

DAEMON sat in silent contemplation as he watched Baelor and Rhaenyra play in the godswood. Boughs of scarlet rubies hung over them like jagged drops of serendipity. He closed his eyes to the whispering breeze, wondering if he concentrated hard enough that he would hear her voice carried upon the eastern winds.

The broken thing in his chest bled furious with searing anguish. Hot and fervent as a glowing knife in a bed of embers. Scarred and twisted, mutilated by his own vengeful hands. Scorned by the very soul it existed for, striving vainly within its mortal sheath.

Daemon had begun to hope, though it was akin to a small frightened creature. Always scampering away into hiding when he looked upon it. A hope that was entwined with fear.

The septa came, as she always did, to usher little Rhaenyra away for the evening. A fond smile formed on Daemon's lips as he observed the children bargaining for just fifteen more minutes. Though it was to utter futility, septas have not been known to be lenient women. That was how they performed their duties so well. Firm and without scruples.

Baelor trudged back to his father with a morose frown. Daemon leaned forward to swipe at his childish pout. "The hour has grown late, little one."

"I do not wish to return yet," Baelor protested.

"Why not?" Daemon inquired with humour.

The boy cast his gaze to the ground, shoes shuffling in a petulant manner. "The room is cold and it's too quiet at night," he complained.

Daemon had to remind himself that he too was once young and lewanting, seeing monsters prowling in the deep shadows. A little scion that was green and fresh and sprouting to a brighter future. He patted his son's raven head with a chuckle.

"That is how you learn not to fear the dark," Daemon said. "Just like learning how to fight with a sword or swimming in the bay or loving another with your entire heart."

The crease between Baelor's brows deepened, eyes flitting, and he was quiet for a moment. Then he asked, "Do you still believe Mother is out there?"

A question supplicated a thousand times over, one that Daemon sought answers for in all his waking days. The letter tucked close to his collar now weighed heavily with newfound melancholia. A small fracture showed in his careful facade.

"With every ounce of my soul," Daemon told him. "I promise I'll find her. I'll turn every stone in the Free Cities until I do."

"I hope you find her." Baelor peered up at him with glassy eyes of longing reflected back in familiar violet. "I miss her."

"As do I, little one ... As do I." Daemon offered his arm out and Baelor reached forwards to squeeze a hug around his father's neck. He then lifted the boy up in the air amidst a dissenting squeal. Baelor kicked his small feet at the betrayal whilst Daemon laughed, stealing him away from the godswood.

That night, he found Baelor hiding beneath his covers. Daemon was unsure as to what tricks the boy's mind played on him in the late hours, but he did find terror in the darkness. He tutted his son, coaxing him out of the blankets then lighting candles in front of his bed.

Daemon sat next to him, playing shadow puppets with his fingers.

"There, that looks like a horse, does it not?" Baelor nodded with fascination. "Now it's a bird!"

He flapped his hands in the air, diving onto Baelor's nose who giggled loudly.

"The shadows are only scary if you think they are," Daemon told him. "Look, you can make one yourself." He held the boy's hands together, thumb lifted like an ear. "You just made a dog."

Baelor grinned, yapping at his own shadow puppet. Daemon drew him close, allowing the child to burrow warmly in the folds of his shirt. Though sleep would not come easily for Baelor, and he implored for a lullaby. So Daemon sang to him, an old song that his grandfather and father used to sing to him before, a million lifetimes ago.

"Drakari pykiros ... tikummo jemiros!.."

He watched as Baelor's eyelids grew heavy, falling into a slumber of flames and skies. "Good night, little one."

The next day, he would bid his son a lengthy farewell before taking Caraxes and riding east.

The dusty, arid streets smelled of wet mud and something dead beneath. Marbled statues of tigers and elephants stood on either sides of the path leading from the northern trade road. Merchants swarmed around him in droves, lugging their wares and goods.

Truthfully, he had never been to Volantis before and had no inkling on where to start his search. The markets seemed as good a place as any to test his luck. The name Targaryen should not be a common one even in Essos. But he had no idea whether his estranged aunt even still used her given name or taken on a different moniker for herself.

He eventually reached the Long Bridge that joined the two halves of Volantis across the Rhoine. One of the wonders made by man, the gateway held an arch of black stone that was carved with manticores, sphinxes, dragons, and other strange beasts. The road itself was barely wide enough for two carts to pass through. Wedged between tall buildings of shops, taverns, inns, cyvasse parlours and brothels.

He passed weavers, candlemakers, glassblowers and fishwives. As Daemon walked on to the centre of the bridge, Volantene spearmen with decorated stripes displayed the hands of thieves and heads of executed criminals for all to see.

On the eastbank, he still spied slaves and hathaysmiling about under the torrid sun. The impenetrable Black Wall came into view, guarded by more striped soldiers. It was said the Volantene rode chariots on top of the Black Wall each year to celebrate the city's founding.

He was questioned at the gates and Daemon presented his letter adorned by a heraldry that was meaningless to him. But the Volantene nodded with permission and allowed him to enter the black heart of the city.

Ancient palaces and temples enduring the test of time laid sprawled before him. Lush greenery decorated the streets like a dreamy oasis, palm leaves swaying in a crisp breeze. Only noblemen who could trace unbroken lineage from Old Valyria itself were allowed to dwell there. Daemon thought he shouldn't have needed any permission to enter.

He traversed the white stone paths, passing walled courtyards and majestic, sculpted pillars adorned with lifelike statues. Then he found it, a courtyard described as housing a flock of swans amidst an eternal spring.

A tall, beautiful woman of the Summer Isles greeted him at the front doors. He was then brought through long corridors of the large house towards the inner gardens. Childish laughter followed him, slipping through doors and passages that he was not privy to.

The woman led him by a large fountain that was carved with so childlike faces, spitting jets of water into a crystal clear pool. He spied a flash of silvery hair running across the hallway he came from, the pitter patter of small feet resounding in its wake.

Then a voice, so as sleeping music, called his name. "Daemon?"

He turned to lay eyes on her. A vision of grace and moonsong. The ugly thing in his chest wailed and clawed at itself. Shedding sanguine crimson over obsidian crags. A desert ran through his throat, as dry and arid as the Great Sand Sea.

"Lyra?" His voice was hoarse. If it was a mirage, he never wanted it to end. If it was a dream, he never wanted to wake.

Her lips trembled as she drew a tremulous breath. Then they were hurtling across the gap between them, colliding in a yearning embrace. He held her face between fervid hands, tears already rolling down her cheeks like sodden pearls. And he kissed her with a ravenous black hunger, a dark desperate need under the blazing sun.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed against his lips. "I'm so sorry."

Daemon held her close against himself, as if she would disintegrate into the shimmering heat. He hushed her gently, fingers tangling in her sable hair. "It's not your fault."

"I never wanted to leave you," she whimpered.

He kissed her, again and again, while whispering, "I know. It's alright, you're back now."

She cried into his shoulder, stopping only when they were interrupted by a small indignant voice. "Mama, what's wrong? Who is that?"

Daemon turned in surprise to find two pairs of lavender eyes staring back at him angrily. Silver hair glistened in the noontide. Lyra snuggled delicately, bending down with outstretched arms. "Come, both of you."

They approached cautiously before hiding behind her skirts. Their unapologetic glares bore holes into Daemon's head, protective hands grasping at Lyra's legs as if he meant to take her away from them.

She looked at him with a wistful smile while still addressing them, "Say hello to your father."

Daemon's gaze softened before he went down on a knee. "Tell me your names, little ones."

The boy looked to him suspiciously, still displeased at seeing his mother upset. "Vaegon, and Alyse."

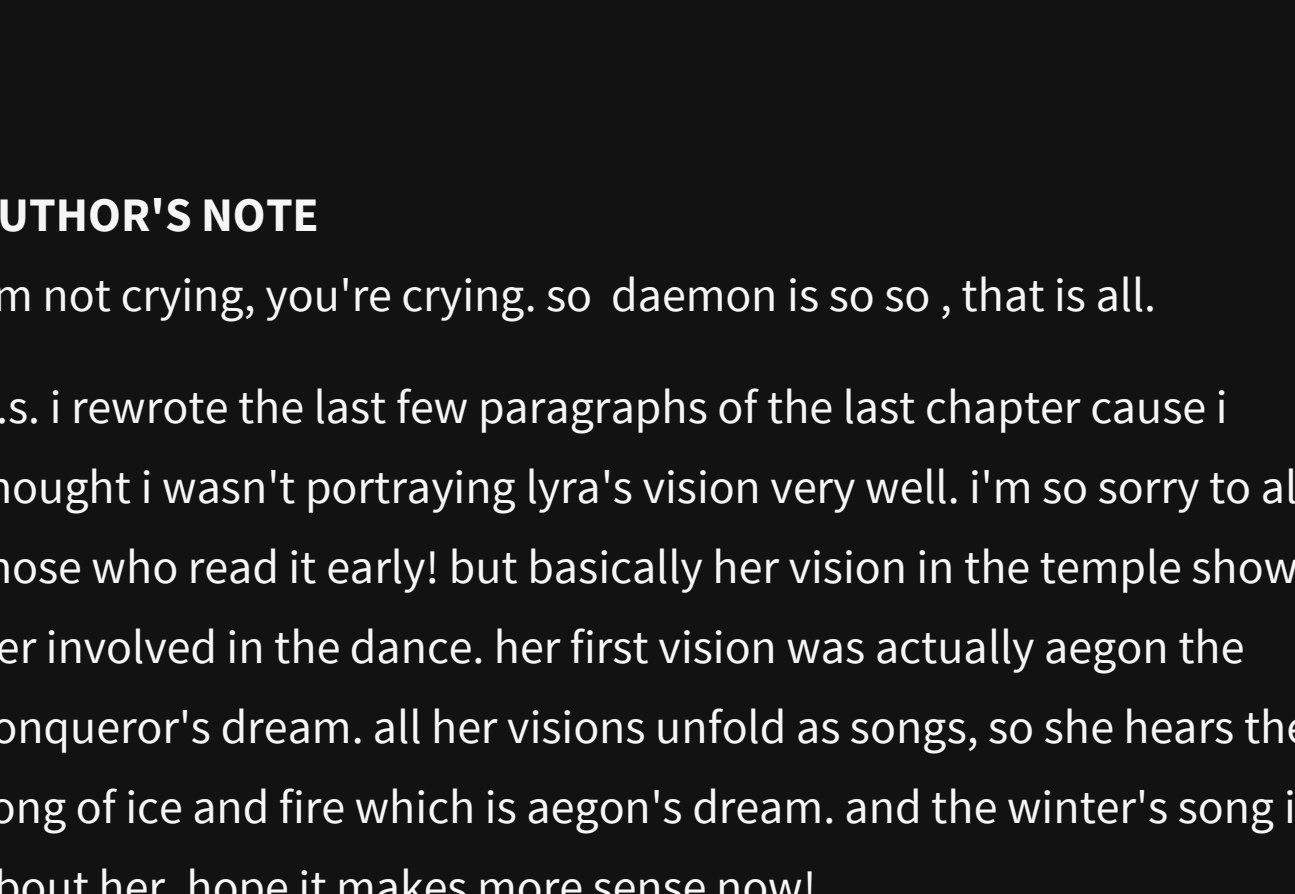
"Beautiful names," he said with half a smirk. He then removed the ring from his finger and offered it to them, shaped in the image of a curling dragon with ruby eyes. The girl reached out for it with interest, turning it between her nimble fingers. "Fitting for two little dragons."

Alyse looked at him with a wondrous expression. "Mother said you have a dragon called Caraxes."

"Yes," he said. "You can see him if you want, and we can ride him together."

Their eyes widened simultaneously before they assailed him with excited requests for dragonriding, little hands grabbing onto his sleeves. "Yes, please! I want a dragon too!"

Daemon laughed, glancing up at Lyra whose dewy-eyed smile was filled with love and contentment. The thing in his chest thrummed, and he remembered what it used to be. With the beat of dovelike wings, his heart rekindled in a burst of summer star fires.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

i'm not crying, you're crying. so daemon is so so, that is all.

p.s. i rewrote the last few paragraphs of the last chapter cause i thought i wasn't portraying lyra's vision very well. i'm so sorry to all those who read it early! but basically her vision in the temple showed her involved in the dance. her first vision was actually aegon the conqueror's dream. all her visions unfold as songs, so she hears the song of ice and fire which is aegon's dream. and the winter's song is about her. hope it makes more sense now!

p.p.s. thank you for 100k reads!! i'm so floored that you're enjoying lyra's story, it's become so precious to me (cries)