A Thousand Years

by IndigoEyes

Summary

A world torn in two. Two hearts loving as one.

Vampires and Werewolves have always been sworn enemies. For both, there seems to be no middle ground to bridge the animosity between them and to leave their blood-painted past and differences behind them.

But what happens when a She Werewolf finds herself bound to a Vampire Prince for life? Lyanna Stark is robbed of her home, of her family, of the man she loves, of a life that had been and never would be. Being left without a choice, she is thrown into a whole new world of magic and dragons soaring the skies.

The more she gets to know the Prince and his world, the more her cold feelings melt, only to realise that her heart's own love is burning brighter than her people's hatred.
Shafts of pellucid moonlight were slicing through the canopy of trees, putting a vortex of drifting mist to rout in its sweeping path and breaking the pouring blackness around me.

The Shadowood was relatively quiet, apart from a symphony of soft sounds that was reaching my acute ears from the close vicinity; the gusting wind, hooting owls, the blissful nature blooming and short heartbeats were keeping me company.

I was perched on the crook of a tree branch, monitoring my whereabouts from an excellent vantage point, in hopes of detecting any hearty quarry but to my misfortune, stragglers like hares and squirrels had been my only meal so far. Although a second nature, hunting wasn't a breeze, even for someone of my age and abilities. Even if, spring was the only season that reigned over this half of the Shadowood, the part that belonged to Valyria; the Vampire Realm. The other half belonged to Zara, the Werewolf Realm.

Legend has it, that the two kingdoms were named after the first two original vampires, from whom my kind was born. According to the story, deep rooted in the traditions of my people, Valyria and Zara were two able Queens, ruling a kingdom of prosperity and justice, keeping it sheltered from the malicious threats of humans.

Alas, one day, Zara was wandering in the Shadowood where she chanced upon Freyr, the heavenly god of fertility and pleasure. Spellbound by her beauty, Freyr coupled with Zara and soon, the fruit of their passion came into this world; two healthy babies, Elijah and Norah.

Years passed and the twins were raised in the Vampire Court, deeply loved by their mother and the people around them. Until the night of the full moon on their eighteenth birthday came. Once the moon was fat and shining on the sky, the twins suffered great spasms and pain, losing the remainders of their senses with every passing second until there was left none. Gradually, they turned into gargantuan wolves, up till the break of dawn, ravenous beasts with the ability to tear to shreds everything in their path and kill a vampire with only one single bite.

Terrified and threatened from the fact that there was actually another weapon except for the ash and oak wood that could kill them, the vampires decided to exterminate this genetic anomaly once and for all, a strategy that Valyria endorsed as well.

Her sister, afraid for her beloved children's life, helped them escape and smuggled them out of the vampire grounds. More years went by and the twins' offsprings began to multiply rapidly. Creatures nearly as fast as vampires, capable of changing into wolves whenever they wished to after their first transformation, which usually happened upon adulthood. Werewolves from a minority became a considerable force, that spread everywhere like pollen grains. This was the reason why they were being oppressed and exploited as slaves and animals by my kind for so many years.

Indignant with their wretched lives and the daily injustice injurious to them, werewolves raised in rebellion, being led by the twins and Zara. War was waged, a protracted calamity of continuous carnage, death, and misery. Werewolves against vampires, blood against blood and dragons against dragons, each one serving their master with blind, steadfast loyalty and gifted with the deadly power of one of the seven natural elements.
When both parties, came to a lamentably enfeebled state, many fervent negotiations took place and as a result, a treaty was signed to ensure that Werewolves and Vampires were kept apart no matter what. The country was split in two, each new kingdom named after the two Queens, sisters who fought against each other valiantly in order to protect their people. Yet, after so many years, our hatred toward each other burnt brighter than ever.

*It's coming your way.* Arthur's voice resonated in my head and ripped apart my thoughts. I reckoned he was somewhere on the other end of the forest. He didn't have to specify what 'it' meant or warn me though since, in an instant, another heartbeat joined in the chorus, this one stronger and louder.

The scent of wet moss that saturated the air around me mingled with another heady aroma caught in my nose, flaring my nostrils.

**Blood.** The cloying scent of sweet blood. My fangs started aching, begging to be released, flirting with the idea of savoring the neck of this poor animal. My eyes appeared to be synchronized too as the violet around my pupils leached of color, and its place took a carmine shade.

With the stealth of a shadow, I whooshed towards my prey, venturing deeper into the woods, so deep where no mortal would dare to go, so deep where shadows and demons said to be lurking in the dark, capable of bringing one's worst nightmares to life. I was not afraid for I was a monster myself, probably the worst one. People often believed they were safer in the light. Little did they know that monsters didn't come out only at night but they were walking in broad daylight too.

The smell of my next meal became tangier and tangier as I was advancing closer, leaving behind me shrubs, thickets, and ageless trees until I reached a wide clearing.

I peered through the thorns and my fangs protested once more. Less than fifty paces ahead stood a healthy enormous stag, which was chewing on the crisp grass, unsuspecting that his death stood a few breaths away. My mouth watered and my throat went bone-dry just as the thirst of two days in a row was demanding to be immediately quenched.

It wasn't that I hadn't access to human blood in my disposal. Thank the Cauldron, blood was flowing in abundance within the territories of Valyria, even though the majority of the remnants of the human population chose to follow the werewolves once the war had been officially over. Nevertheless, it was my choice to abstain, mainly, from humans in general and settle on animal blood as a substitute, even if its effects weren't as empowering. Rarely, when my hunts didn't prove to be successful at all, only then would I seek the Blood Bank, but still, I didn't feed on a straight source.

Taking a step onward, I crept closer but then a twig snapped beneath my feet, a sound more than enough to cause the stag to whip his head toward my direction in alarm. As if it possessed a sixth sense for monsters, the deer rose on its hind legs and flashed out of the glade, like a bolt of lighting.

A growl of unadulterated frustration spilled from my lips, at the same moment that my quick reflexes and my hunger took hold of the reins. In a blink of an eye, I swooshed forward with the speed of a thousand shooting stars.

Three breaths later, just when the stag was again back on sight, I was about to lunge myself at him, to sink my teeth into his juicy flesh but before I could do so, the deer had reached the end of the woods. It had crossed the line of trees and with a graceful leap, it flew above the river and landed on the other bank.*On the other side.*

My legs abruptly came to a halt, still keeping me under the lightless shade of the canopy, a few feet
away from the river, something more like a big brook. I couldn't take a step beyond that river, for this flow of waters was where Valyria ended and where Zara began. Crossing this natural border, meant encroaching on the werewolves' grounds and, therefore, violating a treaty, signed a thousand years ago. A treaty meant to restore peace, a treaty meant to keep our animosity at bay.

The difference between our worlds was already apparent from the colours of the Shadowood split in two. Plush green versus fiery tangerine orange. Green for the spring and winter, the only seasons alternating in Valyria and orange for the autumn and summer, the only seasons alternating in Zara.

I unpin my gaze from the amber path of fallen leaves, from where that blasted deer vanished and instead, I find myself staring at the razor-sharp point of an oak arrow, destined with deadly precision to be pegged on my chest.

My eyes shift from the stretched bow to its owner on the other side of the river, a girl shrouded in a cloak as dark as her onyx black hair. Although her face was overshadowed by a baggy hood, I couldn't help but notice the contrast between her alabaster skin and her voluptuous rosy lips. So red. So kissable.

I took a step forward, out of the shadows and the pale moonlight caught on my ashen complexion, making me glitter all the while. The sun couldn't burn vampires or hurt us in any way but moonlight seemed to had that little effect, the glowing part.

The wolf girl still stood there, unmoved, with her lethal oak arrow pointed at me. Although her stance was solid her eyes were hesitant. Bringing into play my perfect night vision, I zoomed on this pair of doe gossamer blue eyes, so fathomless I was already lost.

Instantaneously, a sudden knot awakened in my bones and started uncurling, excruciatingly slow into a cord, stretching though me and spanning the distance between me and the She Werewolf in front of me. My dead heart felt like she could be missing her nonexistent heartbeats when a single sentence, a single thought of hers was sent down that cord, which was working as an invisible bridge betwixt us.

*The most beautiful man I've ever seen.* Her deep sensual voice echoed in the depths of my mind and burned at the cord, cementing our bond and triggering it to snap into place. I stumbled back as my face was painted in shock. My moonlit eyes bored into hers, fully aware that my confusion was reflected in the deep lines of her forehead.

Suddenly, the realization dawned on me, certain as the sun rising in the east. Before me stood no other than the woman I have been looking for a millennium, for my entire life. The one woman made for me alone, the one I had dreamed of countless times but could never find because she had always been out of my reach all along.

*My other half.*

*My mate.*

The Gods had finally put an end to my lifeless misery, to my infinite loneliness but they were also mocking from above.

*A Werewolf. My mate was a Werewolf.* I didn't even know her name. I exhaled a long torturous breath, full of longing for maybes and perhaps.

Cautiously, she lowered her bow with great deliberation, her doe eyes never straying from mine. Did she feel it? Was her existence such a mess the way mine was? Had she put the pieces of the
puzzle together?

Out of the blue, a piercing howl cut through the air, betokening that our mute time together was off. *Her pack was calling.*

My heart coiled in my chest as I was watching her retracing back to the Shadowood. I couldn't lose her. Not now that I had finally found her.

This was only temporary. Only for the time being, only for a few more hours, I reassured myself. Werewolf or not, she was my life partner, and no damn treaty would ever change that. No damn treaty would keep me away.

The muscles on my back flexed in agreement, the validation of the mating bond slowly etching its inky way on my pale skin.

Chapter End Notes

I am so very happy to be sharing this with you guys ;) Comments are always welcome

So this is an ASOIAF fanfic blended with the universe of ACOTAR. Feysand is not present here but the romance is going to be similar.

Hope you enjoy the story xD
My lashes trembled and fluttered, burdened with an extra dose of sleep caking the corners of my eyelids. I rolled over to my side in an attempt to entomb my dead being under the coziness of the doughy cushions, but the thin sun rays that glided unbridled through the shut drapes, streaked my face and caused a rainbow of colors to splinter in my vision.

I rolled over again, hoping to steal a few more minutes from my day to lie in, a few more minutes of comfortable numbness. Or so I'd anticipated, until short and sharp sounds interrupted my snooze once more. Irritating plinks made impact with glass, a familiar disturbance nonetheless. And I knew exactly who was the source of those noises.

Rubbing my eyes with the back of my hand in order to clear my bleary attention, I scrambled out of my air floating floor mattress and fumbled for the curtains. Just when I yanked them aside, I cringed away from the harsh stream of light and my face met the pebbles that kept hitting on the glass pane. Slowly, I opened my balcony doors and leaned over the rosewood railing, only to find two expectant amber eyes waiting for me, followed by a crooked smile, as soon as they spotted me.

Without waiting for an invitation, with three swift moves of his lithe legs, he climbed the wisteria wall of the manor, like a spider and landed on the balcony beside me. *Such a Werewolfish show off.*

"What are you doing here first thing in the morning?" I said with a somnolent voice and hands pinned on my hips.

"Morning?" He raised a cheeky brow "It's almost afternoon sleepy head."

My eyes skimmed the horizon ahead and the burning sun high in the sky. Whether it was morning or afternoon, I couldn't tell. Here was the Day Court after all, the largest among the three Courts of Zara, where the sun was the master of our day and the moon its servant, where our daylight was longer than our night, where everything around us was painted in gold, from the mown wheat fields to the gilded corn crops.

Today I had overslept longer than usual, since last night's hunt was prolonged until dawn. Indulging in a little more sleep was essential to abate my exhaustion and the gnawing tension building up within my stomach as the nightfall drew closer and closer. As my life was about to change. *Permanently.*

The raucous commotion in the front courtyard of the manor was a pretty good reminder too. Servants were scuttling across the garden, carrying heavy platters laden with food, chairs and tables to be arranged under an arresting pavilion which had been set in the middle of the gardens. Guests from both the Autumn and the Summer Court kept arriving, bearing plenty of presents and ready to partake in my joy. In my engagement.

"You aren't supposed to be here."

I swiveled to take in the beautiful sight of my childhood sweetheart, leaning against the wall and studying me intensely. *Shirtless.*

He was a vision, lean and trim, with the build of a man proficient in warfare. His short blue-black
hair was glistening in the sunlight, like raven feathers, and his maple skin only added to the
handsomeness of his exotic eyes.

"Nonsense."

He approached me slowly to the edge of the balcony, a hint of a wicked smile playing on the
corners of his mouth. "Is it such a bad lack to see your Alpha before the ceremony?"

I didn't think it was bad luck either. In fact, if it was up to me, I would choose to spend these hours
with him, cuddling and daydreaming, regarding the next day like all the others. But the tradition
dictated that we keep apart until we get to recite our vows before the Weirwood Tree and my father
was the incarnation of formalism when it came to traditions.

Extremely aware that we could be seen, I hauled him against the deepest shade along the wall.

"If my father finds you here, he's going to skin you alive, and what am I to do with anot
breathing Alpha?" My pulse raced with my words. "What am I to do without you, Oberyn
Martell?" I whispered under my breath. My confession was meant to be teasing, yet it came out
more melancholic than it should have.

In a blink of an eye, our positions were reversed. He had me trapped between the cool wall and his
broad chest. His callused hands traveled down my waist and pulled me closer to the warmth of his
body, so sultry like the summer that ran in his veins.

"I have been waiting for this day since I stole that kiss from you on the Summer Solstice,
remember?"

Slowly he began trailing soft kisses down the column of my neck, his hot breath burning like fire to
prod the memories out of me, to enkindle every single feeling I had felt that night. The night when
my best friend became something more. The night when my best friend became my only future.
The night when my best friend stole my last first kiss, that he had promised.

"How could I forget, you scoundrel of a flirt."

"I've been waiting for too long to ruin everything today." He repeated, cupping my face.

Hastily, I averted my gaze from his and started fiddling idly with my fingers, trying to fight back
my nervousness. Oberyn couldn't help but notice or rather sense it. But he always did anyway.

Gently he tipped my chin up, bringing me to look at his tiger eyes.

"Is my moon nervous?"

My moon. It was so unoriginal of me to melt every time I heard the word slipping so effortlessly
out of him. My moon he would call me for my milky skin and because, according to Oberyn, his
life revolved around me, the same way we Werewolves took our first and last breath under the
comfort of a full moon.

"Your moon would be lying if she said she wasn't."

Truth be told, I wasn't the 'crappy' kind of nervous. If anything, I was sort of excited. Today I was
going to take a step beyond because I had chosen it. Oberyn was my choice. My engagement to
him was not a union of convenience, although, in the eyes of many, the marriage between the Day
High Lord's daughter to the Summer High Lord was the perfect political alliance. We had time at
our disposal for the wedding though. For me, a match between two Werewolves was always
likened to a letter. The betrothal was the ink for the letters to be put down to paper, and the wedding was the sealing wax.

I looped my arms around the nape of his neck. "What about my High Lord?"

His steadfast eyes could have been answer enough but before he could open his mouth, a sound came from my room and I froze into place.

I disentangled myself from his arms and shoved him toward the wisteria wall. "Time to go."

He hesitated for a heartbeat, lingering on the railing but soon he came to his senses. He planted a soft peck on my cheeks. "See you in a few hours."

I heard a knock again and went quickly into my room, closing the balcony doors behind and inspecting myself for any telltale evidence that might betray Oberyn's presence. He had been sneaking into my room since I was ten and he, fifteen and not even once have we been caught.

When I opened the door, my mother and Elia, Oberyn's twin sister and also my good sister-to-be stormed in accompanied by three slight servant girls.

"My, you have been sleeping, haven't you?" my mom told me off in a mild undertone. I just shrugged it off, not in a mood for arguing.

"Let's get down to business, time is pressing in," Elia announced lowering me gently on a chair. "I promise you when we are finished, my brother won't be able to take his eyes off of you."

For the next hour, I let my thoughts run rampant, while being spruced up like a lifeless doll in the hands of the females around me. My waist length hair was brushed and combed repeatedly, my whole body scrubbed from head to toe with smooth pastes and aromatic oils. Finally, a layered maquillage had been applied on my dispassionate face.

When they weee finally done, I took my time to study the finished product in the mirror. It took all my willpower not to wince away from the foreign reflection of the girl staring back at me. My wavy midnight tresses gleamed like polished obsidian, extra curled and puffed, half up, half down, festooned with sparklers and silly jewels, making me look like a simpering lass taken out of a fairytale.

And my blush pink dress ... Sweet Freya, this monstrosity of a dress ... A floor length ball gown, with elbow bishop sleeves adorning a boatneck neckline and a figure-hugging bodice that accentuated my curvy waist underneath with a corset extended to my hips, choking the life out of me little by little. If my outfit for the engagement was so extravagant, how would my wedding dress look like?

Elia was right. Oberyn would not be able to take his eyes off me, not because I was that astounding, but because I looked so damn ridiculous. This wasn't me, the stranger in the mirror didn't look like a sixteen years old girl at all.

As if the sight of me wasn't already enough to bare, the servant girls eased a velvet mantle onto my shoulders, the last touch to finish me off.

_Breathe, just breathe_, I reminded myself but even drawing free air was a labor, given that I was breathing through constricted lungs due to my vicious corset.

_Only for a few hours Lyanna. Only for your sweetheart._
My dress billowed out around me, with every single step I was taking, at every single rung I descended down the spiraling stairs of my family home. For a moment, I paused in front of the arched garden doors to take a deep steady breath and calm myself from the hubbub of laughter and music that could be heard from outside. Every last touch of sunlight was gone and I angled my head skyward to the sparkling net of stars that was the night sky.

With an air made out of steely resolve, I steered my way toward the dais in front of the radiant Weirwood Tree, lit up with plenty of tiny lanterns and candles enclosed in glass orbs hanging from its boughs. People from every court pivoted to look at me, smiling, bowing and wishing me the best of fortunes.

My eyes stayed trained on the large table aside of the dais where a sea of familiar faces was waiting for me. My parents were merrily chatting with Hoster Tully, High Lord of the Autumn Court while my two brothers, Ned and Benjen were keeping company to Catelyn Tully just because Brandon, my arse of a brother was too absorbed in his conversation with Oberyn, Elia, and Doran, to cast even a glimpse upon his fiancée. Poor Cat ... She was trembling like a fish out of water.

As soon as I was on his side, Oberyn stood up and slid a discreet hand on my waist, grinning crookedly, no doubt with my outfit. "You look ..." he trailed off.

"Like a fluffy bunny? Like a pancake?" I mumbled through gritted teeth and arched a slender brow at him.

"You look beautiful Lya," he marvelled with a moony, yet, genuine demeanor, in an attempt to make me feel less embarrassed. "My sister might have overdone it with the dress though."

So true. Pink. Of all the colours on earth, she had to pick pink. I hated this colour.

On the other side, my Alpha was the exact opposite, dressed in a plain but chic sangria tunic, which complimented his eyes and a golden crown resting atop his dark hair.

"Everything just feels too much."

I found his free hand and he brushed it with his thumb, silently communicating his feelings with only a touch. "The decoration, the dress, the people." I raised my voice slightly to be heard above the deafening ruckus. "I just, you know, this is an important day for me and I have imagined this to be ... a little more private." I could feel many stares studying our proximity from everywhere.

"I know my moon." He leaned in my ear. "Just don't run away, will you? I am here."

"I am sick of you two. Lovey-dovey all the time," Brandon cooed in emphasis "Just get a room love birds."

My father coughed in warning for the impropriety of such a comment but Oberyn only winked at his bestie, thick as thieves since forever.

"We are almost ready to begin," he said squeezing my hand tighter as a tall blonde priestess ascended on the dais, wearing dark blue hooded robes and holding a prayer book, full of hymns to praise Freya and petition her to bless our union.

Suddenly, lighting cracked behind me and darkness erupted. The music and laughter died and their place took muffled screams of agony. The gaggle of guests shifted, people backing into each other, making way for something. Or someone.
Encumbered by my heavy skirts, I turned slowly around. My breath knocked out of me when I saw the silver-haired vampire from yesterday night, ambling his way toward the Weirwood Tree. The closer he approached, the more obnoxiously the same unexplained knot as yesterday stirred within me.

"What a lovely gathering," he purred.

His voice might as well have been the end of me.

Chapter End Notes

Okay here goes another chapter. I had planned this to be longer but I ended up splitting it in two because it was going to be too long. Don't kill me for the angst.

About the Courts;

Vampire Realm (Valyria);
Night Court; House Targaryen
Dawn Court; House Lannister
Winter Court; House Baratheon
Spring Court; House Tyrell

Werewolf Realm (Zara);
Day Court; House Stark
Summer Court; House Martell
Autumn Court; House Tully

Some of you have presumed that Rhaegar fell in love with Lyanna at first sight. Well I don't blame you since ASOIAF readers are not familiar with ACOTAR elements. But this is not an instalove, this is a MATING BOND, something entirely different. I'll try to be as informative as possible in the next chapter to help you distinguish the difference.
I had so much fun writing this meeting ;)

Thank you so much for leaving kudos and all your kind comments. Feedback keeps me motivated and makes me writing faster :P

If you find any kind of mistake, please do let me know since right now I am dying to sleep.

Everything about the vampire stranger radiated sensual grace and ease. A royal, no doubt. He had shoulder-length hair, so smooth that I was uncurling my fingers not to reach and touch them, so silver like liquid mercury. Silver hair was as commonplace in Valyria as mosquitoes during summer, anyway. But here was where ordinary ended and extraordinary began.

He was tall and lean with broad shoulders and a narrow waist. His clothes were all black, from his boots that reached his knees to his plain tunic and pants, finely made and perfectly cut, giving prominence to his magnificence and offsetting his ivory skin, a shade darker than last night. With the moon absent, he wasn't glowing this time.

He had a square face, chiseled by a strong jaw and honed by the hollow blades that were his cheekbones. Once again and to my shame, I couldn't help but think that he was the most beautiful man I've ever seen, vampire or not. The merciless cord from yesterday that had awakened with his voice, tugged in satisfaction at my thought. He couldn't have heard...

Terrified of the possibility that he might have rifled through my mind I tore my eyes away from him, oblivious to how long my intense stare was upon him. Thank Freya, I wasn't the only one.

The screams and chaos had ceased and the guests were now swallowing up the path from where he had appeared, scuttling away from him like scared rats.

Under my touch Oberyn's muscles had gone painfully taut like stretched strings as he pivoted to face the vampire, shielding me behind his back. Wearing an expression forged in iron, he stomped forward along with my father and Hoster Tully.

With a swagger, the stranger stalked closer and stopped some considerable feet before the three High Lords. Dancing curls of darkness were swirling around him, the night rippling off him as if he was its master.

For one thing, he didn't throw a glimpse toward me, he probably hadn't even noticed me, let alone recognized the girl that stood across the river with an oak arrow pointed to his heart. He wasn't to blame since I looked like a pink marshmallow in this ridiculous dress.

Oberyn was the first to crash the silence with a growl. "How dare you interrupt such a holy ceremony, Targaryen."

Targaryen.
The name was as familiar to my ears as my own for the royal family was the greatest of our enemies. A blight not only for our people but for their own as well.

_Mad and heartless. Killers. Monsters._

"Apologies." The vampire's smirk suggested anything but.

_His voice... it made me so lightheaded._

"What's the occasion High Lord?" he bristled with arrogance, mockery playing on the corners or his lips.

He was a Crown Prince, after all, Prince of the Night Court and heir of Valyria, every High Lord in his eyes was beneath him. That's why he could manipulate the darkness in the first place. It made absolute sense. Be that as it may, no matter how superior he thought himself to be, he had no authority over our lands. _Over our packs._

"If I had known, I would have brought a little present myself." His tone was dripping with distaste. The final sound of his voice finished me off, fanning the flames sizzling within my bones all these eternal seconds.

All of a sudden, with a side-splitting sting, pain prickled my skin running from my left shoulder to my arm. It felt like raw needles had just pierced me in half. I could feel it; something was building up beneath my mantle, beneath my dress, roiling and etching and whorling with abandon. All I wanted was to rip off the layers of my clothes and see what was wrong but I couldn't with all those people. With the bloody Prince a breath away.

"If trouble is what you are after, you are not getting any today," Oberyn intoned in warning.

Ravenous golden eyes started shining in the periphery of my vision and materialized from the shadows. They were so enormous that they might have scared the living daylights out of me, had I seen them for the first time. But they had all familiar snouts and colours, I had hunted with them so many times. They were my father's men, my pack, my family and they would strike without remorse. Twice the size of a wolf, the behemoths crept closer, digging their paws on the ground, circling the Prince stealthily and haunching on their hind legs, snarling all the while.

The Vampire had just violated the treaty by trespassing on our land and my Lord father had all the authority to do with him as he pleased.

The prince didn't seem to mind them at all. He regarded them as if he was surrounded by butterflies and not lethal werewolves that could give him a painful death with only just a bite. Moving with feline grace he dared some steps further.

"Whether I am making a fuss, that depends entirely on you Martell." He removed a nonexistent grain of dust from the lapels of his jacket.

For the first time since I saw him I felt a pinch of fear running through me. What was he capable of? What magic did he possess to disregard a High Lord in such an indifferent way like he was a pesty fly hovering over him?

"As long as you are compliant, my good intentions remain." He gave a typical grin that never reached his ears.

His voice, despite the underlying threat, drowned my fear and caressed whatever had formed on my left shoulder. It was warm and comforting at the same time.
"Whatever you want with me, it can wait until tomorrow," my High Lord of the Summer Court dismissed him.

"I am afraid today I'm not here for you Martell." He dared closer again, his tone betraying anticipation. The closer he approached, the more defined his features became. He had a face that cut; A gaze that pierced.

"I am here for the Lady," he said and his eyes locked into mine.

My body was aglow with his scrutiny and my heart was seduced by his other-wordly eyes, painted in the violet colour of a summer dawn. I ripped my eyes off his to look beyond my shoulder, only to find no other Lady that he might have addressed.

"I claim this woman," he pronounced loud enough for everyone to hear, stuffing his hands into his pockets casually, his firm eyes never wavering from mine.

Something about him made me want to run to the other direction but at the same time that fucking cord was stretching across the distance between us, pulling me to this terrifyingly beautiful male without mercy. My limbs were paralysed with panic. All eyes were on me, including seething tiger ones.

"Have you lost your mind?!" My father sputtered out, knifing him with his silver eyes like another Targaryen who had gone mad.

"Get the hell out of here." Oberyn's nostrils were flaring with rage, his hands were clenched into fists

"Gladly," the vampire drawled, smooth and polished. "But this little darling is coming with me." His voice was a lover's purr caressing my insides to my core.

I hated this. I had barely seen him yesterday and out of the blue, my traitorous body was intoxicated by his eyes and drugged by his voice.

Little darling ... Something was happening to me, something so very terrible and the fact that I couldn't name it made me searing with anger. I was starving for an explanation and I was sure he could provide me with one.

Bunching my heavy skirts, I marched forward past the three High Lords, moving like a whirlpool in the midst of a stromy sea, ignoring Oberyn's curses when he saw me halting an arm's length away from the Prince who had just laid his own claim on me. I refused to balk in front him, simply because I wasn't afraid.

The world around me seemed to fade gradually, my heart was racing twice in her normal speed and the undeniable connection between us was cheering hurray for the euphoria of our proximity. His body was calling to me like we were the last two pieces of an unfinished puzzle.

I raised my chin to look into those boundless amethyst eyes flickering with amusement. I had their undivided attention, holding onto me like I was the only person in the world.

"What makes you think that you have some sort of entitlement to me?" I blurted out, my werewolf blood pulsing against my veins with indignation. "I am not a property to be owned," I rumbled using the last fraction of my mind that had stayed intact from his very presence. "With what fucking right do you stake a claim on me on my engagement day."

He leaned forward with a dazzling smile adorning his posh lips."With the right that our mating
bond grants me."

All the air fled my lungs. My world seemed to be tumbling down, witnessing my life being quashed under such a confession.

This couldn't be ... This couldn't be happening to me ... I was just dreaming. I was going to wake up any time soon.

Freya help me, that's why I couldn't bring myself to fire the oak arrow yesterday. It wasn't because I was incapable of killing a vampire but my mate ...

Damp horror began accumulating in the pools of my eyes.

I took a few steps back to grow some distance from him, desperately wishing that I could retrace to the peaceful veil of ignorance.

The sea of people were thrumming now, loud enough to stir plenty of speculations.

"That's not possible." Brandon slammed a fist on the table behind me that made me flinch.

"I am tired of your petty games Targaryen!" Oberyn roared. "You are a liar and I've had enough."

"Check her left shoulder," the Prince dared him with a knowing sneer. My blood froze dead. No. No. No.

My mother, rushed straight to my side, her feet wobbling with foreboding. When her eyes found mine, I only detected fear and my reflection in the silver around her iris, the ghost of a daughter she was about to lose. With trembling fingers she unlaced the velvety mantle and let it slip to the ground thus leaving exposed a shoulder whose sight caused strangled gasps and cries of revulsion from everyone around, even from my own family.

I was doomed.

I scrutinised the tattoo on my arm, resembling to an elbow-length lace glove from afar, bedecked with inky whorls, swirls and intricate patterns of nature, smeared with stars and tinged with the night sky. But the most beautiful or mysterious design, I should say, was the shape of a sideways figure eight, the symbol of infinity, enclosed into two hugging membranous batlike wings. Dragon wings most likely. Every single pattern was black. Black like the night of his Court, black like my future looming ahead.

"She is mine!" Oberyn bellowed with rage, still refusing to see that he had lost, that I was lost and entitled to another male from now on. My fate might have been forfeit but this refusal to let me go, to give up on me, was the only crack of light, of hope in the ruins of my stolen life. "Only under my dead body are you to take her from me."

"With pleasure," the Prince remarked smugly.

"Freya has spoken High Lord," the priestess interrupted from the dais, so far a mute spectator. "and she has blessed this union."

Both my parents shut their eyes in defeat, sharing their devastation through interlaced hands.

"A mate is a gift from her," or a curse, in my case. "the most invaluable of all, and neither marriage nor birth nor an insignificant treaty can break such a bond, for all these are human and don't last but a mate was, is and will be yours for evermore."
Forever was echoing in my head. The infinity symbol on my collarbone was a good reminder too that I was bound to the Vampire Prince for the rest of my immortal days. He had me branded with his tattoo, although I knew this wasn't his choice. And that was so unfair. You don't get to choose your mate rather than it always happens the other way around; the mating bond chooses you. The joining of two mates was above marriage and selfish wishes. Your mate was the one person made for you alone, the only one meant to complete you, to protect you, to love you. If only, I was willing to offer those things to a Vampire mate.

I've never felt my heart so smashed, trampled down my feet when I saw the High Lord and Lady of the Day Court so close, snuggled against each other. My father's weathered face, streaked with a gray beard and temples, was marred by tiredness, his wide shoulders trembling with grief. My mother had her head lowered, mourning her lost child from now on.

"I'll be taking her now."

I jolted at the caress of the Prince's hand on my elbow. His touch was electrifying on my tattoo.  
"Papa," I breathed.  
"Rhaegar-" my father's tormented voice pleaded.  
"I'm in no mood to bargain."

"Please your Grace," my mother beseeched him in shame for the way in which she addressed him. "She is my only daughter."

Still no response.

Heartless pig.

My Lord father made one last attempt to strike a deal with the devil."Name your price. Anything your heart desires."

"From this day on, I have everything my heart desires." He slid a gentle hand around my waist for emphasis, pressing me closer to him. His touch made me sick.

"Just a protraction of a few days." Despair started dominating over my mother's suppressed sobs.

"I've been waiting my whole life." Although he was trying to conceal it, his words were bleeding with sadness. It was gone as fast as it appeared. "I'm not going to trade a single split second without her anymore."

"Papa, please." I didn't want to leave home. I didn't want to go to the Night Court, the Court of Nightmares as many called it. I wouldn't let my imagination run rampant and speculate all the reasons why. Not right now.

"Such dramatics," Rhaegar said, tugging me closer.  

My eyes, brimming with unshed tears, swept all the familiar faces around me to memorise them. Only Freya knew when I was going to see them again. If I would be seeing them again.

Rhaegar released an elbow only to loop a hand around my waist again. "Hold on," he whispered in my ear.

Then a whirl of darkness roared around us blocking everyone and everything out of sight leaving
me staring into a pair of star-kissed purple eyes. The ground fell away and I clung to him out of necessity. And just like this, under the haven of night, I was robbed of a life that had been and never would be. He took everything from me and I hated him for it, with all the crumbs of my broken heart.
"Get your hands off me."

I rammed my palms against his chest as soon as I felt solid and safe ground beneath my tottering feet. He didn't move an inch, but when I shot him a glare he released his grip with playful appetite.

"Welcome to my humble abode." Rhaegar leaned a broad shoulder against the stone-paneled wall of the foyer that led into a vaulted hall.

His home certainly didn't look like a humble abode, but it didn't look like the evil palace of the Night Court that stories had warned me about either. The seat of his House was called Under The Mountain, where the King and his family ruled the Court of Nightmares and the rest of Valyria.

This place was more like a dream than a nightmare. Ahead of me, a snug antechamber greeted me, encircled by cherrywood doors, all of them swung open for me to explore and a wide oak staircase leading up to the second level. The warm wooden floor was glossy and therefore slippery underneath my toes as I surveyed cautiously the rooms one by one. At my left there was a high-ceiling living room with a huge fireplace, posh sofas and bookshelves cladding every single wall. So many books. If only I was able to use them. At my right, there was a dining room equipped with an enormous table of polished ebony and beige gossamer curtains that blew at the slightest disturbance.

All the stress and exhaustion of a long day seemed to dwindle away when a soft scent of vanilla and coffee wafted through the air, inducing calmness into my mind. The atmosphere was cozy and the building itself, well-appointed. It almost felt like our family manor, like home. Or a delusion of it. I had to admit that I could actually be happy in this fairytale house if it didn't belong to a vampire, let alone a Targaryen.

"This is my private residence." Rhaegar followed me into the hall. "One of the two homes I have in the city." City? This couldn't be. The war had wiped them all out. "The other one is for more formal business, though."

"Where are we?" I breathed, a part of me relieved having made sure he hadn't taken me Under The Mountain.

"Velaris." A subtle stroke of awe and pride painted his sharp features. "The city of starlight." I'd never heard of such a city before.

"Of course you haven't," he answered before I could make a sound. "It's a unique kind of city."

"Get out of my mind." I daggered him with a glare. How did he do that? Was this a vampire power or was it rooted down to our mating bond? Damn it, I had so many questions and instead of getting less they kept increasing.

"Both," he answered again smugly. I just wanted to pummel him in his divine face until all this infuriating perfection was disfigured once and for all. "Here's what we are going to do little darling since you have so many questions." I swear, if he calls me one more time little darling ... "As we can both see, you might collapse anytime soon from fatigue. Now, I don't want you to break on me from day one, do I?" He let out an earnest chuckle. "So, my advice would be to jot your questions
down,” I wish I could. "and I'll be more than delighted to answer every single one of them tomorrow at breakfast." If you survive from my lovely hands around your neck until tomorrow ...

"As much as I would love to have those exquisite hands fondling my neck, other parts of my body would be jealous, don't you think?" He raised a brawdy brow.

My cheeks flushed crimson, the ink on my tattoo burning. "Prick."

He let out a breathy laugh, clearly enjoying himself, as if picking on me was an art form. "Okay we'll take it slow." At a snail's pace I hoped. "Let's start with your name."

He was studying me with keen eyes and somehow he was ... what was that? Impatient.

Interesting.

I clamped my mouth shut.

"Come on, beautiful. You know my name. It is only fair that I know yours," he crooned. "How am I to call you for the rest of our little forever?"

I was stuck with him. My name was a part of my identity, of who I am, or was. I could keep it for a few moments longer and enjoy myself as well.

"Marissa," I lied. He shook his head. How he was able to tell, I didn't know. "Laura," I went on.

"No," he mouthed calmly.

"Ariel."

"No." The bond was guiding him somehow, I supposed.

"Anna." I gave a part of my name eventually, one of its many shorts and the most neglected. My family would call me Lya, Ly but never Anna.Yet, it was my favourite.

For a split second he seemed almost misguided, partly confused. "And ..." he urged me.

"Lyanna." I gave in eventually. "My name is Lyanna."

"Lyanna." He tasted it a few times on his lips, caressing each and every letter as though he was reciting a prayer. "I like it."

I chose to ignore him.

"So where is my room?" I headed for the stairs, as far as my feet would carry me.

"There is no 'your room'," he stated as carefree as a toddler on a picnic.

"A dungeon then?" I said with saccharine loveliness. "How considerate of you."

"There is my room which from today will be yours as well." I turned dead on my heels to face him.

"That's. Out. Of. The. Question." I blinked down at him, my mouth agape with incredulity. "Does the word 'privacy' ring a bell in your poor vampire vocabulary?" The volume of my voice rose abruptly. "Maybe you should put a collar on me to match my tattoo. I am nothing more than a pet in your noble eyes anyway."
"You are not a prisoner, Lyanna. You are a member of my household, a member of my family." Right, a mate was if not equal, stronger than blood." and no subject of mine would dare lay a finger on you unless he has a death wish." His eyes from bright lavender turned a menacing indigo. "You are free to do whatever you want, go wherever you wish."

"I wish to go home," I said wistfully. "You stole me away without even letting me say goodbye." The bile rose on my throat. "Today was meant to be the most important day of my life and you ruined everything," I protested through curled lips.

"It still is. Isn't the day you find your mate considered the most important one?"

"My mate was supposed to be a fierce Alpha with tan skin and wolven eyes." Like Oberyn. "Instead, I end up with a frozen corpse."

Normally for someone else my words would sting as hell, but he was no ordinary man. He didn't seem the least deterred when he closed the distance between us with two elegant strides, so close that I could feel his icy breath skating across my jaw. "And yet, you thought I was the most beautiful man you've ever seen." He disarmed me with a debonair leer.

Right now, I just wished for the earth to open and swallow me up, to creep into a hole and never see the light of this cruel world again. He really had a knack for making me feel stupid. What else had he heard? For one thing, I dreaded to find out.

"Ha!" I scoffed trying to conceal my embarrassment. "Who can guarantee me you aren't glamoured?"

Vampires changed glamours the way a snake drops its skin. Most of their legendary looks were fake, constructed on the deception of their glamour.

Another chuckle. "Believe me, Lyanna, I am not glamoured. I am real. And I am all yours." Mine...

I tsked. "Such a shameless flirt."

"Yep." He slid his hands into his pockets. "Come on, I'll show you to your room."

The second floor was a labyrinth of rooms, so many that I was actually rubbing my hands with anticipation. Rhaegar said I was allowed to do whatever I wanted so I decided I wouldn't leave a stone unturned inside the house. I was following him closely but the chances of getting lost were significantly high. The corridors were eerily quiet, not a soul to be seen or heard, not even servants.

Good. The less vampires the better for me.

'Ours' bedroom was the last at the left. My eyes opened as wide as eggs when the arched double doors threw open on their own, with only a wave of the Prince's hand. What sort of magic was this? I gulped down audibly. I could have sworn I heard him chortle, reveling in my dumbfoundedness.

His chamber was fit for an emperor. A cavernous space carpeted in a lovely shade of red and painted in a confection of daisy, baby blue and blush. Occupying half of the chamber, the closet was actually a room, barricaded by damask screens and judging by some fleeting glimpses in the inside, laden with female clothes, my mate had been expecting me. Adjacent to the closet, there was a vintage bath with a porcelain sink and toilet but the bathtub was absent. Strange...

Thin coconut spider-silk curtains were framing a sky-high glass partition, resembling to a mirror of the world beyond. I narrowed my eyes in order to make out the view outside but a dense veil of mist was blocking my vision. Nevertheless, the charcoal grey was splotched with tiny speckles of
light, *city lights*.

The bedroom was chic, open, airy and ... almost peaceful.

Peaceful if it weren't for the ridiculously giant platformed bed that was pushed against the wall, covered in a creamy-white canopy and plush cushions. My heart started racing in sheer panic, something I couldn't help but send down to the bond, something I couldn't stop. My hands were shaking uncontrollably on my sides.

"Lyanna?" A tinge of concern was seeping into Rhaegar's voice. "What's wrong?"

"I ..." I trailed off. "I- I cannot sleep on the bed." Deep lines of confusion creased his forehead. "It's a werewolfish thing actually ... We don't sleep in beds."

"Why not?"

How do I explain such a sensitive thing to an outsider?

"We do not feel safe because beds are in some way high and away from the ground. I am a wolf and the earth is my only comfort zone. If you know what I mean." He released a faint hint of disappointment down to the invisible bridge between us. He almost seemed pained by my confession. What are you hiding Rhaegar Targaryen?

"In other words, you are afraid of heights? Of being detached from solid ground?"

"Yes, I suppose that's the gist of it."

"And where do you sleep?"

"On a floor matress." Suddenly I could feel the husk of my mind being scraped by invisible talons, plowing undistracted, searching for something. But this time he wasn't looking for words, but for images.

"Better, love?" he gestured a hand beside me, waiting for my reaction.

The moment I turned around the terrifying bed was gone and replaced by an equally immense floor matress, low and secure. He had even got rid of the platform to make it easier. So very better.

Without a second thought I plopped down and landed on the mushy comforter. I might have giggled with the softness if I was alone. I willed my features back to stone.

"Your welcome," he bragged.

I sniffed. It was his fault I found myself in this predicament in the first place. He didn't deserve a 'thank you' at all.

"Why would you need a bed if you don't sleep?"

Back at home, we were constantly reminded of a vampire's powers and weaknesses in order to elude them. Vampires didn't sleep, they were just depleted by their bloodthirst and only that. On the other side and to our disadvantage, our body functions and needs weren't very different from human. I had to crosscheck whether the claims of their powers were true or myths.

"For other business," he purred in a suggestive mien.

I felt contempt rising from the pit of my stomach. Who knows how many poor victims he had
seduced in that bed. Realisation hit me that I might be his next one.

"And who said that I don't sleep in the first place?"

"You do?" The surprise beneath my voice was palpable.

"Corpses sleep, don't they?"

"Corpses don't speak either," I quipped, the corners of my mouth quirking up in a venomous grin.

A grin that faltered when the Prince in a crash of air became a blur and with otherworldly speed climbed on the mattress beside me. I shifted back, my skirts sighing with my efforts but he crept closer.

"A temper and a silver tongue." He traced a finger across my collarbone to the batlike wings on my shoulder with mindblowing gentleness, making me burn and melt and then shiver all at once. "I like you very much Lyanna Stark."

Instinctively I raised my leg against his chest and pushed him back. "Come to me that close again and I will castrate you."

"Of course you will," he teased. "Relax. I promised slow, didn't I? Besides, we have all the time in the world." Indeed we had. "And you'll realise at first hand that I am a very patient man."

For a moment that seemed to last an eternity a veil of awkward silence shrouded the room.

"Well, I have business to attend to," he broke the silence. "I'll leave you to your privacy. Clean yourself up, rest and..." His eyes dropped on my body with an extra dose of distaste. "Take that hideous dress off."

At last, we seemed to be in an agreement for once. Now my dress was not only terrible to look at but it also caused me a brutal kind of itch.

He turned away from me and headed for the exit. He hadn't even crossed half the room and I was fumbling with the laces on my back struggling to untie them as soon as possible.

"You know." What the hell ... did he had eyes on his back now. "I could lend you a hand with those wicked laces, Princess."

Huh? Princess? I was no such thing. I was a werewolf and not one of his own. He might as well have spat on me. Red began dotting my vision, the wolf inside me roaring in my head.

One second, I had my silk slipper in hand and the other, it was travelling across the room with such speed that even a vampire's acute senses couldn't detect it. It neared and slammed into his head.

Rhaegar swiveled around rubbing a hand against his head, his face utterly surprised. "I dare you," he hissed.

With my other shoe already in hand, I slang it on him with superhuman force but this time his hands clutched it up, mere inches away from his face. The silk dissolved into his fist, turning into glittering dust that piled on his feet.

"Hmm. Interesting." He ambled on his way again with radiating composure. "Nighty night, love."

The doors closed obediently behind him. I heaved a weary sigh, finally alone in the room.
"So, that went well. " A perky female voice resonated behind the doors. The only answer she received from Rhaegar was a loud snarl.

So the house was not entirely empty after all.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah...
Introductions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One thing I really couldn't stand about this place was that it was absolutely perfect for, not matter how much I was searching, I couldn't find fault with anything. And if something was amiss, just with a simple thought of mine it would finally pop out of nowhere. All I had to do was visualise the thing I wanted and voila! Once I was acclimated to the way it worked, I experimented a little, materializing a toothbrush, a hairbrush and the same fluffy slippers I used at home. I had even conjured up my mother's face, in hopes that she might appear but I just proved myself to be a fool again. The whole house must have been under some kind of spell. I could feel the air pumping with magic. In short, nothing to nag about, nothing to give Mr Prick a hard time about, nothing to get on his nerves the way he got on mine yesterday.

Shortly after he left, for where I didn't really care, I attempted to sleep as lightly as I could, never dropping my guard down in case he was toying with any dirty ideas. Not that I would be able to stop him or that there was the tiniest of possibilities someone would hear my screams and pleas for help. I was entirely on my own, helpless at the mercy of this Night Prince and I had to fend for myself. The thing is that, those macabre scenarios I kept replaying in my head and tormented me for a while during the endless night, never actually took place. Depleted from any kind of mettle and drive, I let my fatigue take over and before I even knew it, I had drifted to a deep peaceful sleep.

The ticking sound of the clock awoke me gradually, darkness sopping up my lazy yawn. It took me some time to fight back my drowsiness and take in my unfamiliar surroundings...and then it all poured back in. Petrified, I jolted up expecting to find a naked Prince sleeping beside me but pure relief washed over me when I saw his side of the mattress unwrinkled, untouched. What a gentleman... I scoffed internally. Just then I felt a slight tug at the bond and him undoubtedly gloating over my reaction at the other end as if saying good morning. Generously, I delivered in turn a surge of irritation extra sprinkled with disdain and a touch of lethality, so strong I could feel it in my guts. Where could he possibly be?

Throwing a fleeting glimpse at the clock to check the hour, I find myself rubbing my eyes to make sure it's right. It was around eight in the morning and judging by the dim light in my room, almost nonexistent, the world lurking behind the shut curtains and glass would be of the same colours. I shouldn't have been surprised. Like the sun reigned over my Court so did the stars over here. Wherever here was...

Out of the blue, while I was stretching beneath the comforter, an ivory paper card popped out of thin air on my belly, carved with flowery cursive handwriting. By Freya, what do I do know? I spend a minute or so just looking at it, praying that inspiration will come to my aid from the skies but I was just wasting my time. My tired eyes seemed to be of the same opinion with my effort. Let him think that I ignored this message as well.

Barreling my way through the dark, I saunter to the glass partition and when I inhale deeply I peer through the curtains. My poor breath knocks out of me. Last night's mist had completely deliquesced now, trailing behind only a coat of frosty dew and unfolding a world to its brilliance molded out of dreams and drizzled with stardust.

The first thing that snatched my undivided attention and, at the same time, shed light to the mystery of my absent bathtub, was the infinity pool that occupied almost half of the vast veranda, its far edge seemed to disappear into nothing. It was lined with a couple of sunbeds and encircled
with fat guttering candles, whose pallid light dived into the pool thus giving the impression of minuscule galaxies whirling into its glassy cerulean waters. A captivating reflection of the starry sky above. The sky I loved painting so much.

And the view.

*The view.*

Details began to emerge as the dawn on the horizon became brighter and brighter. Our house was perched on the crest of a cliff, the highest among other colourful houses that kept tumbling down toward the city center. Before me, this miracle of a city, built on rolling, steep hills and flanked by snowcapped mountains, was brimming with life and colours and ineffable architecture of buildings crafted from white marble and warm sandstone, their flowered rooftops and turrets cleaving up to the sky.

At the very end of the bottom of the hill curved a winding river snaking toward a vast expanse of water beyond; the sea and the harbour, where ships of varying shapes were coming and going.

It was the most beautiful place I had ever seen, a page straightly cut out of a fairytale. How did this place survive the war? Another question to my bottomless list.

Despite the fact that the balcony was open to the winter elements and the gusting wind that characterised the landscape, the pool waters were still and warm, just like the air around me. Magic tricks again. I hadn't realised for how long I lingered in the luxury of the heat with my neck ducked in the water until the same amused tugs returned, summoning me like a dog.

*Come and find me* they implied.

Cursing him out loud, I scrambled out of my temporary sanctuary of relaxation, dried myself and slipped into fresh clothes, fashioned of his Court. High-waisted sweatpants along with an one sleeve asymmetric top that hugged my rib cage and left my tattooed arm and midriff exposed. My outfit was from head to toe a pearl white, counterbalanced by my obsidian hair and the dark ink on my left arm.

Following the constant tug that guided me through the hallways I ended up at the dining room where I found the Prince staring out of the arched windows, observing the throng of people that were weaving their way through the streets. The first two buttons of his black shirt were undone and his sleeves were pushed up to his elbows. His attention turned on me the second I slumped into the upholstered chair that faced his. The corners of his mouth twitched, ready to say something, but this time, just for once, I was faster than him.

"The fact that I can turn into a wolf from time to time doesn't mean that I have to smell like a dog," he hadn't even let me finish my bath properly. "let alone be summoned like one." I said by way of greeting.

"Good morning to you too." he brushed off my remark. "I thought you got lost since you are half an hour late."

"Half an hour? How in the Seven Hells was I supposed to know that?" I snapped.

"If you had read my note, which you so purposefully dismissed, you would have known." So that's what was written on the card.

"I didn't dismiss it." I sputtered out. "Of course I read it." Both my tone and my demeanor suggested dull indifference.
Patently intrigued he weaved his fingers beneath his chin, resting his elbows on the table and bestowing a diabolic smile upon me. "You did?" he could see past my lie and my self-defense began crumbling down piece by piece. "Then could you please tell me what else it said." he challenged me. That's it. I was done. He knew I was lying and his suspicions were going to be confirmed. He was going to humiliate me.

"I don't remember." I had been caught like a mouse in a trap.

"Of course." His eyes were unnervingly fixed on me. "Here you go." The ivory card popped on my empty plate without as much as blinking from his part.

My heart started pounding louder and louder in my struggle to concentrate. I recognised only basic words like the and I and you. Everything else was a blur of letters that I'd have to slowly sound out or research to understand. I couldn't decipher the inscription. I clenched my hands beneath the table in shame while Rhaegar scrutinized me in silence.

"You don't know how to read, do you sweetheart?" No trace of mockery or arrogance or gloating. Just unblended solicitude. Damn with it, I didn't need his pity.

"So what?" I felt the rims of my mind being cleaved by seething unadulterated rage, this time not mine but his. He wanted to make crystal clear how he felt and our bond was the messenger of those emotions. "Why are you angry at me?"

"You think I'm angry at you?" If it weren't for his calm voice, I would conclude that he was even scandalized by my question. "You are the last person to blame Lyanna. You are a High Lord's daughter. This ignorance would be considered, in the best case, unacceptable. Unforgivable."

"Exceptions cannot be made within the pack." I defended myself and my people. "We females are all equals when it comes to this, regardless of hierarchy, birth or status." These rules within our tribes have been applied for thousands of years. Who was I to question them? It wasn't that reading had come in hand during my sixteen years. Not once.

"Isn't an exception that your males are entitled to knowledge while their partners are robbed of it? Indignation honed his already sharp features. "Why such differentiation? Just take a moment to think objectively about it."

"Each and every one of us has a role to play and something, even the minorest thing to contribute to the pack. We are a chain that cannot exist if a single link is missing. Our tasks might differ but that does not mean that are less important."

"And what would have been your role within your pack Lyanna?" He mocked. "Organising parties? Breeding pups for your High Lord? Living the rest of your life being cloistered, from the moment you would have started punching out heirs?"

"We are not being coddled. We train with our males, we hunt with them, we protect each other." I protested. "I might not know how to read but I can do a million other things. A bow and an arrow will save me in a battle field. Words won't." That was the first thing we were always reminded during our training. The world is a cruel and dangerous place. Weakness is not an option. We were wolves, and our primal instinct was survival. Actions always prevailed over empty ideas.

"Reading is knowledge. Knowledge is power. And power is light." he mouthed calmly. "Didn't your ex-Alpha bother to teach you that?" he taunted.

My Alpha taught me how to protect myself from the likes of you I wanted to bark. Instead I came
up with a more creative jab."We had other priorities." I poured myself a cup of apple tea from the steaming pot."You see, Alphas crave female company most of the time. They can be quite persistent when they are met with rejection." I stabbed a slice of melon from a platter with my fork, my silver eyes flickering with mischief. My, this was too good to end so soon."They really know how to eat a good pussy." I added taunting him in return. This was the consequence of having three brothers and hanging out too much with Brandon. Had I spitted out such smutty words in front of my mother, I would have been grounded for like forever, but petting ears and pouring sweet words was not a tactic I was going to follow when it came to a vampire.

He was good at hiding his feelings, whenever he wished to at least, I'll have to give him that. Yet, the only giveaway that no vampire could control was the change of their eye colour that depended on their emotions. And right now his, from star-kissed lilac had shifted into a melancholic mauve, the shade of ashes smearing a soul on fire.

"I can only imagine how proud he must have been of such a trophy." he drawled.

"How dare you imply-" he cut me off."Weren't you a trophy Lyanna? Should I have considered you something else? Last night you were wrapped like a present as if you were his reward to parade in front of his entire court." his voice was edged on ice.

"You know nothing about his court and certainly nothing about Oberyn."

"Trust me, I know more than you think. He is his father's son after all." He had a point. Oberyn had inherited almost everything from his father; his good looks, his tiger eyes, the confidence of a leader and above all, his strength. When his parents died, although he wasn't the eldest son, he became the High Lord, not Doran. Doran was weak with a feeble state of health and once again within our packs, weakness was not an option.

"What differences do you have with the Martells?" He mentioned Oberyn's father which means enmity was not something recent, its roots were deep. And Oberyn knew for sure. The loathing between them was written all over their faces last night.

"That's a long story for another day love." he changed a subject he obviously didn't want to discuss.

My empty stomach rumbled in protestation. Rhaegar barely suppressed a chuckle as he waved a hand where fruits, juices, pastries and breakfast meat were laden on the table. "Eat please. You must be hungry." It was actually quite hard to tell if this spread was all for me since two more plates were set beside me and because Rhaegar's plate remained empty.

"You don't eat." I stated more than asked, picking two chocolate cupcakes as well. Let the interrogation begin.

"Sometimes I might eat normal food. I find it tasty but only blood can satiate me." My next question was easy to guess. "And before you ask. No. I don't drink human blood. Only on rare occasions and even then not from a straight source. My diet consists mainly of animal blood." So that's why he was at the Shadowood. Hunting poor animals. Just like me. I might have been relieved for a second but then I couldn't trust his claims. Vampires were liars. No guarantee he had spoken the truth. Having ticked off this question mentally I moved on to the next one.

"Where are we?"

"Velaris." I rolled my eyes.

"You've already said that."
"Am I not allowed to say things twice?" Prick.

"You said it's a unique kind of city. What's so special about it? And why is it wiped off the map?"

"Thousands of years ago the Night Court was ruled from the Hewn City built under Valyria's most sacred mountain, otherwise known as the Court of Nightmares. But an ancient King had a different vision, and rather than allowing the world to see his territory vulnerable at a time of change, he sealed the borders and staged a coup, eliminating the worst of the courtiers and predators, building Velaris for the dreamers, establishing trade and peace."

"To preserve this piece of goodness in this wretched world he kept it a secret, shielding it by casting eternal spells around the city to make it invisible. Only the Royal family, the inhabitants of Velaris and a few others are privy to its existence. The city hasn't been breached for five thousand years and for the rest of my life it's my mantle to use my powers to ensure that this will not happen."

The Court of Dreams...No monsters. No darkness. No ruins of the war outside of its borders.

"What sort of powers do you possess?" My voice was steady, yet inside I was shaking with premonition. "That thing you did with the darkness... when we vanished... what was that?"

A mischievous smile graced his full lips. "It's called winnowing. Think of it as... two different points on a piece of cloth. One point is your current place in the world. The other one across the cloth is where you want to go. Winnowing... it's like folding that cloth so the two spots align. The magic does the folding and all we do is take a step to get from one place to another."

How very practical...

"What about your mind reading abilities?"

He hesitated for a heartbeat. He didn't want to answer this question. He didn't want to scare me away but it was already too late for that. "I can play with minds." he pronounced it so casually like he was picking flowers.

"Big deal. Every vampire can do this."

His smile widened. "Wrong assumption. The only thing a common vampire can do is read your mind. Period. I am a Daemati."

"What does this mean?" I leaned forward.

"I can stroll through a person's mind. Not only am I able to read but also I can influence and shatter a mind by destroying one's very essence." The sensation of those invisible claws scraping through my mind... those had been his... "I can toy with one's memory and all in all, manipulate whoever I please. The only thing I have to do is blow a single harmless whisper." Mind slaves... So much inconceivable power accumulated in the hands of a single person. An ability to create and destroy as he saw fit.

"So that's why you are so prone to digging through my head?"

"As impossible as it may sounds Lyanna, I have never violated your thoughts, apart from the time I searched for the image of your bedroom matress." The only time I was aware that he had entered. "All the other times you were literally screaming your thoughts at me through our connection."
"How does the mating bond work?" This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all.

“Again, think of the mating bond as a bridge between us, and at either end is a door to our respective minds. A shield. My innate talents allow me to slip through the mental shields of anyone I wish, with or without that bridge unless they’re very, very strong, or have trained extensively to keep those shields tight. As a werewolf with the mind of a human, the gates to your mind were flung open for me to stroll through. As my mate…” a little shrug. “Sometimes, you unwittingly have a shield up, sometimes, when emotion seems to be running strong, that shield vanishes. And sometimes, when those shields are open, you might as well be standing at the gates to your mind, shouting your thoughts across the bridge to me. Sometimes I hear them; sometimes I don’t.”

Long gone was any kind of privacy in my mind too. I had no control over my thoughts and this was my fault. I was so vulnerable. I hated being so... so accessible.

"I don't know how to control it." I was well aware or the despair in my tone but I didn't care. If I had to beg him to help me gain control then so be it, so long as I wasn't feeling so exposed.

"That's why I am here love." Such straightforward willingness took me aback. "In fact, we are going to kill two birds with a stone. I am going to teach you how to read and shield." he grinned naughtily. "Starting from today."

"Wishful thinking." I arched an ebony brow. "You have another thing coming if you think-" Before I could batter him with a thousand objections, quick light steps resonated down the hall, moseying toward us.

If Rhaegar was the most beautiful man I've ever seen, the bleached-haired girl with the fine-boned face and the slender frame that had just entered, was his female equivalent.

"Hello, hello" she said in a sing-song voice, fixing her bright violet eyes on me, her heart-shaped lips parting in a dazzling smile. The female voice from yesterday...


With confident and merry steps she strode towards me and I got to my feet, awkwardly jutting out my hand. She ingored it and engaged me into a bone-crushing embrace. Her skin was smooth but at the same time it felt impenetrable. We had the same height therefore my head was buried in her jasmine-scented hair.

Mercifully, my taut muscles relaxed when she released me and grinned genuinely at my discombobulated countenance.

"I am Dany." she greeted me finally, raising my hanging hand from my side and squeezing it friendishly. "And I am your new best friend." I blinked at her the moment I realised that she did actually mean it. "You look like you were getting under Rhaegar's skin." she said, strutting to her seat between us. "Good thing I came along. Though I'd enjoy seeing Rhaegar’s balls nailed to the wall."

Rhaegar slid incredulous eyes at her, his brows lifting.

I hid the smile that tugged on my lips. "It's nice to meet you."

"Liar." Dany said, pouring herself some tea and loading her plate. "You want nothing to do with us, do you? And wicked Rhaegar is making you sit here."
"Now, with whose side are you Dany?" It was the first time I saw the Prince...irked.

"With hers of course." She pierced him with defiant eyes.I couldn't help but take advantage of such a lovely comment.

"You see?" I raised a sassy brow at him."Even your own sister can't stand you."

"Who would be armed with enough forbearance to tolerate such an arse of a brother?" she teased him, just like I used to razz with my brothers.

"Same applies for you beloved sister mine." remarked caustically the vampire that just strode in and took his seat next to Rhaegar. He had the same silver hair, the same purple eyes, the same honed angles with his siblings. If it weren't for his slightly hooked nose and his pointed chin, he would be impossible to tell from his brother.

His stare fell directly on me, his lips curving into a loose smile of acknowledgement, cordial but mindful.

"Oh shut up Vis." Dany crooned.

"It's true, isn't it? You have us all wrapped around your little finger." He twirled a tumbler around his index finger for emphasis

"Exaggerating as always."

"Whatever you say boss." He raised his hands in resignation.

"Meet my arse of a brother number two." Dany gestured a hand.

"Lyanna, right?" I nodded as a yes."I am Viserys but you can call me Vis." He sort of reminded me of my sweet Ned that moment, polite and good-natured, yet unobtrusive, a word that apparently Mr Prick had never heard.

"I have heard so much about you." Dany called back my attention."Rhaegar couldn't shut his boring, boring mouth last night." The Prince, who so far was following his sister's jabs with silent fascination, averted hastily his eyes all at once. Shy, huh? Who would have thought...

"Really?" I inquired flatly. He refused to meet my smug stare.

"You should have seen him. He was pattering like a fool in lo-"

"That's enough Daenerys." His warning was laced with quiet thunder.

"So grumpy this morning." Her lower lip protruded into a sulky pout.

"By all means," Viserys said to cut the tension."do not feel that you have to oblige her with your company." Daenerys stuck out her tongue at him."If she blackmails you into it, just give a shout and I'll come to your rescue." My goodness, those two really knew how to break the ice.

Rhaegar rolled his eyes, the most human gesture I'd ever seen him make. He examined my plate."Did you eat enough?" I nodded."Good. Then let's go." He inclined his head toward the hall and swaying curtains behind him."Your first lesson awaits." I debated splashing my tea into his face but then I concluded it didn't worth the trouble. I couldn't reason with him and after all, what did I have to lose? I was stuck with him so I might as well benefit from this situation. I didn't have to do something better anyway.
"If he pisses you off, Lyanna, feel free to shove him over the rail of the nearest balcony." Dany winked at me.

Rhaegar gave her a smooth, filthy gesture as he strode down the hall.

I eased to my feet when he was a good distance ahead."Enjoy your breakfast." They weren't hungry at all. They were just trying to make me feel more comfortable, more normal among them and I really appreciated that.

Once we were in the hall Rhaegar opened his mouth, but then the silhouettes of two tall, powerful bodies appeared on the other side of the front door’s fogged glass. One of them banged on it with a fist.

"Hurry up, you lazy ass." a thunderous male voice drawled from the antechamber beyond. My eyes became two full moons when I noticed wings peeking over their two shadowy forms. I took a step back.

Rhaegar didn’t so much as blink toward the door."Two things, Lyanna darling."

The pounding continued, followed by the second male murmuring to his companion, "If you’re going to pick a fight with him, do it after breakfast." A voice, dark and smooth and...cold.

"I wasn’t the one who hauled me out of bed just now to fly down here," the first one said. Fly...Fly?

I could have sworn a smile tugged on Rhaegar’s lips as he went on,"One, no one, no one, but Vis, Dany and I are able to winnow directly inside this house. It is warded, shielded, and then warded some more. Only those I wish and you wish may enter. You are safe here; and safe anywhere in this city, for that matter. Velaris’s walls are well protected. No one with ill intent enters this city unless I allow it. So go where you wish, do what you wish, and see who you wish. Those two in the antechamber," he added, eyes sparkling,"might not be on that list of people you should bother knowing, if they keep banging on the door like children."

Another pound, emphasized by the first male voice saying, "You know we can hear you, prick."

"What are they doing here so early?" Daenerys shouted from the dining room."I thought we were having dinner tonight at the House."

"Secondly," Rhaegar went on, ignoring both parties."in regard to the two bastards at my door, it’s up to you whether you want to meet them now, or head upstairs like a wise person, and wait for me in the study while I beat the hell out of one of them for talking to his Prince like that."

There was such light in his eyes. It made him look...younger, somehow. More mortal. How old could he possibly be...?

"Just come find me when they’re gone." I was too deep in a shock to give a different answer.

That joy dimmed, and Rhaegar looked like he might say something else, but a female voice crisp and edged now sounded behind the two males in the antechamber."Back off you uncultured oafs. Even a dog would have better manners than you." The knob jangled. She sighed sharply."Really, Rhaegar? You locked us out?"

"Hurry up your Grace or else I’ll beat your silver ass until it bleeds." the cheeky male growled."You know what happens when I am hungry."
"Pathetic." The bossy female voice quipped."You idiots are pathetic."

Without further ado, I made for the stairs. I might have kissed my mate for waiting to open the front door until I was halfway down the safe hallway on the second level.

Chapter End Notes

I know...too much information ;)
The library of the living room dimmed to nothing, compared to the ludicrous amount of books that framed the walls of the study, neatly tucked on shelves that touched the ornate ceiling. Two tall ladders rested against those mocha shelves, their polished timber surface, burnished by the sunlight that streamed through the radius double windows which led into a spacious oval veranda. In general, the furniture was an elegant, comfortable but worn arrangement of crystal chandeliers, leather armchairs, a couple of escritoires and...

An harp. A golden eolian stringed harp sitting alone in a corner next to the marble hearth.

Mesmerized by the beauty of such an alluring finding, I couldn't fight my escalating urge to touch it. The metal was cold underneath my fingertips as I ran a hand along its gilded crown, shoulder and finally to its soundboard.

The door behind me creaked and I didn't really have to turn around to know that it was him. I didn't bother to draw an inch away from the harp.

"Yours?" I inquired softly with my back on him.

"Mine."

"You play?" My eyes drifted from the musical instrument to its owner.

"Obviously," he quipped, leaning against the door frame with arms looped around his chest. "Do you?"

"No," I whispered bitterly. "Once upon a time ... I dreamt of playing though. Not the harp but the violin."

"Why didn't you?"

I turned away again not wishing to see his displeasure written on his face. What difference would it make if I told him that my parents were strictly opposed to my desire to learn to play the violin? According to them, such a task would require patience and time. Time stolen from my training, time I couldn't afford to waste on childish whims. They were my parents and they knew something more. That night I locked the part of my soul that craved music. At least in the end of that day, I still had my painting.

"Never mind why." My voice was tinged with the longing of a child's unfulfilled dream, of a pipedream, to put it more correctly.

I could feel it again. Feel him again. Sparks of unmistakable indignation crackling against my core. I was in no mood to sink into another endless argument. Instead I changed the subject. "Did they leave?"

"Yes."

I crossed the room and slouched into a linen tufted chaise lounge.
"Who are they?"

"My Inner Circle," he said while looking for some books on the shelves.

"I wasn't aware Princes kept things so casual."

"Well I do." He was using one of the escritoires, writing something I couldn't see. "And even if I wanted, just for the protocol, I wouldn't be able to. It's near impossible to act all Prince-like in front of someone I've known my whole life."

"Last night," he drew his stare away from whatever he was writing and locked eyes with me, "you told my father you had been waiting for too long. How long? How old are you?"

"How old do you think I am?" He leaned back against his chair with an amused smile.

"Well, if I could tell, I wouldn't be asking, you hell of a genius." One thing I knew for sure was that he was old. Frightfully so, given how powerful he was.

"Come on, take a wild guess."

"Hmm." I rubbed my chin, surveying him closely. He looked young, around Brandon's age."If I didn't know you were a vampire, I'd say you looked like twenty three."

He let out a breathy laugh. "Well now add a millenium."

"What?" I shrieked, almost choking on my breath. Roughly ten hundred years. The age gap was astronomical. "You have certainly robbed the cradle." I gasped and the senseless bastard had the arrogance to chuckle. "I am only sixteen." I threw my hands in the air. Of all the lifetimes he had lived, he had to find his mate in this one, to find me.

"You know I didn't have a say in this either. Be that as it may, I am really grateful that ten centuries of loneliness were worth it after all."

I might have scoffed at such an empty compliment but I didn't because it wasn't empty. Not entirely at least. The loneliness he had undergone, this unexplained melancholy marred his face, his voice and I was incapable of interpreting them both, of judging them. I didn't have the right to do so, for I hadn't spent a thousand torturous years looking for my other half. I recall hearing my mother confessing how lost and abandoned she felt until she met my father. Hollow and incomplete, those had been her words.

"That day in the Shadowood, how did you know? How did you figure this out and I didn't? I mean we just stared at each other."

"You talked to me. Your voice triggered our bond and willed it into place." His voice ... deep and narcotic had engendered all those reactions on my body. His voice was the reason behind my tattoo.

"I didn't make a sound." I barely had taken the sight of him then, glowing like a Greek god under the moonlight.

"Oh but you did speak to me even though you weren't aware of it."

No... Not my stupid rampant thoughts again.

"I heard you, loud and clear, marvelling at my irresistible pulchritude."
I could feel my heart throbbing in my ears, crouching with embarrassment. In a split second I had smacked myself mentally a thousand times.

Mr Prick flashed me a pompous smile. "It's okay, love. You are not the first nor the last one susceptible to my charms. I'm designed to be attractive."

Right, an endearing predator to allure his victims.

"And a narcissistic imbecile, apparently," I rejoined acidulously.

"That one, too," he admitted and claimed a seat beside me, piling a stack of books atop the glass round table. I shrunk away from him. "Let's begin, shall we?"

"I know my alphabet," I said sharply as he laid in front of me the piece of paper he was writing all this time. "I'm not that stupid."

I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of conceding that, to some extent, he was right about my illiteracy. I had attempted in the past to grab a thing or two with the help of Benjen. My brother taught me the alphabet but after that, my inconsistent efforts came to nothing without any opportunities to practise.

"I didn’t say you were stupid. I’m just trying to determine where we should begin, since you’ve refused to tell me a thing about how much you know."

My face warmed. "Can’t you hire a tutor?"

He lifted a brow. "Is it that hard for you to even try in front of me?"

"Yes," I snapped abruptly. "Especially when you act so superior and perfect and keep bringing up all my flaws."

He flinched at my words, disarmed by my outspoken condemnation. Any kind of neutrality was gone from his face, replaced by regret. "I am not flawless Lyanna. I am as perfectly imperfect as you."

"You’re a Prince. Don’t you have better things to do than making your wolf girl squirm?"

"I'll say this once and you better keep this in your stubborn busy mind." His eyes were two dying stars. "Your are not my random wolf girl. You are my mate, my equal. Nothing is more important than you. You are my priority, Lyanna. Always. Over everyone and everything."

"Whatever." I've never been good at words and consequently at conveying my feelings. I didn't know what else to say to him. If he thought that I would open up to him so easily then he was dreaming with open eyes.

Rhaegar heaved a resigned sigh. He tapped the paper in front of him. "Read that."

A blur of letters that composed a sentence written in elegant, concise print. His writing, no doubt. I tried to open my mouth, but my spine locked up. My throat tightened. "I can’t."

"Yes, you can. You can do anything if you eradicate all the doubts those war-mongering fools of your Court have been planting in your head for years, all those insecurities that make you feel inadequate. You are smart and brilliant and able. Never forget that."

"You know nothing, Rhaegar Targaryen. It's been no longer than twenty four hours since you met
me and you act as if you know me your whole life."

"Maybe I do," he shrugged.

I stared at him hard, intensely, ambivalently. Damn him, his riddles and whatever petty games he was playing on me.

Rhaegar snorted. "Try to read it, Lyanna."

I snatched the paper to me, nearly ripping it in half in the process. I looked at the first word, sounding it out in my head."Y-you..." The next I figured out with a combination of my silent pronunciation and logic. "Look..."

"Good," he murmured.

"I didn’t ask for your approval."

Rhaegar chuckled.

"Ab... Absolutely." It took me longer than I wanted to admit to figure that out. The next word was even worse. "De...Del..."

I deigned to glance at him, brows raised.

"Delicious," he purred.

My brows now knotted. I read the next two words, then whipped my face toward him. "You look absolutely delicious today, Lyanna?! That’s what you wrote?"

He leaned back in his seat. As our eyes met, sharp claws caressed my mind and his voice whispered inside my head.

*It's true, isn't it?*

I jolted back, the sofa groaning. "Stop that!".

But those claws now dug in, and my entire body, my heart, my lungs, my blood yielded to his grip, utterly at his command as he said; *The fashion of the Night Court suits you.*

I couldn’t move in my seat, couldn’t even blink.

*This is what happens when you leave your mental shields down. Someone with my sort of powers could slip inside, see what they want, and take your mind for themselves. Or they could shatter it. I’m currently standing on the threshold of your mind...but if I were to go deeper, all it would take would be half a thought from me and who you are, your very self, would be wiped away.*

Distantly, sweat slid down my temple.

You should be afraid. You should be afraid of this, and you should be thanking your accursed Freya that no Daemati has run into you yet. Now shove me out.

I couldn’t. Those claws were everywhere, digging into every thought, every piece of self. He pushed a little harder.

*Shove. Me. Out.*
I didn’t know where to begin. I blindly pushed and slammed myself into him, into those claws that were everywhere.

His laughter, low and soft, filled my mind, my ears. That way, Lyanna.

In answer, a little open path gleamed inside my mind. The road out.

It’d take me forever to unhook each claw and shove the mass of his presence out that narrow opening. If I could wash it away...

A wave. A wave of self, of me, to sweep all of him out...

I didn’t let him see the plan take form as I rallied myself into a cresting wave and struck.

The claws loosened. Reluctantly. As if letting me win this round. He merely said, "Good."

My bones, my breath and blood, they were mine again. I slumped in my seat.

"Not yet," he said. "Shield. Block me out so I can’t get back in."

I already wanted to go somewhere quiet and sleep for a while...Claws at that outer layer of my mind, stroking...

I imagined a wall of adamant snapping down, black as night and a foot thick. The claws retracted a breath before the wall sliced them in two.

Rhaegar was grinning. "Very nice. Blunt, but nice."

"Don’t condescend to me."

"I’m not. You’re reading at a level far higher than I anticipated."

That burning returned to my cheeks. "But mostly illiterate."

“At this point, it’s about practice, spelling, and more practice. Same goes for your shields."

"Do you think that...that if I practise enough, it would be possible to keep you out. Truly lock you out?" If such a prospect was indeed possible, I wouldn't be leaving this room until I perfected my shielding.

"Not even in your wildest dreams." I thought so too. "I am not your enemy, love. Your thoughts are safe with me. As long as I am around, even with your shields down, no one can violate you. In fact no one would dare to even if he considers it in the first place,” he reassured me but his eyes darkened, unbeknownst to him, betraying a shade of fear. He was lying. He had someone particular in mind.

"Are there any other Daemati?" I tried to fish that particular someone out of him.

"We are very rare, but yes."

So there are others...

"Is there anyone more poweful than you?"

His lips were hesitant and partially sealed. He was uncomfortable. He was hiding something. And he was eluding my stare.
"For the time being, yes," he stated firmly. "But she is not a threat."

Again, again, again, he was lying.

*She?* A woman then. I wasn't going to learn any more information from him, of that I was certain. Dany though... she appeared to be more talkative. She could enlighten me regarding to whom this *She* is.

"I see. Well if that's all, I'll be going," I crooned.

"Not even close." He tossed me a pen. "Reading a sentence is the easiest part. Writing one though... is the real challenge." Nah as if he would let me off the hook so easily. "Go on, write something," he urged me, leaning back into the cushioned lounge.

After careful deliberation I ended up articulating something simple, with commonly used words that I encountered from time to time when I was flipping through the pages of a book, with my only guidance the pictures in them.

I pushed the note toward him with my scrawl swimming across the paper. Freya, my writing sucked.

*I want to ki _ _ you (options may vary)*, it said

His keen eyes pored over the paper before turning bright as starlight, flickering with impishness. He shot me one lop-sided grin.

"I say double S." *Kiss. How* groundbreaking of him.


"I'll take option one. I deserve a little treat after all for my hard tutelage, don't you think?" he shifted toward me but I peeled back.

"Only in your wildest dreams, silver boy," I parroted him. I couldn’t help myself. I grabbed the piece of paper and shredded it in two, then four. "You’re a pig."

"Oh, most definitely. But look at you. You read and wrote a whole sentence, kicked me out of your mind, and shielded. Excellent work."

"Are we done?" I picked my nails.

"I am. You are not. Start copying the alphabet. Until your letters are perfect. And those sentences," he laid another paper on the table. "Every time you get through a round, lower and raise your shield. Until that is second nature. I’ll be back in an hour."

"What?"

"Copy. The. Alphabet. Until-"


"Then get to work." Rhaegar uncoiled to his feet. "And at least have the decency to only call me a prick when your shields are back up."

Then he vanished in a whirlwind of darkness.
An uncouth bastard, that's what he was. I was screaming the words to our bond so that he could hear them, *loud and clear*, whether my shields were down or not. He didn't seem to mind my filthy insults but I kept slinging them anyway.

My mind was a mud puddle, having spent the last half hour, raising, lowering and thickening my mental shields. After a round, I would copy the alphabet and after that, the sentences Rhaegar handed me, each one more obnoxious, vain and miserable than the other.

*Rhaegar is the most handsome Prince.*

*Rhaegar is the most delightful Prince.*

*Rhaegar is the most cunning Prince.*

And then there were the others that made me see blood red.

*Rhaegar is a spectacular person.*

*Rhaegar is the centre of my world.*

*Rhaegar is the best mate a female can dream of.*

*Rhaegar is my one and only.*

The turmoil of having to copy every single one of them repeatedly was becoming unbearable as seconds went by.

All of a sudden the light in the room from the veranda disappeared, obscured by a massive shadow and the contours of fluttering wings stamped on the floor.

My heart throttled in my mouth when I turned around only to see that the gargantuan raptor had tucked its wings against its body and was hurtling now toward the balcony in a blur of white feathers and flashing talons.
I was deactivated on the spot.

My limps, my blood, my heart, even my brain.

It was an effort to prevent my breath from coming out in wheezes as I descried, in affright, the flying beast alighting on the balcony. It was unlike any winged creature I've ever seen; a hulk of scaly skin, scissor-like jaws and agile feet, a four-legged monster for even the bravest warrior to face.

Its azure eyes devoured me already from a distance, intelligent and poised for attack. The ground trembled beneath its talons when it started stalking forward, and so did my accelerating heart.

_Don't make any abrupt moves_, my wolf instincts screamed at me.

Clumsily, I shuffled backward, aware of every step, of every flexed nerve on my body. Once I was next to the door, I hurtled for the knob and then for the hall where I collided with Rhaegar's sturdy chest. His lips were pressed into a paper-thin line, his impenetrable eyes were mad with consternation.

His expression hardened even more when he took notice of my quivering hands, balled into fists and my wild hyperventilation.

"What happened Lyanna?" Worry was seeping into his tone as he placed two firm hands on my shoulders to simmer me down. "I felt you..." A deep line creased his forehead. "I felt you panicking." His touch was soothing enough to help me pull myself together.

"There...is a-a monster on th-the balcony and...and it has w-wings and-"

"Take it easy." he said while massaging my collarbones in order to distract me. "One thing at a time."

"There is a flying beast inside." I paused to steal some more air. "It is white and it has blue eyes and horns!" The more information I kept sputtering out the faster confusion seemed to melt away from Rhaegar's face. "That malicious bird wanted to eat me and-"

Halfway of my sentence, the corners of his mouth twitched with hilarity. He barely supressed a chuckle that dissolved into a deep rich laughter. "A bird? Eat you?" He kept laughing in front of me like he couldn't believe his ears.

"You dimwitted, arrogant, brainless jerk." I pummeled his chest with all the ounces of my strength in exasperation. It felt like lunging myself at rocks. "I tell you I have been frightened to death and you have the audacity to laugh at me!"

"I am sorry but..." that smile he had plastered on his face grew bigger and bigger. "A bird? Come on Lyanna...A bird?"

"How do you call a critter with wings and talons that wants to eat you, smartass?" I snapped.
"Okay let me get this straight. Firstly, she is not a bird and secondly, I am sure she meant no harm."

"She? Who is she?" My brows drew together.

"Her name is Seraphina and, let me tell you, my dragon is not even a tiny bit malicious, unless I want her to be of course."

I take a step back. "A dragon? A fire breathing dragon?" It kind of made sense why I couldn't identify the raptor on our balcony since I've never seen one again, not even in a book. Dragons disappeared from Zara soon after the war. "Wait, what? Yours?!"

"Yep. And it would appear that she is here to meet you. Now," he turned me around and nudged me into the room again. "let's clear this terrible misunderstanding. I don't want my girls to be at odds."

Where do I begin? From the fact that he had just leveled me to his pet, which by the way was a carnivorous predator? Birds of a feather flock together, my wise inner voice popped in. Or from the fact that he just called me his girl?

You are not my random wolf girl...Blah blah blah...You are my mate...Yeah sure.

My innards watered when the dragon was back on sight again, to my surprise, waiting perched on the railing. It gave a roar of acknowledgement, so loud I felt the mountains around tremble. My sandals halted, squeaking on the floor all the while.

"I am out of here." I pivoted without further ado. "Tell her I said hello."

He blocked my only way out. "None of that. She is tame and she is not going to leave unless she meets you. Besides, it's rude to make her wait, especially when she has flown all the way here just for you." My eyes rolled in their own accord at such a lame argument.

"Uninvited." I glowered at him. "How in the Seven Hells did she know I was here?"

"She felt you through me." Rhaegar clarified. "In the same way we are connected, thus I am with Seraphina. I am her Master, her Rider. Therefore your encounter would have been inevitable sooner or later."

Before I even realised it, he had swept me toward the patio balcony doors, making clear there was no more room for protests.

I gulp down.

Audibly.

Let's be done with it.

Reluctantly, I stepped out of my temporary safe haven, following Rhaegar closely, always behind him.

The beast...Seraphina, was everything I have ever imagined a dragon to be; A gargantuan form of pure terror.

Two curved horns framed her white menacing snout and her two bulbous blue eyes that turned into slits every now and then. Her white trunk was covered in azure scales that glistened like wet
leather and ran from her head to her thick forked tail. A pair of mighty feathery wings sprouted from her shoulders, adding to her already exotic hostility.

Feathers... White feathers. Not even close to the midnight batlike wings on my tattoo. If those wings weren't Seraphina's then to whom did they belong? Maybe the design of my tattoo was coincidental but... I highly doubted that my mate had chosen his brand randomly.

With an ear-splitting screech, she unhooked her eagle talons from the railing and prowled toward me swiftly as the air.

Without second thoughts I glom on to Rhaegar, using him as my only shield between me and her. When she doesn't seem to stop and she is only a breath away, I grab him by the arm to block her out. Although he was immovable as a mountain when he wished to be, he allows me to manipulate his movements for a while, stirring like a stringed puppet under my fingers as though we were dancing.

"It seems you have finally found a poor excuse to touch me, haven't you?" Over his shoulder, he graced a glance upon me with his bedroom eyes.

"And then you woke up." I retorted but didn't release my grip on him. Seraphina kept rumbling for no reason, opening her slobbering maw and baring a row of her savage spiky teeth, circling us.

"If you keep touching me like this, you are only adding fuel to the fire." I hope he didn't mean her fire... "She is jealous, you know."

"Jealous? Of me?"

"Obviously. All females become territorial at some point after all." Well, I didn't know for how long those two have been together but judging from Rhaegar's age, it must have been quite a while. "Especially when the male concerned is me." Bastard... how disappointing I wouldn't be enrolling to swoon-over-the-silver-arse club any time soon.

"She can keep you all to herself." I pushed him in her direction but he didn't move at all, evidently deciding to turn jammed again.

"She can smell your fear. All she wants from you is to touch her. To feel you. And all you have to do is say her name. Then she will let you be."

She was intimidating, I had to admit so. But deep down I knew I wasn't scared of her. Maybe reserved against this unknown creature but not frightened. Not really. Maybe it was the familiarity through my mate that made me confident enough to believe that. Maybe it was all a delusion. All I had to do to figure this out, to figure me out, was to give it a shot.

I peeled away from him, and with resilient breathing, I stopped a few feet away from Seraphina's massive figure, towering over me. She felt like the sun and I like a minuscule ant.

I raised my head to look at her, and then my hand as I whispered her name softly closing my eyes. "Seraphina."

Obeying to my call, she leaned her head against my touch, her clammy skin white as snow lingering, her flaring nostrils burning like furnaces.

Once I opened my eyes I found hers aligned with mine. Smart and frosty and loyal. Rumbling a loud purr she took off, as fast as she appeared.
"Now, was it that difficult?" Rhaegar crooned and I whirled around oblivious to his presence.

"Where is she going?" I inquired, observing her rocketing through the midday sky, her outline washed out by the sunrays.

"To the House of Wind." Rhaegar said from behind me. "You see that middle peak?" He pointed at the mountains that surrounded the city across the river. Sleeping giants, crowned with sharp peaks like fish's teeth that cleaved the merry green hills. "This is my other home in this city." The largest of the plateaus. Holes and windows seemed to have been built into the uppermost part of it. "We will be dining there tonight for you to meet my friends." he added, and I couldn't tell if he sounded irritated or resigned.

"I didn't know you had friends." I spat curtly, sharply.

He snorted. "You never asked." I didn't care.

"Why do we have to dine there? I think this house is far more than suitable for me to meet your Inner Circle."

"Not big enough. The House of Wind has enough space that I won’t feel like chucking them all off the mountain.” What a tragic irony. He was the most infuriating person I've ever met. The realms of my fantasy couldn't possibly fathom someone more pesky than him.

"And what about dinner? I am not actually very comfortable when I am the only one actually eating."

"You won't be the only one. Apart from my brothers and me, the others eat normal food." A question mark might as well have been tagged on my forehead. If they didn't consume blood then that meant... "They are not vampires." Rhaegar noted.

"What are they?" I waited for an answer with bated breath.

"You'll see for yourself tonight." he grinned wickedly. Mother above. "But for now, after this pleasant little break, you get back to work little one." "How fun." I said. "And don't tell me what to do."

"Absolutely not." I said atop the town house’s small rooftop garden, my hands shoved deep into the pockets of my overcoat to warm them against the bite in the night air.

Before me the city lights were shining like tiny diamonds, a mirror of the night sky above, crammed with twinkling amethyst and pearl stars, along with a waning moon that set the marble of the buildings and bridges glowing as if they were all lit from within.

Spectacular. The night was spectacular. Rhaegar told me that many in his territory, awaken at sunset and go to bed at dawn, just to live under the starlight. Now I could see with my own eyes, a thousand reasons why.

Music, dance, laughter. Velaris was pulsing with life. Unfortunately those pleasant sounds were not the only ones buzzing in my ears.

The Targaryen siblings, except for accommodating Viserys, combined with Seraphina held aloft above me, was a nerve-wrecking assortment. Her fluttering barbed wings were looming over me, thrashing through the air, calling for me to give them a try.
"Come on Lya." Dany attempted to plead with me for one more time. "A less-than-a-minute quick harmless ride. We will be there before you can blink an eye." I opened my mouth, to protest once more but she added, "I am not taking no for an answer."

Sweet Freya, she was even more headstrong than all the Stark offsprings put together. It's been ten minutes now that she and Rhaegar have been trying to talk me into riding Seraphina in vain, and each of their attempts lands more persistent by the second.

"Let her be Dany." Vis objected, the only ally I had on my side. "She can't even stand the idea of sleeping on a bed, how do you expect her to ride a dragon taking up the skies?"

_Hell damn straight._

"Besides," Vis went on. "this is who she is. This is her nature. She can't just dismiss her fear of heights. Her reaction is based on pure instinct, the same way you and I drool over blood, sister dearest."

Well said, I wanted to say but instead I find myself mouthing a mute thank you to him. Once he has read my lips, he winces at me.

"The House of Wind is warded against people winnowing inside, exactly like this house. Even against High Lords. Even against the Royal family." Rhaegar cut in. "Don't ask me why, or who did it. But the option is either walk up the ten thousand steps, which I really do not feel like doing, Lyanna, or fly in."

"And whose fault is that, huh? I pouted. He wanted me to meet his Inner Circle and I, for my part, was perfectly fine with it, if only a bit nervous. But no...Instead of inviting them here for Dinner, Mr Prick decided it would be better to dine at the House of Wind, his second home in Velaris, the one for the official business."

Sure enough, the House of Wind was a vision in the night. Curving along the top of the center mountain behind us, floors of lights glinted, as if the mountain had been crowned in gold. And between me and that crown of light was a long, long stretch of open air.

Clothed in black accented with silver thread, Rhaegar crossed his arms and gave me a slow grin. "I promise we won't drop you."

He was referring to him and Seraphina evidently, since Daenerys was riding with Drogon and Viserys with Balerion. Throughout the day, since I spent some time with him practising my shielding, I decided to make the most out of it by draining him with my dragon questions

I frowned at the midnight-blue dress I'd selected. Even with the long sleeves and heavy, luxurious fabric, the plunging vee of the neckline did nothing against the cold. I’d debated wearing the sweater and thicker pants, but had opted for finery over comfort. I already regretted it, even with the coat. But if Rhaegar's Inner Circle was anything like Oberyn's court...better to wear the more formal attire. "The wind will rip the gown right off."

His grin became feline. "And what a loss that would be." His suave eyes roamed over my body as though they offered themselves to rip my clothes off before the wind would have a chance to.

“I’ll take the stairs,” I hissed as I headed for the door at the end of the roof but Rhaegar blocked me in a whoosh, his stance assertive enough to prevent me from getting away but mild not to make me feel threatened.

Seraphina rustled her massive winds in impatience.
"Okay, I get it. No flying for today." Thank my lucky stars, he backed down at last. "You guys go, we will catch up with you." Rhaegar glanced over his shoulder to Daenerys and Viserys.

"How exactly are you planning on catching up?" Dany inquired.

"Anything but flying." I emphasised.

"Anything?" he raised an incredulous brow. I nodded. "You have brought this upon yourself, Lyanna darling." I swear if the devil had a smile, it would be the one he flashed me just right now.

Uh oh... What have I gotten myself into?

"Well, since we cannot fly in," In a blink of an eye, he slipped a hand under my knees and one around my waist, lifting me off my feet, straight into his arms. Instinctively, I wrapped my hands around his neck, squealing from such an unforeseen course of action. "we'll have to shoot our way in."

"What are you doing? Get me down at once." I growled into his clasp. Rather than granting my request, he pulled me closer, impossibly so, firmly but gently. His icy breath, a light scent of mint and cherry, skimmed across my earlobe, sending shivers scuttling all over my spine. My skin felt paler and colder than ever.

"Off we go." Viserys exclaimed rubbing his hands before blowing a low brisk whistle, like a summoning, at the same time with Daenerys.

And then they were sprinting toward the wide stretch that was the night beyond. And then they were falling. Free falling. Out of my field of vision. And then they surfaced from the dark abyss, in a flash of black and red mighty wings and a bellow of sheer terror. Straddling the back of their dragons, they were now circling the sky above us, like vultures in a desert. So did Seraphina.

"Our turn." Rhaegar whispered in my ear, his errand locks of bleached hair brushing over my heated cheeks.

"I can't do it." I protested, squirming in his arms like a cat shying away from water. I knew what was coming. It was written all over his face. He was stalling, giving me a little time to brace myself for the madness we were about to do.

"Anything you said." he murmured, composed and calm.

"I also said I would castrate you if you came that close to me ever again."

His starlit cinder eyes were brighter than ever. "Too late for that."

"I am too heavy for you to carry me all the way up there."

He huffed a laugh. "You weigh less than a baby to me Lyanna." He took some steps forward, until we were standing on the edge of the rooftop terrace. A faint touch of nausea lurched from the pit of my stomach. Instinctively again, I snuggled closer to the smoothness of his fine clothes, just to make sure that he wouldn't let go.

"Ready?" he tightened his arms around me, reassuring me himself that he wouldn't let go.

"Please don't drop me. And please don't-"

Very casually he stepped out of the edge and I closed my eyes. Before my yelp, which I thought
would be my last, finished echoing, the ground was closing in narrow beneath us. Benting his knees to absorb the impact, the sound of his landing was very low, a muted thud that could have been a door softly closed.

And then he was running, fast and silent like a shooting star. I didn't close my eyes, despite the wind whipping against my face. Not for a split second. With blinding speed, we streaked through the dark and swerved our way into the city streets. There was no sound, no evidence that his feet touched the earth. His breathing never changed, never indicated any effort.

Everything around me was faded, a blur of colours and lights. People's faces flew by at deadly speeds, always missing us by inches. I guess we looked like smoke swirling in the wind to them too.

The only indication of colour, was the contours of wings that overshadowed our path. Above us, the dragons were chasing us, maneuvering and rolling. Dany and Vis surely enjoyed themselves trying to outtrace each other.

Rhaegar's body, contrary to his skin, was hard against mine. Stable. Safe. A solid force of nature crafted and honed for this.

I scowled at the soft laugh that tickled my ear. "I expected more screaming from you. I must not be trying hard enough."

"Do not." A hiss escaped me, muffled between my laboured breaths and his jaw. Even his smell reminded me of wind and rain. Citrus and sea. That's how I could define his scent.

Instead of letting my drumming heart and the rising dizzy faintness of motion sickness overwhelm me, I focused on the approaching tiara of lights in the eternal wall of the mountain. How sad that this unbearable feeling that felt like dying a little deteriorated significantly when we started spiraling up the aforesaid ten thousand stairs.

Then it was over.

So breathtakingly fast.

He stood motionless, waiting for me to climb down. I tried, but my muscles wouldn't respond. My iron grip stayed locked around his neck while my head spun uncomfortably.


"Queasy?" Rhaegar whispered, anxious now.

My rasp of discomfort was answer enough.

Cradling me between his arms for some soft moments, he waited for me to recover from the rocketing shock.

"You might want to close your eyes next time."

Regaining my balance in a hurry, I tested my jiggling feet on the floor, my knees buckling at the adjustment. I shook off his touch with a brutal kind of detachment.

"There won't be a next time." There shouldn't have been a first one to begin with. He could have spared me the trauma of the agonizing horror I had just undergone by winnowing us at the gates of the mountain and save the flashing part only for the steps. Instead, the conceited Show-off opted
for his entertainment over my needs.

With my head, and probably my whole body spinning, I lumbered away from him, still in a daze. He moved his hands under my armpits to support me but I slapped away his touch once more.

"Let me help yo-"

"You helped enough already." I barked. Yes. Anger. Sharpness. Coldness...it felt good. Better than letting him have his way around me.

I created a welcome distance between us, walking as far from him as possible to inspect the broad balcony around me, gilded by the light of golden lanterns. At the far end, built into the red mountain itself, two glass doors were already open, revealing a large, but surprisingly casual dining room carved from the stone, and accented with rich wood. Ahead, the moonlit sea was a glittering vastness to behold.

"Scattered-brained douche." I mumbled under my breath, running a hand through my curly hair and still seething with blind ire.

A cold smile. "I can hear you, you know." Even now, his acute senses never failed to make me hot under the collar.

"Good. It was meant to be heard."

The corners of his mouth twitched, ready to retort but he glanced over me and stopped.

Because the two winged males from earlier stood in the doorway.

Grinning.

I stood statue-still. Perplexed. For their night black wings were the same ones on my tattoo.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys this was supposed to have and the dinner as well but it would be far too long so... next chapter ;)

Now, I am sorry to inform you that I don't know when the next update will be since today I just received in my mail my pre-order of ACOWAR (the third and last installment of ACOTAR on which the concept of this fanfic is based.)

Everything is officially on pause. My life cannot go on if I don't read this 700-pages baby and after that mourn it a little, so please be patient with awful me :

Again, thank you all for the kudos and the comments. The best motivation for me ;)
Rhaegar sauntered toward the two males standing by the dining room doors, giving me the option to stay or join.

Both of them were tall, their wings tucked in tight to powerful, muscled bodies covered in plated, dark leather that reminded me of the worn scales of some serpentine beast. Like Seraphina's. Identical long swords were each strapped down the column of their spines, the blades beautiful in their simplicity. Perhaps I needn’t have bothered with the fine clothes after all.

The slightly larger of the two, his face masked in shadow, chuckled and said, "Come on, Lyanna. We don’t bite. Unless you ask us to."

Surprise sparked through me, setting my feet moving.

Rhaegar slid his hands into his pockets. "The last I heard, Jon, no one has ever taken you up on that offer."

The second one snorted, the faces of both males at last illuminated as they turned toward the golden light of the dining room. Like Rhaegar, both his friends were blessed with unnatural good looks.

"A shame really." I responded to the first male, Jon, ignoring Rhaegar completely. "Because I do bite, if I feel like it." My voice, my face, my stare were hammered out of steely aggression as I strutted close, to the waiting House of Wind behind them.

Jon's hazel eyes lit up with unexpected surprise, sliding to Rhaegar with unmistakable approval. His lips curl up in the widest of grins, so warm like the fiery red of his hair, the colour of spiced sangaree. "I expected nothing less from this dork's mate." he pointed at Rhaegar, only to receive a mild glare from him.

I returned his grin as Jon surveyed Rhaegar from head to foot, his rumpled bangs shifting with the movement. "So fancy tonight, brother. And you made poor Lyanna dress up, too." He winked at me. There was something rough-hewn about his features, like he’d been made of wind and earth and flame and all these civilized trappings were little more than an inconvenience.

But the second male, the more classically beautiful of the two...His hazel eyes, a shade darker from Jon’s, gleamed against his mousy short hair and his tanned skin. Even the light shied from the elegant planes of his face. With good reason. Beautiful, but near-unreadable. He’d be the one to look out for, the knife in the dark. Indeed, an obsidian-hilted hunting knife was sheathed at his thigh, its dark scabbard embossed with a line of silver runes I’d never seen before.

Rhaegar said, "This is Arthur, my spymaster." Not surprising. Some buried instinct had me checking that my mental shields were intact. Just in case.

"Welcome." was all Arthur said, his voice low, almost flat, as he extended a brutally scarred hand to me. The shape of it was normal.

But the skin.
It looked like it had been swirled and smudged and rippled. The scar tissue was grotesquely peeled. Burns. They must have been horrific if even their immortal blood had not been able to heal them.

The leather plates of his light armor flowed over most of it, held by a loop around his middle finger. Not to conceal, I realized as his hand breached the chill night air between us. No, it was to hold in place the large, depthless cobalt stone that graced the back of the gauntlet. A matching one lay atop his left hand; and twin red stones adorned Jon’s gauntlets, their color like the slumbering heart of a flame.

I took Arthur's hand, and his rough fingers squeezed mine. His skin was as cold as his face.

But the word Jon had used a moment ago snagged my attention as I released his hand and tried not to look too eager to step back to Rhaegar's side. "You're brothers?" They didn't look kinred in terms of appearance at all. Apart from that, Rhaegar didn't have wings. He was a vampire and not...whatever these two were. My curious eyes surveyed once more the star-kissed wings, the question of what they were at the tip of my tongue. *Later.* I would receive all my answers later.

Rhaegar clarified, "Brothers in the sense that all bastards are brothers of a sort."

I'd never thought of it that way. "And you?" I asked Jon.

He shrugged, wings tucking in tighter. "I command Rhaegar's armies." As if such a position were something that one shrugged off. "On behalf of Velaris and... usually of the Hewn City." The Court of Nightmares, he wanted to add. The city that had been built Under The Mountain. I didn't miss the fleeting shadow that crossed his eyes nor the abrupt edge that feathered in his jaw.

And...armies. Rhaegar had armies. I shifted on my feet. Jon’s hazel eyes tracked the movement, his mouth twitching to the side, and I honestly thought he was about to give me his professional opinion on how doing so would make me unsteady against an opponent when Arthur clarified, "Jon also excels at pissing everyone off. Especially amongst our...circle. So, as the mate of Rhaegar...good luck."

But Jon nudged his bastard-brother-whatever out of the way, Arthur's mighty wings flaring slightly as he balanced himself.

"I do believe he cannot be worse than him." My stare met Rhaegar's playful one. "He is second to none. Besides, I have a flair for pissing people off myself."

Jon tipped back his head and laughed, a full, rich sound that bounced off the ruddy stones of the House. Arthur’s brows flicked up with approval as the shadows seemed to wrap tighter around him. As if he were the dark hive from which they flew and returned.

I tried not to shudder and faced Rhaegar, hoping for an explanation about his spymaster’s dark gifts.

Rhaegar’s face was blank, but his eyes were wary. Assessing. I almost demanded what the hell he was looking at, until Dany breezed onto the balcony with, "If Jon is howling, I hope it means Lya told him to shut his fat mouth."

Both warriors turned toward her, Jon bracing his feet slightly farther apart on the floor in a fighting stance I knew all too well.

Dany was donned in a red, flowing gown of chiffon accented with gold cuffs, and combs fashioned like gilded leaves swept back the waves of her unbound hair. Viserys was nowhere to be seen, probably waiting for us inside. Same applied for the three dragons that must have flown away,
having come here earlier than us.

"I don’t know why I ever forget you two are related," Jon told Dany, jerking his chin at Rhaegar, who rolled his eyes. "You two and your clothes."

Dany sketched a bow to Jon. Indeed, I tried not to slump with relief at the sight of the fine clothes, I had failed to notice earlier due to my fly-prospect panic. At least I wouldn’t look overdressed now. "I wanted to impress Lyanna. You could have at least bothered to comb your hair."

"Unlike some people," Jon said, proving my suspicions correct about that fighting stance, "I have better things to do with my time than sit in front of the mirror for hours."

"Yes," Dany said, tossing her long hair over a shoulder, "since swaggering around Velaris—"

"We have company," was Arthur’s soft warning, wings again spreading a bit as he herded them through the open balcony doors to the dining room. I could have sworn tendrils of darkness swirled in their wake.

Dany patted Arthur on the shoulder as she dodged his outstretched wing. "Relax, Arthur. No fighting tonight. We promised Rhaegar."

The lurking shadows vanished a tiny bit.

Dany curved her fingers toward me. "Come sit with me while they drink." I had enough dignity remaining not to look to Rhaegar for confirmation it was safe. So I obeyed, falling into step beside her as the two males drifted back to walk the few steps with their Prince. "Unless you’d rather drink," Dany offered as we entered the warmth and red stone of the dining room. "But I want you to myself before Ashara hogs you—"

The interior dining room doors opened on a whispering wind, revealing the shadowed, crimson halls of the mountain beyond and a tall, slender form. If hours ago I thought that Dany was the most beautiful female I’d ever seen, the graceful woman that had just strutted in, proved me terribly wrong. She had long straight walnut hair, styled into a glossy ponytail that reached halfway to her back. Like Jon and Arthur, she was resplendent in the same charcoal serpentine leathers that offsetted her creamy skin and a pair of haunting violet orbs. And like them, two mighty iridescent wings towered above her.

Dany groaned, slumping into a chair near the end of the table, where Vis was waiting quietly, and poured herself a glass of wine. Jon took a seat across from her, wiggling his fingers for the wine bottle. But Rhaegar and Arthur just stood there, watching, maybe monitoring as the female approached me, with a half, almost nonexistent, smile tugged on her lush lips and an expression bordering on the same pumping arrogance Rhaegar never failed to display. An eerie aura rippled of her, a pulse of power akin to Rhaegar’s, but this one...milder. Smothered somehow.

She halted three feet away from me, scrutinizing me from head to bottom with painstaking precision. My toes unfurled within my slippers, for I’ve never felt meeker in my life.

"Mercifully, you don’t smell like a dog." She sniffed delicately, her pert nose crinkling. Her voice was as cold and curt as this morning before the door’s fogged glass. Although she stood half a foot taller, I held my chin up. I was a High Lord’s daughter, not an imp to be debased by whoever this quirky friend of Rhaegar’s was.

"Mercifully, I don't look like an overgrown bat either." I lifted an ebony brow, addressing her proud wings.
Daenerys choked on her wine while Jon and Rhaegar attempted to muffle a laugh in vain. Even Arthur seemed incapable of schooling his features back to neutrality.

Ashara's enchanting eyes became two slits, meeting mine like leashed lighting but again, I refused to balk. The Prince had intoned to me the female I was about to meet was if anything, a little eccentric.

Rhaegar coughed subtly into a fist drawing her attention, trying to break the staring contest between us.

"The tiara suits you Ash." His eyes fell on the silver circlet that adorned her forehead, from which a teardrop amethyst hung, complimenting the lilac in her eyes.

"Everything suits me." Her voice was soft but honed sharper than any blade I’d encountered. With a last leveled glance chucked upon me, she strode to the table claiming her seat next to Jon. I ensconced myself next to Dany, facing Ashara, with Rhaegar on my right and Arthur across from him.

Jon rolled his eyes. "Are you quite finished Ashara bullying Lya cause I’m hungry."

Ashara slid her attention to the warrior to her right. Arthur on her other side, monitored the two of them very, very carefully. "No one warming your bed right now, Jon? It must be so hard to be an Illyrian and have no thoughts in your head save for those about your favorite part."

"You know I’m always happy to tangle in the sheets with you, Ash," Jon said, utterly unfazed the knives in her eyes. "I know how much you enjoy Illyrian—"

"What are Illyrians?" I posed the question to no one in particular.

"Arrogant bastards that's what." Rhaegar responded composed. Even if I assumed that my three new acquaintances were indeed Illyrians for all three of them had the same batlike wings, they didn't seem to object to the insult.

"You are an arrogant bastard and you are not an Illyrian." I quipped earning a howl of laughter from everyone, even a subtle twitch of Ashara's mouth. "Further enlightenment anyone?"

"They are a warrior race, living within my Court." So they pledged filty to the Night Court... The Prince went on. "Illyrians usually form large war bands and inhabit in their training camps. They conform to their traditions and they——"

"I'm hungry," Dany complained nudging me with a thigh. She snapped a finger, and plates piled high with roast chicken, greens, and bread appeared. Simple, but … elegant. Not formal at all. Perhaps the sweater and pants wouldn’t have been out of place for such a meal. "Rhaegar can talk all night and bore us to tears, so don’t bother waiting for him to dig in." She picked up her wine and guzzled it down with two sips. "I asked him if I could take you to dinner, just the two of us, and he said you wouldn’t want to. But honestly...would you rather spend time with all these ancient bores, or me?"

"For someone who is a little bit younger than all of us," Vis drawled, "you seem to forget——"

"Everyone wants to talk-talk-talk," Dany said, giving a warning glare at Jon, who had indeed opened his mouth. "Can’t we eat-eat-eat, and then talk?"

Arthur chuckled softly at Dany, but picked up his fork. I followed suit, waiting until he’d taken a bite before doing so. Just in case——
Good. So good. Except for the chicken I discreetly set aside on my plate. And the wine—

Rhaegar placed his hand gently atop of mine as I made to grab the wine pitcher, preventing me from doing so. Instead he shoved another one toward me, its content a shade lighter. Only then did I realise that the ruby red liquid inside the pitcher from which I was going to drink, was blood. The meal that Dany was referring to.

Who...who had they—

We didn't kill anyone. Rhaegar stated in my mind, talking to me through the bond. This is a supply from the Blood bank. The donator offered his blood with his own free will. Not manipulated, not violated, not compelled or anything. His ministration was repaid of course.

I hadn’t even realized Dany had poured me a glass of the real wine until she clinked her own against mine. "Don’t let these old busybodies boss you around."

Jon said, "Pot. Kettle. Black." Then he frowned at Vis, who had hardly touched his plate, he too savoring his blood "I always forget how bizarre that is." He unceremoniously took his plate, dumping half the contents on his own before passing the rest to Arthur. Ashara just glared at him, digging her fork in her crammed plate.

Arthur said to her as he slid the food onto his plate, "I keep telling him to ask before he does that."

Ashara flicked her fingers and the empty plate vanished from Arthur's scarred hands. "If he haven’t been able to adopt basic etiquette after all these centuries, I doubt he will make any progress now. For one thing, it's not up to you brother."

My eyes narrowed in bare perplexion, drifting from the spymaster to Ashara and back again. "He... he is your brother?"

"Isn't this what I just said or are you deaf?" she quipped. Rhaegar gave her a sharp look, stars faltering in his eyes. She retaliated the glower without second thoughts.

"Do you have Arthur's gift too?" I inquired flatly. No wisps of smoke seemed to be leaking from her, no trace of darkness.

"No."

"Then what is your rank within this Circle?" Jon was the army's captain, Arthur a spymaster and she...

"I am your mate's Second in Command." Her tone was thrumming with pride and...authority. "And Daenerys, his Third."

Her statement seemed to clear the bluriness in which I have been swimming since we arrived. I could sense sheer power rippling off her. An interesting balance between Rhaegar's terrifying Second and his disarmingly chipper Third. If Dany's rank was higher than that of the two warriors at this table, then there had to be some other reason beyond that irreverent charm. I pried further for an answer.

"What powers do you possess to be qualified for such a position?"

Ashara offered me a satisfied grin, pleased with my question. Terrifying she was and yes, terrified I was to hear.
"Cauldron boil me," Dany said, gulping from her blood. "Can we not?"

I decided I didn’t want to know about her powers, either. Not yet at least, while eating .

Rhaegar chuckled from my other side. "Remind me to have family dinners more often."

"I suppose you must be perpetually on holidays." I said to Rhaegar's Second and Third. "You don't strike me like a person who leaves frequently Velaris. For long stretches of time at least." I looked at Rhaegar.

The veil of silence that shrouded at once the room upon finishing my words was maddening. Everyone had lowered their heads digging into their plates, even if they were empty. All of them looked so hard at anything but me, with vacant gazes as though the wanted to burst out of their skin. Only Ashara acknowledged my confusion, her fork mid air. Her amethyst eyes creased, flickering with wrath. Hatred. Menace. A promise of retribution. I wished I could rifle through her head. To see the face of the person she wanted to unleash her power on. To see the open wound on which I had just rubbed salt.

Not an answer. I didn't pry further. The pain that laced the heavy silence told me enough.

Across from me, a more intense cocoon of wordlessness seemed to pulse around Arthur, even as the others dug into their food. His shadows pressed in closer to him, whispering, smoldering. I again peered at that oval of blue stone on his gauntlet as he sipped from his glass of wine. Arthur noted the look, swift as it had been, as I had a feeling he’d been noticing and cataloging all of my movements, words, and breaths. He held up his hands, the backs to me so both jewels were on full display. “They’re called Siphons. They concentrate and focus our power in battle.”

Only the three Illyrians wore them.

Rhaegar woke up from the obvilion my words had pushed him into. He set down his fork, and clarified for me, "The power of stronger Illyrians tends toward ‘incinerate now, ask questions later.’ They have little magical gifts beyond that, the killing power."


Rhaegar went on, though I knew he was aware of every glance between the spymaster and army commander, "The Illyrians bred the power to give them advantage in battle, yes. The Siphons filter that raw power and allow these three to transform it into something more subtle and varied, into shields and weapons, arrows and spears." I am sure Ashara wasn't in need of any of those things. Her Siphons were a mere show-off. A declaration of power. "Imagine the difference between hurling a bucket of paint against the wall and using a brush. The Siphons allow for the magic to be nimble, precise on the battlefield, when its natural state lends itself toward something far messier and unrefined, and potentially dangerous when you’re fighting in tight quarters."

I wondered how much of that any of them had needed to do. If those scars on Arthur's hands had come from it.

Jon flexed his fingers, admiring the clear red stones adorning the backs of his own broad hands. "Doesn’t hurt that they also look damn good."

"Illyrian males." Ashara scoffed.

Jon bared his teeth in feral amusement, and took a drink of his wine.
I scrambled for something to ask and said to the spymaster, those shadows gone again, "How did you...I mean, how do you and Lord Jon—"

Jon spewed his wine across the table, causing Dany to leap up, swearing at him as she used a napkin to mop her dress.

But he was howling, and Arthur had a faint, wary smile on his face as Dany waved a hand at her dress and the spots of wine appeared on Jon's fighting, or perhaps flying, I realized leathers. My cheeks heated. Some court protocol that I’d unknowingly broken and...

"Jon," Rhaegar drawled, "is not a lord. Though I’m sure he appreciates you thinking he is." He surveyed his Inner Circle. "While we’re on the subject, neither is Arthur and Ash."

"And we are proud of it." Ashara mumbled through gritted teeth.

"So you...You aren't half-breed vampires or something?" I said to the Illyrians.

Jon finished his laughing. "Illyrians are certainly not vampires. And glad of it." He hooked his red hair behind an ear. "We’re just Illyrians. Considered expendible aerial cavalry for the Night Court at the best of times, mindless soldier grunts at the worst."

"Which is most of the time," Arthur clarified. I didn’t dare ask if those shadows were a part of being Illyrian.

I cleared my throat, straightening, and said to Arthur who, shadows or no, seemed the safest and therefore was probably the least so, "How did you meet?" A harmless question to feel them out, learn who they were. Wasn’t it?

Arthur merely turned to his sister and Jon, who were staring at Rhaegar with guilt and love on their faces, so deep and agonized that some now-splintered instinct had me almost reaching across the table to grip his hand.

But Jon seemed to process what I’d asked and his friend’s silent request that he tell the story instead, and a grin ghosted across his face. "We all hated each other at first."

Jon went on, drawing my attention from the silent Prince at my right, "We are bastards, you know. Ash, Ar and I. The Illyrians...We love our people, and our traditions, but they dwell in clans and camps deep in the mountains of the North, and do not like outsiders. Especially royal vampires who try to tell them what to do. But they’re just as obsessed with lineage, and have their own princes and lords among them. Ar and Ash," he said, pointing a thumb in their direction, his red Siphon catching the light, "were the bastards of one of the local lords. And if you think the bastard son and daughter of a lord is hated, then you can’t imagine how hated the bastard is of a war-camp laundress and a warrior she couldn’t or wouldn’t remember. His casual shrug didn’t match the vicious glint in his hazel eyes. "Ar’s father sent him to our camp for training once he and his charming wife realized he was a shadowsinger."

"Like the daemati," Rhaegar said to me, "shadowsingers are rare coveted by courts and territories across the world for their stealth and predisposition to hear and feel things others can’t."

Perhaps those shadows were indeed whispering to him, then. Arthur's cold face yielded nothing. Jon said, "The camp lord practically shit himself with excitement the day Ar was dumped in our camp. But me...once my mother weaned me and I was able to walk, they flew me to a distant
"They would have been smarter throwing you off a cliff." Dany said, snorting.

"Oh, definitely," Jon said, that grin going razor-sharp. "Especially because when I was old and strong enough to go back to the camp I’d been born in, I learned those pricks worked my mother until she died."

Again that silence fell, different this time. The tension and simmering anger of a unit who had endured so much, survived so much...and felt each other’s pain keenly.

"The Illyrians," Rhaegar smoothly cut in, that light finally returning to his gaze, "are unparalleled warriors, and are rich with stories and traditions. But they are also brutal and backward, particularly in regard to how they treat their females."

Ashara's eyes had gone near-vacant as she stared at the wall of windows behind me.

"They’re barbarians." she spat finally, and neither Illyrian male objected. Dany nodded emphatically, even as she noted Arthur's posture and bit her lip. "They cripple their females so they can keep them for breeding more flawless warriors." her voice was edged on steel. "When my father learned of Ar's gifts, he grabbed the opportunity and sent him to the nearest camp. While he was on the task, his wife tried to hit two birds with a stone, so she got rid of me too, much to my step-brothers displeasure." Arthur let out a deep growl. "You see back then I was just a girl, a beautiful and fragile plaything for them to do with me as they pleased. I could have wiped them off the face of earth but I didn't, scared of what this witch of a step-mother could do to Arthur and...our mother." The burns... who is so cruel to do such a thing to a child and who is such an evil father to allow his son to be tortured.

"So I played docile coy girl. When we had been announced that we were to leave, I made a promise to myself that I would never let anyone trample down on neither me nor my family ever again." she placed a hand atop of her brother's, the ice in her eyes melting just a tiny bit. "When we arrived at the Illyrian camp the life awaiting for me there was as shitty as in our former house. While Arthur was assigned to practise everyday, I was expected to do the chores, to smother my powers, to lower my head in front of the male warriors, to tell myself that I was inferior when all I wanted to do was train and fight and show them I could kick their pathetic asses without wasting a single breath."

"One day when three Illyrians wouldn't leave me alone, touching me and calling me and my mother different names, I couldn't take this anymore. So I set free whatever was prowling underneath my skin and I...I exploded. When those three bastards recovered from the shock they scuttled away to inform the Commander but in a blink of an eye they turned into nothing more than air. It wasn't me that had misted them but a girl around my age with a fierce smile and...kindness in her eyes. Defiant and strong and independent." Ashara froze for a second smiling bitterly.

My brows narrowed. "Misted?"

Jon let out a wicked chuckle as Rhaegar floated a lemon wedge that had been garnishing his chicken into the air above the table. With a flick of his finger, it turned to citrus-scented mist.

"She approached me and got me to my feet saying that she was my new best friend." Like Dany said to me today... "My first one actually...And that day was the happiest of my life. The next morning we started training together along with the others."

"What is her name?"
"Selaena." Rhaegar stiffened beside me. "Her name was Selaena."

Was... She couldn't be... "Where is she?" I waited with bated breath.

Silence again. "She is gone." Ashara closed her limpid eyes for a heartbreaking second. "Someone took her away from me. From us." When she opened them again, I could only see the pain, the loss shuddering at the memories that were flowing on the surface, but I knew the cut was much deeper. Everyone again lowered their heads, apart from Rhaegar. His features were marred by devastation, sadness, his bright orbs now leached of life and smeared into a bottomless indigo. She was a member of his circle undoubtedly but just by the sound of her name, I could see that she was something more than vital to him.

"I shall be excused." Viserys stood up, attempting to hide the crack in his voice, unsuccessfully though.

"Still no one has answered me. How did you find yourself in an Illyrian camp?" Rhaegar found his composure soon enough. "How did you meet them?"

"When I turned twelve, my parents brought me to one of the Illyrian war-camps. To be trained."

"You are not an Illyrian, why would you train with them?"

"I was the Crown Prince. One day I would have to rule them, my father said, so what would be better than living among them to learn their ways? Futhermore, my parents didn’t want me to rely on my power.” Rhaegar said. "They knew from the moment they conceived me that I’d be hunted my entire life. Where one strength failed, they wanted others to save me."

"I was scared out of my mind," The Prince admitted, not a shade of shame to be found. "I’d been learning to wield my unique powers, but without them, I would have to make do with only my vampire ones." Again, I looked at the slumbering Siphons atop the warriors’ hands. "I tried to use a Siphon during those years." Rhaegar said. "And shattered about a dozen before I realized it wasn’t compatible, the stones couldn’t hold it. My power flows and is honed in other ways."

"So difficult, being the most powerful Vampire that has ever walked, in the history of the world." Dany teased.

"You what?!" I exclaimed dumbfounded.

"That's right girl." Ashara said. "Your mate is capable of wiping the earth off if he wakes up on the wrong side of the bed."

Rhaegar rolled his eyes. "The camp-lord banned me from using my magic. For all our sakes. But I had no idea how to fight when I set foot into that training ring that day. The other boys in my age group knew it, too. Especially one in particular, who took a look at me, and beat me into a bloody mess."

"You were so clean." Jon said, shaking his head. "The pretty Crown Prince. How fancy you were in your new training clothes."

"Jon," Arthur told me with that voice like darkness given sound. "resorted to getting new clothes over the years by challenging other boys to fights, with the prize being the clothes off their backs." There was no pride in the words, not for his people’s brutality. I didn’t blame the shadowsinger, though. To treat anyone that way...

"I’d beaten every boy in our age group twice over already." Jon went on. "But then Rhaegar
arrived, in his clean clothes, and he smelled...different. Like a true opponent. So I attacked. We both got three lashings apiece for the fight."

I flinched. Hitting children-

"They do worse, girl." Ashara cut in, "In those camps. Three lashings is practically an encouragement to fight again. When they do something truly bad, bones are broken. Repeatedly. Over weeks."

I said to Rhaegar, "Your parents willingly sent you into that?" Soft fire indeed.

He nodded, grateful for his stay there. Whatever training he had undergone, its success was patent.

"My education was another weapon," He intoned. A soft imply about my reading lessons. "which was why my mother went with me: to tutor me after lessons were done for the day. And when she took me home that first night to our new house at the edge of the camp, she made me read by the window. It was there that I saw Jon trudging through the mud, toward the few ramshackle tents outside of the camp. I asked her where he was going, and she told me that bastards are given nothing: they find their own shelter, own food. If they survive and get picked to be in a war-band, they’ll be bottom-ranking forever, but receive their own tents and supplies. But until then, he’d stay in the cold."

"Those mountains," Arthur added, his face hard as ice, "offer some of the harshest conditions you can imagine."

"After my lessons," Rhaegar went on, "my mother cleaned my lashings, and as she did, I realized for the first time what it was to be warm, and safe, and cared for. And it didn’t sit well."

"Apparently not." Jon said. "Because in the dead of night, that little prick woke me up in my piss-poor tent and told me to keep my mouth shut and come with him. And maybe the cold made me stupid, but I did. His mother was livid. But I’ll never forget the look on her beautiful face when she saw me and said, ‘There is a bathtub with hot running water. Get in it or you can go back into the cold.’ Being a smart lad, I obeyed. When I got out, she had clean nightclothes and ordered me into bed. I’d spent my life sleeping on the ground and when I balked, she said she understood because she had felt the same once, and that it would feel as if I was being swallowed up, but the bed was mine for as long as I wanted it."

"And you were friends after that?"

"No. Cauldron no." Rhaegar said. "We hated each other, and only behaved because if one of us got into trouble or provoked the other, then neither of us ate that night. My mother started tutoring Jon, but it wasn’t until Ash and Ar arrived a year later that we decided to be allies."

Jon's grin grew as he reached around Ashara to clap his friend on the shoulder. Arthur sighed, the sound of the long-suffering. The warmest expression I’d seen him make. "Two new bastards in the camp. One," he gazed down at Ash playfully. "a raving beauty with a hot temper and the other, an untrained shadowsinger to boot. Not to mention they couldn’t even fly thanks to their shitty father."

Indeed, any warmth had vanished from the siblings' faces. But I quieted my own curiosity as Jon again shrugged, not even bothering to take note of the silence that seemed to leak from the shadowsinger.

Jon went on, "Rhaegar and I made his life a living hell, shadowsinger or no. But Rhaegar’s mother had known Ar’s mother, and took him in. As we grew older, and the other males around us did, too,
we realized everyone else hated us enough that we had better odds of survival sticking together."

"Do you have any gifts?" I asked him. "Like them?" I jerked my chin to Rhaegar and the siblings.

"A volatile temper doesn’t count," Dany said as Jon opened his mouth.

He gave her that grin I realized likely meant trouble was coming, but said to me, "No. I don’t, not beyond a heaping pile of the killing power. Bastard-born nobody, through and through." Rhaegar sat forward like he’d object, but Jon forged ahead, "Even so, the other males knew that we were different. And not because we were two bastards and the most powerful vampire that had ever been born. We were stronger, faster, like the Cauldron knew we’d been set apart and wanted us to find each other. Rhaegar’s mother saw it, too. Especially as we reached the age of maturity, and all we wanted to do was fuck and fight."

"Males are horrible creatures, aren’t they?" Ashara said.

"Repulsive." Dany said, clicking her tongue.

Some surviving, small part of my heart wanted to...laugh at that.

Jon shrugged. "Rhaegar’s power grew every day, and everyone, even the camp-lords, knew he could mist everyone if he felt like it. And the two of us...we weren’t far behind." He tapped his crimson Siphon with a finger "A bastard Illyrian had never received one of these. Ever. For Ar and me to both be appointed them, albeit begrudgingly, had every warrior in every camp across those mountains sizing us up. Only pure-blood pricks get Siphons, born and bred for the killing power. It still keeps them up at night, puzzling over where the hell we got it from. Yet, the real scandal was Ash."

Ashara smiled naughtily. "Like I said, I couldn't keep my powers contained. I was strong and no one could deny that. A shame I hadn't been born with a cock between my legs but, still the greatest asset after Rhaegar. So a few years of training made me unstoppable. Until my first moon’s blood came. They were going to cripple my wings, and I would never fly again. Rhaegar didn't let them lay a finger on me." she bowed her head slightly, thankful to my mate. "After that, I was rewarded with Seven Siphons myself."

"What about you?" I tilted my head toward Daenerys. "Weren't you subjected to the nightmare of those camps?"

"Neither me nor Vis. We hadn't even been born. Besides, Vis is not the fighting type. Diplomacy is his thing. That's why he is the First emissary of Our Court." Yes, Viserys gave the impression of a really eloquent person. He had a way with words, one that allowed him to craft and modify arguments to his advantage.

Out of the blue, my stomach gave out a deep growl. Rhaegar’s attention slipped to the untouched chicken on my plate.

"When exactly did you plan to tell me you are allergic to chicken?" he raised his brows at me.

"How...how did you know?"

"That's a secret. Now what else are you allergic to?"

"To uncouth Princes that keep meddling in my business for the last twenty four hours." I snapped.

"Wow." Jon marvelled. "You two really deserve each other."
"I always thought your mate will be a silver haired lass, around your age with a knack for blushing, batting her eyes and weeping at the melody of your harp." Ashara remarked with a serpentine smile. "Not a short flat-chested brat, paler than a vampire and with a tongue flowing faster than the Sidra." Sidra was called the river that crossed through Velaris.

I didn't care. Rhaegar's Second or not I would throw her off the mountain, and I would gloat over her sorry ass when I would hear the thud of her fall.

Or at least that was the plan until Viserys strode in like a hurricane, with a sealed envelope in his hands, the wax stamped with a three-headed dragon.

He handed it impatiently to Rhaegar with, "This came just now. You should read it yourself."

He started pacing back and forth as if his wife was ready to give birth while Rhaegar was poring over the letter.

Once he was done, he crumpled the paper in his hands and got to his feet, throwing it into the fire of the hearth.

"What does it say?" Jon inquired, slightly unnerved. "What happened?"

"Shit happened, that's what." Viserys cursed under his breath.

Rhaegar swept them all with his stare, no doubt communicating with them through their minds.

Ashara cleaved through the quietness confirming my speculation. "We knew this would happen sooner or later."

"Have the others accepted the invitation?" Dany asked.

"Yes." Rhaegar murmured. I was seated upon my chair watching them without participating in their dialogue.

"Fools." Ashara hissed. "We don't have to go to that snake pit-"

"Yes we have." Vis interrupted dragging a hand through his hair. "This is an order not a request."

"Go where?" I breathed.

Rhaegar faced me, suddenly tired. "To meet my father and the Queen."

*Under the Mountain.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter...the Court of Nightnares!
Something was wrong. Or maybe everything was a mess. No one was putting much effort to hide their frustration. And I didn't give a damn to strangle my fear either.

For the last week, Rhaegar wouldn't leave me alone for the most part of the day. He would monopolize me for hours in the study, helping me to practise my mental shields in order to endorse them. I was slaving myself over my mind's barriers and labyrinths until my head hurt.

Impregnable. My shields must become impregnable. That's what I should be striving for, Rhaegar had said.

For his part, he wasn't himself these last seven days. Gone was teasing and humor and nosing around. He was worried, and he didn't bother appearing otherwise. Even Dany's merry spirits and cheer weren't so loud during the week. Not that I had seen her much anyway. Neither her nor the Inner Circle in general.

In the end of an overwhelming day, I wouldn't even contemplate chilling out in the garden, let alone explore the city's night life that Rhaegar had suggested showing me. Instead of that, I would opt for a protracted steaming bath in the infinity pool, with the twinkling view of Velaris and the stars for company. Afterwards, I would usually read, infuriatingly slow though, some pages of an easy novel, bundled up in layers of blankets until I fell asleep and drifted to my dreams.

Especially these past nights my dreams were always the same blur of familiar faces; My parents, my brothers and ... Oberyn. As much as I dreaded ever setting foot on that notorious Mountain, my longing to see my family prevailed over my unwillingness for they would be there too.

Once the dinner at the House of Wind had been over, Rhaegar filled me in with the details of the letter. It was an 'invitation' from the King and Queen to attend the celebration that was to be held Under The Mountain in honour of their son's mating bond. All of the six High Lords of both Zara and Valyria would be present at the gathering as an example of good will and intentions. This only entailed that the treaty would be invalidated for a while in order for the werewolf retinue to cross the Wall.

As far as I was informed, my parents would be there along with Brandon. Oberyn and Doran would represent the Summer Court and Hoster Tully with his firstborn, the Autumn Court.

Fools they were indeed, as Ashara had proclaimed, for having agreed to such a reckless meeting in vampire grounds. Vampires couldn't be trusted but deep inside I hoped that my family had delved into a less hurried and sloppier plan for their arrival. I couldn't blame them for taking such a risk. They must have been frantic with worry. They had to make sure I was unharmed and I had to see for myself if they were okay, to say properly good-bye to them, to promise them that I would be safe.

We had winnowed our way to the northeast part of the Night Court. Well, practically everyone could winnow, apart from me and Jon.

The Court of Nightmares lay behind a mammoth set of doors carved into the mountain itself. And from the base, the mountain rose high, only snow, and rock, and birds circling above. There was no
one outside, no village, no signs of life. Nothing to indicate a whole city of people dwelled within.

There were sentries at the stone gates, clothed not in black, as I might have suspected, but in gray and white, armor meant to blend into the mountain face. Rhaegar didn’t so much as look at them as he led me silently inside the mountain-city, his Inner Circle following close behind.

My body clenched as soon as the darkness, the scent of rock and fire and roasting meat, hit me.

The Court of Nightmares was the work of a god. This ... this was truly a city.

The walkway that Rhaegar led us down was an avenue, and around us, rising high into gloom, were buildings and spires, homes and bridges. A metropolis carved from the dark stone of the mountain itself, no inch of it left unmarked or without some lovely, hideous artwork etched into it. Figures danced and fornicated; begged and reveled. Pillars were carved to look like curving vines of night-blooming flowers. Water ran throughout in little streams and rivers tapped from the heart of the mountain itself.

The Hewn City. A place of such terrible beauty that it was an effort to keep the wonder and dread off my face. Music was already playing somewhere, and our hosts still did not come out to greet us. The people we passed, only royal vampires were clothed in finery, their faces deathly pale and cold. Not one stopped us, not one smiled or bowed.

We didn't spare a second glimpse upon them all. Neither of us had said one word. Rhaegar had told me not to, that the walls had ears here.

The Prince led me down the avenue toward another set of stone gates, thrown open at the base of what looked to be a castle within the mountain. The official seat of the High Lord of the Night Court.

One of the main reasons that war was waged by my people, was their demand for equality. After the war, in Zara this hunger for equality was satiated by the formation of the Courts, each one ruled by their High Lord. Unfortunately the circumstances weren't so favourable in Valyria. The Night Court, the most powerful one, exploiting the weakness and ruins that the war had caused, subjugated the other Courts, forging a new era of tyranny and injustice, only this time, the victims weren't defenseless humans and werewolves but their own kind. The title of the High Lord of the Night Court ceized to exist and it was replaced by King of the Night Court.

My attention drew back to the great, scaled black beasts that were carved into those gates, all coiled together in a nest of claws and fangs, sleeping and fighting, some locked in an endless cycle of devouring each other. Between them flowed vines of jasmine and moonflowers. The Gates of Eternity, that’s what I’d call the painting that flickered in my mind.

Into the castle beneath the mountain we strode. There were more people here, milling about the endless halls, watching our every breath. After some eternal minutes of swerving around corridors and then some more corridors, we parted ways with the others until nightfall.

Rhaegar escorted me to our chambers, the layout almost identical to the one in Velaris. This one was darker though.

With a last strict request to remain in my room until he came and picked me up, and an underlying tone of regret in his voice, he left me alone to prepare for the night.

It wasn't until late evening that two forms appeared through the cracks from slivers of darkness, no doubt sent from Rhaegar to assist me. But while I expected them to solidify into a tangible form,
these forms remained mostly made of shadow, their features barely discernable, save for their
loose, flowing cobweb gowns. They remained silent when they reached for me. The hands they
clasped around my forearms, while leading me to the bathroom, were cool but solid, as if the
shadows were a coating, a second skin.

They stripped me naked, bathed me roughly, and then, to my horror, began to paint my body.

Their brushes were unbearably cold and ticklish, and their shadowy grips were firm when I
wriggled. Things only worsened when they painted more intimate parts of me, and it was an effort
to keep from kicking one of them in the face. They offered a small tight explanation that those
were the orders of their Prince. I couldn't help but damn him soundly.

Having finished I surveyed my face in the mirror. From the neck up, I was regal: my face was
adorned with cosmetics, rouge on my lips, a smearing of gold dust on my eyelids, kohl lining my
eyes. My hair was braided into a waterfall ponytail. But from the neck down, I was a heathen god’s
plaything. A whore. They had continued the pattern of the tattoo on my arm, and once the blue-
black paint had dried, they placed on me a gauzy moon white dress.

If you could call it a dress. It was little more than two long shafts of gossamer, just wide enough to
cover my breasts, pinned at each shoulder with gold brooches. The sections flowed down to a
jeweled belt slung low across my hips, where they joined into a single piece of fabric that hung
between my legs and to the floor. It barely covered me, and from the cold air on my skin, I knew
that most of my backside was left exposed.

The cold breeze caressing my bare skin was enough to kindle my rage. The two servants ignored
my demands to be clothed in something else, their impossibly shadowed faces veiled from me, but
held my arms firm when I tried to rip the shift off.

"I wouldn’t do that,” Rhaegar warned me from the doorstep, his hands stuffed into his pockets. He
waved a hand, and the servants vanished through the door behind him. I flinched as they walked
through the wood, no doubt an ability everyone in the Night Court possessed.

With feline air, he ambled toward me, circling me, his eyes feasting on every pore of my body.
Evaluating me.

He purred softly in satisfaction.

"What's the meaning of this?" I growled through gritted teeth, pointing at, alas Freya makes this a
dress. "What is this shit?"

"A not so modest dress apparently." His violet eyes glittered with stars.

"You really are a hypocrite, aren't you?" Indignation honed my features. "First, you blame Oberyn
for having me 'wrapped' like a present, parading me in front of his Court as his 'reward'. Yet here
you are, garnishing me to parade me in front of a bunch of filthy vampires like a pet."

His eyes were unreadable, yet something tickled in his jaw.

"Well guess what. I am not a Targaryen whore to be flaunted. I am taking this abomination off
me."

I made to the changing screens but I collided with his broad chest, a mountain of adamant that
blocked my way. His answer was crystal clear. I didn't bother to try to get past him. My efforts
would come to no avail.
"I am taking this thing off or else you can find another escort for the party."

"You are wasting your breath." he declared finally. "Your attire will be the least of your concerns out there."

"What are they going to do to me?" My voice was shaking with foreboding. I was scared and not ashamed of it.

"I just want you to trust me on this one, will you? I won't let anyone touch you."

"The hell you will."

He released a weary sigh. "I want you to listen very carefully Lyanna." I looked him in the eyes long enough to understand that he was serious. "You stay close to me, you never stray from my side. Under no circumstances will you drink from the wine. You never drop your shields and even if you do, remember that your shields are shielded by mine. They have to get through me to get to you, something that it is not plausible at all. And above all," his eyes turned indigo. "you don't do anything stupid."

"Is this really necessary?" I said, gesturing to the paint and clothing.

"Of course." he said coolly. "How else would I know if anyone touches you?"

I braced myself as he ran a finger along my shoulder, smearing the paint. As soon as his finger left my skin, the paint fixed itself, returning the design to its original form. "The dress itself won’t mar it, and neither will your movements." he said, his face close to mine. His teeth were far too near to my throat. "And I’ll remember precisely where my hands have been. But if anyone else touches you, let’s say a certain High Lord with a particular fondness of summertime ... I’ll know." He flicked my nose. "And, Lyanna," he added, his voice a caressing murmur. "I don’t like my mate tampered with."

Ice wrapped around my stomach.

"Now, one last thing." Curving his fingers, a wood pale box appeared in his hands. He opened the lid and my heart stopped beating. Encased in blue velvet, sat a silver diadem, embedded with tiny sparkling diamonds and teardrop sapphires.

A crown.

For a Princess.

"No." I croaked categorically. I couldn't do this to my parents. I wouldn't to this to Oberyn. One of their own, I would never be.

"Yes," he whispered eerily quiet.

"I can't." I stared hard at the elegant crown destined to make me look even for imposing, even more exotic ... less breakable than I already felt. "I won't."

"Yes you will."

The walls have ears and the crows are watching. His voice was an echo in my head.

I couldn't help but look around until my stare stopped on the window, where two ravens were perched outside.
Play along.

When I turned around to face him, he had already crossed the distance between us. With thoughtful deliberation, he deposited the crown atop of my head, his eyes imploring me.

Play along, he repeated.

I wouldn't be leaving this room. Not until I had fully complied. Only a week had passed since I was taken from home. To me it felt like an eternity. I would do anything to see my wolves again, even if it meant I wouldn't be allowed to talk to them. They were out there, probably wondering where I was, counting the seconds to steal a glimpse of me. Missing me, the way I missed them. So far and yet so close. So I objected no more.

"Come." Rhaegar beckoned, looping his elbow around mine. "We're already late."

We walked through the halls. The sounds of merriment rose ahead of us, and my face burned as I silently bemoaned the too-sheer fabric of my dress. Beneath it, my breasts were visible to everyone, the paint hardly leaving anything to the imagination, and the cold cave air raised goose bumps on my skin. With my legs, sides, and most of my stomach exposed save for the slender shafts of fabric, I had to clench my teeth to keep them from chattering. My bare feet were half-frozen, and I hoped that wherever we were going would have a giant fire.

Queer, off-kilter music brayed through two stone doors that I presumed led to the throne room.

The Inner Circle, all five of them were stationed there waiting for us, their faces stone-cold and scrawled, giving nothing away. Even Daenerys wore the same invisible mask with the others. They didn't feel. They. would just exist and breath for the rest of the night until they could go back home.

Rhaegar gave a slight nod and the double doors opened for us, revealing a vast chamber carved of pale rock, upheld by countless carved pillars. The carvings were nothing close to ordinary for they depicted vampires and animals in various environments and states of movement. Countless stories and legends of Valyria were etched on them. Chandeliers of jewels hung between the pillars staining the red carpet in the center of the room with more colours.

"Rhaegar of House Targaryen, Crown Prince of Valyria and his Princess, Lyanna of House Stark."

A short chubby herald announced with cruel formality, making every attendant to whip their heads toward us. Wisps of night and darkness swirled around the Prince who had released the damper of his power, of who he was.

Vampires, gawked as we passed through the entrance, Viserys escorting Daenerys, and the Illyrians flanking us in a triangle formation, their wings sprouting and their Siphons gleaming. Some bowed to Rhaegar, while others gaped.

Only when I spied on their awed-painted faces, did I realise how exquisite we looked together, how calculated our entrance was. How rehearsed.

The sapphires on my crown matching my blue-grey eyes, my white dress purposefully white to highlight the ink on my skin, Rhaegar as usual donned in black, a stark contrast between us. I was the light and he, the darkness but put together we were two halves of a whole, complementing each other. Even his elbow was linked around my right arm, leaving my left one free, my mating tattoo on plain view for everyone to behold his claim, his ownership.

Whispers snaked under the shouts of celebrating, and even the music quieted as the crowd parted.
and made a path for us.

"Lannister Whore."

"Whore."

"Whore."

Only this particular word was crashing toward us like a midsummer hailstorm. But to my horror, everytime I turned to look at the one who casted those aspersions, I found that they weren't pinning me with hateful eyes, they weren't addressing me but ... but every single one of them was for Rhaegar. The word kept being hurled at him over and over.

He wasn't sparing a glance upon any of them, his face unreadable, his eyes focused on the dais ahead of us, where the King and Queen awaited, lounging on two black thrones. And above them... Hell erupted in my eyes.

Heads. No ordinary animal heads, no vampire heads. Just werewolf cut up heads, some of them spiked, others nailed on the cavern. I could hardly hear the fuss of the gathered over the lethal roar in my head. Rhaegar's grip tightened on my elbow.

Careful, it seemed to imply.

I lifted my chin, the weight of the crown digging into my skull and looked up at the royal pair.

The King shared some similarities with his children, like the sharp Valyrian features and that pair of piercing mauve eyes. But unlike them, he was thin like a stick, his complexion sallow, and his long silver hair, that seemed to have lost its shine a long time ago, was in dire need of a haircut, just like his beard.

A brittle lackluster ruler compared to the imposing woman beside him.

The Queen was resplendent in a mermaid silver gown, with a deep decollete that puffed out her breasts, contoured her narrow waist and flared out around her knees. Steely scales were spiked along the fabric. She was devastatingly beautiful, with a creamy skin that brought out the emerald in her eyes and her ruby red lips. Her satiny hair, golden as honey in the sun, was neatly braided and woven through her crown.

Yet ... there was ... something that sucked at her golden beauty, some kind of permanent sneer to her features that made her allure seem contrived and cold. To paint her would have driven me to madness.

The Gilded Queen, I would have named the painting but after all, everything that glistens is not gold.

"Greetings to the Lord and Lady of the Mountain." Rhaegar said smooth and polished. He took a bow, so light it looked like a dance. The others followed suit and so did I.

"High time you finally brought your wildling to join the Court, Rhaegar." The King drawled, his spiteful scrunity over me, staining his black throne with invisible venom. "Did we have to call for you to grace us with your presence?"

"We were quite busy." Tall as he was, he nuzzled suggestively my hair, ensnaring me into his star-infusing scent. "I do have to make up for a millenium of tangling alone in the sheets, after all." Again he brought into play those bedroom eyes. "Taking into no account the last fifty years of
course." Whatever hidden meaning he had smuggled into such a short sentence, appeared to have triggered the Queen.

"You lovely thing." She purred to Rhaegar, her lips parting in a dazzling smile. "I bet she was opening her legs for you like a flower." she chuckled but then when her attention slid to me, I felt it.

Beastly talons, nothing alike Rhaegar's caresses, forged in, scraping against my shields but to my relief, before they could invade further, they crashed against an obsidian fortress of adamant that rose around the doorstep of my mind, Rhaegar's shields.

She ... she was a daemati, the one he had warned me about. He had tried that time to play cool and indifferent but now I could see he had every reason not to be. If Rhaegar was a manipulator with minds, she was a butcher.

The Queen fliched at the resistance, leaning back in her throne to process my mate's defiance.

"She is delectable, isn't she?" Rhaegar gently swept back a fistful of my hair, and leaned closer. All at once, I felt a pair of pointy fangs trailing a path across my jawline, teasing and grazing down to the column of my neck. The sensation accumulating to the pit of my stomach was appaling. "She does enjoy playing. You should see how I make her beg."

"Oh we'll have plenty of time for that." The Queen fiddled with one of the steely spikes that were embedded on her dress. Although short and thin, the razor-honed blades could grant a very painful death to anyone who dared close. "Night entertainment runs low these days, right Aerys?"

"Indeed." The King's didn't even deign to look at his wife. His stance betrayed an icy distance from his part, his aloof stare suggesting he couldn't stand to be any close to her anymore. "Nevertheless, today Joanna and I have planned something special for our long-lost guests across the Wall." A spider scuttled along my spine. I prayed internally that I wouldn't be partaking in whatever horrors these two had prepared. I hope they wouldn't be using me as a bait to get a rise out of my wolves.

"Anyone for me to punish?" Rhaegar crooned intrigued.

"No but we could always select someone here." The Queen offered.

"Pity." he shrugged.

I stared at his profile, at the elegant nose and sensuous lips. Games. Rhaegar liked to play games, and it seemed I was now to be a key player in whatever this one was.

"What's your name, puppy?" The Queen's emerald eyes turned to me and she deigned me a pointed smile, one that made her look like a wild, predatory cat.

"Lyanna of House Stark." I mouthed with my chin up.

"Ah the Martell bride. A dull face for a dull High Lord." Her lips plucked into a perfect moue. "Won't you agree Rhaegar?"

"I suppose. Wolves look all alike to me." His violet orbs held boredom and disdain.

The Queen gave him a saccharine smile. "And what about vampires?"

"Among a sea of mundane faces, yours is a work of art." Had I not been straddling the line between life and death I might have snorted. From the corner of my eye, Ashara certainly had the balls to do
"At last, the Martells will learn what it feels like to be robbed of the one you love." The King murmured to no one in particular but to himself, having drifted to his own realm of thoughts.

"I stole nothing. He was the one who was about to steal what's rightfully mine." The Prince ran his slender fingers across my arm, making idle circles on my tattoo and lingering on the astounding wings.

The King's eyes were burning coals as he said, "And he shall be punished for it, son."

Disgust and apprehension almost threatened to wreck the icy mask I was so desperate to maintain.

"Go show our little pup the allures of my Court." The Queen dismissed us like some kind of mud worms. "I tire of mundane wolf filths." Yes. There it was. The malice I expected to see, the vexation that subtly distraughted her own mask of forced perfection. The confirmation that she indeed wanted to squash me like a louse.

And then I was drifting.

I wasn't in my body.

I stared at the Queen but not through my eyes ... but from another angle in the room. Through Rhaegar's eyes. He wasn't looking at his mother. No, this wasn't his mother. For him, she was just the Queen, the second wife and the devil incarnated.

And then horrendous, paused images started flashing in my vision. In his vision. In his mind. Shards of memories shattering one by one. Skin against skin, nudity against nudity. A tangle of silver against golden hair and him atop of her, inside her. Then there was only darkness in his room, and a fallen Prince finding solace wrapped up around the blanket of his stardusted wings.

Then it was gone, as fast as it came, and I was back to my body again, being led away by Rhaegar. He ... he wasn't aware of the intrusion. He didn't know I had just been in his head.

I shook away the images I had just witnessed. This was another game of his, one I refused to be a victim, a pawn of.

The next half hour was the most humiliating within my sixteen years. The others had split up among the throng of guests and I was abandoned with Rhaegar, at a platformed table that granted our eyes access to the entire chamber. And he had me perched on his lap, and my right arm ringed around his neck, feeding me grapes and fondling the bare parts of me whenever he pleased, as if I was a lifeless doll.

"Cousin." My vacant scrutiny drifted from the void to the tall robust man standing in front of us, with the crushing, crystal blue eyes and the disheveled mahogany hair tucked into a ban. He took a typical curtsy, his snow white clothes, lined with azure thread, catching the light of the chandeliers.

He stirred to take my hand and kiss my knuckles but Rhaegar's unwavering glare, marked his ground. Marked me as unavailable.

"Robert." He acknowledged him flatly.

The confusion must have been engraved on my forehead for the stranger gave a slight nod and a lop-sided smile. "Robert Baratheon," he introduced himself. "High Lord of the Winter Court and a new bedazzled fan of yours Princess."
"Call me Lyanna my Lord."

"Princess will do." Rhaegar declared coldly.

"So formal cousin, as always. How are you to get by with such a fierce woman by your side?"

Rhaegar straightened his shoulders and said something I didn't bother to hear, for that moment, when a familiar scent of summer and sandalwood caught in my nose, the world could have been shattering, the Mountain could have been trembling and still I wouldn't hear a thing.

First the names of my Court and the Autumn's were announced and then...

"Oberyn," the herald raised his voice. "of House Nymeros Martell, High Lord of the Summer Court and his brother Doran Martell."

My heart blasted within my chest and then it turned to piling ashes when I saw the first person I am always looking for in a crowded place; my Alpha, even more handsome and regal and fierce than I remembered him, a wolf among killers, weaving his way through the guests, his sun-kissed countenance bereft of any emotion.

Or so I had thought until his eyes scanned and scanned and scanned and finally found mine. Revulsion was not enough, to summarize the typhoon of all those stifled tantrums that burned and guttered in his eyes as he spotted me practically sprawled in the hands of another like a toy, and practically naked in plain sight.

Oberyn. My Oberyn. He was here. My heart kept drumming in her rising tempo. We were binging on each other for embarrassingly far too long, but I guess it have always been inextricable. This effortless familiarity between us, that is. I felt alive, I felt myself for the first time in a week, and not smothered underneath a fragile mask.

All too suddenly, I felt the cold touch of the Prince's hand as his fingers gripped my chin and ripped my eyes away from my High Lord, forcing me to look only at his cinder orbs. I wanted nothing more than to spit right on his face, to rip his head off and hang it on the wall just to be done with him.

Instead, I lowered my head once more and returned to my empty daydreaming.

Idle minutes were passing by and I couldn't understand what was the purpose of such a pointless gathering, where the only engagements were dancing, cackling and eating.

Freya seemed to have been listening to my prayers when finally Arthur appeared, all this time vanished along with the rest of the Inner Circle.

"I need you to come with me immediately. Alone." The Shadowsinger glanced sideways at me as Rhaegar frowned his brows at him. "It's about Ashara and it cannot wait." Shadows wrapped around him. "We are screwed." He intoned as if this would get Rhaegar moving.

With a last heedful warning to stay at the table, the Prince strode away with his spymaster in a hurry.

After some more unbearable minutes of boredom, I didn’t notice that someone stood beside me until the heat from his body leaked onto mine.

I went rigid when I smelled that summery scent, and didn’t dare to turn to Oberyn. We stood side by side, staring out at the crowd, as still and unnoticeable as statues.
His fingers brushed mine, and a line of fire went through me, burning me so badly that my eyes pricked with tears. I wished ... wished he wasn't touching my marred hand, that his fingers didn’t have to caress the contours of that wretched tattoo.

But I lived in that moment, my life became beautiful again for those few seconds when our hands grazed.

I kept my face set in a mask of cold. He dropped his hand, and, as quickly as he had come, he sauntered off, weaving through the crowd. It was only when he glanced over his shoulder and inclined his head ever so slightly that I understood.

I made myself look as bored as possible before I pushed off the wall and casually strolled after him. I took a different route, but headed toward the small door half hidden by a tapestry near which he lingered. I had only moments before Rhaegar would begin looking for me, but a moment alone with Oberyn would be enough.

I could scarcely breathe as I moved nearer and nearer to the door, past the throne dais, past a group of giggling vampires ... Oberyn disappeared through the door as quick as lightning, and I slowed my steps to a meandering pace until the door was before me, and it swung open noiselessly to let me in.

Chapter End Notes

For some of you who have been asking TOO many questions here come some answers... ;)
If you enjoyed the chapter, please leave kudos :-D
I hardly had time to draw breath before darkness encased me and Oberyn crushed me into a lung-constricted clasp, in a flash of navy blue clothes.

I murmured his name as my throat burned, as I savored the rippling warmth of his powerful body, so comfortingly glued against mine and then—

Then he was holding me at arm’s length, his tiger eyes scouring me from head to toe, restless, furious, insane with worry. He was breathing hard, his jaw tickling wildly. "You’re not hurt." he murmured mostly to himself as if he couldn't believe it, as if I was an illusion, a mind game. "You are all right." he repeated. And then said it again. And again.

My heart cracked, and I reached again to bury my face inside his embrace, to find sanctuary between his sure arms and the intense beating of his own heart.

"No I am not." I was not all right at all. A muffled sob escaped me as I angled my head against the crook of his neck and wrapped my arms around his nape, squeezing him with every ounce of my strength. "I want to go home." I choked another rising sob down my throat. "I thought I'd never see you again." He squeezed me tighter. "I thought ... I thought that you abandoned me." I confessed.

The taut muscles beneath his tunic went overly still. Slowly he drew back to look at me and I couldn't help but feel ashamed the moment I realized what I had just said, how much I had hurt him.

"Never." He leaned forward and pressed his forehead against mine. "I would never—I could never give up on you Lyanna." he rested his hands on my shoulders to reassure me. "I am taking you home." he simply stated. "I'll find a way and I'll break this bargain. I'll find a loophole, my moon. I promise." he balled his hands into fists, but I heard it for the empty promise it was.

"This is not a bargain my love, and you know it. You can find no loophole when it comes to the mating bond."

Oberyn’s eyes flashed with something I couldn't place before the corners of his mouth quirked up. "Maybe I don't know the answer but I know someone who does."
Our eyes locked together as it suddenly dawned on me for whom he was talking about.

"The Suriel," we said at the same time. A malevolent creature that was said to be roaming in the Shadowood. According to the rumours, if captured, it could answer any questions one may have. And it could not lie ...

"This is absurd." I protested for only a few had achieved to capture the Suriel through the millenia, either by skill or by luck. Its knowledge was as ancient as these lands. "The Shadowood is endless and you don't know what ..." I trailed off to find the right word. "what kind of demons you might run into."

"I am a hunter Lya." Yes—Yes he was. One of the best. "I am not afraid. Fear is for those who have something to lose. I have naught. The one that mattered the most was you and I lost you. I'll move the moon and the sun to get you back if I have to." I wanted to change his mind, to talk him out of this folly but because I knew my childhood sweetheart, I also knew that he had settled his mind. He'd go after the Suriel. My disappointment must have been as plain as day. "I can't take this. I ... I just can't. The thought of him putting his filthy hands on you, him touching you—"

"He didn't touch me. He didn't ... we didn't ... He didn't harm me." I cupped his face to calm him down.

"He can harm you in other ways." Oberyn leaned against my touch, closing his eyes. When he opened them again abruptly, his stare fell on my tattoo and narrowed into a glare which in turn turned into nude panic. Without an explanation, he anxiously lifted my other arm and scanned it as though he had run out of air. Relief softened his tan features when he realized that the inky patterns were nothing more than paint.

Before I could even flinch, he took my head in his hands and tilted my neck from side to side examining it

"Did he drink from you?" he asked.

"I said he didn't touch me. He would leave me alone for most—"

"Probably to get you to drop down your guard. You have no idea what games he plays, what he’s capable of doing. He is a liar and a manipulator just like his Illyrian thugs. He is no better than that Lannister witch. But of course, what should one expect from a silver cock that has been playing his step-mother's whore for fifty years?"

The images I had seen in Rhaegar's head ... were real? He had been fucking his own father's wife for fifty years? This wasn't normal. This was sick. They were all of them sick in the head ... and to think I almost felt sorry for him that day in the study, when he had confessed how lonely he had felt during his entire life. Yes. A manipulator he was, and a very talented one. This was pure perversion.

"The sick bastard—" before he could finish I crushed my mouth into his, letting the beast dwelling inside me out of its cage to roam free, just for these precious short minutes we had together.

I was running out of time. It was a matter of heartbeats before Rhaegar started looking for me. I would make these last memories I had with Oberyn count.

I might never see him again, I might never touch him again.

"Fuck him." I breathed between his hot breaths, not wanting to hear another single word about Rhaegar Targaryen. All that mattered was that I couldn't hold my Alpha close enough, I couldn't
kiss him deeply enough.

"I'd much rather fuck you." His wild eyes, beset by the dark, glimmered with lust.

Don't do anything stupid.

Consequences be damned. And you with them, Rhaegar Targaryen.

Lines had already been crossed when I felt Oberyn sucking every inch of my neck. My aching body was begging him, inviting him to venture lower. There was no doubt, I would be caught red-handed so I could as well make the most out of it.

"I missed you." he said between kisses. "I went out of my mind." Our tongues danced, not a waltz or a minuet, but a war dance, a death dance of bone drums and screaming fiddles.

Without second thoughts, I gripped his shoulder blades and jumped on him, hooking my legs around his waist while he stroked my buttocks. His touch grew more demanding and his erection, pressed and hardened against my belly by the second, as he slammed me against the icy wall. I ripped his tunic off like a wildcat and my urgent fingers tossed away his belt while fumbling for his pants.

His hungry lips trailed a path across my collarbones, avoiding on purpose my wing-encased tattoo. His ruthless teeth nipped my breasts and grazed their way from my navel straight to the damp hot center of me.

With his huge hands holding me still by the hips, his deft tongue started making idle circles within my opening, killing me with pleasure and introducing me to heaven at the same time. I arched my head backwards and allowed a moan of elation to slip past my lips.

Someone coughed.

"Shameful," Rhaegar purred, and I awoke from the rapture of sensations that Oberyn's wicked mouth kept pushing me into. I opened my eyes only to find him faintly illuminated by the light that broke in through the doorway. But he stood behind us, farther into the passage, rather than toward the door. He hadn't come in through the throne room. With that ability of 'dematerializing' himself, he had probably walked through the walls. "Just shameful." He stalked toward us.

Time to face the music.

Oberyn stiffened and exhaled a soft mute groan of displeasure which got lost in the heat and wetness that was pooling between my thighs. Easing to his feet from the kneeling position he had adopted, he whirled to face the Prince, hiding my nakedness protectively behind his back.

Panting, neither of us said anything. But the air became a cold kiss upon my skin, upon my exposed breasts.

"Sometimes I wonder if you are an inherently savage lout or just plainly stupid Martell." Rhaegar crossed his arms across his chest. "You come to my home and you have the impudende to shove your way between my mate's legs straight to my face. Where are your good manners High Lord?"

None of us said anything.

"Now, if the lady is quite finished covering her charms I would suggest that you step the hell away from her, like the good little dog you are." Oberyn didn't move an inch. "But then I can always shred you to ribbons and spare myself the headache of having to tolerate you again."
The most powerful vampire that has ever been born ...

Ever so slowly, Oberyn came to his senses by removing my hands from his body and stepping out of my embrace.

"I’m glad to see you’re not a complete fool after all." Rhaegar said, and Oberyn bristled. “Well now that this matter is settled, be a clever High Lord. Buckle your belt, fix your clothes before you go out there and put on your best smile sunshine."

Oberyn looked at me, and, to my horror, did as Rhaegar instructed. Except for the smiling part of course. My High Lord never took his eyes off my face as he straightened his tunic and hair, then retrieved and fastened his belt again. The paint on his hands and clothes, the paint from me, vanished.

“Enjoy the party.” Rhaegar crooned, gesturing to the door.

Oberyn’s amber eyes flickered as they continued to stare into mine.

*I will find the Suriel*, his eyes promised me. *I will see you again.*

Instead he softly said, “I love you. Never forget that.” Without another glance at Rhaegar, he left.

I was temporarily blinded by the brightness that poured in when he opened the door and slipped out. He did not look back at me before the door snicked shut and darkness returned to the dim hall.

“Why do you always have to make an entrance and spoil all of my fun?” I pouted derisively, covering my breasts with the folds of my gown.

With a few easy steps, he crossed the distance between us, grabbed both my wrists in his left hand and pressed them to the wall over my head. Pinned between him and the wall, I reacted like an alarmed hamster. I froze, as if my stillness would discourage his predatory nature. Like a snake that only eats live mice. My bones groaned. I could have sworn shadow-talons dug into the stones beside my head.

"I am not into a second round. Your Grace will pardon me.” I whispered sweetly and pierced him with defiant eyes. "Although, I’ll have to admit that this dress was not such a bad idea, after all." So easy to get rid of and ... The fabric was ripped and torn at some parts, a good reminder of where Oberyn's hands had been. The pink hickey's of his lips were stark against my pale skin and the white silk.

“Is this all a game to you? Or is the Martell boy's stupidity contagious? ” His voice was composed of sensuous, bone-breaking ire.

"He is not a boy." I snarled baring my teeth. "And funny words from someone who hasn't stopped playing games since the very first moment he met me." My stare was unwavering.

“You’re a fool, Lyanna. Do you have any idea what could have happened had the King found you two in here? Thank the Cauldron, I was the one who noticed first.” His breath was uneven.

“What do you care?” I barked, and his grip tightened enough on my wrists that I knew my bones would snap with a little more pressure.

“What do I care?” he breathed, wrath twisting his chiseled features. "What do I care? You are my fucking mate! If you think I'll let a thousand years go to waste—"
"Oh you do remember after all? Because I was under the impression I was your private kind of slave."

"If something—if anything had happened to you—"

"Yeah what a great loss I would be. Though, I am sure the Queen would have been delighted to comfort you—to accommodate you between her own legs. But oh wait ... she doesn't have to kill me to allure you to her bed anyway."

His eyes darkened even more in the pitch black of the room, impossibly so. Anger rippled off him in lumps of darkness.

I had another smart-ass comment on the tip of my tongue, meant to make him even angrier than I was, but before I could go on, his head snapped to the door, then back to my face.

Then his lips were crushing into mine and I whimpered from the fierce intrusion. The very air around me seemed to shift to accommodate him. The kiss was violent, possessive, meant to claim me and the space where I could still taste Oberyn. There was no tongue; he was too smart for that. Just the hard press of his full lips against mine. I thrashed and wriggled against him but my plight to pull away was getting me nowhere. He was stronger, he was in control and I was merely panicked, even terrified from his ferocity. Hot tears started blurring my vision, and I shut my eyes, trying to keep my nausea and shame contained.

My knees slightly gave way under my humiliation but even then, his masculine hard body that pressed into mine, supported me from shrinking away. With his feathery lips still attached to mine, he let his hands travel down my curves. His left hand lingered on my rib cage while his right hand trailed across the underside of my right breast, the fabric of my dress made his fingers balmy satin upon my flesh—

The door was flung wide and Joanna's curved figure filled its space along with a line of familiar faces. My parents and the Martells were standing beside her, all of their eyes wide open, shoulders tight as Rhaegar's lips still asserted ownership of my mouth.

All of them except for Brandon ... Where was Brandon?

Joanna laughed, and a mask of stone slammed down on my family's face, void of feeling, void of anything like I remembered them to be a week earlier. My mother ... I knew that rough look of hers, trying to keep her ire at bay. Her subtle shaking was evidence enough. Her silver eyes found my sodden ones, soft and tender, not a tiny bit ashamed of me. I was humiliated, half naked before a Court of snakes and my mother was the only chasm of light that cleaved through my hopelessness.

Rhaegar casually released me with a flick of his tongue over my bottom lip as a crowd of vampires appeared behind Joanna and chimed in with her laughter. Rhaegar gave them a lazy, self-indulgent grin and bowed. But something sparked in the queen's eyes as she looked at Rhaegar.

A mix of pure seething jealousy and fury, unsafely confined within her two emeralds, brewing to be unleashed upon me if I opened my mouth.

Lannister whore, they'd called Rhaegar.

"Typical wolf trash and their inconstant hearts." Joanna smirked. "Don't you have anything to say High Lord?" she turned to Oberyn, almost cooing with delight. "One day she is your bride and the other, she is just a mere slut drooling over her silver princeling."
I kept my mouth shut, even as I could have died for shame. They could think of me however they pleased. The people in the room that truly mattered to me, already knew the truth. Words were of no importance when our eyes had learned over the years to convey the truth.

But I wasn’t given the luxury of learning whether Oberyn understood as Joanna said. "That's what I thought." She clicked her tongue and turned away, taking her entourage with her, like a satisfied cat.

Following them, Rhaegar wrapped an arm around my waist to escort me back into the throne room, as though he hadn't been molesting me in the worst kind of way mere minutes ago. It was only when the light hit me that I saw the smudges and smears on my paint. Smudges along my breasts and stomach, and the paint that coated Rhaegar's hands.

Wiping the remainders of my silent tears with the back of my hand, I adjusted my vision to the white light of the chandeliers only to spot Ashara exiting another door from the other side of the throne room. Her face was the same façade of impenetrable seriousness but judging from the way her eyes darted right and left before finally deciding to leave the room, I could tell she was agitated and-

After a stretch of seconds, Brandon appeared from the same door discreetly, and fell on step behind her, always keeping a safe distance. He too seemed to be in a twin state of disorder, his usually composed face in shambles.

No.

Not now. Not here. Not with her. The least of my problems tonight would be these two making out. And how had my brother succeeded to tame an Illyrian tempest like Ashara in the first place ...

My attention slips back to Rhaegar and I look up at him, only to find him utterly absorbed, looking intensely at the throne dais, perplexed and ... and almost chilled to the bone. I feel him shudder beside me and he unconsciously pulls me closer, his grip almost painful.

I follow his gaze and my eyes catch immediately the wooden wagon wheel that had been placed in front of the King and Queen. This hadn't been there before.

I follow suit and shudder too when I realise that the wheel wasn't made of any kind of random wood.

Ash Wood.

The spokes of the wheel weren't confined within the circular frame, as it was to be expected, but instead they peaked like sharp thorns.

"Rhaegar ... " I whisper almost breathless, tugging faintly his hand, and he turns to look at me. For the first time since we left Velaris I see his iron mask of cool indifference shatter into a million pieces. His own uneasiness was mirrored on my face. "I ... I want us to leave." I croaked, fidgeting anxiously with his fingers. His pupils were badly dilated, almost imperceptible within the dark indigo of his irises. "Please." My heart was drumming in my ears with foreboding.

"Lyanna—"

He never got to finish his sentence for my name was drowned by the agonising screams that deluged the air. Acid fear ate down to my marrow. 

The pandemonium of hysterical screeches dwindled to nothing when I discerned my father's raucous voice among them and ... and my mother's name on his lips.

I pivoted and followed the voice—followed the screams—followed the terror and—

My mother's quivering body was lifted off the ground, and she was fighting to catch her colvusive breaths, to smuggle some air into her lungs, but the invisible hand that was wrapped around her throat showed no mercy.

Joanna was smiling in amusement while her hand that held my mother aloft, danced in the air, biding its time, wallowing in my mother's choking gasps.

"Let her go!" Brandon hollered from somewhere in the room and I caught him from the corner of my eye surging forward toward the dais like a furious bull seeing red.

The Queen chuckled and raised slightly whatsoever her other hand in a gesture of summon. Obediently, the steel blades that were inbedded on her scaly needle-coated dress tore themselves off the fabric, rolling and flashing around her. With a last devilish smirk upon my brother Joanna whooshed forward her fingers and the blades hurtled toward him, hissing through the air and piercing him like a fork.

"Brandon!" My father shouted as my brother fell on his knees, emitting an inhumane roar of pain, the needles pegged all over him. Ashara—Ashara let out a stifled yelp at the same time with him, her haunting eyes wide as eggs, Arthur's immense wings encircling her, blocking the horror out of her sight.

\textit{Blood.}

\textit{Blood everywhere.}

On his sliced chest, on his stabbed ribs, on his ravaged stomach. Brandon was drowning in his own blood.

"Now that the pup has been dealt with for the time being, let's proceed with the wolf bitch, shall we love?" Joanna crooned.

\textit{My guts lurched upward.}

Aerys nodded. "Impress me Joanna. And do it slowly."

She shot him a kitten's smile and slid her focus back to my barely alive mother who was still struggling to breathe. Joanna crooked her fingers and without laboring a single breath, she slung my mother's fragile body across the room and right on the spokes of the wheel.

I heard it, that vile sound; Bones penetrated, boned cracked, bones smashed.

"Mama!" My voice was a high-pitched cacophony able to shatter glass windows and rip the skies apart. My head felt heavy and the veins in my temples throbbed from the volume of my screeches.

I made to run toward the wheel but Rhaegar caught me from behind before I could move my legs, immobilising me within his arms.

As though my shrieks were a trigger, Oberyn and Hoster Tully zoomed at the same time toward the
dais, the Autumn High Lord unleashing a whirlwind upon the royal pair and Oberyn a gigantic wave of warbling water.

Autumn; their High Lord was gifted with the power of wind manipulation. And Summer; Oberyn's power was water manipulation.

Again, the Queen was faster and before I could draw breath, a transparent wall, like a dome, towered above the dais, trapping my brother and parents inside. The wind and water slammed onto the protection shield.

"Now, where were we?" she purred ominously.

She wasn't done with any of us yet. Not even close. I mustered every drop of courage I had within me and looked furtively at my mother, displayed like a wounded beast to entertain the sick appetites of those monsters.

She was impaled on that wheel, the spokes hewed every inch of her body with clean abhorrence, through muscle and organ, blood and bones.

But none had pierced through her heart. For whatever reason she was spared alive, I dreaded to find out. Her chest heaved excruciatingly slow, the ash wood poles turning her skin a bluish purple.

Brandon was sprawled somewhere near her on the floor, blood sprouting from every pore of his body. He was moaning in pain and he was convulsing like a half dead fish out of water.

My father was towered above my mother's mutilated form. He didn't flinch, he didn't attempt to move. He just stood statue-still. Everything was faceless about him, apart from his eyes which burnt like furious torches in the night.

_I can manipulate whoever I please. The only thing I have to do is blow a single harmless whisper._ Those have been Rhaegar's exact words when he had tried to explain to me what a Daemati was.

Joanna was a Daemati and she was blowing harmless whispers inside my father's head. She was holding his mind and he was a mere mind slave in her disposal to manipulate him all she wanted.

"Do you know what we do to the enemies of the Crown here in Valyria High Lord?" The King spoke, low and detached. "We impale them with ash stakes first, we let them starve from blood and then we toss them to rot until their skin is that ghoulish soulless grey, the colour of your daughter's eyes." Foreboding consumed me when the King looked at me for an instant. "Day and night the vultures circle above them and feast on their alive corpses, eating and breeding within their exposed and increasingly gangrenous flesh. You see, vampires are immortals and their dogged immortality won't abandon them even then."

All of a sudden a terrifyingly heavy iron cudgel appeared at my father's side.

"When I am done with her corpse, I will give it to every soldier within this Mountain, to every Illyrian within my Court. They will fuck it, piss on it, and then I will take it back. I will skin it alive. I will feed her carcass to the dogs and then I'll hang her pelt over my bed as a trophy. Sounds familiar? For the old time's shake Rickard." A sharp and evil smile twisted Aerys's boredom. "Your son will suffer the same fate."

My father blinked and the only confirmation that he was listening was a fat tear that stained his cheeks. The King noticed as well.
"Do you feel this?" The King placed a hand on his chest right above his heart. "The rage, the hopelessness, the powerlessness that cripples every piece of you little by little?" Aerys closed his eyes as if he was reliving the memories. "And then the remorse strikes ... And you start asking yourself all the what if's and the maybe's and the why's. What if I was there? Why me? Why do I have so many powers and yet I failed to protect the ones I love? And then there is 'almost'. She almost made it. I almost saved her. I almost made it on time. 'Almost' is the worst kind of word because it reminds us of all the possibilities that could have been but never will."

"They say I am heartless." The King inhaled a long sharp breath. "A dead heart is not supposed to feel, is not supposed to be bleeding. But mine is. Broken into a thousand pieces. Permanently. And you took the only person that could mend my holes and all of my emptiness. It is only fair that I take this person from you as well."

"Now, if you would." The King leaned back to his throne and gestured to the cudgel on my father's feet. It was then that I distinguished the spark that burnt in his eyes. Not madness. Just the clarity of purpose, of vengeance.

The oxygen in the throne room vanished when almost everyone let out gasps of pure horror.

My father picked up the iron cudgel and walked toward the wheel like a ghost molded out of a nightmare.

I was in the Court of Nightmares. And my worst one was about to come true.

His face was soaked with tears. He wanted to speak, he wanted to tell his mate ... to tell her that he loved her? To apologise? To say goodbye?

My mother's heavy eyelids opened slightly to look at him for one last time. "I told you once that I loved you and that I would love you until my heart stops beating. Now I tell you that if there is life after death, I'll love you even then." Ever so weakly, she brushed her blood-coated hand upon his, as if forgiving him in advance. "I'll be waiting for you my love."

My father raised the cudgel, tears pouring down on my mother's body.

"Papa no!" I screamed and he buried the iron cudgel down—

Rhaegar spined me violently around and I stumbled into his arms. He cradled my head into his embrace preventing me from witnessing my father chopping my mother up, but not from hearing the thud of the cudgel making impact with her already smashed body. Not from hearing her shrieks. My heart sank into my stomach and I closed my eyes.

Again.

Again.

Again. The cudgel was landing without pause—without remorse.

My hands shook badly, looped around his rib cage, and I shut my eyes even tighter as the soft tearless sobs that broke past my lips turned into wild hyperventilation.

This can't be happening. Not to me. I am not here. This is a nightmare. A horribly fantastic dream. Any moment now, I'm going to wake up.

My knees buckled and I almost melted to the ground but again he pressed his body harder on mine, holding me firm, his soothing hands stroking my hair, his angel voice hushing my pain, his fresh
scent washing over me.

I turned my head around to see what was happening but Rhaegar's grip on my hair became iron.

"Look at me." He instructed, his voice controlled but wavering. I didn't open my eyes. "I want you to look at me."

I turned once again around to steal a glimpse but then his fingers brushed underneath my chin and tilted it up. "At me."

So I did. *It's going to be okay.* The melancholic indigo of his eyes was whispering to me. His breath was a breeze against my cheeks.

The screaming stopped. The transparent dome tore itself apart and my father was thrown out it. He landed on the floor, covered from top to bottom with his mate's blood and the dome closed again, leaving my half-dead brother and my mother's corpse at the mercy of the King. Brandon was stealing air with great difficulty but he was still alive on purpose. What did they had in store for him?

"I've been waiting for this day Rickard for a long time." The King said, and I knew he meant every word. "I've been dreaming about it. I've been thinking how to pay you back. Killing you would have been a mercy and you deserve none. Now we are even."

"Lyarra..." My dad was whispering to himself, still on his knees with his head buried into his palms. "Lyarra..." Oberyn and Hoster Tully rushed to his side.

"Two lives for the two you stole from me. Your mate for my mate. Your child for my child." What is he talking about? "I wish you a long life High Lord. A long lonely torturous life to mourn her and your son, to miss them, to feel a tiny bit as hollow as I do. And if you have the audacity, to forgive yourself after this." He canted his head toward the mangled corpse on the wheel and I dared to look at my mother, or whatever was left of her.

She was a mush of blood-caked scar tissue and pulped bones. Her usually vibrant eyes, lifeless and void of light.


"As for you," The King's eyes became two slits when they turned to Oberyn. "your father was a lucky man for dying before I could get my hands on him. But make no mistake High Lord, you will pay the highest price for his deeds, for his arrogance."

A surge of despair overwhelmed me when Aerys targeted me with a huge grin.

"The Dragon Prince will make your little dove scream, he will make her beg, he will make her wish she hadn't been born when he will be raping her. She will plead and plead and plead, just like my Selaena did before your father butchered her. Just like my Rhaella did before he tore her wings off."

"And if the Dragon isn't awake yet," Joanna interrupted and looked Rhaegar square in the eyes offering a villainous smile in lieu of a warning. "I will wake him up myself."

"That's enough." Rhaegar declared. The night, his power was leaking off him like ink in water. His tall figure was shaking with anger beside me. And for the first time, his eyes were neither mauve nor indigo. They were sable. Black like tar as they met Joanna's—
White, blinding light blasted through the room and splintered the protection shield around the dais and the chandeliers into dust and crystal.

One breath I was standing and the next I was knocked down to the floor, with Rhaegar atop of me, using his body as a shield.

This ... I knew this light. It belonged to my father. A gift of the Sun, light for the High Lord of the Day Court. The Sun is our master and we bow to nothing else, to no one else.

Everyone else was sprawled on the ground from the sudden burst of power. My father was the only one standing. Having recovered from the death shock he had gone into, he was staring perplexed inside the shattered dome but he didn't find the thing his eyes were searching for.

*Brandon's body had vanished out of thin air.*

Chapter End Notes

Gods, I am evil I know.

So, under a special request I received, I tried to keep the smutty scenes between Lyanna and Oberyn at a decent level, although I was spoiling to make them a little more descriptive but anyway ...I guess I' ll keep the good stuff for R and L ; )

Does anyone want an R's pov?
"How is she?" I murmured softly and eased to my feet from the tufted armchair in the living room when Daenerys emerged from the door frame.

"She ..." Daenerys closed her eyes and shook her head faintly. "She is a mess."

Nothingness. Silence. For three days now the bond between us was barren—mute. If only her suffering was as silent as the mating bond. She was sorting through all the havoc in her head, all the madness in her heart and all the pain in her soul. Pain I had wreaked upon her myself.

I uttered a sapped sigh. "I am going upstairs."

"Just let her be for the time being Rhaegar." Dany placed her hand on my arm, holding me into place. "Give her some space to sort her feelings out."

*You should understand this better than anyone,* Dany's violet orbs rebuked me.

There it was. Daenerys was the one in my life, constant as the stars, capable of always towing the truth out of me with her nagging and that iron will of hers that could make mountains bow and seas split open. Just like her sister.

*Selaena.*

*Space.* What a foreign word 'space' had been during these last fifty years. No matter how much I craved it, Joanna would never grant me the solitude my heart wished for. Not only once did she deign me the mercy of privacy. Locked under that Mountain for fifty years, isolated from everyone and everything I held dear, away from home and caged like an animal, like a criminal to serve my punishment. That's what I was in my father's eyes; a criminal. And I had to pay for what I'd done. He had to break me for what I'd done. And he let Joanna do it for him.

"She hates me." I breathed heavily. I failed her. Again, I failed to protect the person that mattered the most. I failed to defend her. Not physically but mentally. She would carry them for the rest of her life, those scars and holes that dented her that night, and all the atrocious memories of her mother's face. I was sure of it, because I carried them too. Still. After so many years the memory of my mother's mutilated body wouldn't leave me, Selaena's desolate eyes would haunt me.

"No she doesn't." Dany squeezed my hand.

My mate was fading and I could do nothing.

"If only I haven't been such a fool. How could I be so blind—so naive. I should have seen this coming." A trap. A meticulously executed trap. And I bought it. As if I had been born yesterday.

"None of this would have happened if I—"

"Don't you dare—Don't you dare blame yourself for this too. It's not your fault Rhaegar."

*Yes it is.*

She ... she had called me with my name for the first time mere seconds before hell broke free.
Rhaegar ... I want us to leave.

For the first time—she needed me. She was scared and she had sought my hand. She had felt threatened and she relied on me. And all I did was stare. I wasn't fast enough, I wasn't smart enough, I wasn't strong enough.

I wasn't enough for her at all.

"She is dying Daenerys." My voice cracked. "My mate is wasting away up there all alone. She is drowning little by little in her own misery and I don't know how to fix her."

You thought you couldn't fix yourself either, the sliver of hope within me whispered, Yet here you are on your feet having found her at last. Pursuing her. Pursuing your dream.

"You are not alone Rhaegar. Not anymore. We will find a way to fix her, I promise." Dany held my hand and I believed her. "Together. All of us. Like a family."

She was my mate. She was my family. She was a wolf. And she was a survivor.

"I am going upstairs." I announced once more and this time, my sister didn't bother to talk me out of it.

I knocked softly at the door once and received no answer. Still, I knew she was in there. I could hear her heart beating. Not pumping and thundering like two nights ago. Just a feeble throb as if a butterfly was fluttering her wings. Weakened and labored.

I open the door with a creak, thus announcing my presence but I feel my heart contracting in my chest when I spot her finally. She was perched on the bed with her back to me and curled into a ball with her knees snuggled to her chest, staring out of the glass partition. So fragile and vulnerable and ... resigned. If she had heard me entering, she didn't show it at all.

"Hey." I said deep and low. Again, she didn't even stir. The infinitesimal sound of her heavy lashes osculating together and all of her ragged breaths relieving her body was a good indication that she was awake in the dark.

For me there have always been two kinds of darkness; the one that incites fear and the one that provides console. I guess, she had sought the latter.

Quietly, I walked over to the matress and brought myself to look at her. Her sad sad gaze stole all the words away. Those expressive limpid eyes were now swollen from crying, distant and cold, void of not life rather than the drive to preserve it.

And that colour of her blue-grey irises ... Selaena.

Fat tears kept rolling down her cheeks and collected upon her pillow as she kept gazing blankly at the void. Three days. Three days and still she wasn't drained.

Ever so gently, I brushed a finger along the bluish bruise that streaked her cheekbone and matched the mauve rings around her eyes. Tired. She was so tired.

The moment my finger made contact with her skin she gave the faintest of flinches and her heart popped. I told myself it was from not expecting it than from my touch itself.

"How is your arm?" My tone came out even and characteristically low. She had gained that bruise and a mild sprain of her arm from that violent fall, when her father's light power exploded. I could
heal both her injuries and take the pain away but she wouldn't let me. She wouldn't let me touch her ... not after that kiss ...

"It hurts." she muttered with her husky voice but still she didn't stir to look at me.

"A lot?" I wasn't sure whether she was talking about her arm being in pain or her heart. I was familiar with the feeling. There were times in my life that I was so sad my body ached physically too.

"I am sure it won't kill me." Her pointed jab stabbed my soul like a spear and now it was my turn to flinch. Tension coiled inside me, manifesting in my entire body, my muscles tight. I stretched my hands and then fistled them, my knuckles popping, then relaxing. I loosened my body further, forcing myself to unwind.

*You scared her you idiot. You allured her family into a trap. She is a mess because of you.*

Whatever words I ached to tell her evaporated in the air. There was no word capable of expressing how wretched I felt for what had transpired to begin with.

I had undergone almost the same ordeal. Almost.

I only saw their mangled bodies. I only saw the aftermath of what *they* had done to my mother and sister. I wasn't there. I didn't hear their screams. I didn't stand statue-still watching them being slaughtered. I didn't witness the abhorrent sight of their killers ravaging their wings and parading them like trophies back to their homes.

But Lyanna was there. She was there every step of the way when her mother was being butchered because my father made her watch. And I did nothing save for sitting on my ass. She would never forgive me and I wasn't confident I would ever forgive myself either.

With steps light as a cat's, I strode to the foot of the matress and lied beside her. She barely shifted at the proximity. Then I did what I did best.

I held her.

I tugged her warm body against my front and slid my hands around and over her, one flattening against her stomach and the other gliding under her ribs and arms to wrap around her chest. I sensed a shiver scuttling down the wary posture of her spine.

"This hurts too." She murmured but she didn't push me away. She let me hold her. All she did was breathe a sigh as her chest rose and fell rhythmically against my hand.

Again, I felt a knife slicing me in half. Pushing me away would have been better than not caring at all, than being so apathetic, so despirited. I knew that fiery spark of hers was guttering, giving way under her overwhelming emptiness. She was dying inside and she didn't care.

Never before in my life have I felt so utterly useless. All that lethal powerful gifted to me since birth was good for nothing when it came to her. I was losing her, even if she wasn't mine. I was empty to her. Empty to my mate.

I kept her delicate body strapped across mine for a while. I felt her shaking in my arms, her shoulders quaking against my chest, and I knew she was crying. I didn't hold it against her. She was more than entitled to her tears. I, unfortunately, couldn’t express myself in quite the same way. So much had happened to me in my life. I’d cried all the tears I had in me to weep. All I could offer was strength. I could be strong for her. I could rock her, soothe her and hold her.
Although mine was not the pair of arms she yearned for right now, I knew that she needed to be held too. I used to long for someone to hold me as well every single day for the last fifty years locked under that Mountain. Before the nightmares took control, before that bitch made me fuck her senseless. Someone just to prevent me from falling apart.

"Say something." I brushed aside her onyx hair and, with great care, I nuzzled the slender column of her neck. *His scent was all over her.* I might have snarled if it wasn't for the melancholy of the situation and the answer I never received.

I wanted nothing more than to know what she was thinking but looking myself inside her head was an option I had ruled out from the first day she set foot in my home. Right now her mind was a fortress, for she had raised her shields unconsciously. Some days she would shut me out completely, while others, her mind would be assorted in pages for me to flip through.

"Anything." I did a poor job of hiding the despair in my voice as my nose ventured from her neck to her damp cheek and I started kissing all her salty tears away. "Tell me how much you despise me. How much you hate me." Her heartbeats accelerated a tiny bit when my lips brushed along the edges of her eyelashes to lick her new hot tears. I was desperately struggling to invoke a reaction out of her, anything to break this vicious oblivion that clawed at her soul, even if this reaction entailed her lashing at me.

*Stay Anna. Stay.*

"If you are here to rape me, go ahead. I won't scream." My skin crawled. My insides twisted horribly in disgust. My heart shattered. "I don't want to wake the dragon." her voice sounded dead as she spoke. No sting. No spite. No emotion whatsoever.

My father's empty threats yesterday seemed to have quite the effect on her. And that first kiss I enforced on her ...

I had no choice. Yes I was pissed and insanely jealous. But If I hadn’t kissed her, if I hadn’t shown up and interrupted them, she would have gone out into that throne room covered in smudged paint. And everyone—especially Joanna—would have known what she’d been up to. It wouldn’t have taken much to figure out whom she’d been with, especially not once they saw the paint on the Martell blockhead. I didn’t want to consider what the punishment might have been and certainly I wasn't going to endanger Lyanna. Not when Joanna was looking high and low for one single mistake from her part to get her claws on her. Not when my power was still bound to that sham of a Queen.

"That kiss—"

"It was the worst of my life. I wanted to vomit." Dulcet, merciful relief flooded my heart for her voice was no more empty but edged on ice, the first real flicker of emotion. "You broke my heart."

I closed my eyes and let dejection wash over me. "Let me make amends for—"

"When—" her voice cracked and even though I couldn't see her face, I knew she was striving to block those horrifying memories that were streaming through her brain. "When are you taking me back there?" Her words were a wheezy tremor. "To finish me off as well."

At such a thought from her, anger threatened to blast out of me and wipe Velaris off the face of earth but instead I willed my fury back and let my Night ripple off me in wisps of smoldering shadows, mingling with the darkness in the room.
Anna. Oh, sweetheart.

"I am not." I tightened my grip around her.

"So your mistress is coming here."

Whore. Lannister whore. That's what everyone called me behind my back Under The Mountain and that's what my mate called me too in her head now that she knew. Would she believe me If I endeavored to explain to her? To tell her the other side of the story? No, most definitely she wouldn't.

"She is not coming." Because she cannot. Because she doesn't know about my city. Because I made sure she never would. "And she is not—"

"I want you to leave.' she declared, her tone harsh, unwavering and abrupt. Absolute.

One word was making circles in her mind, one that seemed to be echoing all over the bedroom; Liar.

"Lyanna I—" I buried my head in her midnight river of hair ... Selaena.

"Go to hell." I am already going through a living hell darling. She turned detached again and tore my hands off her.

So I obeyed to her wishes, disentangled my body from hers and made for the exit.

"I'll be gone for the rest of the week." Space. Give her some space. "I have some business to attend to." If babysitting Ashara's new plaything could be considered business anyway. "If you need me, tell me through the bond. No matter how insignificant your problem is, regardless of the hour, if you want to talk, if you need me, all you have to do is tell me. I'll come straight away."

Silence and stillness. Purposefully, she chose to ignore me for one more time.

I turned away from her but before I had a chance to reach the door her shaking question stopped me dead on my feet. "Why can't you just let me go?"

My soul blackened a little more. I came up with a thousand reasons why instantly, but I opted for voicing none of them.

Because even the idea of letting you go hurts like hell. Because I adored you from the very first moment I heard your crying when you came into this world. Because, unlike everyone else, you weren't scared of my powers, of the beast that prowls beneath. Because you make me happy you exist in my world but at the same time so sad I don't exist in yours. Because for the last sixteen years I can't get you out of my head. Because I still wait for the impossible to happen.

Wishful thinking, my stiff logic scoffed. She would never think my Court safe. She would never call it home. She would never choose me. Not willingly. It's always him. It's always going to be him.

She was always going to be my enemy's lover.

"You are monsters." Lyanna sobbed, still with her back to me. "All of you."

Tell me something I don't know.

I never lied to myself. I never fueled any kind of blind delusions. I wasn't her Prince Charming. But
what I hadn't dared to admit even to myself was I wished I could be.

"Monsters we may be, but we are not the only ones." I said and closed the door behind me.

*Let's see how our tough wolf fares in an Illyrian camp.*

Chapter End Notes

Ahhh this chapter left me so emotionally drained. I am so so so insecure when it comes to writing a male's pov, let alone Rhaegar's ...

I hope this chapter doesn't feel like a mess!
Please let me know if I should attempt it again or stick to Lyanna's pov :)}
Okay guys, for those (lovely, amazing, wonderful) of you who have read the books I have to ask for your opinion ...

Would you like to see something related to Calanmai? And if yes who with whom ... (now don't kill me for this question)

I've been dying to execute this vague idea of mine but everything is still a blur. I dont know when and how and where and who but all I know is that it's going to be SO SO SO interesting ;)

Let me know down on the comment session.

How can emptiness feel so heavy?

Hours. Days. Months. Years. A zillion lifetimes might have passed and still I felt so uncomfortably numb inside. Everything around me seemed to have been sprayed in white, the colour of nihility—the colour of vacancy.

Morning dawned cold, and the sun crept up from the snow-coated red mountains of Velaris. The sky began awash in coral hues and by midday, as the sun kept making its orbit, it turned a pale blue, stripped with gleaming sunrays that resembled needles.

Needles.

Like the ones that nailed Brandon's body.

So innocent but if deposited in the wrong hands, so lethal.

I was trying. I really was. It was an effort not to retrace back to that day and replay everything in my head. I would conjure up tiny little things that made me happy, like my mum's chocolate, and paints and bubble baths and Benjen's funny drooling face when he was sleeping and snoring at the same time. But still it wasn't enough, for no matter how hard I jostled them away, flashbacks and red kept coming back the way waves keep crushing on the shore. Lately, the worst place I could be was in my own head.

In spite of the resplendence of the buttery sun and clear blue sky, the day was bitingly cold outside. It felt so strange ... so foreign. The cold, that is.

I've never known cold in my life. I've never known winter. Only sunlight and teal seas and warbling summer sunsets.

Winter is coming and it hums a promise of freezing my heart, I thought sadly as I observed wistfully a bevy of kids playing outside of the house's front yard.

Then, my chest felt somehow too full, brimming with adrenaline, the emptiness subsided and the bond went taut as a nocked arrow. I didn't have to catch his citrus-y scent to know that he was
back.

He walked in the living room with that feline poise of his and paused a considerable distance away from the sofa I was lounging on, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Hello Lyanna Darling." His supple lips parted slightly in a restrained smile.

My tongue was dry and heavy as I simply said, "Weren't you supposed to be returning tomorrow." It was not a question rather than an underlying accusation. It felt good to have the house all to myself. No one would hear my screams during the night, no one would see me having a break down on the bathroom floor after another nightmare. Daenerys would usually check on me during the day, she would try to cheer me up and every time I would shut her out, yet she was never here at night. She was probably somewhere out there hunting.

"I am anxious when I am not around you." he shrugged and stalked closer. "And you could at least pretend to look happy to see me." he taunted but these days, even talking, let alone talking back, felt like carrying a mountain upon my shoulders.

I opted for returning my idle gaze back to the ceiling and starting counting my heartbeats all over again.

"Your shields are down." he observed casually.

"You are going to look inside my head anyway." Even as I said it, the words had no bite.

He gave me a wink. "Where is the fun in that?"

I didn't even blink as I got up and summoned my feet to drag me upstairs.

"No shoe throwing this time?" I could almost detect the other words in his eyes. *Come on. Play with me.*

His scrutiny fell from my face to the rest of my body and that cheeky smile of his turned into a deep frown that darkened by the second as his eyes kept roaming over my body. "You've lost weight." he said quietly.

Food was something I deliberately steered clear of lately. What was the point in eating if every night I was going to throw up my guts after waking up from another nightmare, panting and shaking?

Be that as it may, I hadn't realised how much weight I'd lost. My collarbones were unhealthily pronounced, my ribs prodded beneath my crop top like the bars of a cage, my hip bones were sharp as fins and a gap had formed between my thighs.

I twisted, my loose clothes sliding over my shoulders and waist, and headed for my bedroom.

"Eat lunch with me Anna." There was a note in those words that made me pause. A note of what I could have sworn was desperation. Worry. And the way his voice caressed my name. No one called me like that.

"You don't like food."

"Indeed." His stare didn't lighten. "But I can always give it a try for you." he offerered politely.

"I am not a baby to be pampered."
"Practically, given our tiny tiny age gap, you are my baby." Something like reminiscence flashed across his eyes. "Apart from that, how are you to live with yourself if you turn down the best chocolate cake you're ever going to eat?" he raised an assertive brow.

"Cho-chocolate cake?" My mouth watered instantly. "Wi-with ganache and truffle?"

"Yes." A naughty grin played about his sensuous lips. "And then skimmed with some more chocolate frosting."

I was hungry—I hadn’t yet eaten. And that was indeed worry glimmering behind his cocky, insufferable grin. Besides, chocolate offered to Lyanna Stark was like offering honey to a bear. The temptation was irresistible. Chocolate was always the answer, no matter what the question was.

"Fine." I gave in eventually, having been pricked in my Achilles heel, but before he had a chance to widen his grin I added curtly, "Don't flatter yourself."

So I motioned him to lead the way to that familiar ebony table at the dining room. We walked a casual distance apart. Tired. I was so—tired.

The table was piled high with a ridiculously wide variety of steaming food. This spread was impossible for a single person to consume. But my eyes and my protesting stomach already flirted with the eye-catching delicacy that was the chocolate cake.

I dropped into a cushioned chair, dispensed with my good manners and didn't waste a second as I slid the platter toward me and dived my spoon in the cake, devouring a generous portion.

Divine—it tasted divine, I thought as I closed my eyes and savored the ganache melting in my mouth, letting out a suspiration of pure bliss through my nose all the while.

When I opened my eyes, Rhaegar was literally mooning over my territorial claim of the cake, with his marble hands interlaced under his chin and a loud hint of amusement brewing to break into a smile.

"Stop looking at me like that while I am eating." I demanded, pointing my spoon at him.

"Shy?" he teased.

Embarrassed I might have been, but I wasn't going to admit that to him. I wasn't so charming when it came to pigging out on chocolate. "How you wish." I sniffed. "It's just creepy, that's all."

"Apologies then," he chuckled softly but then his face grew tight with restraint as he did a terribly poor job of gulping down his laughter.

"What's so funny?" I glared at him, my mouth still glutted with chocolate.

"Nothing." He struggled to stifle another fit of laughter by putting a hand discreetly in front of his mouth. "It's just ..." He took a napkin and with its tip, he started wiping gently what I assumed it must have been chocolate that caked the corners of my mouth. "There. That's better." he said when he was done.

I shrivelled worse than a raisin to hide my cheeks that had flushed red as poppy, and I smoothed my tongue over my lips to make sure there was no evidence of further embarrassment left.

Mr Prick noticed and alas he didn't sweep it under the rug, deciding to attest to his nickname further.
"Cute all of a sudden huh?" he purred. "When are the puppy eyes coming into play?"

I huffed a cold laugh. "Cute is for pussies."

The tips of his lips twitched up in a crooked smile as I stuffed another spoonful into my mouth. "You really have a sweet tooth, don't you little one?" He observed while serving himself from the platters of food, barely caring what had been laid on the table. "I'll keep that in mind for any kind of future bribery."

"I'll admit to being a chocoholic and unashamed of it." I paused eating and asked intrigued, "How did you know that I like chocolate?" As far as I could recall, I had told him no such thing. Then again he might have rifled through my head unbeknownst to me like I did that night in front of the Queen.

But who doesn't like chocolate anyway?

"I am afraid that's a secret." he wiggled his eyebrows in emphasis.

"Do you ... do you have any news concerning my brother?" Having dropped the question-bomb the atmosphere shifted. Once the shock of my father's explosion had faded, things only deteriorated when the King found out that Brandon's body was missing. Someone had stolen it and such asinine boldness had only made Aerys's blood boil.

"They haven't found his body yet." Rhaegar gave me a heads up calmly, his shoulders a tad tense though. "You will be pleased to know my father is quite furious." Yes. A small victory but a victory nonetheless that ruined his grand plan of revenge. He might have disgraced my mother's body and bedraggled her through hell before doing so, but he wouldn't have the satisfaction of torturing Brandon as well.

"Why would someone want his corpse? And how did they manage to smuggle it out of the Mountain?" Who was such a fool to even risk being caught?

"Maybe they aspire to ask for ransom, either from my father or your family in exchange for the corpse." Aerys would slice him in half before he had a chance to negotiate. On the other side my father would do anything to retrieve the body back and give his firstborn the proper burial he deserves, to bury his ashes so that he can find peace. And then there is Cat ... "As for the latter, the Queen is convinced that someone winnowed it away."

At the mention of her name, my lips pressed instantly into a paper-thin line. How devastating for her that for once in her life she has been outsmarted. Though, had the circumstances been different and my father's blast, that worked as a diversion, hadn't had transpired, I highly doubted the aftermath would have been in our favor.

"If anything new comes up, you'll be the first to inform." Rhaegar reassured me softly.

Just like that, a sea of melancholy dragged me under its crushing waves. How was my father supposed to announce such a tragedy? How was he supposed to justify it? And Benjen ... He was younger than me, he needed our mother more than anyone. At least he would have Elia by his side and ... Ned.

Ned. Always the strong one, always the one to suffer silently, always the one mindful of his duty, always the one to rely upon, to relieve us of our burden. But what about him? He had no one to turn to ...

"How are you feeling?" Rhaegar asked, his face solemn.
"I am fine." I mumbled hastily. Lips pursed shut, I averted my eyes out the window.

"No, I know you are not." he declared in a matter-of-fact tone.

"You know nothing Rhaegar Targaryen. I think we had already clarified that." I mouthed without looking at him, plowing through the cake and playing with it.

"These days during my absence, all I was hearing through our lovely bond was nothing. Silence. Even with your shields up rather impressively most of the time, I should have been able to feel you. And yet I didn’t. Sometimes I would tug on the bond only to make sure you were still alive."

"Despite whatever delusions you might be suffering, I have nothing." I lied.

I didn't know how to tell him that I was shattered without appearing weak. I didn't know how to open up without appearing needy. I didn't want to depend on him.

Because I needed someone and he was the only one. I needed someone to hold me, to soothe the pain away, to tell me that everything was going to be okay, to be there for me, to stitch me up somehow. Someone I could cling to and be sure that he wouldn't let go, that he would catch me before I fall. Someone to be real among the darkness, when nothing else was.

I glanced sidelong at him—and rage, not worry—flickered in those eyes. I could have sworn the mountains around us trembled in response.

"Every single night since I left," he went on in full force. "terror and blackness blast through the bond. All I get is passing glimpses of you sweating and scared, snivelling crouched in a corner—and then blankness—back to a lull. Is this 'nothing' to you Lyanna?"

He knew about my nightmares. Still his words didn't aim to reprimand me. The concern remained. The franticness swam in the lavender pools of his eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Weariness began crawling against his bladed cheekbones. "All I want is to let me help you."

"I don't fucking need your help!" I bursted out, my sobriety going to pieces. "You are nothing to me. You are just a stranger and a stranger you will remain, no matter how many tattoos you brand me with. You know nothing about me and don't you for a fucking second believe that you ever will because you have scrambled my head once or twice."


"I am not your enemy Lyanna." His hands were flat on the table—and a whisper of black smoke curled over his fingers. Like talons.

Oh, it is Lyanna now. Long gone was Anna and his crap.

"You are my father's enemy and Oberyn's. So that makes you mine."

"Under The Mountain—"

"Don't you fucking dare get started on what you did to me Under The Mountain!" I slammed my hands on the table.

He held my stare and I almost felt the dark calm that settled over both of us. In the meantime I strived to control my heavy breathing and the ticking that throbbed against my temples.
"It's okay not to be okay Lyanna." His gaze softened as he beheld me and it made him look younger somehow. "I know you've lost someone and I know that it hurts. I am not here to tell you that tomorrow is another day or that the sun will keep shining. Instead, I tell you to take your time, take all the time in the world because eventually it will get better, your loss will ebb away. You cannot undo what has been already done but it's your choice whether you decide to dwell on the 'before' or on the 'after'. You lost them but make sure you don't lose yourself because of the circumstances, because of that grief and rage that eats you alive bit by bit."

_Grief, I mused bitterly, or my endless love with no place to go? All the love reserved for my mother and brother that I would never have a chance to give anymore. This love that now accumulates within that hollow part in my chest, in the knot in my stomach and in the lids of my eyes?_

When he spoke again his voice was smoking with shadows, "I have spent these last decades of my life in grief. I was beaten and tortured and fucked until only telling myself who I was."

_Who am I?_

"I just ... I want this to go away; That grief that weighs down on me and overwhelms me like an ocean." I whispered scrubbing a hand over my face.

Rhaegar stared at me for long enough that I faced him.

"Be glad of your human heart, Lyanna. Pity those who don't feel anything at all."
i've just finished this baby and now I am off to my bed to read thirteen reasons why ;) 
Happy reading to you too!!!

P.s: If you find any mistakes please let me know since I am too tired to check the chapter now.

Everything is so unfairly wrong.

One minute, my father was standing abover her and the other ... our places were reversed. My hands were not empty anymore but encumbered with the weight of the cudgel.

My mum impaled, stared at me, the ash wood on her body deadly but not merciful enough to relieve her of her pain.

Trickle. Trickle. Trickle.

Her blood pooled at my feet like a river.

"After you my dear." Joanna grinned broadly and crooked her fingers in command.

My traitorous body obeyed and I raised the cudgel, plunging it straight into my mother's heart.

My mind was a stronghold of adamant and I was a hostage of my own terror, trapped into its impenetrable depths. It was an orb crafted of infinite onyx and guarded by the lurking shadows that were my own demons. A sliver of beaming light sundered through the shields, lasering the onyx in pieces—

"LYANNA." A voice. That familiar voice molded out of galaxies and milk and honey.

Hands—there were strong, unyielding hands on my shoulders, shaking me, squeezing me. I clobbered against their urgency, screaming, screaming—

"Open your eyes." the voice ordered breathless and every inch of my quaking disruption calmed at the primal dominance in it.

I did.

My body was a pyre that shook worse than aspen leaves, my throat burnt, my mouth acrid, my face soaked and sticky, and Rhaegar—Rhaegar was hovering above me, his eyes wide.

"I've got you." he whispered, his voice soft as a sigh that commanded my lungs to close up a little less. “It was a dream,” he said, his breathing as hard as mine.

His sculpted face was so lovingly traced by the moonlight that trickled through the windows, his ivory features now pale and sparkling like the moon itself.
He scanned my face, brushing away the damp locks of hair from my temples, his caress as smooth as dough. Sweat clung to me like blood. "A bad dream." he said again and started rocking me, gathered as I was in his lap. His scent, all at once the night and the dawn and the stars and the earth, instilled idleness in my mind as though my personal kind of tranquilizer.

She wasn't here. I wasn't Under The Mountain. Velaris. I was in Velaris, at his house. And I had—my dream—

Something tart and fluid lurched up from the pit of my stomach, probably my putrid fear that was rotting like muck inside me. I shoved Rhaegar off with a weak shoulder, falling out of the mattress and slamming into my flat chest, my eyes meeting the floor and—


I peeled away from the carpet with a whimper and bolted into the bathing room, fell to my knees before the toilet, and started hurling my lunch out, my shoulders and abdomen heaving with the effort.

Large, warm hands pulled my hair back a moment later and gentle fingers began massaging down the column of my spine.

"Breathe," Rhaegar said and I hugged the bowl tighter, trying to tone down the sounds of my retching. Again his voice was laced with that repose that was able to send all my nightmares to sleep.


Real. This was real. I was real.

I heaved into the toilet again, shuddering as the chilling tremors that scourged through my body began winking out one by one like candles.

I clung to the toilet, spitting once, and reached up to flush. I watched the water swirl away entirely before I twisted my head to look at him. A pause followed that both of us refused to fill. My chest was heavy as the hand of death and I ... I needed to unburden myself to someone who would listen. I was going to bare my soul to him, but would he see it in the dark? Would he see me?

I took a deep breath, "I hate those nights when I feel so hallow inside and out of place." I rasped and curled my knees to my chest, my midnight tresses falling like a curtain around me and touching the floor. "When my mind ventures to the unknown and all I get back is sadness and then some more sadness. I hate those nights when I feel so damn lonely and all I have to comfort me is my own tears and the dark."

Those violet eyes near-glowed in the dim light, being at a loss all the while. "Say it Lyanna, what you want me to be and I will. A listener? A toy? The Prince in shining armor? No one?" I don't want you to be no one. I want you to be someone. "Say it and I will." he repeated quietly.

I want an anchor to hold on to, to prevent me from sinking deeper. I want a friend.

"You said ... you said you can alternate one's memory." His eyes threw wide open, his Night, so far asleep, now whirled like snoot around him. "I want you to take the horrors away. I want you to wipe my mind clean."

His hands were flat on the floor, the marble beneath blackening from his intensity. "I am not going
to fuck with your head." His tone was resolute, definite.

"You don't understand."

"Yes I do. Better than anyone. I thought you were a wolf Lyanna. I thought you were tougher than that." His words tore me apart. Weak.

We are wolves and we don't apologise for our wildness, my mother's voice reverberated in my head, Patiently we will endure, silently we will suffer and quietly we will wait to strike. We are fighters and we will survive.

"If you do this, if you let this bring you down, she wins." Joanna. "They both win." And Aerys. "Wear your scars like armor as a reminder that they tried to break you but you didn't let them. It's your choice whether you conquer your fears or you let them conquer you instead."

We don't kneel, Rodrik Cassel would make us repeat like an anthem every time before the drill started, Unbowed. Unbent. Unbroken.

"Who are you Lyanna?" Rhaegar whispered so softly that I had to lean forward not to miss it.

Who am I?

I repaid his whisper with one of my own, "My name is Lyanna Stark, and I will not be afraid."

Ever again.

A toothy smile he gifted me, and a proud one. "Come on dauntless, let's get you to bed."

Once I left the bathroom I noticed two things. One: It wasn't night anymore for the first lights of dawn greeted me through the glass while the sun was being born anew. Two: my mattress was a crumpled mess. The sheets, and blankets were ripped. Shredded. Not with a knife but with my own honed claws. Did I turn during the night? Freya, If only I hadn't.

"Should you need anything," Rhaegar said, two steps away from the door, rubbing his nape with a hand. "you know, just give a shout." He never slept here. He would leave me alone to my 'privacy' as he had promised. But again he needn't sleep frequently.

"He is different from you," I had to constantly keep reminding myself.

"Rhaegar." Before I even realised it, the little word had slipped past my lips. "Stay." My throat felt impossibly tight as I voiced my request. I didn't want to go back to sleep, back to my nightmares.

His eyes shot open, wild and flummoxed but after a heartbeat he thawed from his cemented position, strutted to the bed and ploped down on the mattress beside me. His lips might not have been smiling but his gaze was.

"Tell me ..." I cracked my knuckles, a mindless habit of mine when nervous. "Tell me something good."

He leaned back against the pillow, folded his hands behind his head and stretched his long legs casually. He snuggled closer so that our knees brushed. His coolness leaked into my feverish warmth. "You see that peak over there?" He pointed at the highest plateau that towered over the horizon, bathed in the colours of dawn. Unlike the other mountains, that one wasn't dusky red but ebony as if it had been smudged. "It used to be my favourite until Daenerys and Ashara got into a fight and left the poor mountain retreat to cinders."
I internally gasped. Don't *get into a fight with them. Don't provoke them.* Although Ashara didn't need to be provoked to tear me to ribbons and then drink wine from my bones. Speaking of which —

"If you talk to anyone about this—about my nightmares," I stressed poking him in the ribs, "I am going to cut your favourite part to tiny tiny pieces and then I'll give them to Ashara to eat them as an appetiser."

"Ashara wouldn't dare touch me. I am her Prince, remember?"

"Do you actually believe what you're saying?"

"No." We both produced a lazy laugh. "But you don't have to be so rude and ruin my delusion of supreme authority."

We stood there for a stretch of some minutes listening to each others breathing. "I am bored." I yawned. "In fact, you are such an ancient bore."

"Now you wound me deeply Lyanna Darling." His bedroom eyes came into play to disarm me, but unfortunately for him to no avail.

"Your Excellence is not so easy to get rid of." I japed lightly.

"Okay, I was planning to do this later but you leave me no choice." He scrambled out of bed and pulled me to my feet so unexpectedly that I squealed. "Come on, I want to show you something."

"What is it?"

"It's a surprise." He grinned inconspicuously. But he always smiled like that anyway.

"I don't like surprises."

"You'll like this one."

"Where are we going?" I asked impatiently as Rhaegar ushered me some levels up through the spiraling stairs of the town house.

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise, now would it?" Pulling me behind him he assisted me in climbing a ladder which led in front of small wooden door. Its smooth surface depicted florid hand-painted patterns of nature and lore and somehow, it gave the impression of a magical portal, able to transport one straight to one of Old Nan's stories.

"Close your eyes." he said.

I arched a sable brow. "Um, in case you are hoping, have in mind that I don't dance."

He grinned lopsidedly and repeated, "Close your eyes."

So I did. I heard the door creak slowly and I hardly cracked an eye open, the contours barely discernable through my thick lashes.

"No peeking." Rhaegar warned and I hastily complied. I felt a faint wave of air crashing on my skin as if he was waving a hand in front of my face to check if I was still cheating. Then tenderly he took my hands in his and guided me in the room.
"Can I open them?" I inquired on tenterhooks.

"No. Not yet. Wait here." He released my hands and then after a heartbeat I heard the sound of curtains being yanked aside. My blind black eyesight went white as a chaos of colours splintered all at once in my vision and I cringed, muddled.

I fidgeted with excitement. "Now, can I open them?"

"Okay. Open them."

Having been given the green light, my eyes pop open—

The room was in fact an attic, sunlit and spacious, with a polished wooden floor, a roof that sloped down and giant crystal windows, webbed with vines and evergreen.

Large boards occupied the walls, equipped with papers, canvases, and other art supplies like pastels, watercolours and charcoal for sketching. An intricate work table was pushed against a corner, surrounded by a couple of easels, creamy white pouffes and tall containers for storing brushes, old and flecked with paint from lazy hands.

An atelier ... Vintage and teeming with colours, teeming with light. Heaven on earth.

"You may want to close your mouth now or something might fly in." And just like that the magic of the moment was lost. I squinted at him with a deadly glare that could murder him on the spot.

He slightly canted his head and a corner of his mouth curved mischievously. "Don't look at me with those judgy little eyes."

I shifted my attention back to devouring the studio and I couldn't help but goggle when I noticed a particular wall. Or better, the astounding mural painted on it.

A forest at night. Nothing sort of like the gloomy Shadowood. These lush foggy woods glimmered with the light of summer fireflies and were the kind of place where fairies might be hiding in hollow tree trunks, and dwarfs might be picking mushrooms. Three dimensional it was and it invited you from every angle to venture in, yet if you did, you would bump straight on the wall.

My feet moved on their own accord toward the mural before reaching an inquisitive hand over the elaborate simplicity of the design, the vivid colours and deep expression of art. Whoever was the artist of such a masterpiece, surely must have invested his very soul on it along with a list of secret ingredients; a spoonful of dedication, an ocean of inspiration and passion, a trickle of talent and a sprinkle of pixie dust.

"Did you—did you paint this?" I twisted bewildered to look at him.

"Cauldron no." he shoved his hands into his pockets. "I hate painting."

His words landed on my heart like a slap. Maybe even as an insult.

"Then whose the studio?" All of a sudden, I felt significantly overwhelmed by the exquisiteness of the atelier and ... and perhaps a tiny tad jealous. I'd never had the luxury of having such a chic place in my disposal for indulging in my art, for breathing my fantasy into life. The only thing I had was a tattered sketch pad and some tins of chipped paint.
We are wolves Lyanna, my father would reprimand me, wolves and smudges don't fit together. The sooner you accept this, the better.

To me they weren't just smudges. They were my soul applied on paper. They were a part of me that my family never bothered to understand, never bothered to accept. I was a huntress with an artist’s soul.


This wasn't living. It was just mere existing.

"It belonged to my sister." Rhaegar's answer ripped my musings apart.

"I didn't know Daenerys had it in her."

"No, not Daenerys. It belonged to ... my other sister." Again his lips had curved a rather bitter smile, his indigo eyes under some kind of sadness spell. Haunted, I realised terrified. His eyes were haunted just like mine.

All I was able to stummer was a simple, "Oh." Don't ask. Don't ask. Don't ask. Fuck! I have to. 'Selaena?'

Rhaegar nodded slightly.

My heart smashed as though she had been trampled by a thousand horses' hooves. Words or rather underlying accusations unbeknownst to me back then started flashing through my memory.

She is gone, Ashara had said that day during dinner in the House of Wind. Gone or murdered, my inner reason screamed at me.

Someone took her away from me. From us.

My father and ... Oberyn's, they had—they couldn't have—

She will plead and plead and plead, just like my Selaena did before your father butchered her, those had been Aerys's threats to Oberyn. But—

He is a liar and a manipulator, Oberyn's voice prevailed over the King's.

My mother and brother ... they couldn't have paid the price. No they were innocents. My father would have never commited such a monstrosity.

"She was an artist like you." Rhaegar's mouth curved into a fading smile, just enough to show that he was enjoying his memories, whatever they may have been. "A crazy one actually."

I huffed a laugh. "Crazier than Dany?"

"Yup."

"Can I ... can I stay a little longer?" I shrugged. "I won't touch anything I'll just—"

"It's yours." He said too straightforwardly. "It's all yours Lyanna."

I stared agape at him for embarrassingly too long. Mine. This little heaven mine. His sister's ...

"Um, I couldn't possibly accept—"
"No need to act proud with me little one." he winked at me. "Now, I'll let you get acquainted with the place and I'll come later to pick you up."

"Pick me up for what?" I rasped.

"I am showing you Velaris." His grin broadened impossibly. "And I'm not taking no for an answer Anna Darling."

The rest of my name melted away on his lips. And somehow, so had the walls between us.

Maybe I don't hate surprises after all.
Arguments

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I used absolutely nothing within the studio, apart from a sketch pad and a charcoal pencil. Even running a finger along the surfaces felt like a violation, let alone looking through another's person stuff.

Even if this person was dead. Even if Rhaegar had given me generously permission, and along with it, the whole studio.

From the chic furniture that occupied the cozy attic, to the diligent work of arts that adorned every crevice in the room, I could tell that Rhaegar's sister had a remarkably good taste.

Sprawled on a pouffe, with my legs stretched on the floor and the pad resting on my lap, my focused brain was synchronized to cooperate with the lines I was drawing on paper. My hand was running faster than a jackrabbit as the familiar landscape took form on the pad. The night landscape I had perfected a thousand times back home.

As an unconscious method of distraction, I counted the seconds out loud. "Two hundred and eighty-seven. Two hundred and eighty—'

Silky locks of white hair appeared in my vision and an equally velvety cheek brushed against my own. My skin electrified and the air saturated with his familiar scent, the most amazing thing in the whole universe that, somehow, I couldn't fathom how to resist. "Mmm, what are you drawing exactly?"

My heart went bang and a line went astray because of the bombshell he just gave me. I clasped the drawing to my chest to prevent him from seeing it.

"Curse you, when did you come in?" I said, started.

"Just now." He flumped into the pouffe across from mine. "Or I might be watching you for some time now, but you were terribly engulfed in your work to notice." Uh oh. I flip through the pages of my mind to spot something embarrassing that I may have done and—

"Why do you do that?"

There it was.

"Do what?" I feigned ignorance.

"That counting thing. I’ve heard you do it before. Why do you do that?" A faintly quizzical look came into his incisive stare.

"It’s none of your bloody business, you stalker." I waved an all too dismissive hand. "Now get lost."

"It was a simple question. So what are you drawing?"

"This is none of your business as well."

"Oh come on. I give you the means to smile a small bit. Am I not allowed to see the fruits of my
"If you think that with a chocolate cake and some paints you are to shove your way back to my good graces, your good sense is blacker than the night in those mountains."

"It's not that I asked you to spend the night with me." His drop-dead gorgeous eyes flickered with mischief. "I only want to see that drawing."

I steered the conversation away from the paper within my embrace on purpose. "As if there was the tiniest of prospects of proceeding with the former." The only way to spend the night with him would be to go fishing and after that to accidentally shove him out of the boat. Afterwards, the sharks and piranhas would do all the job for me.

*Not a bad idea. Not a bad idea at all. And dreadfully tempting.*

"Am I not divine enough?" His voice was thick with hubris and I supposed the question was meant to sound rhetorical. He was well aware of how heartbreakingly beautiful he was and probably of the untold inspiration the Gods had invested when they created him. I was well aware of his unnatural good looks too and I wasn't going to let my mind boggle at them.

"Most definitely Prince Perfect."

"Of all the nicknames I have been given, this one is the most accurate."

*Not even close. Mr Prick was far more suitable.*

"I am profoundly surprised that this house doesn't have more mirrors." My words were teeming with crass sarcasm. "How would you flirt with your reflection after all?"

"Methinks so too." He brushed away a non-existent grain of dust from the lapels of his jacket. "You should see Ashara's and Jon's apartment."

Ashara and Jon shared an apartment? Poor Arthur he must have been cast away. Or maybe he was the one who buzzed off discreetly because he couldn't stand the idea of these two bickering all day long and bossing him around. Every smart person would have done the same, including me.

"A man is known by the company he keeps," I remarked flatly. At that, Rhaegar's twin tanzanites flashed up in a welcome sort of amusement. "Where are the others by the way? Haven't seen them for a while."

"Ashara is outside of Velaris," he answered uninterestedly. "She has duties to take care of. As for the others, apart from swaggering around the city and being a general pain in my ass, they're waiting for an invitation. They didn't want to pester you."

A sardonic smile, "I wish you extended me the same courtesy."

"Quip all you want but in fact, I believe you like my ... company." He wiggled his pale eyebrows, jest and all. "For example, if you wished so fervently to get rid of me, you would store your pride aside and eventually compromise to show me that sketch of yours. Besides—"

"Fine." I snapped. "You are a real chatterbox, aren't you?"

He shrugged casually. Truth be told, his prattle had been intentional. But after all, everything he did was calculated. He didn't even brush his teeth without a plan. He really knew how to press my bottoms. First the chocolate, then the studio ... How did he know about all this?
I narrowed my eyes at him suspiciously. As though our brains had been wired, his countenance adjusted to the most innocent of looks.

I squinted at him one last glare before handing him my pad. Hefty anxiety coursed through me as I observed him closely inspecting my drawing. I had never shown my work to anyone else. Not even to Benjen, afraid that he might poke fun at me for being a silly little girl who put those lights on a pedestal. The myriad lanterns that flowed over the sky, every single year on my birthday.

"This is stunning," he said and I released a breath I hadn't realised I was holding. "I thought you believed yourself to be an amateur."

"This doesn't count." Drawing the lanterns felt as familiar as my own name.

"What's so special about it?"

The reasonable and introvert side of my brain dictated that I said nothing. Yet, the other side, the partial one bribed by the mating bond was clawing at my mouth to throw it open.

I swallowed a deep breath. "Every single year since I was a child, these lanterns would appear on my birthday. I would wake up in the middle of the night, climb on the roof of our manor and gawk at them until dawn broke. There were so many, and their amber light was so stark against the night sky that I would paint them to memorize what they looked like until my next birthday came. I didn't know where they were coming from and I didn't actually care. They were always there as a birthday present, flowing over the woods and crossing the horizon."

I stared expectantly at him, urging him to say something. He was swimming in confusion, his lavender eyes told me.

"Can I keep it?" His glance drifted to the paper.

"Um yeah." I averted my face, shifting it out of the window to take in the view and the fiery sunset. "Sure."

"Why didn't you draw something else?"

"I don't feel like drawing something else." Even the colours were deflated, confined to black, white and grey. The colours that befit my mood. Where all that color and light and texture had once dwelled, there was only my mother's and Brandon's ghost. "I mean ... I might not be inspired to paint anything else."

"You can always use me as inspiration." The corners of his mouth quirked crookedly into a sleepy smile. "Think of how graceful I am, how beautiful—"

"How arrogant." I blew a soft whistle through my gritted teeth. "No thanks. Conceited jerks are not my cup of tea."

"Well, I suppose not everyone has been blessed with a good taste." Huh?

He sentenced it so seriously that I wanted to pummel him so hard on the face, to disfigure that over-confident, brash smirk of his.

"I am done talking to you." I threw my hands in the air, aggravated to a point where the instinct to gag him was particularly strong. "I am just killing brain cells."

"I would like to think you have plenty of those, so you won't have to worry about running low on
them for the time being.” He folded my drawing and tucked it neatly into the inner pocket of his jacket.

Having unfurled to his feet, he said, "Meet me downstairs in fifteen minutes and dress warmly."

All my tired body wanted right now was to slump on the bed and never wake up. But I wouldn’t sit in my room, couldn’t allow myself to mourn and mope and weep and sleep. So I would venture out, even if it was an agony. Rhaegar had called Velaris the city of starlight. I hoped that the net of stars would be a better company than my own torrent of tears.

I was waiting at the front door for her—which was open to the small wood-and-marble antechamber, which in turn was open to the street beyond. When I spotted her descending the stairs I ran an assiduous eye over her, from the suede navy shoes—practical and comfortably made—to the knee-length sky-blue overcoat, to the fishtail braid that began on one side of her head and curved around the back. Beneath the coat, her usual flimsy camisole and pajama pants had been replaced by thicker, warmer brown pants, and a pretty cream sweater that seemed so soft that if I were her, I could have slept in it.

She was literally swimming in them and my stomach strangulated again, palpably worse than the first time I saw her when I returned. Her usual jaunty face was now drawn, her cheekbones sharp, her blue-gray eyes still partially dull and smudged with purple beneath, a ramification of her sleepless nights. Her full lips and mouth were wan, and her collarbones jutted above the thick wool neckline of her sweater.

She looked as if rage and grief and despair had eaten her alive, as if she had been starving. Not for food, but for joy and life.

"You must be kidding me," I said by way of greeting. "You can't go outside like this."

"What do I have?" She looked down on herself, slightly frowning.

"You'll freeze to the marrow with such a thin coat." Cauldron, she has lost so much weight. Something told me, I would have to deplete all of the chocolate reserves in Velaris to put some meat back to her bones. "Not to mention that your ears will go pink because of that braid." The sun was already setting in the sky and soon night would fall. The winter day was nippy outside but during the night it was even colder. I wouldn't risk her catching a cold too.

"Look who's talking." She stuck out her tongue at me.

"Firstly, my body temperature doesn't change regardless of the weather. Secondly, I am used to cold. You aren't sunshine." No, there was no way I would let her go outside like this. "Wait here," I said and winnowed in the bedroom upstairs. I rifled through her ridiculously big wardrobe for a couple of minutes and I rolled my eyes when I found some not so modest pairs of lingerie that left nothing to the imagination.

Cauldron boil me, Daenerys certainly liked to fuss. I hadn't expected exactly this when I asked her to buy clothes for Lyanna. My dirty-minded little sister ... always a step ahead.

Women.

Had Lyanna found the lingerie yet? Probably not. Differently, she would have torn them apart and then she would have used the remainders to strangle me. I smiled unconsciously at the image that flashed in my head.
I collected a scarf, gloves and a beanie, and winnowed downstairs. I found her peering the manicured front lawn and the clean street of white cobblestones behind the curtains.

"These should do for now," I made to wrap the knit scarf around her neck.

"Hey!" She squirmed away from me, taking a step back. "What's this thing?" She eyed the scarf with curious eyes, as though I had attempted to slip a cockroach into her blouse.

"You don't know?" She shook her head as a no. Well, I guess she never had to use one. "It's called scarf."

"Why do I need this?"

"It will keep you warm, like this," I raised the matching knit gloves, "and this." I raised the beanie with the fur pom.

"These are ..." she snatched the gloves from my hand and examined them bewitched. "These are gloves?" her eyes were rife with excitement.

"Yes," I said while wrapping casually the scarf around her neck and adjusting the beanie to her braided head.

"Gloves like the ones people use to touch snow?" She had put the gloves in her hands, testing the wool, flexing her fingers in front of her face as though she had just acquired a new super power.

"Exactly." I ruffled the pom of her beanie and she didn't even scowl at me, engulfed in her thrill.

"Is there snow on the streets?"

"Unfortunately for you, no. It's not snow-season yet."

She sulked, patently disappointed. "I look like an onion," she said, her words muffled behind her scarf.

*Or like a hilariously cute penguin.*

She shifted from one foot to the other to test her gait and eventually buried her gloved hands into the pockets of her coat.

We headed out, side by side, and blended with vampires and humans alike, in various forms of dress that meandered by; some in coats to ward against the crisp air, some wearing mortal fashions with layers and poofy skirts and lace, some in riding leathers—all unhurried as they breathed in the salt-and-lemon-verbena breeze that even winter couldn’t chase away.

I walked in silence to give Lyanna the time to gobble down the details of the emerging city. I was chewing on my bottom lip the whole time, suddenly tense with nerves and indecision, sick to my core with impatience.

*She was here. My mate was finally here with me. In my city. In my home.*

The more we walked, the more town houses with green copper roofs and pale puffing chimneys we left behind us. In the distance, children shrieked with laughter and played with their baby dragons which followed them the way ducklings follow their mother.

No monsters. No darkness. Not a hint of fear, of despair. Nothing like the impression I gave her by taking her to the Hewn City.
“How?” she whispered breathless.

I understood perfectly what she meant. “Luck.”

“Luck? Yes, how lucky for you,” She said quietly, but not weakly, “that the rest of your Court was ravaged while the other half, the favoured ones that happened to dwell in your city, remained safe.”

*The people that dwelled Under The Mountain were as corrupted, twisted and wicked as their Queen.*

“Did you even think for one moment,” she said, her voice like gravel, “to extend that luck to anywhere else? Anyone else?”

*While your father and step-mother brought your country to its knees,* were the words her ferocious slate eyes were throwing at me like knives.

“Other cities,” I said calmly, “are known to the world. Velaris has remained secret beyond the borders of these lands for millennia. Joanna did not touch it, because she did not know it existed. None of her minions did. No one in the other courts knows of its existence, either.”

If Joanna had known about this trove, she would have sunken her teeth first to rip it apart and then she would leave the second bite for her monsters.

“How?” she mouthed, the bond tangibly upset. “When Joanna replaced your mother,” she said, nearly spitting her name, “you didn’t think to open this place as a refuge?”

“When Joanna became Queen,” I said, my temper slipping the leash a bit at the mention of my mother. “I had to make some very hard choices. I did terrible things to ensure that she wouldn't learn about this piece of goodness. Don't think it didn't cost me, Lyanna.”

She rolled her eyes, twisting away to scan the rolling, steep hills, the sea far beyond. “I'm assuming you won’t tell me about it.”

“No, it’s not the time for that conversation.”

She scowled at me, hard, itching to squash me under her glare. “So what is there that was worth saving at the cost of everyone else?”

When I spoke, my tone was as ruthless as the churning winter sea in the distance. “Everything.”

_Rhaegar wasn’t exaggerating._

There was everything to see in Velaris: tea shops with delicate tables and chairs scattered outside their cheery fronts, surely heated by some warming spell, all full of chattering, laughing vampires. There were four main market squares; Palaces, they were called: two on this side—the southern side—of the Sidra River, two on the northern.

In the hours that we wandered, I only made it to see two of them: great, white-stoned squares flanked by the pillars supporting the carved and painted buildings that watched over them and provided a covered walkway beneath for the shops built into the street level.

The first market we entered, the Palace of Thread and Jewels, sold clothes, shoes, supplies for making both, and jewelry—endless, sparkling jeweler’s shops. Yet nothing inside me stirred at the glimmer of sunlight on the undoubtedly rare fabrics swaying in the chill river breeze, at the clothes...
displayed in the broad glass windows, or the luster of gold and ruby and emerald and pearl nestled on velvet beds. I didn’t dare glance at the now-empty finger on my left hand, that Oberyn’s engagement ring was supposed to adorn.

No one on the streets looked twice at me, even at their Prince by my side. Perhaps they had no idea who I was—perhaps city-dwellers didn’t care who was in their midst. A werewolf and consequently an outsider. Nonetheless, every other person outside of the borders of Velaris could be considered an outsider since the city was hidden.

The second market, the Palace of Bone and Salt, was one of the Twin Squares: one on this side of the river, the other one—the Palace of Hoof and Leaf—across it, both crammed with vendors selling meat, produce, prepared foods, livestock, confections, spices … So many spices.

Rhaegar kept a few steps away, hands in his pockets as he offered bits of information every now and then. Yes, he told me, many stores and homes used magic to warm them, especially popular outdoor spaces. I didn’t inquire further about it.

No one avoided him—no one whispered about him or spat on him or stroked him as they had Under the Mountain.

Rather, the people that spotted him offered warm, broad smiles. Some approached, gripping his hand to welcome him back. He knew each of them by name—and they addressed him by his.

But Rhaegar grew ever quieter as the afternoon pressed on. We paused at the edge of a brightly painted pocket of the city, built atop one of the hills that flowed right to the river’s edge. I took one look at the first storefront and my bones turned solid again.

The cheery door was cracked open to reveal art and paints and brushes and little sculptures.

Rhaegar said, “This is what Velaris is known for: the artists’ quarter. You’ll find a hundred galleries, supply stores, potters’ compounds, sculpture gardens, and anything in between. They call it the Rainbow of Velaris. The performing artists—the musicians, the dancers, the actors—dwell on that hill right across the Sidra. You see the bit of gold glinting near the top? That’s one of the main theaters. There are five notable ones in the city, but that’s the most famous. And then there are the smaller theaters, and the amphitheater on the sea cliffs …” He trailed off as he noticed my gaze drifting back to the assortment of bright buildings ahead and the snow-capped mountains.

Snow. I had never touched snow. Or ice. Or snowflakes, for that matter. How could it possibly feel? Would it crunch and melt under my fists? I wanted to reach my hands to those mountains and take a handful of that wide magical powder. If only I could touch it ...

“I’m tired,” I managed to say.

I could feel Rhaegar’s gaze, didn’t care if my shield was up or down to ward against him reading my thoughts. But he only said, “We can come back another day. It’s almost time for dinner, anyway.”

"Let’s come back tomorrow." I labored a tight smile. "To show me the artists’ quarters."

All too suddenly, his expression burneded, his Adam's apple bobbed and I knew something was wrong.

"Maybe not tomorrow but we can leave it for another day."

"Why not tomorrow?" I didn't mean to sound intrusive but I didn't wish to be kept in the dark
either.

He hesitated, choosing his words very carefully. "I have to go back to the Hewn City. My presence is requested at Court."

Before my brain could process the information, I made a choice. A fast one. And even more, a stupid one probably. "Take me with you."

His eyes flashed open. "What? Please repeat that because I think my hearing doesn't work quite well lately."

He could hear a cricket thrumming from those mountains.

"Take. Me. With. You."

"Have you lost your mind?" His fatigued look upon me certainly suggested so.

"I am not some broken doll that needs fixing Rhaegar." My lungs felt unnaturally frail as I pronounced the words.

"You don't understand." His hands were squarely on my shoulders, his face so close to mine that I could see my reflection in the pools of his amethysts. "Terrible things happen at Court. Things that are beyond my authority. I don't want you do undergo further damage Lyanna." I didn't think something worse could happen than last time. "I don't want you to ..." his voice faltered and his features were suddenly way far too overwhelmed. "I don't want you to see me."

_I will not be afraid. I will not balk. And I will not let you have your way around me._

"You are wasting your breath." I stated resolutely, my mind made up.

His grip on my shoulders tightened but his eyes surrendered. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

Chapter End Notes

Guess who's coming next chapter? ;)}
This particular chapter was so fun to write. Definitely my favourite so far ;)

From the very first second, I set foot in this odious Court again, I decided I needed two things to make it out alive. Number one; steady breaths and gulps of air. Number two; a muzzle for my mouth and slippery tongue in order to quench stoically the fury that was fanning within me.

The throne room looked and felt the same. Cold and inhospitable. An incognito trap pleasing to the eye but foul to its foundations. This time though, I wasn't here as a mouse. I was an esurient wolf camouflaged as a sheep, and I was starving for personal retribution, roaring internally to avenge my family, howling to make their murderers pay. Meticulously. Patiently. Slowly.

We keep our friends close and our enemies closer.

It was day outside but the entire palace was illuminated by the white light of the crystal chandeliers. The three Illyrians hadn't accompanied us for a reason I didn't inquire, I contemplated while taking in more details of my surroundings. The throbbing sound of my heart was muffled by the babble in the room produced by unfamiliar vampires, all strangers to me. Except for the Dãrys and Dãria of the Mountain, seated upon their matching black thrones, holding Court as though they were gods. Thus I was expected to address Aerys and Joanna, by the Valyrian words equivalent for King and Queen, Rhaegar had underlined.

Other than that, same rules applied like the last time. I stay close to him, I talk as less as possible, I don't do anything stupid. I was determined to play by the rules of survival, to rule out cheating until ... until my stare locked with the sight of my mother's corpse nailed on the wall along with the other wolf heads.

I see the Dãrys stayed true to the promise he made to my father. My blood pumped and seared excruciatingly slow against my veins but soon afterward my ire turned to sheer trepidation when I beheld the three dragons in the deepest corner of the room and rightfully empty.

Seraphina, Drogon, and Balerion were sibilating sharply, their forked tongues rolling, their tails whipping the shackles looped around their legs. They looked like falcons ensnared in an aviary, when they weren't supposed to be here. Dragons are supposed to be wild, their place was in the skies not under a mountain displayed as pets and symbols of power, displayed to terrorize and engender the fear of the subjects that were present.

Games, I reminded myself, this was another part of the game and, if I wanted to win, I had to learn how to play prudently. So I schooled the frown in my forehead back to porcelain aloofness and didn't trouble myself to ask Rhaegar about Seraphina. I would find out soon about her being here anyway.

Rhaegar as always, had tugged me close to him, though this time I didn't feel self-conscious of his casual yet protective arm around me. Maybe I had gotten used to his skin against mine by now, or maybe my easiness could be attributed to my decent clothes, contrary to last time and similar to his; a black tunic and jacket, black leather leggings and knee-high boots. We looked like a very wicked
duet.

From the corner of my eye, Viserys, so far in a pensive mood, signaled an equally detached Daenerys to follow his gaze. Daenerys's beautiful face lit up when her eyes scanned the crowd.

"Lya," she turned to me and grinned widely, a dimple breaking in her right cheek. "I want you to meet someone." Rhaegar gave her a prolonged stare as if saying, this isn't a good idea, but Daenerys dismissed him completely as if answering, I've got it all under control you dolt. She pulled me behind her, Rhaegar and Viserys following resigned.

A lean man donned in an attire of white and gold waited for us amidst the throngs of vampires, his well-shaped lips set in an impetuous smile meant for Daenerys alone. She subtly accelerated her pace and linked her fingers around his elbow, kissing him on both cheeks but ... lingering as though reluctant to let go.

"Lya, this is Jamie," her voice was unusually soft, her eyes impossibly lavender, her smile brighter than the sun. "a very good friend of mine." A friend, I arched a knowing brow at her, and her grin widened. I had seen how Dany interacted with her friends but this familiarity between them, this effortless smile communication was ... another thing for sure.

"Charmed to meet you at last Princess." his emerald eyes and smart contours of his face felt somehow familiar and so did his flaxen hair, gleaming like wheat in the sunlight. "I am Jamie Lannister, High Lord of the Dawn Court." My taut smile gradually faded and my lips set into a leaf-thin line.

A Lannister. Joanna's blood. Her son most likely. As painfully beautiful as his mother. And as artfully sly I presumed.

The shift in my mood and the distaste in my stare must have shown for his smile faltered and an awkward veil of silence fell between us.

He cleared his throat. "My condolences." he exhaled deeply, his voice benign. "I'm truly sorry for your loss." I couldn't believe my ears. "I've lost my father as well and ... quite tragically." Your father was a High Lord, I wanted to scream. He could protect himself from others or even from himself. He wasn't butchered before your very eyes.

"Spare me your dramatics, my Lord." As if he gave a shit, as if anyone gave a shit about the wolf bitch and her wild pup. They both deserved it, vampires' hateful stares were deriding in front of my face and I wanted to rip their heads off for that. "How can you sleep at night my Lord? After what happened. After what your mother did?" Bile rose in waves in my throat when he made to articulate a response. "But oh wait ..." my tone was solid, unwavering, my aversion crystal clear. "You don't sleep after all."

Rhaegar exchanged glances with Daenerys and his mouth twitched infinitesimally. See smartass? I told you it wasn't a good idea, his cocky eyes taunted hers.

"My mother might have been the one pulling the strings but we all know who orchestrated this ... insightful execution," his voice turned defensive. He was his mother's son. I didn't expect anything less. "even if some of us refuse to see the truth. But I don't blame you for truth is harsh and even harsher to accept."

"Cheap excuses," I whispered under my breath. I didn't refuse to see the truth rather than refused to buy that Joanna was the docile little wife when it came to her husband's demands.
Rhaegar brushed my hand in reassurance. Or perhaps warning. *The walls have ears and the crows are watching.*

"Believe me my Lady, if I-"

"A lion does not concern himself with the opinion of a wolf," a light melodic voice cut him off, its owner a slender female with jade eyes, a fine-boned face that was cascaded by long golden hair perfectly coiled around her head, and a cat-like smirk that refused to abandon her features. "And I think my brother have had enough of yours."

*Ladies and Gentlemen meet Joanna number two. Again the apple didn't fall far from the tree.*

She strode toward us, chaperoned by Robert Baratheon.

"My betrothed can be quite eccentric." The Winter High Lord said, flashing me a sorry look. So Dawn and Winter were going to be united through this marriage of convenience. Or so it seemed, judging from how stiffly these two eyed each other. "Don't mind her my Lady."

The lioness rolled her eyes as if fed up. "What Lady Robert? Do you see a Lady?" her voice dripped with venom. "Because all I see is a plain wildling keen to hunt us all down."

I wasn't sure whether to receive this as an insult or as a compliment.

"Indeed you have a flair for being melodramatic, don't you Cers?" Rhaegar razzed, and attempted to disarm her with a gorgeous smile that made the blades of his cheekbones look even sharper, that made him look so young and carefree. That made him look so ... authentic.

"Speak all you want, mock all you want." Her insufferable smirk vanished and she returned his smile, revealing a row of perfect moon-white teeth. "You are so small I can't even hear you sexy."

An unwelcome sea of melancholy settled on the bond, on that cord between us, like coating mist in a cold day. That's how I felt; cold and lonely. I felt robbed ... as if something had been stolen from me. *He has never smiled for me like that ...*

Maybe I was used to being the center of attention, at least when it came to Oberyn. When we were together, I was the only person in the world and his first smile was always reserved for me. I hadn't realized how homesick I was for my Alpha or perhaps ... the only thing I profoundly craved right now, and I didn't dare admit even to the most secluded depths of my mind, was my mate's undivided attention.

*The attention that the daughter of that witch had now.*

Breaking out of my mind haze, I snorted. Loudly. All six pairs of eyes landed on me quizzically and then—

The giant double doors of the throne room threw wide and the vampires parted like scared does, revealing all too soon what was before us. Four creatures with humanoid bodies and serpentine features, were dragging a sobbing vampire by his hair toward the dais. They were covered completely in dark scales, and had powerful arms with black talons, their eyes amber in color. Not creatures, I realized in horror but ... *naga.* The reason why we were never supposed to hunt alone in the Shadowood.

Joanna's clear voice rang out over the prattle, summoning Rhaegar. My heart coiled. Rhaegar flicked his gaze to me, a silent command to stay here with the others.
Instinctively, I put a hand on his arm and he paused, his indigo eyes boring into mine. "Just be careful." I squeezed and let go.

Joanna caressed her ring, watching every movement that Rhaegar made as he approached, smiling at the pale vampire at her feet like a snake. Beside her, the King remained utterly impassive.

The Dãria waved a hand and two other men came forward. The eldest of the two was short and chubby with a fair trim beard. The second vampire was tall, a handsome male with curly ginger hair and teal eyes, his skin porcelain—impeccable, his beauty undeniable. But his mouth was drawn, his stare darting between Joanna and Rhaegar.

"What do you have to say about this Mace?" The Queen addressed the eldest male who remained silent. "Well if your tongue is tied, what your beloved son has to say in his defense?" she pointed at the male cowering at her feet, still captured by the naga. "He is his squire after all."

"I am absolutely certain that my son had no part in this, right Willas?"

Willas didn't even blink.

"I will decide that." The Queen said and turned to Rhaegar. "The spring squire tried to escape through the cave that leads to the Spring Court lands. I want to know why."

Rhaegar slid his hands into his pockets and sauntered closer to the male on the ground.

The spring squire shook violently, his face shining with tears. My own bowels turned watery with fear and shame as he wet himself at the sight of Rhaegar. "P-please," he gasped out.

The crowd was breathless, too silent.

His back to me, Rhaegar's shoulders were loose, not a stitch of clothing out of place. But I knew his talons had latched onto the squire's mind the moment the male stopped shaking on the ground.

Willas had gone still too and it was pain, real pain, and fear that shone in those stunning blue-green eyes.

After a moment of silence, Rhaegar looked at Joanna. "He wanted to escape. To get to the Spring Court, cross the wall, and flee south into the werewolf territory. He had no accomplices, no motive beyond his own pathetic cowardice." He jerked his chin toward the puddle of piss beneath the male. But out of the corner of my eye I saw both Mace and Willas sag and this made me wonder what sort of choice Rhaegar had made in that moment he'd taken to search the squire's mind.

"Exquisite, isn't he?" Cersei Lannister whispered in my ear and I flinched. "His name is Willas Tyrell, heir of the Spring Court." her breath was icy cold. "He has been locked here—Under The Mountain, like Renly, Robert's younger brother."

Locked?

"Why?" I asked.

"They are leverage, but my mother prefers to call them guests." Her voice was unnervingly low and soft, coloured in plain sarcasm. "You see, there is a bargain between the Dãria and the High Lords. And it is very simple. Their submission for their loved ones' lives." So Willas knew about the escape. "How do you think Robert gave his consent to our imminent marriage?" she huffed a bitter laugh. "Renly has been trapped here for over seven decades. Roughly his entire life. Delightful isn't it?"
I didn't answer. What could I possibly say?

The lioness carried on, "I am sure Rhaegar can assure you of that."

I ripped my stare off the sight before me and pinned her with puzzled eyes. Question marks were blinking in my brain.

"He hasn't told you yet." She stated confused, lowering her eyes on the ground, her tone almost ... sympathetic. "It's not a very pleasant thing to talk about, actually." Another bitter twitch of her mouth. "We spent our 'confinement' together. Fifty years trapped under this rock, my mother fucking your beloved and, at the same time, her own daughter in the head."

I shifted my gaze back to the squire on the floor, only to find my mate's melancholic indigo eyes trained on me, overwhelmed by bottomless sadness. His attention might have been on the Queen, but his ears were here with me. Talk to me, my eyes begged his but he hastily averted them.

Fifty years. Rhaegar has been enduring this for fifty years. Away from Velaris. Away from his family. And Aerys ... His own father had built this living hell for him. What have you done Rhaegar Targaryen to deserve this?

"So we lifted bars around our hearts, Rhaegar and I. We caged them and only reminded ourselves who we were. I was a lioness back then and remained one." She gritted her teeth so hard I thought they would break. "And I am going to show them what it means to put a lioness in a cage."

Gone was the arrogance and derision, that eccentricity that seemed to be as special as Rhaegar's. Gone was the lioness. Beside me stood a girl, a girl who remembered.

"Why are you telling me all this?" I breathed.

"Cage your heart Lyanna Stark." She muttered without looking at me and her fierce words made me pause and think. They made me re-appraise her. Whose side is she with? "This way, no one can hurt you." She walked away discreetly to join Viserys.

Some feet away, Joanna was patently disappointed with the full outcome of the interrogation. She rolled her eyes and slouched in her throne. "Shatter him, Rhaegar." She flicked a hand at the High Lord of the Spring Court. "You may do what you want with the body afterward."

Mace and Willas bowed as if they'd been given a gift and looked to their subject, who had gone still and calm on the floor, hugging his knees. The squire was ready, relieved.

Rhaegar slipped a hand out of his pocket, and it dangled at his side. I could have sworn phantom talons flickered there as his fingers curled slightly.

"I'm growing bored, Rhaegar." Joanna said with a sigh. She was a Daemati and yet, she had Rhaegar do all the shitty junk for her. Yes, she reveled in killing, but punishing Rhaegar was the utmost of pleasures for her. He didn't like killing and she knew it.

Rhaegar's fingers curled into a fist.

The squire's eyes went wide, then glazed as he slumped to the side in the puddle of his own waste. Blood leaked from his nose, from his ears, pooling on the floor.

That fast, that easily, that irrevocably, he was dead and so were whatever secrets the Prince had unearthed. But maybe keeping those secrets had only been done in aid of whatever games Rhaegar liked to play. Maybe sparing that spring squire by killing him swiftly, rather than shattering his
mind and leaving him a drooling husk, had been another calculated move, too.

"I said shatter his mind, not his brain." The Queen snapped.

The crowd murmured around me, stirring.

Rhaegar shrugged, his hand sliding back into his pocket, his eyes burning black with indignation. "Then you should have killed him yourself."

He turned away without being dismissed but Joanna's imposing voice made him pause. "Not so fast my Prince. This was just a warming up." Mother above. "You didn't think I would let you so easily off the hook, did you?" Her smile was the incarnation of evil as she ordered the naga, "Bring the accused in."

The doors opened once more but this time horror devoured my body anew once I saw the accused. Dozens of children were dragged in by the naga, their wrists, and ankles in manacles. All of them had hair as white as snow, mahogany skin and ... ruby red eyes. These were winter children and hybrids at the same time. Half vampires, half werewolves. And according to the vampire law, outcasts—abominations.

Once the King beheld their identity, he straightened in his throne, hatred disfiguring his bony features.

"I believe these mongrels are weeds of your Court, Robert." The Queen clarified in a dull tone. "Correct me, if I am mistaken." There was no mistake to be made. Their pale hair was proof enough.

The Winter High Lord came forward, steadfast and fearless. "Yes, they are."

"You knew the law and yet, you were exceptionally foolish to hide them, to shelter them instead of abiding by reason."

"They are my subjects to do with them as I see fit." Intangible fury started seeping into his voice.

Ours is the fury.

"No." Joanna's irresistible charm began crumbling down like a house of cards. "You pay homage to the Mountain and I am the one who rules it." That's what I thought. Aerys was there only for decoration whether he was indifferent or somehow weak, manipulated. "And for your treason, for your presumptuousness, their deaths will be neither swift nor painless."

"These are just children my Dària. They are no less vampires than us."

"No!" the King yelped all too abruptly. "They are anomalies, they are abominations and as long as I breathe no wolf will be seeing the sun rising over my lands." Lands you took by force, lands you have been oppressing for hundreds of years.

"Mother," Jamie Lannister spoke, his expression solemn, composed. "I do beg you to reconsider. They will be more useful alive. We can enlist them in the army, we can train them and position them to guard the borders. They are harmless and certainly not a threat." Children. All of them, so small. "They are not our enemies."

"Everyone who isn't us is an enemy." The Queen's lips moved slowly, every word clear, indisputable. "Rhaegar," she summoned him again and I knew what was coming.
No. No. No. She can't make him do it. She has no right to. This isn't just. This isn't—

"What would my mother say?" Daenerys approached the dais, her words echoing in the overwhelming silence that deluted the hall. "What would your mate say, if she was here your Grace?"

"Your mother isn't here sweet child." Joanna drawled, and for the first time she looked miffed—provoked. "And she is not coming back."

Dany paid no attention to her whatsoever and went on resiliently. "What would Selaena think, if she knew what you are about to commit?"

The King closed his eyes in pain, even the sound of his daughter's name, devastating. "Someone made sure they wouldn't be here right now." His spiteful eyes darted to me, the accusations flowing in the air. "Someone made sure that they suffered." Liar! Liar! Liar! I know my father. He would never do such thing."

"And I will make sure that no further damage will befall my kingdom because of their descendants, whether they are werewolves or hybrids."

The accusation turned into a threat. It was clear. It was there only for me and Rhaegar to interpret. What if ... a child—mine and his. A hybrid, condemned from the very first second he would come into this world. I would kill him—I would kill Aerys and that witch if they dared come any close to him. Rhaegar wouldn't let them—

No. This wasn't even plausible. Because I would find a way out. I would find the Suriel and I would go home.

"You are not like them." Dany's sad eyes pleaded with his, longing pouring out of them. "You are not like her."

Monsters aren't born. They are raised to become ones.

The King leaned back in his black throne and looked at Joanna for a long minute. He seemed to be in an inner kind of struggle, not with himself but with his mind. She was whispering and whispering and whispering with her power, brainwashing his head.

Eventually, the King nodded weakly, barely, and Joanna shot him a broad, serpentine smile. The order had been delivered and no one failed to notice. Especially Robert.

"You cannot do this!" He roared, ice starting to materialize in the tips of his fingers.

"The Dãria of the Mountain needs no permission for her actions." A blond vampire with an unkind demeanor remarked beside Joanna's throne. Another one of her minions?

"Thank you Kevan, but I am sure I can take care our winter lordling on my own."

"You cannot do this." The Winter High Lord repeated, this time his fury hardly contained.

"Watch me." Joanna grinned in delight and her green eyes landed on the Prince. "Rhaegar honey," my heart quaked, blackened and then died. He braced himself, still like a statue, his breathing ragged. "Burn them."

I shuddered and so did he. The children so far motionless, let out whimpers, wriggling against their manacles and the naga.

"Burn them all." The King whispered ever so quietly.
Rhaegar lifted his head and looked at the three Dragons.

I felt my hand being squeezed and I knew that the lioness was the one holding it. "Don't look."

No. I was done looking away.

"Seraphina," at Rhaegar's order, she flapped her wings and rose high, yet still severely confined by the shackles. He stared and stared and stared at her until his beautiful lips turned drawn and his night eyes defeated. "Drakarys." his deep voice cracked as he gave the command and I didn't have to speak Valyrian to understand its meaning.

*Dragonfire.*

Raging, orange fire crackled out of her maw and the flames unfurled over the defenseless hybrids, grilling every single one of them.

*Breath. You've been here before. You've undergone this ordeal and you survived. It will pass. I promise.*

I heard their screams of agony, and I heard Joanna laughing. This time, louder than the time she tortured my mum.

*Kill her. I was going to kill her. Quietly I will wait to strike.*

Rhaegar stood alone, eyes closed and head lowered, self-hatred devouring him whole, shadows whirling around him and ... in the light, outlines formed behind his shoulder blades and back. Something that desperately begged to pop out but he didn't let.

I ran a hand over my collarbone, over the fabric of my tunic, over the Illyrian wings that didn't make any sense. Until now.

Without thinking, I weaved my way through the crowd, thrashing against the disruption until I reached him and interlaced my hand with his.

*Don't think it didn't cost me, Lyanna.*

"Look at me."

This time, it was my turn to give, not to take.
The thing about guilt is that, most of the times, is paired up with solitude. Solitude that doesn't necessarily mean withdrawal from the people around us, but withdrawal from ourselves. And then, spells of sadness strike in full force, an indication that one cares far too deeply for others and the world. And Rhaegar cared way too much. Even if he made sure his feelings were as well-hidden as the dark side of the moon.

Silent as a mouse, I tip-toed my way up the oak staircase that led to the rooftop garden. He was lolling there, his long legs hanging off the edge of the terrace, his silver hair blowing with the soft night breeze and shining pallid under the stark crescent moon.

Catching him off guard, I slouched beside him like sprinkled ash, our knees and shoulders touching. His cool body stiffened momentarily, yet he didn't turn to look at me. We stared straight ahead on the horizon, Velaris blooming beyond with starlight.

At his prolonged silence, I chose to barrel ahead. "It doesn't suit you Prince Perfect," my words were a whisper, soft and smooth as the bottomless darkness in the sky, "looking so glum."

I shot a furtive look at him, only to find his face unreadable. "The moon always looks glum. And it's always the most beautiful jewel in the sky."

Point taken. He was in no mood to talk and this was so not him. And I could totally sympathise with the feeling. I knew how it felt to be in a constant battle with your own thoughts, with your own qualms. His heart was a battlefield, and if he didn't get this guilt off his chest, it would start to pile up and it would destroy him from the inside.

I shrugged, reaching for the right words. "It's not your fault, you know." My bare feet were flowing in the air, twisting amok and teasing his intentionally, our toes a tangled mess. "You had no choice."

"There is always a choice Lyanna, even though I keep feeding excuses on my conscience that I hadn't one. It is either yes or no. White or black. Right or left."

Yes, he was partially right. There was always a choice. But he was so absolute, so harsh on himself that he couldn't acknowledge that there was always a middle ground too.

I sat up straight and twisted my fall of dark hair so that it hung over my shoulder. Ever so lightly, I canted my head to look at him fully. "You can always choose silence instead of an answer. You can choose grey instead of black or white. You can walk straight ahead instead of choosing right or left."

He smiled, in spite of himself, as a sardonic retort slipped past his melancholic defenses, yet he still didn't bring himself to meet my stare. "And what if there is a wall?"

"You walk straight into the wall, your brain slips into place and then you poke fun at yourself until your cheeks hurt."

I let him ignore me for a couple of minutes, my eyes drinking in the flawless symmetry of his profile, an artist's study in angles. If Gods indeed existed, Rhaegar was definitely their masterpiece.
"You are not like her Rhaegar." For once more, I took the first step to break the wordlessness that I could not stomach.

"I see no difference."

"I do." *Come on, why won't you look at me? "She is a spawn of Satan. You are kind and selfless and ... humble ..." deep inside as far as the latter is concerned at least.*

"A killer nonetheless." His words felt as though they were spiked with a thousand ash daggers which he wished to drive into his own heart. "Killing is a part of my nature that I cannot escape."

"Do you know what is worse than being born a killer?" My knees were now drawn to my chest, my fingers threaded across my ankles, my voice something less than a breath. I could feel his expectant eyes burning on my profile but it was my turn to evade his scrutiny. He was hanging from my lips to hear my answer. "Being raised to become one."

Red shame mounted in every pore of my body as I voiced my own thoughts. And I realised that Rhaegar couldn't look me in the eyes for the very same reason. He was ashamed of what he had done. And it appeared that both his remorse and shame were contagious as well.

Rhaegar needed blood to survive in the same way that I needed air. It was a primal instinct to crave it, to even kill for it. But me? What excuse did I have for all the despicable things I have been taught throughout my sixteen years and was expected to use when the time came.

I have been taught how to kill and maim and torture—I knew how to skin a man—a vampire and keep him alive while doing it. I knew how to keep someone awake and coherent during longs hours of torment—knew where to inflict the most agonising of pain without having someone bleed out.

I had been taught how to prioritize making my enemies suffer while missing out on all the beautiful things that life offered me. Missing out on my art, missing out on music, missing out on my childhood that my own peoples' mindset stole away from me.

"I ... I took their pain away during those last minutes." A muscle ticked along his jaw. "They didn't feel the fire on their skin. They didn't feel anything at all, for that matter. I told them to scream only for Joanna to be convinced. At least they left in peace."

His sharp features were constricted with worry and I wished with all my heart that I could just touch his glowing face and take all his sorrow away too.

But then I remembered.

Questions. I had so many questions, and yet, still no answers. He was so vulnerable right now, like unbaked clay that waited to be molded into my hands. I had laid my soul at his feet after my nightmare. The answers that I sought was the least he could offer me.

Without making any abrupt moves, I lay down, resting my head on his lap, my river of midnight tresses blending with the black of his pants. All at once, all of the nerves in his body went as taut as harp strings under my weight. His brows rose a fraction and the corners of his eyes tightened in disorientation, in thought.

My voice was as soft as a caress when I spoke, "Talk to me." I lifted my tattooed hand and brushed a wavy lock of his smooth hair, as white as the sand of the Summer Court. "Tell me your deepest secret." I ran my inky fingers along his broad shoulders down to his strong arms, harrowingly slow, never breaking my stare from his. My eyes were impregnable—ruthless and his were subdued, alert
even, given my unusual display of intimacy. Splendid. *I knew how to play games too.* "Something that I don't know." I purred and finally traced the lean muscles of his back that coiled and flexed with the slightest of movements. "Something that I *should* know. Something that you should have told me." A shiver snaked down his spine and his breathing became ragged as my deft fingers teased and teased and teased until I spotted two tiny slits under the fabric of his shirt, right in the centre of his back.

*Bingo.* I lingered there, rubbing gently the sensitive spot and, to my satisfaction, Rhaegar closed his eyes instinctively and a stifled moan rose from the back of his throat. I knew all too well this little sound of elation. A sound like this would escape me too every time someone was petting my wolf ears.

"Why didn't you tell me?" My tone was firm, yet dispassionate. My fingernails were digging into the spot, the drums of my anger rising in tempo.

"I ... was dying to tell you, to show you. And I would have. But then you told me about your fear of heights and I ... I just lost it. I was afraid Lyanna." He spoke my name as if reciting a prayer, and under different circumstances no prayer would have saved him. But I knew tonight was not a good time for arguing, for pushing the matter. The death of those children, the heaviness of remorse that clung to his conscience was enough for one day. Besides, had he told me the very first day he met me, I would have lost it as well.

"I want to see them." A spark of joy mingled with nervousness flashed across his face lingering at the edges of his lips.

Before I could twinkle an eye, a pall of dark shadows swirled behind him, and giant glorious wings bloomed from his sides. Breath knocked out of me.

"Can I touch them?" He gave me a keen bob of his head and stayed still for me, in the way that only Rhaegar could. Silent and motionless as a breeze. Having been given the green light, I unfurled my fingers a couple of times before finally spanning the distance. His membranous wings were smooth and jet black, flecked with a hint of iridescence and clawed like a bat's. They were as awe-inspiring and intimidating as the dark waters of the night sea, a dark abyss as infinite as the horizon.

"I want you to tell me a story." I whispered. "Tell me your story. How did you end up here? Who were you before me?"

"I am not very confident I can concentrate if you keep doing that."

"I never knew Illyrians were such sensitive babies," I gave him a lazy smile and reluctantly managed to remove my fingers from his wings. "Go ahead."

Rhaegar returned my smile before clearing his throat. “My mother was low-born,” he told me, “and worked as a seamstress in one of the many mountain war-camps. When Illyrian females come of age in the camps—when they have their first bleeding—their wings are … clipped. Just an incision in the right place, left to improperly heal, can cripple you forever. And my mother—she was gentle and wild and loved to fly. So she did everything in her power to keep herself from maturing. She starved herself, gathered illegal herbs—anything to halt the natural course of her body. She turned eighteen and hadn’t yet bled, to the mortification of her parents. But her bleeding finally arrived, and all it took was for her to be in the wrong place, at the wrong time, before a male scented it on her and told the camp’s lord. She tried to flee—took right to the skies. But she was young, and the warriors were faster, and they dragged her back. They were about to tie her to the posts in the center of camp when my father winnowed in for a meeting with the camp’s lord about readying for
the War. He saw my mother thrashing and fighting like a wildcat, and …” He swallowed. “The mating bond between them clicked into place. One look at her, and he knew what she was. He misted the guards holding her.”

“Through the blood-rain,” Rhaegar went on, “my mother looked at him. And the bond fell into place for her. My father took her back to the Night Court that evening and made her his bride. He made her his Queen. She loved her people, and missed them, but never forgot what they had tried to do to her—what they did to the females among them. She tried for decades to get my father to ban it, but the War was coming, and he wouldn’t risk isolating the Illyrians when he needed them to lead his armies. And to die for him.”

"So all in all, you are an Illyrian.” I concluded, clouds of warm breath swirling out of my mouth and disappearing into the cold night.

"A half-breed Illyrian." Unlike me and since Rhaegar's breath was no less colder than the night air, he didn't produce those breath-clouds.

"Do Dany and Vis have wings too?"

"No they don't. Only Selaena and I were born with wings." My eyes must have been addled by confusion, my question as plain as day for Rhaegar clarified, "I suppose it was congenital. Take as an example a child that inherites his mother's eyes or hair colour. We inherited our mother's wings. They didn't. But they are no less Illyrians than my sister and I."

"Was she older or younger than you?“ A distinct emotion rippled across his face. My pulse jumped to a martial beat, and I had no clue why. The hesitation that lingered on his lips made me dreadfully nervous.

When he spoke, his voice was laden with quiet anguish, "She was my twin."

My stomach hollowed out and my chest suddenly felt too cramped, as though it was going to erupt any time soon.

*His twin. His twin. His twin.*

They shared their mother's heartbeat before they were even born, they were paired up, living their life twice. Twice they smiled, twice they cried, twice they loved and ... and Rhaegar died twice when she died.

"What happened? Wobbly. Everything about Lyanna Stark felt so wobbly right now. My heartbeat rose to my ears as each breath became more labored, as every cell in my body began quivering. "I want you to tell me." *To deem for myself if my mother's and brother's life was worth the price.*

"It had been a rough year, I remember. Most of the northern villages of the Spring Court, the ones closest to the Wall, were hit by a blight. The crops were withering in masses and, other than that, periodical typhoons were adding to the disaster. Something had clearly gone wrong with that year's Calanmai."

Calanmai or Fire Night as it was called in the Spring Court, was a ceremony which signaled the start of the seasons. In Fire Night, various celebrations occured including lighting bonfire, playing of drums and the Great Rite. Each Court's crops were closely dependent upon the magic in The Great Rite on Fire Night for the rest of the year. All seven High Lords were expected to perform the Great Rite where they would allow powerful magic to enter their bodies and seize control of them. After hunting down the White Stag, it would cause them to attempt to find the Maiden and,
through their coupling, release magic that will spread through the lands and allow crops to grow.

"My mother and sister volunteered to visit each and every one of those villages and assist in any way they could. The presence of their Queen and Princess was really empowering for our people. So one day, I was to drop by for an important meeting with one of the local lords. I didn't make it since Jon and I were really busy training a new unit of untested Illyrians. Despite that, word of my visit leaked. Someone betrayed my upcoming meeting. Back then, and still, after hundreds of years since my birth, my powers were growing tremendously. Sometimes, even I was terrified of what I could do. I was playing those endless scenarios in my head where I might explode one day, like a balloon bloated of air."

The most powerful vampire that has ever been born.

"Unfortunately I wasn't the only one who nurtured those fears. Your realm feared I posed a potential threat. They thought I was capable of violating the treaty and starting another war to enslave your people by marching my forces into your lands. So Day and Summer forged an allegiance and crossed the Wall to eliminate me. When they didn't find me in the village, they decided to send a message by slaughtering my mother and sister anyway. After skinning their wings off their backs, they put their bodies in boxes and sent them down the river—to the nearest camp."

A spasm of pain contorted my features, and hot burning tears pricked the corners of my eyes. My head burdened me like a tone of blocks and I rubbed my temples to tone down the throbbing.

"What did my father do?" I breathed.

"This is one less piece of information you could do without, Lyanna Darling."

"Why is he doing that? Why is he so calm?" He was supposed to be throwing accusations at me like bombs by now, to be trying to make me feel like the worst person in the world. I had certainly done that when my mother's and Brandon's absence hit the zenith. He wasn't supposed to be protecting me from the memory, to be shielding me from the truth.

But then again, I hadn't heard both sides. I had to ask my father. There must have been some kind of misunderstanding. I had never seen those pair of wings that, according to Rhaegar, my father kept as trophies. I knew every nook and cranny of our manor like the back of my hand. Maybe all this was another trick. Another lie. Another artful manipulation. Another game.

He is a liar. Oberyn's voice wouldn't leave me alone even in my sleep.

"No. I ... I need to know." I insisted. My mind was torn between Rhaegar's avowal and my blind trust to my father's humaneness.

"No you don't." He placed his hand on my chest, right upon my heart, and my heartbeats reverberated beneath his palm. "Because that little human heart of yours is far too young and tender to be scarred already."

Scarred by that day's images. Scarred by all those screams. Scarred by Joanna's laughter.

"Why is Joanna more powerful than you? You said you were ready to blow up like a balloon because of your power."

She wasn't supposed to be stronger than him. He was the most powerful vampire in history.

His irises turned indigo, the only light of the stars reflected back in his eyes. Eyes that were so sad,
a mirror of his soul. "When my family and I found out what happened, when Aerys saw what they had done to my mother and sister, he went almost mad. Almost. I would never forget the moment when he ripped his teary eyes from my mother's mangled body and looked at me. His stare was empty, void of any kind of empathy, save for a note destined only for me; It should have been you."

He blamed him. His own son. He blamed him because he was lucky enough to have escaped this tragedy. This wasn't fair. This was preposterous.

"That's when Aerys and I ended. That's when I became a ghost to him. The ghost of a son he once loved with all his heart. And the ghost of a son who was responsible for his mate's and daughter's death. Months went by and things only deteriorated. He started hunting down hybrids and for a year, he locked Daenerys inside the Hewn City—he wouldn't leave her out of his sight. Viserys chose to stay with her for as long as it took."

"Why Daenerys?"

"Because he wouldn't risk losing her the way he had Selaena. She was the only daughter he had been left and other than that, she terribly reminded him of our mother, of his Queen."

"A Queen that he was expected to replace ..." I added.

"Precisely. Joanna was the ideal candidate and the only one the other Courts supported. If only they knew. "A Daemati—she wasn't merely powerful. She was Power. She was a noble Lady of the Dawn Court, recently widowed."

"She had been married to whom?" I tucked my free arms behind my head, the soft fabric of Rhaegar's trousers velvety against my skin.

"Tywin Lannister, High Lord of the Dawn Court. He took his own life, or that's what Joanna purports to be the truth."

I've lost my father as well and ... quite tragically, Jamie Lannister had told me. But Joanna couldn't be so heartless so as to plot her own husband's death, her children's father. She couldn't be so greedy, right? But the aligning of the two tragedies sounded too convenient to be just a coincidence.

"Aerys didn't want the marriage but he eventually accepted it. I beseeched him to reconsider, I moved earth and skies to talk him out of it but his mind was already made up."

Rhaegar's wings caught the errand beams of moonlight as they flapped behind him. Such a relaxing sound. I could even fall asleep listening to this soft lullaby of wings and air.

"I had known Joanna since I was a child. Long enough to see the envy she nursed for my mother, the spite that lurked past her fake loveliness and well-rehearsed smiles. Long enough to see her for the snake she was. She was raised to become a Queen, but the crown was snatched away from her when my mother—a no one—a girl with nothing to her name came to the foreground and ruined her grand plans. I could make peace with myself for leaving Aerys to her hands. But I wasn't going to hand her Velaris on a silver platter."

"So one day before her Coronation, I used my powers to wipe clean whatever memories my father had of Velaris. I used them until I was drenched, until those deep-rooted images in his mind were mere dust and ashes."

"You ..." I gawked agape at him, at my terrifyingly complicated mate with the thousand masks who had handed willingly his very self to the vultures to keep this place safe, so that his people
would still be able to dream, even if he was trapped in a Court of Nightmares. "you shackled your powers to him?"

He slightly nodded. He had practically handed his powers to the Queen. Aerys's mind was a vessel, filled to the brim with Rhaegar's powers, for her to drain whenever she pleased. And the only way to retrieve them was to kill Aerys. I swallowed hard.

"You didn't tell me about those fifty years Under The Mountain either."

"Not a very pleasant thing to talk about." The same thing the lioness told me a few hours ago. He had truly been eavesdropping.

Macabre thoughts rubbed at the edge of my composure, stillness pushing me down into the fathomless realms of terror.

He hadn't ... He hadn't seen the light of day for fifty years. He had been isolated from everyone and everything for five decades. A prisoner. Hopeless. Struggling to survive the day and the horrors Joanna subjected him to.

I wanted to break something. I wanted to kill Aerys. And I would one day.

"Did Aerys knew? About you and her?"

Of course he knew, my reasonable inner voice answered, they called the Prince a Lannister whore straight to his face. It was mathematically impossible the King wouldn't have heard about it by now. Yet, a naive part of me still wanted to believe that the King hadn't turned a blind eye to this. Hadn't turned his back to his son.

"Our paths would cross every night when I was summoned to her chambers. And every night he would meet my stare and ... nothing. He felt nothing, except for relief. He didn't care, so long as he wasn't the one in her bed."

His violet eyes were bleeding. Bleeding with sadness, melancholy, rejection.

It wasn't Rhaegar who let his father down when he couldn't protect their family. It was Aerys who let his son down by abandoning him with his grief when he needed him the most.

I shivered. I shivered from how much I despised Aerys. The bitingly cold air gave me such strong goosebumps that I shuddered. In an instant my cold skin met with a soft, silky material. Heat flooded me and I went taut and loose all at once. Rhaegar's wing cocooned me, like a doughy blanket warming me, pulling me closer to his chest. It took all the self-control I possessed not to lean in and inhale that amazing scent of his.

I dragged my fingertips along the inside of his wing and I felt him shudder as well.

"Your finger is so cold," he gritted out. I did it again and he tensed even more.

"You cruel, wicked thing." he purred. "Didn't anyone ever teach you manners?"

I shot him a sleepy half smile. "Consider this a small mercy. You don't get to hide something so important from me and not face the music in the aftermath." His mind seemed to be carried away for some precious seconds, and distraction was all I needed for my next question. "Cersei Lannister" I dropped the name like a bomb. "What did she do to deserve such a punishment?" I muttered, as I delighted in the warmth of his wing.
Unmistakable sympathy clouded his features as he dispensed a breath, "She fell in love."

The door of the atelier closed with a low thud behind me. The lights were off but I could see a faint glow at the far end of the room, Ashara's pale face illuminated by a couple of lighted candles.

As I took some hesitant steps toward her, I saw that she was sprawled in a pouffe with her foot propped up on the table and her hands weaved in front of her midriff.

"So it's true." She said, her voice creepily quiet but vehement. "He gave you her studio." Her supple lips were pressed into a paper-thin line, her expression solemn, her amethysts, two chips of ice. She hated me as always. At least, now I knew why.

"I see all good things must come to an end." I drawled. "Including your absence."

"Sit." She gestured to the pouffe next to her and grinned at me like a shark who was diddling with his next meal.

"Don't tell me what to do." I grumbled.

"I am trying to be polite little brat," she grumbled back. "Don't play with my patience."

"I'm sure 'brusque' is your middle name."

"Bastards don't have a last name, let alone a middle one."

"What do you want Ashara?" I slumped in the seat across from her, releasing a sapped sigh through my nose all the while.

"Did Rhaegar ever tell you the story behind my brother's burns?" In the candlelight, the panes of her jaunty face looked impossibly fatigued. She looked as though she hadn't slept for days. "They are magnificently cruel, aren't they?"

"Get out." My eyes were two slits.

"For eleven years we lived with our Lord Father, step-mother and two monsters that I called half-brothers. Unlike me and my mother, our step-mother kept Arthur in a cell with no windows or light. He was allowed to come out only for an hour a day, and to see us for one hour every week. He was not allowed to train or fly, even when his Illyrian instincts urged him to do so."

Where was this story going?

"When he was ten, our two half-brothers decided to burn him, but they didn't get to finish him off for I heard my brother's screams. I ran down to that rotten cellar before the fire could expand beyond his hands. I was blinded with rage for what they had tried to do to Arthur—couldn't think straight. So I tackled down one of those monsters and started beating the living daylights out of him. I punched and punched and punched until the damage on his face was as permanent as Arthur's scars. Being flogged to unconsciousness served as my punishment afterward."

"Spare me your ticklers Ashara." My conversation with Rhaegar had already drained me mentally. "Whatever you are trying to say, pour it out plump and plain."

"I love my brothers and there is nothing I wouldn't do for them." She barked and slammed a hand on the table. "Arthur spent eleven years of his life in the dark, terrorised by our step-mother, with only his shadows to keep him company. Rhaegar spent fifty years caged under that rock, under that
woman's mercy. He sacrificed himself by giving away his powers. He became Joanna's whore, her poodle to beat and use whenever she felt like it, just to keep us all safe. To keep our home out of her claws—to keep Velaris safe."

Hearing the facts from another person made my heart shrink again. "He is not your brother." I retaliated

"He is my friend. My family. My brother in heart and wings. I'll tell you something little beast and I only say things once. Rhaegar didn't survive Joanna only to be ruined by a weasel like you. It took him so fucking long to make amends with himself, to forgive himself for Rhaella's and Selaena's death, something that wasn't even his fault. I won't let you bring him to his knees. Your father has already done enough."

"My father—"

"Stay away from him," she snarled. "My brother deserves to be so infinitely loved by someone who would offer him her whole heart and not just feed him the leftovers of it. He deserves someone who would return his feelings. You and I both know you are not this someone. Your loyalty lies with the Martell boy."

Did she think I asked for all of this? How had my life gotten so messed up? How did I let myself become so miserable? My fury was a living thing brewing to whoosh out of me and chop this conceited overgrown bat to pieces.

But no. Temper tantrums were for the weak. Not everyone deserved a reaction out of me, and right now Ashara was goading me with burning eyes—provoking me.

I chose my next words very carefully. "I am wondering ... Did you fling all these accusations—these threats to my brother too before he died?"

Her aloofness crumpled, the fatigue returned and she dodged my eyes.

I can be a bitch too.

"That's what I thought. I bet you weren't warbling so loudly with my brother's thing rammed up your ass." I snapped.

"You know nothing." She bared her teeth, her scowl feral.

"Enlighten me then." I never broke the eye contact that had Ashara for the first time on edge. The sound of my fingers drumming purposefully on the table didn't help her fidgeting either. "How did you end up so cozy with Brandon in that room the night he was murdered?"

"You are not getting the answers that you seek from me little beast."

I didn't suffer those delusions either. But I could always work Ashara's upset carelessness to my advantage.

"If you were a Suriel," I added with deliberate slowness, in case she hadn't caught my meaning, "how, exactly, would I trap you?"

She narrowed her almond eyes at me, not bothering to hide her suspicion. "What business a stupid girl like you might have with a Suriel?"

I shrugged. "You have your secrets and I have mine. And indeed I may be a very stupid girl for
wanting to hunt a Suriel. Who knows, what horrors I might chance upon in the Shadowood during my expedition."

If I knew something, it was that Ashara wanted me out of the map. So why not do my best to tempt her to get rid of me one hour sooner?

Ashara picked at her nails before her lips broke into a dark smile. For a moment, I wondered if she would tell me anything at all. Wondered if she would go right to Rhaegar and tattle.

But then she said, “I’d probably have a weakness for groves of young birch trees in the western woods, and freshly slaughtered chickens, and would probably be so greedy that I wouldn’t notice the double-loop snare rigged around the grove to pin my legs in place.”

“Hmm.” I didn’t dare ask why she had decided to be accommodating. "I somehow prefer you as an Illyrian."

She smirked, but the amusement was short-lived. “If I were insane and stupid enough to go after a Suriel, I’d also take a bow and quiver, and maybe a blade just like this one.” She unsheathed the Illyrian blade strapped across her back and set it down at the edge of the table—an offering. “And I’d be prepared to run like hell when I freed it—to the nearest running water, which they hate crossing.”

“But you’re not insane, so you’ll be here, safe and sound?”

“I’ll be taking a fly just to chill out, let’s say around afternoon and I am confident I could give a winnow to someone else as well. Let’s say, a little beast who wants to reunite with mother nature. I’ll be conveniently patrolling on the grounds, and with my superior hearing, I might be feeling generous enough to listen if someone screams from the western woods. But it’s a good thing I had no role in telling you to go out tomorrow, since R would eviscerate anyone who told you how to trap a Suriel.”

"It’s a good thing that while you have superior hearing, I possess superior abilities to keep my mouth shut.” I assured her, picking at my nails, but then I remembered a tiny, tiny detail in our little plan that I hadn't taken into consideration. "One last thing overgrown bat."

As though she had read my mind, she grinned wickedly from ear to ear. "Leave Rhaegar to me little beast."

Chapter End Notes

So next chapter the Suriel!!!
I kept repeating Ashara's instructions through my head as I performed the steps one by one. I had
found a glen of young, skinny birch trees, then stalked in ever-widening circles until I encountered
the nearest stream. Not deep, but so wide that I’d have to take a running leap to cross it. Ashara had
said to find running water, and this was close enough to make escape possible. If I needed to
escape. Hopefully I wouldn’t.

I traced and then retraced several different routes to the stream. And a few alternate routes, should
my access to it somehow be blocked. And when I was sure of every root and rock and hollow in
the surrounding area, I returned to the small clearing encircled by those white trees and laid my
snare.

From my spot up a nearby tree—a sturdy, dense oak whose vibrant leaves hid me entirely from
anyone below—I waited. And waited. The afternoon sun crept overhead, hot enough even through
the canopy that I had to shrug off my cloak and roll up the sleeves of my tunic. My stomach
grumbled, and I pulled a hunk of cheese out of my rucksack. Eating it would be quieter than the
apple I’d also swiped from the kitchen on my way out. When I finished it off, I swigged water from
the canteen I’d brought, parched from the heat.

I moved about as much as I dared on the branch, only to keep the blood flowing to my limbs. I’d
just settled in again when a ripple of silence came toward me. As if the wood thrushes and squirrels
and moths held their breath while something passed by.

My bow was already strung. Quietly, I loosely nocked an arrow. Closer and closer the silence
crept.

Maybe this had been a very bad idea. Maybe Ashara had overestimated my abilities. Or maybe she
had been waiting for the chance to get rid of me once and for all. She made it crystal clear that she
didn't want me near Rhaegar. As if my very breath was toxic for him, as if I was going to lead him
to his own doom. Well I had news for her! He was my mate. He was my business, not Ashara's.
She was entitled to no say between me and him. I wouldn't let that overgrown bat trample me down
her goading smirks. Not now, not ever.

I willed my angry heartbeats back to steadiness. Good. I was in dire need for some nerves right
now to lift my sodden spirits. I couldn't go into a fight with my moral sprawled on the ground.
Shortcomings or no, I could still hunt. And the answers I needed were worth it.

My muscles strained from holding still atop the branch, but I kept my balance and listened. Then I
heard it: a whisper, as if cloth were dragging over root and stone, a hungry, wheezing sniffing from
the nearby clearing.

I’d laid my snares carefully, making the chicken look as if it had wandered too far and snapped its
own neck as it sought to free itself from a fallen branch. I’d taken care to keep my own scent off
the bird as much as possible. But these critters had such keen senses, and even though I’d covered
my tracks—
There was a snap, a whoosh, and a hollowed-out, wicked scream that made my bones and muscles and breath lock up.

Another enraged shriek pierced the forest, and my snares groaned as they held, and held, and held.

I climbed out of the tree and went to meet the Suriel.

The bloody overgrown bat, I decided as I crept up to the critter in the birch glen, really, truly wanted me dead.

I hadn’t known what to expect as I entered the ring of white trees—tall and straight as pillars—but it was not the tall, thin veiled figure in dark tattered robes. Its hunched back facing me, I could count the hard knobs of its spine poking through the thin fabric. Spindly, scabby gray arms clawed at the snare with yellowed, cracked fingernails.

I kept my arrow loosely nocked. I said quietly, “Are you one of the Suriel?”

The creature went rigid. And sniffed. Once. Twice.

Then slowly, it turned to me, the dark veil draped over its bald head blowing in a phantom breeze.

A face that looked like it had been crafted from dried, weatherworn bone, its skin either forgotten or discarded, a lipless mouth and too-long teeth held by blackened gums, slitted holes for nostrils, and eyes … eyes that were nothing more than swirling pits of milky white—the white of death, the white of sickness, the white of clean-picked corpses.

Peeking above the ragged neck of its dark robes was a body of veins and bones, as dried and solid and horrific as the texture of its face. It let go of the snare, and its too-long fingers clicked against each other as it studied me.

“A wolf,” it said, "with a human's heart." Its voice was at once one and many, old and young, beautiful and grotesque. “Did the girl set this clever, wicked trap for me?”

“Are you one of the Suriel?” I asked again, my words solid, my intentions unquestionable.

“Indeed I am.” Click, click, click went its fingers against each other, one for each word.

“Then the trap was for you.”

It remained sitting, its bare, gnarled feet caught in my snares. “I have not seen such a beautiful girl for an age. She should come closer so I might look upon my captor.”

I did no such thing.

It let out a huffing, awful laugh. “And which of my brethren betrayed my secrets to the girl?”

“None of them.” Although Ashara could be considered as cunning as the Suriel at my feet. "My mother told me stories of you."

"The girl's mother is dead." The reminder smashed me like a worm under unyielding boots. “And the girl should not become a liar for she is already surrounded by many.” I am surrounded by liars? Who are the liars? It sniffed again, its fingers clacking together. It cocked its head to the side, an erratic, sharp movement, the dark veil snapping with it. “What would the girl want from the Suriel?”

“You tell me,” I said softly.
It let out another low laugh. “A test? A foolish and useless test, for if the girl was brave enough to capture me, then she must want knowledge very badly.” I said nothing, and it smiled with that lipless mouth, its grayed teeth horrifically large. “Quid pro quo. The girl will ask me her questions, and then she will free me.”

"Which Court do you serve?" If its interests lay with the Night Court ... then I was doomed. "How do I know you will not deceive me?" Like everyone else.

“I am a member of no Court. I am older than the High Lords, older than Valyria, older than the bones of this world. The girl wouldn't have come to me if she didn't believe I could give her the answers she seeks.”

I swallowed hard. So many questions but not enough time to ask all of them. I had to pick smartly. “Who are the liars?"

"Everyone is a liar. The girl must only trust her High Lord. She must find him and stay with him. She will be safe, for he knows her better than anyone and she has been listening to his song her whole life."

A song? Which song?

"The girl must not go looking for answers after today, or she will be devoured by the shadow approaching the Courts. Her High Lord will shield her from the evil that is looming, so she must stay close to him, and all will be righted.” Yes. I am here to go home, I am here to find Oberyn.

“How do I break the bond?” Saying the words out loud felt like the worst kind of betrayal. But my family needed me. I had to go home. I had a broken life to mend. And I couldn't do so by staying shackled to the vampire realm.

"The girl cannot break the bond if she hasn't accepted it yet."

"What do you mean?" The Suriel spoke to me in riddles, calculated words that I was supposed to decipher. I hadn't come that far to be intimidated by my own mind.

"The tattoo on the girl's arm is nothing more than ink, a feeble taste of what the real mating bond feels like. It marks a bargain where she is called to abandon her old life and start a new one. The girl will be made again, flesh out of her mate's flesh, bones out of his bones, blood out of his blood and soul out of his soul. She must choose whether she wants to remain incomplete or be reunited with her other half." I shivered. Rhaegar and I could become more ... than this?

"How do I turn down the mating bond?" I could feel it, the connection between me and Rhaegar, thrumming inside me. If this sensation had only been a taste, how would I feel if I accepted the bond?

"This is a bargain that the girl is expected to accept but never turn down." Whatever last shred of hope I’d been clinging to, whatever foolish optimism, shriveled and died. "If she doesn't wish to be officially mated then she must leave it as it is and face the consequences of her choice."

"Wh-What kind of consequences?" The cheese I had eaten turned leaden in my stomach.

"This is the real question, isn't it?"

"How do I accept?"

"For werewolves is coupling, but for vampires it doesn't work that way. The girl must offer her
blood to her mate and then she must drink his."

The earth tilted beneath me. He ... He didn't tell me. He didn't tell me about his wings, about Under The Mountain. And now this. This blood exchange. My heart was roaring in my ears.

I pursed my lips shut, putting my ire to sleep for the time being. "Is there no way for me to break the bond?"

"The girl's mate is a gift from the creator of all the life around her, the Cauldron. And only the Cauldron can take his gift back."

The Cauldron! This was stupid vampire lore.

"You are telling me to find a pot? There is no such thing. This is just a myth, a fairytale for vampire ninnies like the Prince."

"He is no Prince," the Suriel hissed. "There is only one Prince and he hasn't been born yet. He is a promise, a song of light and night which the girl will carry in her womb. He will be born between two worlds to piece them together. His eyes will be bright as the girl's light, and his hair dark as the night sky."

"A son? I goggled at the creature in horror, in despair, maybe in plead as well. I didn't want his prophesies. He could have them back and be gone to each one of the Seven Hells with them!"

"I don't understand." I breathed.

"The girl will understand. She must find the darkness to her light, for light cannot exist without darkness, and darkness without light."

My head was a mud puddle. But I couldn't afford to waste my time mulling over these conundrums here, in the middle of the Shadowood. I will figure everything out once I was home. I braced myself for the next question.

"Where is my brother's body?" I inquired cautiously. "Who has it?"

"The one who is supposed to." That wasn't exactly an answer. I repeated, "Where is—"

The Suriel straightened. "We are not alone."

I drew my bow farther but kept it pointed at the ground as I scanned the trees. But everything had already gone silent in the presence of the Suriel.

Those milky eyes narrowed. "The girl must free me immediately and run," it said, those death-filled eyes widening. "She must not forget what I told her—She stays with the High Lord, and she lives to see everything righted. His song holds the key."

"What is it?" If I knew what came, I could stand a better chance of—

"The naga—creatures made of shadow and hate and rot. They heard my scream, and they smelled the girl. They will cage me if they catch me here. Free me now and run."

I lunged for the snare, making to put away my bow and grab my blade.

But four shadowy figures slipped through the birch trees, so dark that they could have been sprung from a nightmare, exactly as I remembered them dragging those helpless hybrids in front of Joanna.
Their huge, almond-shaped eyes greedily took in the Suriel and me.

The four of them paused across the clearing, the Suriel between us, and I trained my arrow toward the one in the center.

The creature smiled, a row of razor-sharp teeth greeting me as a silvery forked tongue darted out.

“The Dark Mother has sent us a gift today, brothers,” he said, gazing at the Suriel, who was clawing at the snare now. The naga’s amber eyes shifted toward me again. “And a meal.”

“Not much to eat,” another one said, flexing its claws.

I began backing away—toward the stream, keeping every sense fixed on my retreating steps.

“Girl,” the Suriel begged.

I backed away another step. The four creatures crept closer, as if savoring the slowness of the hunt, as if they already knew how I tasted. I smiled darkly at them. The naga thought I was the prey. Little did they know I was the predator, and if I was bored enough, they would be my meal.

I drew my bowstring back farther, my arm steady and balanced. With the naga practically drooling over me, I fired at the tether holding the Suriel in place.

The snare shattered. Like a shadow on the wind, the Suriel was off in a whoosh, a blast of dark that set the four naga staggering back.

The one closest to me surged toward the Suriel, the strong column of its scaly neck stretching out. No chance of my movements being considered an unprovoked attack anymore—not now that they’d seen my aim. They still wanted to kill me.

So I let my arrow fly.

The tip glittered like a shooting star through the gloom of the forest. I had all of a blink before it struck home and blood sprayed.

The naga toppled back just as the remaining three whirled to me. I didn’t know if it was a killing shot. I was already gone.

I hurtled for the stream using the path I’d calculated earlier, not sparing a look back. *Let the hunt begin.*

Branches and twigs snapped behind me—too close—and low snarls filled the still woods. *I will show them what a real snarl is.*

*Where are you,* Rhaegar’s voice went down the bond. Uh oh. I cursed under my breath. Couldn’t this overgrown bat do her job for once in her life?

The crashing through the brush became louder, closer, and I veered to the right, leaping over the stream. Running water might have stopped the Suriel, but a hiss and a thud close behind told me it did nothing to hold the naga at bay.

*WHERE ARE YOU.* I ignored him.

I might have been fast, but the naga were faster.

*When two legs fail to get you where you want to be, make them four.*
My knees screamed in exertion as I accelerated and summoned the wolf within me. A white-hot flame went through me. Rage or wild instinct or maybe thrill, I didn't know. I didn't think. All I knew was that I wanted to break free of my skin, of this human trap my body was, and make those malicious naga suffer for interrupting my questions. This was the only chance I had to find Brandon's body, and they ruined it.

I felt everything all at once. My existence was a hurricane of sensations; Pain and euphoria and the sweet taste of liberation. I felt my pupils dilate, gray and white hairs sprouting from every inch of my body. My bones groaned as they began molding themselves into a new broader shape. My joints snap, lengthen and pop through my skin that peels away like a banana. It stretches and tightens before sliding into place over my stronger physique.

My face contorts in pain as my pointy wolf ears stretch from my head, as my snout forms, and as my teeth elongate and burst through my gums.

The rush of my enhanced senses hit me in full force. I welcomed the sharpened hearing, my acute smell, the breathtaking agility that allowed me to soar faster than light. This is who I was; a beast made of earth and wind and fire and shadow.

Where are you, his voice, more frantic with madness than ever, reverberated again and red exploded in my vision as I kept running with the only motivating power, my own rage. Betrayal coiled hot in my bones. He lied to me! He lied to me about the blood exchange—

Two dark figures flanked me, closing in to cut me off. I could have leapt above the naga, I could have spared their miserable lives but I didn't. I was going to cut them up so fine there wouldn't be much for the crows to pick at.

Their amber eyes threw impossibly wide when they heard my bone-shattering bay and in sheer horror, they scrambled back like scared snakes. Too late.

I sank onto my haunches and, in a flash or slashing claws, I lunged at the naga to my left. My maw tore into the creature, blood gushing from his neck, and it went flying off the ground, crashing into a tree so hard that the wood cracked.

His companion to my right shrieked before I tackled him and pinned him to the soil. My razor-sharp claws found its target and I disemboweled the naga in one deep, long swipe while sinking my lengthened canines into his neck and ripping its head straight off.

I whirled toward the last of the four naga and prowled to his direction with the stealth of a shadow, blood and gore dripping from my jaws and staining the deep green moss with trickles of ruby-red. I barked a foreboding growl and the ground shuddered. The naga's screech sliced through the air as he made to dart for the woods.

And froze when he beheld Rhaegar's powerful body flying through the canopy of trees and landing like an earthquake in front of him.

And he was angry. Terrifyingly so.

The impact of the landing exploded through my bones and a surge of adrenaline clouded whatever crumbs of sanity I had been left.

The insidious naga snaking away from me made my anger blaze that much brighter, that much deadlier. The critter hissed worse than a viper when I narrowed my eyes at him, yet even his Dark Mother couldn't save him now. All it took was a light flick of my fingers to mist the naga. His
serpentine body popped like an ampoule of blood and its leftovers piled up to the ground among
the mutilated parts of his pack.

*What a mess.*

I rolled my neck. Once. Twice. I let the rage bubble in my veins, smash my bones, sizzle in my
muscles before pivoting to meet my she werewolf's intent stare.

The tightness in my chest eased and I loosed a sigh. The sight of her safe and sound, seemed to
somehow water down my fear and steal my breath away.

She was waiting still on the ground, more stunning and beautiful than ever. Her body was twice
the size of a normal wolf, her paws a sea-foam white, like little socks against her fuzzy fur, gray
with hints of white. Her eyes were the same gossamer blue colour but, at the same time, the orbs of
a predator—of a huntress, stripped of all humanity.

I tucked my wings neatly behind me, shoved my hands into my pockets and swaggered closer with
all the feline elegance I could summon. "Very creative job." My voice was everything but
pleasant.

As an answer, she let out a low guttural growl that scared off every bird in the Shadowood and
reverberated in the pit of my stomach.

I cracked my jaw. "You have one minute to turn into a ruinable person again and tell me why in the
Seven fucking Hells you were roaming in the Shadowood alone and who assisted you in this
suicidal mission of yours so I could skin him with my own two bare hands."

My expression was cool as a cucumber but of course it didn't last long once I saw the Illyrian blade
chucked to the ground.

**Ashara ...** My eyes narrowed on their own accord.

Lyanna bared her flesh-tearing teeth once more, her maw smeared with blood. Feral. She was as
feral as death. Wild and beautiful as a thunderstorm. This woman had me wrapped around her little
finger. She could have me at my knees worshipping her and she didn't even know it.

*You have ten seconds to get out of my way before I bite your sorry ass,* she snarled in my mind and
I couldn't help but grin mentally.

"Such gratitude as always." I scoffed.

*I didn't need your help, you nincompoop.*

Her blood-painted fangs gleamed, something that made her look even more gargantuan. A marvel
of muscle and speed and brute strength.

"That's my tough girl."

She snorted, her nostrils flaring, obviously annoyed by the remark and strutted away not bothering
to look back at me.

*What had happened? This time you are not going to get away with it Lyanna Darling.*

Chapter End Notes
Next update guys, will be next week :)

Does the Suriel remind you of someone from GoT ? :D
We winnowed atop the rooftop garden, shadows and murky darkness fizzling out against the fuchsia and orange background. The fiery semicircle orb was casting crimson shafts upon my already red form. My clothes were shredded, the sodden leather clinging to me with dried blood and gore. The sun was setting—dying—yielding to darkness yet for once more, and I couldn't help but follow suit. Succumb to my slumbering anger, that is.

I twisted away from Rhaegar's arms and turned on my heels.

"Where do you think you are going?" He bristled, his voice sore, his own anger awakening slowly from its embers.

Good. That makes two of us.

"Wherever the fuck I want." I rumbled and shuffled to the door, my steps heavy—ponderous, my jaw as solid as cackling metal forged on an anvil.

"No, this isn't over yet." He threaded his fingers firmly around the crook of my elbow, the seams of my threadbare tunic hissing a little more, and forced me to face him. "This time you owe me an explanation."

"Don't touch me!" I yanked back my arm. "Don't you ever fucking touch me!"

"What's wrong with you huh?" He blinked, brows lifting. "I should be the one to be mad at you," he ground out through gritted teeth.

"The hell you should."

"I will ask only once and you'd better—"

"You don’t get to ask questions," I spat. "You only get to answer them. And nothing more."

Wariness and foreboding flooded his eyes as I stared up at him, the half-Illyrian warrior who was my soul-bonded partner. The man who I hadn't yet figured out. The vampire who was asking for my trust when in reality, he did nothing to prove me he deserved it.

I struck in full force. "How long have you been waiting to tell me about the blood rite?"

Rhaegar stilled. The entire world stilled.

He swallowed. "Lyanna."

Dawning horror. Deep down, some trusting part of me waited. Waited for him to deny it. Waited for him to give a damn good reason why. The suspicion that I'd harbored and resisted was true. How could I have been so stupid? And this—this most important thing in my immortal existence ... He had kept it a secret from me for whatever new games he had in mind.

“How long have you been waiting to tell me about the blood exchange?” I repeated, shaking with anger.
"What did Ashara tell you?" Ashara. But of course.

"Leave her out of this." My eyes became two slits but then I felt scraping. That awfully paralyzing sensation of claws tearing through my shields.

"You ... You ensnared the Suriel?" Rhaegar flinched and I thought something like panic might have flashed over his features. "I have been trying to capture it for centuries now."

"I don't give a shit." Somehow ... It didn't feel right to steer this feral aggression toward him given the last night's tragedy, but I couldn't dismiss the sound of my blood pounding in my ears.

"Lyanna."

A convincing, ego-crushing liar ... That's what he was. "What had you planned to do with me?" I barked, my hands akimbo. "Really planned? Were you to, say, trick me into accepting the bond—into drinking your blood?"

His face grew marred by black disbelief, he even had the temerity to look affronted, as though I have been casting aspersions on him all along. "Do you really think me capable of sinking so low?"

I don't know what to make of you anymore. And to think that mere hours ago, I had believed that we had some kind of understanding, that this bond between us wasn't for naught after all. Yet, here we were back to square one.

"I don't think of you at all anymore." My words were knives that plunged into his heart and made him bleed invisibly. His amethyst orbs tightened in pain before turning a hungry black that could have devoured the world whole.

"Why?" I breathed and his hard gaze softened.

He struggled for the right words, or judging from his answer that was to come, the most convenient ones. "You had already enough to worry about ... you were enduring everything else and it just didn't feel right to tell you."

I clenched my fists and took a deep breath. I hated being lied to, but being bamboozled straight to my face was a whole other thing.

"Bullshit." I growled and closed whatever minor distance stood between us. "You lied to me." My fist landed on his chest like a mallet on a gong. "Over," another blow, "and over," thud after thud, "and over again." I pummeled him so hard that my fists felt like exploding. He didn't try to stop me. He let me deliver punch after punch, not even pretending to be bothered by the impact. His skin felt like impenetrable marble. My hands might as well have been plumes brushing upon his skin.

When I felt the boiling aggression being brought to a simmer, I took a step back, hands falling ungracefully to my sides.

"I didn't lie to you." He leaned a tiny inch closer, his tone soft like a lullaby.

"A lie is a lie. A half truth is a lie. A secret intentionally hidden is a lie. A lie is a lie whatever pretty labels you put on it. And I deserved to know."

"I was going to tell you everything." He took a step forward. I took another step back, quick on my defenses. His eyes appeared to grow deflated by the gesture. Hurt even. "I just waited for the right time."
The right time ... Just like he waited to tell me about his wings and Joanna. Had it not been for Cersei and my, let's say, really slow perception, I would have been in the dark. And he would have left me there.

"What would be the right time according to you? The day you would take me to bed and kill whatever false sense of freedom I have been left?" My voice grew high with hysteria.

"Do not mistake me with that summer fool of yours."

_Oberyn wasn't like that at all._ He was a defender. A protector. A fighter with war and poison in his fangs. And like a viper, he would strike whatever he felt threatened. He would strike without seconds thoughts for me. He always had my back and I always had his.

"Oberyn would never—"

His face hardened. "Oberyn this—Oberyn that," his tone was thick with mockery and what was that? Jealousy. "What is he—some kind of hero? For fuck's sake, wake up Lyanna."

"Love is blind."

"No. Infatuation is blind, _and_ easy. Love is hard and all-seeing. The illusion of perfection is as fragile as glass, and once it shatters, so does the infatuation. And it's then that one's heart should be careful not to be cut by the glass shards."

Silence. Why did he have to be so good with words? So ... invincible when it came to persuasion? But then ... he wouldn't be considered an expert trickster, would he?

"Look, I am sorry." He ran a hand through his silver hair, shining like quartz. "What's done is done. I want you to at least listen to what I have to say."

"I don't want your sorries. I don't want them unless you mean them. So when you mean them, when you truly are willing to tell me the real reason why, then come and find me."

We could wrangle all day long about this but still it didn't change anything underneath. He had lied to me. The weird thing would be to tell me for once the truth.

At least, the Suriel's warnings offered some comfort. He said I had to find my High Lord—to find Oberyn and stay with him. He said he was the only one who could be trusted and it was pure relief to hear such a thing being spoken. Trust was a leisure I could ill afford.

And right now, all the truths that had been spoken from Rhaegar's mouth, have become questionable.

If there was one thing I hated more than royal vampire balls, that would be royal vampire balls without food. Vampires didn't eat which practically was a hell of a good reason for me and my rumbling stomach to detest them even more. But come to think of it, even if there was something edible for me to eat or drink, apart from the wine Rhaegar categorically banned me from touching, it would be a matter of seconds before I hurtled up my meal on the glass floor.

I swallowed hard. _Glass. Glass. Glass, God dammit!_

My whole body was tense for I was sick to my core with frustration. I should have never accepted to attend this most tedious of gatherings in the first place. But then, someone would ask how I found myself in such a bland situation.
All the attendants in the room, noble families from every Court and stretch in Valyria, were guests here, including myself. Invitations were sent a week ago for us to attend the Winter Solstice, and of course, our host was no other but Robert Baratheon. The Winter High Lord wished to make amends for defying the Crown in such a presumptuous fashion, Arthur had told me, so what better way than a reconciliation party where he would be kissing Joanna's feet to wade his way back to her good graces? I mentally scoffed.

How could he compromise to the tragic fate his winter children suffered because of Joanna? Those children for whom he risked his head in order to defend them. How could he be so accommodating? So ... submissive. All his actions and words until now, spoke of grit, and integrity, and outspokenness. I guess he was wearing a mask too—blowing wherever his interests laid.

I dispensed a tiresome sigh. I had difficulty focusing my attention on the throngs of people that were dancing in the center of the cavernous ballroom. The corset constricting my torso made breathing a labor and the fact that I was way too self-conscious of standing within a castle made of glass made me queasy.

I was deep buried in an alcove all by myself, leaning against a wall and poking silently fun at Daenerys who was alternating dances with Viserys and Jamie. She had something irresistible about her apart from her beauty ... She was regal, graceful, funny and helplessly seductive when she wished to be. Not seductive in the way most women are. Most women have to use their physical charms to allure their person of interest in their nets. Rare are those who use their smartness as a weapon instead of simpers and a pair of batting eyes and exposed thighs. Daenerys used her brains and she was capable of disarming you with a simple sentence.

Ashara and Arthur seemed to be bored to tears as well, assigned as they were to guard the entrance of a room where Rhaegar had petitioned a private audience with Joanna and Aerys. Whatever the matter was, it couldn't wait. As far as my ear stretched, I heard that it had something to do with the recent sucking of two temples, one in Cesere and the other in Sangravah. All priestesses were brutally murdered which was extremely weird ... Why would someone do such a thing? And two temples in one week was no mere coincidence at all. Something was going on, and Rhaegar was equally concerned about it.

Jon hadn't come with us. According to what little information I fished out of Viserys, he was banned from attending today's ball. Probably, because of something, or maybe someone.

"My Lady." Robert Baratheon approached me with a half smile of acknowledgement, the lioness sparkling like a diamond beside him. "I can see you are not enjoying our hospitality very much."

"Your hospitality is beyond words." I voiced with as less sarcasm as my sizzling aversion allowed me. "You are most kind, my Lord."

"This night is really special." A tinge of wistfulness overshadowed his voice. "I wish I could show you the wonders of my Court under more timely circumstances. First impression always counts after all."

"Indeed. Be that as as may, first impressions can deceive as well." I shot them both a sardonic smile.

"Pray, explain us." Cersei crooned, her eyes hungry and eager to listen the witty remark on the tip of my tongue.

"For example, my Lady, when I first met your betrothed I thought of him as a candid person, a man who had guts and was bold enough to display them. Now I think he is a mere brown-noser, just like
Cersei's eyes gleamed with amusement ... unmistakably pleased with my answer while Robert's lips broke into a satisfied grin. He didn’t seem offended at all.

"We don’t kneel." he pronounced, his voice triumphant and as calm as the sky before a storm.

My hackles rose in premonition and I froze. This was our motto, the encouraging words that defined our packs. I couldn't help but feel that a storm was brooding. A rebellious one.

"Not that easily,” the lioness added with a twitch of her red lips and dared a small step closer, bunching her heavy skirts in one hand and subtly flaring them to reveal her ankles and—

A discreet ash dagger was strapped around her left calf. I goggled at it and when I met her stare her eyes smiled at me before rearranging her skirts to conceal the weapon.

My eyes scanned the crowd just in case anyone had witnessed the moment since ash wood was illegal in Valryria.

"Red truly becomes you, my Lady." I remarked conspiratorially, referring to her astonishing off-shoulder dress. These two were cooking something under everyone's nose, and they let me know for a reason. But who could be considered everyone? Did Rhaegar know, or even Jamie Lannister? My inner intuition said that they didn't. Rhaegar would have never brought me here if he had the slightest inkling that I would be in danger.

"You think?” Cersei arched a perfectly slender brow at me. Red was beyond doubt her colour. "Red is my favourite. Red to remind me of fire. Red to remind me of dawn. Red to remind me of blood. Red ..." she lowered her eyes to the floor and clenched her hands so hard, her fists went white. "to remind me of someone I used to know—to remind me of hair I used to touch."

The movements of her lips grew reminiscent, melancholy melting into her emeralds. Robert took her hand in his and squeezed it as if to remind her that they were running out of time.

The lioness broke out of her mind haze and whispered, "Midnight." The word sounded as a warning and a promise at the same time. "If you are smart enough you will stay away from glass." Stay away from glass? The whole palace was crafted out of glass. "Unless you want to be cut little moon."

I froze once more. No one called me like that except for the one person who was supposed to be at the other side of the Shadowood. Dear Freya.

Riddles again. They didn't speak clearly. The walls have ears and the crows are watching.

"What's your stake in all this?" I whispered in return under my breath.

"It serves several pursposes of ours of course," Cersei answered for both of them.

Who is against who tonight?

"We are all spokes on the wheel." Robert said. "It's high time the wheel began spinning again."

"We have debts to pay. And I always pay mine." The lioness flexed her fingers as if she couldn't wait to get to work. What might be her power? She appeared terrifyingly strong. "Whether it is to my friends or to my enemies."
With those last words they walked away together, not as lovers, not as friends but as allies.

All too suddenly, the ballroom felt too crumped, the music and babble too loud and the air too tight. I crossed the hall and escaped into an empty balcony, the wintry air hugging me mercilessly. From out here, I had forgotten how dwarfing the glass castle looked from outside. It was gargantuan, a vertical city of shimmering, crystalline towers and bridges, chambers and turrets, endless hallways and walls of glass instead of windows. I couldn't help but feel as tiny as an insignificant ant.

Even the balcony was made out of transparent glass, giving my stare access to the ground beneath that seemed to well up by the second. My heart drummed in my ears as my fear of heights came once again into the foreground.

Something pushed against my barriers that I called mind shields and attempted to pry. It persisted for a minute, and then its touch fell away.

"A penny for your thoughts, Lyanna Darling." I turned, coming face-to-face with Rhaegar.

"I think I am going to vomit." I was pretty sure my face had turned a pallid green for my stomach twisted like a stray boat churning about in a stormy sea.

His eyes burned with amused bewilderment as he jested lightly, "You really are the very epitome of elegance today."

A saccharine smile, "You are the very epitome of jerk-ness every day, for that matter."

He laughed in surrender and ensconced himself upon the glass balcony-railing, something that for an unexplainable reason made me terribly nervous. "Okay, I suppose I deserved this."

"Do not sit so close to the edge." I said and tugged him to get him to his feet.

"Why?" He asked with fake innocence. The bastard clearly enjoyed himself, given my concern.

"You might fall." I answered simply. Why such anxiety all of a sudden? I mean, surely the balcony was frighteningly high but even if he fell, he wouldn't gain a scratch, would he? Still ... the prospect made my sensitive stomach even sicker.

"So what?" His lips were dancing with mischief.

"Don't "so what' me! You might die, you nincompoop."

"Will you miss me? If I died?"

The mating bond heaved with trepidation. Even the sense of the idea felt simply unbearable.

"I ... I don't know." I was too proud to admit it. So I lied. Could he sense it for the lie it was?

"Then," he rose to his feet and balanced on the glass railing. My heart dropped. "you won't mind, if I do this."

He jumped. And I gasped. I threw my hands instinctively in the air, my attempt as futile as trying to catch smoke. My pulse screamed in hysteria and I leaned over the railing before hearing the harmonious flap of wings. The sound felt like angels singing in my ears.

He was there all at once. His face perfectly aligned with mine, his elbows resting on the railing, his head tilted to the side, his cocky grin all over the place. The only thing missing would be a tag on
his forehead saying 'I won'.

"One thing about me, Lyanna Darling." A tickle of his breath on my cheek. "I never lose." I should have slapped him for the fright he gave me. But I didn't. My legs were cemented into place and my mouth was drugged by the starlight swirling inside the lavender of his eyes.

"So," he breathed, his smile broadening. "will you miss me?"

This time I didn't even hesitate. "Yes."

"May I have such a groundbreaking statement in writing, please?"

I shook my head and felt an embarrassed blush creep on my face. "No, you may not." I broke the awkwardly long eye contact and he tucked his wings neatly behind him before his feet touched the glass.

"Come on," he said, jerking his head down an arrangement of opaque rungs that led to the unknown. "I want to show you something."

He led the way down the stairs, his pace matching mine. I was descending as slow as a turtle, clutching the banisters as if they were crutches, as if I was walking on stiletto heels.

"Only an idiot would walk in a house made of glass." I remarked.

"It’s as sturdy as steel and stone."

"Yes, until someone just a bit too heavy enters and it comes crashing down."

"That’s impossible." He smirked. "In fact, you are impossible. You aren't afraid to play the explorer in the Shadowood, to hunt down a pack of naga, but you are afraid of a little glass castle."

He had a point. But he would never understand my fear of heights. He was used to them, designed to have the void as an ally and not as an enemy.

"You know I am still angry at you for lying to me." I reminded him.

"Of course you are."

We walked and walked and walked, leaving behind us the winter palace's gardens, the gravel and grass and fountains, until we reached a lush building with glass panes encrusted with a thin layer of ice. Breath hitched out of me when we entered.

He'd taken me to a solarium, but now the light it captured was the moon's, illuminating all that grew within. The place was a night garden, a manicured parterre teeming with flowers of every size and colour. Tulips, orchids, lilies, daffolis and so many plants that I couldn't name saturated the air with indescribable aromas. But the most eye-catching of them all were the roses that bloomed out of every crack of the fountain at the center of the solarium, some hanging from the ceiling and thus embracing it like a velvety curtain.

These were no ordinary roses, I concluded. I had never seen such beauty before, accumulated in the petals of a single rose, blue as the winter itself.

Rhaegar approached the fountain and I followed him, my toes unfurling within my shoes with curiosity and awe.

The scent was what hit me first. I cringed, my nausea born anew. They smelled awful.
Rhaegar noticed my reaction and laughed with his heart for a stretch of minutes.

I delivered him a deadly scowl.

He chuckled, turning around and plucking the fullest and bluest of blossoms, admiring it in his hand, straitening the outer petals so they conformed to the perfect circle the rest of the flower created. "Here, smell one."

He offered it in the palm of his hand and I shook my head. "Are you kidding me? They reek!" I protested. Was he trying to kill me with stench?

"How do they smell to you?" he asked, bringing the winter rose to his nose and inhaling deeply. Yuck!

"Like boiled cauliflower." He nodded. It was natural for vampires and werewolves to have a different smell of things. It was said that, the more powerful you were, the more pleasant the smells and sounds of this world became to you. My father and Oberyn were powerful enough to belong to the last category.

"To me," Rhaegar petted the blue petals of the rose with heartbreaking gentleness, as though he wasn't holding a flower in his hands, but a woman's body. His eyes, sincere and giddy, bored into mine. "They smell as mind-blowingly beautiful as you."

My stomach fluttered and my heart ceased to pound. The bond was aflame with his words.

"Is this some kind of cheesy vampire compliment?" A smile. "Because this is the best worst compliment I have ever received."

I didn't smell like a goddess, but surely I didn't smell that bad either.

"Come here." he said softly. My lower lip trembled in response and my body went stone-cold. I took some hesitant steps toward him and his slender fingers cupped tenderly the contours of my face. My muscles tensed, my eyes threw wide open in alarm.

"Close your eyes."

"W-what?" I placed my palm against his chest and slowly widened the distance of our bodies, my point taken.

He rolled his eyes. "Believe me, if I wanted to kiss you, I wouldn't give you the tiniest of chances or seconds to refuse me." Arrogant imbecile. "Now close your eyes."

I complied and my hands slackened at my sides.

The first thing I felt was the coolness of his body absorbing my warmth. The second thing was his feathery lips brushing my lashes and finally kissing my closed eyelids. A surge of ferocious power washed over me as my senses became instantly highlighted. No. Not my senses but Rhaegar's. He was sharing them with me. When I opened my eyes, the world seemed to be enchanted. Glamoured. Too ... intense and detailed. Too complicated and paused.

Rhaegar brought the blue rose closer and I leaned over to smell it. Bliss, euphoria, galaxies being born. Those were the emotions its sweet smell induced in my mind. Butterflies stirred in my stomach.

The senses began fading. The magic began bleaching. And the horrible smell became tangier.
"I think I like them."

"I think their blue compliments your eyes." He graced me with a sleepy smile. Before I had a chance to be pleasant, he spoke, taking me by surprise.

"The truth is that ... I am really scared to be lonely." I frowned at him deeply and he diddled idly with a pebble at his feet. "I-I didn't want to lose you. I mean this bond ... it was too good to be true. And everything that I love in this life tends to be taken away from me, one way or another. I was scared that you were going to freak out, if I told you about the blood exchange. I was scared that you were going to run away because this exchange is permanent, it is everything. And I didn't want everything from you. You are too young to give me everything. All I wanted was something—anything. I know, I was wrong. I know you deserved to know. And I am sorry Lyanna."

"From now on, I want you to promise me." I said, my voice wavering. "No more secrets, no more lies, no more games."

His eyes when he turned to look at me held nothing but sincerity. "Cross my heart and hope to die."

The ground underneath me quaked lightly as a metallic sound vibrated through my bones. The clock of the winter palace struck midnight. Midnight.

I almost scrambled back. The door of the solarium creaked open in a phantom breeze and a gigantic black quadruped form prowled in. She was exactly as I remembered her. A marvel of amber-yellow eyes and fuzzy fur, as black as the winter night outside.

Once she tracked my smell she approached me and produced a haunting howl that could shatter every glass pane in the castle. This was no mere howl, I concluded since I recognized the harmony and pattern. This was a signal. Howls began rising in symphony, piercing my ears and making me shudder. Rhaegar was instantly beside me, ready to support me, yet when his fingers touched my shoulders, he got himself automatically in Elia's blacklist.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, I don't know when the next update will be since I have too much studying for another month or so.

As for the next chapter, I am really torn from which point of view I should write this. Options are; Lyanna, Rhaegar, Cersei.

I don't really know what would be more convenient and interesting :/

If you find any mistake please let me know. Right now I dying to sleep ;(
"Elia stop!" I threw myself between her and Rhaegar just when she was about to launch her hulking self at him. I didn’t do it to protect him. No. Despite his meager powers, since the rest of them were bound to Joanna, he could fend for himself without lifting his little finger. It was Elia who I was trying to protect. Even with her horrifyingly sharp teeth and breathtaking abilities of water-manipulation, she was no match for him.

I dropped to my knees and wrapped my hands around her snow-drizzled trunk, wallowing in her summery warmth, in her familiar scent of wet moss and sunlight. Elia rubbed her body closer against mine in a protective warning and let out a low guttural growl that reverberated through my every joint and muscle.

Her bare teeth were savage as they met Rhaegar's amused scrutiny that seemed to be all over the place, intense as radiation. This unexpected kind of bewilderment only mounted when Elia slipped into her human form, an earthen swarthy goddess of dusky brown hair and warm caramel eyes.

"You," Elia hissed at Rhaegar and yanked me behind her back, her grip on my arm almost painful. "Don't you ever fucking think of laying a single lecherous vampire finger on my sister again!"

Ex-sister, I wanted to intervene.

Rhaegar cracked a smile that could have made the air swoon and my inner self sighed in exasperation. Now was not the time to play Prince Charming!

"And who might you be?" he asked, his voice unnaturally deep.

The she wolf raised her chin. "I'm Elia Nymeros Martell, a Princess of the Sun and your soon-to-be worst nightmare."

"Rhaegar Targaryen." He bowed at the waist. "Always at the service of beautiful damsels in distress." His grin widened as he finished, and something in his countenance turned feral and deadly, more so than I'd ever seen him look. Rhaegar purred in approval, and I held my breath as he ran an eye over Elia's semi-naked generous curves.

"I see the Summer High Lord has dispatched his sister to deal with the riff-raff," he crooned in pure mockery. "What a gentleman ..."

Elia's exotic features stiffened, and her tightening grip around my arm threatened to block my blood circulation. "You will watch your filthy tongue when you speak of my brother, unless you want to lose it."

Rhaegar's expression inverted gravely serious. "You might want to release my mate's arm, unless you want to lose that exquisite hand of yours love. You are hurting her."

Elia released a breath, suddenly all too aware of her iron fingers and loosened her grip. "What are you doing here?!" I exclaimed in a hushed tone and she led me deeper into the night garden, taking into no account Rhaegar's superior hearing.

"I would ask the same question." Rhaegar said casually, leaning against the icy glass pane, his
hands folded over his chest. He was as cool as cucumber and this composure of his made me worry.

"Privacy?" I bristled.

"You have none," he said. Elia snarled.

"How did you break in here?" I demanded. The Winter Palace was an ice fortress.

"We didn't break in." Elia whispered, her stare fathomless. "They let us in."

"Who let you in?" Rhaegar breathed and I knew he felt as out of place as I did. My speculations were corroborated. He didn't have a clue. And something told me that neither did Jamie.

Elia ignored his question and directed her attention to me. "It's over Lya. It's us against Night and Dawn."

The ground seemed to disappear underneath my feet. I didn't have to ask her to clarify who was 'us'. Day, Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring. All of us united like a fist against the tyrants of The Mountain. Yet ... What about Cersei Lannister? She hadn't warned her Court. Instead, she chose to side with us. Some pieces of the puzzle wouldn't fit.

"How?"

"They wanted their freedom back." Elia leaned so close to my face that I could feel her warm summer breath brushing upon my cheeks and burning me. Not freezing me like Rhaegar's. "We wanted you."

They had begged for our help before—Winter and Spring—but we denied them any last sliver of hope they had been left. They didn’t deserve it after all. Night had sided with us in the Great War, for reasons and motives, that I'll never learn, while Dawn, Winter and Spring were the Courts who fought against us until the last moment. They didn't want to grant us our freedom, our independence. They wanted us to remain enslaved, to trample us down like trash. So we returned their indifference. We let them see how abhorrent it felt to be constantly watched, to be constantly afraid of your life—to be in chains.

"How did you cross the Wall?" Rhaegar mouthed, quiet thunder rippling off him as he realised the gravity of the situation. He was angry, disappointed even with himself for having been outsmarted. I was angry at myself as well. This reckless invasion should have never happened. It shouldn't have been an option, to begin with. They should have never come for me. I was one, I was dispensable ... and they were so many.

We don't have much time, Elia implored me in my head. Ned is waiting for us in the Winter Cave.

The Caves were magical portals that could transport you from one Court to another. Every Court had one, and apparently Winter had opened its Cave for the wolves to get in. Crossing the Wall was not impossible but one had to be far too powerful or bribe his way in order to cross it.

Where ... Where is he? I asked, and her eyes softened. I had to make sure he would be alright.

He and Rickard have everything under—

A piercing, high-pitched sound penetrated my ears—the sound of glass shattering. I looked up at
the transparent glass palace which was now engulfed in a pall of green flames, swirling ice, smoke and fire.

And then—

A haunting howl of pain. Sloppy, young, helpless. A familiar wolf plea calling me, asking for me. My chest hollowed out and caved in under the heaviness of fear.

_He couldn't have. My father couldn't be so stupid as to bring him here tonight._

I whipped my head toward Elia, blind rage twisting my already fried wits. "How could you?" She blinked hard. "You brought my brother here?! After everything that happened with Brandon!"

Elia looked completely disarmed. "Benjen wanted to come and Rickard deemed him as capable of protecting hi—"

"He is a child." Rhaegar spat begrudgingly and thus earning a special glare from her. I could have hugged him right now.

_I'm going in there,_ I declared through the bond. Rhaegar's eyes became two full moons.

_I'm not letting you go,_ he stated, ensnaring my arm. _It's too dangerous. If Aerys—_

_I'm not abandoning my brother,_ I wrenched my arm back. _I won't lose him the same way I lost Brandon!_

His indigo eyes brimmed with regret and I didn't have to read his head to know what he was thinking. He would have done the same. He would have begged for such a chance to save his mother and sister. But that chance never presented itself.

I twisted away from him and rushed to the exit of the solarium.

"Have you lost your mind?" Elia shrieked. "Oberyn will kill me if I let you go inside!"

I rumbled. "Oberyn should have thought twice before including my brother into this glorious folly."

_If you are smart enough you will stay away from glass,_ Cersei's warning hurtled back to my memory. I was stupid for taking the risk. But I would never forgive myself if anything happened to Benjen because of me.

I was running so fast my muscles were screaming in protest, so fast the gusting wintry air threatened to rip my dress off. Rhaegar was somewhere near behind, chasing after me.

I couldn't go in there completely unarmed. I had no sword, no bow and quiver, no ash dagger to kill. I had nothing but honed claws and a set of sharp wolf teeth that I intended to use. One wolf-bite and any poor vampire, who would dare stop me, would drop dead. So I turned into the gargantuan beast I was, letting the mild pain of the transformation slow down my burning feet.

Glass shards were sprinked everywhere; In the gardens, in the stairs, in the balconies. They dug viciously into my paws sending splinters of pain to every pore of my body. Blood footprints were left in my wake.

When I finally reached the ballroom, the image that greeted me was nothing short of a maelstrom. The hall was abuzz with thrumming power and the shrieking sound of metal hitting metal.
My eyes scanned the room to spot Benjen, yet he was nowhere to be seen, something that made the sound of my own heart even more insufferable. Instead, my eyes kept crashing on an assortment of familiar faces. It was as if all of them were paired up somehow.

At the deepest corner of the room stood Ashara against Mace and Willas Tyrell. Although both father and son had shapeshifted into bulky beasts with long claws that made me want to rub my eyes, Ashara parried their blows with unbelievable ease. Dressed in black fighting leathers and equipped with two Illyrian blades in hand and another one strapped across her back, her graceful fighting felt akin to dancing. The fact that she brought into play only her warrior prowess and not magic, proved that she was strong enough to compete with a High Lord.

Next to her, Hoster Tully had created an army of wolves made out of his Wind, that charged against Arthur's tar shadows.

A few feet away, Jamie and Daenerys fought alongside. The Dawn High Lord was hurtling one fireball after the other straight to Doran's water shield, the produced steam wrapping and blurring the room as a result.

Daenerys's unrelenting clouds of darkness kept finding resistance against my father's irradiating beacons of light, the impact shaking the room to its foundations and shattering whatever remainders of glass wall samples had been left.

My eyes flew open when they recognized the next lethal duel. Robert Baratheon and Cersei Lannister were undoubtedly the highlight of the night. They were charging at each other without pause, each of their impressive maneuvers deadlier than the previous one. Robert's chips of ice freezing her fire, and Cersei's tongues of fire melting his ice. Their fight was a war dance of grace and acrobatics as swift as an asp's. To an outsider the duel would look real, but to me, it was all a well-rehearsed performance, a show to blow smoke over everyone's eyes and mislead. You could tell from the way that both were stalling, trying to give a breath to the other to recover from the impact of each strike. But why? What were they waiting for? And most importantly, for whom Cersei's ash dagger was destined?

Across the ballroom, torturous whines were slicing through the air as wolves kept lunging, in vain, at Joanna since with one flick of her fingers their bodies fell like flies around her. And then—

Another agonising cry travelled to my ears and I followed it, only to see Aerys lifted off the ground, a crystal clear hand—a noose of water wrapped around his throat, choking the life out of him. And the proprietor of this hand—Oberyn. He was armed to the teeth, twisting an ash dagger in his hand and studying with feral content the weakened King, contemplating from which angle he should kill him. From which angle he should make him suffer to no measure—suffer as much as my mother did.

Kill him! Kill him now! I wanted to scream.

Aerys emitted another feeble whimper which had Daenerys rooted on the spot. She whipped her head toward him and violent fury distorted her beautiful face. This was when I had to realise two things. To me Aerys might still be a monster, but to her he was still her father—her blood, and Oberyn still remained the son of the man who tore her family apart.

Without further ado, her fury took flesh and bones as she slammed her hand on the glass floor and created a chasm that branched out toward Oberyn and made him lose his balance and stumble brutally on the floor, his ash dagger slipping out of his reach.

Having been relieved of Oberyn's iron hold, Aerys regained the advantage and retrieved the dagger
for himself. My Alpha made to move but to my dawning horror, he couldn't. His body had frozen into place, and his limbs were paralyzed.

"You little piece of filth." Aerys bellowed and prowled toward him with hateful eyes. "I’m going to make you pay for your insolence," he snarled and my eyes caught Joanna behind him, concentrated on coercing Oberyn into stillness.

"Kill him Aerys." Her features were slightly restrained, betraying her mental effort, and thus empowering my moral with my last best hope that she wasn't invincible after all. Oberyn was a High Lord, not some random weak minion of hers.

Now, I decided, it was the right time to seize my last and only chance. Now that Joanna was too preoccupied to notice. One bite, and he dies. One bite for Rhaegar to take his power back and for Joanna to lose everything as I did. They took my mother. They took my brother. They wouldn't rob me of Oberyn too.

Red and dogged determination began blotching my vision. One second, I was sprinting across the ballroom, and the other, just when the King advanced to drive the dagger into Oberyn's heart, I was charging at him with every last drop of my strength, with every last ounce of my hatred for him.

I aimed at the throat, but my maw went astray, and instead my teeth sank into his shoulder blades, a slapdash execution that would cost me precious time.

Aerys tumbled to the ground, bawling in suffering and Joanna stumbled back as if in a shock, as if she had just lost a significant portion of her power. It ... It was working!

Her control over Oberyn flickered for a moment and he crawled toward me, his eyes ravenous with panic, desperate to reach and touch me, to feel me.

"You aren't supposed to be here!" His hand cupped my snout. "Why can't you just do what you have been told for once in your life!" His expression was mad and frantic. So much that it actually scared me. "You have to leave. Now! You run and you don't look back."

I am not leaving you behind, I rubbed my damp nose against his.

I would never leave him behind—never abandon him, even if it killed me. And if it was to be my downfall, so be it. If Oberyn would be the weakness that would break me, I would embrace it with all my heart. If this was—

"What have you done?" Joanna seethed at me, having recovered from the power-drain shock. Her face blanched as soon as her raging eyes fell on the gigantic wound that had formed on Aery's shoulder, his skin as grotesque as rotten meat. Under different circumstances, the wound would have healed by now, yet to his misfortune, there was no cure for a wolf bite. The King's ominous fate was already written—forfeited.

Without a warning and against my volition, my body straightened, every muscle going taut, my bones straining. Magic, but deeper than that. Power that seized everything inside me and took control: even my blood flowed where she willed it. My claws and fur pushed back and so did my muzzle. Joanna was turning me into a human again, and I couldn't help but feel helpless. I had no defenses to use against her, no weapon any more.

I couldn't move. An invisible, talon-tipped hand scraped against my mind. And I knew—one push, one swipe of those mental claws, and who I was would cease to exist.

Someone cried out, but I was limp, I couldn't even try to get out of the way as something far more
violent than lightning struck me, and I crashed to the floor.

"No!" Oberyn reached for me but the Queen's magic sent him sprawling—so hard that his head cracked against the stones and the knife dropped from his splayed fingers. No one made a move to help him, and she struck him once more with her power. The hard glass cracked where he hit it, spiderwebbing toward me. With wave after wave she hit him. Oberyn groaned. A gigantic transparent bubble trapped me, Joanna and Aerys, leaving all the others mere spectators outside, except for—

“Lyanna!” someone roared. No, not someone—Rhaegar.

Joanna's face shrunk in fright at the sight of him swooping on toward her, his clouds of Night more harrowing than ever, drowning the whole room in shadows and darkness. Aerys was barely breathing on the floor, and the more he faded, the faster Rhaegar's power was being restored.

In an attempt to repel him, the Queen flicked her fingers and struck where he would hurt the most. She struck at me.

My very bones were shattering as my body rose and then slammed onto the hard floor, and I was crushed beneath another wave of torturous agony. A scream ravaged my throat as pain like nothing I had known erupted through my head. A pain that stretched through the mating bond and Rhaegar's open shields. In an instant, the mind-blowing pain brought him to his knees and as he collapsed he placed his hands at his temples, in a futile endeavor to block the knives in his head. Our minds were interfused and whatever I saw, he was going to see it too.

But whatever I had expected to be Joanna's next move, I wasn't prepared for this. My mind became a storybook and she began flipping through the pages. She stopped at that haunting night.

I know what comes next, but no matter how hard I try, she won't let me shut my eyes. Her needles pierce my brother with clean grace, through muscle and organ, blood and heart. Then the memory is supposed to be over.

But she never allows me that small mercy. Instead, she pulls the scene backward. Again it plays. Again my brother dies.

Again.

Again.

Each time she forces me to see something else. A mistake. A misstep. A choice I could’ve made to save him. Small decisions. Run to him, grab his arm, prevent him from attacking. It is torture of the worst kind.


Her voice ripples, all around me and into my mate's head.

Then I felt the connection of another mind joining mine and Rhaegar's and the torture became triangular. The mind that she forced into the triangle was Aerys's.

As the memory starts to play, I realise that it's not mine but hers. In the beginning it's dark, a light rain plinking against the husk of my brain. But then my heart explodes as an almighty lighting cleaves the image and illuminates a woman's face. Just her face. She is a stranger and at the same time so familiar.
Through my fractured vision, I see both Rhaegar and Aerys going statue-still.

Her face is stunning, her skin a shade of coconut, her eyes purple as new-born violets, her hair a liquid silver. She looks as ... an older version of Daenerys, a flawless porcelain doll, if not for the hot tears that roll down her cheeks. Lighting cracks again, this time to reveal her whole physique. The woman is sprawled on the mud, blood pooling around her, brutally mutilated and ravaged; no hands, no feet. She is a living ghost with blood and death clinging to her, with a pair of crippled wings withering at her sides.

My heart blasts into nothingness and I let out a muffled shriek of hysteria that I gulp down and drown inside me against my will. She makes me suppress my horror and blood starts dripping from my nose due to the intensity.

"Shhh." Joanna puts her index finger in front of her lips and smiles at me. "Don't scream. Not yet. Save your voice for the end. The best is yet to come, my precious."

Rhaegar is still on his knees, barking at her to stop. He ... he doesn't want me to see this. He doesn't want me to get hurt. Still, he doesn't care for himself. Still, I'm the priority.

The bond between us went taut. I flashed between my body and his, seeing myself through his eyes, bleeding and broken and sobbing. His heart tears every time he hears another bone cracking in my body.

Joanna spools again my mind and the image of the woman reappears. But this time she is screaming, she is begging ... and it seems as if her voice and Rhaegar's have become one, their pleas a chorus that makes my head want to erupt.

The memory moves on and it is then that I shudder. There is a girl spilled like churned milk next to her but the woman cannot reach her for she has no legs. The girl's face is breathtaking, a summer painting of delicate contours and ripe rosy lips. Her hair is black—black as the evil that feasts on my heart right now—she has the most vivid teal eyes and—

The beauty and serenity are wiped off her face and their place takes ugliness and pain and fear and despair. She is dying to scream but an olive-skinned hand gags her mouth. The man hovering above her smiles creepily as he continues riding her—raping her. Burning tears of disgust trail a telltale path down my cheeks when I identify him. Raven-blue hair, amber eyes ... Oberyn's father.

And then there is another hand—a vicious strong fist that yanks the girl's hair and rolls her onto her stomach. Illyrian wings bloom from her back and are suddenly pinned down with heartbreaking cruelty and indifference. The silver-haired woman shrieks but the hand doesn't stop. It unsheaths a fang-sharp knife with a werewolf carved into its silver pommel. I knew the dagger. My father had given it to me as a gift on my thirteenth birthday. I think I am going to vomit.

The hand starts methodically skinning the girl's back with abandon and proceeds to butcher the wings. The girl begs but the hand knows no mercy. The cruelty of men has no boundaries, no end. The image moves and two silver eyes, decaying with brutality, stare back at me. My father's eyes held no kindness, no compassion anymore. To me, they were the savage, bloodthirsty eyes of a killer. Of a murderer. Of a ... monster.

I had called Rhaegar a liar. I had called him a monster. My mate was no such thing. And now, I wished I could take all my spiteful words back. I would trade everything in the world to take them back. And all of this, because I was blind. Because I thought I knew better. Because I thought I knew my father. Because I was too arrogant and believed that the story had only one side. It is always too easy to blame the others, and always impossibly difficult to accept your fault, to admit
that you hurt someone, to admit that you played a part in destroying his life, in ruining him.

I remember what Rhaegar had told me after my mother and Brandon died.

_Monsters we may be, but we are not the only ones._

My father rolled the girl onto her mangled back once more and she looked at him with her desolate blue-green eyes, before spitting on his face. He began pummeling her face, and the girl endured. He didn't stop landing his blows, until her face was mere meat and bones, until the silver-haired woman crying for her daughter had no voice, no air in her lungs to give.

So I screamed for her. Odium and revulsion and contempt rose from my lungs and materialised into an ear-splitting shriek. Joanna welcome it, smiling like a serpent at me.

All I could hear, see, feel, breathe, devour was Lyanna, convulsing and trembling wildly on the glass floor. The shock of what she had just witnessed tugged heavy on her heart. Her conscience was utterly in ruins. Her eyes, fraught with pain and guilt and regret and salt, told me so when they found mine.

_I am sorry_, she sobbed through the mating bond and chanted it over and over again.

I never wanted her to find out, let alone see it. The knowledge was too much, too heartbreaking for her to bear.

"You ..." Aerys moaned on the floor with pain, his rotting hand deteriorating by the second. "You were there." He looked at Joanna, the sting of betrayal in his eyes. "You divulged their location to the wolves! How—"

"All I did was for you!" Joanna's voice was ragged with rage as she turned to him. Her power over Lyanna wavered for a moment and I felt her pain flickering. Still, her body was too broken to move.

"I did everything for you! I even killed my husband to be with you." Jamie Lannister gasped outside of the Queen's shield but Cersei's eyes remained unbreakable as her lips settled into a hard line. She and I both knew from the very beginning, but throwing accusations was far too dangerous back then. Cersei had been a victim of her mother's power and knew that the Queen was capable of everything. "But you were too ungrateful to acknowledge me, too lost in Rhaella's memory. She was a corpse and I was a living woman and still you loved her more than me. She was a no one, a ghost—"

"She was my mate!" Aerys snapped. "She was your Queen. And you thought you had the right to take her and my little girl from me."

"Oh but I left you the others, didn't I? I left you one little girl, one little boy and most importantly ..." Her eyes flickered to me with a smile. "I left you him." She stalks to me and I can't move as she twists all her power—_my_ power against me. "The most powerful vampire in history," she slaps me across my face. "Your perfect heir," she slaps me again, harder this time. "Rhaella's son." Another slap draws blood, splitting my lips. "The son who loved you so much that handed me all his power to prove it. The son you sacrificed in my bed because you were a coward!"

She lifted a hand and I was slammed back into the wall, my bones groaning as I hit the ground. I rose and lunged for her—talons growing from my hands. Pain shot through my fingers as she wielded her magic and pushed the talons back into my skin and I collapsed. My arms buckled as I fought to rise for once more and blood dripped from my nose.
"Stop," Lyanna croaked with her hoarse voice, blood gushing from her mouth “P-please let him go," she begged Joanna and thus regaining her attention and wrath.

“Stop? Stop? Don’t pretend you care,” she crooned, and curled her finger. Lyanna's back arched, her spine straining to the point of cracking, and I bellowed her name as my senses were addled with panic for once more. I careened like a shooting star toward the Queen but she lifted a hand—not even bothering to look—and I was blasted back by a wall of black light.

“I’ll deal with you later,” she snarled at me and sent Lyanna falling into a fiery pit of pain.

“You think you’re worthy of him?” For the first time, Joanna's face was distorted with ugliness as she prowled toward Lyanna. "A Prince? You think you deserve anything at all, wolf garbage?” I heard her ribs cracking, one by one. She blacked out, but Joanna brought her back, ensuring that she felt everything, ensuring that she screamed every time a bone broke.

“What are you but mud and bones and worm meat?” Joanna raged. “What are you, compared to me, that you think you’re worthy of him?”

Lyanna sobbed between screams as the Queen's foot connected with her broken ribs. Again. And again. She has been craving to do this—to break her—since the day I kissed my mate in front of her. And now she was going to steal her from me. She was going to take my mate.

My mate.

My love. My soul. My sun in the day and all of my stars at night. My life, my light, my torch against the endless darkness that was my life before her. My dream that kept me from falling apart for the last sixteen years. My Lyanna. My beautiful, perfect wolf. My fearless huntress. My sensitive artist. My mate that was going to die.

I felt her weak mental touch, tugging at the bond, caressing my cold insides with her sweet voice, melting with her fire the ice that froze my heart.

Tell me, her brave voice smiled. Tell me something good.

How do I say goodbye knowing that I will never get to say hello?

I looked at her while still battering my fists on Joanna's impregnable bubble, calling for my power that was nowhere to be seen since Aerys was still fighting for his wretched life on the ground. Lyanna endeavored to stare back, blood filling her mouth, warm as it dribbled out between her lips.

Her essence was fading painfully fast, and so did the mating bond. I didn't have much time to tell her all I wanted to confess to her. I thought I had time. I thought I had forever. So I chose the most beautiful thing I could think of, that summarised everything I felt for her.

I love you Anna.

I will miss you. Although her voice bled sadness, I tried to memorize it anyway. With all my heart Prince Perfect.

No, this wasn't a fairytale. Fairytales always have a happy ending, and ours apparently hadn't.

Everything that I love in this life tends to be taken away from me, one way or another.

A tear coursed down my cheek before Joanna crooked her fingers for one last time and I heard the sound of something forever cracking in Lyanna's spine.
Immediately, I perceived the stillness of her heart. Her lungs ceased their labors and the mask of pain on her face slackened.

Her empty eyes betrayed no fear. She was Lyanna Stark—my Lyanna—and she wouldn't be afraid.

My chest hollowed out and the mating bond ceased permanently just when my father took his last scarce breath and the surge of my unspeakable power rocketed back to me. I stumbled.

My wolf died and her remaining pack began roaring in agony to the moon, clawing at their chests with wild sorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Don't hate me :( I know this was too abrupt and sad ... But please don't hate me. I am really confident that this chapter will receive no kudos at all lol.

A sneak peek for the next chapter ... Its title will be: Queenslayer
In the beginning it was dark. Abysmal dark, like the starless night sky mirrored on the tranquil sea water of a summer day. The blackness of nightmares and terror. The blackness of infinity and the unknown.

So I embraced the numb darkness and all the coolness that rippled out of its depths. The clean coolness of loneliness. The icy coolness of a corpse—of death. A faint flicker of light cleaved amidst the coal pit, and gradually became a string that snaked toward me, begging me to snatch it, to stay—begging me not to let go. Not yet. I was hanging on the edge of a vital line. I didn't know what this line was, but I knew I shouldn't cross it no matter what. So I tied the rope of my existence into a knot, and held onto this little life thread as tightly as I could.

I was far away but still seeing—seeing through eyes that weren’t mine, eyes attached to a person who slowly rose from his position on a cracked, bloodied floor.

Joanna's face slackened. There my body was, prostrate on the ground, my head snapped to one side at a horribly wrong angle. The bubble of black light popped, leaving the Queen at the mercy of the spectators.

Her terrified eyes turned slowly and looked at me—not at me—at my host. Joanna backed away—away from my corpse, away from Aerys's corpse.

My host started stalking toward her torturously slow and the world seemed to fall away. The fighting ceased. The howling stopped. The wails toned down. And all the faces in the room awaited with bated breath. Including the man I used to call father.

Where was Oberyn? Where was Benjen?

"Rhaegar," the Queen pleaded but my mate leapt onto her, the force knocking her to the ground. He pinned her on her side, seeking to crush her with his weight. She let out a tortured howl, pulled her arms weakly before her face as Rhaegar's hands reached for her neck.

"Strangling is the most intimate way to kill someone, and you and I have shared a lot of intimacy, haven't we your Grace?" His voice was leveled and methodical, as it was expected of a Prince who had trained armies and armies of Illyrians during his ten hundred years.

Joanna's struggle was ugly. Gargles and grunts bubbled from her throat. Rhaegar's fingers tightened before he slammed her head with a brutal thump against the floor.

"Is this how your pretty little vision ends?" Blood began to trickle from her mouth, darker than her lipstick. "Isn't this how they finished my sister off?"

The ballroom suddenly became too dark, an earth during solar eclipse. And it was all because of Rhaegar. All his rage and hatred and grief seeping into clouds of Night that devoured the room like mist.

Joanna whimpered and wriggled against his iron fist but his mind froze instantly when a familiar voice out of nowhere tugged at his mental shields and echoed around me.
**You promised**, Cersei Lannister appealed.

Ever so slowly, Rhaegar twisted to find her face among the sea of onlookers. She held hands with her brother but a faint hint of distance in her stare told me that she didn't want his support right now. She didn't need it. She could manage everything on her own.

Her green, green eyes were hard, insistent, anxious even. Most likely for her mother's life. *Her mother* ... What had I expected? Blood is thicker than water. And the lioness was probably more loyal than she seemed.

When Rhaegar didn't respond she said it again, her voice more urgent and authoritative than ever, as though he was bound by gods and vows to keep his word, to abide by his promise.

**What did he promise her?**

*So be it,* Rhaegar said finally but ... His voice didn't sound the least resigned when he waved his hand once more and crashed Joanna violently against the wall as if she was a piece of garbage. He couldn't have spared her. He couldn't have betrayed me like this. He couldn't have betrayed his family's memory like this.

Like a rat, she crawled away from him as he approached the pathetic, motionless me and dipped to his knees.

He scooped up my limp, broken body, and began cradling me to his chest, tracing the lines and planes of my face—memorizing me. I heard the shuddering sobs that broke from him as he rocked me, stroking my hair—as silent tear after tear drizzled upon my wide open slate eyes.

From the corner of my eye—of Rhaegar's eye—I caught Oberyn shoving his way through the crowd. When his watery eyes fell on my corpse and the person who held it, all the hell broke loose in an instant. His hard, unforgiving face twisted into something truly lupine as he raised his eyes to the queen and snarled. Fangs lengthened.

The Queen's eyes flew open and Oberyn let out a roar that shook the Winter Palace as he launched himself toward her. He shifted into his beast form faster than I could see—fur and claws and pound upon pound of lethal muscle.

The Dawn guards rushed for the Queen, but several vampires and wolves jumped into their path, tackling them. Whatever was left of Joanna screeched, lashing at him with her dark magic, but a wall of gold encompassed his fur like a second skin. She couldn’t touch him. She couldn’t—

For a heartbeat, she was a blur. A flash of a straight white line cleaving the distance. But then Cersei Lannister was upon him in a whoosh, knocking him to the ground out of the blue, her ruby red dress complimenting the ferocity of her agility and the deadliness of her power. She clasped her hands around Oberyn's thoat and his golden light was no longer there. His slouchy wolf form almost shrank and only then did I realise what she was doing to him; she was milking all his power, absorbing it like a sponge. She was ... She was like a vessel. I had never seen an immortal with such a gift. The people who possessed the gift of stealing power were extremely rare and they were to be feared.

If I had a throat, I would have swallowed. Hard.

Rhaegar tugged my body closer to his. He hugged me tighter and began humming a soft melody against my ear, his serenading voice soft and sweet as honey.

My soul swelled with a long-forgotten memory. A memory distantly familiar. His melody had
always existed from my very beginning. A melody that I've always known but couldn't remember the lyrics. How did he—

The lioness dropped Oberyn's weakened body on the floor like a sack of potatoes and rushed to her mother. Joanna's bloodied countenance melted into indescribable relief when Cersei offered her her hand and got her to her feet. She wrapped a hand around her mother's waist as a support and they began walking and—

The Queen's eyes threw open to their full size and she choked before her knees gave up on her and buckled.

Cersei backed a step revealing her pair of blood-painted hands and the ash dagger plunged into Joanna's side.

A pandemonium of loud gasps and thrumming flooded the room. The voices only deteriorated when she sank to her knees, beside the Queen, and unsheathed the dagger from her decaying bluish flesh.

"Cersei, what are you doing?!" Jamie shouted angrily over the voices as he made to reach her, but Robert's and the Day High Lord's intimidating figures blocked him from taking another step.

"Something you should have done for me a long time ago," the lioness breathed.

"Why," was all Joanna managed to articulate, the sting of betrayal swimming in her emeralds.

"Why don't you just look in my head to find all the whys?" A bitter laugh. "You killed my father. You took every memory I had of him until the only thing I could remember was a blur of blond hair and a muffled voice. You made him kill himself because of your greed. Because your heart was made of stone." Cersei squeezed her mother's hand. "And then, as if my father wasn't already enough, you stole another person from me. The only one who mattered."

"He didn't deserve you." Joanna reached to stroke her face but Cersei flinched away from her touch. "A bastard could never be a match for a daughter of Dawn."

"It was I who didn't deserve him." She began wiping the blood of the dagger on her red dress with painstaking deliberation, her voice calm and composed. "You took my memories, my thoughts and feelings—you cut and tailored them to suit your own tastes, your own expectations and ambitions—you fucked my mind until I couldn't tell which were my own thoughts and which were yours, until all the love I had for him twisted into ugliness—twisted into nothingness."

"Love is a poison. A sweet poison but it will kill you all the same. The more people you love, the weaker you become. You are a lioness, and lions cannot afford to be weak."

If there was someone in this wretched world Joanna loved, that would be her twins. I could tell from the way she looked at Cersei now, her eyes soft and peaceful. Neither judgemental, nor angry. But when you love someone so much, you always see threats everywhere. And then your love becomes possessive and suffocating and toxic.

"Lions cannot be caged either. Yet, you did cage me for fifty years under a rock. But today I'm lifting the bars of the cage. I am cutting your puppet strings. I am throwing the chains you bound me with."

To my sheer horror, Joanna smiled a little. "And I am proud of you my fierce little lioness. No matter what."
Cersei fiddled with the dagger in her hands. "I always rise, constant and powerful as the Dawn."

Her words from earlier started rushing back to me in an instant.

*Red to remind me of fire.* Her fire. *Red to remind me of Dawn.* Her Court. *Red to remind me of blood.* Her mother's blood she was about to spill. *Red to remind me of someone I used to know.* Red for the lover she was forced to part ways with.

"Any last words?" Rhaegar mocked her from a few feet away, still rocking me in his arms, still humming to me.

That's why he spared her. To let Cersei finish the job. What worse and more tragic death than one where your child holds the knife?

Joanna's emeralds became two slits as she said, "I hope that you die from the hand of the person you love the most." Her words didn't affect him the least, but I couldn't help but have the feeling that her words sounded like a curse. "I'll see you in hell Rhaegar," she whispered and Cersei drove the ash dagger straight into her heart.

Silence fell.

Rhaegar looked down on my body once more before he opened his fingers and tipped over his hand. A glittering spark, black as night fell upon me. It flared and vanished as it touched my chest.

Rushing paws—then a flash of light, then footsteps—filled the air. The beast was already gone.

"Get the hell away from her!" Oberyn growled and retrieved my body from Rhaegar's arms.

Rhaegar's fangs suddenly lengthened and, although I couldn't see his eyes, I knew they had turned carmine red. Daenerys and Ashara were straight to his side in an attempt to calm him down. Then there were more footsteps and—

"No," someone breathed—Elia, tears shining in her eyes.

Two more figures approached—The Winter High Lord, wearing a crown of ice and the Spring High Lord wearing a crown of red roses.

Chins raised, shoulders back, they, too, dropped those glittering kernels upon me, one as blue as winter and the other green as a forest. Oberyn bowed his head in gratitude.

The High Lord of the Day Court, clad in white and gold, his sun-kissed skin gleaming with an inner light, presented his similar white light, tears rolling down his cheeks.

Jamie Lannister came forward and extended his hand as he let the seed of light fall on me, red as the dawn. Hoster Tully was the one who came last and chucked a spark that looked like fire, orange as Autumn leaves.

Oberyn tenderly brushed aside my matted hair. His hand glowed bright as the golden summer sun, and in the center of his palm, that strange, shining bud formed.

"I love you," he whispered, and kissed me as he laid his hand on my heart.

Everything was black, and warm—and thick. Inky, but bordered with gold. I was swimming, kicking for the surface, where life was waiting. Up and up, frantic for air. The golden light grew, and the darkness became like sparkling wine, easier to swim through, the bubbles fizzing around
me, and—

I gasped, air flooding my throat.

I was lying on the cold floor, my head resting on Oberyn's lap. No pain—no blood, no broken bones. I blinked. A chandelier dangled above me—I’d never noticed how intricate the crystals were, how the hushed gasp of the crowd echoed off them. A crowd—meaning I was still in that ballroom, meaning I … I truly wasn’t dead. Meaning I had … I had killed the King and … and Joanna was dead.

I went rigid as I sensed Oberyn's familiar touch upon my skin and smelled that sandalwood and sunlight scent of him, richer than I’d ever noticed. His amber eyes found mine and I couldn't breath—I couldn’t … couldn’t look at them without the images of what Joanna showed me flooding my mind.

I could hear him holding his breath—hear as he loosed it. Hear the breathing, the whispering and weeping and quiet celebrating of everyone in that hall, still watching us—watching me—some chanting praise for the glorious power of their High Lords.

My chest felt impossibly full—strong, and so did every pore of my body. Something had changed ...

Still in a haze, I inspected the room. There was Joanna, the ash dagger protruding from the cavity of her chest, blood now soaking her gown and snaking toward Aerys.

The King and Queen were dead. The realm was free. Rhaegar was free. I was free.

I shook my head slowly, trying to push sentences out of my mouth but then my father was on my side, cupping my face in his large palms.

Instictively, my heart popped and I peeled away from him, falling into Oberyn's embrace.

"Don't touch me!" I cried out, my voice trembling with hysteria. My father's eyes shuddered in shock and discombobulation. "I don't want you to touch me ever again!"


The Day High Lord turned to my mate, fury and madness warring in his silver orbs. "What did you do to my girl? What tricks did you play on my daughter?!" He stalked toward him but the terrifying rise of the volume of my voice stopped him cold.

"Stay away from him!" Tears began prickling my already bloated eyes. "You have the nerve to blame him after everything you did to his family?"

Unmistakable panic clouded my father's features. Rhaegar's indigo eyes were trained on me, but I couldn't bring myself to look at him without breaking down from shame.

Oberyn attempted to hush my rising sobs by stroking my face but contempt and bile rose burning on my throat. "What have you done?"

My father's eyes were unrelenting as I expected for his answer that never came.

"Sweetheart …" My father's tone was desperate. "Let's go home and we are going to fix everything."
Even eternity would not be enough to fix me. My body might have been repaired, but what about my soul?

"I am going nowhere with you." I barked at him as Elia assisted me in my struggle to stand on my wobbling feet. "You and I are through."

"Come on, baby," Oberyn whispered in my ear in reassurance, trying to prevent me from saying harsher words to my father that I would regret later. He slipped a warm hand around my waist and herded me toward the exit. "Everything is going to be alright. We are going home."

I halted. I hesitated. I contemplated whether I should turn my head and face him. But eventually I didn't. I just stood there letting his gaze meet my back.

Maybe I was a craven after all for running away from my remorse. I couldn't cope with all the accusations that he most likely held for me. I couldn't look him in the eyes. Ever again.

Ashara was right. He didn't deserve someone like me; a breathing mess. The daughter of his mother's and twin's murderer. A moving disaster. He probably didn't want me. He most definitely didn't need me. Who would need a burden like me?

Go, Rhaegar said through the bond. His voice held no grudge. You are free.

I am sorry, was all my fried conscience managed to say before I carried on walking toward the exit.

A few minutes later we stopped by the solarium where Benjen was waiting anxiously for us. Elia had managed to slip him out of the battle and tuck him safely in the garden. It was a strange and bittersweet experience to be reunited with my brother, but what was even stranger was the divine sweet scent of the winter roses around us.

They didn't reek to me at all. Not anymore.

Chapter End Notes

I know, the interaction between Lyanna and her father was quite limited but I intend to write more in the following chapters ;)
There were two kind of dreams that haunted every single night of these last three months, that dragged me from my sleep, and with a wooden fist slammed me back to places that I desperately wanted to wipe clean off my memory, to voices and faces that enmeshed my wits.

The first nightmare was mine. Silver and amber eyes on the hunt. Creepy laughter. Black hair. Ashen skin. Teal eyes. Butchered wings. Defenseless girl exterminated.

The second one was Rhaegar's. It never changed. It was always the same histrionics of horror. Me, sprawled and begging on the floor. The sound of my bones cracking one by one—the sound of my neck snapping forever. Then ... only silence, and emptiness, and void.

Today it was Rhaegar. For the last four days it was his twisted version of mental plight. I wished tomorrow it would be me, just to break the monotony of the pattern.

I was already half-awake when I felt his fear surging through the bond, like the thud of a hammer crashing down, like the roar of a wounded beast—when I felt the tremors of his powerful body rising like some wild animal's hackles. Our senses were one, and so were our minds. The bond was a portal, a communication bridge between us that somehow ... didn't make me feel so alone in this struggle. The bond was a crutch, one I held onto, lest I broke down.

My body had adjusted by now for it had learnt to anticipate these moments each night. Rhaegar always kept his shields down. He kept them down for me every split second of the day, in case I needed him. Unfortunately, I was too stubborn for my own good. Too independent to ask for help. I didn't want to upset him, and even more, I didn't want to appear weak.

I jolted awake with a gasp, a hand on my throat, cold sweat sliding down my back and pooling in the hollow between my mouth and chin. Panting and trembling, I tumbled blindly out of the floor mattress racing for the bathroom. Rhaegar rose at the same time and walked into his bathroom as well, his wings tucked behind him.

I vomited into the toilet, my burning hands hugging the cool sides, trying to contain the sounds of my retching. My fingertips were living claws of flame that hissed against the porcelain, smearing the pearl white and turning it into ashes. My mouth tasted like ash too.

This was new, I realised to my horror. So far the only sign that something was terribly wrong, were the clouds of darkness that clang to to me like blood after most of my nightmares. Unyielding darkness and Night. Rhaegar's Night. But tonight these flames ... the fire I could summon ...

I had seen this orange flames once before. Cersei Lannister wore them as a second skin the night of the invasion. Again, something had changed within my body—something that everyone in this manor pretended to ignore. Even Oberyn ...

I was immortal before. I am immortal now. But I never knew what strength meant until three months ago. I’d dented and folded every piece of silverware I’d touched for three days upon returning here, had tripped over my longer, faster legs so often that Elia had removed any irreplaceable valuables from my rooms (she’d been particularly grumpy about me knocking over a table with an eight-hundred-year-old vase), and had shattered not one, not two, but five glass doors
merely by accidentally closing them too hard. And top of that, no horse would come near me, let alone let me ride it.

Moonlight leaked into the massive marble bathing room, providing the only illumination as I was quietly, thoroughly sick. Shaking, I braced myself over the bowl, counting each breath. I focused on my breathing—in through my nose, out through my mouth. Over and over.

When it seemed like I was done heaving, I stood and so did my mate. Together, we left our bathrooms, and separately, we returned to our own separate lives.

The state of my mattress was nothing short of a mess. The sheets were no longer white, but grey—cinder grey—and their remainders were nothing more than embers. Just like the porcelain of the toilet.

Beside the mattress, Oberyn remained soundly asleep in his wolf form, yet I knew he was still on his guard. Every night he would monitor my room, the door, the windows in case Rhaegar came to claim me again. To steal me from him again.

I knew something like that was not probable at all. Rhaegar could have kept me with him, but instead he let me go. He gave me a choice, and I knew that he already had compromised and accepted it.

Oberyn's breathing was deep—even, but ... sometimes I wondered if I heard his breath catch, only for a heartbeat. I never had the nerve to ask if he was awake. He never woke when the nightmares dragged me from sleep; never woke when I vomited my guts up night after night. If he knew or heard, he said nothing about it.

It was easier to not have to explain, anyway. If I had to explain, we would have to talk about Joanna and what she made me watch mere minutes before she killed me. It was an unspoken rule between us, not talking about the past. Not yet. I hadn't asked him if he knew about what our fathers did. I was too afraid to do so. If he had known and didn't tell me ... I dreaded to even think of the possibilities.

The Suriel told me to trust Oberyn. He told me to stay with him and everything will be righted. Yet ... nothing in my life felt right so far. Nothing had been fixed. If anything, as the days kept going by I felt the distance growing unbridgeable between us.

We didn't sleep together. We hadn't shared a bed yet. I was not ready for returning back to my old life, simply because everything had changed. My body had changed, my trust in people I thought I knew had changed, and I had changed in general.

I wished my human heart had been changed with the rest of me, made into immortal marble. Instead of the shredded bit of blackness that it now was, leaking its ichor into me.

A strong shiver scuttled down my spine and my body trembled as though I have been thrown a bucket of ice water.

I felt so cold inside. So deadly cold and yet, I could see the summer heat rippling in the air.

Although I was cold, the room felt cramped. Suffocating. I needed to feel the cool air on my skin.

I opened the door to the hall and padded down it, stumbling and teetering every now and then, still struggling to adjust to my new body, to its new balance and rhythms. I carefully, slowly took a narrow set of stairs upward, up and up, until a tiny trickle of moonlight poured into the stairwell and I found myself on the roof of the manor.
I squatted down carefully, and ensconced myself on the edge of the roof, looking out across the endless sea that stretched beyond, and the night sky.

_His night sky._

My eyes locked to the pearlescent moon sitting large and proud at the horizon, the craters and divots obvious against the stark white of its surface. The stars were blinking out in front of me, but somehow they weren't shining as bright as the ones that used to keep me company back in Velaris.

_Velaris._

Longing and regret sank into my stomach and I didn't know if the emotions were mine or his—the other half of my thundering heart.

My chest was a cavity, a bubble stuffed with airy nothingness on the brink of exploding any time soon because of the accumulating emptiness.

Why did I feel so empty? So 'not enough'? So melancholic and upset and anxious?

*I am anxious when I am not around you,* Rhaegar told me once when he was gone for almost a week.

And then the words of the Suriel rushed back in.

*If the girl doesn't wish to be officially mated then she must leave it as it is and face the consequences of her choice.*

Consequences ... The word was an echo in my head. I almost wanted to start crying in despair. I couldn't carry on living like this; with this bubble brewing to explode, with this sense of having been sliced in half—with this vague but insatiable need, longing for the other piece of the puzzle until I couldn't breathe.

A mild sob broke past my lips.

_Hey,* Rhaegar's deep voice reverberated through the bond.

My heart stopped beating and then sprinted into a full gallop. It was the first time I heard his voice after three whole months.

_Hey back,* was all I managed, my mind working feverly to come up with something more to say.

_Tough night?*_ he asked.

_Nothing that I can't cope with,* I lied, my voice unavering.

_You can't sleep, can you?*

_Neither can you._

_Are you alright?*_ His tone was tender, his concern bare on purpose.

_Everything is fine,* I lied once more and faked a smile. Split seconds afterward I realised he couldn't see my face. Nevertheless, a habit is a habit. Faking smiles, that is.

For a moment silence fell and I forgot how to breathe. Until now, I hadn't realised how starved I was for his voice, for that familiar feeling of the bond thrumming inside me.
I was homesick. Homesick for my mate. Homesick for a person whom I promised myself to forget.

Lyanna ...

My soul swelled and sighed in relief when he spoke my name. I didn't want him to stop talking. I wished for the seconds to become infinities. Just so that I could cling to his voice a little bit longer.

Listen ... Just because we don't talk anymore doesn't mean that I no longer care. Truth is, I still do. I do my best to check up on you, to make sure you are okay. But every time I get the urge to talk to you, it suddenly hits me that we are strangers, and that if you wanted to talk to me you would have. You don't want me in your life hence the reason I am no longer a part of you. I ... I just want you to know that I'm still here. Waiting, come what may. I'll still lend you my shoulders and ears. I don't care what time it is or what I'm doing. Don't hesitate to talk to me because half the time I wish that you did.

His name was a plea on my lips. Rhaegar ...

Yes?

I am scared. I breathed—in and out, in and out—and tilted my head, my sharp kneecaps pushing against my equally hollow cheekbone.

Why Anna?

Something is happening to me. My body is not right and ... no one cares. I didn't have to explain further. He already knew. I can't contain it Rhaegar. I can't control it, it's too big. You told me once that you were terrified of your own powers, that the feeling was so overwhelming that you thought you would explode like a balloon.

It's okay love. Everything will be fine. It takes brains, not brawn to master your abilities. Who is the one who trains you?

Rodrik Cassel. Was there a possibility that Rhaegar knew him?

Ask him to add some extra hours to your training. Tell him about your symptoms. He has been the Master-At-Arms since the war and he is an expert in training High Lords. And if there is a problem, say my name. He will understand.

Rhaegar knew Rodrik in person? How was that even possible? Do I tell him that I am no longer allowed to train with the others? No. That would only enrage him and make things worse.

Rhaegar?

Yes love.

What was that melody you were humming to me before you brought me back to life?

I think you know it already.

I know that I know it. But I can't remember it.

His soft laugh traveled along my limbs, warming me. When I see you again, I'll help you remember it.

Can you promise me? I almost begged. That you will see me again?
Cross my heart and hope to die little one.

Somehow, by hearing such a promise from him, I didn't feel cold anymore.

"Lyanna."

The breakfast table was ridiculously piled with food. My chest tightened with guilt. So much food ... and most of it would be thrown away probably. For one thing, I had barely touched my spread.

"Lyanna."

A paltry piece of chocolate cake was the only thing that occupied my plate. I took a bite, closing my eyes.

Hmm ... It wasn't half as delicious as the one Rhaegar brought me once. Could he have been the one who cooked it? Not very unlikely. What Prince Perfect would he be if he didn't know how to cook, or write poetry, or play his harp, or sing so beautifully that the stars would weep? On the other side, why would he know how to cook? He didn't need food anyway.

"Lyanna"

Maybe he knew how to cook thanks to the Illyrians. As far as they were concerned, they ate food perfectly fine ... and some of them had quite the appetite. Jon and Ashara for example. Maybe Rhaegar could stand eating food because of his Illyrian blood. Maybe he craved sleep once in a while for the same reason as well. I should ask him when I see him again. If I ever see him again. But he said I could talk to him. Whenever I want. And these were just little questions, weren't they?

A sweet, female voice trilled my name again and my shoulders tightened. "Lyanna."

She waved a hand in front of my face, sitted as she was at Oberyn's left, and I started, my reverie broken.

"Yes," I said absentmindedly, ripping my pensive stare off my plate and peering into a pair of dark mocha eyes.

Ellaria. The High Priestess and a childhood friend of Oberyn’s, who had taken it upon herself to help me adjust to my role as the future Lady of the Summer Court.

And who had taken it upon herself to worship me and Oberyn as if we were newly minted gods, blessed and chosen by Freya herself to bring peace and prosperity into our lands though our imminent union. We had defeated the King and Queen of the Mountain, and according to Ellaria, I had broken the mating bond between me and the evil Night Prince.

But I didn't complain—not when Ellaria knew everyone in the court and outside of it. She’d linger by my side at events and dinners, feeding me details about those in attendance. She’d been the one presiding over the various ceremonies, after all—and I’d been more than happy to let her choose what manner of wreaths and garlands should adorn the manor and grounds, what silverware complemented each meal.

Beyond that ... while Oberyn was the one who paid for my everyday clothes, it was Ellaria's eye that selected them. She was the heart of her people, ordained by the Hand of the Goddess to lead them from despair and darkness.

I was in no position to doubt. She hadn’t led me astray yet—and I’d learned to dread the days
when she was busy at her own temple on the grounds, overseeing pilgrims and her acolytes.

"So what do you say?" She flashed me an enthusiastic smile and looked sideways at Oberyn whose gaze upon me was equally expectant.

"Um ..." I rubbed my eyes, avoiding both their stares. What could they be possibly talking about? "Could you repeat yourself please?"

"Am I that boring?" Ellaria's full lips puckered out into a lovely pout. "I was talking about the flower decoration of the wedding ceremony. I was thinking of something romantic and passionate and ... classy. How about red roses and—"

"There won't be a wedding." Oberyn squared his shoulders, too abruptly for my liking. So I hastily added, "For the time being. Not until I figure out what the hell is going on with my body."

Or until you two acknowledge that there is something going on to begin with.

Beneath her pale, blue-gray hood, Ellaria furrowed her brow, crinkling the tattoo of the various stages of a moon’s cycle stamped across it.

All the High Priestesses wore the billowing, artfully twisted and layered robes—though they certainly were far from matronly. Ellaria's slim waist was on display with a fine belt of sky-blue, limpid stones, each perfectly oval and held in shining silver. And atop her hood sat a matching circlet—a delicate band of silver, with a large stone at its center. A panel of cloth had been folded up beneath the circlet, a built-in swath meant to be pulled over the brow and eyes when she needed to pray, beseech the Freya or Mother, or just think.

"Now it's not the time for this conversation." Oberyn shifted uncomfortably in his chair, patently displeased that I had brought up this matter. Again.

Just then Elia breezed in and planted a good-morning kiss on my cheek before claiming the empty seat beside me.

"What conversation?" she inquired casually while smearing butter on a slice of toasted bread.

"It's never time for this conversation." I quipped through gritted teeth, refusing to balk under Oberyn's and Ellaria's criticising looks. "Something is changing in my body Oberyn and I cannot put it to sleep. It grows stronger by the second. It is roaring in my ears to be unleashed—to take form—and you know it."

When both Oberyn and Ellaria refused to give me a decent reply Elia spoke in my defense.

"I saw the servants changing the sheets of your bed today." Elia's tone held nothing but integrity and simplicity. The simplicity she used every time she wanted to help me have my way around Oberyn. "And I saw the smudges on the porcelain. These were no ordinary flames and we all know who wields such unyielding fire. I am sure Jamie Lannister won't be so pleased to know that a drop of his power has been transferred to my brother's bride."

Breath knocked out of my lungs. "You think that I—"

"I think that all of the Seven High Lords bestowed upon you the gift of life," Elia took a bite of her toast, smiling mischievously at me. "and unbeknownst to them, a drop of their power."

"Do you think I might have those abilities?" I said, willing myself to hold Oberyn's troubled gaze.
“It’s possible,” Oberyn admitted out loud at last with equal quiet. “And if it’s true …”

“It’s a power other High Lords might kill for.” Ellaria added.

"Hoster Tully and me and your father—"

"I have no father anymore." I spat, my innards turning into ice. "My father died the day my mother and brother paid for his actions."

Oberyn’s spine locked up again. My rejection toward my father didn't please him at all. Nevertheless, he pushed aside the matter and carried on. "Imagine Robert Baratheon or Jamie Lannister finding out about their missing magic. They’d do anything to make sure you don’t possess it—including kill you. There are other High Lords who would agree."

That thing beneath my skin began roiling. “I’d never use it against anyone—”

“IT’s not about using it against them; it’s about having an edge when you shouldn’t,” Oberyn said. “And the moment word gets out about it, you will have a target on your back.”

“Did you know?” I demanded. Ellaria wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Did you suspect?”

“I’d hoped it wasn’t true,” Oberyn said carefully.

Blood began boiling in my veins, anger coiling hot in my bones. He knew ... and he ignored it.

I felt so utterly hopeless right now. So alone. As though I had no allies concerning this matter. Except for one, and although he was a billion breaths away, his absence held as much gravity as his presence when it came to Oberyn.

“Rhaegar wants me to train.” I wasn’t stupid enough to mention the mental shield training—not right now.

Oberyn's tawny eyes snapped to mine, fury simmering within them. His look upon me was hard, the kind of hard that always made me be the one who broke the eye contact first, the kind of hard that made me want to crawl into a shithole and never see the light of the sun ever again.

"He talked to you?" Oberyn's knuckles turned white, his voice laden with awakening thunder. "Or was it you who talked to him?"

Instictively I rubbed my left arm under the table. Today I wore a dawn pink gown and, as usual, my right arm was exposed—sleeveless. But my left arm and my mating tattoo were concealed with a sleeve. As if it was an abomination. As if it didn't exist.

How else could Ellaria proclaim to the rest of the world that my mating bond was broken after all?

"He was concerned Oberyn." I retaliated, softening my voice on purpose, but Oberyn's icy countenance wouldn't melt.

“Training would draw too much attention,” he stated. I was too watched—too monitored and judged. Why should the bride of the High Lord learn to control magic she wasn’t supposed to possess if peace had returned? Rumours would spread faster than a plague. “Besides your training is more than sufficient to protect yourself if need be. Other than that, I can guard you from whatever comes our way.”

For there had been a time when he could not. When he had been vulnerable, and when he had
watched me be tortured to death. And could do nothing to stop Joanna from—

No I would not allow another Joanna. I would not take shit from anyone from now on. Ever again.

"How long did it take for you to guard me when you heard my neck snap?"

A muscle feathered along his jaw but before the conversation could become even worse, Elia intervened once more. "Lyanna is right. Since she already has the power, why not learn how to use it? It would be such a waste. She had been weak and helpless once and you couldn't protect her. Weakness is not an option. It has never been our option. I think the Targaryen arse is partly right."

"You don't understand!" Oberyn barked at Elia and me. "Both of you don't understand. He thinks as a general and abides by strategy and interest, especially now that he has lost his Crown. Lyanna is nothing more than a mere weapon to him." His eyes were flooding with hatred as they met mine. "But to me ... You are everything."

"You say he regards me as a mere weapon but you see me as a person. Then give me the choice I am entitled to as a breathing being. I have been training my whole life. I am a soldier. It's not like I will be starting from square one—"

"Soldiers follow orders blindly and you got yourself killed because you couldn't follow a fucking order to stay away from trouble." Oberyn flexed his fingers—keeping those claws contained. "And even if I started training you today, it'd be years before you could master all this magic flowing within you, and hold your own in an immortal battlefield."

I could do anything if I wanted to. Rhaegar had told me so during our reading sessions. 

You can do anything if you eradicate all the doubts those war-mongering fools of your Court have been planting in your head for years, all those insecurities that make you feel inadequate. You are smart and brilliant and able. Never forget that.

I would never forget it. I didn't want anyone to believe in me. The only person who had to have faith in my abilities was me and me alone.

Oberyn took a tight breath and went on. "So despite what that vampire cunt thinks you might be able to do, Lyanna, I’m not going to have you anywhere near a battlefield. Especially if it means revealing whatever powers you have to our enemies."

"It has already been revealed," Ellaria said, drumming her fingers on the table. I sucked in a breath. Whatever she was going to say next would only add fuel to Oberyn's fire, of that I was sure of. "Rhaegar knows of her powers and how deadly they are. What if he comes again and steals her away High Lord?" Oberyn's eyes turned frantic. "What if he wants to put a child in her belly. His child. His heir."

Rhaegar? Impregnate me? The very conception of the idea was plainly hilariously ridiculous. Besides, in order to conceive a child, I was supposed to have a normal monthly cycle. My moon's blood was gone for the last three months due to malnutrition.

"Imagine Rhaegar's seed blooming in your bride's womb. Their offspring will be invincible and most definitely the end of us. A hybrid—half wolf-half vampire—with Illyrian magic running through his veins. He will inherit from Lyanna the magic of all the seven Courts and then he will inherit Rhaegar's power. He might not be a Prince anymore, he might be a simple High Lord like the rest of you, but still he remains the most powerful vampire in history. If Rhaegar's unspeakable power tastes as our worst nightmare, imagine how unstoppable his offspring would be. No one is
supposed to possess such magic."

"That's enough." I hissed. The Priestess was spider-webbing her assumptions as though I wasn't present. "Rhaegar is still my mate and he would never—"

Oberyn slammed his fist so hard on the table that the chandelier shuddered. "He is nothing to you anymore. I don't want to hear a single thing about Rhaegar fucking Targaryen from this day on, and more than that, I don't want to hear his name on your lips ever again." His chair screeched as he pushed it back and made to leave the room. Elia gave me an apologising glance, promising wordlessly to talk to him later and followed him outside.

I bunched the gauzy skirts of my gown in a hand and stormed out of the dining room, completely aware of the eight sentries who had become my shadow for the last three months. Oberyn had appointed them to guard me when he was gone on the hunt and under no circumstances were they to let me leave the manor.

"Oberyn!" I rushed after him, following him cautiously into the stables. "Take me with you on the hunt."

"No."

"You know I can hunt better than all your sentries put together. Nothing is going to happen to me."

"No." The midmorning sun streaming through the stable doors burnished his raven-blue hair as he finished buckling the bandolier of daggers across his chest. His face—ruggedly handsome—was set, his lips a thin line.

Behind him, already atop her dapple-gray horse, along with three other sentries, Elia silently shook her head in warning. Don't push him, she seemed to say.

But as Oberyn strode toward where his black stallion had already been saddled, I gritted my teeth and stormed after him. "It's just a pathetic pack of naga. Piece of cake."

"Joanna's naga." he said, mounting his horse in one fluid motion. Sometimes, I wondered if the horses were just to maintain an appearance of civility—of normalcy. To pretend that he couldn’t run faster than them, didn’t live with one foot in the Shadowood. "I can't hunt a pack of naga while my mind is on you and certainly I won't take any risks when your safety is concerned. You will remain here in the manor where I can be sure you will be safe."

"What's the difference between a prisoner and me, my Lord?" I glared at him and stomped off toward the manor, my dismissal crystal clear.

In an instant, the stallion was blocking my way and Oberyn leaned downward to cup my face with his free hand. "You are not a prisoner my moon. You are the future Lady of the Summer Court and as my future wife you should be the one supervising the preparations for the feast."

And what would have been your role within your pack Lyanna? Rhaegar had mocked me once. Organising parties? Breeding pups for your High Lord? Living the rest of your life being cloistered, from the moment you would have started punching out heirs?"

Dread banded around my stomach as Oberyn went on, "I'm sure Ellaria is more than willing to lend you a hand. I want this Fire Night to be perfect and I want you to be the most beautiful Maiden my Court has ever seen. Can you do this for me baby?"

As soon as I gave him a resigned nod, Oberyn flashed me a sweet smile and brushed his lips gently
against my forehead.

"I promise you my moon. Everything will be brighter after Calanmai."

*If you choose me as your Maiden.*

Next time, I promised myself silently. Next time, I’d convince Oberyn to let me go with him.

Wasn't this what I told myself yesterday?

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was such a pain to write ... I'll try next update to be by Sunday since the next week I am participating in a book marathon and for seven days all I will be doing is read ;)

Btw, happy GoT season 7 to everyone. Truth be told, I wasn't particularly thrilled with the first episode apart from Dragonstone and Ed Sheeran lol ... Other than that, nothing special so far ;)
Her

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No one cares. No one cares. No one cares.

Her impetuous confession from last night was swirling in my head for the last twenty four hours. It drove knives into my skin and brought into the surface a volatile temper that I had never experienced—a temper that under different circumstances should have been pacified by now.

But nothing of who I was applied when her was concerned. The absence of her voice and scent drove me mad. The absence of those captivating blue-grey eyes drove me mad. The absence of her heartbeat drove me mad. And the fact that another male was enjoying all of her right now without appreciating her drove me even madder. Her who was rightfully mine! Almost.

I may have branded her with the mating tattoo, but she hadn't accepted me. The bond hadn't been cemented by her consent—by her free will.

I exploded. Again. For the fourth time since yesterday night.

All this ruthless power gifted to me since birth that I retrieved three months ago, blasted out of me and enameled the bedroom into a thick coat of darkness.

The outburst was hardly satisfying but brutally calamitous, given the state of my chamber; the partition that revealed only a boundless stretch of blue sky was nothing more than glass shards littering the floor, and so was the crystal chandelier that used to hang from the ceiling. There was a fleeting sense of relief immediately after. As if just the tiniest bit of aggression and fury had been exhaled. And yet still...

I couldn't recall ever being so blinded by rage before, not even when I saw what they had done to my mother and sister. At least then my anger had been cut down with loss and grief. Now, there was nothing with which to water down this fuming red monster within.

No one cares. No one cares. No one cares.

I cared. And it was so unfair, because I was here, a thousand miles away unable to lend her a shoulder, and that cur she left me for didn't even bother to move his little finger to acknowledge her daily nightmares—to attempt to understand what she was going through.

All I wanted was to help her. But she made her choice and I would show her the respect she deserved as my mate—as my equal. If her wish was to spend her immortality in the Summer Court, then so be it. Even if the distance was killing me inside, for her I would swallow this bane with a smile on my face.

For her everything. For her anything.

Three knocks on my door attempted to beat hollow my soul-consuming thoughts and redirect my attention. Before I had a chance to open my mouth, Ashara strutted in, a satchel strapped across her left side.

"As if you needed an invitation to come in," I remarked, lying in the mattress. I hadn't replaced it with a bed. Neither I had replaced the sheets, for that matter. They still smelled faintly of her.
Ashara looked around the room, a small frown playing between her perfectly trim eyebrows. She slid incredulous eyes at me—disappointed even. As disappointed as her next words.

"Ts ts ts ts ... Bunch that sulky mug of yours. And while you are at it, since it's already long enough, use your ugly face to mop this mess."

"Thank you ever so kindly for reminding me how pathetic I am." I lifted my glass of blood from my nightstand in salute and gulped it down like water. For the last three months, my diet had been ruined among other things. Hunting had become quite the labor and therefore I would indulge myself in human blood from the Blood Bank. Guilty pleasures. Only Cauldron knew how hard it would be to get back on track.

"You're very welcome," Ashara crooned and strode to the wardrobe, her leather boots shattering the glass shards in their wake. Carefully she began sifting through the clothes before producing a long, long sigh.

She twisted like a panther and faced me, holding one of Lyanna's dresses. "Remind me why you haven't gotten rid of these yet."

I poured another glass of blood, took another generous sip and said, "That's a good question. In any case, you can have them."

She threw the dress at me and it smacked me right in the face nearly blinding me in the process. Lyanna's scent wafted around me and longing rolled through my body like the tongue of a slithering snake.

"I pretend I didn't hear that," Ashara went on. "Her dresses are fit for a dwarf given how short she is. I have no doubt that Daenerys will love them though."

Ashara's frame was indeed way too tall and slender to fit into those dresses. But on the other side, she was exaggerating. Lyanna was not that short. She had a normal height, sagging slightly toward short, and a svelte and toned body. Just like my sister.

I neatly folded the dress and deposited it on the pillow adjacent to mine. "I am in no mood for banter and all that jazz Ash."

She sniffed. "I am going out for a flight. Care to join me?"

"I'm tired," I responded automatically.

"You know what?" She graced me with a saccharine smile and her voice turned deceptively soft. "I don't give a fart."

"Such a Lady," I joshed.

"The fact that other considerably competent parts of your body, buried inside your pants, have gone rusty since you met Miss Disaster, doesn't mean that your wings have to suffer the same fate."

I simply waved the matter off with a shrug. "You know, you don't have to check up on me day and night. I am fine Ash. Really."

She threw her satchel on the floor and ensconced herself on the mattress beside me. I turned to look at her. Concern was pouring out of her twin amethysts.

Ashara was one of the few people that made my darkest days brighter by just being in them.
"No, you are not fine. Quite the opposite, I should say." She took the third glass of blood out of my hands and shoved it onto the nightstand. "Since when did you become such a loser R?"

"I'm a mated man now."

My answer set Ashara's lips on fire. "Cauldron boil me, she left you! Do you want me to spell it for you?" The strong column of her neck bobbed with frustration. "She left you for another man without second thoughts—without looking back. You gave her a choice and she chose him." She paused for a moment, breathless as she was. "And you know what? Good riddance! She wasn't such a catch anyway."

Still, in my eyes, she remained the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

My own thoughts being spoken out loud by another person hit me like a tone of stones.

I huffed in exasperation. "You of all people should be able to understand me. Our situations are equally messed up. You are screwed as much as I am."

"No, there is a major difference between you and me." She prodded her index finger against my chest, as though to bring me back from oblivion. "I don't let anyone choose me. I am the one who chooses them. As for my situation, I don't have to deal with a childhood romance and long-term commitments and an already full heart. Mercifully, my situation is far easier and simpler than yours. My feelings are returned and not trampled down."

I shook my head, deflated from the inside. "So you are asking me to give her up? To let go now that I have finally found her?"

"I am asking you to move on—just like she did. To forget her—just like she forgot you. Don't you think it's a tad unfair to spend all day worrying about her—to dedicate all your first thoughts to her while she clearly doesn't think about you at all?"

I hadn't told Ashara about my talk with Lyanna. I hadn't told her how last night it took every ounce of my self-control not to winnow straight at the gods-forsaken Summer Court and take my mate from the claws of that misogynistic prick. When she spoke my name with such loneliness that choked her voice like vines was the only time I wavered. The only time my mind and heart collided and I questioned my decision to stay away from her.

"How do you know that?" I asked Ashara. "That she doesn't think of me."

"Judging from the upcoming night of her life, surely she doesn't. I bet the only thing that right now occupies her narrow little mind is what dress she will be wearing on Calanmai and what position she should adapt to accommodate her Hunter between her legs when they enter the cave."

The mountains around Velaris trembled, and I heard Seraphina growling from the House of Wind in response to my awakening anger.

"If the Martell's instincts choose her of course," Ashara added, obviously to placate me, but no reassurance, not even the ocean itself could extinguish the wildfire that had engulfed my body.

My dragon blood was pumping in my ears as the mere thought settled fully within me, like a rock in the bottom of the sea; Oberyn would be the Hunter, and Lyanna—my Lyanna—his Maiden. The mountains quaked again.

"Speaking of which ..." Ashara's voice purposefully twisted subdued and I slowly turned to look at her impish look upon me. Mother help me. "You should start preparing for your own Calanmai too.
High Lord.

My stomach clenched impossibly. Calanmai lasted for one week every year. Each day of the week was dedicated to one Court. The Solar Courts were the ones who inaugurated the ritual and then the seasonal Courts followed suit. Dawn, Day, Night, Autumn, Winter, Spring and Summer. This was the order.

Yesterday, it was Dawn. Jamie Lannister performed adequately his role as Hunter and as it was to be expected, his instincts chose my sister to be his Maiden. Tonight was Day's turn—Lyanna's Court—and tomorrow was mine.

As far as I knew, Rickard Stark would not be the one to hunt and kill the White Stag since his mate was long gone. Ned Stark would take his father's place and according to the rumours, his Maiden in the cave would be Catelyn Tully. How convenient for Ashara ...

"Do I?" My question was rhetorical but Ashara nudged me with her shoulder and answered anyway.

"You might not be a Prince anymore, you might not have four Courts to care for, but you still have your Court to rule. And besides, this Calanmai is going to be different. You won't have to endure sharing breath with that hag pinned underneath you."

Memories of the last fifty years' Calanmai danced in my head. Even then, Aerys would force me to take his place. To sacrifice myself by coupling with his own Queen with the excuse that I was the most powerful male in my Court. The most suitable to perform the task and ensure the best possible results for our land.

"Tomorrow you will have a say. You will be the one to choose your night partner. Although ... who this partner will be is beyond predictable." Ashara inspected her manicured nails before shooting me a suggestive smile. "Every vampire in Valyria knows you are going to choose her. You always choose her."

Light brown hair and baby blue eyes flashed in my mind. I willed my body to remember how it would feel to kiss those full blossomed lips again after fifty years—how it would feel to touch that porcelain, young skin that slid so perfectly against mine—how it would feel to bury my face into her silky hair that smelled of fresh flowers and heaven, and invited stars to dance in my vision and fireworks to explode through my body when I was inside her. I didn't know what superior force made me always pause and look at her before escorting her into the cave. Maybe it was her playful eyes that entralled and aroused me so. Or maybe it was her smart smile. The little rose had a smile such as I've never known.

Shoving my fried wits out of my mind haze, I tried to steer the conversation elsewhere. "Did you talk with Daenerys?"

"Yes, she is on cloud nine. Needless to say she has prolonged her visitation in the Dawn Court for another week."

"How is Jon?"

"Nervous. He threw up thrice before departing with Dany and Arthur." Ashara rolled her eyes. "And guess who was left behind to clean up the apartment."

I chuckled. "Do you think they are going to work things out Ash? I mean, they haven't seen each other for a long time."
"Well I hope so. But enough with this devastating talk. You have more important things to worry about than a ship which has already sank."

I lifted a brow at her. "Such as?"

Ashara turned to me, propping her face on her elbow. "Kevan Lannister. Don't you think it's high time we put a leash on him, or even better, pack him back to his nephew? We have left him playing Lord of the Mountain for far too long."

I returned my vacant stare to the ceiling. "And thus he will remain. I have no interest in the Court of Nightmares whatsoever and I presume that none of you will be interested in leaving Velaris to supervise the Hewn City. Apart from that, Kevan knows the affairs of the Mountain better than anyone and he has proven himself capable of dealing more than effectively with whatever comes his way."

Ashara nodded finally, if a bit reluctantly. She rolled over her stomach, fished her satchel from the floor and tossed it on my lap.

"Take a look at this," she said and her eyes hardened.

I opened the satchel with disinclined fingers and took out the only thing that it contained; a dagger.

I goggled at it, schooling my mind to take one thing at a time.

"Dragonglass," I breathed. "Where did you find this?"

"I visited the temples myself, the one in Cesere and the other in Sangravah. It seems that the priestesses used it to defend themselves. To no avail in the end though."

"Do you think it's them?"

Ashara's eyebrows knitted together. "It's possible." She patted me lightly on the shoulder. "Smart man your father. Died early and left us behind to dispatch the rabble."

We laughed together. A deep harrowing sound. "What are we doing now Ash?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm on vacation." She stretched lazily beside me before getting to her feet and dragging me as well out of bed in the process.

"What now?" I smirked at her.

In life there is family, and there are friends. And there are those rare friends that become family.

She smiled. "We get horribly drunk."

I smiled back.

I hated the bright dresses that had become my daily uniform, but didn’t have the heart to tell Oberyn—not when he’d bought so many, not when he looked so happy to see me wear them. Not when his words weren’t far from the truth. The day I put on my pants and tunics, the day I strapped weapons to myself like fine jewelry, it would send a message far and clear across the lands. So I wore the gowns, and let Elia arrange my hair and paint my nails from time to time.

"Oh, we can’t let her sit next to him. They’d rip each other to shreds, and then we’d have blood ruining the table linens.” Beneath her pale, blue-gray hood, Ellaria frowned. She scribbled out the
name she’d dashed onto one of the seating charts moments before.

I was alone with her in one of the many living rooms of the manor, organising the upcoming reception that would take place in four days from now—one day before the Court’s Calanmai. This social gathering was, in my opinion, completely unnecessary, but according to Ellaria it would be the perfect chance for me to be properly introduced to Oberyn’s Court. As their future Lady.

Ellaria was exaggerating as usual given how many 'unofficial' gatherings she had held in my name, every single one of them duller than the last one.

I was introduced and passed around, and my face hurt from the smile I kept plastered there day and night. I just wished I wouldn’t have to be pleasant or talk to anyone or do anything for a week. A month. A year.

Oberyn endured it all—in that outgoing way of his—and told me again and again that the parties were a way to introduce me to his court, to give his people something to celebrate. He assured me that he hated the gatherings as much as I did, and that Elia was the only one who really enjoyed herself, but … I caught Oberyn grinning sometimes.

So I weathered it, clinging to Ellaria when Oberyn wasn’t at my side, or, if they were together, letting the two of them lead conversations while I counted down the hours until everyone would leave.

The day had turned warm, the room a bit stuffy even with the breeze through the open windows.

The Priestess kept prattling about the guests, and the dishes that were to be served and the napkins that would best match the silverware and on and on she kept talking.

I was bored to tears. So I was just pretending to hear her and ... I observed her quietly.

Honestly ... Honestly, Ellaria, with her silky black hair, those mocha eyes, elegant features, and supple body, looked like she could be Oberyn’s mate. His equal. A union with Oberyn—a High Lord and a High Priestess—would send a clear message of strength to any possible threats to our lands. And secure the power Ellaria was no doubt keen on building for herself.

Among the immortals—werewolves and immortals alike—the priestesses oversaw their ceremonies and rituals, recorded their histories and legends, and advised their lords and ladies in matters great and trivial. I hadn’t witnessed any magic from her, but when I’d asked Doran, he’d frowned and said their magic was drawn from their ceremonies, and could be utterly lethal should they choose it. I’d watched her on some ceremonies for any signs of it, marking the way she’d positioned herself so that the rising sun filled her uplifted arms, but there had been no ripple or thrum of power. From her, or the earth beneath us.

I didn’t know what I’d really expected from Ellaria—one of the twelve High Priestesses who together governed their sisters across every territory in the continent. Celibate, and quiet had been the extent of my expectations, thanks to those whispered mortal legends, when Oberyn had announced that an old friend was soon to occupy and renovate the crumbling temple complex on our lands. But Ellaria had breezed into our house the next morning and those expectations had immediately been trampled. Especially the celibate part.

Priestesses could marry, bear children, and dally as they would. It would dishonor the Mother’s gift of fertility to lock up their instincts, their inherent female magic in bearing life, Ellaria had once told me.
So while the seven High Lords ruled their Courts from thrones, the twelve High Priestesses reigned from the altars, their children as powerful and respected as any lord’s offspring. And Ellaria, the youngest High Priestess, remained unmarried, childless, and keen to enjoy the finest males and females the land had to offer.

I often wondered what it was like to be that free and so settled within yourself.

When I didn’t respond to any of Ellaria's gentle questions, she said, “Have you given any thought to what color roses for the decoration? White? Pink? Yellow? Red—”

“Not red.”


"Okay then ... How about—"

"Ellaria ... Do you believe in the Cauldron?"

I didn't trust Ellaria completely but if there was someone capable of explaining rationally the Suriel's words to me, that would be her.

The High Priestess squared her shoulders and cocked her head, obviously taken aback and ... intrigued.

"My sisters across the Wall do, but I think it's just a goodnight story." Her answer was a fat, fat disappointment. "A sham for the vampires to intimidate and hold the leashes of their subjects." Ellaria's eyes grew suspicious and were coloured with a tinge of wile. "Why are you asking?"

"Just curious." I rushed to change the subject. "I guess you have been informed about the suckings of the two temples."

Ellaria shook her head in acknowledgement. "Quite tragic. But past remains in the past. I can see no reason why we should broach on this subject that happened three months ago."

It was crystal clear she didn't want to talk about it. Maybe she was aggrieved for what happened to her sisters. Or maybe ...

"I don't know about you but I found it to be pretty weird and ... complicated. I mean, we all know that the locations of the twelve great temples are a secret. Therefore, surely it wasn't an outsider who gave away the location. And two temples within a week ... I don't think it's coincidental at all."

Ellaria half-smiled. "Indeed. But don't think, even for a second, that there are no feuds between the temples or within the temples. There is always a game of power and hierarchy to be played. And there are no rules. Only corruption and the insatiable greed of men."

I was willing to delve further into the conversation that Ellaria was patently eager to dismiss but then Oberyn appeared in the doorway with a smile as broad as the sky. I knew that smile. It was a charm weapon he used every time he wished to wile me into doing something.

He asked me to accompany him upstairs and I trailed with curious steps behind him.

We climbed the stairs leading up in the second floor and we halted outside of his office.

"Listen love," Oberyn took my hands in his and plunged his stare into my mine. "I want you to
promise me something, would you?"

I frowned deeply. "Promise you what?"

"That you will listen before you speak. And more than that, that you will keep things civil."

I frowned even deeper. "Just open the bloody door Oberyn."

I didn't promise anything as he cracked the door open and I came face to face with my father, lounging comfortably in one of the leather armchairs scattered across the room.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, the initial chapter was going to include more stuff but it would be too long ...

Btw, I watched the second episode of season 7 and ... it was pure perfection. A tear or two slipped past my eyes when Nymeria reappeared *__* I just ... This episode was too much ... I am sure I am going to fall apart if Jon and Dany meet in the next episode!
The sting of betrayal infected my heart like pus as I twisted to face Oberyn and storm out of this mousetrap.

To my distress, he blocked my way like an immovable mountain, his eyes urging me—imploring me to give this a chance.

I mustered all the crumbs of composure and bravado that still burned in me and pivoted to confront the inextricable. To confront the father that I always looked up to and who occupied a special place in my heart—the father that was always there to pick me up when I fell.

But this man was gone now and his place now had taken only bones and debris and ashes.

"Just so you know, I am only doing this for Oberyn." I declared to the Day High Lord.

His weathered eyes softened and his lips curved into an infinitesimal smile of triumph. "Does this mean you'll hear me out Lya?"

The memories I had shared with him were rooted too deeply. And every time he called my name as though not a single day had passed—as though nothing had changed—I was hearing the crack of my heart breaking a little more.

"The only thing I will be hearing from you today will be your confession. I'm done buying your bullshit." An awkward veil of silence shrouded the room and I took the initiative to break it. "You raped them. You butchered their wings. You murdered them. You broke the rest of their family apart. Isn't this the right order?"

My father lowered his head and so did Oberyn. How could Oberyn be so accommodating? So soft-hearted and clement toward my father. My patience began running low.

"Whatever that witch made you believe—"

"Say it you coward!" I barked at him and my father flinched. All this anger I had been stifling within me for the last three months was pouring out of me like lava. "Confess how you quartered two defenseless women in cold blood and then gloated over their family's heartbreak. Confess how sick you are to have given me the knife you killed them with, as a birthday present. Confess how you can live with yourself after everything mum and Brandon went through because of you!"

My father rubbed the stubble of his face without looking at me. He looked so old and aged and tired. But his grey appearance wouldn't trick me into pitying him the least.

"Your mother knew Lyanna," he divulged at last.

*But Brandon didn't.*

"Did you indulge her into the details?" I mocked, but he refused to meet my judgemental eyes. "*Did you ever tell her why?"

"In this life some things have no reason my pup—no why. The lion eats the wolf, and the wolf eats
the deer, and the deer eats grass. The strongest is the one who survives. You have to break if you don't want to be broken."

The wolf blood coursing through my veins was howling for a fight that would take this damn house down—that would take this unfair world down just so that I can finally wallow in some peace.

"After every thing you did—after all this hatred and pain and ruin you caused, can't you at least pretend that you are sorry. That you have regretted it. That you wish to take responsibility."

Ice wrapped around my father's silver eyes. "Yes, I take responsibility. But I won't apologise for trying to protect my family, my people—my home. You don't know Lyanna what it feels like to be treated like a dog for hundreds of years—to be in constant fear of what could happen to your own and feel utterly powerless to help them, to stand up for them. You don't know. And that's why I did what needed to be done. I broke their lives apart so that they couldn't break ours. So that my family didn't have to go through what I did. So that you could know only freedom and freedom alone. So that you wouldn't ever have to kneel in front of another vampire tyrant—a Targaryen."

"And yet the Targaryens and their Court were the only ones among their kind who allied with us in the war." I snapped. "The ones who fought against their brethrens so that we could know the freedom you are bragging about. Without them, we wouldn't be here. Without them we would be nothing."

"Don't be naive Lyanna," my father bristled. "Do you know why Aerys fought for us? Because he couldn't win against us. He didn't help us because of the goodness of his heart or because he wanted to honour our ideals. He wanted power and dominance. He didn't have the resources to bend six Courts to his will, but what about three? By helping us gain our freedom, he isolated the vampire courts from any potential allies and then enslaved them. How long would it have been before he used his whore of a son to take down the Wall and invade our lands too?"

I think something like an unearthly growl spilled from my lips and the bond went berserk with madness. My body was on fire and I ... I could feel a blue flame welling up from my stomach.

Whore.

"Take this back!" I roared to my father. "You will watch your tongue when you speak of my mate!"

My father stared at me in black disbelief before a torrent of fury hammered on his hard features. "I will speak of that son of a bitch however the fuck I want Lyanna. That mate or yours is nothing more than a self-serving Lannister whore who killed for Joanna because he could! Because he was into killing. Because he is a monster with a good-looking mask. The faster you realise this yourself —"

He didn't have a chance to finish for I lunged myself at him. Oberyn was instantly on his feet, his arms wrapping around my waist but then—

Oberyn was blasted back against the wall of the office, his bones groaning from the impact. When I turned to look at him, he and my father were looking at me in bare horror. Oberyn's hands were severely burned, blisters already forming on his skin.

I looked down on myself and—

I was shielded. Donned in a layer of lethal fire, that encompassed me like second skin, I was seething from head to toe.

As my anger subsided and was replaced by sheer fright, the fire began simmering down gradually.
I needed to get out of this room. I need to ... go to my room and ... Think. Alone. Be alone. Be miserable alone.

I took a deep breath and looked at my father. My voice left no room for arguments.

"I am going upstairs now. When I come down, I want you gone out of this house. I want you gone from my life. For good. And if I find you here, I will be the one to leave this house for good."

I slammed the door of the office closed so hard that the chandeliers in the hall shuddered. When I finally was alone in my room I came in a fit of silent tears.

The same night, Oberyn came to my room to talk. I almost laughed at his suggestion because for the first time in three months, he was the one who wanted to sort shit out and I was not. Not with Oberyn at least.

I climbed to the roof in the middle of the night and ... Whispered Rhaegar's name. His shields were closed. No matter how hard I was tugging and screaming into the bond he wouldn't answer me. He couldn't hear me.

He ... He never shut his shields. He always had them open for me. But tonight ... It hit me that ... It was the Night's Court Calanmai. His Calanmai. He had moved on but I hadn't. I couldn't.

I don't care what time it is or what I'm doing. Don't hesitate to talk to me because half the time I wish that you did.

Another lie I bought. Another false illusion that I clang to, to convince myself that I was not entirely alone and lonely. Rhaegar was this false illusion.

I should have listened. I should have listened and caged my heart. But now it was too late. In the end, the only person I could rely upon was myself.

I thought I had known the utmost sadness in these last three months. But tonight, I realised, I was sadder than ever as I cried myself to sleep and yearned for my mate's hands to hold me and soothe my loneliness. The hands that would hold another woman tonight.

I didn't dream.

The blowing wintry winds of the Night Court were brushing cold, frozen kisses roughly upon my face. In the distance, The Mountain was an endless darkness, its proud peak cleaving through the foggy air and crowning the skies. Still, with all the bonfires that had been lit tonight and littered every stretch of the valley, the night couldn't be outmatched, and the stars outshined.

Due to the raucous music, the ground beneath me kept sending waves of reverberations into my body, that rattled my bones and echoed in my head. Fiddles, drums and flutes were a buzzing symphony that had me balancing on a nerve-wracking edge. An edge that grew sharper as every second settled in.

Around me young girls stood in line, giggling and murmuring and prattling. They were awaiting with anticipation for the hunting party to emerge from the woods that flanked the cave. They were awaiting impatiently to serve as the High Lord's mate for one night. They could daydream all they wanted, because this High Lord was mine for tonight. And for all the nights after this one, for that matter.
I was a winner and I wasn't going to lose to any of those girlies. Most of the vampire lasses had light emrine coats clasped around their shoulders—a show off of wealth and good standing—to protect them against the chill of the night. There was where their modesty ended. The rest of their bodies were donned in gauzy little dresses, every thing exposed on purpose to allure the eyes of the Hunter. *Stupid mistake. And a commonplace one as well.*

Little did they know that the more you snatch the bite out of the dog's teeth, the more the dog crouches between your legs to snatch it back.

To my sheer delight, I was the only one who had settled with a leather gown that accentuated all my ample curves and shrouded every inch of my skin but my face. Mysterious and imposing, an attire that left everything to the imagination—that made stranger eyes burn with desire to explore what was hidden beneath. I could win without petty devices and provoking.

I was a woman beyond feminine—a female that needn't prove to the world her status. I could win a stare, I could win a night and I could win the instincts of the Hunter who was now stalking out of the woods, the killed White Stag slang upon his broad, moon-kissed shoulders.

All too abruptly, the girlies beside me fell silent. Even the fireflies that were swirling around the trees felt like they had ceased their labors to behold what was to come; the selection of the Hunter's Maiden. His mate for one night and one night alone.

Even though this year the Night High Lord had found his true mate. Yet ... the wolf girl was nowhere to be seen. The rumours of her departure had spread faster than venom. They said the She-Wolf had abandoned her own mate for the bed of another man, thus disgracing his Court. They said she had broken the mating bond the moment she was brought back from the Afterlife and was Made—born again as something *else*.

I was torn about whether I should pity her for dropping her rightful claim on a man like that, or thank her for her stupidity, for if she hadn't fled, I wouldn't be here tonight to participate in the Great Rite and enjoy this masterpiece of a male she left behind.

But still ... she might have been smart to avoid Calanmai. Today was not about lovemaking. Even if Rhaegar attempted to be gentle with her, he would break her. She was so young—nothing more than a whisper of age compared to her mate's immortality.

Lyanna Stark was the biggest of fools, that I was sure of. This indisputable belief grew stronger and truer as the Dragon began stalking closer toward us.

My heart fluttered, and my breath hitched.

*Cauldron boil me.*

Even after fifty shitty years, my Hunter still looked like the finest work of art—like a dark angel molded out of unfulfilled promises and sins. He wore nothing but a pair of black breeches, the sight of his broad, sculpted torso making my eyes drool. His pale-blonde hair was flowing like a silver river around his face and softened the hard perfection of his features.

He was stunning.

And utterly terrifying.

My mouth was parched like the desert. I couldn't even gather enough saliva to swallow. So I just watched him stalk toward the line of girls like a hungry tiger that approaches its prey.
I took a deep, deep breath that traveled along every pore of my body and lowered my stare to the ground, so that only my drooping eyelids could be seen. Again, contary to the coy smiles the Hunter received as he inspected his potential night partners, I was the only one who avoided eye-contact and had a neutral countenance. I couldn't help but grin a wicked smile internally.

If there was one thing I knew surely about men, that would be that they didn't like 'easy'. Where was the fun in easy? They didn't like agreement, consent and blind willingness served on a silver platter. They were predators and women were their preys. They wanted to savor the thrill of their hunt. They wanted 'tough' and chasing-after. They loved games.

And if there was another thing that I knew all too well about my Hunter was that he loved games more than anyone. And I adored the players.

The sound of his feet were near silent, absorbed by the mossy earth, as he paused in front me. Let the game begin.

I felt his hungry attention pinning me down but I optioned for avoiding his stare, so I kept my eyes down.

Then his fingers held my chin. My heart began hammering in my throat, and I felt sick with excitement. A wave of heat rolled through me, a strange reaction that I bit down, planning to unleash it when the right time in the cave came. In my peripheral vision I watched him lean into me. His breath was cool against my heated flesh. Still, I wouldn't look at him.

As it was to be expected, he objected to that, because he tilted my chin up until I had no choice but to meet his gaze with my own. His irises were a familiar starry lavender, neither soft nor mischievous, but ... drunk and dark and possessed by the tremendous torrents of magic that he allowed to enter his body for tonight. Magic could strip away any sense of self, or right and wrong.

My lips parted and my lungs pulled in deep, bringing in as much air as they could. It didn’t seem like much.

I stood there doe-eyed and let him. Contary to his feral instincts, his fingers were gentle on my skin, his touch almost tender. He looked into the blue abysses of my eyes like he always had done so many times in the past, and for a moment his amethysts were misted with disorientation. He was looking for someone into my eyes—someone else. He cast a long glance around, as though he could find this someone. It was such a stark contrast to the whole situation that I was disoriented for a moment too.

It was a matter of split seconds before he returned his attention to me and began stroking my hair, lifting a thick brown strand to his face all the while, and inhaling it deeply. With a firm hand, he brushed my hair back over my shoulders and leaned into me, caressing the shell of my ear.

A spider shivered down my spine and my nipples went instantly hard.

"You," he purred against my cheek and I went limp with euphoria.

Suddenly, he reached for me, bending down. He slid one strong arm around my back and another under my knees.

I looped my hands around his neck as he scooped me effortlessly up in his arms and began carrying me to the belly of the cave. I leaned my head into his neck and let his masculine, slightly musky scent seep into me and rush into my lungs. It did strange primal things to my mind. I suddenly felt carnivorous. I wanted to tear the flesh from his bones with my teeth and drink his blood.
I was going to devour him.

And above all, I would make him forget that wolf girl. She could never give him what I could.

Once we were alone in the cave, my Hunter put me down, almost gently and started undressing mechanically. This was a ritual after all and not lovemaking. It was just a process. We were two pieces of a puzzle meant to be pieced together and unleash the required magic that will feed his lands for the rest of the year.

I knew what comes next; He was going to plunge himself into me. No kisses, no making each other feel good. These were the rules of the Great Rite.

But tonight I didn't feel like playing by the rules—and if I was to break them, I was going to do it properly. Rules are too dull and dullness does not suit my tastes. Tonight Rhaegar Targaryen was mine. After fifty years he was mine again. Not Lyanna's Stark. Not Joanna's Lannister. Mine.

I would erase these two names out of his mind. I was going to kiss him so hard until I asked him what was his name and moaned my name in return.

The ground was sodden with moisture against my back, as I watched my Hunter tossing away his breeches, his huge shaft sliding out and catching my eye. Before, I could take another breath, he was above me, pressing into me assuredly and dominating me with his size—with something hard and warm against my belly.

His erection.

He was fully turned on, his cock pulsing, the head growing slick with anticipation against my legs, making me grow wet for it.

His eyes were a bottomless indigo, as he ripped my gown clean from my body with one long swipe I could have taken the initiative to strip slowly, take my time, but this was simply more efficient.

He embarked on a slow perusal of my wholly naked body with eyes that were intense but now warm and violet. He gave a sharp groan that I knew was involuntary. As if he found me beautiful.

I flashed him my most seductive of grins and took the reins.

Before he could blink an eye, I was on top of him, straddling him. Males always revel in having the upper hand—in being domineering—and I had just robbed him of his dominance over me. He didn't seem to like the reversal of our positions but before he could protest, I leaned above him and crushed my starving lips into his.

He groaned, and as I took his mouth, he wrapped his muscled arms over me, hugging me down. I couldn't move even if I tried. His hands palmed my backside and yanked me against his unyielding hardness.

When I moaned with bliss, he touched his tongue to mine and I met him, wanting him to take my mouth deeply, to kiss me as he had that first time in this very cave. It had felt so good, that incredible mouth of his on our first Calamni. It was like kissing an angel. But tonight it was better than even that. He was aggressive but masterful. He made me melt for him, undulating my hips down to his erection, seeking more.
He growled low, then rasped against my lips and I mustered all the self-control I possessed to break my mouth away from his and let my hands travel down his marble torso and straight to his eye-catching shaft.

I shifted just an inch and slid my body sensually against his as I began stroking him there. Gazing up at him, I drew him into my mouth as best as I was able, adoring his flesh with my tongue. His expression was one of ecstasy mingled with disbelief as he watched me kneeling in front of the altar of his masculinity. I reached up to scratch down his torso, nails digging into his flesh, and he shuddered. I could taste him already salty and slick at the tip.

I resisted him taking his shaft from my mouth, licking my naughty lips for it even as he moved like lighting and pinned me underneath him, spreading my knees apart with his deft hands.

He began kissing me again, and caressing my arm, my back, my neck, my outer thigh. His touch was demanding, pushing me to my limits. It was almost like he was giving me a massage, except I could feel the sexual intent in his actions.

He nuzzled my neck, lightly nibbling on the sensitive spot where my neck and shoulder joined, and I shivered from the pleasurable sensation. Suddenly, his silky lips proceeded to venture lower and trail a telltale path from my collarbones to the swell of my breasts. They were there, soft and full and welcome, sucking my nipple, a deep apricot that looked like hard raspberries perched on the gentle upward slope of my bosom. My body arched, and I felt tension low in my belly. He repeated the action with my other nipple, and the tension inside me climaxed into nirvana.

He sensed it. I knew that he did, for one of his hands was now on my buttocks, kneading the soft flesh. His other hand wrapped against my rib cage and crashed my chest against his, as he positioned the tip of his length between my legs and buried himself inside my entrance.

Sweet Gods.

My body arched back into ecstasy and I placed my trembling hands on Rhaegar's shoulders to steady myself as he began accelerating his pace, as each overwhelming thrust became more forceful, more intense—as the magic leaking from our bodies shook the earth to the ground.

I fisted my hands into his hair and when his seed spilled inside me—when I was ready to chant his name to oblivion—he leaned above me and kissed me with heartbreaking gentleness—with heartpounding adoration.

A trickle of breath into my breath and—

"Lyanna ..." he whispered drunkenly into my mouth.

My heart sank into my stomach.

An echo of longing seemed to reverberate through him. At least, that’s what I wanted to believe it was—an echo.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, this chapter was so ... frustrating ...

I mean Margaery's POV was so tricky to write. As for the smut, I was really restrained
in order to keep the scene light and to maintain a certain kind of aloofness. Hope it's not too much ...

I do have a sense that this chapter won't take any kudos as well :/
The door of the study was slightly ajar but, to my disappointment, Oberyn was nowhere to be seen as I intruded into his personal space.

How original ...

Lately, I barely stole a glimpse of him in the manor since he lived with one foot in the Shadowood. These naga— and whatever monstrosities were prowling in there—were making our lives much more difficult and far less safer. Other than that, they seemed to be graced with Oberyn's attention more than me, other known as the Summer Bride-to be.

Bah, what a stupid name. I didn't know how to call myself, and my loyal subjects-to be didn't know how to call me either. They addressed Oberyn as High Lord but I was to be addressed as mere Lady after our wedding since there was no such thing as a High Lady ...

A tiny bit unfair but ... I didn't mind. I never gave a damn for my title anyway so long as I was treated equally and had a choice.

Choice ... Nowadays, the word and its context seemed as alien and distant to me as those blue winter roses Rhaegar had shown me on the Winter Solstice.

To me these roses smell as mind-blowingly beautiful as you do Lyanna.

My heart stammered as the memory settled fully within me.

Fat shafts of dawn light were sliding through the patio doors, hitting on the lacquered wooden floor and illuminating granules of dust that flickered between pages and the spines of leather-bound books.

Oberyn's study resembled to a mini library. A wisp of knowledge among the infinity of times. So many books ... And I was surrounded by these little treasures. I could ... I could read them and not just flip through the pages, searching like a baby for images. Not anymore.

I could read them. I could read them. I could read them. Thanks to my mate.

Oberyn's desk was littered with an intimidating amount of papers and documents. I leaned over and cocked my head, my eyes scanning them with abandon, if only out of pure curiosity to see for myself what kept him so busy all way through the night.

Most of them were centered around Calanmai and the Summer Solstice in a few weeks from now and—

A report. A report about the two temples in Sangravah and Cesere that had been sucked. And ... There was another name mentioned. Or maybe it was a location.

Itica. I didn't recognise it but geography was never my thing anyway.
Ellaria told me there was no point in talking about the sucking of the temples that happened three months ago, yet here was the proof that Oberyn was still dealing with it. And what this other name might be?

I frowned. How unusual ...

The door of the study closed with a soft thud and Oberyn breezed in, a small velvet box wrapped with a delicate pink bow in hand. His countenance was a concoction of casualness and aloofness.

I whipped my head to him and he met my eyes, his expression of neutrality dwindling away as his stare drifted from me perched onto his desk to the documents I was doctoring, and right back to my eyes.

"Hello baby." His tone was nothing short of reserved. "I was just about to come up," he said, his eyes working feverly to do a quick scan over my body to make sure all was right, all was fine. "You should be asleep."

I hardly grabbed some sleep. My father's visit and everything that happened in between kept me upset all night. "So should you," I said, my voice as tenuous as the peace between us. "You work too hard," I complained, eyeing the present as Oberyn had eyed me.

"Why do you think I had such little interest in being High Lord?" He smirked and gestured to the documents. "So much paperwork."

"I could only imagine." I managed a tight smile and flanged my next sentence like a fireball, dragging a finger along the papers on his desk. "Where is Itica and what does it have to do with you and the other two temples?"

Oberyn's eyes tightened with surprise—bad surprise—and his free hand curled unconsciously into a lax fist. His stare drifted again to the documents and back to my face as the realisation hit him like a brick. Good.

"Lyanna ..." he intoned my name in black disbelief or in excessive warning. It felt as if bullying me to back off.

"I am still waiting for your answer High Lord," I drawled, picking on my nails and dismissing that domineering tone of his.

Oberyn stiffened at the unmistakable superiority and arrogance hinted within my voice but blinked his irritation away.

"How did you ..." His features twisted with disorientation. "You read them." His words felt like an accusation. "How?"

I crossed my legs and weaved my fingers upon my kneecaps, sitted as I was on the desk, my pompous tone meant to unsettle on purpose. "Rhaegar taught me a thing or two. Apparently he was the only one who believed I was worth the effort and his time." I arched an ebony brow. "Is there a problem?"

Oberyn slid into a lethal sort of calm. His lips were pressed impossibly hard into a hair-thin line. For a moment, I felt invincible. I was in control and had the upper hand. I was moving the strings
of this confrontation however I pleased.

"No one can know about this. When you walk out of this room, whatever reading lessons and preposterous ideas the Targaryen jerk planted in your head will be wiped clean," he declared. Period. End of the conversation. An absolute verdict and a punch in the stomach.

"What is so wrong with me knowing how to read?" I bristled.

I was done buying bullshit and I was done being the illiterate, naive little doll they were forcing me to become.

"Lyanna, you know the rules and you have always accepted them." Maybe I was a seeing blind all this time. When you see the light of the sun, you cannot return back to the light of the torches. "They cannot change."

"Horseshit. You are a freaking High Lord! If you truly wanted to change them, you would have." But deep down I knew that Oberyn cared too much for his image to do such a groundbreaking thing. "I thought we were equals Oberyn."

"We are. But equality doesn't necessarily mean similarity. Equality equals diversion. These rules apply to every female in our Courts."

I paused. And looked at him, ready to hurtle his own claims against him like daggers

"Why does your High Priestess know how to read and I don't? Why is your High Priestess allowed to paint and create in her temple and I am not? Why is your High Priestess allowed to learn and play music and I am not?"

Cool, deadly ice banded around his tiger eyes. "Ellaria chose this path for herself. She dedicated her life to the gods and the gods always demand praise and beauty in return. But you Lyanna were trained in—"

I didn't cut him off. He realised too late what he was about to say. He was going to say I was trained in battle. Automatically, he was going to cancel whatever safety bullshit he had been mumbling about since I set foot in his home.

"Go on say it," I hissed. "My parents encouraged me to abandon all the things I loved in order to engage in battle training. They said time was precious and I couldn't afford wasting it on useless things. For gods' sake, I am immortal! And now ... Now I have been robbed of my training too. Now that I need it the most. You have me cooped up here when all I want is to help you." My voice cracked. "You know that I can Oberyn, but you are too stubborn to let me. Instead, you invited my father here and turned to him for help. You ignored my feelings and did what you thought best for me. As if I didn't have a say!

By the time I had finished, I was left breathless, and my eyes blurred with hot, rolling tears. Upon hearing my stifled sobs, Oberyn's tense body slackened and his tiger eyes softened with unmistakable regret. He crossed the room with two long strides and trapped me in his arms.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, and my spine tingled. "I'm sorry my moon."

I wrapped my hands around his neck, as if he was an anchor. My anchor in this glorious mess that were our lives since that night. Since we were reunited. What happened to us? What happened to that boy who would have torn the stars from the sky just to see me smile? Maybe this boy was dead
—a corpse deep inside the man who now held me.

“I shouldn’t have brought him here,” he breathed onto my skin and held me tighter, caressing the column of my neck with his lips. "I should have told you."

"Oberyn." My voice was a plea that drowned into his copper skin. He pulled back a bit to look at me, and his expression held nothing but sincerity and vulnerability. My lips trembled like aspen leaves, as I braced myself to ask the question that I couldn't bring myself to ask since I arrived here. I had to know.

"Did you know?" I breathed.

Oberyn's tawny eyes crackled like embers. His lashes drooped slightly and he rubbed the stubble in his chin.

"Tell me you didn't know," I implored. I prayed that would be the answer.

"I knew. My father told me and ... showed me the spoils." 

Spoils ... I was sick.

"Where are their wings?" I asked with bated breath.

"I burned them." Oberyn's eyes held anything but regret. I pretended his apathy didn't pierce me like a thousand needles. "A long time ago."

Change the subject ... Change the subject.

I inclined my head toward the present waiting beside me on the desk, more than willing to let this be the last of it. Oberyn wouldn't stop showering with jewels and dresses and pretty little things that I never wore twice. I gave a small, wry smile. “For you?”

He brushed my drying tears one by one. “For you. From me.” An apology. For yesterday

Feeling lighter than I had in days, I tugged the ribbon loose, and examined the navy box beneath.

I flipped open the velvet lid and a silver ring with an otherworldly blue sapphire stared back at me. I knew this ring. It was an heirloom. Oberyn's mother would always wear it—her wedding ring.

I whipped my head at him.

"So ..." Oberyn graced me with a crooked but nervous smile.

I tried to smile. Tried to will some brightness to my eyes.

Oh gods.

He said, “You don’t like it.”

“No,” I managed to say. “No—it’s wonderful.” And it was. It really was.

My face heated.
"You don't have to answer now. Take your time. Take all the time you need, so long as the answer is yes." He gathered a loose strand of my hair in his fingers and began playing with it gently. "I thought that ... mulling over the answer will take your mind off for a little bit."

“And what about you?” I asked quietly. “Will the paperwork help with anything at all?”

I dared meet his eyes. Temper flared in them. But he said, “We’re not talking about me. We’re talking—about you.”

I studied the box and its content. This was a great leap in my life. And five months ago I was willing to make it. Until my engagement was ruined. Until I was dragged through hell. “Will I ever be allowed to roam wherever and whenever I wish? Or will there be an escort all the time?”

Silence.

A no—and a yes, then.

I began shaking, but for me, for us, I made myself say, “Oberyn—Oberyn, I can’t … I can’t live my life with guards around me day and night. I can’t live with that … suffocation. Just let me help you—let me work with you.”

“You’ve given enough, Lyanna. Why can't you just recover in peace?”

“I know. But …” I faced him. Met his stare—the full power of the High Lord of the Summer Court. “I’m harder to kill now. I’m faster, stronger—”

“My family was faster and stronger than you. And they were murdered quite easily.”

“Then marry someone who can put up with this.”

He blinked. Slowly. Then he said with terrible softness, “Do you not want to marry me, then?”

I tried not to look at the ring. “Of course I do. Of course I do.” My voice broke. “But you … Oberyn …” The walls pushed in on me. The quiet, the guards, the stares. “I’m drowning,” I managed to say. “I am drowning. And the more you do this, the more guards … You might as well be shoving my head under the water.”

"I promise you Lya, once Calanmai is over I will dispense you of the guards." He leaned toward me and pressed his forehead against mine. "Everything will be better after Calanmai."

I sucked in a liberating breath. I could do this. I could endure this three more days until the Fire Night. "You promise?"

"Promise." His warm hands began roaming over my body, petting me suggestively. "You nervous?"

My voice softened as I said, "I trust you Oberyn Martell."

He grinned at me like a tiger and pressed his mouth between the bare spot of my neck and shoulder. "Care for a warming-up?"

My body went taut as his hands began travelling non-stop over the thin fabric of my nightgown.
"Oberyn," I protested but his hands were too addicted to my body to stop so easily.

"Oberyn," I began squirming in his grip but his size always dominated over mine. His hands carried on their hungry exploration before sliding under my night shift and venturing into the cold gap between my thighs and right into the center of me.

"Stop," I pushed my hands against his chest to create some distance between us to no avail. Panic welled up from within me when he wouldn't stop.

But then—

I cried out, instinct taking over as his power blasted through the room.

The windows shattered.

The furniture splintered.

The room exploded into dust and glass and wood.

One breath, the study was intact.

The next, it was shards of nothing, a shell of a room.

None of it had touched me from where I had dropped to the floor, my hands over my head. Oberyn was panting, the ragged breaths almost like sobs.

I was shaking—shaking so hard I thought my bones would splinter as the furniture had—but I made myself lower my arms and look at him.

There was devastation on that face. And pain. And fear. And grief.

Around me, no debris had fallen—as if he had shielded me.

Oberyn took a step toward me, over that invisible demarcation.

He recoiled as if he’d hit something solid.

“Lyanna,” he rasped.

He stepped again—and that line held.

“Lyanna, please,” he breathed.

And I realized that the line, that bubble of protection …

It was from me.

A shield. Not just a mental one—but a physical one, too.

Light, from my father. And wind from Hoster Tully.

“Lyanna,” Oberyn groaned a third time, pushing a hand against what indeed looked like an
invisible, curved wall of hardened air. “Please. Please.”

Those words cracked something in me. Cracked me open.

Perhaps they cracked that shield of solid wind as well, for his hand shot through it.

Then he stepped over that line between chaos and order, danger and safety.

He dropped to his knees, taking my face in his hands. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

I couldn’t stop trembling.

“I’ll try,” he breathed. “I’ll try to be better. I don’t … I can’t control it sometimes. The rage. And we haven’t … I haven’t touched you for so long. Today was just … today was bad. Today—let’s forget it, let’s just move past it. Please.”

I didn’t fight as he slid his arms around me, tucking me in tightly enough that his warmth soaked through me. He buried his face in my neck and said onto my nape, as if the words would be absorbed by my body, as if he could only say it the way we’d always been good at communicating—skin to skin, “I couldn’t save you before. I couldn’t protect you from them. And when you said that, about … about me drowning you … I lost it. Am I any better than they were?”

I should have told him it wasn’t true, but … I had spoken with my heart. Or what was left of it.

“I’ll try to be better,” he said again. “Please—give me more time. Let me … let me get through this. Please.”

Get through what? I wanted to ask. But words had abandoned me. I realized I hadn’t spoken yet.

Realized he was waiting for an answer—and that I didn’t have one.

So I put my arms around him, because body to body was the only way I could speak, too.

It was answer enough. “I’m sorry,” he said again. He didn’t stop murmuring it for minutes.

You’ve given enough, Lyanna.

Perhaps he was right. And perhaps I didn’t have anything left to give, anyway.

Oberyn didn’t stop apologizing for two days.

But he was good for his word.

There were fewer guards as I walked the grounds. Some remained, but no one haunted my steps. I even went on a ride through the woods.

Hold on. I had to hold on a little bit longer. Until Fire Night.

The day of Fire Night—Calanmai—dawned, and I didn’t see Oberyn or Doran all day. As the afternoon shifted into dusk, I found myself again at the main crossroads of the house. None of the servants were to be found. The kitchen was empty of staff and the food they’d been preparing for
two days. So I went upstairs. The sound of drums issued.

I had lied to Oberyn. Nervous. I was so so nervous. My first Calanmai. I was sick to my stomach with anxiety. The thing was that ... I wasn't only worrying about the Great Rite, since I had to be chosen by the Hunter first to enter the cave.

I had a mate, therefore my scent was off. I was no competition. I was disqualified. I had confessed this huge reservation of mine to Elia while dressing and she had assured me that Oberyn was head over hills for me and that he would always choose me. Yet ... Oberyn would be unconsciously another person tonight. And while my Oberyn would always choose me, the Hunter inside him wouldn't.

The drumbeats came from far away—beyond the garden, past the game park, into the forest that lay beyond. They were deep, probing. A single beat, echoed by two responding calls. Summoning.

I stood by the windows of my chamber that gave my eyes free access to the garden, staring down over the property as the sky became awash in hues of orange and red. In the distance, upon the sloping hills that led into the woods, a few fires flickered, plumes of dark smoke marring the ruby sky—the unlit bonfires I’d spotted two days ago during my ride.

As strange as it might sound, I had never partaken in Calanmai. It was a very immortal ritual. Tonight was all about coupling and dalliances and fornicating. This night was a pure orgy. Therefore my father would always ban me and Benjen from attending. We would always lock our doors and set up snares in case anyone sneaked in.

The drums turned faster—louder. Though I’d grown accustomed to the overwhelming smell of magic, my nose pricked with the rising tang of metal, stronger than I’d yet sensed it.

Even the garden, usually buzzing with the orchestra of its denizens, had quieted to hear the drums. There was a string—a string tied to my gut that pulled me toward those hills, commanding me to go, to hear the drums …

Oberyn emerged from the house and I watched him cautiously from my window, drinking him in in order to steal a clue of what I might face tonight.

He was shirtless, with only the baldric across his muscled chest. The pommel of his sword glinted golden in the dying sunlight, and the feathered tops of arrows were stained red as they poked above his broad shoulder. The warrior incarnate.

My attention lingered at the bow in his hand. Judging from the weapons, Fire Night had to be brutal and violent—especially if Oberyn’s beast form wasn’t weapon enough. My heart echoed the drums outside, building into a wilder beat.

As though he detected my scrutiny upon him, he twisted and tilted his head to look at me behind the window. His canines began to lengthen and humanity began bleaching from his amber eyes. My heart leaped into a gallop.

Stronger, faster, the drums beat, and the muscles in Oberyn’s neck quivered, as if standing still were somehow painful to him.
Before I could unlatch the lid and bid him farewell, he took off running. The muscles in his back shifted as he leaped down the short flight of stairs and bounded into the garden, as spry and swift as a stag. Within seconds he was gone.

Half an hour later, I couldn’t stop pacing up and down my room, gazing out toward the fires burning in the distance.

I was not supposed to go out there unescorted until midnight. Until the hunting party had arrived.

But a wild, wicked voice weaving in between the drumbeats whispered otherwise. *Go*, that voice said, tugging at me. *Go see.*

Cladding myself in a dark cloak to conceal the gauzy little gown Elia had demanded I wore tonight, I followed the drums.

The stables were empty, but riding bareback was a part of my training, and my white mare was soon trotting along. I didn’t need to guide her—she, too, followed the lure of the drums, and ascended the first of the foothills.

Smoke and magic hung thick in the air. Concealed in my hooded cloak, I gaped as I approached the first giant bonfire atop the hill. There were hundreds of Werewolves milling about, in their beast and human form alike, but I couldn’t recognise any of them.

I dismounted my mare but kept close to her as I made my way through the crowd, moving deeper into the celebration.

Though a cluster of drummers played on one side of the fire, the werewolves flocked to a trench between two nearby hills. I left my horse tied to a solitary sycamore crowning a knoll and followed them, savoring the pulsing beat of the drums as it resonated through the earth and into the soles of my feet. No one looked twice in my direction. No one recognised the High Lord’s bride.

I almost slid down the steep bank as I entered the hollow. At one end, a cave mouth opened into a soft hillside. Its exterior had been adorned with flowers and seashells, and I could make out the beginnings of a pelt-covered floor just past the cave mouth. What lay inside was hidden from view as the chamber veered away from the entrance, but firelight danced upon the walls.

This was the cave, I was going to enter. If I was going to enter ...

This cave seemed to be the focus of—way too many for my liking—young girls as they lined either side of a long path leading to it. The path wended between the trenches among the hills, and the swayed in place, moving to the rhythm of the drumming, whose beats sounded in my stomach.

I scanned the firelit area, trying to peer through the veil of night and smoke. I found nothing of interest, and none of the werewolves prowling about paid me any heed. They remained along the path, more and more of them coming each minute.

I made my way back up the hillside and was ready to go back to the manor—for Elia and Ellaria would be furious if they hadn’t already perceived my absence—when someone grasped my bare right arm and whirled me around.

Like all the dresses in my wardrobe, this one too was designed with a sleeve to cover the tattoo on my left arm.
I blinked at the three strangers, dumbfounded as I beheld their sharp-featured faces.

The one grasping my arm smiled down at me, revealing slightly pointed teeth. “What a pretty little thing,” he murmured, running an eye over me.

I tried yanking my arm back, but he held my elbow firm. “What do you want?” I demanded, keeping my voice steady and cold.

I could tackle him down in a matter of seconds and chop him up like logs of wood, but that would attract too much attention. And if my identity was revealed ... I wasn't supposed to be here, I reminded to the beast roaring inside me.

The two males who flanked him smiled at me, and one grabbed my other arm—just as I went for ... my knife. Shit. Ellaria had striped me of all my weapons. “Just some Fire Night fun,” one of them said, reaching out a pale, too-long hand to brush back a lock of my hair. I twisted my head away and tried to step out of his touch, but he held firm. None of the revellers near the bonfire reacted—no one bothered to look.

I yanked my arms in earnest. Their grip tightened until it hurt. The three of them stepped closer, sealing me off from the others. The three males chuckled, a low hissing noise that ran along my body. I hadn't realized how far I stood from everyone else—how close I’d come to the forest’s edge. “Leave me alone,” I said, louder and angrier than I’d expected.

“Bold statement from a defenseless girl on Calanmai,” said the one holding my left arm. "Once the Rite’s performed, we’ll have some fun, won’t we? A treat—such a treat—to find such a delectable thing unescorted.”

I bared my teeth at him. “Get your hands off me,” I hissed, my voice intimidating but discreet.

One of them ran a hand down my side, its bony fingers digging into my ribs, my hips. I jerked back, only to slam into the third one, who wove his long fingers through my hair and pressed close. No one looked; no one noticed.

But ... If I could lure them into a quiet spot, away from prying eyes and isolate them ... Then I could work my pretty little tricks on them. I didn't need weapons to defend myself. My body was a weapon, one I honed and polished since childhood.

“Stop it,” I said to be more convincing, but the words came out in a strangled gasp as they began herding me toward the line of trees, toward the darkness. I barely suppressed the feline smile that was brewing to form on my lips. I was the cat and these heedless fools were the mice. I could have a little fun before the Rite. My body was spoiling for a good fight after three whole months of idleness and sitting on my ass.

I pushed and thrashed against them; they only hissed. One of them shoved me and I staggered, falling out of their grasp. The ground welled up beneath me, but sturdy hands grasped me under the shoulders before I could hit the grass.

They were strong hands—silky soft and broad. Not at all like the prodding, bony fingers of the three males who went utterly still as whoever caught me gently set me upright.

My skin electrified.
“There you are. I’ve been looking for you,” the male behind me purred as he stepped to my side and slipped a casual arm around my shoulders.

I sucked in a breath, drowning down my surprise and embarrassment and awkwardness.

_Oh gods. Oh gods. Oh gods._

I wished for the earth to open and shallow me up. Or maybe I could start looking for a shovel to dig a hole, crawl in and die.

My heart was ready to burst into splinters. And damn ... it was beating so fast and so loud. He could hear it, he could hear it. It could be heard all across the world.

The three jerks paled, their dark eyes wide.

“Thank you for finding her for me,” my savior said to them, smooth and polished. “Enjoy the Rite.” There was enough of a bite beneath his last words that the males stiffened. Without further comment, they scuttled back to the bonfires.

Damn Damn Damn.

The bond was on fire and my stomach was swelling with butterflies.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah ...
Okay, this was supposed to take me longer to write but the interaction was easier than I thought. The chapter is dedicated exclusively to GreyMochila as a reward for his infinite patience regarding Oberyn, aka the Summer bitch lol. I hope this chapter and the outcome is compensation enough for 25 chapter of seeing Rhaegar not getting our girl ;) 

Enjoy!

"Oh damn," I murmured under my breath, excitement and nervousness banding around my stomach. A casual, yet protective arm was still slang around my right shoulder, even though the three males were long gone. The slender, elegant fingertips of my savior were like a brand upon my bare skin, touching and touching and touching until they made sure I was really unharmed.

"Oh damn indeed," Rhaegar, looking straight ahead, parroted me, a premonition of feral rage lurking behind his deceptively serene voice. I had the good sense to cease breathing as I dared glance sidelong at him—and temper indeed, bad temper—flickered in those indigo—nearly black eyes.

I bit my lower lip. I was so screwed.

With a fluid move, I stepped out of the sanctuary of his arms, my steps as short and alarmed as the ones of a child who is about to be castigated—or to be more precise, lectured.

Welcome realisation dawned on me that I wasn't the only one who wasn't supposed to be here tonight. I might have sneaked out unescorted but he wasn't supposed to sneak in at all. Therefore, I could turn upside-down the table—ruffle the cards and twist this unfortunate series of bad choices and bad luck to my advantage.

Before I could start spilling words, Rhaegar had ripped his eyes off the horizon and turned to fully look at me. His violet eyes became two slits when they landed on my left arm, sleeved to conceal the mating tattoo. I was sure he had heard the false rumours of our broken bond too.

And although it was sycophants who spread those rumours, I had never proclaimed them untrue. I couldn't ... because thus, breaking Oberyn's heart and trust would be inextricable.

Having pursed his lips, Rhaegar's raged orbs kept drinking me in. Pissed. He was so pissed. All too abruptly, his countenance darkened horrendously and I could have sworn, the night was generated by him. There was nothing humanly delusioned about him.

"Lyanna." Rhaegar's eyes lingered, taking in every detail. "Are you running low on food here?"

The worry hinted in his voice slammed onto me like a brick in the face because it was ... justified. I was an emaciated husk. The shell of the person I used to be. My body was a flesh-layered vertical
line of bones, my curves an unremembered past. My skin was bruised in some parts without reason, due to my low daily intake, and my face was gaunt and hollow as a ghost's. I was robbed of muscle and strength and soul, and the will to preserve one for that matter.

Three months of neglecting and maltreating my body. Three months of not listening to its demands.

Looking down on myself, I was nothing short of pathetic and pitiable. I could detect pity in my mate's bottomless glare. And if there was one thing I despised, that would be being pitied as if I was a homeless puppy.

"You!" I finger-pointed him, in an attempt to change the tide and dodge the food question. "How ... What in the Seven Hells are you doing here?"

Tonight, I wanted to snipe. Of all the days, tonight.

He was taunting me. His very presence tonight—his very breath around me was a smirking, ill-humoured taunt.

Rhaegar snorted. "Right now? I just played 'Knight in shining armor' and spared your reckless arse from a soul-deep trauma. What would have happened if these three—"

I snorted back. "I wasn't in need of your Knight services, Prince Charming. I had everything under control!"

Which was true. I was so close ... So close to unleashing all this fury I had been suppressing and letting stain my insides for so long and ... "You're welcome." Rhaegar said with an insouciant shrug of his shoulders. "For saving you."

I rolled my eyes at him and in a brusque manner took hold of his hand, herding him toward the other direction from where orgies where taking place right now. Away from the cave where Oberyn and the hunting party would be arriving any time soon. What time might be? Please, not any time near midnight.

The feel of Rhaegar's skin against mine was oddly comforting. And frustratingly distracting from the task at hand; getting him and his scent as far away from the wolves as possible.

"Pray tell me where you are dragging me to." He grinned at me like a dark angel. I didn't let myself suffer any delusions that I was the one in control of the situation. He was letting me drag him along. He was clearly enjoying my wildcat attitude.

I would be a self-loathing liar, if I pretended I didn't enjoy this myself.

The difference between us was that his delight was intentionally as plain as day while mine was as hidden as an answer to an enigma.

"Oh don't simper at me," I bristled. He could bribe even the Devil himself with that otherworldly smile of his, but not me. Certainly not his own mate.

"You know," His soft fingers were grazing subtly but at the same time hungrily against my knuckles, as though my skin was a limited, guilty pleasure for tonight, as though he could absorb me with his touch. "You have a flair for hounding trouble and bolting into it."
"You have a flair for always showing up and ruining all my fun." I retaliated. "What are you? My fairy godmother?!"

The bastard produced a humourless laugh. "Is getting yourself nearly raped your sense of fun?"

"Is encroaching on wolf territory and gambling your life yours?" I snapped breathless and let go of his hand. "Why are you here tonight Rhaegar?"

I twisted to look at him—my two waist-long ponytails swaying with the movement—and held his steady gaze for no longer than a heartbeat.

I couldn't look into his eyes without seeing his mother and all the tears she had shed ... Rhaella. I believe that was her name. A spike of sadness pricked my skin.

His expression was unreadable but his voice betrayed deceptive mirth. "My lovely Inner Circle decided I am not a good company these days, so Arthur, Jon, Ash and Dany dumped me in Velaris and tended to their own affairs. Vis is dating and petting his books all day long, and when he isn't, he is rushing from Court to Court as our emissary, in an endeavor to mend a thousand years of bad memories."

If I had any sense about myself, I would be plotting, lying, and running away. But here I stood, craving his voice and that sweet warmth it produced in my chest like chocolate. So I listened, amused while keeping my wits about me in case anyone identified him. With his long, bleached hair cleaving through the dark, and his telltale Valyrian features, the possibility seemed highly likely.

"So, whilst contemplating the cure to my boredom, I decided to pay a visit to the wondrous Summer Court and check up on my mate who, by the way, doesn't seem to care if I breathe or die."

"As if you need breath to survive. We both know the air in your lungs is plainly decorative. I'd say your survival depends on taunting me. You feed on my frustration."

Rhaegar chuckled and slid his hands into his pockets.

"And what are you supposed to do now that you checked up on me? Pat me in the back and give me some practical tips for my glorious comeback to my bedlife?" The moment I spilled words about my sex life with Oberyn and saw the wolfish flash in Rhaegar's eyes, I instantly regretted it. I slapped myself a thousand times mentally as I went on, hoping my reaction wouldn't be obvious. "Or maybe you would like to walk me down the rose-petaled path and escort me yourself in the cave. I am sure Oberyn will be in seventh heaven to see you. Who knows ... maybe you can drop by the manor later to treat you something. Maybe some homemade blood pudding. Or a Bloody Mary. I am an expert in cocktails, you see."

No matter how much effort I put into concealing the slip of my tongue, Rhaegar's brain had stopped registering useless information after that.

"Glorious comeback I hear, problems, problems, problems I am smelling." His well-shaped nose crinkled in a show of inhaling. "Mmm, don't they smell delicious?" I pursed my lips. The words were tinged with an arrogance that only an immortal could achieve. He laughed under his breath and I cursed myself colorfully under mine for giving him the excuse he needed to pry in my personal life. "What happened? Doesn't his little bird chirp for you anymore?"
"Just for the record, his bird is not little at all ... compared to ..." My jeering eyes landed purposefully on his groin in emphasis. "other birds."

Rhaegar clicked his tongue upon seeing my triumphant smirk at the insult of his manhood, but recovered in a blink of an eye and shot me a bedroom smile. "You are a vision tonight, Lyanna Darling. Though, you will excuse my poor manners, but I have to ask. Where is the other half of your dress?"

Now it was my turn to click my tongue at his remark. This was called the banter game. Whoever quipped the most smart-ass comment was automatically the winner. It was inevitable ... All this tongue and cheek verbal exchanges between us.

"Last time I saw you in one of these wolfish ceremonies, your dress was of decent proportions and threatened to shallow you up." Rhaegar carried on. "Tonight though ... But one might say it would be a pity to waste such fine silk, since it's going to be clawed clean off you anyway."

As it was to be expected since Elia was the one who chose my clothes, my dress was extravagantly naughty. The cleavage was provocatively deep, it exposed my bare back on purpose, and the hem barely reached the middle of my thighs.

"You are most kind my Lord," I said through gritted teeth and then ...

A soft summer breeze blew amidst the stillness of the rippling heat and a sweet scent caught in my nostrils. A remarkable and heady aroma. It was a blend of fresh flowers, lavender and peppermint. This was definitely not a male scent. It belonged to a woman ... one I didn't know.

I sniffed imperceptibly and looked around the grounds perplexed, following the invisible trail of the fragrance. Unbeknownst to me, I took a tiny step closer toward ...

Rhaegar.

The scent became tangier and I halted frozen into place as if I had bumped into a transparent wall.

My heart sank into my stomach and splintered into a thousand pieces.

Rhaegar frowned. "So ... Is the wedding on hold, then?"

"Yes," I whispered flatly.

Who this woman might be? Her scent was still all over him. So strong. It must be recent. Perhaps the woman he chose on Calanmai. Or maybe a woman he bedded the night after that.

"I expected an answer more along the lines of, 'Don't ask stupid questions you already know the answer to,' or my timeless favourite, 'Go to hell.'"

I just stood motionless, staring blankly at him and struggling to sort out all this bitterness, and thunder, and chaos through my head. When I screamed his name through the bond and found his shields padlocked that night, I had speculated he had performed the Rite, but now ... all the restless spinning in my bed, all the speculations I had been warping in my head ... were finally confirmed. The confirmation was terrible, and it flayed open my chest to show that my heart, numb for so long, was still vital and beating ... just so it could be ripped out again, after everything.

Rhaegar's frown deepened at my foreshadowing apathy as he took a step closer and said with fallacious aloofness, "I felt a pang of fear through the bond a couple of days ago. Actually, I felt it twice. Anything exciting happened?"
I took a step away to create as a big distance away from him and that woman's scent as possible.

"It was nothing." I said because knocking Oberyn down twice with my powers was something, and it was none of Rhaegar's business.

"You call this nothing?" Rhaegar huffed a breath and looked away, running a hand through his hair, his chest heaving with draining patience. "For fuck's sake Lyanna, I thought you were going to have a heart attack the second time! Did the Martell do something?" I wasn't going to tell him anything about Oberyn. If Rhaegar found out ... especially about the study incident when Oberyn wouldn't stop ... He was going to chop him up. It was an accident. Oberyn would never hurt me, or force himself on me, for that matter. He just had had a bad day and all the sentimental pressure I burdened him with ... "Is it so difficult to just tell me? To ... to trust me?"

The drumming was increasing in tempo, building to a climax I didn't understand and so did the hollow beats within my chest.

"I did." I pinned him with my desolated eyes and rendered my voice as untenanted as my existence. "Or at least, I tried to. I screamed your name until my lungs hurt but your shields were up. You wouldn't let me in. You were clearly busy ... in a cave, I suppose."

I lowered my head late enough to see my jab slamming home at his face before I span around and made to walk away.

"Lyanna..." It was difficult not to detect the catch in his voice, the longing and despair in his eyes. The plea that was my name on his mouth as he looped his light fingers around my elbow and prevented me from running away. Away from my problems. Away from my feelings. Away from ... love?

No. Surely, it couldn't be.

Best not to worry about it, I thought. I didn't need it. Well. I didn't want to need it. Yearning for love made me feel like a cat that was always twining around ankles, meowing Pet me, pet me, look at me, love me.

Better to be the cat gazing coolly down from a high wall, its expression inscrutable. The cat that shunned petting, that needed no one. Why couldn't I be that cat?

I just wished I could be the kind of girl who was complete unto herself, comfortable in solitude, serene. But I wasn't. I was lonely, and I feared the missingness within me as if it might expand and cancel me. I craved a presence beside me, solid. Fingertips light at the nape of my neck and a voice meeting mine in the dark. Someone who would wait with an umbrella to walk me home in the rain, and smile like sunshine when he saw me coming. Who would dance with me on my balcony, keep his promises and know my secrets, and make a tiny world wherever he was, with just me and his arms and his whisper and my trust.

Silly me.

Deep down, and above everything else, I was a girl. Not a soldier, not a huntress, not an artist. A girl who craved love, and touch, and connection. A girl who yearned for placeness all her life.

That's what I felt when Rhaegar hummed that distantly familiar song to me. Placeness.

Ever so lightly, I unhooked Rhaegar's fingers from my elbow and raised my head to look at him.

"You know, since I was a child, I've taken no one for granted. I've never marked anyone as
'permament' in my life, not even my family. Evidently." A mocking twitch of my lips as my father rushed back to mind. "I don't believe in blood, and bonds, and bounds. I believe in time, and loyalty, and actions. Loyalty is earned, not expected. Not blindly handed-over. Just because we are mates doesn't mean that you are accountable to me. It doesn't mean that I deserve your trust and attention. It doesn't mean that I deserve you." I huffed a laugh. "Who am I kidding? I've been an arse to you since day one. I am not some neglected child that needs looking-after. And you are not obliged to care."

I watched his features sharpen with something I couldn't place. His hands slowly curled into fists at his sides and his breaths became uneven.

"Is this what is all about? Do you think yourself as a burden? Why do I have to confirm the same thing a thousand times? You can talk to me. I want you to talk—"

"Yeah, I know anytime. Yet, when I needed you ... when I finally convinced myself that you were the only one I wanted to confide in, the only one who would understand me ... you weren't there." Weak. I was appearing too weak and vulnerable by confessing my innermost thoughts. "Like I said, you are not obliged to care and more than that, to give me promises. But when you promise me something, I expect you to keep to your word. When you make me believe that you mean something with all your heart, I expect you to stay true. Never make promises that you cannot or don't intend to keep."

His body went as taut as funeral and his eyes widened

Across the hills, the beat of the drums crescendoed, shaking the earth, and the sound of horns whistling danced in a frenzy. Summoning. Inviting the Maidens to wait for the Hunter.

Midnight. It was already midnight.

"I have to go." I announced and began unbraiding my ponytails, letting my river of obsidian hair fall loose.

Rhaegar loosed a shuddering breath. If his own heart was beating, I bet it would match the intensity of the drums.

The bond jerked in my chest like a caged animal and I felt unadulterated panic sizzling through it. If Rhaegar was maintaining some kind of coolness for the past half hour, now he appeared lost, unable to keep his dismay and disapproval at bay.

"Have you lost your senses?" He seethed, blocking the path that led to the hills and back to the bonfires. My only escape route. His face had gone ghostly pale. "This is madness Lyanna. When was the last time you looked at yourself in the mirror?" His frantic scrutiny upon me confirmed how fragile he thought me to be. "Even if that brute tries to be gentle with you tonight, he will break you, and then he won't even bother to pick up the pieces."

"Now you are exaggerating," I snapped with burning angst. I knew his concern was not unreasonable. But I shoved aside my insecurities for tonight. And what if Rhaegar watched the ceremony? What if he witnessed Oberyn choosing another? He wouldn't stand idle and watch me being humiliated.

"Am I?" Rhaegar mocked. "Isn't this what he has been doing for the last three months? Ignoring
you. Pretending that he doesn't hear your retching when you hurtle your guts up every night. Does he know why you are avoiding certain rooms and never dare look yourself in the mirror? Why you cannot bear to see certain colours?"

"And what am I supposed to do?" I erupted. "Let him bed another random woman instead? You did your job a few days ago. Now let me do mine," I concluded and then I was gone, sprinting down the path to the cave, following the drumming that had become so loud and fast that it sounded like a thunderstorm.

The scent of my fresh-washed hair, so far contained by the ponytails, wafted around me, but the swirling smoke of the bonfires was weaving through them like a snake around its prey. I hated smoky.

By the time, I had reached the wolf mob, I was out of breath, my bare feet were scraped by twigs, my head was spinning and my heart was quivering. I was bone-tired, and the prospect of spending my night in a cave didn't ease the weight in my head at all. All I wanted was to retreat to the privacy of my room and sleep. Sleep until I couldn't hear Rhaegar's truth. Until the vile scent of that stranger woman was a distant memory. Little did I know, it would be imprinted on my mind forever.

I couldn't have been late, I concluded as I neared the cave. I had to ... I had to make it to the cave. But then the wolves began howling and as elbowed my way through the throngs of people, the crowd parted like needy lips, revealing the hunting party and their leader—Oberyn—the Hunter at their center, prowling toward me.

My knees threatened to buckle at the intimidating sight of him. This was not Oberyn. This man was something else entirely.

His bare, olive chest, was now stained with the blood of the sacrificed White Stag, and lethal claws, that could slash me in two, protruded out of his knuckles. And his eyes ...

These kohl-rimmed portals in a sun-bronzed face. Fire-colored eyes with a charge like sparks that seared a path through the air and kindled it. It gave me a jolt—no mere startle but a chain reaction that lashed through my body with a rush of adrenaline. My limbs came into the lightness and power of sudden awakening, fight or flight, chemical and wild.

Who? I thought, my mind racing to catch up to the fervor in my body.

And: What?

Because clearly he was not human, the man standing amid the tumult in absolute stillness. I searched for the Oberyn I knew beneath, but found no sign of him. Magic had distorted him whole. There was nothing humane about the way he moved. A pulse beat in the palms of my hands and I curled them into fists, feeling a wild hum in my blood.

Enemy. Enemy. Enemy. The knowledge pounded through me on the rhythm of my heartbeat: the tiger-eyed male was the enemy. His face—oh, beauty, he was perfect, he was mythic—was absolutely cold. I was caught between the urge to flee and the fear of turning my back to him as every step he took brought him one breath closer to me. I should be advancing to him as well, but I hesitated, especially when his lips parted into a predator's smile destined for me.

I was sick. Not with excitement, but with dread. I didn't want to do this. I couldn't, under the weight
of those amber eyes.

His father's eyes.

It was as if spooling through the vision all over again. His father on top of that tortured girl fighting beneath him while he raped her and smiled like a devil at the sight of her tears—of her horror and despair. Fighting in a life game that she had already lost. Fighting to change her fate that was already written in ichor.

The only word I could think of was, no.

If I turned away, the onlookers would start talking.

I was going to fall apart, right there, right then. And they'd see precisely how ruined I was.

Help me, help me, help me, I begged someone, anyone. Begged Elia, standing somewhere near, her caramel eyes fixed on me. Begged Ellaria, face serene and patient and lovely within that hood. Save me, please, save me. Get me out. End this.

No one understood me. They could as well be blind.

I retreated a step. No.

I tried to get my traitorous lungs to draw air so I could voice the word. No. No.

But I didn't have to say it.

Thunder cracked behind me, as if two boulders had been hurled against each other.

People screamed, falling back, a few vanishing outright as darkness erupted. And my nude back met with a broad, hard chest until it was flat against it.

My mate.

Palls of shadows engulfed us both.

Oberyn let out an otherworldly growl as his eyes threw daggers at the male behind me. His smile turned cold and cruel, baring a pair of inexorable canines. "I claim this woman for my own."

"I am afraid you cannot," Rhaegar crooned and proceeded to massage my exposed back and shoulders. A lover's caress. All around, a weave of murmurs and the weight of being watched, and I registered almost none of it. Instead, I found myself leaning back, seeking the comfort of his touch. I could have slept right there, just by listening to his honeyed, deep voice. The sound of it was a melody, and a lullaby, and an answer to a question I've been asking myself for the last three months. Or has it been longer?

"She is mine," Oberyn thundered and I would have stumbled back from the brutality of the sound, if not for my mate's solid grip around me.

I was fairly sure that Rhaegar's eyes were taunting Oberyn like hell as he nuzzled my neck and said, "Yeah, and I'm a flying penguin, if that's the case." I could feel the arrogant smile forming on the skin of my throat.

"How dare you interrupt my Ritual-"
"Was I interrupting? I thought it was over." He knew. Through that bond, through whatever magic was between us, he'd known I was about to say no. "At least, Lyanna seemed to think so, didn't you, Lyanna Darling?" Rhaegar's right hand began stroking my unbraided hair, sending shivers all over my scull, and his left one shot to my left, sleeved arm, rubbing it gently. Suggestively. That thing beneath had gone roiling. No no no no.

Oberyn noticed. Elia noticed. Ellaria noticed. The lie they had been heralding to their Court for so long was going to be revealed. All it would take, would be one swift swipe of Rhaegar's finger and ... Snap. They would be the liars. But my mate was not going to end this game so fast. He was playing his cards, excruciatingly slow, savoring the thrill of their agony, the rhythm of their panting hearts, their uncertainty of victory or defeat.

"Take your hands off my woman, you Lannister Whore." Oberyn's tawny eyes burned like glowing embers in the dark.

I endeavored to ignore the sting that shot through my heart when Oberyn referred to me as though I was his property.

His empty threat didn't seem to affect the least the Night High Lord who interpreted the words more like a challenge. In a blink of an eye, his hands webbed around my waist to hug me closer, harder against him, so that I was boxed inside his arms. His chin came to rest on top of my head and my heart stuttered, the gesture meant to intimidate me with his towering height. Was I that short? No, it couldn't be. He was the one who was simply way too tall for my proportions. Period.

"Or else what?" Rhaegar breathed into my hair and ripped my sleeve open with one quick swipe of his fingers, revealing thus my mating tattoo and triggering a chain of gasps and reactions of incredulity. "This woman doesn't need a mate for the night, for she already has one for life. Why prefer the, clearly, second-rate substitute over the original, anyway?"

The bond was bubbling with rage and, at the same time, triumph.

Oberyn's nostrils were flaring like an animal's as he advanced suddenly too close to me. "I said, let go of her."

The stench of magic filled the air like mist. The magic of two territorial, immortal males who were fighting like street cats to win a prize. I was that prize. And unfortunately, I was encased between them, watching.

"Perhaps," Rhaegar purred and his lips brushed faintly over the shell of my ear. It was an effort not to melt into lava. "When I'm done with her. I am High Lord now, aren't I? I'm sure I can use my own's mate company for tonight. What a shame I'll be the only one."

And then we were gone in a whisper of shadows.

Chapter End Notes

Attention! Attention please!

For those of you who are either here for ACOTAR or who are GoT fans but decided to read ACOTAR series and loved all three books, with boundless pleasure I announce
that the first ACOTAR novella will be released in May of 2018, which means nine months from now.

Today, I received August's newsletter by Sarah J Maas where she informs that the first novella will be narrated by Feyre AND my baby Rhys. It will be post-Acowar and all our favourite characters and ships will be included (Nessian, Elucien or maybe ... elain and Azriel hihih ... ) Also, Sarah has hinted that this book will prepare us somehow for the next three spinoff novels so I presume that we will see another new set of characters (hopefully)
Or perhaps the story of Jurian and Myriam, the story of Kallias and Viviane, perhaps poor Tamlin ... that finally finds his happy ending .

I am just so so so excited right now!!!! The possibilities are endless.

For more information subscribe to Sarah’s newsletter!!!!
One of the most unfortunate disadvantages of being a vampire is the ability to perceive every single sound. Agreeable, or not. Among the raucous raps of the drums—echoing from somewhere across the undulating hills—and the animalistic roar of a certain High Lord who realized he had just lost his dick-scabbard for tonight, I chose to focus on the melody of that all too familiar heartbeat I've been longing to hear for the past three months. I chose to pretend that time didn't work, and wallow in the incredible feeling of my hands affixed on that feather-soft skin, of that small chest rising and falling so close to mine.

An incredible feeling indeed, until it was replaced by an impromptu assault of pain as my mate's knee connected with my most sensitive spot. Instinctively, I folded myself in two, and stifled a grunt down my throat.

I guess I deserved that.

Once the pain subsided, I looked up only to find her glaring at me, her eyes promising me a fate worse than death. I smiled, in spite of myself.

The perks of messing with Lyanna Stark.

"How dare you—"

There we go.

"I certainly missed that look on your beautiful, beautiful face." I composed myself, and stalked closer, my gait gradually retrieving its feline gracefulness after that violent boot in the balls.

Despite her misleading loss of weight, she was still unbelievably strong.

"Take me back," she thundered. "Now. I didn't wish to be stolen away. Again."

I chuckled. "I believe that some twin, kohl-smeared lines on your cheeks, and an ax would be ideal to complete the murdering set. Oh, and a pair of fangs maybe. I could surely lend you mine sometime but—wait." I snapped my fingers as if recalling something. My expression turned gravely serious as I went on. "I need them to take care of that Summer Bitch that was about to drag you in a cave."

Her eyes were two blue-gray flames, brewing to engulf me with their intensity.

She was angry. Very angry.

"Stop driveling about, and take. Me. Back."

I shrugged. "What better time to take you here? Maybe your joke of a High Lord, didn't notice you were about to reject him in front of his entire Court—maybe you can now simply blame it on me."

"You are a bastard," she spat, baring her teeth. "A smirking, arrogant, jealous, territorial bastard."

A mirthless smile. "For once again, your sense of gratitude is overwhelming."
"Oh my," She clasped her hands together in a show of unalloyed burlesque. "You are seriously expecting me to thank you, aren't you? Thank you for what exactly?"

I dared approach her in a way one would advance toward a watchful kitten lounging on a window, and paused less than a foot away, sliding my hands into my pockets. "For saving you when asked."

She stiffened. "I didn't ask for anything, and hypothetically speaking ..."

I snorted, and didn't bother to be subtle about it. "Always hypothetically."

"Hypothetically speaking, even if I asked someone, that wouldn't be you. I thought I made crystal clear that you owe me nothing."

My stare dipped at her tattooed arm, and the torn sleeve I had slashed loose mere minutes ago.

I gave no warning as I gripped her arm, snarling softly, and tore off the remainders of the sleeve purely out of spite. Lyanna flinched, yielding a step, but I held firm until her flushed face was inches away from mine. "I heard you begging someone, anyone, to rescue you, to get you out. I heard you say no."

She struggled to wrench my iron grip away, to no effect though. "Then your ears do not work quite well lately. But again, it must have something to do with your age," she taunted me, and enjoyed every second of it. "Growing-old problems are knocking on your door."

I turned her bare hand over, my hold tightening as I examined the design of a cat's eye I'd tattooed upon her palm. I tapped the pupil. Once. Twice. "I heard it loud and clear."

With a violent jerk, she yanked her hand away. "Then let me make this clear for you. My name is Lyanna Stark, and I am a wolf. Not some fragile damsel in distress that you are supposed to be constantly saving by swooping in. I can take care of myself."

How utterly boring.

"And yet there you stood helpless, not looking like the strong wolf I used to remember, but more like a lamb awaiting its slaughter."

My words landed like a slap on her ego. It was impossible not to tell, not to notice the strain in her lips, the deflation in her long, long breaths, the soreness that her racing heart gave away.

Her despondent gaze was a fist that cracked open my chest and squeezed my heart to fire and blood. Her voice was as hollow as mortal promises when she spoke. "Take me back, Rhaegar."

No, I repeated in my head. She said no.

This little word was all I needed.

I wasn't trampling down on any liberties here. This was her choice.

Her choice. Her choice. Her choice.

But she was too damn stubborn to admit it.

"Oberyn is still searching for you." I said, scanning the trees for any abeyant threat. "I'll keep you here until he moves to someone else."

Lyanna's heart slammed in her chest. I knew her soul was in pain, gradually being infected with
Dread to return to the manor. Dread to face the consequences of her hesitation, for a Hunter never stays partnerless on Calanmai. The magic always chooses a mate to be unleashed upon, regardless of unwillingness and shared promises.

Calanmai is ruthless. Calanmai doesn't make exceptions. Calanmai is the Devil's lair glamoured as the gods' garden. A nightmare dressed like a daydream.

I knew it. Lyanna knew it. The whole world knew it.

And I wondered ... Who would be the female that would warm the pelts of the cave in Lyanna's place tonight?

My mate's question was soft, a breeze filling in the bubble of tension between us. "Why are you doing this to me?"

Her tone held no grudge. No derision, though it should have.

Because although, this unfortunate-or-not turn of events was meant to wreck Lyanna's feelings, I felt unspeakably relieved. And although this liberating, petty kind of relief should have made me instantly feel like the most despicable person, it just didn't.

I wasn't, by no means, content with her misery, but rather with Oberyn's predicament when he would break free of the magic's hold, when he would regain full consciousness and realise what he had just done. How screwed he was.

If indeed he loved Lyanna, in his own toxic way, he deserved to hate himself after Calanmai. He deserved to have shame perched on his shoulders, weighing down on his conscience, in the same maddening way I did when I cheated on the woman I loved for the sake of that nutty Rite.

And more than that, he would deserve that soul-shattering look of smothered heartbreak Lyanna hurtled upon me when she made clear she wanted nothing from our bond.

My dead heart began to hurt as I pictured again that look.

*It's better this way,* I told myself.

Even if she hates me after this, I will have done my best to keep her safe. I would sacrifice anything to keep her safe.

When I spoke again, embedding a fragment of my thoughts into my confession, steel lurked in my voice. "Because, contary to what you have made yourself believe, I care about you Lyanna. I've never pretended otherwise."

Her eyes became two full moons before she pinned her troubled gaze to the ground. All she did in response was shake her head. Shake the sincerity of my words away only to replace it with her own malicious doubts that were eating away all her self-esteem.

She regarded me as if I had just told her that the sky was pink. As if the prospect that I truly cared was preposterous.

And how could she believe me after I irreversibly betrayed her trust that night? I proved myself a liar of my own promises.
"You ..." She looked around in befuddlement, her expression marred by that enraging hint of dejection. "You should go."

The dismissal made me feel so terribly, hopelessly lovelorn. A circling moth that sought a flame's reciprocation.

And with this stabbing impatience to be done with me, she turned her back and the world fell away.

"Don't go," I whispered reflexively. I pleaded. It was too soon. I knew that parting ways again with her was something beyond inevitable, but I wanted to spend more time around her, regardless of the fact that I would miss her anyway. It was a daily routine, and the reason why I craved sleep so often. Closing my eyes to see her. Opening them to miss her all over again. "Stay, Lyanna. I just want to see you. You don't even have to say anything."

She froze still, her hands slightly fluttering at her sides, her dilemma flickering between the blinks of her eyes. I couldn't see them. But I could hear them.

And suddenly, I was in another place. In the ballroom of the Winter Palace all over again. Her reaction so much reminded me of that night she was brought back to life.

When she stood still as death, her back meeting my face. When she left me.

I'd let her go, I'd done it through my own stupidity, but I'd let her go. And all I could think about was that she hadn't even looked back. She'd just run away ... from me.

The thought itself was enough to make the pain of rejection of that night throb within my chest.

Maybe because I wasn't used to being rejected. Maybe because I wasn't used to hearing no when it came to females.

I always compared the art of conquering a woman's trust with a chess game. I thought I could win any match with a clear head bereft of emotions. Emotions are never a good counsellor. They are only useful to control, survive and succeed. I was apparently relearning the lesson I believed I had mastered until I met her.

This woman had driven me out of my skin more times than I could remember. She made me want to slap the chess to the floor and turn the table upside-down.

Finally, after much deliberation, she exhaled a positive, positive sigh, and shuffled toward one of the many ageless tree trunks that surrounded us, their thick roots cracking through the mossy earth. Soundless as a mouse, she slumped against the maroon bark and huddled her bare knees closer to her face.

My chest sparked with butterflies.

Without wasting a second, I joined her on the ground, our bodies inches apart.

For a good amount of time we said nothing. I was too taken, too exhilarated to talk, and she, too preoccupied to listen. Her mind was roaming somewhere, probably back to where Calanmai was taking place right now.

I cleared my throat. "So," She tensed. "How is your training going?"

She tensed even further, but didn't let any of her agitation leak into her voice.
"Good."

"Your poor excuse of a health tells me otherwise," I offered, quite begrudgingly.

No answer. Consequently, no excuse. No explanation either.

"Did you speak to Rodrik?"

A buoyant shrug. "I am working on it."

Not a yes. Not a no. Her deliberate ambiguity was igniting the dogged momentum that flowed in my dragon blood even more. If she favoured willfulness, I was going to show her I was better at it.

"What happened?" I angled my head to meet her pensive profile. She was still gazing daydreamingly ahead, rapt in her own tiny worlds battling within her head. "That day you reached for me through the bond."

A tiny frown formed between her brows, but disappeared in a beat. "Nothing important."

I clicked my tongue, as irritation and ice shot through my veins. "You said you screamed my name until your lungs hurt. Surely, it couldn't have been something you could easily dismiss. I want to know. I need to know."

"You shouldn't have shut me out then."

Her response was almost automatic, dashed at me as a reminder.

A needless one, for I did remember. My memories of that night—if a bit fuzzy—were knives, and I was not pleased to have them turned against me. I had to clench my fists until I felt pain, to push them away. I didn't want to remember. I didn't want to think about another woman. And more than that, I didn't want to think about another woman in the presence of my mate.

I didn't feel guilt very often and she seemed to have an uncanny ability to bring it out of me. The feeling was ... alien, unpleasant, and aggravating as hell.

"A still optimistic part of me hoped I wouldn't find you here tonight," I mused.

Lyanna slightly cocked her head in a birdlike sort of way. "Why wouldn't I be here tonight?"

"I thought you would be in mourning." Her eyes clouded with confusion and turned completely gray. No blue, just a bleak gray. Grayest than every storm cloud I've ever seen. So I elaborated, "Twelve days to mourn your dead after the funeral. Isn't this what's expected of your people?"

"What ... What dead?" she voiced sharply. "Whose—Whose funeral?"

My incredulous scrutiny upon her was heavy. "I sent your mother's corpse back." Or whatever parts Aerys spared of it.

A jagged gasp broke past her lips and her bewildered countenance benumbed. Time between us froze while an eternity revolved in the space between heartbeats. I could hear her heart beating fast and hard and loud in the silence between us. She felt too still, too tense, like she was trying to maintain some kind of control over her body.

I felt her hands shake, just a little, as if the effort to keep them in one place was too much for her.

"You didn't know," I murmured softly, my voice low not to unsettle her further.
Bitterly, Lyanna breathed, "How long since then?"

"Less than a fortnight ago."

"A fortnight?" Her face did some weird snort-scoff-laugh-cry thing, before she began repeating the word over and over again.

She didn't say a word after that, didn’t shift an inch, didn’t make a single sound. Seconds flew by, swarming the air all at once and I wanted to swat them all away; I wanted to catch them and shove them into my pockets just long enough to reverse time and take my words back.

Finally, when the worst part of her shock had ebbed away she said, "You know what's the worst part? That I met with my father a few days ago. He looked me straight in the eyes, and still he mentioned nothing about my mum's funeral. As if she wasn't mine. As if I wasn't entitled to saying goodbye."

My blood boiled hot with rage. If Rickard didn't tell Lyanna about Lyarra's funeral then he had done so, so that he could shield his daughter against any potential distraction that would prevent her from partaking in Calanmai. Which entailed that Oberyn was a part of this too.

I swallowed past the dryness in my throat. I was going to kill Rickard and I'd make Oberyn watch, giving him a preview of things to come.

"How did it go?"

Lyanna ran a hand through her hair. "It was a disaster. A glorious, epic disaster, glittered with his bullshit from start to finish. Things got nasty between us, and I lost my grip on the conversation, and made to lunge myself at him, and Oberyn tried to stop me, and then I ... I set myself on fire."

A tinge of bright amusement lingered at the corners of my lips.

I would have paid good money to see this.

That was my girl. A sweet thunderstorm, hiding behind a delicate soul and a vulnerable smile. A force of nature destined for great things, if only she willed it.

"Why would you lunge yourself at him?"

"He was provoking me—trying to get a rise out of me by belittling someone I ..." There was sudden tension manifesting in her strong jaw, as her undivided attention dropped down to the hands she was gripping too tightly in her lap. "Someone I care about."

Mean curiosity got the best out of me, for I automatically asked, "Who?"

Her voice turned defensive. "You don't know him."

_Him_. So it was a male. A male. A male. A male.

The word was a buzzing mantra in my head.

Brother, friend, lover, all possibilities flashed through my mind.

This was pathetic, I rebuked myself. She must have been talking about one of her brothers. But ... why would Rickard Stark insult his own sons, in the first place?

Perhaps, it was Oberyn. But no. This didn't make any sense either. As far as Arthur's shadows kept
me updated, the relations between the two High Lords were stellar.

My brain was working amok to come up with a plausible answer as to who this him might be. Maybe ... it was a new special someone.

I fretted.

Maybe that's why Lyanna was so reluctant to be chosen as the Maiden. And earlier, she mentioned she hadn't shared a bed with Oberyn yet, after her return. Maybe because a third person loomed as an invisible barrier between them.

My good sense was scowling at me, saying that I was being overdramatic. Delirious. Yet, the bond was fizzing with paranoid madness. It was brainwashing my wits, bombarding them with one word; competition.

All too suddenly, the urge to unleash my mental claws and tear through her shields was irresistible. To see for myself if there was indeed someone else in the background.

Maybe, I was a territorial bastard after all.

Lyanna's pounding heart brought me back to the realms of reality.

"You should have been there to hear him, Rhaegar—to hear that shit tone of preposterous excuses he was bathing me with to condone the unjustifiable."

Her breathing was uneven, thick with emotion. And the bond was bundled with the same chain of reactions I had sensed a few days ago. When I sensed that dreadful pang of fear. When I almost lost control of my wings while flying because I thought she was going to have a heart attack.

What could have possibly scared her so much in her own house?

"It's okay, Lyanna."

"No it's not," she hissed, invisible acid drooling from the corners of her mouth. "It's not okay at all. It will never be. Because I might have found justice. I might have avenged my mother and brother. I might have made their killers pay. But you haven't."

The regret, and guilt, and shame that overwhelmed the cord between us rendered me speechless.

I was rooted to the ground, frozen in my own skin.

So this was all about me from the very beginning.

"There is something you need to understand, love; one cannot fix himself by trying to break someone else. Sometimes, you have to find the strength to forgive those who have hurt you. Not because they deserve your forgiveness, but because you deserve to move on."

"My father never sought your forgiveness, you sugar-hearted fool," she snapped, the syllables almost stuck in her throat. "He is void of any kind of remorse."

"Lyanna—"

"I asked Oberyn about their wings," she disclosed, quietly enough for only her and the summer breeze to hear. "He said he burned his father's pair a long time ago. I wish he hadn't. I wish I could return them back to you. I wish I could make this up to you."
"I don't care about the wings."

Wings or not in my possession, my mother's and sister's memory was safely tucked within my heart, their faces and smiles intact from the brutalities they suffered before they left this world. And this piece of goodness was all I needed.

Lyanna looked up, looked at me like she could really see me, see into me, like she wanted me to see into her and then, all too hastily, she averted her eyes. As if she remembered something. As if she couldn't bear to maintain eye contact with me for no longer than a blink. As if she was afraid of me.

Something was unnervingly off. Abnormally wrong. The Lyanna I used to remember balked under no one's stare. The Lyanna I used to remember had defiant eyes, bright as lighting. These eyes were nothing short of dull, docile, crestfallen.

"Well, you should," she snapped again, but the reprimand sounded more like a choked sob.

"This happened a long time ago, Lyanna," I struggled to reassure her, my hands pondering on whether they should unfurl to touch her, or not. "It is something deep buried in the past, and I would like for it to remain this way. My only concern right now is these sad wolf eyes that don't dare meet mine."

Lyanna went bone-still. "You ... I don't see how ... I don't see why you care so much. You barely know me." If only you knew. "My family has done unspeakable things to yours, and yet ... You said you loved me, mere seconds before I died." Her voice slowed down into a wheeze. "You said it like you meant it. You weren't supposed to say these three little words to me. You are not supposed to love a stranger, broken girl with bitterness in her veins, and iron around her heart. You are supposed to hate me, Rhaegar Targaryen."

I felt a kind of rushing around me, years of a secret I could no longer keep from her catching me up like a wind, a wind, I wished with a wild kind of surrender, that could just bear me away, with Lyanna and our truth she didn't know, to a place without our pasts, without vampires and werewolves and their talent for hate, without anyone to come between us, ever again.

"I could never hate you, Lyanna Stark," I marvelled softly, and the weight on her shoulders eased a bit. "Aren't you supposed to hate me, for that matter. You and I, we are two sides of the same coin, after all."

Her lips cut a cruel line. "You don't understand."

"Then make me understand," I said in exasperation, a statement, not a request.

"These past three months ... I've been trying to see you. Just steal a glimpse of your face. Remember whether your eyes are more blue or gray. But you never look yourself in the mirror. You are always avoiding your own reflection, Anna, and I don't know why. You never leave the house, and I don't know why. You are terrified every time you see certain colours, and I don't know why."

Her sad gaze crossed paths with mine for a split second. My mate regarded me as if I had just stripped her naked.

She was petrified.

So vulnerable.
"You ..." My fingers lighted upon her chin to tilt it up, but she kept her stare firmly dropped, brushing my touch away. "You can't even look me straight in the eyes."

"When I fall asleep, it's when things get worse," she said as she sought my hand and wound her warm fingers around mine. "It's when these nightmares claim me that I am truly afraid." Her voice was cracking with panic as she spoke, but she didn't try to conceal her emotions. She ... she was opening up to me. The world could have gone to hell, and I wouldn't give a shit. She was opening up to me.

Her fingers were squeezing the life out of my own as she went on, "In my sleep, I'm powerless. I cannot choose what I see. But when I am awake, I can. It's the colours that are the most disturbing. In my head, these colours are classified into a scale. I call it the 'Rainbow Scale'. In the bottom of the scale, there is red. The dusky red of blood. My mother's blood. Brandon's blood. Your sister's blood." The last word of her sentence came out as a half-whimper. The strong column of her neck was bobbing with unspilled sobs.

"Then comes, gray." I shuddered. Slowly, she lulled her eyes shut, and warm, fresh tears began pooling around the edges, skating down her temples, snaking over her cheeks. Her thick lashes were two black crescent moons that lined her closed eyelids a bit too perfectly. "That bluish silver of clean corpses and death. So much death. And it is all accumulated in the pools of my eyes. I cannot stare into the mirror and not see my father's eyes staring right back at me, a killer's eyes. It is a matter of seconds before I immediately become the killer."

Her silent tears didn't match the intensity of her heaving chest, or her trembling lips.

"The second-worst colour in my scale is purple. An irony really, because I used to be in love with that colour. Actually, it was your eyes that kindled this infatuation. They used to be so heartbreakingly beautiful. Sometimes, I would have to make a monkey out of myself when you caught me staring without pause. I didn't want to give you another reason to fall more in love with yourself. All this fussing, until that poor woman's eyes slammed into mine through that vision."

My mother.

I squeezed my eyes shut. My body shook with a fury I hadn't felt since the night Joanna tortured and, afterwards, murdered my mate.

Joanna. The slumbering dragon inside me cracked open an eye. Even now that she was rotting in one of the Seven Hells, she was still making my life miserable. She was responsible for the ordeal Lyanna was going through right now, for the images that would come unbidden into her mind through the night, for the Erinyes that were chasing her throughout the day like starved hounds. She was the one that showed her that horrendous vision, just because she could.

I should have never listened to Cersei. I should have been the one to deliver the finishing blow. And now ... I wished with all the bits and pieces of my black heart that I could bring her back from the dead, so I could make her suffer. Make her appreciate the moment she died.

"You have so identical eyes, you and ... Rhaella." Lyanna's warped voice broke my murdering daydreaming apart. "I used to think them angelic, blessed by the gods themselves, somehow. Now? I think them as nothing but ugly."

I couldn't take this. This unexpected confession of heart made even my bones ache. I didn't want her to be in so much pain. I had never seen her so broken inside. Not even when she had lost her mother.
Ever so slowly, I leaned toward her quivering body and waited. Waited for her to do what I knew she longed for the most. What she needed the most; a crutch. A solid presence that wouldn't let go.

To my astonishment, without opening her eyes, she instantly wrapped her arms around my neck and buried her face against my shoulder, refusing to let go. Her body was so burning it could have melted into mine. Warmth spread through my limbs wherever her trembling body met my own, a feeling as pleasant as letting the sun touch my face. A new stream of hiccups interrupted her ragged breaths anew as her endless tears soaked through my tunic and travelled along the skin underneath.

"Hush, love," I breathed into her ear and clutched her closer.

Lyanna plunged ahead despite my shot at calming her down. "The most terrifying of all colours in my list, the colour I hate the most ... Amber. Oberyn's eyes. His father's eyes. Two predators similar in so many ways."

"Shh," I whispered again but she began sobbing even more violently.

"You were right, Rhaegar. I was no wolf. I was just a pathetic, terrorized, whimpering lamb awaiting its slaughter. That's why I cowered under Oberyn's stare and couldn't bring myself to let him touch me. That's why I hesitated to enter that cave. In that moment, he was his father, and I your ..." My sister. "His victim. It was that witch's vision all over again." Her mind was so deeply drowned in terror that her mental shields had started crumbling down one by one. Staccato visions raced through her memory. Oberyn stalking toward her during Calanmai and ... "It was that day in his study when Oberyn wouldn't—"

Lyanna stopped midsentence, realizing the slip of her tongue, but it was already too late. In a heartbeat, her body turned stiff as a cucumber against mine. Raw fury flashed through me. Adrenaline surged hot as my hands seized into fists. A familiar feeling was making its way through my fingers up my arms, spreading through my chest and forcing my pulse to speed.

"When Oberyn wouldn't what?" I inquired through gritted teeth with tempered anger and restraint, leaning back to look at her.

Lyanna, with horror-struck eyes, answered in a rush, her breathing thin, "N-nothing. Nothing happened."


When no smart answer escaped her saucy little mouth, the last tether of my patience snapped. She sensed it, too.

I could almost hear the metallic sound of gears twisting in her head as her brain worked feverly to patch up the holes and fractions in her shields. I saw that she thought she could protect him. A stout resistance, but pointless nonetheless. Having no time to waste playing games, I decided on a more drastic approach; I cracked her memories open for me by unloosing these mental claws of mine.

Aa it was to be expected, they were simply atrocious; Lyanna perched on a desk, and that bastard all over her, molesting her with his hands while she was pushing him away. The image of that cur touching her against her volition turned my insides out. And then, there was a blinding explosion of light, and Lyanna trapped inside a fat bubble of air. No. Not trapped. Shielded.

The strong pang of fear I felt a couple of days ago ...

I was rendered nearly deaf by the sound thundering in my ears.
"Did he hurt you?" I demanded immediately, seizing her arm. She flinched. She had never heard my voice raised to this pitch. It was like stone grating against stone. I myself could feel it in my skull. I was gripping her arm so hard.

"Did he?" I repeated, louder, my teeth chattering with blind ire. My fury was a chant in my blood. A command in my bones.

She simply shook her head, drying away her remaining tears with the back of her palm.

Bloodlust ripped through me, and I fought the urge to fly straight in that cave and crush his skull in two. Skin him alive with my own two, bare hands and then feed his carcass to the dogs. Or even better, to Seraphina. I owned my girl a hearty meal, after all, for neglecting her so terribly lately. What better snack than a High Lord?

My head swam with pleasure, as the visualization took flesh and bones.

The Summer Bitch was already dead and didn't even know it.

"Is this what he has been doing to you, and you are always so depressed?" I hissed right in front of her face.

This time the shake of her head was almost imperceptible. Only then did I paid close attention to her drooping eyelids, to her frazzled lashes, to the beads of sweat rolling down her clammy face.

My eyes threw wide open. "What's wrong?" I asked under my breath before I proceeded to cradle her face into my hands. Her pale skin was sizzling with invisible flames, burning with vicious fever.

"It's fine," she mumbled quietly and untangled herself from my embrace to lean her head back against the tree trunk. "It happens from time to time." Incredulity was written all over my face so she added, "When I don't turn in my wolf form often, my body temperature rises as a reminder," I opened my mouth but she cut me off before I had a chance to voice my concerns. "And before you ask, I have no freaking idea why this happens."

"When was the last time that you turned?"

She blinked. "It's been a while." An overprotective voice rooted within me told me it had been more than a while.

"So, what are you waiting for? A special invitation?"

She relaxed her back against the bark, folded her thin arms over her chest casually, and closed her eyes. "I'm so very tired. Perhaps you would like to shut your big fat mouth for a while."

Her giant wolf body was cozily curled next to me, her warm breaths seeping into my skin.

She had been soundly asleep for half an hour now, and all the while, I had been hovering above her, memorizing the planes and slopes of her snout and petting her gray fur until I could feel the ramble of her belly purring underneath my palm.

Somehow, the whole situation seemed so heartwarmingly intimate to me. And above that, right.

I let myself pretend, just for a moment, that I could have what my heart wished for: an eternity with her. Everything I had always craved was right here: solidity, a mooring, love.
And even if morning dawned and I had to part ways with her, I would await her return. With the infinite patience of one who has learned to live broken, I would wait for her.

Chapter End Notes

Seriously, this chapter drove me out of my skin. It just was impossible to write. I rewrote it around seven times to be finally satisfied with it. I am so frustrated because of the writing process but at the same time, so glad I will never have to see it again. Rhaegar's pov are just so tough, and since I am a girl, I don't have much insight into a male's character.
Fractures

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

All the lights in the manor were on when I arrived in the middle of the night. From a decent distance, I could make out black figures—stark against the tawny background—pacing to and fro in front of the windows.

Goodbye, was the last word I said to Rhaegar as I bid him farewell, for all I knew ... I didn't have a clue when I would be seeing him again. My chest was tugged down by an invisible weight; my mate's palpable absence.

A heartfelt 'take care' and a prolonged squeeze of my hand was all he offered before he un glamoured those star-kissed Illyrian wings of his and took off to the sky, leaving me standing and gawking a few yards away from the house. I knew he would have walked me to the door if this was up to him, but the vicinity was heavily patrolled by Summer sentries. He had already infringed a lot of rules tonight. I didn't want him to gamble his head for me again.

And even more, I didn't want him anywhere near Oberyn. Not after he learned ... after he saw ... I had never seen him so enraged. His reaction was so liquid and boundless and earth-shattering and so ... unrhaegarish. And that feeling of these mental claws scraping me open, hugging my mind and the core of my thoughts, of my memories ... Stupid, stupid, stupid me and my stupid mouth! What had gotten into me and I poured my emotions raw and rampant straight from that thoughtless source that I called heart? What had gotten into me and I turned into that cat which begged for love and attention?

I had to be the other cat. The cat that needed no one, that shunned petting. And yet, there I was a few hours earlier, cradled in a vampire's arms, safer and more cherished than I had ever felt in my entire life. Feeling that I somehow belonged. Feeling connected. Feeling ... the placeness, the rightness of my mate's touch, of his urgent need to be around me—to feel me, to ... to understand me.

Something in my joints ached with an acute yearning, a desperate need I could no longer fulfill now that he was gone. My bones were begging for the comfort of his scent, for the tenderness of his voice, for the wholeness I felt every time he caressed my name.

In the dark, I examined my right arm, pale and ink-free. Perhaps, I could mark this area, too. Etch something like, Be that cat!!! No one would understand its hidden, miserable meaning, anyway. As far as my stay in the wondrous Summer Court was concerned, no one would make even the smallest of attempts to understand me, even if I tagged a label on my forehead saying, homeless puppy, girl unhappy.

The truth was one, and it was harsh. I didn't have a home. Not anymore. I might have had a roof above my head and four walls around my body, but Oberyn's home did not feel mine. And some insidious voice whispering from the depths of my forlornness, told me that it would never feel like mine.

At last, I loosed a steady breath and began shuffling toward the gates of the estate.
Shuffling toward a heated—definitely unpleasant—ugly confrontation. Walking toward my dull, stale, grim life that entailed becoming Miserella for once more.

I found Oberyn in his study, Doran and Elia standing around a map-covered worktable.

Doran was the first to turn to where I lurked in the doorway, falling silent mid-sentence. But then Oberyn’s and Elia's head snapped up in unison, and they were both racing across the room. I hardly had time to draw breath before Elia reached me first and crushed me so hard against her, that I almost heard my bones rattle.

I murmured her name in reassurance as my throat burned, but the word was barely discernible over the hammering of her racing heart.

"You are okay," she breathed against my cheek, the sharp intake making me feel as though her chest might collapse, as though she might faint from relief. Her hands were violently trembling, pressed as they were against my back, and so were her lips as she began brushing small, gentle kisses upon my temples. The sheer intimacy of the gesture and a fleeting glance at Oberyn's miffed face left me caught in colliding currents of confusion.

Then she infinitesimally tilted her head back to scan my face. The genuine worry and analloyed affection in her kind, chocolate eyes warmed my heart like a fire on a winter day. Because she cared. Because, right now, she was really seeing me.

"You are okay," she repeated over and over and over, her olive cheeks flushed with emotion.

"I’m alright," I said, noticing the exact moment when Oberyn made to cut into our embrace and Elia’s lithe body stiffened, as if in a defensive mode.

He made to wrap his arms around me but Elia swatted his touch away.

"You buzzard don't get to touch her," she hissed, her breathing hard, her scowl wild.

Oberyn pulled back, growling.

Disoriented, I searched Doran's eyes for some kind of navigation, but he wouldn't even turn his head to acknowledge me. On purpose, of course. Right now, I wanted to crush his head against the wall and crack it open like a watermelon.

Tension. There was an unnerving veil of tension between the three of them, and I couldn't help but have a feeling that I had missed something.

All this intense vibes of hostility until I paid closer attention to the details of the room. I took in the scuffed and chipped furniture and the shredded study walls—the claw marks raked down them. All over them. And the table they’d been using ... that was new. “You trashed the study," I said after a long pause of silence, my eyes goggling incredulously at the Summer High Lord.

"I trashed half the house," Oberyn snapped, his temper almost caught between my nostrils. “He took you away, he stole you—"

"Did he touch you?" Elia asked urgently, but she was not looking at me; she was looking at all of me. Her eyes were searching my body as if to ensure I was still intact, arms and legs and everything in between. It was only when she found my face that she met my gaze; her dark eyes were shining with unshed tears. My heart cracked. Elia never cried. I had never seen her so unsettled, and heavy and ... burdened. Everything about her was always light; her voice, the
gracefulness of her movements, even the scent of her hair. But right now, everything about her seemed rough. "Did he ... did he violate you?" she asked again, and her voice came out pained.

"He did no such thing," I answered and squeezed her hand to calm her down. Oberyn was ready to melt from relief and become one with the marble floor.

All too abruptly, he straightened and cleared his throat. “I need to ask you some questions.”

I blinked at the stiff formality that had wormed its way into his tone. “What?”

Oberyn just strode to his desk and plopped down, motioning for me and Elia to take a seat in front of it. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly, as Doran strolled to claim his own seat beside him, his expression inscrutable. “This is for our own good. Our safety.”

The two brothers exchanged glances, speaking without uttering a word in that way only people who had been partners for their whole life could do. Doran gave a slight nod and leaned back in his chair—to listen, to observe.

“I didn't want to put you under more pressure when you first came here. I knew you were in dire need of time and space to recover from ... from that last night. But now the circumstances demand that I do what must be done to ensure that this incident tonight won't take place ever again. We need you to tell us everything,” Oberyn tapped a finger on the wooden surface. “The layout of the Hewn City while you were there, who you saw, what weapons and powers they bore, what Rhaegar did, who he spoke to, any and every detail you can recall.”

“I didn’t realize I was a spy.” The words tasted like ash on my tongue.

Elia shifted in her seat, but Oberyn said, “As much as I hate this wretched bond, you’ve been granted access into the Night Court. Outsiders rarely get to go in—and if they do, they rarely come out in one piece. And if they can function, their memories are usually ... scrambled. Whatever Rhaegar is hiding in there, he doesn’t want us knowing about it. Maybe he is already preparing for another war to retrieve his crown.”

Bile rose on my throat and before I had a chance to process what I was thinking, my thoughts had abandoned my mouth. "Oh, bite me!" I barked, my glare drifting to Doran. "Both of you. Why do you want to know? What are you going to do?"

Oberyn's jaw was set. “Knowing my enemy’s plans, his lifestyle, is vital. As for what we’re going to do ... That’s neither here nor there.” His amber eyes left no room for argument as they pinned me. “Start with the layout of the court, and their numbers."

“This feels an awful lot like an interrogation.”

Doran sucked in a breath, but remained silent.

Oberyn spread his hands on the desk. “We need to know these things, Lyanna. Or—or can you not remember?” Claws glinted at his knuckles.

“I can remember everything,” I spat. His eyes lit up with expectation, but I had already made my desicion. "I'm sorry, Oberyn."

Rhaegar had entrusted me with the knowledge of Velaris, because from the very beginning he treated me like his mate, his equal and not an outsider. I was not going to betray his trust. Not even for Oberyn.
"Pray repeat this."

"I won't be a part of this game of paranoia," I declared. "You see enemies everywhere, and Rhaegar is not one of them."

His lips curled into a vicious snarl. What a pity that I had grown so used to his temper. "How do you know that he is not?"

"How do you know that he is?" I retorted. "He is not Aerys."

"All the Targaryens are made of the same crap! And all of them have the same two weaknesses; power and dragonfire. They are prone to wreaking havoc and disaster all around them."

I simply shook my head in denial. Oberyn didn't know about Velaris. He only spoke on behalf of the one side of the Night Court; the Court of Nightmares. He hadn't experienced the goodness and creation and wonders of the Court of Dreams.

"Perhaps Lyanna is right," Doran intervened. "Worse things have happened, worse things can happen. He didn't touch her. He could have never brought her back, but he didn't. All that matters is that she is here, safe and sound. Just relax and—"

"Did I ask for your opinion?" Oberyn blustered churlishly, slamming his hand on the table, claws poking through his flesh.

Those words, the look he gave Doran and the way Doran lowered his head—my temper was a burning river in my veins. Look up, I silently beseeched him. Push back. He's wrong, and we're right. Doran's jaw tightened. Do not back down.

Elia jolted up from her seat in a heartbeat. She leaned forward, bracing her own hands on the wood and weathering Oberyn's stare without a flinch. "You have no right to talk down to him—"

"Get out," Oberyn grumbled straight to her face, his teeth bare in unembellished warning. Part of me admired Elia's sheer nerve. Had Oberyn's sharp teeth been inches from my throat, I would have bleated in panic. "Both of you." His feral eyes drifted to his brother and then right back to Elia, who was looking at him in horrendous disbelief. When none of the two didn't show the slightest inclination to leave the room, Oberyn repeated, "I said Get. Out."

Elia just stood there, her pronounced jawline clenched, her hands curled into fists, her body language upset and furious, until Doran wove his fingers blandly around her elbow and tugged her along toward the door. With reluctant steps, they were gone within a span of five blinks.

Awkward, charged quietude shrouded the study. And because I knew Oberyn better than the back of my hand, I also knew that this intentional sullenness was meant to dragoon me into meekness, to sap my morale even further. Under different circumstances, and a few months earlier, it would have worked. I would have been demoralized by now. But today ... for the first day in a long while, I wasn't tired. I felt refreshed. Lightheaded. And all this thanks to the peaceful nap I had taken beside my mate.

"Where is Ellaria?" I questioned belatedly, drumming my fingers on the arm of my chair.

Oberyn's voice was low when he spoke. Distant. Self-conscious. "In her temple."

"I guess you two must have had a busy night together."

My jab enforced the covetous effect; it rendered him even more aloof. I wasn't in a mood for
weathering another drama-glutted quarrel and whatnot. I just wanted to know what had happened while I was absent and move on.

Maybe ... Perhaps I could turn a blind eye to tonight. I was the one who pushed another woman in the jaws of the shark, anyway.

*Sometimes, you have to find the strength to forgive those who have hurt you. Not because they deserve your forgiveness, but because you deserve to move on.*

Rhaegar was right. Grudges would only slow me down.

"It was her, wasn't she?" I asked bitterly, referring to the High Priestess. "The one who took my place."

Oberyn was gripping the edge of the table so hard I thought it would splinter. When his wandering gaze met mine at long last, it was anguish—genuine anguish—that haunted those tiger eyes. And what was that? Shame.

Ever so slowly, he shook his head as if to say no.

My heart began racing faster than the wind.

An indescribable torrent of alleviation washed over me. It wasn't Ellaria. It was a stranger. This made things so much easier to accept. It made moving on so much more attainable.

"Then who?" I breathed, literally on the edge of my seat.

His sad as a ballad gaze shifted to the door of the study. And stayed there. I twisted my head to look at the door and attempt to decode Oberyn's equivocal hints when a vulgar suspicion began creeping into my soul.

And then it suddenly dawned on me. The door ... The door from which Doran and ... and ... And Elia left.

A nippy chill shuddered through my gut, the aforementioned assuagement short-lived. "No."

I tried to pronounce Elia's name but no sound would come out. As the shape of her name formed between my lips, Oberyn read them and nodded in mute understanding.


That's why she acted so weird earlier. Could it be that she felt ashamed? Could it be that ... that Oberyn hurt her under the effect of the magic?

"Say something," he implored me with every ounce of who he was, but I couldn't articulate a proper sentence. I was fresh out of words. Someone had just robbed me of my entire vocabulary. This was too much. Simply too ... much.

I hated Calanmai. With all my heart.

Oberyn reached for my hand but I instinctively pulled back, a pang of heartache surging in spite of all my efforts at aloofness and dispassion. *Not worth it*, I told myself. Not even close.

"Baby, I'm sorry," he coaxed. "You know I couldn't ... This was beyond me. I'm sorry, so very—"
I was exhausted of hearing his sorrys repeatedly.

"Be sorry, then. Just be sorry out of my bedroom tonight."

The legs of my chair screeched against the marble floor as I bolted up and stormed out of the room.

In the night, Elia's silent sobs were wandering in the house like ghosts.

During that first week after Calanmai, I wasn't allowed out of sight of the house.

Some nameless threat had broken onto the lands, and Oberyn and Doran were called away to deal with it. I asked Doran to tell me what it was, yet he had that look he always did when he wanted to, but his loyalty to his brother got in the way. So I didn't ask again.

While they were gone, Ellaria returned to keep me company, protect me, I don't know. And since Elia was unceremoniously avoiding me, I was stuck with the High Priestess.

She was the only one allowed in. I was glad for the silence though—even as it became a weight on me, even as it filled my head until there was nothing inside of it beyond ... emptiness.

Eternity. Was this to be my eternity?

I was burning through books every day, stories about people and places I'd never heard of. They were perhaps the only thing that kept me from teetering into utter despair. And perhaps the only thing that preserved my sanity.

Oberyn returned eight days later, brushing a kiss over my brow and looking me over, and then headed into the study. Where Ellaria had news for him. News he wouldn't share even with his siblings.

That I was also not to hear.

Oberyn didn't seek me out for the next two days. I wondered if he and Ellaria were still debating my future and the threats against me.

There were sentries outside of my bedroom the following afternoon when I finally dragged myself from bed.

According to them, Oberyn and Doran were already holed up in his study. Without Oberyn's courtiers poking around, the manor was again silent as I, without anything else to do, headed to walk the garden paths I'd followed so many times I was surprised the pale dirt wasn't permanently etched with my footprints.

Only my steps sounded in the shining halls as I passed guard after guard, armed to the teeth and trying their best not to gawk at me. Not one spoke to me. Even the servants had taken to keeping to their quarters unless necessary.

My silk slippers scuffed on the marble stairs, the chiffon trail of my green gown slithering behind me.

Such silence. Too much silence.

I needed to get out of this house. I needed to shapeshift into my wolf form, but not just stay in my room and lazy around. I needed to run, and hunt, and ... find Rodrik. Maybe, if I talked to him he
could help me. He could convince Oberyn to let me train.

I was about to turn down the hall that led to the yard, determined to find Rodrik and talk to him, ready to beg for his help if needed be, when the study doors flung open and Oberyn and Doran emerged, both heavily armed. No sign of Ellaria, or Elia.

"You're going so soon?" I said, waiting for them to reach the foyer.

Oberyn's face was a grim mask as they approached. "There's activity on the western sea border." I wish there was any kind of activity in your head so I could talk some sense into you, I wanted to quip, but bit down the insolence. "I have to go."

"Can I come with you?" I'd never asked it outright, but ...

Oberyn paused. Doran continued past, through the open front doors of the house, barely able to hide his wince. "I'm sorry," the Summer High Lord said, reaching for me. I stepped out of his grip. "It's too dangerous."

"I know how to remain hidden, goddamit. Just ... take me with you."

"I won't risk our enemies getting their hands on you." What enemies? Tell me ... tell me something.

I stared over his shoulder, toward where Doran lingered in the gravel beyond the house entrance. No horses. I supposed they weren't necessary this time, when they were faster without them. But I could keep up. I could outrun every single one of then. Maybe I'd wait until they left and ...

"Don't even think about it," Oberyn warned.

My attention snapped to his face.

He growled, "Don't even try to come after us."

"I can fight," I tried again. "Please."

I'd never hated a word more.

He shook his head, crossing the foyer to the front doors.

I followed him, blurring, "There will always be some threat. There will always be some conflict or enemy or something that keeps me in here."

He slowed to a stop just inside the towering oak doors. "You can barely sleep through the night," he said carefully.

"Neither can you."

But he just plowed ahead, "You can barely handle being around other people."

"You promised." My voice cracked. And I didn't care that I was begging. "You promised your sentries will be gone after Calanmai. You promised things would be different."

"That was before that cock appeared and—"

"I need to get out of this house," I screeched hysterically.

"Have my uncle Lewyn take you and Ellaria on a ride—"
"I don't want to go for a ride!" I splayed my arms. "I don't want to go for a ride, or a picnic, or pick wildflowers. I want to do something productive. I want to do what I was born to do. What I'm designed to do. I want to hunt. So take me with you."

I had never been a girl who needed to be protected, who craved stability and comfort. I might have died Under the Mountain, but the wolf inside me never did. I had died, and there had been no one to protect me from those horrors before my neck snapped.

I was not a porcelain doll who needed coddling and pampering, who wanted luxury and easiness. I didn't know how to force myself to crave this shit. How to force myself to be docile.

Oberyn's claws punched out. "Even if I risked it, your poor health renders your presence more of a liability than anything."

It was like being hit with stones ... so hard I could feel myself cracking. But this ... this was my life. My choice. Only me and me alone knew what was best for myself. All I could think right now was, enough. Enough. Enough. Enough. I lifted my chin and said, "I'm coming along whether you want me to or not."

"No, you aren't." He strode right through the door, his claws slashing the air at his sides, and was halfway down the steps before I reached the threshold.

Where I slammed into an invisible wall.

I staggered back, trying to reorder my mind around the impossibility of it. It was identical to the one I'd built that day in the study, and I searched inside the shards of my soul, my heart, for a tether to that shield, wondering if I'd blocked myself, but ... there was no power emanating from me.

I reached a hand to the open air of the doorway. And met solid resistance.

"Oberyn," I rasped.

But he was already down the front drive, walking toward the looming iron gates. Doran remained at the foot of the stairs, his face so, so pale.

"Oberyn," I said again, pushing against the wall.

He didn't turn.

I slammed my hand into the invisible barrier. No movement—nothing but hardened air. And I had not learned about my own powers enough to try to push through, to shatter it .... I had let him convince me not to learn those things for his sake. For his huge, insatiable ego and illusion of dominance.

"Don't bother trying," Doran said softly, as Oberyn cleared the gates and vanished. "He shielded the entire house around you. Others can go in and out, but you can't. Not until he lifts the shield."

He'd locked me in here.

I hit the shield again. Again.

Nothing.

'Just ... be patient, Lya," Doran tried, wincing as he followed after his brother. "Please. I'll see what I can do. I'll try."
I barely heard him over the roar in my ears. Didn't wait to see him pass the gates and vanish, too.

He'd locked me in. He'd sealed me inside this house.

I hurtled for the nearest window in the foyer and shoved it open. A cool summer breeze rushed in and I shoved my hand through it—only for my fingers to bounce off an invisible wall. Smooth, hard air pushed against my skin.

Breathing became difficult.

I was trapped.

I was trapped inside this house. I might as well have been Under the Mountain; I might as well have been inside that hall where I was forced to hear my mum and brother being tortured to death—hear their agony while losing them.

I backed away, my steps too light, too fast, and slammed into the oak table in the center of the foyer. None of the nearby sentries came to investigate.

He'd trapped me in here; he'd locked me up.

I stopped seeing the marble floor, or the paintings on the walls, or the sweeping staircase looming behind me. I stopped hearing the chirping of the summer birds, or the sighing of the breeze through the curtains.

And then crushing black pounded down and rose up from beneath, devouring and roaring and shredding.

It was all I could do to keep from screaming, to keep from shattering into ten thousand pieces as I sank onto the marble floor, bowing over my knees, and wrapped my arms around myself.

He'd trapped me; he'd trapped me; he'd trapped me—

I had to get out, because I'd barely escaped from another prison—my death—once before, and this time, this time—

Winnowing. I could vanish into nothing but air and appear somewhere else, somewhere open and free. I fumbled for my power, for anything, something that might show me the way to do it, the way out. Nothing. There was nothing and I had become nothing, and I couldn't ever get out—

Someone was shouting my name from far away.

Elia ... Elia.

But I was ensconced in a cocoon of darkness and fire and ice and wind, a cocoon that smudged the floor underneath me. I wrapped that raging force around myself as if it could keep the walls from crushing me entirely, and maybe, maybe buy me the tiniest sip of air—

I couldn't get out; I couldn't get out; I couldn't get out—

My body was cracking from the heartache I'd swallowed so many times, heaving with sobs I could no longer suppress, my dignity dissolving in my tears, the agony of this past week ripping my skin to shreds.

I couldn't ever breathe.
I couldn't catch the oxygen around me and I was dry-heaving into my dress and I was hearing voices, wisps of words wicked away by confusion, thoughts scrambled so many times I didn't know if I was even conscious anymore.

I didn't know if I had officially lost my mind.

Slender, strong hands gripped me under the shoulders.

I didn't have the strength to fight them off.

One of those hands moved to my knees, the other to my back, and then I was being lifted like a bag of feathers, held against what was unmistakably a female body.

I couldn't see her, didn't want to see her.

Joanna.

Come to take me away again; come to kill me at last.

There were words being spoken around me. Two women.

Neither of them—neither of them was Joanna.

"You! What do you think you are doing?" Elia. "You have five seconds to put her down before I rip your throat!"

From right by my ear, the other replied, "Consider yourselves very, very lucky that your High Lord was not here when we arrived. Your guards will have one hell of a headache when they wake up, but they're alive. Be grateful." Daenerys.

Dany.

Dany held me—carried me.

The darkness guttered long enough that I could draw breath, that I could see the garden door she walked toward. I opened my mouth, but she peered down at me and said, "Did you think his fucking shield would keep us from you? Rhaegar shattered it with half a thought."

But I didn't spy Rhaegar anywhere—not as the darkness swirled back in. I clung to her, trying to breathe, to think.

"You're free," Dany said holding me tight. "You're free."

Not safe. Not protected.

Free.

She carried me beyond the garden, into the fields, up a hill, down it, and into ... into a cave ...

I must have started bucking and thrashing in her arms, because she said, "You're out; you're free," again and again and again as true darkness swallowed us.

Half a heartbeat later, she emerged into sunlight—bright, strawberry-and grass-scented sunlight. I had a thought that this might be Spring, then—Then a low, vicious growl split the air before us, cleaving even my darkness.
"I did everything by the book," Dany said to the owner of that growl.

I was passed from her arms to someone else's, and I struggled to breathe, fought for any trickle of air down my lungs. Until Rhaegar said, "Then we're done here."

Wind tore at me, along with ancient darkness.

But a sweeter, softer shade of night caressed me, stroking my nerves, my lungs, until I could at last get air inside, until it seduced me into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys, I had so much fun writing this chapter!!! For obvious reasons :P

I had planned to upload this chapter by next week, but I pressed myself to finish it earlier. Consider this a present from a writer who is becoming 17 today :)
Hey everyone! So I know, it's been almost three weeks since I last updated but believe me I've been crazy busy with studying. And the thing is that I feel so overwhelmed with all the amount of stuff I have to memorise until my exams in May. My stomach is a mess because of anxiety, I can't sleep properly, I can't think as much as I used to, my heart is racing all day long and all of this because of stress and growing pressure and the fear of failure.

My free time is almost zero, and the fact that I cannot make time to dedicate myself to the fic makes me even more depressed. I have every chapter totally planned but I don't have time to put the words down.

Updates will be rare from now, so please, please be patient.

I woke to sunlight, and open space—nothing but clear sky and snowcapped mountains around me. And Rhaegar lounging in an armchair across from the couch where I was sprawled, gazing at the mountains, his face uncharacteristically solemn.

I would have been blind not to notice the red dragon ire slumbering beneath. I swallowed—the air like glass shards against the walls of my throat—and his head whipped toward me.

No kindness in his eyes. Nothing but unending, icy rage indeed.

But he blinked, and it was gone. Replaced by perhaps relief. Gratitude. Exhaustion.

And the pale sunlight warming the town house floors—dawn. It was dawn. I didn't want to think about how long I'd been unconscious.

The tight-fitting summer dress was gone, exchanged for soft, comfortable pijamas that made me look so lazy, and a pair of thick woolen socks. Heat rushed to my cheeks. I dreaded to jump to the conclusion that Rhaegar was the person who stripped me off.

Dany. I remembered Dany's voice somewhere in my hazy recollection of what transpired before I blacked out.

"What happened?" I said. My voice was hoarse. As if I'd been screaming.

"You were screaming," he confirmed. I didn't care if my mental shield was up or down or completely shattered. "You also managed to scare the shit out of every servant and sentry in your beloved's manor when you wrapped yourself in darkness and they couldn't see you."

My stomach hollowed out. "Did I ... Did I hurt anyone?"
"No. Whatever you did, it was contained to you."

"You weren't ..."

"By law and protocol," he said, stretching out his long legs, "things would have become very complicated and very messy if I had been the one to walk into that house and take you. Smashing that shield was fine, but Dany had to go in on her own two feet, render the sentries unconscious through her own power, and carry you over the border to another court before I could bring you here. Or else Oberyn would have free rein to march his forces into my lands to reclaim you. And as I have no interest in an internal war, we had to do everything by the book."

Internal? The choice of this particular word felt a bit bizarre since Rhaegar picked his words painstakingly—more meticulously than anyone. Internal? If anything, the war would be external for our countries had a long history of wasting their time in the battlefields. If Oberyn's looming threat was referred to as such, then what could be considered external ...?

"I'm sorry, Rhaegar."

"For what?" he whispered, his lips moving as lightly as feathers afloat on the air.

"For all the trouble I gave you. I-I didn't mean to—"

"If there is one person you should apologise to, that is to yourself and yourself alone." He rubbed at his temple. "I thought your self-esteem was higher than letting that bastard grind you down for so long. Is that how much you value yourself, Lyanna?"

The question settled in me like a stone sinking to the bottom of a pool. There was such quiet in me, such ... nothingness.

And the fact that he called me Lyanna ... I've always liked my name. The light and airy sound of it. And I've always felt lucky that my parents named me so, that they didn't ruin my childhood with a traumatising name that sounded awful. Benjen would always complain that he despised his name, and I would always poke fun at my little brother just so I could get on his nerves and snap us both into a wolf fight.

But now Rhaegar had used my whole name. Nothing to sweeten it up. No 'Lyanna Darling' or 'Anna'. Which brought me back to the sobriety of my predicament.

"He locked me in that house," I managed to confess even as I heard my voice snap in two, and my heart reverberate through my chest.

A shadow of mighty wings spread behind Rhaegar's chair and his knuckles had gone paler than clouds from how tightly he gripped the arm of the chair. "I know."

His face might have been calm as he spoke, but I could detect the raw fury building underneath. Could feel it in my bones. He sounded as if he had seen this coming. It wasn't a stretch of a few heartbeats later that I realised this anger was not directed to me but ... to himself.

His was mad at himself. As to why, that I couldn't decipher.

I made myself meet his hard stare. "I have nowhere else to go."

It was both a question and a plea.

His expression was now one of bare fury and pain, the wings fading. "You know that's not true.
Stay here for however long you want. Stay here forever, if you feel like it." His galaxy eyes were brighter than ever, burning into mine, so full of hope and dauntless longing. I hastily ripped my gaze of his. Violet. I hate this colour. He noticed, of course. From the corner of my eye, I caught his full lips settling into a paper-thin line as he said, "No strings attached."

His words sounded more like a plea too. No, not like a plea. A wish.

His wish ... to stay here with him. And this time ... willingly.

An overwhelming torrent of paralysing terror surged through me. One I could not explain away.

Although he said no strings attached there was only one word making circles in my head: commitment.

Immediately terror was replaced by a four-head monster clawing at me. The monster had a name. It was called guilt. Guilt for being here with Rhaegar, while Oberyn was alone, having no clue about what was happening to me. And yet ... he had no clue about what was happening to me when our only barrier were our skins. It wasn't the mile distance between us. It was the distance between our hearts that led to this enstrangement.

"I ... I need to go back at some point."

Go back to silence, and those sentries, and a life of doing nothing but dressing and dining and planning parties.

Rhaegar didn't seem to like that, and didn't even bother to conceal his disapproval, as he shot up to his feet and began pacing up the room. His breathing became palpably thin—something I thought was nearly impossible—and his chest ... his chest was heaving as if he couldn't draw air to his lungs. As if he was drowning.

Panicked. He was so hopelessly panicked. And his tension was so very contagious.

I've always been an anxious person. Always an overthinker. Always an overanalyzer. Always a doubter. Always a mulling-overer. Always a pessimist.

All this bravado, and aggression and straightforwardness, all of them were just a façade. A façade to conceal all my insecurities and the timorous soul buried underneath.

Finally, catching up with reality, Rhaegar stopped in front of one of the ceiling-high windows and leaned against the glass pane.

"Don't ask me to do it," he murmured so softly without looking at me, and I knew that he meant returning me back.

"I need to go back sooner or later. By staying here I am just stalling the inevitable."

"If you think I am returning you back to that shithole, then you haven't been paying attention, Lyanna."

My heart sped up impossibly at the inexorable certainty in his tone. The declaration was absolute. The authority that poured out of him ... He almost sounded like Oberyn.

A maddening dose of fear spread through my veins, one as I've never known. I wouldn't exchange a gilded cage for another.
But ... Rhaegar's concern was justifiable, healthy. Oberyn's ... was straddling a line between overprotectiveness and paranoia.

"On the Winter Solstice, I forced myself to make a decision: to let you go." Rhaegar's icy breaths were clouding the transparent glass as he went on, "I told myself it was your choice. If it made you happy ... I was willing to step back. I was willing to lose my mate to another male. But what I am not willing to do is let you suffer. To let you fade away into a shadow."

Shadow. Ghost. Living dead. An unusually polite reminder that I probably looked like misery incarnated. I felt like it.

"This ... whatever this is, it's not permanent. Feelings aren't permanent. They come and go," I tried to calm him down, to reassure him a tiny bit even though I wasn't entirely convinced by my words either. I willed my lips to form the smallest of smiles."It's just a bad phase, really. I will get over it soon. Oberyn, too."

"Why are you still defending him?" Rhaegar snapped, and my heart slammed into my chest. "I just ... I don't get it. I don't get why you're still making excuses for him! First, those nightmares. You told me yourself he didn't give a fuck. You told me no one cared."

My fake smile faded as I remembered that last phrase of mine clearly, that night I talked to him through the bond for the first time after three months. I was lonely. I was sad. I was ... lost. Still am. Maybe worse than when this marathon of keeping my heart beating started.

"Then, that piece of shit blew apart his study, when he tried to ..." I didn't want him to say it. Every perfectly dictioned accusation against Oberyn was sapping my will to return back to him. "A few days later I see you on Calanmai. Emaciated and completely untrained. Depressed. Neglected. Withered. Dying. Lyanna." His voice was thick with emotion, and although I couldn't see his hands, buried deep into his pockets, I knew they were clenched into fists. "But the moment he locked you in the house ..." His wings ripped from him without notice, and I started.

My limbs turned light, trembling at the dark power curling in the corners of the room. No fear. I wasn't afraid of him. But afraid of the shattered control, at the boundless emotions Rhaegar experienced every time I was concerned. How far could he could go for me? How far could his mate instincts lead him? And more importantly, did I have any ... mate instincts?

Yes I did. That time when my father called my mate a whore, I snapped. I acted on instinct. Without second thoughts, I would have torn him down to ribbons, if Oberyn hadn't stopped me.

Rhaegar's eyes softened as soon as he noticed my disturbance and his iridescent wings slid back into their sheaths.

"You may find it in yourself to forgive him one day, Lyanna. You may have forgiven him already, for all I know." I weathered his intense stare for no longer than a second. His words held so much gravity. My stomach churned with something I couldn't place. Overwhelmed. I was so overwhelmed. "But I will never forget how it felt to sense your terror in those moments. So, I would rather cut my own wings than return you back to that worthless cur. At least here, I know you will be cared for."

I looked toward the mountains, as if I could see all the way to the Summer Court in the south. Oberyn would be furious. He'd shred the manor apart.

But he'd ... he'd locked me up. Either he so deeply misunderstood me or he'd been so broken by what went on during the Winter Solstice, but ... he'd locked me up. My chest was a gaping, open
wound. I wondered if I'd bleed out from it, if a spirit could bleed out and die. Maybe that had already happened.

"I'm not going back." The words rang in me like a death knell. "N-not until I figure things out." I shoved against the wall of anger and sorrow and outright despair.

Maybe—maybe Oberyn would come around. Heal himself, that jagged wound of festering fear. Maybe I'd sort myself out. I didn't know.

But I did know that if I stayed in that manor, if I was locked up one more time —It might finish the breaking that Joanna had started.

Rhaegar's tight posture went completely slack, as though a huge burden had vanished. In a blink of an eye he had closed the distance between us. He summoned a mug of hot chocolate from nowhere and handed it to me, before taking a seat beside me on the couch. "Drink it."

I took the mug, letting its warmth soak into my stiff fingers. He was monitoring my every sip, as though I was that malnourished. But actually ... I was.

When the mug was half-finished, I fished for something, anything, to say to keep the crushing silence at bay. "I need to inform them." I couldn't even say Oberyn's name. "Do you think I should write them a letter?"

"Of course," Rhaegar said and slowly, but not a bit reluctantly, placed his hand on top of mine. My hands were trembling from the very thought that I would have to confront Oberyn even through a letter. "We will do this day by day. Don't hesitate to tell him what you feel. Be honest with him. If he truly cares for you, then he'll understand."

Warmth spread through my limbs like sunrays through a rain cloud. And yet, I couldn't push past the knot that had formed down in the pit of my stomach. Past the anxiety, and the melancholy of my feverish mind.

Without warning, the door of the living room threw open, and Dany stormed in, almost out of breath.

"Look who is awake," she chirped and her whole face lit up as she graced me with a broad, toothy smile. "I would ... I would hug you but," Her chest was wildly rising and falling. She looked as though she had been running, especially as she lowered her head and braced her hands on her knees to retrieve the coherence of her voice. "We don't have time for hugging right now."

"What's wrong?" Rhaegar and I asked at the same time.

"The others are already waiting in the House of Wind."

"What happened?" Rhaegar said, obviously on edge.

"There has been another temple sucking," Daenerys blurted out and Rhaegar went still beside me. "In Itica."

My heart stopped beating. And although I hadn't been running, I felt like I couldn't breathe.
I know this chapter was short but I made myself write it in one sitting, just so I could relax for a few hours. Sorry if there are any mistakes. I had no time to proofread it. :(

Next update will be probably in 10-15 days ...

P.S: Remember when a few weeks ago I was ranting about the Rhaegar/Lyanna awful casting and that from now on I would only rely on fanfics and the books and fanarts? Well, I found this awesome fanart of R and L and let me tell you, I wish I could find the artist of this little masterpiece and give him a hug. This is how the couple and the freaking wedding should have been! Whoever is the creator of this fanart did real justice to our pair. I don't know how to insert the image into the text, so if anyone knows please give me a short tutorial in the comments below ;) For the time being, here is the link.

https://gr.pinterest.com/pin/AcvNZHoPZ2jNbmmebYCxOGCZZokVqCzhv-mHlhBetCa-wQunhYcFQdM/

Check it out, guys please!!!
Out of shape. I was completely out of shape. The fact that I had barely climbed twenty stairs and couldn't stop panting proved how devitalized I was.

*Gods,* I hated climbing stairs.

And this mountain ... Why did it have to be so high and vast?

I was scowling at Rhaegar’s muscled back as I kept a healthy ten steps behind him while he led me through the halls of the House of Wind, the sweeping neighbouring mountains and blisteringly blue sky the only witnesses to our silent trek.

I was too drained and mentally disturbed to demand where we were now going, and both he and Dany didn’t bother explain as they led me up, up—until we entered a round chamber at the top of a tower.

Apparently, we were the last ones to arrive—quite belatedly—since everyone else was already seated and maundering on.

The moment I set foot in the room, four pairs of heads whipped toward me. All of them smiled instantly at me. Apart from one.

Haunting, violet eyes were pegging me as if I was on a cross. For an execution.

"Oh great," Ashara mocked and her lips twitched up into the most contumelious smile I’ve ever been given. Nevertheless, she wasn't looking at me as she went on. "You know guys, I was wondering what has been missing from this marvellous morning of mine. The sun is shining, the birds are singing, I ate pancakes for breakfast, and now a dog is groveling at our doorstep. What a dream."

"How funny, Ash," Vis drawled, his bright eyes cold and his expression more solemn than ever. "Tickle me a little so I can laugh."

Ashara merely sniffed before carrying on anew with her persiflage, this time addressing me directly. "What are you doing here?" Her voice cut sharper than ice. I just stood motionless, blinking at her, striving to tone down the staccato rhythms of my pulse. I'm sure Daenerys had informed all of them of my current situation. "I asked you a question," she ground out, even more abruptly than before. "Or are you deaf?"

Rhaegar was in an instant beside me, the very gesture a silent reminder of who had the last word in the room. "That's enough, Ashara," he said in unembelished warning.

"Oh no," she retaliated, her mouth on the brink of unleashing an inferno of carefully crafted affronts. "This has just begun getting interesting."

Rhaegar chose to ignore her as he led me to the circular table of black stone that occupied the center, while the largest stretch of uninterrupted gray stone wall was covered in a massive map of our world. It had been marked and flagged and pinned, for whatever reasons I couldn’t tell, but my gaze drifted to the windows throughout the room—so many that it felt utterly exposed, breathable.
The perfect home, I supposed, for a High Lord blessed with wings.

And for the Illyrian female that monitored my every move as I took a seat across from her. Her eyes were clearly alight with such a strong aversion toward every single breath I took.

"So, little beast, tell us what brings you here," Ashara demanded, twirling an Illyrian dagger on the table. Oh, how she dreamed of plunging it into my throat. "Did your hairy boyfriend got bored of you and then you remembered that you have a backup plan?" Of course she wouldn't let go so fast. Why would she, when she was presented with such a great opportunity to give me a hell for coming back? "The way I see it, your Plan A failed, and then you turned to Plan B from here." Her eyes pinned Rhaegar to the ground.

"Cauldron boil me, Ashara!" Jon protested in my defense, and warmth spread through my cheeks. "Knock it off, will you? Even scorn has some limits."

"No. Stupidity has some limits," she hissed and the room fell once again quiet. "Let me get this straight: she abandons us. She forgets that her mate exists for like, how long, Jon? Three, four, five months? And then, all of a sudden, out of the fucking blue, she is here, attending a crucial meeting with us. How convenient! Maybe we should strike up a competition and see who is the most lameheaded of you all."

A spy. The accusation was clear. She believed me to be a spy. Part of me was envious of her simple-mindedness. Ashara was cunning and distrustful and definitely not naive. I couldn't blame her. Had I been in her shoes, I wouldn't trust me either. Wasn't this what Oberyn asked to become? A spy?

"Are you quite finished?" Rhaegar snarled quietly. "Because this meeting doesn't work around your schedule of arseness, Ashara."

"Oh look at you," Ashara cooed venomously. "When did you get that smart to talk back to me, Plan B?"

"This banter is so stale," Daenerys remarked bored. "Perhaps we should talk about something more pleasant. How about the weather? First snows of the season have already fallen in the Illyrian camps." Ashara's eyes snapped to Dany's as if shocked. Panicked, perhaps. "We should take Lyanna with us and have a snowball fight! Or perhaps Ash should be the one to give her a tour herself—"

Ashara went as taut as agony. She clicked her tongue but slumped back to her chair. "Very well," she cut in, resigned, and Dany graced her with a terrifyingly smug smile. "You are all worthy of your stupidity."

I couldn't believe my ears. Dany made Ashara shut up. Either their argument didn't make sense or I was simply too stupid to understand it.

Having avoided another soul-draining confrontation, I allowed myself to take in the table, where there was another map spread, figurines dotting its surface. A map of our continent—and ... lands that surrounded it.

Every court in our land had been marked, along with villages and cities and rivers and mountain passes. Every court ... but the Night Court.

The vast, northern territory was utterly blank. Not even a mountain range had been etched in. Strange, likely part of some strategy I didn't understand.
I found Rhaegar watching me—his raised brows enough to make me shut my mouth against the forming question. After a small pause he ripped his eyes off me and focused on the Shadowsinger who was monitoring everything, as silent as night. "Arthur, report."

"There was a temple sucking in Itica a few hours ago. All priestesses slaughtered. Same pattern with the other two temples."

"What pattern?" I asked immediately—my inquisitive nature getting the best out of me—speaking for the first time since we got here.

A feline smirk danced on Rhaegar's lips and my heart sped up thrice as he gave me an answer. "All the priestesses tried to defend themselves with dragonglass. To no avail though."

"What is dragonglass?" I breathed, my brows knitting together.

"Obsidian forged in dragonfire," Viserys fleshed out and drew a delicate makeshift dagger out of his pocket. Weird. And dull.

"Why would they use this and not some other established weapon?" I inquired. It looked pretty harmless to me, a weapon merely like all the others. "What's so special about this dragonglass?"

"Because their killers were no ordinary creatures," Arthur replied, his singing shadows curling around him. "They are devils, unlike anything we've ever seen. They are ... dead. Walking fossils. Or at least we are confident that they have remained so since the last time we saw them."

Vampires were practically dead, I wanted to object but ... They didn't look like the dead. They had feelings despite the fact that their hearts didn't beat.

"Who is them?" I breathed, my own heart drumming in my ears because ... because there was a slight possibility that Oberyn had something to do with these ... demons. The location of the secret temple was mentioned in his documents. It couldn't have been a mere coincidence.

Should I ... What was I supposed to do with this crawling suspicion?

"Aerys used to refer to them as Others." Ashara spat, annoyance still painted on her face. All of them straightened as if she had just said a forbidden word.

"When the war started," Rhaegar spoke, "my father called in all his vassals to pledge fealty to him and join their forces with the wolves. Most of them followed him but there were some others—the Loyalists—who committed treason and allied their forces with the other three vampire Courts. Once the treaty was signed and Aerys emerged as the victor he took control of Valyria. He demanded of the traitors that they free their slaves, both human and werewolves alike. The Loyalists butchered all of their slaves instead of granting them their freedom."

I blinked. Once. Twice. "How ... How are these Others related to all of this?"

Rhaegar cocked his head, his mouth tightening. "The Loyalists created them. Or, to be more precise, their leader. I can't remember his name, only a pair of crashing blue eyes and silver hair white as ice. He called himself the Night King. I don't know how he did it or what kind of dark magic he used to ... to breed these undying abominations."

"What happened after that?"

"The Night King presented his ... procreations to my father, suggesting that with a whole army of them my kind could retrieve its lost property." Property. That's how werewolves were referred to
before the war. We were vampire property. "He wanted these creatures to be unstoppable. Unlike vampires, he designed them to be immune to a wolfbite and ash wood. And indeed immune they were."

"Apart from dragonglass," I filled in. "It seems this Night King went for wool and came back shorn."

"Exactly," Rhaegar confirmed. "Aerys had the good sense to actually feel threatened of these devils and their puppeteer." The Night King must have been in control of these ... things since he was the one who bred them. "Especially when one of the Others almost attacked my mother and tried to turn her into ..."

Aerys was a greedy man, a High Lord lusting after power, lusting after a crown. He was a strategist. He was no fool to have his power snatched up from this Night King.

My blood stopped frozen in my veins. "You mean if they—if they bite you, you turn into one of them."

Rhaegar nodded. "Aerys had dragons burn every single one of them before it was too late, and exiled the Night King and his followers."

My frown deepened even more as I asked, "Exiled them where?"

Rhaegar pointed to a weird shape on the map. Not a weird shape but a—an island. It was called The Wastes. The island was plainly white—barren and winter-stricken probably—and it was ...

“What do you see?” Rhaegar's voice rang in my ears.

All I could see was Zara and Valyria and a thick line between them—the wall, its massive line bisecting our world. And that island ... It was from the side of our country. It was a few waves away from my Court.

“Tell me what you see,” Rhaegar repeated.

I whipped my head toward him. “My Court—” I halted on the word. "My family—"

“Your family,” Rhaegar finished, “would be deeply impacted if the Others cross the sea, wouldn’t they? So close to its border … If they’re lucky, they’ll flee across the ocean before it happens.”

“Will it happen?” I gasped.

Rhaegar didn’t break my stare. “Maybe.”

“Why?”

“Because war is coming, Lyanna.”

War.

The word clanged through me, freezing my veins.

I waited for him to go on, glad for the spacious room, the bright air, as the ground started to slide out from beneath me.

“Put your damn shield up,” he growled.
I looked inward, finding that invisible wall had dropped because of panic again. But I was so tired, and if war was coming, if my family—

“Shield. Now.”

The raw command in his voice—the voice of the High Lord of the Night Court—had me acting on instinct, my exhausted mind building the wall brick by brick. Only when it’d ensconced my mind once more did he speak, his eyes softening almost imperceptibly. “Did you think it would end with Joanna?”

“Oberyn hasn’t said … ” And why would he tell me? But there were so many patrols, so many meetings I wasn’t allowed to attend, such … tension. He had to know. I needed to ask him—demand why he hadn’t told me—

“The Night King has been planning his campaign to reclaim the world south and north of the wall for over a thousand years,” Viserys said. “This is his idea of revenge. All this time he has been experimenting on those devils, biding his time until the most timely opportunity to invade our continent presented itself.”

“Will he attack Valyria first?” Dany asked, possibly because she was as clueless as I was.

“The Day Court,” Arthur said, pointing to the map of my massive Court on the table, “is all that stands between the Night King and the continent. He wants to reclaim the vampire realm there—perhaps seize the werewolf territory, too. If anyone is to intercept his conquering fleet before it reaches the continent, it would be Rickard.”

I slumped deeper in my chair, my knees wobbling so badly I could hardly keep upright.

“That bastard who dares to call himself a King will seek to remove Zara from his way swiftly and thoroughly,” Viserys continued. “And shatter the wall at some point in the process. There are already holes in it, though mercifully small enough to make it difficult to swiftly pass his armies through. He’ll want to bring the whole thing down—and likely use the ensuing panic to his advantage.”

Each breath was like swallowing glass. “When—when is he going to attack?” The wall had held steady for a millenium, and even then, some damned holes had allowed the foulest, hungriest vampires to sneak through and prey on us. Without that wall, if this Night King was indeed to launch an assault on our world … I thanked the gods for having not eaten breakfast at all.

“That is the question,” Rhaegar said to me. “And why I brought you here.”

I lifted my head to meet his stare. His face was drawn, but calm.

“I don’t know when or where he plans to attack Valyria,” Rhaegar went on. “I don’t know who his allies here might be.”

“He’d have allies here?”

A slow nod. “Cowards who would bow and join him, rather than fight his armies.”

“What about their numbers?”

“That is yet another excellent question for which I don't have an answer to, Lyanna Darling.”

I could have sworn a whisper of darkness spread along the floor behind him. “Do… do you
remember the War?"

“Yes I do. And that's why I have no interest in ever seeing full-scale slaughter like that again.”

The age of these people hit me like a brick, despite all they'd told me minutes earlier. The War. Apart from Vis and Dany, they had all fought in the War ten hundred years ago.

Rhaegar blinked, as if clearing the horrors from his mind. “But I don’t think the Night King will strike that way—not at first. He’s too smart to waste his forces here, to give the continent time to rally while we fight him. If he makes his move to take control of our realm, it’ll be through stealth and trickery. To weaken us. We now have several untested High Lords, broken courts with High Priestesses angling for control like wolves around a carcass, and a people who have realized how powerless they might truly be.”

I tamed my features into an apathy I didn't feel. "How can I help you?"

"We are the ones who are going to help you first," Jon said pointing a finger at me—at all of me. "Starting with working on these new powers of yours. Then, you work with us."

Training ... I was ... I was going to train. The possibility had been stuck in my mind for so long as a wish that now ... it sounded like a pipedream.

"You are our only voice, Lyanna." Dany said and Ashara, ever so discreet, snorted. "After what happened, we are completely isolated from the other Courts. Our only ally is Dawn. The High Lords won't listen to us."

As far as I knew the werewolf Courts wanted nothing to do with vampires, let alone the Night Court. But from the other side ... So did Robert Baratheon and Mace Tyrell. How could they trust the Court that held their relatives prisoners under a rock for so long?

"Wait," I murmured to no one in particular. "Because I am a bit confused. You said these things can turn you into one of them if they kill you. They were the ones who slaughtered those priestesses, right? And yet, all of them were simply found dead, not turned. Nothing suspicious so far. And, most importantly, why would they suck the temples?"

"That's what I want to find out," Rhaegar mused, crossing his hands over his broad chest. "They have been leaving carcasses all over the country—whole villages slaughtered—and never one witness alive to indeed confirm it's them. They have the opportunity to wrack havoc and yet, they are still moving underground. And then there is the bone-thing."

"What bone-thing?" I inquired, my breath thin and heavy.

"All the victims had been missing a bone—the pinky bone to be exact—and an eye."

"The pinky bone?" I mocked, sporting a perfectly arched eyebrow. I couldn't believe my ears. "And an eye? What kind of an ill-humoured joke is this?"

"I know right." Dany blew a soft whistle. "Rhaegar sucks at telling jokes, doesn't he? Once a sucker, always a sucker."

Rhaegar sliced her with a glare that could have killed her on the spot.

"What if they're trying to ... resurrect them or something?" Viserys suggested. My guts turned laden.
"Bullshit," Jon spat. "There is no fucking way to do that."

"Word must have reached him about Lyanna's making," Arthur intervened. Rhaegar shuddered. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "The Night King knows it's possible to upgrade those devils. He's looking for something to remake them again."

"Or he has already found it." Rhaegar interlaced his fingers and rested them on the table. "Now, we simply have to find out what is this something and how it is tied to our bone-and-eye case."

Ashara sighed. "You already know how to find the answer. Go to the Prison. Talk to the Bone Carver."

"Shit," Dany and Jon both said.

Rhaegar said calmly, "Perhaps you and your bullying methods would be more effective, Ashara."

I was grateful for the table separating us as Ashara hissed, "I will not set foot in the Prison, Plan B, and you know it. So go yourself, or send one of these fools to do it for you."

Jon grinned, showing his white, straight teeth, perfect for biting. Ashara snapped hers once in return.

Arthur just shook his head. "I'll go. The Prison sentries know me—what I am."

I wondered if the shadowsinger was usually the first to throw himself into danger.

"If anyone's going to the Prison," Rhaegar said before Dany opened her mouth, "it's me. And Lyanna."

"What?" Dany demanded, palms now flat on the table.

"He won't talk to Plan B," Ashara said to the others, or to Arthur. Or to any of us. "We've got nothing to offer him. But an immortal with a mortal soul ..." She stared at my chest as if she could see the heart pounding beneath. "The Bone Carver might be willing indeed to talk to her."

They stared at me. As if waiting for me to beg not to go, to curl up and cower. Their quick, brutal idea of an interview to see if I was trustworthy, I supposed.

But this Bone Carver ... I didn't know what creature he was. A monster most likely. I had stopped being afraid of monsters a long time ago. Maybe Joanna had broken whatever part of me truly feared. Or maybe fear was only something I now felt in my dreams.

"What do you say, Lyanna Darling?" Rhaegar said casually. "Are you on board?"

Did I have any choice? Hm, actually, I had two; to shirk and mourn or face some unknown horror. The answer was easy. "How bad can it be?"

"Bad," Jon said. None of them bothered to contradict him. "I say you skip breakfast tomorrow."

"Firstly, Lyanna skipping breakfast ever again is out of the question," Rhaegar declared, and his expression meant business. "And secondly, we are not going tomorrow," he announced, his profile pensive. "This can wait. There is something else that needs to be crossed off the list first."

Across from me, Ashara looked as if she wanted to crawl underneath the table and die.

Maybe it was my idea.
Chapter End Notes

For those of you who have read ACOTAR, I think you know where this is going :P
The process of writing a letter to Oberyn was even more daunting than I thought.

My mind was a skein and my thoughts the endless path of threads that I had to untangle, to tame and put into the paper that had been sitting in front of me blank for nearly an hour now. No words, none of the twenty six letters of the alphabet was good enough.

Another desperate sigh escaped me, the same moment that Dany breezed in the study, an encouraging smile playing between her lips, and a tray crammed with food balancing on her hands.

"Still no luck, huh?" she mused, frowning upon the pile of crumpled paper-balls that littered the floor.

"Nothing," I said, throwing my pen across the desk in frustration.

Dany set the tray in front of me, slumped in a nearby armchair and sprawled her feet onto my desk. For a tiny spread of eyeblinks we said nothing, just stared at each other. Finally she said, "How are you feeling?"

The knot in my stomach formed and coiled again. How did I feel? I felt like air. Light and empty and as meaningless as a gulp of breath. Instead I said, "I don't really want to talk about it.

Dany nodded. As if she understood. "I've been through the same, if that helps. Just a tiny bit."

I squared my shoulders, vague pieces of what Rhaegar told me once coming together. "What do you mean?"

"I spent a year Under The Mountain. Locked up, that is," she trailed, her bright eyes losing their light as memories crept up on her mind. Under Aerys's orders, was what she didn't want to say. "When I heard your screams in that manor, it was like reliving the whole damn thing all over again."

"Did you ever forgive him?" I asked, trying my damniest to avoid his name and the image of his bony face that had taken root in my mind ever since he murdered my family.

"Yes," Daenerys admitted. "I could never unlove him or blame him actually for being ... him."

"He was mad," I stated flatly.
"Despite what you may think, my father wasn't mad. He was lonely. He stopped living the day my mother died. He thought himself to be on his own, even though he had us still."

Just for a moment, my heart twisted uncomfortably with pity. And I didn't want to feel the slightest prick of remorse for Aerys. I didn't want to ... to admit that I kind of related to him.

Did I feel this lonely too? My proneness to random spells of sadness certainly suggested so.

"A Targaryen alone in the world is a terrible thing," Daenerys ruminated wistfully.

"A wolf without a pack, that's a terrible thing," I retorted, my tone more tense than intended.

"You still have a pack." Dany's expression softened, yet still her tolerance couldn't douse the fire burning in my breast. My mother was gone. My father was a living-dead to me. Bran ... My Brandon was gone. "You still have your Summer High Lord."

"Do I?" My voice was brimming with doubt. And I didn't want to be doubtful of ... of what I had. Or used to.

"You wouldn't have stayed with him for so long if you believed otherwise, would you?"

"I ... Would I? "I don't know. What if I had doubts all along?"

Dany leaned forward, took my hand in hers and looked into my eyes. "Then why are you still with him?"

I slowly retracted my hand as though I'd been burned. "I ... I can't let go. I'm afraid to let go."

Afraid to let go of that one person with whom I grew up. Oberyn was all I had. And then, there was Elia. I wouldn't just abandon her, especially after what happened.

"Relationships are not handcuffs Lyanna, and people aren't prisons. You don't need permission to end something that makes you feel inadequate."

"It's not all that easy," I murmured, frustration seeping into my voice. "Some part of me can't just throw away something that I have put so much effort into, just because the situation is not ideal. I can't give up on someone because of a few setbacks. I have to find a way to make this work, because I ... I don't want to be a quitter. A coward whose loyalty falters at the first difficulty."

What would Ned think of me?

"You are a coward now," Dany stated flatly, and I think I might have flinched. "A coward who has decided to make herself miserable because she doesn't want to hurt someone else. You have trapped yourself in a relationship full of low-lows and depression and confusion. Well, in case you didn't realise it, love doesn't feel like this."

"Before, you said you can't unlove someone."

Dany sported a tiny frown. "No, I think no one can. But one can always distance himself from toxic people and their toxic love. These kind of people love us too much. And maybe that's their mistake. They love us so much that they make us compromise our happiness because of their needs and fears. And as much as we may care for them, we can't destroy ourselves for the sake of someone else."

Words had totally abandoned me. Dany's opinion on my case was clear, and at the same time, the
only reasonable thing to do. And yet, I felt as if I had a firm thread tied to my heart that was
tugging every time I dared consider the prospect of breaking up with Oberyn. This thread was
called duty.

"Your High Lord doesn't differ from my father at all," Dany added after a while, having detected
the mist in my eyes. "My father never forgave himself for being late. For not having a chance to
save his family. But your High Lord wasn't late. He had a chance to bring you back. And maybe
that's why he is so afraid of losing you again."

My answer came out faster than a reflex, all the anger I have been swallowing for so long pouring
out me. "My High Lord wanted to keep me caged in. By doing that, he thought he would save me
—protect me. And I think … I think what happened to him, to us, Under the Mountain broke him.”
Perhaps more than it had broken me. "The drive to protect at all costs, even my own well-being …
I think he wanted to stifle it, but he couldn’t. He couldn’t let go of it.”

There was … there was

much I still had to do, I realized. To settle things. Settle myself.

Daenerys summed my feelings up. "Then you have made a decision."

Momentarily, I dropped my gaze to the paper in front of me, ready to write a simple answer.

Dany interpreted the intention as such. "I'll leave you to finish your letter and," She pushed the tray
toward me, leaving no room for negotiations. "this lovely meal. Rhaegar will kill me, if he sees this
untouched and we don't want that, do we?"

My response was a simple wink, a thing so effortless I hadn't performed for so long. Dany smiled
at me and I felt refreshed somehow.

"Oh, and Lyanna," she called softly when she was about to exit the room. "Whatever you choose,
just make sure you don't regret it later." And with this unsettling advice, she left me alone.

The letter was quick, simple. But each word was a battle. Not because of my former illiteracy. No,
I could now read and write just fine.

I left of my own free will.

I am cared for and safe. I am grateful for all that you did for me, all that you gave. I think that you
and I, we could have been. But we just did it wrong.

Please don't come looking for me. I’m not coming back.

When I finally unhooked my eyes from the letter, I found Rhaegar standing hesitantly outside of
the doorway, studying me closely.

His careful scrutiny upon me, somehow made me feel even more sure about my decision.

I was no one's pet.

I chose to follow my intuition.

I chose me.

I chose me over Oberyn.

Or was it Rhaegar over Oberyn?
Her Illyrian wings peaked proudly over her shoulders, her lustered snow-boots nearly silent as she made her way to the town house's lobby where everyone else was waiting for her. Well, her ... And the little beast.

Before she could make her presence known, hushed murmurs and howling laughs that sounded more like dog barks reached her sensitive ears.

Ashara paused.

“Twenty gold dragons says there’s a fight in the first half hour,” Jon said.

“Thirty, and I say within twenty minutes,” Dany challenged.

Ashara's heartbeats accelerated their rhythm.

“You do remember this is my mate we are talking about,” Rhaegar said mildly.

“Exactly,” Dany chirped. "Cauldron boil me, this is going to be epic. It's high time we had some real fun.”

Arthur said from the door, “Fifty, and I say within fifteen minutes.”

"Sixty, within fifteen minutes. Started by Ash," Jon gambled, and although she couldn't see his face, Ashara knew her roommate smiled as if he had already won. She couldn't help but smile too.

Rhaegar rolled his eyes. “Try not to look like you’re all gambling on them. And no cheating by provoking them.” Their answering grins were anything but reassuring. Rhaegar sighed. “A hundred dragons on a fight within ten minutes started by Lyanna.”

Ashara snorted and all pairs of eyes whipped to her. Oh, how she delighted in making people uncomfortable.

"It's a shame you will be losing all this money today, High Lord." Light as a summer breeze, she walked over to Rhaegar and flashed him the kind of smile she wished she could be admiring in the mirror right now. "You could as well use it to buy some judgement. Or, maybe something more practical. How about the balls to come any closer than one meter to your little beast after today.”

Rhaegar returned her smile, his eyes alight with jovial provocation. "I've been doing some practice."

Considering how many times the little beast had made a scene at the drop of a hat, Rhaegar must have gotten used to her drama by now.

The girl, apart from irritating as fuck, was stagy, and Ashara had no doubt she was going to bring in her hidden talents and make a fuss today too.

The preludes of a headache were already throbbing in her temples, but Ashara had promised to herself she wouldn't let whatever happened today bring her down.

From the corner of her eye, she scooped the overwrought faces of her friends, recited her own inner monologue of discomfort and flapped her wings. "Let's get some shit done."
Hey guys! It's been a long time, I know ... But here is another chapter :)

I wish to all of you a Happy New Year full of health and smiles :P May 2018 be your year!

The Illyrian war-camp deep in the northern mountains was freezing. Apparently, spring was still little more than a whisper in the region.

What a blasted place.

The word continued echoing in Ashara's head as she walked at Jon's and Dany's side, Rhaegar and Lyanna Stark a few steps ahead, Arthur and Vis lost in conversation behind them.

Built near the top of a forested mountain, the Illyrian camp was all bare rock and mud, interrupted only by crude, easy-to-pack tents centered around large fire pits. Near the tree line, a dozen permanent buildings had been erected of the gray mountain stone. Smoke puffed from their chimneys against the brisk cloudy morning, occasionally swirled by the passing wings overhead.

So many winged males soaring past on their way to other camps or in training.

On the opposite end of the camp, in a rocky area that ended in a sheer plunge off the mountain, were the sparring and training rings, where she and her brothers had trained so many times before.

Where she and Selaena used to train.

Racks of weapons were left out to the elements; in the chalk-painted rings males of all ages now trained with sticks and swords and shields and spears. Fast, lethal, brutal. No complaints, no shouts of pain.

There was no warmth here, no joy. Even the houses at the other end of the camp had no personal touches, as if they were used only for shelter or storage.

And this was where she, Rhaegar, Jon and Arthur had grown up—where Jon had been cast out to survive on his own. It was so cold that even bundled in her fur-lined leather, she was shivering.

As they slowly marched their way to the stone houses, every step forward she could feel Illyrians looking down their noses at them. Still, after a thousand years among them, Ashara's Inner Circle was still frowned upon as outsiders, bastards.

Even Rhaegar was considered a bastard, as all half-breeds were.
But the most hostile and envious of glares were reserved for Arthur.

People often made the mistake of assuming Jon was the wilder one; the one who couldn’t be tamed. But Jon was all hot temper—temper that could be used to forge and weld.

There was an icy rage in Arthur Ashara had never been able to thaw. Although he was her brother, he’d said little about his life, those years in their father’s keep, locked in darkness. Perhaps the shadowsinger gift had come to him then, perhaps he’d taught himself the language of shadow and wind and stone.

His eyes were speaking this language of slumbering ferality as he retaliated every single silent hostility towards his person.

"Where are we going?" Lyanna Stark nagged, her eyes scooping up her surroundings in frozen alarm. "Tell me I won't start training here."

Ashara almost wanted to whine hysterically. She was exhausted, and high-strung and she wanted the girl gone from this place. She wanted her as far away from her business as possible.

Instead, she compromised with a simple jab rife with sarcasm. "Tough."

All heads whipped to her, including Lyanna's Stark. Her eyes were crackling wildfire.

"Relax," Rhaegar said too calmly, ignoring completely Ashara and she wanted to slap him across the face for being so cool. How could he be so ... so okay with what was happening? "And trust me for once, will you, Lyanna Darling?"

"This is not an answer, you buzzard," Lyanna said miffed, but the defiant tone of her voice was at variation with the stiff language of her body, as she glued herself closer to her mate.

The she werewolf was scared. Outstandingly so. Had Ashara not been scared too, she would have been trying to bully Lyanna Stark even more.

"What is this place," Lyanna asked, surveying painstakingly the little wooden house she was about to enter.

Rhaegar inclined his head smoothy. "See for yourself."

As soon as the permission had been given, Ashara's breath jammed to her frozen nostrils.

The door opened with a subtle creak and Ashara was greeted by the dim light of the lit hearth and a familiar musty smell.

And then by a dissonant yelp capable of tearing her eardrums in two.

The proprietor of the yelp was no other but Lyanna.

"Bran-Brandon?" she whispered, her voice a weak echo of black disbelief at the sight of the wild wolf standing at the other side of the room.

"Lyanna," Brandon Stark whispered back.

At the sound of her brother's voice Lyanna's demeanor melted into chaos. She took some hesitant steps towards him. "Is that you?" She reached one hand to touch his face, and with gentle strokes she brushed her fingers against his disheveled brown hair. "Is that really you?"
Her voice broke and she fell into his open arms, winding her hands around his neck.

"You are not a dream?" she sobbed sloppily into his ear and clutched him tighter.

Brandon's face morphed into apparent pain from the force of her hug but he didn't protest. His wounds had not fully healed.

Ashara almost hissed but Rhaegar's firm grip was instantly on her arm, keeping her at check.

Hot tears rolled down Brandon's cheeks. "No, I'm not a dream."

"I missed you big brother," Lyanna cried softly, dissolving once more into sobs so deep and full of pain.

"Missed you too."

"We ... we thought ..." Lyanna said, hiccuping wildly. "I thought you were dead. How ...?"

"It's a long story."

"I saw her Bran!" she screamed, her elfin body shaking uncontrollably in fear, fury perhaps. "I saw that witch stabbing you with those needles! And you were bleeding on that floor and I did nothing to help you and mum!"

Ashara's heart twisted with agony as the image of Joanna popped up in her head. She would always live with the regret of not delivering the finishing strike. She would gladly have done it. For all the suffering she caused Rhaegar. For all that she did to Brandon.

"It wasn't your fault," Brandon consoled his sister, his voice ragged; he wanted her to understand. But how could he make Lyanna discharge her guilt when he blamed himself for his mother's death as well. She saw it in his eyes, and with it the helplessness and anguish she'd seen in glints and glimmers since he had come into her life that night. Only half a year before. It was unbelievable it had been so short a time.

"Mama, mama ..." Lyanna searched her room, her glossy grey eyes burning with hope. "Is she here?"

"She ..." Brandon's stormy gaze plunged into Ashara's, as if for guidance. Her heart soared every time he did that, every time he played tough but sought her help in his own proud way. "She is gone, Lya."

Silence. Awkward, insinuating silence spread like mist into the room.

Rhaegar and Viserys, Jon and Daenerys, they were exchanging glimpses full of sorrow.

"Of course she is not," Lyanna said finally, wiping the tears off the corners of her eyes with the back of her palm. Her attention swerved to the Inner Circle. "You all knew about this? And didn't tell me?"

Rhaegar, now anxious, was the one to deliver an answer. "Aerys was looking for his corpse. You could hold it a secret but your mind would not have lasted if Joanna was to peruse though it. It was a risk we weren't willing to take."

"Why didn't you tell me afterwards?" she offered with a small frown. And yet, there was no accusation in her tone. If anything, her stare upon Rhaegar was serene, trustful even.
"Because you left him," Ashara explained plumb and plain. "That's why."

For the first time, Lyanna appeared to be hurt by the realisation. Rhaegar noticed too but the girl quickly averted her face and turned her attention to her brother.

"Ned and Ben will be so happy to see you!" Lyanna exclaimed. "And Cat."

Ashara almost choked on the bile that rose from her throat at the mention of that girl's name. She had never met Catelyn Tully in person, but she knew she didn't like her. Rumours said her to be astoundingly beautiful, with her fiery hair and fair complexion.

But she was no competition for Ashara. Most importantly, Catelyn Tully was not an alpha female.

"Lyanna," Brandon softly touched his sister's hand, fumbling for words to put his feelings into context. "I ... I'm not coming back."

Ashara's heartbeat accelerated.

Lyanna's expression languished like blossoms during winter. "You learnt about dad, didn't you?"

Brandon simply gave a nod.

"I understand," Lyanna condescended. "If I were you, I wouldn't want to go back either."

"Nevertheless," Brandon trailed off, "this is not the case."

"Indeed, this not the case," Jon popped in, his tone thick with insinuation. He wiggled his eyebrows playfully at Brandon and then winked at Ashara.

Ashara promised to herself, that if she was to get through this nightmare, she would kick Jon's ass as soon as they were back to their apartment.

As if he was going not to provoke her to win that bet. At least she would make him share the profits.

"What do you mean?" Lyanna snapped at Brandon and grasped his arm as if to shake his brains up. "Why ... What about Catelyn?"

That was it. Ashara had had enough of that name!

She knew she was being absurd but was she really jealous? No. She was territorial. Jealousy was for those who lusted after something that was not theirs. Feeling territorial was protecting something that was already yours. And Brandon Stark was hers.

Two days and two unending nights she had been apart from him, and her eyes were darting, hungry. Her heart was gasping, empty. Whatever resistance had been in her, she gave it up. Her hands knew what they wanted: They wanted Brandon, the spark and heat of him. Even in the warmth of the firelit room she was cold, as if the only thing with a chance of warming her was him.

She wanted to hold him and be held, in soft perfect unity, like slow-dancing. She wanted to fit herself to him, breathe him, come alive against him, discover him, hold his face as he had held hers, with tenderness.
"Okay that's enough for today," she intervened at long last and got herself between Brandon and Lyanna. She groped for an excuse to justify her behaviour. "Can't you see that he is still hurt?"

Lyanna's eyes sizzled hot with anger. "What is your problem, huh?"

"Lyanna—" Brandon tried to separate them.

His sister waved him off as one might fan at a fly. "No, seriously Brandon!" She turned to Ashara again, her hands curled into fists. "What is your problem?"

"Go on Ashara," Jon popped in again in a sing-song voice. His attempt to contain his laugh was pathetic."Tell her what's your problem."

Ashara in her predicament sought Rhaegar's help. His endeavor to constrict his smile was futile as well.

_You've made your bed, and now you have to lie in it_, his smile seemed to taunt her.

"I asked you a question, or are you deaf?" the little beast growled, imitating the aggressive tone Ashara had displayed during the meeting at the House of Wind a couple of days ago. "What. Is. Your. Problem."

What was her problem?!

She was the one who had lost her sleep over these last six months, who had spent every night at Brandon's side trying to patch him up, who drowned in an ocean of tears every time he howled in the middle of the night because she couldn't stand seeing him in so much pain.

The little beast had no right to ask her such a question.

"I don't know what happened between you and Brandon when you first met him—I don't even care," Lyanna bared her teeth. "But he is my brother!"

Ashara erupted. "And he is my _mate_!"

There. She said it.
Hey guys!!! Here is another chapter, a small one though. It's a filler but I promise the next one is going to be very looong and an important one at that ;) I hope it will be up by the end of February, but so you know the updates until June will be really scarce ... My free time is zero and as my exams approach I have to increase the hours of studying.

But I promise in the summer, I'm going to compensate you all for your patience :) Thank you all for your kudos (Seriously, the last chapter broke the record) Please, bear with me :D

How long had passed? Seconds or minutes? Years or centuries? The track of time was gone. Numb. I couldn't feel. There was air in my lungs again, scraping in rough bubbles up and down my throat.

I tried to feel my heart, to find it, but I was so lost inside my own body. I couldn't feel the things I should, and nothing felt in the right place. I blinked and reality slapped me back into the little house.

I had found my brother. Brandon was alive. Next to me. Safe. Breathing. A tiny sliver of light slipping through the asphyxia of the past half-year.

In a moment I had found him, only to have him snatched away from me with four evil words.

*He is my mate.*

"Rhaegar," I demanded and swerved my stare at him. All I wanted was for him to look at me as if I had lost my wits. To tell me I had misheard. Misunderstood, perhaps. Sadly, he did no such thing.

I turned to my brother.

"Brandon," I pleaded.

Bran's expression became very nervous. "It's nothing you need to worry about—"

Air hissed up my throat, spitting through my clenched teeth with a low, menacing sound like a swarm of bees.

I glowered at Ashara. "Consider yourself dead."

Rhaegar rushed to my side, palms up, trying to reason with me. "C'mon, Lyanna Darling. You know it's something beyond their control."

I heard Dany chuckle, a sound of anticipation.

I was shaking uncontrollably with anger. Rhaegar shot me another odd, frantic look as if I was going to suffer a stroke any time now.
There was a fat possibility I would, actually. My brother ... My brother and that haughty cobra. Together.

It all made perfect sense now. The way Arthur had sought Rhaegar that night Under The Mountain, mere minutes before my mother was tortured and then murdered, telling him there was a problem with Ashara. The way I spotted her that same night leaving a room, my brother following after her. The way Brandon vanished, having been winnowed away by someone.

That's why Ashara was always absent and exhausted the past months. She had ... She had been looking after her mate.

I didn't know if I had to thank her, or slap her for keeping my own brother all to herself.

"Practically," Rhaegar went on, monitoring every cell in my body, "they haven't slept together so the bond is not fully activated yet."

"We haven't slept together." Ashara smiled sharply at me, her every syllable a straightforward provocation. "Yet."

My temper snapped. I felt my body convulsing with fury, imploring me to turn into my beast form. My joints were trembling with an adrenaline that ached to be released.

I leaned into my hunting crouch and took two long steps forward toward Ashara. "You stupid bat —"

Rhaegar's undisputably strong hands wrapped instantly around my middle, holding me into place.

I glared at him with real irritation. Brandon shuffled uneasily next to me. We were all crowded so close that every tiny movement seemed very big.

Peevish as a bull, I joggled out of Rhaegar's grip and faced my brother, recruiting every ounce of disbelief into a single stare.

"Tell me you are not going to cement the bond."

"I haven't," Bran supplied, overly self-conscious of what he was about to say. His grey eyes settled on Ashara with a novel short of intimacy that rendered my pride a burning hell of jealousy and folly. "But I will."

"Her!" I erupted. "Out of all the people her!"

"Yes her!" Brandon's rough features turned defensive. "And I don't know why you hate her so much, Lya."

"Because she hated me first!" The answer flowed out of me as effortlessly as breathing.

"Brandon, wake up." I shook my brother by the shoulders in hopes that his brain would slip into place. "What about our Court? You are the High Lord's firstborn—the heir—the future of Day."

My brother held my hopeless look, apparently unmoved. His deep patriotism seemed to have evaporated along with whatever sort of respect he nurtured for our father.

I chose my next words very carefully. "What about Ned?"

Brandon blinked with perfect clarity. And something in his softened stare told me that he already knew. He knew Ned had taken his place. He knew Ned had offered to marry Catelyn instead. He
knew Ned had mated Catelyn on Calanmai.

"He is going to make a better High Lord than I would have ever made."

Something in me shattered; it was the perfect image I had formed for my big brother. I used to look up to him. My fearless wild werewolf, who moved earth and heaven to protect our lands against the vampires. And now he was turning his back against his own family for the batting eyes of a woman. That easily. I couldn't help but feel stabbed. Betrayed.

"What about Catelyn, you coward?" I barked, my eyes stinging with a sea of emotions. "You have exchanged vows with her—"

"Lyanna, have you not listened anything about what I have been telling you this whole time? I have a mate now. There is no one beyond her. Why don't you want to understand?"

"Because that's what duty—that's what honor demands."

"And yet here you stand, having abandoned Oberyn without a second look back. At least I know what I want. I'm not the one who has been changing sides depending on the circumstances."

Silence.

My brother regretted the moment he opened his mouth.

His words felt as if I was being pelted with stones. No, not words—accusations. Brandon realised that too.

And so did Rhaegar. My mate's darkness spread through the crammed room before his enraged voice did. In an instant he was beside me, his eyes as black as death when he faced Brandon.

"Lyanna had every right to leave, after what that cur made her go through. Your sister was a prisoner—a living dead in there."

I wished for the earth to open and swallow me up. I didn't want to explain myself again. I didn't want to be criticised again. Only this time it wasn't a stranger who judged me—it wasn't Ashara—but my own brother.

I thought about a place that was peaceful, a home where I could flee to. Thick palls of darkness began pouring out of me and I let them engulf me. I carved a path in the realms of my mind and thought of Velaris, of the little town house, the only place I deemed safe. And so I winnowed in a woosh of black air.

I was sitting on the edge of the town house's roof, looking out across Velaris, bathed in afternoon light, so gold that set all the green rooftops glowing.

"I thought you might be up here," Rhaegar said, striding across the flat roof to where I leaned against the wall that lined the edge. He took a seat next to me and scanned my face with a mate’s unflinching assessment, his mouth tight. "You still angry?"

Was I still angry? And with whom? For one thing, I was not angry with Rhaegar. More than anything else, was I angry with the idea that my brother had found his mate or the fact that this mate was Ashara? Selfish, and at the same time absurd.

I exhaled a long breath. "Do you think I may have overdone it?"
"I think you had every right to overreact. Believe me when I say that Ashara is not willing to share her mate with anyone else either."

I simply nodded. I was too drained to argue over spilled milk. If Brandon's choice was to stay with Ashara, then so be it. In fact, I was pretty aware that my anger boiled down to raw jealousy. I was jealous that Brandon's choice was so simple for him. He chose his mate. He chose the natural course of things, while I hadn't. I was still torn between two males.

"Bran hated vampires, you know," I stated. "Such a paradox."

"Yes, but what about Illyrians?" Rhaegar teased and after a moment we both fell silent.

"So," Rhaegar cleared his throat. "You winnowed."

All too abruptly, I straightened. "I don't know how this happened. I just wanted to get away from that camp."

"Your powers have grown faster than I thought." Rhaegar rubbed his neck, befuddled. "Even I needed three months before I could master my first winnowing."

I raised a cheeky eyebrow at him. "You really like hearing youself brag, don't you?"

Rhaegar laughed, and flicked my nose playfully. "Mock all you want, but my powers are the ones who are going to keep us safe tomorrow when we visit the Prison."

I whipped my eyes to his, not caring if he could detect the sheer fright crawling underneath my skin, if he could interpret the accelerating drumming of my heart. "So we are doing this? Are we really meeting the Bone Carver?"

Rhaegar simply nodded. "You have nothing to be scared of. You just have to trust me." Even the sound of his voice was a balm and a blessing.

"You know, I've made a big mistake. Up till now, I thought you to be my enemy, but if anything, you might be the only one I can really trust." Rhaegar's starlit eyes sparked up like a torch against the night. "What I'm trying to say is that ... I want us to become a team."

He flashed me a genuine grin. "I never pretended I wanted anything less, Lyanna."

The reassurance in his voice convinced me that behind his words there was a promise. A promise he was ready to keep this time. He was here, and he wasn’t something I’d made up, some wild dream I’d had imagined.

Breaking out of whatever reservations held me hostage for so long, I leaned against his shoulder and held on to him, so fiercely I could feel the weapons beneath his clothes. It would all be fine, even if it went to hell, so long as he was here with me.

I slung an arm around his waist, unwilling to let go of him lest he turn into wind and vanish. His casual arm around my shoulders was a glorious solid weight that made me feel that perhaps I wasn't completely alone after all.

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I stared up at the sharp grassy slope of the small mountain, shivering at the veils of mist that wafted past. Behind us, the land swept away to brutal cliffs and a violent pewter sea. Ahead, nothing but a wide, flat-topped mountain of gray stone and moss.
Rhaegar stood at my side, a double-edged sword sheathed down his spine, knives strapped to his legs, clothed in what I could only assume were Illyrian fighting leathers. The dark pants were tight, the scale-like plates of leather worn and scarred, and sculpted to legs I hadn’t noticed were quite that muscled. His close-fitting jacket had been built around the wings that were now fully out, bits of dark, scratched armor added at the shoulders and forearms.

If his attire hadn’t told me enough about what we might be facing today—if my own, similar attire hadn’t told me enough—all I needed was to take one look at the rock before us and know it wouldn’t be pleasant. I’d been so distracted in the study an hour ago by what Rhaegar had been writing as he drafted a careful request to visit the Spring Court that I hadn’t thought to ask what to expect here. Not that Rhaegar had really bothered explaining why he wanted to visit the Spring Court beyond “improving diplomatic relations.”

“Where are we?” I said, our first words since winnowing in a moment ago. Velaris had been brisk, sunny. This place, wherever it was, was freezing, deserted, barren. Only rock and grass and mist and sea.

“On an island in the heart of the Western Isles,” Rhaegar said, staring up at the mammoth mountain. “And that,” he said, pointing to it, “is the Prison.”

There was nothing—no one around.

“I don’t see anything.”

“The rock is the Prison. And inside it are the foulest, most dangerous creatures and criminals you can imagine.”

Go inside—inside the stone, under another mountain—

“This place,” he said, “was made before High Lords existed. Before Valyria was Valyria. Some of the inmates remember those days. Remember a time when it was the two Queens, that ruled these lands.”

“The hike will get your blood warming,” Rhaegar said. “Since we can’t winnow inside or fly to the entrance—the wards demand that visitors walk in. The long way.”

I didn’t move. “I—” The word lodged in my throat. Go under another mountain—

“It helps the panic,” he said quietly, “to remind myself that I got out. That we all got out.”

“Barely.” I tried to breathe. I couldn’t, I couldn’t—

“We got out. And it might happen again if we don’t go inside.”

The chill mist bit at my face. And I tried—I did—to take a step toward it.

My body refused to obey.

I tried to take a step again; I tried for Benjen and my beloved Ned and my Court that might be wrecked, but … I couldn’t.

“Please,” I whispered. I didn’t care if it meant that I’d failed my first day of work.

Ashara was standing at the foot of my mattress.
I jolted back, slamming into the wall, blinded by the morning light blazing in, fumbling for a
weapon, anything to use—

“No wonder you’re so thin if you vomit up your guts every night.” She sniffed, her lip curling.
“You reek of it.”

The bedroom door was shut. Rhaegar had said no one entered without his permission, but—

She chucked something onto the bed. A little gold amulet of pearl and cloudy blue stone. “This is
my lucky charm. Wear it in the Prison, and they can never keep you.”

I didn’t touch the amulet.

“Allow me to make one thing clear,” Ashara said, bracing both hands on the carved wooden
footboard. “I do not give that amulet lightly. But you may borrow it, while you do what needs to be
done, and return it to me when you are finished. If you keep it, I will find you, and the results
won’t be pleasant. But it is yours to use in the Prison. And remember, I’m only doing this for
Brandon's shake.”

By the time my fingers brushed the cool metal and stone, she’d walked out the door.
Rhaegar hadn’t been wrong about the firedrake comparison.

He kept frowning at the amulet as we hiked the slope of the Prison, so steep that at times we had to crawl on our hands and knees. Higher and higher we climbed, and I drank from the countless little streams that gurgled through the bumps and hollows in the moss-and-grass slopes. All around the mist drifted by, whipped by the wind, whose hollow moaning drowned out our crunching footsteps.

When I caught Rhaegar looking at the necklace for the tenth time, I said, “What?”

“She gave you that.”

Not a question.

“It must be serious, then,” I said. “The risk with—”

“Don’t say anything you don’t want others hearing.” He pointed to the stone beneath us. “The inmates have nothing better to do than to listen through the earth and rock for gossip. They’ll sell any bit of information for food, sex, maybe a breath of air.”

I could do this; I could master this fear.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “About yesterday.” I’d stayed in bed for hours, unable to move or think.

Rhaegar held out a hand to help me climb a particularly steep rock, easily hauling me up to where he perched at its top. It had been so long—too long—since I’d been outdoors, using my body, relying on it. My breathing was ragged, even with my new immortality. “You’ve got nothing to be sorry for,” he said. “You’re here now.” But enough of a coward that I never would have gone without that amulet. He added with a wink, “I won’t dock your pay.”

I was too winded to even scowl. We climbed until the upper face of the mountain became a wall before us, nothing but grassy slopes sweeping behind, far below, to where they flowed to the restless gray sea. Rhaegar drew the sword from his back in a swift movement.

“Don’t look so surprised,” he said.

“I’ve—never seen you with a weapon.”

“Jon would laugh himself hoarse hearing that. And then make me go into the sparring ring with him.”

“Can he beat you?”

“Hand-to-hand combat? Yes. He’d have to earn it for a change, but he’d win.” No arrogance, no pride. “Jon is the best warrior I’ve encountered in any court, any land. He leads my armies because of it.”

I didn’t doubt his claim.
"I have a question." There was plenty of curiosity in my voice that I almost felt like a toddler asking his parents about sex. “Dany—what does she do for you? I mean, what are her duties as your Third?"

“Dany is who I’ll call in when the armies fail and Jon and Arthur are both dead.”

My blood chilled. “So she’s supposed to wait until then?”

“No. As my Third, Dany is my … court overseer. She looks after the dynamics between the Court of Nightmares and the Court of Dreams, and runs both Velaris and the Hewn City. I suppose in a way, she might be considered a queen.”

“And Ashara?”

“Her duties as my Second make her my political adviser, walking library, and doer of my dirty work.”

“I mean—in that war where your armies fail and Jon and Arthur are dead, and even Dany is gone.” Each word was like ice on my tongue.

Rhaegar paused his reach for the bald rock face before us and said playfully, “If that day comes, I’ll get Viserys to find a way to turn Ashara into a dragon and unleash her on the world.”

"Mother save us all," I chuckled and offered him an impish smile. I shivered again and stared up at the sheer stone wall. “I can’t climb bare rock like that.”

“You don’t need to,” Rhaegar said, laying a hand flat on the stone. Like a mirage, it vanished in a ripple of light.

Pale, carved gates stood in its place, so high their tops were lost to the mist.

Gates of bone.

The bone-gates swung open silently, revealing a cavern of black so inky I had never seen its like, even Under the Mountain.

I gripped the amulet at my throat, the metal warm under my palm. I would walk out, I would walk out, I would walk out.

Rhaegar put a cool hand on my back and guided me inside, three balls of moonlight bobbing before us.

No—no, no, no, no—

“Breathe,” he said in my ear. “One breath.”

“Where are the guards?” I managed to get out past the tightness in my lungs.

“They dwell within the rock of the mountain,” he murmured, his hand finding mine and wrapping around it as he tugged me into the immortal gloom. “They only emerge at feeding time, or to deal with restless prisoners. They are nothing but shadows of thought and an ancient spell.”

With the small lights floating ahead, I tried not to look too long at the gray walls. Especially when they were so rough-hewn that the jagged bits could have been a nose, or a craggy brow, or a set of sneering lips.
The dry ground was clear of anything but pebbles. And there was silence. Utter silence as we rounded a bend, and the last of the light from the misty world faded into inky black.

I focused on my breathing. I couldn’t be trapped here; I couldn’t be locked in this horrible, dead place.

The path plunged deep into the belly of the mountain, and I clutched Rhaegar’s fingers to keep from losing my footing. He still had his sword gripped in his other hand.

“Do all the High Lords have access?” My words were so soft they were devoured by the dark. Even that thrumming power in my veins had vanished, burrowing somewhere in my bones.

For one thing, I’d never heard neither my father nor Oberyn mentioning the Prison.

“No. The Prison is law unto itself; the island may be even an eighth court. But it falls under my jurisdiction, and my blood is keyed to the gates.”

“Could you free the inmates?”

“No. Once the sentence is given and a prisoner passes those gates … They belong to the Prison. It will never let them out. I take sentencing people here very, very seriously.”

“Have you ever—”

“Yes. And now is not the time to speak of it.” He squeezed my hand in emphasis.

We wound down through the gloom.

There were no doors. No lights.

No sounds. Not even a trickle of water.

But I could feel them. I could feel them sleeping, pacing, running hands and claws over the other side of the walls.

They were ancient, and cruel in a way I had never known, not even with Joanna. They were infinite, and patient, and had learned the language of darkness, of stone.

I was shivering beneath the fur-lined leather, my breath clouding in front of me.

Down and down we went, and time lost its grip. It could have been hours or days, and we paused only when my useless, wasted body demanded water. Even while I drank, he didn’t let go of my hand. As if the rock would swallow me up forever. I made sure those breaks were swift and rare.

And still we went onward, deeper. Only the lights and his hand kept me from feeling as if I were about to free-fall into darkness.

Rhaegar’s hand tightened on my own. “Just a bit farther.”

“We must be near the bottom by now.”

“Past it. The Bone Carver is caged beneath the roots of the mountain.”

“Who is he? What is he?” I’d only been briefed in what I was to say—nothing of what to expect. No doubt to keep me from panicking too thoroughly.
“No one knows. He’ll appear as he wants to appear.”

“Shape-shifter?”

“Yes and no. He’ll appear to you as one thing, and I might be standing right beside you and see another.”

I tried not to start bleating like cattle. “And the bone carving?”

“You’ll see.” Rhaegar stopped before a smooth slab of stone. The hall continued down—down into the ageless dark. The air here was tight, compact. Even my puffs of breath on the chill air seemed short-lived.

He at last released my hand, only to lay his once more on the bare stone. It rippled beneath his palm, forming—a door.

Like the gates above, it was of ivory—bone. And in its surface were etched countless images: flora and fauna, seas and clouds, stars and moons, infants and skeletons, creatures fair and foul—

It swung away. The cell was pitch-black, hardly distinguishable from the hall—

“I have carved the doors for every prisoner in this place,” said a deep voice within, “but my own remains my favorite.”

Rhaegar went instantly taut as soon as he saw the owner of that voice. For a fleeting moment, I detected true fear crossing his now black eyes.

The fear flew away and composure was regained.

“I’d have to agree,” Rhaegar said. He stepped inside, the light bobbing ahead to illuminate a boy with night-black curly hair, sitting against the far wall, his attention taking in Rhaegar, then sliding to where I lurked in the doorway.

The boy had a complexion so pale that even moonlight would be jealous, and his eyes—his eyes were a dark colour I couldn't tell. His face was chiseled with the trace of a beard.

Rhaegar reached into a bag I hadn’t realized he’d been carrying—no, one he’d summoned from whatever pocket between realms he used for storage. He chucked an object toward the boy, who looked no more than fifteen. White gleamed as it clacked on the rough stone floor. Another bone, long but delicate.

“For your collection,” Rhaegar said. The boy diddled with the bone in his hands—as if it was a toy—before breathing it in.

The Carver smiled. "How generous of you, High Lord. Much obliged, thank you."

"Don't thank me. Thank Joanna."

My very blood stilled. This was one of Joanna's bones?

“Come inside,” was all the Bone Carver said, and there was no innocence, no kindness in that boy's voice. And yet ... His face was so familiar. So ... reminiscent.

I took one step in and no more.

“It has been an age,” the boy said, gobbling down the sight of me, “since something new came into
“Hello,” I breathed.

The boy’s lips twitched up into a smile that was a mockery of innocence. And his mouth ... full and narrow, like mine. Benjen's lips. Bran's lips. My father's lips. Stark lips. “Are you frightened?”

“Yes,” I said. Never lie—that had been Rhaegar’s first command.

The boy stood, but kept to the other side of the cell. “Lyanna,” he murmured, cocking his head. The orb of light glazed the inky hair in silver. “A-nya,” he said again, drawing out the syllables as if he could taste them. At last, he straightened his head. “Where did you go when you died, Lyanna?”

“A question for a question,” I replied, as I’d been instructed over breakfast.

The Bone Carver inclined his head to Rhaegar. “You were always smarter than your forefathers.” But those eyes alighted on me. “Tell me where you went, what you saw—and I will answer your question.”

Rhaegar gave me a subtle nod, but his eyes were wary. Because what the boy had asked...

I had to calm my breathing to think—to remember.

But there was blood and death and pain and screaming—and she was breaking me, killing me so slowly, and Rhaegar was there, roaring in fury as I died, begging her to stop … But there was so much agony, and I wanted it to be over, wanted it all to stop—

Rhaegar had gone rigid while he monitored the Bone Carver, as if those memories were freely flowing past the mental shields I’d made sure were intact this morning. And I wondered if he thought I’d give up then and there.

I bunched my hands into fists and I took a step closer to the Carver so I could look better into his eyes.

I had lived; I had gotten out. I would get out today.

“I heard the crack,” I said. Rhaegar’s head whipped toward me. “I heard the crack when she broke my neck. It was in my ears, but also inside my skull. I was gone before I felt anything more than the first lash of pain.”

The Bone Carver’s bottomless eyes seemed to glow brighter.

“And then it was dark. A different sort of dark than this place. But there was a … thread,” I said. “A tether. And I yanked on it—and suddenly I could see. Not through my eyes, but—but his,” I said, inclining my head toward Rhaegar. I uncurled the fingers of my tattooed hand. “And I knew I was dead, and this tiny scrap of spirit was all that was left of me, clinging to the thread of our bond.”

“But was there anyone there—were you seeing anything beyond?”

“There was only that bond in the darkness. And there was a melody. The song that Rhaegar was singing to me.”

Rhaegar's face had gone pale, his mouth a tight line. “And when I was Made anew,” I said, “I
followed that bond, followed that song back—to me. I knew that home was on the other end of it. There was light then. Like swimming up through sparkling wine—"

“Were you afraid?”

“All I wanted was to return to—to the people around me. I wanted it badly enough I didn’t have room for fear. The worst had happened, and the darkness was calm and quiet. It did not seem like a bad thing to fade into. But I wanted to go home. So I followed the bond home.”

“There was no other world,” the Bone Carver pushed.

“If there was or is, I did not see it.”

“No light, no portal?”

Where is it that you want to go? The question almost leaped off my tongue. “It was only peace and darkness.”

“Did you have a body?”

“No.”

“Did—”

“That’s enough from you,” Rhaegar purred—the sound like velvet over sharpest steel. “You said a question for a question. Now you’ve asked … ” He did a tally on his fingers. “Six.”

The Bone Carver leaned back against the wall and slid to a sitting position. “It is a rare day when I meet someone who comes back from true death. Forgive me for wanting to peer behind the curtain.” He waved a slender hand in my direction. “Ask it, girl.”

“If there was no body—nothing but perhaps a bit of bone, and an eye perhaps,” I said as solidly as I could, “would there be a way to resurrect that person?”

Those eyes flashed. “Was the soul somehow preserved? Contained?”

I tried not to think about the bones and eyes of all those innocent people that had been slaughtered. “Yes.”

“There is no way.”

I almost sighed in relief.

“Unless … ” The boy bounced each finger off his thumb, his hand like some pale, twitchy insect. “Long ago, before the vampires, before werewolves, before man, there was a Cauldron … They say all the magic was contained inside it, that the world was born in it. But it fell into the wrong hands. And great and horrible things were done with it. Things were forged with it. Such wicked things that the Cauldron was eventually stolen back at great cost. It could not be destroyed, for it had Made all things, and if it were broken, then life would cease to be. So it was hidden. And forgotten. Only with that Cauldron could something that is dead be reforged like that.”

Rhaegar’s face was again a mask of calm. “Where did they hide it?”

“Tell me a secret no one knows, Lord of Night, and I’ll tell you mine.”

I braced myself for whatever horrible truth was about to come my way. But Rhaegar said, “My
right knee gets a twinge of pain when it rains. I wrecked it during the War, and it’s hurt ever since.”

"Come on, High Lord," the boy challenged him and for the first time I looked carefully into his eyes. "You can do better than that."

At the first look, the boy's eyes seemed gray but from closer, they were the familiar indigo I had found myself lost into so many times before. These were ... Rhaegar's eyes, melancholic and ... extraordinary.

"When my father locked me Under The Mountain," Rhaegar said, more quietly than usual, with a helpless look on his face, and I steeled my stomach. "I almost put an end to my life."

I gasped without caring how my façade of composure had fallen apart.

The boy with the night voice leaned closer, delighted and, at the same time, starving for answers. "What stopped you?"

"Love," Rhaegar said as calmly as his feelings allowed. "I ..." He groped for meaning. "I fell in love."

My heart dropped to my stomach. No—no, lower than that. It dropped to the floor and shattered into a million pieces.

He ... he was in love? With ... With whom?

These last days with Rhaegar made me feel as if I had been filled and didn't realize it until the gravity of this new information landed and missingness rushed back in. It pounded inside me now, cold and aching, void and wanting—wanting—and a desperate part of me had to be stilled from darting forward to touch his hands again. Wary of the extraordinary compulsion beating in me, I forced myself to resist. It was like fighting a tide, and in the fight was the same terror: of being swept into deep water, beyond all safety.

The Bone Carver bit out a harsh laugh, even as I gaped at Rhaegar. “You always were my favorite,” he said, giving a smile I would never for a moment think was innocent. “Very well. The Cauldron was hidden at the bottom of a frozen lake in Lapplund—” Rhaegar began to turn for me, as if he’d head there right now, but the Bone Carver added, “And vanished a long, long time ago.” Rhaegar halted. “I don’t know where it went to—or where it is now. Millennia before you were born, the three feet on which it stands were successfully cleaved from its base in an attempt to fracture some of its power. It worked—barely. Removing the feet was like cutting off the first knuckle of a finger. Irksome, but you could still use the rest with some difficulty. The feet were hidden at three different temples—Cesere, Sangravah, and Itica. If they have gone missing, it is likely the Cauldron is active once more—and that the wielder wants it at full power and not a wisp of it missing.”

That was why the temples had been ransacked. To get the feet on which the Cauldron stood and restore it to its full power. And Oberyn knew about that. He had something to do with the temples. But how could I guess?

Rhaegar merely said, “I don’t suppose you know who now has the Cauldron.”

The Bone Carver pointed a small finger at me. “Promise that you’ll give me her bones when she dies and I’ll think about it.” I stiffened, but the boy laughed. “No—I don’t think even you would promise that, Rhaegar.”
I might have called the look on Rhaegar’s face a warning. “Thank you for your help,” he said, placing a hand on my back to guide me out.

But if he knew … I turned again to the boy-creature. “There was a choice—in Death,” I said.

Those eyes guttered with cobalt fire.

Rhaegar’s hand contracted on my back, but remained. Warm, steady. And I wondered if the touch was more to reassure him that I was there, still breathing.

“I knew,” I went on, “that I could drift away into the dark. And I chose to fight—to hold on for a bit longer. Yet I knew if I wanted, I could have faded. And maybe it would be a new world, a realm of rest and peace. But I wasn’t ready for it—not to go there alone. I knew there was something else waiting beyond that dark. Something good. That song ... it was begging me to stay.”

For a moment, those indigo eyes flared brighter. Then the boy said, “You know who has the Cauldron, Rhaegar. Who has been pillaging the temples. You only came here to confirm what you have long guessed.”

“The Night King.”

Dread sliced through my veins and pooled in my stomach. I shouldn’t have been surprised, should have known, but …

The Carver said nothing more. Waiting for another truth.

So I offered up another shattered piece of me. “I’ve thought about killing myself too.” Rhaegar went still. "I thought this hole in my essence, this pain of hearing my own heartbeat would fade away in time. But the moments of misery became days, and the days became weeks, and the weeks months and I ... I kept asking myself: what if it never goes away? I can't spend my whole immortality like this. I am only sixteen and no one's supposed to be so young and at the same time so heartbroken."

"Something was happening to me. Sometimes when I looked in the mirror, I experienced a moment of blank unfamiliarity, as if I were meeting the gaze of a stranger. I was totally detached. My name, called out to me, didn’t always register, and even the lay of my shadow could strike me as foreign. I’d catch myself testing it with quick gestures to see if it was mine. How difficult could it be to kill a stranger?" My voice cracked, and I wondered if the blue flame in the carver’s eyes might burn my ruined soul to ash.

I dared a glance at Rhaegar, and there was something like devastation on his beautiful face. I was aware again of his strain. Of his hopelessness. I had really hurt him.

Even the Bone Carver said gently, “With the Cauldron, you could do other things than raise the dead. You could shatter the wall.”

The only thing keeping human lands—my family—safe from not just the Others, but any other vampires.

“It is likely that the Night King has been quiet for so many years because he was hunting the Cauldron, learning its secrets. Resurrection of a specific individual might very well have been his first test once the feet were reunited—and now he finds that the Cauldron is pure energy, pure power. And like any magic, it can be depleted. So he will let it rest, let it gather strength—learn its secrets to feed it more energy, more power.”
“Is there a way to stop it,” I breathed. 

Silence. Expectant, waiting silence. 

Rhaegar’s voice was hoarse as he said, “Don’t offer him one more—” 

"I don't want her answers," the Bone Carver sentenced calmly. "I want—I want to taste her." 

Rhaegar was beside me in an wingbeat, tugging me to him, old wrath stirring in his touch. "Try touching a hair of her and I promise you even the Seven Hells won't be enough for you." 

The boy laughed humourlessly, his gaze scorching me from head to toe. "Just a taste, sweet." 

This was our only chance to dig for information. I ... I had to do it. As much repulsed I felt from the very thought, I had to. for my Court. And all these innocent people that would die. "Fine." 

Rhaegar gripped me by the elbow, his frantic eyes questioning me through one single stare. 

I slowly removed his fingers off me and turned determined to face the Bone Carver. I could be brave. Just for one minute. I had cowered at the sight of the Prison and ran. I wouldn't be a coward today. I would just close my eyes and pretend— 

The Carver took hold of my hand and in the twink of an eye I felt his tongue licking my fingertips. One by one. I swallowed a squealy gasp of aversion. This creature ... whatever crawled underneath that boy's skin, it was not of this world. 

His tongue kept savoring my fingers and then moved to tracing a slow path between my knuckles and up to the veins zigzagging on my skin. 

"You taste like nectar and salt," the boy half-moaned releasing my hand. "Nectar and cinnamon and apples. Pollen and stars and hinges. She tastes like fairy tales. Wolf maiden at midnight. Cream on the tip of a fox’s tongue. You taste like hope. And loneliness." 

Lonely? I felt bare in that moment, to have this creature get at my substance like that. He went on, whispering: “All that beauty, it’s wrapped around loneliness. You think I didn’t taste it? You’re practically hollow. A piece of empty candy to lick, but oh, you taste so good.” His head fell back and he gave a groan, eyes half-lidded with remembered pleasure. I felt ill. 

“When the Cauldron was made,” the carver mused, leering at me, “its dark maker used the last of the molten ore to forge a book. The Book of Breathings. In it, written between the carved words, are the spells to negate the Cauldron’s power—or control it wholly. But after the War, it was split into two pieces. One went to the vampires, one to the wolves. It was part of the Treaty, purely symbolic, as the Cauldron had been lost for millennia and considered mere myth. The Book was believed harmless, because like calls to like—and only that which was Made can speak those spells and summon its power. No creature born of the earth may wield it, so the High Lords and humans dismissed it as little more than a historical heirloom, but if the Book were in the hands of something reforged … You would have to test such a theory, of course—but … it might be possible.” His eyes narrowed to amused slits as I realized … realized … 

“So now the High Lord of Spring possesses our piece, and the other half ... they have the other entombed in their shining palace. Valyria’s half is guarded, protected with blood-spells keyed to Spring himself. The one belonging to the Day Court …" My father had the other half of the book? "The Day High Lord was crafty, when he received his Court's gift. He used our own kind to spell the Book, to bind it—so that if it were ever stolen, if, let’s say, a High Lord were to winnow into his home to steal it … the Book would melt into ore and be lost. It must be freely given by him,
with no trickery, no magic involved.” A little laugh. “Such clever, lovely creatures, wolves.”

The carver seemed lost in ancient memory—then shook his head. “Reunite both halves of the Book of Breathings and you will be able to nullify the powers of the Cauldron. Hopefully before it returns to full strength and shatters that wall.”

I didn’t bother saying thank you. Not with the information he’d told us. Not when I’d been forced to say those things—and could still feel Rhaegar’s lingering attention. As if he’d suspected, but never believed just how badly I’d broken in that moment with Joanna.

We turned away, his hand sliding from my back to grip my hand.

The touch was light—gentle. And I suddenly had no strength to even grip it back.

"Just a moment. You have been very generous with me today, sweet," the boy explained. "And for this I would like to make you a gift in return."

"She declines your gift," Rhaegar hissed and tugged me behind him.

I paused and looked at the Bone Carver, my curiosity strings gravely pulled. The boy smiled at me knowingly.

"No," Rhaegar said roughly reading my silent intentions. "We are leaving. This is just another one of his games."

I didn't move. My intuition didn't let me dismiss this 'gift'. My instincts called to me. I had to listen to what the Carver had to say. Because from the moment I set foot in this cell everything felt as if I was being played—tested even.

"You may wait outside, High Lord," the boy dismissed him. "Right, sweet?"

I frowned and so did Rhaegar. Did I want Rhaegar to leave? Why did I have this bad feeling that I didn't want him to hear whatever the Carver was about to unleash upon me?

"This won't take long," I said finally.

"Lyanna—"

"Wait for me outside. I'll be fine."

At long last, Rhaegar reluctantly shuffled to the gates and I turned just in time to see the gates close in his wake. When I redirected my attention back to the Bone Carver, I almost choked on my own breath.

Gone was the black-haired boy. In front of me stood now a wolf. A werewolf with fur as white as winter and with ruby-red eyes. A ghost perhaps. No. Not a ghost. But ... a mulatto. A hybrid. Half werewolf half vampire.

And I suddenly knew.

"You don't recognise me?" asked the wolf, the boy's voice coming out of his maws.

It dawned on me. That boy ... With the curly black hair—my hair—and those full lips—stark lips—and those indigo eyes—so dark that they could be mistaken for gray—this boy was mine. Rhaegar's son and mine. And that wolf ... that white wolf was his beast form.
There is only one Prince and he hasn't been born yet.

That's what the Suriel had told me.

*He is a promise, a song of light and night which the girl will carry in her womb. He will be born between two worlds to piece them together. His eyes will be bright as the girl's light, and his hair dark as the night sky.*

This boy's eyes were dark though. But so were Rhaegar's when he was sad. Yet, his natural colour was purple. A bright soft purple.

The wolf strutted to the bone that Rhaegar had dropped and picked it up.

Within the span of an eyeblink the Carver was back into the boy's form. My son's form. Only this time he had glorious Illyrian wings towering over him, iridescent black. Just like Rhaegar's.

He brought the bone to his nose and inhaled deeply, as if drinking in the most exquisite scent.

"Hmm." The boy flashed me a wicked grin that made my stomach churn. "She is angry, frighteningly so. Do tell me how exactly you killed her."

Killed ... killed her? I had to remind myself that this was one of Joanna's bones. And she was dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Rotting in one of the Seven Hells.

The Carver chucked. "What exactly did you do to her to deserve this?"

I frowned so intensely that I could feel my forehead wrinkling. "Deserve what? Joanna is dead. She can't harm us anymore. She can't harm Rhaegar."

"Of course she can't," the Carver drawled. "You ... You though. Can't you, sweet?"

A chilly shiver ran down my spine. Instinctively, I shut all my mental shields down. I didn't want Rhaegar to hear anything of this nonsense.

The boy inhaled the bloody bone once more and went on laughing to himself. "My my my, this is brilliant."

"Stop," I barked to him, my patience running low.

"I can smell death from afar and your mate reeks of it."

"What do you know?" I breathed. "Drop the riddles."

C'mon think, Lyanna.

The boy looked me straight in the eyes, his expression gravely serious. "I hope that you die."

Where have I heard this—

"From the hand of the person,"
"You love the most."

My body was convulsing with tremors, premonition and real fear parading on my skin.

I remembered.

I hope that you die from the hand of the person you love the most.

These were Joanna's last words to Rhaegar before Cersei plunged an ash knife into her mother's heart. Before Joanna's own daughter betrayed her. Before she died from the hand of the person she loved the most.

She ... She cursed him?

"No," I growled. "This is balderdash. You are lying!"

"That's a given, sweet." The boy snorted, unamused. "The real question is whether I'm lying to you or you are the one feeding yourself lies."

"You don't know what you're saying," I attacked him verbally. "You are just bored from so many years of idle uselessness in this shithole. You are messing around with me."

This couldn't be. This proclamation of a curse was just a way for that monster to kill his time.

And I ... I couldn't be the person Rhaegar loved the most.

This was too much information for one day. I stepped away and fumbled for a way to push the gates open. So I could get away from this monster's lair.

"Tick tock," the Carver chirped. "You can run as far away from the truth for as long as you want. But the curse will have its way. One way or another. And you, sweet—you are going to have his blood on your hands."

I turned one last time to see his face. To memorize my son's features. But it was such a feat, marvelling at the boy I was meant to bring into this world while a monster prowled underneath his skin.

The carver weighed the bone in his slender hands. “I shall carve your mate's death in here, Anna.”

As soon as I closed the gate behind me, I spotted Rhaegar pacing the gloomy corridor outside like a restless animal.

Before he could utter a single word or question me, I seized his arm and led him away. Up and up into the darkness we walked, through the sleeping stone and the monsters who dwelled within it.

At last I said to Rhaegar, “What did you see?”

"What did—"

I tried to avoid the nets of his curiosity. "I don't want to talk about it." I wouldn't let Rhaegar find out. Because he was already encumbered with a shit tone of worries. The Carver's claims were simply gibberish. I wasn't a murderer. "What did you see?"
“You first.”

"I just saw a boy," I lied.

Rhaegar looked at me in disbelief.

“What did you see?” I pushed.

He shuddered then—the most human gesture I’d seen him make.

“Joanna,” Rhaegar said.

Chapter End Notes

This one is one of my favourite chapters I've ever written :) I hope I have given you something to look forward to!
Hey guys! It's been a few months since my last update and I'm so sorry. This year has simply been a nightmare for me, filled with studying I didn't want to do, on subjects that left me coldly indifferent.

My anxiety levels have never been higher and as a result I'm still feeling drained, even though my exams are over.

As of this chapter, I wrote it a couple of months ago, so it's not that polished. Needless to say, I had a hard time editing it because... guess what? Writing Slump.

I've been detached from the story for so long that I've lost touch with the plot and characters. I'm not sure if continuing it for now is a good idea given my current state and lack of motivation. This last month, I tried getting back into writing but I couldn't help hating everything I wrote and I am convinced that you would too. I guess I don't want to ruin the story or something like that, if you know what I mean. Those last chapters felt slightly dull and disappointing to me, anyway.

I just want to thank you all for taking the time to read A Thousand Years. Your feedback and support was what kept me going. You are awesome!

“Ashara's right,” Rhaegar drawled, leaning against the threshold of the town house sitting room. “You are like dogs, waiting for me to come home. Maybe I should buy treats.”

Jon gave him a vulgar gesture from where he lounged on the couch before the hearth, an arm slung over the back behind Dany. Though everything about his powerful, muscled body suggested someone at ease, there was a tightness in his jaw, a coiled-up energy that told me they'd been waiting here for a while.

Arthur lingered by the window, comfortably ensconced in shadows, a light flurry of snow dusting the lawn and street behind him. Viserys chatted quietly with him. And Ashara …

Nowhere to be seen. I couldn’t tell if I was relieved or not. I’d have to hunt her down to give her back the necklace soon—if Rhaegar’s warnings and her own words were to be believed.

Damp and cold from the mist and wind that chased us down from the Prison, I strode for the armchair across from the couch, which had been shaped, like so much of the furniture here, to accommodate Illyrian wings. I stretched my stiff limbs toward the fire, and stifled a groan at the delicious heat.

“How’d it go?” Daenerys said, straightening beside Jon. No gown today—just practical black pants and a thick blue sweater.

“The Bone Carver,” Rhaegar said, “is a busybody gossip who likes to pry into other people’s business far too much.”

The hell he was. And he was a twister, a mean little monster who liked weaving falsehood in order
to scare me. Rhaegar had told me he could smell fear. So the monster pushed me to my limits. I had to remind myself that none of his claims were true.

“But?” Jon demanded, bracing his arms on his knees, wings tucked in tight.

“But,” Rhaegar said, “he can also be helpful, when he chooses. And it seems we need to start doing what we do best.”

I flexed my numbed fingers, content to let them discuss, needing a moment to reel myself back in, to shut out what I’d revealed to the Bone Carver.

And what he had revealed to me. I had dismissed the curse scenario, because I had promised myself that I would let Joanna behind me. She belonged in the past. And with her all that she did to me and Rhaegar. But that boy ... That boy with the Illyrian wings and the wolf form.

He was beautiful.

My son.

What would his name might be? What name would I have given him in the future?

And what the Bone Carver suggested I might actually be asked to do with that book. The abilities I might have.

So Rhaegar told them of the Cauldron, and the reason behind the temple pillagings, to no shortage of swearing and questions—and revealed nothing of what I had admitted in exchange for the information. Vis and Arthur exchanged something like a knowing look and Arthur emerged from his wreathing shadows to ask the most questions; his face and voice remained unreadable. Jon and Dany—the duet of prattle—surprisingly, kept quiet—as if the general understood that the shadowsinger would know what information was necessary, and was busy assessing it for his own forces.

When Rhaegar was done, his spymaster said, “I’ll contact my sources in the Spring Court about where the half of the Book of Breathings is hidden. I can fly into Zara myself to figure out where they’re keeping their part of the Book before we ask them for it.”

Something didn't settle fine with me. Because Day was still my Court. And Arthur had just suggested to encroach on our territory. My father was still High Lord. He had to know.

As if Rhaegar interpreted my stiffness he said, “No need. And I don’t trust this information, even with your sources, with anyone outside of this room. Save for Ashara.”

“They can be trusted,” Arthur said with quiet steel, his scarred hands clenching at his leather-clad sides.

“We’re not taking risks where this is concerned,” Rhaegar merely said. He held Arthur’s stare, and I could almost hear the silent words Rhaegar added, It is no judgment or reflection on you, Arthur. Not at all.

But Arthur yielded no tinge of emotion as he nodded, his hands unfurling.

“So what do you have planned?” Dany cut in.

Rhaegar picked an invisible piece of dirt off his fighting leathers. When he lifted his head, those violet eyes were glacial. “The Night King sacked one of our temples to get a missing piece of the
“Cauldron. As far as I’m concerned, it’s an act of war—an indication that His Majesty has no interest in wooing me.”

“He remembers our allegiance to the wolves in the War, anyway,” Jon said. “He wouldn’t jeopardize revealing his plans while trying to sway you.”

Rhaegar said, “Indeed. But this means The Night King’s forces have already successfully infiltrated our lands—without detection. I plan to return the favor.”


Rhaegar crossed his arms. “It will require careful planning. But if the Cauldron is in the Wastelands, then to the Wastelands we must go. Either to take it back … or use the Book to nullify it.”

Some cowardly, pathetic part of me was already trembling.

“Theyir fortress likely has as many wards and shields around it as we have here,” Arthur countered. “We’d need to find a way to get through them undetected first.”

A slight nod. “Which is why we start now. While we hunt for the Book. So when we get both halves, we can move swiftly—before word can spread that we even possess it.”

Jon nodded, but asked, “How are you going to retrieve the Book, then?"

I braced myself as Rhaegar said, “Since these objects are spelled to the individual High Lords, and can only be found by them—through their power … Then, in addition to her uses regarding the handling of the Book of Breathings itself, it seems we possibly have our own detector.”

Now they all looked at me.

I cringed. “Perhaps was what the Bone Carver said in regard to me being able to track things. You don’t know … ” My words faded as Rhaegar smirked.

“You have a kernel of all our power—like having seven thumbprints. If we’ve hidden something, if we’ve made or protected it with our power, no matter where it has been concealed, you will be able to track it through that very magic.”

“You can’t know that for sure,” I tried again.

“No. But there is a way to test your abilities.” Rhaegar was still smiling.

“Here we go,” Jon grumbled. "Again. Just give her a day off, you cruel bastard. If you were my mate, I surely wouldn't want to bed you.”

I flushed instantly red through my hairline.

Dany gave Arthur a warning glare to tell him not to open his mouth. The spymaster just gave her an incredulous look in return.

I might have lounged in my chair to watch their battle of wills had Rhaegar not said, “With your abilities, Lyanna Darling, you might be able to find the half of the Book at the Spring Court—and break the wards around it. But I’m not going to take the carver’s word for it, or bring you there without testing you first. To make sure that when it counts, when we need to get that book, you—we do not fail. So we’re going on another little trip. To see if you can find a valuable object of mine
that I’ve been missing for a considerably long time.”

“Shit,” Dany said, plunging her hands into the thick folds of her sweater. “I too wouldn't want to even kiss you, let alone bed you after this.”

“Where?” I managed to say, ignoring all the gross comments.

It was Arthur who answered. “To the Weaver.”

Rhaegar held up a hand as Jon opened his mouth. “The test,” he said, “will be to see if Lyanna can identify the object of mine in the Weaver’s trove. When we get to the Spring Court, Mace Tyrell might have spelled his half of the Book to look different, feel different.”

“By the Cauldron, Rhaegar,” Dany snapped, setting both feet on the carpet. “Are you out of your —”

“Who is the Weaver?” I pushed.

“An ancient, wicked creature,” Arthur said, and I surveyed the faint scars on his wings, his neck, and wondered how many such things he’d encountered in his immortal life. If they were any worse than the people who shared blood ties with him. “Who should remain unbothered,” he added in Rhaegar’s direction. “Find another way to test her abilities.”

Rhaegar merely shrugged and looked to me. To let me choose. Always—it was always my choice with him these days. He believed me ... he had faith I would be able to complete the allotted task. Even in my current broken state, he believed in me, in my abilities.

And I was willing to respond to the challenge.

I gnawed on my lower lip, weighing the risks, waiting to feel any kernel of fear, of emotion. But this afternoon had drained any reserve of such things. “The Bone Carver, the Weaver … Can’t you ever just call someone by a given name?”

Jon chuckled, and Dany settled back in the sofa cushions.

Only Rhaegar, it seemed, understood that it hadn’t entirely been a joke. His face was tight. Like he knew precisely how tired I was—how I knew I should be quaking at the thought of this Weaver, but after the Bone Carver, what I’d revealed to it … I could feel nothing at all.

Rhaegar said to me, “What about adding one more name to that list?”

I didn’t particularly like the sound of that. Dany said as much.

“Emissary,” Rhaegar said, ignoring his sister. “Emissary to the Night Court—for Zara.”

Viserys said, “There hasn’t been one for ten hundred years, Rhaegar.”

“The wolves must be as prepared as we are—especially if the Night King plans to cross the sea and unleash his forces upon them. We need the other half of the Book from Day—and if we can’t use other means to take it, then they’re going to have to bring it to us.”

More silence. On the street beyond the bay of windows, wisps of snow brushed past, dusting the cobblestones.

Rhaegar jerked his chin at me. "We set up a base in neutral territory. In a place where the wolves trust us—trust you, Lyanna."
“My family’s estate,” I said automatically.

“Mother’s tits, Rhaegar,” Jon cut in, wings flaring wide enough to nearly knock over the ceramic vase on the side table next to him. “You think we can just show up into their house, say hello and demand the other half of the book? Rickard might have a soft spot for his only daughter but he still hates you.”

“The land,” Dany said, reaching over to return the vase to its place, “will run red with blood, Jon, regardless of what we do with her family. It is now a matter of where that blood will flow—and how much will spill. How much blood we can save.”

"Rickard won't be a problem," Rhaegar said without so much as a blink. "He is not in charge anymore."

I whipped my head at him. "What do you mean? Who is in charge?"

"Your brother, Eddard. Rickard left and before you ask, we don't know why or where he has gone. He left your brother as High Lord which is as fortunate as a miracle for our case."

“I won’t risk discovery from any court, though word might spread quickly enough once we’re there. I know it won’t be easy, Lyanna, but if there’s any way you could convince your brother—”

“I’ll do it.” I said. “Ned might not be happy about it, but I’ll make him understand.”

“Then it’s settled,” Rhaegar said. None of them looked particularly happy. “Once Lyanna darling returns from the Weaver, we’ll bring The Night King to his knees.”

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