellowed in agony. *Brother!* The woman heard herself call as she threw herself onto the comely one's almost lifeless body…

The Waif picked up a handful of reddish talc from her hidden satchel. Hastily, she strewed every particle of it in all directions. Onyx-hued smoke swirled all over the two Faceless Men, coiling around them both, swallowing them whole.

Seconds later, they had vanished. What was left were traces of black soot whorling and snaking about. The dark mist dissipated with Euron's mad screams.

He stood up, spat out blood. "Get me the obsidian candle!" he ordered one of the men. He hissed as he pulled the poniard out of the flesh of his back. With force, he flung it against the stone wall. The strength of the impact broke the blade away from the hilt.
I must speak with the Valyrians. Those Braavosi assassins are here.

They say that there is a story to all, and all stories begin with her.

There was that ugly scar on Arya's right knee, which Robb had named 'The Buffoon'. Its shape was that of a laughing face with a jester's hat, and Robb used to pester her with his usual mockeries about it. When it was still a flesh wound, her oldest brother had sworn that he would always see the ugly lesion moving, juggling distractedly, unknowingly walking off to the edge of a cliff. "That's because the jester is careless, Arya," her brother had told her. "The jester doesn't listen to the advice of the wise to not steal horses while the stablemaster is busy with the newbreeds. She forgets that Ser Rodrik can smell tracks of both girls and their mounts even when the snow is knee-deep."

Arya remembered begging Robb to not tell Lady Catelyn—this was a third offense, and the lady of the house promised her a good chastening should she learn of anything akin to another mischief. Arya was almost crippled by that fall. "Half a boy, half a wolf pup," her dear mother had always said this about her. "You collect scabs twice as much as the other girls collect dolls!"

It was not Robb who told the Lady about her antics. It was Hullen, their master of horses.

Arya recalled very little about how exactly she got that injury. What played vividly in her remembrances was the argument thereafter. "Flesh wounds don't kill, Cat," the girl had heard Ned say behind the closed doors of their family hall. "Tell Arya not to do a thing and she would do it. It's wolf-blood—Lyanna had a touch of it, and Brandon more than a touch." Her mother's scoff was too embittered. "Wolf-blood, indeed," was her sour retort. "And that brought your siblings to their early graves!"

Arya shook her head in indignation at her mother's words. Always, Catelyn would despair over making a lady of her. I never wish to be a lady. It was only Ned and Jon that understood her, and Robb too, sometimes. Not my mother, she was then convinced. Never my mother.

Robb's words played unceasingly in her head that night:

Careless jester.

Death always wears a jester's garb. It humbles all, just as court fools make fun of every man regardless of standing. This was the very message her mother wanted to get through her.

She remembered how the door of that chamber burst open as she stormed in, with bloodied knees and a tear-streaked face. "I'm sorry!" she cried to both Ned and Cat. "Please don't fight over me, I'm sorry!"

Indeed, all stories begin with her—her mother. She is the reason why a portrait of Arya Stark as a child hung on a wall that led to the great keep; why the same child knew that scrolled writings are not just scrawlings but are in truth, storytellers; why that child, despite her dark, camouflaged soul, still looked no different in the eyes of the one who bore her.

"Oh, hush!" Lady Catelyn had rushed to her. The woman held her tight, kissed her hair, wiped the salt-tears off of her oval face. "Very thoughtless! We will clean this wound, we don't want this to fester. Now, what do you want for sweet course over dinner, sweet Arya? Berry tarte? Custard pie?"

In her memories were Lady Catelyn's scent of fragrance and mint as she tended to her wound, the sound of her humming voice, her auburn hair and blue eyes, her smile.

And in spite all those tellings that spoke of Mother Merciless as a monster born out of a dead
woman's body, to Arya Stark, she was still the most beautiful thing.

Words were unnecessary if not futile. When Arya stepped onto the heart of that cavern and saw her dear mother's clawed face, the flesh that had almost decayed if not for Beric Dondarrion's kiss of life from the lord of light, the laceration with dried, black blood from this ear to that, she had abandoned all cares and doubts and rushed to her, threw herself in her mother's arms.

For minutes, they just held each other...unmindful of anyone else. Lady Catelyn's hums were soft and sweet—softer and sweeter than when Arya last heard them back in Winterfell. *I am a proof of my mother's strength.* Arya inhaled the scent of all those candles lighting and warming the cavern, and prayed that she would not smell the faint essence of smoke that comes when the flames flicker and then die. The dying candlelight's waxy, burnt-wick odor is for Arya, the saddest smell—it's the smell that's left in her bedchamber after Catelyn had tucked her into bed and blown off the candle. It's the smell of her *leaving*.

"Mother," Arya whispered, clutching tighter the rough fabric of Catelyn's raiments. "Mother... mother..."

Arya...her mother replied in a raspy, quiet voice. *My stranger that was lost...*

She did not know for how long she had held the woman. Reconciliation truly has its own way of stopping the dusts of time and urging the both of them to not forget. Sansa coiled her arms around them both, and once more they had heard Catelyn's lullabies—*The paly moon hath brimmed her cusp in dew, I sing o, love to you.* Whatever enchantment from the lord of light may have led to this, or graces from the old gods whose eyes were the very eyes of those heart trees, with their roots sprawled in the Hollow Hill and ever-witnessing, one thing was true—there was something in that encounter that had completely shattered the lady's merciless heart of stone.

There was still the desire for justice, but such desire will cease being born out of blind want for vengeance.

In hushed tones, the Starks spoke and sighed and laughed. Soft smiles formed upon the lips of the brothers. "I pray for her to vanish," Thoros of Myr spoke. "After justice has been served, may the Lady Stoneheart die and the Lady Catelyn be reborn. War is tiring; it makes monsters of us all."

"I share your hopes," Jaqen H'ghar replied, whose eyes were fixed on the three. Catelyn was then sitting on one thick buttress root that is part of the tangles, with Arya and Sansa settled by her feet on either side. "War is a monster in and of itself; however, it is just beginning." The Lorathi looked at the red priest with a melancholic smile, and that smile launched daggers of pain into the priest's heart.

"Gods and men," Thoros shook his head. "Dragons breathe fire, and fire is from the lord of light himself. Fire must tame Winter, act as a balancer of it. Yet men desire to use it according to how they see fit, and interpretations to what is fitting and right are more often unreasoned if not deceptive." His eyes cruised to Daario who was then engaged in a silent colloquy with Harwin and Lem, before finding their way to Jaqen's face. "Do you think the gods care about the mortal realms? For the lives of men?"

Jaqen smirked. "It is the nexus of power that they care about, my friend. They have this impulsive need to be in the middle of a cyclone where the game of thrones gets nasty and sickening. Do they care about us? Essentially, no. The only recourse for men is to *make* them care."

Thoros's laughter sounded like the wheezes of a dying man. "And how do you make them care, pray tell?"
Jaqen gazed at the priest, his expression undecipherable. Nevertheless, he was smiling. "Sharing of power between creators and created. They need men to perceive their existence," he replied. Thoros wheezed once more, cursed. "Those gods we serve are at war. Unless we prove ourselves useful in the battles they fight against each other, then we don't stand a chance against their games. Valar Morghulis."

"Warrior of Light," Thoros spat. "The Nissa. Chosen ones are named based on preconditions set by the flames, and these chosen ones vary from age to age. When does it all end?"

"It's a cycle, my friend," Jaqen answered. "Winter comes and is defeated. It comes again, and it needs to be once more subdued. It never ends. Time is nothing but a created thing, yes. But it rules over us because we desire order. Desire for order is a good thing, I believe."

Thoros nodded, pensive. "Desire for order is a good thing, like hope."

"Come, love."

Jaqen turned his attention to Arya. He smiled and walked to where the three Stark remnants sat, his irises of bronze and gold upon her face that was the face of all women. He had never told the girl, the woman, his wife this: that it was not he who had made her brave in her bleak days at Harrenhal.

I am not brave enough, the Lorathi told himself. All courage I have and will ever have came from her.

The Lady Stoneheart extended her hand, bade the Lorathi to her. Closer, she said in her raspy voice. I want to see your face.

Jaqen did as he was told. He knelt in front of the Lady, took her hand and pressed his lips upon it. He assayed the woman's mien, and was persuaded that despite her self-inflicted mutilation, the ugly gash on her neck, and her hairstrands that were now white and brittle, Catelyn Stark is still a beautiful woman. "The gods have been merciful," Jaqen spoke to Catelyn. "They murdered you, yet here you are. A spit on Death's face. It is a scornful act well done."

Soft laughter escaped from the lady's pale lips. Death claims all, but not before their time.

The Lorathi smiled. "Time prevents all things from happening all at once, true." The Lady chuckled, causing the brothers to raise their brows and glance at one another in wonderment. Jaqen spoke again. "Unfinished business—even Death respects those who are bold enough to bargain."

Indeed, the Lady replied. The gods saw my intentions worthy enough perchance, and so I was gifted with continuance...though not for long. Let me finish what I have to, and let me be done. The soul still resides in the woman's frame, reflected clearly by her eyes of azure—the only parts of her that were truly alive. And you? She asked the Lorathi. What made you return and live again?

Other men, those who know nothing of love and its divine condition, may respond, 'irrational fancy'. He could have stayed dead. What made him return, do it all over again, though unsure he was of what future the spectre of his past had carved out for him, though he had to traverse timelessness and betray his own self?

Jaqen H'ghar had known hell. He was in it just recently, in one of his dreams. Yet in the days of Valyria, he had died and he thus realized that hell is not the demons in Stygai and the brimstone that lay waiting, the suffering spirits crying out for emancipation. Hell is this—waking up alone with his seed spilled on the bedlinen, fresh from after he had pleasured himself with Arya's face still clear in his dissipating mad fantasies, and with all these, the fear of not spending the rest of his godforsaken
life with her.

His answer was certainty in itself.

"Your daughter, Lady Catelyn Stark," he replied, fond eyes cruising towards Arya's loveliness. With tenderness, she held the Lorathi's hand and let it cup her cheek. His gaze returned to the Lady. "Call me a fool, but there was truly no other reason. It's Arya—always. And bargain I would with Death over and again till it hides its face from me, for Arya."

Sansa exhaled at the beauty of it, smiled softly.

The heart trees saw all, heard all. The roots of them lie deep in that cavern, and roots carry not only water to the tree's trunks and to their branches and leaves, but words too, and their hidden intimations. From the eyes that were in the carved faces of the weirwoods dripped sap. The trees, and whoever acted as witnesses behind them, wept that night.

Jaime Lannister growled as Lem crudely removed the sack that covered his head. His hands were still bound to his back, and he very much needed to urinate. He could bear all dishonor—he is the amoral kingslayer after all, the one who fucks the queen, the 'goldenhand' as some jests would have; but never could he suffer the disgrace of pissing his pants. He was stripped off of his weapons and other implements, and what remained in his possession were his tunic and breeches. Even his boots were taken off; he was half-dragged from the Forks to the hill on barefeet and those feet, along with his hands that were tied the tightest with a thick, three-strand rope, were bleeding profusely, bathing the dirt of that cavern with red. The dirt he was sitting on were full of irregularly-shaped and sized rocks, some of them sharp and jagged, such that he almost begged to be dragged once more by the horses so he may be forced to run instead of sit, though the snow outside was thick, and it was all because of the discomfort he was feeling.

Fate was dealing him its playful, duplicitous hand. Here he is again—a prisoner of the Starks. Mere three to four years ago, his troops were wiped out by Stark loyalists in the riverlands, and he was taken captive for weeks, perhaps even moons. As he had lost all track of time, he could not anymore recall how long he had stayed a prisoner of Ned's eldest in the worst conditions—with nothing but stale bread and soily water for sustenance, his face unwashed and his hair in tangles, sloshing around in his own shit. He had lost his sword hand, and if not for Ilyn Payne who served as his sparring partner during the recent besieging, he would not have been able to strengthen his weaker arm. All these he had done for duty, for family.

That family he had served had repaid all of his efforts with ridicule—despite his loss of hand, his father had gifted him with a sword reforged from the Ned Stark's own Valyrian, and from his brother Tyrion, he had learned that Cersei had taken in both Lancel and Osmund as lovers while he was away. The accursed woman had blown up the sept, their son Tommen is dead, Cersei is now crowned queen.

Had it not been for Brienne, the 'ugly, shambling wench,' in Cersei's words, and the maid of Tarth's stubborn adherence to her own codes of integrity and fealty to a sworn duty to Catelyn Stark, Jaime Lanister would have lost himself.

Truly, he had hoped for Sansa Stark to be returned to Winterfell. Tried he did, to turn it all around. But who could trust the words of a kingslayer, believe that by some miracle of one from the Seven, he had grown even a small bough of honor the same way that boys grow cocks?

The captive hurled the subduers a venomous stare, arrogance still evident upon his visage. At the back of his tongue rolled silent curses towards Cersei Lannister, with hatred in its purest form
seeping through his every pore. Those eyes of his moved from Harwin to Lem, to Daario.

"This is he?" Daario queried, stroking his pronged beard while assessing the Lannister. "The one who knifed Aerys II on the back?" The Stormcrow leered at the man's fake hand. _The same hand he had used in murdering Daenerys Targaryen's father._

Despite himself, Jaime was still smug with his retorts. "What have you brought here, outlaws?" he spoke to both Harwin and Lem. "An Essosi fanatic of the Mad King?" His words were now directed to the Stormcrow. "I'm afraid you have wasted all your efforts dragging your arse into this cave, no bedtime stories about wildfires and long-haired, long-nailed, scab-riddled kings for you."

The Stormcrow snorted. He faced the two brothers. "I like him."

Dennett who was then at the rough-arched entrance of that lower cranny guffawed at the man’s words. "Of course, you'll like him," he chimed in. "His Lannister gold could get him any woman he wants, no strings attached at that—he's a member of the kingsguard, you see; well, queensguard now. Yet, he chose to fuck his sister in the broom closet whenever King Robert's out hunting. You have got to admire the courage and thickness of this one."

It was not for Daario to judge. Targaryens were known to do the same thing—engage in incestuous relationships, polygamy, concubinage. Valyria existed for more than five thousand years, and there were some practices that cannot be erased by mere passing of time. Still, the Stormcrow thought Daenerys to be different. Her rule was marked by dragons and cruelty, with wise masters and great masters cowering at her feet; yet she was named *Mhysa* by those emancipated slaves in that place where Old Ghis used to be. It was so wrong, the Stormcrow thought, to find one's worth and sense of self from a woman, to become dependent upon everything that she is and call such deference 'loyalty'. His purpose had been naught until Daenerys came along.

*My sword is yours, my life is yours, my love is yours.*

Men who would claim to know Daario would say that he is poison—fatal. He has a sellsword's conscience, if he had any to begin with. The man knew that he possessed shallow conceptions of things moral and immoral, he's a trained killer after all. But he knew, even though he's a scorners of faiths and gods, that one does not simply fuck his own sister. Oh, no.

*My blood, my body, my songs, you own them all. I live and die at your command, fair queen.*

He smiled softly as he recalled his words of fealty to the Targaryen queen; curious, for in usual days he would have regurgitated at such words even from the mouth of a man that holds his highest esteem. Nay, it was not for him to judge Jaime Lannister—the man had loved only. That poetic fall of his may have been impelled by the wrong woman, and he had erred greatly no doubt; but to it there was love still, and this…this Daario Naharis perfectly understands.

"You will provide us with information in exchange for your freedom," the Stormcrow spoke to the Lannister. "It would be wise to cooperate. Your infantry and cavalry were slaughtered by the wolves, and most of the surviving men scampared in all directions all over the riverlands. No one will come to your aid now, no one but you. Save yourself and confess everything."

Jaime's laugh was sardonic. "In which ancient rock did you thrive and grow? You're in Westeros, and here in Westeros, sellswords don't give orders to lords."

Daario still grinned, apparently unoffended, rather amused. "Ah, but you have forgotten!" He inched his face closer to Jaime's, spoke in a calm undertone. "Here in Westeros, you are a lord and a captive."
"Enough with your babbles," Jaime retorted with the same calmness. "If combat would not work for the likes of you, cowards, then kill me now and be done with it. You will never force out answers from me."

"Kill you?" the Stormcrow raised one brow at the suggestion. "Oh, no...no, Jaime Lannister. If I kill you, then this night planned with the suds running through our parched throats would be too dry, wouldn't it?" He turned his attention to Dennett and nodded once. The man brought to them a cruddy pitcher of soft ale and a couple of tankards. "Not to mention, we need you breathing."

The three brothers left the captive with the Essosi in that nook, and upon their departure, Daario walked behind Jaime Lannister and severed the ropes that bound him with one dagger-slash.

The captive was too surprised to even plan his next recourse, much less move from his incommodious position.

The Stormcrow half-filled one tankard, handed it to the other man. Jaime scoffed with disparagement at his offer. "You are indeed primitive," he said. "You expect me to just shove your poisoned ale down my throat? You cannot even lift a finger to draw your sword and hack my head off?"

He smiled at Jaime in response, lifted the tankard's rim to his lips. In three quick swallows, Daario emptied it. He then poured ale into the other tankard and handed it once more to Jaime. "Tank up, don't be such a kitten."

With force, Jaime grabbed the container from Daario's grasp and began to wash his athirst throat with the liquid. He couldn't help but smack his lips at the ale's taste, though it was far from agreeable. In the capital, he used to take a swig of the finest Arbor and Qarthian bottles, with mixed berries and roasted meat to accompany the bittersweetness of it. Beggars don't get to choose, and though pride would not allow him to feel it, his gratitude of having been offered a drink came from his acts of letting the liquid roll and linger on his tongue.

For minutes, they just sat there in the quiet.

What the Stormcrow was doing was a strategy Jaime knew all too well. The Lannister was aware that the Essosi cannot extract responses from the captive and be antagonistic while he is at it. Hostility would only bring resistance; better to gain the captive's trust and hope that in such tactic he may freely disclose whatever it is that he knows. Then, he will kill me after my concession though I was promised life and liberty in exchange for my disclosure, Jaime thought. After all, who would frown at lies and agreements gone awry?

It was Jaime who broke the silence, more because of curiosity than anything else.

"Why are you even here, sellsword?"

Daario's eyes were fixed upon the dancing flames of a small, prepared heap of wood for burning. He shrugged, glanced at the Lannister. "Same as you. A woman led me here."

Jaime prodded on; still, he was cautious. "You swore fealty to the undead Catelyn Stark."

"Not exactly to her, no," Daario replied. "To the Targaryen Queen."

Jaime's laughter was derisive. "Ah! How quickly vengeance ate their hearts, those Starks. I've known Catelyn to be an honorable woman, but I guess death changes people. To scorn Ned Stark's bones by seeking for the Targaryen usurper's sympathy? Wrong. So very wrong." He tipped the rim of his tankard to his lips, swallowed audibly. "Who can blame her? If she wants this realm purged of her Lannister enemies, I suppose honor must come last."
"True," Daario said. "Now, she's fighting her husband's battles, her son's war. Would she be able to return to life had she placed her honor above anything else? There is honor in death—her demise was the murderer's fault, not hers. There is no honor in living a second life like that, knowing that the air you breathe is but borrowed, killing those who have wronged your most beloved ones as if you have not seen enough of the dead, existing for the sake of poisonous wrath," the Stormcrow paused, shook his head. "It is a bold act—to live again, but there is no honor in it. Yet she chose to do the dishonorable because she's a wife, a mother. Same as the lot of us, she would kill for her own family."

Jaime's jaw hardened. His thoughts went back to Joffrey's purple corpse, Tywin's rotting body in the sept, Myrcella's collapse, and Tommen whose death he still believed not the cause of. Those tellings were all full of shite—the young king would not have thrown himself out of the keep's window over the death of a woman he barely knew. Tyrion is nowhere to be found, and mayhap he too, is dead like all the others. While Starks kill for each other, Lannisters kill one another, he thought. That is, if their acts do not directly lead to their enemies killing them.

This was all Cersei's doing.

"Lannisters are the common enemy now, as it appears," Jaime remarked bitterly. "All things, undone by one woman's misrule. If subjects think that kings run kingdoms, then think again they must. Kings warm the throne with their arses, the queens rule in truth, or rather, misrule. This is why the likes of Catelyn Stark rise from the grave."

The Stormcrow chuckled. "We think them fragile things that need protection, and from what, we cannot even tell. However, I would beg to disagree. There are queens whose hands are soiled, and there are queens whose hands are soiled and know they are. There are queens that listen to none and queens that listen to all, queens that forge chains and queens that break them."

_Damn you, Cersei_, Jaime cursed.

"What kind of men are we," Jaime asked the Stormcrow. "That we would allow these women to turn us into fools?"

Daario Naharis just smiled. _Fools of men, then._

The pitcher had gone empty. There were no more words to be uttered, unless the captive wishes to confess.

"Harbors," Jaime finally said, gazing at the Stormcrow.

"Harbors," Daario repeated, stroking his beard in contemplation. "The Queen plans to use the Saltpans and the Gulltown east from here, and for what?"

"That is for you to discover, sellsword," Jaime replied. "I know nothing of her plans, especially behind her alliance with the Ironborns."

"You, if I may ask?" Daario asked. "If we let you out of this cavern, what would your plans be?"

Jaime clenched his teeth. "Find my brother."

_And kill the queen._

"Well, that wasn't so bad," Jaqen said. He was preparing their cot of old sackcloth and threadbare cushions beside the overgrowth of Weirwood roots. "A man was dreading the worst."
"It wasn't 'so bad'?" Arya raised a brow at the Lorathi's words. "My mother loved you, Jaqen. Gods, for a while there I was almost tempted to think that she was more delighted seeing you than seeing me."

Jaqen chuckled and tousled Arya's hair, then evaded a smack on the arm. "Just to avoid complicating things, do know that a man would not ask her what mischiefs you have gotten yourself into with your then small feet. No wonder why the Lady Catelyn was that overjoyed in meeting a man. 'Ah, finally! A leash to her horseplays!'"

"Shut up," Arya rolled her eyes and settled on the cot. Her gaze softened as she beheld the Lorathi. "Oh, Jaqen. Can this get any better?"

The Lorathi smiled. "Of course." He sat beside Arya and brushed his lips across her neck, unmindful of eyes that may be staring, particularly those of Lady Catelyn and Sansa who were not very far. "You'll be looking at better things and better days, Arya Stark. A man promises you this."

Arya tilted her head to the side. "How so?"

He ran his forefinger through the soft of the girl's leg. She knew what Jaqen wanted that night, and so a lickerish thrill invaded her asudden. However, the smirk on Jaqen's face was ambiguous.

Arya saw traces of it—traces of the death god that might never be erased from his marrows. It was warped, and wild, and bereft of any form of virtue, yet Arya accepted it for it is part of who he is. Still, a portion of her hoped for that invisible monster to just disappear and quit from owning them both, and stop making monsters out of them.

She knew it had to be done somehow.

The Lorathi kissed her on the lips, as if relishing the future scenes of that one imminent kill.

"Better days, lovely girl. We still have Walder Frey in your list."

Chapter End Notes

Happy weekend guys! I know that this chapter had a lot of blahs and you were hoping for more J/A. I just had to set everything up in here and key players started appearing because they're now in Westeros. Next chapters (up until the end) would focus more on our beloved ship, right hand up! Thanks for the feedback and kudos, and *sigh* thanks a lot for reading and staying with the fic. You're awesome.<3
A Reenactment

Chapter Notes

"When it's black
Take a little time to hold yourself
Take a little time to feel around before it's gone
You won't let go but you still keep on falling down
Remember how you save me now from all of my wrongs."

Certainties within uncertainties: J/A Love

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It is the she-wolf of winter that marks the birth of spring.
Petals wither and fall, but they too, grow and unfurl
And when this comes,
Even the gods would pause their breath."

Death and the Nissa, Songs of the Faceless (Lost Leaf, XLIll)

"Time is nigh, surrender the man and the girl to us. Your thousand years are over."

"And who are you to order such?"

Those white eyes without irises seemed to smile at the Elder's query.

The dark mage called Overcast, along with the other Burners of the Pass, had returned to the temple to collect the Elder's end of the bargain. Like all others, he had entered in one in order to preserve himself, in order to go beyond a single man's life; and like all others, he pretends that such agreement never existed when time arrives for him to fulfill his other half of the deal.

Why of course, the Elder thought, as if he was able to read what lies in the minds of the death god's envoys, though he knew that spirit warriors do not possess intellections and thoughts apart from what the death god plants deep within them. The agreement was born out of the most desperate of circumstances. Justice exists within yet beyond the hungry eyes of those gods; and that bargain was unjust.

"You were humans before you became Burners," the Elder began, in an attempt to divert the colloquy to matters that may perturb them, if not influence them altogether. "Sothoryosi, were you not? Tell me, have you no concept of good prior to accepting your elevated status as vicars of the great other?"
"You have shrouded the Lorathi-Valyrian and the Chosen with your rune," the one called Silverwing ignored the Elder's question. "We could forage the whole realms and attempt our best to find them, but we would not see them, would we? You Faceless Men are gifted with enchantments from your thirteen other gods whom you claim are impressions of the many-faced one, and your wielding of these powers is anathema to the great other, you know this. For the second time, where is the Fallen Warrior and his Nissa?"

'His' Nissa? The old man suddenly needed to laugh. Do they not know that no man, no warrior of light, heavens, not even a god, can ever 'own' the Nissa?

"You have not answered my question," the Elder said, undaunted. "Since you were mere mortals before, would you say that goodness is an imperative of all life? What it is not—let's see. It is not the brutal acts of men nor the lofty ambitions of the deities, is it? It cannot exist for one and not exist for the other, yes?"

The one called Tattershell raised his brows in response. "Most amusing," was his response. "Do you wish to die, Mage?"

A soft chuckle escaped from the Elder's lips. "Ah, Death! Now, that is one subject I find most compelling. But no, I do not wish to die. I have done it before, and it was an utter waste of time," his eyes cruised from one face to another. "Why would I wish to re-enter a state of illusion?"

"Illusion?" the one called Mistface ensphered the old man, hissed out the word. "Death is as real as your flesh when I burn it, Mage. Or have you forgotten?"

"My memories serve me well, thank you very much," was the Elder's arrogant response. "You all have your duties—the greatest, if not the only one, is your duty to your god. I am no stranger to such thing. I have my own duties as well, to the realms and to whichever god is willing to preserve these realms." His irises dug deep into the murky souls of those Burners, if even they had souls. "Any god who teaches nothing but death and makes others see it as their only form of escape, any god who is willing to annihilate a whole race for the sake of winning some damnable cosmic battle, any god who does not inspire zest for life and continuance without condition, is a god not and never worthy of any worship."

"You seem bitter," the one called Overcast sneered. He walked encircled the poison pool, dipped a finger into the still waters of it. He tasted a bit of it and shrugged. "Yet you have built this temple, this Order, and you have killed for the death god for what...scores? Centuries? Hypocrisy is too polite a word to use to label your pronouncements, you."

The Elder smiled, as if finding amusement in the Burner's insults. "The many-faced god had taught me to wear my guises well," he said. "How do you hide from Death, do say? There is no existing answer to that, for the truth is this: you don't. Can we raise the dead ones to the heavens? Is it enough for them to be free from any threat and not become a threat themselves to the living? No, and no; the death god may do with the dead whatsoever she wishes." His tone was resolute, and though he was sure that the Burners would see his words as nothing but palaver, he still had to try. "To the death god, all men are faceless, all men are No One—they never mattered. Never will. What is the best recourse, then? Ah, of course! Accept this facelessness, this...this No One-ness, embrace it fully and let it define you, build a whole system around it in order to learn about the god and how to best defeat her. We Faceless Men were spawned out of the death god's stoicism for all things living. Never will we claim that we are righteous, oh no! We are murderers—we had to play the accursed part and act as if we are one with the deity! We had to kill and take faces and use these to hide from Death itself, gather those faces in this very temple to thwart the rising of another god of yours, the one chained in the City of Night. We kill a few so more could live. A lesser evil than your god—this
is who Faceless Men are."

The humongous Silverwing’s laughter was almost hysterical. His sounds of hilarity shook the thirteen statues arrayed with the pillars of the temple's atrium. "This Order is a front. Hah! And I thought mages of the red god are nothing but flamethrowers and fire-spitters! Still, a question remains," the Burner snapped two fingers of his and with the sound, the statue of the Pale Child called Bakkalon, who stood beside the Hooded Wayfarer, exploded into smithereens. "The heart of Bakkalon is the heart of fire. His children have abandoned him to bow to softer gods. For the sake of good chuckles Mage, who do you truly serve?"

The Elder still smiled.

"Simple. All men."

"Then, you are a fool," the one called Mistface retorted.

"Better be a fool than dead," the Elder replied. "You can threaten me all you want, but you can never have the Lorathi-Valyrian, much less the Chosen."

"We could kill you and burn this temple, then," the one called Overcast rejoined the others after examining each face of the arrayed gods. "Your protective rune of them would fall, and the faces in your sanctum will fly like ashes to Stygai." He shrugged his shoulders once more, grinned maliciously. "Easy. We don't even have to wait for the lords of Valyria and their dragons to do it."

At those words, six other Faceless Masters emerged from the shadows and proceeded to the atrium, encircling the four Burners of the Pass.

"You can kill the Elder and burn the temple, true," the Faceless named Cythnar spoke. "But the four of you would have to get past six of us; and forget you not that like you, we too are ascendants of Death. Your bodies are not yours, they're all made up of a sickening amassment of spirits—powerful, oh yes; but very unstable. Defeating us is not impossible, but one…two of you may be completely wiped out."

"This is the Isle of the Gods," the Faceless named Ieli supplied. "This is our turf, and the Ash is far from here. Your fancy collection of rune may be too insufficient."

The one called Overcast clicked his tongue as his white eyes raked every face and form of the mage-assassins present in the atrium. "Pitiful numskulls," he shook his head. "But I admire your lot, let me be truthful. Despite the irrefutable fact that you have lost this battle before it even began—ah, but who could win against a god?—still, you press on with your philosophical nonsense and your tenets born out of your inferior, mortal minds. Must be hard, living in fear, hiding that fear when Night draws nigh."

"Are we going to talk or fight?" the Faceless Master called Uldaren retorted, flexing his arms upwards. "I still have twenty-four acolytes waiting for me in the training chambers, let us all get this over with. Unless," he smirked. "Sense had returned to you four, and you decide asudden that it's best to shake your dusty garments and scamper off from this hallowed place."

The one called Silverwing spat on the temple's floor. "Nothing is hallowed in this place," he said, then turned his face to Overcast who nodded. "We will find the host and wolf down the soul of that damnable woman of his. Her fate will be so cursed that she would pray for release, only that Death will flee from her."

The temple's double thresholds opened on their own and allowed the four Burners of the Pass to take
their exequents. They disappeared with the wind as effortlessly as they have arrived. Like desert breeze, they fleet from place to place.

The Elder turned to Cythnar. "You should not have threatened them like that, brother," the old man's reprimands were soft, and curiously pleasant. "Had they accepted your challenge, they would have decimated this entire temple and the places hundreds of falls close to it. None of us here would have survived."

Cythnar chuckled. "True, but it was then difficult to tell that my words were misleading, yes? Their sorcery is unparalleled, yet they seem to not fully know that it is."

A deep sigh escaped from Ieli. "You gave me a fright there, brother. And I never get frightened."

"They will turn the realms upside-down in their search, Elder," Uldaren said. "This is the year of the tyrant gods. All signs point to it—the return of the slavers, Valyria rebuilt, Winter. As soon as they find Jaqen…"

"Then, we must act in haste," the Elder concluded. "If Jaqen H'ghar dies before they could find him, then they would never be able to use his body for their hosting."

"Are you suggesting—"

"That the Lorathi master must be assassinated? Yes," the Elder smiled and began walking to the path that leads to the sanctum, hands behind his back, with a demeanor that was very, very calm. "Two masters—Fyn, Mesphares. Sail for Westeros, the Titan's Daughter will make its way to Gulltown east of the Vale. Do not delay this. Keep Arya Stark safe while her time for demise is not yet ripe. She must die only by the Warrior's sword."

The two other masters glanced at each other, nodded. They turned to the Elder. "Valar Dohaeris."

All men that must die, must die.

Winter seeps through the bone, that is, if one is not from the land whence it came. Snow started falling once more as the three Stark women moved out from the cavern and climbed the steps crafted by dirt and roots. They were accompanied by Jaqen, the Blackfish, and Ser Gendry. "Stay a little far, please," Arya had requested. "We need silence so the weirwoods could speak. Cover yourselves, winter has come." The men hence watched them from a safe distance while surveying the immediate vicinity for any more Lannister soldiers. They contented themselves with discussing the plans of reoccupying Riverrun, and since Brynden Tully is an impatient man, he insisted on starting the retaking after three days. "More than half of the men inside that castle are ours," the Blackfish told them. "Those Freys who aren't anything but damnable filths may hold them now, yet when they see the Tully banners in front of the Water Gate, they would waste no time starting a mutiny from inside the sandstone walls."

"Forgive me, Ser," Jaqen said. "But who else would aid us in this apart from the brotherhood? The Water Gate is out front, and you have mentioned how properly garrisoned and guarded it is."

"Tytos Blackwood never surrendered to that golden-haired Lannister fool," the Blackfish answered. "He is as we speak, gathering his men to march southeast to our aid. Robin Rygers gathered his own and freed the Mallisters from Black Walder, who incidentally is searching for the Lady Stoneheart all over the riverlands, that idiot. Ryger's infantry is a thousand strong, the Mallisters have two thousand, Blackwood has two thousand. Desmond and Rygers will then proceed to Riverrun with all those
forces combined."

Ser Gendry cleared his throat. "I heard that two nights from now, the Freys will hold a banquet to declare themselves lords of the greathouse—"

"Pah!" the Blackfish scoffed. "Even the Lannister fool knew what incapable dimwits they are, that he would rather pass on the castle to a brothelkeeper! But yes, yes. There is a banquet, indeed."

Jaqen H'ghar smiled inwardly, his assassin's blood leaping in familiar mirth and excitement, and only rare situations like this could incite such emotions from him. "May I offer my conjectures, Ser?" he queried.

The Blackfish looked at him with raised brows. "Why of course, son."

Not too distant from the men were the three women in front of the almost moon-pale weirwood. Arya tightly clutched the cloak wrapped around her, wondered too, if her days in Braavos had been that long for her to suddenly feel the cold that pierced her in a curiously malevolent way. Compared to that in the North, snow here should not be that crisp. The fall is scattered, so the chill should not be this keen. And the snowflakes…Arya sighed as she watched one land on upon her fingertip. The snowflakes are suddenly patternless. Her eyes slowly cruised to Jaqen, speaking with Brynden Tully and oblivious to her worriments. It'll be a different winter this time around.

She turned to Catelyn.

"Unless disproved, you must have faith in all things, mother," Arya told her calmly, leading her mother's hand to touch the weirwood's face. "You cannot name it belief unless it clings to the unbelievable, can you?"

Arya…the Lady smiled and pulled her hand gently from her daughter's grasp. She brushed away the strands of hair that clung to Arya's face. Always too smart for her own good.

"But you've had…visions through this weirwood before, mother?" Sansa asked. "When I was in the Eyrie, I longed to see the garden that was meant to be for the godswood, but no weirwood tree grew there—the soil was too stony. I had dreams though, and in those dreams…I saw Bran and Rickon."

"I had dreams too," Arya said. "Well, I still have them. Almost every night."

Visions…Catelyn confirmed. Her eyes had suddenly turned mournful. Visions of the past—I saw Robb's death, and Ned's death through your eyes, Sansa. And though I could not quite understand it, I saw Arya dying and yet…she appeared to elude death everytime she would supposedly breathe her last.

Arya smiled. It's because I was once a servant of death, mother; until I broke away from the shackles and wore my face again.

"Mother…" Arya gestured once more to the weirwood. "The roots leading North await."

Catelyn sighed, nodded. Gently, she closed her eyes and allowed her right hand to be led to the weirwood's face.

Fractals of blur enveloped Catelyn Stark's consciousness, and if not for her two daughters holding her upright, she would have collapsed onto the snowy ground. She had known life and death and the kind of time that begins and ends; but time within turfs and turfs within time, the interconnectedness of the two, their oneness, these were simply beyond her comprehensions.
Whoever is part of the weirwood holds all epochs and space within his mindwork.

And she saw them all—all that Bran Stark had known and will know still, presented to her generously albeit overwhelmingly in a vanishing span: Winterfell, Rickon the heir and Skagos, a conspiracy in the North, Jon the Lord Crow, Bran the Winged Wolf, and a raven with a thousand and one eyes fleeting through the skies with him...

The valonqar's charge to the maiden of sapphires...

Breathing corpses...walking beyond strongholds of ice...

Dragons...

Death...

And death...

And death...

And—

Stop! Catelyn hissed as she keeled over the ground. Stop, stop! She wrapped her own frame with her arms, and sobbed in the midst of her raspy pleas. Arya turned to the men, held up a hand to assure them all that the situation can be contained.

"Mother..." Arya whispered. "Forgiveness, please. The course to reaching all truths—it is difficult and a painful one. There was no other way, forgive us..."

Sansa bit her lip, unable to utter any word in the face of their dear mother's plight. With both hands they lifted her, brushed away the snow and wet soil that had clung to her skirts.

"Mother," Arya still urged. "Tell us..."

Inside, Catelyn shook her head, clutching her chest in between fitful breaths. Many things, dear ones...many, many things...

For hours, they spoke only of Catelyn's weirwood visions by the fire. Stew and bread were served, and thanks to provisions sent by Long Jeyne from the inn, they had cheese, meat, and some berries to go with their usual evening's repast. "If snowfall gets worse, the madam said that we may not be able to bring food in here as often," said the messenger lad. "The inn needs to keep its own stocks too, you understand. Daily catch by the Forks and Saltpans had dwindled, they say. Not enough supplies are coming in from the south—seems like the capital is holding them back for reasons still unknown."

Tattered blankets were laid on the hard, dry dirt that rested beside a thick, tangle of overgrown weirwood roots. The brothers had their own agreeable places of slumber, and most have departed for the night, while some kept watch either on the cavern's mouth or the cranny where Jaime Lannister was held captive. Catelyn slept on a makeshift bed of hay and old linen of faded beige; Sansa slept on the ground, despite Catelyn's insistence that her daughter takes the bed. "These thick blankets are as good as any mattress, mother," Sansa told her. "Rest, for you have been through too much today. Worry not about me, or about Arya." She glanced quickly at her sister and smiled. "She might even use her own husband as cushion for the night."
Catelyn gazed at Arya and Jaqen huddled close to each other on the far side of the cavern. They were barely visible from where they lay, for the knots of wood partly obscured them from the eyes of others who may pry, not that anyone would be so bold or impolite. *He loves her too much,* Catelyn voiced out her musings to her eldest daughter. *Too much love—such does not lead to good.*

Sansa laid herself on the spread of blankets she had prepared for herself, propped her head on both hands and stared at her dear mother's visage. Though sleeping conditions would no doubt be utterly uncomfortable, and though she might rise from slumber in the morn with her entire body sore and her sinews twisted due to what may be a most wearisome night, she never uttered any word of complaint. It was marvel at her own self which she had felt, for had she been the less mature version of Sansa Stark, that girl whose greatest fancy is to marry a prince atop his steed of white, then not even the Maiden goddess of the Seven would persuade her to lay herself on that begrimed, stony ground.

Sansa sighed. "Too much love—isn't that what drives a person to do everything, surpass all, for the sake of one beloved? How can it not lead to good?" She smiled bitterly as a wave of nostalgia swept over her. She was taken back to King' Landing where she knelt half-naked in front of Joffrey, bloodied and bruised because of Meryn Trant's unmerciful strikes. She prayed to the gods for emancipation from such a humiliating plight, yet no one came to her aid. No one that is, but Tyrion Lannister.

*What is the meaning of this?!* These were his words, as clear to Sansa as if they had been uttered only yesterday. She recalled how he boldly proceeded straight to the Iron Throne to confront the king. *She is to be your queen! Have you no regard for her honor?* There was a sudden pleasantness in her chest as she remembered how the Imp had called the king a half-wit, and had taken it as far as to announce to all those present in the king's courts that he is merely there to educate his fool of a nephew. From where Sansa knelt, that half-man stood to the front like some little god from a machine—sent there by unexpected intervention from the real gods; and when he held out his hand to her so she may stand, her impression of the Lannister filthy-blooded, ugly, perverted Imp was forever changed. Sansa shook her head to rid herself of such unwanted reminiscences, yet wondered too, if Tyrion had received the message she had sent a fortnight ago.

He had saved her more than once; yet Sansa had to admit that Tyrion Lannister is that part of herself she would never want Catelyn to know about. Her dear mother was more than aware of their marriage and that it was not consummated, but she doesn't know that Sansa had never, will never regard Tyrion with contempt. *How can you loathe your own flesh?* Sansa asked herself. *If I am married to Tyrion, then he and I are now made of the same thews.*

The flames of the dying bonfire were reflected upon Catelyn's irises, and a hint of sadness danced in them. *There is truth to that, child,* the Lady said. *But love and love only, the one kind that forgets that it is not merely the heart that functions, can lead to obsession. And obsession can destroy, can kill.*

"You loved Father, too much," Sansa said. "Tell me, mother. Did that love of yours lead to anything other than good?"

*To evil,* yes, Catelyn replied, and chuckled softly at her daughter's expression that was nothing short of aghast. *You see, I loved your father too much, that when he brought Jon to Winterfell after the war, I couldn't bear look at him for moons. 'He is a Stark,' he only told me, and said that this was all I needed to know. There was no love left in me for that boy, because all the love I have I gave to your father; and all the love within me that was still to be found I had to dig from my own chasms in order to forgive him, in order to see him again without the shadow of his betrayal looming over me."

Sansa just listened in silence.
She quite respected Jon. During her days as the bastard, Alayne, she had patterned herself after him. She started disliking dancing and singers, and began longing for the cold of the less-sophisticated North. "Still," Sansa voiced out her hinted dissent. "Jon had been a good brother to all of us. Bran and Rickon loved him, Arya, Father…Robb especially."

To think that I mistreated the boy, Catelyn croaked her remorse. He had endured all in silence, not once did he voice out his hurt, though so apparent it was in his face. She shook her head. I did those things...for all the while I was convinced that he is Ned's son. Wrong...so wrong.

When Lady Catelyn revealed her visions to both of her daughters, it was only Sansa who appeared surprised with the telling. Arya knew it all along, and how so, Sansa is yet to ask her. Many more questions—her stay in Braavos, the Lorathi named Jaqen H'ghar. The queries are many and the days, short. "He is family, mother. Nothing can change that fact."

He looked more like Ned than any of you, Catelyn's smile was with melancholy. Robb is gone, and I fear that when I lay my eyes on Jon once more, though such a thing would be impossible now, I would see Ned in him.

"And is that such a bad thing?" Sansa japed.

No, Catelyn replied. It may even be a...lovely thing, I guess.

A few moments of silence ensued between them both before Sansa spoke again. "Forgive yourself, mother. Jon holds no grudge against you, believe me."

As I hold none against him, Catelyn replied.

They spent the next few hours outside the cavern. Snow had stopped falling.

Does winter love? The girl asked herself, and laughed inwardly at such a query. It made no sense yet it did. Does it perhaps send the snow to kiss the grasses and the ground, to whisper to the trees 'sleep, till spring comes once more'? She looked at the man beside her whose eyes were intent upon the soft flow of the only stream near Hollow Hill. This man is the embodiment of all her life's ambiguities, yet she chose to be with him anyway, even if it meant running away from a sacred vow she had sworn in front of eleven assassins, and living the rest of her life in constant fear—glancing at her back at every breath, being left in the blind about when those brothers they have abandoned would get their due, strike, and steal the Lorathi away from her.

Arya Stark clenched her teeth at those thoughts that pervaded her mind asudden. When it came to Jaqen, she had realized how bound and determined she was to take up the gauntlets and fight a god if need be.

Assassins are mere mortals. They should think twice about coming to Westeros and finding us both.

She reached out for his hand, allowed their fingers to intertwine. "At the Crossroads, when you inked your name on my skin, I saw our faces through the looking glass, Jaqen."

"Yes," was the Lorathi's response. He bent to kiss her on the temple, then coiled his right arm around her frame. "Ordinary mirrors do not cast a Faceless Man's reflection."

"So, I was right," Arya purred, tracing Jaqen's collarbone with a finger. "We're no longer faceless."
"Not exactly," Jaqen sighed. He found her eyes and let his gaze rest there. "Once faceless, forever faceless, lovely girl."

"And our reflections?"

"Projections, you mean?" Jaqen said. "The skill of changing faces will always be there; it is learned after all. But the rune, the camouflage to the self—that protective layer—will be lost."

"Which means?"

"That everyday could be our last."

Arya nodded. It was plain and simple—sworn oaths will chase both keepers and deserters to the ends of all realms. This is the way; this is justice.

"Well then, let me tell you this," Arya whispered, reaching for his mouth. She let her own lips linger there even as she spoke. "That I love all your faces and the persons that come with them. All your eyes—the bronze and the blue, the dark purple, the midnight. I love the golden hair and the scarlet-and-ivory…” she giggled as she felt his lips on her neck. Heaviness gorged her heart mercilessly, yet she must say these things…she must. Everyday could be our last. "I love your overlapping temperaments—the savage and the sweet, the calm and rage, the severe master and the passionate lover…” she pulled him to her and buried her face in his tunic. She felt her eyes burn, as a swirl of madness enveloped her mind and her already messy soul. Life indeed, is a horrible place to be in. "The saints and the demons within you, I love…I love…” she choked at her own words, and felt the Lorathi caressing her back. She held him tighter. "…I love every damned thing about you."

Jaqen smiled softly.

He had this one task at Lys many years ago wherein he was required to wear a sellsword's face. Coin was paid in exchange for the life of a magister—a man twice his age. "Your gracious pardons, m'lord, but I am far from a believer of magic," Jaqen had told the man when the latter spoke of dragons born from a mighty khal's pyre outside Vaes Dothrak.

"You may not believe in the magic of dragons," was the old man's reply. "Magic however, is multifarious—"

"I do not believe in any form of magic," was his steadfast claim, and a stern response in order to end the conversation.

The old man chuckled. "Ah! That's because you have not seen her yet."

"Her?"

"The woman who would make you fall on your knees and deep in love."

When Arya Stark came to Jaqen H'ghar in that dispiriting cage of his, when the realms were frayed and their versions of selves collided within the fibers of time, he realized the truth of the magister's words.

Let me die loving her, Jaqen prayed to any god who may be virtuous enough to heed men. Let me do this, for if I die loving her, then I would never truly die.

"No one can snatch us away from each other, Arya," Jaqen whispered. He lifted the girl's face so she may dwell in the assurance of his words. "I promise you this."
They returned to the cavern when snowfall had begun once more.

"You think it will work?"

"How can it not? If the brothers' assessment of the castle's layout is accurate, then there is no reason for the plan to not work. Unless they can anticipate infiltration."

Arya's spine was against Jaqen's chest. The tangle of weirwood roots provided what was close to a niche, partly concealing them from the rest, though if a brother would be as meddlesome as to venture into the far side of the cavern where no tunnels and crannies can anymore be accessed, then he would probably find more than what he was expecting to see.

"Jaqen, stop it," Arya shoved the Lorathi's hand away from her right breast. "My mother and sister are a few feet away from us."

"A few feet and asleep," Jaqen purred seductively, then resumed to fondling her bosoms. He nipped her shoulder as he delicately toyed with her tips. "Your breasts are even softer than a man remembers, Arya…"

She gasped as she felt Jaqen's hardened shaft stroking her behind, and thought that the breeches that covered his manliness were too thin. *He should purchase thicker ones, especially when we ride for Winterfell,* Arya thought. *It might take him a while before he gets used to the cold.* "There is a ditch west to the third side, mother said," she still managed to tell him, even as she was struggling to let the phrases out, what with his incessant caresses. "The moat will be filled with water once they open the sluice gates. Entry would then be impossible, unless through the front portcullis. Even there, it is properly garrisoned and our men no doubt—ah!" She moaned as Jaqen reached under her shift and carried on with his touching. "Stop it, I said!" she hissed. "Have you no concern at all for this undertaking?"

Jaqen ignored her remonstrance and replied with a groan. "A man wants you now, Arya…" In between his strokes, he moved his hips against her behind. "Right now, a man's only concern is you."

"Oh gods, Jaqen H'ghar, you're such a child!" Arya complained. "They have recently received a message from Tom Sevenstreams—"

"Ser Desmond and Captain Ryger never set sail for the Wall, a man knows," Jaqen still whispered, in the midst of nipping Arya's ear. He chuckled softly upon feeling his wife's soft shudders at his attentions. "They were hidden by Maester Vyman in a chamber close to the dungeons, and they would open the rear gate for us once we give the signal. The Mallisters, Blackwoods, Rygers would enter through the Water Gate only when the situation inside gets out of hand. Save your worry for other things, lovely girl...a man and his companions have everything under control."

"Let us hope then, that Emmon Frey notices nothing," Arya said. She placed her hand on top of Jaqen's own that was fondling her bosom, guided his strokes. "It will all be a blur, I suppose. We must be careful in sorting friends from foes within the castle walls."

"Uh-huh…" was Jaqen's reply. His hot mouth now traveled to the woman's neck. "Careful...yes...friends and foes...and that..."

Arya felt the Lorathi unlacing his breeches with his left hand, whilst his right continued soothing her breasts with his palms. She almost squealed when she felt his nakedness against the lair of her
buttocks, though she was still fully clothed. The woman clapped a hand to her mouth as she felt him pulling her breeches down. "Jaqen!" Arya whispered irritably. "We are not going to do it here! For sakes, could you practice some form of decency?"

"Arya Stark H'ghar…" came Jaqen's lustful grunts. "A breath, a blink, and it will be all over. A man promises this…"

She clicked her tongue in vexation. "That's not the point. We are hardly in the proper place—"

"Do you love me?" Jaqen cut any more utterances from her.

"Why, of course!"

"Then, why must the place even matter?" His caresses had gone more desirous, lewd. "A man should be allowed to love you in any place, yes?" With this, he gently pulled down her undergarment and entered her with a finger, moaning ardently against her ear as he toyed with her taut inner walls. "Deceiver," Jaqen teased upon feeling her inside. "Hardly in the proper place? You're already so wet. You want this with a man, Arya, don't you?"

"Oh, Jaqen," she moaned as she felt her walls tightening around him. Arya bit her knuckles hard to prevent herself from moaning some more. "I have a feeling that I'm going to hate you for this."

Always, always, Jaqen H'ghar would evoke from her a spectrum of emotions even she could not quite comprehend, despite the agelessness of her own soul, and his too. To be desired by him, and to be worthy of being desired, the girl thought as she closed her eyes and reveled in the stream of sensations he brought upon the wholeness of her. During their coupling, he unclothes not only her body—there is not much depth in such an act. She stands, and sits, and kneels, and lies in front of him and with him, naked in spirit. And always, always, their coupling would be about the sharing of passions and power. Arya loved it so very much. "Of all men, you are most cruel. To rouse the animal within the ravines of your wife's person, where is mercy in this, my love?"

"You talk a lot, sweetheart, and loudly at that," the Lorathi murmured. He lifted her leg and draped it over his, pulled her close. "We do not wish for anyone to walk in on us, yes? So, we will play the quiet game. Only a man would do the talking this time around. Do you understand this, sweet girl?"

Arya only nodded, biting her lower lip lest the charmed sounds escape from her parched lips. She promptly felt Jaqen's sex entering her, so, so smoothly; and her body received him, as if it knew he really belonged inside her. The Lorathi began moving in mellow, flowing motions—his manhood caressing her like velvet against soft skin. His rhythms were effortless, frictionless, and though Arya struggled to not blandish him with her usual prurient utterances, she found resisting too impossible. Softly, she mewled in the midst of Jaqen's pushes. True enough, the Lorathi kept his promise and closed a hand around her mouth, as he continued owning her. In between his gentle thrusts, Jaqen H'ghar lavished Arya Stark with his usual flatteries, and there was nothing in the world that she could do but to nod and moan just a little, for she wasn't allowed to speak a word at all:

Does it feel good, your sweet, little sex clenching around my Lorathi shaft?

You do know that a man loves the sounds you make, yes? You sound so damned steamy…

A man could spend all day between your legs, Arya. You feel amazing.

You want a man to go harder?

You're squeezing around me, sweetheart? Maybe a man should stop—
"No!" Arya exclaimed against Jaqen's hand that was covering her mouth. The Lorathi only laughed softly and hastened his movements, burying himself deeper. "No, no…please…keep going…"

He's a potion that sends her every time into mad fits of trance—one that doesn't end unless the peak is reached, unless her thoughts and her frame both explode in the realization that their bodies were made simply for this. She heard the man heaving air forcefully in every push and pull, grunting, and she widened her legs some more to receive him. "A man is already as deep as it gets, Arya," was Jaqen's response to her silent begging. His thrusts had gone more possessive, as if even she is not allowed to own her own self. "You're so tight, my love. You're killing me…"

And here, and here, all hard facades melted away—there is merely the need to satisfy herself and to gratify him, love him and give him all. Moments later, Arya flinched as she felt Jaqen burying his teeth in her shoulder, his entirety shuddering against her. He had climaxed, and she smiled upon hearing the Lorathi's audible gasps and very satisfied respirations. "Arya…damn it, you're…so wonderful…"

"L-let's get dressed, Jaqen—"

"Just one second, please…" the Lorathi whispered. "A man wants to stay inside you…just a while."

There were words that must be said after encounters as this, but to Arya, the silence of that moment and the warmth of his body that came from the very fervor of his own heart were more than sufficient. She marveled at the rise and fall of his chest, the exhales from the mouth, his scent. Arya had realized much—her need for Jaqen is as obsessive as it is obscene, and should he wish, she would reduce every fragment of her person to a mere breathing body, she would teach herself how to satisfy him with pure animal-like pleasure, she would dishonor herself over and over, if need be.

Both of them were awakened from their flights of fancy by Ser Gendry's urgent voice. "Arya! Jaqen!"

With haste, they began lacing their breeches and fixing themselves. Had the knight arrived a fraction of a second earlier, he would have seen the girl still pressed against the Lorathi, naked from the waist down. "Forgive me," were Ser Gendry's words. "But two more Essosi just arrived—a man and a woman, one of them is severely wounded."

Jaqen rose and helped Arya to her feet. A sudden disquiet showed itself upon the Lorathi's face as they rushed to the center of the cavern, with the Lady Catelyn and Sansa trailing behind them. Upon reaching the hollow's heart, they saw the brothers already gathered around the man bespoken by Ser Gendry, now a hair's breadth from dying, and the woman who was kneeling beside him.

"Out of the way, please!" Jaqen ordered, and hurried to the two Faceless Men. "Sabine! What happened?"

The Waif only looked up at Jaqen, then at Arya. Her eyes were bloodshot, as if during the entire ride towards the riverlands she did nothing but weep in the midst of the harsh snowfall. She shook her head, unable to speak. Her eyes traveled back to Aegeus who was then dead to the world but still continued heaving shallow breaths, as if battling against unmerciful forces.

Arya knelt beside Sabine and surveyed Aegeus's form. Poison from blade, she immediately concluded. The man's abdomen from where the blade had pierced through his flesh was bleeding profusely, and though Sabine had wrapped swaddles around his waist, the blood still kept on pouring out. His lips were beginning to turn blue, so was his entire skin. It is usually the cold that brings this, but such an effect stems from the doing of one poison, something even the Order of the Faceless Men were careful not to use. "Shade of the evening mixed with Venumortem," Arya voiced out her
suspisions. Sabine only nodded. "Who did this?"

"Where are they?" one other voice partially dispersed the people gathered. It was Daario. "Let me through, plea—" He swallowed back his own words upon seeing Aegeus's almost lifeless form—bloodied, broken, and perchance dragging himself towards hood's path. The Stormcrow clenched his teeth and screamed in wrath. "I will kill that accursed Greyjoy!" he claimed in the midst of rage that shook the whole cavern and caused most of the brothers to retreat many steps back. "I will slaughter him and feed him to his own band of rapers!"

"Calm, Daario!" Jaqen admonished him. "We cannot afford to act without thinking. Everything we do will have consequences in moons forthcoming." He lowered himself and stroked Aegeus's temple, slapped the comely one's cheek gently for blood to flow once more to his temples. "Brother…wake up, brother…"

Thoros of Myr nodded to Harwin and Lem, who signaled to all the other brothers to depart and return to their places of sleep or their respective stations of watch. Catelyn remained with Sansa.

"He will not wake," the red priest spoke, kneeling beside Jaqen. The priest pressed his hand against the comely one's chest as if assaying his condition within, then proceeded to whispering incantations and words of entreaty to the lord of light. Thoros shook his head, eyed Jaqen and Daario dismally. "The life force is there, but it is waning significantly. Whoever holds him now in the realm between, he…she is intent on keeping him there. Plague dreams torture him too as we speak. This is why you never bargain with Death," he stood up. "It always gets the last laugh."

"Does Winter have anything at all to do with it?" Arya queried, and surprised herself at the sound of her broken voice.

"Everything, yes," the priest spoke. "The more the Long Night approaches, the more the rune of the other gods become inaccessible to us, mortals. Fire dies, so does its gift—bringing back those who were once dead from the brink. However, he is neither dead nor alive, we must wait for a few more days and decide for a course of action."

Daario tugged his hair, exhaled sharply. "You…you have that potion, Sabine. Revixit coile-tare, is it? The one you used to revive yourself? You have it?"

Sabine bit her lip. "I…I don't, brother. Concocting it would take me a whole moon, I have naught with me—ingredients, implements. Even if I do have it, it should be taken prior to engaging in any form of combat, in anticipation of a serious injury."

"Other potions? Any damnable cure?"

"I have those which I always carry with me, but…" Sabine choked at her next words. "Shade of the evening with Venumortem is very rare, it is almost a mythical substance. I'm very surprised that the Qartheen warlocks were even able to concoct it. I know nothing as of now about the antivenin, forgive me…we were not at all expecting…"

"Are you telling me that you have nothing to cure Aegeus with?" Daario's voice rose. "What is your use as potions master if all you ever carry are serums for tummy aches?!"

At these words, Sabine buried her face in Aegeus's chest and wept silently, clutching the fabric of the comely one's tunic the tightest she could. Arya stroked Sabine's hair, a futile attempt at comforting the woman.

Jaqen rose.
"What's your problem?" the Lorathi faced the Stormcrow, then pushed him forcefully. "What's your problem?!"

"This whole scheme is my problem!" Daario roared. "Our brother is dying and you seem to be too casual about this whole arrangement from the Order's twisted mindwork!"

Jaqen grabbed the collar of Daario's tunic and shook him with violence. "You have a better plan?! Huh?! All you ever do is rant about how shortsighted the Order is, but you offer none of yourself to it!"

*Stop!*

It was the Lady Stoneheart's voice that shattered the growing enmity between the two. She approached the men, looked at each of their faces.

*Kill this,* she said. *This antipathy. It will not save your brother. It breeds nothing but deep hate. Once the hate is gone...* her right hand cupped Jaqen's cheek, and she smiled at him but her eyes were with sadness. *You will be forced to deal with the pain. You would never wish to deal with pain, sons. No...oh, no...*

It is said that when any man is in the brink of losing someone that matters to him, the whole world becomes his enemy. Yet, there are those that are like him too, who lost and might lose some more. But there are true foes, and friends that men have reduced to foes simply because the torment at the moment was too much to bear.

Daario pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. "Help me, Jaqen," he finally whispered. "We will carry Aegeus close to the fire." He walked towards Sabine who was then slumped over the comely one's body. Gently, he lifted the woman, squeezed her in a tight embrace. "Shush...shush...we would do every damned thing we can..."

The three-sided castle was not as monumental as Winterfell is, yet the Tumblestone on the north side and the Forks on the south made the fortress all the more imposing. Its standstone walls rise from sheer water flowing from the intertwining rivers, and in situations when battle is necessary, the sluice gates open to allow water to surround all its three sides. The keep is within the high walls, and Catelyn had said that her most favored place in the castle is the path that leads to the Great Hall—a godswood with wildflowers, redwoods, elms, streams, and birds that found their niche on the branches. A sept is also amidst the gardens, a rainbow of light filling it every morn through its stained-glass windows.

Entering the castle through the Water Gate required no elaborate tricks apart from donning the most plain of faces. Hence, there was the servant girl, the alekeeper, and the dining hall's esquire who all entered the Water Gate through boats secured against the walls by thick iron rings. One after the other, they traversed the path to the kitchen close to the Great Hall where the banquet will be held, taking the water stairs from the lower bailey. The two men wore boots that went past the legs, yet the river's currents were too strong and so they found themselves wet from the knees down, with their boots doing very little to keep them both dry. The girl's hem was soaked.

"Turn left before you reach the keep," one of the guards had told them. "No frolicking around Lady Minisa's garden!"

The rest of the brothers would be by the rear gate where the Tully's maester would be waiting.
Meanwhile in the Great Hall, Westerosi colors and flavorings bathed all spaces and corners. Lord Emmon Frey had invited the recently besieged noble houses of the riverlands, and failure to attend to the declaration of House Frey as lords overseer of Riverrun would be considered an act of defiance to the crowned queen who had ordered that such ceremonies be done in the castle. Tully sigils of an argent trout leaping in azure and muddy scarlet were replaced with banners of two blue towers united by a bridge—House Frey's sigil. And upon the sandstone walls, those sigils ensphered a grand escutcheon of a stoned head and orbed gules—emblem of House Baelish of the Fingers, from where the lord paramount of the Tridents hails.

The kitchen was large and wholly occupied, that the servant girl asked herself if she would at all be noticed had she worn her true face. Pots, kettles, waffle irons landed on open hearths with metallic clangs, blending with the gossips and urgent calls of the cooks. Cauldrons were placed atop open fires, and skewers were either with quails or a whole ox.

The two men wearing the faces of an alekeeper and a kitchen esquire were now nowhere to be found in that riotous place.

"Not a sharp one, are yeh?" she heard one of the female cooks speak, one hand against her plump waist and the other holding a cleaver with the blade facing the ground. Only when the girl turned did she realize that the cook was speaking with her. "From which mother's cranny did you wake up? Can't see that chores are piling up in here?"

"The pheasant to the banquet table, then," the servant girl replied to appease the woman.

An irritated pout escaped from the female, her head she shook vehemently. "Not that! The haddock with figs and raisins! Carry the sauce that comes with that and don't spill it with your clumsy hands or it'll be naught but gratitude for your service, yeh gettin' me, girl?"

The servant girl just nodded and picked up the platter containing the haddock. She walked towards the Grand Hall and surveyed the immediate vicinity. A great table was set on a dais where the members of House Frey and other important lords were expected to sit, while on the far side, a buffet was artistically set up on a series of wooden table planks draped richly with brocade and organza. Wine was served mere moments ago, yet some of the guests were already half-inebriated, engaged in senseless colloquies in between mad growls and fitful laughters.

In a split-second, the platter of haddock in her hands was replaced with a whole pork pie by the one wearing the face of a kitchen esquire.

Lord of the Crossing, Lord of the Crossing…

There he was, the man of the hour, though such status of him that night only existed in the servant girl's purview. He had just assumed his seat at the head table beside Lord Emmon who now holds Riverrun, and rarely does the Lord of the Crossing leave the Twins. Ah, but why would he not this time? The riverlands are now theirs, and though titles would name Petyr Baelish as lord paramount, he who has the first hand on matters is the true sovereign.

The true lord that runs the game of thrones in the riverlands is none other than Walder Frey.

He was ninety yet very able still to run a whole castle—death passes over evil roots, and so they are harder to kill. It was even said that Lord Emmon would merely be Walder's hand on seeing the day-to-day matters at Riverrun—a lordling, from the mouth of more polite jesters. The old man's high-pitched hiccup of a laugh heightened the servant girl's loathing for him in unthinkable levels, that it took everything she had to not rush to the great table and murder the demon vulture. Patience breeds rewards, she said in an attempt to calm herself, and cursed repeatedly as his laughter escalated and
mixed with obscenities directed towards the other servant girls. When she saw the alekeeper and the kitchen esquire performing their duties in pretense, she decided to proceed with the plan. In the background was the orchestra playing 'The Bear and the Maiden Fair', led by Tom Sevenstreams. Cheers inundated the entire hall as the rhythm and cadence of the song had changed from leisurely to lively.

The girl strode to where Lord Walder Frey was sitting and with a flirty sway of her hips, set the platter of pie in front of Emmon.

The servant girl let out a fake gasp of surprise at Lord Walder's lecherous slap on her buttocks, and even that was not enough. The filthy old goat slid his hand in between the girl's thighs in an attempt to feel her feminine lair. "M'lord!" the one wearing the face of a servant girl giggled nervously, as she tried to close both of her legs to trap the old man's hand. "Food is on the table m'lord; I hardly look like a scallop!"

"Oh, I suppose you would be tastier than a scallop, my sweet. Heh," was Lord Walder's ribald jest. Without warning, he lowered his face to smell the servant's behind. The girl almost squealed at the act. "Tired yet of milking goats and awaiting catch by the Saltpans? Just say the word," Walder Frey chuckled richly, forking a thick slice of pie that the servant had placed on his dish. He stuffed the slice into his mouth, spoke in between his struggles to chew the piece. "I treat m'whores as well an' good as I treat m'wives. E'en my bastards have their own seats on my table." He swallowed the chunk and washed his throat with wine. "You ever had one in between your legs before?"

The old man was too forward. Mere minutes and here he was, offering one servant girl a place on his bed.

"Father," Emmon began, in an attempt to chastise the lord. "Lower your voice, please."

"Pah! You now presume that you can teach me courtesy, is that it?" the lord scoffed. "Shut your piehole and let me do as I wish. You may be my overlord but you still came out of my breeches, boy. Dare you not forget that!"

Seats on his table, is it? Very unlikely, the servant girl thought. With twenty-nine trueborns and baseborns he could hardly count, from eight wives he had outlived? He does not seem to get along too well even with the least detestable of his sons. "Oh no, m'lord," she replied modestly, ignoring Lord Emmon's disgusted stare. Walder Frey's left hand was still grasping one cheek of her buttocks firmly. "No man has taken any interest in this girl as of yet," she continued, rewarding the lord an innocent smile which the former found too beguiling. In her peripheral sight, she saw the esquire drawing nigh, feigning occupation, asking the lords how the eatables were and if they found the malt fitting to their taste.

With the back of his hand, Walder Frey wiped his now drooling mouth and carried on with stroking the girl's behind. "Fools, eh?" was his reply. "Can't tell the savory from the bland?"

"I guess not, m'lord," the servant girl once more giggled.

What had transpired in the following seconds registered as one whole blur in Walder's consciousness.

'And who are you', the proud lord said, 'That I must bow so low?'

The song had changed abruptly, and with it came the old man's protest. "Who the hell plays 'Rains of Castamere' in a feast, damn it? Change that one to 'Cask of Ales', you bungholes!"
If the musicians have heard the lord's orders, then they showed no signs of it. They blew and fiddled and tapped to the tune of a massacre's canticle.

*A lion still has claws, and mine are long and sharp as yours, my lord—as long and sharp as yours.*

"Lord Frey!" two guards rushed to Emmon, who was then exchanging quiet words with a lord bannerman. "The castle is surrounded with cavalries!"

Sounds of panic suddenly pervaded the chamber, queries regarding the castle's garrison were thrown here and there, as some lords and their ladies began rising from their seats either to get a better view of the Freys or to slip out from the grand hall before the situation gets out of hand.

Emmon stood asudden, ignored his father's fitful coughs caused no doubt by the old man's pigging out. "Those are Jaime Lannister's soldiers, you idiots!"

"No, my lord," one of the guards said. "Mallister and Ryger sigils, and Blackwood had joined them as well. Around four thousand strong, discounting the infantry."

"Ours?" Emmon queried calmly, even as he was tempted to strike his lord father's nape so the old man could spit out the slice that had severely choked him.

"Mere three thousand. Half of them are already drunk."

"Assemble five hundred men by the front portcullis. Open the sluice gates."

"We tried, my lord. The gates were locked from the outside," the other guard had reported, "The boats by the Water Gate are missing as well."

*But now the rains weep o'er his hall with no one there to hear…*

Walder Frey bellowed out commands in between his hacks. "Ar—archers to the battlements… have…have them positioned by the arrow loops." He knew what would become of this unexpected episode; he was one of the architects of one such during the war, along with Tywin Lannister and Roose Bolton. *And now, both of them are dead,* Walder Frey thought, *no cook turned into a rat that night, yet the gods made sure that those two traitor lords would meet their end in a way or another.* He spat out what remained of the pork pie, and gasped upon seeing what had been there all along—a fingernail, and an argentite ring. "No…no…" Walder Frey howled. The fingernail and the ring were both Raymund Frey's own. "Noooo!"

The song played on through the musicians' pipes and fiddles—the same one that had signaled the slaughter of the Stark and Tully soldiers, their kith, their overlords and vassals:

*Yes, now the rains weep o'er his hall and not a soul to hear.*

"Ambush! This is an ambush!" came Lord Walder Frey's enraged screams meshed with the melodies of that treacherous ballad.

At these words, the one wearing the esquire's face pulled Lord Emmon back to his seat and gave him a quick throat slash. Blood spritzed out in liberal amounts, choking the dying man, and some of the scarlet sprayed over Lord Walder's face. He whimpered at the sight, then regurgitated.

The old man was then pinned down to his chair by the servant girl and the dining hall's esquire, and they hastily tied both hands of his behind the seat's splat. "Enjoy the show, m'lord," were the girl's words that rang decibels in his ears. Around fifteen other Frey guards rushed to the grand table upon seeing their lords being assaulted, unsheathing their broadswords as they advanced, screaming in
rage. Poisoned quarrels were set loose from the crossbows of those fiddlers and pipers, who were in fact knights still sworn to House Tully, all disguised as musicians. Eight Frey guards were subdued on the spot, while the others were stabbed with long-bladed poniards by other sworn swords who had entered the grand hall through the side pillars that led to Riverrun's dungeons.


It was a whole reenactment of the Red Wedding.

The servant girl stood on the table, as if it was one monolith that hosted the envoy of Death itself. "One chance to have your lives spared! Run and save yourselves, or remain here and get slaughtered!"

Most of the lords did not have to think twice. They rushed out of the grand hall with reckless abandon, leaving behind the Freys and some Lannisters of Darry.

The servant girl turned to Walder Frey, removed her face to reveal her true visage.

"The Stark and Tully dead send their regards."

The events outside the keep were as intense.

Frey soldiers began raising the drawbridge to thwart any more attempts of the rebel houses to besiege the castle. The bridge has been lifted halfway when a pack of twenty direwolves leaped onto the planks and raced to the iron portcullis. Screams and howls echoed throughout Riverrun's bailey as the beasts began tearing and ripping and killing, evading arrows and quarrels.

With the gatekeepers slaughtered, the drawbridge succumbed to a mighty collapse to its usual position above the castle's moat. Mallister and Blackwood cavalries began charging and infiltrating the castle.

Snow had started to fall, and already, the immaculateness of it was besmirched with betrayer's blood.

"Take the keep! Surround the castle!" were Jason Mallister's orders. He hissed at the impact of an arrow against his left shoulder. He quickly snapped the shaft and resumed at barking out commands. "Second cavalry to the west wing, fourth to the south!" In the midst of that fray, Mallister burst out laughing at Blackfish Tully bellowing like mad in every sword slash and thrust whilst atop his steed. "You Frey traitors will be nothing but bloody meat for the wolves tonight!" were the words of the lord.

The bloodbath continued in the outer courtyard and in the hall at the other side of the castle's threshold.

Simultaneous with the riot in the outermost, a lady dressed in gray cloak alighted from her steed and entered the castle through the now widely open double doors of redwood. With her was a lady knight taller than the lord's guard who was supposed to man the thresholds. Her movements were unimpeded, and she seemed to be glissading only as she traversed the long aisle that led to the grand hall.

With a gentle push of the door, she entered the scene of butchery. Frey soldiers and sons—trueborn and baseborn all, now lay dead in their own pool of blood that left abstract patterns upon the marbled floor. It was as if in her presence, those enemies have surrendered at her feet and laid themselves all over her in a show of submission; and if the dead do ask for mercy, then perchance their soulless bodies were screaming for it at that precise moment.
"An eye for an eye," The Lorathi told the captive, but his awed eyes were on the corpse woman as she continued drawing close. "A debt will be repaid tonight."

"In what hell..." the lord stammered, his entirety convulsing as the woman removed the hood that covered her mutilated face. "How'd yeh...Emmon!" he called to the second-born though he knew that dead men do not answer to the living. "Emmon! Ghoul! A ghoul...get...get away from me!"

The woman laughed richly, her burst of mirth over the inevitable demise of a foe resembled nothing but an eerie cackle.

"To show them that mercy, to honor them still, despite what they did to Robb and the Northmen, to those sworn to House Tully, to you," was Arya's remark. "It must have taken you all the courage and virtue of the greatest of men to do such."

Catelyn Stark responded with a wistful smile. *I have died and returned, and it only took the courage of a mother to do all the things I have done. I would have spared his life had he spared Robb's.*

She had recounted that story before, how she had tried to bargain with Walder Frey, how she had begged for mercy and swore in front of the old gods and the new that no soul in both betrayed houses would take vengeance over the death of those trapped inside the hall. When all recourses were exhausted and she had realized that the lord could never be persuaded to yield, she had thrown all notions of honor in the wind and threatened to kill one of his own. "A son for a son," she had threatened and bargained, but the lord only gave her a wry grin. "That's a grandson; and that boy was never much use," were his words.

"We will forget about all these, mother," Arya told her as they rode back to Hollow Hill to retrieve Sansa and the two envoys from Braavos. "Then, we will all return to Winterfell. We have to find Bran and Rickon, restore what was ours. The Boltons are dead, thanks to Jon and Stannis. Father swore fealty to him and he has not forgotten us." Arya did not tell her mother about Jon's legitimized heirship of Winterfell through Baratheon claimer's ruling; neither did she tell her that her allegiance is...
right now torn between Stannis and Aegon the Sixth. And there's one more name, she thought. Cersei. For Eddard, for Robb. Even as she rolled the syllables of that last name across her tongue like sweet Samori, she still felt the strong urge to spit it out, and such reaction was not caused by mere loathing for the queen, but by loathing towards herself too, for Arya had become no better than her.

Jaqen's words from many nights ago continued to pierce her. "You see, lovely girl, those people were breathing, living, before we took them away with our poisons and knives," The Lorathi had told her once. "Perhaps they were lovers, or fathers, or friends. They suffered too, they laughed like the rest of us did. You feel a certain pain, the pangs of guilt when they die in your hands. You persuade yourself to bury them in the deepest, darkest parts of you—maybe in forgetting, you would cease to go mad. Don't think, don't feel, just do—this is what we were taught." Her heart almost screamed in anguish when Jaqen smiled; for it was as if that smile may be his last any moment, and the thought of it being so was something she couldn't possibly bear for the life of her. "But in killing them, you steal their humanity; and in stealing their humanity, you take away your own. The madness would come, maybe not today like what we tell Death, but it will. Your hands were innocent, your notions of virtue, uncorrupted until a man came. A man led you to this assassin's life which is also his own life, taught you to disown yourself, to kill. After all these, Arya, would you… would you still be able to ever forgive me?"

"I will forgive you even if you will be the death of me," were Arya's words of response to him. "Like you, no regrets. Out of countless lives, I would choose this one with you—would always choose this."

Winterfell, Catelyn said, bringing the girl back to the present. My northern days are behind me now, Arya.

Arya's eyes darted to her dear mother's face, her face was aghast at the woman's words. "How could you even say that, mother? What of these acts of reprisal then? You are the Lady Catelyn Stark of Winterfell, may I just remind you of that fact?"

Was, the woman corrected her, patting the beige-maned steed to calm it as it trotted. I don't belong there anymore, my love, as I do not anymore belong here.

"Enough of this nonsense, mother," Arya directed her gaze towards the road. Sorrow engulfed her, for even as she desired to argue, Catelyn's words made sense. If the only purpose for her return, the only thing that fueled it was to avenge Robb's death, then she had served that purpose without contest. But she was murdered, her life was stolen before her time, an insistent voice played devil's advocate in her addled thoughts. What of her purposes before her demise? "Many people desire to live but they were not as fortunate as you are. Now, you want to waste this gift away? Do you not desire to see Bran and Rickon once more?"

Oh, believe me, I do desire this more than anything, Catelyn said. Her lips were quivering, yet she still held her head high, she had shown weakness before and that weakness had spurred her very ruin. Night after night, they visit me in my dreams. The Hollow Hill is full of weirwoods, and they speak, they show. My boys—even that boy—Jon. For many nights I couldn't sleep, and that is mayhap because I am awake in Bran and Rickon's dreams. Her smile was with hidden pain, but Arya chose to ignore it lest the pain invades her heart as well. The last time I saw the bleeding star was five years ago. Catelyn continued, and laughed softly at Arya's irritated sigh—her daughter sensed she was changing the subject, only that she was not. 'Red Messenger', the rivermen called it. Edmure and Brynden had argued about the comet's meaning—victory for House Tully, blood and war. I thought it heralded laurels for the Lannisters. That bleeding star stayed in the heavens for days, Arya. I loathed its presence; I even prayed to the gods so that comet would just blow to
"Makes two of us," Arya replied quietly. "We were on our way to the North when I saw it, and I thought I saw father's blood along the blade of his own greatsword. I hated it too, at first."

Catelyn pulled the reins of her steed lightly in order to slow it down. Arya did the same to her own ride. You hated it 'at first'. Oh my, what made you lose your contempt for it, pray tell?

At this question, Arya quickly glanced at the Lorathi who was riding beside Jason Mallister, occupied with a most pleasant conversation with the lord. "Jaqen," she said, turning her attention once more to the grassy thoroughfare. "He came to me when that bloody star had shown itself in the skies, mother."

A good moment of silence befell upon them both.

Curious, Catelyn replied. We were at camp, and I couldn't sleep. I went to the closest thing there was to a godswood, prayed. I was kneeling, and my eyes were shut tight. Even with my lids closed, tears still escaped from me. And then…and then when I opened them, I saw him. Catelyn gazed at Arya, who was then riveted asudden to the woman's recounts. Your father. Ned was there, in the godswood.

"You had a vision of him."

Catelyn Stark shook her head. Not a vision, my love. Ned was there.

"Father was already dead when that bleeding star appeared, mother."

Yes, Catelyn replied. It was the longest prayer of my life. I knelt and stayed in that position for gods know how long. The bleeding star had just materialized in the skies and I beheld it for just a few seconds, then resumed to praying…

'Return him to me,' I beseeched the gods. 'Even as a shadow, even as a dream.'

The wind was cold…I could still remember how it soaked me. All the while I thought my scales had turned to fur when I became a Stark, but nothing had prepared me for that chill that burned. They said that there was a split second when the red comet's tail sparkled brighter than the sun. A split second, Arya.

That comet appeared chaotic yet unbroken. Nothing…no one could have predicted what mysteries moved with it.

"They say it moves in the void," Arya said. "It's true, no one could tell when it would come again. I have seen it, and thought of father. You have seen it, and thought of him too. That is all; and there is no need to overthink."

That is where you are wrong, Catelyn smiled softly. I have seen that comet, and your father came with it, so I did not just think of him.

I saw him as clearly as I saw that streak of red in the sky.

Arya snorted. "An apparition."
Our lips touched, child.

"What?" Arya pulled the reins of her horse asudden. The horse brayed at the sudden tug on its bridles and jerked backwards to unseat its rider. "Ho!" Arya stroked its crest to calm it. "Easy boy, easy. Come now, boy…"

"Everything fine, Arya?" Jaqen called from the back.

"Yes!" Arya replied. "Horse just got a little skittish." She turned her attention back to Catelyn who was holding back the sound of laughter. Arya's voice was no louder than a hiss. "Impossible! It was all an illusion of yours, mother. He just died and you longed for him, that is all there was to it."

*Perhaps you can kiss the dead's spirit,* she replied. *But you cannot speak with the dead, can you?*

The pain never stops, and those who think that there is a cessation to grieving are cursed with hearts of stone. Was this perhaps why Catelyn Stark thought she saw Eddard in her longing?

"And what did you talk about?" Arya asked skeptically.

*I'll keep that to myself,* Catelyn teased her.

"Of course, you will," she answered in between chortles. "It happened during the appearance of the *shierak qiya*, the bleeding star showed him to you once more…" she paused a while and trapped her lower lip with her teeth, suddenly addled with a host of thoughts. The doubt seemed to fade as she realized how very parallel their experiences were. "The same way…the same way it had led Jaqen to me."

*Love lost and found, you mean?* The woman continued to tease her.

"Perhaps," Arya replied with a grin, for lack of a better thing to say.

She suddenly understood that she could not refute what Catelyn Stark had just confessed to her. The *shierak qiya* was a great harbinger of things to come, and for men, it would herald various meanings—life and death, victory and defeat, a forbidden confluence.

*Dragons.*

It is even said that when the red comet appears, it means that one realm is currently colliding with another. Realms are akin to floating spheres after all, and they interact. How can she even doubt such a thing, impossible though it may be, when she had in fact returned with Jaqen to one of the realms that hosted her old self?

*Did Ned Stark show himself to Catelyn at the night of the bleeding star?* The girl thought. *To comfort her during his death in this realm, and assure her of his life in another?*

"How long was it, mother," Arya asked suddenly. "For how long were you with him?"

Catelyn sighed, waited for a few good seconds before answering.

*No more than one passing of sand grains in an hourglass, Arya. Just an hour—a speck of eternity. That is how long.*

Arya's heart broke at her mother's words. Perchance, the woman had searched her soul that night and found it empty, and searched the throng instead for Ned Stark's face. In that desperate search, maybe the gods have taken pity and have allowed the membranes of this realm to meet with another—for a
mere hour and no longer, so Catelyn may see him one more time.

"That is why you hated that red comet," Arya concluded, and surprised herself at the sound of her breaking voice.

Yes, Catelyn replied, her eyes towards the firmaments. *To see him and touch him and kiss him for just a full clock's turn, then to blink and witness him evanescing in front of me, never to return...I...I died that night.*

*I want to be with your father, Arya.*

*Forgive me, it is a selfish desire.*

*I have realized so many things. If all things died and he had lived, then I shall continue to be. But if all else lived and he had died, then I would be nothing but a stranger to my own self.*

*Just as I am now.*

Hot tears flowed down on Arya's cheek. She did not even wipe them away. She had to accept the painful truth now—they all had to—that their parents are pilgrim souls hoping to meet once more in a realm where the dead belongs, for that is where they were *supposed* to be. Their lives had but faded, and the laughter and hopes that come with it, they would carry with them in the void.

If a soul loses its other half, there is no other recourse but to really search for that lost piece of one's self.

They have reached Hollow Hill in half a day. From the cavern's mouth came Ser Gendry who then rushed towards them with apparent alarm on his face. *Not now,* Arya begged to whomever merciful may be listening at the moment. Sansa emerged from the opening as well, but she stayed in her place beside the overgrown roots. She was calm, yet her expression reflected grief. It was as if she did not sleep the entire night, and Arya wondered if this may have been the case. Her older sister had offered to be left behind with Sabine to tend to the wounded Aegeus, and with them were a few from the brotherhood and some soldiers sworn to House Mallister who were charged with guarding the Lannister captive.

"All are safe, I hope?" Ser Gendry queried. His eyes quickly found Jaqen's, as if intimating more than what he had asked.

"You can say that," Jaqen answered. "Riverrun was reclaimed. We lost a few men of course, but the other side lost a good number of theirs. Ser Brynden holds the castle now, Ser Tytos Blackwood is with him."

Jason Mallister spoke to Gendry. "We understand that you serve no banner, but the gates of Riverrun and of its loyal houses are open to receive each and every man in the brotherhood."

The knight nodded. "Thank you for your graciousness, Ser. Of course, this is a matter that must be discussed in the presence of the other members of the brotherhood. Thoros and Lem are running the band with Lady Sto—the Lady Catelyn Stark. This would require pondering on their part, and ours too." He exhaled, as if unsure of how to proceed with whatever news he may have for the newly arrived ones. "I understand that your recent victory in retaking Riverrun had sent you all to good spirits. Forgive me for taking that away, but this must be known to you all, especially to the Lady Arya and her spouse. The Braavosi envoy, Aegeus, the wounded one," he finally said. "We lost him just this morning."
Hey guys! A weekend read for all of you. I hope you liked it, let me know what you think (The Walder scene is my extrapolation from the TWoW released chapters, I gave Walder for Catelyn to finish). More, more J/A in the next chapters, promise. Thanks much for the kudos and comments! ;D
"We'll make a falling star wish,
One more slow kiss,
What are we waiting for?"

Meadows, Flowers, Dragon, Wolf, Man, Girl

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Winter's spouse is chained

His scepter's command is gone.

But heed the signs, the burgeoning of his return.

After eight thousand years..."

The Jade Compendium (derived)

He was said to be the exact antithesis to Azor Ahai, yet some who claim to know the annals would say that he and Azor Ahai are one. It is best to keep men confused, for confusion breeds dissension of beliefs.

Before he was chained in Stygai, he had fashioned an empire of sorts in the land of Yi Ti, and his rule was marked by a reign of terror—bereft of the virtues men had come to learn from the Lion god and his Maiden, riddled with endless drama, and a quagmire of abomination and wretchedness. Out of envy, he had slain his sister-spouse, the Amethyst Empress; then practiced dark arts and necromancy, feasted on human flesh, and took in a tiger-woman for a wife. Without trepidation, he cast down the true gods of Yi Ti and worshipped a black stone that fell from the sky though he knew not the origins of it.

He enslaved his own people, even founded the sinister church of starry wisdom so the enslavement would go beyond the physical and seep through his people’s deep-seated consciousness and faith. Even up to now, one of his churches still stands in the Free City of Braavos.

Those he had enslaved managed to persuade themselves that they somehow possessed liberty—a will of their own, and believed that time will come when a savior with a flaming sword would deliver them from their godforsaken lives. But his priests were too gifted, and so they managed to convince those slaves to proclaim him a god-on-earth, to construct pantheons to serve him, to mimic his reign of tyranny with inexplicable cosmic perfection that there was nothing more the emperor could do but laugh at the absurd effects of his own orchestrations.

His was a rule of dread, his was blood betrayal.

It was even said that every turn of the moon, he would venture to the Grey Waste towards the Heart
of Winter in order to mate with the cursed god of death.

This mating spawned the first Long Night, and chronicles would say that the dead of winter happened because the righteous gods have punished the realms—men have gone cruel. Not everything that was written would hold truth in it, of course.

Whatever the only truth was about the fate of the ninth and last ruler of the Empire of the Dawn, whom they called the Bloodstone Emperor, this may be lost in time. Whether such truth would bring good or harm is not even a matter of consequence. As for the Bloodstone Emperor, only one thing mattered—that his empire should have been an infinite dynasty of great rulers had the gods not intervened. Eight thousand years have passed and his apotheotic soul had found a host, and that host came from the blood of dragon conquerors and slavers, from a tyrannical empire much like his own many, many years back.

The host of his soul belonged to the greatest fool—a dragonrider renamed Warrior during the days of Valyria and Rhoyne, who chose to bargain with the most deceitful of deities and thus, was led to live the life of obliterated selves, all for the sake of sparing the life of one beloved to him.

Perhaps there were those fanatic worshippers who sought the chained god's release for eons, and even waited for him outside the gates of Stygai. The cycles of time had begun once more.

It had been a whole eternity, yes.

But for gods, even eternities end.

______________________________

In front of Aegon the Sixth sat Ser Rolland Storm, the bastard of House Caron and castellan of Dragonstone. Daenerys was on the head seat of the Painted Table to his right, while Jon Connington and Tyrion Lannister were seated to his left. Barristan Selmy contented himself by leaning against the mullpost of the heavy door, listening intently to conversations, and offering his own conjectures only when asked or everytime the discussion gets out of hand. Wooden markers were strewn all over the carved map of Westeros, and commanders were dismissed for the time being. Though the soldiers were gaining hints on what the closed-door colloquies were about—breathing dead north of the Wall, that is—some are still skeptical, for they were convinced that the Targaryens resettled in their ancient seat of power for one and one purpose only and that is conquest.

Marwyn the Mage sat with them, holding his scrolls that spoke of the magic of dragonglass.

"I lost almost thirty men in Dragonmont; we were all underneath when a contained explosion occurred far right," Ser Rolland reported. "Lord Stannis said we had to dig deep, well, a quarter of a mile because that is where the dragonglass deposits are. There were chunks and boulders of it in the old tunnels by the side of the mountain, most of them black, but they were not as much as we were expecting."

"How much were you able to dig up?" Archmaester Marwyn queried.

Ser Rolland sighed. "About an eighth of a shipload. We were able to obtain most of the dragonglass reserves, and what is left in the mines would not even fill a deck."

The Prince gazed at the Mage, then shook his head. "That is not enough."

Ser Rolland snorted and responded with sarcasm. "You figured that, didn't you?"

He ignored the castellan's rancor and spoke to the rest of those who were in the chamber. "We need around two full shiploads of obsidian for what's coming, comrades. It took Ser Rolland Storm three
full moons to dig up a mere scale, and he had two hundred men with him. Apparently, obsidian is hard to come by in Dragonmont now since the volcano has been inactive for a couple of years."

"Aurion and Winter," Daenerys remarked. "For years I have delayed conquest, stayed in Meereen to gather forces, rethink about the plans, reflect on my own motives. Those slavers by the bay masquerading as good and wise masters delayed me further because of the siege. Now, it's you who's delaying us all, dearest Aegon. Is this conquest ever going to happen?" Daenerys asked. Aegon just smiled at his aunt's japing. "Apart from Dragonstone, there are only two places in the mapped lands where you could obtain your two shiploads of dragonglass."

"We cannot haul all of our men to Asshai to mine dragonglass," Marwyn offered. "Too perilous, we will collide head-on with the slavers."

"The Redwyne Fleet would never sail far from Westeros, not while the Shield Islands are still held by the Ironborns," Tyrion added. "The remaining Tyrells have to retake their turf, or they will face serious rebellion in the Reach. Now, it's Euron's ace against Cersei, he had named Harlaw Lord of Greyshield and the other three islands he besieged as well."

"Not to mention that if we sail to Essos at this crucial time of conquest, not enough forces would be left to hold Dragonstone and the seat at the Stormlands," said Ser Barristan.

"There is only one place to go, I'm afraid," Jon Connington concluded, eyes on Aegon the Sixth. "I would advise against this, my Prince. It is not wise to fly straight to the dragon's lair. This is exactly what Aurion wants the Targaryens to do."

"Valyria," Aegon the Sixth declared, as if the Griff did not voice out his remonstrance. "There is no other way but to proceed straight to the Freehold. All forces would stay here in Westeros—commanders, infantry, cavalry, ships. Those dragonlords have the entire Volantene fleet with them. We have the Braavosi and Pentoshi fleet of two hundred and seventy ships, although…" the Prince exhaled. "If they could be persuaded to sail straight to hell is a thing I am not entirely sure about."

"This is not the plan we have discussed with the legates of the Free Cities, my Prince," the Griff still protested. "The plan was to use the Pentoshi ships for rear ambush should the Volantenes decide to sail north and attack Braavos. You will only place yourself in peril with such drastic measures! Heed reason—"

"Jon," Aegon called to him calmly, and with kind eyes gazed at the man. "I appreciate your concern for my sake, but time is not on our side as you can see. Meereen has been retaken by the slavers, Tyrosh was turned by those lords into a city of soot, and just last night, our watchers at the Windwyrm Tower informed us of snowfall near midnight here in Dragonstone, of all places. Unless we get out of our crawl spaces and face the lords head on, stop them from rebuilding their slavers' empire with a sickening deal with Winter on the side, we cannot hope to accomplish anything. The threats are real. To delay is to perish, my good friend."

The Griff shook his head in disagreement but kept his mouth shut. Aegon the Sixth Targaryen is king while he is mere hand; and even though there was no clarity yet as to who must occupy the throne, questioning the lad's decision in front of Daenerys Targaryen and Ser Barristan would only give them the impression that Aegon is unfit to rule.

This means that whoever is seen as a more capable ruler would most likely earn the support of noble houses that would bend the knee.

Jon Connington's proposal that Aegon must marry Daenerys was dismissed by the Prince as well. Tyrion Lannister had persuaded the lad that sharing the marriage bed with his father's sister would
scream of transgression in the eyes of noble-borns and commoners alike, and such would result in antipathy from his own subjects. A proposition was made for House Stark, yet the Prince had allowed the Lady Arya to walk away from it without even putting up a fight, and this was something the Griff had not expected from Aegon the Sixth Targaryen whom he had trained for years.

*The dreams were never gone*, the Griff thought to himself. *He still spoke of those dreams to the halfmaester. Aegon still longs for that girl, and that longing is even stronger than his want to reclaim the seat that was snatched from his family. 'Winter is coming'—Stark words have become the words of his own tongue, and he would do anything, even ride to seven hells for the Lady Arya.*

*His desire to protect the North that is the seat of the Starks is taking his focus away from the throne.*

Daenerys clasped both of her hands in front of the Painted Table. "I gather you once rode to Volantis with Lord Tyrion and Lord Connington, yes? You sailed through River Rhoyne and had some serious encounter with enchanted creatures there—*stonemen*, were they? The soldiers love to talk, you see," she said, her eyes cruising slowly to the Griff's greyscale-infected hand. The latter was quick to put his hand under the table in order to conceal it. "However, no one has ridden for Valyria before, save for Euron Greyjoy. We only know Valyria from what remained of Galendro's writings. Some seafarers have claimed seeing the reformed string of Fourteen Flames south of Oros, at the very heart of the Freehold. Not only do we have to get past the Volantene fleet north of that string if we wish to obtain dragonglass; we have to get past three imperial dragons commanded by Valyrian warlords. We are unfamiliar with the layout of the entire peninsula, my dear Aegon. We know naught about aerial combat, battle tactics when firebeasts are involved, not to mention that we would be walking straight to Aurion's trap. The Lord Connington here has made a sensible point—we are unprepared for this. We can only ride dragons and command them to spew fire onto enemy ships and soldiery, but frankly speaking, we are both greenhorns as far as a dance of dragons is concerned."

"This is why we need another rider for Viserion—another Targaryen-blooded," Aegon replied, rubbing his lower lip with his thumb in an effort to gather his thoughts which all took him back to that sprightly night with Arya Stark, when the voices of Prince Rhaegar and his Lady Lyanna conversed through them. *Jon*, Lyanna had spoken through the Stark girl. *My most beautiful memory.* A small smile played at the corner of Aegon's lips at the next words. "We need a Targaryen-blooded, and an imperial dragonrider."

"We are the last surviving Targaryens, dear one."

"Incorrect."

Daenerys laughed softly, regarding Aegon with narrow eyes. "Very well nephew, I will play. Targaryen bastards are plentiful especially in Lys, we might find a handful in there." She leaned forward on the Painted Table. "But where in this realm could we find that imperial dragonrider, pray tell?"

"He's here in Westeros."

"He cannot be. Haresh Esdraelon is dead; in Aurion's hands at that. Or did your halfmaester fail in providing you instruction on Galendro's twenty-seven missing scrolls?" the woman queried.

"True, the Esdraelon Archon-heir is dead," Aegon the Sixth replied. "A thousand years it had been, yes? Yet he lives, albeit under a different name—his true name."

"That is most amusing."
"Indeed, it is."

"Feed my eyes and my belief is yours," Daenerys Targaryen concluded. "Show me that mythical dragonrider. It is true, I desire for bloodbath through dragonfire against Aurion and those accursed riders of his for what they did to Meereen; and though it was never my home, it had served as the closest thing there is to a niche of my own when I had none. Thousands of righteous men and their children who were newly-liberated from thrall had perished beneath the flames." Though she kept her calm, the viciousness in her eyes was still evident. "I cannot just retake a new throne and forget about the conditions of Dragon's Bay. I have crucified the masters, now, I must burn the lords that impel them to act like demons."

The discussion was interrupted by the arrival of the castle's messenger. "Pardon me, your…graces," the messenger began, addressing both Daenerys and Aegon the Sixth. Tyrion Lannister only chuckled at the confusion, unmindful of the displeasure in the faces of both the Griff and Ser Barristan. "A message—"

"Arya Stark?" Aegon the Sixth stood abruptly and rushed to the messenger, snatched the scrolled message from the man's hands. The girl had promised before leaving Pentos that she would send him a missive with details concerning her travel to the North. A whole moon's time it had been since he had last seen her, and though the most rational part of him would deny the truth of his incessant longing, he knew that concealing his ardent feelings for the Lady Arya in front of all men who may bear witness would only leave him on the losing side. How ever can I deny this love for her? His heart ached at such admission. To burn with desire and shut my damned mouth about it, to scream her name out of passion unreciprocated, to allow her to be with another though it would cause the death of me?

With bursting hope, he unscrolled the message, ignoring the growing displeasure in the Griff's countenance, the questioning gawk from Ser Barristan, the amused stares of the Lannister Imp and the Silver Queen. His brows furrowed as he skimmed through the contents, and creased even more heavily as his eyes darted from left to right of the parchment with haste. When he had finished perusing the message, he exhaled laboriously, utter disappointment showing in his features.

"It's for you," the Prince tossed the message to Tyrion Lannister, who caught it with his right hand.

"You read each other's letters?" Daenerys queried, apparently intrigued by the lad's acts.

Ignoring her question, Aegon the Sixth sank on the chair, clicked his tongue irritably. Here he is, a dragon-blooded claimant to the Iron Throne, a commander celebrated for his recent victory in besieging the Stormlands that is the seat of the strong usurpers, the author of a great alliance amongst the Essosi Free Cities—irked by the thought that one lovely girl still owed him a love letter and that she doesn't seem too adamant about sending him one.

"There are no secrets between us, my queen," Tyrion replied with good humor, though upon his mien was the slight puzzlement regarding the letter's origin. Who could have written to him? Varys? Queen Cersei? He snorted at the latter thought and smoothed out the paper. "Ah, seems that the Lords Declarant of the Vale still recall me very well, and might be concerned about how their freed prisoner is faring," he carried on with his quips. Amusement died from his face asudden upon realizing who had inked that scroll.

Sansa Stark.

"The wife summons you," Aegon teased the Imp, though there was still a tinge of bitterness in his voice. "A rekindling of marriage vows I suppose, as she is in dire need of escorts on her way to the N—"
"I was in fact taught to read, thank you very much," Tyrion said, containing the surge of emotions that had whelmed his rationalities. His expression turned severe as he digested each word from Sansa Stark’s own handwriting, and prayed though he was not a great believer of any form of faith, that those present in the Chamber of the Painted Table fail to notice his feelings of unrest.

And curious anticipation.

And utter hurt.

He crumpled the paper, forced a calm smile as he turned his attention back to the two Targaryens. "Pardon the interruption. Some…unfinished business with…" he sighed. "Explications are unnecessary, of course. The matter is personal, you understand."

"Personal?" Daenerys Targaryen raised one brow in her interrogation. With a quick nod, she dismissed Ser Barristan, Marwyn, and the Griff, then turned back to the Imp when they were out of the chamber. "Forgive me, dear Tyrion, but nothing must remain personal when Targaryens, Lannisters, and Starks are all involved." She motioned to the crumpled parchment with a slight tilt of the head. "Whoever holds Winterfell holds the Wall, and whoever holds the Wall holds Westeros. No matter what fools like us would think, it is the North that serves as our first and last garrison when winter comes. However, we cannot entirely set the politics aside, can we? It is the politics that solidifies your marriage to that Stark, and in turn, your affiliation to that House. In matters of conquests and loyalties, Tyrion Lannister, nothing is personal."

The Imp smirked at the queen’s rhetorics. She could have just said that she has this obsessive need to pry.

"Oh, come now, Daenerys. He's still brokenhearted," Aegon carried on with his teasing. "Should we not let him wallow in self-pity first? Surely, the contents of that letter can wait."

"Read it," Daenerys ignored the lad and spoke directly to Tyrion.

Tyrion Lannister only chuckled. "You might find the message too absurd, Daenerys, and you might ask yourself after you have heard the last syllables roll from my tongue why you even bothered to spare this scroll a minute, when you could have better spent it elsewhere."

The woman only smiled. "Try me."

Why is it that when one man builds a wall, the next man immediately needs to know what is on the other side? Tyrion shrugged in what may be a useless effort at insouciance and smoothed out the paper once more. He did not wish to relive the humiliating plight he had been dealt with in that marriage, but he does not have many options. This is the price one has to pay for having a soft spot for broken things, like Sansa Stark. "Well, since I have this iron-willed desire to rape and kill my own sister, I suppose I still need the both of you," the Imp japed. "Otherwise, I would never be persuaded to torture my own self with the products of a poisoned quill."

"Bitterness, my friend," Aegon leaned against the chair and pestered the Imp even more with his teasing. "It is the one that breeds poison. She had admitted to the fact that she needs you. Oh, I'd give all to be wanted like that."

The Imp laughed with derision. She was my wife, and though we were married only as duties would dictate, she left me when I needed her the most, sailed with the Littlefinger to the Vale. "Worry not, dear Prince," he replied. "The Lady Arya would realize one day that she might have a need for you as well. She is merely too in love with that Lorathi right now to admit to that fact."
Those words wiped the grin off of Aegon's face. The lad appeared as if he was slapped on both fair cheeks of his.

The Imp calmly read the message:

*Tyrion Lannister*

*Seat at Dragonstone*

*May this message reach you at the best of health, under the grace of the Seven that preserves.*

*I am not one gifted with verbosity, and as such I will let my intentions be known to you in as short a missive as possible.*

*Forgive me, Tyrion. I had to run.*

To admit that one has erred is a great embarrassment, and truly I do not know if indeed I had made a mistake. I was young then, and thus was forced to a marriage I resented the purposes of, though I knew that you were merely compelled to such union as well.

I am aware of the fact that it was not in your hands that Joffrey Baratheon had died, that you were accused wrongly, and though I have heard tellings about the demise of your lord father caused by you, it will never be in my place to judge. Should I have been there with you? Should I have battled beside you like a dutiful wife would? Should I have defended you at all cost, despite knowing that the ruin of my entire family was caused by your kin?

*Forgive me, Tyrion. I knew nothing then. Though you have been in every way good to me, I was impelled only by my will to survive, and so, I had to leave.*

*As you have said, this marriage of ours is duty…not desire.*

*I left the Vale through the aid of my kin, Ser Brynden Tully.*

*In a moon’s time, I would ride for the North. Whatever your plans may be, I would pray for your success.*

*Do pray for me as well, Tyrion. Do pray for me as I head back home.*

*Be well.*

*Sansa*

"There," the Imp said afterwards. "A second reading, yet I could not find a hint of need or want in it, far from the maudlin qualities of the usual letters, and unlike what our sentimental prince here would say. Forgiveness—ah, people ask for it as if it is mere buttered bread in the morn. Skullduggeries first, pleas for clemency afterwards. Such mad world this is."

Daenerys Targaryen was chewing her lower lip. "Why of course, she would not speak of her true intents in that letter. Self-preservation, we call it. No woman would think of herself as a villain, no matter how flawed a choice of hers may be, any woman would stand by that choice if it is the only option she has at the time." She smiled at Tyrion. "How very fortuitous, we need allies in order to secure the North, and what better ally than your lady wife, Tyrion? Aegon is right, Sansa Stark needs you."

Tyrion Lannister chuckled, wished for strong Arbor wine that could drown the heaviness he felt in
his chest asudden. "She does not, I can assure you this."

"She's going to ride North and assume her role as lady of their ancestral seat, that is, if Stannis's appointed liege lord would allow such. The Northerners may doubt her intentions greatly because she's married to you, but we really don't know how things would change once we offer the North our aid," Aegon the Sixth said, ignoring the Imp's denial. "Why write about her future whereabouts if she has no wish of seeing you? The way to the North is chaotic: the Ironborns are in every harbor, the Lannisters are in all forking paths of the Kingsroad, Stannis Baratheon is riding southwards."

"She knows where you are," Daenerys interjected. "Clever girl, she knows that you are under our banners. Your marriage was never consummated yet in the eyes of the faith, she is still your wife. She's using that in order to advance her gains, albeit discreetly. I like her very much, Tyrion."

"Maybe Arya is now with her," Aegon offered. "You cannot just dismiss Sansa like that, my friend. The Starks are our only link to the North."

Tyrion shook his head. The Targaryens are not just persuasive, they are both wise as far as gracious invasion is concerned that the Imp was almost tempted to ask whether they have conquered some hidden kingdoms south of Ulthos before, considering how crafty the both of them are. "What do we do, tell me? Ride to the North and threaten the vassals with dragonfire so they disavow fealty to Stannis Baratheon and bend the knee to Targaryens instead? 'Oh, hey Northern lords! Here's the Lannister demon monkey who was forced into a sad marriage with your Sansa Stark. Don't worry, he wants the queen dead, like all of you do. Oh, and did we tell you that we plan to reconquer the throne stolen from our mad kith Aerys II during the rebellion? Dear gods,' he exhaled. "Your firebeasts certainly make things easier for you, don't they? I do not even wish to explore the alternative."

Aegon chuckled. "Who said anything about using firebeasts, Tyrion? No, dear friend. Threatening the North would only lead them to withdraw their affections from us, if they even possess any, and they are a prideful lot as I have learned. Unless you prove to be one with their aims, you would not have a place in their domains. They all swore fealty to Stannis Baratheon because he helped them retake Winterfell and re-install a legitimized Stark as liege lord. If we wish to gain their loyalties, then we must proceed to their turf with much-needed aid in hand. A courtship, Tyrion—this is what you have instructed me to do, though your methods are too questionable."

"Shiploads of dragonglass to the North," Tyrion concluded, a wry smile forming in his lips. "It seems that you have read my mind, and so I am now convinced that I have taught you well, Aegon the Sixth. One concern remains. We cannot dishonor ourselves by taking credit from the efforts of others. Stannis ordered the digging, not us."

"Excellent, then," Daenerys remarked. "The Northern lords would then believe that our aims are one with Stannis. They are, as far as the Wall is concerned. The throne is another matter."

"And they will never think ill of us, Targaryens," Aegon said.

"Why is that?"

"Their liege lord," The Prince's eyes cruised to Tyrion, then Daenerys. "He might be one of the last surviving dragons."

They found Sabine curled up, with her back against the overgrowth of Weirwood roots. There she was, silently humming a Braavosi ballad, with her misty eyes fixated upon Aegeus's unmoving frame. The last bitter hour is the first sweet hour. Breathless darkness to rest, a million songs of
solitude… those unsung words that were also her words prior to her righteous surrender in the hands of Arya Stark played soft melodies in that cavern.

"Sabine," Jaqen called her.

She raised her eyes to the source of the voice, as if realizing for the first time that she was not alone. Sabine forced a smile on her face, even as her heart was being mercilessly gorged by anguish that murders the soul, by despondency that was more raw than all emotions of men combined in the event of a just god's death.

"H-he's gone, Jaqen…our brother…" she bit her lip hard and promptly wiped teardrops that had just fallen. "I…I couldn't…couldn't save him. Forgive…forgive…"

The Lorathi strode closer to the woman and gently lifted her to stand. With his arms he enveloped her, murmured words of comfort in her ears, set aside the harrowing feeling he too possessed, struggled against losing it all and collapsing on his knees so he may be allowed to mourn.

Arya knelt beside the comely one and rested her left hand upon his chest. "Aegeus," she whispered, for fear of hearing her own broken voice—useless now, for even though her voice was strong her soul was not, and she realized that she was sobbing. She felt those tears and the walls of her chest tightening, killing wind that sought passage within her body. "R-return, brother. The other side of the curtain is not that far."

"The dead will not wake now, Arya Stark," Thoros of Myr said. "I have tried rousing this man, made my entreaties known to the lord of light, even offered a bargain on his behalf. Men are going to be hurt when it is time for them to be hurt, and die when it is time for them to die."

*How could he have been snatched from our hands?* Arya thought as she slowly gazed at Sabine, who was still held tightly by Jaqen. The woman's eyes were brimming with hot tears, yet they were lifeless, as if Aegeus's death had sapped the animation from them the moment he had breathed his last, as if he had carried with him Sabine's very spirit that was once awake.

"Where the hell is that priest?!"

Daario Naharis pushed through four men that guarded the interiors of that cavern and rushed to where they were all gathered. With brute force, he pulled the rough collar of Thoros's tunic. "Honor your words and wake him up, damn it! Do it or I'll chop your bones!" Some members of the brotherhood yanked the Stormcrow away from the red priest, voicing out their protestations. Longswords and cutlasses were drawn in the event of a possible riot.

"Daario!" Jaqen quickly crossed the distance between him and the Stormcrow, seized the man's arms and locked them to his back, confining the Stormcrow's movements. The Stormcrow bellowed like one devil-possessed and thrashed violently against the Lorathi.

"ENOUGH!" came out the voice of a woman that stirred all the men from their raging states. Sansa Stark screamed hysterically and ordered them to depart from that part of the cavern. "OUT! All of you! This is hardly the time for all your senseless skirmish! OUT!"

Some of Lord Mallister's men dashed to the area to escort the others to the outer subterrane as the Lady Sansa had ordered.

Four women now knelt in front of a lifeless Faceless Man.

Endearingly, Sabine stroked Aegeus's hairlocks of midnight and whispered to him some lyrics in Braavosi—*To lay with kings of ages past, the wise, the good, the strong, the bold. Withdraw, heed
and take the hand of that lovely phantom...The woman toiled so, so much in order to keep her voice a little blithesome. "He's with the Weirwoods now, Arya," she said. "In a realm better than this hell we are all in."

In Sabine's thoughts, he was there—tracing the labyrinth of cities they both have been in, the mazes of emotions and the whole blur of these, each word, each stare, each kiss. She reminisced even the times they had argued and hurt the other, and the pains were more than any shared laughter they've had. Maybe it was all lust and no love between them, but it didn't matter to her one bit. And though she knew she was punishing herself relentlessly, chaining him in her memories was her only salvation.

Losing someone over death, Arya thought as she wiped her own fallen tears. Surely it does not kill?

Of course, Arya Stark knew it was folly. Eddard had died, Catelyn and Robb had died. Losing someone over death would not kill you—it would cripple you, and weaken you, and maim you and mutilate you, torture you from the first of your waking hours till the last of your breath and these, these are so much worse than dying over and again.

Aegeus.

Gone.

How many more deaths must I endure?

Catelyn Stark stood and walked slowly to a Weirwood root that was jutting outwards.

"You have told me about that brotherhood, much like the one we have here in Hollow Hill," Sansa held Sabine's hand. "For years, Arya stayed with all of you. That brotherhood—whatever that is, since I could not quite understand a thing about it—that brotherhood had been a family to Arya when she thought she had none. To lose someone so dear to Arya and to you, it…it saddens us too, more than we could ever tell, Sabine. We lost our father and brother, you see, and those deaths separated us all, sent us to impossible places and situations."

Sabine smiled, cheerless. "All of us in that brotherhood were broken and scattered, Sansa Stark. Arya came, and the dismal roof where the brotherhood stayed suddenly sprang to life. Arya is very dear to us, and though Aegeus was not one gifted in making his emotions known, he was actually very fond of your sister."

Arya snorted. "Fond? Twice he had failed me in combat training, without providing justifications. He merely said he didn't like my grip on the daggers and that my swordwork is boring him to infinite death." Sansa laughed softly at her sister's recount. Arya's eyes softened as they cruised back to Aegeus's face. "Oh, but whenever I miss Jaqen, I would always look at Aegeus, Sabine, truly. It's not difficult to replace his midnight hair with Jaqen's scarlet-and-ivory in my surreal imaginings."

Sabine looked amused. "He is far lovelier than Jaqen, but I do understand the desperation. Uldaren, your 'lordling', he does look agreeable as well, wouldn't you say?"

"Ugh!" Arya scoffed. "I hate golden-haired men."

"And why so?" Sansa queried, her thoughts rushing to one golden-haired half-man.

"They make me think of Joffrey," Arya said, to which Sansa laughed. "That disgusting creature. It's a good thing he's out of our hair now, that beast."

Leave.
Their attention turned to Lady Catelyn whence the command came.

"Is everything fine, mother?" Sansa asked.

Catelyn walked to the three women, bade them all to rise. They did as they were ordered. Sansa...their mother spoke. Arya...

Whilst she uttered their names, she held their faces, placed light kisses upon their temples. To the two daughters, Catelyn Stark appeared to be strengthened through a spine of steel she may have acquired when she returned from the shadows, yet the edges of her were delicate, comforting. She is their blood, their every beat of heart, and it pained them to realize the reason why they were being asked to leave that place.

She had spoken about it many nights ago, how she desired to see the shierak qiya once more so the membranes of the realms would meet. In that hour-long communion of realms is a face she has never forgotten and would always love. Her time was past her, and she knew she must not be here at all.

I love you, dear ones...

If it meant sacrificing everything so one pilgrim soul could rest, then it is a thing that must be done. Riverrun has been retaken, the Freys have been brought to justice. Though Jaime Lannister still breathes the air with the rest of them, his life must be traded for Edmund's. Let the gods deal with the Littlefinger, and may he suffer the throes he had dealt others a thousand times stronger. Let the righteous demons deal with the Queen. May she drown in the filth of all her machinations.

Bran and Rickon...

The dead belongs with the dead.

Catelyn turned to Sabine, held her face.

And to you...Arya's sister, when she thought she had forever lost Sansa.

Sabine smiled, nodded.

Leave...

Let the dead stay with the dead, dear ones.

Leave.

That night, Jaqen H'ghar was summoned by Lady Catelyn, much to Arya's surprise. From the tunnel's opening she saw them, and Jaqen was bent on one knee in front of her mother, as if accepting a charge and swearing an oath. The woman's right hand was on Jaqen's head, and her left was held tightly by the Lorathi.

And though she could hear nothing but Catelyn's ungraspable words in a hiss, and see Jaqen's lips moving in quiet response and acceptance, she knew what her mother and the Lorathi were speaking about.

... that you will appreciate what you know of her, and trust who she will become, be her source of comfort...

"I promise," Jaqen whispered his reply to Lady Catelyn's adjuration.
... you will respect and honor her in all ways, that you will stand by her side and defend her till
breath fails you, and give to her till you have nothing left...

"I promise."

...and that love which you have pledged for her, you will give to all those she holds dear in her heart
—her sister, her brothers, her home in the North. You will love her with a love greater than what
Ned has given her...and me.

Jaqen pressed Catelyn's left hand to his lips. "I promise."

So, all things happened as they must.

Aegeus who was once named Garin the Great during the days of Valyria and Rhoynë awoke from
death which felt like restful sleep only. His awakening had been to him, one true gift, for the woman
who had given up her life for his sake had asked for nothing at all in return; unlike the death god that
breathes under her hood, unlike the unnamed deity prepared for a most rapacious bargaining with
whoever had entered the gates of demise.

That gift was a childbearer's lifeforce, one that was loaned from the seven lives and deaths of Beric
Dondarrion.

It was Catelyn Stark's borrowed life.

Let me be one with the Weirwood, were the last of her words which the Handsome Man had heard,
before he felt that kiss of life. It was warm, like the very kiss of one mother to a child, filled with
hopes unfulfilled and hopes gratified. The man felt breath, blood, animation course through his every
vein and sinew, and felt the waning of the life of another. When he opened his eyes, he saw the
firepit's stains upon the ceiling of that cavern, like painted patterns depicting the Second Spice War
and another great war that must be fought against Valyrian slavers and the Undead, which he had
take part in.

The women all entered that area of the cave after fire had died down, and they saw Jaqen and
Aegeus holding the hands of a now lifeless Catelyn.

They say that a part of you is lost after coming back from death's curtains.

Can I dwell on what I scarce remember? I held a castle on the Marches once, and there was a
woman I was pledged to marry, but I could not find that castle today, nor tell you the color of that
woman's hair, were Lord Beric's words. Memories—they all fade.

Who knighted me?

Which food did I like the most?

Are you my mother, Thoros?

But Aegeus remembered them all—Jaqen and Arya, Daario...

Sabine.

Yet he could not tell, for the life of him, why Sabine had locked him in a tight embrace when she
saw him alive, why she had wept against his bloodied tunic, why she had whispered 'I love you' over
and again.
The first thing a man would forget after he dies is the very thing that mattered to him the most, the very thing that was most true for him—her scent, her face, the spirit of her that he once longed for, her strength, her…everything.

"Sister," Aegeus had called her and his tone was admonishing. "Why…why are you even saying these things?" He slowly shook his head as confusion settled on his mien, and removed her hands that were around him. "Please, just…stop. This should not be." It was as if the woman had been struck by a thousand warhammers on all sides of her, what with her anguished visage; but Aegeus held himself steadfastly even as he wanted, needed to probe her on those uttered words. *We were never in love,* the man thought. *I could not recall us ever being in love. If ever we were, then a stranger had inhabited my mind before I died.*

*Once Faceless, forever Faceless.*

Could it be that the Waif had truly lost him?

There was painful pathos in that sudden separation, Sabine had learned. You can summon the dead back from the heavy drapes, but they may never fully recall what was on the other side whence they came. The affinity, the duty that had once bound her and Aegeus to each other, to a single link that was once friendship at the very least—all these had been sundered.

Sabine was thus left, feeling lost, more alone than when her lord father had offered her to the death god's temple in Braavos many years back…more alone that she had ever been.

There was on the other hand, the perfection of those moments with Catelyn, and the fleeting nature of it as well. Sansa and Arya did not anymore weep. This realm they are in has its own stories of absence and loss, and they must learn how to deal with the irreversible. "Though sorrow may impede our hearts, we will let you go, Mother," Arya had whispered to her. "We will honor your wish to truly depart." They knew it as well, that if they allow Catelyn to wake each morn in her borrowed life, then all of them would live day to day in a world of half-truths.

They held Catelyn Stark's burial rites in the Red Fork, with the lords and knights of the noble houses in attendance. Four bannermen placed her body in a boat, with Robb Stark's crown on her chest, Sansa's necklace and one of Arya's Valyrian daggers. A flaming arrow was fired by Brynden Tully to light the sails as the boat traveled downriver. *Be one with the waters, Mother,* Arya spoke to her as the boat was carried softly by the currents. *I will always be in the waters with you, for all rivers and seas are mine—Rhoyne, Summer, Sunset, Jade, Shivering. Be one with the waters that nourish the Weirwoods. Meet Eddard in that realm, wherever that may be.*

*Be soothed by that steadfast trust, when you are bid to come.*

In that second death came brief partings—Brienne of Tarth will escort Jaime Lannister to the seat at Casterly Rock, with a thousand cavalymen from sworn houses of the Riverlands, and retrieve Edmure Tully and his pregnant wife in exchange. She had surrendered Oathkeeper to Arya, and renewed her vows to House Stark, "Until death claims me," Brienne had said. "This is what I swore in front of Lady Catelyn." Thors, Gendry, and the rest of the brothers chose to remain at Hollow Hill, but agreed to Mallister's offer of aid should they need it, since Lannister forces are still on the move and Ironborns are still sacking the harbors. Daario Naharis will ride to Dragonstone, Harwin will proceed to the North with the two Stark daughters.

They had bid one another farewell. The ride to Winterfell would take them a whole fortnight, that is, if no snowstorms would come their way. From the Trident to the Twins they will take the Kingsroad, and sail from the Three Sisters to White Harbor in order to avoid complications with Baratheon forces riding south.
"Everyone ready?" Jaqen H'ghar mounted his horse and surveyed his companions. He checked the girth straps of the steed one more time. Stocks and provisions would be sufficient for half a moon, and should they run out of supplies, there are inns close to roads leading to The Bite. With them were Aegeus and Sabine, and three hundred soldiers from House Tully.

"Look who's coming home with us to the North, Jaqen," Arya smiled, her eyes on the far end of the Fork. The Lorathi turned his attention to the other side and chuckled. "It's the whole pack."

Nymeria and some twenty direwolves stood on the banks, their fur being blown by the listless winds of coming winter. The wolf's eyes were locked upon Arya's, and it was in the way they gazed at each other that they understood what the other one meant and had always desired to say—*We are one*. There is no line separating the warg and the wolf but the physical form, and perchance, the animated soul of Arya of the Rhoyne still lives on through the wolf's body, and the present incarnation of her, in the Stark girl's. Woman, Wolf, the Moon: symbolic entities of the mortal goddess, the Nissa that is Arya Stark and Arya of the Rhoyne.

The eruditions of one penetrated the other, since volumes are spoken when nothing is said. *We have a war to fight, Nymeria. A war to win.*

*Stay with me.*

The wolf's eyes flew to the skies asudden as a mighty screech resounded—from a distant magic at the heart of things, from a creature that is the law of rune unto itself. It circled the heavens, with its expansive wings of gold toying with the snowfall, creating swirls of soft storms, though the creature is an enchanted storm in its own right.

Outcries of both trepidation and awe came from those who were witnessing.

"Look who's coming home with us to the North, Arya," Jaqen teased her. The girl laughed with delight, as she waved both of her hands at the firmaments. "It's your darling pet dragon, lovely girl."

Heraxos continued glissading above them, its shimmers casting and angling light from sunset, acting like one balefire that would guide them all in their journey.

The firebeast's eyes of bronze were upon that gray direewolf whose soul he had always known. His heart would cease to beat and would beat again, but he knew there would never be anyone else, not even in a thousand lifetimes. *There was once a Dragon who had loved a Wolf. The Wolf loved him back.* They were embedded in each other's skin and scales, and their names are forever in each other's lips. And though the wise would say that all maps are works of fiction, he had traversed the forking paths of realms still, in order to find her.

And find her, he did.

"Oh, dear gods," Aegeus rolled his eyes. "Dragons and direwolves for company. How very discreet."

Sabine smiled softly at Aegeus's japing, while Sansa's mouth was still agape with fright and wonderment at the unexpected sight. "Arya..." she called. "What...what's that? What in the world..."

Arya maneuvered her steed towards Sansa. She held her sister's hands that were tightly gripping the reins, giggled at the latter's reaction. "That's Jaqen's," she whispered, to which Sansa gasped. "I'll tell you everything on the road, I promise. It's a long ride, and stories are very good companions."
Samwell Tarly knew that something was amiss that night at the Quill and Tankard. Alleras the Sphinx had just earned his iron link, proving his adeptness at warcraft, and thus bought Roone, Mollander, and Armen a round of cider to celebrate. Samwell was seated with them on the roundtable, but refused to drink. "Oh, come now, Sam," Alleras urged him. "You have earned your pewter and silver too, not many acolytes earn two links in one moon. Stop wallowing in there and beat the drum with us."

"The Cinnamon Wind sank at sea, didn't you hear?" Samwell said. "Archmaester Marwyn is supposedly there, he was to go to Meereen and meet Daenerys Targaryen. The queen has now settled in Dragonstone, and we still have not heard from the maester."

"I'd say the Ironborns did it," Roone offered. "Their waylaying had scared off the Free Cities from our harbors. Some fisherfolks even claimed seeing Volantene old salts sailing in some ships with krakens for sigils. They're in Shield Islands now, north from here."

"So, the maester is dead?" Mollander queried.

"Maybe," Armen spoke.

"Seems to me that you don't feel so bad."

Armen only shrugged his shoulders.

"You worry too much, Samwell," Alleras said, tipping the tankard to his lips. "Cinnamon Wind may have sunk, but who is to tell if that ship had reached Meereen before it did sink? The maester is enjoying himself with those dragons to bother writing to us, not to mention that the seneschal could intercept messages from ravens. I could swear by the Seven, he's sleeping with the birds. He had mentioned more than once that he wanted to be eaten by those ravens when he dies." Mollander laughed boisterously at the Sphinx's words.

Another round was served by Emma who runs the alehouse. Roone asked her about Rosey, who the serving wench said was out with Leo Tyrell. "Ladies right now prefer brawns over brains," Roone complained to the rest of the other acolytes. "Ah, what were Rosey's words? 'Leo is as pale and handsome as Aegon the Sixth Targaryen.' Pah! When did ash-blond hair become the trend?"

Armen chuckled. "Rosey-the-choosy. The folks were saying that the pretty prince is in Dragonstone with the silver-haired aunt. Why the ladies are gushing over that Aegon when he has nothing but his baby face to show for it is something that's beyond me."

"Baby face?" Roone snorted. "Have you been sleeping under the hearth again? He besieged the impregnable Storm's End, you buffoon. Dorne is behind him, Free Cities too."

Mollander patted Sam on the shoulder. "Let the archmaesters worry about the Targaryen claimants. They'd realize soon enough how very right Marwyn was."

"It's not just that," Sam shook his head, still troubled. "Pate."

"He has finally realized that he cannot have Rosey?" Roone replied. "He's not exactly with wits, I wonder why he's even in the Citadel."

"Pate would not just disappear like that," Sam said.

"But he did, didn't he?"

"The snow."
"That," Alleras nodded, raised a finger to make a point. "That is something even the maesters could not explain. It never snows in Oldtown. Hells, last night was tough! The Weeping Dock was covered with frost, and it has not melted fully. Some folks were complaining about thick snow covering the thresholds of the rookery. Less messages are coming in and going out. You know the maesters, they do not believe in long winters and the undead."

"Fools," Samwell said, remembering his conversation with Marwyn right after Maester Aemon's death. Wights, he had told him. Breathing corpses that are vulnerable only to obsidian. This telling of his was what led Marwyn to locate Daenerys and offer to be her maester. "I might need that cider after all."

There was one other thing that caused him botheration, and it was not that what he had learned would forever change the way he would regard that friend he had held next to his own heart. Whatever those hidden writings have said, Jon would always be Jon for Samwell Tarly.

The night of Pate's disappearance, Samwell was awoken by a soft whisper from the distant Weirwood and the sound of clinking keys. When he rose from the bed, he saw the ragdoll cat toying with the archmaester's key—the one that could open the door to any chamber in the Citadel. "Hey, little fellow," he remembered speaking with the ragdoll cat. "Are you not supposed to be in the seneschal's court?" The cat had whisked away, taking the set of keys with it. Sam recalled running after it until he found himself in front of a locked vault containing the Citadel's collection of rare Valyrian scrolls.

I shouldn't be here, Sam thought.

The key lay in front of the threshold, but the cat was gone.

Without hesitation, Samwell took the key and after surveying the vicinity, used it to unlock the vault. It was as if there was an unseen force controlling his volition—somehow, he knew what he was searching for.

And he found it. The contents of the unbound scrolls were written in High Valyrian, and this is a tongue he could not speak much less read. Mayhaps, a being whose faculties possessed knowledge of the language had entangled itself with and within him, for he remembered having a thousand and one eyes that could read the writings and even envision its recorded chronicles. The scrolls contained raw, unpublished copies of Maester Malleon's 'The Lineages and Histories of the Great Houses of the Seven Kingdoms, With Descriptions of Many High Lords and Noble Ladies and Their Children'. "Unexpurgated," Sam whispered. "The copies the noble houses possess are therefore incomplete? The ones written in the Common Tongue?"

He rummaged through the book's old pages, and stopped at one leaf that had been folded.

"House Targaryen…Aerys II married to sister wife Rhaella…Shaena…Dareon…Aegon…stillbirths…died in infancy. Rhaegar…Viserys…Daenerys…"

He ran his forefinger through the page some more, traced Rhaegar Targaryen's lineage. A straight line connected Rhaegar's name with that of Elia Martell of Dorne "Rhaenys—confirmed dead…Aegon the Sixth—presumed dead…"

But there was another line—an unbroken one that connected Rhaegar's name with another woman. "Lyanna of House Stark, whom he married in the Isle of Faces…three witnesses to this union." And under their conjoined names was yet another line tracing a child born unto them.

"Jaehaerys."
Jon, a voice that was not his but his screamed throughout the closed wall of his thoughts. Jaehaerys—his real name was taken from 'The Wise', 'The Conciliator', the champion of the Night's watch. Jaehaerys, who received the original prophecy about the Prince that was Promised from the woods witch and Jenny of Old Stones.

He remembered another old scroll falling from the shelf that contained the collections, and though he was still quivering inside because of what he had just unraveled, he still picked it up. The leaves of it were older than Lineages and Histories, and appeared to be crumbling. With care, Samwell smoothed the scroll out onto the only table in that vault and perused the contents of it.

Nothing special—it was merely an older copy of 'Watchers on the Wall' from the hands of Archmaester Harmune, containing legends about the Nightfort and Bran-the-Breaker's alliance with Joramun to end the thirteen year-rule of the Night's King. They have a surviving copy of such in the small library at Castle Black, but the one he was holding now appeared thicker than any such copy of Harmune that he had held before.

Six leaves were missing from the scrolls at Castle Black. The one he was holding then was the unbroken copy.

"Larger than the firebeasts of Valyria, it breathes ice instead of fire...and is so vividly white that it almost appeared bluish...its skin is frosted over, like thin sheets of ice...this is why the road beneath the Wall is as dark and cold and as twisty as a serpent...and it is said that the wind blowing east from beyond the Wall came from its very breath...."

Samwell wanted to stop reading as unthinkable fright clawed at his heart, but he couldn't.

"With shapeshifting abilities...used to roam around unchartered territories past the Shivering Sea, but Bran the Builder buried the largest of them beneath the Wall, and the others have gone extinct...and as long as it remains buried, the Wall will stand...dear gods," Samwell remembered collapsing on his knees after reading the rest of the words.

An ice dragon.

"Told you," Alleras mussed Sam's hair, forcing his thoughts back to the present time, at the Quill and Tankard. "You just need to loosen up, wight-slayer."

A week after that confabulation with the acolytes, Samwell Tarly stood in the midst of a peak of chaos. The Ironborns have invaded Oldtown.

Horsesoldiers from the city watch loosed fierce cries as they led their steeds to the gangplanks, hammering their swords to this enemy and that in all futility. They battled against reavers and rapers who wielded warhammers and enormous poleaxes, flails and war scythes; and since the sacking happened at midnight, Oldtown was practically asleep.

A hundred and fifty-seven Ironborn ships besieged the city.

The scene at the quayside of the Weeping Docks was pure riot, with a mass of unruly noble-borns and commoners and pillagers, as flashes of iron-headed halberds sliced mercilessly through heads and limbs. The dock had become a killing ground.

Fire razed Hightower at the center of Oldtown. A dragon of dark-marillion spines and scarlet scales ravaged the surrounding structures with dragonflame.

Ironborns and Valyrian slavers, Samwell shuddered at the sight. The gods have abandoned us.
He dashed away from the scene of fray towards an inn outside of Scribe's Hearth, where Gilly was staying with Rayder's son, Aemon Steelsong. There were dreams during his restless nights—dreams that came from the Weirwood beyond the Wall, foretelling this very catastrophe. It was in Samwell's nature to be prepared at all times, whether or not threats are real, and so he had arranged for two horses seven days ago, and these horses would take him and Gilly from Honeywine River to Roseroad. From there, they would ride north past Highgarden and Bitterbridge, towards Blackwater Bay. May the gods allow him to cross the bay to Dragonstone.

He had to meet with the Targaryens.

He brought the scrolls inked by Maester Malleon's own hands. If the contents of the scrolls were true, and this is yet to be confirmed by Marwyn if ever he is there with the dragon claimants, then Jon is a legitimate son of Rhaegar Targaryen, and is therefore a full-blooded brother to Aegon the Sixth.

He gritted his teeth at the thought. These maesters killed all the dragons, hid scrolls that spoke of rune. Now, more dragons are needed, obsidian, Valyrian steel.

They hid everything from us.

Let them suffer the throes of their own doing.

Samwell left the T-shaped quay with its murderous Ironborns, frightened Oldtown dwellers, and belligerent warhorses. He turned a blind eye to the bottleneck that had formed at the dock's end, where maesters, nobles and common-borns were being hauled to slavers' ships, where the reavers were unsheathing their tulwars and waving the curved blades threateningly at those conquered, occasionally severing a head or two if their hysteric barks had become too much, where the marillion-spined dragon carried on with burning the buildings to soot.

The oldest city in Westeros, the grand haven of maesters who are also scholars, healers, great scoffers, and unbelievers of dragons and magic, was decimated in a night.

Samwell Tarly struggled against angry, frightened tears as he ran and ran…

"Lovely girl."

They were now in an old hostelry past the Twins and close to the Three Sisters. Jaqen lay beside Arya, who was suddenly bereft of her usual mirth. Catelyn's second death had finally sunk in.

"Lovely girl."

Arya turned her back to Jaqen and lay on the bed sideways, propped her head on both of her hands.

"I miss my mother."

Jaqen held her tight from behind and kissed her gently on the hair. "I can see that," he purred. "I'm very sorry, sweetheart."

She spoke, and her voice was broken. "I know she had to leave…and Aegeus had to be brought back because he has unfinished business with those dragonlords. And Jon…he needs Aegeus for battle…he has Garin of Chroyane's warfare tactics…” she tried not to weep, tried not to appear weak in front of the Lorathi. "Why…why can't we have them both? And father, Robb…”

Jaqen didn't know what to say.
Be her source of comfort, came Catelyn's words in his recollections, and he had promised the lady on the night of her final death that he would do every damned thing for Arya Stark.

"Tell me one thing, Arya," Jaqen asked softly, brushing his lips across the skin of Arya's shoulder. "One thing that could make you happy right now."

Of course, he knew what her response would be—'A whole day of sword-and-dagger fight, please,' so she could drown her feelings of sorrow under the sounds of clashing steel, exhaust herself through forceful assaults so she could just sleep at the end of the day and forget that she must weep, wound herself severely so the physical pain could overwhelm the pain that is in the heart.

The Lorathi was to the core, stupefied at the girl's reply, for it was far from what he was expecting.

"A storm of petals instead of snow."

He chuckled, then stopped himself when he realized that Arya was dead-serious with those words.

"A downpour of petals is an impossible thing, Arya Stark," Jaqen said with a sigh, still persuaded that the girl was half-japing. "The heavens were made only for snow and hail and rain."

"True," Arya whispered, a solitary tear escaping from her eye. "Which means that nothing in this godforsaken world can make me happy right now, Jaqen H'ghar. So just...stop asking."

Jaqen felt his heart break at Arya's pronouncements.

Sleep eluded him that eventide. How can I turn the lonely dust of her heart into a haze of sparkles and gold?

He smiled asudden as if a rare realization kicked in. He moved to kiss Arya's lips softly, disturbing her partly from her slumber. "Shush, I love you," he whispered to calm her and to bid her once more to sleep. "I love you so much." Then, he rose from the bed in a manner so careful in order not to rouse her.

Oh, yes. Jaqen will do the impossible.

*For Arya.*

---

She woke up near-dawn. Jaqen wasn't on the bed.

*Where the hell is that Lorathi?*

She surveyed their bedchamber. The candles were flickering and were almost out, which meant that dawn was about to break in an hour or so. She sensed no movement either, no sound from the hostelry's first tier; the innkeepers are not yet up to attend to the day's usual hustle and bustle.

Arya sighed at the sudden heaviness that collapsed upon her. Woe gorged her heart once more, and she wallowed in the anguish so that in the later days, she could get used to it and thus have her entirety benumbed. Jaqen chose the perfect time to leave her alone—right in the midst of her mourning.

*Damn it, Jaqen.*

A note was carefully placed on her bedside. She took it and perused the contents.
My sweet Arya...

She so desired to laugh despite her grief. He couldn't sleep perchance, and might have taken a short ride somewhere to inspect the hostelry's environs should they decide to sail to White Harbor that day. The love note was so unnecessary.

Ride towards the open field east of the Kingsroad. Once you reach the centermost part of the meadows, close your eyes and wait for the first ray of sun before you open them.

Bring your winter's cloak, a storm might be on the way.

All my love,

Jaqen

An afterthought: you're so beautiful even in the morn.

She smiled, albeit with melancholy. Two persons argued within her—the woman wanted to scoff at the frivolity of his demands, needed to question the motivation behind these; while the girl was curious, and was feeling nothing apart from delighted anticipation. Yet both were atingle at the Lorathi's show of affection—he never runs out of quixotic tricks. It wasn't safe to ride to the Kingsroad on her own, yet she trusted him more than anything that is in this world, to the point that if he ordered her to jump off of a rocky crag and splay her hidden wings, she would.

With haste, she dressed herself and slipped off the inn. Arya rode to the fields east of the thoroughfare in her black-maned steed, alert for any signs of peril since the surroundings were still dawn-dark.

She reached the fields in no time, tied her steed on the trunk of one of the dwarf trees. Warily, she walked towards the middle and saw nothing but grass lightly blanketed by snow from last night, heard nothing but the whistle of leaves and the shrill cry of the wind. Mere minutes and the blackness will fade, to be replaced by day's brilliant amber.

Still, there was that emptiness within her as she inhaled the scent of petrichor and rich loam. Arya closed her eyes and let the tears of keening fall freely. She recalled Jaqen's instructions: …wait for the first ray of sun.

Even if sunrise comes, I don't know if I could will myself to open my eyes and look at anything, she mourned as Ned's face and Catelyn's and Robb's invaded her mind. In every place I look, there's pain.

Then, there it was—the soft lines of glare that descended upon her closed lids. She could imagine it, the stars concealing themselves, the darkness dissipating, the soft rays of morn's orb spreading in various directions, scattering all over an illusion of bronze and gold as if by the works of a celestial hand.

Even then, Arya kept her lids shut.

There's nothing worthwhile to see anywhere.

Until a single, velveteen petal kissed her damp skin.  

Impossible, the girl thought. Petals don't just fall from the heavens.

Very slowly, she opened her eyes and allowed them to settle on the ground. True enough, a lone
pink petal was there, like a delicate epiphany on snow and rich, verdant grass.

*Dianthus,* Arya gasped at the realization as she bent to pick up the petal. She felt it through her thumb and forefinger. *Dianthus only grows in the Reach.*

Her breathing had gone wild with astoundment. No...no...Jaqen could not have...

Arya's gaze flew to the far end of the meadows upon hearing a familiar howl—a direwolf's.

"Nymeria!" Arya called to the wolf, and felt unexpected joy coursing through her. The direwolf ran to her direction, then stopped abruptly when they were but a few feet away from each other.

They both lifted their eyes to the heavens at the sound of a dragon's cry...

*Heraxos.*

It glissaded along the azure skies, and with it...came Arya's *storm of petals.*

A whole cloudburst...

In swirls and downpours...

Carried by the wind...a legion of hues...uncountable and immeasurable...

So very *beautiful* beyond words.

*Jaqen...*

Those petals descended upon her face like silky rain and she held out her hand to feel their soft opulence and hear their lovely whispers and have them caress her skin. And they were of various tints and of various species—periwinkle and amaranth...aster and yellow dandelion...heather and delphinium and freesia and iris and larkspur. "Winter roses!" Arya screamed with rapture as she twirled in the midst of that lovely tempest. "Blue winter roses!"

Their shades captured her, they were not plain orange or yellow or red or blue. All over her was an overwhelming burst of incarnadine, lusty-gallant, pervenche, verditer, zaffre, damask, glittering jasper.

Now, what was earlier a plain meadow of green and white was carpeted with a splurge of colors, and the skies kept on raining flowers as Arya ran across the fields in ecstasy, taking in the fragrance of wild eglantine and gladiolus, catching some with her bare hands...and letting them fall...and laughing and spinning like mad and wishing that this day never ends...with Nymeria howling blithely and running across the fields with her.

*Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen...*

*The wildness of your passion, the clarity of your melodies,*

*My lips are smitten by the music of your kisses...*

*Even the greatest of bards would fail to write you a song.*

And as if the utter beauty of that display was not enough, Heraxos kept on flying in helixes, bathing those petals with its golden shimmers that Arya had to squint and cover her eyes at the scintillations of that spectacle.
Time ceased…and those petals cascaded upon her, above her, all over her…and she relished the touch, the scent, the sight…

Were those ten thousand butterflies blossoming from calyxes unknown? A million? A whole ten to six hundred, a centillion of these?

Fragrances enwrapped her body and spirit as she leaped in fits of laughter. All her life there were only bloodshed and slaying and hatred, forced death masked as a gift, lifelessness, antipathy, all things vile and wretched. In one act, Jaqen had forever erased those, replaced those with memories of love and springtime in the face of looming winter.

*Stars falling…a hundred colors*

*Dew, life…*

*And they fall on my face like rain*

*A lover's gift—a wedding wreath*

*I fall to my knees…*

"Come down, Jaqen!" Arya called, waving both hands and dancing like one lunatic. "Come down my love, I want to kiss you!"

*Hang on!* she heard him respond, and she laughed for there were still around four baskets of petals left to scatter.

Finally, the firebeast descended on the petal-carpeted meadow, and with it was her Jaqen—his face a smiling tease yet with a certain softness, a deep, deep fondness for her, his hair of scarlet-and-ivory tied back in an irresistible man-bun, his hands…bleeding, for what may have been an entire night of picking and pulling ten thousand flowers of thorny stems.

And perhaps, Arya giggled, perhaps he had threatened the lords of the Reach so they may show him their bed of daffodils. She could imagine him—sailing through the skies atop Heraxos, then flying low, sweeping along fields of blossoms…snatching…seizing stems and the blooming flora they hold, with her lovely face in his mind the whole damned night.

Arya ran towards Jaqen and threw herself in his arms. They both fell on the petal-laden ground and rolled over the meadows in sounds of blithe; their mouths found each other, communed. The Lorathi moaned as the girl's hot mouth deepened the kiss, as if the love is too much to contain and tomorrow may not show itself.

She had known the Lorathi all her life, yet her heart still flutters at their breaths mingling, at his lips that were both her salvation and torment. Wonders and sparks, magic—they were never gone.

Arya groaned as Jaqen carried on kissing the hell out of her, as if fire lived within his kisses.

"I love you…" she whispered against his lips. She embraced him tightly and buried her face in his cheek. "I love you, Jaqen…"

"I love you more," the Lorathi murmured. "Oh, Arya Stark…the things you make me do…"

Arya laughed, then lay flat on her back, raised both hands as if to touch the sun. The rays frolicked with her face, and she realized asudden that she had to close her eyes. It wasn't because of those intense traces of light hitting her irises. She closed her eyes to keep herself from sobbing in utter bliss
because of what Jaqen had done for her.

Jaqen lay on his side facing her, and contented himself with gazing at her beauty that for him was the beauty of all girls and women and the mothers that bore them, allowed himself to be carried in sublime spirits at the sight of her chestnut hairstrands strewn all over the petals of many hues. He too, closed his eyes and prayed to the old gods, thanked them for the unbelievable grace that is Arya Stark.

She bit her lip for she had heard his whispered prayer that screamed only of lovely, lovely words.

"I looked for her, the other half of my soul. I looked for her but didn't find her. I searched through the darkest night and you showed her to me. And now my love for her is the kind which many waters cannot quench.

Lock her in my heart so I may not sin against her.

May I hold sway over this love I have for her, because it's damned much that it's drowning me..."

The words stopped.

Arya opened her eyes and turned to gaze at Jaqen. His chest was rising and falling in calm breaths, and she realized that he was already snoring lightly. His cheek was against those soft petals, inviting his weary self to rest. A long, long night it had been for him.

Dear gods…Arya thought. He's so beautiful...

She brushed a few strands away from his face—gently, so she may not wake him. Her hand settled on his man-bun, and she kissed him again, unmindful of Nymeria still frolicking with the petals and Heraxos staring at the wolf with eyes fanciful.

Their paths diverged as the direwolves took the road from The Neck to Moat Cailin, avoiding the Kingsroad; while they sailed to White Harbor through The Bite, and followed the trail of the White Knife, river in the southeastern stretch of the wolfswood. It would be a day's ride from the harbor to Castle Cerwyn, and quarter of a day more from Castle Cerwyn to Winterfell.

Jaqen and Aegeus led the riders, with the women behind them and the retinue at the rearmost.

"Old Nan's tales," Sansa said, maneuvering her steed so it follows the river's course in a straight line. Arya just smiled at her sister's perfectionist, compulsive mannerisms. "Who could have thought that they could carry more than a hint of truth to them? I wished to return to Winterfell, urge Jon to find Bran and Rickon with us. I wished to stay with you all and live the rest of my days in that castle, a spinster, but a happy one nonetheless." She sighed. "Your stories, Arya. They made me fear returning even more, but we cannot always run from home, can we?"

Arya smiled. "No, we cannot. If someone attacks home, we defend it, Sansa. We have planned it all out. I was against it at first because I was so worried about Jaqen; but no other recourse seemed fitting and adequate."

"Dance of the Dragons in our age," Sansa shook her head and laughed. "The Starks are caught in a war amongst four, five Valyrian clans, only that the war exceeds blood-conflict. Had Bran not revealed those visions to me through my dreams and through the Weirwood at the Hill, I would not have believed any of these. Slave-sacrifice to pacify Winter—and I thought the Lannisters are the greatest of all demons."
"A Lannister is involved, incidentally," Sabine replied. "Your queen had drafted an agreement with the Ironborns and those Valyrian lords. 'Dārion mijegon mōris'—empire without end. Slavery would be one its many complex institutions; and expect that in the Freehold's capital, slaves would include physicians, teachers, merchants. We managed to dredge up such information during our task in the capital. Aegon the Sixth has to move faster, Arya."

Arya blew air from her mouth. "I know, but I couldn't send him any message—Jaqen will kill me, he's still convinced that Aegon is a threat, despite you reversing the memory manipulation. But frankly, I think he's just jealous of Aegon." She saw Sansa's confused look, and so Arya waved her hand to dismiss her own words. "We have to wait until Daario reaches Dragonstone."

"It would take him time. We don't know how fast the foes are advancing."

"I sent Tyrion a message," Sansa offered. "It was three weeks ago. I told him about my plans of returning to the North."

Arya quickly turned to Sansa. "And has he written back?"

"Not yet. But I hope he's sharp enough to read between the lines."

"He's with the Targaryens in Dragonstone," Sabine said. "When we spoke with Aegon the Sixth last time, he said they will carry on with the conquest. However, it would be unwise to face Lannisters, Greyjoys, and Stannis Baratheon at this crucial time. We need him in the North—it's closer to the Wall and to Braavos. Jaqen has one firebeast, but Aegon has three. The Valyrian lords have their eyes set on Braavos, then Hardhome. Last time I heard, the Ironborns are moving south of Shield Islands."

"Oldtown," Arya exhaled.

"Arbor and Dorne," Sabine added.

They immersed themselves in the silence, as they pondered on the many things that must be done, listened only to the soft winds carrying the snow, the ripples of the river against thin ice that formed along its embankments, the distant howls of direwolves on the other side. They have gone past Lord Manderly's 'hidden' ships east of the White Knife, past Castle Cerwyn, and were now following the river's tributary that leads to Winterfell.

A quarter of a day more. Despite the worries, Arya's feet are already itching.

She could envision their home more clearly now than ever before. Five years, she thought. I merely blinked, and it seemed to me as if I've lost a whole lifetime. How long was that blink? Suddenly, the query mattered very little as she felt herself drawing closer to Winterfell. When they get there, she decided, the first thing she would show Jaqen is her bedchamber—oh, he would like that so very much, no doubt; and she would let him make love to her there, soil the bed that had once cradled her innocence. Then, she would take him to the glass garden with its hot springs and pretty flowers and vines. Then, to the godswood with its dense canopy of heart trees and the cool pond. "This is where my father used to whet his greatsword," she would tell him. "This is where I would want us to be wed...again." He would no doubt ask her about the armory and the battlements gate; he would waste no time planning for what is to come, being the Valyrian dragonriding warlord that he is. She would show him the battlements, very well, but not before she brings him to the tower where all the books about Stark Kings were kept, so he could learn about her lineage. "Our children would ask you about my predecessors," she would convince him. "You cannot just tell them that I was placed in a basket and merely dropped off to the thresholds of Winterfell by great ravens."
Would Jon like him? Arya simpered at her own query. Would Bran and Rickon?

Arya was suddenly roused by Sansa's remark. "Your husband, Arya. It's no wonder why you were...drawn to him. I can tell that he is an honorable man, and that he loves you more than anything. It shows, everytime he looks at you."

Jaqen glanced to his back and grinned when he caught sight of Arya, though he could hear naught of whatever the women were talking about.

"See what I mean?" Sansa giggled.

"I do," Arya replied with a laugh. "Jaqen...he's...how do I even begin to describe Jaqen? Let's see, he's..."


Sansa chortled at what she thought was a jape. "That, and a dragonrider. Oh, and the rightful heir to a lost empire!"

"Very good in bed," Sabine teased. Sansa gasped at the words, albeit delightfully. Arya's raised her brows, questioning the Waif, demanding for a decent explication. "Our chambers in the ship to Gulltown were adjacent to yours. Your squeals, Arya," the woman thus explained.

Laughter erupted from the three, causing the two men in front to turn to them. "Female colloquy, boys," Sabine said. "Just keep your eyes on the road and ignore us."

They went back to their conversation. "Jaqen..." Arya continued, toiled so her voice would remain blithesome. "Well, he's one of those few capable of giving you the purest love, I guess. You don't even have to earn it, he would just give it to you, like that," she snapped her fingers. "And it's not just the bed and the sex, Sabine. His love...it's something that time and circumstance cannot bend. He's the kind of man whom when you throw away, would pick himself up just so he could be there for you when you realize you need him again. He's the kind who would never, ever fight fair when it comes to you. He's the kind who would abandon all sense of self, kill himself repeatedly just to be with you in another cycle...do you...do you understand any of these at all?" The two just smiled at her, urged her to go on. "No, of course you don't...forgive me for saying this but none of you had ever been loved like this before. No...no. Of course, you wouldn't understand..."

"It's beautiful, Arya," Sansa said, for she had sensed how difficult it was for her sister to be that expressive of her affections for the man. Jaqen had changed her so much, and the change was so breathtaking. Arya used to be the greatest skeptic on matters of tenderness and passion, she would shake her head at Sansa's romanticisms, name her delusional and a pathetic mortal living in the pages of poetry books. Now, the great doubter had become the converted. Sansa thought as she beheld Arya's lovesick face. The mocker had become the most ardent believer. "So beautiful. You and Jaqen."

"Beautiful, yes," Arya smiled as her eyes lingered on him. There he was, laughing with Aegeus, as if the wars he would fight on her behalf and for her damned sake would be none too great; as if those wars would not expose him to the straight sight of the death god. It was as if he had no other care in the world but her, and Arya cursed, because for many nights she had dreamed of losing him. "It's so beautiful that it's killing me."

Jaqen and Aegeus pulled the reins of their mounts, slowed the steeds down as they approached the towering structure that was now so visible from the hillock. "Ho!" came their call. The rest of the retinue did the same, even as half of the Tully soldiers were laboring against the cold and their
There it was, the majestic castle of the Northern greathouse Stark, like an old albeit wise man of the snowhills, with its ancient walls and once proud turrets crumbling yet standing true. From where they stood, they could see the first keep and the broken tower, and the castle's steadfast walls that were built for defense during an age that was defined by blood, bone, and rune. Snow-beaten stones served as façade, iron gates served as sentinels that sang of the castle's history. The structure was far from pitted and forlorn, unlike what most would assume after it was sacked and burned by Ironborn reavers; in fact, even as the sun cast shorter shadows in the event of its setting, the castle is richly bathed with flaming torches dancing with the silver hues of House Stark's banners that hung from the parapets.

A dragon's cry was heard not far from the castle. So were the distant howling of wolves.

Jaqen H'ghar led his mount close to his woman's own, tousled her locks of chestnut fondly. The girl laughed, trapped her lower lip with her teeth, and wrestled against her own tears of mirth. His deep purr consoled her, calmed any more storms left within her:

"Arya of House Stark," Jaqen said as he pinched her chin fondly. "You're home, lovely girl."

Chapter End Notes

Above: Arya's storm of petals.

I do not own the image.

A weekend chapter to you, guys. Thanks for the comments and kudos and I would love to know what you think of this one. Updates may be on and off but I promise you, we would finish this! ;D
"She's got a way of changing the game
The way that you play is never the same..."

(Warning: too mushy; don't click if you want to skip the mush) Jaqen: the helplessly, hopelessly in love; Jon: the awkward lover

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Moonlight dancing…
Forest floor…
Broken branches and leaves beneath the frost…
A warning snarl…
Vanquishing howl…
Hunters will die."

Hour of the Wolf, A Song of Ice and Fire

"A thousand years before the conquest, a promise was made, and oaths were sworn in the Wolf's Den before the old gods and the new. When we were sore beset and friendless, hounded from our homes and in peril of our lives, the Wolves took us in and nourished us and protected us against our enemies. In return, we swore that we should always be their men."

Lady Maege, A Song of Ice and Fire

For years, they have run in and with the shadows, relying on mere instinct and some inspiring memories of yesteryears for dire survival; they were chased, hunted, preyed upon. There were only howling and tearing and on very few occasions, silent anguish, for in the face of foes they could not afford to be vulnerable. There was the pursuit to be fierce in the midst of loneliness, in the midst of undertakings at which even the greatest of maesters would shake their heads. They would have suffered the fate of the Reynes of Castamere, if not for the Wall, the Weirwood, the island of wargs, the amethyst hairnet, the iron coin and 'Valar Morghulis.'

When the red star bleeds and the darkness gathers, Azor Ahai shall be born again amidst smoke and salt to wake dragons out of stone.

They were all summoned by Bran from the stone cave beneath the Weirwood, north of the Wall—Sansa from her Stone bastardy in the Vale, Rickon from the stone islands of Skagos, Arya from the
stone-built secret city of Braavos.

Bran had forgathered them all for Jon—true subject of this age of those prophecies long-writ, the stone dragon whose hidden ancestry he is yet to learn.

Once more, everything had to happen as it must. Rickon sailed with Ser Davos Seaworth from Skagos to Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, with a small retinue of five men commanded by Cotter Pyke. Altogether, they headed to Castle Black and waited for three days for news from the twelve rangers that had gone to the haunted forest north of the Wall. On the third night, Dolorous Edd returned with Iron Emmet and four more brothers of the Night's Watch—they lost six in a fight against White Walkers in the Fist west of the woodlands. With them was Bran Stark, horribly weakened due to the unexpected onslaught. "There were about seven, eight of them," reported Dolorous Edd. "We only had around four obsidian spearheads and ourselves. The Stark boy...he had somehow...bent those demons to his will. We were about to be slaughtered, transformed to breathing carrions had the boy not intervened." The commander of the Watch knew that they needed more men in the Long Barrow and Westwatch-by-the-Bridge, and with Jon Snow gone, holding the Wall had become less of an honorable oath and more of a burdensome measure to ensure survival. They have less than a thousand men now, and the stakes have risen higher.

After half a day, the whole retinue rode to Winterfell with the young lords.

Jon was on his way to the Great Keep from the armory when he was informed by two sentinels of the North gate about Ser Davos's arrival. "Marchers are with him, seven from House Manderly and two from House Glover, my lord," one of them had reported. "A landed knight from House Magnar in Skagos and...Bran and Rickon Stark, they were saying. Subterfuge, perchance—"

Jon rushed back to the armory and descended to the Guard's Hall, dashed towards the north gate. Shireen Baratheon was already there with Devan Seaworth, requesting the guards to open the portcullis. "We don't take orders from you, scale-girl," one of the guards said. "Unless the Lord Stark commands us to raise the iron, those men on the other side would have to wait to be received; that is, if they do not die of frostbite or hunger first." The second guard let out an uproarious laughter at the words.

"That's the Princess Shireen you are speaking with, ser," Jon was walking towards them in haste. "Yes, you must indeed wait for my orders before letting any man gain passage, however, your manner of explaining such to the Princess is hardly proper." His expression was both severe and commanding, howbeit a smile formed on the edges of his lips as he turned to the girl. "Grant them your pardons, Princess?"

The girl smiled back. "Why of course, my lord. Without pardons, there will be no one to man the Wall."

Jon chuckled at the girl's words, patted her head. Then, he turned his attention back to the guards. "Raise the irons."

The guards did as they were ordered.

Davos and the marcher retinues entered the gates in full haste. "Call the maester!" Davos barked out orders to one of the wardens. Meera Reed was quick to alight from her own saddle to summon the maester from the turret close to the Hunter's Gate. Davos dismounted, hoisted an unconscious Bran from the steed and spoke to Jon. "He was enfeebled by the ride and a recent battle, Lord Stark, pulse is weak. He needs tending and a hell of a lot of warmth." Devan Seaworth took the boy from his father, awaited orders.
"To the keep, then. Bedchambers are in the east wing" Jon said calmly, even as he wanted to crush Bran's weak frame with the tightest embrace. His voice broke at the next words, and though he tried to clear his throat, the surge of emotions cannot anymore be contained, much less concealed. "Maester Mullin is with us...beside the Bell Tower. Fresh supplies of healing implements...the...the Cerwyns have sent...new ones...they have sent..."

Davos patted Jon on the shoulder. "Leave it to us," and nodded to Devan to take Bran to the keep. Shireen trailed behind after exchanging quick news with the knight.

"Jon!" it was the voice of a boy, and though it had quite changed, traces of the same one in Jon's old memories still rang in between its sounds.

"Jon!"

"Rickon..."

The boy leaped from his saddle, did not anymore wait for Lord Magnar to hoist him from the steed. Rickon ran towards him. "Jon! Jon!" he still called. "I was in Skagos, Jon! They don't eat folks in there, they taught me how to warg, and there was unicorn's meat, and Leuric said he would come and visit—"

Jon hurriedly picked Rickon up from the ground, kissed the boy all over the face. "Unicorn's meat?" he queried as a tear fell from his eye. "Is it true that it tastes a hundred times better than ordinary horse's meat, that you don't have to put salt in it?"

Rickon laughed. "It all depends on how you cook it, I suppose. They have spices in Skagos that we don't have here."

"Then, we should ask Gage and Turnip to sail back to the Stone isles find those spices for us, shouldn't we?" he japed, and locked the boy in a hug.

"My Lord Stark," Alret Magnar addressed him, unsheathed his sword, settled it on the ground, and knelt in front of the liege lord. "Alret of House Magnar of Skagos, sworn to your lord father Eddard and now, to you. Should you bid them here, the Skagosi will set their sails and come to Winterfell's aid. I offer my services, I will shield your back and keep your counsel and give my life for yours if need be, and I swear this by the old gods and the new."

"Rise, good Ser Alret," Jon replied as he set Rickon down. "I should be the one kneeling in gratitude for what you have done for my brother. I vow in return that you shall have a place in this castle, meat and mead at our table. I pledge to ask no service of you that might bring you dishonor."

"I pledge the same." Ser Alret rose, then chuckled. "Young lord Rickon here was euphoric throughout the whole ride from the Isle to the Eastwatch." He tousled the boy's hair, bent so he could look at the boy's face. "Ready to teach Jon your wolf tricks?"

"My lord!" the master-at-arms from the South Gate called to him, interrupting them. "Visitors, my lord—carrying House Tully's banners, with a missive in Ser Brynden Tully's handwriting, and another from the Lords Declarant of the Vale. About fifty of them. Escorts, I am supposing."

"Escorts to whom?" Jon queried.

Damn it, Jaime Lannister.
She should not have done what she did. Since when did she regard any other thing as more worthy than honor, more worthy than fulfilling sworn obligations?

Instructions were clear, and Brienne had violated the sacred trust the dead Catelyn Stark had given her. In the lady's eyes, she had failed in her duties when she accepted what remained of Ned Stark's sword from Jaime Lannister's hands. Even then, Catelyn had given her a second chance when she pleaded for Pod's life, and so she participated in that carnage at the Freys and came forward to escort Jaime Lannister to Casterly Rock.

It would have been so easy—Jaime in exchange for Edmund. The Riverlands was now in open rebellion against the throne, but surely the Queen will deal with all of them mercifully if she learns that her beloved brother was delivered safely to the westerlands. Another attempt for diplomatic parleys, threats, another war. Nothing's ever new. But at least, Jaime Lannister would be out of harm's way. That mattered to Brienne as much as her vows to Catelyn Stark did.

It would have been so easy, if not for Brynden Tully's hidden schemes.

She had learned that he had conspired with Mallister and Blackwood to have a thousand more cavalrymen sent from Raventree Hall to Ashemark. They knew that the defenses of Casterly Rock had weakened since Tywin and Kevan's deaths, and that most of the forces in the westerlands were deployed in the capital due to the threats at Dragonstone. An ambush—much like the ones done at to the Freys—would be nothing but a plain sail.

"We'll take Lord Edmund and his lady wife and march back to the River Road," she overheard the cavalry commander telling the others. "No trade will happen, as Lord Brynden had ordered. He said to kill the Lannister captive and throw his body in the Crag. He would never agree with the terms that the crown must leave the Riverlands in peace, anyway. He will waste no time running to the Crownlands and building an army for another attack, and stakes are higher now that those damnable Ironborns are in the game."

That same night, Brienne forced Jaime into the deep woods, her castle-forged sword aimed at the nape of his neck.

"If you're going to behead me," Jaime had told her, "Then, better make sure that your blade has been whetted, and that it's sharp enough to chop my head off with one blow. I don't want multiple hacks, I would hardly look like a decent dead man—make it clean."

She clenched her teeth and shut her eyes tight. With one quick slash, she severed the heavy ropes that bound his hands.

For the first time in so, so long, tears streamed down her face.

"Go," she whispered. "They will kill you if you remain in your hopes that they will make that trade. Run, and don't you ever come this way again."

Brienne didn't dare open her eyes and look at the fruit of another one of her betrayals, the reflection of her weakness, of her inability to keep her word.

His damp lips touched her cheek, and she shivered at the contact. It was no more than a split-second, but it took her perchance an entire aeon to feel the cold wind that brushed against her face, replacing that very brief kiss.

It might have been the wind's whisper calling her…

_Brienne._
When she opened her eyes, Jaime was gone.

Brienne mounted her saddle that night and rode as fast as she can towards the North.

*Let the Lady Sansa decide—death or pardon. And if it be the latter, then I shall rebuild my honor and take the Black.*

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Gather all the rocks thrown at you, the wise would say, and build a castle out of these.

Now, the flametorches were lit more brightly than before, not that the sun had fully concealed itself on the west. The illusion of twilight was gone, unlike when krakens and flayed men used to hold the castle. Snowdrifts illuminated by faint light piled against the half-ruined, half-burnt walls, with the large windows of the Great Keep bright and gaping. The bastions no longer stand mute, the rusting iron that make up the south portcullis—bold and defiant, threatening anyone unwelcomed who would wish to enter. There were voices, the sound of hooves against dirt, the clash of metal against metal.

*Winterfell, Arya thought. Its ancient roots have survived all tempests, and here it stands.*

And though her eyes were on the South Gates only, she could very clearly envision what lay on the other side of the passage barred by steel—the smithy to the left and the stables beside it, the kitchen south of the bell tower, the Great Hall to the right and the sept between it and the Great Keep, the maester's turret and the courtyard and—

"Raise the irons!" came the command of the sentinel stationed at the South Gate. Arya held her breath as the gate was drawn up, revealing the torches that glowed, ensconced against the walls on either side of it. *Black boots,* these were all that Arya could see as the irons grated open. *Black boots against the white of snow.*

And when the irons were completely raised, the entire castle and the structures around it had bared themselves for her to once more see.

But the sights and sounds have faded when she beheld his face after so long.

She desired to utter his name, let the sweetness of it roll on her tongue. Years it had been, or were it so? Who was keeping time, and why does it feel as if it were only yesterday when she had held him tight after receiving his gift of steel, only yesterday that he had mussed her hair as they both watched Ghost smelling Nymeria, giving her ear a careful nip?

For moments there, they just gazed at each other, their faces growing as still as the pool at the heart of the godswood.

He was the first to shatter the wordlessness between them.

"Arya."

There was the bond of kinship and the bond between one and his beloved. They have transcended both.

An utterance whispered from the distant past fleeted in their ears. Fourscore centuries it had been
since the flesh of one had rubbed that other being's own, since the sound of his voice giving his assent to her want to be sacrificed rang in her heart—’Well then, bare your breast. Know that I love you than all that is in this world.’

Her soul and blood had wrapped around that steel. She was then at her loveliest and at her most grotesque…

"Jon."

Arya dismounted from her saddle, with knees quivering and all of her—resolves, defenses, self-possession—being dissolved like withering papyrus. The one she had called Jon was walking towards her in haste, his eyes were a storm of emotions, lawlessness was in them. He spoke to her. "Do you know that you almost had me beheaded during my first few months at the Wall, Arya Stark?"

She smiled. "I didn't know that giving one girl a needle of a sword does count as betrayal of the Watch."

He chuckled, and in that act his eyes sparkled, melting more of her in the process. "That's only half of the story."

"Oh?" Arya Stark raised one brow, treading closer to Jon. Her feet left their imprint upon the thick snow. "And what is the other half, pray tell?"

"When Father was executed," Jon replied, his voice broke once more. "Nobody knew where you've run off. I almost abandoned my vows to...scour the realms and find you."

"Can't live without me?"

"Hell, no."

They laughed and cried as they crushed each other in a tight embrace. They laughed at the cruelty and mercy of fate—he had survived, she had survived, and here they are after one of them had said that different roads lead to the same castle many years back. They laughed because there was no other fitting way to express mirth—except to shed tears in the midst of it too, especially if the whorl of all that one human could feel cannot anymore be held back. They laughed because they thought the meeting of souls to be impossible—it might have been a blink, or five years, or a thousand multiplied tenfold, and they cared not whether all things have stayed the same or have changed.

And they cried. They cried because of the missed time they could never make back, because of the absence of the other the pains of which they have buried deep within their stone facades. To remember is to hurt, they would always persuade themselves. They cried because of the fear that the other might just vanish, that this might just be a forgotten dream after all, and so one held the other tighter. They cried because suddenly, every damned thing in the world made sense after so long.

"Don't go, Arya. Not again," Jon whispered in her ear. "I need you more than you would ever know."

Arya nodded, though her face was still buried against Jon's shoulder. "I won't, Jon. I promise."

Sansa was half-expecting feelings of disaffection, yet none of those seemed to emanate in that reunion with Jon. The illusion of separation between trueborn and bastard was effaced, and it was
not only caused by that will inked by Robb Stark's hand. It was only now that they have realized the depth of that bond born not only out of mutual respect for each other, but out of genuine concern, brotherly-sisterly love.

He had asked for forgiveness—did he choose wrong when he elected for himself a practically-ostracized life at the Wall? Should he have been by Robb's side when he called for his banners during the war against the Starks' enemies? Would it have done them any good had he abandoned his post and marched south instead to find them?

"No, Jon," Sansa whispered, her right hand against his cheek. "I know what you're thinking—we never should have left Winterfell. Yes, we never should have, yet we did. Everything went to hell, yet here we are. There are more questions than answers, yet the more pressing of all is what do we do now, dear brother?"

Jon chuckled softly, and it was the sweetest Sansa had ever listened to in years. He kissed her on the forehead. "Rest awhile, sweet sister. We will talk, then." His eyes caught sight of two companions of theirs whose distinct Essosi features cannot be mistaken. "Welcome to Winterfell," came Jon's greetings, even as he wondered why such people would be at all part of House Tully's sent retinue. "Do share with us our bread and salt, join us in our table, find shelter under our roof. Whilst you are here, I assure you that you will be granted the rights due you as guests and that no man will bare his sword and deny you of hospitality." He held out his hand. "Jon."


"Well met, Jon Stark," the Handsome Man replied as he dismounted, and helped the Waif alight as well. "Well then, we offer you nothing but friendship and good will in return. Aegeus, Sabine—from Braavos both. Thank you for obliging us."

"Our pleasure to receive you," Jon said. "The conditions here in the North are not anymore as agreeable, I'm afraid. Less horses venture to these territories now that winter has come—"

The trail of his speech was disrupted when another man came into view.

It was as if Jon saw himself in the eyes of the red priestess' flames as he beheld that man's face. The mirror of his own self that had cracked from side to side in the event of his death suddenly reformed itself from the shards. The seeing glass lies, Jon convinced himself. It's all in the mind—I think I see my reflection on it, but reflections are unreal because the seeing glass never stares back at the one who's looking. However, the more he persuaded himself of his disconnectedness with the man, the more he felt the kinship between them, as if the both of them existed in the framework of someone ideal, as if there were phantoms of old selves in different points in time that inhabit them both, melding them into one linked identity.

He cannot be mere reflection.

He exists in me, and so do I in him.

I alone cannot exist.

He recalled asudden the moniker Bran had used to label him. 'Warrior,' the boy had uttered. 'The Promised.'

"Jon," the man called him by his name, and by the gods, Jon felt that unexpected familiarity engulfing any form of doubt that may be present within him as far as that man was concerned. "Finally, we meet. A man has known you only through Arya's tellings." He extended his arm to him.
"Jaqen."

Jaqen, Jon repeated the name in his thoughts. *Self-abnegating speech. Lorathi?*

Jaqen—sent by the gods.

Jon grew up in the North, and he knew the ballads sung by the Northern and free folks alike—The Rat Cook on the subject of guest right, The Winter Maid on more festive occasions, The Last of the Giants, and its words of *for these men who are small can never stand tall whilst giants still walk in the light.* Then, there's The Night that Ended, with its verses on the battle between the Night's Watch and the Others.

However, another song played in Jon's ears—it was a canticle that was eight thousand years old, and though he remembered none of it in Old Nan's chilling tales and even in her eerie lullabies nor in Ned Stark's insipiriting legends, he knew what he was hearing.

It was the Song of Ice and Fire, said to belong to the Warrior of Light yet its contents remained unknown, since only the Weirwoods and the flames know the prophecy's significances.

*His face is stitched with wounds and scars,*

*His breath brings forth both ice and fire,*

*From kingdoms near and empires far*

*His name they speak, their souls' desire.*

Jon cleared his throat to utter a reply. He knew that he had been staring too much. "Can't all be true, good friend—Arya's stories about me. You see, she loves to exaggerate. Forgive me," he accepted Jaqen's hand, and struggled against gasping as he felt the surge of affinity's warmth course through his veins. *This man felt it too, though he was gifted in concealing it, Jon thought. I saw his eyes flicker when our skins made contact. Who is he? *"I know nothing yet about you, though I feel as if I have known you from a place or a time."

Jaqen smiled at his japing. "A man knows what you're thinking. If I am *me,* and you are *you,* then why does it feel as if I'm looking at my own reflection?"

"Wise, my good friend," Jon said, his grin widening. "What we perceive in the seeing glass are mere realm suits—the outside. What is the core? This, I do not know. I look at the mirror and I see only a stranger, a misbegotten bastard acting like a legitimate liege lord in the face of friends and foes alike. What brings you here in the North, Jaqen?"

"Same thing that made you stay—a great war, and one other reason," Jaqen's eyes cruised slowly to Arya's face.

"Ah," Jon laughed, nodded his understanding. "Finally, she has found a man worthy of attention and thus decided to do away with her fancy swords for a while!"

"A man comes only second to the swords, if you must know. She thinks him a worthy sparring partner and so she likes keeping a man close."

"Sparring partner? Truly?" Arya grimaced. "You don't even know how to water dance."

"O-ho!" Jon still laughed. "Used to her temperaments, I suppose?"
"Oh, very much," the Lorathi replied, pulling Arya close to him and mussing her hair. "Despite that, she still manages to leave a man puzzling over her moods everytime."

They all gathered inside the Great Keep where the largest hearth stood. The gray stone of which it was made, the large doors of oak and iron sang of homecomings and forewarnings. In front of the hearth sat Rickon, gazing at the fire intently, then leaping upon seeing Sansa and Arya. "You came back!" the young lord buried his face against Arya's tunic and sobbed, as if realizing now only that the parting had been real all along. "I miss Father and Robb. I miss Mother most of all. They're gone…they've left us for good."

"Hush, sweet one," Sansa consoled him as she kissed his hair, wiping tears from both of their faces. "They never left. They are always in the godswood…"

There was half-truth to what Sansa had said. The oak is the acorn and the acorn is the oak. And though the death of their parents and elder brother did so much as to shatter the Starks, there are some things that must happen in the way they had. Understanding then becomes a requisite, in order to keep one's self sane, in order to accept and move on.

"Welcome home, Starks."

All turned their attention to the source of the voice.

A burly serf carried Bran to the seat at the center of the drawing chamber. Upon settling, his eyes roamed across the room and saw the faces of all those he had summoned from the Weirwood many moons ago. It was true that he was weakened by the most recent encounter against those demons of ice, however his enervation seemed to wane as he witnessed his plans coming into fruition right before his raven's eyes. The Wolves, he smiled as he gazed at his siblings. His eyes turned to the Waif and the Handsome Man—Healer, Garin the Great, then to Jaqen—the Warrior a thousand years past from the blood of dragons…and Jon—the Warrior of this age from the blood of dragons.

Finally, his eyes locked upon Arya's face. He exhaled heavily, for looking at her was akin to witnessing a goddess descend to the realms of men.

Nissa Nissa.

"Bran, dear brother…" Arya endeared him as she stood from the floor where she and Rickon were sitting and walked towards Bran. Her eyes were misty the entire day, and she had repeatedly blamed Winter for it. Gods, and who was she fooling? The bones of my spine, my blood, the beating of my heart, Arya thought as she wrapped Bran in a tight hug. This whole meeting is burning my tearducts! "Beneath stones upon stones they have buried us; we climbed out of the barrow." She caressed Bran's cheek and touched his temple with her lips and tasted salt—fallen tears from them both. "What now?"

Supper was served an hour after sunset—rye bread and pottage soup, pigeon pie and sturgeon, weak wine. They have discussed about, debated on numerous plans for days forthcoming, the priority being the gathering of vassal lords and heads of the wildling clans after three days for the disclosure of the Stark children's return. News about recent sightings of Sansa and Arya have reached the Cerwyns, and tellings travel fast even when the snow is at its thickest. Stories would no doubt reach Hornwood and Torrhen's Square, and since Ser Davos's retinue made two stops at the Last Hearth and at Deepwood Motte, news about Bran and Rickon may reach Bear Island in around a couple of sunsets. Ravens are yet to be sent on the morrow.
The matter on who to declare for was also brought up, and not without disputations. Jon was unswerving in his support of Stannis, and with him is Rickon whose speech resembled Robb's very much, that Sansa had to clutch Arya's hand tight in order to hold back tears. "Ser Davos retrieved me from the Stone Islands," the young lord said. "I'm neither young nor stupid. I know I owe it to Stannis, and Father died declaring for him. I would not bow to some other claimant just because he claims to have three domesticated dragons."

"It's more than a claim, Rickon," Arya said. "I saw one of them with my own eyes in Pentos two moons back. If we are to believe Jon's accounts, then we must admit to the fact that we need those dragons." He's Jon's brother, too, Arya thought. As much as I want to divulge the truth however, it is not in my place.

"I don't care. If he's truly honorable, let him bring his dragons here without conditions for Northerners to bend the knee," the young lord snapped, stabbing his pie listlessly with his fork.

"This Aegon the Sixth came out of nowhere, we were not even aware of his existence until now, and he has proven naught apart from his taking of the Stormlands and his kin besieging Dragonstone," Jon said, slightly irritated. "Stannis was the only claimant who took seriously the warnings of the Night Watch concerning those Undead. This…Aegon lived most of his life in Essos—your own words, Arya; so, this only means that he is trying to 'retake' a land he knows very little about. Not to mention, a Lannister on their side would scream of hostility to the Northern lords."

"Tyrion is hardly a Lannister, if by Lannister you mean a snake donning a lion's coat," Sansa interjected. "We are too quick to judge, and we have not heard his side of the story yet."

"You were married to him," Jon answered. He held Sansa's hand and squeezed it. "It was a marriage arranged in the most horrible of circumstances, forced upon you. You need not speak in his defense, Sansa."

"I am still married to him," Sansa shot back. "Nothing was forced, dear brother. In that marriage, we swore in front of the gods. I am a Stark and Starks honor covenants, even if those around them do not."

Bran was silent in the midst of that colloquy, observing them all. Despite the heights of the tension, he still smiled—as if amused by every utterance and gesture, and the motivations behind these. This is real, he thought. This is truly home.

Sabine elbowed a seemingly untroubled Aegeus who was busy with the bread and stew. "What?" came his whisper, and so the woman motioned her head to the Starks. Aegeus sighed. "Jaqen," he called quietly. "Enter the scene of fray, brother, before it gets worse."

Jaqen's brows furrowed—why me?—the Lorathi appeared to ask, then turned to Bran. The boy just shrugged his shoulders and laughed. "Meet Arya's family, brother-in-law. May the gods grant you the patience of septons and the wisdom of maesters during times of brannigans, such as this."

"May they," was Jaqen's response to his japing. He let out a sharp exhale. He pounded one fist on the table. "Starks!" he suddenly boomed.

Voices died down. Even Shaggydog's snarls at the corner were silenced.

"You cannot talk like this…uh, siblings," he began, then frowned when Arya snorted at his unease at uttering the last word. He sighed and shook his head at his wife, who bit her lip in order to drown her own giggles. "Leave the discussion and wait for sunrise. We're all exhausted."
"Your promise, Jaqen," Rickon reminded him, a soft scowl forming upon his face at the Lorathi's insinuation that they must all retire for bed. "Swordwork tomorrow, lar gwanur."

The Lorathi nodded and smiled. *Lar gwanur* means 'older brother' in Skagosi, and it touched him how those endearing words so easily came out of the boy's mouth. "Which is why you need the rest, neth gwanur—younger one."

The boy's scowl deepened, then was replaced by a most delighted grin.

Rickon and Sansa departed for their respective bedchambers by the keep's east wing, and Aegeus and Sabine in separate chambers along the west. "It's not like he's my lord husband, Arya; and the servants certainly do not require more subjects to gossip about," Sabine had told her, though Arya could tell how very pained the woman was. "He was my lover-assassin-at-night, and I, his darling cut-throat. Things end, sweet girl." Arya reminded her about how memories could come back through certain triggers. "Surely, the Elder had taught you how to do it!" The girl said. Sabine shook her head. "He may, he may not have. I don't want to force Aegeus to remember, Arya. If there was any truth to what has happened between us, then he would remember even without me interfering."

Jaqen stared at the crackling flames in the hearthstone. They were in the drawing room with him—Arya, Jon, Bran.

"You're a warg. Dragons are like wolves, brother, only that they have scales instead of fur, and they can fly," he had told Jon. To his surprise, Arya did not voice out any more of her usual protestations, though her face still appeared beleaguered. "It would be mere child's play for you."

"How so? No one can befriend a dragon, Jaqen. The lores are clear about this—they can be tamed yes, but you cannot name them friends the same way you could a person who has seen you grow up and has fought battles at your side and on your behalf."

"True. The closest thing there is to a friend in a dragon's perspective might be a foe who is still alive. You know the saga during the Dance. Targaryens against their kin during the war of succession between Rhaenyra and Aegon II. Despite the former being a dragonlord in her own right, Sunfyre still feasted over her flesh and bones upon Aegon II's orders. There are even some dragons who were known to throw their riders off when they get pissed."

"You seem to be an adept on Westerosi annals."

Jaqen H'ghar responded to Jon's observation with a kind smile.

All this time Jon thought he had lost all sense of skepticism. He had witnessed the wights raised by the White Walkers, fought against them numerous times—in the haunted forest and the Fist, at Hardhome. They are vulnerable to Valyrian steel and obsidian, and he knew how nigh they are to the realms and somehow, *sensed* their plans of going past the Wall.

Arya had told him earlier that night that Jaqen H'ghar, the Lorathi she had brought to the ancient gates of Winterfell, is a dragonriding assassin.

His poor sister had to wait for a good minute before he could stop with his laughter that was nothing short of belly-rich. He surprised himself too, for that was the first time he had laughed heartily after he had been summoned back from hood's curtains.

"He told you that? And you believed him?" Jon said in between his fits of hilarity. "Not only that—you *married* him! Now, now, Arya, I like Jaqen very much; I may not be the best judge of character but I could sense a good fellow among a sea of rotten others. He's brother to us now—kin, though
not by blood. But surely, he has better sense to realize that even without that phantasmagorical backstory of his, you would love him all the same, yes? Oh, sister!" He only forced himself to stop when he noticed Arya's jaw hardening in vexation.

"Jaqen!" Arya called the man without taking her piqued eyes off of Jon. The Lorathi was then in the middle of a discussion with Harwin and Ser Davos. Seeing that her bid had been ignored, she marched to where her husband stood with the two and dragged him from the conversation after mouthing out pardons and excuses. "To the Bell Tower, Jon," was her order.

He followed merely to play along. Her frolics, her wild imaginations are what make her up, and Jon had missed her so. Seeing once more the child within the woman that had become the fruit of her transformation delighted him beyond words.

When he had reached the Bell Tower, he found Arya clutching her pendant of scarlet stone and charging Jaqen to 'summon it'. The Lorathi was shaking his head. "It's not even midnight yet, lovely girl. I saw a handful of people by the smithy and some more at the stables."

Arya was too headstrong, even after Jon had acquiesced and in false tongue declared that he's now a believer of Arya's story and that there is no such need anymore to beckon the beast. "I say there is," Arya said, then spoke in a language Jon knew not. "Māzigon, zaldrīzes," were her words.

After the scarlet pendant glowed in its usual erubescent hue, a dragon's screech was heard west of Hunter's Gate. A few seconds, and an aurelian firebeast circled the skies in its flight, before soaring past Winterfell's towers and keeps. A caterwaul of fright rang from below as the firebeast's golden shimmers blanketed almost half of the castle's stretch.

How could the commonborns and the maesters have killed the likes of these after the war of succession? Jon thought to himself, and wondered if he was merely asleep and dreaming, or if he was swallowed whole by a page written by the hands of Maester Thomax. His astounded eyes followed the trail of the dragon's flight, and shuddered intensely as the firebeast looked back and locked its eyes of glittering bronze against his. Another glorious screech came out of it as it sailed through the nightsky and ensphered the castle. "Never laugh at breathing dragons," were words that Old Nan used to say. "Whether they be those that breathe flames or those buried beneath the frost."

Seconds later, it was gone. It did not even fly away, it merely…evanesced in space.

Jon had wasted no time barraging Jaqen with queries.

Why did the dragon respond to Arya's call? "Well, in our case, Heraxos is...how do you say it?" the Lorathi fumbled for words, scratching the nape of his neck and looking a little displeased, what with his wife's stubbornness. "Conjugal property? And you see, Arya is very strong, so the dragon...it knows her voice."

Can it take apart a throne of Valyrian steel swords forged through dragonflame? "Dragonfire can melt the hardest kind of steel, Jon."

What must be done to tame it? The Others...they are vulnerable to dragonfire, yes? "Through blood-bond, brother," Jaqen answered. "Dragonglass, dragon-forged steel, dragonfire—it might be that they are vulnerable to all these."

"Jaqen, brother mine," Jon exhaled as if redemption had revealed its mien, then pulled the Lorathi to him in a brotherly hug. "Where have you been all this time?"

Those Others would drag them all to eternal night if they were allowed past the Wall, and Bran knew
about the Horn of Winter, reportedly found by the wildlings in a glacier by Frostfangs. That horn was thrown moons ago in the firepit when Mance Rayder was burned alive. Jon recalled seeing its runes burst into yellow and green flames, briefly shimmering in the air. "He wanted you crows to think he had it in his power to blow your bloody Wall down about your knees," Tormund said. "But we never found the true horn, not for all our digging."

*The Horn is still somewhere in the limit of permanent ices,* Jon thought. *If by wrath of the gods, the Others found it first then the Wall will collapse, and there will be nothing else to stop them but dragons.*

Jon saw Arya smirking triumphantly but he didn't care. The questions never stopped even after countless of others.

"Sadistic creatures—common men carrying their pitchforks may have fallen before the dragon guarding the tower was slain by the hero, children may have been burned to soot. If you visit the library tower, you would find no shortage of maesters' writings on the subject," Jon told Jaqen as he forced his mind to the present, in an attempt to challenge the Lorathi's opinions on the matter.

"Those who do not understand how the universe works would never understand dragons, brother," Jaqen replied. Arya was now asleep, her head upon his lap and she was snoring lightly. The Lorathi brushed his fingers gently through her hairlocks. "All these which your books have written, they're all contrived superstition. What if a man told you that dragons actually loved the finer things—harp tunes, sung poetry, falling stars, gems, flowers…oh yes, Jon, they do," the Lorathi chuckled when the lad snorted at his words. Arya shifted a little, and so Jaqen lowered his face to kiss her on the lips. *Sleep on, lovely girl,* he whispered in her ear, then turned back to Jon who was smiling softly at the Lorathi's show of affection. "But that they act cruelly, ruthlessly, that they embrace evil because men sought to control them for their personal motivations?"

"True," Bran offered, his eyes sparkling as he gazed at the faces of both Warriors. "Dragons have embodied all things vile which we have stood against, and embodied the denunciation of all things good which we have stood for. In reality, dragons are works of the good-spirited, and we men are the shite ones."

Jon's smile was not without amusement. "And where did you learn to speak like this, Bran? Ah, what would Maester Luwin think of you now—he's one of the greatest critics of dragons and magic."

Jaqen kept his eyes locked upon the hearthstone's dancing flames, however, he was smiling softly.

"When you've lived for more than eight thousand yea—" Bran began, then waved his hand in dismissal of his own words. "Nevermind. Just firebeasts tonight, more stories to tell in future gatherings. And this," he reached out to place his hand on top of Jaqen's. The Lorathi shifted his attention to the boy. "You must quit from blaming yourself, brother. The past is its own realm."

The Lorathi simpered, albeit with slight bitterness. "Easier said than done, Bran. My writ leaves are archived with the rest of those accursed slavers I regret being identified with. The torment and hell I've caused others…"

"All those, yes," Bran replied. "But there is one thing which I think you cannot argue with. Something good came out of Valyria because of you."

They spoke of other things, caught up, laughed some more.

Bran's mind was somewhere else.
He's sailing for Dragonstone, very good.

The Raven's eyes see you, Sam the Slayer, the boy whispered inwardly, and knew that his words have reached Samwell Tarly's dreams. Yes, Bran had warged into that cat that carried the Citadel's master key, and had ordered Sam to locate and carry with him Maester Malleon's scrolls on the Targaryen lineage, and Archmaester Harmune's that spoke of winter's dragon beneath the Wall...

The Raven's eyes know where you are...

Be quick about it, Sam the Slayer.

Bring them here.

The scrolls.

The Targaryens.

The dragons.

From Honeyholt, they rode past Highgarden and Bitterbridge through the Roseroad, all the way to the Kingswood south of the bay. They purposely went around the capital, they could not use the harbors there in order to reach the outlying island, and so they rode for two days more to the port at Duskendale. Within a week and a quarter, they have reached Dragonstone.

The travel was not without complications. Many times, they had to pause in order to answer queries from the soldiers of the Reach especially those stationed in the market towns of Tumbleton and Ashford. They have heard of the recent besieging of Oldtown, no doubt, and so they are more wary of travelers especially those that came from the southwest. The towns were in their usual hustle and bustle, though it was observable how trade had dwindled significantly due to recent events. Samwell wondered where the words from his explications had stemmed from—he was terrible at concealing information. *Men of the Watch are noble and true,* he would always convince himself even when he was still with the brothers at the Wall, and so deceptions, fabrications, were never his strongest suit. He had told the soldiers that he left Oldtown two months before, for fear that they might ask him details about the Ironborns and thus delay their journey further.

"What about the girl and the child?" one of the soldiers asked, wrapping himself tight with his cloak. Snow is about to fall once more in the south, and so there is now a shortage of mouth-melons, peaches, fireplums, and all other harvest crops that sustain the whole of Westeros.

"Met her close to the Goldengrove, Ser," Sam answered, giving Gilly a reassuring look. "Said she needs to be in Rosby. Winter had started, you see. Very few horsecarts travel close to the capital."

"You sure you don't have any information concerning the Ironborns?"

"Most sure, Ser."

The soldiers dismissed them, signaled for them to carry on.

Now, Sam was being led by Maester Pylos to the Dragonstone's central keep. The stairs were serpentine, twisted, like a firebeast's hidden lair. "Answer questions without delay, look them straight
in the eye. Tell them *straightaway* why you are here."

"Wouldn't they kill me if they learned *straightaway* the purpose of my visit?" Sam queried, and laughed nervously. "I still have duties up North, as you know. I'd like to return there in one piece, with my head about my shoulder."

Finally, they have reached the door to the Stone Drum that houses the courts of the Targaryen claimants. Thereupon, Samwell heard a woman’s voice in the midst of a heated argument with another. He turned to Maester Pylos, as if consulting whether or not they should proceed to announcing themselves.

*My orders were clear, Daario, and you chose to defy them and to sail here on your own. Now Meereen is in damnable ashes!*

*I have advised you to leave Ser Barristan and at least a quarter of the Unsullied in the city. You know that those lords will never agree to a temporary armistice. Your priorities are divided, Daenerys. You cannot rule Dragon's Bay from a thousand leagues away, proceed to conquest, and expect to get good results in both feats.*

*You left Jorah there alone with city watch and a handful of mercenaries. How can I trust you after these foolish decisions you have made?*

*Jorah is here now, is he not? He's alive, Daenerys. The moment you sailed with the Ironborns, you've left Meereen defenseless and open to attack.*

*Ah! Wise! Blame it all on the queen! You were the one who has failed in your duties!*

*My sworn duty is to be at your side, serve at your command. Tell me, would you rather that I have stayed there and died with the rest of them?*

Those last words were met with silence. The man spoke once more.

*Forgive me, Daenerys...but the real battle is here. I cannot just stand by, hold Meereen on your behalf, and kill myself every second worrying about whether you are alive and safe. You know that my concern for you goes beyond my duty as your sworn sword.*

Arms draped themselves around the shoulders of both maesters, and those arms belonged to a purple-eyed, silver-haired lad. Sam's breath seemed to have been caught in his throat as he gazed at the lad's face, for there were features of him that were very much identical with another lad whose face Sam had committed to memory, what with their shared good will, a pact sworn in front of the Weirwood, and a conscience that never slumbered. Even in the absence of any word from the fair lad's lips, Sam knew that introductions were unnecessary.

Aegon the Sixth was apparently listening to the dispute behind closed doors, with narrowed eyes and occasional clicks of the tongue. "Lovers' spat?" he asked Maester Pylos, who only nodded. He turned his attention to Samwell, who was still engrossed with studying the lad's Jon-like features, marveling at the points of resemblance. The Prince smiled congenially, and there was nothing else to do but to smile back for his pleasant spirit was nothing short of contagious. "Welcome to Dragonstone," the Prince said, and patted Sam's shoulder. "Aegon the Sixth, and do accept my apologies for this fracas you're witnessing after what I'm guessing is a tiresome journey."

*Get out of my sight, Daario. I can't...I can't do this with you right now.*

"Ouch," remarked the Prince. The door burst open asudden to reveal a fuming, heavy-hearted Stormcrow. "Daario," Aegon called to him, his voice half-reassuring. "The Painted Table in three
hours, good friend."

The Stormcrow heaved a sigh, pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes tight. "Talk some sense to your aunt, will you?" came his request before storming out of the keep.

Aegon gestured that they enter the chamber and the visitor followed only, as if adrift and unknowing.

When Sam had gathered back his wits, he promptly yet decorously removed Aegon's arm that was still about his shoulders. "Your…grace," he began, for he knew not how to properly address him. With a low bow and a fist against his chest, he proceeded with the formalities. "Samwell Tarly of the Night's Watch, sent to the Citadel to receive maester's training—"

"Citadel?" Aegon the Sixth repeated. His earlier affable expression was replaced asudden with an impending, wrathful one. His back straightened, head raised slightly, and deep worry was suddenly across his mien. "You were there when the Ironborns pillaged Oldtown, then?"

"Yes, your grace," Sam inclined his head a little, shuddered as he remembered the terror around the Hightower and the port that surrounded it. Flashes of images—children being hauled by the neck to the slaveships, women being stripped off of their clothing and violated on the spot, men being disemboweled, dragonfire in all intermediate directions—he shook his head. "Seen it all. Devil's work, though they claim to worship the Drowned God."

"Dragons?" was Daenerys Targaryen's query. Slowly, she stood from the seat beside the makeshift throne of iron.

"One," Sam replied. "D-dark marillion spines."

Aegon the Sixth's exhales had deepened as had the fury within him, and despite Sam's inexplicable fright of the lad, he still was awestruck at the apparent likeness between the Prince and that friend in the North he had always held dear. This is Jon's face, Sam thought. This is his face of wrath—when the Starks were killed, when the Night's Watch voted against allowing the wildlings within the safety of the Wall. This is his face when those wights attacked the children at Hardhome.

The Prince spoke. "Surely, you did not come all the way here just to confirm the sacking. What else do you have for us, dear friend?"

Sam nodded, then handed a copy of Maester Malleon's scroll to Aegon the Sixth. The original scroll he had sent through white ravens straight to Winterfell, and may the birds not perish in their journey, may the contents evade interception. Aegon took the paper from him and read it. "I have news regarding Jaehaerys Stark Targaryen, lastborn son of Rhaegar," Sam announced quietly.

The Prince's expression was unreadable as his eyes darted from left to right of the scroll, tracing the lines from fathers to offsprings. A sigh escaped from Aegon's chest, and Samwell could swear that he had sensed relief in it.

Daenerys Targaryen's brows were raised partly. "Where is he?"

"Winterfell."

"What more?" Aegon the Sixth raised his eyes from the parchment. 

Tell them straightaway why you are here.

"An ice dragon is buried underneath the Wall," Sam said. "We might…need your help."
And if someone asks you about all the names that had mattered in your life, how long would it take for you to say her name?

He tossed and turned on the bed. Ever since Catelyn Stark had given him the gift of another life, he had found it almost impossible to surrender to slumber. It was as if sleep had connived with death, and refused to visit him while he still breathed the air with the rest of the living.

Yes, please. Convince yourself about all these. Feed yourself with falsehoods, he thought.

He saw Sabine entering the chamber adjacent to his just when he was opening the door. Just passing stares, exhales, soft smiles. No words. Now as he lay with naught for company but relentless whispers and particles of his thoughts that were scattered in all spaces and directions, he recalled her words prior to what she had named her 'righteous surrender' many moons ago in Braavos:

*Chain me in your remembrances if I try to escape, yes?*

He closed his eyes tightly. Her beauteous face was still there in the darkness, and he couldn't hide from it, run away from it, kill it in his deepest subliminals so that her face would cease smiling at him, so that her eyes would not burn his entirety with her ardent, kind gazes, so that her lips would not touch his as in those blessings of dreams even in his state of wakefulness.

And there was this indecipherable fear too, the arrogant type of fear. Between the two of them, she was always the braver one, and he, despite the hard exterior he chose as a passive camouflage, was always the anarchical doubter of all things; and if not for her—the most absolute of all those sworn to facelessness—he may have remained the greatest unbeliever of even the simplest things such as friendship, such as life and love.

Aegeus, in whose person writhed bitterness, vengefulness, hardness of heart, and all things ill and hostile—no doubt fruits of his training as one assassin—loved to watch faith, uprightness, and devotion soar in that woman. A merciful assassin? The comely one scoffed at the thought. Even during our mad days in the temple, she would spend sleepless nights in her workchamber just to concoct a murderous poison that doesn't hurt, and would grant those marked men with 'blithesome dreams'.

*They deserve to die by the coin,* he remembered the Waif telling him. *But let death be peaceful sleep only.*

"Enough of this," Aegeus said under his breath as he stood from the bed.

Within seconds, he was already in front of Sabine's chamber. He raised a fist to knock, but paused asudden and shook his head at himself. He never knocks, and so he waved a hand instead to unlock the bolt that secured the threshold, pushed the wood, and shamelessly invited himself in.

Ah, but of course. She had to be in the middle of undressing herself.

"Aegeus!" Sabine exclaimed, concealing her own nudity from him with the thin nightrobe she was clutching. "W-why are you here?" Another wave of his hand and the door bolted itself shut. Useless, the Handsome Man thought as he raked the Wait's form with one of his racy stares. A useless struggle. It's not just her naked body but her naked soul, too—that which would diminish and reveal her identity both.

"Sabine..."
It was only her name that he could dare utter even as he had rehearsed countless of times what he desired to say to the woman. Where were those thoughts now? *Useless*, useless indeed.

"What do you need?" the Waif asked kindly despite herself, and the Handsome Man heard the slight quiver in her voice, the hint of pain in it which perchance resonated to the fibers of her being. Winter had nothing to do at all with her soft shudders—the hearthstone in that bedchamber had fire crackling in it, and the keep was built over natural hot springs that keep it warm even during the harshest snowstorms. "Balm for your pain? The ride was a rough one. I carry no Sweetsleep with me but I could mix some integrants for a mild draught—"

"You."

Her eyes were those of a plagued child, with her deepest self stripped, standing bare for someone she barely knew and at the same time, knew so very well…and he could tell. It terrified her.

The Handsome Man crossed the distance between them slowly, his eyes never once departing from her visage, and if only he could hear the murmurs stemming from her deepest seat of affections, then he would have smiled at the quixotic silliness of it all:

*With you, I feel naked and vulnerable.*

*When I am naked and vulnerable with you, I feel robed…* 

*Safe.*

"Brother…" was her utterance instead—a protest. An attempt to summon between them this…this impossible soundness of mind. He cared not about all these. He gently pulled the nightdress that covered her body, let it fall softly on the floor.

"You," the Handsome Man murmured, his face descending to the Waif’s own, his lips an inch away from hers. He combed her dainty locks of gold through those long fingers of his, held her on the small of her back. "You," he spoke against her mouth. "I need all of you."

"Why?" she whispered her query.

"Damn it," he whispered back. His mouth closed in on hers.

*I don't know.*

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Third morn came.

In the Great Hall sat the lords of those sworn houses—Manderly of White Harbor, Glover of Deepwood Motte, Mormont of Bear Island, Flints of Widow’s Watch, Thenn, the surviving Umbers who had feigned support to the Boltons along with Lord Mors, Locke, Pool, Tallhart, Cerwyn, Ryswell, the newly arrived Magnar from the Skagos Isles. At the far side of the hall sat Tormund named the Mead-king of Ruddy Hall, and Val, the wilding princess and sister of Dalla, Mance Rayder's wife. With them were Ser Davos and Jaqen. The Lorathi’s back was against the stone wall. After some discussions with the onion knight on matters concerning the wildlings, he contented himself by watching the Starks whose places were on the high table atop the dais, opposite the large bay window. The central hearth warmed the whole chamber, and on top of it was an elaborate overmantel that contained iron carvings of the once lost sigil of the greathouse Stark with their heraldic words. Three direwolves sat in front of the dais, with Shaggydog snarling low, and Nymeria
and Ghost calmly assessing the faces present in the hall.

Lady Selyse and the Princess Shireen chose to settle themselves on the minstrel's gallery where they could see every person at the lower tier of the grand chamber. Recent news has reached them—that Stannis Baratheon was now riding south from the recently besieged and now reacquired Raventree, and had met with his retinue of fifteen thousand more sellswords that docked on the harbor of the Three Sisters with Justin Massey. Within the moon, his forces will ride towards the capital. Why the Iron Bank was still aiding the Baratheon king despite Braavos's open support to the Targaryen claimants still remained a mystery even to those who knew the internal politics.

"What kind of a Hand remains in the safety of these castle walls while his king battles against those souther forces?" was Davos Seaworth's reaction to the missive. He must stay with Selyse and Shireen in Winterfell, and send the king some ravens once Rolland Storm brings the mined obsidian to White Harbor. The onion knight had insisted to follow him to war, the king had expressed his disapproval. Now, the knight had found a confidante in the Lorathi and was venting out all of his frustrations. "One mistake in the Blackwater, as if Tywin Lannister and Mace Tyrell could both be defeated with nothing but mercenaries of arguable loyalty. One mistake!"

"Do you trust your king, Ser Davos?" Jaqen queried calmly, for he had run out of words to alleviate the man of his grievances. "Do you think him wise?"

The knight was taken aback, responded nevertheless. "Why, of course."

"Well then," the Lorathi said. "Why do you question his ruling?"

Ser Davos heaved a sigh and eyed those Northern lords who were now in the middle of their deliberation concerning the wildlings at Oakenshield. "Frankly, I worry for Stannis."

"Ironborns?"

"That," Ser Davos replied. "And those dragons at the Stone and the Stormlands. He plans to retake his ancestral seat after laying siege to the capital."

"Ah," Jaqen's smile was with a hint of amusement. "You trust Stannis, but you lack faith in him. Fair enough, you've lost in the Blackwater as you've said, that led you to the belief that the capital is impenetrable. As for the Vale and the Riverlands—"

"They will never declare for Stannis, I know," Davos finished the sentence for the Lorathi. "They were besieged by those Lannister forces, and they renewed their fealty to the throne, and now their boy-king is dead. After the retaking of Riverrun, those lords sworn to House Tully and the Lords Declarant have declared once more their allegiance to the Northern lord's heir—their King in the North during the war. In this case, it's Jon Stark."

Jaqen left the knight's word hanging as his eyes caught quick sight of a woman of pale skin, with hairlocks of burnished copper, donning a long robe of red fabric. Around her neck was a gold choker with a ruby, the same stones the Faceless Men use for glamor. She was standing west of the dais, partly hidden by the heavy drapes of gray and bronze, and her eyes were intent upon his face that Jaqen wondered if he was the only soul in the hall that could perceive her. With equal power, he stared back at her, as if assaying her motivations, the demons and holies within.

None.

Curious. The Lorathi assassin could not get a reading of her.

He had heard of a certain red priestess aiding Stannis through her visions gifted by the flames. A
servant of R'hllor, yet about her I can sense only shadows.

A blink, and she disappeared.

Mors Umber's voice boomed across the great hall, interrupting the colloquy between the two. "We follow legally-recognized process, of course. Bran Stark is heir to Winterfell, de jure."

"There is a will, Lord Mors, forgive me," Lady Maege's voice was thick with disagreement. "It was in Robb Stark's own handwriting. We risked our lives, the Lord Glover and Howland Reed too, in order to carry his will intact from Riverrun to here. Eddard's bones now rest in the crypts through Mollen's own blood but his son's bones are nowhere to be found. We cannot dishonor the will of the departed."

"The will was drafted because the heir apparent was presumed dead," said Lord Mors, undaunted by the She-bear's tone. "Here is the Lord Bran—alive, breathing. Unless you desire to turn the North into Dorne and take the Lady Sansa as ruling dame of the House. No offense, my lady," the lord turned to her. "But you are a woman, and married to an exiled Lannister."

Sansa was silent during the brawl of words amongst the vassal lords, but those stinging words of Lord Mors Umber made her rethink her decision of keeping her mouth shut during the entire gathering.

"I will not ask for your pardons for this, Lord Mors," she began. "But compared to Dorne, the North's notions of identifying succession on the basis of either legitimacy of birth or sex are notions too backward, wouldn't you think?" Her eyes never once left the lord's face, and a staring game it was for the both of them. "To be forthright, I applaud its scheme of passing on rulership from one person to another—women in there are given chances equal to men. If not for Nymeria of the Rhoyne, ah then, Dorne would be nothing but a sandy hole of sour wine, queer spices, and male chauvinists. We have a lot of the latter here in the North, as it appears."

Jaqen snorted at the words, his amused eyes riveting to Arya of the Rhoyne whose name Sansa had spoken. He trapped his lower lip with his teeth to stifle a laugh. From across the hall, Arya shushed him with a stern look, but her efforts had gone futile when Lord Wyman Manderly began to fill the great chamber with that rich laughter of his, prompting Tormund the Mead-king and the other vassal lords to echo his amusement. "With that tongue, the Lady Sansa would not have any troubles overruling Robb Stark's bestowal," remarked Lord Wyman.

When hilarity died down, Lord Mors spoke once more. "I suppose this means you desire to take over ladyship of the House?"

"No."

"What then?"

It was Bran who spoke on everyone's behalf. "We will honor Robb's will. Jon Stark—lord of Winterfell and warden of the North."

"A legitimized bastard bypassing natural-borns in heirship?" Lord Mors scoffed. "Pray tell, is this still Westeros?"

"Legitimacy came not only from Robb Stark, my lord, but from Stannis Baratheon as well—the same claimant who had aided your defense of the Last Hearth, and helped you in reacquiring Deepwood Motte and Winterfell," a soft voice chided the man, and the voice belonged to Princess Shireen. The girl smiled. "The trueborns have spoken. They will rally behind Jon Stark."
Arya spoke, and her gaze to Princess Shireen was a mirror of deep respect. "All of us are essentially trueborns. Jon is Eddard's son." Tried she did to hide the slight dither in her voice. Jon is not Eddard's son, was never, and it did not matter to her that he was not. It shouldn't. However, the lords were another story—the North remembers. Rickard and Brandon were burned to soot by the Mad King whose blood runs in Jon's very veins. "Let us not speak of what constitutes a de jure, Lord Mors. We all know that the North has broken away from most of the laws drafted in the capital."

Arya stood. "I concur on Bran's pronouncements. Jon Stark—lord of Winterfell and warden of the North."

"I concur on that as well," Rickon declared. "Jon Stark."

"Concur," said Sansa.

"Jon Stark," Tormund Giantsbane affirmed, simultaneous with Ser Davos.

"Jon Stark!" the Northern lords with the exception of Lord Mors and some others, echoed their assent.

"Jon Stark, it is," Lord Wyman said, then rose from his seat albeit with slight difficulty. "My loyalty is to Eddard, to his scions. Walk us through your plans then, Lord Stark. What of the folks at Oakenshield and the Gift? Winter has come and white ravens are swiftest at this time. The capital has no doubt learned about our support of Stannis's claim—expect a stoppage of provisions from the Reach and the Riverlands to the North. The cold had curtailed White Harbor's produces as well. Nothing to hunt and fish. There's the Night's Watch to bolster and we now have less of everything. How do we feed those wildlings?"

Jon stood and appraised the temperaments of those gathered. He too, was silent during the colloquy and was almost tempted to relinquish his hold of Winterfell just to pacify the Northern lords, though such act may speak clearly of treason—an apparent defiance to Stannis Baratheon's ruling. His eyes then locked upon the faces of the Starks. "Go on, Jon," Sansa reassured him. "Whatever your plans are, you can expect that we will throw in our lot with you."

"Thank you," he replied quietly, then turned his attention to Jaqen H'ghar from whom he had solicited advice the night prior. From Arya's recounts in the midst of the usual ale, Jon had learned that the Lorathi was trained to run a whole slaver's empire, and though a part of Jon questioned his decision of consulting the man, a stronger part of him intimated of nothing but utter trust and deference for him. Jaqen nodded, urged him to begin. On Ser Davos's visage was anticipation, to Jon's relief.

His eyes then cruised to Val's face, whose lovely, lovely expression was unreadable.

"Forget the capital, they will never come to our aid. We must rely on whatever produces we can yield. Six glass gardens are there—at Castle Cerwyn, Torrhen's Square, and Ironrath south from here; the reclaimed Dreadfort to the east, and the Last Hearth closest to the Gift—"

"No offense, my lord," one of the Forresters interrupted. "Those gardens are meant to sustain those living within the keeps, not those wildlings numbering thousands."


"Damn right," Tormund spat.

"Those glass gardens produce more than what the residents of the keep would need," Jon continued, with his eyes intent upon Jaqen in a silent request for inspiritment and confidence. "A third will thus
go to the castles, and two-thirds to the storehouses. We have harvests from the Rills enough for two
straight years of winter, and Stony Shore would provide us all with fish meat till the bays run out.
There's Widow's Watch and Bear Island, too. I have sent a hundred men to Long Lake for inland
fishing. We have begun smoking and salting the fish and meat we have left. We have wool, hides,
and timber to trade; ships from Braavos and Pentos are still coming in. All of our reserves would
allow us all to thrive for a couple of years, three at the most; which is why we must act in haste in
assembling forces to be deployed in the Wall. Snow can fall forty feet deep this time around,
thousands of us may be taken by famine faster than those Undead could get to all of us here."

"Ravens have been sent to Driftwood Hall in Skagos, my Lord Stark," Alret Magnar offered. "The
winter did nothing to put a brick wall to the hunting game."

"Your gracious pardons, Lord Magnar," Lord Mors interjected once more, a brow raised in sarcasm.
"As much as we appreciate aid from the Stone Islands, the Northerners have heard enough of these
mythical wights and walkers. To force them to partake of your fictitious unicorn's meat—"

"Wild horses, bears, boars, deer," Alret cut him. "From Skagos to Eastwatch-by-the-Bay in two
moons. However, if you wish for the good Lord Stane to haul in here some unicorn's arse for you to
have a taste, then we would gladly oblige."

Laughter once more erupted in the hall, with Tormund's and Wyman Manderly's being the loudest.

Lady Cerwyn stood. "What of the wildli—free folks, then? May they be allowed to return to their
abodes beyond the Wall should we ascertain the lack of truth about those…breathing cadavers in the
permanent ices?"

Arya scoffed at Lady Cerwyn's pronouncements, and was about to rise on her feet and engage in a
most sour argument with the lady if not for Sansa who held her by the arm. It was Bran who
answered. "There is nothing to ascertain my lady. I've been beyond the Wall, and on my honor as a
Stark, I can assure you that those breathing cadavers are as real as the lords sitting on either side of
you."

Lady Cerwyn's lip tipped up, still unconvinced.

"Not one soul will be allowed to return past the Wall, or will be forced to," Jon declared, his tone
more stern asudden, more powerful and commanding. "This is the purpose of the bestowal of the
Gift; not to mention, Sigorn of Thenn is lord of Karhold now—since Harrion is gone, Alys Karstark
obtains the seat." His attention was once more to Val—the wildlings' warrior princess, whose passive
expression beset him more than it reassured him. He had known the wildling princess only for three
moons, yet he knew that in her mien's passivity, a whole eddy of emotions was madly swirling
about, a whorl of clever counterplots, a perilous yet enthralling ambiguity he could not quite spell
out. She was the one who brought Tormund and the rest of the wildling clans to the safety of the
Wall, with naught for companion but a half-blind horse, and through these acts she had gained the
respect of the Night's Watch and of Stannis himself.

Jon had said this about Val many, many times in wakefulness and sleepless nights both—she is as
lovely as she is lonely and lethal. 'Deadly, yes. But there's the good hips, good breasts, well made for
whelping children,' were Axell Florent's words to Jon concerning Val. 'Very nubile, in her prime.'

Very nubile, indeed, Jon thought, and struggled to lift his stare from the warrior princess' bosoms.
May the gods grant me forgiveness.

"One wildling clan occupying Karhold will not justify the presence of other clans in both the Gift
and Oakenshield," Lady Cerwyn pressed on. "How can you even trust a Karstark married to a
wildling after what those accursed Boltons have dealt us with, and after the raids north from here, with Thenns participating?"

"You bloody kneeler," Tormund Giantsbane stood, pointed a forefinger at Lady Cerwyn. "The Gift belongs to the Night's Watch, or have you but scant knowledge about your history? Oakenshield is part of the Wall. You own nothing but that crumbling castle of yours!"

Jon raised one hand up to calm the Mead-king, who spat and sank back on his chair. "I trust the free folks more than I trust half of the lords seated in this chamber, Lady Cerwyn," was Jon's reply, eliciting wide, approving grins from both Manderly and Glover. "If it's only justification of their presence which you need, then let me provide you with one. "I, as liege lord, plan to marry one from the clans."

"Farce."

"What nonsense is this?!"

Arya and Sansa gasped delightedly at Jon's declaration in the midst of that tension-filled hall. They both looked at Val, whose face was now a complete impression of one flummoxed—her face had turned scarlet and her mouth was agape.

Lord Mors stood once more. "Nonsense! Using marriage as mortar to seal peace with the wildlings? You cannot marry, boy! When you dragged yourself to the Wall, you swore to keep your cock about your breeches!"

Jaqen's voice was calm, yet it resounded across that hall like dragon's tongue, silencing those who were present. "The Lord Stark was relieved of his duties by Stannis. Not to mention, his watch had ended in the event of his death. There was a precedence to this—some kingsguards relieved of their vows were allowed to reclaim their lands and titles, were even encouraged to marry and have heirs."

"I will hear no more of this foolishness!" bellowed Lord Mors, then dashed towards the double thresholds. Thereupon, Ghost leaped from the dais onto the long table at the center and forcefully pushed the door to a close with his paws, trapping the lord. Shaggydog and Nymeria snarled at him.

"Sit down, my lord," was Jon's calm invitation. Mors did as he was told, hiding his horror behind his façade of a raving face. "More than matrimony, this is a proposition for alliance. Hundreds of times I have spoken about those that await beyond the Wall. Let not your conscience allow men, women, and children to be devoured by those Undead just because of your unfounded prejudice. Let not your wits dictate that the battle is between kneelers and free folk, I can assure you all, it is not—has never been. I have spoken of my intents to..." he cleared his throat, and felt his cheeks burn. Jaqen H'ghar's amused expression did nothing to aid him with his cold feet. "...spoken to Val, that...we...maybe, she would...certain conditions and..."

"Hah!" Lady Cerwyn's soft laughter was embittered. "Of course, she would agree! Why, a wildling princess and a northern lord? A whole castle to herself, liege ladyship—a stature surpassing those of Eddard's trueborn daughters! There would hardly be any argument!"

"Lady Cerwyn!" Arya snapped, as flashes of her bidding with the Valyrian Conclave invaded her memories. "Your words are unjust and offensive!"

Finally, Val stood from her seat. She had swallowed the bile of humiliating words hurled by those highborn to the free folk that were her kith. To safety she had gathered them, but it might be that the bigotry of these educated lot would kill them faster than winter could—hatred from their hearts, firm as weed amongst stones. Arya gazed at Val and saw herself—Nymeria of the Rhoyne, with her
impossible implorations in the face of those unmerciful Valyrian lords for the sake of her own people.

"There will be no argument, the Lady Cerwyn spoke of truth only," Val said, her warrior stance making the broken look strong, and the strong look unconquerable. She may have the weight of seven realms upon her shoulders at the moment, yet somehow, she had managed to build her own world out of the dust of these. "The Red Wanderer is close to the Moonmaid—the bleeding star is nigh. This is the most favorable time for courtship."

Arya smiled at the words, then stifled a giggle when her eyes chanced upon Jaqen, who was assaying her and the warrior princess, his eyes darting from Arya to Val and Val to Arya, as if enumerating their points of similarities.

"Courtship?" Jon exhaled nervously. "Pardon me, Val. The free folks do not practice courtship."

"Oh, but we do," Val said with a hard expression. "I want my people safe, so I will play along with what you kneelers call a diversion, entertain you all for the sake of being allowed within the safe confines of the Wall. I'd do anything if it means sheltering my kin. If you wish to marry me, Lord Crow, then you must steal me from my clan. Such act will prove your strength and determination, and my independence, my ability to defend myself. This will strengthen your clan, and mine too."

"She means," Tormund interjected. "That you must defeat her in combat before you could have her."

"Ooo-hooh," were Bran and Rickon's response, nodding at each other. Jaqen and Ser Davos were clear as day, very entertained.

"I like her, Jon," Arya remarked with a grin. "Oh, Sansa and I could use another sister."

_Blessed be she who is both enraged and majestic, _Jon thought. _A bloody crossing of swords and axes?_

_But if this is the only way to have her…_

"There are two consequences to this 'stealing'—either your liege lord wins and takes me, or I kill him," Val said with serene ferocity, now speaking to the lords. "If I kill him, there will be no marriage, of course. But the North will bend to our demands to be allowed to settle permanently in the Gift and Oakenshield."

"Easy," Lady Cerwyn shrugged her shoulders. "Just let these free folks resettle beyond the Wall where they belo—"

"Silence," Jon spat, though his eyes were still on Val's face. _This is she_, he thought once more. _Indebted to no man, held back her words for no one. Hells, she might even stand before those weirwood gods and tell them how to make use of their immortal souls._ Another exhale escaped from his chest before speaking. "You wish to be stolen? You wish to put up a fight? Very well," A sly smile played at the corners of Jon's mouth, as if the warrior princess who was shaped by ice itself awoke the dragon out of him. "Very well, Val. We will play."

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Not that the first few nights were utterly uncomfortable—they both slept on a cot in the drawing room, conveniently set up beside the hearthstone. "A man wishes more privacy," the Lorathi had told her once or twice. _This is the common room, Arya._
"Three to four days, the keepers have said," Arya reassured him. "They still have to do some serious scrubbing in the east wing."

Fourth night thus went as Arya had planned, continuing their series of eventides in the bedchamber where she had spent all of her nights as a young girl. The east wing was one of the few parts of the castle that did not burn during the sacking of the Ironborn, and Arya's chamber, being the farthest in that wing, remained untouched even when the Boltons have occupied Winterfell. She shut the door, observed the Lorathi's movements and reactions. "What? No dolls?" Jaqen teased, as he surveyed the whole room. His eyes chanced upon a wooden chiffonier opposite the bedstead. There was the expectation that the escritoire would at least contain a hairbrush, some trinkets or a necklace perchance, a good set of poetry scrolls, quill and some ink, powder and facial hues. "Nothing at all but this russet comb that's missing half its set of teeth, and this…horrible sketch of your direwolf." The Lorathi raised both objects for Arya to see, then chuckled in a manner most amused at her simplicity, the utter beauty in her artlessness.

"Shut up and come here, Jaqen," was Arya's reply to his good-humored mockeries. She sat on the edge of her bed and raised one foot up, enticing him. "Let me kiss you."

The Lorathi's response to her tempting was a smirk, as he carried on with his calm yet obsessive estimations. He knew the girl, of course—every eccentricity, unconventionality, her temperaments, hopes, demons. He knew every inch of her body, the smallest scintilla of her carefree spirit.

Despite this knowledge, something stirred Jaqen H'ghar upon entering the thresholds of Arya Stark's bedchamber—a girl's lair of secrets, as the old ones would say. He struggled to control his excitations as he examined the bed's drapes and fringes or the lack thereof, as he traced with his fingers the handles and paneled doors of her wardrobe. In his flights of fancy, he could see young Arya in every corner of the room, young yet already beautiful, with a certain wildness about her. Oh yes, she was all over him—beside the closet having some change of vestments, with her skin as white and as dainty as the snowflakes outside Winterfell's keep, her virginal body saved only for him another five or six years after; on the floor petting her direwolf, plopped down on the cold stone so carelessly that a fraction of her budding breasts was showing; on the bed, asleep, wearing nothing but her very thin nightgown, muttering…muttering the name of someone she was to meet only after twelve moons, stirrer of her womanly passions. Jaqen…Jaqen…Jaqen…

He turned his attention to her, and her head was tilted to the side, as if awaiting him to leap onto the bed and devour her in the most painful way possible. The thing about this girl, the Lorathi thought, smiling. Every damned thing she does—even breathing, blinking—is absolutely pretty. Then, you fall in love with her, then you lose yourself, then she laughs at you for being such an obsessed fool. "Kisses in a while," Jaqen responded calmly, even as he desired to tear Arya's raiments and tear her apart with his love, too. "A man wants to know what is inside this wardrobe."

Arya raised one brow and bit her lip—seductive gestures. "Open it."

He did, and was pleasantly surprised that the clothes she used to wear were all folded and kept in a neat pile, with her cotes and winter mantles hung properly on the built-in racks. "It is a pity that a man had never met your Septa Mordane," Jaqen still teased her. "She must have died a hundred deaths for you to learn how to keep your personal effects in order." He picked up a small, off-white, silky undergarment from the pile, lifted it for Arya to see. He smiled and wet his lips, assessed those panties with pleasure.

"You perverted man," Arya remarked as she slowly unlaced her blouse. "There you go again with your insane fantasies. Even at Harrenhal, you hardly ever waited. You had to visit me in Weese's chamber and ask for those names because you were already itching."
"Why, you insolent girl," Jaqen replied, his amusement growing by the minute. "How dare you interpret a man's attempts to help you as acts of one perverted. It was your dirty-girl mind that played tricks with you, perhaps." He stood up, his thumb and forefinger tracing the gusset of Arya's undergarment that he was holding, rubbing the part that covered the sex. Arya gasped delightedly at the act—it was as if Jaqen was actually caressing her down there, and she loved it so, how her dirty-girl mind was actually frolicking with sensitive territories. "It might even be that your smallclothes had gone wet after a man's visit, and that you had so wanted him to stay, but you were too ashamed to admit it back then."

She removed the last of her garments, and there she sat in front of him—wholly naked and wanting to be ravished.

"You talk a lot for a man," she snapped, albeit calmly. "Come here so I can feed on you, Jaqen."

"Taste me, you mean?"

"No, eat you. As in eat you. I want your sex inside my mouth, my teeth against your skin, my tongue all over you. Come here, Jaqen, love."

He smiled at the girl's daftness, walked closer to where she was sitting. The girl wasted no second pulling him by the waist and unlacing his breeches. His huge sex sprang free for her, and she touched that thicket of curling hair, traced it with her tongue from shaft to navel and back, all the way down to his legs, before allowing her mouth to own him. Immodest words and sounds came out of Jaqen's lips. She felt him throbbing at every suckle, and she felt pity for him too, for he was once again absolutely out of control. He ran his fingers through Arya's hairlocks, gripped them tight, guided her so she could own him in perfect cadence—fast, smooth, maddening.

"Hah…" came his groans.

"I've never seen a man before you, did you know that?" Arya said whilst stroking him, licking the tip of his shaft, trapping it with her lips. "The arousal, the swelling that comes with it." She assayed the Lorathi's sex with fascination, as if seeing it for the first time. "Lover's dream, I call it," she said, then laughed at the name she had conjured up in her head for it. She noticed how her fingers could not quite reach the tip of her thumb when they closed in around his shaft. "Seven hells..." she marveled at his size. She played with it, petted it, kissed it. Jaqen felt himself almost bursting in the center of all unnamed exquisite sensations.

And when he could hardly bear the sweet feeling of her mouth 'feeding on' his sex, for he never desired to reach the summits unless he's inside her, he settled her on the bed and splayed her legs. He pulled her a little to the edge and knelt—it was his turn to pleasure in beautiful ways, violent ways.

His tongue and lips discovered her once more, the rose-hued cleft of flesh at the center of her. It was tenderness, the mark of his adulations and acts of cherishing her, as he slowly then hastily ran his tongue across her ruby line. It was a painter's touch and he holds the brush and the shades, with her very core as the canvas.

"You taste like seven heavens, Arya Stark," Jaqen murmured whilst pleasuring her.

The Lorathi felt her body shudder and knew that she had climaxed. He promptly thrust himself in, coming in the hardest he could...the strongest he could...not allowing her to recover at the slightest from that sensational capsheaf. "Jaqen!" he heard her moan. "Jaq—" he crushed his lips against hers as he rammed his sex in and out and in, drowning groans and gasps and sighs, overwhelming all her senses, commanding her to see nothing, smell and hear and taste nothing, feel nothing but him.
"Breathe, Arya," Jaqen teased her in the midst of ravishing her lips and owning her body, mindful only of his own pleasure. "Breathe...come on, sweetheart, don't die on me..."

He plunged himself deeper into her, savoring how her silky walls caress and squeeze around his length, relishing the explosion of feels as he communed with her over and over. The Lorathi groaned upon hearing that familiar wet sound of her sex sucking in his own.

Oh yes, all went according to Arya's plan.

All night, Jaqen fucked her.

"Just say, 'udrāzmalon'."

"Udrāzmalon."

Now, they were both sitting on the roof of the Great Keep. Snow had stopped falling and the midnight sky was clear. The kiss of winter's wind was cool but it was the kind that does not chill, does not leave one cold. It seems that the thick fur draped over their shoulder to keep the warmth about them had little use after all. Jaqen held Arya from behind, rested his chin on her shoulder. Me, you, Arya thought. Nothing could go wrong now.

The godswood was perfectly visible from there, with its trees forming a dense canopy of blood-red leaves. This illusion of leaf color was merely created by the Weirwood at the very heart of it, and by the pool of black water which can cast variegated hues when the shierak qiya draws near.

"Your accent is still horrible, lovely girl," Jaqen teased her in between smelling her neck and planting soft kisses on her snowy skin.

Arya laughed. "High Valyrian is not my native tongue, Lorathi. If you can recall, I am Westerosi and a Rhoynar."

"Say it again."

"Udrāzmalon."

"Again."

"Udrāzmalon."

"Very good, Arya."

She turned to face him a little so she could kiss him. Their lips made sweet contact, and that should be enough for such a time as this, yet Arya did not wish to let his lips part from hers.

"It's the first time I've heard of that word," Arya whispered against Jaqen's mouth. "What does it mean? 'You're sexy?'" she heaved a contented sigh upon feeling the Lorathi's lips gently caressing her face. "Or...I want you', perhaps?"

"None of those."

"Then, what?"

Jaqen stopped kissing her. A melancholic shadow formed across his mien, yet there was depth to it
too—a whole anthology of emotions and sentiments that very few could maybe understand, and for the life of her she could not say why her heart, her soul, were being shattered to sharp, torturous pieces by the way the Lorathi looked at her.

"It lacks a precise version in the Common Tongue," Jaqen explained. "The closest rewording that I could think of is I...belong to you."

"You said it's the most powerful word in Valyrian," Arya teased him. "Belongingness is too ordinary a concept. Of course, we belong to each other, Jaqen. Is there a more powerful word than jorrælagon—love?"

"You don't understand," the Lorathi said. "Udræzmalon—it gives you charge of everything that I am."

"Love does that."

"That word commands even the love you feel for another."

"You're right. I don't understand."

The Lorathi smiled. "Which part of you loves, Arya?"

She smiled back. "The heart."

"Well then," the Lorathi inhaled the scent of her chestnut hair. "If jorrælagon—love—is to the heart; then udræzmalon is to thousands of it. Tell me how so, you're a witty girl."

She bit her lip and swallowed the painful lump that had formed in her throat. Somehow, she understood.

"It's because...the love is too much, that a single heart cannot contain it."

"And the love..." Jaqen purred against her ears. "Is the kind that you don't have to run away from, or chase, or fall into. All you have to do in order to feel that deep love is to exist. Whenever I utter that word, I give you charge over my life—my body and soul, my dreams and the throes that come with these, my future and past. Whenever I utter that word, I acknowledge that my words and acts are not mine, but yours; my every breath is yours, every blink, every tear. I exist only for you. No one owns me but you—not even the gods. Whenever I utter that word, I acquiesce to the truth that you are the author of me, that you are the wellspring whence I came. And I will carve your name into my bones and write spells on your heart and—"

"Stop."

"Arya..."

She shook her head and wiped the tears that had suddenly welled up in her eyes. He was giving her too much, and she knew that whenever he would utter that word, she would die at the sublimity and beauty of it every single time. She cannot. She cannot.

"I didn't bring you to life by my words, Jaqen, or by my touch," Arya murmured. "She could not dare speak louder for she might sob at the sound of her breaking voice. "No...no, you cannot give me charge over you—it's...it's madness! Who would you live for when I'm gone, Jaqen?"

The Lorathi sighed.
"I don't know."

Arya laughed bitterly.

There was an old saying in Rhoyne centuries ago, that Valyrians cannot feel love. For them, love is not a glorious thing taken as the subject of many poetries and songs—it is no more special than hunger, or rage, or lust. However, there were also the old words of the river clans and those words were these: that out of a million Valyrian souls, one would be so lost that he would love deeply. And when he does love, his very soul would burst open and create a whole, separate universe only for that beloved even if such an act will evoke unending wrath of the gods. He would hear and see, touch and taste, breathe and cease to breathe, live, die, rekindle himself all for the sake of that one other person.

**Udrāzmalon.**

Words have run out.

"They will come after us, Jaqen," Arya spoke after what may have been an eternity of silence. "*All of them.*"

The Lorathi kissed her temple and embraced her more tightly. "Yes. But no one can snatch you away from me, lovely girl. I promise you this."

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Chapter End Notes

Check this out:

**Val, the Wildling Princess**

(Another amazing character that wouldn't be in the show, thanks a lot.)

Happy weekend, guys! Let me know what you think of this chapter. Sorry if it's too wordy but I needed to patch some things up and I love writing predictions for TWoW. Thanks, thanks for reading and have a good one! ;D
Bloodstone

Chapter Notes

Jaqen: "Clouds of sulfur in the air, bombs are falling everywhere--it's heartbreak warfare..."

Arya: "So let me just give up, let me just let go. If this isn't good for me then I don't wanna know..."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"And from the ashes she shall awaken him,

In bloodied black, she will redeem him.

Never will she die in the cowering and cornered ruins of that which Winter had wasted.

As unbreakable as the gods..."

Songs of the Faceless (XLII, Lost Leaf)

That direwolf of light gray fur and yellow eyes was buried in Winterfell's lichyard at Ned Stark's orders, and it was said that the other direwolves that shared the womb with her howled upon her corpse's arrival at the castle. Jon once said that the children were meant to have those pups, and only now did Sansa understand why. "She was bonded to me, and I was devastated when she was killed. I hated Father for it, but I know that he killed Lady with his own sword to spare her from being tortured by the executioner," Sansa had told Arya the previous night. "That's a better death than Greywind's or Summer's, if you ask me."

She was in the godswood to say her usual morn's prayers. She was more of a devout of the Seven, but her father's death and her occasional meetings in the past with Ser Donto, the Florian to her Jonquil, has deepened her connection with the old gods, as she was led to believe that they were the only gods who have truly responded to her calls for help when she was still a hostage in the capital. Sansa uttered the last of her words, and when she opened her eyes she saw her own face reflected by the black pool, her eyes as blue as the sunlit sea. Petyr Baelish had told her more than once that she had her mother's eyes—honest, innocent, and that they will make many men drown in them.

Honest eyes, yes, Sansa thought as contempt for that man swept over her asudden. But far from innocent.

Brothelkeeper's work—all that filth in the capital and the Vale. He's making money for himself out of those, getting himself into positions of power.
All that filth at my family's expense.

Someone has to make the milker pay.

She had sent a message to Petyr Baelish before they rode for Winterfell. "Your time is up," was written in all clarity in that letter. Lady Catelyn had told Sansa everything—how he was instrumental to running the Starks to the ground starting with Eddard's death, his want to take hold of Winterfell, his loan schemes without the Iron Bank's knowledge that aimed to cripple the flow of gold in the Vale. He had planned those wars, too, much to Sansa's surprise; and the most recent of his acts was his attempt to poison Sweetrobin Arryn to death.

A quiet rustle broke through her contemplations. She smiled upon seeing the source of it.

"Come here, love," she said, stretching out her hand as if to reach it. "Don't be scared."

The direwolf was partly concealing itself behind a huge hawthorn. Its eyes were upon her, its gaze soft and a little bashful. Sansa's heart broke at the direwolf's utter beauty—its fur of light copper was being blown listlessly by the wind, its eyes were a sparkling brown. It looked no bigger than Nymeria, and Sansa wondered how in the world it managed to get inside the godswood through the castle's well-garrisoned gates and almost impenetrable walls.

Its soft whimpers, the closest it could do to attempt to speak with her, made Sansa laugh a little too loudly. The direwolf backed a couple of steps away, its eyes troubled by Sansa's show of amusement.

"Shush…it's fine, my sweet," Sansa consoled the wolf. Now, both of her hands were outstretched—a welcoming gesture, an acceptance. "You're so lovely. You can't just forever hide behind that tree, can you?"

Its footsteps as it trod towards her were light, wary of the unexpected. From Sansa's lips came the melody of a Northern ballad, and the sound of her humming voice seemed to have melted whatever disquiet the direwolf carried within it, for three steps have become four, ten…

Now, they were face to face. Sansa was on her knees, and with hands quivering slightly she reached for the wolf's fur and felt it wince a little at first contact. "Shush, sweet one…" she purred, then allowed her palms to feel the softness of its fur, satiny to the touch.

As they gazed at each other's eyes, Sansa felt the commencement of another one of her soul's journeys. The strings of her lute were once alone, but seeing this creature, touching it, made her feel as if the strings were quivering in consonance with the music of another. Even with words unsaid, Sansa had poured out to this creature her life, her history, tethering herself even more fully into this creature's heart.

And just like that, the story between another warg and another wolf wrote itself.

She wrapped her arms around the direwolf's neck and stroked gently its smooth coat. "What's your name?" she asked, then giggled for she knew that direwolves cannot converse the way humans do. "Is it fine with you if I give you a name?" The direwolf only whimpered its agreement, burying its face in Sansa's shoulder. "Very well, from this day on, you shall be Ethuil to me. Do you know what 'Ethuil' means, sweet one?"

"It means 'spring' in Skagosi." It was Rickon who answered. With him were Arya, Nymeria, Shaggydog. "It's a lovely name for a direwolf, Sansa."

She smiled in response. "I just saw her here…I don't know how she ended up in the godswood."
"There's a tunnel close to the Hunter's Gate," Arya replied, settling herself beside Sansa. Nymeria plopped down on her foot and she petted it. "The wolves got bored, maybe. In any case, they're the ones to be blamed for the dredging."

"She's so beautiful," Sansa murmured. "Do you think she's bonded to someone else?"

Rickon snorted. "Who else but us take direwolves as pets, sister?" Both girls laughed at the words. "She's a lone wolf, as far as I know. She visits the godswood almost everyday and plays around with Shaggy and Nymeria. I feed her most of the time, you know how Turnip detests being near animals. You can't even trust her with the dogs in the kennels."

"Do you know how to get inside a direwolf's head, Sansa?" Arya asked. "Perceive the world through them, control them, be one with them?"

Sansa laughed, led Ethuil's head on her lap so she may rest it there. "And here I thought you hated Old Nan's tales."

"Old Nan's tales are the only ones I used to listen to," Arya replied.

"Father had good ones, as well," Rickon reminded her. "Giant spiders and all that, to scare Bran and me and force us to tuck ourselves in while the lot of you are still enjoying the mead."

"Ah, yes!" Sansa laughed. "I remembered him telling Robb and Jon to tap some sticks in front of your bedroom doors so you wouldn't anymore think twice about just staying inside."

"Those sticks sounded more like giant spiders falling off from their webs than giant spiders walking," Arya remarked with a laugh. "They left raven poop all over the floor because of those sticks, Vayon threatened to throw them both from the keep should that happen again."

Their chortles filled the godswood and the three direwolves bonded to each of them, even Sansa's newfound one, stared at them with amusement.

Sansa kissed Rickon on the temple then cupped Arya's cheeks. "Very well," she finally said. "How do you warg into a direwolf?"

"You will be my second Jaqen, should it come to that."

"Your swordwork had since wavered, is that it? It hasn't, trust a man on this. Why take a second when you can defeat her within seconds of combat?"

They had just finished four bouts of sword duels. Oathkeeper's grip was in Jon's hand, its fuller glimmering against daylight. Ripples of blood and night were evident through the steel, and its pommel was ornamented with a golden lion's head of ruby eyes. He was there when Ned Stark had swung that same sword, beheading a deserter of the Wall. *Had he known that those Walkers were real, he would not have passed that sentence, Jon thought. That brother of the Night's Watch merely told us what he saw, and he was killed because of it.* It was more slender yet curiously more weighty than his Longclaw, a half-inch wider and three inches longer. This *was* Ice—House Stark's ancestral Valyrian sword—this was what was left of Ned Stark, apart from memories and dreams that did nothing to assuage the longing he felt.

They were all gathered in Winterfell's courtyard. The castle was no longer silent, its snow-beaten stone walls were once more echoing the collection of sounds in the nearby smithy and scullery, and
the stables too—hooves and metalworks, the bray of animals, occasional arguments amongst the
hired men, skillets and buckets of freshwater carried from the Hunter's Gate to the galley. Jon
allowed his eyes and ears to take in all images and impressions and din, and a fleeting prayer of
gratitude he uttered to the old gods that were also Ned's because the Starks were there.

He looked at Arya who was then honing her daggers and sitting on the oaken pew beside Sabine,
and with them was Sansa. If truth be told, his deepest subconscious in that shunned life at the Wall
carried nothing but thoughts about the Warrior and the Maiden. In his dreams which he had told
none—not even Sam, not even Maester Aemon—he saw his face in the former and Arya in the
latter, as if their souls had been conceived prior to their own births and rebirths. He could not
understand a thing of it, and that frightened him. However, what frightened him more was the
torment of his own suppositions, that the red lady could see through him, just as she could see things
in the flames.

Between the images of the Warrior and the Maiden is that of the Stranger, hovering over like a
shadowy cloud—the impression of a god that is genderless, of one that cannot be reduced to
dualisms. Yet in that epoch he saw the god, and the god was a woman, as 'nubile' as, and in her 'very
prime' like his Val. Yet the deity's motherhood was not at all characterized by deep-seated
infatuations and protectiveness, of love unequivocal. The birthing was not at all a euphoric form of
release, gifting the realms with life.

It is poison to the veins, hopelessness, darkness, ruination, Jon thought.

His eyes were riveted once more to Arya's face.

He was blind to the corruption that was in his person, and the emotions he may or may not have
towards his own sibling may well be the scourge of his own flesh and blood. *Arya is a sister to
you*, Jon would always remind himself after being roused from those dreams and in between fits of
breaths. *A sister, a sister...*

And so, he would always negate his own self and say that it wasn't Arya at all that he saw in Ygritte,
with her unconventional beauty and her hair kissed by fire, and that he had fallen merely after that
torrid love the woman had shared with him in the warm spring in order to save his life. It wasn't Arya
whom he saw in Val, his lovely, lovely 'wildling-to-the-bone'. Oh yes, he would always say that it
wasn't Arya at all that he saw in that wildling princess and her resplendent warrior soul, with her
bearskin cloak and long bone knife on her hip. Perhaps, he had already fallen for that wildling
princess too, or maybe he still knows nothing.

And deny all these he did, even as he awoke one night in the crypts after opening Lyanna's tomb.
There was no other face in the darkness of those dungeons that plagued and blessed him both...no
other face, but *Arya's*.

He had told no one about these.

He forced himself to look away from her, lest Jaqen notices.

*Of course, he would*, Jon cursed himself. The Lorathi's eyes were on him, and amused curiosity was
written all over his face.

"How badly do you want that Val, Jon?" Jaqen asked, choosing to ignore Jon's quaint stares at Arya
earlier.

"It's not just about *wanting* Val," Jon replied, defensive. "This whole thing concerns the free folks
and the Northern lords, brother. We have the Mead king's clan and the Thenns, but there are still a lot
of them left beyond the Wall—the cave men, the horned bones, and those in Frostfangs. The easiest way to get them here—"

"Is to bed one of their own?" Aegeus came into view from the keep and walked towards them both. He flexed his arms up and allowed the warm rays to bathe his face. "I agree. This stealing ritual is unnecessary should you think about it; but acquiescing to their traditions of getting a spearwife would convince them that you do value their praxes, that you desire to understand them, be one of them, even. A wise move."

"Wise yet perilous," Jaqen remarked. "Either you temporarily incapacitate her, or she kills you. The complication is, you don't want her harmed. This is impossible, Jon. Unless…"

"Unless what?" Jon asked, suddenly piqued.

Jaqen turned to Aegeus. His gaze at the latter was suddenly ambiguous, yet the edges of it screamed of wicked mischief. Aegeus smirked and nodded at the Lorathi, as if to say 'yes' to something wayward and perverse.

"Unless what?" Jon repeated himself, sheathing his own steel rather agitatedly.

It was Aegeus who answered. "Unless you seduce her right in the middle of combat."

"What?!" Jon exclaimed and with exaggeration, shook his head though to the core he knew that his manly interests were stirred asudden. His attention darted towards Jaqen in half-expectation that the words were all farce. The Lorathi's expression was assenting of Aegeus's idea. "Swordwork and seduction—can anything else be more askew?"

The Handsome Man narrowed his eyes and assessed the lad from crown to sole. With this act was a weighing of Jon's remarks. He clicked his tongue. "He's young, Jaqen. He knows naught yet."

"Might be true," Jaqen replied while placing his longsword back to its scabbard. He exhaled sharply, as if the succeeding feat would be more exhausting than endless bouts of swordfight. "It's been a long time. Skills need whetting, yes?"

The women paused with their occupations and colloquies, and their attentions were to those three.

"As they say in Chroyane, 'When one with evil, honeyed words but noble mind persuades the mob, great pleasures befall the state.' Fitting words, if you ask me," Aegeus said, footfalls purposeful and aimed towards the Lorathi.

"I may know a thing or two," Jon scoffed. "Vague speech and swoon of sin. You need not teach me about—"

Jon swallowed his own phrases at the unexpected turn of acts.

Jaqen had pulled Aegeus so, so close to him, until their faces were mere hair's breadth away from each other, until their minty breaths collided like delicious starbursts gone nasty and awry. Aegeus's soft, almost inaudible chuckles were too charming to ignore; and Jaqen was biting his lower lip, eyes locked upon the comely one's face, his inhales and exhales intermittent, wanting.

The chilling blow of wintertide was harsh; yet in that very courtyard, there were nothing but wildness and sexual innuendos and primal heat and sacred hunger…and if this be instruction, Jon thought as his mouth fell, then please teach me more.

Very slowly, Jaqen ran his forefinger across the bridge of Aegeus's nose, traced the comely one's lips
in feather-movements—subtle, outrageous. The comely one's mouth was partly open, partly wet; still, the Lorathi touched the soft of it, as if touches are whispers and those whispers screamed of erotic dispositions. Aegeus gently bit Jaqen's finger in response to his enticements, and the Lorathi grinned.

"Naughty, as always," Jaqen whispered.

"Tell me though," Aegeus whispered back, trapping the Lorathi's forefinger gently with his mouth. "You like it a whole damned lot."

The Lorathi wet his lips and smiled. "Hell, yeah."

Arya felt Sabine's hand gripping hers really tight. "Holy shit, Arya..." the woman breathed the words out.

The girl's mouth was agape, and she had become a breathing mass of many spectators marveling at the display. "What in the world..."

Sansa however, was just utterly dumbfounded to even breathe a phoneme.

Their acts were all silk and song, as they explored sensualities and the excitements of these. The charms of Garin of Chroyane were not lost from Aegeus even after centuries of his soul's wayfaring —there were endless arts in his old Palace of Love that did nothing but to inflict upon the greatest of princes the sweet addiction towards intimacies; and so, he enticed the Lorathi, and responded too, whenever the Lorathi would entice him back.

"There was this old Chroyanean saying which I adore too much," Aegeus spoke in an undertone as he slowly brushed the Lorathi's strands with those long, able fingers of his. "Indulge my wandering hands...above, below, before, between. Oh gods, Jaqen...your hair..."

Jaqen drew his face closer to the comely one's, and now they were nose to nose. "Stop it," came his purr, as he pretended to chide Aegeus in a manner seductive. His stare was powerful, owning; and his lips moved to speak directly in the comely one's right ear. Despite his hot breath that came in contact with Aegeus's skin, the latter did not wince, his breathing never changed, and there was no trace at all of lust-induced gooseprickles. "A man might forget that his lady wife's bedchamber is along the east wing."

"Cruel man," Aegeus replied, grinning. His eyes were locked upon Sabine's face; and a chuckle escaped from his chest upon seeing her blush. "You've known your lady wife for four years only, you've known me for ten. Not once did you ask me to wallow with you in the bath..."

The Lorathi still spoke in the comely one's ear though his peripherals caught sight of Arya —full focus on them both, as if affrighted that she might miss a single parlance or gesticulation. He smirked. "Too risky. A man might forget his own name should that happen."

"Ah...never forget your name, Jaqen," the Handsome Man murmured back. "Who knows? Perhaps one of these days I might ask you what men call you, just so I would know the name I'd have to scream every damned night when I need to pleasure myself."

"Why pleasure yourself when we can do it the Valyrian way?" Jaqen's attention was now on Arya and Sabine, who were both aghast. "Dirty game of four on the featherbed—toss and turns, slaps and pushes..."

Aegeus laughed softly. "Now, wouldn't that be so hot—"
"Enough!" Sansa stood up abruptly, shuddering slightly in disgust and mayhaps, a curious thrill she could not quite identify the wellspring of. "This is how you Essosi do it? Let me tell you then that it's a tad bit different up here. We are dealing with a clan whose men call their women spearwives, and for a good reason. Your come-hither acts have no place in their established ways. Either Jon fights Val—not even fight for her, hells no—or he risks losing those free folks in his desperate resort to such...lowly tactics! The way to seduce women for the lot of them is through show of force, flummeries would do nothing but insult their habitudes. Isn't that right, Arya?" Sansa said, and upon receiving no reply, turned her attention towards her sister. "Arya!" she called once more, and shook the girl to rouse her from trance.

"W-what?!" Arya queried hotly, massaging her arm that was tightly gripped by Sansa. She cursed inwardly at herself. She knew how dangerous Jaqen's Valyrian mask was, to the point that it could transform squalor into inescapable pleasure, draw out utter beauty from even the vilest of acts. She had experienced it all from him after the fall of Rhoyne. Winter is the era of mating, and all wars are based on metaphors.

And the death god impels men to resort to seduction before the kill.

"Oh gods, you're really not listening to me!" Sansa responded with frustration, for thrice she had repeated her queries.

"Regardless," Jon spoke up after collecting himself. "I hardly think that performing that buffoonery with Tormund is the way to make Val acquiesce."

"Not with Tormund, silly," Aegeus chuckled, unfazed by the show of affection a mere while ago. "Seduction is the tall story of combat, it is the very nature of combat; but you would have to do it with Val."

"You take Val's focus away by interspersing lewd phrases in between sword thrusts," Jaqen added coolly.

"Jaqen! Ugh! You boys are just pathetic!" Sansa exclaimed, lifting her longskirts for an exeunt. "Excuse me, I would have to send some missives. Listening to you all is a waste of time!" She promptly left the courtyard and headed towards the rookery.

Arya stood and walked slowly to the men. Her expression was severe, as if alluding that she was done with frolics though the morn was still young. Her eyes cruised to each face and settled upon Jaqen's—admonishing even in the absence of words. She spoke directly to Jon. "What do we do with Theon, Jon?"

"Theon?"

"You heard me," Arya replied. "Asha still is a prisoner of the Glovers. Theon remains with us, a captive."

Turmoil showed itself upon Jon's mien at the mention of Theon Greyjoy. Despite the protests of Lady Selyse, and a stern warning that Jon's merciful acts would scream only of treachery against Stannis, he had ordered Theon to be taken out of the dungeons of Deepwood Motte and sent to Winterfell. There was the old bedchamber for the Greyjoy ward along the west wing; and even though it reeked of dung, of dead hounds and of flayed corpses, a cot to himself is a thousand times better than the damp and cold Deepwood, with ghouls and fiends wailing even at noontide. Jon has plans regarding Theon Greyjoy, and these plans he revealed neither to Stannis nor to Davos—not yet.
Jon finally spoke. "The northern clansmen have been pacified by the fact that Bran and Rickon were never killed by the Ironborns, and I would not allow that red priestess to torch Theon alive just because I owe her a second life. I never asked for it, may she pardon my ingratitude."

"He's more useful to us alive than dead," Jaqen offered. "As it is, the Ironborns are scattered. One claimant is in the capital, another is in Dragonstone. A favor for his life."

Arya shook her head. "Have you seen Theon recently? He's a shattered man, Jaqen. He rarely leaves his bedchamber, and every night he weeps for Robb, mulling over how he should have died with him. It's more than his bones which that Bolton bastard had broken, he's hardly himself now."

"Of course, he knows," Aegeus chimed in. "Jon here made sure he receives the littlest of details about the kingsmoot in the Iron Islands."

"You told him?!" Arya pulled Jon's arm and forced him to face her. "How could you do that given his ghastly state? He dreams about getting burned every night, did you know that? It's a good thing the whispers in the godswood have gone away when Bran returned. What the hell are you planning?!

Jon gazed softly at Arya, yet his eyes reflected a motive unswayable. There was danger to it all, and he would be at the nexus of it without his intention to attract it at the slightest. Yet they say that war becomes the absolute craft when one subdues the enemy even without fighting. "I need Stannis Baratheon to dismantle the Iron Throne, Arya. Piece by piece, I need him to take each Valyrian sword that's making that seat stand, and bring everything here."

"You've mentioned that already," Arya spat. "What does it have to do with Theon?"

All of a sudden, he appeared from the third threshold of the keep. He was far from the lean, handsome, and cocky youth that he was before the War of Five Kings. Theon Greyjoy appeared as if in the turn of a few years he had aged forty more, and he hobbled like a decrepit, looking more like a labyrinth of sufferings than a person. Gone was the arrogant façade, gone were the promiscuous and the vain. Now, what stood in front of them all was one who had found his true self in the throes—a kraken of idiocy, a stinking turncloak who desired nothing but to be allowed to repair the last shred of honor he has left.

"This has to do not just with me," Theon spoke, and his voice was too shrill. "Asha...she must sail with me to Pyke. Erik the Just rules Iron Islands in place of Euron. She's married to that anvil-breaker, and the only way we could get the Seastone Chair back is through her.

"Theon will attempt to regain the fealty of those left in the isles," Jon announced. "With an octogenarian warming the seat for Euron, it should not be as complicated considering that Theon is the rightful. If discussions turn out as we are hoping, he would declare for Stannis and persuade the remaining Ironborns to do the same—gods know they need provisions from the Reach. Dagmer had returned from Torrhen's Square and told me this: that Euron had charged the commonfolks to dig up more iron and lead despite the worsening conditions in the mines. Even the hardest thrallsmen would not be able to endure such backbreaking labor. Some of those who were left were questioning the lawfulness of the kingsmoot since parts of the Sunset Sea had begun freezing."

"I am far from a theist, but a godless, sickening raper on the Seastone Chair may indeed awaken the drowned god if ever there is one," Theon added, albeit weakly. There were enough murmurations
from the old gods through the weirwood trees, naming him 'Theon', that he had abandoned his troth with the sea and the deep ones within it. "He promised the greenlands to those Ironborn, promised them dragons. They will get those, very well, but along with Euron's words will be the Ironborns in the center of all battles—where else would he get steel for weapons, a fleet, and his soldiery? He cares not if salt wives and rock wives die with their ironmen, even if their young do. As it is, hundreds of young lads and lasses have been unnecessarily sacrificed during the raid at Shield Islands."

Jaqen sighed, but in his calm Arya sensed the budding want for reprisal. "The Old Way that your Ironborn kin had been practicing for ages is no different than the ways of those Valyrians, Greyjoy. Your lords still keep their thralls? They still sail to the Stepstones and the Basilisk Isles?"

"Miners and bedslaves by the thousands, yes," Theon replied, then bowed his head as if saying more would shame him to near death. "Euron had recently pillaged those places you have mentioned."

The Lorathi exhaled in repressed ire, then shook his head. His eyes chanced upon Arya whose hard face betrayed nothing.

"Lord of Winterfell and Lord Reaper of Pyke, an alliance north to west for Stannis," Jon declared. "This is the game plan."

Arya's laughter was suddenly derisive. "Against Euron and those dragonlords? Forgive me, but you are all digging your own barrows, as if there are not enough bodies in the crypts, as if this family has not had its own share of passings! How long can Stannis last in battle, that you would declare for him? How long will it take for him to dismantle the Iron Throne? What kind of strength does he have that would help us hold the Wall when those wights come feasting?"

"Father declared for Stannis, Arya," Jon's tone had gone severe. "Dare you not forget that."

"And Father died, didn't he? He died doing the right thing! There is no place in this world for what is right, Jon, has death not taught you that?" Arya shot back. The righteous, or those who seek to be, die in the end—like Jaqen H'ghar, like this family, she thought, then shook her head with much impetuosity. "Father and Robb, mother—honor killed them, they shouldn't have died, but they did. Most of those who ordered that they be slain still breathe the damned air with the rest of us! How can you still be such an ideal prick even after what has happened?"

"Arya," Jaqen's tone was admonishing.

"And you," Arya ignored the Lorathi's gentle rebuke and pointed a fore at him. "You have this pathetic desire to die over and again and relive your glorious days as one Valyrian liberator?! You're placing all of our efforts in Pentos to waste because of your damnable pride, Jaqen!"

"Keligon, Āria," the Lorathi responded through clenched teeth. He pulled the girl to himself and held her by the chin. "īlon daor ivestragī bona dārilaros, māzigon va ao…"

 Enough, Arya. We cannot let that prince come near you and you know why.

The girl removed Jaqen's hold of her face. "We need Aegon the Sixth, Jaqen," Arya said. "Ravens have arrived. You know what those lords have done to Meereen and Tyrosh both. They're heading north to Braavos. If the temple burns…" Arya shook her head, ignoring the questioning gawk from Jon and Theon. She looked at all of them. "There's another battle up here, against forces more sinister than those Valyrians. When Stannis rides out for the capital, the whole south would drown beneath a series of wars. No one else would come to our aid—the Lords Declarant would never allow the Valemen to take up their saddles, Brynden Tully has to hold Riverrun. We cannot have
men, women, and children perishing by the thousands at winter's dawnlight. A few more days and we will all ride to the Wall. Tell them what has happened to Nightfort before you rode here with Stannis, Jon."

Jon pursed his lips and let his eyes settle upon Jaqen's face. "The Black Gate isn't anymore allowing brothers of the Night's Watch in and out of the fortress. The case wasn't such before. The gate has a weirwood face that permits any brother access as long as the vows of the Night's Watch is recited when seeking for passage. Now, it's as if the Weirwood door had closed itself for good."

"And there are cracks along the Wall where those seventy-nine sentinels are," Arya added. "They were sentenced to die for deserting their posts, holes of ice cut into the Wall became their barrows, they were sealed up inside. There was more to the lore than failure to keep their vows and having themselves atrociously punished. Those deserters had to guard something in the Wall. In their deaths, their watch goes on forever and you know why."

"Old Nan's stories and nothing more, Arya," Jon replied.

"Oh, yes," Arya's smile was sardonic. "And your vision about a winged serpent underneath Nightfort is just a boy's dream."

Jon Stark knew that it wasn't.

Many times he had thought of the tunnels through the Wall, the labyrinthine road beneath it verily like the dark and cold belly of a dragon spawned by ice. That ice would always press around him, the chill would always seep through his bones, and he would always feel as if the weight of the Wall is above and all over him. Always, always he would remember Old Nan's tales and the dreams that molest him each midnight—the ice is its iris, the cold is its breath, the passages are its gullets. They were said to roam around the Shivering Sea and the White Waste, yet no soul, not even that of the most gifted of seafarers in the harshest winter could claim to have ever seen one.

"Winter creates thralls out of us and this must not be," Arya's voice was now gentle, imploring. "The snow is beautiful, the kiss of the winds is beautiful, let them be so. Men should hunt before frost carpets the forests, women must build fire in the hearths, children must be allowed to frolic when the flakes start falling."

"Nothing has changed with you," was Jaqen's response to her words. His smile was soft, his gaze upon her face was full of fondness. "Even as a young girl, you would always try and save everyone." Harrenhal came rushing to his reminiscences—the fire, the offer of three kills, the kiss on the hair, the bath, the carnage, the coin. 'Free the northmen,' were her audacious orders, and Jaqen H'ghar could do nothing else but to submit, the same way that he had submitted when she wanted the Rhoynar freed. To save all, you must risk all, the Lorathi thought. It was the same principle she followed when she was still queen to Rhoyne, the same precept that urged her to go out of her depth and imperil herself, by pronouncing her demands in the face of her enemies seated in the Conclave. Nothing has changed, true. She still enraptured the Lorathi with her fearlessness, her heart that was once and forever in the right place. More courage than sense—she would endanger herself by choosing to proceed with the Order's schemes, because this is she. Her devotion to her own self comes last, a reason why even the death god cannot have a hold on her facelessness.

Her fate in the Songs is chasing her, Jaqen realized, and felt the weight of the realms upon him that instant. In everything she does, she sacrifices a portion of herself. He planted a gentle kiss upon Arya's temple. Very much like the Moon that allows herself to be devoured by day—a crack at each moment.

She continues acting like the Nissa, and she must not.
"Put honor before wits and Winter will kill us even before the heaviest snowstorms begin razing," she now spoke to all of them. "We all must watch each other's back and stay alive."

"Dragons then," Jon concluded, in _fake_ assent to Arya just so the discussion would be all over. "Those that breathe fire."

Yes, Bran thought as he watched those gathered from the second tier of the keep. His hands were gripping tightly the wooden railing that serves as parapet to the cloister. _War is upon us_. He shut his eyes, exhaled sharply as he tried to cast out the insistent whispers of the Weirwood beyond the Wall.

The whispers were Bloodraven's.

_Assassins_, the warg surmised, and shuddered at the apparitions that invaded his mind asudden like howling specters. _They need Bloodraven dead, his thousand and one eyes closed forever._

_They're coming._

It is often said that a wise warrior avoids the battle. He doesn't fight like a mad bull—carrying fearlessness in the embattlements and leaving forethought in the encampments; neither can he be lured to any trap, and so he cannot be that easily caught in an ambush and slain before he could draw his own sword.

Stannis Baratheon had done it numerous times—_win_, and it was even mentioned by southron lord-owners of massive fleets and cavalries that Tywin Lannister himself used to pattern his own siege tactics after the strategies Stannis had employed in the Battle at Storm's End. For a full year, he held the castle against Mace Tyrell's forces with naught but rats and radishes for sustenance; and if not for Davos's onions and saltfish they all would have starved to death. There was his amphibious assault in Dragonstone that was then the seat of House Targaryen, earning him the respect of his foes; and the operations at Fair Isle and the Great Wyk where he smashed the Greyjoy fleet, earning him their fear. Up north he had purged Deepwood Motte of kraken reavers and expelled those Bolton traitors from Winterfell.

His lords may still nurse within them some feelings of skepticism, but his men—the common men—had their fullest faith in their king. In every battle, he leads them with his hero sword, the enchanted steel whose glow lit up the night. The red priestess had never once erred with her flame-spawned visions, and so when she had declared Stannis to be the long-awaited Azor Ahai, the Warrior of Light, the Promised, none dared raise their voice in protestation.

The Blackwater Bay was his biggest mistake, and so for his second attempt at besieging King's Landing, his force of fifteen thousand took the sea route from Maidenpool to Duskendale. From Rosby, a thousand would cross the tunnels leading to the Dragongate and the pit closest to the red keep; seven thousand will create a diversion in the harbor by the River Gate, and another seven thousand will infiltrate the capital through the Gate of the Gods.

Half of the Lannister forces are in the westerlands, holding Casterly Rock in case the eyes of those Targaryen conquerors get exhausted of Dragonstone's vistas and decide that gold and gems might be agreeable sights.

_Scatter the forces inside—a surprise attack. Greyjoy fleet are docked in the Blackwater. We will not engage the ships this time._
When the simultaneous infiltration of the city gates began, everything descended to chaos rapidly.

The bastions and loops by the Mud Gate began raining down arrows and pikes towards the gathered forces outside of the harbor. Fifty of Stannis's men attempted to smash the gates with two battering rams—one on each threshold, while the rest hastily set up ladders and climbed up the bastions, drawing weapons of their own to deliver blows upon reaching the summit of crenelated battlements. Almost half of goldcloak forces and Lannister-hired mercenaries were deployed near the River Gate to bar the attackers and engage them in combat. Already, a large fraction of Stannis’ men had infiltrated the southern fortress.

By the Gate of the Gods, trebuchets flung boulders towards the sackers in full intensity, shattering detailed carvings of the Seven by the front portcullis. A hundred archers from Stannis's forces launched attacks towards the inadequately-manned garrisons as most of the capital's soldiery were defending the Iron and River Gates. Without much difficulty, Stannis's forces were able to weaken the fort's defenses thus allowing the mercenaries to take control of the portcullis and send it collapsing above the moat.

Sellswords commenced with their waylaying, with their impromptu, indiscriminate slaughter from the gates to Cobbler's Square. They swooped in on felled bodies consisting mostly of commonborns, even as the place was filled with the confusing din of commands and shuddersome sounds of wailing. "Bend the knee to Stannis Baratheon, one true king of Westeros!" were the words of one sellsword commander. "Spare us! We will bend the knee! Mercy, lords!" came the response of nobles and commonfolks alike, as they collapsed facedown, or sought for a place to conceal themselves. The sackers pushed through the last of the crowds on their mounts, slashing, beheading soldiers who may be blocking their way. And when the last soldier in that vicinity was disemboweled to one mercenary's satisfaction, those sellswords lined up at the center, facing five hundred citizens who had fallen silent and were now backing away. "Any more Lannister loyalists out there?" boomed Lyon Hoare of the Stormbreakers. "Speak up so we could carry on with the gutting!"

None dared speak a word.

The heavy sound of hooves interrupted what the mercenaries thought was undisputable victorious claim in the name of Stannis.

It was once more hue and cry as people rushed to all directions. The mercenaries were left in the middle of the cobbled thoroughfares, turning their heads this way and that in assessment of the situation. They unsheathed their weapons as a full cavalry rode from east and west of the Square towards the group of sellswords at the center, closing in on both sides.

"A mere thousand!" Hoare roared in laughter. "Feast on, men! Kill everyone that gets in your way!"

The cavalry was being led by Ser Robert Strong.

Clashing steel resounded in the whole Square, drowning even the cries of men who were either stabbed or slashed open. One sellsword managed to thrust his sword on Ser Robert's belly, but gasped wide-eyed in horror when the giant knight pulled out the sword from his own gut and didn't even stagger as he stood from the blow. Even in panic, the sellsword scoured the scene of fray and realized that there was absolutely nothing beneath the helms of those cavalymen.

"Corpses!" the sellsword boomed. "Corpse soldiers! They cannot feel a thing—" his mount reeled back and he fell from it, then felt a stabbing pain on his throat, felt himself choking in his own blood as the giant knight repeatedly swung his blade to hack the sellsword's head.
The last he heard were the tortured cries of his fellow mercenaries.

Finally, Stannis Baratheon emerged from the tunnels of the Dragonpit and continued his way towards Maegor's secret passages with his thousand men.

The network of tunnels was confusing, but Stannis is a combat engineer prepared for any type of war. He knew that Maegor's Holdfast does not have a passage for escape since the former king hated rats, but that the entire red keep was full of channels and pits, with one leading straight to the Great Hall where the Iron Throne sits.

The tunnels are made of stone or earth supported by heavy timbers. With Justin Massey on his right, he traversed the winding paths of chaotic profusion, past that which led to the Master of Whispers' chamber, and another that was connected to the Tower of the Hand. Skulls of Targaryen dragons adorned the earthen floor, eliciting affrighted whimpers from some mercenaries who were then sneerers of dragonlore.

"Fools," Justin Massey remarked, raising his torch to get a better view of the passage. "All their men are in the strongest gates. They left the minor gates defenseless. Had we entered through the Old Gate and paraded along the Street of Sisters, no one would have noticed us."

"Shut up, Massey," were Stannis' words. "Keep your eye on the egress. We need the way out of this place."

"News travels fast in here," Massey spoke on, ignoring the king's stern disposition. "The River Gate and the Gate of the Gods have collapsed already. Our forces—"

"I said shut up," Stannis spat. "Great Hall is this way, the double thresholds are on the other side. Two hundred men with me and three hundred to garrison the doors. Five hundred, straight to the Hook."

Commanders began barking out orders albeit cautiously, mercenaries departed for their stations.

*Something is very wrong here, Stannis thought. Everything is too simple.*

Massey raised the trapdoor and climbed up the keep. Fifty men followed and surveyed the hall. A quick signal was given and Stannis emerged from the pit followed by the rest of his landed knights.

*Empty.*

Only the Iron Throne, with its thousand Valyrian swords stood at the center—grotesquely magnificent, imposing.

He walked slowly towards the throne, settled his right hand on one protruding blade. He ran his forefinger across that steel, allowing the sharpness of it to cut his skin and from it draw blood, so the throne's assymetric monstrosity, its greatness, could be forever imprinted on him.

*Something is very wrong.*

"Massey, proceed to the keep's entrance and assess the situation there."

A quarrel hit Justin Massey straight on the temple.

Several quarrels struck those two hundred landed knights—skulls, faces, guts, chests.

Stannis's eyes flew to every direction. The top gallery was filled with Ironborns.
"Divine art of subtleties," said Euron Greyjoy. Calmly, he strode towards Stannis, lochaber axe in hand. "Never trust sellswords, Stannis. They are loyal only to gold."

"And as it appears, we have more of that than you do," came the voice from his left. Petyr Baelish clicked his tongue athrice. "Your defeat in the Blackwater had taught you nothing. The sacking of the city today was mere theatrics, except for the Stormbreakers who were all willing to die for you, curiously. They are food for the corpses now, as you have allowed yourself to get lost in the middle of stagecraft."

"You think you've got the Vale and Riverlands on your side?" Euron said. "One attack at Gulltown like the ones done at the harbors of the Citadel, and those stinking rivermen and hill clans will come crawling at the throne's feet."

"Where's Cersei?" Stannis Baratheon asked through clenched teeth. "Where's my dead brother's whore?"

"Here," came the words. Stannis turned to his back and saw Cersei Lannister, crossbow in hand, with a poisoned quarrel trained on Stannis's chest. "Here's your dead brother's whore, who's about to have a dead brother-in-law."

"Why, you debauched—"

Clack.

The quarrel hit Stannis straight to his intrepid heart; and the last sound that rang in his ears was Cersei's deranged laughter.

In the flames, she saw her king die.

If the flames speak truth, then why did I err?

Melisandre of Asshai retraced her steps—in the past weeks and moons, in the past five centuries before that cataclysmic Doom that had swallowed the slaver's empire whence she came. My power grows stronger when I am in the Wall, stronger than when I was in Asshai. Why so, when all her life as one shadowbinder she was led to believe that the limit of permanent ices is the turf only of the old gods and the great other? The lord of light is a pervasive god, she would always convince herself. If so, then why is it that after setting Jon Snow's pyre ablaze, the whispers of the weirwood gods knelled in her hearing senses—guiding her, filling her with warmth, the same way that the red lord would bless her as if by lover's kisses?

A confluence? She asked, as those flames danced in her sight. A coming together?

Every evening, she would light fires and sing prayers, gaze into the flames in an effort to see harbingers and good tidings both. Her language of ash and cinder and twisting smoke had all turned bitter in her tongue, and she had started questioning the usual habitudes of the faith, especially sacrificing men through fire. Valyria had done it before—the lords sacrificed slaves in the mouths of the Fourteen Flames by the hundred thousand; and Valyria was punished, obliterated from the face of the realms.

Yet they say that Azor Ahai would come from the blood of Old Valyria. Melisandre had prayed for a
glimpse of the Promised, but her god would only show her Jon Snow.

And one other soul—a deserter of his fate as a Warrior a thousand years prior to this time, she thought. The one renamed 'sent by the gods', the Valyrian whose history was wiped out.

Melisandre recalled the events earlier that day. She was in the godswood, and fate had sent Arya Stark there as well. The girl was already wary of her presence in the castle as it is; and perhaps, her being in the godswood had only heightened the girl's distrust.

"I thought you worshippers of R'hllor detest all other gods?" Arya asked.

"I like the quiet."

Arya's brows furrowed at the response. She headed towards the other side of the godspool and sat on one of the boulders. For moments, they merely stared at the Weirwood's face in stillness. The tree appeared to them like a pale giant frozen in time, older than Valyria maybe, with great oaks and hawthorns and ash trees serving as gray-and-green sentinels all around it.

It was Melisandre who pierced through the silence. "When I first saw your face, Arya Stark, I thought I saw darkness. You've been in the house of death for many years that the shadows of it had become you." She gazed at the girl. "Maybe I am misguided, but the darkness seems to spring from something else—someone else."

"Who?" the girl asked, indifferent.

"The one whom you have named Iāqaen."

Arya snorted. "Why are you so severe on your fellow redheads?"

Melisandre laughed at the girl's words, amused. "I try not to be."

"There's darkness in him, you're right," Arya said. A blood-red leaf landed on her lap, and she examined it. It's as red as the blood that smeared Ned's ancestral greatsword when he was beheaded through it. Its five-pointed structure appeared to her like a pentagram, and she recalled what Old Nan used to say about the configuration of those red leaves: keep the topmost pointing upwards, facing the heavens. Careful, for if you keep it in reverse, the result will be perversion. "All of us have dark sides which we hide from everybody else. I'm not willing to divulge too much, but Jaqen and I had a long history—"

"I know, Arya of the Rhoyne," Melisandre cut her. If the girl was taken aback at such words, then she was gifted at concealing it. "I was there."

"You were there?"

"I was sold to the red temple at a young age before those dragonlords hauled me in chains to Valyria. They thought that sacrificing men through fire could calm the fourteen flames down," Melisandre recounted. "It was the only life I knew and perchance it was all a lie. The mouth of R'hllor swallowed whole the land of dragons; and yes, I was there." Her gaze cruised to Arya's face, and the red priestess appeared to be seeking something from the girl's eyes. "But no, the darkness I am speaking about has nothing to do with his Valyrian ancestry."

"He was the single candle that defied the dark days of Valyria," Arya replied. "The chronicles of him as one Valyrian before, though wiped out, spoke of hope only, wise priestess."

"True," Melisandre said. "Hope, and martyrdom—a noble self-sacrifice for the sake of an enemy
clan. There's the darkness of lovers and darkness of assassins. He had chosen both."

Arya shook her head and laughed scornfully. "Everyone I meet speaks to me in riddles—you, the Elder, the masked woman, the reader."

"You know what Jaqen H'ghar had become, yet you deny the truth."

"I'm not denying anything."

"The blood of his wounds fell into the dark green earth and turned into stone," Melisandre recited the verses of the Fallen Warrior of Light. "And from it came that gem that is the paragon of self-sacrifice..."

"Bloodstone."

"Very good."

"It has nothing to do with Jaqen."

"It has everything to do with Jaqen."

Arya exhaled, as she struggled to cast out her recollections of her last encounter with the Qohorik reader of cards. "The Bloodstone Emperor is a myth, and he is not connected with bloodstone that is the gem of altruism." She stood, even though she wanted, needed to hear more. "Keep your notion of 'Jaqen's darkness' to yourself, you seem to have a very conflicted idea of what it truly is."

"You said that he was the one who lit the candle during those cimmerian days in Valyria," Melisandre still spoke. The girl walked away, surrendering to her own ire. The priestess did not raise her voice. "When you light a candle, you cast a shadow. Darkness breeds light and light breeds darkness. The Warrior of Light cannot exist without his treacherous antithesis—for if the Warrior did exist even without the Long Night happening, then what would be his damnable use?"

Arya paused with her steps at those words of the priestess. She spoke, but she kept her back to the woman. "It's all a myth as I've said, priestess. No one has seen that Bloodstone Emperor of yours, no one else believes in the existence of that chained god, no one knows for sure if he does need an animate host whose blood bathed the stones in an act of sacrifice—"

"No One has seen, No One else believes, No One knows," Melisandre's voice was suddenly antagonistic, and whether or not this sudden antipathy the priestess felt towards the girl was born out of the latter's denial, or out of the evil that seemed to burst forth from the girl asudden, she couldn't tell. "You love that man with a love that is greater than what the gods can give to themselves. Very well, walk in blindness if you must. But don't you return to me and say I didn't warn you. Force answers out of your beloved Lorathi, threaten him with a dagger on his throat, fuck him till he confesses, do any damned thing, Arya Stark...before it's too late."

Arya felt her hands ball up in a fist. "What the hell are you trying to tell me?" She faced the priestess and glared at her with bloodshot, loathing eyes. "Plain and simple, Melisandre of Asshai."

"This epoch's pendulum has fluctuated to 'Her'—mother, maiden, crone in your faith of the Seven, the Moon in the faith of the Jogos Nhai and of your old gods, the Nissa for us believers of the red god. Even the Great Other in this cycle has a womb that births the Undead. Plain and simple, what the hell am I trying to tell you?" Melisandre stood. "It's the Woman who must save the Warrior this time—he's lost his way, and you must find him, call him back to you."

The priestess walked out and left Arya to herself in the godswood. The girl merely stared at the black
pool that reflected the Weirwood's face. The lips of the heart tree were closed.

Tormund the Mead King sat with her in the great hall as she awaited the Lady Sansa to accept her.

His stares were unnerving, even more so than his usual impulsions of tapping his fingers on the oaken table to show either restlessness or obsessive interest. Brienne of Tarth exhaled in ire but kept her calm. The ride to Winterfell was a long one and she was not one to waste her efforts just because she was being provoked. Sworn to Lady Catelyn, Brienne is part of the Stark household now; and members of the Northern greathouse must practice restraint expected of dwellers-within-the-Wall, must not draw their swords and threaten a wildling man of disembowelment or decapitation should said wildling man decide to just settle his queer stares on one's breasts.

Perchance, her jaw would lock tonight from gritting her teeth too hard.

"Didn't know ladies could land as knights," Tormund spoke, his eyes still calmly assessing Brienne's entirety. "Good with swords, are yeh?"

Brienne answered in a most lusterless tone. "You can say that."

"Heh," Tormund chuckled, amused. "How many men?"

The lady knight turned her attention to the wildling, and with a derisive smirk answered. "More than the count of your fingers and toes combined."

"Ooh-hoo!" Tormund hooted. "Now that's a lot of blood righ' there." He shifted to his seat, assumed a more congenial tone. "Ever had a fight with one who wields double-bladed axes?"

"Not interested," Brienne replied, assessing her fingernails that were too big for the usual female, keeping her voice as dull as was humanly possible.

"Scared shit of their kind, maybe?"

She faced the wildling and raked him with a disparaging stare from head to toe. Her eyes landed on the man's double-bladed axe. Brienne smirked. "With that yea big weapon? First bout and my broadsword would hack that axe into pathetic pieces."

Tormund chuckled richly—very entertained. He wiped his bearded mouth with the back of his hand, tilted his head to have a look at the broadsword the lady knight spoke about. "You like 'em long, eh? And full from the base to the tip?"

Brienne clenched her teeth once more and gripped the hilt of her sword the tightest she could.

Finally, Sansa entered the hall through the double threshold with Jon and Arya.

"My lady," Brienne suddenly rose to her seat and knelt to the ground. "I am pleased that the gods have aided you in your ride here to the North."

"What happened with Jaime Lannister?" Sansa's query was direct. The tone of her voice was neutral, yet Brienne could sense wrath on the edges of it. She knew Lady Sansa only through what short time they had in Hollow's Hill. She knew naught about Arya Stark, and Jon Stark, their legitimimized bastard brother.

"My lady," Brienne bowed low in front of the three, then rose to her feet. "I beseech your patience
and discernment." She eyed the three warily. Starks see through deceptive intents, what with the unthinkable betrayals they have faced, and Brienne knew that there was no recourse but to give them an honest to goodness account of what has happened. "I set Jaime Lannister free."

Her confession was met by a good minute of silence.

"You've broken your sacred vows to this house," was Sansa's calm reply, but her fists were clenched tightly, her eyes were raging. "You've dishonored yourself for the second time. Why, Brienne of Tarth?"

Brienne's eyes cruised from Arya's passive expression, to Jon's. Same as everyone's reason—irrational vagary, the lady knight thought. Repaying a debt owed. He saved my life from the bear and from those men at Harrenhal, from the queen. I had to save his. What came out from her mouth was the truth, albeit the one that betrayed nothing about her emotions for the man. "Ser Brynden Tully never planned to deliver him to Casterly Rock, my lady. He had planned with the Lords Mallister and Blackwood to have him killed and thrown at the Crag."

"And their plans for Casterly Rock?" Arya asked.

"Sack it, take the Lord Edmund without performing the trade," Brienne replied. "It's not what we have discussed with the Lady Catelyn. Their schemes will complicate everything in the south."

"Ironborns," Jon concluded. "Once the Lannister queen learns about the kingslayer's death, she will waste no time sending ships to Gulltown, cavalries from the capital to the riverlands. A second besieging, and she'd make sure conspirators would pay to the last drop of blood."

Sansa paced across the hall in agitation. "But why would Ser Brynden decide to do away with the plans? He almost led everyone into a suicidal course of action!"

"This is what I know," Brienne spoke. "The Vale and the Riverlands plan to break away from southern rule, declare for the king in the north. That, before those Targaryen dragons begin razing unbending greathouses with fire."

Arya looked at Jon. "They would bend their knee to whoever was named by Robb Stark in his will."

"A pity, for there is no king in the north, never would be," Jon declared. "They declare fealty to House Stark for the sake of it, yet none of those houses are willing to come to our aid when they were informed about those breathing cadavers beyond the Wall. Ravens have flown and gone back—not one offered to leave the south and march up here."

"They're holding the castles against Lannisters and Ironborns," Arya offered. "Unless they can be assured that the capital is not going to once more besiege those reclaimed castles, they would not take their forces up north."

"But the real battle is here!" Jon bellowed.

"They don't know that, Jon," Sansa said, placing a hand atop his shoulder to console him. "They don't care."

Brienne knelt on one knee once more, her head almost touching the stone tier. "Forgive me my ladies, my lord. Please know that my actions were based on what I saw fit—it is to spare this house from participating from another war. I have set the kingslayer free and thus broken a vow. Yet in such act I believe I have proven more my loyalty to this house, in that I thought only of how to pull all of us out of the fire. Death or pardon—I leave my fate to your hands."
"Rise, Lady Brienne," Arya said. "We saw reason in your decisions. Killing the kingslayer would indeed be an unnecessary cry for another war against the throne."

"You would remain within the walls of this castle," Sansa added. "And if Ser Brynden wishes to question why House Stark is harboring you, then he must ride to the North and take his ten thousand with him."

"Might be useful for what's comin'. We need men, Lord Crow," Tormund interjected, then directed his gaze at Brienne. "Women too."

Jon nodded. "We need someone to man the Nightfort as soon as Yarwyck finishes restoration." He turned to the lady knight. "Are you up for it, Lady Brienne?"

She rose. "Yes, my lord."

"Great," Tormund grinned. "Wicked great."

After the shuddersome dialogue with the red priestess, Arya dashed to Sabine's chambers along the west wing. "I need that favor now, sister," she had told the woman. "Dreams, visions—all of them point to one thing. I need certainty."

"He still cannot recall a thing about that bargain?" Sabine queried. She locked the door and leaned her back against it as if to secure it should the latch fail. They cannot afford to have their conversation overheard by either Aegeus or Jaqen. "I may be able to do it, but I need Bran's help."

The process is a complicated one, as it would require unlocking, deciphering Jaqen's memories from a derived form of himself from the past and from another realm. The Lorathi has to be subjected to a state very much akin to lucid dreaming—his awareness must be as strong as his deepest subconscious, therefore, he must know that he is dreaming and that he is not.

Bran Stark would incubate within the Lorathi one specific dream subject through suggestions over dinner table: "Starks honor covenants...", "The North remembers, those lords and the Stark kings entered a pact, sealed an alliance...", "The deal with the wildlings...", "Death allows men to bargain..." and with all these are the distant whispers of ravens, with their idiomatic murmurs intended only for the Lorathi's ears and consciousness. These suggestions will be nurtured like seeds on damp soil, grow within him, till the themes of it converge into a larger dream picture.

In the middle of Jaqen's sleep would come the Waif's trigger queries:

Tell me about the hooded woman.

Riddles...what riddles did she speak about?

Were you seduced?

What have you given up?

When is she going to make you pay?

It took them a couple of days to gather incoherent, cipher-like responses from the Lorathi and elucidate the meanings of these. "It's shadow-work, Arya," Bran had told her. "Nothing in his dreams is as it is—everything is a reflection, a projection, an association. Everything is upside down."
When I invaded his dream realm, I looked at Jaqen. I saw my own self in his eyes, yet in his sight I am malformed. That is because his person fell over me, his whole self is warped, Arya."

The girl felt herself tremble slightly—out of dread or out of fury, she couldn't say. "What does it mean?"

"His lost memories are too dark, too misshapen to even explore."

And Arya understood that it was so, for on the dawn of the third day, she saw Sabine crouched on one corner of their bedchamber after her attempts to repossess Jaqen's remembrances. The Lorathi was then asleep, as if unaware of the horror he had dealt the woman. "Jaqen will unhinge me, Arya," Sabine whispered in the midst of frightened tears. "I cannot...I cannot..."

"Hush," Arya rushed to her sister, wrapped her in a tight embrace. "I will retrieve his recollections in another way. Forgive me for dragging you into this."

_How, _the question raced through Arya's very unsettled mind. How do you force out answers from a master assassin?

_The greatest of lovers are the most articulate, _Aegeus had once told her in her training as one acolyte. _With words you can stir up a man's repressed emotions, cloud his rational side, lead him to think that illusions are real. _

"Damn it," Arya cursed under her breath. "I am far from a gifted lover, and I am not willing at all to endure this agony of not knowing."

She knew that if she would desire, merely _desire_, to touch his soul, she would have to reveal hers and protect it too; because the dark chasms of him that Bran and Sabine spoke of were not at all metaphorical. He may swallow her whole, kill her _after_ she dies. _Know all theories, master all techniques._ Done she must be with feelings akin to a multitude of prisms which the Lorathi could evoke from within her through a mere breath or a glance. Done she must be with fanciful acts that entice.

A man is not what he thinks he is; he is what he _hides._

And so on that same night, Arya Stark chose rampage.

Jaqen entered their chamber after another repartee with both Jon and Bran. To the bone, the Lorathi was utterly exhausted—Rickon had demanded a whole morn of training with swordwork, ravens had to be sent to the wildlings at Oakenshield and the Gift regarding the 'stealing' that is to happen a couple of days from now. The door was shut, bolted. Nothing was odd, apart from Bran's usual inscrutable speeches about weirwoods and slayers. He removed his tunic and threw it on the bed, thought about the gods of the Seven. _Why is it so easy to tell the most twisted secrets to shadows and strangers? _came the Lorathi's thoughts. He exhaled sharply, traced whence the deduction sprang forth. He couldn't find the source of it.

Jaqen smiled and felt himself grow hard as a sudden.

"Come out from wherever you're hiding, lovely girl," he purred.

At those words, Arya emerged from the far corner of the bedchamber. A single menorah held three candles that lit the whole room, and they did so poorly, or perchance the girl has gotten better with the assassin's game of disguises that the Lorathi master had failed to notice her standing there. Two daggers were on either side of her hipbelt.
"I don't want blood to flow out from either of us, Jaqen," Arya said in a grave tone, forewarning him of possible occurrences should he fail to concede. She unsheathed her daggers, gripped them tightly, and prayed—may she find no reason to harm herself by harming Jaqen H'ghar.

"Neither does a man," the Lorathi replied and turned to her. His voice was raspy, a whole allurement impossible to resist. Arya Stark would have found the latter assumption untrue had it not been for his eyes of bronze and gold that raked her entire form, undoing—almost—the laces that held her tunic and riding breeches, her underclothes, her damned mind. His heavy breathing resounded in their closed chamber; it was supposed to be soundless, but it screamed of all things dirty and vulgar and wet, and as if those were not enough, he licked his lower lip and trapped it between his teeth. "Come here and let a man distract you for a while. It's been such a long day…"

"I thought I was going mad. Those visions during my task as the Winter Maiden showed me you—your draconian form and your face obscured by mist, the black and the white, the eye that watched over you and the realms," Arya shook her head and walked towards him but kept herself at a safe distance. "You know what that Seer had called me before? A rival of a god."

The Lorathi's brow creased for a second out of confusion, but the want within him was stronger than his desire to listen to his own wife's ramblings. "Very well, a man will know the details of those railleries of yours with your tarot reader; but save those details for latter hours, please." His hands moved to his trousers. Slowly, he undid the fastenings. "Right now, a man needs to be all over you."

"We tried to repossess your memories, Jaqen," Arya said, ignoring his lustful intimations. "We have the edges of them, but Sabine's queries were not enough to unlock what were lost to you a thousand years back. Too dark, too shapeless—Bran said these, too. Tell me now about that bargain and save us both from tragedy."

The Lorathi clicked his tongue. "You're playing coy, my love," was his smooth reply. "Don't try to turn my lust into ashes, Arya. I might explode instead. You won't like it very much should that happen." He smirked, raised his brows as if realizing something. He trod closer to her. "Unless that's what you're planning to do right now—discover how much more obscene we could be when it comes to pleasuring each other. Well then, tonight's the perfect time to do just that."

Arya gritted her teeth. Nothing. Many times she had attempted to invade his memories, read his eruditions and whatever else lies within the mind of him. Nothing. None but a whole nebulous ravine.

And his usual hunger for my cunt.

"Stay where you are, Jaqen," Arya warned him. "I'm not in the mood for your senseless games."

The Lorathi smiled charmingly. "How the hell could a man suckle your breasts if he would stay where he is?"

"Damn you."

He threw a small cushion on the floor in response to her cursing. "Evil lips—dark with wine and froth and fleeting love," he teased. "I want to be made ageless tonight, Arya. The gods gave us our souls, our mortal frames. They gave us desire so we could mate and moan and worship them in so doing." His hands returned to his breeches, fiddled with the last of its fastenings. His hardness was now very visible, ranting and raving and tonight, the girl realized, will be the night of shattered bodies. The Lorathi gestured his head to the thrown cushion on the floor. "Bare your breasts and kneel, sweetheart. I want to love your mouth with my sex."
With movements rhythmic yet unrehearsed, he pulled his trousers down and revealed his nakedness in front of her. He was already on the warpath, Arya knew—why else would his sex quiver in front of her if not, why else would he hiss as if deprived, as if he has all intentions of breaking her with his savage, savage love? There was the anatomical difference between them, the gods have designed their bodies for specific purposes—her body to quench his unappeasable greed, to swell afterwards, to carry his seed till it grows and becomes another him; and his body, to merely own her, and also own another one, and another one, and another one. With his secrets, he is in danger of besmirching the sacred space she has toiled to build for the both of them, of nullifying her sacrifices so they could both reach their unexpected states of being. He wanted her yet he still cannot give up on that god of his fully, despite his desertion of his facelessness.

For Jaqen H'ghar to have both would be a slap on her face as a wife.

No, no. She cannot just share him with another woman.

It does not matter, must not matter that that woman is a god.

"Why are you still dressed, lovely girl?" Jaqen's tone of voice was like one harassing needle to her pained ego. Here he is with his usual Valyrian-Lorathi smooth talks—tricking her, trapping her, torturing her like she has not been through enough yet. "A man has bared himself in front of you already, is that not enough for you to want to squirm out of your garments?" He chuckled, touched and frolicked with his own sex as he beheld her with the eyes of one starved beast. He ran his gaze across her form and opened his mouth partly to exhale as he felt himself grow right in front of her, with his intentions as amorphous as the lies he had lived and the lies he had made her believe in their ambiguous years together. "Damn it. You're so beautiful, Arya Stark," he muttered as he continued stroking himself. "I could spill my seed all day just thinking about fucking you."

Eloquence was never Jaqen H'ghar's strongest suit. Arya bit her lip hard, as if in so doing she could drown the angst that was threatening to weather her stone of a self, her strength, her very foundation. How do you deal with a lie if you've come to love it with all that you are? She asked herself. "You speak to me as if I'm just some kind of a fuck thing," she whispered bitterly. "I've been trying to get through you, to understand you, to find the reason for this…madness I feel about you. Yet you burn me with your words—as if I'm the kept woman and that god of yours is the wife."

He only smiled, paused with his lewd acts. He sighed, as if attempting to summon within him some patience. He folded his arms across his bare chest. "What is it that you really want, Arya?"

"I want you to own those memories," she replied. "I want you to want to remember what happened after your death at Aurion's hands."

"Ask Jon," Jaqen replied, scouring her form once more lustfully. "Ask your half-brother if he remembers anything after his reawakening. Ask him and he would tell you this: once you leave the curtains, you are not allowed to recall what was on the other side. It is not in a man's intention to disturb memories whilst they slumber; he has better things to do—like lick every part of you, and push himself into every hole of you." He walked to her till the space between them was no more. He lifted his hand to her right breast, stroked it intensely. She felt her tips crystallize with his shameless plundering. He spoke against her neck. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. You deserve more respect than this, a man knows. But really…all a man could think about tonight is how he's dying to spend an eternity in between your thighs."

He ravished her mouth as he undressed her brutally, and Arya Stark felt the hilts of those daggers slipping away from her grasp. Jaqen was fierce that night. Too fierce, Arya thought, her eyes burning asudden. And too dark, and too treacherous. Is it maybe true that hers is a solitary love only, and that his love for her was just an illusion, since after all, the Nissa is the obverse yet the mirror image of his
goddess of death? *His faithfulness and unfaithfulness.* She cannot remain forever a lover to him—he would only fear her and hate her, because always, she would try and unclot her him of those layers he still uses to conceal himself; always, she would try and save him, and be with him, and love him with all that she is, and perhaps...he wants none of those. Perhaps, despite the marriage of their bodies and souls in the days of Valyria and Rhoyne, there are still some facets of him that he just could not give up to her, simply because he owned *none* of these anymore.

Still, there is a part of her that would always hope for good things, beautiful and timeless things with him; and so, there is a part of her that would always be a fool.

*Enough,* Arya persuaded herself as she felt his tongue inside her mouth, his strong hands kneading her behind, his hardness against her nakedness.

She pushed the man and slapped his face with all the force she could gather. Hastily, she retrieved her garments from the floor.

She felt a strong pull on her arm, and her body fleeting for a split second before landing on the bed with a resounding thud. Wind died from her lungs, and before she could even breathe or blink, Jaqen was already on top of her, one strong hand pinning her through the wrists and another spaying her legs. She writhed underneath and cursed him, moved her head from side to side in storm and riot. "Get off of me, you brute!" came her screams. Her movements were madness, yet the persistence of the needs of his own flesh overwhelmed all words and acts of her. "Jaqen!" she shrieked, as she struggled to defeat all emotions—loathing and love for him, hurts and high hopes, in order to still preserve a fraction of herself should he decide to take her forcefully...and leave her torn from crown to sole after. "Jaqen! Let me go!"

*A mighty pain it is...to love this man.*

Regression—this was what the Elder said would happen should a Faceless Man renounce facelessness. The abyss of his old self would merge with the gorges of his heinous assassin's life, and he will lose himself to himself.

And it was true, Arya realized, as Jaqen bit the tips of her breasts and suckled them like one man who had lived a thousand lives with nothing but desert whirlwinds for companions. Her breasts ached like hell, her lips, her skin and every pore...her *heart.* She prayed for her entire body to start bleeding so he may taste the stannic tang of it, so he may stop and think and realize that she's already dying underneath him. Jaqen crushed his lips against hers, spoke in a severe albeit desirous tone.

"You so love discovering sensitive turfs, don't you, Arya?" He drove his sex against her already wet nub, causing her to whimper in both pleasure and pain. He spoke once more, his voice with a hint of rage this time. "You think a man has limitless patience, that he cannot bear it to see your skin marked with his dagger's blade? You selfish woman, your possessiveness will ruin us both."

"I want that damned memory, Jaqen!" Arya spat, screaming and scratching. "I'd rather destroy you than see you owned by another; I'd rather break you than find out that you're with me now but you cannot remain so till the last of your days!"

"You will truly destroy and break a man with your plans, Arya!" Jaqen shot back, shaking both of her shoulders. "You even allowed Sabine and Bran in on your folly! I never wish to remember; do you understand any damned thing at all? It's a part of me that's too distorted—to go back is to scourge myself. I cannot!" Jaqen grabbed her as she attempted, though uselessly, to slither away from him. He settled her forcefully on the bed once more and held her face firmly so their raving eyes could meet. "You're my wife and the blood of my blood, Arya Stark *H'ghar.* I ransomed you with my own soul, so you will fulfill your end of the arrangement. You will not leave this damned
"Your own words, Jaqen," Arya answered heatedly. "I'm your wife. This is a marriage. Yet you never tell me anything at all even though in the days that pass you're becoming hopelessly different!" She closed her legs, trapped his hand that was now ruthlessly romancing her wet slit, forced him away from her, denied him of even tasting her on the lips.

"Close your pretty mouth, sweetheart," Jaqen purred—his tones changing from raging to silky. He reached for the side of her lips and failed. "You'll have better use for that later, I promise." He reached for her again, failed. He growled when after a few more pursuits, he still wasn't able to ravish her mouth. "You don't want to be loved, is that it?" He asked in displeasure, as he mercilessly pulled both of her legs. Her back landed once more on the mattress. "You don't want to be loved—as if you have a choice on the matter?"

He gripped both of her hands tightly, pinned her legs with his elbows, then buried his face in her sex, drove his tongue against her sex over and over and over. Arya moaned as he felt him biting and suckling and drinking from her, yanked his hair so he would stop, tried to free both of her hands from his grasp. *He's hurting me...* her heart wept. *How can this even be an act of love?* "Jaqen, please..." she begged, but the Lorathi was famished, ravenous to the point of no return, despite the fact that he never missed out on making love to her every single night. "Y-you're killing me..." Still he went on with his tempestuous romancing, as if tonight is the last night of wolf-hunting, as if tonight is the peak of all nights and his dragon's blood must be appeased no matter the stakes and the circumstance. Jaqen entered Arya with his tongue, then licked her inside as his thumb stroked her slit in a manner too impassioned, too obsessed. *This isn't the way...* Arya thought. *Jaqen...*

There shouldn't be any shame in loving another, yet Arya was feeling to the core, misused and manhandled. She shouldn't mind—she should in fact revel in such acts of his—he is her spouse, they are one, this is sex. Except that it *wasn't* merely so. The hot, exotic scent of him clung to her nostrils and at that precise moment, she *loathed* his smell of ginger and cloves the same way that she had when he had shackled her in his tower in Valyria, and left her to herself despite the shadows and malevolence and the glowing eyes of dragon statues on his plinths, and returned to her only when he needed to spill out his man-seed because his insides were already aching. His acts had become intensely male, demanding, predatory. His tongue carried on possessing the wholeness of her feminine part, and she felt her soul crumbling, her love for him scaling impossible heights, plummeting, then ascending once more.

She looked down on him and noticed the scratch marks all over his arms and cheeks, and the red on her own skin marked by his cruel grip, and the red will no doubt turn to ugly purple bruises in the morn.

She wept as she felt herself slipping away, her head in a trance of Lorathi purrs and knives and layers of faces, her body in a breathless state, in relentless paroxysm.

"Oh! Oh! Jaqen! Oh!" She had climaxed despite her emphatic hatred for him that night. She prayed for the comforting silence of the godsdownd, for his embrace, and his reassuring whispers, yet the gods blessed her with none of these. "S-stop! Pleaaaaase!" she begged, for even as she was shuddering all over, Jaqen still consumed her—hastened his tongue-strokes, sipped audibly from her core, suckled the lips of her sex. He's crushing her, and ripping pieces out of her as he bit and licked her skin—inner thighs and breasts and neck—and his words rang in her ears and tortured her spirit like ruthless Valyrian rawhides.

"Aren't you a mystery, Arya Stark," he whispered in her ears, and pinned her on the bed using all of his weight. Her quivering, writhing body clawed at the bedlinen. Both of them were panting, yet his
exhales were louder—as if it was he who had reached the zenith of their exchange mere seconds ago. "You're driving a man so mad. A man's name on your lips," he gazed at her misty eyes. "That vague look and the heavy breathing, the silent pleading that comes with it—really, a man is confused about whether you're turned on or terrified." His hot mouth descended upon hers, and he spoke against it. "My wild assassin-princess. Do tell a man, please. Should he worship all of you or fuck you, love you hard? Ah..." he chuckled, kissed her lip and sucked it. She moaned. "There really is no difference, is there?" He nipped the skin of her neck, exhaled, marveled at the gooseprickles that had formed on her skin. "I love you so much, Arya. You're making me lose myself always and I like that."

"Jaqen..."

"I'm not finished yet, sweetheart," he purred. His temple rested on hers, their eyes locked upon each other's. "I know I would never have my fill of you, and I like that. Everytime I thrust myself in you, in my useless attempt to own you for you can never be owned, I desire always for you to scale those summits and fall off the cliff with me—I want to own all of your groans and your dirty thoughts, your every climax, every drop of wetness, every exhale. I want you. I want you to give me everything, Arya..."

_How can I break through his immortality, his bloodlust?_

_How to vanish? How to lose innocence?_

She felt Jaqen entering her, in a manner far from his usual poetic, rhythmic one. It was sweet yet stinging, loving albeit punishing. She heard the sound of their bodies colliding—harsh, rough—and felt him ramming against her wickedly, as if the sinfulness of the act is the most hallowed of all virtues. He draped her left leg over his shoulder and continued forcing himself into her, groaning, hissing, helplessly allowing his humanity to be replaced with animal-like delusion. "Arya...Arya...oh, I love you..." came the words in between his pushes. He went faster...harder. "Come for me, Arya...please..." It was heart-wrenching pain which she felt inside and out, flesh to soul he was tormenting her as he kept on ignoring her protestations. "Hot damn...Arya, say my name...say it..."

"Jaq...heavens..." she whimpered, as she felt herself building up once more, her hates and lusts all. He had weakened her, reduced her to a mere breathing frame, and he was far from done. "J-Jaqen! This...too...too much! It hurts!" she gasped as she felt the inside of her feminine lair burn with devastating pain, his sex coming in hard, excruciating contact with her womb.

He needed rough possession—a claiming, a branding. He needed to be satisfied the Valyrian way.

"Hurts? But I'm just loving you, sweetheart..." Jaqen grunted at every thrust. "You understand this, don't you? You're mine..." He deepened his push in every declaration. "Mine..." Another hard push. "Mine, baby..."

He held her waist tightly, and moved her body up and down to meet his strong thrusts...and he buried himself and pulled himself out of her faster than she could breathe or think, groaning obscenely in the middle of those acts.

Arya screamed.

_Well then, let him take me in his usual firestorm, and leave me in ashes..._

During that harrowing hour, she cannot trust her cicerone that is the Winter Maiden, for the Winter Maiden deals with men she can only pleasure but never love, the Winter Maiden trades her body for coin and sweet flatteries, and such is not the case with Jaqen H'ghar. _I am not a whore, I am a wife_
to him, keened the deepest of Arya’s person as she endured each painful thrust. Or perchance he thinks it so, that beneath every woman including his own wife, is a true whore.

Pure rage enveloped her as she surrendered and became a host to all forms of hatred directed towards the man. With all her strength she pushed him, and their bodies disconnected as he was thrown aback. "Is this what you want?!" Arya screamed as she straddled him, and forced him inside her once more. In brutal motions, she coerced herself to allow him in and out, as she toiled to ignore the savage throe gripping her already sore sex. The scent of blood wafted in the night, drawing sadism in more pronounced edges, tormenting, killing. She cared not if she breaks herself open for him, if she dies afterwards. "To open my legs for you and give all, destroy myself, dishonor myself so I could be allowed in on your affairs?! This is what it takes!"

Jaqen gasped in the midst of Arya's hysterical movements, and felt his sex ache, as if gorged by beasts of large claws and sharp teeth. "Ar…Arya…sweet…" he buried his face in her bosoms and held her tight through the soft of her back. Arya was screaming in utter wrath as she carried on with her madness. "Gods, stop!" came Jaqen's pleas as he felt himself exploding inside her, filling her. Still she forced him to take her with bestial carnality, letting the strong urges overwhelm them both, letting the agony sap out all the strength they still have left.

The Lorathi looked down and saw his length smeared profusely with blood from Arya. He held her tighter, forced her to cease moving.

She buried her face in his neck and sobbed, struggled to breathe.

"I…I hate you…I hate you, Jaqen…dear gods, I love…love…oh, Jaqen…"

Remorse collapsed on him like colossal stones from the gods' abodes.

"Arya, sweetheart…"

She broke away from him, her face a waterfall of tears. Jaqen pulled her once more to him, she struggled against his hold. Whence came those acts, the urges? Jaqen asked himself, and realized asudden that he need not ask, for he knew that it came from the ancient curse of his Valyrian roots—treachery, depravity, inhumaness. He kissed her feet, every toe of it; then he reached for her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, too.

Arya shunned his deeds that spoke of atonements. She curled up on the bed with her back towards him, concealing her nakedness underneath the sheets. She sobbed on, softly…soundlessly…biting her knuckles and shuddering in grief. The silence of her mourning soul sang threnodies that speak only of love's death and heartbreaks.

Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen Jaqen…

He lovingly stroked her hair. "Arya…forgive me," he whispered. "I love you more than anything, but Arya…I just cannot…help me, Arya. I can't do it…" He kissed her neck, her naked shoulder, and pulled her the closest so her spine could rest on his chest. "I love you, I love you…"

No response came from her.

Jaqen struggled with self-loathing the whole night, as he uttered her name over and over, praying to the gods that each utterance heals her…and him.
Arya awoke to a curiously pleasant scent and the faint light coming in from the west window.

Morn's rays made her still slumbering eyes squint for a while there. She sat up and flexed her arms upwards, sorrow still chewed at her heart.

When her eyes have finally adjusted to the light, she saw the state of their bedchamber and gasped aloud.

Each corner was filled with blue winter roses, the petals still carrying the dew of that snowless morn. The drops acted like prismatic glasses splitting sun's rays into different hues—glimmering diamonds as the bards would say—spreading to all corners of the bedchamber.

She looked down on herself and realized that she was fully clothed with sleeping garments, and that she was already wearing smallclothes though her recollection carried nothing about wearing these the previous night. She embraced herself to contain the last of her shudders, as she recalled the too impassioned exchange with her Lorathi husband.

"Good morning, Arya."

Arya turned her attention to the voice.

Jaqen had set up a reasonably-sized table for their morn's repast. Reluctantly, he crossed the distance between them and sat on the edge closest to her, lifted her hand to his lips. He looked like utter shite—his usually well-kept hair was then disheveled, his eyes were hollow, and he appeared very, very exhausted.

"Did you sleep well?" he murmured his query like one remorseful cub, his torrid dragon's blood was then in the calm and was replaced with archangelic gentleness. His eyes were downcast, shamed, as he rubbed his lips across the back of her hand.

Arya cursed inwardly. *He's done it. He has broken once more through the stonewall I've built to preserve myself. Just like that, damn it.*

"Who said that you're allowed to pluck winter roses from the glass gardens?" she asked in a condescending tone. "Did Jon not tell you that we would use the roses for making dye for fabric, trade this along with our wool and hides?" Arya pulled her hand from Jaqen's hold. She regarded the whole chamber with derisive stare. "Which damnable god in the Seven had whispered to you that we need useless embellishments in this hell of a room, Jaqen?"

The Lorathi's eyes flew to her face, hurt manifested in them. "But you love winter roses, Arya."

"That is besides the whole point."

"I rode to Wolfswood," Jaqen replied. "Nymeria was with me. There's a whole field of winter roses beyond the hawthorns and the evergreens. I didn't pluck these from the greenhouse, Arya. You see the petals?" The Lorathi smiled sadly as he took one from the bunch, unmindful of the thorns that found their way into the skin of his palm. He held out that one rose in front of her, his soft gaze was searching for absolution and release from those gray irises of hers whose light had but faded.

"They're almost...sapphire-like. The ones we have in the gardens—they're paler than these. The woods have a collection of pretty things, Arya. I would have taken you there but I didn't wish to wake you up."

The girl held her breath at Jaqen's words. The ride to Wolfswood would take more than a quarter of a day.
The bastard didn't sleep.

I should ask the stablemaster; perchance one of the horses died last night. The road to the woods is a harsh one.

She sighed, kept her façade lest he strips her soul naked again with his usual brutish ways. He's unreasonable, erratic, vicious. Love him anyway. She stood and ignored the Lorathi's gesture, walked to the table; and there lay their morn's meal.

Arya shook her head. "You cooked?"

"Yes," Jaqen's tone was suddenly hopeful.

The bread for the thick stew was burnt, and the slices of chicken meat were either charred or undercooked. Messy slabs of white and yellow were set on an oily plate. When Arya bent down a little to take a closer look at the food, she realized that they were eggs cooked in lard. She suddenly needed to vomit.

To withhold or bestow forgiveness is a power.

The Lorathi spoke. "I thought you might want something to eat—"

"I'm not hungry," was her prompt response. "Eat if you want."

Without another word, she left Jaqen and shut the door behind her.

For the days that followed she allowed herself to bask in the misery and throe and deep hatred. To hurt is as human to him as to breathe, and she could not just give him the right to it—she's not a plaything, a bedcrawler if the night had become a little too wearying, a whole set of holes he could bury his damnable self into. For the days that followed, she refused to accept his offering of remorse, even as he had tried different ways to reclaim her affections. The thought of stabbing herself so she may bleed to death was there—the Lorathi's pain was her pain, too; and she couldn't quite bear the sight of him everytime she would lay eyes on him or everytime their eyes would meet.

As for him, he had become the paragon of depthless grief, from whom all disconsolate men could find inspiration.

She cursed him, cursed herself inwardly. Why is it that even though she was the one whom he had preyed upon, even though she was the one hurt, desecrated in an almost unthinkable way, she cannot not fully spite him still? What love for him has she, that she would think more of how he was faring after their quarrel, when it was she who was severely manhandled by him?

This is Jaqen, she reminded herself. Of course, he would hurt you. But he would love you all the same. Then, he would hurt you again. But he would save you. Then, he would keep secrets from you and drive you mad. Then, he would fill your marriage chamber with winter roses, and cook for you, and stare at you for the whole day like one miserable dragon hatchling. And then, and then when you have hopelessly fallen for him once more, he would do things that would make you hate him.

She would ignore him whenever they pass each other by the corridors of Winterfell, would not acknowledge his queries or remarks over luncheon table—and the rest of the Starks had noticed this too, and she would sleep with her back facing him, and pull away whenever he tried to hold her or kiss her or whisper his romanticisms.

Warriors should suffer silently.
"Look, Arya," he called to her one time. They were both beside the smithy, honing the castle's collection of longswords since two of the smiths had taken leave. His eyes were on the kennelmaster's wife who was then carrying a plumb babe in her arms. Jaqen grinned as the infant giggled animatedly at having been gently thrown to the air and caught by his mother's hands. The babe's stout legs and feet wriggled as his mother kissed him all over. Jaqen's chuckles were the kind she had never heard before, and so she turned to him, raised her brows in clear bewilderment. "Squirmy little thing, isn't he? His laughter, gods," were his remarks about the babe, then he looked at her with a gaze too fond, too meaningful. He stroked her cheek gently, kissed her temple. "When all this is over, Arya, I promise you we would—"

Arya stood abruptly. "You don't have to promise me anything, Jaqen," she responded coldly, then left to carry four whetted longswords to the armory.

She didn't even dare to glance back, for she knew that his face that no doubt reflected utter hurt would only be the death of her.

It was said in stories told by northerners and southrons alike that even the moonlight cannot penetrate the timeworn tangle of roots and thorns of those woods, yet these are mere tales, of course. Those who are dauntless enough to traverse the paths of trees that seemed to brood knew better—the woods accepted those who are intrepid enough to challenge its domain.

Deep within the haunted forest where frostfires and piper's grass cease to grow, and where good men were said to have ventured but never got out, was the Weirwood whose roots have built a niche for him who had a thousand and one eyes.

Those eyes saw all faces and fates in all realms. The possessor of those eyes had been part of the Weirwood from the time the gods have created it, though in his mortal life he had been a Targaryen bastard, a hand of the king, a master of whisperers, lord commander. He saw himself in those many eyes of his—impressions, projections, realities.

"I have my own ghosts, Bran. A brother that I loved, a brother that I hated, a woman I desired. Through the trees, I see them still, but no word of mine has ever reached them. The past remains the past. We can learn from it, but we cannot change it."

Why of course, Bloodraven had to lie to the boy he had trained to become the last greenseer. If Bran Stark would choose to be master to a pack of gaunt gray wolves, choose carrion crows that whisper to his ears as companions for life, choose to be imprisoned by the roots of the heart tree in order to preserve those realms still left to men, then he must stop believing the false promises that the past cannot be changed.

The past can be changed, actually. The present is the past of the forthcoming days.

Just as the present is the future of the past.

Therefore, he knew the true characters of the Warrior of Light, countless these may be. There was Azor Ahai whom they also called Neferion and the Shadowchaser fourscore centuries ago, the Valyrian renamed Iāqaen Haegār a thousand years back prior to the Doom, and Jaehaerys, who is also named Jon Stark Targaryen, from the blood of the last dragons.

One woman binds them altogether—the Nissa who is Arya Stark.

She is beauty, the light of her soul, the wraith-like built. The Warrior had touched her, sought to own
her, yet whenever he holds her, his fingers pass through her like they would in mist—she is unrealizable, insurmountable.

Despite this, he would be forever tethered to her, just as she would be to him. Their existence is parallel to each other, interwoven.

Bloodraven gripped tightly those overgrown roots of heart trees for the last time.

The assassins are here.

It was time for the last greenseer to take his place.

Accept the fate you have chosen for yourself, Jaqen.

He was in the middle of the God's Eye, in that place with many weirwoods where the ancient war was fought by the children of the forest against the First Men. A pact was signed—the heart trees must remain heart trees. Pacts must be honored.

I saw those hidden memories—too sinister to even look at, too nefarious to understand.

He roamed his eyes and saw the faces of those faceless trees, their hollowed eyes staring back at him, as if questioning his very presence in the Isle of Faces that is a most hallowed place.

This is why you were sent to us by the gods.

He walked towards the largest heart tree at the center, and touched its face. Jaqen's eyes were brimming with hot tears. The Lorathi knew that voice, knew the face and the person that owns it; and so it pained him even more, that this person whom he had held close to his heart because of a promise he had made to Catelyn and to Arya, would ask from him a most dishonorable form of sacrifice.

"Why do you wish for me to surrender to darkness, Bran?" he whispered his query. "Should I not battle against this darkness, purge it out of my deepest self, live my own life?"

You are a Fallen Warrior.

You have died for your Nissa when it was she who was supposed to die for you.

Liquid scarlet flowed from your body, on the dark green earth of Valyria because of courage and love. Bloodstone against Bloodstone—one is vile, the other is virtue; one is greed, the other is sacrifice; one is impure, the other is blameless.

Jaqen exhaled, and collapsed on his knees in front of the Weirwood. "Which one am I?"

Both.

The Lorathi dug his nail into the dirt and shook his head, as sorrow overwhelmed him. "Brother…" he whispered. "What if I do not wish to drink from that cup?"

Then, you must die.

And you cannot die—your bride needs you.
If your body dies, the chained one will find another host:

One who does not have your heart.

"What must be done?" Jaqen asked, his forehead now against the ground. His tears fell on the dirt that held the roots of the Weirwood firmly, and he felt the tree being nourished by his suffering.

Only his remembrances of Arya's lovely face kept his sanity.

The blameless will become the blamed, the sinless would become sin.

You must become one with evil, so you may defeat the greatest of it within yourself.

An anguished sob escaped from him, as he felt his consciousness drifting away from that vision of the Isle.

Chapter End Notes

Weekend chapter for all shippers! ;D Hardest one I had to write so your feedback is most welcome and I seriously hope no one got offended. Jaqen loves Arya so much in this fic, just to be clear. Have a good one, guys! ;D
Arya: "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put me back together again..."

Aegon: "I won't run, 'cause I don't wanna feel numb..."

Jaqen: "And the sixth is when you admit that you may have messed up a little..."

(I OWN NOTHING, the vids belong to the awesome youtubers I subscribe to.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"She holds power in her sway
She owns all depths
As she rises from the leaves of myth
Into a ceaseless course of greater becoming."

Songs of the Faceless (Lost leaf; XLI)

They were both in the now frozen River Rhoyne.

His eyes were on her—her face that was the face of all women. The long lashes and the aquiline nose, the silky skin of her cheeks, those wolfish, pearl eyes and full lips. Her hair was a fount of diamonds. The lines of her face etched stories that screamed only of darkness and deceptions, and she had persuaded all men to serve her and die for her, and she had crafted torment and sorrow into their lives, and killed them by the thousands, and her hissing voice sang of their desolation and anguish, yet to him, she's still the most beautiful.
But beneath the layers of faces she wore, the limpid pools of sweet talks and promises of gratification, the offer of Death masked as a gift, was one truth—she's nothing but a heinous spectre, a solid one.

Lust is a deadly sin, yet the Lorathi's body was not his own. *My dire Self is hers, now. It is the era of Winter and Darkness, the era of mating.*

He felt her cold tongue tasting his length and he shuddered at the contact. Oh, she does look like a goddess whenever they're both close to orgasm, and her voice... gods, how ever could he resist this sinful addiction?

**Who are you?**

He chuckled at the query. He threw his head back, relished the sensations brought by his goddess pleasuring him. He groaned when her lips tightened around his shaft.

"**No One...**"

Yes, the goddess whispered in response, for if he must host the chained god's apoteotic soul within his mortal frame, then he must be empty to the core.

He was being consumed by that act, and anytime now he would spill his seed and feed his goddess with it. He heard her branding him, naming him, though the name wasn't his at all—

*Bloodstone—spirit spouse.*

But there was another voice, and it was the voice of a water naiad that was once defeated in a war against three hundred dragons; yet in that war, she never actually lost. And the voice was branding him too, naming him, and around that name he had created for himself a whole new identity—

*īaqaen, jorrāelagon...*

His eyes flew open, and he searched for the source of the call. Thereupon, he felt the frozen River Rhoyne melting, its placid waters replacing the false calm of Winter. Warmth coursed through him, life, and more than this... love.

"**Nissa Nissa!**" he called to her, for she was on the river's other side—fully naked, her womb swollen with his child. He rose quickly and swam to get to her, but he felt himself being held back by colossal shackles of ice, and they were around his hands and feet and neck.

"**Arya!**" he still screamed her name, but she was slowly turning away from him, her face a mirror of grief and agony. "**Arya, please... don't leave!**"

She drifted away... towards that blinding light far from his reach, and she was gone.

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It was the day of the the Lord of Winterfell's 'stealing' of the wildling princess.

Stark banners were hung on the castle walls, marks of silent disclosure and declaration that the descendants of the greathouse occupy Winterfell once more. The bridge between the armory and the great keep, the pillars of cloisters constructed out of wood were festooned with smaller pennons of various colors—Sansa's work, and no, she could not, _would not_ be persuaded against it. "It's a festive day, as far as my knowledge serves me," was her explication. "We will be welcoming another in this
family, Jon."

Jon exhaled sharply at Sansa's words. "We are not even certain yet about what the outcome of the stealing would be."

"Do you mean that you intend to die in her hands?" Arya scoffed, as she fixed the gardbrace of Jon's leather suit. She tapped Jon's chest twice, signaling that the hinges were set and ready. "If you die, the lords will waste no time driving those free folks back to their settlements, use your second demise as justification to their acts. Greater dissension would be there, trust me. As it is, their loyalty to Stannis is an uncertain thing. Even Ser Davos knows it, not that he had voiced it out, of course he would never—the lords want to redeclare you King in the North, break away from the southern rule for good. You heard Brienne of Tarth."

"A scheme that I will never endorse," was Jon's stern reply. "To break away from the south is unwise, and I am not merely speaking about my fealty to Stannis. We need as many men as we could gather, I hardly care if they're Valemen or Riverlanders or Ironborns or...Dornish southron snobs. The threats beyond the Wall are real and the North cannot do this alone."

"Which is why you must be victorious at stealing her," Sansa said, smoothening Jon's unkempt hair, as if the lad would merely grace an event meant for titled ones. "Please, dear brother. You know how I desire to see for myself the reactions of both Lord Mors and Lady Cerwyn. I haven't had a good laugh in years."

Jon smiled, though his heart was at the moment, being devoured by unease not for himself, but for Val.

Rickon emerged from the inner armory, handed Oathkeeper to Jon. "Polished the blade for you," the boy grinned. "Win brother, but keep your steel clean."

Jon ruffled Rickon's hair and chuckled quietly. "I will try."

He then turned to Arya, and by some cosmic conspiracy, he could not help himself from tilting his head and planting a kiss on the side of her lips.

For seconds, they just stared at each other. Thank the gods, Jon thought as his eyes lingered on those gray irises. Sansa and Rickon had left before the kiss and thus did not see anything. Thank the gods.

"Jon..."

He traced her lower lip with his thumb. "We must go," he whispered.

The two descended from the armory and proceeded straight to the courtyard. They were greeted by applause from the northern lords and ladies seated on the dais in front of the great keep, and by hoots of wildling clanlords scattered all over the courtyard's environs. "Lord Crow!" called Tormund the Mead-king who was seated beside Bran. "Keep your cock in your breeches or you will lose it in the first bout!"

"Accept my thanks for that reminder," Jon japed back. "I have my hopes that she would direct her attention elsewhere."

Tormund's laughter was a roar, as he bade Sigorn of Thenn to him. The latter sauntered towards the clanlord, short stabbing-spear in hand. "Placed my bet on Val," the Mead-king said in between fits of hilarity. "Good ale from the Harbor is hard to come by these days, mind yeh. We've stopped raiding the villages a couple of moons back."
Sigorn snorted. "I hope you have my flagons ready," he turned his attention to Jon. "The Lord Crow here knows he has to win. Not to mention, Val isn't at all armored."

Jon raised his brows in naked alarm.

Val appeared from the crowd of spearwives with her usual accoutrements of white tunic and woolen breeches tucked into high boots of white leather. She removed the thick ermine cloak that covered her frame, set it on the dais where the northern lords sat. Then, she took two short-handled battleaxes from one of the women and marched calmly to the center where Jon was already waiting.

The lad sighed helplessly.

"Start moving, Jon!" he heard Jaqen's voice from a sea of others. He was standing beside a clearly entertained Aegeus below the keep's bridge. "The bouts cannot be too long, or you will hurt her severely!"

She's unarmored, Jon thought, as his mind spun uncontrollably. *I told her to don those black boiled leather clads. She didn't listen to me.* Confusion settled as he weighed which tactic to use—should he hit her with the flat of his blade on her strong legs, and pray that she falls so he may pin her on the ground? Should he cut a bit of her pretty hair so he may steal her focus away, then proceed to shackle her entire body with his arms? Should he thwart her series of attacks only, hope that she tires herself to the point of surrender—

*Swish!*

Val had thrown a double-bladed boomerang right at him, drawing first blood from a small portion of the skin on his face. The weapon spun in spiral motions, sliced through the air in a curve with its flight perfectly tuned, before returning to its thrower. Val caught the weapon by the center elbow. Already, the tip of the blade had Jon's rich scarlet imprinted on it.

Mad cheers erupted from the side of the wildlings.

Arya's words drowned the din all over. *The only way to show your respect for her is to give her a proper fight.*

Jon clenched his teeth, gripped his sword tightly, as he prepared for the wildling princess' looming attack.

What had transpired afterwards registered as a series of chaotic scenes to Jon.

*Clang!*

The blades of her short axes connected with the edge of his steel. With dexterity, her hands commanded her weapon, attempted to strike him on all sides. A voice cried out far to his right and he whirled to see her left axe almost severing his arm. Jon brought his own blade across his body to thwart another one of her strikes. He dropped into a crouch and raised his weapon over his head as Val carried on with her calm yet forceful assails. His sword caught her right axe's blade, deflecting a charge.

It took all his might to push the blade away and have Val backing a couple of steps. The wildling princess exhaled in ire at having her advances thwarted. They circled each other, calculating how to proceed with their attacks.

Jon gave the princess a disarming smile, smoothly lifting his weapon across his chest lest she decides to charge once more. "You're so very beautiful today, Val," he remarked. He backed a step upon
seeing her approach, then realized that it was a feigned attack meant to test his defenses. "Those vestments of yours suit you well."

A scoff. "You think you can charm your way out of this, Lord Crow?" she wielded her short axes in motions gyrating, but her eyes were all over him as if assaying his possible points of weakness, his open areas, his dominant strategies. "Best keep your mouth shut so you may save your strength for later."

"Ah, yes," Jon grinned. "I could hardly wait for later, Val. This Lord Crow has spent his entire night planning for later."

Val's eyes grew at the lad's suggestive pronouncements, then narrowed in rage.

She charged once more, her blade flashing at Jon's face. He ducked to one side, his right hand snapping up to grasp her wrist, pushing away the axe. The handle of her other axe almost hammered a glancing blow along his temple but he was quick to evade it, sliding to the opposite direction. He reared upright and drew Oathkeeper to the center guard position.

They circled each other once more.

"You're holding back," Val observed, and Jon could tell that she wasn't at all pleased with the realization. "This is not a fair fight, Lord Crow."

"Holding back? Oh no, no," Jon replied. "No battle could ever be won by restraint. You know what they say," he raised his steel just in time to fend off two more attacks from her. "Love is a great leap to the unknown, there is hardly any time to hold back."

Jarring sounds of warring steels pervaded the entire courtyard, with the fibers of the sounds' aftermath entwining themselves with the array of reactions from lords and wildlings alike. Val's litheness and the mastery she has of her own weapons equaled Jon's dexterity—it was as if she can anticipate Jon's attacks even before he could fully conceive them. However, her propulsions had changed at the last of the lad's words; they have become more raging, more combative. Confuse her by interspersing phrases of romance during the fight? Jon recalled Aegeus and Jaqen's advice. She only went rabid on me!

In all intermediate directions, he deflected Val's charges, blocking her axe blades with his own steel, assailing only when he had to force her to retreat for a few seconds so he may gain his momentum.

"Ah!" Jon exclaimed and held his shoulder. The edge of the princess' blade had sliced through his leather clads and had wounded him. Blood gushed from him. It was true—he was holding back from hurting her, yet here she was, determined to inflict serious injury upon him, if not slaughter him altogether. She didn't armor herself on purpose, Jon thought. She knew I would practice care should I see her battle-naked.

He gazed at her with imploring eyes—a manipulation, as he warded off another one of her blitz of assailments. "Why are we even doing this to each other, Val?" he asked, donning that face of torment. Clang! He narrowly missed a strike on his chest—the leather garbs did not aid him much, what with Val's heavy weaponry. "Do you truly wish for me to die a second time?"

Val blinked athrice at those words.

The warrior princess fumbled for a proper response. Color drained from her lovely face as she beheld Jon from crown to sole even as she wielded her axes in all the proper angles and ranges; and mayhaps she had recalled too, how she had wept when his body was about to be burned in the pyre.
The red priestess had told her that her tears had somehow woken up the lad and had summoned him again to the realm of the living.

She carried on with her swift attacks, he parried them.

And why did he die again?

Ah, of course. In the verily justifiable opinions of Bowen Marsh and the others that participated in the mutiny at Castle Black, Jon had broken his vows. For the Watch, were their words as they stabbed him in the gut, at the back, on both sides of him. He had risked his own life—lost it, in fact—for her free folk clans' sake. And they've built a great wall through my valleys, and fished all the fish from my rills. If Jon Snow had not lived, and the old gods that reside in the Weirwoods have elected to claim him like they do fallen acorn seeds, what would have happened to the lot of them, especially to those who had once dwelled in Hardhome?

Simple, the wildling princess thought. We would all have become food for Winter.

The next thing she knew was the agonizing pain along her wrists and her hands surrendering her battle-axes even without her willing them to do so. Jon had disarmed her, and before she could recover and retrieve her weapons, she had felt her back against the ground, cold and damp with trace of snow…and Jon's lips lightly brushing hers.

The whole courtyard was astir.

He pressed his lips harder against hers, stealing wind from her lungs. The din of cheering men all over became nothing but a whorl of confusing sounds to her, their acts, a whole disorienting display. Everything seemed to have faded, slowed…and her eyes were wide open—this was betrayal, screamed her innermost, to take possession of her in front of her clan when the victor in their duel is yet to be determined. However, to push him away, to moan her remonstrance, such acts had seemed at the moment, senseless.

"Enough of this, spearwife," Jon whispered against her mouth. "You've been stolen."

Breathing had become suddenly inconsequential. Who needs air when here he is, her very source of it?

Why of course, perhaps…perhaps, she's a little bit in love with him.

"Dear gods," Jon murmured, letting his eyes cruise to every part of her face. "I want to shatter you in the most beautiful way possible."

Val trembled at his words. She had never heard him speak like this—he was always severe in his musings, too refined, too cultured, too…honorable. She had japed one time how she would love Jon Snow to steal her in her bed, and he only ignored the intimation. Yet now…

"Death certainly taught you a lot of things," she whispered back. "I don't know whether to be pleased or…"

"Be pleased," he muttered. "Be happy, my wildling-to-the-bone. While we're still here, while we still can."

Jon stood and helped her up, brushed the damp dirt that had clung to her breeches of white. "This is embarrassing," Val said, her eyes wandering all over the courtyard yet avoiding the faces that reflected a thousand and one emotions. Her suddenly meek eyes settled on the snow-laden ground. "I lost, though I tried my very best. You might think me weak now, or unworthy—"
"Shush, shush," Jon sheathed Oathkeeper, then held her face. "I would never think that."

Their silent conversation was disturbed by five guards. "Lord Stark!" called one. "A cavalry of five hundred men by the South Gate!"

"Sigils?" Jon queried, releasing Val for a moment and motioning so Jaqen would come to him. "Brother," he called. The Lorathi did as he requested.

"Sable, a dragon thrice-headed," replied the captain of the guards. "Targaryen, my lord."

Lord Wyman and Lady Maege promptly rose from their seats and headed towards Jon. Ser Davos wasted no time assembling the troops to fortify the gates, and with him were Lord Galbart and Lord Mors. Tormund the Mead-king was assessing the information in wordlessness, weighing whether or not the guards' words were true. He gestured to Sigorn of Thenn to warn the clans of what may be an unpleasant situation.

"Masqueraders?" Lord Wyman offered his doubt. "Why would anyone of those mad-bloods even ride to the North?"

Dragons do not bother with introductions.

Thereupon, a jade-green firebeast appeared out of nowhere, its wings carving out horrendous magnificence in the air, its screech resounding to as far as the deep woods and erasing all traces of disbelief amongst the ones gathered there. Intense panic and ruckus filled the whole courtyard, and the castle seemed to shudder at the impact of the firebeast's presence. "Dragon!" came the cries of those gathered. "To the dungeons! The crypts!"

"Ho!" Jaqen called. "Everyone, calm down! Arya!" he called to his wife, who had already rushed towards the South Gate. "Damn it." He ran after her, charging the master of arms to assist Ser Davos, shouting futile words of reassurance to pacify lords and free folks scampering in all courses. "Arya!" he still called, but the woman was unheeding.

There was no snowfall that morn, yet Jon shivered at the dragon's appearance. They are supposed to be heartless, dreadful, the lad thought as his eyes locked upon the beast's scales of verdigris. Yet, there is a certain goodness to them, an innocence even. Its beauty was the kind that unhinges, and Jon knew that its heart cannot at all be bound, and that the skies in all realms will never be enough to host the magic it carries within its perfect, glistening form. Jon sighed in awe as he beheld the dragon's eyes—brighter than polished shields, and they glow with their own heat.

The dragon knew him, and he knew it. There is no other wise decipherment to it all but one—this is fate.

Flashes of memories long gone invaded Jon's consciousness.

*The valiant one, who died in the green banks of the Trident...*

"Rhaegal."

The jade-green dragon circled the firmaments for a while, partly shielding Winterfell's walls and strongholds from the blinding sun, before flying to the direction of the White Knife.

"Jaehaerys the Conciliator," Bran's voice pierced through the lad's legion of thoughts. He was still seated near the dais despite the upheaval all over, and though the boy was far, his voice broke through Jon sharply. He knew that name which the boy had used to label him, yet he did not. "Jon," Bran's lips were closed yet an outpour of phrases rushed from him and with these are revelations,
stories untold, promises kept, confessions upon confessions. "The dragon has three heads. The third has arrived."

He found himself running towards the South Gate.

Jaqen was already there with Arya, and with them was Ser Davos and around three hundred infantrymen. Archers were positioned along the arrowloops of the battlements. The iron portcullis remained shut.

"Who goes there?!" queried Jon as he rushed to position himself in front of the infantry. He ignored Ser Davos's advise that he should remain behind the captain of the guards. Hastily, he removed Oathkeeper from its scabbard, stood firm and awaited the response of whoever might be on the other side of the gate.

"Jon, it's me!"

It was the voice of Samwell Tarly.

He could not be mistaken about that voice—it was the only one he trusted in his banished life in the Wall, the only one he would ever trust. It was the voice of a craven turned wight-slayer. He's back from the Citadel? Jon thought, and his heart leaped at the thought, even as his logical side warned him to don that cloak of distrust, to ask questions about his arrival. Did he truly ride with the Targaryens? Did he turn over to the side of conquerors, abandon his sworn oath as a brother of the Night's Watch?

Is that truly Sam on the other side?

"Gilly is here, with the baby," the voice from the other side spoke, as if hearing Jon's presentiments. Proofs had become inconsequential.

"Raise the gates!" Jon commanded, casting aside all disquietude and doubt.

True enough, as the iron rails of the portcullis left the ground, there stood Sam on the other side. There he was, in front of a cavalry carrying heraldic gonfalons of a greathouse he knew only from the writings of maesters and the tales of Old Nan.

A mystifying surge of hisses echoed within the walls of his head as he beheld the red dragon with three heads imprinted upon the ebony.

Truth…light…

Scales a tenfold shield…

Wings a hurricane…

…fire in ice.

Fire and Blood.

He walked towards Sam, yet his gaze was fixated upon the banners that were as familiar to him as the argent one, with a direwolf courant cendrée; its words as familiar to him as Winter is Coming.

"Jon!" Sam broke into a run and threw his arms around the lad. His voice was breaking as he spoke. "I thought Bowen…and the others…"
"They failed, good friend," was Jon's reply, as he forced himself to look away from those sigils. He smiled as he crushed Sam's burly frame with his arms. "Thank the gods they failed."

At these words they both laughed, and stopped only when Sam signaled to a man on his left. "Jon, do you recall Lord Jeor's telling about…"

"My Lord Stark," the man quickly knelt, swordtip on the ground in an act of veneration. "Jorah Mormont, exiled. Imploring your gracious pardons, your acceptance, though if you wish to banish me once more, then I shall deal with the fate I am given." He stood and handed Jon the scroll containing his royal pardon from Robert Baratheon's own handwriting, but his head was the facing the ground.

Jon knew Jorah Mormont from Eddard's stories—he sold poachers to Tyroshi slavers when he could not anymore fund the lavish requests of his Lynesse, and fled to Essos when he was to be executed through the liege lord's sword. Lord Jeor spoke of him with contempt, though in his deepest, Jon knew that the old man was crushed by the fate of his eldest, and desired nothing but to see him once more, a thing as impossible now as ravens turning gold.

"What have you for us, Ser Jorah?" Jon's tone was very neutral as he perused the scroll's contents. The rule to Bear Island remains to be Lady Maege's by birthright, since the heir apparent was banished though pardoned. Jon knew he must choose his words well. "You have been absolved of your crimes by acting as spy against the Targaryen who calls herself queen, yet you brought her here, despite what I do not doubt is full knowledge on your part that the North is sworn to Stannis."

"Stannis is dead, Lord Stark," came another voice from the crowd.

Tyrion Lannister walked towards the gathered men, his half-man's built casting a large shadow against the snow-carpeted ground.

Jon turned his attention to Sam. "You brought a Lannister exile here?!"

"He brought my Lannister husband here," replied Sansa who was now marching towards them, both hands clutching her longskirts. Her eyes that hosted all vague thoughts and feels remained on Tyrion's face. The half-man's expression was neutral, yet his irises revealed to her his concealed emotions that were far from dispassionate. "I see that you have received my message, Tyrion," she said as she paused to stand beside Arya.

"Lady Sansa," the Imp inclined his head in a show of respect. "As duties would dictate."

"You care very little about duties, we both know that, Tyrion," Sansa remarked, her heart being clenched tightly by her deep want for that one response from him. "I didn't ask you to come, yet you did."

"Ah!" Tyrion chuckled, then cursed inwardly at the knots twisting in his gut asudden. To burn with desire and to keep quiet about it, as the pretty prince always says, the Imp thought, but he was gifted at hiding truths, especially those that concern his deep-seated affections. "I've been taught to read between the words of any missive. You needed me to come."

Sansa's lip tipped up in a soft smile. "Very obedient, as I can see."

"A husband must serve," Tyrion tried to sound sarcastic. Instead, what came out of his lips were hints of guilelessness, the desire to truly own his vows in the eyes of the Seven, when he had cloaked her under his protection. "Threats are everywhere—dragons, wights…” he cleared his throat. "Men such as myself, which is why you had to run away—"
"We can carry on with this bitterness of yours in the keep, in closed chambers," Sansa declared, her face stern. "This matter is between me and you."

It was certainly too much to take in, and Jon could hardly keep up with the arrivals and the exchange of phrases that came with them. It was as if he was left out on matters of importance, and he couldn't stand it. "Where did you get this deceiving news about King Stannis's death?" he asked Tyrion, and decided to suspend formalities for the latter part. He couldn't bear to draw his sword across his knees and deny the Lannister half-man the guest right that was due him, for there was Sansa to think about.

Still, there was another voice.

"All two hundred and forty-five banners—heart gules enflamed, stag's head sable crowned of the field, all half-burnt—those were sent straight to Dragonstone by Euron Greyjoy. Stannis Baratheon lost the battle at the capital."

Jon turned to look at the source of those words, and saw only himself.

Except that he has silver-hair and purple eyes. And those purple eyes shifted to dark and blue at a certain angle of sun's incandescence.

The lad disembarked from his steed and held tightly his plain bearskin cloak that served as protection from the icy winds. Despite this act that spoke only of discomfort, the lad's movements were still eloquent, august, very regal, yet they were absolutely unrehearsed, too—as if it was intuition that guided him to move in such a lofty way. He was spontaneous yet calculating. That prince, Jon immediately thought, and knew immediately who he was. Sixth of his Name.

However, as Jon had realized, he was far from the warlike, ruthless, dragonriding conqueror that Stannis had painted through words. His raiments were plainer than those of Winterfell's smiths and his manners and acts, though stately, were forthright and unfeigned.

More than this, more than this was a realization too true to dismiss. Two thorns of the same thistle, and Jon felt his blood leap at the full sight of this lad. A connection, an alchemy of undeniable kindredship, the threads of destiny that bind them to each other.

A mirror to me, Jon thought as the lad stepped closer. A witness, a midnight companion. These, amidst legions of breathing souls and numberless infinities.

But who is he, truly?

There they stood, face to face, neither one breathing a word.

Finally, Aegon the Sixth Targaryen broke through the silence.

"Jaehaerys Stark Targaryen," he named him. "Jon."

Then, his gaze slid past him, landing upon one other's face. Aegon the Sixth smiled like one lovelorn fool.

"Arya Stark."

They all gathered in the Great Hall, with Jon seated at the edge of the table atop the dais where the liege lord's place is, Bran on a chair to his right. Arya sat with Sansa on one of the tables intended for
guests, and Sansa kept on shushing Rickon's queries about the silver-haired lad that had paid them a most unexpected visit. Jaqen stood next to Ser Davos, leaning against one of the wooden posts with his calm eyes directed towards Aegon the Sixth. The lad was then in the midst of a staring game with Jon, seemingly unmindful of Tyrion Lannister who had just entered the hall with two of the Prince's men, a small dray of obsidian in tow.

Samwell Tarly struggled to keep a straight face, attempting his best to get a read of everyone. Beside him was Ser Jorah whose expression betrayed nothing. The vassal lords and free folks who witnessed the stealing were enraged at having been dismissed at the arrival of what they supposed is a Targaryen claimant, but the liege lord was unyielding. "Two dragons we have sighted here in Winterfell," Lord Glover said. "I believe we are owed an explanation, and an assurance." Jon provided them the assurance right then and there. "Order, my lords," he had told them. "On matters as this one, the lords and ladies of the greathouse receive the guest. This gathering goes beyond political matters, I can assure you this." Despite their vehement protestations, there was nothing the lords and the clan leaders could do but to adhere to the system's dictates, with demands that they be informed immediately of the proceedings.

"Towards the center of the hall, please," was Aegon's serene command to the men, his purple eyes never leaving Jon's. "Let the Lord Stark have a look."

Jon did not move at all, made clear his dispassion towards the Prince's show of favor. "Where did you dig it up?" His voice was cold, guarded.

"Dragonmont," Aegon replied. "It was Stannis who ordered Rolland Storm to do the digging." He turned to Davos. "Despite his key role in the rebellion, I must say that the king you serve was an honorable man, Ser. Duty above all else, and sadly that led to his demise in the capital."

"He's not dead," Davos clenched his teeth in response. "Stannis could never be defeated in battle, unless Tywin Lannister has decided to rise from his damnable catacomb and defend the city's gates with his Lannister hounds."

"Uh, ravens have just arrived, Ser," Samwell interjected albeit reluctantly and walked towards the knight to hand him the scroll. "Maester Mullin of this castle confirmed it." Davos grabbed the scroll and quickly skimmed through its contents. A forlorn shadow showed itself upon his mien as his eyes moved from left to right of the parchment.

"Where's Daenerys?" Jaqen asked.

Aegon shifted his attention to the Lorathi. "She holds Dragonstone as we speak. Daario Naharis is with her, Ser Barristan too, and my trusted friend, Connington. Ironborns and Lannisters to the West, Valyrian warlords to the east. You understand siege and conquest; we cannot leave the Stone and the Stormlands vulnerable or our efforts would be put to utter waste—"

"Your efforts!" Davos bellowed in anguish, hurling the scrolled message forcefully to the lit hearth. "You and that Targaryen kith of yours! Your efforts of reliving your dark days as tyrants, playing Aegon-the-Conqueror-rides-his-dragons-and-sisters all over again, as if we haven't had enough of wars and dead yet!"

"In the event of Stannis's death, the rule passes on to Princess Shireen," Jon declared, in an effort to pacify Davos and challenge Aegon's claims. His expression remained hard and neutral, though his mind has not wrapped itself fully around the fact of the king's impossible defeat. "The throne was taken by the Baratheons from your kin through righteous rebellion, and so Baratheons must sit on the throne." His eyes cruised to Tyrion's face. "Not Lannisters," then back to Aegon. "And certainly not Targaryens. The sickening reign of dragons had ended decades ago."
"Yet here you stand, forgive me," Tyrion Lannister remarked with amusement, as he assayed Jon from crown to sole though not with hostility. "A dragon-wolf-bred, ruling the North, preserving what was left of the wildlings, rebuilding the Night's Watch."

Jon gritted his teeth at the Imp's words, his hand curling up into a fist. "I am not a dragon-wolf-bred."

Aegon's smile was kind, encouraging. "Oh, but you are."

Jon growled as a surge of anger enveloped his entirety.

He dashed towards Aegon the Sixth and grabbed the collar of his shift, shook him with all of the force he could muster. Still, the Prince was tranquil despite Jon's outbursts, and that enraged the latter all the more. "Don't you dare brand me that way, you don't have the right!" came his indignant words. "You don't come in here with your fancy firebeast and an obsidian peace-offering, and accuse me of being one with you and your murderous lot!"

"Stop this foolishness now, Jaehaerys," Aegon mildly admonished him in the midst of frantic voices, and Jon widened his eyes at the charge, for he sounded so much, so very much like Robb. Like an older brother, an unwelcomed thought seeped through him, inflaming him beyond control.

His fist connected with Aegon's face. Jaqen and Ser Jorah rushed towards them both, separated them from each other. "You're not my brother!" Jon pointed a forefinger at him, and the finger was quivering with fury. He brushed off Jaqen's hold of his shoulder. "My father is Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell, not that gutless Prince who abducted and raped my father's sister, spurred that damnable rebellion that killed thousands!"

"Jon," Arya called to him as she rose. "Do calm down, this is not just a baseless inference." She walked to where he was standing and cupped his cheek, her thumb caressing it softly, containing his shudders and rage. "Forgive me, Jon," Arya whispered. "But perhaps in his words, there lies the truth. Give it your thoughts."

Jon laughed rancorously, directing his gaze at Arya. "Stop this inanity, I beg of you."

Arya shook her head softly, rested her temple on Jon's chin.

Bran spoke. "You knew about it. The crypts, Jon, you visited the crypts after your death. You saw something there, I know you did."

_Somewhere, I know I have to go down there, but I'm afraid of what might be waiting for me._

He had spoken about the crypts with Samwell Tarly more than once, how he'd dreamed of hearing Ned's voice and Robb's, and a woman calling to him, bidding him to open her tomb. He did, despite the strong and stern faces of those Stark kings that seemed to have their dead eyes set upon him, screaming perchance despite their voicelessness that he doesn't belong there.

"It doesn't prove anything," Jon hissed at Bran and broke away from Arya's hold. "It's nothing but a damned harp!"

Aegon smiled, even as he was brushing the blood from the side of his lip. "A harp. Let me guess—golden pillared, silver-stringed? With a dragon's head at the crown and dragon's claw by the pedals?"

"Close your mouth," Jon seethed. "Or it's my father's sword unsheathed upon my knees!"

"Jon," Samwell finally interjected, his craven voice now more resolute. "You have sent me to the Citadel to fulfill a duty to the Night's Watch. You are my lord commander then, I obeyed your
orders. I have spent moons there," his eyes cruised to Jaqen, as if silently dreading the Lorathi’s presence. "Met...people, saw things, almost got myself killed during the sacking of the Ironborns. Hear me for once, Jon." He paused, though very sure of how to proceed. "They thought you dead after the siege has been lifted, close to the rebellion's conclusion," he held up the scroll containing Maester Malleon's writings on lineages. "Lyanna and Rhaegar were married and had a child—"

"I do not care if they were married or if they did it in hell, damn it!" Jon bellowed, and his anger was now directed towards Sam. "I do not care if that accursed union of them plagued this realm with another child! It does not concern me, it does not prove any damned thing about who I am!"

"Dare you not utter those words of ingratitude," Aegon's tone was suddenly severe, as if signaling that he was done with Jon's denial and acrimony. Aegon strode nearer to him. "Three kingsguards were sent to that tower for you, soldiers fought to their graves for you, father died murmuring your mother's name and thinking about you, how to protect you from the Usurper while Elia was being raped and Rhaenys was being dragged away from her young's cradle," he shook his head and his eyes were full of anguish. Jon almost broke at his sudden despondence which he only tried to conceal beneath a hard façade. "And for you to deny him like this, to refuse to heed anyone?! Who taught you the damnable ways of an ingrate?!"

Jon felt his eyes burn with grief.

_I am a Stark..._ he persuaded himself. _A Stark._

And _he is._

Just not...Eddard's son unlike what he had believed all his life.

A concealed identity, that which he never wished to learn about himself yet he had relentlessly dreamed about every night, had now revealed itself unto him.

And it was damned painful to swallow.

He surveyed each face in the hall, his eyes lingering upon Aegon's face then settling upon Arya's. _These faces_, Jon recalled his slumber-induced visions back in the Wall. _Lyanna's face... Rhaegar's... _

_It cannot be._

Without another word, he stormed out of the hall, slamming the double threshold shut behind him.

Jaqen found him by the godswood, whetting Oathkeeper beside the black pool. The Lorathi observed how forcefully he pushed the blade against the fine grit of the whetting stone, unmindful of the angles, of the proper process—two or three light strokes should do it, but the lad seemed to want the steel to break with his sharpening, and the stone along with it. He was grunting at the effort, and of this too he was unaware.

The Lorathi leaned against the the trunk of a ten-year old sentinel, watching as the lad carried on with his unmethodical honing. "Turn the blade over, place the bevel side down," Jaqen offered. "Hold it at the same angle as used when whetting on the rough side of the stone."

"I know how to hone blades," Jon retorted. He tested the sharpness of the edge, held the blade where good light would shine on it. He was unsatisfied with the result, and so he hurled the whetting stone
towards a soldier pine and thrust Oathkeeper against the ground of snow and dirt in repressed fury. He looked up at Jaqen. "Did my beloved sister send you here?"

"A man came here on his own volition," Jaqen replied calmly, then walked towards where Jon was sitting. "May I?" he asked, motioning to the overgrown Weirwood root used for sitting. The lad felt his jaw harden, yet he nodded at the Lorathi's behest. "Must be too much to take in, this whole thing about your Targaryen brother."

"He's not my brother, has never been," Jon spat, eyes aflame once more. "Robb, Bran, Rickon, the faithful ones of the Night's Watch, now those are the men whom I could call brothers," he heaved a sigh. "And you as well, if you'd just stop being such an annoying arse, and think twice before believing that Targaryen's cursed falsehoods."

Jaqen only smiled softly. For minutes, there was only the rustling sound of half-frozen oak and ash leaves, the soft ripples of the black pool which Winter was not able to touch.

Jon broke through the quietness that gradually made them both ill at ease.

"Father would have told me, had it been true," he said. "There's no sense hiding it from me, not when it had everything to do with Lyanna, not when he knew fully that his ties with his lady wife would face the risk of being severed. It just…it doesn't make sense."

"It makes perfect sense, as a man sees," Jaqen replied. "Aegon the Sixth has mentioned it too, it had to be done for your own protection. A man actually finds it amusing, this entire order of precedence which you Westerosi follow; we have such versions in Essos yet they are not as strict as what you practice in this land."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jon retorted. "And frankly, I don't care."

"Perhaps you might," Jaqen replied. "You might have been told once about the kingsguards that were at the tower, yes? There are many places where they might have been otherwise: with Aerys, with Rhaegar, or if the two were already dead, then they should have been in Dorne with Aegon the Sixth."

"Aegon the Sixth was presumed dead after the rebellion, Jaqen," Jon said. "The kingsguards had to be in Dragonstone, you mean, with Viserys Targaryen. He's next in line to the throne if all of Rhaegar's children had been killed, in the presumptions of most."

"But they weren't in Dragonstone, were they?" Jaqen queried, eyes intent upon Jon. "Those kingsguards were with Lyanna Stark in that tower, which means that whoever was with her in that tower was more important than Viserys Targaryen, if not the most important at that moment. Chain of command, brother—rule of the king must be passed on to the surviving son. You know it better than an Essosi like myself."

Jon scoffed bitterly. "It still does not confirm anything."

"Of course, it doesn't. But you can always revisit the crypts, you can always skim through Malleon's scrolls, and listen to your good friend, Sam."

Jon stood, shaking his head at Jaqen. The hostile temperament, the earlier irascibility was gone, replaced with incredulity at the Lorathi's motivations. "Why the hell are you forcing this, Jaqen?"

"A man is not forcing anything, Jon," the Lorathi answered. "What a man needs you to understand is one truth only: that you cannot forever deny this. You have told me once how you desired to be seen as a trueborn, to be treated like one. People fail to see you for who you are, for what you are worth.
Yet now, you are no different from them—you cannot accept your own flesh and thews, your own roots, those who have breathed in you life."

"I thought you hate that Prince," Jon spat.

"I do, I don't even want him near Arya," Jaqen replied. "But the more Night draws near, the more I see sense in Arya's words. Keeping the pride, not admitting to our need for one another would never get us anywhere. It could even get us all killed."

"You can never persuade me, my disbelief is as unswerving as my beliefs," Jon said, with a voice less adamant than it was before, as if he was convincing his own heart with those words. "I have nothing to gain by admitting to a lie, or if by some form of cosmic impossibility Malleon's writings and Aegon's claim hold truth in them, they could only present complications I do not wish to deal with. I have a war to fight against the Undead. I don't have time for this."

"All of us, Jon, we don't have time for this. There are creatures of fire and creatures of ice, demons and gods, battles that must be won. We are in need of a lot—forces, obsidian, dragons. What did the chief of the ice-river clans report through ravens recently, do tell?"

"Damn it," Jon muttered under his breath. Despite his attempts to dismiss it as speculation, despite his pursuit to not rouse from the clans unnecessary panic, there was only one explanation to the giant cracks seen on the Wall, particularly in the Nightfort and Woodswatch-by-the-Pool. A monster that breathes ice, he thought, and shuddered a little at what the cave-dwellers have recounted—Winter had gone so cold that they could not even keep the woodfire aflame for more than a few minutes. Already, some free folks are asking to be allowed to leave Oakenshield and the Gift, and settle south instead. Every night they hear those murmurations in the Old Tongue, a sign that wights feeding on blood are nigh; and children are being killed by the blasting winds of winter which carry in them a hellish kind of chill, that which seeps through the lines dividing between the bones and the marrows.

Winter is slowly sapping life out of men—Valar Morghulis.

"There's another way to sort out truths from lies," Jaqen said after assaying that the length of silence between them was enough. "We ride for the Wall tomorrow."

"To do what? The wildling clans would never lie about something like this," Jon said.

"A man is not speaking of the colossal beast beneath the Wall," the Lorathi corrected him. "We all know that fourscore centuries, a whole epoch of waiting is enough. Time is now ripe—what slumbers will soon wake and not even the gods can stop it."

Jon sighed, shook his head at the madness they would have to face. "So, which truth, which lie?"

"That of your descent." Jaqen raised his head to the skies, and closed his eyes as if sensing the presence of one other creature bonded to him. "If that dragon Rhaegal responds to your summoning, then all incertitude must be effaced."

Jon snorted, amused eyes directed towards the Lorathi. Hells, he wants me to call that firebeast, as if it's nothing but a friendly steed twice exaggerated in some mad rider's poetry.

"Dragons are legends and legends are time," Jaqen whispered, eyes still closed. He inhaled the wintry air sharply. Perchance, in so doing, he might be able to see and feel and taste what lies deep in the Heart of Winter, and thus realize altogether how to surmount and quell it—for good. "There are many kinds of hypocrites, brother. Howbeit, the greatest hypocrite of all is a man who claims that he does not want to fight beside a dragon."
All of a sudden, jade green and dark gold bathed the entirety of the godswood, and perhaps the whole stretch of the great castle and the lands that surround it desired to witness these creatures with profoundness—their glitters and glories, their elegance. Jon's stared at the heavens, mesmerized, even as the leaves of heart trees, the ash, and ironwoods partly obscured his view. *Maester Aemon said they're genderless,* the lad thought. *They could create more of themselves just by existing.*

**Is anything more breathtaking in this world than dragons?**

One response echoed in the recesses of his mind like a thunderbolt of understanding:

*Soaring with them, possibly?*

They were myths leaping out from crumbling pages of old and Jon watched, in the midst of awed laughter, how Heraxos chased Rhaegal in the expanse of the firmaments which they owned, how their screeches which are nothing short of terrifying for most continued to beguile him, how their wings toyed with Winter's wind—defying it, provoking its wrath, challenging its assumed dominion. The intense radiance of their reptilian scales almost blinded his eyes...jewels, gold, treasures, Jon told himself, they make their lair out of these.

His admiring gaze followed their trail, memorized each detail of them—the beauty in those horns and spines and wing-claws and those spades on their tails, their movements that mirrored impossible spirals and whorls, the verdigris and aurelian clashing against the immaculate frost. The lad ran to the center of the grove, sounds of blithe upon his lips.

Those two firebeasts ensphered the heavens before flying away to the dense woodlands with bears and elks aplenty.

He ran towards Jaqen and gripped his shoulders, shook him with controlled excitation. "How in hell were you able to do that!!" came his delighted query and he sounded so much like a boy, he realized, as he pondered through the agelessness of what he had just seen, though it wasn't at all the first time. "Just...you close your eyes, and...they appear? Just like that? How did you, Jaqen?"

"You tell me," Jaqen replied with a chuckle. "Dragon-wolf-bred, as Sansa's husband had so eloquently put it."

The appellation carried less sting to it now, it wasn't anymore that hidden beast of the self morphing into something that would only suffocate him. Or maybe it was because that unwelcome agnomen came from Jaqen H'ghar—a man whom Jon holds in high esteem, a reflection of a fallen Self he knew yet did not, akin to a smoldering stone that had appeared from the sky just when he thought that vanquishing Winter is as elusive as him waking from death through salt and smoke.

"I need you, Jon," the Lorathi finally said, placing his hand gently on the lad's shoulder. "I need dragonriders. And you need me too, I suppose. Dragons must be awoken out of stone."

He responded with a sigh of resignation, of half-acceptance.

"The Wall on the morrow, but not without Arya."

The Lorathi blinked athrice, surprised with the lad's impositions. "You, me, Aegon the Sixth. There's Sam. As for Tyrion Lannister, well, we cannot just leave him here. The Cerwyns will waste no time reporting to the other Northern lords that their Imp is in the castle and the liege lord has packed his rucksack for the Wall. But no Arya, please."

"You have not spoken to each other for days," Jon voiced out his observations. "You hardly ever look at each other, you feel awkward around her and she feels suspicious of you—these are not very
good signs, Jaqen."

"Says the man who had just stolen a spearwife mere hours ago," Jaqen teased.

Jon smiled, albeit sadly. "I know Arya," he said. "You lose her once, you lose her forever. Trust is her fundament. You see, this family had faced betrayals of unthinkable kind and so she needed to keep guard of herself and the ones that matter the most to her. Brother, I do not wish to ask you what happened between you two."

The Lorathi fell silent.

Of course, Arya would recoil after that body-shattering sex he's had with her some nights ago. He remembered how very famished he was of her snow-soft, impeccable built, how he needed to suck the soul out of her lips and out of the abyss of her femaleness, how he desired to not, never stop pushing and pulling his ruthless self inside her. But he lost it when she started prying into things she should just leave alone. She deserved more than that, Jaqen knew, and he also understood in a sense how he's been losing control over himself these past weeks. Not that he could ever resist taking Arya, the gods know how very vulnerable his defenses become whenever she's near, how very inevitable it was for him to grow hard even when it's only a whiff of her winter petals-scented body he's smelling.

These many nights too, he had been dreaming of children; and may he be damned if he wouldn't admit to himself that he's obsessed with the thought of seeing Arya's belly transform into his babe's alcove. He wanted to fill her with all that he is, create life with her, mark her forever as his own and his only, as if he was consumed by both wild infatuation and unprincipled, wicked possessiveness. The shuddersome part of the dream is this: those beings coming out of Arya as he was witnessing her giving birth were not breathing little ones at all, but wights.

Damn it, the Lorathi cursed inwardly. How very convenient that Aegon the Sixth has arrived, now of all times, when our relationship is being perturbed at the very least by forces we could not even name.

"I…I've hurt her," Jaqen admitted. "I tried asking for forgiveness and regaining her affections, she… she's shutting me out."

"Is there another woman involved, brother?"

Jaqen was rammed to the core by Jon's bold query. There is, the Lorathi's soul howled. A goddess—the Nissa's counterpart, many-faced, death, winter, malevolence.

"No," Jaqen lied.

Jon regarded the Lorathi with narrowed eyes, yet he nodded his acceptance. He looked around the godswood and fixed his attention to the Weirwood's face. "Renew your vows to her."

"Vows?"

"Your marriage vows," Jon said, eyes cruising to Jaqen's face. "I don't know how you did it in Essos—maybe you broke the brown bread with her or presented her with a rare necklace of whale teeth so she may take you as her spouse, or sacrificed a goat to the gods you worship in the east so they may bless your marriage. I don't know if you did it the Valyrian way, whatever that is. But up here, we swear by the Weirwood and beseech the old gods to witness the union." Jon settled his palm on the heart tree's mien. "Eddard is in every space of this godswood—this is his turf. He's one with the Weirwoods now, and I am certain he would want to see you making your solemn promises known to
his daughter right here."

Jaqen pursed his lips, assessed Jon's intentions. The lad was bound and determined to make him acquiesce.

_We were married a thousand years back_, the Lorathi reminded himself. _In that sacred confluence where we partook of our own blood, performed the charge to unite the Rhoynar and the Valyrian. The red god and the old gods have forgotten their enmity that very night at the River Krylst_. Yet a taint had presented itself in their marriage when he bargained with the death god for another cycle, and six more; and it's ruining them both in the realm of both the material and immaterial. Trust is Arya's fundament, and he must prove once more that she can, she _must_ trust him.

And there's Aegon the Sixth too, another man with whom Arya has undeniable, almost unbreakable connection.

"Arya, she…" Jon began. "She means so much to me, Jaqen—to all of us. We want to be truly assured that you will take care of her."

Jaqen decided.

"Right here," the Lorathi finally said, exhaling sharply. "Tonight."

Tyrion tried to look undaunted faced with her. It was impossible.

She doesn't need the gold of Casterly Rock, not that he could make such offer whilst his brother and the queen still live. Surely, she has grown weary of the usual ballads of southrons that sang of princes and knights, and pretty suitors and their gifts of roses. _The disillusioned_, as Tyrion had named her. After being held hostage and molested at the capital, after escaping from the agonies of witnessing her father's death, being stripped naked and beaten in the throne room perchance every waking hour of hers, being married off to a dwarf though the dwarf clearly saw beauty in that union, Tyrion knew that the _last_ thing that Sansa Stark would need is him.

She just sits there, the Imp mused, with her blue eyes fixed at his face; and those eyes were overwhelming with emotions and words unsaid and at the same time were devoid of all these, her lips partly open as if to speak, her exhales sounding decibels in that chamber, unhinging the last knots that held Tyrion's wine-sloshed brain together in painstaking slowness.

He cursed inwardly.

There was truth to what Rolly Duckfield had told Tyrion during one cyvasse game with Aegon the Sixth. "You are a man in possession of a good fortune, exiled or not," the Duck said. "You can have your Braavosi or Pentoshi, Lyseni ones who do it best with their mouths; have them line up and taste your cock, while you bask in the flutters of their lashes and the giggles. You wake up beside three, four of them and realize, none of them would _ever_ match up to your wife."

_This is why the gods made whores for Imps like me._

"Must we really lock that door?" He forced a smile, tapped his fingers on the side table. He crossed his legs. "You might need to make a run for it when I transform into something else. Mind you, I've been to Volon Therys these past moons, rubbed elbows with those legendary stonemen." He lifted his sleeve a little and assessed his arm's skin. "Ah! None so far, but who can really tell? The Imp has always been hideous."
Sansa raised a brow. "Typical you—the exemplar of all men who pity themselves. You think I'd care if your body is covered in greyscale, Tyrion, in times like this one? How mighty fine of you to think that I'm that shallow."

"Well, that stung," Tyrion's reply was with a hint of scorn. "Sansa Stark never cared for you, never will. And she would make it a point that you get the message." He stood to pour himself a goblet of ale, and wished—may the ale be poisoned so he may just drop to the floor and perish at the face of his own wife.

Sansa stood then calmly snatched the goblet from Tyrion. "You will not drink in front of me. You think this is a jape?"

His laughter was embittered and tormented. He would let her have the cup, of course. There's no use fighting over cups. "You know what I think?" he asked, raising a finger to make a point. "I think life is a jape. Yours. Mine. Everyone's."

Sansa shook her head, pain was in her eyes asudden. Pain, and pity for him. "Our marriage was just a jape to you, then?"

"Wasn't it for you?!" Tyrion exclaimed. "I'm the demon-monkey who's deemed unfit by his own wife to share the bed with her, and I am not merely speaking of consummating the marriage! You ran away—"

"You expect me to stay under the roof of people who planned for my family's demise? How could I not run when I was led to believe we were married off so the Lannisters could have Winterfell?" Sansa cut his rancor. "You wanted Winterfell. It was all duty for you at my expense!"

"I needed you at the trial."

"And for the thousandth time, forgive me for acting like the child I was then and running away in fright."

He stood with much difficulty, paced the room to collect himself.

"I wanted Winterfell, I would fool myself if I lied to you and say that the idea of wardenship of the North didn't appeal to me," Tyrion said. "I could never have Casterly Rock, I knew that. I wanted Winterfell, Sansa but I wanted you too—child or woman or...whatever you are!" He pointed a fore at her, pursed his lips to control his rage, his longing. "I wanted you to come to me willingly, and bring me your joys and your sorrows and your lust. I told you that I will wait however long it takes, and you didn't give me that."

His confessions were met only by silence, and it pained him even more than hearing her words of loathing for his kin, the grand architects to the slaying of those Stark-blooded ones.

He could survive without a wife he realized, he could survive without the nuisance. But years of bedding whores of different faces and scents, an unmarried Targaryen Prince suffering from the pangs of unrequited love, his near-death aboard the Shy Maid—all these made him realize how much his soul was longing for something unfading, with someone who would not just leave his bed before sunrise after gold has been handed over.

And I've missed her so, Tyrion thought. The wife I barely knew.

Finally, Sansa spoke.

"You want me, and I need you," she said. "We are married in the sight of the gods."
"Lady Sansa…" he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Tell me please, why you needed me to come."

At those words, Sansa let her silken dress and undergarments fall softly on the floor.

"Maiden, crone, warrior, stranger!" Tyrion exclaimed, covering his eyes in panic as Sansa revealed herself naked in front of him. "Father, mother, smith—would you just…hells, garb yourself!"

She crossed the distance between them, soft footfalls against the rug. "If it takes consummation of this marriage for you to shut up about your bitterness, then let's have it by all means. And you've been with a thousand whores before me, Tyrion. Surely, I hardly look unsightly compared to some of them, yes?"

*Unsightly?* Tyrion swallowed hard, raked Sansa's form with one eye open.

"What do you need," he asked, emphasis on each word, one hand still partly covering his eyes. "That you had to throw all sense of courtly manners and undress in front of a dwarf? Who owes you?"

"Same person who owed you, framed you for Bran's fall with that dagger that was in fact Robert's. The same one who framed us both for Joffrey's death. The cause of this whole enmity between the Starks and the Lannisters, orchestrator of the war," Sansa replied, eyes on the Imp's now pensive visage. "You know things—every vested interest, every perversion. Surely, you must know who this man is that owes us both, yes?"

Imp exhaled as ambiguous emotions engulfed him, with loathing being the strongest. "Littlefinger."

"Yes," Sansa's eyes sparkled at the name. "Yes…very good, Tyrion."

Tyrion stared at her, calculating her intents and tracing the source of her sudden want for retribution. *It's long overdue, this part of Sansa,* he thought. *The demons in her should have been uncaged years ago. You want him dead.*

"Not just dead, no…" Sansa laughed softly. "I want him as meat for the dogs."

The Imp smirked at the bold yet impossible request. "And how do you expect me to get close to him, butcher him and dump his body to the kennels, pray tell?"

"Don't soil your hands, Tyrion," Sansa answered. She knelt in front of him and let her fingers crawling along the man's arm. Tyrion flinched. "Whatever you do, keep your hands clean. No…you will not kill him. Your good friend Aegon the Sixth will."

"What would make you think that that righteous Prince would do it?"

"He's a just man. Righteous as you've said."

"Then, let Aegon the Sixth grant him pardons and send him to the Wall, Sansa," he challenged her.

"For high treason?" she raised her brows at the query. "I don't think so. The rebellion that killed
Aegon's father and exiled all Targaryens, the rebellion that forced him into hiding and robbed him of all, broke this whole realm apart," Sansa smiled. "Littlefinger caused it."

It had been a while since Euron Greyjoy had laughed that richly.

"Utter brilliance," he said as he gulped the last of his Arbor-pressed. "A rumor started by you?"

Petyr stared at his own reflection against the red wine on his own goblet, undeniably pleased with himself. "I had no army, no swords. I'm no threat. I was even injured to near fatality because of that duel with Brandon Stark for Catelyn Tully's affections. The other Starks were then riding south for Brandon and Cat's wedding, while I was sent back by the Lord Hoster and my father to the Fingers."

"The abduction was a plain ward-turned-brothelkeeper's fabrication," Euron said, eyeing him with approval. "And the maesters wrote that Lyanna was abducted less than ten leagues from Harrenhal."

He rewarded Euron's statements with a smirk. He stood, poured them both some more. "My eyes were on them, and they planned to run. It doesn't take an archmaester to figure that out. Sent the word to Brandon as soon as I got to the Fingers—an anonymous tip right after Lyanna's disappearance. Brandon marched to King's Landing, that hot-blooded fool, and threatened the crowned prince. Got himself burned, old Rickard Stark too."

Euron raked him with applauding stare from crown to sole, gave him a nasty leer. "And the rest as they say, is history."

Petyr raised his goblet. "Indeed."

"Tell me," Euron sat upright and took the goblet from Petyr. "Have you no other occupations apart from spreading rumors and starting rebellions and wars? What made you do it?"

Two reasons," Petyr replied. "The first being Catelyn Tully. After the duel, I realized this, that if I cannot have her then Brandon Stark shouldn't."

"You have the Mad King to thank for that," Euron remarked. "You still did not get her though, she married Eddard instead, did not even give you a second look."

"Ah! But didn't Eddard die as well?"

The Ironborn's laughter was that of a maniac. "I like you," he said. "Seriously, I do." He finished up his wine and assessed the blade of his lochaber axe. "And the second reason?"

Littlefinger smiled.

To watch you all as you kill each other for the throne, to walk on your burnt corpses and be the last one standing.

Jaime Lannister was hardly recognizable when he arrived at the capital through the River Gate around seven days ago. The goldcloaks thought him a spy from the riverlanders, and so he was thrown to the dungeons' second level where the highborn captives were kept. "Let him stay in Maidenvault," the second-in-command of the goldcloaks suggested with a derisive sneer. "He would
He was brought to the queen's courts and thereupon, Cersei recognized him. She had those goldcloaks executed for throwing Jaime in the bastilles.

"Is it true?" he asked Cersei one night at her chambers in Maegor's Holdfast. "What I've been hearing when I was still in the Riverlands? What Tyrion told me about before he escaped? You and our cousin Lancel, and all three Kettleblack brothers—tell me, please...that there's no truth to any of these."

Cersei was in front of the mirror, examining the growth of hair in her mostly bald head. "So what if they're true?" she scoffed. "All semen smell and taste the same, dear brother. Worry not, I have atoned for my sins, and they have atoned for theirs."

"You're also fucking Euron Greyjoy, I suppose?"

Cersei paused from her occupations and stared with incredulity at the man. "You think me that low? I'd rather parade around naked a hundred times."

"You've burned the Tower of the Hand upon Father's death. You've burned the sept and it caused Tommen's."

"Did you return all the way from the westerlands to relive your bitterness? Might I remind you that you did not even respond to my summons when I asked for your aid in my own trial by combat? I was only forced to act as I saw fit."

Jaime didn't answer.

It was not her paranoia that estranged Jaime from her, it was her rottenness. He thought about the years he had spent with her, and thus realized that Cersei in truth does not know how to love people apart from herself. Tyrion had said how her deep devotion for her children was the only one quality of her that was admirable, but in Jaime's purview she only 'loved' them because they were a reflection of herself, and she 'loved' him because he was a reflection of herself—they are twins after all. It's her face she sees whenever she looks at me, at our children, and so Cersei was devastated when they died, for it was like seeing herself die too, envisioning herself being poisoned, being forced to leap off the keep.

By nature, she believes that she is deserving of every damned thing that she wants, and that every damned person owes her.

Jaime knew that he wasn't misguided with his suppositions when he awoke at the sound of her conversing with another woman. They were at both at the open cloister at the west side of Maegor's Holdfast, and Jaime shuddered in fright as he saw the face of that one with whom Cersei was having a parley.

He wasn't dubbed the kingslayer for nothing—that face is the Mad King's own.

"Not to me," the silver-haired woman told Cersei. "But to the rightful heir to the throne, Aegon the Sixth."

Cersei's laughter was disparaging, hysterical. "Wouldn't you look at that? Had Rhaegar chosen to fuck me instead of that no-good Dornish woman of his, Aegon the Sixth would have been born from us. I wouldn't have to listen to your nonsense, we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

The silver woman's lip tipped up. "Except that Rhaegar never wanted you—else, he would have
chosen to take you in as a second wife, but we know that you lost him to Lyanna Stark, just as you lost Robert Baratheon to her."

Cersei smirked. "Fuck you. Your arses were never made for the throne."

"You'd risk fighting a war against Dothraki warlords, well-trained mercenaries, and dragons than surrendering?" The silver woman's brow shot up a little. "And I thought you had wits."

"You're not the only ones with dragons," Cersei replied pacing the cloister. "Or perhaps you need a retelling at this very hush of night—what those dragonlords have done to your beloved Meereen. See that?" Cersei pointed at the ruins of the Sept southwest of the red keep. "I don't need dragons to blow this whole stinking place up, and blow this whole damned city to make sure that none of you would see even a silhouette of a single steel in that throne. I'll burn them all—even the innocent ones in all spaces and radii."

The silver woman shook her head in utter disbelief. "You demon's whore."

Cersei laughed. "Oh, come now. Your father wanted to do it when the rebellion rose to climax." She raked the other woman with a nasty stare from head to foot. "Well then, let me tell you this, Daenerys Targaryen—if you want my city, I'll give you naught but ashes. I'll let your Aegon the Sixth be king over charred bones and cooked meat. I'll set this city ablaze faster than your dragons could leave their pits."

"We'll see about that," the one called Daenerys replied. "Drogon!" she called, and with her summons came a black dragon frilled with scarlet spine plates. She mounted the beast. "If I were you, I'd stop sleeping from now on, Cersei Lannister." Daenerys flew away into the night.

Jaime held his head with both hands as Cersei's words echoed in his addled brain—burn them all. "Burn them all..." the kingslayer whispered as he staggered to their bedstead. "Burn them all..."

"I can't believe that Stannis is dead and Nymeria is pregnant."

Arya climbed up the steps of the rolling ladder and from the ceiling-to-ceiling shelf, reached for the castle's copy of Archmaester Gyldayn's scrolls. She was then in the library tower with Aegon the Sixth, rummaging through the old collections that were not razed by fire. The lad was on the other side, running his fingers through the spines of some leather-bound books, looking for another set of writings from Maester Munkun's.

"No surprise as regards both," Aegon replied, pulling out The Dance of Dragons from the collection. "Missives have reached Dragonstone that Euron Greyjoy and Cersei Lannister are both commanding a whole army of breathing corpses—around four to five thousand strong; there were of course the Lannister soldiery and the Ironborns. This was how they defeated Stannis's forces of fifteen thousand. How they obtained bodies for such purpose," Aegon shook his head as he placed the book on the reading table. "We could only guess. There were reports though, of missing men and women in nearby Rosby and Duskendale."

"A maester stripped of his chain, the one banished from the Citadel—that's the one aiding them in their sickening schemes," Arya descended from the ladder, The Blacks and Greens in hand. She slammed the bound scrolls on the table forcefully, causing dust to scatter all over. Aegon just smiled as he leafed through the pages of Dance, but didn't look up. "You're too gentle for a conqueror," Arya eyed him with vexation. "Aren't your palms itching for fire and blood? They're demons, Aegon
Euron, Littlefinger, Cersei most especially. Hells, I want them dead!" She furiously unscrolled the parchments, tearing one of the pages in so doing.

"Calm, sweet princess," Aegon purred, attention still on Munkun's. "Who told you that Nymeria is pregnant?"

Arya glanced at Aegon, and exhaled irritably for she knew he was changing the subject. "Bran and Princess Shireen. She's been spending some amount of time with Nymeria recently, she noticed that her belly's all grown and curving outward. She told Bran and Bran told me." She exhaled at the sudden weight upon her heart—Stannis is now dead, and while the Lady Selyse is mourning till kingdom come and questioning why the greathouse Stark has accepted Aegon the Sixth within the castle walls, Shireen was very peaceful. *Does she not know what 'dead' means?* Arya asked herself. *Is she not aware that she would never see her father again?* Yet she heard Shireen speaking with Bran about death a mere while ago. They were both seated on the floor close to the hearthstone. "Stannis Baratheon can never be killed, Bran Stark," Shireen had told the boy. "He may be dead but he will live on and on—inked scrolls and word of mouth and reminiscences of sagas fought will make sure of that."

"Who did it?" Aegon still probed.

"*Ghost,*" Arya replied. "Jon's direwolf."

The Prince nodded but kept his silence.

Arya sensed the cause of the lad's suddenly dispirited mood. "Give him time, Aegon. Surely, you cannot expect Jon to just cry and kiss you like a good brother should. This is but the first time you've encountered each other—let reality be reality. Worry not," she placed her hand on top of the lad's. "He would see his face and the person that carries it, he would accept that person and appreciate his own chronicles, and he would realize what he's capable of being."

"I never worry for Jon," Aegon replied. His thumb moved to caress the back of Arya's hand. "Though I've spent my whole life not knowing about his existence, a part of me tells me somehow that he's meant for greater things, and I believe that about him."

Arya smiled, then pulled her hand gently from Aegon's grasp.

The Prince held it tighter, and he was now looking fixedly at Arya's heavily bruised wrist.

"Who did this?!" Aegon asked, ferocity replacing his usually calm visage. He stood abruptly and knelt in front of the girl, lifting the cuffs of her sleeves, examining her skin for any more purple marks. There was another one, as severe as the one on the left if not more, apparently gripped tightly by someone to restrain her mayhaps from struggling. "These are finger marks, Arya. Strong hands," the Prince said, his tone now enraged. "Who did this to you?!"

"I bruised myself, whole day of swordwork, Aegon," Arya lied, and thought asudden how utterly stupid her excuse had been. To fool Aegon the Sixth—her mind was scattered if that was her intention. She flinched as Aegon traced his fingers across those ugly marks, yet there was a burst of emotions within her too, as a response to those acts of his that spoke only of deep concern for her. Arya couldn't help but chew her lip, sigh, smile a little as Aegon pulled her gently to stand, as he obsessively assessed her condition, as he brushed away her hair to see if her neck was in any way injured, her arms, her feet and calves.

*It is his tenderness that breaks my heart,* the girl thought. **The loveliness of his soul that makes me want to weep.** She heard him curse as his hands went back to her wrists. "I'm fine," she assured him,
then with a slight tease, added, "If your true motive is to undress me so you may appraise my
physical state, then let me tell you now that I cannot indulge you."

"You were limping, Arya," Aegon ignored her attempt at humor and cupped her cheeks. He
clenched his teeth even as he spoke. "Damn it, what did Jaqen do to you?"

Arya felt her eyes burn at the sight of Aegon's face—his brows were heavily creased, as he
continued stroking her wrist gently, and his eyes were misty, as if wrath was about to pour from them
anytime. They say that sweetness and chivalry cloy women, yet at that precise moment, Arya wanted
to...needed to relish the gentleness that was Aegon the Sixth, the regal yet modest air about him, the
benevolence and sensitivity many men, even Jaqen, were almost incapable of possessing. *Dragon's
blood run in their veins—Jaqen and Aegon both,* Arya thought, tilting her head with fascination at
the way Aegon's lips moved, with his words speaking of how he had failed to keep her safe. *But
there's a certain sadism in Jaqen that Aegon doesn't seem to have one whit of.*

If they were of the same rose, Jaqen is the thorn and Aegon, the petals...

How could he have commanded those twenty-five thousand, how could he have besieged Storm's
End? He had seen blood and gore and death for sure, caused them even.

But mere bruises on my skin, and he's raving like that?

Her consciousness was not her own, and the desire to touch him may have stemmed from her
profound desolation as of late, may have sprung from her broken heart. Slowly and without her
conscious intention, she lifted her hand and traced Aegon's lower lip with a forefinger.

"Please, don't be nice," Arya whispered, then heaved a sigh to contain herself. "You're killing me."

"Arya..." Aegon whispered back, kissing that forefinger and pulling her closer to him. He planted a
soft kiss on the girl's temple and searched her eyes. "Talk to me, princess. What happened?
Please..."

Jaqen's words echoed clearly in the walls of her mind.

*I could spill my seed all day just thinking about fucking you...*

*Bare you breast and kneel...let me love your mouth with my sex.*

*I want to own all of your groans and your dirty thoughts, your every climax, every drop of wetness,
every exhale.*

*Come for me, Arya.*

She shook her head, hot tears brimming in her eyes. Arya buried her face in Aegon's shoulder and
gripped the sleeves of his tunic the tightest she could. His hands caressed her back, and she felt the
comfort the gesture brought to the wholeness of her.

Then, Aegon chained her in his arms.

"Let me speak with him," the Prince said in between clenched teeth. "Nay. On second thought, let
my steel speak with his guts."

"No..." Arya replied weakly. "He's done nothing serious, truly."

"The marks on your skin tell me otherwise, Arya!" Aegon growled. He broke away from her hold,
turned his back to her and tugged at his hair. "I'll kill that Lorathi…"

"Don't push this anymore," Arya said calmly. "It's hardly your business—"

He faced her. "Everything about you is my business!" he roared, then crossed the distance between them. "I love you, and it kills me that someone's hurting you yet I'm not allowed to do any damned thing about it because I'm nothing to you!"

"Aegon…"

"I love you, Arya, damn it!"

He pulled her and pressed his lips upon hers, and kissed her in a manner insistent, desperate, yet soft and worshipful. In wordlessness and just by the gentle movement of his lips he demanded her to open her mouth and accept him. Her eyes were wide with stupefaction, and there was nothing at all that Arya could do but to allow herself to be carried away, to melt in his touch that perchance sought desperately to heal her brokenness.

It was insanity, and she was so very confused. Howbeit, she lacked the strength to push him away, or to voice out her protestation since the kiss was improper at the very least, or to remind him that her lips belong to Jaqen H'ghar, so do her body, and soul, and life in this cycle and in all others.

But Aegon was sweetly murmuring in her lips, and his words were too beautiful to ignore. To stop him from uttering those words in between the kisses they're sharing is to sin against herself. "Arya, my love…I'm sorry…I'm so sorry…"—as if it was he who had bruised her and misused her nights ago. His kisses deepened, yet they were not at all demanding. Kisses that heal, the girl thought, as she felt Aegon washing away those unseen anguish, qualms, angst, like currents of the River Rhoyne that had always been the embodiment of her. He nipped her lower lip gently, and she basked in the thrill and comfort of it.

His kisses were not magical, unlike Jaqen's. They were divine, making her feel as if she was one theistic being from an unknown realm or so. The snowflakes were not supposed to stop falling outside, yet they did; the summer roses were not supposed to unfurl, yet they did…

Heaven is not supposed to meet with earth, yet it did.

A kiss, and all was said.

And she found herself responding to him, waltzing with his tongue, intoxicating herself with his mouth. She erased the lines dividing her desultory breaths from his, reducing these to a mere blur. And she took him in—the sweet taste of him, the strong feel of him, the scent of fragrance jewels and vanilla that was him. Ecstasies unsayable, Arya thought as she wrapped her arms around his neck and brushed her wet lips across his cheek. This one act, and the hundred nights of forgotten love have once more showed themselves.

"Aegon…" Arya exhaled against his open mouth. She gasped upon feeling herself being lifted on the table. One hand was on the small of her back, the other was gently holding the nape of her neck. Aegon planted small kisses on the side of her mouth, before moving to taste her exposed skin just beneath the collarbone. "Do tell me if I'm hurting you," Aegon murmured against her neck, and she almost broke into a sob at the words. She entangled her fingers in his hairlocks of silver, and allowed him to taste her exposed skin just beneath the collarbone. "I love you…Arya, my sweet princess…"

He rose once more to meet her lips, while his hands kneaded her hips gently. By instinct, she wrapped her legs around Aegon's built and the lad held her the tightest he could. His lips traveled to
her eyes, her nose, her chin, before owning her mouth once more. "I love everything about you," he groaned, and traced her jaw with his tongue. "This…heartwrenching pain of wanting you, when I know that I could never have you…" He spoke against her neck. "My mind was set on conquest, but you came and so I started seeing nothing else but you, doing everything and forsaking everything for you. I see you with him—with Jaqen; and I feel like drowning except that the waters just wouldn't let me die. Then, I would learn that he's just hurting you like this? Arya…"

"I'm sorry," Arya whispered, for it was all that she could manage to say. "I...didn't mean to cause you pain."

"You couldn't help it," Aegon smiled wistfully, leaving trails of kisses on her shoulder. "I have already conspired with myself to remain silent about how I feel—'It's just heartbreak, a gifted curse,' I would always convince myself. And I love you and I want you to be happy but I couldn't keep my damned mouth shut when I know you're hurt."

He kissed her once more—ravished her lips is more of it. Arya seized his hair and pulled him closer and licked the soft of his mouth, drinking the wetness of it; she was being drawn to him so, so helplessly…

"A...Aegon..." she gasped, whimpered when the Prince deepened the kiss.

A surge of memories overwhelmed her. These were memories about one man, a man who flew in his aurelian dragon in the fighting stades of Valyria, who built those ten thousand ships, who died and re-entered the cycles for her sake. It was the same man who bequeathed her with the gift of a dragon queller, veiled her from death, delighted her with his kisses and touch and storm of petals.

"Stop..." Arya said, her tone soft yet resolute. "I...I can't do this to Jaqen."

Aegon buried his face in her cheek. He waited a good minute for the sting of Arya's rejection to dissipate before speaking. "Why do you love that man so much?"

"I...I'm sorry, I'm just so confused right now..." she cupped his cheek and looked into those purple eyes. "But I'm bound to him. I could live a thousand lives and tell you why, tell you the story, till the gods die I could speak, but all the days in all layers of time would never be enough to finish the telling."

The Prince sighed dejectedly, stroked her cheek.

"You deserve to be loved only, Arya. You deserve better than this..."

"Perhaps," Arya said, resting her temple against Aegon's. "But what is 'better', truly, without Jaqen? What good would it do me to gain everything in this world but lose him?"

Aegon scoffed. "That fortunate yet unworthy bastard."

Arya only smiled softly at the words.

"He hurts you again, I'll slaughter him. I'll start by cutting his hair which you love so much."

"Jaqen would never hurt me, Aegon," she assured him with a pained smile on her lips. "Not in the way that you think. Oh, you have no idea what he has done for me, no idea..."

Aegon straightened up, pulled her gently towards the cushioned settee. "Sit with me, here."

The girl obeyed, tantalized by the Prince's gentleness, by his voice that soothed her inner tempests
and touches that inspire her to still believe in good things, lovely things. She sat beside him, and let out a surprised gasp when Aegon lifted her so she could sit on his lap.

"Aegon," came out her protest. "We shouldn't—"

"Shush," he said, kissing her bruised wrist once more. "Don't worry, we're just friends. Friends could sit on each other's laps."

She laughed, then felt that sudden exhaustion so she rested her head against Aegon's shoulder.

"Friends, yes."

She closed her eyes, immersed herself in the soft melodies coming out of Aegon's lips. At that moment, Arya realized how too old and tiring the ballads are that sang of ancient blood spilled by brave men, of the night that gathers, or giants and wolves, and...some other things.

The girl wanted...needed a song that would make her feel whole again, and cherished, and sheltered.

"Dārilaros isse īā sombāzmion, kostilus māzigon ilagon..." Aegon murmured the lyrics in her ears.

_Princess in the castle, please come down...don't be scared, I will protect you now..._

Arya laughed at the verses, punched him lightly on the shoulder. Aegon chuckled. "You're making me sound so helpless, sing me another," she demanded.

"Very well," Aegon whispered, kissing her hair. "How about...she's clad in silver armor, sword and shield in hand, and oh, how my dire heart falls whenever I see her stand..." His lips traveled to her cheek. "Better, lovely girl?"

"Uh-huh," she whispered back, then ran her fingers across the Prince's sleek, silver hair. She settled her head on his shoulder once more and swallowed the pain in her throat. She closed her eyes. "Better."

At least the earlier tensions have subsided over supper. Jon was still wary of Aegon yet less hostile, and the Imp was now in the middle of an awkward conversation with Ser Davos, who was then querying about how he managed to hold the gates of the capital during the Blackwater. "Stroke of luck and intervention from the gods," Tyrion half-japed. "Some desperate rhetorics, too. All those, when you have a cockless, sadistic boy for a king."

"Tywin Lannister arrived, of course, with reinforcements from House Tyrell," Davos said, his tone with a hint of scorn. "Had they not ambushed Stannis's forces from the rear, the city could have been sacked. It was all just dirty game for your lot, the war. No wonder why from Dorne to the North, the Lannister name means swine to the Westerosi."

Tyrion smiled, tipped the goblet's rim to his lips. With much difficulty, he tried to avoid Sansa's gaze at him—the gaze of a dutiful wife prepared to pounce on Ser Davos should his words turn out a little too harsh. He ignored the man's embittered tirades. "Stannis is a very good commander, Ser Davos, a just man, the most terrifying kind. Yet as king, he either has subjects or enemies—just those, no trusted people whom he could regard as friends or family." The gaze he gave the onion knight was sympathetic of the latter's loss. "As such, he did inspire respect, but not loyalty."

"Even Tywin feared him," Ser Davos said, his voice breaking.
"My father feared Eddard, too," Tyrion said, his eyes cruising to Sansa; and he just stared at her—broken, beautiful thing that she is. "Tywin Lannister dreads the honorable ones. And please, good Ser, I do not wish to speak about him any longer than necessary."

Jon broke through all pocket discussions.

"Eighth a shipload of obsidian is not enough," Jon said, his eyes still locked on Aegon's face. The Prince was speaking with Bran and has been all the while ignoring Rickon's venomous stares. Aegon shifted his attention to Jon who carried on. "We need marchers, Valyrian steel. I suppose you have planned for all these before dragging your retinue and dragons up North."

"Plans, yes," Aegon ignored the vile in Jon's words. "Marchers are here in Westeros. We have twenty-five thousand strong from the Golden Company, Daenerys has fifteen thousand Unsullied, horselords, mercenaries. As for Valyrian steel—"

"King's Landing," Jaqen cut him, yet his attention was on Arya's neck. Slowly, he raised his thumb and caressed the girl's skin that seemed to have been lavished with kiss marks by another. When Arya shoved his touches away though gently, the Lorathi dropped his hand, sudden heaviness collapsing upon him. "You cannot proceed yet to conquest, Aegon. We would lose men on the wrong side of the battle."

"Dragonmont has run out of obsidian," Tyrion reminded them. "We're looking at Valyria for dragonglass."

"We need you Aegeus," Arya said. "We need Garin against those lords—to assemble armies from the Free Cities, marchers up here."

Aegeus exhaled. "I...I've forgotten, the Second Spice was a thousand years back…"

"I could help you," Bran offered. "Face those memories, Garin of Chroyane, so you can battle against the illusions of the past." The boy ignored questioning looks from the rest of those who knew nothing about the subject. "Time to bury the enmity against that Esdraelon—he's dead and Jaqen lives now."

"Very well," the comely one replied. "Before Valyria and the Wall, Ser Davos and I would have to assemble the troops at Cerwyn and here."

When everyone had departed from supper, Arya proceeded straight to her chamber without so much as another glance to Jaqen. The Lorathi followed, closed the door behind him and found Arya already packing for their ride to the Wall.

"Are you sure you want to go with us?" Jaqen asked as he observed her from a distance.

"What do you think?" she spat. Her back was facing him as she loaded their rucksack with necessities.

Jaqen took a few steps to get closer to her. Slowly, he wrapped his arms around Arya's waist, placed his chin on her shoulder. The girl looked at the Lorathi from the mirror of her wardrobe. He was kissing her neck, that part that Aegon the Sixth had blandished with loving cerise marks. "You smell like fragrance jewels," Jaqen whispered, and even in that whisper Arya could sense his pain. "You're that angry with me?"

"It was nothing," Arya replied with a cold tone, though she was embarrassed because Jaqen managed to uncover that unwanted dalliance with Aegon the Sixth. Her heart was shattered too, as he buried his face in her hair and held her tighter.
He sank on the edge of their bed and pulled her to him. By instinct, she settled herself on his lap. The Lorathi brought her fingers to his lips and stared at her with dejection. "Am I losing you?" he whispered.

"No."

"Do you still love me?"

"Yes."

"Must I worry about Aegon?"

Yes, a primal part of her screamed.

"No."

A forlorn smile showed upon Jaqen's face.

"I love you, Arya."

She only sighed. "We need to rest, Jaqen."

"Yes," the Lorathi chewed on his lip, allowed her to settle on the bed. He stroked her hair and kissed her firmly on the lips. "Sleep, Arya." Then he lay behind her, and kept on whispering her name, over and over and over. His voice was utterly disconsolate, and Arya cursed inwardly at how his godforsaken state is ruining her to irreversible fragments as well.

He's fighting it—the old self that's becoming his new, this regression.

She didn't know how to fight for him anymore, much less how to fight these impossible wars with him. Rival of a god—how do you win against a cosmic being threatening to break your hold of the one person you love the most? Must she blame him for that bargain? Must she ask why in hell did he forage the realms to be with her again, when she never asked him to do such a thing?

Must I give up on him?

She wanted to stab herself till the blades of her poniards reach her soul.

"I want to fall into the Sweetwater River again, Arya," Jaqen whispered as he pulled her closer. "And soak with you in the bath, watch as you undress in the goddess pool, sing for you in your barge…ride a boat with you…" he yawned. "Make love to you in a cave…paint you a tattoo right here…" he traced her spine gently and kissed her shoulder. "…shower you with petals…"

She bit her lip and felt her heart collapse. If it is not madness, then it is not love, Arya thought, as she recalled every beautiful moment with him. Yes, she was uncertain about him now; howbeit, is that not the very heart of romance—leaping with your beloved to the uncertain, trusting him with all that you are, and with him, believing in the impossible?

"Jaqen…"

"Shush…" he murmured, for he was not finished yet. "…ride dragons and see lands…marry you in the Krylst…watch you as you give birth…"

"Give birth?"

"Yes…"
She swallowed the pain in her throat. "You… want children? Why?"

Jaqen kissed her hair. "I love you so much, I want you so much. I'm a man possessed, and this obsession, I should redirect this elsewhere, shouldn't I? Perhaps, children could help me do that?"

"And what makes you think I would want children?" she asked.

The Lorathi chuckled softly. "Oh, lovely girl. You've been spending almost every waking hour of yours at the kennelmaster's quarters, with his wife and the babe. I can hear you laughing from the keep. You hate sewing, yet I saw you two days in a row with Sansa, making some socks and mittens. I'm not blind, I'm just lost…"

Arya bit her lip to keep herself from smiling. "And what makes you think you'll make a good father?"

Jaqen pulled her to her other side so she could face him. He stroked her cheeks, bit her chin. "I'll do whatever the mother tells me."

She traced the line of his nose. "Eyes? Hair?"

He pulled her closer. "Silver irises like yours, chestnut strands like yours."

"I wouldn't mind a silver-haired baby…" she traced his lower lip. "You'd teach him how to ride dragons?"

"If you'd teach him how to warg."

"Daggers, poisons… game of faces?" Arya teased him.

"None of those, please," Jaqen murmured, his eyes surrendering partly to slumber. "I want him to be honorable, and compassionate, and loving, and just."

Arya felt her chest hammered by the Lorathi's words. "Gods Jaqen, he sounds like Eddard…"

Jaqen smiled languidly and pinched her nose. "He does, doesn't he?"

She buried her face in his chest, smelled him, found comfort in him. I haven't bled in a moon… Arya thought as she blandished his bare chest with soft kisses. Oh, Jaqen… Jaqen, love…

Moments later, she heard him snoring softly, his mild, minty breath colliding with hers as she looked up.

Arya planted a deep kiss on his lips, smiled. "I love you…" She closed her eyes and waited for merciful sleep to steal her consciousness.

I'll never let us go.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys, I hope you're happy that Aegon's back and that you liked the reveal at the last part, as in I really, really wish this. XD Please drop a feedback whenever. We're getting there… thanks for the kudos and comments. ;D
The First Wave

Chapter Notes

The ultimate J/A song (IMO)

Moonstones, Stark Swords, Dragons, and Dancing (A Valyrian's Serenade) Warning: Mushy

I do not own the video above and the pic below. I own nothing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Scars, battles, printed memories of sufferings
She has walked ancient roads
Leagues across centuries…
'Finally,' she would say. 'This is why I am here.'"

Songs of the Faceless (Lost Leaf, XLII)

Rise, Arya. It's time.

She heard that voice in the midst of dreamlessness, and thought that it was a dream unto itself. It was Sansa's voice, but the outlines of it seemed to have faint sounds of Sabine's charmed laughter, and Val shushing the both of them.

Arya…the voice urged her in a sing-song.

She half-opened her lids and sensed the flicker of candelight from the sconces. Arya willed her eyes to close once more. "It's the middle of the night," was her response, and wondered if those words really came out of her mouth. "Sunrise wouldn't be for a few hours."

Yes, it's midnight, was Sansa's reply. The Moon is at its full—the perfect time for fires of love and passionate confessions.
Spell-bound sighs and giggles pervaded the whole chamber. Arya was irked. She sat up and regarded the three ladies with dyspathy mixed with bemusement. "What the hell?"

"Up, up!" Her sister's voice was now clearer than before, and her commands were not the likes she could merely dismiss. "Your lover awaits, helpless and tongue-tied."

"W-what…" Arya began, but paused when she saw Sabine lifting an immaculate robe of silver for her to see—laced, long-sleeves with pearl and crystal adornments, flowing skirt—and Val, carrying a head wreath of winter roses. Without another word, Sansa promptly undressed her, and too stunned she was at the haste of her sister's hands that she wasn't able to breathe out another word.

Frozen, overwhelmed, she watched as the women slipped onto her that silken-laced, crystal-bedecked robe, and placed the wreath on her head. Val brushed her hair of chestnut with bare fingers, whispered in her ear. "I have never seen a kneelers' union before, Arya. They say it's almost chimerical—whatever that means."

"Kneelers' union?" Arya gasped at the realization, yet no one seemed to have heard her. The women carried on with their preparations, and for what she was yet to ask, though she certainly have caught some hints of it. "Hold on!" she called out as they led her out of that bedchamber a little too insistently, and with bursting excitation. "Where's Jaqen?"

You and he, by law divine…

Your souls will once more meet and mingle.

He will fill you with pieces of himself,

His flaws and virtues, his dark and light…

Sabine laughed after finishing the last lines of that canticle, nodding at Sansa's behest that she be taught the words. "You Essosi are the most poetic of all bards," Val remarked with good humor, still holding Arya's hand and leading her from the great keep to the bridge that stops at the godswood.

The godswood? An inexplicable thrill coursed through Arya's flowing blood, a sudden outburst of toe-curling sensations. Solemn oath…ties that bind…in front of the Weirwood whose eyes are the eyes of all heart trees?

She lifted her gaze to the Moon and true enough, it was full. Distant sounds of howling direwolves acted as heralds in that night that sang only of worship and promises. She gasped as Val pulled her other hand, willing her to hasten her movements.

"Heavens, Val, the man can wait!" Sansa admonished her albeit with a smile. "You'll feast your eyes in a while, patience."

There's something different about the godswood that night as she beheld it from afar. It was… unusually bright, as if it then hosted celestial lights that respect only the old gods that reside there. Finally, they all descended from the bridge and walked to the black pond that was still untouched by snow.

Arya gasped.

A walkway of transparent moonstones was there, leading to the center of the godswood where the heart tree stands waiting. The moonstones' soft, water-like translucence, the silvery-white reflections of these angled the source of light, their chatoyancy allowing the moon's incandescence to interact with the blood-red leaves of the Weirwood that were then…curiously aglow.
Secrets are locked within the pearly veils of those moonstones, higher truths. These stones take beings to inner journeys that help them retrieve whatever fragments of their selves they have lost. They are a channel of prophecy, a path to wisdom…a lover's gift. The love that had waned will wax again in cosmic, cyclic perfection.

*What magic is this?* Arya asked herself in breathlessness.

The nearby pool was alive. Petals of various shades were strewn all over it, and ripples played as the leaves of witnessing sentinels and ash fell on its surface. Arya looked at herself in the waters and saw who she *is* in all realms and turfs of time—Āria Stārke, Āria hen Rhoyne, Nissa. She is the Moon, the Woman, the beginning, fertility, spring. And these versions of her would converge in one renewal of a sacred confluence with another.

Those tender melodies of Sabine's songs had but faded, and when Arya looked at both sides of her, the women were gone. And when she turned her eyes once more to the heart tree, she saw him—that man who was sent to her by the gods, thrusting an ancestral greatsword onto the snow-laden ground just beside the aisle of moonstones, as if building a monument that would preserve that place and that moment. That ancestral sword once belonged to Jon Stark, the king in the North who built the Wolf's Den and drove out Valyrians away from the White Knife.

That act with the sword was symbolic of his total surrender to her.

He thrust another sword to the ground, then another, then another, until the aisle of moonstones was filled with standing steel of old Stark kings on both sides, like gallant keepers. And Arya knew the hands of Stark kings that wielded those swords—there's Rickard's sword, and Edrick's, and Brandon's, Torrhen's, Harlon's, Edwyn's—

"Edderion, Walton, Jonos," Jaqen H'ghar pointed at the swords one by one. "And that's Eyron's." His fond gaze cruised to Arya's face, then traveled to the flowing silver robe that embraced her perfect form. He exhaled sharply, as if he was unable to fathom her loveliness that night. "I want your Stark ancestors here when I marry you *again*.

She bit her lip and clutched her heart.

*If darkness is to be loved, then…*  

*Let me die loving the darkness that is you.*

*Udrāzmalon*—he was that one Valyrian soul in the lore long forgotten who lost his way because he had loved deeply and truly, and she could not fail him, not after all that he had done for her sake. May anyone who would desire to break them both be damned.

And she would accept him, no matter who he is and would be—Valyrian or Lorathi, murderer or life-spawner, demon-host or descendant of a god. He's *Jaqen*, and for her Jaqen is the embodiment of all loves and hopes and good things.

"Who helped you carry those swords from the crypts?" Arya was smiling at him, yet she felt waterworks in her eyes threatening to fall once more.

"I did," Jon whispered in her ear, then locked her right arm with his. "Let me walk you. The Weirwood is waiting; so are Bran and Rickon." On his left hip was what was left of Ned's Ice—the Oathkeeper, and on his right, was Robb Stark's sword.

"Bran and Rickon will officiate?" Arya laughed as they traversed the walkway. Her silver robe seemed to glow in response to the moonstones beneath her feet. She couldn't bear look at Jaqen; for
some reason, she was blushing at the Lorathi’s passionate gaze. She certainly didn’t desire to fall, not that night, though she knew that she would never, ever stop falling for him.

"Rickon insisted," Jon replied, then pursed his lips to hold back a laugh. "Dear gods, Jaqen’s stare at you is making me uncomfortable. He wants to carry you out of here already."

She laughed a little too loudly, and saw Rickon’s severe countenance. She pursed her lips and shook her head, shoulders still shaking because of that hilarity.

Now, she stood face to face with Jaqen, and the heart tree’s eyes were upon them both.

"Who comes to the Weirwood?" Rickon asked, a signal to commence.

The Lorathi spoke.

"Iāqaen Haegār."

"With whom does he wish to be eternally bonded?" came Bran’s words.

Jaqen looked at Arya, who was still trying to hold back the sound of laughter at the sternness of her two younger brothers. Rickon shushed her, his face a perfect reflection of solemnity. The boy gave her a quick nod, urging her to respond.

"Āria Stārke," she replied, then breathed deeply in order to calm herself and kill the amusement.

"Why this marriage?" Bran asked. "How do you wish to pursue this bond?"

Jaqen spoke once more.

To the depths of me, I longed to love one person...

Her life had crossed mine, and I am now forever hers.

A seal I would place upon her heart

So that even in death we will not be sundered.

Arya gasped as her Queller lit up. A burning sensation coursed through her right arm, and through the lace of her sleeves she saw that Jaqen had marked her, had imprinted himself upon her through those words of promise.

A dragon, Arya thought, as she traced the glowing imprint with her forefinger. The brand of my dragonriding mate.

It was from the old rune of ancient Valyria, dragon bond, as the once writ chronicles would say. The imprint would only show itself upon the person who had first touched a dragonrider, truly touched him in all and every aspect of his person—body, soul, dreams, truths, memories, purpose, substance.

And that mark will span eternities which even the gods cannot erase.

She saw Bran smiling softly at the imprinting they had just witnessed.

"Man, will you share her laughter?" Rickon asked, still unsmiling.

"Yes," Jaqen replied with a tone and expression sincere.
"Will you cause her pain?" the boy probed on.

"I may."

"But is that your intent?"

"No."

"Well then," Rickon held his head high like one true officiant of grace, and recited the blessings, with Samwell at the back dictating the words. "Blessed be this bond with gifts from the east—rising of the sun, knowledge of growth, sharing of silences."

"Blessed be this bond with gifts from the south," Bran spoke next. "Warmth of hearth and home, heat of lover's passion."

"Blessed be this bond with gifts from the west," Sansa said. "Deep commitments, swift excitements, a cleansing."

Jon cleared his throat. Soft laughter came from those who were present to witness. Rickon was still quick to silence them with a stern stare. "Blessed be this bond with gifts from the north—firm foundation and fertility."

A collection of "Ooohs" pervaded the godswood at the mention of the last word. Jaqen forced himself to contain the grin that was showing upon his face as he chewed on his lower lip. Arya didn't even bother composing herself as she threw her head back with a delighted giggle.

"One Lorathi is going to get dirty-soiled tonight," Aegeus teased, ignoring Sabine's nudge on his arm.

"Yes," Jaqen replied with a soft smile. "But not here."

At this, he pulled Arya away from the godswood and led her towards the Northern gate where a steed awaits. "Raise the irons, please," was the Lorathi's request to the guards. They did as they were told.

They rode to the paths that lead to the boreal forests of Wolfswood.

And there, on the snow-blanketed field outside of Winterfell and close to the pines and spruces, was Jaqen's aurelian firebeast.

"You made him wait here? Poor thing," Arya said, drawing close to the beast. It just stared at them both with expectant eyes, as if awaiting its masters' commands—'fly, take us to unknown stars.' It let out a soft exhale upon feeling Arya's touch on the glistening, hard scales of its mien, as if her touch brought forth animation within it. "You do remember me, don't you?" Arya asked the beast. "Heraxos, yes? Do you recall?"

The beast closed its eyes as Arya ran her hands through its scaly cheek; and it seemed to take in every one of Arya's pronouncements—You are beautiful...I have never seen anything like you before...how high can you soar in the heavens? Have you been to other realms? What is West of Westeros like?

She squealed when Jaqen had lifted her from the ground and carried her on his shoulder. Playfully, she writhed against him, wiggled her naughty feet. "A Northern inquisition?" the Lorathi japed. He mounted the dragon's frilled back and settled Arya in front of him. With haste yet efficiency, he checked the beast's crownpiece and throatlatch of solid Valyrian chains, held tightly its dragonreins.
He secured them both on the rider’s seat. "Where's the thrill in telling? No, Heraxos will not tell you what it's like to touch the Moon—he will show you."

Without Jaqen uttering any command in dragon's tongue, the firebeast began its ascent.

"Jaqen!" Arya shrieked, burying her face in the Lorathi’s shift. "That was without any prelude! You absolute arse!"

He only chuckled, as he maneuvered the dragon towards south. "Look, Arya…” he whispered in her ear. "There's Winterfell."

Slowly, she gazed down and saw their ancestral castle diminish in size as they drifted higher. The people had become but little ants, the keeps their burrows, and the glowing moonstones and blood-red leaves of the heart trees seemed to be an entire galaxy of fireflies in her purview. She squealed again and gripped his sleeve tighter as the dragon descended a little upon reaching the White Knife. From a distance, the river appeared like a silver serpent slithering from Winterfell to Castle Cerwyn to White Harbor, its surface glistening in the pale moonlight.

Arya looked up, and beheld them all—the pearly glow of night's orb, the stars that to her, were faerie lights against the black satin of night, with lights dilating then waning then bursting in brilliance. And those stars were precious sequins against ebony, and Arya felt so close to them...that if she stretched out her hand far enough she would be able touch them and pluck them out from the heavens.

To hell with the gods.

"Do you think that Eddard is in one of those?" Arya asked Jaqen, pointing to the star that appeared brightest among a whole group of seven. "And Catelyn, and Robb?"

"I know they are," Jaqen replied, then navigated southeast, higher and past Hornwood and the Broken Branch. "See that star formation?" the Lorathi traced his finger across the ebony sky, creating a fleeting pattern. "Fifty-five known form my most favored. In Valyria, we call it Se Buzdari Dārilaros—the chained princess."

Arya smiled as she beheld the constellation. Valyria and Rhoyne—even the stars sing of their stories. "A slave princess? Like Nymeria of the Rhoyne?" she lifted her face to kiss him. He responded with a too masculine nip on her lower lip, an aggressive plundering of her mouth.

"She was the most beautiful of all water naiads. A goddess envied her, and so she was stripped and chained naked to a rock to await her death," Jaqen recounted the myth.

"The princess and the dragon," Arya said. "A chivalric romance where the virtuous hero saves the damsel from the beast, and ends up marrying the dragon-slayer—usually a prince."

"Wrong," Jaqen purred as his eyes searched her soul. "In that myth, it was the dragon who saved the princess."

Oh yes, Arya thought as she let her eyes roam on the spectacles above and below her, as the wintry air kissed her skin, as Jaqen's touch lit her Queller up and the mark too that he had imprinted upon her. Love always awakens the dragon, and the flames and passion that come with being in love.

"What did I ever do to deserve you?" she whispered her query.

"No, lovely girl," Jaqen kissed her hair. "What did I ever do to deserve you?"

She ran her hands through the dragon's golden scales, then gasped as she noticed a moving object on
the sky reflected on its mirror-like built. Her eyes flew to the firmaments and she saw it—a comet, its blazing tail shooting brazen through the skies, its fire dust scattered in various directions, as if greeting those fortunate enough to see it. It crossed the realms in its usual path and suddenly the night was morn for a moment.

Arya closed her eyes and relished the sensations brought by dragon's flight and the awe brought by those cosmic bodies, then uttered a simple wish:

*Please, do not take him away from me.*

"Best night ever…" she whispered, spreading her arms as if to splay her goddess' wings. She inhaled the scent of wind and the scent of him, basked in the miracle of that flight, delighted herself in that heart-stopping moment. She laughed and screamed the words out. "Best night ever!"

And on they soared, past Ramsgate and Old Castle, across The Bite and the Three Sisters. She saw the Eyrie and the Riverroad that meets with the Trident, and even without Jaqen saying anything, she knew where they would go.

*Harrenhal.*

It stood a hundred leagues from the Isle of Faces, more imposing, more magnificent than Arya had last seen it, despite its being practically a place of ruin. The colossal curtain walls were mountain cliffs, with wood-and-iron scorpions in the battlements.

The castle was empty, saved for her memories of one Lorathi who asked her for a drink, offered her three kills, comforted her in the godswood. Balerion the Dread may have burned the stones of the castle, yet to Arya, the fortress would remain impregnable. That castle of ruined towers, ghouls, and draughts, is her niche of love.

They dismounted. Jaqen led her to the castle's highest point which was the summit of the roofless Kingspyre Tower. From there, they could see the lights from the nearby towns of the Riverlands.

"We cannot stay here that long," Arya said, gasping at Jaqen's wet mouth flirting with her neck. "It's an open tower, the snow will kill us."

As if sensing her concernments, the built-in torches in the tower lit up with dragonfire, warming them both. Light from the flames all around them cast their shadows, and Arya gazed only at the dark silhouettes of them moving across the opposite wall.

On the Lorathi's lips were soft chuckles as he twirled her, and she spun with dazzling grace in response to his silent commands. Jaqen caught the small of Arya's back, while she coiled her arms around his neck. Their bodies truly knew how to speak with each other, they were beautiful souls dancing to the tune of one ancient music. Their movements were living poetry with rhythm and rhyme, rare language. In that moment, they were both lover and beloved, the knower and the known, the artist and the art.

And perhaps if others would see them, they would dance too, and they would wish for dragons to dance with them so spring may arrive.

Arya giggled at the sound of Jaqen's godawful singing voice, as he carried on guiding her hips and feet to his cadence, and it's as if they're running away together—from what, they knew not—in their every step and sway and spin.

... *hepnon sīr eglie...*
The words tumbled out of her lips, the melodies. "Kosti ūndegon mirre ra hen kesīr…"

Arya gasped as Jaqen pinned her against the wall as sudden, unmindful if her robe of silver would be more than tainted by the burnt stones of it.

Climbing so high, just don't look down

We can see everything from here…

He tilted his head, ran his forefinger through the dragon imprinted upon her arm. "It feels so damned good seeing my mark on your skin, Arya…"

She watched him as he carried on tracing the mark, fought against soft shudders spawned by his mere touch. "It certainly looks sexy."

Jaqen's brows furrowed. "Sexy?"

She placed her mouth against his. "You're now etched on my skin and flesh, Jaqen. It's like…you fully own me now and there's nothing I can do about it."

"But don't you want me to own you in all and every sense?" the Lorathi purred.

She bit his lower lip. "Oh, you have no idea…"

Excitement flared through her as Jaqen slowly removed her robe, trailing kisses all over parts of her that he had unclothed. She moaned as she felt his tongue swept through her bare legs, climbing back up to her feminine folds. "Heavens!" she exclaimed, convulsing because of her need for him, his lustful acts, his love.

Jaqen rose once more to meet her eyes. "I've always wanted to take you against a wall, do you know that?" He ravaged her mouth and invaded it with his tongue, in and out and in, then moved down to consume her breasts like one famished babe. Arya marveled at the sound—the break of contact of his tongue from his palate, the wetness of his suckles, the way his tongue slid against her tips. "Gods, Arya…give me babies…" He lifted her, commanded her though in the absence of words to wrap her legs around his waist. She grabbed him, his naked shoulder flexing beneath her grip. Nothing separated them now, there was only the tantalizing sensation of his flesh against her flesh.

He was still humming that song…

Arya was at Jaqen's mercy that night, yet never had she felt more powerful. She stroked his chest—wide and muscled, decadently hard against her hand.

She felt his thick length entering her, forcing its way gently inside the crevice of her. Jaqen began moving his hips and Arya shuddered at their connection, the absolute perfection of his male self inside her, and he sank himself more deeply, grunting…groaning…squeezing her behind so she could open herself more to him.

"F-feels so good, Jaqen…" Arya murmured. The rough stones of the wall scraped her back, sending her small pains, yet all these were overwhelmed by the Lorathi's pushes.

"Hah…yes, feels fantastic…gods," he responded as he drove himself into her again and again, going faster and harder in each thrust, as if wanting to release his passions inside her at the soonest possible moment.
"Harder, my love," Arya purred, adjusting her position so the Lorathi could go the deepest in her. She felt her sex clenching his thickness, wetting it profusely from the inside, sucking it in, caressing it. "Please, Jaqen… I need to feel you more. I need you, I need you, Jaqen…"

"Shush, shush…" the Lorathi owned her mouth as he kept on thrusting himself within her. "I won't stop making love to you, Arya… don't worry, sweetheart…"

She began riding him, meeting his rhythm, and he gasped at her bold behest to be allowed to take over. Arya sensed control slipping from him, his chiseled back now slick with sweat. His breathing escalated… so did his moans, as he continued pushing himself in and out of her…

He went rigid as climax swept over him.

Arya threw her head back and smiled.

She smiled because she remembered those lovely words that rolled out of Jaqen's tongue earlier.

_Gods, Arya… give me babies…_

And dear heavens, what in this world and in another would she not give him?

She lifted his face that was then buried in her bosoms, held it and kissed it all over, before kissing his mouth. For now, they could crawl into the comforts of being locked in each other's embrace.

_For now._

_In the morn, all sweet dreams would end._

______________

_Temporary armistice is shite._

Aurion sat on his imperial firebeast, scouring the peninsula of Braavos of the Hundred Isles with his hawk-eye. His Valyrian armour glistened in the sunrise, and so did his pauldrons and vambraces forged by their ancient steel of rune and the breath of dragons. Yet beneath those bronze chains, the tassets and the greaves, was utter malevolence that could shatter the soul of any person bold enough to host it.

But Aurion knew better. He knew that the armour he was wearing may protect him from the offenses and defenses of the Titan and those hidden behind the walls of the Arsenal, but the same armour can never protect him from his own heinous self.

_There is neither good nor evil— honey of his mouth. Ascendancy— one word that the weak and witless would never be able to fathom._

The lore was true—heightened sense comes to one when one makes the original possessor of it a part of himself. His sight was now akin to dragonglass candles that can perceive all things from a distance and unlock the meaning of events _before_ they happen, as his eyes that were then purple had turned green. It was during a slave trade close to the White Knife, centuries past, when he discovered the Isle of Faces and the green men that dwelled there. They asked him of his intents. "Perfect balance between Ice and Fire," he had told them, and so they had made him drink from the lake for they said they respect creatures that can wield magic. When he woke up the next day, mote was washed off from his eyes and he saw it all—the forthcoming Doom, Winter, West of Westeros.

_The Warrior and the Nissa._
He chuckled viciously, his fingers fiddling with the Dragon Queller found beneath the ruins of Old Valyria—the one that used to belong to Kleitos Esdraelon.

The Ragman's was in its usual bustle. Dyed banners hung from clothesline along the Drowned Town, painted flowers were on wood-framed doorways, and bushels of wheat gathered from the other Free Cities were tacked against walls—superstitious nonsense. A mob of people already filled the streets, Pentoshi weavers, Dornish traders, Braavosi local sellers, calling out in their nasal sing-song endless descriptions of clams and cockles and cloying eatables. Braying goats and sheep, ox-drawn wagons with cheese and ale jugs, smoked fish, bitter fruits, buzzing flies. Ah well, the Purple Harbor certainly does not have such colorful scenes.

Most of them were still in denial, despite tellings all over about the recent fate of Meereen, Tyrosh, and the Citadel. Worries disappear for a time—they must.

The descendants of those escaped slaves in Valyria had been faring well, till now.

He gave the first signal.

Volantene and Ironborn galleys numbering almost one hundred and fifty immediately sailed towards the peninsula's front—forming offensive semi-circles within semi-circles, and stopped when they were a few leagues away from the Titan. The distance is safe enough from the reach of that colossal statue, thus the ships will not evoke its wrath, unless in the event of a clear attack. The galley commander of the Volantenes raised a banner signaling the rest of the fleet to launch assaillment.

He lowered the flag, and the onslaught commenced.

Fifty-two ships closed in on the lagoon and around the gigantic warrior statue, and began ejecting fire from the galleys' dragon-shaped siphons, aiming at the black granite where the Titan stands. The fortress will collapse once the stones melt. Trebuchets hurled barrels upon barrels of wildfire past the Sellagoro's Shield that served as the city's stronghold. Bright green flames crawled along the Shield, burning and destroying soldier pines at its summits, with some of the barrels catapulted past the hillgates to the direction of the inner lagoon where the Arsenal and Chequy Port were standing.

Wildfire snaked across the waters towards the mainland.

Inside the Titan's helm which is Braavos's peak stood the Sealord who saw everything from his vantage point. "They did not honor the armistice, as I have feared," Aristide Antaryon spoke to the Titan's commander, calm eyes directed towards the enemy ships and the soldiery on board. "Very well, then. Charge all fleet captains—full counterattack."

Arrow slits from the Titan's breastplate opened, archers positioned themselves to the battlements. They nocked flaming arrows and released these onto the approaching ships, and already, some of the smaller vessels that were now directly below the Titan were swept back by the waves as colossal boulders were dropped on to the ships by watchmen inside the statue's hidden chambers. Helms and decks were wrecked by the impact, killing a considerable number of soldiers. The sails of some vessels bearing Volantene banners and sigils of krakens were already aflame. "Abandon ship!" screamed some of the cowardly ones, leaping onto the unmerciful Narrow Sea. "Overboard! Desert the decks now!"

More ships approached the statue, their positions in perfect crescent making it impossible for other ships to penetrate through and breach the formation.
"Light the signals," the Sealord ordered, hands behind his back. The enemy fleet would truly dwarf them in number, but this is not a battle of numbers but a battle of galley tactics. "Red flame: Braavosi ships from the east and west; blue flame: Pentoshi ships from the south. Alert the Arsenal." He turned to another commander. "Evacuate all women and children from the mainland to the hills. Use the ships docked along the Purple Harbor. Order all men to stay and take up arms—for precautionary purposes. We will not let any of these ships get past the Titan."

The torches were lit, and in a matter of minutes, Braavosi and Pentoshi ships from outside the peninsula assumed position in a crescent and prepared for rear ambush. Some ships from inside navigated their way towards the Titan's feet to act as blockade.

A dance of ships commenced on the waters of the Narrow as the Braavosi ships from east to west began ramming the vulnerable sides of enemy vessels through their front rostrums of hard steel, destroying oars and delivering shattering impact that almost broke some of the ships into half. Foremasts and sails collapsed mightily onto the soldiers on deck, the force angering the waves and drowning even those who were on the ship's secured part. Fifteen, sixteen ships capsized. A rain of quarrels came from both sides, evoking a caterwaul of both trepidation and rage from those engaged in battle. Both sides wasted no time using their naval artilleries against each other.

Planks were dropped from Braavosi and Pentoshi galleys on the decks of the enemies to serve as bridge for the taking of the ships. Spikes were hooked on to the enemy ships and grappled the prow of their rammers. Mercenaries boarded the vessels and began slaughtering Volantenes and Ironborns they could possible lay their hands on. The foes fought with equal brutality, slashing and beheading using their spiked flails and halberds and glaives.

Victorious cries were heard from a group of Braavosi warlords who were able to take one of the lead ships, bolstering fearlessness of those who were still in the fray.

The Sealord smiled.

"No damnable slaver's empire will win against Braavos."

What had transpired next made him swallow back those words.

Two dragons swept past those pine clad hills from the peninsula's east and west. They easily penetrated the Titan and the Arsenal's blindspots. The target—the Sealord's Palace and the Long Canal.

The fleet of one hundred and fifty was just a diversion.

Dragonfire engulfed the domes and towers of the Palace and the office of the city magisters northeast of the lagoon. With flames nefarious and relentless, the grand obelisks of strong stones and heliotropes melted like candlewax, its great pillars at the mercy of fire's sheer strength. Those who were by the Moon Pool and the Purple Harbor began scrambling for cover, with some leaping onto the waters and calling for the grace of the Drowned God whom in usual days they would merely ridicule. The cards that spoke of a mighty tower destroyed were materializing right in the very eyes of the witnessing victims. "Run! To the Isle of the Gods!" one religious fanatic had managed to scream before he too, was turned to instant ash by the crawling conflagration.

Ships were turned to fine embers in both harbors, as men, women, and children were burned to death by the hundreds. It was inferno that could be paralleled only by a thousand Dooms of Valyria, and the mass genocide of those Braavosi carried on, annihilating all in dragonfire's path.

Fire continued to slither across the Long Canal, towards the Canal of Heroes where statues of
Sealords stood fearless. Stone architecture, granite monuments were all reduced to grime. *No man, woman, or child will ever be a slave, thrall, or bondsman*—that first law etched on a stone arch spanning the canal—erased after more than eight hundred years.

"Rain fire!" was Aurion's command as he flew from north of the city. Already, colossal arrows of black spruces coated with Death of Dragons found their way from the Titan to the beasts, concealed arrow loops opened for the archers to attack. "Burn them all!" The beasts soared through the peninsula's airspace, evading the giant spruces. Dragon's eye—this is the beast's most vulnerable part. Quarrels flew to this direction and that as troops began assembling along the harbors and beside every major structure.

But the battle was three imperial dragons against one colossal statue, and the other side could make hell appear out of the mouths of their firebeasts.

Three dragons converged in the Isle of the Gods where most of the Braavosi and foreign traders had scrambled. The dragon with cerulean shades commanded by Daxen Ophistor spewed fire onto the shrine of the Weeping Lady and the Gardens of Gelenei, diminishing both monuments into burnt relics. "Take the Moonsingers!" the Valyrian woman shouted her command to Lathos Hadervaren. "Let your firebeast feed on all the cursed priestesses!" His scarlet dragon with dark marillion frills swept along the expanse of the Isle and attacked the white temple.

Aurion stopped mid-air and with his evil eyes raked the entire cay. "Akhraaaast!" He bellowed. "Get out from your damnable animal's lair!" He zoomed across the air, *Drakarys* in his lips, as he took sweet revenge against Braavos's most hallowed places—setting breathing men and stone structures ablaze, melting mighty granite where the Isle stood.

Finally, he reached the House of Black and White.

"Akhrast L'ris!" he shouted on, his voice accentuated by the horrifying sound of Urkon's flapping wings. "Show me your treacherous face, you damned Mage!"

At these words, the double doors of ebony and weirwood opened to reveal the Kindly Man, four other Faceless Masters behind him.

Upon the Elder's mien were emotions almost impossible to name—as there was grief in him, and wrath, and remorse, and a reckoning; and all these dovetailed within one Faceless Man, the greatest of them in fact, who was supposed to think and do but *not feel*. He roamed his eyes around the city being decimated by dragonfire, then held his head up and regarded the dragonlord with utter hatred and incredulity at the Valyrian's artistic wickedness. "You've crossed turfs West of Westeros, surrendered yourself to the god of death and re-entered the cycles all for this?!" came the Kindly Man's anguished roars. "Demon of all demons, how must you be slain so you wouldn't rise from the ashes of the Smoking Sea anymore?! Your greed, your lust for power, your cruelty, this endless cycle of destruction and restorations, an empire without an end—think you that the deceptive god of death you entered into a bargain with would allow you to actually rebuild Valyria?!"

"You still talk a lot, Mage," Aurion spat. "For a whole millenium you have hidden that traitor, *Iāqaen Haegār* and his Rhoynish slut for some stupid prophecy of yours. Reversal of Valyrian diaspora—the Mother Freehold will reclaim that dragonriding fool no matter what steps you take to thwart it; and that woman whom you call the Nissa," the dragonlord sneered maliciously. "…must die. Her blood is ours. Surrender her to us or I'll create hell in this temple of yours."

"Hell was invented for the likes of you!" the Elder bellowed back. "You will never get either of them. If they die, they die; but *not* in your hands."
"We'll see," the dragonlord primed his firebeast for an attack. "As soon as Arya of the Rhoyne learns about what has happened to the slaves she and that Valyrian traitor had freed, to this city they had built, she would waste no time coming to us to exact retribution."

The Elder hardened his jaw in pure spite. "Don't you dare."

"Too late," Aurion sneered. "Drakarys!"

Deadly blue flames spritzed out from Urkon's mouth at the command. However, not an iota of flame could touch the temple and the masters that were standing in front of the ebony and weirwood.

Fire could not break through the sphere the assassin-mages have built up as a shield, and that field of invisible force seemed to consume, absorb dragonfire, reducing it to mere sparks and smokes. The temple must not burn, the Elder persuaded himself as he channeled all energies in order to fortify that defensive wall of rune, even as he felt cracks within him streaking outwards, deep fissures reaching through to his flesh and sinews. Dear gods! He exclaimed, as he heard the sound of a mighty structure collapsing—the Titan has fallen.

Two dragonriders came to Aurion's aid. Lathos maneuvered his firebeast south of the temple and attempted to shatter the sphere. The firebeast was thrown back many leagues as soon as its scales came in contact with the rune. Daxen's firebeast bathed the protective sphere with orbs of flame, to no avail.

"Damn that Mage!" the Valyrian woman's screams had gone hysterical as she circumnavigated across the Isle. "As soon as we break through this rune of theirs, I will mangle his bones and feed his assassin-mages to Varathis!"

"Keligon," was Aurion's command. Stop—and Urkon closed his beastly orifice, paused from ejecting flames. He pulled the beast's dragonreins and urged it to fly a bit higher. "We cannot tire our dragons like this, these useless mages will sap out all of our strength." He looked around, smiled at the sight of the almost-obliterated city of slaves who had broken away from Mother Valyria's bosoms—the bastion of false hopes and illusions of liberty, of absurd faiths and distorted visions of free rein. "Work of art…work of art…" he said, then turned his attention back to the Elder. "I will return, and when I do, I'll be looking at your burnt corpse."

"Go," the Elder retorted, trying his best to appear resilient though his own rune had weakened him. "Get the bloody hell out of here."

The dragonlords commanded their beasts out of the peninsula, their screeches echoing all over the ruins of what once was the most powerful of the Free Cities.

Arya awoke with a gasp.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?" Jaqen purred, grasping Arya's left breast and pushing her down with him. They had spent the night in the Kingspyre Tower at Harrenhal on a cot of very thick blankets, danced, made love. Curiously, there was no snowfall, not even a single snowflake that descended from the heavens that night. "Lie down, please. Sunrise is not for a few hours."

"Braavos…" the girl whispered, shuddering at the vision that had pervaded her most recent dream. She wrapped her arms around herself, stood abruptly, and leaned against the tower's parapet, hoping that the gifts from the faceless old gods would allow her to see beyond…past the Narrow Sea, to the lagoon hidden by pine-clad hills with hundred isles—her second home.

Jaqen rose and strode to where Arya was standing, embraced her from behind. "Talk to me."
The girl faced the Lorathi, gripped tightly his sleeves. "Everything that the Elder could perceive, Jaqen...his eruditions. Once faceless, forever faceless; no matter how hard I try to cast out the connection with him—"

"You cannot," Jaqen supplied the words for her. "The mindwork of each and every Faceless Man is linked somehow to rest of the Order. It's the work of the Crux and those alchemical stones safekeeping our memories."

"But Sabine stole the gold and silver that contained ours..."

"She stole replicas of those," the Lorathi explained. "Those elements would always belong to the Crux and we can never get them back unless the temple is completely decimated. Even in that event, well, the elements will be destroyed as they are all vulnerable to dragonfire." He led her hand to his lips. "Did the Elder try to communicate with you?"

"Yes," Arya replied, and her visage that earlier reflected worriment was now whelmed with wrath. "He told me not to go to Valyria."

"And he's right," Jaqen said. "After the ride to the Wall, you must stay in Winterfell. I'll have Jon and Aegon with me to the Freehold to obtain dragonglass, Braavosi and Pentoshi fleet to ship them to White Harbor."

"I cannot not go to Valyria!" Arya roared her fury. "Those accursed lords razed Braavos with dragonfire!"

Jaqen was rammed to the core by Arya's declaration, as he became the host of inexplicable fear and rage. "That's impossible. Temporary armistice, Arya—"

"Those Valyrians agreed to nothing, Jaqen! It was a one-way proposition! Meereen and Tyrosh, and just recently, Oldtown; after all those attacks, what else would make you think that honoring agreements would be part of their damnable gameplan?" She broke away from Jaqen's hold and paced the tower. "I will warg into those demons and maim their brains till they scream for death, came Arya's thoughts. I will make them suffer until hell freezes over in that Gehenna of theirs!"

Jaqen clenched his teeth, his dragonrider's blood burning with pure rage. "The temple?"

"No stones were burnt," Arya replied. "But I saw them all—the same visions in my dream back in the House of Black and White. Volantene and Ironborn fleets managed to conquer the Titan. The Sealord's, the Shield, the Long Canal, the Isle of the Gods, the Braavosi...they burned everything, Jaqen, they set everyone on fire!"

"Heraxos!" Jaqen summoned his firebeast which promptly responded to his call.

The dragon ensphered the tower in its flight before settling itself on the thick stone parapet. Its eyes were ablaze as if sensing the battle that was to come, breathing heavily, containing the deadly burst of flames threatening to escape from its colossal mouth. "Naejot se Dōros," he said—to the Wall. He turned to Arya. "We need to get Jon and Aegon. Let's move."

"Lemon cakes or custard tart?"

"Lemon cakes."

"Did you hear that, Jon? Aegon likes lemon cakes, too! I remember how we missed those in Castle Black—they don't make them in there, they keep on baking lamprey pies that not one of us could
Jon kept his mouth shut and his eyes focused on the snow-blanketed thoroughfare, maintained the silent animosity between him and Aegon the Sixth. He led his mount to a safe distance from the Targaryen Prince, not that it was necessary as Sam's mount was between theirs.

Harsh snowfall made the ride to the Wall a hundred times harder. In usual days and during gentler winters, riding from Long Lake to the Last Hearth would only take a day, a day and a half at most. Thrice they had to stop and set camp, and the small retinue—consisting of Northerners, that is—that rode with them had to be left at the wildling village, since most of them had gone indisposed because of the almost unbearable cold. They were tended to by those free folks, fed and given cots and hay pillows to lay their heads on.

Their wary eyes were all the while upon him and Aegon the Sixth, and Jon could swear that the subjects of their evening colloquies were not at all about his return from hell and rumors about the Prince's fire-breathing beasts but about the utter and undeniable resemblance between the two of them. Twice he had controlled himself in order not to give one Frostfang-dweller a full blow on the face, for he had overheard him speaking with a Thenn: "Just keep your keen eyes on them, I could swear by the Weirwood's face that if both of them wore that same silver hair, I wouldn't know who's the Lord Crow and who's the Dragon Prince."

A night they had spent in the wildling village before the last ride to Castle Black. Jon exhaled in ire as Sam carried on with his self-imposed role of acting as bridge between the two of them.

"Never did like the sweet reds, I prefer cider and I had them aplenty back in the Citadel," Sam giggled. "Best way to end the night after all those readings, and the acolytes were not bad company either." He glanced cautiously at Jon whose expression remained passive. "I know that Jon here likes them simple—mead is something we used to have all the time in the Castle to ward off the cold from the body, isn't that right, Jon?" he received no answer, and so he turned to Aegon who appeared most engaged in Sam's tellings. "You?"

"Arbor gold, what else?" Jon scoffed bitterly. "Do you honestly expect a Targaryen conqueror to just drink ale from a wooden tankard, Samwell?"

Aegon the Sixth just smiled wistfully and kept his eyes on the road, choosing the more honorable response of ignoring his brother's tirade.

Sam laughed nervously, attempted to salvage the situation. "Growing up with sellswords for company? I hardly think Arbor gold fits well, Jon. Mercenaries detest soft ones as that."

"Qartheen dreamwine with strange spices, Pentoshi pale ambers, those bottles from Andalos," Jon carried on with his sardonic remarks. "If you would be king, you have to taste them all."

Jon knew better, and he knew that he must not speak like one embittered bastard who had recently gained the birthright he was so wanting, before realizing that he was the long-lost son of a Targaryen Prince whose infidelity spurred an uprising, killing thousands. He must not think like this, not when Winter is but hair's breadth away and the only way to vanquish what was coming is accepting Aegon the Sixth's offer of aid.

He despised the thought of being in any way connected to Rhaegar Targaryen, even though every scintilla of his being screamed of it as the truth, and even though Bran who practically knew every thing about every damned thing confirmed it. There was the harp too, and the Malleon's scrolls that as clear as crystal, documented his birth from the Prince's union with Lyanna Stark.
No, he must not act like one self-indulgent, sarcastic fool.

But it feels so fulfilling to act like a fool most of the time.

"Tasted a lot but not all, Sam," was Aegon's indirect reply. He smiled congenially at the wide one, his eyes still with a certain sadness. "Although I must admit that I do like pale amber, drank it once with Arya when she was in Pentos with me."

Jon pulled the reins of his mount at the words, maneuvered it to face Aegon the Sixth. I must not do this, the more rational part of him admonished the overpermissive one. This might have serious consequences, and we don't have the time for serious consequences right now. "With Arya?" with narrow eyes he queried the Prince. The more primal part had overtaken the logical. "Pray tell, Aegon the Sixth, how long have you been in love with my sister?"

Aegon pulled his mount to a stop as well, faced Jon with a very patient expression. Younger brothers are indeed pains in the arse, he thought, and laughed inwardly for a part of him—that repressed part that wanted to, needed to belong was bit by bit being gratified by Jon's decision to speak directly with him. Aegon knew that Jon's tone was bordering on antagonistic, but beggars don't get to choose.

"Not very long," the Prince answered calmly.

"You do know that she's Jaqen's wife now, right?" Jon said, emphasis on each word. "I have heard about your proposition to House Stark through Tyrion Lannister—alliance through marriage, is it? The easiest albeit most backward form of establishing partnerships? How do you plan to go through it now that Arya was wed just a couple of nights ago?"

"I don't," Aegon replied. He lifted his head up to meet Jon's gaze levelly, even as his heart was being gorged by fangs of unrequited love that is the greatest slayer of all silent lovers. "I have revoked that proposition when we were still in Pentos, asked Lady Arya for her most gracious pardons. I do not intend to force the North into an alliance for the sake of conquest. Our efforts as of now must remain focused on fortifying the Wall."

Aegon was at the bridge that night, the one that connects the great keep to the armory and he saw it all—the moonstones, the swords of Stark kings, the laughter all over the godswood. And dear gods, Arya's sounds of mirth were the loudest and for a moment there, Aegon was able to breathe and rest on the thought that she might be telling the truth about the Lorathi's real affections for her, that the Lorathi would not hurt her indeed, that the Lorathi would love her the way she deserves to be loved. Just...I want her happy, please...he voiced out his hidden anguish that same night for he knew that the old gods of the North listen to prayers through the Weirwood. Do whatever godly things you gods do in order to keep her safe from any harm.

"The Wall," Jon nodded, as if awoken once more by duty. Folly can wait. "Of course." He whipped his mount gently through the reins. They began moving once more. This time, Samwell chose to stay at the back so the two brothers could speak.

Deafening silence for half a mile.

"You've done very well, Jon," Aegon finally spoke. "Ingenious scheme—free folks at Oakenshield and the New Gift, marrying Val to seal the alliance and to give those free folks some form of citizenship. The Northern lords' fealty to you is unparalleled, and I've learned about your agreement with Theon Greyjoy." He glanced at the younger one. "The newly-manned castles in the Wall, the once abandoned ones—a system of yours?"
"Yes," Jon led the steed leftwards, the retinue followed. The lad exhaled, thought it best to inform the would-be king about the situation at the Wall. "Still, all castles are undermanned. I've assigned Halleck to re-garrison Deep Lake and Sable Hall and he was able to gather enough folks. Two hundred in the Shadow Tower, six hundred in Castle Black, fewer in Eastwatch-by-the-Sea, the remaining thirteen castles only have around…fifty to a hundred men. Eddison Tollett leads them now."

"I have instructed the thirteen thousand from the Golden Company to ride North." He glanced at Jon. "Harry Strickland is one of my most trusted, last I've heard they have already set sail from Gulltown to White Harbor, give it three, four days and they'll be tapping on Winterfell's gates."

"I thought you have twenty-five thousand," Jon said. "We need as many men as we can get. Horselords, the Unsullied ones. Riverlands would pledge half their soldiery only after Lord Edmure is brought back from Casterly Rock—even then, we cannot be assured that they would take the threats of Winter seriously. They haven't seen anything, that's why."

Aegon gazed at Jon and was partly surprised when he saw his lip tip up a little. "Believe me, Jon, I want to haul all mercenaries here but we have Greyjoys, Lannisters, and Valyrians to worry about down south."

"You trust them?" Jon queried. "Your army of sellswords?"

"The same way that you trust your wildlings."

Jon held back a smile. "They're foreign mercenaries. They're sworn only to gold. I assume you have an abundance of that which is why you don't seem to worry about their loyalty one whit, no offense. The wildlings on the other hand, they don't care about any of that anymore—gold, possessions. All they care about is surviving; they need a home within the confines of the Wall."

"A home, yes," Aegon the Sixth answered. "The Golden Company was founded by Bittersteel—a Targaryen bastard, but I suppose you already know that. The members are revenants of forgotten wars and failed rebellions, Westerosi exiles like Ser Jorah, your pardoned one." He exhaled, for suddenly the winds have gone heavy. Or was it only his heart? "They marched with me in high hopes that they could come back home with me—here, in Westeros." His smile was once more melancholic. "I took it upon myself to bring them here, give them back the pardon they were owed. I'm done running and hiding. I'm done denying who I am. I suppose they were, too."

Same here, a part of Jon screamed, but he was quick to suppress the thought. Still it was insistent, like hisses that would never depart from him. Who am I, truly? He asked himself though he knew that the answer would be ever-elusive. Stark? Targaryen? A fallen brother of the Night's Watch who chose to take the side of the wildlings? A Northern liege lord whose rule is questioned by his own vassals behind his back?

That moniker which Bran had given him before his reawakening through salt and smoke echoed clear in the walls of his memories:

Warrior.

Promised.

Jon knew nothing about what those labels meant, if even they meant anything.

He gazed down at Oathkeeper and remembered Arya. "This was father's sword, Jon," she had told him. "It's yours now." Longclaw is now with Ser Jorah, for Jon saw it proper and honorable that the
ancestral sword of the Mormonts be given back to a Mormont, the same way that Stark swords should be wielded by Starks. But I am not Eddard's son, Jon's heart broke at the realization he was slowly accepting. I've died and lived again with a single want—to be declared his trueborn. The gods did not give me that.

They were now approaching Mole's Town, and Jon knew that he should not attempt to engage Aegon in another conversation that might once more lead to embittered exchanges. Still, he couldn't help himself. "Why did he have to do it—choose Lyanna?" he asked, pained gaze upon the Prince. "Thousands of choices and he picked the wrong one?"

"Yes, that choice was indeed wrong in the purview of most." Aegon glanced back at Jon, pulled the reins of his mount so it would slow down a little. "You hold that belief now because Lyanna had to die, and thousands had to die with her as those stirring words of yours had so put it. Forgive me, but I have to say this," he carried on and lifted his head to the look at the skies, as he reminisced that one night when Rhaegar had communed in spirit with his beloved through him and Arya Stark. "It might be that for him, that choice was so right that he had to risk leading others to their graves for such purpose. As to what that purpose is...maybe we'll get to know. Maybe, we won't. Or maybe..." he gazed at Jon. "The whole reason for Rhaegar's very choice was you."

Before the ride to the Wall, Jon had visited the crypts and headed straight to Lyanna Stark's tomb. For what might have been hours he stayed there, eyes fixed on the statue that had her face. He held the stone hands that were clutching at the heart, prayed for one thing for her—true rest. He uttered that one word before leaving the crypt, an acknowledgment and a farewell.

'Mother.'

"For one whose family got slaughtered because of Rhaegar's deeds, you seem to be too earnest to defend him," Jon said. "As much as I admire your devotion to Rhaegar, I can't help but wonder what he did to deserve your regard; well, apart from the fact that he's your father."

Aegon smiled, a manner of temporary surrender. "It makes me brave, knowing that I have you on my side in this battle, Jaehaerys," he said, choosing to ignore the hint of harshness in the last of Jon's words.

Jon stared back at Aegon, an ambiguous set of emotions overpowering his doubts and instinctive want for hostility. This lad whose mount is beside his own is but a stranger to him, kin or no. He never knew he existed until three days ago when he so boldly rode from Dragonstone to Winterfell, with his wagons of obsidian, like an older brother bringing promised favors to the younger one after some great wayfaring of his.

However, when Aegon indirectly confessed how he needed Jon for what was to come, how badly they needed each other, there was nothing more Jon could do but to nod.

"What's happening over there?" Sam asked, his gaze fixed on the marker shack of Mole's Town.

Free folks were scrambling out of the town's warren of tunnels, carrying nothing but a few personal implements and children that couldn't walk yet on their own. The bray of men and horses could be heard from where the three were standing. It was a whole whirlwind of riot and cry as the wildlings ran in scattered directions, as if escaping from something unidentified. Hysterical shouts, terror-stricken voices. With movements unnerved, they stampeded out of the town of burrows.

"Ho!" Jon pulled the reins of his steed as it too, joined the caterwaul of panic. He caught one wildling lad running past their direction through the lad's coat of bearskin. "What has happened here?!"
"Three…three, one brother came on a horse and told us…three, and we had to move…" the lad stuttered, as he uselessly writhed from Jon's grasp.

"Three what?!" Aegon demanded, losing his calm for a while there as he felt his dragon's blood beginning to boil in his veins.

"T-three blasts of a sentry's horn…from the Wall."

Sam whimpered and stared at Jon with petrified eyes.

**Others.**

As if affirming such, the sun that was earlier a glow of bursting marigold faded in plain sight in the west, concealed by some form of celestial, malevolent hand.

Darkness *literally* crawled on the ground, enveloping all that it could reach, as if heralding the arrival of flesh and blood monsters and taking its stranglehold, sapping life out of anything and anyone.

The uproar intensified.

"To the Wall!" Jon roared, kicking his horse's girth. "Call your dragons, Aegon!"

The three rode past the pandemonium and rushed to the Wall half a league away.

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Two muted thunderclaps sounded not far from the castle as the north spread its ebony cloak, the first boom followed scant seconds later by the second. Direwolves howled from a distance as the chill and damp of the sudden night clung with tenacity to the grounds surrounding Winterfell, its walls and turrets.

"The sun just…waned," Rickon told Tyrion. They were in the library tower and they saw from the giant windows how daylight evanesced asudden, how it was thereon replaced by shadows when the hours were far from nightfall. "Did you see it? Did you see how blackness slithered from up north?"

Tyrion felt gooseprickles all over his skin, felt the ill-boding meaning of the sudden disappearance of day. Still, he had to play the part of an inspiring fool in the face of his lady wife's brother. "I saw it. It's the effect of winter solstice, dear boy, nothing more."

The boy eyed him with incredulity. "It's no wonder why Sansa liked you. You make everything appear fine when everything is clearly not. I've been to Skagos, Tyrion. I know more than the lot of you combined do." He pointed towards the source of crawling darkness. "See? It's coming from the north. As in north-north—the Wall. You've been to the Wall, haven't you? You should know that this thing here is not at all ordinary."

"No," Tyrion voiced out his assent. "It's damned chilly in the Wall but in there, morns are morns and nights are nights. The moon does not usurp the sun's territory, if that's what you're asking."

"So…something's happening in the Wall?" Rickon probed on, his face a reflection of utter woe.

"Let's hope not," the Imp answered, then closed the tower's large window. "Let's go, Rickon. We have to speak with Ser Davos and Aegeus Ioannanou. You must gather the men and play liege lord's proxy in Jon's absence."

"The vassals would kill you if they see you, Tyrion."
He opened the door and turned to Rickon with a cheerless smile. "On the contrary, they would be most overjoyed to see Tywin Lannister's murderer. No need to worry, all is well."

*A lie,* Rickon thought as he tossed and turned on the bed that midnight. *Starting now, all hell breaks loose.*

The tensions during the gathering of vassals were no match to the perturbations he's having right now. The most challenging part as he had predicted was making the Northern lords understand and accept Ser Jorah and Tyrion's presence in Winterfell. "Tyrion Lannister is married to a Stark," was Rickon's declaration earlier. "He is, whether you intend to question this or keep your wise silence, is family to us. He never was a threat to Bran, never forced Sansa into union. Our full acceptance of Tyrion within the walls of this castle is the same as what had been done to Alys Karstark who sought for protection through Jon Stark at the Wall."

"He has turned his back on the Queen?" Lord Mors asked. "He should be executed for treason, then." Laughter followed the lord's japing.

"Hundred and eleven, hundred and twelve." Tyrion craned his neck to have a better look at the gathered vassals. "A hundred and thirteen northern nobles in the hall, young lord Rickon Stark. I assume we have a hundred and thirteen nooses somewhere in the castle, yes? We should all be hanged for turning our backs on the Queen and declaring for either Stannis or Aegon the Sixth," He turned to Lord Mors and smirked. "I suppose the good Lord Umber here would do the honors of showing us how to properly stand on the stool before the drop."

"I will kick away the stool for the Lord Umber should he wish," Sansa added.

Wyman Manderly's roars of hilarity were once more loudest in the hall.

"What about Mormont?" Lord Glover asked, motioning his head to Ser Jorah. "He was pardoned by Robert Baratheon, but Bear Island must remain under the rule of the Lady Maege—"

"I have spoken with the liege lord," Jorah said, tightening his grip on his father's sword. "The battle is up north, I will take the Black and aid the Watch."

"All is settled then," Rickon said, glancing at Bran and Sansa who both nodded. "Now, onto matters. We need to gather all forces to re-garrison the Wall within two days, tomorrow at the soonest. You saw what happened today, night has fallen even when it wasn't supposed to. We must all act in calm haste. Soldiery will be under the command of the vassals and the vassals will be under Ser Davos Seaworth and Aegeus Ioannanou."

Partial, temporary agreements were made. They would gather the troops for the battle up north, for now. They would fight what devils need to be conquered beyond the Wall, would all swallow their pride and accept the young lord's orders of combining forces, for now.

The politics will be there, but it can wait.

Rickon drifted away from that memory of the gathering, sat up on the bed and felt his irises dart rapidly from left to right before succumbing to oblivion, only to find himself within Shaggydog's consciousness.

He was loping and winding south along the corridor that leads to the east wing. His massive head was slung forward in front of his broad shoulders. He sensed something—an unwelcome presence that screamed of devastation and betrayal.

He paused when he noticed glinting drops of red on the floor.
Blood…

Stark blood.

The direwolf whimpered as its sight traced the source of those scarlet drops, trotted towards Bran Stark's bedchamber and stopped by the closed threshold.

Two voices—a woman's and Bran’s.

Before your death, last greenseer…spare yourself of the agony and tell me what I need to know.

Where's the other assassin?

Foraging the North to find them both.

You don't own either of them.

Yes, the oaken door was indeed shut, yet Rickon could seem to see beyond that door that barred him from fully witnessing the encounter through Shaggydog's eyes, and he watched them both—Bran soaked in his own blood, already weak and close to submission, and the woman touching the tip of her bloodied dagger.

Rickon gasped as he recognized the woman's face.

Sabine.

Something's awful wrong.

It can't be her.

"Bloodraven is dead," the woman's lip tipped up. "You see, when you are already marked for demise you would not be able to escape or thwart the grand chase with death, and it hardly matters if you can skinchange into ravens and bears." She leaned over to Bran and pressed the dagger against his already bleeding neck. "Before you got out of the Weirwood, that greenseer showed you everything about everything. You know what's to happen to Jaqen H'ghar, don't you?"

Bran's visage betrayed no emotion—there was only serenity in it, a welcoming of fate which was shattering Rickon by the turn of the hourglass. "Yes, I do."

"Yet you chose to spare him?" the woman clicked her tongue in feigned disappointment. "You're running a dangerous game here, Stark. That Valyrian-Lorathi needs to die and you know it. All for the good of the realms, or had Bloodraven not taught you anything of consequence?"

"Jaqen is more than aware of what must be done when the time for hosting comes," Bran replied, then smirked back. "Forgive me, I do not wish to disclose anymore than what is necessary simply because none of it is your damned business."

"Then, I'll take you first before I take him," the woman said, holding her dagger in a throwing stance.

The attack was so swift that she was not able to raise her hand to release her weapon. The direwolf had broken through the door and was now upon her, surging through her assassin's rune as if it was no more than useless wind. Rickon heard a snapping sound, replaced by spurting of blood as he rammed his direwolf's body against the woman, flinging her upwards.

She landed on both feet as if the impact was nothing. However, her right arm was bleeding profusely. He had bitten her.
Rickon felt Shaggydog falling to his knees. The direwolf regained his feet but collapsed once more, and the boy realized how badly stabbed he was.

"Rickon, leave!" Bran screamed. "Leave Shaggy now, you can't be within him when he dies!"

But the boy knew that if ever he left the direwolf's consciousness and returned to his own, the assassin would waste no split-second giving Bran a final stab in the heart.

"Rickon, get out of him!" his brother kept on screaming.

No…no…

*The lone wolf dies but the pack survives.*

Rickon dispelled the waves of Bran's voice urging him to run and save himself. His growl deepened, as he felt chaos swirl in that chamber, a form of lawlessness that churned into him like a bedlam of pestilence. He threw himself onto the woman and felt their strong collision against the wall, the almost unbearable pain of dagger pierces. Fragments of stones puffed into the air around them as crushed bricks scattered across the floor.

The woman mysteriously vanished in the air.

Rickon gazed back at Bran, as Shaggydog breathed his last.

Memories of the attack… a whole confusing blur of it.

Sabine's mind was reeling with possible explications as to how anyone from the temple could have done it.

She was sitting on a stool beside Rickon's bed. The boy was still unconscious but his breathing had gone back to normal. Color had returned to his face and body, blood had started to flow once more. "Wake up, dear Rickon," she whispered as she wiped the boy's head with damp cloth. "You cannot remain forever with the direwolf. It's gone."

She and Sansa had rushed to Bran's bedchamber upon hearing the din, his screams, and one direwolf's howls of pain. They reached him in no time and saw the tragic state he was in—bloodied from the neck down, bruised and broken all over. He had dragged himself towards a lifeless Shaggydog, laid his hands upon the direwolf as if to heal it. Angry tears were all over his face. "Rickon warged into him, he was inside the wolf when it died," Bran had told them. "He might be trapped, rouse him and be quick about it, please!"

"Who did this?!" Sansa had asked, then on the border of hysterics.

"An assassin."

During the past days, Sabine had worked on healing draughts as Jaqen and Bran have so instructed her. There was one newly-concocted draught that would aid the body and consciousness in recovering from a traumatic encounter, and so he had given drops of it to Rickon. It was working as she could observe, yet in too gradual a pace. The boy had warged into the wolf and the wolf had died a split-second before he could leave it. The battle now is against immaterial forces that reside within the warg and what had become of the host. If the boy is strong enough, he will win over the eidolons that sought to conquer his animism. If he is not resilient, however…

*Wake up, Rickon.*
Sabine felt her body being thrown in the air, her back hitting the solid wall of that chamber. She landed with a hard thud on the wooden chiffonier, knocking off some scarce personal effects. Her lungs seemed to have collapsed because of the impact, yet in between her deep breaths and silent clamor for dire air, she managed to lift her head to have a look at her assaulter.

"You attacked Bran Stark?!" Aegeus crossed the space between them. He forced her up and pushed her body against the wall in all ferocity. She gasped for air and felt her nose bleed out of shock, her head spun in a whorl of turmoil, helplessness, throe. "Dare you not deny it, the maester saw you tiptoeing to the boy's room!"

"I did not attack anyone," Sabine said with a resolute tone, even as she desired to die in front of Aegeus, what with his certainty over a baseless accusation, his heaven-reaching wrath, those words that kill, those eyes. "It wasn't me. Bran knows it. You know it."

The comely one pinned her harder as if taking measures in order for her to not just vanish from his grasp; and when she writhed in protestation, he slammed her brutishly. She coughed and spat out blood. "You liar!" Aegeus roared. "Who did it, if it wasn't you?! Speak!"

"I…I don't know, Aegeus, please…" she whispered, as she felt herself on the verge of passing out.

"You still have not decided any damned thing about what to do with your own life, is that it?" Aegeus probed on. "You follow their orders blindly, assault allies, create dissension, all for what? So Arya could die?! If she dies, do you think Jaqen will take you as his bedwhore?"

Tears escaped from her. "I didn't do anything. Someone wore my face, Aegeus. I was with Sansa during the attack. I'm…as devastated as all of you are, and I'm trying my very best with Rickon, I need him to wake up…"

He tightened his grip on her shoulders, shook her violently. "Who could have worn your face, huh?! Masters cannot wear the face of another master, damn it!"

"My face was the one that lingered when I was ordained," the Waif reminded him calmly, imploring in between those words that he sees reason. "The one with the black hair, small eyes, thin lips? The one that Arya Stark tore when she killed me, do you recall? I've worn that for eight years and the dreadful dreams that came with it I endured too…I can hardly complain, that was the face I was given when I was appointed master. They...they couldn't wear that one infused with faceless rune—it's unyielding to other masters. But this face you're seeing now..." she coughed, and more blood came from her mouth. "My true face that plagued you before, they could wear this. It's mere acolyte's face—we were fifteen when you last saw this, do you remember? It cannot resist a Faceless Man's usurpation."

The Handsome Man was silent, as if weighing the truth within the Waif's words. His eyes were still raging.

"I would never betray Jaqen and Arya," she continued, sensing now that he was willing to take heed. "The war against those lords matters the world to you—you want retribution for what happened to Chroyane a thousand years back. I would never betray you..."

"Unhand her, Aegeus. It wasn't her." Bran Stark was settled by the manservant on the edge of Rickon's bed. "I knew those assassins were coming—men whom you have called brothers before. Shaggydog managed to attack the assailant, gnawed at his right arm. If it was Sabine who did it, she should be bleeding to death right now because of that bite."

"How could you have known the attacker was a man?" the Handsome Man probed on.
Bran raised his brows partly, asking himself inwardly why Aegeus had to ask such. "I can see through glamour, artifice, all forms of facelessness. Garin of Chroyane, I've known you before you became faceless. Third sight has given me that."

Aegeus released the woman gently, his face a perfect mirror of shock. "Dear gods," he muttered as he looked at his own hands that have caused Sabine pain, then glanced down at the woman who was now slumped against the floor, completely weakened by his aggressions. She did not even lift a hand to defend herself, what with her unwavering trust that he would never hurt her—at least not in the real sense. But the gods knew how the desire to kill earlier had crawled relentlessly beneath the comely one's skin.

"They've killed Bloodraven, attempted to shut all realms West of Westeros in so doing. The Weirwood lies empty now, and it cannot remain so when the Dead come feasting," Bran continued. "You know that when the threads tighten, as we proceed to the summit of all of these, opponents would seek to undermine the trust we have for one another, plot out internal battles amongst us, and this must not happen."

Sansa appeared by the threshold, and her mien that was then of restlessness was replaced with horror at the sight of Sabine's dismal condition. "What happened?!" she shrieked, then rushed to the woman. Sansa wiped her blood-streaked face with her hand, then turned her vicious eyes to Aegeus. "What the hell is wrong with you?! She was with me the whole damned night, talking about you! What kind of a beast are you?!"

Sabine smiled weakly. "I'm fine." She winced as Sansa attempted to lift her up through the arm.

"Here, let me," Aegeus said, distraught and suddenly remorseful. He cradled her, uttered words of reparation. "Oh, Sabine…Sabine…"

"The Elder's knows we're now moving on our own while he still has his schemes set in motion," Sabine smiled. "You know how compulsive he could get. This was just misunderstanding, don't blame yourself."

That torture he had inflicted upon her, those vile words he had so callously hurled at her should be enough for her to cause him harm even in his wakefulness. She's a living, breathing poison—one kiss, and she could trigger toxins from within her, contaminate him with unthinkable blight, kill him should she desire.

Yet there was nothing in her face but the usual gentleness; that very thing which defined her.

And her benevolence made him feel worse about himself.

He shook his head as he beheld her. "I've hurt you, I've…said things—"

"Wounds heal," she murmured as she buried her face in his shoulder. "And forget the words; there's love between every painful utterance. And please, stop this thing with Jaqen. I'm no one's bedwhore but yours."

Whatever sorcery was unleashed that morn's night at the Wall was enough to once more fray the fabric dividing all realms.

The frightening chaos felt close enough to reach out and touch the last of the men still left standing on that fortress of ice. This was no battle against wildlings and giants, this was no battle against breathing mortals. This is a battle against an army of the Dead and creatures of rune that wield weapons made of ice and command them; and those forgotten legions and their wiped out vicious
history was about to tip the scales of comeuppance over to their side.

The worse thing is this—tonight is only the first wave.

"Prepare the scythe, boys!" Eddison Tollett bellowed out his command. They were at the Wall's summit. "Archers at the ready, save the obsidian arrowheads for when they're near, we don't have much of those!" His teeth were chattering because of chill and fear. He had almost thought that he was spent, that his emotions were used up by the horror of witnessing a myriad of White Walkers and their battalion of wights marching in a horrendously grotesque fashion. Wrong, Dolorous Edd thought as he carried on barking out commands and carrying out most of the tasks himself. Fear never runs out as long as the vessel that carried it still breathes. His jaw hardened as he watched the tight ranks of a multitude of Undead traversing the distance that separated them from the last garrison of the realms.

"H-how many do you think are there, Lord Commander?" Iron Emmet asked. "They killed Benjen and Jaremy, a good number of our brothers but…they can't be killed, can they?"

How can you kill what is already dead? Edd felt strong shivers down his back, as he held tightly the rope that would release the barrels of flame lest these collapse onto the frost at the wrong time, be reduced to mere wastage. "Around three thousand, but numbers hardly matter, do they?" He spat, a futile attempt to show that he's still in charge of all, especially of himself. "The wights can be burned. As for the Walkers—they can't be killed, all right; but they can be crushed to damned fine pieces—literally."

They must have emerged from the hidden crags and pocks of the Land of Always Winter. Fear lurched into terror as Edd heard the shrieks and hisses of those wights that grew more defined, as they slithered and glided across the icy ground in haste—mangled bones and mutilated miens all, and the White Walkers that held their weapons of ice glissaded just behind those Undead. While the wights appeared to be tragic, misshapen moving corpses, the White Walkers that commanded them were almost fey-like in their talismanic beauty, with bodies carved out of ice…transparent…glittering.

Cold, heartless, inexorable.

"Dear gods!" the first ranger exclaimed. "They're moving in too fast!"

A sword of ice flew from a White Walker's hand and collided against the Wall.

It was one damned sword, yet the impact as it struck the fortress was more than enough to rock it. Colossal masses of ice collapsed from the top, sending six brothers seven-hundred feet down to their sure death. The environs blighted as the necrous force from that weapon engulfed all that was near, weakening the Wall, thinning it, taking gargantuan fragments from it little by little.

Slabs of ice kept on falling.

"We should loose the arrows!" Emmet exclaimed hysterically. "They are nigh!"

"Not yet."

"We will all die if we delay!"

"Not yet!"

Until the commanding Walker raised its crystal sword up, as if to charge.
At this, the throng of wights raced to the Wall, their shrill cries filling the limit of permanent ices and the lands beyond it, starving for carnage...for breathing, animated bodies.

And they whisked and rushed...crawled...leaped...wriggled their way towards the stronghold...shrieking and howling...with raging eyes...clawing at their own disfigured faces...flaying their own maimed skin...wolfing down the brains and bones and flesh of the fallen brothers...devouring their own kind...

"Archers!" Edd bellowed. "Nock the arrows!" Brothers standing on the battlements did as they were told, their hands quivering in cold and fear. Most took time in fitting the ones with flaming arrowheads to the bowstrings, as their hands were already benumbed by the wintry air. "Draw!" came the second charge. "And loose!"

A rain of arrows landed on those Undead, piercing through their bloodless flesh. And as if their skins were coated with oil, they were immediately set aflame, their leathery skins incinerated at the slightest contact with fire.

"Nock! Draw! Loose!"

The turf below the Wall had become the killing ground, as wights were immolated by those flaming arrows.

"Shit! There's still a lot of them!" Edd growled in frustration. "Release the barrels!"

"Release the barrels!" the master-at-arms echoed the command.

At the words, twenty barrels were dropped from the peak of the Wall's escarpment. Those barrels exploded upon hitting solid ground, sending conflagration snaking in all directions, burning anyone that got in its way. The caterwaul of those wights being set ablaze was deafening.

But the Undead are almost uncountable as they were expendable, and they outnumbered the Night's Watch a thousand to one.

Upon reaching the foot, hundreds of them began scaling the Wall, eyes on the summit, digging their bloodless nails and hands in the hard ice, ascending...ascending in unthinkable speed...

"Drop the scythe!" came Edd's orders, followed by an echo of commands from the brothers. The second ranger hammered on the counterweight opposite the beam, releasing the chain that held the three-bladed gigantic weapon.

It scraped through masses of ice as it made its way from west to east, mightily sweeping away wights that have already scaled the Wall halfway, severing their limbs, chopping their heads, mangling still their already mangled bones. Shattered bodies fell hundreds of feet to the icy ground, but kept on moving and wriggling and twitching as they can be completely killed only by flames.

Hundreds more rushed to the fortress—fresh replacements to those that have been vanquished.

"Dear gods," Eddison Tollett finally collapsed on his knees. "Help us all..."

"Alert the master-at-arms!" bellowed the gatekeepers upon seeing the small retinue approaching the gate of Castle Black. A hundred soldiers to two hundred, but they appeared to be a league of a hundred thousand reinforcements in that face of utter desperation. Still, they had to be sure. Half of the men in the retinue do not appear to be Northerners.
Leathers, the castle's master-at-arms, rushed to the gate to take the retinue in. "I don't bloody care what damned sigil they carry or if they carry no sigils at all!" he growled in the midst of chaos. "Raise the irons, you twats! Our men are dying seven hundred feet above us all!"

"Raise the irons!" echoed the captain of the guards.

Jon immediately entered the gate in haste, and leaped off from his mount even before it came to a full halt. He dashed to Leather who was then barking out orders for the new recruits to proceed to the winch. "Wights?" His expression was severe and a little agitated. The master-at-arms just nodded his conformation. "How many are they?"

"A whole battalion," Leathers said, clenching his teeth to contain a confusing whorl of distress building up. "We're looking at a thousand of them for every one of ours."

Jon exhaled sharply, but wasted no time commanding the men to position. "Take the arms, take with you the obsidian weapons. A hundred soldiers to the peak—fifty through the winch lift, the other fifty through the switchback stairs. Seventy to the inner tunnels leading to the iron gates north from here; thirty to man the towers and the keeps. To your posts!"

The men did as they were told.

"Jon!" Sam called to him in a rush. "Jon! Aegon just disappeared! I don't know where he's gone!"

"He'll be back," Jon assured him. He patted Sam on the shoulder. "Attend to our wounded, maester," he said, then ran to the winch. "Hold the lift!"

The ride to the Wall's peak seemed to have lasted ages, but there was nothing Jon could do but to clench his fist and steady his gaze up in the midst of the din and ruckus at the summit. Howls of pain and fright resonated all over, permeating through the very filaments of his skin. What do they want? Jon still asked himself despite knowing that such query is as vague as the origins of those demons of Winter. What would they get out of wiping out a whole race of breathing mortals? A combustion on his far right disturbed his contemplations. Barrels of flammable powder exploded upon being struck by a gigantic spear made of ice. Three to four brothers fell on the castle's courtyard, with one landing straight on a spike, impaling him through his guts. The blaze was blinding, and if only the Wall did not possess any magical properties, the thick ice of it would have melted instantaneously at the sheer force of the flare-up.

From where Jon was standing, he could clearly see that a fraction of the structure had already collapsed.

Finally, he reached the peak of the Wall.

"Edd!" he called, then unsheathed his sword upon seeing that the brothers were already engaged in combat against those wights that have successfully scaled the Wall. The structure shook violently at another colliding impact against the Walkers' weapons of ice. Some breathing corpses fell hundreds of feet down on the hard ground, their limbs wrecked and torn up from their bodies, still writhing and clawing their way back up, still shrieking from beneath. Jon lunged an attack and stabbed two wights behind Edd, severed the heads of two more. They stood back to the back, watching each other's rear, slashing and thrusting their weapons at the corpses.

"Welcome back, Lord Crow," Dolorous Edd spoke. He quickly coated his blade with oil and dipped it in an iron bucket of flames. With a strong kick, he sent one wight falling hundreds of feet down. "Festivities are still on. Glad you caught up." It was as if Jon's arrival had infused him asudden with vibrant courage. He bellowed and cursed those undead ones in every attack, hurled all forms of
insults to those mystical creatures of Winter still hell-bent on shattering the Wall.

Jon gutted a corpse through a quick vertical slash. Despite its scattered innards, the wight still kept on advancing towards him, five to six more behind it, snarling and slithering towards Jon. "Oil!" he screamed. Edd flung a whole canister of it towards the corpses, and Jon followed up the attack by tossing them one lit firewood. Their rotten bodies were set afire the moment the flame came in contact with their skin.

He surveyed the Wall's apex. Most of the men were still engaged in combat—one against three to five wights, and they kept on coming, carried on climbing up the fortress with almost imperceptible speed.

*The Wall's rune is failing,* Jon thought. As if confirming his suspicions, a gigantic slab of ice the size of Nightfort's great keep fell from the northwestern side, carrying upon its collapse their wooden trebuchets and some twenty brothers.

The last of the screams of those men were drowned by another explosion. To his far right, two brothers have blown themselves up along with ten wights in order to thwart those corpses' taking of the winch lift.

He turned a quick eye towards those White Walkers commanding the corpses, warging into them, whispering orders in the Old Tongue and the tongue of Death itself. The orders—how to attack and when, which places to scale—were being carried to those moving corpses by winds of winter. Their feet were not planted on firm ground at all, even the weapons they held which were spawned by ice were hovering atop their palms. And they were glistening at moon's refulgence, illuminating the horrifying motivations beneath their cosmic appearances. White mist was all over them, their voices resembled that of cracking ice on winter lake.

*The ones they call the cold gods,* Jon's jaw hardened.

A thousand more wights raced to the Wall upon the silent charge of the Others.

"Obsidian arrows, Edd!" Jon said, picking up the bow from the pile of arms. Edd rushed to the eastern side of the apex and returned, six arrows in tow. Jon took one and nocked it on the bow, pulled the string and aimed at the White Walker at the center of the line—their strongest.

Val was the better one between the two of them at aiming, but the overly-protective aspect of his person, the Warrior's instinct somehow foresaw this very event, and so he commanded his spearwife to stay in Winterfell much to her chagrin. *I've lost Ygritte,* Jon persuaded himself about the objectivity, the rightness of his decision. *I've almost lost Arya. I can't lose Val, too.*

He rid himself of all other thoughts and pulled the bowstring tighter. He released the arrow.

The obsidian arrowhead glowed like black fire as the arrow's shaft and vane spiraled in space, with an almost immeasurable energy about it, as if absorbing forces of rocks and water and heart trees and of all other elements that were from the old gods.

The arrow landed straight on the temple of the White Walker beside the one Jon had aimed for.

Upon contact with the obsidian, the Walker's entire form of ice shattered mightily into fine fragments, and the remnants of it were scattered all over—carried far off by the winds or absorbed by the frozen ground.

The chain reaction to Jon's attack was instantaneous. Some hundreds of wights scaling the Wall's midmost area fell unmoving to the base at the ruin of the warg that controlled them. Mad hisses came
from the cold lips of the other White Walkers, and they wasted no time hurling gigantic ringswords onto the structure. The weapons scraped off huge boulders of ice from the Wall.

A massive javelin flew to the air and anchored itself into the frozen structure. Chains of ice sprawled out from its shaft, flying to the directions of the Others—one chain per ice demon. They held their individual chains steady, coiled these around their arms and began pulling...hauling the Wall into its unthinkable collapse.

The structure shook violently.

These were not mindless villains they were dealing with, as Jon had realized; they were tacticians, with battle strategies that may be as sophisticated, if not more sophisticated than those of their mortal counterparts.

Jon clenched his teeth as he slowly gained understanding of the siege tactics planned by those creatures of ice.

It was attrition warfare at first which they employed as strategy—wearing down the outnumbered enemy to the point of collapse, destroying their arms and killing as many in the Wall's battlements through direct attacks towards the now crumbling structure. Then, came the blitzkrieg of concentrated forces of wights that would scale the stronghold with unthinkable speed, so they can penetrate the enemy lines and assail from the inside.

And after all these, Jon was presupposing, would be the final battle for annihilation.

*How do we win this impossible war?*

Wrath and the instinct to fight and defend overwhelmed him, and he roared his fury as his memories were dragged asudden to one realm eight thousand years past, during the Battle for the Dawn when he last wielded his flaming sword. The why of all things presented itself to Jon in blurred clarity. Men and Others are instruments in a damnable cosmic war amongst the gods who have decided that the battleground must be the realm of the living and the dead.

And there were forms of him, versions of him from the blood of dragons failing to meet the configuration of the Promised; all these failures caved in on his persona—and suddenly he had to take it upon himself to shield the noble ideas mortals have stood for in over fourscore centuries, to defend the realms as his vows would so dictate, to use his sword for good and protect those weaker than himself, to accept the path of warriorship that runs through his entire life.

He is the Warrior archetype; the Lorathi-Valyrian was right all along. He must accept who he is to be who he is.

He sank on both knees as he was jolted back into the present, the fractals of the past dissipating from his consciousness.

Chaotic profusion was all over him, and he was shuddering in the midst of his hope and hopelessness, courage and fear. He hoisted himself up, took up the bow and nocked another arrow on it. "Night gathers and now my watch begins..." he whispered. "And it shall not end until my death."

"I shall take no wife, hold no lands, father no children," Dolorous Edd recited the words along with him, hacking off the limbs of two wights. "I shall wear no crown and win no glory. I shall live and die at my post."

"I am the sword in the darkness...the watcher on the walls...the fire that burns against the cold!"
Iron Emmet raised his sword, inspiriting the men, eyes intent upon the throng of a thousand yet to scale the Wall. Those vows they all have sworn in front of the Weirwood resonated for leagues east and west of that giant fortress of ice; they uttered those words that reanimated dauntlessness and with those words came their tears of blood.

"The light that brings the dawn!"

"The horn that wakes the sleepers!"

"The shield that guards the realms of men!"

Jon aimed the arrow once more, this time, may he not miss. "I pledge my life and honor to the Night's Watch," he carried on, pulling the bowstring. "For this night…and all nights to come."

He released the obsidian arrow a second time.

The next thing he knew was Dolorous Edd pushing him out of the way, taking the hit of a solid sword of ice. It pierced him straight to his heart. "Jon…" he whispered as he staggered, his entirety being enveloped by frost.

"Edd!" Jon bellowed, rushing in an attempt to save him. He caught Edd's hand just when he was about to fall, but his body was now of solid ice, weighing Jon down.

The sound of obsidian hitting the frozen form of one Other rang like clarion in Jon's ears before he descended seven hundred feet down with Dolorous Edd.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, awesome people! Thanks a lot for staying with the fic. The chapter is all rush and blur with a side of romance and I hope you liked it. Let me know through the comments! Have a good one. ;D
The Dawn and the Spice War

Chapter Notes

Lost lovers' souls in cities lost

Vids belong to youtubers I subscribe to. I own nothing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Burned unquenched his spirit

As the frightened and foolish fade

'Take shield and go,' she told him,

'The red star bleeds, now end their loathly tale…"

The Warrior and the Nissa, The Jade Compendium (derived)

It wasn't just Dolorous Edd weighing him down, causing him to fall. It was his own heart.

The environs rushed by in a confusing blur as Jon plummeted towards his sure death at the base of the Wall. His descent was both fast and slow, and he counted the seconds as he felt his fallen tears being turned to ice by the winds—and the winds seeped through his thick clothing and pierced through his every pore, leaving him in fatal coldness. Suffocation overwhelmed him, blood thumped most painfully in his head.

He knew it was going to hurt. It would hurt a million times more than the stabs he had endured from his traitorous brothers.

No, Jon refused to accept the fate carved out by that collapse. This is not falling.

One falls so he may fly.

A cry…the redeeming sound of wings slicing across the winds of winter…breath of fire…

Jon felt his body hitting something warm. He opened his eyes but they were met only by shimmers. His skin was against its skin, and he automatically felt blood pulsing, rune bursting. Jade green, he thought as he ran his hands across its reptilian scales.

It was the dragon which his older brother had brought to Winterfell, and it saved him.

It screeched mightily in its flight, flying low and sweeping away moving corpses with it wings and claws.
"Rhaegal," Jon called it by its name as it soared across the aerial expanse. It screeched once more in response to Jon's branding. "I need your help."

The dragon knew what it had to do. Jon gripped its frills tightly as it swooped down, spewing fire onto wights still rushing towards the structure of ice. A perfect domino effect—what came out of Rhaegal's fanged orifice were flames a thousand times faster and stronger than wildfire.

Wights were immediately turned to soot, and the cinders that were left were promptly swallowed by the icy ground, vanishing from plain sight.

"Splendid, Rhaegal!" Jon screamed in rapture as the dragon soared sidewards and disgorged a sea of flames from its mouth, burning those moving corpses still attempting to surmount the Wall. "Rain dragonfire on them!"

Green-veined orange flames bathed the army of the dead in all directions.

Cheers of half-victory resounded along the Wall's summit, and he heard the brothers screaming his name, as if it carried for them the saving grace that came straight from the lair of the gods. "Jon Stark!" they called. "Jon Stark! Jon Stark!"

"Targaryen," he whispered, as he stroked Rhaegal's flecks of bronze. "Jon Stark Targaryen."

It glissaded along the skies in majestic spirals, circled the heavens along with another dragon—one with ivory scales and spines of gold, teeth like black daggers. It carried Aegon the Sixth on its back. "That was magnificent, Jon!" his brother said, before turning his attention to the White Walkers now aiming their weapons on the both of them.

Spears of ice shot upwards, all directed towards Jon. Those weapons rotated in space, their forces in perfect synergy with the winds.

Aegon maneuvered Viserion to fly low and fender-bend the attacks. The dragon sped in Rhaegal's defense and began ejecting orbs of flame towards those speeding bullets of weapons. The weapons shattered, melted, dissipated upon contact with dragonfire.

With movements that were lightning quick and graceful, leaving no imprints upon the snow, the Others modified their positions to surround the two dragons from below. A demon's shriek was followed by a hundred more spears flying into their direction.

"Decussate!" Aegon bellowed at Jon.

"Wha—I don't know how to do that!" Jon screamed back.

"Crisscross flights with me, avoid the weapons, rain fire on them when you see a window!"

Jon did as he understood and flew alongside Aegon. When the spears were but hair's breadth from them, they split and maneuvered the dragons in oblique motions east to west, intersecting their flights at some point to defend each other. Their movements appeared erratic in the face of enemies, a whole vortex of confusion.

They evaded the spears, yet those weapons seemed to possess a mind of their own for these chased them in their flight, covering the trajectories the two dragons have ranged thus far.

"By the Seven," Aegon said as he turned to his back and saw the spears rushing towards them from behind. "What kind of demons are these?!"
"I have an idea!" Jon exclaimed, his voice competing against the sound of dragons' wings. "Fly low in parallel directions—southwards. Approach the army of the dead, then we'll break apart!"

Aegon nodded and led Viserion directly beside Jon. The dragons took a simultaneous dive, advancing towards those thousand corpses still rushing to the Wall. Upon reaching considerable distance, the two dragons went separate ways—allowing very little time for those 'freethinking' weapons to change course and pursue them. The spears thus sustained their usual momentum and plunged themselves straight to the bodies of those moving corpses, driving these corpses back with velocius force.

"That was bloody brilliant!" Aegon yelled to a grinning Jon. The lad's grin disappeared from his mien upon seeing colossal chains of ice flying to their direction.

"Aegon, look out!"

It was too fast—the chains wrapped themselves around Viserion's neck and mouth, trapping its only orifice that could dispense flames. The dragon was hauled down with a resounding thud, and the chains kept on dragging him towards the Others, its body carving out grotesque patterns upon the icy ground. The trappings were undone by the attack, and so Aegon fell from Viserion's back straight to the foot of one White Walker. The ice demon drew out its frozen sword.

"Brother!" Jon screamed, and felt Rhaegal's suddenly haphazard flight. Its neck and mouth were bound by chains as well, shackling its rune, dragging it to its most sure demise.

There was but a split-second to react. Jon leaped from Rhaegal's back and rolled over Aegon's side, unsheathing Oathkeeper. He gave the ice demon a quick stab on the heart. The life within Jon's Valyrian steel cast out a fiery force at the center of the Other, and it exploded intensely like vulnerable glass.

They stood back to back, serving as each other's defense. Aegon held Blackfyre's grip tightly, his raging eyes upon those Walkers closing in on them. "Jon," he whispered. "I'll create a diversion. Run towards the castle's gates—"

"I won't leave you here," Jon whispered back. "We'll fight together. This is not the day we die."

The heartwrenching screech of those two dragons bound by ice's rune heightened their trepidation.

The Others encircled them, hissing with inconceivable loathing, drawing their array of frozen weapons. They despise warmth, fire, life—and these two were at that precise moment, paragons of those. Jon shuddered with fright and cold, it was as if death's breath was sapping out the strength of his very soul.

Upon the charge of one White Walker, sharp icicles flew towards them both.

They deflected the deluge with their dragonsteel, blasting those icicles into smithereens. But there were too many of them...too many...and they're coming in from all spaces and courses...and for every bursting icicle is a hundred more...colder, sharper, deadlier than the ones before...

"Jon!" Aegon gasped as he felt one slicing through his skin, then another, then another. Blood trickled from his flesh to the immaculate ground. He continued hacking those lengths of ice. "I beg of you, run!"

"No!" Those spikes found their way across Jon's face—slashing through, carving out battle wounds on him. "Just block the damned icicles!"
But Jon knew, it's becoming a hopeless fight.

In the midst of that whirlwind rushed those Others, prepared to deliver the final blow…

*Jon...* Aegon's call was waning in his ears as those spikes continued piercing through his skin, their deadly chill seeping through his marrows. He collapsed on both knees, blood now flowing liberally from his wounds, tainting the white of snow. *Run…*

A White Walker raised its sword to decapititate him…

Until the sound of another dragon's cry shook the limit of permanent ices, the gold of it engulfing the darkness that blanketed the ground, acting as sun's regent.

It encircled the stratos before swooping down, snatching seven of the Others through its resilient bronze claws, throwing them in the air before setting them ablaze. The beast was ferocious, sublime, that the Others had to shield their own eyes as its glistening form glissaded across the skies.

It continued dispensing flame onto a myriad of moving corpses before flying to the shackled firebeasts.

Seeing that window of opportunity, Jon and Aegon began engaging the White Walkers—swords against swords. The other ice demons drifted in haste towards the two manacled dragons, seeing that the firebeast that had just arrived was now destroying those chains of rune with dragonfire. *"Drakarys!"* came Jaqen's command. With one heavy surge of flame, the links exploded—their fragments dissipating in space. Rhaegal and Viserion took off, flew straight to the two dragonriders still engaged in swordfight against Others that outnumbered them greatly.

Arya leaped from the dragon's back and ran towards the approaching Walkers. She unsheathed her last Valyrian dagger and with dexterity expected of a warrior, a once-assassin, hurled it to the direction of the enemies. The steel collided with those ice demons, and in oblique motions rebounded from one to another, leaving a trail of explosions and fragments of ice. With Dark Sister in her hands, she decapitated two White Walkers in a single blow.

Four more closed in on her in almost imperceptible speed. She stood her ground, shut her eyes tight. Force radiated from the center of her, crawling along the frozen ground. A second ticked, and those Walkers' skulls of ice exploded like glass at the sheer strength of Arya's warging.

Jaqen left no corpse unburnt on that other side of the Wall.

One by one, the cold ones vanished from sight, summoned perchance by the Heart of Winter. Another reckoning must happen in days succeeding.

Triumphant cries from the men of the Watch reverberated loudly, clearly. They have managed to hold the Wall in the first wave of the Long Night.

Jaqen leaped from his dragon's saddle and approached the three.

"*You lied to us, Jon,*" the Lorathi said as he walked towards them. *"We're not dealing with an army of the dead. We're dealing with legions of armies."*

Jon only smiled weakly as he struggled to lift himself up, fully enervated by the encounter. *"My gratitude, brother. For coming to our aid."*

*"They're going to return,"* Arya said, wiping the blood off of Jon's face. *"We have to hurry to Valyria."*
"Whose idea was the decussation?" Jaqen questioned the two dragonriders.

Aegon draped Jon's arm over to his shoulder and helped him up. "Mine," he said, then grinned at the Lorathi. "It worked."

Jaqen raised one brow and smirked. "It sucked."

Aegon rolled his eyes at the sarcasm.

"What about the low flight, the split?" Jon asked with hopeful eyes. "Did you see it, Jaqen? I came up with that."

Jaqen smiled genuinely at Jon. "Utter genius."

Arya snorted, shook her head at Aegon the Sixth whose face was most amused at Jaqen's juvenile display. "Best course of action—ignore the Lorathi."

The Prince smiled softly at her, brushed away the locks blown across her lovely face. "Thank you for the rescue, princess."

They all walked towards the iron gates of Castle Black, allowed themselves to feel the first taste of victory, the slight exuberance, before another Battle for the Dawn.

The Night doesn't go away now, and windfall of winter crackles dire omen, scraping through the once placid lakes and snows of the North. A single day's shadow had become a hundred thousand, and though unbelieving men would deny what was coming in all vehemence, the Night's dark-and-crimson would sweep over all the living at the turn of the hourglass. All men must die, the Night would whisper, for its quickening was and is not dependent upon the belief of all men.

The great cabal is breathing now—its whisper of sorcery, its long-repressed groans from the caverns of death would emerge from the crags faster than men could accept that winter has indeed come.

"To your mounts!" came Aegeus Ioannanu's orders. "Weapons in check—four obsidian blades per man and no, those are not playthings." The words came out more sharply than he was intending upon hearing scattered laughter from some soldiers from House Glover. He surveyed the night sky—the stars shimmered with startling clarity. Only those plain longswords strapped on either side of his hips branded him as a commander, yet that kind without provenance, for all his life before this he was No One.

The Handsome Man could breathe now—Rickon had woken up and has confirmed Bran's claim that it wasn't the Waif who attacked them both. Before he left Shaggy's consciousness, the boy saw the mask evanesce from the attacker's face, and the face was a man's. The man had a scar close to his right eye, and his nose appeared as if it had been broken several times.

Mesphares, Aegeus clenched his teeth. He was sent by the Elder with another to finish off Bloodraven, and now they want Bran gone too, and Jaqen... He had noticed that Rickon's lips had turned blue, and that he seemed to be more alert than how he usually is, and though Sabine did not tell him which potion it was that enabled the boy to wake from his unconscious state, Aegeus knew it well enough to be mistaken.

It was Shade of the Evening which the Waif had given to the Rickon, and Bran seemed to fully know it, and might have even commanded that the potion be given to his brother. The whyfor of the plan remained unclear, but Aegeus trusted Sabine, trusted Bran more than he could trust his own self.
He looked at Sabine who was then strapping clothbags of supplies onto her own saddle. There was purpose in her which he couldn't see from all these cynicals. All over her were men who saddle up only because of the lords' orders, men who appeared to be weary and weathered heroes returning from some epic war even if they have not seen much since the War of Five Kings and the retaking of Winterfell. At that moment, Sabine to him was the paragon of everything all men could ever want—peace, hope, bliss. "To be happy?" he had asked her the prior night, for he still could never understand where she's deriving that optimism from, that certainty which had become his own strength.

"Not just to be happy, Aegeus," she had told him. "We live so we can be good, and honorable, and brave. We live so we can love."

"But we are No One, Sabine."

"Well then, that makes it even more lovely, does it not?"

"How so?"

He remembered her kissing his temple. "You deny yourself of all things, empty yourself of all things, for a purpose greater than your own."

"When all this is over, will you teach me?" he had implored.

"Teach you what?"

"How to love the way you do."

He forced his gaze away from her, occupied himself with his official duties. Grim martial images possessed his mind—castles ragged and windtorn, skies storm-warped, men driven either to the brink or to death. *Another great war,* he sighed at the thought of his ill-fated life. *When will this be over, for good?*

Aegeus turned away from his mount and dashed towards Sabine. When he reached her, he pulled her to him and crushed his lips against hers, unmindful of the disapproving glances and mocking smirks, the arrogant whispers of 'not much can be expected from the Essosi'. He didn't release her even when she was already whimpering against his hot mouth, and it took everything he had to not undress her and take her right there and then.

"If we win..." he began.

"We will win," Sabine cut him. "You will come back to me. You must."

"I will kill those dragonlords for what they did to Chroyane, then I will come back to you."

She smiled and touched his cheek. "I will wait."

The troops were assembled as soon as the thirteen thousand from the Golden Company have reached the south gate of Winterfell. Homeless Harry, the coward in Griff's words, led the brigade to the courtyard leading to the north gates where the forces were gathered. The commander of the company began his introductions. "Harry Strickland, sworn to his grace, Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of His Name, rightful king of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First M—"

"Skip the titles," Aegeus cut him. "Aegon the Sixth hates formalities. We're all on first name basis up here. The Undead couldn't care less who we are, much less how we're styled."
Harry Strickland nodded, smiled. "Why, of course. Jorah Mormont?"

"First regiment by the northern gate," Aegus replied. "The both of you will lead the forces to the Wall. Snow has gone deep, ride would take you about a couple of days. Single stop by the Last Hearth—let the mounts rest, replenish your provisions and supplies, and make sure that each man knows what he's up against before you reach the Gift."

"Been apprised by Aegon the Sixth himself, naught more to explain," Harry Strickland said. "However, these men need to have their eyes fed with the truth before you could get them showing some faith. Wights and wildlings are one and the same for the lot of them, as it appears." He shrugged his shoulders. "Can't blame them there."

"Well then, I'll let the Wall do the talking," Aegus answered. "First wave hit the Watch mere two nights ago, your fortress of ice almost collapsed. Ask Aegon the Sixth, he was there."

The commander's mouth fell open, but he was quick to close it to hide his consternation. "The king can attest to all of these, then?"

The Handsome Man smiled with pursed lips, attempted to summon within him some cool. "Night has gathered, comrade. This is not just some ruse to haul you up in here out of your king's chivalric whim. They lost a good four hundred brothers in the first bout." He motioned towards the woman who had just arrived. "Lady Brienne, second regiment."

Harry assessed the woman from crown to sole, and his eyes lingered upon her dented steel of deep blue cobalt. His smirk was a little disparaging. "A lady knight commanding a whole brigade?"

"You have a problem with that?" Brienne of Tarth raised her head in asking, looked down upon the man who was two to three palms shorter than she is.

"No, not at all," the commander stammered. "It's just that..."

"It's just this," Aegus sighed rather impatiently. "Those wights would not bother unlacing our breeches and raising the ladies' skirts in the midst of battle. We're not lords and ladies, perverted men and whores. Men, women, little ones, we're one thing to them—meat. Now, may I just suggest that you proceed to Ser Jorah as was your earlier intention?" He turned to Brienne as he prepared to leave. "Show him the cohort out front, Lady Brienne."

"And you?" Harry Strickland asked, eyes narrowed. "Where's your regiment?"

Aegus paused with his strides and turned to look at the man. "The corps is now headed to Valyria, I'm afraid."

Shock registered in the commander's mien. "A whole forty thousand from the Free Cities? You're commanding those?"

The Handsome Man merely gave him a winsome smile then walked off.

The Shieldhall that was earlier infested with rats and housed nothing but worm-eaten wooden rafters was heated, prepared for the gathering of what remained of the brothers of the Night's Watch, some free folks, and the soldiers from Winterfell and Dragonstone. After two nights, the high spirits have waned, replaced with the usual restlessness and fright, misery over the fate of four hundred fallen men including the lord commander—a truth realized not until the horrors of the first attack at the Wall had seeped through their respective intellects. There was on one side, the desire to abandon vows and run instead, though the whereto is unknown, though there is the awareness that no place
will be safe now that Night has begun. There was on the other hand, the idealized notion of courage, the want to wrestle against those ice demons that perchance clearly reflected even the demons of the self—a painful fact often ignored.

"We have defeated them once with our scant numbers not even fit for a battle against fellow mortals that carry sigils," Jon had told the men earlier that night. "You know the chronicles in the vaults. Eight thousand years during the Age of Heroes, these creatures were forced back in the permanent ices. They were once more forced to retreat because they knew we would never yield without a proper fight first."

"They will come back," Iron Emmet voiced out what the others may have been thinking at that moment. Some scattered murmurs of agreement filled the Shieldhall. "Did you see how they shackled those dragons with their rune? If not for the gold one…” his voice trailed off as he glanced at Jaqen, and Emmet's eyes were more affrighted of the Lorathi than they were of those legendary walkers. "As it is, parts of the Wall have collapsed already; and the iron gates have been completely wrecked by those assails, leaving the western part exposed. Even with our numbers doubled, we cannot be assured that our forces would be prepared to engage in real combat against those cold ones."

Aegon the Sixth surveyed the hall. There were less than a dozen shields adorning the hall now. There might have been shields of hawks and griffins, spears and longswords, bears and quills in the old days, when service to the Night's Watch was then seen as an honorable feat. Knights used to give up their shields when they join the brotherhood and replaced these with the plain ones of the Watch. When they die, the shields burn with them in the pyre.

Now, knights have become less than two hands' count, and what manned the Watch are mere dregs of the Seven Kingdoms—disgraced nobles, bastards, offenders. Yet after that horrendous night, Aegon the Sixth saw none but conquerors and gods garbed in black and tins, and he smiled bitterly at himself as a faint bit of shame brushed over him. Conquest was suddenly placed at the bedrock of all his concernments.

He waited for silence among those gathered before speaking.

"We will not face them unprepared, comrades," Aegon said. "As soon as forces from the Northern houses and Dragonstone arrive, we will fly straight to Valyria to obtain our shiploads of obsidian. The Lord Stark here just needs to brief them about which castles must be re-garrisoned."

"If the odds are favorable, we rally the southron houses to ride up north as the ravens sent through Maester Mullin have not returned as of yet," Arya added.

"What makes you think that those ravens would return here?" one brother asked. "After the Lord Stark has declared for Stannis, do you honestly expect that the other houses would risk the throne's ire and provide the North any form of support? Even the Night's Watch was dragged into bending the knee, when the brothers were supposed to declare neutrality in all and every circumstance."

"Without Jon declaring for Stannis, all free folks would have been feast for the wights," Leathers the wildling spat. "We have every right to live as you do, we have every right to fight for our lives as you do."

"Doesn't mean that you have to do it within the Wall."

Leathers' eyes widened at the retort. "Why, you cursed bastard!" He leaped from his seat and grabbed the crow by the collar. "You really care not if our women and children die of the cold and get massacred by those Undead, do you?!” Two brothers rushed to separate them, but without
Leathers delivering a solid blow on the brother's face first. "You'd rather see us turn to wights ourselves than fight beside us!"

"Order!" Jon boomed, then shifted to a more serene tone. "Order, or I will be forced to act."

That one warning was enough to calm down all those gathered—they knew the former lord commander to be a just man, the reason for their deference. There is no creature in any realm half more terrifying than a truly just man moved by unbiased compassion, a just man whose notion of justice is duty as well as truth. Wildlings are kneelers and kneelers are wildlings.

Aegon met Jaqen's eyes. They both smiled. Jon has the leader-guts, and it's the one thing that's pacifying these terror-stricken, angry men, the one thing enabling them to move forward.

Jon eyed every single person in that hall, his gaze lingering a little longer on Arya Stark's face. Those inexplicable feelings overwhelmed him once more—there was certainty when she's nigh and there, and uncertainty too, for as long as she's with him he knew she would be endangering herself. And from what, he couldn't tell. I've lost some and gained some, Jon thought, and wondered where Arya Stark stands as far as losses and gains are concerned. She's a married woman now, and he had taken for himself a spearwife more out of duty than out of anything else. Jon knew he loves Val, he loves her but damn, where is this confusion springing from? And who was Arya to him, who was he to himself, before the world had told them who they truly were for each other? Those nights of mine made of anguish and longing that kills. I could have had her, Jon's heart screamed as he bit his lip in sudden misery. Now she has grown, fallen in love, given herself to someone else. Then, I learn that she is not my sister.

She never was my sister.

Selfish. But I could have had her, and Winterfell too.

Now, there's a great war to win, and I might die.

No, no. Jon must only love Arya. He must not be in love with her.

This must be all for duty, not desire.

It took everything that he had for him not to unsheathe Eddard's sword and gut himself with it.

His gaze cruised to Jaqen who was then in close scrutiny of him. The Lorathi knew, of course. He had always known. I didn't ask for this, he seemed to tell Jaqen. Beside him was Aegon the Sixth, who was also one helpless victim to the utter perfection that is Arya Stark; whose plans of conquest drafted right after he was snatched away from his cradle in Dorne were put to hold until the gods know when, just because the North—Arya Stark's very home—needed his soldiers.

His eyes locked upon her face once more.

"Don't look at me like that," Jon admonished the girl. Arya's eyes widened for a fraction, unsure of the lad's intimations. "You're too lovely."

The reactions were spontaneous, prompt. Jon saw those confused stares from the men, Aegon's narrowed eyes, Jaqen's unreadable expression that has always riddled Jon. Arya was blushing. Jon exhaled in half-resignation, carried on.

"Men," he began. "We have nineteen castles along the Wall and only five of those are fully-manned and commanded ably. Westwatch-by-the-Bridge and the Shadow Tower would still be under Ser
Denys, Eastwatch-by-the-Sea would be under Cotter Pyke, Oakenshield, under Leathers. The Torches would be under Iron Emmet." Cheers and jeers inundated the hall upon hearing the last two names. "Reinforcements will arrive tonight, we were assured of this. I'll have Soren Shieldbreaker and Borroq from the Sentinel Stand to the Stonedoor, Bedwyck in Hoarfrost and the Ice Mark, Tormund Giantsbane and Brienne of Tarth at Nightfort, while Deep Lake and Queensgate will remain with Halleck and Morna Whitemask—"

"Two commanders at Nightfort?" one brother raised the query. "Shouldn't we distribute the men to the stretch?"

"We have serious concerns with Nightfort," it was the Lorathi who answered. "Your maesters' pages were not lying when they inked those scrolls—a dragon with breath that chills and all that. It needs as many men as Castle Black would require."

Scattered laughter came from all corners, but died instantly when the Lorathi did not share the chuckles. A dragon's screech was heard asudden, creating a split-second of panic. Jaqen only smirked.

"Greenguard?" Iron Emmet asked.


"And who will command Castle Black while the lot of you are off to Valyria?" Leathers queried. "This is the core of the Wall, Lord Crow. All the wights came rushing here as if this was the only castle."

"Ser Jorah Mormont. Ser Davos will be with him, and Tyrion Lannister."

Jon was expecting violent responses from the Men. There were none, much to his surprise.

Jeren, a young steward raised his hand. "Are you a Targaryen, my lord?" came his unexpected query, his eyes darting from Jon to Aegon and back.

The lad smiled. Am I a Targaryen?

"A Stark and a Targaryen, yes," Jon confessed and this time, there was nothing but certainty, self-trust in his pronouncements.

Jeren motioned his head to Jaqen. "Is he Targaryen, too?"

The Lorathi beamed for the first time in that gathering. 'No."

The young steward's brows furrowed. "Then, how come that he could ride dragons as well?"

It was Arya Stark who answered, and upon her mien was a certain gentleness, a kind understanding towards a young soul desiring learnedness about things that cannot be encompassed by what is simply real. "Anyone can ride dragons, Jeren," were her words. "There are mysteries to it, of course, but not the kind that we cannot fathom. The truth is, it doesn't take a Targaryen to ride dragons."

"What does it take, then?" the lad asked.

Arya smiled, fiddled with her Queller. "Faith."

"We do our duties as we see fit, Jon, and damn the consequences."
She was with Jon at the Wall's summit, assessing the parts of fortress scraped off by the colossal scythe and the weapons and rune of the cold gods. Arya clicked her tongue. Half of that ice rampart had already collapsed, and a large fraction of the keep of Castle Black and the passages leading to the innermost tunnels were now fairly visible from the other side.

Even with the plans to re-garrison the other castles along the stretch in haste, the Wall will not stand a second wave of attack. The biggest problem is that those ice creatures come like thieves in the night, and there are literally legions of them.

"Yes, we must do as we must," Jon agreed, bending on one knee and running his fingers across the hard ice as if tracing any speck of magic left on it. "In spite of personal desires, tribulations, peril. There are thralls of fire and thralls of ice. If only Eddard could see us now, battling both. Perchance, even he was not able to see the truth in the very words of the Starks when he was still alive."

"How could he have known?" Arya asked. "It's been eight thousand years since this last happened." She walked along the Wall's battlements, bit her lip in woe at what remained of the weapons and the brothers and those other spirited ones. Memories of the Second Spice War invaded her thoughts once more and dissipated as quickly as they had come. The pain for what the Rhoynar had suffered is still there, it would never leave even if memories were forcibly kept at the recesses of one's person. "Have you any personal desire after all these, Jon? Apart from Val and ruling Winterfell?" She glanced at him and smiled.

Jon smiled back.

He cannot confess. It would ruin all—everything he had struggled to build by taking in Val as his spearwife, it would ruin his honor and the last shred of dignity he has left, the alliance with the Lorathi-Valyrian and the sense of kinship he had so freely offered him, even that connection with an older brother Jon never knew existed till days ago.

But how could he just remain silent about all those sentiments, feign strength and speak with her without taking his own blade and slashing himself? He had kept himself under the tightest rein for the longest time; pray, when will his angst end?

"For years, I have spent my nights there in the brothers' quarters." Jon pointed at the part of the castle beneath the stout wooden keep. "And there too, in the lord commander's tower. Every night, I felt as though…as though I'm nothing better than an animal."

"You're a warg, Jon. You are as much an animal as you are human."

"It's not just the warging," he replied, his eyes finding hers. "It's the darkness, Arya, the filth within me—a sort of tainted, stigmatized identity I never knew I had."

"I don't understand—"

"Have you ever thought of me, even once, when you were in Braavos?"

Arya's mien was suddenly pained. Why was he asking her this? "I never stopped thinking about you—in my hours of wakefulness, Jon…even when I was dreaming, you were there with me. All of you. Father and mother and Robb, especially."

Jon pursed his lips and nodded, and felt his inner self in merciless paroxysm. The anguish had been too much, and he did not possess the erudition to unlock what he meant by each question, by each response he was wanting from her. This is wrong, he thought. But nothing makes any damned sense in my world right now but this.
"Do you love me, Arya?"

"Why, of course, Jon!" she responded heatedly. "You're my brother! I don't care if you're Lyanna's son, though I am happy that you found the truth about yourself and accepted it; I would not have wished it any other way. You're still a brother to all of us—to me, to Sansa and Bran and Rickon, just as you are a brother to Aegon the Sixth."

Even with those words, he was cheerless and aching. He couldn't bear look at her, the question was shaming him to the core yet he had to ask it. He spoke once more, and his voice was so broken. "What I mean is, can you love me... the way you love Jaqen?"

Arya gasped.

Before she could draft a reply in her thoughts, Jon had already pulled her to him, shackled her in his arms. And those arms were too strong, unyielding, as if smoke and salt had made him realize that this was meant to happen, that they were bound to meet once more. Her entirety was aghast, as if that simple query screamed of a million words unsaid, a million emotions concealed for eight thousand years.

He buried his face in her hair. "This is sin... I shouldn't... I shouldn't want you like this."

Yes, Arya's heart screamed. And I should not allow you to want me this way.

Brother, cousin, friend, one beloved to her—who is Jon truly? Had she missed so much when she met that Lorathi and sailed to find him in Braavos? Was there anything at all between her and Jon when he rode for the Wall and she rode to the south after carrying his gift of steel, was there a seed planted perhaps, which she had failed to nurture and thus had died? Was this a tendency of his Valyrian blood, a blood that recognizes nothing but incestuous love?

Or had they known each other before, loved each other in a different time and realm, in a different form of existence? Had they known love before—not as brother and sister, or Stark children both, but as lover and beloved? Were they each other's beautiful secret?

Yes, there was this one song that she had forgotten. In the distant past, there were only him and her—the Warrior and the Nissa, her bared breast and his sword forged in fire. They have lived and died and have been mayhaps hosted by different bodies whose possessors are either connected or one, but the lyrics of that canticle were the same. The lyrics were her very voice, those erratic exhales that form the name of her lover in her lips, the pains of his sacrifice and her sacrifice, the pangs of a love forbidden by both circumstance and time, the kind of love that would save all but themselves.

Their love is darkness and light, good and evil. Their love can never be consummated unless one dies for the other. There's love, there's reality; and it's verily the latter that's standing between them.

"Who are you, Jon?" Arya whispered.

Verses of a song, the song of both ice and fire and the song of their wandering faceless souls now settled, these verses played ceaselessly in the midst of winds of winter.

Nothing—no realm, no time, no mortal, no god—can ever triumph over us, can ever break us...

"I don't know who I am," Jon whispered back, and he buried his eyes in Arya's shoulder to conceal his tears. "I just know that I am nothing without you. I just know that there is no other way for me to exist, except with you."
The Lorathi and the Targaryen Prince reached the grove of heart trees within the haunted forest, where the brothers of the Night's Watch recite their vows before fully taking the black. It was a few leagues away from the castle, quite a distance considering the harsh snowfall and the recent attacks by White Walkers. Despite these, Jaqen cannot be persuaded to postpone the ride for another day. "We need to be in front of that Weirwood tonight, Aegon the Sixth," the Lorathi had told the Prince. "A matter of life and death—you would understand this soon enough."

They dismounted and trod towards the Weirwood trees, with nothing but their eyes and keen senses as companions apart from their own armed selves. Moonlight does not penetrate in those ancient grounds and tangles, but there were spirits of the First Men aiding those who seek to make sacred vows in front of the old gods.

Jaqen traced the outlines of the Weirwood's face gently with his fingers. It was as if his dragon's blood was recognized by the heart tree, for the leaves have glowed as sudden, desiring to witness what must transpire between two men that night.

Aegon just observed him quietly, arms across his chest, and still puzzling over the Lorathi's intents of seeking his company that night. "I am well aware that you want me gone for good, Jaqen H'ghar. If such is the reason for this man-to-man tryst which I am guessing you told your wife nothing about, then may I be so bold as to request that we slay each other instead after the war against the lords and those Undead?"

Jaqen ignored Aegon's words. The Lorathi's back was to the Prince, as he kept his eyes locked upon the Weirwood's carved face. "How far are you willing to go for Arya, Aegon the Sixth?"

"How far?" Aegon said, even as he was utterly surprised by the Lorathi's question. "Let's see." He started pacing. "I'd go as far as chopping your head off should I learn that you forced her into your bed again, should I learn that you bruised her again and made her weep with those filthy bedtalks of yours. I'd go farther than that—I'll draw my sword and despoil your Lorathi built, scatter your innards in front of Arya as a sacred offering." He paused, as if forgetting something. "Oh, and I promised her I'll cut your pretty hair."

The Lorathi nodded, chewed on his lower lip. Heaven and earth were collapsing upon him and he could hardly breathe to salvage his already perishing self. Arya...Arya...cried out his soul, as the day of his death in Valyria came rushing to him, coiling all over him. It was the greatest pain he had ever known, but it was second only to the thought of losing her. "And if someone tried to kill her—"

"I'll kill him first."

"No matter who that person is?"

"Yes."

Jaqen drew out his dagger, bent on one knee in front of the Weirwood. He touched the tip of it—a preparation. There was nothing in him that very night but childlike purity, and the bursting love for Arya Stark that was consuming every last fragment of substance he still possessed. The next words came out, though he wasn't strong enough, though his voice and resolves and all that he is were breaking, though he was to the brink and he knew not who to trust. "Will you...stand by her side, and defend her till breath fails you, and...and give to her till you have nothing left?"

Aegon stopped pacing and stared hard at the Lorathi whose back was to him. His head was slumped, his body was weary, his hair of scarlet-and-ivory covered his visage yet even in that shroud Aegon the Sixth knew Jaqen's thoughts in the midst of all his sorrows.
"What the hell?!" he dashed to Jaqen and grabbed him by the collar, hid his shock at beholding the Lorathi's face—lost and wretched, with eyes that sang of rue and lamentations. Aegon shook him.
"What is this?! You're making me swear in front of a Weirwood, you bastard? You're yielding Arya to me?!!"

"I might die, Aegon…" Jaqen responded with pained calmness. His bronze irises against the gold locked upon Aegon's purple-set. "I don't know when or where or how, but after all these…I must. I chose to die, and die I will."

Aegon's fist landed on Jaqen's jaw. The Lorathi fell back, his spine slamming against the Weirwood's face. He once more grabbed Jaqen by the collar and pushed him forcefully against the heart tree. "We could all die, what are you talking about?! You will ruin her, damn you," he said in between clenched teeth. "You know how much that woman loves you? She won't survive if you give up on yourself, you cursed beast. You're an imperial dragonlord, for sakes! You don't just die! The real battle hasn't even started yet!"

"We will not leave this place unless I have your word."

"I will not acquiesce to your plans that will only cause Arya's misery, Jaqen!"

They wrestled against each other, bellowed out their curses. Their bodies scraped through the snow that was already many inches deep. Aegon was underneath him, and managed to land another jab on Jaqen's face. The Lorathi spat out blood and sank a fist on Aegon's belly. Blood pooled in his mouth as he gagged. Scarlet sprayed all over the white ground. "I need you to make that vow!" Jaqen delivered another blow, but Aegon was quick in parrying it. He pushed the Lorathi away from him with all the force he could muster, and they stumbled apart from each other for seconds, catching their breaths.

"Make me understand, damn you!" Aegon raved. "I don't know a thing about this, you bastard!"

And so, he told him everything—Valyria and Rhoyne…the Warrior and the Nissa…his death…the cycles…the death god…Stygai.

*For what is love without pain, without sacrifice?*

Aegon the Sixth tugged at his hair, stared at Jaqen with inexplicable contempt, and a pity that overwhelmed all other vile emotions of his. "You'll break her."

"Not as much if you'll be with her."

"Why me?" the Prince queried him hotly. "You hate me. Why not entrust her to Jon?"

In the Lorathi's eyes were swirls of mad throe. "I don't know if I can trust Jon at this time."

Aegon's laughter was with deep bitterness. "I never curse, but fuck you, Jaqen."

Jaqen only smiled sadly. He must persuade Aegon the Sixth to swear in front of the Weirwood, so those false memories implanted in the Prince's mind by the Order could be completely effaced by those vows. Once the Prince had sworn, he would be forever bound to the duty of protecting Arya,
and that was what mattered the most to Jaqen H'ghar.

And Jon...Jon.

*Brann the raven with the third sight orchestrated everything through the guidance of the gods,* Jaqen thought.

*Jon is the Warrior, Arya is the Wife.*

Jaqen is not blind to the concept of greater good—it's the very fundament of the House of Black and White. Bran saw all the realms, all possible choices and ends to those choices, and is drafting a path to rectify what's wrong. Yet in that greater good is a huge sacrifice that must be made, but Jaqen could not just surrender Arya to that fate.

"Do you know that she fancies having children?" Jaqen swallowed his own heartache, and he almost choked at the act—the agony just wouldn't go. He gasped as he breathed his next; the anguish was too much to bear now. "She had told me once that she would care very little if the gods would bless her with silver-haired babes."

"Fuck you," Aegon replied. The Lorathi chuckled softly. "This, and you still have the guts and the time to jape."

"She's the most wonderful thing."

Aegon sighed and threw his head back, shut his eyes in utter hurt. "I know. Despite that fact, you're still willing to let her go."

"Sometimes," Jaqen said. "There are choices you simply are not allowed to make. I didn't know who I was till her, I was a floating entity until she named me. I can never...I can never be enough for her—none of us can. You understand...why I don't want her to be left alone after all these, don't you, Aegon the Sixth?"

The Prince's jaw hardened with ire and sorrow both. "I love her, Jaqen."

"I know. I love her, too."

Aegon exhaled sharply, nodded. "I will do this for Arya, not for you."

Jaqen smiled, pressed the tip of dagger against his skin to draw blood. Oaths will be declared tonight in front of the gods—a bequeathing for one, an acceptance for the other.

"Do it for Arya; that's good enough for me."

The first and the last camp was at the Last Hearth. The castle was able to house six regiments, and will house the remaining once the soldiers have crossed Long Lake. If not for the meat provision sent from Skagos through Eastwatch-by-the-Bay, there would be nothing but stale bread and some greens to sustain the men. The catch has dwindled significantly in the Bay of Seals, inland fishing proved to be less and less a good recourse now that the waters have frozen and night doesn't anymore turn to day.

The usually loudmouthed Lord Mors kept his trap shut the whole time and merely occupied himself with his expected duties of hosting the cohort, much to Ser Alret Magnar's surprise. The men feasted on deer, boar, and wild bears' meat as promised, and chanted some words of gratitude to the Skagosi for the fare.
Scattered conversations filled the castle's great hall. News from Mole's Town has reached the Hearth— the Wall was indeed attacked by those mythical cold ones, and the brothers and some soldiers from Winterfell and the Stone were barely able to hold the fortress.

Castle Black would have fallen to the hands of the ice demons had it not been for those three dragons that arrived when a great fraction of the stronghold was already about to collapse.

"The wights are easy to tackle," Ser Davos told the rest, as they mulled over the impending over tankards of ale. "They're vulnerable to flame, but don't let that vulnerability fool all your airy guts—they're very fast. Imagine them scaling a seven-hundred-foot tall ice fortress in a matter of seconds. From what I've heard, they were able to almost take the iron gates leading to the inner tunnels." He turned to Brienne, motioned to Podrick who was sitting at her right. "I trust that you've trained this boy on swordwork?"

"Most certainly, ser," Pod answered. "Though bastard swords tire me too much."

"You cannot use that as excuse in the middle of battle, Pod," the woman said, then resumed her conversation with the knight. "So, this means to say that as long as we hold the Wall, we're fine, isn't that right? That doesn't seem like such a daunting task."

A snort came from Tormund, prompting all others to gaze at his direction. Brienne flicked her nose with her thumb, eyed the Mead-king with displeasure. "Speak if you must," she said, sitting upright. "You've got what I am guessing is another old-hat wisecrack. Let's hear it."

Tormund stared back at the lady knight, tipping the tankard's rim to his lips. He smacked them, as if relishing the aftertaste, though his eyes he had locked upon the woman's face. "Not a jest—you can ask your Lord Crow. The Wall is enchantment in itself. There's magic above it, within it," the Mead-king paused, smirked. "Under it."

Brienne of Tarth scoffed.

"You believe in that, Giantsbane?" Ser Jorah queried. "I was with the khaleesi when I heard the maesters speak of it—winter's dragon? Can't say I believe, can't say I do not; but ever since those fire-breathers, ever since the sack of Meereen, I've realized that there is absolutely no strength in unbelief."

"True," Tormund replied. "The existence of those creatures of rune up north is not and never dependent on the belief of kneelers and wildlings alike. Might be a bloody useful advice for scoffers."

Tyrion was silent the whole time, his attention fixated on the pitcher of ale at the center of the table.

"Penny for your thoughts, Lannister?" Ser Davos remarked.

The Imp smiled. "Pardon me, I've been a most stolid companion. Just..." he shrugged his shoulders, then directed his gaze at Sansa sitting on the table's far end. "Battle tactics."

In the Wall, in the capital, Tyrion thought. He had asked his king to carry out Sansa's demand that Littlefinger be put to justice.

"A master puppeteer at the sides," the Imp had told Aegon the Sixth before the latter's ride to the Wall. "Worked his way with those dragonlords, caused the rebellion, instrumental in Ser Robert Strong's revival, who incidentally is Gregor Clegane. Remember good ol' Gregor?"

Aegon's face dimmed at the mention of the name. "Elia's raper, Rhaenys's murderer?"
"That's the one."

"Very well," Aegon the Sixth had decided that instant. "Let's meet this Littlefinger."

"Battle tactics?" Jorah asked, pulling Tyrion's mind back to the present. "Care to disclose?"

"Of course," Tyrion answered. "Nothing complicated—just wildfire, wargs, wolves, wyverns."

"Like this," Sabine said, closing her fingers in on the upper part of her wrist. "See how the tallest finger doesn't reach the thumb?"

"Oh?" Sansa's laughter was very amused. "That's when Aegeus is already swollen, yes?"

Sabine nodded, grinning. She turned to Val "Jon's?"

The wildling princess drank silently from her tankard. "I guess it's...somewhat like yours, too."

"You're not sure?" Sabine asked.

Val laughed. "It's not like I carry my measuring implements with me to bed, Sabine."

"This is becoming awkward," Sansa complained. "That's my brother you're talking about."

"Oh, come now," Val urged her. "You haven't told us a bit about Tyrion's. So?"

"They're all the same," Sansa shrugged her shoulders, smiled maliciously. "But Sabine's estimation, that's when it's still 'sleeping'—I mean, that's not Tyrion's excited state yet."

The Waif gasped, slapped Sansa's hand gently. "You teller of tales!"

"Oh, no," Sansa drank from her tankard, eyes still on the woman. "That, I am not."

Val glanced at Tyrion who was then in the middle of a conversation with the others at the far side of the table. "For a man his size—no offense." She turned her attention back to Sansa. "He's loaded."

"Who's loaded?" Rickon asked the three women. "Loaded with what?"

"Hush, Rickon," Sansa admonished him. "It's not for young ones, my dear."

"I'm not that young," the boy protested. "I held Winterfell when Jon wasn't there."

Bran was with them but his mind was somewhere else. It's getting stronger, and he could feel that nefarious force within his marrows. The Heart of Winter which he saw behind the curtains of light was calling him, challenging him to thwart it once more. This would be another Age of Heroes, another Battle for the Dawn.

The Wall was built then and the heroes are long dead. If by will of the gods the Wall does fall since dragons have been once more awakened out of stone—and a dragon indeed it is that sleeps beneath—their warriors of this age must act as the last fortress to shield the realms.

And his friends from beyond the Wall, those brown-skinned ones gifted with greensight, with eyes slitted like those of cats were mourning over Bloodraven's death. The oak is the acorn and the acorn is the oak, and the raven whisperer's body is now part of the heart trees, and everything else in all creation. The Weirwood is empty, waiting for the last greenseer to hold its roots and allow these to be entangled with his body, his consciousness, his substance.
East meets West. Two Walls will fall, and when they do, the great battle begins.

The other Wall is the Five Forts, standing along the boundaries of the Empire of Yi Ti, the Bloodstone Emperor's lair before he was chained in Stygai. Heart of Winter, Heart of Darkness—both will consume the realms with powers unparalleled should the warriors of this age fail to defend.

And so, Bran had given him a choice. Accept or deny the fate, this was what the boy had told Jaqen in that vision of his at the Isle of Faces. If Jaqen chooses to surrender himself to host that chained god that spawns all things chaotic, then he could defeat that god from within him. If not, the cycle of Winter and Darkness will continue time after time after time, for how many Warriors would choose to spare their Nissa? How many Warriors would choose their own death over a sword forged in flames if it meant saving their beloved?

Jaqen, the honorable, selfless one that he is, has chosen to fall once more. Jaqen thought about it, that if he would sacrifice himself to Death for the last time, then perhaps Nissa Nissa wouldn't have to die in order to birth the Lightbringer.

We are yet to see that, Bran spoke to himself as he weighed all possible choices, scenarios, aftermaths. The conclusions to all and every tangle would depend on the courses of action each of them would take in the midst of battle—Jaqen, Arya, Jon, Aegon.

His eyes burned, as he felt the heartache of having to choose between the realms and family, between greater good and home.

"What's wrong, Bran?" Sansa queried when she noticed his breathing change, and his eyes too, which reflected nothing at that moment but pain.

He shook his head, stared gently at each face. There was resignation upon his mien but there was indomitability in it as well, as if the war he would wage against Winter and Darkness was nothing but a warg's cruel dream that could vanish as soon as the ravens sing their lilt in the morn. He might die—all of them might. Still, he must be steadfast.

"We're in this because we love not the sword or the arrow or the warrior, yes?" His misty eyes were trained on Rickon. "We do not wage war because we despise those that dwell beyond the Wall, but because we love those who dwell behind it."

"Yes," Val smiled at the boy's declaration. "Those who do not love would never choose to fight, Bran."

Sansa's expression was then distraught, because she has sensed what Bran had been intimating. "What do you plan to do, brother?" She asked softly. "And please, don't kill me with your decisions."

"I have to go to the Weirwood beyond the Wall."

"No!" Rickon exclaimed. "It's too dangerous there, Bran! Don't do it!"

"I'll go there with Meera again, Ser Jorah with us. I have to do it, Rickon," Bran replied with a pained smile. He covered his face with his hands to conceal the tears forming. His voice broke at the next words. "There's a parallel battle...not just here. It's in a realm hidden from us...West of Westeros, and the Weirwood could bring me there. Sabine," he turned to the woman. "The Death of Dragons. You brought the poison with you, yes?"

Sabine gasped. "The concoction was meant for...for that ice dragon?"
"Yes," Bran nodded. "Your Order meant it for the dragons of Valyria, but that is not the only purpose it serves. The maesters of the Citadel cannot see past their own skepticisms, so they hid everything. I need that poison now, beyond the Wall."

Sansa slammed her fist against the table, prompting a moment of silence from those gathered. Her half-filled tankard spilled the ale; she didn't care. "I can't understand this family. It's like all of you want to die the stupid way!"

"Sansa..." Val calmed her.

She exhaled sharply in response. "This is not part of the plan at all, Bran," she seethed. "The plan is plain and simple—you will stay in Castle Black, and you will communicate with us from there."

"That's Jon's plan, and I had little to do with it," he replied. "I wouldn't be of much use to anyone if I would remain in Castle Black, no...no...we don't even know how long the Wall would stand. I should go back..."

"Go back where?" Rickon shook him. "Go back where? I'll go with you!"

"You can't, Rickon. No one can go there unless through the Weirwood, and only Bran could traverse turfs through the trees," Sabine said, then placed her palm gently on Bran's arm. "Bloodraven is gone for good, isn't he? Is this why the Wall's rune is waning?"

"Yes."

"How so?" Val probed on.

"I don't know how much of these you would be willing to understand much less accept, but the Weirwood where Bloodraven used to dwell holds all realm-versions. Now that he's dead I cannot...I cannot connect with the fibers of my old self—the one that built the Wall millennia ago."

"You're right, we don't understand, but there's a more pressing question and you're trying to evade it. Where will you go?" Sansa asked in between clenched teeth, and her voice was failing her yet she had to pursue the query. She thought she had gathered the Starks for good, and that the impending battle was nothing more than Stannis's besieging of King's Landing which she had experienced behind closed doors. *How can this war be more than that? What kinds of creatures are they really, the ones we have to face?* "Make me understand why the lot of you, especially you and Jon and Arya, want to act like damnable saviors of this realm and leave the rest of us while you sacrifice yourselves to wights and Weirwoods."

Tears fell from Bran. "Believe me, I want this to pass; but this must pass well. I want Winterfell, I want the Starks, I want a life." He shook his head. "I can't have any of those unless we win this. The only way to win this is if I go back..."

"Where, damn it?!" Sansa probed.

The boy's eyes cruised to their faces. *The mind is the only weapon to win battles against reality. Before I built the Wall.*

The crawling night has reached Essos, enshrouding the landmass like a black cloud, hiding the orbs of both morn and evening. The Moon seemed to wane, and the rivers that were tributaries of Rhoyne, the seas, they all stilled as if preparing to witness the last battle between Valyrians and their thralls that have gathered to crush what most have known as the empire without an end.
In the Tyrant's Hill at the axis of Valyria stood Aurion Archestrad's throne of sorrow. His retaking of Slaver's Bay, recent victory against Braavos, and attacks in one of the core cities of Westeros had one by one given him back that wrathful glory stolen from him during the Doom. A persistent voice would hiss in his ears in his state of slumber and wakefulness both—a whisper from the gods, perhaps, to which Aurion would merely wrinkle his nose in scorn. *When does it end?* The voice would ask.

"When there are no more lands left to conquer," Aurion would always persuade himself, then he would laugh at his own malevolence. "When the realms are all mine, and when that Esdraelon and his Rhoynish whore are eaten by dust and worms for good."

For what would the realms look like without evil and shadows and death? No one would find bliss in insane fantasies. The eyes of men were not made by the gods to forever see naked light.

With anticipation, he awaited what was left of the forces from Braavos, Pentos, Lys, and Myr. Battle horns will be sounded if the forces are nigh—around half a thousand leagues from the once more terraformed peninsula. "Forty thousand from the Free Cities. Those Ironborn that broke away from Euron Greyjoy, useless Dothraki, and stinking sellswords will not be useful to them in battle. They cannot leave Dragonstone and the Storm's End un-garrisoned or the capital's forces will reclaim those Targaryen-besieged castles," Aurion told the two other Valyrian warlords. "Garin of Chroyane has learned nothing from the Spice Wars."

"Hah! What would you expect from a trout-brained Rhoynish Prince?" Daxen Ophistor replied. "If he wants to be scaled, gutted, and charred, then let him."

"Two legions from Tolos are set to arrive by ship," said Lathos Hadervaren. "The Qartheen Fleet is here, six legions from the New Ghis discounting soldiery from the Slaver's Bay, sellswords, crossbowmen and cavalry from Elyria and Mantarys." He stood, tied back his dreadlocks in one long tail, and poured them all some goblets. "I wonder what Haresh was thinking when he turned down your demands, Aurion. The bastard wants to dig his own barrow. Pity," he smirked and directed his gaze to the Valyrian woman. "Daxen here would have taken him back on her bed."

The woman smirked back. "Who wouldn't miss that cock of his?" She took the goblet from Lathos. "I'll seriously think about fucking him to death for the last time before I burn his face."

"As for that Rhoynar," Aurion said. "I would drain every drop of blood from that virginal body of hers, discover what kind of damnable rune she has that she managed to get those assassin-mages on her side."

The clear report of the battle horn being blown was heard in all corners of that fey empire of tragedy. From below the Tyrant's Hill, the legions marched to the battlements by the peninsula's waterfronts, while the commanders bellowed out commands amidst the sound of weapons and bray of horses and war elephants.

*It is time,* Aurion thought, smacking his lips at the Sarnori's aftertaste, with his calmness in the face of an impending carnage as shuddersome as the howling demons in the city of night.

*Die, lāqaen Haegār.*

*Die, Āria hen Rhoyne.*

This man once called Garin of Chroyane beheld it once more when he gathered the forty-thousand of the Free Cities. Rhoyn's featureless expanse was in front of him. The waters still whispered, calling
him ‘Child…’ and he still felt the profusion of protective sorcery emanating from all over it. This river and the ruins beneath it never abandoned them in battle, even after dragonfire turned the river into steam and killed both its Rhoynish children and Valyrian foes with its sheer strength a thousand years ago.

He recalled the many cultures of Rhoyne filled with symbols that were then the pictographic tongue of its vague chronicles. The symbols were bloodlife to any Rhoynar, an indelible mark so profound, a secret language that no Valyrian soul could understand—except if the Valyrian chose to be one with them. Rhoyne is gone, Braavos is gone, the Handsome Man thought as his gaze foraged what was left of the cities. But perhaps, it's not impossible to rebuild homes lost to you?

Cavalrymen marched from Myr to Chroyane all the way to Mantarys, then traversed the path south towards the rebuilt ruins of Valyria. They stopped at the flat-topped hills built up from layers upon layers of destroyed cities and saw its infernal grandiosity—the Fourteen Flames that had been the bane of thralls breathing once more, the gigantic dragon statues and flame-shaped obelisks and monuments, the aqueducts, the fighting stade, and the slave shacks visible from the elevated Tyrant's Hill, with its garrisoned walls profusely cluttered with sickening drawn histories of Valyria's imperial expansion. Aegeus felt his Rhoynish blood boil at the sight, and wasted no time giving the commanders his final instructions before they could all proceed straight to battle.

"Highland charge, comrades, then on to shock tactic. We have the fleet at the southwestern, they would surround the peninsula through the straits of the Summer Sea to as far as the Gulf of Grief. We will only commence attack when the dragons are here," Aegeus said, running his fingers through his hair of midnight in order to control his thirst for blood. "We ram the gates and penetrate the center, concentrate our superior forces in the middle and punch a hole into their formation, then we'll exploit the gap by letting in our reserve forces." He allowed his eyes to survey every face. "Questions?"

"What if a regiment gets detached from the army's main? The battle would be chaotic as hell and enemies might surround us," asked one cohort commander who was a good ten years older than he is.

The Handsome Man rolled his eyes, as if finding the query no better than a child's. "Then, use the Orb. Hold all shields in defensive formation—circular wall, swords and spears in between the slits and wait for the main army to rejoin the rest of you."

"That's one of Garin of Chroyane's battle tactics, commander," one younger leader remarked. "No offense, but how come that you know so much about his strategies? You said you're a Tyroshi sellsword."

He smiled then patted the young leader on the shoulder. "Garin of Chroyane is wicked awesome," came the Handsome Man's reply. "All soldiers should know his tactics."

From her purview atop Jaqen's firebeast, Arya saw Rhoyne once more. The ancient civilization was stripped off of its power during the days of antiquity, but she could still see in all clarity every footpath, every road by the river, every boat and trader track. There were countless other cities that lay beneath the ruins now, and maybe there's truth to what the Essosi were saying whenever they pass by the River Rhoyne—that it is nothing more but a home to spectres and other vile creatures, and its substance was now reduced to nothing but memories of a city that wept and laughed. Now, it's below the layers of crushed bones and skulls, and soot that had become part of the dirt and had been carried away by the waters.

The river still glimmered in the afternoon sun as the dragon circled it in its flight.
She felt Jaqen kissing her shoulder, before finding her lips. "When all this is over, I will rebuild Rhoyne for you," he whispered in her ear.

"You don't have to, Jaqen," Arya smiled, caressed his cheek. "We don't live in the past anymore. You're my home now."

He kissed her again. "You don't have to be at the center of war, Arya. You can stay with the reinforcements outside the gates of the Freehold, close to the ruined cities by the hills. I spoke with Aegeus—"

"I have to be there," she replied. "Aurion burned Rhoyne, he burned Braavos. He has his eyes set on Westeros now. If I want him to stop chasing me, then I should stop running."

Finally, they reached Valyria—its half-buried dolmens, its structures and ancient stones, its mines and volcanoes and caverns glistening with dark emerald fire appeared more sinister than they had ever been. The enemy soldiers and fleet from the Ghiscari cities and the Slaver's Bay, those cavalrymen north of Mantarys led by Aegeus, and those battleships spearheaded by Daario seemed nothing like playthings in Arya's vantage point, but these are mere illusions, of course—the war will be fought on land, at sea, in the air, and this is no divertissement.

This will be the conclusion of the unfinished chapters of the Second Spice War.

"Hold your dragonreins firmly, Arya," Jaqen said, and the sonance of the firebeast's wings against the wind seemed to intensify asudden as they approached the battleground. "As soon as you see their firebeasts, summon your Queller's rune so the dragons would listen only to your voice. We would close in on the peninsula on all cardinal directions—we go from north, Jon and Aegon would fly from east and south, Daenerys goes from the west. Once we besiege the center, we weaken their defenses from the sides until they lose control of their firebeasts and legions. You with me, baby?"

Arya exhaled, gripped tightly the chains. "Yes."

"Don't worry," Jaqen kissed her hair. "I got your back."

At this, Heraxos screeched, swooped down on the shores of Valyria where the regiments from New Ghis stood, close to the iron-and-stone fortifications.

A deluge of fire came from the dragon's beastly mouth, burning Valyria's soldiery by the hundreds. Spears and arrows flew to their direction, but the firebeast evaded these all through its whorls of flight, the splayed tip of its wings brushing scarred obsidian rocks that make up some of the Freehold's archaic towers, sending giant fragments of these into sure collapse. It soared with a thundering refrain of strength, unrelenting power, that mere wind from its flight propelled enemy ranks into the unforgiving waves of the Summer Sea.

The Freehold's expanse was drowned by confusing, frightening din of battle horns, clashing weapons, screams of men and dragons.

Aurion arrived with the two other Valyrian warlords, his outrage growing more defined as they all soared nigh with their imperial beasts. "Esdraeloooon!" came his wrathful call. "I will have your damnable head!"

Everything descended to pandemonium and hell as Urkon launched attacks, one ball of flame after another in rapid succession. Heraxos took decussated flights, ascending…descending…to avoid the spheres of flames. What burned instead were the antique structures of the risen empire, and the stones of these caved in on the soldiers at the bottom—mangling and shattering their heads and limbs and
every part of their fragile bodies. Blood and brains exploded in all spaces.

"Call you rune, Arya!" Jaqen ordered her.

The Queller was not lighting up.

"I can't!" she answered, panic eating her heart. "It's being cancelled by some other force!"

Jaqen forcefully pulled the reins to maneuver the dragon upwards, safe from the blasts of poisoned arrows of thick pines and sentinels. The clouds dissipated, fragmented, as if giving the beast the right of way. "Damn it!" Jaqen cursed as he saw the cause of the rune's non-response. Glowing scarlet in Valyrian rose gold—much like the one Arya was wearing. "The other Queller! It's with Aurion!"

As if sensing the enchantment's other source, Heraxos sped down even in the absence of Jaqen's command, intent on connecting with the other Queller's power.

"Heraxos!" Arya shrieked. She held the dragon's chains tighter and felt her hands bleed as the roughness of it scraped her palms. "Fly up! Up!" but the dragon was unheeding, even as Jaqen was bellowing out commands in High Valyrian and forcibly pulling the reins.

The dragon plummeted down in an almost impossible speed.

Arya felt her lungs collapsing at that reckless descent, her face being battered by the suddenly wicked wind. She gasped and choked, coughed and spat out blood she didn't even know the cause of, and she cannot perceive a thing, for the flames spewed by those beasts in all directions, the swirl of smoke and the embers from those already burnt men blinded her.

She felt a sudden jolt, as if the dragon had collided against an impenetrable solid, and heard Jaqen's raging orders—*Vīlībagon, Heraxos!*—futile, scorned by his own firebeast. Another violent impact almost sent her flying from the dragon's frilled back. Arya struggled to open her eyes and saw them—Daxen and Lathos soaring on both sides of them, ramming their dragons against Heraxos in full force.

"Give up, Haresh!" Lathos Hadervaren bellowed, then laughed like one deranged. "This is your gravestone we're carving!"

With a hateful scream, Daxen hurled her Valyrian birthchain towards Arya, and it gyrated in open space as it flew to the direction of its target. Arya dodged to deflect it, but it rebounded towards her as soon as it had traversed the farthest distance it could go. She unsheathed her steel to intercept it, felt her entirety shake at the impact. The chain coiled itself around her neck tight, squeezing...killing at each turn of the second.

She struggled to remove the chain that was strangling her at the moment, felt her very consciousness ebbing away and abandoning her. Scarcce air was reduced to none as she was slowly...slowly being dragged to nothingness. A dagger flew from Jaqen's hand, landing on Daxen's thigh and shattering her focus. "You damned fuck!" the woman screamed at Jaqen as the chain fell from Arya's neck and flew back to its wielder.

They were trapped, Arya realized, for even as Jaqen commanded the dragon to take an ascent or descent, speed up in its flight or digress, the other dragons on both sides were quick to follow their course and keep up with their pace.

The sound of colliding steel muddled her already whelmed hearing senses. Jaqen drew his sword and blocked a straight attack from Lathos, engaged him in sword combat mid-air. He was quick to parry the thrusts but his focus was divided among her safety, the two dragons on either side of them, a
possible way to escape. It's only a matter of time before Heraxos surrenders itself fully to the other Queller's regency, and they must act quick.

She looked back in an attempt to find a recourse. Perchance, they could slow down and use the other dragons' momentum as leverage.

Dear gods.

Aurion was behind them in a mad pursuit.

It's now three imperial firebeasts against one.

Aurion's dragon launched a wave of gilden flames, hitting Heraxos in the rear. The beast screeched in pain, its flight turning erratic as red, writhing waves of fire found their way onto its body.

The two other firebeasts soared upwards in simultaneous, perfectly synchronous flights, before taking a rapid descent towards their target. Those beasts disgorged dragonfire upon Heraxos's wings, setting these ablaze. The dragon cried out as it endured that hellish pain, staggered in flight.

"Jaqen!" Arya screamed. "They're killing Heraxos!"

"Hold on tight!" Jaqen responded. "We'll find a way out of this."

I need to tip the scales to our side, Arya thought as the dragon collided head-on against the marble wall, shattering it in order to kill the flames now devouring its wings and to pave for them a way to escape. The tetrad of dragons had crossed the shores and was now approaching the Summer Sea. How...how...

She held her Queller tight, shut her eyes. Calm as still water...

Hide yourself beneath the mist, Heraxos. You've done it before.

She channeled her ancient magic and felt it course through every fiber of her body. In Rhoynish tongue she mouthed out the chain-words and unleashed her power, drawing it from that forgotten, mysterious source.

"God-rune," she whispered.

Arya felt their outlines and full forms vanishing, fading away, being concealed by the water's secrets.

The waves of the Summer Sea rose in a mighty swelling, as if disturbed by behemoth boulders from the niche of the gods. And those three imperial firebeasts were swept back to the terrains of Valyria by the gigantic waves, their bodies carving out jagged paths along Valyria's soil, crashing into their own ranks of soldiery, slamming against the Freehold's structures.

Upon recovering from the attack, Aurion commanded his firebeast's chains and willed it once more to fly. Urkon flapped its own wings like mad, its fiery eyes scouring the stretch of that peninsula, screeching in utter fury as it looked for any signs of its rival beast. "Esdraelon!" Aurion screamed, as his beast dispensed spheres upon spheres of deadly flames on the enemy fleet that had just arrived. "Stop hiding behind your whore's rune, you cowardly bastard!" The two other dragonriders joined him at the center, taking the defensive position—rear to rear to rear, ensuring that no flank is left undefended. Their eyes carefully foraged the expanse, looking for any signs at all that imperial dragon that just...evanesced in space.

There was complete silence and centering of focus on the part of those three dragonriders that were
then suspended mid-air, a complete contrast to the mayhem transpiring at the moment below them—fleet against fleet, cavalry against cavalry.

Jade-green, ivory, high midnight flew from Aurion's north and south and east.

And there it was, that aurelian dragon that had earlier disappeared, speeding towards the triad of beasts from the west.

Aurion cackled, as if very pleased by how the dance amongst dragons was turning out. "Do you really expect that your neophytes can stand a chance against imperial firebeasts, Esdraelon?!"

Jaqen's whole focus was on those three dragons they plan to trap in the middle. He knew that the attempt to engage them in full aerial battle was a risk too deadly to even explore, but the summit of all climaxes must require such gamble on their part, or they would never win.

"It's a direct attack, Jaqen!" Arya exclaimed. "I'm with you all the way, but do tell me that you have planned this well!"

"Forgive me but I cannot assure you with anything, sweetheart," Jaqen replied, commanding the firebeast to zoom towards the center of fray. "When it comes to Dance of the Dragons, you can never plan a damned thing."

"What?!" Arya shrieked. "What could help us win without a plan?!"

Jaqen assessed the distance of the three other dragons flying from various directions. They were within stone's throw from those imperial beasts, and every estimation, every conjecture, every second must count.

"Faith."

Prior to the war in Valyria was that battle in the Isle of the Gods where the vilest of runes were unleashed. The Elder and the Faceless masters were the last to stand between the Burners of the Pass and the sanctum that carried all the faces of the dead.

Magic was not supposed to be practiced in such a way; magic should preserve all things, spawn change in the material and immaterial realms that are now and forever chaotic and hopeless, should chasten the defiled and celebrate the faultless, should defy natural laws so the minds of the young may believe.

Midnight flash swallowed two of the assassins, reducing them to rotting heaps of soot, mown down like fallen stalks.

Fire and demons blighted the last remaining structure in the isle in a grand duel of magic against magic. Their sources of rune created fluxes and tides of power, surging and dissipating like the mad beating of an intrepid heart. One realm collided against another, fought for dominions. The necrous forces that emerged from the mages and burners exploded like blinding red and silver lights—a foul cleansing, a grand spilling of lives, one magnificent tragedy.

Figures of the night closed in on the assassin-mages, and these became a swirling blur of motion and shrieks, delivering ruin to all that these creatures would touch. With enchantments carved out from the flames, the mages pierced the dark veils fueling them to move and kill. Those demons flung themselves onto them, penetrated their mortal frames, consumed what was inside till their shells turned more empty than empty.
They have defended what remained of the Isle of the Gods and the Hall of Faces to the last of their breaths, to the ends of their lives; and though in the sight of the death god they have taken the left-hand path that was to her an abomination, they stood their ground and carried steadfast their notion of Valar dohaeris.

They have failed.

Now, six assassin-mages of what was once called the Order of the Faceless Men lay dead in their own pool of blood, and the blood had the hue of shadows and dark things—mark of elder sorcery of those that serve the tyrant gods whose abodes meet east to west.

Perchance, the Elder of the Faceless Men had allowed himself to become a host to the last of his thoughts as life ebbed away from him. Was this now his karmic destiny? Had he truly done his due for the red god? What would the fate of the realms be?

He closed his eyes for the final time.

Night howled as those faces in the sanctum were turned to ash by the two remaining Burners. Those faces were summoned to the City of Night where the chained one lay waiting.

It would be named thereon as the Fall of Braavos.

The Crow's Eye beheld the completely decimated city, bereft of its usual animations, robbed of its greatness. He trod on the ruins and the dregs that served as the sad remnants of a place that once prided itself as the beacon of enlightenment and power of choice.

Collapsed structures, ash and cinders, corpses. Naught left but these.

He walked some more towards the Isle of the Gods and noticed something glimmering beneath the debris. Red gold, Valyrian steel, Valyrian glyphs, The relic was familiar to him for many moons ago it was stolen from his own brother's ship, ruining his chances on the Silver Queen.

Dragonbinder.

"Men!" he called to his Ironborns, and they wasted no time tackling the wreckage and retrieving it. It never burned. Why of course, how could one that could possess dominion over fire be vulnerable to fire?

He had it carried to his fleet, had it blown by five men who all collapsed dead after a thousand souls screamed from the horn, their lips blistered and their lungs charred. This is what caused Braavos's collapse, he thought. Not one is willing to risk the lives of others so the Dragonbinder can fulfill its damnable purpose. Every life to those fools is precious. Too upright, and look at them now.

He turned his eyes at the red priest with the dragon-headed iron staff, whose loyalty is and has always been with the lords of Valyria. "Aurion has the Archon's Queller, it's the stronger one," the red priest had assured him. "Yes, his dragon could resist the call of this horn."

"That Stark girl has the other Queller," Euron reminded him. "Wouldn't that make the other firebeast resistant as well?"

"No," the red priest replied. "She doesn't own that dragon, the Archon-heir does. Her command over that beast is unstable, and that woman has no drop of Valyrian blood in her veins. She's a Rhoynar."

Now, Euron's crow-eye was on the shores of Valyria where a series of battles had already
commenced. He traced the glyphs along the horn with a forefinger and inhaled sharply, reveling at the feel of his blood rushing through his veins—his kraken's blood prepared for a most glorious reaping.

And he would rule over all of them.

Chapter End Notes

Hey there, shippers! So, Sam has Jaqen/Pate's storyline now, which means that Jaqen won't be coming back in the series (I hope I'm wrong). And there's Nymeria walking out on Arya, too. Here's a chapter to brush away some of the pain. XD Yay, Hotpie-Arya reunion, and he told her she's pretty! XD
"Lives foredoomed will be placed on the altar

Solace will be on the parched, weary ones

The naiad of Rhoyne will carry the sun

And all will be hushed in Valyria…"

Songs of the Faceless, last leaf

The battles amongst fleets and cavalries were no less dramatic.

"Ram the sides!" Daario bellowed as their fore ship approached the enemy’s lead. "Maneuver, smash the galley then disengage!"

The galley's captain echoed the commands—directed the rowers to speed up, ordered the sails to be put down in order to exploit the wind's force. With full intensity, he drove the ship's front rostrum against the enemy's flank.

Foremasts and sails collapsed upon collision as the enemy ship was split into half, its aft hold surrendering to the strong tides. Those soldiers on deck were either swallowed by the sea or leaped onto it on their own accord. Screams were enmeshed with the uproarious waves below, as galleys collided against other galleys, as planks were dropped onto the decks of the enemy ships for the seizing. Soldiers from the Free Cities wasted no time crossing the corvuses and engaging the foes in combat of swords and spears and battle axes. Blood of slavers and thralls both bespattered the decks and within minutes, the waters of the Summer Sea had turned scarlet.

Severed heads and limbs, drowning men and drowned cadavers floated on the surface.
"Defend the planks! Don't let them use our own bridge against us!" Daario bellowed out orders in the midst of hammering his weapon. Three soldiers came in on all sides of him, swords prepared to deliver their fatal blows. The Stormcrow deflected the assault of two, then drew up his shield to block another one. Upon seeing a window, he wielded his blade horizontally, disemboweling two in a single strike. He quickly turned to his rear and thrust his blade onto the last one's throat. A few more blows and five...six men succumbed to their own ruin.

The Stormcrow assessed the situation in the waters. The Free Cities managed to seize a good number of ships from the Volantene Fleet, yet the hand-to-hand battle on the planks and decks was weakening their forces little by little. The soldiery of the Ghiscari empire that await them on the decks was conceived as early as in the days of the harpy—they are well-trained, well-disciplined, and well-equipped. The only thing urging the soldiers of the remaining Free Cities to fight is the want for a reckoning, a recompense for Valyria's brutality, the desire for this to end once and for all so that men could be allowed to live as men.

"For Tyrosh!" the Stormcrow exclaimed, and heard the ranks joining him in his every declaration. "For Braavos and Meereen!" With a quick hurl of his Dothraki arakh, he decapitated a burly Tolosi crossbowman targeting their soldiers from atop one of the masts. The arakh flew back to his hand, and he wasted no time climbing on the shrouds of thick ropes towards the very top of the mizzen mast in order to get a bird's view of the mayhem. A Volantene soldier grabbed him by the ankle and dragged him down. Enraged, he kicked the man and the spiked sole of his boots pierced the foe straight in the eye. He continued his ascent, stabbing guts, slashing throats on the way.

Finally, he reached the topmost part of the ship, wrestled against a slinger to gain control of the small deck that was at the mast's summit. He picked up a crossbow from the collection, loaded it and began releasing quarrels onto the captains and leads of the enemy soldiers. He quickly dodged a quarrel that flew to his direction, released his own towards the attacker. Daario then loaded a gigantic movable bow with seven to eight arrows, trained these towards the enemy forces crossing their planks and attempting to take over their ships. He pulled the string and loosed the arrows in rapid progression, hitting the targets at their dead centers.

"What the hell?!" he exclaimed, as he felt the whole galley being rocked violently by a massive, solid object dropped straight on its midmost deck. His gaze flew to the source of the disturbance.

From the west of the Summer Sea was the Ironborn Fleet approaching Valyria's shore.

Another shake made Daario curse a second time.

Euron Greyjoy was visible from where Daario was, and the Salt King was standing beside a huge artillery launched grappling hook, and though the Stormcrow could not be certain about it, he could swear that the kraken's only eye was trained on him. Euron mouthed out what seemed to be a series of commands. A giant iron claw attached to a metal shaft was nocked on the artillery, and the shaft was connected to the ship by a long iron chain.

In a flash, the iron claw was released, landing with a resounding thud on the deck of the galley where Daario was. The claw attached itself firmly on the galley's metal railings, serving as a grappling harpoon; and hundreds of Ironborns quickly boarded the iron chains that served as hanging bridge, then slid from the elevated part of their ship towards the other galley.

More harpaxes, more iron claws found their way from the krakens' ships to those of the Free Cities'.

A horrifying series of wailing was heard in Valyria's expanse, causing the men to cover their ears. With such sound was that of thunders and storms, and even though he had never laid eyes on that mythical relic, Daario knew the source of the call.
And there it stood on the Ironborn's lead ship being mightily blown by Euron's pale, blue lips—those treacherous lips tainted with Shade of the Evening from the warlocks of Qarth, granting him a certain form of invulnerability against the horn's brutal enchantment. The Stormcrow lifted his head up to survey the dragons, and true enough, two of them are already in erratic flight, attempting to throw off their dragonriders as they helplessly yielded to the horn's regency.

Daario immediately leaped from the mast's deck and slid down the sails to meet Euron in battle.

Valyria's northern gates were penetrated by the Free Cities' forces on land, and a quarter of its garrisoned walls near Mantarys had fallen through colossal boulders hurled by counterweight trebuchets, and flaming trunks of ash and pines. Ghiscari legions rushed to the inner gates to defend the last stronghold and thwart the Free Cities' full invasion. The enemy legions lined up in a solid throng, acting as human ramparts with their shields at the ready and archers on higher ground.

"Phalanx!" came Aegeus's command. They were on lower ground as he had assayed, counter-defense is a necessity. At his orders, the advancing foot soldiers quickly and efficiently placed their iron shields at the front and overhead, drew their longspear in between the gaps of those shield phalanxes. "Cavalries at the flanks!" Horsemen moved on both sides to support the advancing legion and chase scattered enemies away. "And move!"

They all forged ahead in painstaking slowness, keeping themselves within the formation, beneath and behind their shields. Flaming arrows and boulders rained from the man-made hills of Valyria towards the marchers but those weapons hit naught—the phalanx was a tight wall of shields, and there was utterly no room for those assailments to penetrate.

As Aegeus's forces drew nearer to the gates to commence attack, they advanced with increased aggression. Gaps were widened in order for quarrels to be launched, and the number of spears increased along the slits between the shields. They quickened their pace, until the regiments broke into a systematic run, and though the whole battalion was in fact made up of a force of the five thousand per phalanx, they moved onward like a single man—footfalls and breaths in perfect synchronism.

The combined weight of the entire legion commanded by Aegeus was too much for those Ghiscari to handle, and since no assail was able to go through the tight formation, the phalanxes were able to crack open the enemy lines guarding the last gate. Spears pierced through the exposed parts of those enemy soldiers, here and there arrows and quarrels were released, and throwing axes were hurled, and the attacks were so quick that the enemies' own assaults were not able to even infiltrate the Free Cities' defensive lines.

Those holding the gates were slaughtered, one regiment after another as the swordsmen began engaging them in direct combat.

"Blitz!" Aegeus finally said as they penetrated the Freehold fully. "Form a wedge, charge and take the center!" At this, the cavalry by the flanks advanced to the regiments in the middle of the terrain and delivered lightning-quick stabs through their spears, breaking the middle of the Ghiscari's loose formation. Their assaults were supported by swordsmen at the rear, countering the offenses of the enemies, finishing off the cavalries’ leftovers. Another battalion awaited them at the other side, and so the cavalries rapidly split into two groups and charged at the vulnerable sides of the enemies, with some carrying heavy assaults as they reached the foes' rear.
The formation was broken and the battle descended to rapid chaos as men fought against men in the blur.

Aegeus rode to the axis of war and performed his usual swordwork with blows and blitzkrieg of attacks and two cavalymen defending his flanks. He paused to assess the conditions—his soldiery was still engaged in heavy battle, but they now outnumbered the Ghiscari legions significantly. He looked up upon hearing the thundering screech of dragons from four directions, closing in on the center where three more firebeasts await. "Don't die, Jaqen," he muttered, then directed his attention towards the Free Cities' ships now being seized by the Ironborns that had just arrived.

It's not looking good.

From where he was standing, he saw the harpaxes anchored on the ships and the reavers sliding through the hanging bridge the foes have set up. The Ironborns' flails and halberds and heavy maces and war scythes clashed against the swords of the Free Cities' forces, and the latter seemed to have been overpowered.

_Daario._

He turned to the second commander. "When you all have finished clearing up the field, proceed straight to the shores. Those at the ships need reinforcements." He kicked the horse's girth and rode to the fray at the fleets.

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Jon exhaled heavily as Rhaegal sped up its flight from the east, advancing towards those dragonlords in a royal melee of fire and blood.

Jaqen's instructions were clear, and they had rehearsed the aerial tactics countless of times at the Wall before they flew to Valyria. Howbeit, now that he was seeing those imperial firebeasts in the flesh, his entire anatomy, his thinking capacities were paralyzed asudden as he questioned unceasingly the whyfor of the war.

He swallowed as Rhaegal gained momentum. _Forward velocity, then fly up. Assume wingman's role._ Jon ignored the beating of his heart that was then full of trepidation. _Jaqen will be there in the lead._

Jon held all steadfastly—his visions of the North, the Starks, the wildlings and his Val, his brother…

_Arya._

He shook his head—fear is a little death that kills the mind. Jon was frightened to death, yes, but the only time a man can be brave is when he is afraid.

Jon gripped his dragon's chains tightly and prepared for his ascent. "Don't fail me, Rhaegal," he whispered.

Until he heard the sound of a dreadful horn being blown at the far side of the shore.

Rhaegal's bronze eyes turned bloodshot red upon hearing the sound, then rushed at the center of the fray as if entranced by the ancient rune.
Jaqen held his breath as his three other dragonriders rushed to the heart of war.

"We'll dash past Aurion and you grab the Queller," he told Arya. "We've got a split second so make it count, Warrior Bride."

"Got it," Arya replied.

They were immediately met by dragonfire from those three imperial beasts as they reached the midmost. The plan is *not* to engage the warlords straightaway, and may this scheme work, may they survive this with their heads about their shoulders and their bodies unburnt.

Jaqen maneuvered his dragon upwards simultaneous with Jon, while Aegon and Daenerys flew downwards. It was a diversion tactic, the enemy dragons had to choose which targets to pursue and this will force them to break apart. As Jaqen was expecting however, Aurion saw through his plans and did not take the bait. The Valyrian warlords maintained their defensive positions—rear to rear to rear—and lured the four dragonriders to come to them instead through the Queller's rune.

"Damn it, he's good," Jaqen said. "No choice, sweetheart. We'll engage. Hold on tight."

"Jaqen, no!—"

Arya's words hung in the air as Jaqen plunged instantaneously in perfect sync with Jon's firebeast. Aegon and Daenerys got the signal and flew up. "*Drakarys!*" the command only came from Jaqen yet the four firebeasts disgorged a deluge of deadly heat simultaneously, and this attack was followed by one ring, one chain of flames after another in almost unfathomable progressions. *Anger the beasts*, Jaqen thought as he carried on with the assaults. *Poke the dragons in the eye and let them run after you.* Dragonfire burned partly the overwings of those imperial beasts, snaked through their tails and underbellies before dying out. Aurion's wrathful scream rang clearly in the expanse as he ordered his two other companions to proceed straight to aerial combat. Jaqen soared west with Jon at his rear and flank, while Aegon flew east with Daenerys.

"Everything fine, wingman?" Jaqen queried.

"How kind of you to ask!" Jon cried. "Those dragons breathe literal hell! And…something's wrong with Rhaegal!"

The dragon was criss-crossing flights, disobeying Jon's orders and heading straight to the Ironborn fleet where the source of horn's call was. Jaqen flew to his flank rear and attempted to defend Jon from behind.

"It's that Dragonbinder, Jon!" Jaqen exclaimed as soon as he realized the cause of disruption. "Strengthen your command of your own beast, don't let it surrender to the horn's call!"

"How in the hell do I do that?" Jon bellowed back, gasping and choking because of the sudden surge of air as Rhaegal took a quick descent. He felt his lungs bleed at the rush, felt mortality knocking at the doors of his frame.

"*Warg* into it!"

Aurion and Lathos pursued them both, ejecting massive and solid spheres of flame. The dragonlords took a low flight and carried on expelling fire to the ranks of soldiery on lower ground just for divertissement's damned sake, before soaring back up and carrying on with the chase. Daxen pursued the two others all the way to the Gulf of Grief.

Arya looked behind and saw the two other dragons gaining on them. "They're fast, Jaqen. We can't
Jaekn evaluated the situation at the back and true enough, the dragons were but a stone's throw from
them in distance. "You're right," then turned to Jon who was at the side. "We have to split up!"

"What?!" Jon exclaimed. "And tackle the beasts one-to-one?! My dragon has already gone defiant!"

"No, we need them to chase one of us!"

"What if they chose to chase me?!"

*Then, that would be perfect*, Jaekn thought. He chose carefully his words, instead. "Evade their
attacks as much as possible! Trust me on this!"

Heraxos sped upwards and Rhaegal dove in order to perform their defensive split. Aurion knew that
the tactic was well another bait—those two riders planned to bifurcate in flight in order to break the
enemy apart and weaken their defenses, so they may be able to perform an ambush at any angle.

As Jaekn had predicted, the dragonlords stayed on Jon's flight path and rushed behind him in a full-
speed chase. Of course, Aurion would choose to pursue who in his opinion was the weaker rider—
the one at the flanks, the wingman, the neophyte. That would give them one less dragon to finish off,
before they could proceed to butchering Jaekn's imperial.

Jon's dragon kept on flying unmethodically, resisting Jon's warging and slowly drawing to the path
of the Dragonbinder's call.

The two dragons dispelled flames from their fanged orifices, scalding Rhaegal's tail-tip. Jon
maneuvered the dragon quickly in order to avoid those attacks, flew in digressing paths left to right,
swerving in erratic yet systematic flight before doing a sharp dive.

The Lorathi smiled at the lad's skills—Jon is a natural.

The smile immediately waned as Ajax's flight thrice accelerated and blocked Rhaegal's path, forcing
it to pause and diverge. Ajax flew in one quick spiral and ruthlessly whipped Rhaegal's face with its
spiked tail as it dove, and it circled Jon's dragon, blasted it with flames and scourged it and clawed at
its scales.

"Aaah!" Jon screamed as Rhaegal's entirety shook because of those vicious attacks. The beast was
forcefully thrown aback, landing straight on and destroying one of the domes because of the sheer
strength of the impact, with its wings still afire. "Escape, Rhaegal!" The dragon plunged to the
waters of the Summer to rid itself of the flames, and emerged a few seconds later to resume vertical
flight. Jon proceeded straight to Valyria's nave, away from the horn's call.

Ajax and Urkon pursued Rhaegal with their usual velocity.

*Fly faster, dragon-wolf-bred*, Jaekn thought as he assessed possible points and bends for attack. He
pulled higher and felt Heraxos slowly resisting his own commands, and saw Jon attempting to force
an overshoot. "Drop-down, and we'll ambush them from behind," Jaekn told Arya. "I'll speed up a
little to keep up with Aurion. Can you warg into him?"

"I'll try," Arya replied. "We have to get to Jon, now! His dragon will kill him!"

They sped towards the triad of dragons and did a surprise attack from behind. Surge of flames came
out from Heraxos, slithered their way to the stratos before hitting the wingspan of the two other
dragons. The scale of Lathos's firebeast caught fire which caused it to digress and take the low path.
Jaqen was now chasing Aurion who was then still pursuing Jon. "Adere! Gaomagon bē, Heraxos!"
At Jaqen's orders, the dragon doubled up speed and rushed to Aurion's defenseless flank. With velocious force, Heraxos rammed Urkon to the side and forced it to break away from Jon's path. Heraxos buried its fangs onto Urkon's neck, the latter writhed violently and began disgorging flames, targeting the other dragon's exposed wing.

Urkon flew up, coiled its tail around Heraxos's neck.

The dragon screeched in pain as the tail tightened around its neck pulling it up with brutal force, the spikes digging into its scales. Heraxos thrashed against Urkon's hold, spewed fire on the enemy dragon in vain, as it could hardly open its mouth to deliver counterattacks. Already, arrows and quarrels coated with Death of Dragons found their way on both beasts, targeting their most vulnerable points.

Scales of both dragons bled as each carried on with the attacks.

Rhaegal was once more in a duel of fire against Ajax.

"A split-second Arya, now!" the Lorathi said as he directed the beast at hair's breadth away from Aurion.

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Something's very wrong.

Daenerys ran her hands through Drogon's scales and attempted to calm it. She sensed the force that was slowly cancelling the bond she carried with her dragon, and this must not happen, not while they're so close to death.

"Aegon, no!" she screamed as Viserion flew straight and attacked Drogon's side. The impact sent Drogon smashing against the stade of volcanic rocks. Its body bounced athrice and Daenerys was thrown to the ground.

She lifted herself, coughed out blood. Daenerys hatched the three, and in her deepest she knew that none of them would ever act defiantly against the riders with whom they are bonded.

She quickly surveyed the environs and saw the mayhem escalating—the ships...more than half of their fleet was already devastated.

Daario...she fought against the fear rising up to her chest. She ducked, then vaulted behind a collapsed pillar to evade being snatched by Daxen's firebeast. Overhead, she saw the other dragons in chaotic flights—each one turning against each other, deaf to their dragonriders' call.

She quickly ran and leaped on to Drogon's back, did her trappings once more. "Drogon, wake..." came Daenerys's plea. "I need you, blood of my blood." She pulled the dragonreins and the beast ascended once more, soared towards Viserion in irregular wingings. "Aegon!" she screamed. "To the ships! The Greyjoy bastard has your horn!"

Aegon struggled to keep control of his beast. "If I go there, I might lose Viserion for good!"

"Take that risk or we'll all lose these damned pets for good!" she spat back.

Without another word, Aegon rushed to the fleet and allowed Viserion to succumb to the horn's rune. There, he would try and burn the ship where the Crow's Eye is—a probable act of suicide.
"We're all on suicide's path anyway," Daenerys stilled herself as she maneuvered Drogon to face Varathis—the firebeast of one Valyrian warlord.

"Ran out of luck, you cunt?!" Daxen taunted her, then laughed with chilling hysteria. "Your dragons will be history—burned to cursed ashes just like your stallion-worshipping Dothraki husband!"

Daenerys gritted her teeth as she channeled her will, all that she is towards Drogon's consciousness. *Nothing can ever break a bond made through blood.* "Let's see whose version of history would prevail," she answered. "And know this—I'll burn you not just because you're a sickening slaver, but because I don't like your filthy mouth."

Night and chaos continued to explode around him as he blew the horn with all might.

He should be shrieking in utter pain right now, enslaved by the coruscating power of that binder. Sorcery should now be clawing its way into his flesh, should send jolts of agony within every fiber of him. Yet he felt naught but the warmth of the Dragonbinder's lips that kissed his own, enwrapping him in a false sense of regency. *Nothing personal, of course,* Euron thought as he observed how the dragons were one by one surrendering to the horn's summons. *It's all politics.*

He heard a bellow of fury to his left and felt himself being tackled onto the ground. He burst into mad fits of laughter.

"Fool!" Euron spat as a jab flew straight to his face. He retaliated by dealing the assaulter a hard blow on the jaw. "You think I can't see through your face, you half-witted merc?!" Euron's strong kick threw the sellsword some good fifteen paces away from him—his strength was that of two men.

Daario leaped to his feet and pulled out a lance stuck on the wooden mast. He threw it towards the Ironborn, then lunged for attacks in quick successions using his Myrish steel.

The Stormcrow's eyes widened as none of the attacks struck home. The damned bastard had one eye, yet that one eye of his seemed to be all-seeing, for him to anticipate assaults a good three seconds before these are actually carried out. He pulled six daggers from his hipbelt, hurled these towards Euron, but the latter fended these off, shifting his weight and dipping a shoulder or sliding away; and those daggers hit the Ironborns scattered all over Euron's rear.

Euron heaved his throwing axe towards Daario, the latter evaded it, but not without the blade of it slashing through his shoulder, incapacitating his left hand. The Stormcrow hissed at the pain that lanced down his arm—his fingers were now unmoving. His Myrish steel fell on the deck.

With his right, he unsheathed his Dothraki arakh. Daario directed the width of its blade to Euron. "You don't know what that binder is really for, do you?!" The Stormcrow raised his arakh to fend off Euron's blows. "You know nothing!"

Euron rammed Daario's with his steel in staggering attacks. The Stormcrow pushed his weapon away. They circled each other, catching their breaths as they cursed the other one.

"You wretched assassins have this strange assumption that every damned man cares about your quote-unquote *noble* intents," Euron said with a nasty grin. "Very well, I'll indulge you. I *do* know what that horn is for but sadly, I don't care. That fortress of yours up north will fall when it's time for it to fall!"

At the last word, Euron dealt the Stormcrow with a perpetual sequence of blows with his axe. Daario
couldn't penetrate. The attacks were too swift…and he might lose.

He tightened his grip of his arakh. The Ironborn managed to wound him severely on the side.

Euron ceased with his assails.

His eyes were trained on Daario's face and his mouth was with a beastly leer. Euron now had a dagger to his spine close to the nape. He chuckled, then pulled out the dagger buried in the flesh of his back as if it was nothing but a splinter of wood. He tilted his head to one side. "Someone out there wants to play," he said in a sing-song, turning towards the dagger's source.

Euron's jaw dropped upon seeing the thrower's face.

"Oh yes," Aegeus smirked, two longswords in hand. "It's not everyday that you get to have krakens for toys."

The Ironborn clenched his teeth in fury. "Why in the bloody hell are you still alive?"

Euron jerked his gaze up as the screech of Aegon the Sixth's dragon resounded. It flew low and began ejecting fire onto his fleet.

Aegeus nodded at Daario—tactics. Both of them ensphered Euron, weapons at the ready. "Assassins don't just die, Greyjoy."

Even with the warging, Arya knew that such a short time would not be sufficient for her to snatch the Queller away from the dragonlord. It would require more than just a split-second to distract Aurion's dragon and force it away from Heraxos. Jaqen's beast is already on the losing side…

Much to the Lorathi's surprise, Arya unfastened herself and leaped from the dragon's back towards Aurion's firebeast. She caught the dragon's elbow attached to the left wing, dangled a few seconds before crawling towards the spine. She unsheathed her dagger and thrust it against the dragon's scales, allowed the sharp blade to penetrate its flesh. She used the hilt as leverage, a handle for her to climb up. Her movements were lithe and well-calculated, it was as if she knew how fast the dragon will move at one second and whether it would take an ascent in another. She pulled her dagger out of its now bleeding scales, pierced it once more on a higher section and gripped the hilt tightly as she carried herself up towards Aurion's saddle.

"Arya! Leap off from that dragon now, damn it!" Jaqen bellowed in rage and utter worry, maneuvering his dragon on the low to catch her if she loses her footing. "Arya! This is not what we have talked about!"

Aurion's dragon sped away in erratic flight as it suddenly felt the pangs brought by the poisoned Valyrian dagger. It thrashed, flailed about violently, so Arya gripped the protruding blade of its spine in order to keep herself from falling. When she had regained her balance, she threw herself onto Aurion and attempted to snatch the Queller from his neck.

They wrestled against each other as the dragon continued its whorl of movements, competing against the strong gust of wind and the assails of its foe.

"You whore!" Aurion exclaimed, drawing his poleaxe and attempting to hack off Arya's neck. She dodged the attack and hurled her dagger towards the lord. Seeing that he had evaded it, she quickly drew Dark Sister and parried the assails he made using his weapon. Arya brought the blade across
her body, crouched, raised the sword over her head to catch the poleaxe's shaft. With one quick maneuver, she disarmed Aurion as the deflected weapon sped past her, bouncing off the beast's scales before falling to the Summer Sea.

Aurion roared his fury as he undid the fastenings securing him on the saddle. Arya's heart pounded like a thundering drum, and the sounds of Jaqen's orders for her to leap back to Heraxos clobbered her ears, making the heat and blood rush up to her head. The seven-foot dragonlord towered over Arya as he stood, two Valyrian broadswords in hand.

"I should have burned you in Rhoyne and fed your scorched bones and flesh to the hounds!" Aurion growled. "You will pay dearly for this—I will drink every drop of your filthy blood, carve out your heart, and offer it to the cursed god of Winter!"

"No," Arya said, trying to stand her ground. "Your blood will bathe Valyria and you will descend to hell's chasms. You will leave this slaver's empire in ruins as in ruins it must be."

"Not before I feed on your corpse, and the corpse of that damnable Valyrian traitor!"

At this, Aurion brought his two weapons into play, hammered his steel with inexorable strength against Arya's sword. There was nothing at the moment that Arya could do but to deftly disengage his attempted beats. They both slid off towards Urkon's wings as it took a quick descent, still in a duel against Heraxos. Arya leaped up and was quick to thwart a blow from Aurion, slowing his momentum and pushing him aback.

Arya attempted to lunge an attack and cursed as her forward motion brought her to the tip of Aurion's blade. The dragonlord had pushed the steel through her left shoulder before she could move to the side. Pain lanced like a million daggers up her arm. She swung her sword savagely at the man's torso, but he caught the blade with both tips of his Valyrian and sent Dark Sister flying from Arya's grasp. It landed far on Urkon's spine.

Arya collapsed upon Urkon's hard scales at the impact, and when she whirled to face Aurion, he had already slashed her leg and sent blood plenteous gushing from it.

She hissed in pain.

"Last chance, Rhoynish whore," Aurion said, extending his blade towards Arya's face. "Surrender yourself and die. If you do, I will spare the realms from dragonfire, especially the North which you call home. Carry on with this fight with me, and not only will I slaughter you and despoil your corpse with my Valyrian seed, I will make sure that none of those whom you hold dear will see the light of day."

"Damn you!" Arya replied as she struggled to get back up. "The dead thralls, those you have killed will have their reprisal. Your sickening cabal ends now, and I will not throw the lot of you back to West of Westeros, I will finish all of you right here and I will not stop until justice flows down like Rhoyne!"

She felt her body still throbbing even in the midst of her supposed numbness, as if her pores gasped for breath. She was slow to grasp that Aurion was walking towards her with both swords prepared to slaughter her to her last inch of flesh and drop of blood. All the din around her ceased, even the voices at the back of her tortured mind had fallen silent. She raised her bleary eyes around the expanse of Valyria and saw only the billows of fire and smoke, ships and structures and men ablaze in a hundred places on the Freehold's ravaged mien.

Her breath coming in desultory and fast, she summoned her ancient rune to once more flow within
her. She shaped it, drew it from the gods that were also Eddard's gods, and she surrounded herself with both order and chaos in the axis of her own enchantments.

She knew she had to be resilient; she had once penetrated the Stern-faced one's consciousness and the act almost killed her. *Open yourself to it,* Arya thought, as she felt her skin crawl and her eyes burn, tasted what might have been bitter sap right in her mouth. *When the body fails, the mind fails, and the threshold closes.*

*Don't let it close.*

The call of the Dragonbinder had ceased.

Arya allowed herself to unveil and bristle with power. She felt herself being absorbed by Aurion's dark self, a blackness closing around her. Within the dragonlord's set of memories and intellections were corpses planted on the ground, fire and blood, shrieking and howling and mouths that remained open even in death. A faint sound came to her ears, that of a million ululations of suffering souls, and those souls were clawing their way inside Arya's body as if gaining passage. The sound remained, drowning her screams.

Who was she?

Whenever she wargs into someone, she becomes anyone, anything in this world except for her own damned self. *Warging should never efface the self, it must allow the self to merge with the selves of others.* Yet, Arya knew that such is easier said than done.

There was Jaqen's voice calling her…the confusing whorl of dragonflight…the bellows of men dying beneath her…and Bran summoning her back from the veil.

Whatever interceded severed the connections she had with Aurion's heinous person, and she found herself usurping him finally, ridding his body of his soul, gaining dominion over him.

Finally, Emperor Aurion Archestrad was at the naked mercy of Arya of the Rhoyne's will.

As what had happened to Haresh Esdraelon a thousand years back, the slaver had become the slave.

*Fall with me…*Arya commanded him. *Enough…you belong in another realm. You should not have crossed the turfs to relive your days long dead.*

*You should not be chained forever to the circles of this world…*

*There is something beyond these realms you've transcended, and there you must go.*

Arya knew even when she had lost her sight of things that she was falling from the dragon's back, down…down to where the Summer Sea awaits, and that there was Aurion, falling with her.

Their bodies hit the sea's chilly surface, and both of their tired souls sought refuge from those fairings offered by it—stillness, healing, permanence. They were both pulled by the currents underneath into the depths that could either save or kill. The mighty waters were there and they were the vastness of space and immensity of time. Arya and Aurion should both shiver at the thought of annihilation, howbeit there was nothing in her but placidness, an acceptance.

*Perhaps,* Arya thought as she felt her life force waning, the brilliant scarlet of her Queller and that of Aurion's dissipating as they plunged deeper into the abyss, the waves lifting the Valyrian chain of rose gold and carrying both necklaces away. *Perhaps, death is not the end of life, just as horizons are not the end of the sea…*
"Valar Morghulis…"

She closed her eyes and waited for the sea to claim her.

Jaqen saw them falling off Urkon's back and being swallowed by the waters.

I'm coming Arya…

No second was wasted as he mapped out schemes for assault. He maneuvered his beast upwards, took a rapid descent, and rammed his dragon's belly against Urkon's back. Both dragons plummeted down the fighting stade that sang of firebeasts dancing, until Urkon's back collided with unthinkable impact against the stands with obsidian pillars of sharp peaks. The pointed pillars impaled the dragon, hitting straight its heart. It was as if a necrous force engulfed the whole stade as the arches and statues of travertine marble collapsed, followed by a caving in of velarium of pleistocene rocks, posts, and shields, all burying Aurion's dragon beneath the wreckage.

Heraxos lifted an intact, sharp obsidian from the rubble and flew up once more towards where Ajax and Rhaegal were having their duel of fire by the third of the Fourteen Flames. It circled the firmaments in a single flight and upon Jaqen's commands, lit the obsidian through its tempered dragonflame. "Take the low, Jon!" Jaqen ordered. Thereupon, Heraxos hurled the keen-edged obsidian through its mouth towards Ajax, and the lit igneous spun in space until it found its target's eye.

Jon followed up the attack by taking a swift ascent and plunging towards Ajax. Rhaegal let out a burst of flame, burning Lathos Hadervaren into cinders.

Both dragon and rider fell onto the mouth of the third volcano, melting the scales and the fragments left to them.

The Fourteen Flames continued shaking in wrath, and so Rhaegal and Heraxos flew towards Valyria's nave far from those open mountains.

"Damn good, Jon!" Jaqen exclaimed, then exhaled in relief as he saw Aegon flying towards them from the Gulf of Grief. Daenerys trailed behind him, with Drogon disgorging flames on the last of Volantis and Qarth's fleet and the marchers of New Ghis, as she was intent on exacting retribution for Meereen that was now in ruins, though retribution would do none to bring the city back from soot.

Both of them were a reflection of their firebeasts—bloodied, almost shattered to the point of permanent brokenness. Yet, there was the faint hint of triumph etched across their faces.

"You tackled the hatcher?" Jon asked Aegon.

"Beginner's luck, brother," Aegon replied weakly.

Daenerys joined them mid-air. "That cursed woman has such a foul mouth. She has managed to injure both of our dragons severely. We could have died if not for Aegon's drives." She smiled. "Your hardwork paid off, Esdraelon."

"It's Jaqen H'ghar, and it hasn't paid off yet," the Lorathi replied. "Gather all of our remaining forces, command them to dig our shiploads of obsidian, then leave this place in haste—the Flames are about to erupt. I have to get Arya."
Jon and Aegon were thunderstruck. "Where is she?!" Jon asked.

"Summer Sea."

"Damn it, Jaqen, I'll go with you!" the Prince demanded, but the Lorathi had already flown away. Jaqen scoured the expanse of the Summer Sea in search of Arya. "Jurnegon syt zirūla, ŋuha raqiros," he told the dragon as he flew low and looked for any signs of his beloved. *Find her, my good friend.*

You are half water, jorrāelagon, Jaqen allowed the winds to carry his message to the sea's abysms, for he knew that no matter where Arya was, she would still be able to hear him. It's not a solid wall, it flows, and it can bend to your will.

There was nothing but a measureless feature, its illusion of serene cruelty haunting him and intensifying the wortiment of his heart, consuming the shreds of hope he still possessed. He listened closely to any echo that may be present in the substance of each drop, the smell of her in the briny air, a trace of her face…

None.

Jaqen leaped from his dragon's back and took a dive into the depths of the sea.

The sea engulfed him, drowning him in all its cold monstrosity. Yet there was something rich and strange to it—an unfathomable power that was both glorious and affrighting—much like the rune Arya had always embodied, that part of her that captivated him. Being underneath the waves is like communing with all things and with the old gods that have created those things.

Despite the weakness threatening to squander away what was left of him, he willed his entirety to go against the waves. Salt burned his eyes yet he kept them open as he searched for her obsessively, allowing his body to flee from the sun-speckled surface. *Arya!* Yes, he might have screamed her name repeatedly though he verily knew how futile the act was. *Arya!*

He sank deeper and felt colossal waves lashing out at him, filling his nostrils and lungs. Jaqen moved his legs to inhale from the surface and save his perishing form, yet the water was weighing him down. The cold of winter rushed in, piercing his every pore and demanding that he succumbs to the strength of the sea. Deep dread enveloped him asudden, a split-second of hopelessness—what if their bodies were meant to decay under the currents?

He forged ahead, using all of his strength as he paddled on and threshed beneath. Still, the water that had once seduced and consumed him froze his flesh and bones, willing him to listen in his near-death to the songs of sirens and the screams of shipwrecked men, burying him within a realm of infinity.

*Arya…I will find you…*

*Find…*

Jaqen felt himself disintegrating, his consciousness ebbing away…and the last thing, the very last thing he saw before conceding to the chasms was the vague silhouette of his Rhoynish water wolf.

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The lips against his were warm, thawing his wintering mind and body. The breath coursing through him was that of life, and he felt himself being awakened and clinging on to that soul which was the
source of his newfound strength.

Tender love, softness, warmth sang in his blood as it flowed once more in his then dead veins.

He gasped, spat out water that had earlier filled his lungs. In his bleary sight he saw her, the loveliness and kindheartedness he could never exist without; and she was crying and murmuring his name and it broke his heart to witness her this way for in each tear he was persuaded that he had given her only pain.

"Arya…" he whispered weakly.

"Oh, Jaqen!" she exclaimed, then buried her face in his chest. "Why did you jump off to the sea, you fool?! I thought I'd lost you!"

"I…I had to find you. You fell with Aurion, my love."

She pummeled her fist on his chest as she sobbed. "I wasn't lost! You think yourself better in everything, is that it?! You assume that I always need you to save m—"

Jaqen pulled her on top of him and ravished her lips with sweet abandon. The man in him just could not keep himself on the leash anymore; not to mention, he has less than a thin thread of patience for a loquacious wife.

He heard her whimper against his mouth, felt her gasping for air yet he cared not as he forced her to taste the coolness of his tongue and feel the sensation of his teeth scraping roughly her lower lip. They were both so very wet from the fall, and that stirred his manly passions in ceaseless levels, and he was oh, so lost in her, and he loved every second of being adrift in the midst of all that she is. Arya's body…dear gods, it was as soft as silk but her heart was as sharp as sparks and he knew that anytime they would both explode like nebulous, blue stars.

And their bodies danced too, yet the dance was not of the courts—there were no ballets and waltzes as Jaqen grasped the cheeks of Arya's behind and forced her to move north to south on top of him. He adjusted so that his hardened member could deliciously stroke the slit of her sex, despite the raiments separating them from each other.

It was a deadly dance of war, his body against her body, yet their movements were perfectly in sync with the imagined sounds of warhorns and bone drums, with the grunts and battlecries and raising of weapons and the brutality that was about to come.

It was plain and simple, hot love that he felt for her at that moment.

And he was nothing then but a testosterone-laden specimen.

"J-Jaqen…" Arya moaned.

"Damn it," he cursed, and marveled at how the littlest sonance of pleasure from her lips could have such a profound effect on him. He growled as wildfire blazed through him and pooled at his core, and he allowed it to burn holes within him so she can heal them and fill them. Jaqen pulled Arya's wet hair and deepened the kiss, devouring her lips, as if she was one phantom that could vanish at the first turn of the hourglass. He shifted and pinned her on the ground and carried on kissing the hell out of her, and allowed his hands to roam across her hips, the curves of her breasts, all the while caressing her sex using his, against the very soused fabric of their breeches.

And he kissed her all over—a kiss for each burn, each wound, each pain. A kiss for this day and for all other days.
His wild, intensely masculine breathing was the most audible in a sea of din.

"Want to fuck you here, hard…" he murmured as he tasted the skin of her neck. His mouth moved towards the exposed part of her left breast, and he sucked the skin of it till his teeth had marked it scarlet. "I want you so much, Arya Stark…" He bit her nipple against the fabric, and suckled it like one seafarer who has been athirst for moons.

The sound of a man clearing his throat made him pause with his vagaries.

He slowly looked up and saw them all—Jon and Aegon, Aegeus, Daenerys, Daario.

Aegeus spoke. "Must we let you finish, or…"

Jaqen cursed under his breath as he felt blood rushing to his face. The girl's taunting laughter did nothing to assuage him from embarrassment. He lifted himself from the ground and pulled up Arya, shushing her the entire while. "F-forgive me," he stammered. "I was merely…carried away."

"We're sure you were," Aegeus teased. "We do understand."

Jaqen surveyed what remained of Valyria, the very dominion he was supposed to inherit from the blood of dragon-archons a thousand years past—burnt fleets, collapsed structures, a saga-scared mien, a whole empire once and forevermore in majestic ruins.

Those who have survived were now being tended to, while the others wasted no second proceeding to the lair of volcanoes where the dragonglass reserves are located.

He smiled, contentment carved along the lines of his face.

Daario confirmed the aftermath of what he was seeing. "We won, Jaqen. We lost a good number of men but we won—call it a good day. A decapitated Euron was most helpful in persuading the remaining Ironborns to defect to Victarion." He threw a sack carrying Euron's head on the dirt. "Does he actually think that he can win against two assassins?"

"They would all defect to Theon Greyjoy—rightful heir to the salt throne. Should he wish, Victarion could challenge the laws of heirship through another kingsmoot, but I doubt if they would have time for that, what with this harrowing loss. Digging is on its way," Jon said. "Obsidian is plentiful in the mouths of the Flames, Aegon wasn't lying."

"How much could we carry?" Jaqen asked.

"Three to four shiploads," Aegon answered. "Those are all our time and resources would allow, and we cannot risk losing these men to the Flames. We need them all."

"We're looking at Valyria to Pentos, then to White Harbor in around a fortnight or less," Aegeus said.

"Good, but we need them sooner," Arya remarked. "You saw what happened at the Wall before we left for Valyria. We have not re-garrisoned five of the nineteen castles."

"Dragons," Daenerys offered. "You take Rhaegal and Esdraelon's firebeast up north—Jaqen's firebeast, I mean—have them fly some obsidian straight to the Wall. Dragons could carry eight tons of load."

"Eight and a quarter," Jaqen corrected her. "You'll come with us, Aegeus." He turned to Aegon. "What about you?"
Aegon exhaled, weighing his options asudden. "No other choice—Connington and Ser Barristan have gathered the forces to sail for Blackwater. We have to dismantle that damned throne and take the steel. The brother here demands it." He motioned to Jon and grinned.

"You owe me," Jon replied in a half-jape. His expression turned severe as he placed a hand on Aegon's shoulder. "Be careful, brother. You don't know what the Queen has in store for the likes of us. She has nothing to lose now, so she'll bet against all odds."

"Let me deal with that Queen," Daenerys said. "And with that accursed brother of his."

"Yes," Aegon turned to her, his expression severe. "The last of the Lannisters, and that Clegane who murdered my family."

Jaqen concluded the gathering. "Take the throne, Targaryens. We'll meet you at the Wall. As for you, dragon-wolf-bred," he turned to Jon and gave him a doting pat on the back. "You'll lead us there."

"Very well," Jon nodded his assent and started walking away. "But first, let me get one thing from the Ironborn Fleet. Might be useful for what awaits us at the Wall."

"Which thing?"

Jon paused and looked back. "The Dragonbinder—Joramun's."

Nothing burns like the cold, and despite having been branded a child of the North since his birth, Bran Stark hated the Winter that was to come—hated it more than falling helplessly from the broken tower and getting himself crippled, hated it more than the assassins under his bed, or the wars that killed three of the Starks, or the fact that the pendulum and the cycles chose two of his most beloved to fulfill a prophecy that would only demand from them a surrender of the most brutal kind. It is during winter that childhood ends, Old Nan used to tell him, and Bran understood how very real each word was, and he could feel nothing but deep regret that he had chosen to listen to bloodcurling stories of giant spiders and ghouls over the ones that spoke of Night and the Hero.

What is coming is an immortal loom that's about to transform the realms into an endless deathbed.

Yet, many things await beneath the snow. The carpet of white, the naked trees and dead feeling, these do not quite tell the full story yet.

Spring is under all these, Bran thought. It's up to us to thaw this Winter.

He had requested Ser Jorah to bring him to the Weirwood cave inside the haunted forest. "Leave Castle Black to Tyrion Lannister, Ser," Bran had told him as he watched Meera Reed pack their rucksack for the journey. "This battle is more than ensuring that the fortresses are well-garrisoned for the Night. Have you seen the Wall yet from the other side? It's not going to hold up our defenses much longer. Whilst Jon and our forces fight here, we must fight there with them."

"I would be honored to do you service, Lord Bran, but I am not familiar with the forest's layout," Jorah voiced out his concern. "I have never been north of Winterfell, much less beyond the Wall. Speak where and I will bring you there, but the lord would have to lead me."

"We have been there, Bran and I," Meera informed him. "The ride would be a harsh one, and the haunted forest is riddled with illusions and creatures of the night. I am not giving you unnecessary
fright, Ser Jorah, but these are what you can expect in this brief jaunt of ours; but we have friends along the way, and more to where we are going."

They took their exit through the castle's tunnels leading to the iron gates. "Can't let you all out without the Lord Commander's approval," the guard had told them. "We just had the first wave three, four days ago, we cannot afford to send rangers to rescue the lot of you should you find the other side too much to handle."

"This is the Lord Bran, boy," Ser Jorah spat. "Better let us out or the Lord Jon Stark will hear about this."

"I'm not taking orders from you, exile," the guard retorted. "You weren't here when those wights attacked, you have far from an inkling as to what's outside these gates!"

Ser Jorah tightened his grip of the Longclaw, willed himself to practice due forbearance. He patted instead his horse's girth to quiet its brays.

"Don't do it, Bran," Meera warned him as she sensed the boy's restiveness. They are bound by time, but they must not resort to half-thought acts. "You don't know who this man is, you have no idea about his life's timeline, who and what connects with it."

"We would all have died had it not been for what I did with Hodor," Bran answered. "As it is, all our timelines are messed up. A second of usurpation would not do much to set a whole other chronology branching out from this man."

"You will ruin him!"

"Then, he has to be resilient enough or else he would lose it like Hodor," Bran said as his eyes turned white, as he invaded the man's consciousness.

Seconds later, they were out of the Wall.

"What was that?" Jorah asked the two of them. "A mere snap and the guard lost all senses and allowed us through the gates?"

"You know it from your old tales in Bear Island, Ser Jorah," Bran said. "Your ancestors did it through bears and we do it through direwolves."

He nodded his understanding, though he was still stunned at what had just transpired.

They all rode close to the Nightfort.

"Bran!" Meera called out to him. Her eyes were on the Wall, as she ran her gloved hand along the large craters that were the aftermath of that great battle. "This is one serious damage."

Ser Jorah led his mount to where Meera was standing to let Bran have a look. True enough, that part of the Wall opposite the tower had been rammed so forcefully that a colossal fraction of it had already collapsed, causing the once flat and stable ice fortress to curve inward.

The Wall is thinning.

"Do you see that?" Ser Jorah whispered.

The once exiled lord had seen dragons being birthed from the pyre, had witnessed a hatcher stepping into the flames and surviving with naught but a few burns, had fought against imperial firebeasts and
had almost died, yet none had prepared him for what he was seeing. It took the man everything he had in order not to collapse from his steed and beg the pyramids of Meereen to hide him beneath their dregs.

It was a mere outline, but even with nothing in the Night but their torches to illuminate what lies within the fortress, they saw it in all clarity.

The creature lay suspended, motionless within the Wall, its body that was that of a behemothic serpent's was possibly carved out of translucent quartz. Its expansive wings were of solid ice, its spines and spiked tails were as immaculate as white onyx. The mouth was open thus revealing four fangs ten times larger than the ivory tusks of Ghiscari war elephants; and it may be that it had suffered much before it was buried beneath the ice that it was not able to do naught but screech and vow for a reckoning.

And its eyes were the most dreadful. The irises of dark silver were mere narrow slits, yet they were sparkling and alive…and moving here and there as if scouring the environs…

Meera Reed screamed in utter horror as the ice dragon settled its eyes upon her face.

"Shush, shush," Ser Jorah dismounted and lifted the girl that had collapsed on both knees. "Dear gods…” he muttered, his eyes still on that riveting yet petrifying sight.

"It's awake," Bran said calmly. "It's about to get out."

"We need the khaleesi here at the soonest, and the rest of her other dragonriders," Jorah said, then choked as he heard the fright in his voice. "This….surely fire can melt this creature, yes?"

"Fire and blood," Bran replied, resorting to a staring game with the beast. "A sword forged in fire and blood; and…a magical poison—Death of Dragons." He shook his head, remorse and grief overwhelming him asudden. "I should not have buried it…should have finished it right from the start."

Meera exhaled, spoke in weakened voice. "But…you said it had to be buried…or else the Wall would not have been built."

"Yes, this creature is what has been making the Wall stand for eight thousand years," Bran replied, then buried his face in his palms. "And its millennia of sleep only made it stronger, more insurmountable now…"

"Then, we must hurry," Ser Jorah said, mounting his steed in haste. "I do not understand a thing about this but…I urge you to do what you have to do, Lord Bran."

And so off they rode the fastest they could past the Whitetree onto the deserted vastness, with the harsh winds licking their faces like rough curtains of transparent, featureless lace. Before reaching the niche of ironwood and oak, the three of them traversed the naked path where nothing grows, their eyes wary of wights and walkers.

"Faster, faster!" Meera commanded her steed as she caught sight of figures with faint blue glow and silken movements as quick as lightning. "Bran, there are Others on both sides, hiding behind the trees and they're pursuing us!"

"Move!" Ser Jorah kicked the horse's girth, whipped it with its own reins. "Fly if you must!"

Bran turned to Meera. "You have the obsidian daggers with you?"
"Yes, but they're not going to be enough to keep those Others from attacking us!"

"Just hold on to those weapons!" Bran replied, then shut his eyes. When he opened them, his irises were once more gone, only the sclera was visible. He summoned them from the woods—direwolves, heralded them to take their places on either side and act as ramparts till they all reach the cave beneath the Weirwood.

Thereupon, a chorus of howling was heard, shaking a little the full moon that had revealed its imperfect mien. Around twenty direwolves emerged from the thick weald of leafless sentinels, converged at the center and dashed with them towards the Haunted Forest.

Icy spikes found their way from the woodlands to Bran. One direwolf was quick to shield him from the attack, as it leaped and took the blow. Six spikes pierced its body, transforming it into a figure of solid ice; and when it collapsed to the ground it shattered into fragments like fragile crystal.

They kept on moving, navigated their way across that tenebrous woodland, past the living trunks and the shrieks of fiends that echoed in the night, past the tangles of roots and thorns and limbs that grasp. The tall trees seemed like monsters behind the shadows, yet beyond the illusion that the mind conjures, all of them knew that the real monsters were the ones chasing them, concealing themselves beneath a hood of darkness and malevolence.

One of the Others glissaded towards them, bursting forth like hazy smoke from its eon-long sleep, ice sword at the ready. Before the sword's tip could reach Ser Jorah's cheek tainted with demon mask, three direwolves flung themselves onto the creature, tackling it to the ground. The horses sped away, yet Bran knew despite not having seen what became of the three wolves that an Other's rune was sufficient to obliterate anything that challenged it.

Two more White Walkers appeared from the boreals and pursued them on both sides. They were floating on space as if space aided them, and they were as quick as their mounts if not quicker, and their angry hisses were like those of cracking ice, the words mocking and hostile. Their eyes were dead but they still stared, and they fleeted and breezed through the air with horrendous grace, and the evergreens froze and died as they passed.

"Duck, Bran!" Meera screamed, then hurled a dagger towards one of the Others on Bran's side. The obsidian landed straight on the Other's chest, shattering its entirety. The other one lunged to attack Ser Jorah, but the man was quick to raise Longclaw to his chest and fend off its assails. It therefore suffered the fate of the first, and the Others' bodies that were fragmentized kissed their skin and chilled them to the core.

"There it is!" Bran exclaimed. "The cave!"

At those words, ice javelins came from all corners.

Bran had but a speck of a second to think.

He shut his eyes and sought to do it—he had never done it before yet Bloodraven had told him it was possible. Beings and objects are marionettes, time is the string, the greenseer is the master puppeteer. You can control the way they move, the purpose, the intensity, the pace…it all depends on the string.

Let the currents be calm currents, Bran whispered.

At this, those ice javelins remained suspended in the air. They did not cease moving, for Bran saw how their shafts rotated in space, albeit in thorough slowness. He roamed his eyes and beheld the
surroundings and saw that everything had slowed—the snowfall, the howling of the direwolves, the last gallop of their horses, even the cold vapor that is coming out of his mouth.

It was time dilation which he did.

Bran stretched time, expanded it; and the dimension where time moves broadened with it, causing time itself to slow to a standstill—an almost standstill.

And he was outside of time, he realized; for when he lifted his hand and moved his fingers, they moved at the usual pace.

However, the dilation was slowly waning…

Another split-second to act.

Bran warged into those remaining direwolves, and willed them to move according to his commands. All of a sudden, everything began moving in their normal momentums. Those direwolves leaped to catch the javelins, shielding Bran and the others. "To the cave!" Bran bellowed. "Quick!"

Ser Jorah wasted no time hoisting Bran to his shoulders and rushing to the murky cavern. They all slid down the cleft that served as threshold and shut the wooden door as the distant howls of dying wolves reverberated within the walls where no sun or starlight could reach.

"The protective rune of this place will not last long," said a tiny voice. "Unless the greenseer allows the Weirwood to take him."

The voice belonged to Leaf, a child of the forest.

"You…" Bran stuttered. "You never died."

"The oak is the acorn and the acorn is the oak, Bran the Builder."

Bran surveyed the cave where he had spent his years in hiding. It was of black soil and white wood, cramped and with branching tunnels full of roots of heart trees. Stalactites and stalagmites glowed even in the absence of light from any source, and all over were bones of birds and beasts, children of the forest and giants. Down the black abyss where a swift river runs is the throne of Weirwood where the last greenseer must sit.

Tears streamed down his face and only Ned Stark’s words calmed him I'm scared, the boy in him thought. But I know…only when I'm scared can I be brave.

He gazed at Ser Jorah who was then still shaken by the recent encounter with the White Walkers, then to Meera who only nodded at him.

Finally, he decided.

"Please…let me be part of the Weirwood."

Twice, the great Stannis Baratheon had attempted to penetrate the walls of the capital, challenge its defenses.

Twice, the great Stannis Baratheon had failed.
"They will never get past our forces stationed at the Iron and River Gates, the commander of the City Watch assured me on that," Littlefinger told the queen. "We have corpse soldiers waiting for them in all intermediate directions and corners."

"Any word from the Ironborns?" Cersei asked.

Baelish cleared his throat, feigning uncertainty. He might err with his conjectures, he might irritate the queen, and spur her notorious wrath. Every second counts, he thought. Lies first. Then move like lightning in the night. "I'm sure the ships are on their way from Valyria, your grace. The waters have begun freezing and they have to sail across floes now. It would take them time, you see."

Of course, Littlefinger knew everything. Varys had sent him a missive—the Valyrians have been subdued. The Ironborns hence, would never sail back to King's Landing.

Time to turn tides, time to change sides.

The response was met by the queen with vague silence, her eyes fixed on the crowd of raging smallfolks marching from the Cobbler's Square and the Street of Steel towards the Guildhall where the city's alchemists reside. In usual days, Cersei was blind to the bronze-skinned ones tortured by the sweltering heat of the sun, the skin and the bones, the starving mouths inside and outside the shanties standing by the city's walls. In usual days, she would choose to ignore the dirty and unsightly and focus her eyes instead on Rhaeny's Hill with its lavish villas, pay the stench of piss and dung no mind. Hunger had become the language of those common ones since the War of the Five Kings, that the Faith and the salvation of the soul had become so inconsequential to the dire point that they have claimed to accept the gods only if they would appear in the form of stale bread and cold soup.

"They plan to take the Guildhall," Littlefinger voiced out his observations. "I've warned you about this. They know that our pots of wildfire are there. You have to give them credit—seems like starving them did nothing to drain them of their wits."

"I'll burn them first," Cersei whispered. "These no-good, foul-smelling trash."

The smallfolks were the least of her concerns, however; for outside the gates of the capital where the Unsullied and Dothraki led by Ser Barristan Selmy and Jon Connington. They have sent one concise message: Spare the capital. The queen had laughed hysterically at the missive and thought the commanders too astute. Why, of course they knew that one wrong move on their part and King's Landing along with every stinking part of it would be blown up to kingdom come.

Should she decide, Cersei can lay waste on her own city.

She might spare only the Red Keep for the throne is there. Even in the midst of soot and ruin, she must sit on the throne till the end for she is queen.

They cannot prevail over me, Cersei thought as she tightened her grip around the stone railings of the cloister. I can be destroyed, but not defeated.

"My queen!" the commander of the City Watch came rushing to where they were. "Heed…they have pillaged the shops along the Street of Steel, they're marching towards the Guildhall with weapons. More of them are coming in from the Muddy Way, we should recall some of the forces stationed at the gates to thwart this—"

"Where's Robert Strong?"

The commander blinked at the queen's calm. "River Gate, my queen."
"Qyburn?"

"No one has seen him since the previous night."

Cersei's jaw hardened with rage at having been abandoned by her most trusted in the council, yet what escaped from her lips instead was a throaty, delirious laughter.

The commander backed a couple of steps away, seemingly agog at the queen's curious disposition.

Littlefinger smirked and shook his head softly.

"Well then, give the signal to the alchemists," she ordered with astounding imperturbation. "They know what to do."

The commander did as he was told.

Pervasive dread clung to the air, accentuated by the distant shouts from from all spaces of the squares. The smallfolks were but a stone's throw away from the Guildhall, and winter's breath did nothing to sap out their strength. Too much was owed, too much must be settled. The entire capital was cloaked with a myriad of cries and mad shrieks. Some goldcloaks rushed to the angry throng in an attempt to contain the situation, lined up in ranks two deep, but the mob found weaknesses in that bristling line. The soldiers were stripped naked, gutted and beheaded by the mad crowd, with some smearing themselves with the blood of those slain, and some others taking their cloaks and shields and swords as they carried on with their demented procession.

The commonfolks tossed dead bodies aside with contempt, roaring, beckoning. The crowd stepped on the bodies of those goldcloaks and allowed large flies to feast on their flayed flesh and headless corpses.

Finally, the mob reached Guildhall.

"Seize the pots!" one of the elders bellowed. "Careful with the lit torches! We'll carry every last one of those urns and take the red keep!"

Most of the men rushed inside, past the gallery of iron torches towards the stone cells beneath the hall. Mad shouts erupted from those that awaited them outside as another crowd from the Muddy Way and the Fishmonger's Square all converged at the center of the capital.

The elder who led the men towards the hall paused at having realized that the entire place did not have a single alchemist within it.

"Must we proceed to the cells beneath?" A burly lad asked him.

"No…no…" the elder one replied, sensing, inhaling, taking a gut-feel of everything. "No one's here…" he concluded. "Nothing's here but wildfire they're about to set loose! Out! OUT!"

Before any cry of trepidation could abscond from the mouth of anyone, a massive explosion of bright green swallowed the stone cells and crawled towards the gallery. The flames billowed outwards, escaping through the gigantic holes and cracks caused by the sudden blast.

A great gush of flame rose, engulfing the throng that had gathered around the Guildhall. Rags of fire changed from bright green to red to black, setting a vast chain reaction, licking and consuming anything and anyone that were in its path. A series of explosions spouted upwards, reaching to as far as the already burnt Sept and the brothels along the Street of Sisters. Molten debris landed on the pits and cobbled walks, reducing these to acid and burnt sediments.
Cersei witnessed everything from the red keep, and she shuddered with rapture upon seeing the capital's dregs being devoured raw by wildfire. The blinding flash continued like sheets of lightning, with smoke-rings rising up in the air, writhing and twisting, changing shape and hue at each turn of the second.

"Cersei," a voice behind her called.

It was Jaime.

"Shush…shush…" she lifted her forefinger against her lips. "The flames…the flames are so pretty…I want to watch them for a while…"

She did not anymore notice Littlefinger leaving her alone with the kingslayer, did not notice herself chanting and humming. "If you're going to set them afire, then go all the way and try…or don't even start, nay, don't even ask me why…"

"Enough, Cersei," Jaime said, his speech slurring, his senses being overwhelmed by blasts and fire, of screams and death all over.

She paused with her murmurations, turned to Jaime and gave him the courtly smile she dons when receiving nobles in the throne room—a smile devoid of shame and remorse, devoid of the want for any form of reparation. "Or what Jaime, pray tell? Enough…or you'll kill me?"

He looked utterly distraught, lost except for that one purpose. He was on the verge of withdrawal, but there was a single thing that's holding him by the tips of his fingers as he dangled in that crag of hopelessness. To suffer, he thought. To suffer so in the end I may persuade my dead self that I have paid my due.

Jaime approached her, staggered as he took the steps. He pointed one forefinger at her, laughed cheerlessly. "You…you are one twisted cunt. Nay…" he collapsed on his knees, struggled to get back up. He spat with disdain, allowed his lips to form one crooked, one embittered grin before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Twisted cunt of all cunts—worse than…worse than Robert's whores and Tyrion's whores and father's whores combined. Worse than the whores of all men and all gods…" his eyes were bloodshot, fuming. He gave her one nasty leer. "Kill you…kill…"

It was too much to take in. His years as one warmonger had taken toll, and there was the cruelty of fathers and sisters and kings and queens to endure. His bleary eyes saw the explosion's aftermath. Hell, he was convinced. Tattered flags, corpses, embers and grime. And demon's cry, a day of blood, a thousand daggers to the dark…

And an accursed feat to reminisce for all cruel days.

"Fuck you," was Cersei's reply. "You'll be more worthless than nothing if I die. I created you, Jaime; I shaped you. You've said it—you feel whole only when I fuck you, you find purpose only in fucking me, you live only so you and I can fuck. Apart from me," she shook her head in feigned empathy. "You possess no sense of self."

Something inside Jaime, something he had concealed for far too long snapped and raged within him, coiled around his heart like poisoned serpent. There were prisons mayhaps for demons, and those prisons were within his dark heart. The latch clicked open, and on went those fiends, their shapeless forms spreading in the deepest cracks of his parched person, consuming him till none of his truths were left.
And he found himself lunging onto Cersei, his fingers wrapping around her white neck.

Jaime heard nothing but the beating of his own heart, the persistent hisses of the Mad King's voice whose face is that of Cersei's. *Burn...burn...burn...* the voice said. His fingers tightened around her neck, acting as judge and jury and executioner, and she was nothing to him then...nothing but blood and bones, meat inside a whole spread of skin.

*Winter come.*

*Shatter the day...rime all those that have breath...*

They have both collapsed on the tiled floor. He straddled her, his fingers curling more around her neck—pressing, closing. He heard the choking sound narrowly escaping from her, saw her pink tongue peeking out her mouth. Small, ragged gasps...silent screams...vague implorations...useless.

*All useless.*

Jaime tilted his head in fascination as he saw Cersei's eyes bulging out, and the flawless skin of her face turning purple. She writhed and clawed, kicked her way out of his unrelenting grasp in vain. She heaved an utterly horrific groan, akin to a thousand lamentations of burnt men, women, and children, as she tried to spit on his face. "Shush...shush..." Jaime whispered. He settled his forehead on top of hers, stared at her then glittering, misty eyes and saw the red crawl like vines on the white sclera of these.

*Duty, family, duty, family...*

There was another man laughing inside him because he doesn't laugh like that and he couldn't laugh, not while his beloved Cersei is dying in his own hands but oh dear gods, she does look laughable and he hasn't seen her like this and so he laughed and laughed and he wished to never stop laughing. "Ho!" came forth from his mouth. "Hoooo! Heeee!

It was gratification unlike any other.

And Jaime had realized...her face is loveliest at the point of near-death. Her irises of emerald shone twice as bright, her lips from red had donned the color of lavender petals, and her mouth was slack, welcoming, and so Jaime lowered his face to kiss her on the lips, his fingers still tight around her neck. "You're a ghost..." he whispered against her lips. "A beautiful ghost..."

She moved with a sudden lurch, then stopped moving...ceased breathing...her frozen eyes fixed on Jaime's only.

Cersei was there, and then gone.

And Jaime saw only sylvan scenes and bleeding nymphs, and beneath the illusion—a half-man holding a crossbow, shooting Tywin Lannister straight in the chest.

"Tyrion..." Jaime lifted himself up, walked falteringly towards the cloister's edge. "Tyrion..."

He lifted his bleary eyes to the sky and thereupon saw two beasts...and the beasts can spew fire and they have wings...and they looked like Lannister lions...and mayhaps like them, he too, can fly.

And he sent that Stark boy falling down Winterfell's broken tower...and he never died. So maybe, Bran Stark had wings that spread open only when he's an inch from the hard ground.

*Men can fly after all.*
Jaime climbed up the cloister's wooden railing, threw himself over it.

*Lion's wings...*

*Fly me to Tyrion.*

Littlefinger was at the far end of the cloister, saw Jaime strangle the life out of Cersei and leap off the balustrade to his own demise. He saw everything behind one of the marbled pillars, yet there was no dark surprise to the witnessing. He knew what was to happen, when, how.

*They never learn.*

He traversed the cloister's path that leads to the throne room at the keep's first level. The sacking of the city had commenced. Already, he could hear the sound of Unsullied steel connecting with the swords of the City Watch, the atavistic battlecry of Dothraki horselords, the cries of dragons.

To his ears, the sonances played like string orchestra, the guttural screams—those of an archaic mummer's play. And his feet moved, so did his hands as he walked, and the movements were in perfect sync, in rhythm with the dreadful classicism of the carnage outside.

Kings and queens think they rule, but they too are pawns though they would never admit to such a fact. They think themselves wise in all things, they would like to believe that they are the ones behind the ropes, that they are the movers and players and victors of all cyvasse games and those games of extrapolation in war in front of their fancy maps and wooden markers.

In truth, they are nothing but slaves of history. They're as expendable as those folks in places like Flea Bottom, where every meal is considered a last.

It wasn't difficult—persuading Cersei to set the Guildhall ablaze. Qyburn was against it, so he was naturally dispatched. Littlefinger's whisperers have informed him of a looming rebellion planned in the shanties and the plot to burn the red keep through wildfire, so the Guildhall was emptied save for a few urns of the green substance and was blown up only when a large part of the mad throng had already gathered close to the center. *For some to live, some must die.* The uprising of those common folks would just complicate every other thing—it had to be nipped in the bud.

Things were far more complicated for Jaime. His night goblet had to be spoiled with heart's bane in order to intensify his recollections, unlock his frustrations and fears in the midst of dreamless slumbers. He was never the same after his encounter with the one named Stoneheart, whom Littlefinger assumed was a mere spectre in the kingslayer's surreal imaginings; yet this, he used to his advantage. It did not take long for the kingslayer to succumb to derangement. Why would he not, now? His father was slain by his own brother. All his children have died. The sister he used to fuck is no better than the scab-king.

Yes. All these, without Littlefinger actually soiling his hands.

*Let the Targaryens do the rest.*

He reached the throne room and set his eyes upon that seat of jagged and twisted steel. There it is—the active witness to every sickening ingenuity and every traitorous move done for purposes branded noble by the corrupted ones; there's the culprit, the prize.

He climbed up to the steps of cold, hard steel, running his fingers along the spikes of it.
When he reached the topmost, he sat—purposefully feeling the back of it that was fanged with steel, and he reveled in its assymetric monstrosity, the chronicles that shaped it and those which it had created itself, the thousand blades that symbolized total surrender.

Petyr Baelish just sat there, until the last sounds of battle dissipated in his ears.

When the calm took over the chaos, he descended, and upon reaching the bottom of the throne's steps, he knelt on the ground facing the throne room's double threshold.

A few seconds later, it burst open and there it revealed Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of his Name, carrying what could only be the helm of his mother's raper and his sister's murderer—that of Robert Strong who is also Gregor Clegane. On his left hipbelt was Jon Connington's bloodied sword.

Behind him was Daenerys Targaryen, queen of Meereen, Ser Barristan, and a good number of Unsullied and mercenaries from the Golden Company.

*All kings must be butchers or meat,* he thought. *And here comes the greatest butcher of them all.*

Littlefinger lowered his head till it almost touched the tiled floor. When he looked up, his cunning eyes were on Aegon the Sixth whose expression betrayed nothing. "Your grace," he began. "My warm compliments on your victory. The Lannisters are dead," he smirked. "And yes, you are most welcome. My fealty is to the Targaryens and to them only, as was the case prior and following the Usurper's Rebellion."

"Rise," Aegon commanded him with narrowed eyes. He strode closer to the man. "Speak of who you are."

He rose. "Petyr Baelish, named Lord of Harrenhal and Lord Paramount of the Vale and the Riverlands; former master-of-coin and member of King Robert's small council."

"A Usurper's adviser?" Daenerys said, hostility pouring out of every word. "Give us one reason to not drag you out of this hall and burn you to the last shred."

*Time to turn tides, time to change sides.*

He took out a scrolled missive from his breastpocket, handed it for the Targaryens to see. Aegon the Sixth snatched it and quickly perused through the contents.

"The message came from Varys, one of your most trusted. It came with the Pentoshi magister's seal," he informed them. "For years we have laid out everything for this purpose—to once more seat a Targaryen on the Iron Throne for the good of the realms."

Aegon's jaw hardened as he read the last lines of Varys's letter. He folded it with calm, then with an ambiguous countenance, raked Littlefinger with a hard stare from crown to sole. "Well played, Lord Baelish. I'm surprised you remained alive in the midst of all your plotting."

He chuckled, hid the shivers evoked curiously by the lad's mere stare. "Even cats have nine lives, your grace; and they're just cats." He held out his arms. "Welcome home Aegon the Sixth Targaryen, King of the Andals, the Rhoynar, and the First Men, Lord of the Seven Kingdoms, and Protector of the Realm." He gestured exaggeratedly to the seat of twisted steel. "Your throne awaits."

Aegon was not amused. He merely stood, unsmiling at the center of the throne room.

"How can you be of use to us, do tell?" the king asked. "You still have not convinced me to allow you to breathe your next."
"Straightaway, I will tell you this," Petyr replied. "Keep me alive, and I will bring the entire Vale and Riverlands to the North to stand at your side and fight those creatures beyond the Wall. Your dragons have been weakened by the war you have waged against Valyria, they might be weakened by another besieging. The Valemen and Riverlanders are proud, you see. They would not easily bow down to someone that is not of their own. Let them rally behind Jon Stark, king in the north—remind them of their fealty to Catelyn and her son who was once king, and they would saddle up faster than you can fly up there."

Aegon merely fixed his eyes on Littlefinger's face, as if weighing the soundness of his propositions.

"Men!" the Targaryen king finally said. "Haul the seat outside. It needs to be torn down."

"What?!" Baelish exclaimed, for the first time losing his delicatessse. "Why the...break the throne apart? I mean...your grace, you must think this through! Such an act will dishonor your ancestors, the blood of dragons that ruled atop this very seat! You cannot just break the Iron Throne apart into damned pieces!"

"Well, it's not your throne," the lad-king smirked. "It's mine, and I'll do whatever the hell I want to do with it." He turned to Laswell Peake. "Accompany this man with half a thousand of yours and ride to the Riverlands. Keep him under your straight eye, I want to make sure that he's telling the truth only about Varys. Ravens will be sent to the Lords Declarant and Ser Brynden to announce your arrival. Ser Barristan, make sure that all the survivors from the wildfire explosion are tended to, fed, and resettled. Duckfield, forage the entire capital for any more Lannister loyalists. Carry on with the slaughter of those armed, unless they surrender without conditions."

Without another word, Aegon the Sixth took an exeunt and summoned his dragons for the dismantling, Daenerys beside him, leaving the throne room in sudden chaos.

"He told us about it, Arya. But you know Bran, he can never be persuaded against something he had set his mind on doing," Sansa recounted in a manner composed; even as she wanted to weep and drag Arya and Rickon to gods-know-where—any sanctuary if even there is such a thing at this time, so they could remain unharmed. "He left in the middle of the night with Ser Jorah and Meera Reed, went to the other side through Castle Black's iron gates. I couldn't...couldn't stop him, forgive me..."

"Hush, Sansa, no one could have," Arya replied, then reached for her sister's hand, squeezed it reassuringly. He turned to Jon. "Is it possible for us to deploy a small retinue to ride for the Haunted Forest? I'll go with them, we need to persuade Bran to return; he's endangering his life."

"I will send for a retinue but you need not go, Arya. I need you here," Jon replied, gazing at each face, each person. "All of you."

"No one has to go."

They all shifted their attention towards Rickon.

"He told me everything, before he left, after I woke up from my attack," the boy continued. "He can't come back here, doesn't wish to. He said he has to...honor the duty left to him by Bloodraven, whoever that is. He mentioned something about a cave beneath the heart trees, and there are children in there—children that see beyond, and that he has to finish it all from the beginning or else we would all die." The boy's jaw hardened, as his eyes brimmed with tears. "Bran told me to not run
after him, that the Weirwood owns him now."

"He's going to look through the realms," Arya deduced. "Eight thousand years back, relearn how the Battle for the Dawn was won the first time? He's being ridiculous!" Anger swept over her and more than this, the utter horror of losing all the Starks again just when their ancestral home was recently rebuilt, their family, forgathered. No…this is not fair. Why was it that woe had always clung to them, and still does; why is it that wars and deaths and overcoming these must constantly encumber their shoulders, as if they have not had their beyond-a-fair share of these yet?

Why must we fight all men's wars for them?

"There's nothing else to do but fight," Jon murmured dejectedly, as if sensing Arya's contemplations. "If Bran wishes to take part in this in his own way—and his ways have worked far better than ours—then we put our faith in him, entrust him to the gods of the Weirwood."

"Yes," Rickon replied, keeping a straight face and failing to. "And after that, we must hope that all these end well."

"How can you just say that?!" Arya shrieked in pure rage. "How can you just act as if Bran doesn't matter?! You want this whole family ripped apart once more, is that it?!"

"Arya!" Sansa stood, slamming her hands on the table. "How can you just accuse us of that?! We all have toiled in order to bring this family back together—we have mourned, suffered as much as you did! Bran knows this, yet he chose to leave, anyway! Perhaps, he does have a plan; perhaps, he doesn't. Whatever the case is, you have no right to put all the blame on us, as if we have done nothing for this family!"

"Don't fight," Rickon begged with an unsteady voice, tears now streaming freely down his cheeks. "Please, don't fight over Bran. Father and mother and Robb wouldn't be pleased at all with your fighting…"

Arya had not heard the last of Rickon's words for she had already stormed out of the room.

It had been two days since Bran was last seen at Castle Black, and the guards that held the gate could not recall a thing about anyone going beyond the ice fortress.

Arya sat on the topmost of the Lance—an abandoned tower, slim and crumbling, and the tallest in Castle Black. She was whetting Needle but her eyes were on Dark Sister where a trace of Aurion's blood still glistened, feeling numbness consuming her pore by pore. It was mere yawning chasm, a hollowness that she felt as she recalled how hard she toiled so the foes could meet her wrath, so the Starks could gain back the lives and years stolen from them.

Were they all truly destined to be apart?

"Does Jaqen know?" a soft voice behind her asked.

Arya turned, and there she saw Jon, his vague eyes settled upon her face, before moving down to her belly. She sighed then returned to her honing.

"No, and I don't have any intentions of telling him about this yet," she replied. "If he learns about our child, he would waste no second locking me inside steel-barred chambers. I could have better use for my damned self, thank you very much. We still have a brother beyond the Wall." A few seconds of quietude passed between them before she queried him. "Who told you?"

"Val," Jon answered. "She has her ways of knowing things. I would have missed it since I am not
too keen, but true enough, you've...grown."

Arya didn't answer.

Jon crossed the distance between them and sat beside her. Gently, he brushed Arya's hairlocks that were then covering her face, trapped these inside her ear.

She flinched when Jon kissed her cheek.

"You can't come with us to battle, Arya," he said quietly. "Bran isn't here and his choice has driven me so mad. Yes, I know I've said that I need you, and I do. Just...I can't fight if I know you're there beside me, placing yourself in peril. I...I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happens to you, gods..." he ran his fingers across her hair. "I would die. And Sansa...Rickon...I don't want them there."

"Jon," Arya whispered back, setting her temple against his chin. "You do know that you can't tell me what I need to do, yes? The same way that you cannot talk Sansa and Rickon out of this."

"I don't own you, I know that. Jaqen doesn't own you—no one does," Jon replied. "But I can beg...I can ask you to assuage the grief I feel right now, this grief, this...this wretchedness of not having you. I can beg so you would think against taking up your sword with the rest of us. Remain safe because Arya, I don't want you snatched out of my grasp—our grasp a second time."

She sighed. "I can't have you fighting without me; and I want a better realm for my child, Jon."

"I could give your child that, I can give all of the Starks that—a better realm. you don't have to be there."

"Oh, Jon. I have to. This battle goes beyond those Undead for me—I have to win this thousand-year old war for Jaqen, for what is ours. I cannot not take part and in the end despair over losing them both." Arya shook her head, then stared directly at Jon's eyes where there was nothing but immeasurable emptiness, a depthless space of uncertainty. She cupped his cheeks with both hands "Jaqen is my life, he's the blood of my blood, he's my chosen universe amongst infinite others. I can't say anything more than this, I don't know how much of these you'll understand—"

"I love you, Arya."

She smiled softly. Arya lifted her face and placed a light kiss on Jon's temple.

*To want, to need, to love someone for all he's worth.*

The thought of losing them all to death, just as she had lost Jaqen during the days of Valyria and Rhoyne collapsed upon her. She had wrapped her identity around the Lorathi and the Starks, and all other people that had ever loved her, and so now she realizes the impossibility of reassessing the world and her place in it apart from all of them.

"I know, Jon. And I love you too."

Jaqen was groaning in the midst of slumber and those anguished sounds were caused by the unbearable throe of dreaming about Arya.

Those thousand blades of the Iron Throne were stabbing her all over, but those swords possessed not
a mind of their own and were acting only upon the silent orders of a direwolf with a coat of snow; and Jaqen knew as he beheld the mystical transformation the creature was assuming, that the direwolf is a dragon and the dragon is a warg. But wargs cannot control steel. Swords are inanimate, the Lorathi thought as he acted as one witness to his own dream. The direwolf could speak, and the words were to Nissa Nissa: ‘Bare your breast; bring me light.’

That dream brought him to the empire he was supposed to rule.

It is said that when Valyria dies, dragons perish with it and yet are reborn. The priestess of Jogos Nhai saw it true when she beheld the Nissa's face for the first time—she was a mere child then, with her shades that were white and silver, and her spirit that was in every way untameable. This is why, the Moonsinger had mayhaps thought before her death, she can make dragons and dragonlords bend to her will, unhinge them, subject them to her power.

And Jaqen saw her—she had crossed the realms of both the dead and the living and the illusions that lie at the edges of these, had met her Warrior of Light in different forms every thousandth year, and in her every emergence, she grows wiser, more virtuous, more unconquerable.

But there is the fate, and the fate is one that would require her to lay down her life.

It's not that the Nissa exists only for this purpose. It's merely that she chose such sacrifice as a determiner, an impetus to her own existence; for what is the value of a meaningless life and a life lived only for oneself?

The Fourteen Flames continued bubbling in wroth. Beneath the hellish chasms are the dead lords and their dragons, never to rise again. A second Doom—this is Valyria's inescapable destiny.

She has defeated Valyria—the gateway to hell, the empire of flames desiring to rule above all others.

But there was Winter left to vanquish.

Slowly, he drifted from that vision and found himself in the City of Night where monsters and demons and all forms of eldritch creatures and the things of the mad gods dwell. Behind the curtain of light was the Heart of Darkness—a spouse to the Heart of Winter; but in that nefarious abyss, there was naught but open shackles and chains of rune that lay uselessly on the dirt.

Souls kept on howling, and from their mouths was chant of dreadful worship:

_Chained and conquered was this god;_

_but take caution for the red wanderer of death will be summoned._

_Chained was this fallen god, and so the chain was destroyed_

_And what bound him was shattered, and in his coming is the sundering of the realms…_

Chapter End Notes

Hey there, guys! A chapter for all of you, uh...what do you think? A few more chapters before closing. Thanks a lot for staying with this fic. Really, really appreciate it. ;D

For those of you who have watched Episode 4, wasn't Arya so awesome with her
swordwork?! 

Brienne: (amazed) Who taught you how to do that? 
Arya: (gazes down sadly, smiles) No One <3 (a.ka. my man, Jaqen whom I left because he tried to have me killed, but dang I wish he was here with me right now, less of a jerk, but still here.)

XD
It has been a fortnight since the war against Valyria.

The Lorathi wordlessly observed them all in a sea of white, as they heeded orders and prepared the arms they would take in the castles along the Wall that were still un-garrisoned. Slung about their shoulders were giant bows and arrows with obsidian heads made from Valyrian dragonglass, daggers, spears, and other weapons; and on their hipbelts were scabbards containing castle-forged swords, for the thousand Valyrian steel swords from the capital had not arrived yet. Waiting might prove to be utterly useless now, though a silver lining of hope was there still. Through ravens they have learned of the fate of the Crownlands' heart—that the mad queen had allowed it to be swallowed by wildfire starting from Guildhall of the Alchemists at the center. It is but unknown if the Targaryens have survived the almost unfathomable explosion, and it was even rumored that none of the forces on both sides, not even dragons, were able to escape from that green hell.

An even worse humor is that of the Lannister queen transfiguring herself into a fiery demon in the midst of those flames, with barbed tails that coiled and snapped like sharp whips, dark horns thrusting from her head, and wings that spanned the red keep from end to end. The men have laughed about it over their last tankards of mead the previous night—humor, though forced, had become a necessity these days past or they would all go more mad than mad, what with the Night slowly crawling to its own horrendous summit.

Of course, the men knew the truth. Even with ten thousand barrels of wildfire, no real hell could ever be created south of the Wall—the Faith of the Seven is naught but farcicality riddled with theological nonsense. Even Valyria's string of volcanoes would pale in comparison with the netherworld that is beyond the ice fortress. The boastful claim amongst the men the previous night...
was this—if you haven't seen the cold gods, then you haven't seen death.

And if you haven't seen death, you haven't lived.

*Hell is empty*, Jaqen thought as he beheld the staunch faces of those men, chilling, harsh winds lashing out on their faces. He recalled the horror of what awaits them beyond the Wall. *All the demons are here in the North.*

Around forty brothers and fifty more from the lords' armies have fled south. There would be none to behead deserters and escaped cravens since the capital has fallen and so did the rule. There was also absolutely no time to run after those who have abandoned their sworn duties—*let the boys leave and let them piss their pants while they're at it*, the lords have said, *and let the men stay here where the true war is.*

Other men were dying by the hundreds because of unrelenting cold that cripples the bones, especially those mercenaries whose lives were spent foremost at the south.

One by one, those stationed at the stretch of castles left for their posts. Plans have changed.

The Wall whose rune had defended the realms for eight thousand years will not anymore act as those realms' last rampart. Every last man would stand and defend the Wall instead. Bran Stark had made it clear, there is within it, a stone beast that must be conquered in a realm existing and parallel to the one they are all in; for if it was not defeated, then it would remain part of the fortress—a looming catastrophe and an existing threat, and the war against the cold ones will never, *ever* end.

If on the other hand, the Wall does fall, then they must all face Winter's beast and try their very damned best not to die.

To defeat the enemy, one must face the enemy; not hide from it from behind the strongholds, not conceal it. Those centuries of camouflaging one ice dragon within the Wall's very quintessence, those centuries of pretending it never existed apart from what were spoken about in the lores of the elder ones, well, those centuries are over.

Jaqen saw Arya giving each of the spearwives their own obsidian implements, charging Val with the rest of the other weapons. "We'll have our swords once Aegon returns from the south," Arya had told the wildling princess. "Keep with you your spears in a while, and make sure they have obsidian heads on both ends. The poles must be strong but lightweight enough for throwing. We would use the ones with ashwood shafts."

"Arya," Jaqen called her, then tugged gently at her arm. "Can I speak with you for a second?"

She looked at Jaqen's hand that was wrapped around her arm rather possessively, smiled. "Can it wait?"

The Lorathi turned to Val, and with a meaningful gaze pleaded for a moment alone with his woman. The spearwife got the hint. "It seems like it *cannot* wait, Arya," and her smile was with a hint of tease. "You know where to find me." She sauntered off, ten to fifteen spears in tow and four other wildlings with her.

He led her towards the Silent Tower at Castle Black's far end.

Jaqen needed Arya—needed her like a husband would need a wife in seconds when love is most evasive and loss appears in the most tangible of forms, needed her like a child would need a mother during his innocent hours, like a believer would need a god in times when he could not tell heaven and hell apart. Yes, the need is gorging his heart in incessant levels that he would find himself
breathless and dying in the midst of each night, whispering her name over and over as if he had lost her already.

The tower's interior was dark, yet their wanting eyes could trace each other's silhouettes from the torchlights inside Shieldhall, casting soft beams on them both. Jaqen lifted Arya so she could sit on the old table of sentinel, then pulled a chair close to her and settled on it, wrapping his arms around Arya's waist and resting his head in between her bosoms.

*Why is it, the Lorathi thought,* that *everything seems darker when the light goes out, than when it had not shone in the first place?*

*Would I hurt this much had I not pursued Arya, or decided to meet her again?*

"How do you want me, Jaqen?" Arya whispered her query with a silken voice, tempting, frolicking with sensitive, amorous turfs. Her fingers brushed through the Lorathi's hair, then traced infinity patterns along the skin of his nape. "You're in between my legs. Does a man want his girl to unlace her breeches so he can lick her?"

Jaqen lifted his face from her chest and chuckled softly. "You're flirting at a time like this?"

"We flirt with death every second," Arya replied, her thumb now caressing his lower lip. "Why the hell could we not flirt with each other before we die?"

The Lorathi's jaw hardened. "No one will die, Arya. Especially, not you."

She laughed. "If you say so." She kissed his temple, his lips. "Are you not going to take me tonight, Jaqen?"

"Arya," the Lorathi's tone was admonishing. "I came in here to talk."

"About how much you want to be inside your lovely girl right now?"

He chuckled again, then pulled her down so she could straddle on his lap. "No."

"I did realize," Arya whispered on, her lips gently caressing Jaqen's. "We have not tried it with my little arse."

"Shush," the Lorathi said, then kissed her deeply, as if wanting to own even just a speck of her soul so he could carry on being dauntless for her sake, so he could drown the pain threatening to consume him whole. "I love you, Arya..." he whispered.

"Talk to me, Jaqen."

He gently broke away but kept on planting light kisses at the side of her mouth. "I know I can never persuade to back away from this and ride instead to Winterfell where you could be safe—"

"You're right."

"A man is not finished, lovely girl," he smiled, then bit her chin. "But he can ask from you a small favor, can he not? Be very mindful. I need not remind you what an outpour of chaos the next battle is going to be, and I want you to not trust anyone—not Aegon, or Jon, or...me."

Arya stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean."
She scoffed, shook her head with incredulity. "No one will take out a sword and thrust it into my bare breast, Jaqen. People are a lot superstitious when the Moon is full. I heard one of the spearwives naming tonight the Night of the Shattered Moon. You worry too much."

"The wolf goddess of winter dies her seasonal death on a blanket of white, yes, I've heard the Frostfang-dwellers speaking of it, too," Jaqen said. "Most people allowed their disbelief about the Long Night and the gods to overpower their belief about all other things, and so far, it had not done them any good—it only led them to inaction. Men tend to fall for anything when they do not believe in at least something, Arya."

"Yes, like Haresh Esdraelon dismissing the Elder Mage's ruse on the Warrior of Light?" Arya teased. "Well, if you would recall, you were crown-to-sole madder about me than I was about you, and that remains true up to this day, Lorathi. But worry not," she kissed his nose. "I promise to practice care, but I would never turn my back on this battle."

"I understand," Jaqen murmured, and the edges of his voice were with unbearable agony. Yet, he kept his tone light for this was all he could do to not encumber her any longer. "Some wolves are not meant to be caged. Their fur is just too argent, their howls...too wild. Naughty feet—you just cannot tell them to sit and stay."

Arya giggled. "Wolves are not dogs, Jaqen."

Jaqen grinned. "I know, my sweet pup."

She threw her head back and laughed more loudly, and her teeth and eyes were glistening with genuine mirth.

Jaqen just smiled and gazed at her, locked her face away in his most profound memories lest they dissipate as the hours pass and leave him with nothing but his own aching self, and he relished her sounds of blithe, the feel of her skin against his skin, her body pressed against his own, this precise blink of eternity which they both shared. He lived with her in that mere iota of infinite time, holding her more closely and kissing her cheek and pretending even for a mere while that they were just two people in love and nothing else, caught in a moment suspended.

Dear gods, Arya Stark, the Lorathi exhaled. Why do I love you this damned much?

It's not fair...

And when the laughter had died down, she kissed him again and spoke with their lips still touching. "One long night may cloak the realms, the stars may hide and the sun may wane, frozen waters may thaw and dragons may drown, but I will always be yours."

The Lorathi smiled.

"The oceans may claim the terrains," he murmured. "Blight may swallow whatever grows, the gods may vanish and all men may die, but we will always be each other's."

They stayed in the murky Silent Tower for the gods know how long, wrapped in each other's embrace and warmth.

Now, coldness had truly gathered—such that the only sound was naught more but that of Winter's tongue, and the only things that the sight can catch were the very faint outline of shadows.
Ice crawled in the waters of the Gorge in the west and the Shivering Sea in the east, and the darkness had once more caused the Rhoyne of Essos to dwindle then disappear, its silver waters now frozen as far south as Selhoru, and perchance the Crab King and the Old Man of the River had been transfigured to solid ice beneath the river as well.

Those who used to claim that they loved the silent hours of the night would swallow back their own folly.

Thick snow fell from the heavens and blanketed the terrains of what was left of the Free Cities. Southwards, the wroth of the string of volcanoes in Valyria had calmed because of the outpouring of ice flakes, filling the mouth and the raging liquid of fire, until it churned no more. It was another Doom, yet this time the Doom was neither from the seven hells nor from the mouth of R'hllor—the volcanoes' vomit will not anymore rise as it was vanquished by Winter's breath. From burn to chill, Valyria was reduced to ruins beneath the ice, its sussurating currents gone, its wrecked stones that had once soaked up sorcery like blood were frozen by the cold.

Far East, the once slavers' empire of New Ghis, Astapor, and Yunkai had begun tearing down their structures and monuments of Old Harpy for they now saw the symbol as nothing more than a plague, and they cursed it just as they cursed those dragons, but beneath the hard façades of the defeated masters was inexplicable horror at the Winter they were witnessing.

Why the fear? But of course, it never snows in the Slaver's Bay.

Further east is Asshai-by-the-Shadow, sprawling leagues across the Shadowlands. Its waters that usually glistened black at noonday and glimmered green at night had suddenly turned silver; curious—the now argent color of the waters should at least provide the city some form of luminescence, yet Dark Asshai had succumbed to its darkest that very night.

Only a million ululations signaled the malevolence that was about to emerge from Stygai.

_The realms will be called down...things will be born, will die._

_The realms will be sundered by the god's fists,_

_For the god's fists that were once chained_

_Are fists that are now free._

Furthest east at the Empire of Yi Ti, the current god-emperor to a thousand princes had his eyes directed towards the Five Forts, that fortress which had stood and defended them from demons of the night for thousands of years. Within the walls of his city of Yin that had seen more glorious days, he held the scrolls on the Bloodstone Emperor, whose rule spawned the first night of all nights. _And he vowed to return_, the scrolls have said, and those scrolls the emperor held with trembling hands, _after fourscore centuries—when the night of the shattered moon falls upon the realms, when the star bleeds once more._

All these, while an army of the dead regathers in the very Heart of Winter.

Snow continued to descend like ghosts of fallen leaves across the lands south of the Neck. The days that were blithesome and golden and crisp had indeed faded—not a thing grew in the fertile terrains of the Reach, much less in the fancy hothouses of the capital. As is the case in the North, the Night never goes away now, but this Night carried no sequin-like stars against its large blanket of darkness. The wind was bitter and vile, too harsh with its icy particles, whipping and howling like one rough ode to death.
"How many more swords?" was Aegon's question to Tobho Mott. The Qohorik smith was summoned to the red keep's armory to straighten out the steel taken straight from the king's throne, and reforge these through dragonfire. "We need the swords to hold an edge, ripples on the fuller, larger crossguards for more balanced wielding."

"These are more than a thousand, your grace," the Qohorik replied. "Throw in my apprentices and those five more surviving weaponsmiths and you'd still be looking at ten to fifteen days—"

"We don't have that much time," Daenerys cut in. "As it is, we are already delayed and we cannot emphasize how very desperate the situation in the North is."

Aegon was pensive, his eyes fixated on those swords that were still twisted and deformed. His mind was all over—the armies of the houses they had managed to rally on their side were no doubt past the Neck now. They have to move faster. "Spell-forged, aren't they?" he asked, thumb on his lower lip as he pondered. "Do tell, my friend, if we throw in a thousand men with you—one for each sword, how long would it take us to fix all of these?"

Tobho Mott chuckled nervously. "You've said it, your grace. Valyrian steel is spell-forged. The magic involved in making it from naught and reforging it from a parent source was lost many centuries ago. Mere soldiers, no matter how gifted they are in battle, cannot just do this thing."

"You cannot presume to teach them? You have your scrolls, your integrants and implements. We have dragonfire."

"Your grace," the smith replied, his face a reflection of ambiguous pleading. "We Qohorik…well, we keep the secrets of forging Valyrian steel within the circle. Bad for business, you see, if we let everyone in on the techniques then we might as well retire from the craft altogether."

"Makes sense," Aegon the Sixth nodded. "Makes sense. However, do you think the business would still matter if the Dead came marching south and feeding on living bodies and corpses alike? The great war has come upon us, good friend; more than anything else, it should be necessity that must compel us."

"Why…of course," Tobho Mott exhaled in resignation. "If your grace could have his thousand men gathered in one of the large halls here in the keep, I think they could all be taught how to forge their own weapons."

"Yes," Daenerys said. "If the men must fight, then they must indeed start by shaping their swords. How many days are we looking at?"

"About two to three," Tobho Mott answered.

Aegon the Sixth smiled, patted him on the back. "Most excellent. And I have someone who could help you with the task."

"Who, your grace?"

The king merely followed Arya Stark's instructions. There's this knight in the hill close to High Heart, she had told him before they all parted ways. Summon him and his comrades. Be careful, they are loyal to no banner.

Locating them was an easy task for Laswell Peake, persuading them to ride for King's Landing was the hard part.

If not for the priest, Aegon thought.
A lad of blue eyes and thick, black hair entered the smithy, and with him were the members of the brotherhood.

"Gendry?" Tobho Mott stood, his mouth agape.

"Indeed, it is I," Gendry smiled, then roamed his gaze around the smithy. "Full house, lord smith. Seems like you need some hands."

"He sure does," Thoros of Myr emerged into view. "And I might have some fire tricks that could hasten up the work."

Bran?

It was Meera calling to him softly.

Bran...

Be resilient enough to deal with the rune.

Countless days have passed. He was still tightly gripping the roots of the Weirwood, seeking and begging for passage so he may cross the realms and return to that time referenced by the lores of the Long Night. He could sense nothing but the thick, rich, and twisted veins of the large roots running downwards from the cave ceilings to the deep earth.

I was a ghoul in the face of the coming night, Bran spoke to the old gods that reside in the heart tree. I must walk along the old paths—such is my journey. I must run leagues across centuries.

Let me in...

Let me in...

Let me in.

Bran felt winter's night blossoming around them, penetrating the cave with coruscating power, flinging Meera and Ser Jorah from the center of towards the hard walls of dirt. "Lord Bran!" Jorah exclaimed, scrambling to his feet and throwing himself into the translucent sphere of rune that had suddenly formed around the boy. He couldn't go through, even as he unsheathed his Valyrian and attempted in all futility to wreck it with his hammering.

"Leave him!" Meera said. "He has to go!"

"Go where?!" Ser Jorah probed.

"Eight thousand years back."

Bran felt sorcery clawing into his flesh, the icy cold around his bones, sending jolts upon jolts of agony up his limbs and through his marrows. His mouth fell open to release his sounds of anguish, but none came out—as if the movement of the waves of his screams were suspended in time with him. His silent scream rose higher as that unthinkable torment reached his brain, discoloring his entire world with blood and darkness and a haze of souls and faces. It was one horrendous assault, with sorcery invading every fragment of his being.

Let me in...
And the thick roots of the Weirwood slithered across his body, coiling around his neck and arms and legs, breaking through even the smallest pores of his skin, penetrating the depths of his flesh and the bones and marrows underneath it. A tangle of thinner roots slowly split his skull open and settled there, allowing his reminiscences, his eruditions to be amassed within the heart tree's undying trove.

He lifted his eyes and saw clear all places and periods—ancient buried cities with walls folded, sagged crowns and toppled towers, great structures split in dusts of white marble, those who have transcended death and those who chose the peace found in it, the ruthlessness of the hearts of winter and darkness.

Farther, farther he went; and instead of his age regressing he found himself gaining tens of years as he flew to the past. He traversed the innumerable fleeting pathways that led to thresholds of time, and felt chaos and order touching on all the realms, wounding and healing the fibers of these worlds. And each realm possessed a certain scent, a certain pattern even, such that one realm is entirely different from those others that were identical with it. Yes, the realms had their own laws but he had opened them through his mind and through the roots of the Weirwood that span both time and space.

All of a sudden, nothingness enclosed him—twisting and fraught with malevolence, with only a thin lining of hope. His eyes were closed and he felt his body kneeling against a cold, hard surface. He slowly ran the tips of his fingers on the ground and felt only ice that burns like fire.

When he opened his eyes, he beheld winter's wasteland, a barren terrain of white where the Wall should be standing. It was empty, save for the harsh snow and wind whipping his face, blurring his visions with their ragged veils of malice. *Hurry and begone!* One cold voice seemed to say, yet Bran had asked himself in the midst of the confusion—whereto and to what purpose?

"Bran the Builder," a tiny voice named him. "You made it."

He turned around to the source of the voice. It was Leaf, and with her were a hundred more Children of the Forest.

"This is all your fault," Bran said in anguish. "Had you not spawned those creatures of ice—"

"We were used only by the god of winter," Leaf replied. "We all were. Your lot began butchering our kin and cutting down all of our Weirwood, and we had to defend ourselves. But a pact was reached, and now men and children must fight for the same side, or all realms will die. You must help us, Bran the Builder."

Bran collapsed on both knees and covered his face with his hands. "It's a cumbersome task, and I might…die. The ones I love might die. Dear gods…"

"The oak is the acorn and the acorn is the oak, Bran the Builder. All men must die, though if you do, you will not die alone."

He lifted his face and gazed at the child's slit-like eyes. He clenched his teeth. "I will *not* build the Wall this time around."

The child smiled. "No, you will not. You will not bury any enchanted beast beneath it, either. The Wall was there to protect your realms against the Others whom you have in the past driven away in the permanent ices. If we all do it the way it *should* have been done, then the Wall won't be necessary anymore."
Bran nodded his understanding. "I know, I must kill that dragon."

"Yes," the child replied. "And kill all the Others."

They have finally reached the Nightfort with a thousand men. There was no time to waste, and so the soldiers were deployed to the Wall's summit and some on the Weirwood pass inside the scullery. "There is a tunnel west of the forge, connected to all the secret vaults and other crannies," one of the brothers had offered. "We might need men in there as well."

"Go and take two hundred with you. Examine any openings, breaches along the tunnel's walls that might be infiltrated by the enemies. Then, send a man up to tell us about the conditions," Lady Brienne ordered.

Five hundred traversed the steps carved on ice and headed to the battlements' peak.

She turned a wary eye toward the red priestess that rode with them to the fort. The priestess was calmly pacing across the castle's outer courtyard, whispering unintelligible phrases that sounded High Valyrian. The woman directed her gaze towards a specific part of the Wall, that part where the sentinels lie in their barrows of ice.

Brienne sensed the perturbation building up on the red woman.

"That's her?" Brienne asked Tormund. "The one who summoned the Lord Stark back?"

Tormund just shrugged. "Saw it with my own two eyes. She claims it's the work of the lord of light. Can't say I disagree. That damned tragedy at Hardhome convinced me how huge this bloody war is."

They occupied themselves with the arms for a few good minutes.

"Know any fancy stories about this one?" Tormund asked the woman as he sorted out spears of single and double obsidian heads. "Them crows say castle's haunted, that true?"

"Haunted ruin, dreary place," Brienne replied, her face expressionless. She hoisted a collection of arrows and placed them on separate quivers. "Ghosts might have found their dwelling in this very fort. This place is twice as old as Castle Black." She gestured towards the gigantic horn with Valyrian glyphs. "That plaything of yours?"

Tormund let out a hearty chuckle as he studied the relic. "A toy it most certainly isn't. 'Tis a fabled horn you see, they say it can wake dragons out of stone, subdue them to the will of the master that blows the pipe."

"The Lord Stark ordered you to bring it here," Brienne said with narrowed eyes. "Why?"

Tormund shrugged. " Beats me. But he did say that we must wait for the young Lord Rickon. Boy knows what to do." The Mead-king clucked his tongue. "Ah, I envy them wargs, and pity them at the same damned time."

"I heard that you saw the Night King and the Others at Hardhome," Pod queried with a rather interested tone. "Heard you fought them. Is it hard...defeating a White Walker in combat?"

Tormund's face had suddenly grown severe. "The harder thing is overcoming your fear of them. They're all bloody scary all right—ice demons that die only through dragonglass. They have
weapons I haven't seen or known for the life of me, and they're not bad in combat. No, forget the shit I just said. They're damned good in combat and it's almost as if..." the Mead-king paused, then shook his head. "Ah, nevermind."

Brienne stiffened a little, then shifted her full focus on Tormund. "Almost as if what?"

He stared at the woman's face, measuring the truthfulness of his own words, for he tends to assume most of the time. I felt it, he thought. What these cold ones are capable of. "Almost as if they can read you—what your next move is going to be, how you'll react."

Brienne felt herself shiver at the telling. She had seen Stannis Baratheon's shadow murdering Renly, and knew that a demon from the land of shadows and ashes was behind it, but there seemed to be something more sinister to these creatures than anything metaphysical she had ever encountered.

"Lady Brienne!" one man called out to her asudden. "My lady!"

She turned to the one rushing towards her. "What?"

"The tunnel leading to the other side is open, my lady. The men surveyed what's out there—a large portion by the east seemed to have caved in, large slabs of ice have collapsed, and...there's movement."

Brienne gathered some spears in haste. "Others?"

The soldier shook his head. "Winged serpent within the Wall, my lady. And..."

"Speak!" Tormund bellowed.

"It's trying to get out."

All of a sudden, a massive explosion resounded from the tunnel west of the forge, originating from the Wall's other side.

Jon paused with his occupations and turned to Tyrion and Ser Davos.

"Did you hear that?" he asked, narrowing his eyes as if to evaluate the source of the ear-splitting sound. "It seems to be coming west from here."

"It could wake even the dead," Ser Davos replied, then turned to one of the commanders. "Send twenty men of yours—have them ride quickly to Deep Lake, Queensgate, Nightfort and see how the rest are faring in there."

"It's not like any kind of explosion I've encountered," Tyrion offered. "Doesn't sound like our wildfire, or flaming barrels, I think you'll agree with me, Ser Davos. It doesn't sound like fire at all."

Jon darted his fullest attention to the Imp. "What do you mean?"

"To be honest, Jon Stark, I don't know what to make of it," Tyrion answered. "But there is a certain urgency to the sound. The Nightfort is leagues away from here, and those two on horseback might not make it in time to report the situation there. You know nature to have a very dismal aspect."

Another thundering sound, this time a thousand decibels more uproarious than the previous one. A sharp feeling rushed through Jon's veins, seemingly freezing his blood—the feel of a chilly and
neverending night, colder and older than the dead stars swallowed by one infernal god.

"That's here!" the lad exclaimed, quickly collecting weapons laden on the table. "I cannot be mistaken. We'll deploy the men to the battlements and the gates now."

Ser Davos raised a forefinger to advise. "There's a blast of storm at the moment, Lord Stark. Men couldn't see a thing from the summit and winds are strongest—they could topple a whole set of barrels and our lighter trebuchets."

"No other choice, Ser Davos," Tyrion said, sheathing his steel and hoisting a crossbow along with some obsidian quarrels. "We need to be in those battlements and by the gates. These enemies are as dark and impenetrable as night. The only way to defeat them is to attack and fall like thunderbolt."

"We are not risking our men unless we can be assured about the source of those explosions!" Ser Davos raved.

"I'm afraid Lord Tyrion is right, Ser Davos," Jon said. "The point of battle is risking it and winning afterwards. Hardly any time to listen to conjectures much less carry out the plans that come with these, forgive me."

They all stormed out of the armory and were met by Iron Emmet rushing frantically towards them. "Icicles. Gigantic ones, Lord Stark!" he exclaimed. "Can't see anything from above, don't know if those cold ones are nigh or—"

**Boom!**

Emmet's speech was interrupted by a massive flail of ice colliding against the Wall, and it was the size of Castle Black's great keep. The flail's spikes had pierced through the structure's other side, sending three of the castle's mightiest towers collapsing on men and horses. Another blast sent colossal boulders collapsing from the Wall's summits and sides, and with these came hundreds of men falling seven hundred feet below and others being thrown backwards due to the attack's almost unthinkable impact.

Huge slabs of ice came raining down on the fallen and falling men, and even with their shields raised and the castle's garrisons that could provide them temporary cover, they knew that it wouldn't be long before the ice structure caves in on all of them.

Still, another explosion was heard on the east side where Oakenshield was; and though it was a hundred leagues away, the upheaval, those sounds of desperation and utter fright from the free folks and their spearwives rang clearly in Jon's ears like screams of slaughter than cannot be hushed.

*They're weakening the castles one by one,* Jon thought as he crawled for cover under the tower of the guards that so far has not collapsed yet. *The attack began at Westwatch-by-the-bridge. It's running east now.*

"Jon!" came Arya's screams in the midst of the pandemonium. "Jon!"

"Right here!" he called back, then rolled over to the side to avoid a large ingot that had fallen from the tower. The heavy iron fell with a deafening crash. Jon surveyed the environs and realized that the heavy attacks have ceased for now—moving in his projections, towards Eastwatch-by-the-Sea. All over him were riots from those still breathing against the silence of those dead, scarlet-stained snow, broken blades and shields, helmed heads and mangled limbs underneath a heap of ice and debris. Jon staggered, his eyes burning with both woe and madness, his heart being gorged by rage he never knew he was even capable of feeling.
With utter wrath, he screamed upon laying eyes on Val.

She was beneath the brickwall of Hardin’s Tower that had collapsed, the blood on her skull and face bathing the snow profusely. He rushed to her, lifted the debris off of her almost breathless frame. "Val!" he cradled her head in his arms, patted her cheeks to rouse her. "Val, Val…please, oh no…” He hoisted her and rushed to the Shieldhall that was then only partly wrecked.

The winds continued howling fiercely, wiping away the senses in that most desolate time of whiteouts and fatal blurs, numbing, leaving everything in shades of black and white.

"Sam!" Jon called when he had reached the hall. The maester was there, rushing towards him with a sack of healing implements. "Val first, the others afterwards. Please…do every damned thing that you can."

"Leave her to me, Jon," Sam said. "Go out there or we'll all die."

He nodded, planted a quick kiss on Val's pale lips, then stormed out of the hall.

"Lord Stark!" came another call, and this time it was from Leathers. His face and hands were bleeding, out of his own injuries or those of others he had tended to, Jon could not tell. "It's a massive charge. We all must go to the other side, the structure will fall upon us if we don't."

"Where's Jaqen?" he shook his head in order to overcome disorientation slowly consuming him. He surveyed once more the entire vicinity for any signs of the Lorathi. "Jaqen!" he bellowed and ran to him and Arya, who were then salvaging weapons which were not destroyed yet. "It's a full assault on our defenses! Those damned demons plan to kill us all by blasting the whole Wall and burying us under it!"

"Then, we cannot remain here," Jaqen calmly concluded. "We'll have to engage. Cavalry rush, frontal assault. Let's finish this once and for all. We cannot allow them to cross the Wall's borders even after the structure falls, gods forbid, or it'll be over for us."

"You'll transfer our forces on the other side of the Wall now?" Arya asked. "We don't have the proper weapons yet, Jaqen. We have to practice a bit of patience and wait for Aegon the Sixth! We have to tend to our wounded and dead, regather the remaining men. That," Arya pointed towards the ice fortress. "That is the only thing separating us from the lot of them and this is their plan—rattle us all about this Wall's possible collapse so they could get us to engage."

"I say we swarm them," Aegeus cut in as he approached the three with Sabine, Tyrion, and Ser Davos. All of them appeared to have sustained injuries of some kind. "We cannot hide behind this fortress and wait for it to fall. Dispersed mass, simultaneity, then convergence at the center. Three phalanxes, a warg per phalanx to counteract. But Arya's right too, we cannot swarm them effectively if we don't have those Valyrian swords."

"And it would take us time to organize our forces, Lord Stark," Davos said. "We need to keep the Others at bay to regather the men and form the phalanxes."

Tyrion cleared his throat. "Dragons, from Westwatch to Eastwatch. Build a wall of fire to hold the wights. That would buy us enough time to organize the men and the arms."

Jaqen nodded, impressed.

"Brilliant, Tyrion," Jon said, suddenly gaining clarity over the blur. "Jaqen will take east, I'll take west. Arya?"
"I'll call Sansa and Rickon, for the...phalanxes," she replied, to which Jon nodded. "I'll have them ride to Nightfort."

"Sabine will stay with the Maester Samwell," Aegeus interjected.

"What?!" the woman exclaimed. "I have to be out there! I did not come all the way here to—"

The Handsome Man pulled her, silenced her with one long, deep kiss. "Our wounded men need you," he whispered when he released her, but his words were resolute. "You will obey me and stay here, no protestations."

She threw him a vicious glare before walking off.

Even with the hell all over, Jaqen was amused. "She'll kill you when you return, brother. Do prepare yourself."

Aegeus smiled, but his eyes were languishing, cheerless. "If we don't die out there, perhaps..."

"First rule in any battle," Jon cut in, his eyes on the Handsome Man. He gave him a reassuring pat on the back. "Stay alive."

The shierak qiya had finally revealed itself in the night sky—a portent victory for some, an omen for others.

"Ready, Jon?" Jaqen asked as they both settled on the back of their own dragons. He did the trappings as was the usual, checked on the chains, the dragon's girth, iron collars. The Lorathi knew that Heraxos had been weakened by the recent war waged against Valyria—traces of burnt scales and flesh were still there, slight fracture on the wingbones, heavy lacerations, swelling. And in every exhale, the dragon breathes chilly vapor instead of warmth. "Hold on, good friend," he assured the firebeast. "This too shall pass. Stay with me."

"You can never be ready with these things, Jaqen," Jon said after securing himself. "You never actually prepare; you merely...fly out there and do what you have to, damn the aftermath."

"Most true," the Lorathi answered.

They both took off—one towards the east and the other, to the west.

Beyond the Wall was a mad swirl of silverstorm, and there was no way for the two dragonriders to know the direction, for all spaces were engulfed by a haze of harsh winds and hard crystals flying in mad whorls. Solid snow, and they could even hear the scream of winter itself and the white flakes whirling around them in an angry vortex, stealing away their sight, erasing all panoramas and courses. Even with their armored bodies, they felt as if those crystals were colliding against their unguarded skins, their projectile-like movement battering the two men, pelting against their frozen cheeks. Snow clung to their crowns and lashes, and their throats ached because of thirst and the cold.

"Drakarys!" came Jaqen's command. From the firebeast's mouth came out tempered flames, sweeping away parts of the snowstorm for a while, allowing him to gain sight of his environs.

A massive, writhing cyclone of snow was advancing towards them, prepared to swallow whatever came in its way like midnight's flash. "Fly west, Heraxos!" Jaqen ordered, then maneuvered the beast to evade the mighty tempest, but the winds caught the dragon's tail and was pulling it inside that
murderous whirlwind. Jaqen felt his dragon struggling to flap its wings in order not to be swallowed by the storm. "Escape! West—fly west!" the Lorathi bellowed out his commands. The eddy had turned to a swirling mass, threatening to suck them in its force-filled center.

The dragon let out a pained screech as it carried on threshing and flailing its wings in a desperate attempt to escape; while the Lorathi kept on shouting out orders that were slowly becoming futile, what with their already perilous position. "Resist the winds, dragon!"

At the corner of Jaqen's eyes, he caught sight of the legion of wights and cold ones they were all to face that night. How many were they? Ten thousand? Ten times more than this? His blood froze and his teeth began to chatter because of chill and alarm, yet this is neither the time for counts and trepidation. He focused his attention to one White Walker that seemed to have both of its arms outstretched, and even in that distance, Jaqen knew what he was beholding.

*It's controlling the tempest—holding sway over the winds.*

The Lorathi hastily grabbed a spear with an obsidian head, and with a quick and precise aim, threw it straight to that one Other. It pierced through the cold monster's heart, causing it to shatter into fine fragments.

The tempest died with the cold one, and finally, Heraxos was able to free itself from the whirl, soaring straight to Westwatch-by-the-Bridge. All of a sudden, a blood-chilling shriek caused that myriad of wights to rush to what remained of the Wall, howling and tearing and flinging themselves onto each other to gain ahead. Upon their mouths were blood and flesh from human and animal preys that may have fought back in vain.

Most of those wights were already decaying, their putrid smell clinging to the Lorathi's nose though they were far from him, and the cruel winds had done nothing to numb the olfactories or bury the stench within the snow's particles.

And they dashed faster than the Lorathi could blink. He surveyed the Wall and saw the men rushing outside of the castles' gates and converging at the center to form tight ranks, with some soldiers from the battlements climbing down through ladders of woven hemp or through the chains of the giant scythes clacking against solid ice. "Fly low!" He ordered the dragon while evading the arrows and spears flung at him by those Undead. Upon reaching lower ground, Jaqen pulled the rope securing a barrel of oil, then allowed the liquid to spill on the ground as he carried on flying west. The beast disgorged a sea of flames onto the shed oil, creating a massive, blazing wall along the expanse—and the wall of fire was a good two hundred feet high, temporary holding back those wights while the phalanxes were being formed.

Those moving corpses too impatient and witless attempted to cross that wall of fire, and were instantly turned to ash and cinders, tainting the snow's immaculate ground of pearls.

Jaqen flew back to where the troops were being assembled and met Jon there, leaping off of Rhaegal's back. "A whole stretch?" the Lorathi asked as he dismounted.

"Yes, built the wall though, to keep them all at bay for a time," Jon replied. "We'll take the flanks, Jaqen."

"Form the first, twenty-five men deep!" Aegeus ordered, and the men rushed to carry out the commands, lining up with their shields and spears. "Archers, remain at the battlements! Don't you dare rain down friendly fire on us or I'll chop every one of your damned heads and sew them about different shoulders!"
"Trebuchets at the rear!" Tyrion said as he walked across the line of gathered men. "Have those barrels of oil and torches at the ready; swordsmen on horses at the flanks, make sure your castle-forged swords are afire once those corpses draw near!" He rushed towards Sansa who was then preparing her mount to head towards the castle at Nightfort, Rickon with her. He pulled her hand and forced her to face him. "Sansa," he muttered, then looked at her with imploring eyes. "Sansa, you don't have to do this. Some of our ladies and those spearwives in delicate positions all chose to stay in the Shieldhall. They offered their aid in tending to the wounded."

"Tyrion, but I must do this with all of you," Sansa responded with a determined tone. "We need every last man and woman in this war, and I've sat behind the table with my knittings for far too long. Arya needs me now—she needs wargs. I do not have a clear idea regarding how to harness this gift of mine, but I want to find out. The time to do that is now. I do not desire to put all of Bran's efforts to waste either—he has toiled so hard, given so much." She leaned over and gave him a soft kiss on the temple. "Be careful. See you at the end of this." She mounted the horse and waited for Rickon to embark behind her.

The boy walked over to Tyrion, his face suddenly a mirror of grief above the fortitude. "Tell Jon, please...we won't be long."

"Of course," the Imp replied. He watched Rickon saddle up and ride to the west with Sansa, her direwolf, and some five hundred men.

There was hardly any time to agonize over fate chasing them all to either survival or demise, for already, Tyrion heard Ser Davos barking out urgent orders to the men. "Stay half a league away from the Wall! Hasten up, men. The flames are waning!"

True enough, the wall of fire in the distance was faltering, succumbing to the cruelest kisses of cold winds and the persistent hisses of those cold gods that sounded like a series of chants against foes. The blaze subsided, withered away.

Finally, the last flickers of it died.

When the smoke from dragonfire dissipated, the foes showed themselves in all their malevolent glory.

"Dear gods..." Ser Davos whispered as he saw the throng of demons mere leagues away from their ranks, snarling and scraping their hands and feet across the icy ground. "What are these creatures?" From their mouths poured out bale-fire red blood from their recent kills, and they seethed while they choked on the innards of both beasts and mortals they have fed on, transforming the taintless ground into a grease of gore. Their movements were grotesque, too...too affrighting—with their bones snapping and splitting and breaking out of their flesh, yet they kept on marching and crawling towards the ranks in painstaking slowness, as if to taunt them.

On either flank of that army of the dead were plagues of hellhounds, wight bears, wild horses, wolves.

And behind them, more daunting than the reanimated corpses themselves were the cold gods—a whole legion in themselves, hovering along doom-laden space like an elite battalion of triarii. With them were swords and poleaxes, maces and flails spawned by ice, unparalleled rune and possibly, immortality.

It was the most inexorable nightmare for any living soul.

Jon and Arya rode to the front to prepare the men for battle.
"Brothers!" Jon began. "In the eyes of every man I see the same fear that had almost crippled me at Hardhome. Nay, I will not tell any of you not to fear." He directed his mount across the ranks, so all the others may hear him. "In fact, I will tell all of you this—do fear! Fear for your lives in order for you to fight, fear for everyone that you hold dear in this realm so you may have the guts to face what is out there. My father told me one thing—that the only time when we can be brave is when we are afraid." He turned his gaze to Arya, and the latter nodded for him to proceed. "I do not see kneelers and wildlings, sigils of various hues and symbols. I see men and women willing to fight to the death in order to leave this realm better than when they walked on its earth—just that, all differences are downright effaced in my sight. Do this not for the songs that the bards would write about when you're gone, do this for the sake of duty, of family, of love. If we must be free men, then we must fight, and fight well!"

Roars of acknowledgment and support resounded from the ranks. The men and women raised their spears, tapped their swords against the shields. The clank and clatter of weapons echoed from the Gorges to the Shivering Sea, and perchance, the battlecry was heard to as far as the Summer Isles that was ravaged too by winter. Trepidation and uncertainty was replaced by unparalleled dauntlessness, a renewed dedication, as they all vowed to see and hear the promise of spring.

"This is the last Battle for the dawn, people," Jaqen said, mounting on his firebeast once more. Arya echoed his declaration, followed by the ranks. "Battle for the dawn!"

Jon climbed up Rhaegal's spine and did his strappings. "So," he turned to the Lorathi. "When exactly do we rush?"

"We wait for the signals from Tyrion," Jaqen answered. "Some plans he's trying to work out—he says it could cut a good quarter of the enemy's forces."

"Good," Jon exhaled. "Very good."

Those hisses, those spine-chilling sounds reverberating from the frozen lips of the Others sent shivers on every man that hearken these; and it was as if the horrendous tales from the quills of maesters and the mouths of the elder ones had come to life that spite-filled night.

From a distance, Arya saw one White Walker glissade towards the front. It stooped on one knee, then settled a forefinger on the frozen ground. The finger dug deeper in the snow, and a faint glimmer showed on where the Other had touched it.

All of a sudden, a crack appeared on that very ground of ice, crawling, slithering…that crack branching out to form other rifts…snaking towards where the forces were situated.

It stopped upon reaching the ones at the front of the phalanxes.

In a flash, what seemed to be a harmless fissure had opened up into a large crevice asudden, swallowing two hundred men to three hundred before sealing itself tightly.

"Gods!" an outcry erupted among the men at what they had witnessed, with some breaking away from the phalanxes and the others either screaming or pleading for counterattacks. In panic, a good fifty to sixty archers from the battlements released flaming arrows despite the absence of any direct order, prompting the wights to rush straight towards the regiments. Aegeus and Ser Davos rode across the troops to maintain the shield walls.

"Calm!" Tyrion shouted his mount at the front. "Men, attach the cloth to the loads! Hit the weights!"

At Tyrion's commands, the men at rear the hastily tied one gigantic cloth around circular stone loads
of ten to fifteen trebuchets. Upon securing the knots, the counterweights were rammed down, sending stone loads flying towards the approaching wights, and these loads carried Tyrion's gigantic cloth that was earlier, soaked in wildfire.

The boulders fell upon the wights, crushing the skulls and bones of some, while the cloth attached to those boulders covered almost an eighth of a league of moving corpses, trapping them beneath it and impeding their advances. The chaotic movements underneath the cloth was visible even from a distance.

"Nock, draw, loose!" came Leathers' orders at the battlements.

The archers released flaming arrows in rapid simultaneity, and these arrows landed straight on the wildfire-soaked cloth, setting the entirety of it ablaze faster than the wildling chieftain could utter another order. More flammable cloths, more flaming arrows found their way from the Wall's base and battlements towards the wights, and in various trajectories too, and those corpses burned in the same way that souls-turned-demons burned at the hells of Stygia. The sight—a Doom in itself.

A good number of Undead was turned to fine embers in that first counterattack, yet it was as if the forces did not charge at all, for the numbers have increased by two or three and it was true—what is dead may never die, but rises again, harder and stronger.

And those corpses advanced towards the forces with unfathomable speed, racing and leaping and whisking.

Tyrion rode across the regiments of men, and with his sword he tapped each spear and weapon as preparation for full assault. "Light your weapons! We'll engage!"

"That's our signal," Arya told Jon and Jaqen who were at the flanks. She removed Dark Sister from her scabbard and raised it. "They will target the dragons, of course—practice extreme care, you two. We need those dragons if ever the Wall falls."

"Be battle-calm, Arya," Jaqen said, but his eyes were fixated on those approaching wights. "Today, we fight. Tomorrow, we live."

Arya smiled at the last of Jaqen's words. "Be safe, Jaqen."

"And you."

The battle horn was finally sounded. She kicked her mount's girth to lead the phalanx straight to battle. The horse galloped onto the axis of war.

Forces advanced to meet those Undead at the center of the killing ground, with their shields and lit swords on both hands. It was as if the fury of the gods was unleashed as they all collided in the center, immortalizing the horrendous carnage of that night of all nights—living against the dead, breathing beasts against breathless ones, fire against ice—and they slashed and severed, pounded and pummeled, carved and cleaved, until the sound of men's screams and wights' shrieks filled the leagues of the permanent ices.

It was a windstorm of flames and snow in the midst of clashes and clangs of steel, with the seething, basalt-black lair of the gods above as the great beholders.

Two dragons flew on either flank of the soldiery and carried on spewing flames on the scattered wights. The traces of dragonfire etched on the cold stones as the dragons evaded the weapon throws, yet inevitably catching some on their wings and underbellies. Rhaegal staggered in flight as a large harpoon pierced through its wings. It fell with a resounding thud on the myriad of Undead, sweeping
them back with its colossal body that carved out a tunnel against the frozen earth.

"Jon!" Arya screamed in the midst of a duel with another. She hacked the head of two and severed the limbs of three more, then hissed as she felt the impact of a pointed lance puncturing the flesh of her arm. She caught the stench of the wight's breath—foul and sickening, and howled when she felt the lance being twisted, ripping and sawing through her leather armor, her skin and sinews.

Nymeria leaped onto the attacking wight promptly and tore it to shreds starting from the head. A group of corpses closed in around the direwolf and began piercing its flesh with their spears.

"Nymeria!"

Ghost lunged on those corpses gathered around Nymeria, severing their heads from their bodies through its wolf-teeth, tossing them afar, forcing them away. It howled a long howl, then ripped the remaining corpses to shreds, that flames were suddenly rendered unnecessary.

More wights rushed towards them.

Arya deftly unsheathed a dagger with her free hand and hurled it towards those wights. The blade bounced from one corpse to another, severing their heads at Arya's control. She caught a torch tossed by a comrade and set those foes afire.

Nymeria and Ghost leaped off from the blaze and carried on ripping and tearing.

Arya pulled out the lance from her arm and turned to the source of the saving torch. "Sabine!" she exclaimed. "I owe you one!"

"Duck!" the woman screamed, then threw a poisoned dagger towards a corpse on Arya's rear. It landed on the corpse's head, melting the flesh. "You can drown with me over ten flagons of Arbor gold after this!"

Despite the chaos, Arya directed her attention to Jon on the far side. She exhaled her relief as she saw Heraxos tugging at Rhaegal's neck chain, urging it to fly once more. The jade green responded, flailed it wings and dispensed a whirlwind of flames onto the surrounding wights, before soaring the skies again with the gold one.

She was taken back to battle as she heard Sabine's swords colliding against iron and wood, and saw that she was ensphered by five to six wights. Arya quickly pulled her horse's reins and forced the beast to attack. The wights dispersed a little before charging once more, but Arya was quick to heave a canister of flammable oil on them, and kicking them towards a soldier wielding a lit sword. Upon contact with the steel, the wights were aflame and in cinders.

"Arya watch out!" Sabine cried. Arya felt her horse jolting violently and sensed the impact of a spear point snap against the beast's flank. Weight pulled her down and she found herself being thrown from the horse's back. Her head collided against the frozen ground, and she found herself losing sight of everything.

Curses and screams…metal against metal…the feet of friends and foes digging into the snow…the whoooshing of spears being thrown overhead and the flight of dragons pervaded her hearing senses, her brain…

The scenes dashed in her failing sight in a fog, and all she saw was endless frost and inferno, wights feasting on the carcasses of men, living bodies transformed into moving corpses, endless death…

It has been eight thousand years—and so when the dead all woke up, they all woke up. And now,
the army of wights overpowered their forces. To survive after all this is as impossible as the dawn ever showing its face on the realms.

A sea of monsters surrounded her as she lay weakened by the assaults. Blood gushed from her. Three, four leaped onto her, scratching and clawing at her face, and ember red poured out from her neck and cheeks. She screamed in pain, writhed underneath the corpses attempting to take hold of her life. She choked as one wight strangled her with its iron chains while the others looked for flesh to devour underneath her leather pauldrons and vambraces. And their shrieks were bloodcurling, so were their faces, and their putrid, cold breaths lashed out at her cheeks as she felt life slowly ebbing away...

Think...think...

A layering of warg's rune...

The bond between dragon and wolf.

She felt her inner power surge all over her like brisk wind, coming from Jaqen's dragon mark on her arm. Around her was a sudden penumbra of protective magic encapsulating her frame; causing the surrounding wights to be annihilated at the the force of her warging and the mark. Their dead bodies could not host within them the warg's enchantment and so they succumbed to its strength, their fragments drifting off into the icy winds.

She leaped up and charged once more to the center of battle, screaming in wrath, slashing, her power coursing through her every movement in the form of a visible glow of silver phantom-flame, obliterating all that crossed her way. She stood at the center and channeled all her forces to strengthen her own rune. That chrysalis blaze was both fire and ice, and the wights were drawn to it like moths would be to flames, and so they rushed towards her, bursting upon first contact with Arya's rune, until all around her were obliteration and final deaths.

The dragons carried on setting the wights ablaze, those who were still dashing towards the curious glow they had just discovered emanating from one woman, while the soldiers wielded their lit swords and hurled blazing torches on a myriad still left. On and on it went until there was naught more left in the battlefield but a mere trace of those Undead—all of them had faced utter destruction, their nefarious borrowed lives once and forever claimed.

Arya collapsed on the ground and felt blood trickling from every part of her body, turning to ash as it landed on the ground. Her protective rune had waned. Scattered cheers erupted from the men, and she felt herself being lifted to stand. Arya looked up to see whose hand she held. "Jaqen..." came her whisper, yet the Lorathi merely shushed her. She threw herself in his arms.

"Even the dead ones obey your call," Jaqen shook his head in complete astoundment. He pulled her in a tighter embrace. "I mean...are you well, Arya? You must return to Shieldhall now—"

The carrion-black sky darkened even more, as wayward winds drew wintry breaths across the scene with a sound like an angry hiss, shivering even the frozen grasses. Overhead, stygian clouds covered the stars and the moon, and half a league away from the forces, an entire gamut of argentite light exploded from the winter-spawned bodies of those throngs of Others. They languidly approached what remained of the forces, their miens and forms as taintless as the clean-washed heaven and earth, and they would disappear like thin wisps of smoke, then appear once more, this time scaling a good league closer to them.

Fear flooded Arya's heart once more. The pawns have been used up, she thought. Now, the kings and the queens will play.
The soldiers gripped tightly their weapons made of obsidian as they moved once more to their phalanxes, and Arya could smell the fright threatening to consume each one. Jon directed his gaze towards the skies, and his eyes widened as he realized what was about to fall from above. "Shields up!" he bellowed. "Take cover! Hailstones!"

Even before any soul could react, massive boulders of ice began raining down on the men—landing straight on the heads of some, mangling fallen bodies, until the ground turned slick with blood, bones, and brains. Keening and cauterwaling, sounds of panic filled that death stage as the men struggled to form a tight shield of walls. The hailstones were the size of a full-grown, and so it breached through the soldiers' formation and killed more; and those cravens who retreated back to the assumed safety of the Wall were all smashed and buried underneath the boulders.

Those heavy stones kept on falling, carving out craters upon craters on the ground, murdering, then digging deep barrows for the dying and the already dead ones.

It all registered like a blur to Arya's senses, but she knew that men were perishing around her. When she looked up, she only saw scales of gold and realized asudden that she was under the wings of Jaqen's firebeast, and that Jaqen's arms were still wrapped tightly around her, his lips against her ears. I'm here...he whispered. I'm here, Arya... The dragon screeched in pain, lurched, and Arya shut her eyes tight and forced the thoughts away—how long can their dragons and men last in battle? How many had already died? How are Jon, Sansa, Bran, and Rickon faring in gods-know-where?

Would we ever survive this?

Finally, the hailstorm ceased.

Arya rushed from underneath Heraxos's wings and saw the aftermath.

A graveyard, Arya thought grimly. Garish scarlet over frosted white, armless hands still gripping swords of broken hilts, sheens of silver tainted by gore, helmed heads drawn back in throe, lifeless eyes fixed skywards, as if cursing the god of winter a second before death claimed them. Torn sigils and shredded armors glistened in the ice fields.

She gritted her teeth in rage.

They've wiped out half of the forces.

Her heart faltered as a flurry of motion went past them. Invisible cloaks of darkness exploded all around them and with these, a snapping of massive ice chains latched onto giant claws. Those claws flew past the forces and clamped themselves onto the Wall, the sheer impact sending men collapsing hundreds of feet down. Ice cannonballs zoomed and slammed onto the fortress in rapid succession, blasting the entire structure.

That sound akin to seven shrieks of hell resounded near west. It was the sound of a horn Arya had last heard in Valyria—the one that can bend dragons to its will.

The Dragonbinder, Arya thought. The one carried to Nightfort.

"Jaqen!" Arya screamed. "It's Joramun!"

"Move!" Jaqen ordered the men. "As far away from the Wall as possible!"

The regiments started dashing towards the approaching Others—there was simply no other way to go.
From the cracks appeared colossal geysers of ice. A deadly rainfall of behemoth pillars from the fortress followed.

Then, an explosion unlike any.

The Wall that has for eight thousand years defended the realms had fallen.

Rickon fell on the ground, his lungs burning after blowing the horn with all his might. His hands closed in around his own neck, choking at the effect of the horn’s rune. The shudders ceased after a few seconds, his breathing had gone shallow.

Nigh, the sound of the massive structure that had crumbled to pieces heightened their fear.

Boulders of ice rained down on the castle's roofs, caving these in. Screams of dying men resounded in the whole fort.

"Rickon..." Sansa threw herself on the boy's body, stroked his cheek gently as she watched the direwolf Ethuil succumb to a state of trance. The wolf ceased howling and collapsed on the ground beside the boy, convulsing. "You're stronger than this, Rickon. Come out and then come back."

Brienne rushed back to them after barking out orders and assembling the men. She hastily knelt at the boy's side and checked for his pulse. "It's weakening," she said, then shook her head. "I hope he makes it."

"Skinchanging is one nasty business," Tormund remarked, then spat to rid himself of anxiety. He tightened his grip on the spear's pole. "I saw Orell live through his eagle's life, never got out of there. That woman Varamyr tried skinchanging into expelled him out of her wits, he didn't have any choice thereon but to live inside his wolf. I say damn this," the wildling cursed, then motioned his head towards Rickon. "He's just a boy."

"The young Lord Rickon knows what he's doing," the red priestess interjected, her gaze fixed on the boy's blue lips. "He's acting according to the Lord Bran's plots—"

"According to another boy's plot!" Tormund bellowed, then turned to Sansa. "No one's asking these nurslings to fight, this is our battle! The lot of you Stark kneelers are running some ugly schemes here—these could get us all killed!"

Brienne stood and faced Tormund levelly. "Your outburst is not helping at all, Mead-king. And in case you have not noticed it yet, the Wall has fallen and it's only a matter of time before all of us actually get killed."

He ignored Brienne's remarks and fixed his attention on Sansa. "Why let your baby brother do it?" he asked. "You're willing to just watch them all make the sacrifices and not utter a damned thing about it?"

Sansa shot Tormund a vicious yet pained glare. "I'm not that strong of a warg. Otherwise, Bran would not have risked Rickon and would have asked me to do it instead," the lady admitted. She knelt down beside Rickon and stroked the boy's hair. "I do not wish to destroy the persons I value the most just to gain the goodwill of the gods, nor do I wish to see them destroying themselves." She shot another anguished glance at Tormund. "You have four sons and a daughter. Tell me, if they wish to do whatever it takes—fight to the death to spare the bloody realms and your lot of non-kneelers, in the name of all that is good would you be able to say no?"
Tormund opened his mouth to answer, but there was naught fitting to say so he kept it shut.

Sansa smiled bitterly. "Didn't think so."

The Mead-king shook his head as he beheld the boy's face. "But they're mere babes..." he whispered.

"Mere babes, yes," Sansa nodded forlornly. "Those spearwives who lost their children at Hardhome certainly know how I must be feeling right now."

Despite the din all over—both of men and falling fortresses—Rickon Stark remained dead to the world.

"It's safe to get out," Brienne remarked, and her affrighted eyes were on the fallen structure. "To the battlements at the base, now Mead-king! Or the Others would cross our borders!" the lady knight dashed outside, followed by the wildling and the red priestess.

One dreadful screech planted them all on the spot.

Another realm may have opened itself before the eyes of those present that night, and the fissures that connected that realm with the one they're in now was almost immaterial, yet very real. Darkness seemed to have fallen to a more profound form, bursting forth and obscuring everything in sight, before waning and dying out completely.

After eons of imprisonment, after the life it lived as one thrall beneath Bran the Builder's enslaving magic, it had awakened fully to lay waste just as it should have done when Night first gathered.

It seemed to have come from the updraughts of the Wall, some other dimension even the Men of the Night's Watch never knew existed. Its serpentine body previously curled up in a tight coil was now stretched to its fullest length, spanning the expanse of the Nightfort up to the Sable Hall. Its glittering blue eyes were fixed on heavens' vault, and its wings had that thundering refrain of relentless power.

That dragon was living, breathing ice at its most horrendous form.

Another screech and the earth exploded in various places in that arena, revealing warrens of ice that were not there before; and it was as if there were land mines of magic buried underneath the soil for thousands of years triggered by that beast's cry.

The ice dragon splayed its wings and sent hazes of water and frost flying all over. Its long, oddly-segmented tail jutted out, whipping and sweeping away regiments of men gathered in tight phalanxes. Its body's translucence allowed the rays of moonlight to scatter all over its body, casting upon it variegated hues working like illusions in the consciousness of those who were witnessing.

Then, it rose above the fallen Wall, as the winds of winter swept its wings. Thick wisps of cold smoke soared through the currents of the night air like lost ghouls. It flew in a mighty helix, then circled the stratos once, before directing its gaze onto the fire dragons that far west.

The ice dragon took a sharp dive and tunneled through the frozen ground, disappearing like mist. Then, it emerged instantaneously from the earth in the midst of those men battling against the Others, swallowing whole regiments, flogging forces of men away through its herculean tail, disgorging cold wind and transforming men to solid ice. The White Walkers finished those men off by shattering their frozen bodies through their spears and swords.

And it was bigger than Valyria's imperial firebeasts, stronger, more impossible to conquer.
It carried on ravaging the myriad of mortals still left after the hailstorm, ripping and killing and glaciating them all to the bones. Two dragons took flight and attacked that winter's beast, spewing orbs of flame on its face and body. It screeched in wrath and scourged one dragon with its ice-spiked tail, while the other, it caught through its fanged mouth and slammed onto the ground with unforgiving strength.

Sansa saw the ice dragon from a distance and all the seemingly futile attempts the forces were doing in order to subdue it.

She shut her eyes and willed herself to do what Arya believed Sansa could do. Let me in, she whispered. Don't let it close without letting me in.

Sansa collapsed on her knees.

Fatal cold embraced her entire form; and she screamed as icicles pierced through her flesh, as her breath turned to frost at her very sight. All over her were a thousand gibbering wraiths, burying her in her own barrow of ice. A horde of Others tugged at her hair and limbs, clawed at her face, fed on her flesh with their teeth of chill.

All of a sudden, the ice dragon ceased its attacks and remained suspended in space. Its raging blue eyes had appeared calm and passive, its ferocity was replaced with painful lassitude. Sansa had willed it to stop.

And through the eyes of that dragon, Sansa saw the permanent ices and what lies beyond it—the goddess that births Winter, the greatest foe they are yet to face.

Rickon awoke with a gasp. He had left his body to enter Ethuil's when he was mere seconds from death, just as he did in reverse with Shaggydog. Through his warg's subconscious that was once and always linked with Bran, he told Sansa what must be done with that winter's beast. Hold sway over it, Bran had allowed the message to penetrate Ethuil whose essence was linked with Sansa. For as long as the battle lasts, be in the dragon till you defeat it from there and till I defeat it from here. Leave it before it dies.

Or you'll die with it.

Rickon saw his sister standing firmly with her full focus on the killing ground, and she was not quite herself. Her irises were gone.

She had warged into the ice beast, and since her warging is raw, it was at its strongest and at its most vulnerable at the same time. However, the boy knew that she cannot remain within the beast that long. Seeing that the beast's movements were suspended, the forces will waste no time attacking it in its immobilized state and annihilating it. If she fails to leave the dragon in time, it's either she truly dies with it, or she continues to live through it.

The boy directed his gaze towards the fray. "Most of the men had been killed already," he whispered woefully to himself, then rushed towards the arena to catch a quick glimpse of Jon, Jaqen and Arya, Tyrion. Hot tears streamed across his cheeks. "Where are they? Even the firebeasts are nowhere nigh…"

The Others carried on with their assaults even with the ice beast temporarily incapacitated, using their weapons and rune to subdue the mortals. The snow was now bloodsoaked, the battleground a mere
remembrance of what had been there, as the last of their men struggled to fight those cold gods with the strength they still have left. Everything appeared to have slowed in Rickon's very sight, everything was a blur, even the clangor of swords is slowly dying.

He witnessed the Others flinging themselves onto the ranks of soldiery, unleashing magic in unthinkable levels. Enormous slabs of ice were sheared from the frozen ground. A rage of flame and a trail of cold smoke swirled violently all over the field of ice, transforming the environs into a cauldron of death.

Tears kept on falling from the boy's eyes. *The men are dead.*

*We lost.*

Yet through it all sounded the steady thunder of two dragons' onslaught.

The boy raised his gaze to the heavens and saw one midnight, one ivory, two silverheads atop these. Those dragons zoomed to the center of hell and from their wings fell glistening blades of distinctive patterns, reminiscent of the flowing waters of Rhoyne in Old Nan's tales, their edges and fullers chatoyant against the full, silver moon.

*Valyrian swords.*

In the center of devastation, the Stark boy laughed delightedly and broke into a run, imitated what the rest of the men did—he raised both hands to the skies and attempted to get ahold of one from that storm of swords. "Aegon!" the boy shouted as he dashed past boulders and corpses, running after the ivory one soaring across. "Aegon! Over here!"

Aegon the Sixth maneuvered Viserion to a full turn and rushed towards Rickon Stark. He tossed the boy a hand-and-an-eighth sword of red and black ripples. It was a Oathkeeper's twin—Widow's Wail, before a part of Eddard's very sword. "Here you go, warrior," Aegon said with a grin. "Carry that sword and fight like a Stark should."

Rickon nodded and grinned back. Two battlehorns that were sounded on the forts made him look back to where the Wall used to stand. A cavalry of forty thousand were now lined up on the base. The soldiery had sigils of blue celeste and falcon volant, a trout embowed against azure and gules, a dragon thrice-headed.

The Valemen and Riverlanders, with House Targaryen's armies. With these were the rest of the Golden Company, now led by Daario. *Sunspears and roses...Dorne and the Reach.*

Something else caught the boy's attention. Sable-hued sigil with the full form of a sea monster at the center, something all too familiar with the young lord. *Kraken,* he thought. *Ironborns have declared for Jon.* Those who marched did not defect to Theon Greyjoy out of fear of his dragonriding allies, but out of their loyalty to the Iron Islands. Their ore reserves were claimed by winter and their bays, frozen.

The superstitious lot have demanded for a reckoning.

Ironborns will not be Ironborns without their ships and the sea. The drowned god may have called them to this war, and they are seeing for the first time that the threat has been real all along.

"Men! Charge!" came Blackfish Tully's command. The cavalry rushed to the scene, carrying their Valyrian steel and weapons of obsidian.

Aegon the Sixth scooped up Rickon from the ground and rode straight to war.
Bran stood in the middle of that snowstorm with eyes shut, awaiting that one enemy he had bound through his magic.

*It's awake,* the once Stark king thought as he saw flashes of events in that other realm—the present one, as men who believe in the arrow of time would call it. *The battle of the gods has begun.* Yes, he saw them all through his third sight, and knew how very near and how very far the dawn is. The heroes that command whole armies, wield swords, and ride dragons are masons that cut and carve the stones of history in the night, and write the stars with their battered and bloodied hands. *Choices. Those choices would uncloak the reason of fate's own shaping.*

When the Wall fell in the realm of the present, Bran heard a resounding echo of the collapse from afar—between the Bleeding Sea and the Mountains of the Morn. *Chained is this god and chained he is no more...* hissed the winds from the Grey Waste, causing the Moon to meander away from the dark and gibbous heavens.

In his third sight he saw the inevitable rising, and with it came all forms of malevolence, as the once blind and deaf and silent was awakened once more. In the haze, he caught sight of the chained god once crippled, ascending from depths Bran didn’t even know existed, and the god lumbered into sight from a formless slobber to a mighty immensity that defies human understanding. The city of night had transformed itself into a heinous city of madness.

There was simply no language for that evil that had come back to life.

Bran shuddered. *It has begun.*

The Five Forts of Essos had fallen too, and east will meet west.

Winter shook Bran violently, but he persuaded himself how close it was to succumbing to the coming sun. *Nissa Nissa,* Bran whispered that name and willed his voice to cross the realms to reach the one person meant to receive it. *Surrender to death in the hands of the Warrior when the Warrior too, is bid by death.*

*The Bloodstone has been freed.*

He was caught in the doldrums of Night as the winds howled all over him. Bran Stark gripped the hilt of his sword tightly—it was Bran the Builder's sword coated with Death of Dragons—and in his empty eyes he saw the withering of his own soul as a child, and he wept. The source of his horror lay in the unveiling of what would become of the Warrior and the Nissa after the cleansing of that sea of slaughter.

He suddenly caught a rising current of chilly air, blowing right in front of his face. Bran slowly opened his eyes.

There it is in all its horrifying magnificence, the cold dragon he had once conquered and chained, prepared to obliterate him in the face of all realms.

The beast roared, revealing its colossal fangs of ice. Bran moved to raise his sword and struck the dragon's face with all the strength he could muster. It shrieked in fury as the sword carved out grotesque patterns on its face of frost, then it pounced on him through its strong claws, sending his sword flying towards its tail. The beast disgorged a blast of icy winds from its orifices, and it bombarded him with attacks in quick successions. Bran leaped, then slid from the dragon's underbelly towards its tail to retrieve his sword.
He turned to have a quick look of the aftermath of the attacks. That cold breath transformed the Children and the already frozen evergreens into crystal ice, and the slightest contact with wind shattered them to smithereens. Bran assessed himself, cursed when he realized that his left hand was now partly ice-bound.

And the ice was slowly crawling upwards. In a matter of minutes, his entire body will be nothing but solid, hollow ice.

It roared once more, then with its spiked tail bludgeoned the frozen ground in an attempt to bury Bran beneath it. Bran jumped and caught one of the spikes, then coiled his legs around the beast's tail. It thrashed against his hold, flailed its tail in all directions as it soared with immeasurable speed in the skies. Bran felt his pores bleed and his flesh burn as the winds lashed out on his entire body, benumbing him and urging him to surrender, but he held on to the dragon steadfastly despite one hand gripping tightly his sword and the other already incapacitated. Obsidian daggers and arrows from the Children targeted the dragon, with some landing on its wings and torso, yet the beast carried on flying in rapid whorls as if nothing could truly quell it.

With one strong whip of its tail, the ice dragon sent Bran falling a thousand feet towards the ground.

Everything vanished, everything was forgotten. Bran coughed and choked as merciless air punched him from every direction. The power of Winter that engulfed him in that fall was immense, far beyond anything he thought he could anticipate. He cried out in pain, spinning in his descent.

*Time is the string, the warg is the puppeteer.*

Bran took a gamble.

He shut his eyes and once more willed time to slow. Time does not really pass, it continues. And with enough power, it can be understood; it can be bent and expanded.

He felt himself falling still, yet space seemed to aid him in his fall. He held the grip of his sword more tightly, and all over him he could sense the rapid chaos in the midst of his own calm. Two hundred feet from the ground...a hundred...Bran saw the names and the faces of all that had mattered to him and matter still, the wheel of weaves and the patterns of age...the shadows lengthening at twilight and the shadows waning at morn's light...

Twenty feet...ten...

He felt his back hitting solid ground, yet he felt no pain.

Bran rose in haste and observed his environs. The dragon was still mid-air, movements curtailed by the dilation; the Children's obsidian daggers and lanceheads moved in thorough slowness. He surveyed himself, and found out that half of his body had already been consumed by ice.

Any second now, his trick with time would come to an inevitable end.

Bran recalled the Weirwood—the center of his control. He knelt and touched the frozen ground, prayed to the old gods that the warmth left in him could seep through the cold and reach the roots of the heart trees buried deep within. *I am dead in all other realms but this*, Bran thought. *I have offered everything that I am to the Weirwood tree beyond the Wall.*

Whispers in the tongue of the old gods pervaded the walls of his mind. He let out a deep sigh and smiled softly. There was the wisdom of the great ones colliding with the wisdom of men.

*Yes, it has to be done*—only death may pay for life. And the time is now.
From the Weirwood he conjured up an illusion where the parallel realms could meet.

Army of the dead…army of the living…

Others and mortals…

Wargs…

Dragons that breathe ice and fire…

Warriors…

Nissa Nissa.

When he opened his eyes, the illusion had become real.

Now, he was in the midst of the second Battle for the Dawn, and he was witnessing everything through his third sight—wind snapping at tattered flags and sigils, ten thousand hands and feet in battle, falcons and bears, lions and hawks, griffins, suns, stags, stallions, dragons and direwolves in a duel of ice against fire.

His eyes flew overhead and he saw Daenerys and Aegon soaring side by side atop their firebeasts of ivory and midnight, ensphering the ice dragon's serpentine form in spirals of flight, dispensing flames onto the beast's body in relentless speed. Flying west was Jaqen, leading that ice dragon away from its myriad of Others in a high-speed chase, away from the soldiery, in order to tackle it in a head-on duel in an open killing ground. He could sense Sansa within the dragon's subconscious, invading it still, controlling it, but failing to keep it within the shackles of her mind.

Arya and Rickon were in the battlefield, with Jon on Rhaegal, and Bran could hear the clangor of Valyrian steel against those weapons of ice, the death of the living and the cold ones, the gushing and spritzing of blood and the shattering of winter-spawned bodies.

That illusion would serve as a confusing apparition—the ice dragon would sense that it has to deal with a throng of enemies, and it would thus act for the sake of survival. Yet it served a purpose for Bran, as well. He realized for the first time, when he had stepped once more into the Weirwood cave and traversed the path of the realms, that he was not, was never alone in this battle.

More than all these, however, what must happen must come into fruition.

Sword forged in fire and blood.

He willed himself not to weep as he shut his eyes and spoke to Jaqen.

The Walls have fallen.

The spheres of space, the air detonated as the realms of the now and the past collided completely.

The faces were burnt to the last scintilla, their traces have flown straight to the Shadowlands. Winter's spouse was unchained and must be hosted, as the Lorathi's thousand-year-old bargain with
the Great Other would so dictate, or else the god's soul would find a more malevolent persona to merge itself with and the Nights won't ever end. In the perfect order of the universe, what must happen *must* happen—yes, this is the way; *Valar morghulis, Valar dohaeris.*

He had lived and died, foraged the realms, seen all, felt all, tasted all. He had loved and learned and lost, and no matter what the seen and unseen realms had become since he had accepted the fate of the Fallen Warrior of Light, Jaqen was more than ever, calm and prepared, and if only he could fall on his knees and spread both arms to show the gods his overwhelming conviction, then he would.

*Give me strength, Arya,* Jaqen spoke to his beloved. *Jorrâelagon, be with me in this surrender.* *Teach me that I am at my most powerful when I no longer need to be...the measure of this cessation is the greatest I will ever face.*

*Never forget my name.*

*Keep me with you. Always.*

Jaqen zoomed past the Wall's ruins and evaded the blasts of ice the cold dragon was disgorging. He surveyed the expanse in haste and drafted a plan to weaken the impossible foe, assessed how he could use the chase to his advantage. The forces were still engaged in a most diabolic battle against those throng of Others, and even with men from the south, Winter's rune was still a formidable enemy.

A quick decision.

Jaqen maneuvered his dragon to a full turn and headed for the Others, leading the ice beast towards the myriad. Even with the din of flight he could hear Aegon and Daenerys screaming their protests in all vehemence behind him—the move was too perilous that it would kill even the dead. Still, he went on; and willed himself never to stop until he hears the hush of the gods.

In his peripherals, he saw Arya—the warmth to his winter, his lifeblood, *udrâzmalon,* whose memories and love would forever keep him immortal. He saw her lips open but heard naught, yet he knew the words and these words formed a single plea that he could never, *ever* satisfy.

He closed his eyes for a second. *Forgive me, Arya Stark.*

"Fly low, good friend," Jaqen told Heraxos, then pulled the Valyrian chains strapped on the dragon with great force so it would hasten up its flight. The firebeast took a quick dive, plunging onto those Others of infinite count, dispensing a whole inferno and drowning them in a merciless sea of flames.

The ice dragon plummeted towards the frozen ground, still chasing the firebeast. It tunneled through the earth, burying thousands of White Walkers beneath the dredge its immense body had carved out, obliterating its fellow ice-spawned ones.

The forces of Ice and Fire cancelled each other out, meshed, then exploded as in an apocalyptic flare-up, sweeping over Jaqen with fierce, chilling yet conflagrant winds. He breathed in the heavy, sulphurous air, and sensed his dragon's erratic flight—its wings were torn from the foreclaws to the tip, and buried all over its scaled torso were what may be a thousand ice spears, with one puncturing its eye. It howled a painful screech before landing hard on the gelid earth, its body digging its own death pit.

The plunge threw Jaqen off his firebeast's back, his body bouncing on the wintry grounds. His flesh split as it scraped through the rough surfaces, and the chill burned his face and arms. His armor parts were now askew in different directions, punching holes right through his chest and guts. He
screamed as a strong whirlwind of power battered him, coiling around him and seemingly crushing his bones and skull, ramming him with indescribable force. The torture was too much...ten thousand times more harrowing than his blood-brothers' treacherous acts against him in the days of Valyria, and he wished for all things to cease and vanish right before his very eyes.

He landed right beside Heraxos's face—severely damaged, its scales of gold now all black and scarlet.

*It's hard to live, but it's harder to die.*

He turned his face to the right and with a trembling hand, reached out to touch his dying firebeast. "H-Heraxos..." he whispered, choking at the words and spewing out blood liberally. "You...did great."

The beast let out one long exhale, before succumbing to the realm where dead dragons make their lair, where dying and being reborn intersect only in the wildest of dreams.

Jaqen shut his eyes to let the tears out, and felt thick blood flow from his cheeks instead. He struggled against the agonizing throe of holding on to dire life and heard Arya Stark's lovely, lovely voice calling out to him. She was nigh, and she had come to save him though he did not wish to be saved—he cannot forever escape from fated death.

His bleeding eyes locked on the Others' empty, deadly gazes. Through his already bleary sight he saw four to five of them, hovering on top of him with their loathly miens, and their hisses bore down upon him with the sharpness of serpents' fangs.

*Arya...*

*Death would never end our story, jorräelagon.*

*It would merely...change it.*

He felt that frozen sword piercing through his heart in painstaking slowness, and he shuddered at the fatal coldness it brought upon his entirety. *No!* he screamed, *don't take everything away!* as he felt Winter sapping out the warmth of his love and the life within his memories of his beloved, stealing all that he had locked deep in his person and will, eroding his spirit, weathering his soul.

He eased into the twilight, and whispered to his dying self that this is sleep only—an endless one, yes—yet serene sleep, nonetheless.

Jaqen H'ghar drew one sharp breath as his fragile human heart took a beat for the last time, and he fell into that abyss where even the darkest deepens into its own midnight.

Sorcery swirled around him, blending his armor with his Valyrian sword and chains, with his imperial dragon—drawing everything to a form he now ascended towards. He disappeared right in the eyes of those who were at the heart of war, but even in death he knew how eloquent yet nefarious his transfiguration is. Skin and flesh and bones changed in shape and swelled up in size.

Power filled his being.

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His entirety was now a distorted mass of burnt faces of the dead, and the lips of those dead were open as if screaming for impossible liberty. These faces will never make it to the avenue of souls, for
they were consumed fully by the chained one—the thirsting hour must end for an awakening to
commence.

Seething worms crawled all over him in mindless migration, falling away and getting scorched at his
very feet, bursting when they hit the earth. He had smeared himself with the blood of those he had
killed thousands of years past, and he would smear himself with a whole generation's blood once
more, for the gods have stolen much from him.

It was an eon-long thralldom, and so his limbs throbbed with dull aches as if stabbed by rusty
daggers, his bones creaking at first. The effort of emancipating himself from those imprisoning chains
of the gods had weakened him for a time, but even weakness must end.

He was more than prepared to claw his way out from the Heart of Darkness, and he knew that the
mouth of the pit opened out into new realms. Perchance, those devouts in his Church of Starry
Wisdom awaited him outside his barrow, those who sought his release for generations had
interpreted correctly the presages of the stars and the shattered Moon. And now here he is, after
fourscore centuries—unchained, and nothing can stop him now.

*So shall it be freed—that trembling rage of antiquity.*

*Pilgrims, come to me and you will know the power in great evil.*

The Bloodstone emperor spread his arms wide and unleashed his own necrous sorcery, his arms
shedding old skin like ash. He felt the cavern of darkness crack all around him, he heard the
sundering of the rocky crags, the snapping of immense boulders. Finally, light came through and he
saw it after eight thousand years; horizons and vistas blurred as a whirlwind of dust and magic
surged upwards and curtained the entire sky. A god's warhammer flew from the abyss to his open
hand. He gripped tightly its shaft.

*Kill…kill…*

Yet, deep within his own skin was the selfhood of one whose mortal body hosted his soul.

*Bloodstone against Bloodstone—one is vile, the other is virtue; one is greed, the other is sacrifice;
one is impure, the other is untainted.*

*The blameless will become the blamed, the sinless will become sin.*

His heart glowed. He looked down at his chest and saw glittering bloodstone at the center of it—the
stone of sacrifice.

Who *is* he?

Had his beloved, the Great Other betrayed him? Why is there a seed of personhood inside him,
threatening to destroy him from within, undoing the clasps and grasps of evil around his heart?

And…

Who is she—his *Nissa Nissa*?

Why does it seem as if…he had loved her so with all that he was and is and will be, though in a prior
life he was most sure that he belonged *only* to the death god whose lair is in the Heart of Winter?

The Bloodstone emperor crossed the summit of Stygai and stopped when the entire city of night
came into view.
Jaqen...

He hastily turned his attention northeast. There is a voice calling out to him past the Grey Waste leading to the Land of Always Winter, where east meets west.

Jaqen...

"I am not he..." he whispered to himself. Then, he laughed harshly. Wailing souls flew in all directions upon hearing his demonic burst of mirth. His black, parched lips screamed out his words succeeding. "I am Bloodstone!"

Jaqen...

He started walking towards the source of that voice—and he was so helplessly drawn to it. It was wooing and loving, very much a woman's yet very much a goddess', appealing to his sentiments and affections, awakening the heroic heart he never even knew he possessed.

"I am Bloodstone."

Jaqen.

He kept on walking.

Chapter End Notes

Fellow shippers! Hardest one I had to write. I would accept whatever feedback you'd throw at me. XD

This will be a bit embarrassing.

I just did a reread of the previous chapter and found so many spelling mistakes (extra letter typed here, a letter replacing another one, a letter that's not supposed to be there, etc.) I did some edits already. I can also assure you guys that I do know how to spell and I'm old enough to write a mature fic. XD Really, sorry for the mistakes but I posted the update late in the night and didn't bother proofreading.

Thanks for the comments and kudos! ;D
A happy ever after, like so many things, is a subjective concept

I do NOT own the above. I'm just a subscriber.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

'Her cries of anguish left cracks upon the Moon's face

The shattering has begun.'

The Warrior and the Nissa, Jade Compendium (derived)

"Jaqen!"

Arya rushed across that withered killing ground towards where the Lorathi had disappeared. Every wave of attack directed to her she shunned aside with her Valyrian steel, wreaking havoc among the Others that had covered asudden in her show of wrath. Through the massacre filling the chilly expanse, through the cold wintry winds and scorching flames, through the rain of weapons and the shrieks of shrill-tongued Walkers and dying men, through the deadly rune flung by the cold ones onto ranks of soldiery—through all these resounded Arya's thundering screams and steady attacks.

She had seen her beloved plunge onto the myriad of foes, giving up his own life and the life of his firebeast. Even in that surrender, he still thought of how he could inflict greatest devastation on those cold ones and their dragon. What may be a whole league of Others he took with him to his ruin, yet the enemies seemed to still stretch from end to end—materializing right before their sights in infinite numbers and immeasurable strength.

She rushed past the mercenaries and sworn soldiers, past Brynden Tully and Yohn Royce bellowing out futile commands, past the brotherhood without banners. "Arya!" she heard her name in Gendry's voice. "Arya, return to the safe side! You're heading straight to danger!" She only ignored the call… kept on running—past the cold ones and their blasts of ice.

An ivory dragon flew low beside her, and Arya felt her body being scooped up from the ground by strong, warrior arms. "Let me go, Aegon!" she shrieked, threshing against his hold.

"Arya! Stop resisting or you'll fall!" Aegon bellowed back. "We all saw Jaqen die, there's nothing you can do!"

"I need to get to him! Let go!"

"I'll bring you to safety, damn it! Enough!"
The girl unsheathed her dagger in response, gave Aegon a shallow slash on the arm to take his focus away from her. The Targaryen king cursed and hissed in pain as Viserion staggered in flight. Its claws scraped against the hard ground, so Arya took the opportunity and slid down across its wings and onto the ground. She ran to west as the dragon took off, paying Aegon's distant pleas no mind at all.

She reached the very spot where Jaqen's body had evanesced after a mad whorl of sorcery swallowed him fragment by fragment. She collapsed on the ground and ran her hands frantically on that gelnid surface, hoping to see even the faintest speck of him.

None.

"Jaqen!" She shrieked, as she allowed rage to consume her. "Talk to me! You don't die! Don't die…"

Chunks of ice exploded into the air around her as a spiked flail landed on the ground where she was kneeling. She rolled over to deflect the attack, then drew her sword up to thwart another strike. The flail was too heavy, and it almost dug into her chest before fragmentizing into fine pieces. She spat out blood and felt staggering pain, her head spinning and succumbing to a state of haste as those cold ones gathered around her.

One frozen sword appeared again, flashing at Arya's face. She dodged to one side, her free hand slashing the wrist that held the weapon. The Other shrieked upon contact with her dragonsteel, shuddered before bursting and disappearing.

More blood came out of her mouth and nose. Her bones were battered and she could almost feel the fissures crawling on her skull as the Others kept on dashing onto her, prepared for the kill.

Arya shut her eyes in the midst of that hopelessness and traced a finger on the mark Jaqen had imprinted upon her arm the night she married him in the godswood. Cold fear ate her—the dragon's mark was not emitting its usual glow. "Jaqen...where are you?" Is the source of her protective brand truly dead and gone?

*Summer to my Winter, Shield to my Sword, Shadow to my Being.*

Bran's voice pervaded her subconscious, and that voice for her was guidance and solace, faith. *Your heart and blood,* the voice had told her, *your soul and courage and strength—surrender these and forge that steel.*

*Bare your breast, Nissa Nissa.*

"Arya!" Jon called to her. A ringsword flew past Rhaegal, scraping a part of its scaled wings. It tumbled belly-first on the ground, sending Jon bowling down its back before it rolled over, sweeping a whole throng.

Jon struggled to lift himself up and dashed to where Arya was, outnumbered and overpowered by the Others. He unsheathed Oathkeeper and drove it sideways, connecting with two, three enemies. A blade lid against the line of his jaw, cold fingers snagged a handful of his hair. He wheeled around and stabbed the attacker straight in the guts. Dregs of ice spattered like rain on frozen earth.

"Stay close to me, Arya," Jon said, positioning himself at her front. "Keep your sword at the ready, charge at any sign of danger—they're all over the place."

Arya whisked and stood back to back with Jon, acting as eyes to his blindspot. She surveyed the environs and saw that despite the armies from the Vale and the Riverlands, the South, the Ironborns,
and the sellswords that have arrived, the cold ones still surpassed their count, as if a thousand more White Walkers are born after each obliterated one. Her eyes flew to the heavens—Aegon and Daenerys were still in a deadly duel against winter's beast. "They're not going away, Jon," Arya said, a hint of withdrawal in her voice. "They did not wake up from their dunes of snow to be defeated by mere mortals and their firebeasts. They plan to win this time."

"And so do we!" Jon replied hotly, drawing his sword across his chest. He parried an attack from a White Walker, stabbed it straight in the eye. "I promised you a better realm, Arya. I intend to keep that promise!"

A host of White Walkers closed in around them, hovering in space…their forms dissipating…materializing…

"Sword, Arya!" Jon exclaimed.

Arya drew her steel and thwarted those series of attacks from the cold ones, struggling to hold on to dire hope in each harrowing second. The clangor of their swords against the ice weapons of their foes drowned all her senses; and at that precise moment, she was transfigured to a killing beast—No One-ness regaining its dominion upon the substance of her Self. Who am I? She asked herself in the core of all din and death. Why am I here?

It was a spit on the death god's face.

Yes, Arya Stark is No One. Once faceless, forever faceless. Sabine was right all along—Valar dohaeris is this: getting rid of all loves and hates, strengths and fears, desires and loathed things to serve.

And how does one serve? For how long must one serve?

By laying down your life for your beloved ones if need be. To your death.

For one who is No One, existence must not be, but must be derived.

The Elder had once told her that the state of being No One is in the middle—between who you are, and who you must become.

Who am I? Why am I here?

She gasped upon seeing a colossal form looming behind Jon, and it belonged to one creature next to her own heart.

"Nymeria."

But the direwolf was not quite itself. Its gentle eyes were raging yet dead, and its entire body was full of teeth-and-weapon-caused lacerations. Rich scarlet oozed from those wounds that were so deep Arya could almost see the flesh and bones beneath its skin and fur. The direwolf moved in a grotesque manner, and its actions were not its own—it's being warged into. It had become one of those winter-spawned creatures—cold, inexorable.

Undead.

Jon was oblivious to the danger behind him, as he was at the center of fray against the Others.

Nymeria has become one of them.
Arya froze on the spot as she locked gazes with her wolf. There was naught in its eyes but the thirst for blood, and it broke her heart to pieces. Arya is Nymeria—she had transcended death and realms because her naiad's body and soul were one with that wolf. They are from the North, they both call to the Moon, and even in the days of Rhoyne, they were both in the mysteries of the grand river's water.

What she saw in the wolf was dispassion, a disconnection that was irreversible. It pained her to see the mirror of herself regress that way.

The wolf howled then snarled, and Arya saw the fatal clenching of those jaws. Nymeria is going to kill Jon.

There was a split-second to act, and a single way to carry out what must be done to save Jon's life. Oathkeeper might be on her way, she couldn't let that sword thwart her plans—she must bend the damned sword to her will.

Nymeria lunged at Jon from the lad's behind. Arya drew out Dark Sister and threw herself onto Jon. Oathkeeper pierced her breast, and her heart received the blade fully. While life still clung to her, she swung her sword with all the strength she has left and severed Nymeria's head, thus foiling the direwolf's plan of slaughtering Jon.

A warg killing her own wolf is akin to killing herself.

"Arya!" Jon roared upon seeing her body impaled on his sword. He quickly turned his head to the back and saw Nymeria's headless body. Understanding swept over Jon—Arya took the fall...for him. He screamed in utter anguish, his heart maimed and torn to shreds by her act. "Aryaaaaa! No!"

"J-Jon..." she murmured, then gasped as the last vestiges of the Moon hit her eyes brimming with pained tears. She felt her heart beat faster, and in its every pulse were blood and life and love, coalescing with the cadence of one Song—that of Ice and Fire; and the melodies of it played once more, stirring her soul, revealing to all the realms who she is.

Nothing—no realm, no time, no mortal, no god—can ever triumph over us, can ever break us...

A powerful swirl of rune burst from her heart, and with it was a mist of glittering jasper coiling around Oathkeeper, as if imbuing it with talismanic strength and sway. Arya screamed at the ecstasy and throe brought upon her entirety by that sword, and her cries were the howls of a wolf. She called to the Moon, and the Moon responded—a fraction of its face that speaks of time was shattered as the shierak qiya collided against it asudden.

For she is ice and fire, calm and rage; she is of yore and forever.

She sits not at the center of time for she is Time.

The power that enwrapped her being was immense, and she could feel it seeping through her very marrows. At that moment, she was at her most grotesque; yet beauty emerged from that brokenness—the type that has suffered through and conquered the ache of devastation and loss, the type that is willing to give all.

Time remained suspended, and mortals and Others shielded their eyes in the face of that lovely transfiguration.

It was triumph over death, an unbreakable connection between mortality and immortality, the temporal and the eternal. The act of sacrifice brought out the goddess that was within her all along.
The Moon, the Seasons, the Tides...

The turn of the Universe."

And at that point, it was as if a thousand, thousand dragons poured out from the crack on the Moon's face towards Jon's sword, suffusing it with the rune of fire and blood.

Very slowly, Nissa Nissa opened her eyes.

Azor Ahai, she spoke to Jon, and held out her hand to touch his cheek. *Draw from the fire of my heart your burning sword. Let darkness flee from it.*

Jon carefully pulled out his sword from Arya's chest. Beloved, he named her. *Where to?*

There was nothing in her eyes but nursed rage, torment. *The lair of the Great Other—to end this. To save one fallen warrior, the one sent by the gods to me.*

Then, those ancient, mystical faces appeared before Jon in Arya's form, scintillating around him and beyond him. And there were shapes and shadows and figures, illusions and apparitions showing themselves in vapors indescribable, shooting all over through light shafts of gold and silver.

Then, Arya was gone.

The stairs carved out of ice continued further down. Arya descended, the shattered Moon fading away in sight. The farther she goes, the brighter it gets; yet she knew that such light is naught but deception. In the Heart of Winter, time ceases—it is always dawn and morn and night. In the Heart of Winter, what is unbent is also oblique, and nothing that one sees is as it is.

At the hundredth step, she ended at the cavern that she had seen in her dreams during the days of Valyria and Rhoyne. Protruding stalactites and stalagmites of ice acted like deadly friezes that threaten anyone seeking passage, the colors are in the many shades of the cold. The air was dry, scentless; and that cavern was in the center of a desert of ice.

With resolve, she entered the cave through its narrow tunnel and gripped her dragonsteel tight. Arya was sure that the walls were of ice and that on the surface of these walls light bounces and casts her reflection. She looked at her image on those walls and gasped at the sight—her eyes were her nose and her nose were her ears and her mouth wasn't there yet it was. She was none and all, her entirety was warped, distorted in a most horrific way. Those reflections revealed her inner demons that overpowered the most sacrosanct of all her aspects. All over her ears were poetry sung by the dead for the dead.

And when she had reached the end of that tunnel, she was brought to the Great Other's den.

There was No One in it, and its expanse was infinite yet shrunken, geometrically perfect yet full of chaotic fractals, such that when Arya roamed her eyes around the spaces of it, she could see the concave-convex walls closing in around her then expanding and evanescent. She wanted to scream in fear and confusion, yet the urge to save her beloved was stronger and so she forced her focus away from the intolerable sight and persuaded herself—*this is the Great Other's trickery, nothing more.*

Language was lost on her—no tongue can ever capture the deformity and malevolence, the utter vileness of such place that would stir madness even upon the greatest of gods.
Arya Stark was in deepest hell, and hell is not fire and brimstone. Hell is ice that burns.

Gently, she traced the dragon's mark upon her skin, the mark of the red god against her blood that is from the old gods' own veins. She prayed for calm if even the entire universe could offer her that. Setting foot in this place is a thousand times worse than dying.

"Jaqen," she whispered his name. "Jaqen. Show yourself to me."

_Nissa Nissa_, a cruel voice hissed in her ears instead. She turned to her right for she was most sure that the source was there, yet there was only dissipating mist. _We are two females of the same cloth…_

An evil cackle. _This marks the end._

She turned this way and that to catch sight of the fleeting figure of silver. It appeared…waned…cackled like one horrendous phantom…and Arya felt feverish chill enveloping her as the figure possessed the depths of her mind telepathically…deceiving her till her brain gets unhinged…

And all over, beyond her were bodies, naked human bodies. _Carved figures? No…_

They were as real as her own flesh and skin, and they moved and moaned and writhed in place. Their eyes were wide open and their mouths were agape—screaming…soundlessly screaming in pain as their bodies were being twisted by some unseen, heinous force.

Arya staggered as a wave of confusion and trepidation rushed through her. The silver phantom loomed right in front of her in an ever-expanding symmetry. "Reveal yourself!" Arya screamed at the figure.

She squinted as a series of ghastly apparitions unveiled themselves through that phantom's form—a warrior dying by the sword…an innocent babe…a dessicated Dothraki…a defiled Westerosi girl…the pale child Bakkalon…the Stranger…the Maiden-made-of-Light…

"Shed your many faces and show me who you really are!" Arya screamed in wrath.

A mellifluous, deep-throated laughter in response. The voice of that phantom hissed through the chilly air. _Very unimaginative._

And so, that silver phantom, the Great Other cast off her many faces to reveal one. Arya gasped as the figure shrunk to her size, donned that hair of chestnut, wore that skin of snow, carried a reflection of that steel handed to her by one dragon-blooded. She beheld the Great Other's face, and the face was _hers_—Arya Stark's, Nymeria of the Rhoyne's, the Nissa Nissa's face.

However, it was her corrupted form that she saw, her obverse, just as life is the undeniable counterpart and balancer of death. She is all-good yet all-evil, she is light yet darkness. Arya knew by heart the very words written in the tenets of the Faceless Men, that every being carries with her a mirror that casts her reflection, and it is as impossible to escape from as her own shadow.

_Who are you?_ The Great Other asked her, taunting. Arya heard her _own_ voice, her damned voice, and it was mating with the words and the words were rolling off the Great Other's treacherous mouth—her mouth…Arya Stark's mouth.

_You don't know who you are_, the god said, but what moved were Arya Stark's lips.

_Well, then a kind reminder—_

_You are No One._
"Shut up," Arya spat, drawing her sword in a fighting stance. "Shut up, and give me back my man."

Another taunting laughter came from her lips—from Arya's...from the Great Other's...she couldn't anymore tell. *Which one is the reflection and which one is real?* She asked herself, and wondered too, if the god is as glassy-eyed as she is, if she is the god and the god is she, if there is even the thinnest line dividing one from the other.

**Who am I? Who am I?**

*Who am I?* the god voiced out her thoughts, imitated her very manner of asking. *Who am I?* They circled each other, both appearing confused and lost at such conjured illusion, yet Arya Stark knew that the Great Other could never be fooled by her own damnable ruse. *If so, who is the Great Other, who is the Nissa?*

"Aaaaah!" Arya staggered, before kneeling on the ground and dropping her sword. Both hands were on her head, and she looked at herself—her two selves that were sapping out her sanity.

She laughed shrilly as she beheld her own laughing face—delirious, unable to distinguish who she is and who she is not in the face of that non-existent, mystical mirror. She held out her hand to touch the god and the god held out her hand to touch her too, and their palms connected—Arya Stark's fingers entangled themselves with Arya Stark's fingers, so Arya Stark laughed and Arya Stark laughed with her.

Suddenly, the cackles of one had gone louder, more disparaging. Then, that hissing voice reverberated within the twisted walls of that place once more, and her other self was smirking with raw derision. *Today it ends,* the god wearing her face had said. *We will both bleed each other to exhaustion.*

The death god vanished.

A mad whorl of red and black haze swirled about, and Arya turned her attention to the eddy that had suddenly formed. The faint outline of a figure gradually became visible in the midst of that haze. It was a figure of a hundred thousand deaths and a hundred thousand more, and it had the face of one herald of chaos—chained then awakened. All over him were shadows that appeared in illusions of vanishing spans, the very worshippers of the sinister Cult of Starry Wisdom who mayhaps planned the god's unchaining by design. The figure was that of doomed abym, a contradiction to all things good and alive. From being crouched on the ground, the spawn of the Heart of Darkness stood to reveal himself—a misshapen mass of blood and gore clothed in the ancient accoutrements of the god-emperor of a once tyrannical empire.

*Bloodystone.*

The figure was all too familiar to her—even with the confusing mirage concealing reality, Arya Stark knew what, *who* she was seeing. He still had that hair of scarlet-and-ivory which she loved, that beautiful face...

Their eyes locked upon each other. There was wickedness in those irises that were once bronze-gold, a corrupt force the girl never thought any creature—even the vilest—was capable of possessing. But this evil, this utter madness was what the Fallen Warrior within him had chosen to host.

No one was simply more resilient, more selfless to host a sin such as this one. No one is simply more worthy to defeat the god from within himself.

*No one that is, but läqaen Haegär...*
And then, there was her love for him...her love had simply grown deeper, stronger as their hour of separation drew close, as she beheld the sweet lover beneath that malevolent facade. In her universe there is no other name but his, no other face but his, in an ocean of other faces and names. And though it was lunacy for he is the enemy now—the greatest she would have to fight—she still held on steadfastly to that love.

Those lips were pursed tightly, as if suppressing rage. But those lips were the same ones that purred in her ears and called her 'lovely girl', the same ones that had gifted her with lover's kisses...

"Jaqen..." she called out to him, walking falteringly. She smiled at him, then gasped at the throe that clawed at her heart. "Oh, Jaqen..."

The one she had named Jaqen responded to her call by drawing his warhammer and smashing it straight onto the ground where she was standing. She rolled over to one side to avoid the attack, cold winds washing over her as chunks of ice were sheared from the ground. Arya struggled to stand, backpedaled upon seeing the glint of a greatsword's blade on Bloodstone's other hand. His hand darted up and Arya drew her sword across her chest to block the blade. The impact threw her back and blood gushed up to the side to fill her mouth. Arya reeled, leaned on the oblique wall, one hand grasping the frozen stones and the other gripping Dark Sister tightly. Her fingernails gouged tracks through the boulders.

Jagged arcs of lightning warred against each other from a distance, and when Arya turned to the source of the storm, her sight brought her beyond and she had realized that she was staring at the realm whence she came—the realm of dragons and armies, of wights and mortals. Her beloved ones were there—facing all forces sinister just as she was facing her own battles in the very Heart of Winter.

Both of them shielded their eyes from the blinding flash of red light in that realm.

The light was on Jon's hands, and the light was in the form of a sword.

*Lightbringer.*

The Bloodstone Emperor realized what it was—his doom, and right in front of him was the woman who had birthed that red sword of heroes.

He roared in fury, hurled his warhammer towards Arya from a thousand paces away. She dodged the weapon by taking a dive to the ground. It smashed against the wall where she was earlier leaning, but the wall swallowed the weapon, like a river would a pebble that fell upon its surfaces.

Seeing that Jaqen's one hand was unarmed, Arya rushed to him, only to find the warhammer emerging from the wall opposite to the one that swallowed it. It flew back to Jaqen's hand and with strength he rammed it on the ground where Arya had collapsed—on and on and on, trying with might to crush her bones and skull. "Jaqen, no!" She kept rolling over to her side, running, jerking backwards to evade the assaults.

He threw the hammer once more and a fraction of its face hit Arya's left hand. She lost her grip of Dark Sister, it clangored uselessly on the ground.

She touched Needle's grip, made sure that even a trace of Jon was still with her.

Bran had warned her—she knew that this was going to happen. Jaqen is not himself anymore, and she wanted to howl in anguish and stab herself endlessly and hate herself for the ruin his sacrifice had cost him and the both of them. He should have killed her in Rhoyne after the war, or...or in
Valyria after he had had his fill of her. Yet he chose to keep me and save me, even at the cost of his own life in this realm and in all others.

And now, that choice had destroyed him fully…

From strangers to lovers to strangers...

The heartache was filling her, filling her whole world.

"Jaqen…" Arya murmured, and though he was approaching she just kept herself on the ground. She had to try. She smiled at him, searched for the slightest trace of him in Bloodstone's eyes. She tilted her head and gazed at him lovingly. "I'm here—I've followed you to hell to bring you back. Return, Jaqen," her free hand traveled to her belly, she gently stroked it as she fought against tears. "For me and…and our little one…" Arya tried to keep the blithe about her voice despite the wretchedness consuming her. "You are yet to see me giving birth to our child. You told me you want to see us both—do you recall? You…you missed it in your Valyrian days, did you not—we sailed for Dorne, and you chose to give up yourself for our sake? Please, I cannot let that happen once more. Please, Jaqen…"

He stopped cold.

Might that be a flicker of recognition, of sweet recollection in his eyes?

His expression had changed from perturbed to raging. He stood face to face with her, weapons in hand. "Jaqen is dead. I am not he."

Arya rushed to him, then wrapped her arms around his right leg. She buried her face in the leather of his boots, swallowed the painful lump in her throat. "Do remember, Jaqen. Our leaves in the Songs though those leaves brought us to this collapse. We have loved none but each other, we vowed in front of the gods…"

He was unmoving, and Arya could not bear to gaze up at him, for maybe it was loathing that he felt for her—she was the one who brought him to such plight, he had saved her once and forever and now he's paying the price of that bargain.

"Do remember, Jaqen. I'm your wife," she said in a shattered voice. She tightened her hold of his leg, she was so, so afraid to let him go. "They shall mingle their lives and he will not tear her from his dire heart," she recited those lines in the sacred confluence, the forty-fourth leaf in the Songs. Her voice was very broken and she gasped as invisible fangs fed on her heart—the pain was almost unbearable. "They shall be very nigh to death, but they shall fear with the fear of love, and through it shall they overcome." She lifted herself and threw her arms around his neck. "Your blood is shield —"

"…and you vowed to bleed before I do," Arya Stark interrupted herself.

Her other self was approaching them both and she too, was staggering and wounded in the same places, and her Valyrian sword was on the ground. She ran to him, fell then struggled up and wrapped her arms around his waist from behind. She battled against her inner maelstroms as she held her beloved—the harrowing truth, the shock of learning how quickly love can disappear. "When you left me at Harrenhal, your face…your voice haunted every inch of my soul. I suffered in silence before I decided to sail for Braavos and find you. Do remember, Jaqen—the temple, the bridge where we kissed and fell, the city where you loved me. Jaqen, please…" her fingers clutched his sleeves tighter. It hurts, and she was so tired of it—chasing the one she loves then losing him and falling apart in the end. Even then, she kept herself from weeping. "Fight with me, not against me."
"Listen *only* to my voice, Jaqen," Arya said as she rose, looking into his eyes. She planted a soft kiss on the side of his lips. She had poured her heart out, and now she was nothing but an empty shell which only he can fill. "You know me. I'm your Arya...you know my touch and scent, how I taste..."

"...how I speak, and act, how I love," Arya cut in. She rested her cheeks against his lean back and allowed the tears to flow freely from her face. She needs to stop running back to him—she would be caught in a loop where no escape is possible. "Your heart knows me, it knows *us*. Listen to it, I beg of you..." Or perchance, Arya never wanted to escape in the first place. She merely wanted to touch him even though it could burn her, and love him even though it could kill her.

Jaqen beheld them both, the one embracing him through the neck and the one whose arms were around his waist. "I lost two empires—the Great Dawn and Valyria," the Bloodstone Emperor spoke. "The death god promised me the realms to reestablish the dominion I have lost. My fealty is to her—which one of you is she? I have no need of one named Arya Stark—or two, I have no need of any of you."

"Then, kill me," Arya Stark said.

Arya Stark countered. "Jaqen, no..."

"K-kill me," she begged, collapsing onto the gelid earth. "End this...for me."

She shook her head. "Jaqen, please...don't—"

Miasmic waves of power burst forth from the Bloodstone's body as he spread out his arms. The force threw Arya aback. She crawled in haste towards where Dark Sister lay then retrieved it. She unsheathed Needle. A series of attack blasted her, but she was quick to parry every sword thrust, escape from every ram of the warhammer. She was at a disadvantage, for all of her assails she carries out only to disarm Jaqen. "Jaqen, please! I don't want to hurt, you!" she screamed at him in the midst of his sword clashing against hers. At the center of that duel between them—a reenactment of Valyria against Rhoyne—Arya prayed to the elder gods. *Let me in*, she implored.

For a split-second, she traversed the paths and rediscovered the dimensions of his mind. To reason with him only, not to gain dominion over his person and thoughts—this is the purpose of her warging.

At the very same time, the god wearing Arya's face possessed Jaqen's body—her vile sorcery coiling around the Lorathi's limbs like snake before seeping through his every pore.

The Bloodstone Emperor and the Great Other merged into a single being, transforming themselves into one creature dwarfing even the ice dragon that was awakened beneath the Wall. The creature swelled in size, the slits of his pupil dilating, his eyes gleaming red.

His exhales gusted in heavy grunts, his flesh and bone groaned, his chest swelled, his back arched.

The skin of his spine ripped as jet-black wings snapped out, unfolding from his shoulders. Sorcery swirled all over him. His transformation was horrendous, glorious.

Arya screamed as a crackling fire of the Bloodstone's sorcery choked her being, sending her feverish fits, seeking to undo her mind. He was too dark, too twisted; and she found herself leaving his consciousness as she was slowly succumbing to madness.

The Many-faced god had taken her too.
Bran…

She was falling…

She was falling a hundred leagues per second. It was sure death in that descent, for she will most surely land on the mouth of the first of the Fourteen Flames in Valyria. Illusion, she convinced herself. This is nothing but an illusion. Magma sprayed into the air, large pillars of smoke formed at the rim. In her descent, she only breathed in fierce, hot wind.

When she opened her eyes, she saw that the winged being Jaqen had transformed into was plummeting towards her, his flaming sword trained at her chest, and his heart was the heart of fire. In Jaqen's eyes, Arya saw her form—she was wearing many faces and those faces appeared then disappeared in the midst of her fall; albeit the face that lingered was the face of the Nissa, and the Nissa must die, just as the Many-faced god must.

The red god, Arya thought as she saw how very incongruous space and matter were in that illusion. The god was summoned and he lives within…Jaqen?

They had entered a realm of lawlessness—a realm of infinite chaos.

In her call for help, Bran had conjured up an impermanent realm where it may be possible for a mere mortal such as herself to defeat a god. The mortal must act wise and call to the other gods for aid or summon them from their cosmic niches for the mere sake of it, so they can fight their own damned battles.

Bran…she still called, as she felt her skin being scorched. She was one stone's throw away from being consumed by fiery magma from R'hllor's mouth. With a scream, the red god in Jaqen's form had pierced the flaming sword deep in her heart, and those faces she wore fled from her, scattered; and she felt herself being cleansed by the act.

Arya plunged into that liquid hell and felt her entirety being burned and blown to kingdom come. A million hands pulled her towards the abyss. She kicked and scratched and thrashed against their hold till they released her. She swam to the surface and caught her breath as she reached it.

Arya gasped and scoured that infinite expanse. The Fourteen Flames were gone asudden, replaced by cool, placid waters. She had fallen on River Rhoyne.

Colossal waves built up as something began to churn in the deadly waters. The waves engulfed her and pushed her down to the water's chasms. She fought her way back to the surface and caught sight of a boat being cradled ruthlessly by the river.

She swam to it, went against the river's currents. Finally, she reached the boat. She grasped the wooden plank attached to its bow, and lifted herself up. Arya collapsed hard on the boat's deck, coughing out excess water and catching her breath. As soon as she regained her footing, a mighty eddy formed in the currents, and the tributaries of the River Rhoyne had converged to form an entire sea. From the water's abysms emerged a creature larger than Valyria's firebeasts, even more behemoth than Winter's own. The creature had a thousand polypi, and its nature was to swallow men and their ships, to scare away those who navigate the oceans. It too, had awakened from its dreamless and ancient sleep and was in the axis of war. Its body was that of a kraken, but its face was that of a man—so familiar, so…him.

The drowned god towered everything else, shadowed even the tallest structures known to mortals.
And it stood there, its reckoning eyes fixated on that tiny boat as its giant arms stirred the already winnowed river-turned-sea. In the drowned god's eyes, Arya was the goddess with many faces, the goddess of death and winter, the goddess that seeks to freeze the seas and oceans which are the drowned god's very turfs, the goddess that has the Nissa's face.

No, no...one god cannot rule over all.

The drowned god raised his gigantic kraken hands and smashed the tiny boat where Arya was. Its small sail and mast collapsed and were swept underneath the tides.

Arya couldn't breathe, she was already beneath the billows—yet these billows as she had realized were the thick and strong roots of the Weirwood trees strangling her, destroying her entire body. She felt the roots constricting her arms and legs, her neck and chest, mangling the bones and crushing the organs. To scream is to die, and every breath she took was a wrestle against permanent quietus, and so she ceased gasping for dire air and allowed the heart trees to shatter her, to consume her fully. She felt every inch of her disintegrate as the roots invaded her mouth and nose and eyes, and found their dwelling within her. Her skin cracked open to let those roots pass through and have sway on her entire being.

The old gods had buried her in that eternal and complex labyrinth of seeing trees.

That tangle of Weirwood roots had allowed her to see, and indeed she saw the faces of the Seven who are One. In that end, a parallel battle must be fought even in the realm of the gods—the battle now was between the Warrior and the Stranger, even though both are aspects of a single deity. Balance was lost when the Stranger attempted to take over, and balance must be restored.

Bran...she called out to him again. Arya sought to be with her beloved only, and save him from the plague of having to host an inexorable foe, yet she was overwhelmed instead by incomparable suffering, the total weathering of the Self she had once known. *The Many-faced one dwells in me, and I in her. The other gods are killing her through me. Brother, please*...she wept and rich blood flowed from her eyes. *Take this cup away*...

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She lay there quietly.

The Sweetwater River gushed beside her, flowing in serenity like time unhurried. Its gentle murmurs were akin to the wise words of Mother Rhoyne; and its calm and bliss comforted her, erased her throes for a while.

"Lovely girl."

Arya smiled. That deep purr, that endearment. Oh, that man had ascended Death over and over to be with her— surrendering his mortal coils, bearing a thousand heartbreaks and ten thousand more shocks. From her lips escaped soft laughters as she felt tiny hands on her chest and tiny feet on her belly. Those coos were gentle chimes that balmed her after suffering the whips and scorns of the gods in that realm of lawlessness.

When she opened her eyes, she was greeted by the only being who had heard her heart beat from the inside. They were one for nine full moons, sharing the same blood to the last drop and the same air to the last particle. "My sweet love," Arya purred as she traced her forefinger across his petal-soft cheeks, his delicate form, the stout bracelets where the fat folded at his wrists and plump legs. She could kiss him all day and for days endless and would never tire of the act. He who personifies hope...
for her and a new lover and better years, was finally with her again; and time, life, death, all other concerns seemed to fade as she beheld his face, the soft lips and the button nose, the innocence and tenderness.

His eyes as he stared at her were round and doe-like, misty, with gleaming irises of bronze against the gold, and it carried no prejudices, just…wild fascination. Its giggles were a lullaby. Arya brushed the thin strands of her babe's silver hair and felt tears brimming in her eyes—he was utter perfection, and now she must protect the new life she was given. Her laughter moved the ripples as she lifted the babe in the air with both hands, then nestled him once more atop her. Am I in the future, Bran? Arya asked. Because if I am, then I wish to stay here. If I am, I wish to live.

"Lovely girl."

She turned to her left and saw Jaqen lying on his belly so close to her, observing her reactions as she held their little one to her chest. He smiled, planted a soft kiss on her temple. "He's been trying to wake you up," the Lorathi murmured, then caressed the babe's cheek mildly with his knuckles and spoke to him directly. "Is Damien hungry? He's been cooing the entire while. Does he want to feed on ma's bosoms?"

Arya felt color rise up to her cheeks at those words. Ma's bosoms? "Where are we, Jaqen?" she asked him, evading his hot, famished stares.

Jaqen ran his tongue across the flesh of Arya's breast in response.

Arya gasped as a pool of lust swept over her. Heated desire brimmed in Jaqen's eyes as he studied her face. He's an assassin, a dragonrider—a being whose companions are cold deaths and hot passions. Raw sensuality pulsed from him, and at that moment, each breath of his carried hints of erotic promises.

She allowed her gaze to settle instead on their little one. This must be—she has to fight that painfully intense yearning for him. "Where are we?" she repeated her question. Surely, they cannot be as deprived of each other as to do it in front of their babe, can they be?

"I'm not sure, Arya…" he whispered, then suckled the tip of her left bosom against the fabric. Arya bit her lower lip to keep herself from moaning and opening her legs for him. "And truth be told, I don't care." He lifted his face a little and licked the side of her lips. "Feed our babe, sweetheart."

She exhaled as she felt a surge of unexplainable sensations crawling all over her. She kissed her babe's forehead and shushed it for it was on the verge of tears. "I…I will," she stammered. "But you have to turn your eyes away."

Jaqen smirked. "Why?"

"Because!" Arya exclaimed, then held the babe tighter as his whimpers grew louder. "Men shouldn't watch women while they nurse."

His heavy-lidded eyes settled on both of her bosoms. Jaqen trapped his lower lip with his teeth, and scoured her form that was visible against her very thin garment of white, as if preparing for his momentary loss of self. "I want to see all of you. And yes, that includes seeing you with our babe, witnessing every second of your motherhood, Arya."

Arya smiled. "You brought me to this state, my love."

"I did," Jaqen replied. He pulled down the sleeve of her thin gown till her breast lay bare for him to see, then rubbed her left nipple intensely. Arya gasped as the man fondled it with his thumb and
forefinger. A small drop of pearl liquid came out from it, Jaqen caught the drop with his fore, brought it to his lips, took a taste. All the while, his impassioned eyes were on her, marveling at her reactions, relishing the littlest expression brought by his eroticisms. He smacked his lips as he savored the taste of that drop of her bosom's milk, letting its saccharine aftertaste roll along his wanting tongue. "Hot damn, Arya…you taste wonderful. I want to suckle you till you have none left—"

"Jaqen!"

"Just…" he shook his head but the smile of mischief and dirty man-thoughts were still all over his face. "Feed Damien, please."

Her cheeks were still burning, and as to why she couldn't tell. Jaqen had seen her naked many, many times, had claimed her in all turfs and time and depths, had possessed her in ways she couldn't have imagined. Why then, was she feeling abashed asudden by his show of interest on her bosoms? *They're just breasts,* Arya persuaded herself, then laughed inwardly. *Why of course, Jaqen sees my breasts as instruments for his ecstatic release.*

It was because the bosoms cradle the heart, and the Nissa's heart is the most beautiful in the eyes of the Warrior.

Arya shifted so her spine was towards him. She cradled Damien on one arm, stroked his head when he thrashed against her hold. The babe's face formed a gentle frown, as he cooed his clamor for his mother's milk. "Here, my love," she whispered. "Did you wait too long on me?" The babe began feeding and then everything else had gone silent, just the soft rush of the Sweetwater was there. She cupped the little one's head and it was so soft against her palm, then set her lips at the top of it. "Your father wooed me there," Arya said, gazing up at the bridge where they had both fallen to the river, where they have learned fully of each other's sentiments. She laughed softly. "He waited many, many moons before he could gather up the courage to create you with me. Can you believe how very weak-kneed he was?"

Jaqen rested his chin on Arya's shoulder and watched her sustain their child. "It's because your father was...how do you say it? Ah yes, too *affrighted* that he might fail the both of you. You see, all his days he had tainted his hands with murdered men's blood, he had known nothing but that life. He had brought your mother to such a life, and...and he just couldn't bear to bring you to it, too."

"But here we are now," Arya glanced at Jaqen and smiled.

"Yes," Jaqen smiled back. "Here we are now." With his fingertips only, the Lorathi gently caressed the babe's cheek. "And I figured, if you would come to us, I never want to steal away your life by teaching you to steal away others'."

Longer quietude. The stillness was the loveliest she had experience in a while.

"Let's stay here, Jaqen," Arya murmured as she cuddled their young. "Let's not leave this place."

The Lorathi exhaled and kissed her shoulder gently. "We cannot forever stay in an impermanent realm, Arya. It's hardly a place. This...a glimpse only of a future in a myriad of others? We do not belong here. No one does and no one should."

"Where do we belong, then?" Arya asked in a broken voice. "Are we dead?"

"You are not dead, Arya Stark," Jaqen replied. "Great souls like you don't just die."

"But I felt Jon's sword in my heart," Arya replied. "How can I not be dead?"
"Bran's fault. Even I am astounded by your brother's machinations." The Lorathi rubbed his lips gently across her neck. "Jon did not ask you to bare your breast, he did not plunge his steel in you willingly. You threw yourself straight to the Warrior's sword to save him. Yes, you are Nissa Nissa, but you changed your own course. Eight thousand years ago, the Warrior killed his own wife, the wife did not necessarily die for the Warrior. She did this time. That is it, perhaps."

"It still does not explain why I died for Jon and yet I am not dead."

"Ah, that," the Lorathi continued. "Do you recall, Arya? You were veiled from death that night at the Moonsingers—it was the Elder's work, Sabine's work, my work as Guardian; and even though the death god bids the Electi 'Come,' she can refuse. Oh yes, lovely girl, the Electi is the Nissa." He chuckled because her eyes grew wide like a child's. "I've long shielded you from that fate yet it's an honorable one, how could I not have known? As I have said, great souls like you die only when it is time, not before." Did daggers just stab her heart at the last of his words? The babe wailed softly too, he might have felt her ache. She shushed him promptly, whispered her sweet words into his ears. "What if I never wish to be one great soul? What if I merely wish to be with you, with our little one? Be your wife—that's it! Why should it matter if we forever lose the dawn? Why should I care about anyone else besides you and our child?!

"Do you wish to stop fighting, Arya?" the Lorathi asked her. All of a sudden, there was a hint of anguish in his voice.

How was she to answer such query? If she raises her banners of white, decide for herself the easier course, what assurance has she on transcending that impermanent realm and living the rest of her days with Jaqen H'ghar? He was already god-consumed; and she is with him only because Bran had once more taken a gamble and cheated on time yet again. This realm we are in now is a mere crossroad, Arya realized. Our paths may converge or diverge—I might return and he might tarry here and then carry on. The same way when we had parted ways at Harrenhal.

"If I surrender," Arya began. "I'd be spitting on your acts of sacrifice. If I cease fighting I'd be… casting you aside, throwing away your blood and toil—these will all be for none. How can I…how can I ever do that to you?"

Jaqen only smiled, the agony in Arya's words piercing every scintilla of him.

"But if I continue fighting," Arya choked at the next words. The babe in her arms was stirred, and it cried as if feeling his mother's pains. "If I carry on, I might kill you with my own sword. Dear gods...you and Bran...you planned all these!" She sat upright and held her babe tighter. She wanted to pound on his chest but the torment was stronger than the rage. "You plotted out your own death!"

Jaqen sat up and wrapped his arms around Arya.

"I needed to protect you so I took on that role. I'd rather fully die in your hands than live the sickening life of a god-host. I was born a tyrant, I would never die like one, Arya of the Rhoyne. I implore you to release me from bondage, just as you have released from thrall your riverkin, just as you have freed me by renaming me Tāqaen. I am not he; I am not the Great Other's lover once chained. No...no." He held her chin and kissed her deeply. "Udrāzmalon—I exist only for you. No one owns me but you—not even the gods. So own me...claim my life, jorrāelagon. Wrap your Valyrian steel with my blood, tell our babe our story, never ever forget my name, Arya Stark." Their temples connected, and Jaqen closed his eyes and inhaled her scent. "Take me so I can always be with you."
"I don't want to!" Arya screamed. "You can't force me to take your life!"

The Lorathi smiled. "He will bleed before she does, and he will take the last of his breath, before she takes the last of hers," he recited the forty-fourth leaf of the Songs of the Faceless. "I still am your Faceless Master, lovely girl…and this is what I have trained you for. Enough of the stubbornness now, sweet pup." He kissed Arya's forehead, kissed their babe's cheek. He took something from his breech pocket and held it out in front of her—the Queller which she had lost in the battle against Aurion. He fixed it around Arya's neck. "I retrieved it from undersea when I fell. Do me two favors. Don't lose this ever again and teach Damien how to properly hold a sword, yes?"

"I will hate you forever if you push me to do this, Jaqen!"

"But I will still love you forever, Arya."

The realm was then aquiver, the mirrored edges of it breaking into billions of shards. Everything around her was slowly fading, but his deep purr and his scent, his face, lingered as she drifted away from him…for good.

Jaqen H'ghar was right.

Arya held the pendant of her Queller with one hand and the grip of her sword with another. The cycles must end or they will forever be thralls to it.

Her grief was more pronounced yet it was unspoken too, and it was bidding her overwrought heart to break. The loss will be deep, it might kill her even; yet Jaqen had chosen death over continuance and though he was right he had lied—indeed he wished to be freed from the god that had used his body as host, had despoiled it irrevocably; yet the greater truth speaks only of sacrifice, and the truth is this: it was her freedom that Jaqen had ransomed in his choice to fall.

If Jaqen chose to walk away from his fallen warrior's fate that was the path of his own doom, then Arya would never be liberated from the destiny of being Nissa Nissa—the wife who has to die every time Winter returns to ravage all. Every cycle, she will birth Warriors and red swords of heroes; every cycle, she will have to face the torment of being killed by one beloved to her; and every cycle, she would have to face the Great Other and her tyrant spouse chained and freed and chained once more in a harrowing, endless game with time.

Everything that Jaqen had done was for her.

In all realms, he had kept his vows as written in the leaves of their Songs, though the verses blinded them and led them to astray to its own path carved out of fixed destinies.

The pendant of her Queller lit up with power, yet the glow of it was new to Arya. The radiance of it was more intense, more…beautiful. When she gazed down upon the pendant, she noticed that what she thought was the ruby of it was actually as green as the earth, and within it were drops of his blood which he had shed for her in Valyria, blood he is shedding for her now so she may be emancipated from the fetters of the cycles.

"The blood of his wounds fell into the dark green earth and turned into stone,

And from it came that gem that is the paragon of self-sacrifice…"

She brought the bloodstone pendant to her lips—another one of the Lorathi's layer of protective rune
meant for her, along with his veil from death, the imprint of his dragon's blood upon her skin.

Slowly, she stood and gazed up.

The chained god towered her, and within him is the Many-faced god weakened by the onslaught of the other gods in the realm which Bran had conjured up. *I must kill the one I have loved dearly,* Arya persuaded herself. *I can only love him so utterly as when I lose him.*

He was first to draw his sword, raising it overhead. She lifted both of her swords and blocked his attack, then pushed his weapon away. The emperor-god's eyes widened in surprise as he staggered backwards, before screaming in raw rage. Blow after blow he went, she parried. She wounded his right leg deeply as she rolled over to avoid a sequence of thrusts. Dark blood oozed from him.

*I will retrace the labyrinths of your person as I once did in the mazes of Lorath...*

And she carried on...thwarting his charges, delivering attacks herself. With warrior's skill, she stabbed and ripped him in the right places, weakened his limbs and assails. Dark sorcery burst forth from him and enwrapped his steel. His face was taut with fury but within him, Arya knew, was the deep, elemental beauty of one she had known the way she knew her own heart. He bolted towards her, his sword emitting waves of energy.

She braced herself.

*I will keep with me the memories of the city where we ran and laughed and tasted our own blood...*

Arya felt her blood pulsating, with Jaqen's dragon imprint on her arm glowing and its force flowing through her veins. The power of the mark suffused her steel fully. The rune was warm to the skin, and it swelled like a mighty torrent from her. Its surging mass of smoke and traces formed a figure: a *dragon*—imperial, aurelian. Even in the verge of his own ruin, her beloved still fought beside her.

The dragon's form was of vapor only, yet it was an amassment of magic coiling around the the god's form, shackling his entirety. He struggled against the rune's hold on him but the strength of it was his own strength—the very strength he had given his Nissa.

Arya's heart broke as she witnessed how the dragon mist choked the life out of him. Great sorrow crippled her and for a second, she couldn't raise her sword to finish him...

Jaqen's words rang clearly in her ears, transcending the immensity of time—'Own me, take my life so I can always be with you.'

*I will take a thousand trips to the realm where you are...to a place that overlaps with where I am now.*

*And perhaps...*

*Perhaps, I will be with you again.*

With an anguished scream, she thrust a sword into his heart.

His eyes were tragedy...and Arya sobbed as she murmured words of reparation, love. Could he understand any of these? Perhaps not, but what does it matter? She would say those words because she loves him, because they are true.

And because she had lived with him as her purpose, because she had wrapped her identity fully in all that he is, this loss would be the saddest, the greatest...
Let go…

The Many-faced god absconded from the emperor's host, her faces and persons clawing their way out of the host's pores. The god let out a thundering scream and unleashed the last of her sorcery to fortify her cold ones in the permanent ices.

The once chained god collapsed on his knees and bled; and Arya witnessed the emperor's many souls wriggling out of Jaqen's body only to be obliterated by the force emanating from her sword.

She knew it in her bones—she had done it. She felt herself die too as she saw him surrendering his immortality to mortality.

The other half of my heart…

Gone.

From a distance, Jon witnessed the glare beyond the cold waste, exploding then waning. A god's scream burst from the ridges along its horizon.

Somehow, he knew that Arya was in the very heart of winter, facing the source of all malevolence that brought them to this. All over him were corpses either bloodied or frozen, and the bodies of some had been reduced to pitiful shards of broken ice. The dragons were at their weakest and already, Drogon lay flat on the ground, unmoving. Daenerys was nowhere in sight and Jon was fearing the worst. Aegon was the last one riding against the behemoth creature of solid ice, and frost was slowly crawling across Rhaegal's body starting with the left wing—he can neither fly nor spew fire.

How can mortals ever win against magic?

The Warrior of Light is the dragon, the greatest believer. Fate whispered: and 'faith', it said.

He raised his red sword and it flared with blinding light in response. It both shone and radiated heat, the Nissa's heart was still along the blade of it, her soul still enwrapped its steel.

The mad hisses of the cold ones ceased as the brilliance of that sword burned bright. Night vanished in sight for moments, replaced by the dazzle of the Lightbringer, forged from the sword whose name spoke of oaths kept—indeed, the Warrior of Light will once more draw his sword and scatter darkness.

The Others rushed to Azor Ahai, with their scheme to attack him and seize the red sword before it could cause their ultimate ruin. Those Others left the frozen dead, the breathing men and their dragonglass and steel, and converged around the Warrior with their weapons of ice.

Azor Ahai felt the cold seeping through his marrows, felt eight thousand years all over again. Yet this time, he had decided, he will not chase away darkness with his red sword.

He will end it.

With a thundering war cry, he thrust the sword on the frozen ground. The Lightbringer's power burst like spheres of flame all around him, its seething power obliterating those cold ones bold enough to challenge its authority. The Warrior was wreathed with the crackling flame of the red god's undisputable power, annihilating all enemy forces.
Bran took the opportunity and dashed towards winter's dragon. He climbed up through its spiked tail, traversed its spines and scales of ice as frost crawled across his body. He had reached the dragon's head before the creature had taken a sharp dive. Bran felt himself losing his footing and falling once more, yet this time, the fall was his own choice.

He hurled his sword straight onto the dragon's right eye, then surrendered to his collapse. The sword pierced the eye and the ice dragon thrashed its head from side to side, agony consuming every inch of its serpent's body.

Aegon the Sixth flew in front of the dragon and blasted its face with orbs of flame. A mighty explosion devoured the dragon's body still lashing out waves of power. Finally, it shattered into fine fragments of ice, sending a jolt through the air and the ground. Those fragments fell from the skies like snow.

The Many-faced god at the Heart of Winter paused from her duel with the Nissa as she beheld the might of the Warrior's sword. She hissed and shuddered in fright.

Arya began to launch savage swings of her dragonsteel. The Many-faced held her ground and delivered fierce ripostes through her sword of ice. But the Nissa was relentless, and she pressed on with her attacks.

The god staggered beneath the blows, then with a scream, launched herself at Arya.

A streak of dark scarlet burst from the death god's back, light bleeding from the Nissa's sword that had impaled her. She shrieked in both horror and pain, as the aurelian dragon in mist's form spread in swift coils from Arya's sword, engulfing the god whole.

The smoke twisted then disappeared, as the Nissa's sword screamed in earnest.

Arya collapsed on the ground.

She had died, fought, loved. She took the hard path and became the tale the good gods had wanted her to be.

_Ceri-hafe._

Done.

In the midst of her tragic glory was her broken heart screaming out Jaqen's name.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, check these out (I don't own them, but they're pretty cool):

_Bloodstone Emperor_

_Nissa Nissa (just...how I imagine her)_
Thank you for reading! As always, your feedback and kudos motivate me to finish this fic. XD Have a good one.
Silence cloaked the expanse beyond the Wall that once stood, transformed into a wasteland, a graveyard of the unburied. Winds of winter still blew but there was less trace of malevolence in it. Still, the aftermath was irreversible, and though the grieving men chose to speak not of death’s throe, deep sadness sang its lamentation within each one of them—louder than the hisses and shrieks of the creatures of winter now dead.

The screams of slaughterers and slaughtered, the clangor of swords and spears had been hushed. Snow had gone scarlet; broken armors and weapons lay in heaps beside assemblages of dead ones. Those who have died may have uttered the last of their prayers to their gods, and may now be in the lair of their ancestors. Mothers and wives and children awaited them perchance in their dwellings south of that place.

But they are all gone now, never to return.

Very well, the bards would sing of their heroic deeds and never will they be forgotten, not in a thousand years. However, what good would a song do them now? They are dead men. Dead men don’t listen to harps and fiddles.

Jon had told Arya that they had gone looking for her past the Valley of the Thenns all the way to the Land of Always Winter. Aegon and Jon followed the path of the Milkwater on horseback; the
dragons were all badly injured and so they couldn't fly at all, and one was already dying. On the way, they saw the dead along Frostfangs and Hornfoot—casualties amongst the wildlings numbering to thousands. These figures, despite the alliance formed between the North and the Free Folks, despite the efforts to open the gates of the Wall to let everyone on the other side in.

Still, there were those brave men who fought in that tragic war. The dead toll stood at around twenty thousand.

It did not really feel as if they had won. Lives were spilled, and though their side emerged victorious, such victory came with an unfathomable price.

After a couple of days, they had found her lying half-dead across the border between the permanent ices and the Grey Waste. They found temporary dwelling in the caves close to the ruins of the Fist. They stayed there for a good three days because she was having mad fits…screaming and weeping…thrashing against even the slightest touch…suffering through convulsive attacks…clawing at her own face and arms…yet amidst all these she was never actually awake.

The game was scarce, all they had managed to hunt were winter hares and snakes. At least, the cold was already bearable.

Her fever was on and off, for days she had eaten naught for she was dead to the world.

In that cave by the Fist, Jon saw his brother almost lose himself for the first time. The sight of Arya possessed by her inner demons and by the utter cruelty of that war almost sent Aegon to the point of near-collapse. The regal, self-assured air about the lad-king had at that moment disappeared as sudden, replaced with depthless grief of a lover in mourning, as if the beloved had gone to a realm even the gods are not allowed to enter.

Why of course, there are a thousand ways to lose a beloved.

They took turns on watch duty, but Aegon never really slept. Jon saw him lying on his side every night, head propped on an arm and observing Arya—as if counting her every breath, praying for even a flutter of her lashes to indicate that she truly is just aslumber. In every one of Arya's slightest whimpers, Aegon would sit up and gaze closely at her face, and press his lips upon hers to be assured of her warmth, to be assured that blood still flowed and life still dwelled within her body. Each night, he ran his fingers across his silver of hair and exhaled in sweet dejection before resuming his place beside her and battling against night that bids him to sleep.

Of course, there was Jon's love for Arya, too—as a sister, as…someone else. But from where Aegon was deriving that unexplainable attachment toward her, Jon could only speculate. It's as if something deeper connected Aegon with Arya now—it was something more than fondness or friendship.

It was devotedness of the most profound kind.

Surely, he could not just replace Jaqen in that role, can he? Jon thought, but forced himself to pause with his musings. Unless...

Jon felt his jaw harden.

Did Jaqen and Aegon perchance reach a compromise, something Jon was deliberately left out of?

Is it because of the Warrior prophecy? Did they think that I could bear it upon myself to kill Arya in that war?

He quickly vanquished the rage growing inside him. It was all a game of fates and chances, a gamble
with time, as Bran had said. The littlest thing that had happened was fueled by their choices. This could not have been anyone’s fault. Only the foes were to blame.

Jon directed his gaze to her face. It was far from peaceful, as if she was still fighting indomitable enemies within. Or had I pushed her to such fate when I gave her Needle? Did that small act lead her to desire for and fulfill greater things—winning battles and dying for all men?

It broke his heart to see Arya that way. He showed very little, yet her state was killing him as well. It was for Jon’s sake after all that Arya had allowed herself to be consumed by his sword—another one of her many sacrifices. Even as a young girl, Arya thought she could save everyone she loved.

On the fourth day, she had regained consciousness. They saddled up and rode for Winterfell on her firm request.

"What happened to the others?" Arya had asked both of them upon reaching the ruins of Craster's Keep. Her tone was emotionless, so were her eyes that were fixed only on the road ahead, yet unseeing. The dead ones seemed a hundred times more alive than she is.

Aegon threw a glance at Jon and sighed. "We will fill you in once we reach Winterfell, Arya."

"What happened to the others?" She repeated the query with the same lackluster tone, howbeit with slight emphasis on each word.

"Sansa and Rickon are alive and well," Jon answered. Aegon exhaled in irritation—before the ride, both of them agreed not to disclose the war’s aftermath just yet. Even if they commenced with the better news, her questions will pile up and they will be forced to answer them and recount every dispiriting detail. It would only devastate her, throw her once more over the edge.

"Bran?"

"You know what happened to Bran, Arya."

Her eyes were still dead; there was no flicker of confirmation to say that she knew about and accepted Bran's chosen fate within the Weirwood cave.

"And the other ones?"

Jon swallowed a lump that had formed in his throat. "We lost some."

"Who?"

He was gripped by shame as he heard his own voice break. "Val and…"

Aegon threw him a worried gaze. "…a good number of people," the king carried on for Jon. Lady Brienne kept her promise and protected the Stark children till her last at Nightfort, and so she had died in battle; and so did Tormund the Mead-king, the red priestess, Ser Barristan, Blackfish Tully, Ser Davos, Gendry and the brotherhood, and many, many nameless others.

Arya still kept her eyes on the road. "So, we lost in the war after all."

"In a way," Aegon replied. He looked at Arya and felt the lifelessness in her. "We also won, in a way."

"Everything is going to be fine, Arya," Jon offered. "We promise you this."

Arya didn't answer.
She was right, as Aegon the Sixth had realized. They had lost in the war after all.

Two weeks after the war against the Others, all the high lords of Westeros who took part rode south of the Wall and gathered in Winterfell at the Targaryen claimant's behest.

Defeat registered in the face of each one. The death of twenty thousand soldiers, mercenaries, and plain citizens untrained in battle was more than enough to place everyone in downtrodden, hopeless dispositions. For the longest time, they had ignored the threats Beyond-the-Wall and listened to the skeptics of the Citadel more than to their own wise instincts that were gifts from the gods. The southern forces had rushed to the North only when the lords were convinced that the snowfall was no natural thing, and they all did so because of the persuasions of Lord Petyr Baelish who had already sworn fealty to the Targaryens.

Even with the obsidian weapons and Valyrian steel, the marchers still arrived to the North unprepared.

Unprepared, yes. For if they truly were, the death toll would have been far less.

All of them lost not only soldiers—they lost fathers, sons and daughters, friends. Some houses even suffered a fate worse than that of the Boltons and the Freys, or even the Reynes of Castamere.

"...as Ser Jorah Mormont is now Lord Commander. However, the Night's Watch will be there to seal peace and alliance permanently between the Free Folks and the rest of Westeros. The Wall had fallen for a purpose—it's a border that had long since separated us from the Thenns, the ice river clans, the cave-dwellers that are all brothers to us."

Jon and the other lords were silently listening to Aegon the Sixth's post-war prelections. The great hall was a mirror of unbreakable silence—one pretentious cloak to the howls of anguished keening in the souls of each one.

"Yes, we mourn for our dead," Aegon carried on. "And may none forget this fateful day—when all the greathouses of Westeros, along with the wildling clans, have raised their banners to fight a common foe and keep what is ours." He allowed his eyes to travel across faces and linger on some. "It is done."

"What now?" came Theon Greyjoy's unexpected query. It was vague, yet the answer it required held the certainties the realms needed at the moment. "What of the Seven Kingdoms?"

Unlike the others, Aegon expected such questions to arise. Will the kingdoms be allowed their respective independence?

He gave Tyrion Lannister a quick glance, the Imp only nodded. Aegon sighed, weariness apparent in his face. He sank to his chair and allowed air to escape from his mouth. Surely, the nobles could forgive him for his lack of regard for court proprieties. The lad-king had fought in three straight battles all for the sake of Westeros whether the lords would admit to such truth or not, and he was drained. "I leave the decision to the lords. Whatever the consensus is, House Targaryen will have to concur."

What he expected was an inundation of demands—let the Targaryens lay claim on the Crownlands, let the Prince of Dorne rule his own turf and the North declare a king. Leave the Vale and the Riverlands to their rightful lords, as what must be done as well to the Rock and the Reach, the Stormlands and the Iron Islands.
Seven calls for self-government—these are within logic.

Instead, he was met by total silence.

There were occasional clearing of throats, gentle taps of fingers against the wood, gentle huffs with expectant stares. But not a single word. Aegon the Sixth regarded each one, and most of them were looking fixedly at Jon Stark, a Targaryen-blooded as they have recently learned, the one whom they have witnessed was carrying the legendary red sword of heroes during that impossible war. The Warrior. The Prince that was Promised. Azor Ahai. The great doubters had become the most profound believers. In one night, they all had altered their convictions as they were impelled by something that had saved their very lives.

Myths are as real as men and gods. The fabled Azor Ahai indeed fought with them in that great war.

Jon Stark Targaryen stood and spoke to the lords. "I say we are each other's business." After everything they all had suffered, he had no intentions of tiring them with the rhetorics of the North. He let the words linger for a few good seconds before carrying on. "Pray, what have we accomplished divided?"

Tyrion Lannister responded. "None."

Jon directed his attention to the man, nodded. "And what have we accomplished altogether?"

"All," Ser Jorah replied.

"It's settled then," Jon said, unsheathing Oathkeeper and bending on one knee with the sword's tip on the ground. "The North will declare for Aegon Targaryen, Sixth of his Name."

Aegon smiled. Jon smiled back. The bent knee meant more than the deference of a subject to his king, but a deeper understanding between brothers who both had been through so much—solemn promises must be made to make sure that the then undivided realms would not sink into chaos.

One but many.

No further persuasions were necessary. One by one, the high lords unsheathed their swords and knelt, accepted Aegon the Sixth as their king. If the fabled Warrior who had saved the realms from that great war had bent the knee and placed his full trust to this king, then there is no reason for anyone to do otherwise.

The sacred thread of unbroken unity must remain, now more than ever.

What does West of Westeros truly hold?

"You will rule this land which Aegon I had conquered," were her instructions to her nephew. "Lead, for our House and for all houses. I have my land waiting for me in the far east. Find a queen to rule with you, have her birth you some heirs. Carry on with the lineage, Aegon the Sixth. I...am barren and will not be able to do it."

Daenerys Targaryen surveyed what remained of her beloved Meereen.

She had promised them all a new life but she had failed to deliver. Indeed, the Silver Queen had won more battles and lost in less, all her life she had been set on conquering Westeros—in Vaes Dothrak
and the Slaver's Bay, she had thought of and dreamed of and planned for nothing but this; and all be
damned but she would prevail over her foes.

Indeed, she had.

Yet, Daenerys realized how so consumed she was by power that she had lost her eyes and failed to see things that truly mattered—her city, her people, her home though that place of many faces and tongues would forever be foreign to her. If one's eyes are set on vengeance, one would truly lose sight of everything else.

*When the rivers run dry...*

Those dragonlords, the harsh winter had both overrun the city's once great walls, slaughtering almost every living soul within these. It was as if the hands of one malevolent god had closed in to gather all the city's pyramids, crushing them all while burying them beneath their own dregs.

There were survivors, of course—a good number, much to her surprise. And they still called to her. 'Mhysa,' their lips would say; and it made the mother in her weep. How could hope still glisten in their faces after they had fallen, after she had abandoned them all?

*When the womb quickens...*

She cannot fall into despair. She owed it to her people not to.

And so, the moment Drogon had landed on the soils of Meereen, Daenerys had begun her extensive and ambitious rebuilding, to honor the city that once stood where she was standing. The Unsullied, the Dothraki that remained loyal to her now aided her in her plans of restoration.

Footfalls and a familiar, deep voice disturbed her contemplations.

"Shall we begin with the gates? The tonnes of red bricks have arrived," Daario Naharis informed her.

She sighed, taking in the sights of her pursuits. "Start with the deep wells near Skahazadhan. Our people need water."

The Stormcrow nodded and turned to leave.

"Daario," she called to him.

"Daario," she called to him.

He circled back. "Yes?"

She faced him, uncertainty in her eyes. *What is this?* She had never needed anyone but herself. *Why now?*

"Tell me," Daenerys said in an unsteady voice, searching for something in his eyes. "In the years you've been with me, have I done anything...good?"

The Stormcrow smiled. His eyes were too kind, and the queen's heart screamed as she felt once more those familiar emotions when she had lost her beloved khal and their child. This is more than the primal want for a man's body to warm her bed, more than having someone to satisfy her lusts and dispel the thoughts of these from her addled mind after one fleeting gratification.

She was powerful, and the realms east to west witnessed that.

Yet she was *so* very lonely.
The dead would not anymore live, even if the sun rises in the west and sets in the east.

"I've known good only through you, my queen," Daario replied.

Daenerys inhaled sharply, reached for his hand and brought it to her cheek.

*What is this?*

"Stay with me," she whispered, and her eyes were plagued like those of an unsure child. "Please?"

Daario stroked her cheek gently, spoke.

"I would never wish to be anywhere else."

It doesn't do a man any good to dwell in the past. Cersei was a fool; and Jaime, an even bigger fool for falling for her and thus, falling into her trap. Were they not exhausted yet of Tywin Lannister that they had to desperately follow him to the grave?

He had sent Jaime a missive a moon before he rode to the North with Aegon the Sixth. He waited, but the letter was unanswered.

Of course, they had cut ties with him for good.

It *is* strange—feeling a sense of hollowness for losing the last of your kin, though those kin want absolutely nothing to do with you.

Casterly Rock is a magnificent fortress, Tyrion had told Sansa. Stone—hard and unmoving. He knew she doesn't have one whit of interest about the gold. She merely needed a place where she can look into matters and rule, question, gain understanding, wield power.

There's the Stone Garden too, the godswood with twisted heart trees a tenth the size of Raventree Hall's. She could offer her prayers there. Does she want handmaidens from the North? Some gold, perhaps—and no, he's not bribing her at all just to gain her acquiescence—to repair northern castles ravaged by the harsh winter?

"…and I can assure you that you will be comfortable there. I have spoken with Aegon the Sixth and he agreed to such arrangement—I would be allowed to visit you twice a moon, and you are free to sojourn in King's Landing anytime you like. Or you can stay in King's Landing, for good. It's a good place to raise children—"

"No."

Tyrion's jaw clenched. "No?"

Sansa looked up from a scroll containing the most recent of Winterfell's expenses, then smiled sadly at the Imp. "No."

He cleared his throat. "May I ask why?"

"I wish to stay here in Winterfell," she replied. "If we are to keep this marriage, then you will remain here with me."

The Imp chuckled, then silenced himself when Sansa did not share his amusement.
Of course, Sansa was burdened.

Bran had decided to stay beyond the Wall. And ever since the Lady Arya returned from some distant land close to the Grey Waste, she was never the same. *Alive yet dead*—Tyrion had heard this from the servants themselves during one of his aimless ventures in the scullery, *doesn't eat, doesn't sleep; all the lady does is stare at the godswood for hours from her bedroom window.*

She's shutting everyone out, and perhaps what the servants had said over preparations for repast was true—that Lady Arya had died with Jaqen H'ghar, and the one that sits in the Lady Arya's bedchamber, mulling over a thousand different pains, whispering *'let me undo it…'* over and over, gazing at nothingness with lifeless eyes, was in fact an *Other* in disguise.

Tyrion wanted to laugh at the inanity of their presumptions. All the Others are gone; Lady Arya is in the deepest state of mourning only. The Imp understood such perfectly, for in a most tragic way he had also killed two beloveds to him—a whore, a lord father.

And now, he had lost a sister and a brother.

He exhaled deeply and spoke. "You do know that I have duties to the king. As Hand, I must remain with him in the capital and reestablish lost dominion in the westerlands. I still am a Lannister, however rotten-sounding the name is. Casterly Rock is my home."

"As Winterfell is mine."

"I'm your husband, Sansa."

"And I, your wife."

Tyrion exhaled sharply. Thorns twisted in his heart as he beheld Sansa's face. Of course, he should have known that she can never be persuaded.

"You have your sworn duties to your king, Tyrion. I too, have my duties here, how ever unbelievable that may sound to you," Sansa explained. "Please do not make me choose between Winterfell and Casterly Rock, or King's Landing—between home and you. It's going to break me only, and I have been through that as you may well know."

"Those words," Tyrion answered. "Yet, you're making me choose between you and my obligations."

"I am not."

"Then why won't you come with me?"

"Why must I be the one to make compromises?"

Tyrion shut his eyes in irritation. "Winterfell is an eternity away from the Crownlands, Sansa."

"Do you love me, Tyrion?"

He opened his mouth to answer, thought better of it and pursed his lips instead.

Sansa turned her eyes back to the scrolls, and her soft smile was with a hint of sorrow. She started to walk away.

"Sansa," he called to her.
Slowly, she turned and faced him—expectant, close to heartbreak.

Tyrion merely stared at her and wondered how many words were unsaid, and how many times he had died inside because he was too affrighted to say them.

He shook his head, unsure. *But this…she had eyes and she chose me.*

Finally, he answered.

"Yes."

Sansa crossed the distance between them, then knelt in front of Tyrion. She kissed him on the cheek. "As I do."

"Yet," Tyrion exhaled. "I still have to go."

"Then go," she said. "Go and fulfill your duties to the king and the realms. We will send ravens to each other, in the godwood there and the godwood here, we will say our prayers and renew our vows every fortnight. If you tell me you'll ride to the North in the next moon, or the moon after that, or many moons further..." she rested her temple against his. "I will wait."

"How is she?" Aegeus asked.

"Grieving," Sabine answered. "Bewailing her loss *silently*—most painful of the lot."

"I know that, but...have you spoken with her?"

"No. She's not speaking with anyone, remember?"

She packed her potions and he packed his weapons. None of them spoke for a while. The clinking of her glass decanters and the soft clanging sound of his daggers and longswords filled the chamber, replacing the awkward silence.

For days, they had mourned with Arya. All of their attempts to engage her in even the simplest of conversations—a query on how she was faring, a remark on how lovely the days are getting now that spring is about to arrive—all of these had been useless; and so, they chose to keep her company and in the silence lament over the losses they have suffered. *Braavos, the temple and the Elder, Jaqen.* How many deaths must one witness and endure before the gods whisper, 'enough'? Enduring the loss was too fatal for words, but they cannot just die for the sake of themselves. The dead had reached a toll close to that of Daeron Targaryen when he fought for Dorne's submission—war is never a game; this much they have learned.

Every morn, they wake and realize that all things that had happened had been real.

"Do you think he's coming back?" Sabine asked out of the blue. "It is fated death, I know. Still..."

Aegeus sighed. The most difficult for all of them is to let go, to imagine alternate courses at the end of the road. *Is he coming back?* It's quite simple—human life ends in death. Is Jaqen dead?

*Yes.*

"Don't cling on that hope too much, Sabine. He acted based on choice."
"The only choice left to him, you mean."

"Yes. Had it not been for that choice, we would all have died. No questions."

"It's not fair, Aegeus."

The comely one felt his heart cave in.

He so desired to weep for his dead Lorathi brother, but Sabine needed him…strong and knowing and calm. Hence, he chose to swallow the hurts and act as if he was the most unshaken of them all, the most resilient, as if he knew that what had happened was bound to happen, that it was all for—in the Elder's mighty yet hollow words—greater good.

"Nothing is ever fair, Sabine."

Oh gods, his voice was that of broken glass. So very…weak. Damn it, he cursed. My serene cover in front of this woman—gone.

The Handsome Man felt the Waif's arms coiling around his waist, embracing him from behind. She rested her cheek against his lean, decadently firm back. "You can weep, Aegeus," she whispered. "I promise, I won't look."

The tears had fallen even before she had reminded him that it was utterly fine to cry.

And he felt her too, her soft shudders, her sharp gasps akin to one pleading for wind, the wetness of her tears that seeped through the fabric of his tunic onto the skin of his back. He despised it—knowing that she was so pained yet not being able to do a damned thing about it.

Aegeus turned to face Sabine asudden, pulled her and crushed her dainty, female built in his arms.

If she dies in that embrace, then so be it. He's not letting her go.

"Come with me, Sabine."

She looked up, her eyes still glistening and misty. He wiped those tears still unfallen and kissed her temple.

"Where?" she asked. "Where do you plan to go now that it's over? The temple is in ashes—our home. Gone, Aegeus. They burned it, killed the Elder and our brothers…our only home for years…"

He lifted her chin and devoured her lips, transferring all rage and desolation onto the passions of his kisses. Perhaps, the Handsome Man thought. She could make the pain vanish. Perhaps, she has within her some potion that could bring back bliss to a grieving, shattered man.

When he released her, he spoke. "We will build another home—together."

She shook her head, and her eyes revealed all her unexplainable aches, the sufferings, the uncertainties. "I don't know, brother. I know no other life but this assassin's life. I've cooked potions but not food, worn countless of raiments but washed not a single one. How would we live?"

Aegeus kissed her again, cupped her cheeks. "We just do, Sabine. I don't care—I could fish or farm or trade. I could buy us a ship and enter the business, sell your bottles of amortentia and those fancy trinkets you find only in Lys, dye Pentoshi rags or offer my services as a mercenary. Anything! I'd do anything…"
She buried her face in his chest. "You really have thought this through, have you not?"

He chuckled and raked her hair with his fingers. "Yes. Over and over."

Sabine stood on her toes, kissed him deeply. "Chroyane."

"What?" Aegeus raised a brow.

"I want to live there, Aegeus—Chroyane. I wish to be in that city where your Palace of Love used to stand. I wish to remain with you in your land from a thousand years."

Aegeus smiled.

*Anything lost comes back in another form.*

He nodded.

"Chroyane."

The war was not over. Never will it be.

It would always take her the greatest of efforts to not drag herself to the pit whenever those hellish dream-spectres would wake her in the middle of the night. Black, red, shadows, shrieks, fire, ice—the shades and the masks that befogged her mind were as sharp as the burning pain on her chest and guts. At times, she would find her face inside the clay basin, retching her innards out though she had eaten almost naught for many days. She wanted to starve herself so she may die, and in the midst of her wretchedness she cursed all the gods, cursed her fate in that book she had once regarded as hallowed, cursed him—for choosing to save all and abandon her.

Of all the faces she had worn in her life, the face of the Nissa is the most loathsome, the most damned.

Was she mistaken when she had told Jon that a warg is as much human as he is an animal?

*A man can befriend a wolf, but not truly tame it*—Bran's words, yet isn't the warg's soul married to the wolf's? And if wolves are wargs and wargs are wolves, then are humans essentially animals? If so, how can a human person such as herself become so disconnected with everything else as to lose the basic instinct—animal's instinct—the instinct to survive and simply… breathe her next?

Losing him was akin to a white raven losing a pair of wings.

*No.*

It was so much worse, so much more unfathomable. It was crippling, maiming, flaying her alive. A fortnight ago, the gods defeated the Many-faced one through her. It was complete cosmic pain which she had suffered, and recalled such quite well. Yet…and yet she was able to bear it.

Not this.

*Never this.*

Arya wanted to be obliterated to the last shred of her soul.
For nights, she had gazed upon the night sky, trying to make sense of the cluster of stars the Lorathi had once showed her when they rode his firebeast to Harrenhal. *Fifty-five known stars form my most favored. In Valyria, we call it Buzdari Dārilaros—the chained princess.* With much pain, she recalled the Lorathi’s recount.

*She was a water naiad chained in a rock by one goddess who saw her as a threat.*

*No prince came to save her.*

*But one dragon did.*

"I see no dragon in that star formation," Arya whispered to herself, but her lusterless eyes she kept locked upon heaven's ebony. There was a gap now, on the very place where the dragon constellation used to be. "That dragon is nothing but myth."

And how she despised those who were around her, unfettered by her agonies! How dare they tell her that they understood, how dare they offer their unsolicited words that she must pull herself up. Arya so desired to slit their throats whilst they slept, push a pillow against their faces to drown their pleas out, poison them all and watch as the white of their eyes grow purple veins, regard them all with fascination as she chokes the life out of each of them.

She wanted to make them all suffer, the way Jaqen had suffered for all of them.

Could they not die for their pathetic, useless selves? Were they such helpless, worthless mortals to have need for someone who would save them?

And did that cursed savior have to be Jaqen?

*Damn you, Bran.*

*Go hide, and hide well,* Arya clenched her teeth as she nurtured the rage. *If I see you, gods know what I'm going to do to you.*

A knock on the door. She didn't bother turning her attention from the window. Arya heard it open then close.

"I brought you supper."

It was Jon.

"I'm not hungry," she monotonously replied, her back still to him. "Leave."

Jon sighed, set the plate on the bedside table. "You wouldn't know that you're hungry until this chamber spins about you and you collapse on your face again." He sauntered towards her, and though the servants and Sansa herself had warned him about Arya's unbelievable temperaments as of late—and Sansa rarely visits Arya now, after that incident when the latter threatened her—he carried on with his admonitions. "Twice a fortnight you had fallen ill. We have all recovered from our injuries, you have not. The healing implements would hardly work if you would fail to sustain yourself—"

"What part of the word 'leave' do you not understand?" Arya turned to him abruptly, hands forming tight fists. Her tone was hostile, and she was never hostile to Jon. "Had that war robbed you of your wits?"

Jon's expression was hard, unyielding. *A broken mirror,* he thought. *Yet not grotesque, there's*
beauty still in those shards. How does one make the anguish of one's beloved disappear? "Do you really intend to kill yourself by not eating?" He scoffed. "What a stupid way to die."

"Go away," Arya said in between clenched teeth. "I'm tired of you—of all of you, so just go."

"You want me to shove spoonfuls in your mouth?" Jon replied, shedding off the role of one lover and assuming that of the elder kin. "You need me to shackle your wrists on either side of your bedpost to make sure that you will eat? Speak and I'll do so."

"Damn you," Arya shot back. "What are you now, embracing the call of your slaver's blood?!"

Jon's eyes widened for a second at those words, hurt registered in them. Still, Arya's face betrayed no remorse of any kind for the insult that had rolled off a mere while ago from her mouth; etched upon her face was deep hatred, for what or whom, Jon could not tell.

"Oh, I get it," was Jon's reply to her rancor. "You're blaming us for Jaqen's death, as if we murdered him in cold blood, as if there was no grand war half a moon ago." He shook his head, bitterness gorging his heart slowly. He willed himself to kill the antipathy right away. "We do mourn for Jaqen, Arya. We mourn for the twenty thousand others who have died. All of us have lost beloved ones to us. Bran is as good as dead now, and before the battle could even begin, I had lost Val—"

"What gave me away?!" Arya spat, walking towards Jon. The latter stood his ground. "What gave me away for you to assume that I need to hear any damned thing from any of you?!"

"She was with child, Arya."

She paused with her steps and her lips quivered as she shook her head in disbelief. "No…"

"Two moons old," Jon whispered weakly. He sat on the bed's edge. "I…didn't know. Sam told me about it when he was tending her at Shieldhall. He had died in her belly before…Sam could save her."

A boy. Jon and Val could have had a son.

"She didn't tell you."

He exhaled dejectedly. "Perhaps, she didn't want me to worry and stop her from taking part in the war. She had to be there to show a face to the high lords. She had demanded Oakenshield from them, after all. She is…very much like you. Stubborn, abandons all sense to…fight for the ones she loves."

Jon's voice was broken.

We've all lost something along the way. Sansa was right.

Still, she couldn't bear think about the heartaches of others when hers was consuming her—ripping skin from her flesh. She thought about her foolishness. Had she not loved Jaqen so strongly, she would not be suffering right now to the point of a thousandth death.

What they had was gone in the blink of an eye. He threw all the good things they have toiled and bled for, good things they have built. Promises of forever—gone.

Perhaps, she indeed had died in that cavern at the heart of winter. She was shattered during the days of Valyria and Rhoyne, but now…she was so, so broken that even the god of gods could not bring her back.
Arya looked at Jon, her face hardening with icy rage.

He dragged himself into her chamber for this—to speak of one beloved to him who had died, to burden her even more even after she had saved his arse from her own direwolf at the height of the war. Was this a ploy to brand her with guilt at the way she's making her choices—die instead of live?

Must she thank the gods for her breath, though each intake of air pierced her with anguish, knowing that she would never see him again?

"Why are you telling me this?" She bared her teeth.

Jon's eyes flickered with pain, understanding of loss. "To let you know that you do not have to go through this alone."

"Get out."

"Arya—"

"Get the hell OUT!"

Jon opened his mouth to argue, thought better and closed it again. He shook his head and exhaled heavily before storming out of the chamber, slamming the door behind him.

Arya rushed to the closed door and banged the wood with her fists, kicked it, as if in so doing she could rid herself of the misery and relentless madness tearing her into ugly ribbons. She screamed and screamed and screamed, as loud as she can—and may the sounds reach Ny Sar by the river so Mother Rhoyne could comfort her, cradle her in her state of anguish. Then, she collapsed slowly on the floor, choking in her own sobs, damaged…damaged to the point of irreparable pieces.

Four moons. Eight.

Ninth moon came.

She was gasping for breath, large beads of sweat bathed her face. Sharp exhales, an agonized groan. A scream, as she felt her guts being torn from skin to flesh. The maester's voice wasn't helping, neither were Sansa's whispers that were meant to soothe. Arya's strength came in bits and pieces, winnowing before materializing. She would never be able to endure this—not without the man who had brought her into such state.

The bedlinen had turned dark scarlet.

She hated the shade. Rich red is the shade of battle, the shade of Valyrian and Rhoynish and Stark lifeblood all, the shade of the Lorathi's hair…

"We're almost there, Lady Arya," she heard Maester Samwell say.

It was a tug of war, and she felt herself being pulled apart as she pushed and squeezed and twisted.

With one long scream, she emptied all that she is out into the world that waits.

Then, came the sound of an infant's cry—beautifully raw, melodic.

Nissa—child, woman, wife, mother.
Except that it did not at all sound like that to Arya Stark.

She kept her eyes shut as she fought for breath, her entire body tense and weak. She shuddered at the pain the child had brought upon her. How could a mere babe sap out all of her strength like this? She had witnessed battles upon battles, fought, endured the most torturous of throes, why then—it's as if nothing has yet compared to this great pain?

"It's over now, Arya," Sansa whispered in her ear, consoling. She felt her sister's fingers brushing gently her damp hair. "You did well. It's over, and he's out."

Bane, Arya's mind shrieked. Another bane of me.

Then, she felt the gods scourging her for her blasphemy. Mentally, she cried her lungs out. She was given a life, and she was being ungrateful.

Arya didn't care if the gods banished her for all eternity. She kept her eyes shut, her exhales still erratic. What was there to see, truly? Nothing. No One. This would all just end in another fatal loss that would rip her apart, another rhythm of her many sufferings.

She had loved the Lorathi, and she had lost him.

Rid yourself of anything, anyone that would only shatter you in the end, she thought. Better not to love, than to love then lose in the end.

The babe was wrapped in linen and clean bear skin. "Shush…shush, my sweet..." Sansa calmed the babe. "Aren't you a lovely little thing? Oh…sweet boy…” She hummed a few tunes—Catelyn's, the ones that spoke of spring. The babe's wails were replaced by stilled sobs.

"Lady Sansa," Samwell beckoned her. "On the Lady Arya's chest, if you please."

"Oh! Of course," Sansa laughed softly, reluctant still to let go of the child. "I mustn't be too carried away, not while Tyrion isn't here." She sat on the edge of the bed and began settling the babe on Arya's bosoms.

Silver hair, with eyes partly open, irises of bronze against the gold.

Arya stared at the babe, a mad eddy of emotions swirling about her.

He was so soft against her breast, so fragile. Small mouth, nose, hands, feet. Small everything. Yet this...little thing almost killed her a mere while ago. There is innocence in his face and form, yet Arya knew better—this child will be another realm-curse, another assassin, another dragonriding slaver, another chained god-host.

Another scourging memory of Jaqen.

She ran her fingers across the little one's skin and saw what others couldn't—dragon scales and direwolf fur. She gasped.

"Get him away from me."

Sansa gasped. "Arya!"

"And leave me alone. I don't want anyone in this chamber right now."

"What is wrong with you?!"
Arya looked at Sansa, that face unaware of the inner demons she had to wage war against. With deep hatred and fear, she just stared at her before shifting her eyes to Samwell. She didn't dare look at the babe again.

Then, her mouth on the gaunt face spoke. "Everything."

"Lady Arya," Samwell began with a voice of plea. "The babe needs to be fed in about…half an hour."

"Get someone else to nurse this babe," she replied, then directed her attention to the candle by her bedside.

Sansa clenched her teeth as she lifted the babe from Arya's bosoms. "You have indeed died beyond the Wall. What a terrible shame."

Without another word, Sansa walked out of the room, Maester Samwell trailing behind her.

The king now stood waiting at the Dragonpit, a ruin blackened by fire atop the Rhaenys Hill.

They would bring him there, the grand orchestrator behind rebellions and wars among kings, stirrer of chaos in the Seven kingdoms. Despite himself, Aegon the Sixth had to admit that there was true wit in the man for his treachery to reach as far as Essos.

Even the greatest orchestrators die, as all men must.

Through Sansa Stark, through Varys of the Whispers and Tyrion Lannister, the king had learned of every atrocious plot Petyr Baelish had conjured up and performed, beginning with the Rebellion, continuing to the War of Five Kings. He conspired with the lords against the Free Cities, cheated the lords of the Vale and the Riverlands through his loan schemes with the Iron Bank as leverage. He juggled loyalties in the midst of it all, then bent the knee after setting up the murder of the Lannisters, after the Targaryens have reconquered the capital.

The king kept his calm as six from the City Watch dragged the Littlefinger to him.

He did not honor the man's request to be executed through dragonfire in front of the capital's smallfolks and nobles, lords who had defected. Littlefinger wanted it grand, needed his death to be the talk of castles and brothels both. Even in the face of his sure ruin, he still desired a whole scene—staged and with spectators, akin to the mummer's rigmarole he had run from the time of Baratheon and bastard kings.

*No,* Aegon thought as he beheld the face of the master mummer. *He would die a simple death, and no one will know about it. His name will be forgotten. No scroll will ever be written about him, no one will ever know who he is. This is the fate he deserves.*

Littlefinger's head was pushed against the beheading block. No resistance, not that resisting would change the course for him.

Still, he couldn't keep his damned mouth shut. The bastard had prepared a damned script. "Forget you not how I aided you in the great war, your grace—"

"Gag him," the king cut in.
No, Aegon would not honor him with the ritualistic last words due him prior to execution.

The soldiers did as they were told.

Aegon the Sixth lifted Blackfyre and with one smooth motion, swung it.

Littlefinger's head toppled on his feet.

"Bury the body," he said. "With the head."

And no, Aegon would not even give him the honor of a spike.

"...as far as the plans for restoring the Citadel is concerned. The Scribe's Hearth and the Sensechal's Court were both partially damaged, the Weeping Dock, fully damaged. The cost per structure is around a million gold dragons, and with Braavos being restored, we could not acquire such amount so easily—not while the magisters of the Free Cities are at present, rebuilding their own. As it appears, the Sealord had transferred all gold depositories to Lorath prior to the attack by the Valyrian slavers..."

Varys's words fleeted only past Aegon the Sixth's ears. He was seated in the head of the small council's table, though in truth he was somewhere else.

_North._ His whole damned self was in the North.

He was once more lost in his own thoughts. His blank eyes were on the missives at the center. There was a message from Daenerys about the now stable conditions in the Dragon's Bay and the Vaes—no more rape and pillage, thank the Seven, from Illyrio Mopatis and the triarchies with reports from across the Narrow, and a few others containing request for aid from Dorne, the Reach, the Riverlands.

He suddenly could not care less about any of those. Curious—a few moons ago, this was everything he had ever wanted, _needed._

Apparently, becoming king only meant sitting on one's arse during gatherings, listening to endless talks and pleas in the throne room that seemed considerably larger with the seat of jagged iron torn down, riding south and across seas to check on the strength of the crown's forces. If only Connington were still alive, the old man would have probably given him a slap about the head—*_More than kingship being your right, it is your duty!*_ he would have said. *You owe it to this people to rule and rule well!*

During lazy nights, he would invite Tyrion over to Maegor's Holdfast for some Pentoshi amber. "Duty, not desire," the Imp had told him one evening. "Most of the time, it's never easy."

"Perhaps he still lives," had been his reply to the half-man. "Everyone thought Aurion dead until he emerged from the pocks of West of Westeros."

Oh, yes. Tyrion had laughed himself hoarse when Aegon voiced out his plans that were ridiculous at best—send scholars to Essos to study the layout of the Grey Waste, Stygai, the lands within and beyond Yin.

"Are you out of your damned mind, Aegon?" Tyrion had asked, incredulous. "Why in hell would you even do such a thing? Don't tell me that you too, have fallen in love with Jaqen H'ghar and
wished to find him so you can spend the rest of your life together like in some Essosi faerie tale of
dragons loving dragons?"

Aegon wasn't amused.

"Ah, but of course," Tyrion carried on, as if recently realizing what was already known. "You wish
to pursue such an impossible feat for the sake of the Lady Arya."

The king's eyes widened as it would in near-death. For the sake of the Lady Arya—how could the
half-man have realized the motivation? The lids of the lad's eyes grew heavy as he cast his gaze
downwards, sighed at the pain. If only he could give the Lorathi a fraction of his breath should he be
found, then Aegon would do such thing, no damned questions. Yes, he thought dejectedly. That, for
the sake of the Lady Arya.

"I've lost her—we all have. Since after…that war."

"You lovesick fool, you," Tyrion replied, shaking his head. "We all have lost a part of ourselves after
that war. There's no other way but to heal. Give her time."

Your grace?

Your grace…

He blinked.

All eyes of the small council were on him.

"Er…" he stammered, pulling himself back to the present. "Please…do proceed."

A sigh escaped from the Head of the Kingsguard, and the Masters of Ships and Coin were slightly
shaking their heads.

This is now the king; and the king's head is in the clouds.

"We will all be informed of their grace's decision soon," Tyrion answered on his behalf. "As of now,
I believe that a recess is in order."

The members of the small council departed from the room. Tyrion stayed with the lad, eyeing him
with concern.

Aegon the Sixth clicked his tongue. "What?"

"You know what."

Aegon rubbed his face with both hands. "I'm just a little…” he stared at the Imp, melancholic, the
way Rhaegar himself was. "Uninspired."

"Forgive me, your grace," Tyrion's lip curled up in sarcastic retort. "But we cannot summon your
royal artists in every small council meeting to have them paint the Lady Arya naked for you whilst
you lend the men your ears. You have to find inspiration somewhere else."

"You really are an arse sometimes, do you know that?"

"And you will think me more of an arse with what I'm about to say," Tyrion answered. "If you fail to
perform as king, you will lose the seat—throne or no. You kill yourself over such concern for her,
yet she doesn't give a horse's shit about you."
Aegon the Sixth winced, as if a million lances struck his heart.

The messenger came. Good, the king thought. Great timing. He couldn't show his Hand how utterly wretched he's becoming.

"Missive from the North, your grace."

Aegon had snatched the scroll from the messenger before the man could even finish his announcement. "It's from Sansa," he exhaled, unscrolling the message.

"What?" Tyrion exclaimed, grabbing it from the lad's hands. "Why would she even write to you?"

They both read the missive silently.

Aegon,

I hope you are in the best of health.

Arya has given birth. She is not well. I was hoping that you and Tyrion could come and visit.

Sansa.

Too straightforward. Written in urgency.

"She wrote straight to me, so she can be assured that you would cease acting like the stubborn spouse that you are and indeed ride for the North." Aegon stood and walked in haste towards the holdfast. "Do prepare, we leave tonight."

"The retinue, your grace. The horses and the men—I need time to gather them all. Supplies, provisions," Tyrion said, trailing behind him. "It's nearly impossible to ride within three days, much less within the night."

Aegon paused and turned to Tyrion, his smile with a hint of tease.

The half-man sighed in irritation. "You do know that I hate flying."

The king merely patted him on the shoulder. "The sooner we get to Winterfell, the better," then, strode off.

A few hours and it will be dawn. She hasn't slept couldn't. She was dead, and dead ones never slumber. She was slumped over on the cold floor, begging the Lorathi to chase away shadows and demons hovering over her. Jaqen...her lips have whispered, and felt the wetness dripping from her mouth. There he was at the corner of the dimly-lit crypts of the castle...head tilted...smirking...or perhaps it was mist only, conjured by the twisted workings of her warg's mind.

Statues of Stark kings that lay dead in that undercroft had no eyes, yet they all saw her.

Arya held tightly the hilt of her dagger, pressed the blade against her wrist. A quick slash—that was all, and her pains would cease.

She giggled. It tickles. The blade felt like dandelion seeds kissing her skin, those delicate ones in the far grasslands where Valyria and Rhoyne converged. Let us play in the fields my goddess. A cackle escaped from her drooling mouth, so loud that she had to tip her head back. Her eyes chanced upon a
small opening across the crypt's stone ceiling, showing clearly the ebony sky with scattered stars and thought of the *shierak qiya* that had brought the Lorathi to her and taken him away, too. She hissed with contempt at the cosmic herald.

*Lovely girl…*

*Udrâzmalon.*

If she hurled her dagger to the heavens, would it reach the heart of that damned bleeding star and shatter it to fragments?

Arya held her hand out as if to touch the distant comet...she shook her head, eyes wide, lips quivering. "Haaa..." she laughed softly, then stopped to clutch her chest...gasped...for she felt invisible knives stabbing her guts, her spine. *If the star shatters and rains down its fragments, would the fragments fall on my face like Jaqen's storm of petals?*

There is that second which would forever define eternity. There is that second when Arya had realized that utter devastation is as real as the blood that now trickles from her wounded wrist.

*He's not coming back.*

Arya smiled. She longed for the scarlet, *blood*—that which she used to steal from others, that which had become the purpose of her heinous assassin's life, that which the Lorathi had so willingly given up.

*Jaqen—liar.*

*Traitor.*

*Oathbreaker.*

He broke his vows to Catelyn at the Hollow Hill that he would take Arya under his protective wing, broke his promise in that sacred confluence in the Hall of Faces, his oath in the godswood of Winterfell.

She knew she had to bleed.

If she wouldn't, how in hell would she know that she's still breathing?

"Damn you, Jaqen," she whispered, the wet of her mouth mingling with the blood.

*You've ruined me…forever.*

She shut her eyes and savored the pain, deepened the cut, slid the blade slowly across the flesh.

The sound of urgent, commanding footsteps startled her.

"Get up."

She whirled back and hurled the bloodied dagger to the source of the voice. He blocked the throw with his sword and hissed with rage as the dagger clangored uselessly on the floor. He sheathed his Valyrian steel then rushed to where she was slumped, baring his teeth.

"Is this your clever plan?" Aegon the Sixth asked. He knelt and surveyed Arya's dismal body of skin and bones, the hollowed eyes. He pulled out a kerchief from his breastpocket and wrapped it roughly around Arya's bloody wrist. "Kill yourself, and kill others who plan to stop you from killing
yourself?!

Her cold stare met him, raving mad beneath the mask of calm. "Unhand me."

Aegon stared back, containing himself that was then being pushed to the warpath. He growled but carried on tying the cloth to ease her bleeding. "You haven't been taking care of yourself! You have not fed the child and left him entirely to the care of a wet nurse—"

"What is it to you?" Arya spat, wrenching her hand free from Aegon's grasp. "Did you fly all the way from the Crownlands merely to enlighten me about how very flawed I am as a childbearer?!

"Arya—"

"Summon your dragons and leave this place," she seethed before limping away.

Aegon stood and looked over his shoulder. "I will take Damien to King's Landing, have him as my ward—raise him as my own, train him."

She froze on the spot, then turned slowly to face Aegon. The latter faced her as well, his eyes and stance both uncompromising.

"Don't you dare take my child away," Arya said in between clenched teeth.

Aegon the Sixth shook his head. "I have spoken with Jon and Sansa. Rickon was devastated but he voiced out his assent in the end. You are, as of the moment, unfit to have the child around you. A whole week had passed since you have given birth and not once did you visit the babe to see how he is faring, if he's still alive. Many times, you have hurt yourself—pray, who would dare speak that you would not redirect such rage to your own son? Please, Arya," the lad scoffed with feigned derision, and felt his heart break in so doing. He couldn't just…rush to her and crush her now delicate form in his arms—the body he so worshipped, and kiss the hurts away. Not now…maybe not ever. Aegon shook his head. "Do not, for even a second, pretend that you actually care about that child."

"How dare you," Arya shuddered with grief, with fright and fury. She dashed towards Aegon and pummeled his chest with her fists. "How dare you! You presume you can act on anything just because you're now the blazing king of this godforsaken place?! Damn you!"

She screamed in wrath as if betrayal rolled in the aisles in front of her, and clawed at him, cursed, used her might to hurt him—blow after blow after blow…yet he stood his ground, gazed only at the woman he loved with all that he is to the point that he had risked losing everything else, as she carried on scratching and striking him here and there. He felt the blood on the side of his mouth, the scarlet oozing from his cheeks that she had scraped with her nails, felt his heart collapsing in on itself with her every gust of attack.

And she was sobbing and snarling with rage and sorrow.

_Weep, Arya…_his heart whispered inwardly as he endured every pain. _Just weep…feel again._

Until she collapsed on her knees on the floor, weakened by her own acts.

She tightly gripped the fabric of Aegon's riding breeches, shuddered...

Tears fell and carried on falling.

"I killed him…"
Aegon felt his eyes burn. He shut them, inhaled deeply.

"I've been blaming everybody for…for a fault that was mine…"

He knelt in front of her, held her chin to lift her face.

_This is sin_, his soul roared in earnest, yet he held no sway over his being at that moment…and she was so broken and he merely desired to…heal her, _be with her_, just as he had promised the Lorathi many moons ago. _No_…his head was at war with his heart yet the stronger between his two faculties swallowed the other, and so he found himself kissing every tear away…

Gently, he took her in his arms. He exhaled in relief and uttered silent worship to the gods when she did not pull away.

For moments long, he just held her.

There was no sound in the crypts but their gentle exhales. Even the sobs had vanished.

And he only allowed her to heal. It would take a lifetime, yes, but to begin is to aid the self.

Stillness, permanence.

_Find your way back, Arya Stark._

Finally, she broke the silence between them.

"Tell me, Aegon," Arya whispered. She was now sitting with her back against his chest, his arms around her. Arya's bleary, empty eyes were on Eddard's statue. "You and Jaqen…the godswood beyond the Wall…"

He smiled.

"I'll have you know—he knocked the hell out of me to force me into swearing that vow with him. I rode to Valyria heavily injured."

"You…" Arya's voice broke. "You regretted your decision."

"No," he said with a sigh. "Not one bit."

"You were fools both," she said. "Jaqen, especially. I'm not some shatterable object that he can hand over to others for caretaking."

"You're not."

Arya turned to face him, indignant. "That's all you have to say about that stupid vow?"

Aegon roamed his eyes across her face, traced every feature with that purple gaze of his. "Vows are words only, Arya. But to make them—the reason and motivation, the pain it takes and it will, the act itself, these are…what make the vows better than the wind, I guess."

She didn't speak, not for a full minute, as if weighing the truth and worth of those words.

"And what's the reason, what's the motivation behind the pain?" Arya asked quietly, her anguished eyes still trained on him. "Why did Jaqen make that vow? Why did you?"

Aegon held her gaze as he let his fingers interlace with hers. "We swore…because we _love_ you."
She bit her lip. "Why?"

The lad shook his head. "I…I don't know, Arya. That's like asking me why I bother breathing my next when I know I'm going to die anyway."

She nodded once, as if to accept his persuasions, then stared at Eddard's statue once more.

"I see him. In that child."

He kept his silence.

"Jaqen's lips, nose, gods…his eyes. The babe looked at me and I just saw…” she gasped, then exhaled heavily, woe gorging her again. "How can I bear go anywhere near my son, look at him at the very least? I wish to hold him, but I also wish for the pain to go away. That child…that child is Jaqen's ghost."

"The pain will go, eventually," Aegon replied. "But for now, you must hold on to it."

"Why would I when it's killing me?"

"Yes, it's killing you. It's bruising your soul right now and making it bleed. Let it do so, Arya. Let it scar. It's the pain that keeps everything real. It's the pain that keeps you from forgetting that Lorathi."

"I love him."

"I know, Arya."

"I love our child."

The lad smiled and planted a gentle kiss on her hair.

"Yes. I know that, too."

"Don't take him away from me, Aegon. He's the only one I have left," she whispered her plea. Aegon dipped his head to gaze at Arya's eyes. "Only if you take good care of him."

"I will."

He nodded.

"Will you help me, Aegon? Be…with me?"

*Friendship.* Even if he desired more, this…this should be fine for now. It may be a sundering of his hopes that she could be his in the distant days, yet he didn't care.

*Be with her—not because I promised Jaqen—but because…because I love her.*

Aegon smiled.

*Be with her.*

"Always, Arya Stark," he kissed her brow. "Always."
It hadn't been easy, but day to day she licked her own wounds, allowed herself to heal.

Aegon was there, Jon and Sansa and Rickon, too. And how she at first managed to push them all away during her darkest hours, during those times when death had almost won her over, was just beyond her. Jon's words made sense—she didn't have to go through the loss alone.

Sabine and Aegeus had left Winterfell for Essos three moons ago. She had kissed the woman farewell and the man, she embraced tightly. Masters, friends. "Thank you," were Arya's words, and those were enough.

Aegeus had given her his scrolled map of the Known. "There are places I never finished mapping," he had told Arya. "The realms are endless."

And Damien…

He was exactly as Arya had remembered him during her cycle as one Rhoynar a thousand years past. Three moons old, and he already wished to be freed from the cradle and crawl or walk, and he laughed as if the wind carried mirth, and always he would attempt to open his tiny lips as if to speak or argue, then wail when he could not convey himself.

_I always looked at him in slumbers and laughters_, Arya recalled her own words by the Zefarisse. _I witnessed him walk his first steps on the shipdecks cradled here and there, and he would never fall. It's almost as if...almost as if he can fly._

The loveliest thing of all is that he has so much love about him, in the gentlest gaze and smallest smile he exuded it, and benevolence, and warmth. There was Eddard in the child's face at one angle, and…Jaqen in another.

Arya loved the babe, loved him so. Loved him more than anything.

"His cries are a warrior's cry," Jon had told her one time as he watched her tend to the little one. "Strong, powerful."

Arya ran her forefinger across Damien's sleek, silver strands of hair, still marveling at the life that came out of her. "He's a dragon. Of course, he's strong."

"And a wolf," Jon added. "He's Jaqen's and yours."

"Dragon-wolf-bred," Arya smiled sadly, then looked up to Jon. "Just like you."

Sansa ran day-to-day matters in Winterfell whenever Jon was away to survey the wildling settlements in the Gift and across the fallen wall. He always returned with playthings carved out of ashwood and sentinels—tiny direwolves, swords and spears, horses—made by the spearwives for Damien. _The shattered Moon's son_, the free folks had named him, _the dragon that came out when the Long Night caused the Sun to crack the Moon's face_. Arya only smiled at Jon's recount; the wildlings were raising them both to some divine status merely because of what they have witnessed during the great war. Over the ale even, the wildling men would do their occasional huddle merely to speak about the Lady Arya's child—a _shapeshifter_ they say, like Robb Stark himself, only that Damien can transform himself into a direwolf and a dragon both, with fur of silver and scales of gold.

Arya had laughed spiritedly at the last of Jon's accounts. "And you did not even utter a single word to deny their unfounded lore about my son?"

"Why would I?" Jon laughed back, then took the babe from Arya's arms. He playfully threw Damien
in the air and caught him. The babe squealed and giggled, his stout legs and feet wriggling in delight. "Why would Uncle Jon? Let them think that Damien is a firebeast and a winterbeast and a headstrong, naughty little thing…” he carried on with the infant-talk, tickling the babe’s sides.

Arya only smiled softly as she gazed at them both. "He's not a shapeshifter, Jon.

Jon paused, then gazed back at her. "We don't know that yet. And just let them talk," he turned his attention back to the babe. "They know what Jaqen did for them, they know what you did; and so, your child had become their most favored subject during their evening huddles."

Damien's first nameday came. He was nowhere to be found.

They scoured the whole castle, Sansa more hysterical than Arya was. After half an hour, they found the babe in the maester's tower west of the keep with Rickon.

Damien was firmly seated on the table, wide-eyed and very still and with a mood so unlike his usual child-temperaments.

The young lord’s fingers were combing the babe's locks gently—Rickon had just finished dyeing the babe's silver strands scarlet.

"Rickon!" Sansa shrieked. "Why in the world did you bring Damien here?!

The young lord didn't answer as he lifted the child from the table and carried him to both of them.

Arya gasped in shock, then grabbed the nearest chair in order to keep herself upright.

"Dear gods…"

She had not cut Damien's hair since birth, and so it grew past his ears. Soft waves had formed at the tips, and the silver—the silver strands shone against the blood hue. The babe cooed, reached out both arms to Arya, his plump fingers opening then closing.

Jaqen—just…a smaller, stouter version of him.

And as she took the child from Rickon, she couldn't hold sway over herself as she placed gentle kisses on the babe's rosy face. Her eyes shuttered, her flesh trembled with inexplicable emotions, conflicting, drowning her, overpowering her—Arya was grieving and nostalgic, broken but whole, blissful yet…undone.

"You should not have done this, Rickon," Arya said weakly as she tightened her hold of Damien.

"I beg to differ," the young lord replied with a determined tone. "I do not like hearing the servants and the lords spitting out their senseless grapevines. The silver hair—they are convinced that Damien is Aegon the Sixth's bastard. I…" he shook his head. "Aegon is an honorable man and perchance the lords read his fondness for the child differently, but Damien is Jaqen's son."

"We know that, Rickon," Sansa chided him gently. "You need not concern yourself over the opinions of worthless others."

"I need to," Rickon replied, his voice rising a little. "You should have heard them talk—Targaryen mongrel, another Snow. After the great war, you'd think they've no strength left for absurd prattles. Some were even speaking of outright falsehoods, that you whored yourself in front of Aegon the Sixth in Pentos so he would ride with us to battle, and that Jon persuaded you to do it. They have to know that the man who saved all of our arses is this child's father, not the king."
Arya ached for her babe. It was painful to witness her innocent child becoming an object of either worship or scorn, yet the more painful part is not about the lords never learning that Jaqen is Damien's father, but the fact that Damien himself will never learn who his father was. There would be stories—hers and others—but no lore, no myth could ever capture who the Lorath truly was, what he had done.

She stroked the babe's hair of scarlet and ivory.

"I've stopped concerning myself about what others think, Rickon," Arya replied calmly. "We'll dye Damien's hair every fortnight, and we're not going to do it just to prove a point to the Northern lords."

Rickon nodded.

*Time will come,* Arya was convinced as she pressed her lips against Damien's temple, pledging a promise. *And all will be well.*

The *shierak qiya* was not supposed to appear in the heavens for many, many moons.

One spring day a year after, it did.

"Don't stray away that far, my love," Arya had told Damien who was collecting smooth moonstones by the heart tree. They were in the godswood. It was almost sunset. Arya was whetting her blades after training some of their northern young on the bow and the arrow. Ten and three to ten and four, the females have outnumbered the males who wished to train, two to one, and Arya was able to hide her surprise but not her delight. "Girls should learn how to defend their own damned selves," voiced out one, throwing the boys a glance daring them to say otherwise. One of the lads smirked at the words of the bold lady, who was then donning oversized training breeches, then whispered a remark about how ladies nowadays are discontented with men's swords between their legs, that they would rather seek to train with swords of steel.

Arya had whacked the lad's behind with the flat of her long blade, and the latter ran off, limping and howling.

*Another year.*

She paused with her whetting and watched Damien, those stout legs walking and skipping, his footing sure yet unsure, as he murmured unintelligible words to himself. Arya smiled softly as the child placed some of the moonstones he has gathered inside a small sackcloth he had no doubt retrieved from the scullery, as his soft curls of red and white were being blown listlessly by the wind. The smile had turned to laughter when she saw how Damien would study the patterns of the stones first before deciding whether to keep them.

The child had saved her from herself—salvaged her sanity.

It would take her forever perchance, to truly say that she has healed. But she is healing, and it certainly helped that Aegon rides for Winterfell every two moons to see how she was coping, and Damien loved it whenever he arrives, loved it whenever Aegon carried him to Rhaegal and let him touch the jade scales, loved it too, whenever Aegon would bring those utterly unnecessary novelties meant for children, and other fancy playthings from the capital.
Aegon's arrival would always stir the whole North awake, and with this came the gossip, the whispers from serfs and lords. "Dragon's misbegotten, the king had come once more for his bastard," and "Time to bed the Lady of Winterfell again. What has it been, two moons? Ah, 'nough time. King's itching all over." All these, despite the heaven-reaching resemblance between the Lorathi and the child.

Arya had swallowed some and spat out some. Let them think her a whore. Aegon never touched her and she knew the truth, but at times she loses herself. The altercation with Lord Mors was the most recent.

But who could blame them? Who could blame them when during Aegon's most recent visit, he had kissed her on the lips and she didn't pull away?

Or perhaps, it was because all she could see beneath the silver hair and the purple eyes is the Lorathi-Valyrian who had loved her.

Midnights were the most ruthless of times. Always, she awoke with a gasp, with large beads of sweat on her face despite the cold. Always, she clutched at her heart because it was squeezing painfully, collapsing in on itself, and her eyes burned but she dared not shed tears...she dared not, in order not to shatter the chrysalis she had formed around herself—a protective fortress so she may cast the Lorathi out from her memories, so the fibers of her saneness would not break. Always, she retched, and did so silently in order not to wake Damien from slumber.

And always...

Always, her fingertips would gently run back and forth over the linen and the fur of her bed—their bed, silently begging for the slightest feel of the Lorathi. Always, she would sense his strong legs brushing against her own, his lips light upon her cheeks, his lashes fluttering against her bare shoulders, his sensual touch...ghosting all over her.

Always, she would catch a faint scent of ginger and cloves against the fabric, a deep purr that could be no more than a whisper...

Arya missed Jaqen like hell.

The shierak qiya just hovered over them in the godswood, brighter than she had last seen it.

She shut her eyes and uttered a prayer to the old gods. Catelyn's prayer.

Show him to me.

Even as a shadow, even as a dream.

She sighed and collected her blades from the ground. Some blood-red leaves had fallen from the heart tree. "Come, Damien, love," she called to the child. "Let's head back now."

"Mum."

Damien's call—it was different. It wasn't fear which she had heard from her child's lips even though the bleeding star blazed high above them, sending flashes of red all over the firmaments. Hooting sounds pervaded the castle's courtyard from a distance.

A split-second. The comet's tail sparked brighter than the sun. Cheers erupted from as far as the keep.

A mere split-second.
Arya gazed up and marveled at the blazing herald. *That comet appears chaotic yet unbroken. Nothing…no one could ever predict what mysteries move with it.*

Just like that, her recollections traveled back to Harrenhal.

"Mum."

There was fascination about the voice, a wild recognition of something long lost.

And when Arya turned her gaze over to her son, she saw a man kneeling in front of him. *Impossible.*

She gasped in shock and despair and love and everything else…and it took all the strength that she had to not collapse on the damp earth and crawl her way towards both of them.

"Jaq…" she opened her mouth but no words came out. Deep exhales…*breathe Arya…don't die…tears…sorrow and bliss lancing through her flesh…and she tugged at her hair and bit her lip so hard and asked herself if she has gone mad…*

But the man reached out his hand to the child, and their palms connected.

The child gasped, as if the tether that linked him to the man had just materialized as sudden and with it, a surge of power rushing like one bequeathment from father to child. Damien's hand and fingers were so tiny that they didn't cover even half of the man's palm, and they looked so, so alike that Arya couldn't tell where the child ends and the man begins.

But those connected palms, they were not *quite*…touching.

She knew what was happening. It had happened before—with the same *shierak qiya* as the harbinger of curse and blessing both, and when it had come, a dead Eddard and a breathing Catelyn had met face to face for a speck in eternity.

*The realms are colliding…*

And that was when she had abandoned all reason and rushed towards them.

"Jaqen! Damien!"

In her desperate haste, she tripped and fell, then forced herself to stand. She ran to them and they both seemed so far away from where she was that she almost prayed to the gods for wings.

*Arya…*

Jaqen opened his mouth and her name rolled out from his lips, but his sweet utterance was soundless.

And she reached him…

And she spread out her arms to throw herself onto him, so they may touch and kiss and sob with mirth together.

And she was thrown back with such force just when she was a fraction of a distance away from him.

Something hard, something…*impenetrable.* She had hit an invisible wall of glass, one that can *never* be shattered, one that would *never* allow her to fully be with him.
Arya rose again, ran to him. Her body hit that wall again. He was in a different realm with different laws, and…she couldn't cross it.

With desperation, she ran her palms across the imperceptible barrier, looking for a rift, any gap at all that would help her break it. Jaqen held out his hand and lay his palm flat on that wall as if to touch her face, but they both knew, it was akin only to touching someone at the other side of a transparent mirror.

"Jaqen," she pleaded as she carried on running her hands across the barrier frantically, her eyes never once leaving his face. "Jaqen, come…come to us…"

He only shook his head.

*It cannot happen, Arya,* he said, soundlessly.

"Bran…Bran…" in her desperation she had begged the Weirwood, even offered a bargain. "Brother…make the realms meet…please…please…"

Could the last greenseer hear her? Could he possibly, on their behalf, ask the gods to grant the Warrior and the Nissa one *last cycle, together?*

Damien was watching them both, his very young eyes and mindwork already comprehending what was happening.

*This is their story.*

Jaqen knelt and wrote something on the ground with his forefinger; then he stood, his eyes riveted on Damien's face, his gaze that of anguish…longing…

And Arya had realized as she uselessly reached for him that the dead lives on…and they still hurt and feel.

With her fists and knees, she pounded on the unseen wall, every strike sapping out her strength. She unsheathed her Valyrian steel and with all might, hammered the wall with it, thrust it in futile hopes of breaching it.

The steel shattered.

She didn't even have the time to be stunned. Arya knelt on the ground and clawed out the dirt like mad, even as her hands and nails bled. That wall had to end somewhere beneath the earth, and if she had to dig a whole tunnel to get to the Lorathi, then damn it, she will.

Her eyes flew up to the heavens. The bleeding star…*fading.*

"Bran…Bran…please…" she implored as she rose and with a quivering hand reached out for the Lorathi. Her eyes darted up to the *shierak qiya*...then back to her beloved, the existence of one dependent on the other, and they both waned in sight.

*Time, Arya's soul screamed her plea. Give me time.*

Jaqen smiled softly.

Arya's now healing heart broke. Old wounds resurfaced, pain was roused. One damned smile…and she had to start all over again.

His lips opened. She couldn't hear his words, but she knew every word.
Nothing—no realm, no time, no mortal, no god—can ever triumph over us, can ever break us…

Then, he faded away as that fleeting collision of realms ended. Second after second after second, his lovely face vanished in front of her.

It wouldn't happen again—this meeting of mated souls. Not for a very, very long time.

Gone.

"Jaqen…"

She merely stared at the void for what must have been hours before her knees gave out.

Her tears bathed the spring ground.

Then, she felt tiny hands and tiny fingers caressing her hair—Damien's hands…healing her again.

Gently, she pulled him to her and held him tight.

Five years.

The shierak qiya appears every five years. Realms collide every five years. A damned blink in eternity with him…every five years.

There is a reason for leaving, and that reason is simply to…return.

"All will be…well," she said, more to herself than to her son.

Five years.

Chapter End Notes

Uhm, guys? You okay? XD

Shippers! Here's our penultimate chapter. As always, your comments and kudos are much appreciated so just keep them coming. Thanks for staying with the fic. :D

Check this out (Some of you may have seen this before. I do NOT own the pic.):

Red-haired J/A baby, really cute
The Dragon's Star

Chapter Notes

I do NOT own the vid (plebeian subscriber only):

'Reflecting now on how things could've been, it was worth it in the end.'

Check this out, guys (I own nothing):

How I imagine Damien, just insert the white hair streaks somewhere

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Wind and words. Wind and words.

We are only human, and the gods have fashioned us for love.

That is our great glory, and our great tragedy."

The Maester, A Song of Ice and Fire

So, they waited.

Arya spent the past years telling Damien about their tale in a version fitting for a child. Stories about Rhoyne and Valyria whether writ or unwrit had replaced the usual Westerosi lore. She left not a single detail. The boy always begged for tellings before being tucked in to bed, and so Arya assumed the teller's role till the peak of night.

Over and over, the boy had made her recount the stories from the Jade Compendium, especially that of the Fallen Warrior.

Then, there were her stories from Harrenhal, and Braavos, and the North.

Tell our babe our story. Never, ever forget my name.

Fifth year arrived.

The shierak qiya did not appear.

"Why do you think so?" Arya asked Maester Samwell. They were combing through some astrographic charts in the library tower as she had insisted, told the maester that they needed to ascertain whether or not the northern fields are ready again for tilling. The maester assured her that there were steady provisions coming in from the Reach, and that Jon and Aegon have been talking. "I know that, Sam, but...we have to be self-sufficient up here, don't you think?"
"The shierak qiya remains a mystery even to us, maesters. Forgive me, Lady Arya," Sam said, not taking his eyes away from one chart. He threw Damien a quick glance, reading quietly in the corner, his small sword sheathed safely on the table beside him. "I have noticed your…curious interest on cosmic patterns as of late."

Arya shrugged. "I find the whole system riveting."

Sam nodded, not because he was convinced. He had always known the fierce woman beneath the façade of a loving mother, the warrior and the wolf in the Lady Arya's essence that cannot be swayed, caged. Her son seemed to have inherited such traits—he was wild at times yes, but wild with a good heart. The maester had grown fond of the child—he had pulled him out of Arya's womb after all, such that everyday, he had a stack of scrolls ready for Damien to peruse after a bout of swordwork with Arya. The child always had so much to ask, especially about Stark kings, dragons, time.

And the boy was only seven.

Somehow, Samwell knew that the woman's newfound inclination towards star formations was never about the Northern fields and their potential for growing winter berries.

"If I may be so bold," Sam began, exhaling, unsure of whether or not to proceed. "I think that…there is something you wish to tell me but could not for some reason, Lady Arya."

Damien shifted in his seat but kept his eyes on his book, moved his gaze left to right of the leaf to convince the maester of the act. The maester's lips tipped up in response.

But, of course.

Damien had been listening to them. That boy was far intelligent and profoundly keen for his age.

"And if I may be so bold," Arya replied, half-humoring the maester. "What, pray tell, is it that you think I wish to tell you, if there is?"

"Mum wishes to travel." It was Damien who answered. He raised his eyes from the pages for a while and smirked. "But she doesn't know where."

Arya regarded her son with amusement. "Very perceptive, my love."

He dipped his head as if to partly bow, then ran his fingers through his hairlocks of scarlet-and-ivory. "A boy has been trained well."

"Yes, I daresay he has," Arya smiled, bowing back. "Thanks in large part to his mother."

The boy's grin reached his eyes of bronze-gold.

Arya's smile fainted. She sighed and looked away.

*Dear gods…* she thought. *He's practically the Lorathi incarnate.*

"Been in the dull North that long, eh? Very well." Maester Samwell unscrolled one of the maps—the most recent one drafted for Westeros, with new borders and sigils drawn for each territory. "Let's see, the South is most agreeable during the summer, but I suggest staying away from Dorne unless you crave for sour wine and queer spices—"

"You're looking at the wrong realm, Maester Sam," Damien teased, his voice in a sing-song, his
attention still on the leaves of his read.

Samwell's brows furrowed, then rose as if realizing what the boy meant. "Ah!" he raised a forefinger, then continued digging through the collection of scrolls. "Essos…Essos…"

Arya only exhaled, throwing the boy a vague look. Damien grinned again, then shrugged.

They had to tell Sam, or else they would never know where to go.

"It's not in the maps," Arya finally said. She sank on the settee and buried her face in her hands, as if chagrined though she had asked nothing yet from the maester. Her eyes cruised to Damien's face, now passive, then to Sam's utterly dazed visage. "Not in our ordinary maps, at least."

The maester paused with his rummaging and stared at them both. "There is no shortage of maps in the Citadel, my lady, my lord. I've seen them all and they all look the same. There's Westeros, then Essos, then the Unknown lands of Sothoryos, Ulthos—"

"Bran the Shipwright," Damien said, winking at the maester.

Samwell was suddenly thunderstruck, his mouth agape for a good minute. He laughed nervously, then pointed a playful finger at the boy. "You, you! You really find amusement in torturing your good, old maester with your witticisms, eh?"

"Not at all, Maester Samwell," Damien replied. He was smiling yet his eyes were bound and determined. "Not at all."

The maester stared at an expectant Arya who only nodded, then turned his attention back to the boy. "This—all this..." he gestured towards the star charts and the maps. He shook his head. "Gods, you are impossible. Both of you."

"Oh, come now, Sam," Damien still teased. "Don't break my dear mum's heart."

Arya pursed her lips—whether to stifle a laugh or to suppress the urge to shush the boy, she wasn't sure.

Sam paced across the room, then paused to survey the charts again, now more concerned. He looked up to Arya. "The place you are looking for is not a place, my lady."

"True," Arya replied. "Very true."

"It's a gateway to other places," Damien finished the statement for them both. He leaped from his seat rather excitedly and looked at the maps. His palms brushed across the scrolls, as if sensing where the portals are. "Other time-realms."

"Why do you want to find a...a non-place that is not in the maps?" Sam queried them, a hint of panic now evident in his tones. "Not to mention, if Jon learns about this—"

"Let me deal with my Uncle Jon," Damien assured him, eyes tracing the border of the realms. "You have to worry about a single thing only, Maester Sam."

Arya laid out another scrolled map for them to survey, the one which Aegeus had left her before he departed for Chroyane with Sabine.

Then, a small piece of parchment containing two words—those words that one Lorathi had written on soil when the realms collided five years ago.
"You do know a thing or two about High Valyrian, don't you, Sam?" Arya asked. She motioned her head to the written words. "Decipher that for me, will you?"

Sam looked at the words closely, swallowed. There was a hint of smile on his face, the nostalgic kind. "I remember one fellow novice of mine at the Citadel. He would always view the star formations from the roof of our tower and stare at this," the maester pointed at the words. "The dragon's star—zaldrīzes qēlos. I found him once, and sat with him. He asked me if stars ever gaze back, and if the worlds last. He said 'worlds' so…I thought him mad and never talked to him again. Next thing I knew, he was gone from the Citadel."

"The dragon's star?" Arya held her breath, her gaze moving slowly to Damien who only stared back at her. "Tell me about this…dragon's star."

"It used to be part of the Buzdari dārilaros—star formation of the fabled chained princess," Sam replied. "After the Long Night, the dragon's star just…disappeared from the heavens. Even the surviving maesters were scratching their heads at such strange turn in the cosmos."

"What does it look like?" Damien asked. "The zaldrīzes qēlos?"

Samwell smiled and patted the boy's head. "A dragon eating its own tail."

A full minute had passed without anyone uttering a single word. Only Arya's heavy breathing was audible in the midst of that perplexing stillness.

The sound of a leather-bound book landing on the table with a soft thud stirred them. Damien had taken it from one of the shelves, and was now searching for something in the pages. "A dragon eating its own tail, " the boy read from the leaf. "…describes self-suff…suff…"

"Sufficiency," Samwell offered.

The boy nodded. "Self-sufficiency and the perfection of the created universe." He looked up to Arya. "What does that mean?"

It was Sam who answered. "Infinity—a neverending cycle of death and rebirth leading to immortality. The concept of eternity and eternal return. A completeness, a liberation."

"Who is he," Arya's question came out in a weak whisper. "This…novice who looked at the stars?"

Sam's eyes narrowed with concern for the lady, for the curious shift of her temperaments. He answered, nevertheless.

"His name is Pate."

Arya inhaled sharply. Damien squeezed her hand.

He knows the whole story. He knows about Pate, and the man who wore his face.

"He's about as big as I am, too…pale, and has never earned a single link despite his years in the Citadel," Sam recounted, shaking his head.

Damien snorted.

Arya laughed.
Sam merely looked at the two, confused.

Still, the maester had to know.

"Why do you wish to find West of Westeros, Lady Arya? Truly?"

She didn't answer.

Damien was smirking as he sauntered towards the settee and retrieved his playsword. He settled and leaned against the cushion, studying the glistening blade. "Lovely girl," he purred—a poor attempt at imitating the Lorathi, then threw a shock-faced Arya one of his teasing glances. He studied the white strands of his hair rather obsessively, cleared his throat and purred again, in a deeper voice this time. "Arya, jorrāelagon."

Oh yes, the boy knew it all—the pet names, the stories behind the pet names...

"Quiet yourself, young man," Arya snapped with an amused smile. She turned to Samwell, who was chuckling softly, now understanding the whyfor of the whole request. "And you too, maester."

Damien only shrugged and winked at the rebuked maester.

"Please," Arya placed her hand on top of Sam. "Tell me how to find it, tell us."

The maester sighed. What is honor compared to a beloved, and duty compared to the feel of a newborn in your arms? He recalled Maester Aemon's words. Wind and words...the gods have fashioned us to love.

And love...this one Samwell Tarly understands perfectly.

"They say that the dragon roams across the cosmos and returns to the chained princess every thousandth year," the maester finally said. "The mystical portals to other realms lie on the exact coordinates where the dragon's star makes its temporary lair, and...it is constantly on the move. It is almost impossible to pinpoint its exact location because our spheres move alongside it. Whether against or towards, we don't know."

Do the stars gaze back?

Yes, Arya thought.

"A thousand years," she repeated. "I can't wait that long, Sam."

"We can't wait that long," Damien corrected her.

Arya raised a brow and smiled. "Very well, Damien—we. She turned to Sam. "There must be another way."

"Yes, there is," Sam replied, occupied with the star charts once more. "The dragon could not have gone that far. It's only been a few years since it was last seen—seven years, to be exact." He motioned his head to the boy. "Right before the young lord here was born."

Arya exhaled impatiently. "You're riddling us, Sam. What are you truly saying?"

Sam chuckled. "Be a good boy and tell your mum, Damien. You're a clever one, after all. Not to mention, you've been asking me day after day about what is West of Westeros."

"Tell me what, Damien?" Arya turned to her son with folded arms across her chest.
Damien leaned forward. "That if we wish to find my father," he began, gazing at Arya as if he understood everything, and shared the pain with her, the longing and the hope that cannot be bent. "If we wish to find Jaqen, then we must chase that dragon’s star."

---

Chase that dragon's star.

The maester was right—they're being impossible.

Arya settled herself on the bed beside Damien. He was lying with his back towards her, a book in hand. She stroked his hair gently, then planted soft kisses on it. "What are you reading, my love?"

Damien yawned. "Just…an Essosi tale."

Arya peered over to have a look at the page. "Will you read it for me?"

The boy faced her and grinned sheepishly. "I still stutter with some of the difficult words, mum."

"Don't worry about it," Arya pinched his nose. "It's just me you're going to read for."

"That's the thing, mother," Damien replied. "It's you I'm going to read for. I should be able to read well."

She smiled.

"And I have no doubt that you'd be able to."

He thought about it, then nodded. An exhale came out of his lips before the words of the lore rolled off his tongue.

This Valyrian never wished to fall in love for love makes men weak. And so, he locked his heart inside a crystal coffer that could withstand the heat of the Fourteen Flames.

"Interesting," Arya remarked. "And what are the Fourteen Flames, if I may ask?"

Damien rolled his eyes at the query. "The string of volcanoes that used to stand in Old Valyria."

"Very good," Arya said. "Carry on."

The gods have a terrible sense of humor.

Even with the Valyrian's heart locked away, he still could not help but fall for one woman he had taken captive in a war against Valyria's enemy clan—the Rhoynar.

Seconds of silence.

"Are you well, mother?" Damien asked, when he sensed how Arya's breathing had changed.

"Yes," she replied softly. "What happens next? Tell me…"

He loved her so, and desired to prove it. One night, he led her to the dungeons and showed her his heart—beating only for her. The woman did not believe him.

'After what you have done to Rhoyne, you could never persuade me that you indeed possess a heart that loves,' the woman had told him.

'Then, take it,' the Valyrian said. Take my heart and show it to the lords. They promised to free you
'And will you truly die if I take this?' she asked, for she did not wish to steal the man's heart just to free herself.

'No.'

She took his heart with her.

And the Rhoynar were freed.

But the Valyrian suffered a fate worse than death. His heart hosted his soul and all that he is, and now, the woman has it.

She has all of him.

He foraged across the realms to find her. Gods came and went, mortals faded, and he still wandered...and wandered...for a thousand years and another...screaming out her name...the one that has his heart.

Arya felt her eyes burn, her heart collapsing. "Did...did he find her?" she whispered.

Damien smiled and kissed her cheek. "I think...she has to find him this time, don't you, mum?"

She smiled. "I love you, Damien."

"I love you, too."

Persuading the rest of the Starks to allow them in such an escapade wasn't the hardest part.

The hardest part was bidding them all farewell.

A missive was sent from Winterfell to Bear Island. Jon had requested the Lady Maege to welcome in her harbors a small ship with white sails carrying a crew of ten from the Iron Islands—most of them saltwives skilled in navigating the seas. An expedition, the missive from the liege lord had said. To find lands across the Sunset Sea; to learn if there are people in these lands that the North can trade with; to acquire valuable information on what lies beyond the mapped realms, fully sanctioned by the king: Aegon, Sixth of his Name.

The reasons were half-folly. The expedition was meant in part to sate the desires of two dreamers.

And no one dared ask why the young lord Damien would accompany the Lady Arya in that voyage, but there were whispers, as was the usual.

Jon had held them both tightly, had reminded them countless of times to practice care—lower anchors at the first sight of land so provisions could be replenished, refer to the charts and maps always, navigate wisely so as to avoid the path of seastorms.

And if worse comes to worst, sail back home.

The small ship would carry provisions for a full crew sufficient for two and a half years of seafaring.

Arya had assured Jon that the saltwives knew the seas better than he or she ever would, and that she would not steer the rudder herself.
Sansa saw through the supplies, made sure that these were all packed and prepared. Just the night prior, she had the most emotional verbal fracas with Arya, screaming her lungs out, making Arya understand the lunacy of her plans, persuading her that West of Westeros is just a figment of some mad sailor's surreal imaginings, even going as far as making threats of riding south to the Crownlands and taking Damien with her.

"And Jon…how foolish could he be, that he would allow you to pursue this madness?!" Sansa had shrieked hysterically. "I will send ravens to Tyrion. Aegon the Sixth will hear about this and you will never set sail, Arya!"

Sansa, like Jon, had acquiesced in the end.

And Rickon could not help it but cry, much to his own chagrin. He had begged Arya not to take Damien, to no avail, and Damien had only laughed at him. It ended with Rickon chasing Damien across the courtyard with a stick.

"Go, Arya," were the last of Jon's words. "Go mad like the moon and find what you seek."

They both rode to Bear Island with a small retinue and reached the harbor within a day.

"Clear the port!" Arya heard the captain's orders.

*Finally, finally.*

*A chase that's worth all that is in this world.*

"Come, Damien."

The boy turned his attention from sea and crossed the ship's deck towards Arya.

"This is pretty wicked, mum," the boy said delightfully. He spread his arms and inhaled the briny air from the seas, toying with his hair. "I have never been on a ship before."

Arya smiled. "Oh, but you were born at sea a thousand years ago, my love. And you were still in my belly when you first rode a dragon."

Damien's brows furrowed. "I don't understand."

"Yet," Arya kissed her son's creased brows. "You don't understand much yet." She held out both of her closed fists to the boy. "Very well, here. One of my hands has *magic* in it. Can you guess which?"

The boy bit his lip and darted his eyes from one hand to the other, leaning forward to have a closer look, then leaning back, thinking carefully. He tapped his chin with a forefinger. "How can your hand even hold magic, mum?"

Arya laughed at the boy's witticisms. "I'm an enchantress, Damien," she japed, then with a hushed tone, added, "Don't tell a soul."

The boy grinned, then tapped at her left hand. "Here."

Arya opened the palm of her hand. On her ring finger, a pendant of red jasper against specks of verdigris dangled with a chain of Valyrian rose gold.

The pendant glowed for a second, the glittering green scattering within the scarlet hue.
Damien gasped as he touched the pendant, thrilled. "What is this thing?"

"A dragon queller."

"The Dragon Queller?" the boy asked, his eyes wide. "The same one father gave you?"

"The very same one," Arya answered, placing the necklace around the boy's neck. "Regency over the magic of Old. Wear this, Damien, and dragons will come to your aid."

He fiddled with the pendant, utterly pleased. "Does it truly work?"

"Of course, it does, my love. I've used it many times."

Damien smiled and kissed Arya's cheek. "Thank you, mother." He examined the pendant, smelled it. "But…what if there are no dragons around when I call for help?"

"Dragons are everywhere, my sweet, always," Arya told him. "Dragons are legends, and legends are time."

"Truly?" the boy asked, excitement flaring in his eyes at sudden.

"Truly," a man's voice said.

Thereupon, a jade green dragon screeched as it zoomed across the sky and circled their small sea vessel. Sounds of panic and awe erupted from the crew, with some taking cover behind the still lowered sails and the others remaining rooted on the deck either due to fear that froze them on the spot, or the want to witness the beast's glorious flight.

"You would leave, Damien, without even saying goodbye?"

Both of them forced their eyes away from the magnificent beast and turned towards the voice.

Damien grinned ear to ear upon realizing who the man was.

"Aegon!"

The boy rushed to him and hugged him tightly around the waist. Aegon stroked the boy's hair in response, his stirring eyes never once leaving Arya's stunned face.

"You've grown taller," the man remarked, turning his attention to Damien. He lifted the boy's arm and examined it, nodding his approval. "More sinewy, too."

The boy flexed his arm as if to show his brawns. "I'm seven," he said, shrugging. "I'm one of the big boys now."

Aegon chuckled, then leaned over to pat the boy's head. "Any girls yet?"

"Lots, but…" Damien winked at the man. "I just pay them no mind."

Aegon the Sixth had laughed so loudly at the boy's quick-witted retorts that the ship's crew had to pause with their pre-voyage occupations and turn their attention to the three. Realizing who the man was, and the firebeast that heralded his arrival, they all bowed deeply and uttered their salutations and compliments. They were not able to tell despite the silver hair, for the king was donning one of those ordinary, worn-out seafarer's accoutrements from Pentos.

"Hardly necessary, comrades," Aegon the Sixth told them, bowing back with the same regal finesse.
"We're all voyagers here."

At these words, he threw a large rucksack atop a pile of packed supplies.

"What are you doing?" Arya asked, her eyes darting from the rucksack to Aegon to Damien who was now grinning with clear excitation.

Aegon just threw her one of those smiles. "Is it not obvious?" then, led Damien to the west port beams to survey the waters. "How's your swordwork?"

"Excellent, as expected," Damien replied, tapping lightly at the sword sheathed on his hipbelt. "Mum's taught me how to block then spin for counterattacks—"

"Damien! Aegon!" Arya called to them both. The two spun to face her. "A word with you two."

The boy groaned and the man only chuckled in response, but both approached Arya, anyway.

Both of Arya's hands were on either side of her hips, demanding for a clear explication on Aegon the Sixth's presence. She pointed at the man's rucksack. "Explain that to me."

Aegon raked Arya's form with one sensational stare, then shrugged. "I need a vacation."

Damien laughed.

Arya gave the boy a stern look, which shushed him on the spot. She went back to Aegon. "The voyage might last for moons, even years."

"I know."

"And who's to look after the kingdom while you're out at sea in a most delightful furlough?" she asked, then swallowed as the warmth of the king's stare seemed to crawl through her every pore. She could almost hear her own heart beating like war drums and the blood flowing like Rhoyne all over her, and as to why, she couldn't tell.

"Tyrion will oversee the lot on my behalf till I return. He's a grown man, he knows what to do," Aegon replied with nonchalance. "Not to mention, Sansa is there to aid him with the matters of court. And should they find themselves insufficient, there's Jon."

"You're impossible," Arya snapped, albeit deep within her, there's that comfort, the assurance that she and Damien will not be alone in this journey. And truth be told, she wanted no other companion in this madness but Aegon the Sixth. Still, there are apprehensions—a mechanism of defending oneself from getting hurt again. "Utterly impossible. You're going to leave the Seven Kingdoms for this…insane voyage?"

Aegon chuckled richly. "Oh, gods! Don't be silly, Arya Stark," he said. Then, his expression softened, his purple eyes sparked with…all things lovely. "I'm leaving the damned Seven Kingdoms for you."

None spoke another word.

Only the whispers of the ocean's wind, the orders of the captain and the first mate, Arya's erratic exhales could be heard on the deck at that moment. Aegon just held her gaze, and she held his.

A hint of smile played at the corners of her lips.

Someone to love…and something to hope for.
Damien broke the silence. "You said that only dragons can see the zaldrîzes qêlos—the dragon's star from afar, mum. Aegon had brought us one."

The man smiled at the boy, brushing away the strands that covered the boy's eyes. "I can summon two more, should Damien wish," he teased, then turned his fond gaze to Arya Stark. "I don't need to eat much—bread and stew and mead will do for me, I don't snore, and I know some songs that could make krakens fall asleep."

Damien snapped his fingers, pointed a forefinger at Aegon. "We need his skill set, that's for sure."

And Arya just stared at them both—her beloved son and her devoted friend—and she couldn't help but smile as bliss filled her heart. "You do know that we're embarking on this voyage to look for Damien's father, yes? The man I love?"

"Of course," Aegon replied, grinning back at her. "I have done my fair share of wayfaring—twenty years to be exact, and I know how it feels to finally know what you're searching for. And you cannot cease to search, Arya Stark, or you'll be lost."

The search...what did we all want to find, or what have we all found that we would risk our lives scouring the realms in order to have it again?

For Arya and Damien, it was Jaqen.

For Aegon, it was her.

"Very well, then," Arya finally said, mussing Damien's hair fondly. "We'll let Aegon come with us."

The boy grinned and coiled both arms around Arya's waist.

"And just so you know, Damien," Aegon said. "I didn't actually need your mother's permission to set sail. I too, am a big boy, so…"

The three of them laughed.

"Raise the anchors!" came the captain's orders. "To the helm! Check your swings, sailing now!"

And as they all walked to the ship's beams to watch the seas, a voice called to her from the waters, the depths of which are connected to the endless and undying Weirwood roots.

Arya of the Rhoyne, Arya Stark...

Nissa Nissa.

Where to?

"To find a man, Bran," Arya whispered. "To find him."

“No, I would not want to live in a world without dragons,

as I would not want to live in a world without magic,

for that is a world without mystery,

and that is a world without faith.”
Hope you liked the whole fic! Leave a comment/kudos whenever. Thank you for reading, guys. <3

J/A ship is the best.

BOWS.

CURTAINS CLOSE.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!