Winter Thorns of Highgarden

by Madrigal_in_training

Summary

The knight's supposed to save the princess from the dragon but here, the princess is a dragon, the knight is a bookish lord, and the greatest threat is either the old lady in the blue wimple or the honorable warden with the Ice sword. Because no one thought a second Stark girl would be kidnapped for marriage or that the sensible Willas Tyrell would be the one to kidnap her.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

They meet before the midday sun when a cadre of noble visitors from the North enter the Great Hall to negotiate a trade deal. Willas is barely two-and-twenty, as yet unwed, the promised Heir of Highgarden and better known as the Fat Flower’s crippled son. She is the infamous single stain on the Lord Paramount of the North’s honor: four-and-ten and arguably more beautiful than any Stark had the right to be, even her sainted aunt. Lyarra is kept close to her father’s side and he thinks this to be more sensible precaution than sign of preference. How does the Lady Stark rage that his bastard would step out of the bard’s songs?

Lyarra is dark of hair and pale of skin and after that, all surface resemblance to Lord Stark ends. Her pink bowed lips, her arched brows, her aquiline nose and heavy-lidded violet gaze, all hint at the ethereal beauty of Valyria, of Targaryens and Velaryons and Daynes. It is the last that he attributes them to; House Dayne and Lady Ashara in particular had created his bewitching child.

Even Lord Mace is struck silent for a moment before his wits regain him and he blusters about unexpected surprises and time consuming negotiations and such. His Grandmother intervenes before the boundaries of good taste can be crossed and welcomes them in. Petulantly, his father assigns the bastard to his care and Willas dryly offers his opening remarks.

He receives all the proper courtesies in return, the sweet tone belied by an unexpected, matter-of-fact handshake, before Lady Lyarra Snow ignores him at the earliest convenience of society. They eat their meals in near silence and he returns to his contented observation of the table. Her eyes have skipped the high table entirely to survey the one directly below: minor nobles, important merchants, talented or lucky knights and Willas thinks that she could afford to skim more quickly.

‘Clever bastard.’ His conclusion is decidedly neutral and bordering on amused when Willas dismisses her from his thoughts and returns to his smoked fish.

Lady Snow remains absent until he is walking by the sparring yard of Highgarden. It is massive, in relation to a family that boasts little martial prowess, but she is present near the tidy corner of his path. Willas lingers in the shadows at the sight of a noblewoman, bastard or not, dressed in trousers and tunics that draw attention to her more womanly assets. The knights taunting the Tarly heir seem to appreciate the sight as well, less so when the lithe form springs forward with a wooden sword. It appears to be a fight for Samwell Tarly’s honor and Lyarra performs admirably for one her own age. Ducking, weaving, near dancing around the men in an unorthodox fighting style that befits her agility, dexterity and speed but lacks endurance to be truly effective. Tarly suddenly regains a smidgen of courage near the end to sobbingly attack one man when his back is turned. It ends in a tie but an apology is offered and Lyarra dismisses the others to grin brightly at the crying Tarly boy.
Garlan would have struck at the more vulnerable areas around the neck and collar. Though what she lacks in viciousness could be countered by sheer enthusiasm.’ Willas reconsiders the scene as he limps back to his office. ’Not a poor choice in targets.’

In the next meal, Lyarra eschews the high table for the one directly below. She sits beside the daughter of a Redwyne sworn knight but focuses her attention on Samwell the entire time. The boy practically blossoms under her attention, careful words and encouraging smiles drawing out some esoteric piece of knowledge or the other. Occasionally hands would brush during the meal but the boy, currently the recipient of many envious stares, seems entirely oblivious.

Willas rarely takes the same walk twice but he deliberately traces his steps the next day. They engage in a short conversation that leads to him sicing multiple guardsman on the bastard and the craven boy in an attempt to draw out Samwell’s courage. It is successful enough that Lady Snow ends her lesson early and declares that she will spend the remainder of her afternoon in the library.

Impetuously, he offers to escort her there. Willas is terribly amused by the three different men that wilt immediately thereafter.

“Thank you for your offer, my lord.” Lyarra’s response is distant. Her lips curl in momentary irritation over the exhausted and inattentive Samwell but soon an insincerely warm smile is present.

“Lord Tarly is a pious man,” he informs her. “You may be able to see Samwell in Sept services.”

Violet eyes pin him back. “You are very attentive to my presumed desires then, my lord.”

“It is merely a host’s duty to attend to his guest’s personal needs as presumed by their situation.”

Lady Lyarra neither stiffens on his arm nor quickens her pace to trouble him. He would have thought her ignorant if not for the tightening of the eyes, thebrittleness of her smile. She releases his arm upon immediate entry to the library and heads towards the bookshelves in the Hour of the Wolf. Willas has work of his own to do but is intrigued enough to take a seat in the strategically placed sofas of the center dias. The library is divided into the twelve hours of the night and he sits by the Hour of the Eel.

It gives him a perfect view of the Hour of the Owl where Lady Lyarra slips out of moments later with a copy of the Seven Analects.
'How utterly pleased she looks.' Willas inwardly chuckles, even with lips pursed and nose wrinkled in disgust, Lyarra Snow was lovely. ‘At least she has the sense to pick her battles.’

The Maester heads the expansive library but one of the two assistants in his employ receives Willas’ coin. He directs the man to take note of the bastard’s selections there and notify him afterward. An extra silver stag is slipped into his hand when he receives a list of titles as diverse as botanical poisons and shipwright lectures to musical compositions and Essos trade. More interesting is the secret of Lyarra Snow’s pocket money.

Willas hadn’t noticed it until she stood beside one of his Fossway cousins but Lyarra Snow, dressed in the simple yet well-woven dresses of a Northern noblewoman, lacked common maiden baubles. His first assumption would have been that she didn’t receive an allowance but Lord Stark appeared warm towards his bastard daughter. It made more sense to find that she poured any available gold into rolls upon rolls of parchment and local bookbinders. When she wasn’t attempting to marry above her station, Lady Lyarra was trying to copy down the entire Tyrell library.

Speaking of that romance…

“She may have to resort to something more direct soon,” Garlan remarked, discreetly watching the ‘accidental’ hand brushes and fluttering eyelashes of the dark-haired girl. The covertness wasn’t necessary really- more than one man seemed content to stare unabashedly at the young woman, Samwell Tarly not included. “Do you think he favors the stem before the petal?”

“I doubt it. He’s merely that untested to the womanly arts,” he answered.

“Shame for the beautiful lady then. Bored stiff from the minutiae of the Alchemy Guild without even a huntsman cloak for her troubles.”

Willas felt that his brother was incorrect on this account. As one unsuccessful dinner after another passed, Lyarra Snow’s tension drained with it. Her flirtations continued but they seemed to be an afterthought to sincere interest and genuine smiles in the two’s conversations. It shouldn't be a surprise; they were two odd ducks, the bastard and the coward, that shared a love for esoteric knowledge and forthright discussion. Friendship wasn’t the strangest conclusion.

The unvarnished reactions drew out greater beauty from the bastard though; Willas noted bubbly laughter, animated gestures, and a tendency to bounce on the heels of her feet. He caught her twisting a curl around one finger when arguing once and wondered whether he could draw the same
An impassioned defense of a subject out.

"Would you care to take a ride with me around the castle this afternoon?"

It didn’t please him that she was unable to refuse—by the dictates of their relative social positions and the rules of polite society. It took out the challenge of coaxing her onward that Willas suspected would amuse him. Nonetheless he could find amusement in drawing out that brief show of spirit.

She maintained more poise than most of his silly, trueborn cousins in accepting the offer. The smile offered could shred ice with its sharpness but he was a Tyrell, bred and born in the warmth of summer, and he would melt that harsh smile before it could cut flesh. Lady Lyarra returned a slim hand, as calloused as Garlan’s was, as calloused as Lord Tarly wished his son’s would be, to the crook of his elbow and he led her to the stables.

Willas silently appreciated that she took consideration of his preferred pace as well. It was kind.

She was kind. And ignorant, which drew a measure of pity from his breast. The Heir to Highgarden suspected that this sympathy would be returned with the same unimpressed banalities that he would have reacted to for his crippled leg and kept his face still.

“You have an unusual bridle, my lord.” Her first remark held an undercurrent of curiosity.

“I designed it to account for my physical disabilities.” He took the bridle off its peg, waved off one of the approaching stable boys and approached the horses.

“You designed this yourself?” However nonchalant she attempted to make her tone, the older man could hear the mild hitch of wonder present.

“I assure you that a cripple remains capable of such.” He neglected to inform her of the sixteen failures before a working prototype was made.

The rebuke added a fetching pink to her cheeks, followed by the impression of one who believed herself gainsaid on purpose. She refused to apologize and Willas decided it to be a compromise for he would certainly not offer one himself.
“You’re comfortable with the horses?” The ones here were specifically bred by him to be physically imposing and intimidatingly powerful but they fall obediently to her gentle hands. It unnerved him slightly for they didn’t even act this warmly towards the Stable Marshal.

“I assure you that a woman remains capable of such,” she snarked back. Immediately, her mind catches to the words flown out of her mouth and she flushes an even deeper red. It suffuses her face entirely, endearing and skittish, and drawing out the violet of her eyes.

She doesn’t apologize here either but it may be for the way his lips twitch in response. Willas offers her one of his best steeds in silence.

A smile now. “He has your colouring, my lord.”

“My sister named him Apple Cider for it.” There’s an unexpected gratification at the giggles unwittingly escaping her lips. The honey brown color of his coat does match Willas’ locks and to match the pair, he selects a steed with a coat of such dark brown that it appears black.

They’re well into a slow, meandering ride around the trails when Willas approaches the subject.

“His brother, Dickon, is favored by Lord Tarly to be the heir. It is expected that Samwell will take the Black.”

Lyarra is silent for so long that he expects her to disengage from the subject and then she speaks.

“I know. He told me,” she admitted quietly. “Tell me, was it obvious to everyone else?”

“No. Most would care to overlook a bastard and those who would not were otherwise engaged,” Willas said flatly. “Why did you continue then?”

“He became a friend,” Lyarra shrugged. “Unlike others who wouldn’t overlook a bastard, he kept his eyes up and his mind ready.”

There was a momentary silence. “Do you think me cruel for how I began the friendship?”
“Your marriage prospects are poor, even in the north. I admire you for attempting to elevate them.”

“It wouldn’t have been entirely mercenary,” she argued halfheartedly. “Samwell is a pleasant boy but he’s not particularly commanding of… well, anyone. I would have been a good wife for him. My education did include the particulars of running a household, even one of Winterfell’s size.”

“Have you considered the younger brother then?”

“The boorish warmonger? My opportunities are poor, not nonexistent.”

“Then you’re not as practical as you should be,” Willas responded frankly. “Beauty is fleeting and you must strike a match before that.”

“Yet you’re so charming that Highgarden’s wealth and splendor are entirely wasted on drawing a wife for you.” Lyarra’s heels pressed down and Apple Cider tensed. “I will see you at the castle, my lord!”

She loosened her grip and the horse leapt forward, breaking into a smooth gallop. Under no false notions of his own prowess, Willas admired the skilled horsemanship that led to Lady Lyarra racing the massive war steed forward. He patted the skittish Skyrunner in comfort and followed the path staidly.

What an exceptionally odd girl, Lyarra Snow was.

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Lyarra paused to look briefly towards the center table, specifically to where a certain noble man with honey brown hair and a damnably infuriating smirk resided. She had scarcely finished her first and only ride with Willas Tyrell before berating herself for her impulsive words. Nothing she had spoken had been a lie and arguably, the man deserved her ire for being as uncomfortably intimate as he was but that was hardly an excuse! She was not of the North where bluntness was expected and even preferred. The Southron men wouldn’t excuse her honest tongue, as fragile as their manhoods were.

‘Not that he has any reason to be concerned by a bastard’s words,’ Lyarra reminded herself.

She had wondered why the Tyrell had not demanded an apology from her but had arrived to the conclusion that she was simply too far below his notice to care. It was a comforting idea for she had developed an immediate dislike of him, though she could not explain why. Even Theon had needed to mock her bastard status for a moon’s turn before she decked him. An act that oddly enough earned her the Greyjoy boy’s friendship. Boys were strange.

Assured that the Heir to Highgarden had no interest in her, Lyarra took her usual seat. “Hello, Saml!”

The young man spoken to looked up and offered a quick smile. Samwell Tarly was a brunette that could generously be described as pleasantly plump, though Lyarra found it difficult to reprove him for it. She was of the North and accustomed to hardy crops, glass houses and summer snowfalls. It was a world of difference when she rode down the Roseroad and saw a golden sea of ripened wheat, miles upon end of lush acres, banks of wildflowers and towns of people well-fed and content. The Reach’s bounty was truly remarkable and Lyarra heard that they were not even the wealthiest constituency in Westeros! Though she doubted she would be as impressed with the Westerlands; she was a Stark and one could not eat mountains of gold after all.

“Hello, Lyaa,” Sam said, appearing ignorant of his own brother’s ire. “Will we be training today?”

“I would like to practice footwork until noon, yes.” The dark-haired girl picked up a ripe apple and bit into it to disguise her uplifting smile over the way her friend slumped over. “Then perhaps you can show me that text on grayscale?”
“The text is in High Valyrian,” Sam replied. “I’ve spoken to the Maester and he hasn’t a translation.”

“There is no need. I read Valyrian well enough to do so for us,” Lyarra dismissed.

Her friend- and was that not odd, for a bastard to find a friend south of the Neck and north of Dorne-perked up at the fact. A flash of surprise passed his eyes too but he tucked into meal rather than question her. In public anyway, for her new friend was both discreetly curious and curiously discrete.

Lyarra appreciated that sentiment for speaking and reading High Valyrian fluently was not a talent boasted of in the Stag’s kingdom. The dark-haired girl had developed it because she desired to be a Healer, the best medical texts originated from the Free Cities and Maester Luwin was willing to teach her. Hardly malicious reasons but it would be shortsighted of her to draw attention to herself. Her Father was rather uncomfortable when that occurred and would send her back to Winterfell posthaste. He had only brought her to the Rose Kingdom to spare her Lady Stark’s ire.

One would think the Lady would be pleased that Lyarra was not a son to challenge Robb’s heirship but unfortunately, this was not to be. Some man had foolishly speculated on the origins of her beauty within the woman’s hearing and Catelyn Stark’s jealousy had spiralled on from there. If Lyarra ever found that man, she would personally rip his intestines out and strangle him with it.

On an unrelated note, Lord Rickard Karstark shivered as an ominously icy wind filled his chambers.

‘And it would be an absolute shame to leave Highgarden before I can copy as many texts as the my bags can hold,’ Lyarra added as an afterthought. Maester Luwin had promised two stags for each quarter-finger’s height copied and given her an advance of ten stags for ink and parchment. With her fluid hand, she had already completed the advance and would be making pure profit onward.

Her decision to focus on grayscale had a more selfish purpose to it. The Snow child had heard rumors that Lord Stannis Baratheon would offer a hefty amount of gold- two hundred dragons worth- to anyone who could diminish Lady Shireen’s scars. Healing was not necessarily in a noblewoman’s skillset but it was associated with the Seven enough to be acceptable. Lyarra could find a profession in that field though she would risk contagious illness, attack by vagabonds, denial of payment for her work and other such worries. It would be safer to stay on her brother’s lands and nurse people there but Lyarra Snow was not in the least eager to share a castle with Lady Stark.

More sensible to accumulate some gold, marry a decent guardsman and persuade him to reallocate elsewhere in the North. This plan had been second to the one of finding a husband in the Tyrell’s court before she learned that her preferred choice, Samwell, was disliked by his father. The others were wary of their presumed intimacy and while Lyarra could better her chances by stepping away,
she had become too fond of the older boy to do so.

The appeal of a formerly out-of-reach book pushed Samwell into finishing his breakfast more quickly than usual and soon, her friend was waiting impatiently for her to be done as well. Lyarra shoved the last bite of a honey-drenched buckwheat pancake into her mouth and stood up. As the two hurried from the hall, she remained ignorant of a set of tawny brown eyes watching her leave.

Later, Willas Tyrell gestured for one of the servants to come closer and whispered orders in his ear.

“Among the... ruins of Old Valyria, exist the... exiled survivors of greyscale, known... commonly as Stone Men, for the manner by which their skin becomes dead and... hardened by the... affliction,” Lyarra kept her voice to a whisper, as she slowly read through the book. It was one of the older, rare texts in the library, thus chained to the shelf and necessitating her sitting down on the floor. Samwell peered over her shoulder, having already received her explanation for the talent. “Before it hardens, the skin becomes thin and... brittle, thus moving the flesh creates a... spiderweb of cracks throughout. It is thus... recommended by this... author that those... unfortunates afflicted with greyscale remain... silent throughout treatment.”

Samwell dutifully wrote each word that passed her lips, having kindly offered to help her in his task since she was the one translating the text. “The disease spreads in stages and not all are... infected equally. At the end stage, it progresses to the... organs of the body, shutting down the kidneys first and the... connection between the brain and the limbs, afflicting madness before... ending at the heart. There may be... many years of time from when one first... contracts greyscale to when one dies.”

“The most common of the afflicted are those of poor... circumstances, as greyscale is spread... commonly by touch from another afflicted. There are also those who... contract the disease without any... explanation but live near the water and dust and heat. In the salt of the... ocean, greyscale is not an uncommon affliction.” Lyarra grimaced at the picture shown of a little boy whose entire body seemed to be made of a stone. It was a particularly talented illustrator who had drawn this, for the touch of madness was conveyed even through the parchment. “Those Stone Men who live near the water have their disease... progress more quickly than others in the sands.”

As she continued reading, it became clear that the text spent more time discussing the colony of Stone Men in Old Valyria than it did the illness itself. For her benefit, it did have a concise summary of how the disease progressed and its infection rates. The author argued that the rates subsided as the illness fell into relapse, which meshed with her own knowledge of how no one else contracted the disease in Dragonstone yet despite being in contact with Lady Shireen. If nothing else, it assured her that she would not be infected during treatment.

Lyarra was almost to the end of the text and planning to re-copy it at Winterfell for her own private
library, when she heard footsteps coming toward them. The dark-haired girl paused and looked up to see one of the Maester’s assistants approaching. Ah well, that wasn’t odd then. These books may be in an empty area of the library but the Maesters would have their own reasons to work with them.

She was a little more concerned when the man stopped in front of her.

“Lady Lyarra,” the blonde man murmured politely, offering her a folded note.

Mentally noting the Tyrell servants to be aware of her birth status and too well-mannered to draw attention to it, Lyarra hesitantly accepted the paper. She waited for the man to leave but when he did not, quietly pretending to be fascinated by the shelves above her head, the Snow opened the note.

Tyman will lead you to me. ~W.T.

There was only one person she knew with those initials and regardless of the inferiority of her social status, Lyarra was most certainly not obeying his directive. Exactly what type of woman did Lord Willas think she was?

“Are you Tyman?” the dark-haired girl questioned.

The man nodded. “Yes, Lady Lyarra.”

“Then kindly return to the sender of this note and tell him that your task is complete.” She would have liked to send an insult back but while not as improper as a clandestine meeting, sharing notes was still rather scandalous. When he hesitated, she added. “That would be all, thank you.”

Gracefully accepting the dismissal for what it was, the man walked away. Lyarra waited until he was out of earshot before passing the note over to Sam. The bookish noble’s eyes widened after reading it.

“Lord Willas? But why would he want to meet with you?” When the dark-haired wolf arched a brow, Sam managed to blush in both embarrassment and exasperation. “Not that you are not beautiful, Lyaa but Lord Willas isn’t one to engage in dalliances with noblewomen. Too much risk for marriage.”
“I suppose that he has a courtesan or two that he prefers to keep?” Lyarra’s tone ventured close to irritation. “Perhaps he thinks me of the same stature?”

“You’re the daughter of a Great House. Lord Willas wouldn’t do that,” Sam refused. “Maybe he actually wanted to converse with you?”

Now it was her turn to be both amused and exasperated. “I can count on one hand all of the men that have ever desired my conversation and weren’t named Stark.”

“I can’t see anything good from ignoring his directives though,” Sam fidgeted for a bit and then seemed to close in on himself. “If- if you like, I can speak to him for you? It’s alright if I should meet with him and not you.”

Lyarra was touched. “Thank you, Sam but I don’t think it will be necessary. I’ve rebuffed his advance and a lordling like him won’t bother to pursue me when his gold can buy most anyone else. As you said, Lord Willas is too sensible to bed a noblewoman.”

Her belief was dashed after supper when another servant brought a note to her room.

A Valyrian dictionary can be received upon request from Maester Timmons. ~W.T.

Lyarra closed the door on the woman’s face and tossed the note into the hearth.

In the library, the next day…

There is a chapter on grayscale in ‘Death Without Peer: Moste Cruell Illnesses in Essos’. ~W.T.

On the training fields, at noon…

Incorporating Braavosi water dancing into your footwork will improve your speed and agility. ~W.T.

At the stables, for a quick ride…
Apple Cider prefers ripened green apples with the stems cut off. ~W.T.

The notes were discrete and appeared when she was either alone or in Sam’s company, much to her relief. Lyarra threw each of them away, once even before the honey-haired lord’s indifferent eyes but didn’t do anything else to provoke him. Lord Willas appeared content to be offering suggestions and comments to her everyday life, which were… discomfiting but not overtly threatening. The dark-haired girl resolved to keep a sheathed blade within her boots and ignore the notes otherwise. She would have informed Father about this but for her deep reluctance to leave the Highgarden library.

Lyarra Snow’s access to that wonderful collection of books would be cut short over her own dead body.

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“Brother, what are you doing?” Garlan appeared doubtful that he would like the answer.

“Tormenting a bastard.” Willas’ nonchalant tone was utterly at odds with the way he covertly eyed the attractive young woman sitting with the plump Tarly.

“I can see that.” His brother was already penning his next note, despite having sent one today. “Is there any reason why you’re inviting scandal?”

“Because I’m bored and she makes the most amusing of faces whenever I do so,” Willas smirked. “Still, I’m not merely doing so for amusement. There is something odd about her, is there not?”

“Beyond the sword she wields?” Garlan asked. That had caused nearly as great a stir as her arrival. “I would have liked to cross blades with her. She has enough talent and her fighting style is refreshing.”

Willas frowned. “Not yet. I would prefer not to draw Lord Stark’s attention at this stage.”

From next to them, Margaery leaned closer and smiled wickedly. “You’re not falling for her charms, are you, Brother?”
“Grant me more credit than that, Sister,” Willas chided. “There is something amiss about Lyarra Snow and the tale her father spreads. For one, the Tourney of Harrenhal was nearly three years before Lord Stark ventured to Dorne.”

“What do you mean by that?” Their sister’s teasing smile faded as her eyes sharpened.

“He means that a daughter of Lady Ashara and Lord Stark would have been five-and-ten at the youngest and more likely, six-and-ten by now,” Garlan answered. “Lady Lyarra is less developed than such a woman would be but she could also be a late bloomer. One deviation explains nothing.”

“Perhaps but Oberyn claims Lady Ashara’s daughter to have been born sickly.” It had taken a gift of two barrels of Arbor Gold to coax an answer from the temperamental man. Even now, Willas knew that Doran Martell would be aware of his interest. “Impressive that she survived two moon’s worth of hard travel to the North, wouldn’t you say?”

“Then Lady Ashara wouldn’t be her mother but why should that matter? A Lysine bedwarmer, a Crownlands tavern wench… there are many ways to inherit Valyrian features,” Margaery mused.

“Would Lord Stark have raised his daughter in Winterfell if she was born from the womb of a whore?” Garlan wondered.

“I think him too honorable to do otherwise,” Margaery refuted. “By that measure alone, there wouldn’t be any other Stark bastards running around Westeros.”

“I agree,” Willas added, making his sister beam at the indirect praise, “Though I wonder why an honorable man like Eddard Stark would stay silent when others spread rumors of Lady Ashara’s bastard.”

The other two fell silent then, considering the words of the eldest Tyrell present before Garlan voiced the question. “Then what is Lord Stark hiding?”

“I don’t know,” Willas answered, returning tawny eyes to the bastard beauty of the north. “But I haven’t anything better to do, so I may as well find out.”
Lyarra pasted a smile on her face and lowered her book. Next to her, Sam looked one part concerned and two parts miffed from being interrupted when they had found an incredible book on Essos fairytales. She expected another servant, most likely the polite Maester’s assistant but was surprised when an exquisitely dressed woman appeared instead.

Margaery Tyrell shared her brother’s honey brown hair, fair complexion and comely features but her doe-shaped eyes were a warm brown color and her smile was far livelier than Lord Willas’. She wore a dress of dark forest green, elegantly stitched and embroidered at the breast with golden roses, and simple gold jewelry at her throat, wrist and ears. Her hair was embroidered with thin strands of golden filigree too and pulled up into a complex crowned braid.

The Rose of Highgarden smiled at her brightly. Lyarra wondered if perhaps she should have been honest with her father after all.

“Lady Lyarra,” Margaery’s voice matched her appearance, with its soft and sweet tone. “Lord Samwell. I had hoped to find you two today. No, no, you needn’t stand up. I shall be brief.”

“L-lady Margaery,” Sam greeted, freezing in his position between fully raised and crouched on the floor. Lyarra grabbed his hand and jerked him back down. “How can we help you?”

“My friends and I,” Margaery gestured behind her, where Lyarra could see several noblewomen staring at them with curiosity and disapproval. Had Arya been here, she would have stuck her tongue out at them and for a second, the dark-haired girl had the irrational desire to do the same. “We were hoping that you would attend a boat ride with us before supper.”

“Please do say yes!” The Tyrell lady clapped her hands to her chest in a pleading expression. “We haven’t enough people to form a party and I would hate to cancel the trip.”

‘The mummer’s show was unnecessary,’ Lyarra thought wryly, ‘Even if I did believe that there wasn’t a crowd of nobles eager to ingratiate themselves to the Tyrells, Lady Margaery must know I am not in a position to refuse.’

First Lord Willas and now Lady Margaery… Lyarra was being to suspect that some grand joke was to be played on the Bastard of Winterfell. She side-eyed Samwell and saw that he appeared equally
uncomfortable with the invitation. Hmm, refuse Lady Margery, risk drawing attention to herself and be sent home early? Or accept the temporary humiliation, let the Tyrells have their fun and continue to work towards her future independence?

Well, when she described it like *that* …

“I would be pleased to attend a boat ride with you, Lady Margaery,” Lyarra answered sweetly. To her relief, Sam echoed the acceptance and the smiling girl left soon after.

When they were done, Lyarra turned to Sam and, with an entirely straight face, stated. “Fuck the Tyrells.”

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*I’m thinking Sam Claflin as Willas Tyrell and Michelle Trachtenberg as Lyarra Snow.*
Chapter Three

‘The problem with being the eldest sibling,’ Willas reflected, ‘Is that everyone expects you to share your toys.’

Perhaps it was unfair to compare Lyarra Snow to a wooden trebuchet or an illustrated storybook—she was far superior in the art of amusing him after all—but it certainly felt that way. His younger siblings had taken their discussion as an implicit invitation to study the Northerner themselves. Now it had devolved into a competition between Margaery and Garlan, the latter of which was currently speaking of the Sword of the Morning with embarrassing enthusiasm. Though, from the brightness of her smile, the dark-haired bastard apparently shared his brother’s idolisation of the Kingsguard knight.

Willas meanwhile was reclining on the cushioned seats beside Samwell, praying that the boy’s sick wouldn’t end up painting the deck of Aunt Mina’s wedding caraval. Those golden roses that Uncle Paxter had sketched by hand wouldn’t look nearly as beautiful when splattered with yellow-green bile.

Unwilling to face his aunt’s ire should that occur, the Heir to Highgarden attempted to distract the pasty-faced boy. “Have you tried the chilled mint tea, Samwell? It is meant to settle weak stomachs.”

“You thank you but I’m afraid it was of little help.” The plump boy eyed him oddly, “Are you enjoying yourself, Lord Willas?”

“Of course.” A practiced smile crossed his face but Samwell still looked unconvinced. “The Mander River is beautiful in this light, is it not? The waters are swift but we will move to one of the smoother inlets soon. There are some lemon trees there and I’ve sent men ahead to ready refreshment.”

“That was thoughtful of you, my lord,” Samwell said, relief plain in his voice. “Thank you for inviting us on the trip. You did us a great honor.”

Willas rather suspected that Samwell and Lady Lyarra were the only ones not to appreciate the value of an invitation. While the Northerner had shown some political instincts before, she appeared willfully ignorant of the ladies glowering at her now for seemingly monopolizing Garlan’s attention. The honey-haired lord smiled regardless. “Us?”
“Ah, that is, Lady Lyarra and I,” Samwell stammered. “Your sister invited us together at the library.”

He swilled the dark red wine in his glass and contemplated which manner of address to make. “Do you two spend a great deal of time in the library?”

The Tarly Heir gave him another odd glance at that. “Don’t you already know? I could have sworn the Maester’s assistant reported everything to you.”

Willas tucked his lips upward in a small smile. “Yes but it’s considered rude to discuss such, publicly.”

“I suppose.” Samwell offered a frown in response. “Lord Willas, I do not mean to insult you—”

“But you will,” Willas lazily interrupted. “Whenever someone begins thusly, an insult will be offered.”

“Yes but…” Samwell chewed his lip and then looked directly in his eye. “Lady Lyarra is a sweet girl and she is my friend. I don’t want her to be hurt so I’m asking you to end any games you may have.”

Willas raised a brow. “And what games do you believe that I would play?”

The plump boy shrugged. “I do not know but Lyarra… she doesn’t mean anyone trouble. She is a bastard and I understand that some people may— that is, her reputation is easy to— she’s not the kind of girl that— please, just don’t hurt her.”

‘Then a friendship did arise between them.’ Willas blinked tawny eyes, too hawklike his sister had claimed once, too predatory for anyone’s comfort and Samwell recoiled. Then the Heir to Highgarden offered a smile one notch brighter, meant to ease the receiver and draw attention away from his gaze. “You need not worry, Samwell. I have no intention to dishonour Lady Lyarra.”

Not allowing the boy a chance to question him further, the Tyrell braced his walking stick, carved with a trailing pattern of ivy-twined roses, and pushed himself up. He attended to the guests of their small soiree that Garlan was too distracted to speak to, occasionally allowing his thoughts to wander to the dark-haired bastard. Her skillset seemed to expand by the day from the swordsmanship
displayed early, to at least a theoretical knowledge of healing and an adept grasp of High Valyrian. Willas had reviewed her list of books earlier in the day, acknowledging that she was far more well-read than any other young lady of his acquaintance. Even Margaery preferred to dedicate her time to outdoor pursuits: falconry, riding, archery and sailing.

It was a shame her talent hadn’t extended to sewing. The stitches on her barely-embroidered frock were almost but not quite even, almost but not quite tightened. The design of grey snowflakes on a dress of white hardly detracted from her beauty though; the appearance was plain, simple and understated to the bejeweled women in the caravel. Willas wondered if it said something about him that he would view such purity and desire to draw her into his bed.

‘And then promptly be visited by the Maester when she stabs me afterward.’ Willas eyed the minor protrusion at the hem of the dress, shaped eerily towards a dagger. A genuine flash of teeth managed to slip through, eliciting a giggle from the woman he was currently speaking to. The Tyrell hurriedly replaced it with an expressly friendly smile before inclining his head and moving on.

“Tell Garlan that I want a turn,” Margaery whispered in his ear, as he escorted her off the caravel. Strings of lanterns had been set up in the trees though the sun hadn’t quite set. There was more than enough light to admire the green-and-gold tent, under which a wide array of sweets had been prepared for their leisure. “He’s been singing love songs to Ser Arthur Dayne for the whole trip!”

“I believe he’s moved onto Ser Duncan the Tall now,” Willas told her. He nodded towards their Hightower and Redwyne cousins, as well as Lady Bethany Merryweather, Lord Eilwen Rowan and others. “I will fetch her for you but you must settle them down with some music first.”

Margaery was too proud to make a face but he could well understand his little sister’s cutting slip of eyes. Her musical talent left much to be desired. “I will encourage Lady Ashford to play the psaltery.”

Allowing the offended girl to walk away, Willas headed towards the trees where Garlan and Lady Lyarra lingered. The two were in a spirited debate of the merits of Ser Duncan to Ser Arthur. Willas was uncertain as to whom each was supporting, as neither knight received censure from their lips. When the tip-tap of his walking stick announced his presence, the two looked up. Lady Lyarra’s open grin slipped somewhat but she appeared happy enough to offer a small, composed smile to him.

“Margaery would like your help with hosting our cousins,” Willas stated. His brother looked disappointed for a second before he nodded and turned to bow towards the bastard.

“Thank you for this engaging conversation, my lady,” Garlan said, “I hope that we may return to it
one day? I must still convince you of the wonders of the Hedge Knight after all.”

The dark-haired girl’s curtsy was, as with her sewing, almost but not quite perfect. Her smile was charming in its lack of guile. “You are welcome to try, my lord, however fruitless your quest may be.”

When his brother headed towards the group, Lady Lyarra meant to follow. His hand though, resting on her elbow in a gesture both innocuous and yet intimate, had her pause. Willas moved his walking stick down with a deep *thwack* on the ground, drawing her eye and idling her footsteps to a speed that he could match easily. Aware of her own obligation to walk with him now, he deliberately slowed down and led her off the beaten path to one of the lantern-held trees. The Tyrell leaned against the wood, thankful for the support but more aware of how the flames turned his eyes to molten gold.

“I hope you have had a pleasant trip, Lady Lyarra?” Willas inquired. To his amusement, her eyes, lipid pools of dark violet, met his own and then skittered away. Pink dusted her cheeks and it took a reminder of his own vow to never let a noblewoman entrap him, to keep him from moving closer.

The dark-haired shewolf nodded cautiously. “Yes… it was kind of your sister to invite us.”

*‘She refers to herself and Samwell as a unit then,’* the Tyrell observed. Rather than press further, he continued elsewhere. “I hope my brother did not bore you with his passionate discourse of knights? They are an interest of his.”

“In the realm rumored to be the heart of chivalry, I am not surprised,” Lyarra’s smile widened, miniscule. “They are an interest of mine as well.”

“I confess I have little interest for chivalry and tourney knights,” Willas admitted. “History is a passion of mine but I have only rode in the one joust.”

“The one that stole your limb from you?” The Northerner guessed boldly. Rather than draw away from the topic, common even amongst his own family, she inclined her head. “My Father had always claimed tournaments for fools. I think I would agree with him; there exists little honor to fight for a tourney purse and a crown of flowers.”

“Does the glory of victory ring so hollow in the North?”
“We are a simpler people.” And now her smile hinted at a sad note. “We tend to forswear war unless our own have need of us.”

“You are of like mind with Prince Doran of Sunspear then,” Willas mused. “He is a peacemaker.”

“An honorable pursuit,” Lyarra said plainly. “I have met many lords who would raise their banners with little provocation, Lord Willas. It takes a special kind of man to put his sword down and persuade other men to lower their own.”

“And if a man should find something worth fighting for?”

“There are many things that men have claimed worth fighting for.” The dark-haired girl looked up contemplatively. The flames of the lamps flickered down, casting a pool of warm light at the curve of her pale throat. Willas was both thankful and not for the conservative cut to her dress. “I would fight for my family, I know, but I have not had to yet. Hopefully I shall never have to.”

She looked up at him and smiled softly. “Old Nan says that I am a sweet summer child.”

The honey-haired man could hardly care what any old woman had said, with those pink bow-shaped lips curved upwards to him. He wondered briefly how she would taste. Willas would have leaned forward to find out (and likely gotten hit for it) before a savior came from the most unlikely of places.

“Lyarra! Lyarra, are you there?” Samwell called out, not jogging but certainly walking rapidly towards the trees. When he got into sight of them, he blanched. “Lord Willas?”

“Samwell,” the Heir to Highgarden greeted. If his voice had grown huskier, neither of the bookish pair of friends seemed to notice. Lady Lyarra echoed his greeting, a pleased chirp to her tone as she moved forward to take the arm the plump boy naturally offered.

“You’ve missed a wonderful performance on the psaltery from Lady Ashford,” Samwell chattered on. He still looked nervously towards the Tyrell Heir but when Willas said nothing of note, he allowed himself to be drawn into conversation with the bastard. “They are passing around the instruments and encouraging each lady to take a turn. You play the harp, don’t you, Lyarra?”

“I doubt anyone wants to hear me play, Sam,” the dark-haired girl demurred.
Willas would have expected the craven Tarly to back down but surprisingly enough, he pressed on. “Well, why shouldn’t they? I’ve heard you play and your music is beautiful.”

“I haven’t any formal training. They will want someone far more polished.”

“Even then, you have quite a bit of talent,” Sam weeded. “Oh, try it, Lyaa! They are far too drunk on their wine to cast you away.”

Willas stayed silent, his mind still far too full of wide violet eyes and pink bow-shaped lips to pay too much attention to the two. Eventually Samwell managed to persuade Lyarra into playing one song by the time they reached the tent, darting forward to pick up the harp before one of his cousins could do the same. Ignoring Lady Mella’s pout, the Tarly turned it over to his friend’s side.

Margaery, in her typical manner, jumped on the opportunity. “Lady Lyarra, would you play us a song?”

A few faces darkened at the appearance of the bastard girl, one fairly quick-witted girl hastily seating herself beside Garlan. “Please do sing for us, Lady Snow.”

Taking position next to his sister, the young lord noted the dark look that briefly passed Lady Lyarra’s face. She was not so forgiving of slights to her birth then, that she could not smile demurely in Garlan’s direction before nodding. Placing herself directly across from his brother and therefore, from him and Margaery, she tentatively thrummed a few strings.

“This is the song of the Knight of Tears and the tourney he won in Queen Naerys’ name…”

It was a dirthful dirge, one of Aemon the Dragonknight’s lesser known tales but one done justice by the steady and skilled hands of Lyarra Snow. For any mistake that there could be in the proficiency of her strings was drawn back by her voice, soft and clear and sweet, and the passion in her music. The melancholy tune, for this was a song of a brother’s fight against injustice, of a knight’s defense of his Queen, rang throughout the air, each note meant to enrapture and sway its listeners. Willas’ eyes caught his sister swaying, the peaceful smile on Samwell’s face, the fascination present in Garlan’s face and yet they were caught, over and over again, by Lyarra Snow.

Under the lantern’s light, those dark curls burned bronze and her pale skin was awash in the flame’s merry glow. Her violet eyes were lit in happiness, her brow unfurrowed by concern, her lips pulling
almost without thought into a smile of her own. She was breathtaking and for the moment, Willas was utterly entranced. He had seen her fight and ride and laugh and read but never had Lyarra Snow looked as content as she did then, with a harp in her hands and a song on her tongue.

“Thus, even though, the King had raged his scorn/ The gallant knight had forsworn his lord/ To honor my Queen, Aemon had said/ For that, I would gladly raise my sword.”

The song had several more verses until it reached his end but by then, Lyarra had raised her eyes until they met his own. There was a glimmer to those violet orbs, one that invited him into a private amusement for the two to share and Willas allowed himself to return her smile, as the notes wound down. The last thrums of the string faded into the evening air and the group began to stir.

“Thank you, Lady Lyarra,” Lady Leonette of House Fossoway, dainty, bright-eyed and more tolerable than most said first. Her smile was tremulous as she bowed her head. “It was a lovely song.”

The others followed, some more reluctant than others and Samwell nearly beaming like a proud brother himself. Lady Lyarra blushed a deep red and accepted their thanks, moving soon to her friend’s side and appearing too embarrassed to engage the others any further. Margaery managed to get a few words out of her and approached Willas soon afterward, a smug smile present.

“Lady Lyarra and Lord Samwell agreed to attend my stargazing party tomorrow night,” Margaery said. “You must come with me, so that Garlan cannot steal the chance to discover her secrets for himself.”

“If that is your wish, dear sister,” Willas murmured. Holding his walking stick securely in one hand and with one final, lingering stare to the beautiful if inexplicable bastard, he headed towards the servants. Someone had to manage the cleanup of this event and the organization of the next one after all.

A few hours later, when a sleepy-eyed Lyarra walked down the corridor to the suite of guest rooms, she would notice a minor change. After hugging her Father goodnight, she would move towards her own room and pause before the table next to her door. There was one, often graced with a vase of fresh flowers, between each set of doors and her own was no different. However, it was unusual to find a cyvasse board set up on the table. Each piece was in its place except for a single white rabble, moved one square forward.

Lyarra picked up a black elephant and moved it to her own square. Then she went to bed.
x
Chapter 4

When Lyarra woke up, it was to another white rabble piece moved on the cyvassé board. She quickly moved her own black rabble piece two squares forward before heading down to break her fast.

“Good morning, Father.” Lord Eddard Stark’s time had been primarily occupied with negotiating the next five years’ worth of trade deals between the North and the Reach, so it was an unexpected pleasure to see him take meals outside of the guest solar now. Lyarra slipped into the seat beside him, accepting a kiss to the temple and preparing a plate for herself. “Have you slept well?”

“The heat was intolerable but I’ve managed,” Lord Stark replied, the two sharing a smile over the southrons’ light constitutions. “Have you been enjoying your stay here, Lyarra?”

The dark-haired girl nodded. “I’ve had plenty to write home about though I doubt Robb would care for the library as I do.”

“Have you enough coin for the ravens?”

Sending letters between Winterfell and Highgarden was expensive. The distance between them was such that multiple ravens would be used, each one carrying it one leg further in the journey and still risking poor winds and heavy rainfall to destroy the correspondence. She had dug into her own savings to purchase an oilskin pouch, which was far cheaper near the oceanside. It would keep the letters home dry and allow Robb to reply back more quickly.

“I have,” Lyarra affirmed. “Have the contracts been going well?”

“Better than expected, though I would not like to argue with Willas Tyrell again,” her father grumbled. The familiar name had the dark-haired girl look up, raising one eyebrow in interest.

“Lord Willas takes part in the negotiations?” Lyarra asked. She hoped her tone was casual enough to belie any guilt. Not that she had any reason to feel guilty! She hadn’t replied to any of the notes he had sent and the mystery cyvassé player didn’t *have* to be the Heir to Highgarden.
“Lady Olenna and Lord Willas have been representing House Tyrell in the trade deals,” Lord Stark explained. “They’re rather good at it too, though I’m convinced Lady Olenna will be stealing her grandson’s walking stick any day now to rap us men over the knuckles. She’s a rather sharp woman that doesn’t abide by any foolishness.”

“And Lord Willas?” Lyarra intently studied the contents of her plate as she waited for an answer.

“An intelligent man, very measured in his response.” Her Father looked at her curiously. “He was absent from our last meeting due to a sailing party. Didn’t you attend that one?”

“Lady Margaery was kind enough to invite Lord Samwell and I,” Lyarra explained.

“And did you enjoy yourself?” Lord Stark’s smile seemed a little sad, as she nodded. “That’s good. I’m glad that you haven’t been occupied by the library for the entire trip here.”

“It is a very nice library,” she protested. “Not as large as the one in Winterfell but the Citadel is here and the Reach gets the latest books.”

“I am pleased that you have such a thirst to learn but there is more to the world than merely books,” Lord Stark picked up an apple and bit in. “Tell me of Samwell Tarly. Is he a good friend?”

The conversation moving to waters not concerning her guilt or lack thereof had Lyarra cheerfully chattering on about her new best friend. Ned Stark listened with an indulgent smile on his face as the dark-haired girl demonstrated the sword drills that she had been putting Samwell through via cucumber slices and orange peels. As the two wolves spoke, the Hall began to fill with Reach nobles coming down for a meal of their own. The Northerners customarily woke up earlier than their southeren counterparts, to make full use of the available sunlight before night fell and were thus often done eating before the others arrived. Atypically taking a leisurely approach had Lyarra still sitting by her father when Garlan entered the Hall.

Nursing a cup of tea in the uppermost dias, Willas immediately turned and engaged his mother in a conversation before Lady Alerie Tyrell could notice.

“Lord Stark, Lady Lyarra,” Garlan greeted, offering a shallow bow. “I hope that your meals are satisfactory?”
The Starks assured him that it was and, with basic courtesies accounted for, Garlan immediately took a seat across from Lyarra. “My father plans to host a tourney for Loras’ nameday!”

“Your youngest brother? The squire for Lord Renly Baratheon?”

“That’s the one,” Garlan confirmed. “I intend to enter the joust and melee. You should join me.”

“I’m a Northerner. I don’t believe in tourneys and they wouldn’t allow a woman to compete anyway,” Lyarra reminded him. Lord Stark took a sip of his tea and quietly studied the conversation between his eldest daughter and the second son of the Warden of the East, a contemplative look in his eyes.

“They have a woman’s side for the archery competition. Besides I wanted to ask you to be my squire.”

“Garlan, I think tournaments are a ridiculous exercise in waste and vanity that reveal talents better-”

“Lord Beric Dondarrion will be there,” Garlan interrupted shamelessly. Lyarra paused and he pressed his advantage. “The Lightning Lord himself! And that is not all. Ser Arys Oakheart, Ser Richard Horpe, Thoros of Myr and even Ser Robar Royce from the Vale. They’re no Aemon the Dragonknight or Ser Arthur Dayne but being my squire will allow you to meet them. You may even issue a challenge.”

Sensing a weakness in the she-wolf, the brunette boy continued. “Please say yes, Lady Lyarra. If you don’t agree to be my squire then I’ll have to take one of my cousins! You’ve met them yesterday. You know how insufferable they all are! How could you not spare me such a fate?”

Lyarra blinked dazedly as she looked at him. With his wavy hair just a shade darker than Willas’ honey brown and his pleading eyes near the color of Arbor Gold, Garlan bore an even more striking similarity to the eldest Tyrell from the night before. She couldn’t help but think of him less of a skilled knight and more as someone’s little brother; a look into the person Bran may be in the future.

“I can hardly attend without my Father’s permission,” the dark-haired girl offered weakly.
Garlan promptly turned his most charming smile towards Lord Stark. It was, Lyarra noted absently, eerily similar to Lady Margaery and Lord Willas’ smiles. The consideration of three siblings standing in front of a looking glass and practicing their smiles together had her muffle her rising giggles.

Unfortunately, her father was unmoved.

“Thank you for the offer,” the Northerner said dryly, well aware of the oddity of proposing a squireship to a lady. “However my contingent and I will be leaving before the tourney begins.”

Lyarra’s face fell at the news. She had known Ned Stark would never allow any of his daughters to squire, regardless of how tolerant he was of her lessons but to miss the knights entirely…? Garlan appeared equally dismayed, though soon recollecting his grace and offering a proper goodbye to them. A moment later, she spied him heading straight to his brother, the two Tyrell’s heads bent low to discuss some subject between them.

Her attention was soon reclaimed by her father. “I didn’t know that you were on such friendly terms with Garlan Tyrell.”

Lyarra flushed at the insinuation. “It is nothing like that, Father. We merely share a love of knights.”

“Are you certain? I haven’t seen him personally greet any other lady ‘for the meal,” Ned Stark stated, a twinkle present in his eye.

“We’re just friends,” Lyarra protested. She made a face at the accusation. “He’s like Bran.”

“Oh? Does he sneak into your bed during storms too?”

“Father!” At her indignant squawk, the stoic lord finally ended his guise of innocence, chuckling freely. “If you must know, we met at Lady Margaery’s sailing party yesterday and enjoyed a discussion about our favorite swordsmen. He was quite enthusiastic about the Dragonknight, not unlike Bran, I think.”

“Do you intend to meet with him again?” Lord Stark inquired, a more serious mein to his face.
“I am not sure. Lady Margaery invited Lord Samwell and I to a stargazing event this evening but I do not know who else may be in attendance,” Lyarra hesitated. “I understand that is is past the time that I usually return to my rooms, Father…”

“I will allow it this once.” Another inexplicably sad smile crossed Ned Stark’s face at how quickly she brightened up. “I understand that the Tyrells have been kind to you so far, Lyarra, but I caution you to be wary. They do not seem unkind but…”

“I understand, Father.” And she did understand that her position as a bastard left her vulnerable to machinations that her siblings perhaps need not worry for. She wouldn’t allow herself to fall prey to such, for no matter how kindly they had treated her thus far, there must be some reason for the Tyrell heirs to take an interest in a penniless, nameless bastard. The thought that her budding friendship with Garlan was inspired by less honourable intentions soured her stomach and she decided that the meal had come to an end. Placing a kiss on her father’s cheek, Lyarra rose to find a friend whose intentions were crystal clear.

On an unrelated note, Samwell Tarly shivered as he felt a particularly taxing lesson approaching.

The two friends had a fruitful day once Lyarra finished her lesson (“This is cruel and inhuman, Lyaa!”, “If you have breath enough to complain than you have enough for another five laps around the yard”). Then they had taken a break from reading medical texts to delve into history for a bit. Samwell located all of those texts in High Valyrian that he hadn’t been able to read before and Lyarra faithfully translated them. The day only got better when the Maester located them a few minutes later. Apparently someone had informed him of her abilities and he desired to hire her to translate a few texts for the library. The dark-haired girl hadn’t thought twice before agreeing.

‘Lord Willas may be nosy and meddlesome but I cannot deny the benefits of his interference.’

Eventually the time came for supper and after managing a quick introduction to her father, who was currently occupied with discussing matters with his men, Lyarra ate beside Samwell. There was minor interference from Dickon Tarly, who had a newfound interest in spending time with his brother and a more honest interest in his brother’s friend. It took the dark-haired girl every shred of grace she had to maintain her composure, not because she was unfamiliar with men such as this but because Lyarra despised sitting idly while her friend was mocked.

“I do apologize for him,” Sam looked shamefaced. “I never wanted to be the reason for you to have to deal with men like him.”

Lyarra patted his elbow. “He’s hardly the first one, Sam. I just can’t believe how someone as stupid
as Dickon Tarly is related to someone as smart as you.”

“I hear that comparison often but it’s usually for Dickon’s benefit.” A shy smile crossed her friend’s face. “I think this is the first time that he’s envious of me actually.”

Not for the first time this moon, Lyarra Snow thought that Randyll Tarly was a blind fool.

When supper was done, the bastard girl left to her room to ready herself. She lingered outside of the room for a moment, noting that a spearmen piece had been moved. Making her own selection, she oriented another elephant, to create the crossbow defense pattern used often against Robb. Willas Tyrell didn’t strike her as one to employ the hard and fast striking tactics preferred by her brother though, so perhaps she would lighten the defense and play more aggressively in the next round.

Cyvasse on her mind, Lyarra either did not notice or refused to acknowledge her selection of dress. She chose a pale blue gown embroidered by Sansa’s hand, her sister’s skill evident in the graceful sweep of the wind and grass, the playful joy in the tussle of the wolves. The middle sister had embroidered three such gowns for herself, Lyarra and Arya, each one with three wolves playing in the grass. In Lyarra’s dress, the eldest white wolf took prominence, in Sansa’s, a golden-furred beauty ducked under the others and Arya’s had a feisty black wolf pounce on the two.

“The Reach court is one of the finest in Westeros, so you mustn’t show them anything but your best,” Sansa had fretted. “Oh, I hope they like you!”

“If they don’t, then it’s because you’re prettier than them,” Arya informed her, lazily laying over in her bed. “You look nice, Lyaa.”

“You really do,” Sansa confirmed. She was deservedly smug as she finished the final tucks in. A sheepish expression crossed her face when she was done. “Ah, let’s not show this to Mother, okay?”

Arya was rather free with her love. Sansa walked a more balanced line but they hadn’t shared the girl’s nursery until Lyarra’s twelfth year without developing some affection for one another. The bastard quickly slipped the dress on, followed by one of her sole pieces of jewelry, a bracelet of silver chain links commissioned by Robb and pulled her hair up into a half-up crown braid. This could also be attributed to Sansa for her extensive knowledge of Southron fashions and hairstyles.

The final image earned Sam rather more glares than usual when she met up with him at the Hall.
“Is this your attempt to find me more sparring partners?” he japed.

Lyarra rolled her eyes. “Name me your champion and I shall handle them for you.”

The two were joined by other members of their party soon after and the bastard got the impression that she may soon be drawn into spars without swords. A few of the women there, such as Lady Leonette, greeted her kindly but the reception was hardly much warmer than the last.

‘Not that I should be surprised,’ Lyarra thought discouraged. ‘No matter how I dress, they will never consider a bastard as one of their own.’

Lady Margaery arrived on her eldest brother’s arm and soon led them up a winding flight of stairs to an open tower. It had been decorated with even more candles and lanterns than the riverside had, with carpets and cushions aplenty dragged around the floor. A musician had been scrounged up to play a light tune in the background while cupbearers were swarming around and offering goblets to anyone in attendance. Of interest to her though was the unusual metal and glass contraption near the edge of the tower.

Holding Sam’s arm for reassurance, though it was unsure as to whom was reassuring who, they edged towards the strange object. Margaery Tyrell accosted them soon after.

“Lady Lyarra, Lord Samwell!” The brunette’s friendly trill was accompanied by one arm forcefully linked to her own. Lyarra quickly found herself and her friend by extension, manhandled to the edge. “Have you ever seen a telescope before?”

“I have not,” Sam admitted freely. He eyed the machine with interest. “What does it do?”

“It works much like a spyglass but with a far more powerful lens. The Citadel has finally begun to sell them to others, so Willas purchased one for my nameday gift. I haven’t bothered to learn the particulars of its workings myself but it does show the stars marvelously. Would you like to try it?”

The Tarly nodded eagerly and then shot her a questioning glance. Lyarra gestured for him to go first.

As Sam bent down and adjusted the telescope to his eye, Margaery sidled closer to the dark-haired girl. She tried to discreetly add some space between them, rather aware of those soft brown eyes looking up at her with predatory focus. “Do you have an interest in the stars, Lady Lyarra?”
“You may use my given name if you wish.” The dark-haired girl paused when the Tyrell gleefully accepted and issued the same invitation. “I confess that I have no particular interest in the stars themselves though I do admire their beauty.”

“A shame then. I am quite delighted by discoveries of the heavens, particularly in the works of Lord Archimedes Dayne.” Margaery studied her intently.

Lyarra gave a noncommittal hum and then ventured. “Have you had this interest long?”

“Since I was a child.” Margaery’s smile softened. “My brother would draw me pictures of the stars. He was very attentive to detail even then; they were all as accurate a chart as a child could ever make.”

“I had thought Garlan more the type to draw knights and battles.”

“Garlan was never a talented artist,” Margaery chuckled. “No, I mean my eldest brother, Willas.”

“That was kind of him.” The Snow instinctively swept her eyes over the party, pausing briefly over one honey-haired lord holding court at the center. “Did he entertain you often?”

“Oh, all of my brothers entertained me.” For a moment, Margaery’s smile became less perfect and more impish. It suited her face well, Lyarra thought. “Willas would read to me every day. Garlan taught me to ride and to sail. Loras taught me to dance even when half our lessons ended with a trip to the Maester. I’m afraid that I was terribly spoiled as a child.”

“It sounds nice to have three older brothers then.”

“And you?” The Tyrell cocked her head to the side inquisitively. “Haven’t you an older brother?”

“Robb and I are mere moons apart. Our childhood was spent learning everything together.” She recalled memories of the redhaired boy and shook her head. “We spent a great deal of time getting into mischief with one another. Though he did take the blame for our exploits more often than not.”
Because she was the bastard and Robb was the heir and the servants scolded him far less harshly.

Unaware of the gloomy path of her thoughts, Margaery grinned. “Older brothers are handy for that, aren’t they?”

Lyarra would have replied but Sam had completed his turn with the telescope then. He turned to offer it to the ladies and the dark-haired girl was soon pushed into looking into the lens herself. She quietly gasped when the field of stars, dark and remote and beautiful, suddenly came close enough for her to distinguish them individually. She slowly moved the body forward until one exceptionally bright cluster of blue caught her eye.

“The King’s Lance.” A voice, similar to Margaery’s in tone and accent yet undeniably male, said. When she looked up, it was to find that Willas Tyrell had replaced the other two nobles on the edge.

“My Lord?” Lyarra stood up and hurriedly offered a quick curtsy.

“The King’s Lance,” Willas repeated, tawny eyes focused unerringly on her face. She wondered what it was with the Tyrell siblings that each of their gazes seemed like they were dissembling her. “The cluster of stars that you saw are called the King’s Lance. The brightest point always faces north.”

“Ah, we call it the Ice Dragon’s Eye.” The dark-haired girl focuses on the searing blue still present without the help of the lens, more for a desire to escape that keen stare than anything else. Willas takes the opportunity to sharply graze his eyes over her full appearance, any color to his cheeks attributed to the cold when the Snow eventually turns her eyes down.

“The North is amenable to the old title then. King Robert has been trying to rid the kingdom of any names related to the former regime,” Willas observed. “The Maesters complied to his whims.”

“The Citadel bows down too easily,” Lyarra scowled. “The Ice Dragon involves more than House Targaryen.”

“They are the principal orchestrator of the name though,” the Tyrell retorts. There is an odd quirk to his lips, almost as though he finds this argument amusing.

“Not in the tale that I’ve heard,” she retorted.
“Then we have heard different ones,” Willas leans forward. “Tell me your story, Lady Lyarra.”

Lyarra was accustomed to a more intimate standing between people, to limit the exposure to the brittle winds in the North but this feels unfamiliar. There is a puzzling intensity to those golden eyes, a peculiar warmth pooling at the center of her stomach. Lyarra is hesitant to the faint tingling in her arms, the warring desires to either move closer or flee far, far away. She has a sudden and terrible suspicion that Sansa would be squealing right about now.

But Lyarra is not Sansa and so all she does is clear her throat. “I must find my friend, Lord Willas.”

“Another time then.” The moment in broken and Lord Willas steps back, an aloof yet friendly cast to his face once more. “Lady Lyarra.”

It is a goodbye but as Lord Willas walks away, Lyarra feels as though an invitation has been issued instead.

When the party ends and she returns to the Northerners suite, it is to the news that the Tyrells had rejected one nearly completed treaty. They would be staying for a few weeks longer.
Chapter 5

Willas doesn’t order Lyarra Snow’s mail to be read.

This is standard policy for House Tyrell for there is little to be gained and quite a lot to be lost should the practice be known. Few secrets are sent publicly by ink and parchment and the fools who do so, have their own secrets revealed too easily to bother. Nonetheless, Tyman Flowers alerts him that two letters have been sent, one to her brothers and the other to her sisters. Willas knows the latter to be confidences shared and is distressingly interested in knowing what has been said about him.

“Will you be skipping out on another trade talk today, Willas?” His grandmother asks him, pointedly looking towards his plate.

He obligingly selects another slice of bread and lathers the bare minimum of honey that he can on it. “Thank you for delaying the talks, Grandmother.”

“I’ll accept my payment in answers.” Olenna Tyrell jerks her hand forward, gesturing to the tables below. “Is there any reason for you to be mooning after the wolf’s bastard daughter?”

“Curiosity.” He dips the bread into the tea before taking a bite. “What kind of woman can make the Honourable Lord Stark forget his wedding vows?”

“The one whose daughter can make an otherwise clever boy lose his senses,” Olenna snorted. “Don’t tell me that the bastard has taught you to love.”

“Not at all,” Willas replies honestly. A lightning flash of a smile hidden by a fresh strawberry to his lips. “Lyarra Snow has taught me to covet.”

His grandmother studies him slowly, as though trying to reconcile the brief passion of the words to his unflappable demeanor. Willas widens his eyes to a mockery of innocence, composes his face to a rictus of disbelief and counts it a blessing when the old woman snorts again. Olenna surrenders.
“Not a single flower,” she warns. “You are not too old to put over my knee.”

Willas places a kiss to her cheek in thanks and then returns to his plate, though without any great appetite. Grandmother has no need to be concerned for this; Lyarra Snow would die before she allowed any man to put a bastard in her. He is confident in this as he is in little else. The infuriatingly curious bastard girl hadn’t made a single move in their cysasse game since the stargazing party.

‘I moved too quickly,’ Willas acknowledged. ‘I pushed her too far and now she wishes to be rid of me.’

The Heir to Highgarden obeyed her silent directive and stayed away. He was never too far from her mind, he was sure, for notes had still been sent. Innocuous messages advising books or training routines, informing her of pleasant trails in the garden and warning her of brisk winds. Willas hadn’t approached her personally himself but Garlan had taken to dropping unexpectedly on Lyarra’s training sessions while Margaery invited her to several rides. The girl had selected Apple Cider each time.

The problem wasn’t that Lyarra Snow was skittish. She was young and inexperienced and the Tyrell Heir was not adverse to pursuit. No, it was that the young lord no longer knew why he was doing this. He still desired to know her heritage but a part of him, a not insignificant part that he attributed solely to her clumsy and unintentional seduction, wanted something else. Though even with senses muddled, Willas Tyrell knew that Lord Eddard Stark would not be amused to find Lyarra Snow in his bed.

Worst of all, Willas was beginning to suspect that a bedding alone wouldn’t rid him of his fascination for her.

Work could prove a temporary distraction though and the young lord had much to go through. He was nominally in charge of managing the Tyrell’s assets, expenditures and investments, having been trained for the job under the sharp eye of his Grandmother and the elderly Steward of Highgarden. They had been managing the finances for years, limiting the damage of his well-intentioned but spendthrift father, until Willas reached his sixteenth year. It was a heavy responsibility to assume at so young an age but he had rather excelled at bookwork and administration, even finding the time to pursue projects of his own to increase the Tyrell family’s wealth.

It had also helped, of course, that the other main responsibility of the Lord of the Castle, namely managing the bannermen and ensuring adequate martial ability in the men-at-arms fell to Garlan. Likewise Margaery was being trained to one day take over the social responsibilities of their family, a role held primarily by Lady Olenna Tyrell. Willas had never been sure as to Loras’ role in the House, beyond growing his reputation as a knight and serving as the bedwarmer to the King’s brother. He supposed that his youngest brother had plenty of years yet to find his own area of
As befitting someone who was more or less the acting lord of House Tyrell, though still reliant on his Grandmother’s advice, Willas had his own solar with an attached office. Large windows let in plenty of sunlight to warm up the otherwise dark green walls and walnut furniture. The wide desk at the center of the furthest wall, emblazoned with a single banner of a golden rose at Margaery’s insistence, was nearly buried with parchment. He was in rather desperate need of an assistant, considering the sheer amount of busywork generated by a Great House but Tyman was his right hand spy and Willas hadn’t yet found anyone else to trust for the position.

An image of a pudgy, craven boy often in the proximity of his current object of fascination suddenly appeared in his head. Willas shook his head to dislodge the idea. He was having a difficult enough time focusing on his work without inviting additional thoughts of Lyarra Snow to his mind.

Instead the honey-haired lord drew over the topmost parchment, which contained the quarter-annual list of all loans approved by Steward Vayne. They had been a recent implementation by Willas, modeled after the Iron Bank’s policies and had been doing very well. Oldtown had been producing more novel inventions in the last year than the decade before that and House Tyrell either received right-of-first-refusal for investment or interest on the loans given. The scale was limited so far but he intended to pour more resources into the program for the next year. House Tyrell didn’t have quite as much gold as say, House Lannister but they also didn’t have to sink millions of dragons into the Usurper’s wine cellars and whorehouses either.

‘I wonder if Lady Lyarra knows of the King’s behavior,’ Willas wondered. ‘I cannot imagine Lord Stark speaking unfavorably of his friend but she knew enough to censure the Citadel for their astronomers.’

He promptly pushed that thought out of his head and added notations to those businesses that he wanted further investment in. Willas’ next focus was on the expansion of the glasshouses. One would think that with the Reach’s fertility, there wouldn’t be any need for them. It was not a false assumption for the ones that the Tyrell Heir commissioned focused almost entirely on plants from Essos, trying to adapt them to Westeros soil or grow the more delicate ones in the Reach.

‘Those fire berries from Asshai are particularly intriguing, being able to stimulate heat after being ingested. Ground into a spice, they could be exported to the North and Vale. Mayhaps the Black would like a sample to keep their balls from freezing during their Watch. Isn’t Lady Lyarra’s Uncle a Crow...’

Willas stilled. He carefully put his quill down, cleared some space from his desk and let his head drop down with a muffled thump. Damn bastards.
For the next few minutes, had anyone cared to peek in the room, they would have seen the Heir to Highgarden soundlessly counting to twenty. First in the Common Tongue, then High Valyrian and finally the Summer Tongue. When he was done, the utterly resigned lord searched through his busywork until he found the drafts for the Northern trade deals. If Willas absolutely had to think of a certain violet-eyed bastard, then it may as well be when he was getting actual work done.

x

“Brother!” Margaery was far too old to run up the cobblestones and throw herself into a tackle at her third brother but she still maintained her enthusiasm for when he arrived. Loras, who had complained bitterly of the embarrassing displays when they occurred, found himself missing them now.

“Margaery, my most beloved of sisters.” The golden-curled Tyrell swept her into a hug of his own, spinning her protesting form around twice, before gently placing her down. She was too ladylike to swat him in response but that shifty-eyed glance suggested that he had best protect his plate later. “How are you sweetling?”

“I am well, of course,” Margaery smiled. It was that practiced one that all Tyrells eventually mastered, though none quite like Garlan, whose natural cheer added credence to his affable look. “Lord Renly, forgive me for overlooking you. You are welcome at Highgarden as always.”

“I can hardly blame you when Loras is here to catch every gaze,” Renly teased. He turned a tender look towards the man in question, one that never failed to pull a smile from him. “Is your family well?”

“They are all here to greet Loras themselves.” When he looked past his sister’s brunette curls, the knight saw them all approaching. His father, Lord Mace, and mother, Lady Alerie, were moving forward quickly, with beaming smiles on their faces. Garlan approached close behind, his customary grin present. At a more sedate approach were his Grandmother and eldest brother, a twinkle in the former’s eye and a pleased smile on the latter’s.

When the two parties met, the effusions of happiness and warm welcomes were all that was expected of a family as close as their own. Loras received hugs thrice, a cheeky tug on his cheek from Garlan and a fond complaint that he was evidently starving himself in the fashion of the court from Olenna Tyrell. As expected, this sent Mother into a bit of a frenzy, whereupon she fretted over his skinny frame, entirely ignoring that to be his normal bone structure and insisted he come inside to eat. Loras submitted to this with minimal suffering; Mother was silly but she did love them all.
The Knight of Flowers noticed Renly out of the corner of his eye, looking wistfully at this happy family reunion and promptly pointed out his lover’s own nonexistent hunger pangs. Soon the copper-haired man was too busy deflecting Mother to be sad anymore and Loras could turn to his baby sister.

“Now is there anything important that I must know before supper?” Loras whispered.

Linking their arms together, her smile turned positively impish in nature. “Oh well, you know. Lady Ashford’s daughter rather scandalously withdrew from society after sporting a suspiciously round tummy. Lord Florent gambled his sister’s dowry away. Mother is convinced that Lady Elena has paid her a most grave insult and Garlan still thinks that Lady Leonette finds his jokes funny.”

“And of course, there is the matter of this Northern bastard,” Margaery half-sang.

“Oh?” Her voice was still pitched low, so Loras angled his head to allow the words better purchase to his ear. “Tell me more.”

“Lyarra Snow, bastard daughter of Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. She rides like the wind, plays the harp, speaks High Valyrian and wields the sword,” Margaery answered. “Willas wants to wed her or bed her and likely both, Garlan is still trying to convince her to squire for him for the tourney and Grandmother delayed trade talks to keep her in Highgarden.”

“What?” Loras yelped. “I was gone for two moons!”

“Hush. We’re playing a game, Garlan and I, and it will be no fun if you invite everyone in. Perhaps you may play as well,” Margaery said playfully. “She only arrived a fortnight ago, so who knows how many more secrets she may hold?”

“Lady Lyarra’s weakening,” Garlan added, stepping up to Loras’ other side. “She’ll agree to be my squire any day now.”

His sister huffed. “I rode with her this morning and she hadn’t any indications of such.”

“You don’t understand swordsmen,” Garlan sniffed.
“You don’t understand women,” Margaery retorted.

“And neither of you understand secrecy,” Willas deadpanned. His walking stick lightly hit Garlan until he moved aside, letting the eldest boy slip between his brothers. “Do keep in mind that we are keeping this amongst ourselves. That includes Lord Renly, Brother.”

“Very well.” Loras shrugged easily. While he adored the older man, he knew that not everyone in his family shared the sentiment. Grandmother was convinced that Renly was a shiny penny copper, pretty but not all that useful. Willas had shared his own reservations about their relationship starting when he was still Renly’s squire. Loras was also well-used to keeping their family’s machinations secret.

“Grandmother knows,” Garlan reminded him, looking miffed.

“She doesn’t count,” Margaery glanced back at the wizened old lady warily. “The Queen of Thorns knows everything.”

“It doesn’t help that you look fearfully at her every time you use that title,” their eldest brother stated dryly. Margaery sulked while Loras looked at the honey-haired lord speculatively. Willas was not immune to bouts of pique, however much he acted like he was in perfect control of the world around him but they mainly followed phantom pains in his injured leg. There hadn’t been any rain recently…

“Lady Lyarra Snow?” Loras guessed, nodding towards the eldest.

Margaery and Garlan suddenly started snickering while Willas leveled a scowl on them. Loras grinned back, undaunted. “Have you been unable to lure her into your bed, Brother?”

“She is not that kind of woman,” Willas snapped back. The knight thought he sounded disappointed by that fact.

“Lady Lyarra’s ignoring him,” the brunette knight informed him. “Willas spooked her.”

“I moved too quickly and her courage fled her. I merely need some manner of restoring it. Garlan is convinced that the tourney shall be it.”
“I only need a few more days to convince her,” Garlan asserted optimistically. “She’s weakening. I just know it!” His sister snorted in disbelief.

“How have you been going about it then?” Loras asked.

“I’ve explained to her of all of the knights that will be entering. As my squire, she could challenge them herself and test her skills against a strong opponent.”

Loras considered that for a moment. “That will never convince her,” he stated bluntly. They all ignored Margaery’s triumphant smile. “She is a Stark, yes?”

At the nod, the Knight of Flowers continued. “If you want to make a Stark do something, you must appeal to their sense of honor, loyalty and duty. Should Lady Lyarra be anything like her father, she will submit to it easily.”

He should know. The King never shut up about Ned Stark and his honor at court. Had Littlefinger not been making bank for the man’s whoring exploits, Loras would suspect that Lyanna Stark wasn’t really the Northern love of Robert’s life.

“Dickon Tarly will be participating in the tourney. If I recall, he recently exchanged some harsh words with his brother over Dickon’s envy for Lady Lyarra’s company,” Margaery said, her memory for other people’s business uncanny. “He may have spread some unsavory rumors about Samwell too.”

His second eldest brother nodded thoughtfully and the subject soon turned to the events expected at the tourney. The next day, Garlan the Gallant arrived to a late lunch, sweat still on his brow from a training session and a brilliant grin to his face. He hugged Loras once and the blond knight was then forced to explain to his confused paramour that Garlan occasionally acted overtly affectionate when he mastered a new technique or the like.

When Tyman Flowers approached the table moment later, he handed Willas a folded note that returned a smirk to his face. “The Spearmen was moved three squares across,” was all he would say.

“Your brothers are…?” Renly began.
“Ignore them,” Loras advised. His eldest brother had taken out a fresh parchment in the middle of lunch and was already penning a note. “That’s what I do.”
Chapter Six

Her siblings replies are all Lyarra Snow expects. Sansa’s is filled with effusions of delight over all the dark-haired girl described, from the grandeur of the castle to the elegance of the ladies, interspersed with sly questions about her friendships with the Tyrells. When she demands to know if Lord Willas is as beautiful as his brother, ‘for I have heard that the Knight of Flowers is the handsomest man in court, Sister,’ Lyarra writes back that Ser Loras is a handsome man. Sansa reasonably takes this to mean that her older sister is indeed attracted to Lord Willas, much to Lyarra’s future chagrin.

Arya wishes to know of all the knights in the Reach and peppers her letter with anecdotes about Winterfell. There is an admonishment near the end though to have care with those Southron nobles and their petty word games. Bran requests a book’s worth of details on the tournament and excitedly informs her of his progress with the bow. Robb, who has been carefully placed out of the loop to any mention of pretty-boy lords and their infuriating smirks, has only concerns for her health. He tells her of the daily occurrences around the castle and advises her to enjoy the tourney. The bottom half of his parchment includes Rickon’s giant lettering: MISS YOU, LYAA. COME HOME SOON.

Lyarra writes them all back dutifully and doesn’t make any mention of her newfound squireship. She does like to think though that four out of five of her siblings would approve and Sansa too, if she phrased it as a way to meet handsome and gallant knights. Sam unfortunately does not approve.

“This is a mad idea!” Sam waves his hands erratically in the air, as though unable to contain the sheer absurdity of her choice. “You will be found out! Your reputation will be ruined! You will get hurt!”

Lyarra nods. These are all good points. “I intend to squire for Ser Garlan regardless.”

“But why?” Sam’s high-pitched wail of despair sounds as Rickon does when he is forbidden cake.

The dark-haired girl considers informing him of her intentions to challenge his brother, amongst others and demand an apology in recompense but refrains. Sam would only be more distressed if he thought himself the reason for her folly.

“It will be a good opportunity to test my skills,” Lyarra admits, because this is also a compelling
reason. “I know how to fight, Sam but I’ll never go to war or spar against anyone outside of Winterfell. This will show me how far I’ve come and how much more I need to learn.”

“If it is a spar you want, challenge Ser Garlan again. I will even speak to my brother, if you’d like. Dickon is a talented swordsman.”

“Will he take a female opponent seriously?” At his defeated expression, she smiled. “You needn’t worry. Ser Garlan is just as invested in hiding my identity as I am. Though if you would like to help…”

“I already know that I’m going to regret this.”

“No more than my squireship.” The two were sitting in their section of the library, meant for rare or valuable texts in High Valyrian. It was located at the very end of the Hour of Ghosts, bordered between the Hour of the Wolf for history and warfare and the Hour of the Nightingale for agriculture and industry. One of the reasons they had chosen it was for its secluded setting.

“That doesn’t reassure me at all.” Nonetheless the Tarly stands up and chivalrously offers his hand to her. It is a gesture that Lyarra would have been pleased by when they first met and one that still draws a smile to her lips, though she knows his reasons innocent. “What would you have me do?”

The dark-haired girl places a finger against her lips. One of the Maester’s assistants was a spy for Lord Willas, the other she was wary of. “Would you escort me to my room?”

“Certainly. The rumors can never have enough kindling.” They had reached the end of the aisle when a squeak was heard and then footsteps moving hastily away.

A few minutes later, Lyarra grinned. “My dearest Samwell?”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Yes, my sweet?”

“You’re going the wrong way.”

“Only to fool the watchers, dear.”
A few minor corrections to the path and the two were soon entering the rooms set aside for the Stark party. They maintained a respectful distance between them; whisperings aside, intimate gestures would slander her reputation.

“They think me Florian the Fool,” Sam noted idly, standing politely outside her door. There was a brief glimpse of her room, in shades of mint green and sky blue and dominated by a sinfully comfortable bed, before she closed the door. Lyarra hurried to gather her tunic, trousers and boots.

“I should be rather pleased to be Jonquil then. My sister does love her stories,” the dark-haired girl called back. She slipped out of her satin slippers, footwear rather all too common in the Reach. “Have they been teasing you for it?”

“No, no, I believe them more puzzled than anything else and mayhaps amazed. Wait, Sister? The one that broke into a stable of horses and took one out for a ride before daybreak? She admires the tales of Jonquil and Florian?”

“That would be the youngest, Arya and no, she does not. Her admiration is for Queen Nymeria or Danny Flint. My other sister, Sansa, adores them.”

They continued this line of conversation until the bastard girl stepped out, drawing Sam’s attention away from the table to the left of the door. “Sam?”

“Lyarra… why is there a cyvasse board here?”

“Ah… someone left it here?” Lyarra ducked her head down, sheepishly rubbing the back of her neck.

Sam looked at her, then at the board and then at her again. “Lord Willas set up a cyvasse game and you played?”

Lyarra cringed. The disbelief and disappointment there was even more striking than any accusation would be. “It could have been someone else.”

“Fair enough. Why are you playing into the games of Ser Garlan or Lady Margaery then?”
“It’s cyvasse, Sam! What could they mean by it?”

“I don’t know but certainly, it’s something,” Sam groaned. “The Tyrells consider a day wasted unless they execute at least one plot whereas you outright asked me if I was betrothed to anyone.”

“Mayhaps it’s something kind then?” Lyarra shrugged. “I don’t understand why they pay me such attentions—surely, any japes on my behalf could be done by now— but they haven’t been cruel so far. And what else could they be planning to do? Gain my good favor? Why? It’s hardly worth anything.”

“He could be trying to bed you?”

“With his sister’s help?” The dark-haired girl looked incredulous. “Even then, he’ll find that I have no desire to be anyone’s bed warmer.”

“Wed you?” Sam’s own expression was dubious as Lyarra practically snorted in laughter.

“Lord Willas may be nosy, manipulative and infuriating but I can hardly believe him that poor a bridegroom.” Lyarra considered the man in question, in particular the pools of melted gold that regarded her by the riverside and hoped Sam overlooked the pink to her cheeks. “He is handsome and intelligent, well-mannered and articulate, kind to his sister, skilled with—”

She noticed how Sam’s eyebrows were steadily raising higher and hurriedly finished. “He shall have no trouble finding a bride, I’m sure.”

Suddenly soured to the conversation, Lyarra moved to her next order of business. “Ser Garlan and I have agreed that I shall pose as a mystery squire though he believes that a false identity would also serve me well. To that end, would you mind terribly if my guise was Samwell Tarly in the guise of a mystery squire?”

x

The fledgling suspicion that there was a Tyrell-wide conspiracy against her merely strengthened when she stepped into the secluded clearing. Across from her was not a knight of medium-height
with dark brown hair, a neatly trimmed goatee and a ready smile but a golden-curled song in a bluebell cloak. Lyarra’s first thought identified him as Ser Loras Tyrell, Knight of Flowers and the only Tyrell sibling she had yet to meet. Her second thought wondered how his hair managed to shine so well and if he would be amenable to sharing the secret. Her third was a mangled groan of despair.

“Lady Lyarra,” the Tyrell knight greets her warmly. His hand is outstretched and as she places her own on his palm, she acknowledges it as calloused as the middle brother’s. The man handles the resulting handshake with equal aplomb to the eldest and his smile is just as sweet as Lady Margaery’s.

“Yes, this is definitely another thorned rose.” It was a shame that Sam had returned to the library.

“Ser Loras,” she murmured. “Does your brother intend to leave my lessons to you?”

“Not at all. Garlan merely has a detour to make.” Loras stepped back and turned to retrieve something. “Have you ever jousted before?”

“I have.” Her experience had been limited and often resulted in a loss, for Robb held the edge with a lance but she had some skill. “I had intended to challenge the other squires to swordfights though.”

“They would insist on using live steel,” the knight warned. “I would advise against it, particularly if you are as talented as Garlan says you are. Lords rarely take their injured heirs well.”

“Ser Garlan said that I have talent?” Despite her better nature, she was flattered. Ser Garlan was the most skilled knight she had met so far, after all.

“Hmm, my brother offers praise rarely and is even more guarded with his time,” Loras informed her. He raised a blunted lance and balanced it with one hand. “You shall have a disadvantage in the lists with your lithe body and limited strength. Tell me, are you a good rider?”

He must have read the answer in her eyes for his own lit up. “Excellent! And my brother is here now.”

Lyarra turned to see the second son of House Tyrell ride into the clearing, pulling the steed to a stop before her and jumping down. Trailing behind his dark brown mare was a familiar honey-gold figure.
“Apple Cider?” The bastard girl missed the amused looks of the two men as the horse nickered into her raised hand.

“The stable master said that you had ridden him often,” Garlan explained. “The familiarity should help you learn. But first! I have something to show you.”

Ser Garlan the Gallant withdrew a folded square of silk and unfurled it with a flourish. It was a banner of dark green, a crimson bow lying at the center. In place of where the arrow would be was a finely notched quill. “I present to you the sigil of the Squire of Quills!”

Lyarra looked it over slowly. When the time had lengthened enough to make the older man squirm, she beamed. “I love it. Thank you, Ser.”

“It is of no import,” he replied modestly. “I drew it myself.”

“Oh? We must show this to Lady Margaery. She has been doubting your skill for years now, Ser.”

“As I said, I convinced Willas to draw it myself,” Garlan corrected, without an ounce of shame. The dark-haired girl’s smile started to fade, Loras intervening before she realized it herself.

“While a sigil is all well and good, Brother, she needs to practice! My nameday is less than four days away and they mark the start of the festivities!”

“Right! Let’s start with a simple test to determine the level of your abilities,” Garlan pointed towards the trees. “I would like you to weave between these trees, following the markers tied to the trees. It’s a slightly elongated circle, dipping into the forest at certain turns and can be easily observed by Loras and I from here. Do you think you can do it?”

Lyarra’s eyes caught swathes of green fluttering in the air from the branches and followed their path around the clearing. It fell past her gaze at some points but she was fairly confident that she could do this. The Wolfswood was far more challenging to ride through on a daily basis than these Reach trees.

Instead of answering, the dark-haired girl moved to the saddled Apple Cider and easily pulled herself
up. One hand held the bridle, the other movements communicated by her knees to this remarkably well-trained steed. With a shout of ‘good luck ’ ringing in her ears, Lyarra Snow began.

‘To the right, duck, slow down and trot between the narrow gap here.’ Apple Cider followed her commands obediently and soon her taut nerves loosened to genuine pleasure. Her Father had always said she inherited her Aunt Lyanna’s talent as a rider. ‘ Turn sharply left, don’t let that curve widen. ’

A stretch of open plain came up, she tightened her legs and brought Apple Cider up to a canter. An approaching log, she braced her body and flicked the bridle once. There was a smooth rush of air and then she was flying over it, immediately approaching another turn in the run. ‘This is fun!’

Had Robb been there, laughing gaily as he urged his own horse forward, it would have been just like the races at home. Though there lacked the snow on the ground, the frost nipping her ears and the ancient, watchful sentinels of Winterfell. The Reach was younger, lighter and more flash than substance but the woods here held a beauty all their own.

‘How fast can I get this done?’ A little more reckless, Lyarra kept the canter going despite the oncoming copse of the trees. She dodged them well enough regardless but nearly missing the next marker, brightly coloured though they were, had her slow down again. There was no point in rushing through the test if she would fail. ‘Another log. Jump and then weave between another copse.’

It took less than ten minutes before she re-entered the grove she began from, easing Apple Cider into a light jog. The bastard grinned over at the two men, catching the impressed look on both knight’s faces. As Lyarra was easing the pace of the horse, slowly coming down from the adrenaline, she missed their conversation.

Ser Loras leaned over to whisper into his brother’s ear. “Ten dragons that Margaery gets her into bed before Willas does.”

Lyarra rushed up the stairs of the raven’s tower, several rolls of parchment and an oilskin bag in hand. She had meant to send her siblings’ letters in the morning but had been distracted by her talk with Sam, thus finding them on her bed when she returned from practice. Rather than bathe and dress herself, the dark-haired girl had decided to rush up four flights of stairs and complete her errand before lunch. It was a decision she regretted within minutes of stepping into the room.
“Lady Lyarra.” The Heir to Highgarden was standing by the window untying a package. He looked up when she stepped into the room, tawny eyes widening before his face turned oddly still.

“Lord Willas.” It was rather curt compared to his own friendly tone but she was too mortified to care. The dark-haired girl was dressed in her training clothes, sweaty and grass-stained, whereas his forest green and silver tunic was pristine. A few dark curls had pulled themselves out of her ponytail, clinging to her damp skin and the flush to her pale cheeks had only been heightened by the exercise.

Lyarra waited for the censure to come and when, after a moment, the honey-haired lord continued to stare unabashedly at her, turned to the ravens. They were neatly labelled on orderly cages attached to the stone but she had used the Winterfell one often enough to move to it by sight. It greeted her with a bell-like caw, receiving a happy rub to his head in response. Lyarra had always a gift with animals.

‘If he wants to say something, he should say it now.’ The bastard girl wanted to twitch at the prickles on the back of her neck. She knew he was staring at her, likely indecisive over which insult to use. ‘Nothing you say with faze me, Lord Willas. Unladylike, sinful, unmarriageable, dirty, disgusting… Septa Mordane has managed to hit them all.’

“Are you sending a letter home, Lady Lyarra?” Even his voice sounded tense. Was he investing that much effort into hiding his displeasure?

“I should hope so since I am using the designated Winterfell raven,” Lyarra answered dryly. “You are aware that men could be sent to retrieve your package for you, yes?”

She paused in tying the rolls to look back over her shoulder. His eyes were immediately turned from hers and for a brief moment, Lord Willas, Heir to Highgarden, one-day Lord Paramount of the Reach and future Warden of the South looked like a boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar. Another heartbeat and he was returning her glance with a cool one of his own.

“I may use a cane, my lady, but I am more than capable of traversing a few stairs in my own castle.”

“I am certain that a cripple remains capable of such,” the bastard quipped. “However I would presume that you have your own fair share of responsibilities to attend to. This is a minor duty that can and arguably should be delegated elsewhere.”

“You presume correctly. I am rarely within this part of the castle,” Lord Willas admitted. “I’ve been waiting for this package for awhile though and wished to fetch it myself.”
Ignoring her curiosity in regards to this— they were hardly intimate enough for her to ask— Lyarra studied the raven. It was indeed one of those rare and expensive birds that could carry light packages but that did absolve her doubt. Sam’s warnings and Arya’s admonishments came to her mind and she wondered if it was truly happenstance that had Lord Willas present at this particular time. Her own actions had been on a whim, had almost always been likewise with him but the honey-haired lord’s motives were oblique.

‘He could be trying to bed you.’

A flash of fury crossed her eyes at the remembrance. No matter how wanton the Southrons may think her, Lyarra Snow would never carry a bastard of her own. Ignoring the Tyrell’s curiosity, she deftly tied the final roll on and offered her sleeve. The raven hopped on and with a single flick of her wrist, had the propulsion to fly up and out of the tower.

Lyarra didn’t trust her voice yet so she merely offered a shallow bow before striding out. Unknown to her was Lord Willas Tyrell’s attentive gaze and newfound appreciation of women in trousers.

x
Chapter Seven

"More tea, my lord?" Tyman Flowers inquired softly.

The honey-haired lord soundlessly held out his cup, allowing it to be filled to the brim with his preferred rose petal blend. He brought it to his lips, a touch of satisfaction found in the rich, sweet taste, before returning his attention to his book.

*Notable Names of Westerosi Nobility* was one of the rarest and most expensive tomes in the Citadel's catalog. This was not due to any great work of scholarship- Willas found it rather trite himself- but because there existed a mere dozen copies in the entire Seven Realms. The reason for *that* was due to the painstaking, full-body, inked profiles of every famous or infamous individual mentioned. The Heir to Highgarden was currently engrossed in the Northern section of the book, particularly the heavy brows, hawkish nose and flint grey eyes of Cregan Stark.

At least half of his attention was on the book. The remainder was devoted to an enchanting young woman who appeared conflicted by his presence. Lady Lyarra turned to find his eyes fastened on her once more. Willas offered his most genial smile and she returned it with an icy, blank stare.

*Ice glitters in the sunlight, my lady and your tempest draws a gaze more bewitched than you think.*

There was a want of understanding for her regression into spite, having elected to change her reaction so suddenly but Willas preferred that to a spooked wolf. Anger he could work with. Anger brightened the eyes and quickened the pulse, made Lyarra Snow even more pleasing to the eye. Anger cast away the title of bastard and drew out the predator to challenge him. It was futile, for the wolf was skittish for a fight that Willas would never offer but it served a purpose in waylaying reason. It kept her near him until the heady scent of roses brought the she-wolf closer and had her lay willingly by him.

Dragons conquered, lions mauled, wolves tore but roses? Roses seduced.

"I would remind my lord that my capabilities as a guard are woefully inadequate."

Willas flickered tawny eyes to his most capable manservant. "The Lady Lyarra is too self-controlled
to attack an Heir to a Great House."

"As you say, my Lord." Tyman inclined his head. "Biscuit?"

He shook his head and returned to the training session before him. A visual aide was necessary in the course of his investigation but even without, he would have found an excuse to be present. Willas was a lover of horseflesh; he had spent countless hours breeding and raising the finest horses and falcons in the Reach. It was a pleasure to see someone utilize the fruits of his labor to its fullest extent.

*Apple Cider* broke into a gallop then, the pace and force pulling yet another curl from the Northerner's braid. It glimmered in the sunlight, copper as with most darkened hair but interspersed with curious strands of silver. Lord Stark’s hadn't done anything of the like.

‘*She shares such few features with him...*’ In the course of his study, Willas had found remarkably few ‘Stark’ features. He had used a liberal definition for them, accepting any such details that were shared with at least two other Starks, one of whom could be her father. Yet despite the Stark features holding prevalent throughout the book and with Lord Eddard, there were few of them to be found on Lady Lyarra’s face. When one disregarded her coloring, those dark curls painted silver in the light and her pale skin fairer still then her Lord Father’s, than she didn’t look much like a Stark at all.

So the penultimate question remained: who *did* Lyarra Snow look like?

Obviously not Eddard Stark, to his dismay. Willas’ plan had been to take this oft-vaunted ‘Northern’ beauty and, through his study of the Starks, isolate those features uncommon to her Father’s House. The presupposition had been that any features withstanding the blood of the First Men had to be hallmarks of whatever other blood she carried. That plan was shot to hell since the only message that Lady Lyarra’s features communicated was that they *weren’t* Stark ones.

Those violet eyes had been uncommon but they could belong to any Crownlands House or to House Dayne. A willful jut to her chin and the curve of her nose had the touch of House Blackwood. The skin darkened as easily as any Dornishman while the curve of her body was as slender as the Rhoynish. It narrowed her claim to three Realms but damn if he couldn’t narrow down which!

‘*Not to mention that the names prick at something in my memory.*’ Willas was a student of history and as such, he supposed that there to be at least one House where those bloodlines mixed. He could not recall the name of which but it must have crossed his lessons at one point in time.
Before he could get worked up about his failure, the Tyrell lordling held out his cup again. Dutifully, Tyman filled it up and he turned his attention to Lady Lyarra. Oh dear, Loras had brought his cloak.

Willas had personally found his baby brother’s jeweled rose armor to be ostentatious, imprudent and morbidly dazzling. He had paid for it regardless since it was an ultimately harmless (if expensive) desire but had warned that his cloak of bluebells was foolish and would be endlessly mocked. Loras had argued that women would find it charming rather and he had been right—at least, until Lyarra Snow took a glance at it.

He could almost see her innate kindness and polite manners war with her Northern sensibilities. Eventually even Lyarra Snow succumbed.

“Your cloak is exquisite, Ser Loras. Are… are those roses fresh?” Loras nodded proudly, making the dark-haired girl look faintly horrified by the sheer expense of it all. Of course, all of her winter roses would be grown in glasshouses and sold for goodly sums. “Truly the Reach is a realm unto its own.”

His younger brother stopped puffing out his chest at her next, amazed words. “To think the land so fertile that men may devote themselves to twining roses for such a fragile cloak.”

Loras’ eyelid twitched. “It is the responsibility of my squire, good Lady.”

“Is it?” Lyarra suddenly turned and bowed deeply to an amused Garlan. “Thank you, Ser Garlan.”

“I knew you would come to appreciate being my squire.” The brunette knight waved his lance in the air. “Now let’s run some practice drills!”

Lady Lyarra paled as she was dragged away while Samwell looked downright vindicated. Loras stomped over to where he was sitting, receiving an unimpressed raise of a single eyebrow from Willas.

“Northerners don’t have any taste,” his brother said sulkily.

“They do not,” Willas soothed. Each of his siblings had their own way to be calmed. Margaery wanted someone to listen to her ranting, Garlan, physical exertion to exhaust him and Loras, to be distracted. “Do you remember any Houses with these uncommon features?”
The golden-haired Tyrell quickly flitted through the notes he made, occasionally turning to study Lady Lyarra. His brother moved through it more quickly than he would have, likely because he hadn’t paused every now and then to admire the features he was studying. At the end, Loras looked puzzled.

“She has Renly’s nose,” his brother finally said. “Same straight slope with a protrusion at the nostrils and faint lines extending downwards to the mouth.”

The merest sign of Willas’ surprise was his tightened grip on his tea. *Stormlands* blood? He hadn’t even considered the possibility nor seen any indication. He knew better than to challenge Loras on the veracity of those words though. If anyone knew every aspect of Renly Baratheon’s body in full detail, it would be his baby brother.

‘*Why would Ned Stark hide Stormlands blood in his bastard though?*’

“I see,” Willas said softly. He closed the book and handed it over to Tyman. “Thank you for your assistance, Loras. I must return to my study.”

Grasping his cane tightly, the Heir to Highgarden pulled himself to his feet. He had a starting point. Now he needed to find merely an ancestor that gifted both Renly Baratheon and Lyarra Snow with such a notable feature and the entire mystery would unravel.

Then afterward he could address the issue of his inexplicable attraction to the bastard Stark.

x

“Brother, you are being a bore.”

“Sister, you are being an annoyance.”

Margaery pursed her lips for a moment and then reached over to snatch his book away. “How much time have you spent with this book?”
“Far less than you think,” Willas stated. “Can I have it back?”

“Not until Loras’ joust is over,” the brunette noblewoman snapped. “You’re neglecting your duties to the family, Willas!”

“I am not. I put a wager of fifty dragons on him earlier in the day.”

“Making money off of your brother’s accomplishments does not count as supporting him.” Margaery looked exasperated. “I don’t care if these are the preliminary matches. They’re important to Loras!”

“He doesn’t look particularly devoted to them.” Willas nodded towards the knight stands where his brother was receiving last minute ‘advice’ from Lord Renly while his opponent glared at him. Loras’ penchant for indifference to opponents he did not personally respect tended to rile them up easily.

Before his sister could throw his new, expensive book at him, Willas demurred. “I’ll place it under my chair if you would like.”

“I would,” Margaery sniffed. It wasn't too great a loss. The preliminary matches for the joust would be over soon and after that, the informal grudge matches between squires. Lady Lyarra would be performing in two of them today, not that Willas intended to be present. He hadn't ever attended one before and wouldn’t raise eyebrows by attending one today.

In truth, the Tyrell Heir found himself regretting the success of that particular bit of mischief. It had done its part by emboldening the she-wolf but the risks severely outweighed the reward. The potential marring of Lady Lyarra’s reputation was not negligible and her actions today were likely to be singular. He couldn't see himself or any other lord for that matter allowing a wife such freedoms later.

Loras won his joust, not unexpectedly and Lyarra, her two matches afterward. Tyman reported that her shield had been cloaked in a gelatinous substance, forcing the opposition lances to slide across, and her armor meticulously polished to blindness. She had gone further in disguising herself than he expected by adding padding underneath her chainmail and a rapid dye to her hair to lighten the curls. Loras was confident that the Squire of Quills remained a mystery.

Willas meanwhile put aside the gold he made from their victories and studied the book across his desk. It took several goblets of wine to calm his racing heart and a second text on royalty to confirm his suspicions but there was no doubt about it. Renly Baratheon had inherited his grandmother's
And if Lyarra Snow had the same nose as Princess Rhaelle Targaryen, as Prince Rhaegar and King Aerys and Queen Rhaella, then of course Lord Stark had lied. Eddard Stark, one of the most honorable men in the Seven Realms, the Lord of a House infamous for its lack of guile, the oldest and dearest friend of the King, was the greatest liar in Westeros. He had orchestrated such a masterful mummer's show that the sole living child of the Silver Prince grew up safe and happy in a rebel kingdom. His willing acceptance of a dishonor never committed blinded men to the truth. Even the Tyrells hadn't suspected, wouldn't have stumbled across his secret hadn't Willas been fascinated by a bastard.

The last thought made him pause and reflect on the consequences of this truth for himself. It was a remarkable if unintentional coup for House Tyrell, true but for Willas personally... He had accepted his desire to tease her, to ensnare her, to seduce and bed her but to keep her was a dream. A fancy that whispered of incomes in his grasp, of castles that could be purchased, dishonor washed away by time and gold. Mother and Father would be mortified, Grandmother furious but familial love would have won his forgiveness eventually. As long as Willas had the sense to keep his bastard wife away from House Tyrell until a child was in her belly anyway. Even Grandmother wouldn’t orchestrate one of her little disappearing acts after winter roses were planted in the garden.

Willas Tyrell wouldn’t have gone through with it. He was sensible, far too sensible to even consider it. And even had his otherwise clever head been spun to dizziness by a Northern bastard, inspiring such insipidity as undermining trade talks, surely he wouldn’t have dared to…

A moot point. For pride’s sake, the Heir to Highgarden would refuse to admit any such sentimentality. He wasn’t Duncan the Small, for the Crone’s sake.

There was a legitimate reason to keep a dragon now, even should her scales be black and the throne in the lion’s claws. Lyarra Snow, if that was indeed her true name, had the blood of two royal lines in her veins. The Tyrells had none, having been elevated to the nobility from a mere stewardship and hadn’t yet acquired any such relations yet. Father would be exulted at a grandchild with dragon’s blood, even if he could only publicly claim ties to the ancient Kings of Winter. If they acquired proof of her heritage, than there may arise an opportunity, if not in his lifetime than perhaps his children’s or grandchildren’s, to make a claim for the throne.

If Renly’s descriptions of his nephew were in any way accurate, than Willas might even sire a King.

He needed to send out men to find midwives and embalmers near the Tower of Joy. He needed others to scrounge the Citadel's records and interview priests in Dorne. He needed to sneak spies into Winterfell to sniff out any other truths they may be hiding. He needed to gather proof to confirm a suspicion he already knew true.
‘It would help if she were legitimized but giving her the Stark name would leave her open to claims of forsaking the Targaryen one. After marriage then, since it would merely recognize her as a Tyrell.’

Willas also needed to convince a bastard to marry him but that was more of a pleasure than a task.

‘The game just changed,’ the Tyrell thought giddily. He thought back to the dark hair burnished silverlight and the violet eyes of Old Valyria and felt fit to burst. ‘I have the sole living child of Rhaegar Targaryen in my hands. A rabble meant to be a dragon and with the potential to be a king.’

When Lyarra returned to the cyvasse game later, the white dragon had been moved three paces forward.

x
Lyarra subtly adjusted the skirts of her dress, uncrossing her legs and straightening on the wooden seats. The matches themselves were riveting but the heat, even through the light covers above the noble’s heads, dampened her excitement. Still, Loras and Garlan had both made it to the semi-finals!

“Would you like a drink, Lady Lyarra?” Torrhen Karstark was fair of skin, as were most Northerners, and thus, his blush was readily visible when she flashed him a smile in thanks. Next to him, Daryn Hornwood snickered in amusement and received a glare from his future good-brother. Torrhen had the grace to place the cup of wine in her hands, before turning to elbow him.

Lyarra sipped from the drink. The wine was warm but welcome nonetheless. The cup itself was made of reddish brown clay and emblazoned with a rose. House Tyrell seemed to have an obsession with stamping their mark on anything that came across their path—she herself wasn’t blind to the bright golden border around her Squire of Quills sigil.

“Who do you think will win?” Her Father sat to her other side and nodded to the track. Garlan and Loras had been matched and neither looked willing to give an inch. If her memory served her correctly, the former was the more talented swordsman while the latter was second only to Lady Margaery in his skill with riding.

“Ser Loras will win,” Lyarra answered nonchalantly. “I should have placed some gold on it.”

“Gambling is hardly a virtuous, ladylike habit, Lyarra,” Lord Stark chided.

“There is nothing to be risked in a definite outcome. Can it even be gambling without chance?”

The Quiet Wolf chuckled. “Even then, I would have you keep your gold in hand.”

“Yes, Father.” The match itself started out well. Even with the greater edge attributed to Loras, Garlan was a fine jouster and the two raced each other with marked speed and courage. Lyarra had a newfound appreciation for such skill after her own experiences with the lance. It took three runs but eventually, Garlan was unseated, tumbling over his saddle and tucking into a trained roll out of the path of his horse. It must have been one of Lord Willas’ mounts, for it was too well-trained to rear
wildly and calmed at his rider’s touch a moment later.

When the stadium erupted in cheers, she joined in clapping along. Loras bowed grandly to his adoring fans, sky blue eyes dancing across the crowd until they seemed to settle directly on her own. It was too discreet to be noticed but Lyarra quickly turned her face blank regardless. She hoped that would be enough to deter whatever he planned before Lord Stark or Ice got involved.

“You were right,” Ned Stark commented. “I had heard that Ser Garlan is the finer swordsman and would have assumed that applied to their jousts.”

“Ser Loras is the better rider and has more experience with jousts besides. He spends most of his time in King’s Landing or the Stormlands and has a larger pool of opponents to compete against.”

“You are surprisingly well-informed on his movements.”

Lyarra’s cheeks darkened red. “He occasionally joins my sparring matches with Ser Garlan.”

“Would he be like Bran then?” The Northern bastard looked at her father’s face with uncertainty. He didn’t seem displeased but neither did his face show any joy. When he repeated her name, she decided to consider the question with some depth.

There was that flair for dramatics and love of songs that had ‘Sansa’ at the tip of her tongue but there was more than that. There was a gravity to Ser Loras Tyrell, a fundamental wariness of the world, a slyness, that her most idealistic sibling did not have. An innate kindness and decency, an immediate acceptance of her name ‘Snow’ and an easy affection for his family. He was strongly prideful of his House and dedicated to the improvement of his skills. He thirsted to prove himself under the shadow of two brothers that Lyarra found to be already accomplished in their respective fields.

“Robb,” she decided. “Loras Tyrell reminds me of Robb.”

Though Ned Stark’s expression didn’t change, Lyarra knew she had surprised him. They returned to watching the joust; once the other semi-final match was done, Loras came out for the last one. His opponent, Ser Arys Oakheart, nearly had him bend sideways across the saddle but that innate stubbornness had the blonde knight holding fast to his reins. When the Knight of Flowers eventually won, the crowd practically roared its approval.
As the winner of the tourney, Loras would crown the Queen of Love and Beauty. The dark-haired girl expected that to be his sister, Margaery, or his mother, Lady Tyrell, as he hadn’t any lovers. Or known ones at any rate, since Loras looked at Lord Renly much like Torrhen Karstark sometimes looked at her. If that were so, she wished him well.

Like most of the crowd, Lyarra turned her attention to the main box holding House Tyrell. When Lady Margaery, a veritable rose in bloom in her golden dress, impishly smiled back, her stomach sunk.

It didn’t surprise her a whit when Ser Loras Tyrell accepted a crown of yellow roses and rode past the main box. She was well-aware of the shock spreading across her companion’s faces, the slowly dawning look of worry on Ned Stark and the horror on Torrhen, as the winner’s horse pulled up before her. Her eyes flickered across the hushed stadium to Sam, whose expression was of acute sympathy.

“My Lady.” The Knight of Flowers had stepped directly out of Sansa’s dreams then, his golden-spun hair shining softly, his sky blue eyes lit with mischief.

‘Fuck the Tyrells,’ Lyarra deadpanned, gracefully inclining her head and allowing a smirking idiot to put the roses on her. Whispers spread across the stands and Loras was damned lucky that she refused to start a fight in front of her father or there would be many more exclamations to be had.

She let him ride away before turning to her left. “May I please be excused?”

There was still one more match for the mystery squire to fulfill after all.

“Lyarra, we need to talk.” Lord Stark’s face was pallid, his gaze heavy and disapproving.

“After supper, Father.” The dark-haired girl felt nervousness squeeze her heart and tried to make herself look as disheartened as possible. It was harder than expected since she deeply wanted to hit somebody instead. “I need some time…”

Thankfully, the Gods still had some mercy for her. “After supper then.”

Keeping her eyes on the ground to avoid the stares directed to her- by the Gods, were those people aware they could fall off the stands if they leant that forward- Lyarra hurried out. She carefully didn’t
acknowledge the strangled sound escaping Torrhen’s mouth or the faint whistle from Daryn.

She wasn’t so quick that Ser Wylis’ last words didn’t reach her ear though. “Why do these Southron ponces keep crowning our girls?”

Lyarra demanded similarly, when Ser Garlan slipped into his tent next. “Why did your ponce of a brother crown me Queen of Love and Beauty?”

The brunette man eyed her warily. “Er… he found your beautiful and lovely?”

“Did Lord Willas put him up to this?” It hardly mattered that there was no evidence to suggest the honey-haired lord a culprit; he had a hand in every other oddity in her life since arriving in Highgarden. When Garlan offered a genial smile, one all the more polished than his easygoing grins, Lyarra scowled and grabbed her chainmail. “Your brother is awful.”

“Which one?” The gallant knight stood as far across from the sheets hung to preserve her modesty as he could without escaping the tent altogether.

“Now that I think about it, both of them,” Lyarra’s voice was muffled, “You and Margaery too.”

“I do take offense to that, my lady. I am utterly delightful.” Had she saw the wicked grin on his face, the bastard girl would have been twice more cautious. “Though Willas is an acquired taste.”

“One I care not for, I assure you,” the Northerner shot back. Ser Garlan, whose smile contained that teasing quantity not uncommon to Lyarra before Robb jested at her expense, held her shield in his hands. When Lyarra stepped out to retrieve it, once again briefly savoring the less restrictive lines of chainmail and armor to gowns and girdles, he held it closer.

“Are you certain that you would like to do this?” Garlan inquired, brown eyes inquisitive.

“If I recall, Ser, you recommended this course of action for me.” He grimaced but nodded to the point. “Are you so eager to be rid of me? I should hope not. I would like to complete my last joust.”

“Yes, undoubtedly your last one. It was a pleasure to have you as my squire, Lyarra Snow.”
“And an honor to squire for you, Ser Garlan.” Those words merited a bow at least, her ire lessening at the sincerity of his tone and her anticipation for a fight. “Thank you for everything.”

“Think nothing of it,” Garlan waved it off. “There is one more matter I should address. Your spoils?”

She nodded. “Would you care to buy them from me?”

A common wager between squire fights was that the losing party forfeited either armor or steed to the winner, with her adding an addendum for an apology when approached by a man with a red-dipped quill. Of the common forfeit, Lyarra had selected armor, knowing that a noblwoman could not explain her possession of either but reasoning that the armor would be easier to sell. Her only possible buyer, House Tyrell, had no need of horses of lesser quality when Lord Willas bred his own.

"I would." Garlan offered a goodly sum, one that made her reel back in surprise. Lyarra had been expecting to undersell when the armor left her hands, aware of her limited leverage in bargaining. She had hoped that House Tyrell's apparent fondness for her would hold back their appetite for profit. But this was generous, too generous for such unadorned pieces, even though Lyarra wasn't well-informed on the cost of a suit of armor. One suit was thrice the amount she had made transcribing books.

'Am I mercenary enough to accept this?' She wasn’t prideful enough to reject it. Taking advantage of a friend's generosity was unkind but this House had bled gold for bluebell cloaks for the Gods' sake.

'Eh, they can afford it,' she decided, nodding eagerly.

Now, Lyarra had some frustration to work through, as well as another incentive to defeat her opponent and earn more gold. Not to mention that this was the fight that had compelled her to accept squireship in the first place. And of course, it didn't help that even the crowd watching the fights were talking about the mysterious, wild beauty that had caught the third Tyrell son's eye. So her aggression was understandable.

Lyarra pulled herself onto the saddle, hunched forward on her padding to make her bulk more notable. She brought up her sanded lance and pointed it forwards, braced her shield proudly and entered that quiet escape of her mind where it almost seemed as if she was sharing her thoughts with Apple Cider. A wolfish smile crossed her lips under the helm and when the horn was blew, she charged.
Dickon Tarly didn't stand a chance.

No, that was unfair. The dark-haired girl's breath was blown out when his lance impacted the shield, cracking it and forcing her arm to vibrate. She slid back on her saddle but he slipped out of his outright, mistaking that the padded bulk needed a forward charge for force rather than a slanted blow against her added mobility. Dickon rolled across the beaten soil, armor clanging along, while Lyarra hissed in pain and used one hand to have *Apple Cider* block his horse. She wasn't quite angry enough to forget Sam's words.

"He's my brother," the mild boy had said fiercely. "My little brother who's always doing everything he can to gain our father's approval. He's not the most tactful person out there and his words have been unintentionally cruel before but he never means to hurt me. So please, don't hurt him."

Lyarra could respect that. Sansa was occasionally overzealous in her attempts to be like Lady Catelyn and while those events tended to hurt her, she never wished her sister ill. So when the feat was done, she nodded her recognition of his talent and hurried away, knowing that Garlan would step in to handle the rest. They had agreed he would be the one to do so, to keep people from wondering why the Squire of Quills had such a high-pitched voice.

She was in the tent, taking off her helm when a young, boyish voice tentatively called out. “Hello?”

The dark-haired girl practically jumped out of her chainmail, dropping her helm in the process and dropping down to cover her face before anyone saw. There was the sound of footsteps coming closer and canvas cloth being brushed aside, before it stopped. She jammed the helm back on her head and turned to look at the intruder. He couldn’t have been a year or two older than Bran, with silver-blonde hair, rich amethyst eyes and a nervous expression.

““This is a private area,” Lyarra warned, pitching her voice low. It sounded like she had a scratchy throat, so she tried to turn it into more of a growl. “Who are you?”

“Edric Dayne,” the boy murmured. He raised something in his hands, a scrap of blue fabric with offensively bad stitching. Oh Gods, she had forgotten one of Arya’s handkerchiefs. “You dropped this.”

‘*Dayne? Like Ser Arthur Dayne? Wait, no, focus Lyarra. You have to change for the feast afterward.*’
“Thank you,” the Snow managed, nearly snatching the piece back while scrabbling for an excuse. “It’s, uh, a favor. From a lady friend.”

She inwardly cringed. ‘Gods, I hope that didn’t sound as bad outside of my head.’

The boy seemed to have accepted it though, as he nodded in understanding. She waited for him to leave but instead he lingered, shyly venturing. “You did really well out there.”

“Thank you,” Lyarra repeated. The words were curt enough that she hoped he would leave.

Sadly, pretty boys refusing to follow basic hints were the norm today. Edric Dayne brightened. “Have you been a squire for long? It must not have been for more than two moons for Ser Garlan was in the last tourney my lord entered. Does he push you very hard? Lord Beric rarely allows me rest and I suppose it must be the same with you, for you are quite good! Much better than me anyway. Do you travel a lot? I know Ser Garlan prefers to stay near to Highgarden. Your sigil is amazing!”

‘Do you mean for me to answer any of those questions?’ Lyarra stared at him blankly. “Thank you?”

“Would you care to join my lord and I for a cup of ale?” Edric asked hopefully.

‘Why is he being so friendly?’ The behavior of the Targaryen lookalike was downright suspicious. ‘Targaryen. Usurper’s Kingdom. Even in the Reach, his Dornish blood works against him. He actually does want a friend and a mystery squire who hasn’t thrown him out yet is just as good a bet as any.’

Lyarra inwardly sighed. Damn her soft heart. “I need to change. Perhaps we could meet afterward?”

Or Sam could meet him and she could tag along as a friend. He had returned Arya’s handkerchief.

Edric Dayne was amenable to the offer in a way that was both sweet and a little sad. Lyarra sent him off with a gruff promise to meet afterward and then hurriedly changed. There was a bucket and a washcloth available for a swift if unpleasant bath and then a dress folded near the end of a bench. It
was one of fine azimuth blue embroidered with silver and black stitching of the Wall and flying crows. There were enough stars added to make it cut off the night sky itself and if one looked closely, the biggest stars had tiny letters stitched in, the initials of herself and each sibling. It was mostly her own work, with the more delicate stitches detailed by Sansa and the Northern bastard chose it mainly for the conservative cut that hid the yellowing bruise on her chest.

‘Though that wouldn’t be the only reason,’ Lyarra admitted. She had enough silver hair pins in her possession that she could pull her hair up into crowned ringlets and adorn it with stars of its own.

Of course, drawing attention was the last thing she should do after Loras’ stunt. Not that she had any other clothes on hand…

‘Fuck the Tyrells. Fuck them so, so much,’ the bastard bemoaned. Now she couldn’t even dress up without sparking rumors of a love affair with the son of a Lord Paramount. ‘How is this even my life?’

Finishing her outfit, Lyarra Snow snuck out of the tent and headed towards the castle. Lord Mace had the guests feast and dance after every day of the tourney, offering only the finest meats and wine for his beloved son’s nameday and she intended to make herself a plate and find Sam. They could pass the evening well enough mocking all of the high-strung nobles and might even convince him to dance.

That was the plan until a golden-haired knight intercepted her. “May I have this dance?”

Lyarra looked above his shoulder to see that while half the room were pleasurably entertained by other matters, the other half were nosy enough to stare at her. Even Lady Alerie was looking at them with an expectant smile on her face.

She pasted a genial smile on her face, whispering lowly. “I hate you so much right now.”

“Willas made me do it,” Loras quickly added, accepting her hand and leading her to the dance floor. “I do apologize for the shock of it all.”

“But not for gifting me a crown,” she noted.

“Mayhaps you were born to be a Queen,” the knight replied merrily. “Did you win your last match?”
“As if you don’t know,” Lyarra said archly. She slowly relaxed into the neutral topic as Loras expertly spun her around the dance floor. This served them well for the next few minutes.

“I have heard that women are enamored by scars,” he said suddenly, smiling reassuringly at her startlement. “Would you like to see mine?”

“If you should care to show them to me,” Lyarra replied noncommittally.

The blonde-haired Tyrell raised his arm, shaking it slightly to bring the loose cuff of his sleeve down and baring his wrist. There were faint incisions on his skin. “My first scar.”

She studied them briefly. “They look like bite marks.”

“Willas’ work. I tried to take a favorite toy of his when we were children and this is a result.”

“That doesn’t sound like him,” the dark-haired girl noted, considering the soft-spoken, measured man often bewildering her. “Of course, the first time my brother ever pushed me was when I wouldn’t surrender a trebuchet he wanted to play with. Father took him over the knee for that.”

Lady Catelyn hadn’t been pleased to have her firstborn punished for the bastard’s sake but a sniffling Robb had been very apologetic afterwards.

“My brother is often more than he seems.” Loras leaned forward, his eyes wide and earnest. “He-Willas is not a selfless man.”

Uncomfortable with the turn of the conversation, the Northerner flitted her eyes about the room, trying to find a point of common interest. “Lord Dondarrion and Thoros of Myr appear good friends.”

Loras ignored her words and pressed onwards. “He was raised as the eldest son of a Great House. My parents were not in the habit of denying him and my Grandmother rarely so. Willas grew up selfish.”
“Is there a reason why you’re telling me this?” Lyarra demanded. ‘Why are you insulting the brother that I thought you loved?’

“It’s important that you know this,” the Knight of Flowers insisted. “My brother portrays himself a man of reason and cold, hard logic but he has his own weaknesses. His acts of kindness are not always to advance the position of our House. They may be explained in that way but Willas is strongly motivated to please his loved ones, even unfairly so.”

The dark-haired bastard furrowed her brow, parsing through the words. She cautiously ventured. “The gold for the armor and horses was overtly generous, yes?”

“Yes.” There was a smile on the man’s face but she couldn’t shake the sudden feeling that Ser Loras Tyrell was disappointed. The conversation moved to more banal topics and he teased her for the golden roses that no longer graced her brow. Their dance slowly came to an end and the handsome knight leaned forward to kiss her hand. When he stood up, there was a softer glance to his eyes.

“Thank you for the dance, Ser.”

“It was a pleasure, my lady,” Loras paused. “Please remember that Willas is a selfish man. He wants to make the people he cares for happy.”

With another bow, the man strided away, leaving her befuddled by the entire cast of their talk. When Ser Garlan stepped up to request a dance next, Lyarra accepted and braced herself for more Tyrell confusion. Fortunately, the brunette man’s sole intention was to return to their discussion on the Kingsguard, a pleasure that Lyarra was happy to indulge.

‘Tyrells. They’re lucky to be so pretty lest people give up listening to their doublespeak altogether.’

When Garlan was done, a determined Torrhen asked for her hand and then Daryn after him. She danced once with Ser Wylis Manderly, was led by her oddly melancholy Father and managed to drag Sam into a near-scandalous three dances. It was forgotten moments later when a still impish Margaery dragged her out and spun her around the dance floor.

When Lyarra managed to extract herself out, she fell exhausted to the bench. Her feet were throbbing in pain now, not unlike her sides and her arms were but she was almost breathlessly happy. In that sense of euphoria, she turned and saw a flash of silver blonde hair.
“Edric!” The Snow called out, drawing the attention of the boy and a handsome, older man with ash brown hair and beard. “Would you care to dance?”

The boy pointed to himself, surprised but a forceful nudge by the grinning man had him stand up. He walked closer to her. “You know me?”

“A mystery squire told me about you.” She grabbed a hand and put it on her waist, holding the other.

Face reddened, his mouth formed an ‘o’ of realization. “Are you the lady friend?”

“A lady friend,” Lyarra said with a straight face. While building Sam’s reputation as a warrior, she may as well boast of his talent with women.

Edric Dayne was a wonderful dancer, light on his feet and blushing becomingly whenever the steps required her to step closer to him and she enjoyed the experience. Given the chance, she would have to do persuade him into another. It was when they were done though that the music fell to a close.

At the dias, a figure stood, honey hair and tawny eyes both golden under candlelight and tapped his goblet. “May I have everyone’s attention?”

Willas Tyrell had a gift for public speaking. He hadn’t needed to raise his voice higher than the norm of her lessons to catch everyone’s ear. When their attention was focused on him, the Heir to Highgarden started. “On behalf of House Tyrell, I thank everyone here who has done us the honor of attending my brother, Loras’, nameday.”

Waiting for the cheers to end, he continued. “He is eight-and-ten this year and a credit to his family. I wish him every luck and happiness for many namedays to come. And every luck for the many more tourneys that he plans to enter, of course. May you have a crown to bestow every time, Loras.”

More cheers and a few speculative looks to the dark-haired young woman in the starry night dress.

“In speaking of tourneys, I would be remiss not to make an announcement regarding the mystery squire now,” Willas continued smoothly. Lyarra nearly choked on the wine in her hand. “My brother, Ser Garlan, recently accepted a talented, dauntless young man by the name of Samwell Tarly as his squire. To prove himself, he partook in a few unsanctioned jousts with other squires that I am told he did rather well in.”
“However successful though, Samwell desired another path for his talents and after a persuasive recommendation from someone of sound judgement,” the golden eyes focused on her then, “I have decided to offer him a position as my executive assistant.”

Yet more cheers arose then. From afar, Lyarra could see her confused friend being slapped on the back by his cheerful brother.

“Well done to Samwell and to everyone else, please enjoy the rest of the festivities,” Willas concluded.

Loras’ words return to her. Willas is a selfish man. He wants to make the people he cares for happy.

‘Oh, dear.’

x

A/N: About Willas’ pragmatic reaction to Lyarra’s heritage reveal in the last chapter. Willas is an Heir and as an Heir, it's his responsibility to marry well for his House's sake, a duty that he reasons would be fulfilled with his marriage to Rhaegar Targaryen's daughter. This isn't necessarily true, for while there is a significant advantage to marrying Lyarra, there are also risks, not least of which is Robert Baratheon's fury should he find out. There's also factors like the madness in Lyarra's line, the high rate of stillbirths and miscarriages, the shame of marrying a bastard, the ire of his bannermen, etc. It's a sign of his affection- one strongly ignored by Willas- that he doesn't consider the disadvantages. He's like Robb in that while the Stark married for honor and the Tyrell for ambition, both incentives are underscored by the fact that they wanted to marry the girl in the first place. Robb reasons Talisa Maegyr's honor important and marriage his duty because he desires Talisa Maegyr. Likewise Willas Tyrell argues that Lyarra Snow would be a valuable political marriage because he wants a reason to marry Lyarra Snow.
Lyarra blamed her recent upsetting discovery for the hysterical edge to her voice when she insisted that no, Loras Tyrell was *not* trying to court her.

Her Father didn’t believe her. “Would it be so terrible if he was, Lyaa-bell?”

The childhood nickname- weeping bluebells for his most melancholy child- had the she-wolf abandon her rigid pose on the couch to curl into his side. She buried her head in his burly chest, allowing the bemused lord to hug her closer. This was familiar. This was comforting. This made *sense.*

Lord Willas Tyrell, Heir to Highgarden, future Lord Paramount of the Reach and one-day Warden of the South loving a Northern bastard *did not.*

“Do you want me to tell the boy to leave you alone?” It was moments like this that made Lyarra Snow love her father all the more. While other lords would be pushing their daughters, particularly baseborn ones, into superior marriages with third sons of Lord Paramounts, Ned Stark allowed her first refusal.

Though it undercut her former position, Lyarra gave a muffled ‘no’. “Ser Loras is a friend, Father but he doesn’t seek to wed me, nor do I, him.”

“Do you seek to wed any man here?” To this, she gave an emphatic shake of her head. She had sought to marry Samwell once but he was a dear friend now and no one else did she seek to marry.

“Do you care for any of them, Lyaa-bell?” The dark-haired girl shook her head again, though a brief flash of memory painted tawny eyes and enigmatic smiles, tousled hair and intricately carved canes. Lord Willas was infuriating; she *didn’t* - well, not beyond physical attraction anyway. And mayhaps a begrudging admiration for his intellect.

“Even with your birth status, you know that you would make a prized match, do you not?” Her father squeezed her hand. “You’re a she-wolf, intelligent and fierce and beautiful. While many men fail to see past the taint of bastardy, Ser Loras doesn’t seem one of them. You said that he was like
Robb, he would treat you well.”

“Father, Ser Loras doesn’t want to marry me.”

“As you say, my sweet,” the man agreed easily. “If improbability is the sole obstacle than do not disregard an offer. A Son of Highgarden would be a good match for you. He’s a talented knight, likely promised a keep of his own one day. You would make a handsome couple. And he doesn’t seem to mind your sword practice.”

“Ser Loras doesn’t want to marry me,” Lyarra repeated. It was evident that her protests fell to deaf ears, so she shook her head. “I’m too young to be a wife.”

“You are.” Ned Stark studied her face briefly, seeing more in her features than the girl herself could. “It does an old man’s heart good to know that his daughter doesn’t want to leave him so soon.”

“You’re not old,” Lyarra argued halfheartedly. Ned chuckled at the unconvincing tone to her voice.

“I have three sons and three daughters. The Gods have blessed me greatly, even as each child adds another streak of grey to my hair.”

“Even Sansa?”

“Even Sansa,” Ned agreed. “It’s for the best that you aren’t in a hurry to be wed, Lyaa-bell, for I shudder at how adamant your sister will be for a husband of her own.”

“She would want to marry one just like Ser Loras; someone as beautiful as she is.”

“Mayhaps but that wouldn’t be the man I would want for her.” At her quirked brow, he added. “Sansa needs a man who is strong and gentle and kind, who could protect her tender heart from the evils of the world around them. And Arya needs someone stubborn yet humble, who can stand against her temper but have the tolerance to accept a self-willed and independent wife.”

“And me?” Lyarra was genuinely curious at this point. She had desired a compatible husband but had focused more on livelihood. It would be interesting to know what her father thought she needed.
“For a daughter reckless enough to clad herself in chainmail and ride a joust?” Lyarra flushed deep red at his resigned tone. “A man who is perceptive, quick-witted and patient. You are occasionally stricken by dark moods, so one that is willful enough to draw you out. An open-mind for atypical talents and a loyal heart for the people he loves. A man unyielding to the unjust demands of others. One will shelter you through every storm life may bring.”

The last two lines would have received a further question of interest had the dark-haired girl not been dutifully attempting to twist her left thumb free of its socket. “How did you…?”

“I taught you to ride, child,” Eddard Stark sighed. There was a gentle sort of nostalgia as he looked at her. For a moment, it was as though he saw another face there. Lyarra recalled that Lord Stark had met Lady Ashara Dayne at the Tourney of Harrenhal. “Not that you will be riding overmuch when we return to Winterfell. I have one more question for you. Was Ser Loras aware of your exploits?”

At her meek nod, he shook his head. “To our previous subject, I’ll add ‘a man who can curb your more dangerous, unladylike habits.’”

She inwardly wilted. It was an agreed upon conclusion of all the Stark children that their father’s disappointed tone was far more effective than the yelling or punishment of any other adult.

“Get some sleep, Lyaa-bell. We have all had a long day.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her brow. “And friend or not, I don’t want any more private practices from now til we leave Highgarden.”

“Yes, Father.” Normally missing a practice with knights as talented as Sers Garlan and Loras would be disappointing but then she didn’t think herself ready to meet the eldest Tyrell son yet. “Goodnight.”

x

‘I’m not ready to meet his mother yet either,’ Lyarra Snow internally wailed.

The dark-haired girl had come down to the Great Hall by common Northern hours, which let her break her fast with minimal whispers from the Highgarden court. Samwell had been there too, apparently so excited over his new position that he couldn’t sleep. Despite her own anxieties, she was pleased on his behalf and had mustered the courage to thank Lord Willas for it. Or at least had
mustered the courage to try for Lord Willas hadn’t come down to breakfast at all.

Lyarra would know. She had lingered in the Hall for near two hours time in wait for him. She had also received queer glances from the Northern contingent as they filtered out, Torrhen looking particularly disheartened by the handsome Ser Loras sitting at her side. The bastard had done her best to persuade him otherwise but neither he, nor his surprisingly cheerful ‘friend’ Lord Renly, bowed to her whispered demands. With Ser Garlan at her other side, Lady Margaery across from her and Lady Alerie Tyrell next to her daughter, Lyarra was well and truly boxed in.

Lady Alerie was a bright-eyed and beautiful woman with sunshine-streaked hair and a chirping musical voice reminiscent of songbirds. There was an elegance and dignity to her, soon undermined by the genuine, non-coquettish warmth of her greetings, so alien to courtly graces. The dark-haired girl had been unnerved by that; this woman was the pinnacle of a Southron Lady, all that Lady Stark had espoused and yet regarded her with the hesitant eagerness of one hoping to please. Not entirely sure how but certain that she had been played, Lyarra soon found herself agreeing to attend a midday tea.

She assiduously avoided any hint of green or gold in her gown, selecting a soft grey that, in all honesty, made her pale skin eerily translucent. A simple Northern braid reinforced her decision to appear harmless to those ladies that attended the small party, only to find her efforts wasted when she learned exactly how small that party would be. Three generations of Tyrell women- Lady Olenna, Lady Alerie and Lady Margaery- and herself, the bastard that Ser Loras’ mother seemed convinced would wed her son.

Lyarra had already tried to convince her Father otherwise- not that this tea was helping!- and it didn’t seem fair that she would have to do the same for Loras’ mother. By the laws of this mainly being his fault, he should have to be the one to deal with it. Unfortunately, the Knight of Flowers didn’t take midday tea and probably wouldn’t have bother refuting the rumors regardless.

‘I should have pretended sickness when Lady Margaery invited me for a boat ride.’ Though considering her sort-of friend’s conniving nature, she wouldn’t have put it past the brunette to insist on ‘nursing her back to health’, thus keeping her hostage to her lie.

They dithered for a few moments on common pleasantries. The dark-haired girl submitted to it with some grace, even when it breached intimacy. Under the Lady Tyrell’s expert hand, she found herself admitting to her family life (“How wonderful! I’m particularly close to my eldest brother as well.”), her accomplishments (“A sword is a bit unorthodox. Are you also an archer? Margaery is a gifted archer.”) and her shortcomings (“Courtly graces are not quite so hard to learn with a devoted teacher.”). Some of the questions, like how often ravens were exchanged between Winterfell and the Capital, Lyarra deflected. The answer was quite often, at least when it came to the letters that the King would periodically send her father but she didn’t want to foster the woman’s hopes.
Throughout it all, foggy blue eyes kept careful measure of her speech and expression. Lady Olenna did not speak but Lyarra Snow was well too aware of her critical gaze.

“Garlan introduced the two of you then?” Lady Alerie inquired. “Where did you two meet?”

“The sparring yard.” To her credit, the woman’s smile didn’t falter once. She had likely already braced herself to such shocks from the uncouth, Northern bastard target of her son’s affections.

“He is a very talented knight,” Lady Alerie’s face shown with motherly pride. “With lance and sword, and he adores riding as well. It didn’t surprise me one whit when he won the tourney, though, and I confess this is a little embarrassing, I hadn’t expected him to have a maiden to bestow the crown to.”

Lyarra stared at her in mute horror. She thought she heard a snort from the direction of Lady Olenna but surely that couldn’t be right?

The elegant woman waxed poetically about her son’s jousting ability for a few minutes longer, occasionally with a backhanded compliment by Margaery thrown in, and ended it with an expectant look towards her. Lyarra murmured an agreement to Ser Loras’ martial skill, mentally noting that she would have to take him by surprise if she wanted to kick his shins in later.

“You two looked quite handsome dancing together!” Lady Tyrell leaned forward, a conspiratorial hitch to her voice. “I hope you don’t mind my presumptuousness but I spoke to Lord Stark and he claims that you’re not yet matched?”

“A remarkable feat considering your beauty,” Margaery added, impish smile unwavering. The Northern bastard managed a mangled expression of gratitude.

“Indeed. I had thought you might be with one of those Northern boys that arrived in your contingent or mayhaps young Samwell but Margaery informed me that you are only friends.” Lady Alerie peered at her with guileless eyes. “How did that come about?”

‘Then Lord Willas came by his curiosity honestly.’
“Samwell and I share a love of literature, my Lady,” Lyarra replied. “Highgarden has a remarkable library and we spent much of our time there.”

“I should hope so. All that gold lost waiving those nosy grey rats’ taxes had to amount to something.”

“Mother!” Lady Alerie protested. Lyarra wasn’t too lost in her wide-eyed gaze to miss the look of fond exasperation Lord Willas’ mother sent Lady Olenna. “We’re speaking in front of a guest.”

Lady Olenna appeared unimpressed. “A Northern bastard on whom hopes are too highly settled dear.”

The Snow child stiffened. Unwilling to test the limits of her composure, she set the delicate cup, a handle wrought in painted vines, down and settled her hands on her lap. ‘Polite and understanding,’ she reminded herself. ‘They accuse you of nothing that you had not already tried with Sam.’

“Lady Alerie, Lady Olenna,” Lyarra began, nodding once to each woman. “I believe that we are all here for a misunderstanding. Ser Loras does not mean to court me. I have no desire for him to do so, nor do I wish to be wed. There was no… seduction or duplicity on my part, neither was there any on his and the gesture with the roses, while kind, was meant in the spirit of friendship.”

Lady Alerie’s face fell. She sounded dismayed. “You must be mistaken, dear. One does not crown a woman Queen of Love and Beauty for friendship.”

“Nonetheless, Ser Loras has done so.” The dark-haired girl attempted a sympathetic smile for the older woman. Lady Alerie hadn’t yet expressed Lady Catelyn’s piety but the Reach was known as the cradle for the Faith for a reason and well… Renly Baratheon was handsome, wealthy, a knight, brother to the king and a lord in his own right. He would make an ideal lover for Margaery Tyrell.

“Are you certain?” Margaery asked sweetly. “My brother has never paid such marked attentions to any woman before. One would think him besotted.”

‘Are you still speaking of Loras?’ Her pulse quickened at the possibility that they were not. She curled her hands inward, nails digging into the flesh of her palm. Sansa would flush becomingly here, Arya wrinkle her nose in disgust. Her own reaction she did not know. “Ser Loras is a good friend.”
“Friendship is a wonderful precursor to marriage. Lord Tyrell and I met as children.”

“Where you thought him a piggy fool and swooned over the now Lord Ashford, as did every other eligible maiden at the Merryweather boy’s tourney.” Lady Olenna swiftly dismissed. She pinned her with a gimlet eye and the dark-haired girl felt spiders creep up her spine. “I had thought you a wily bastard, one using her charm and beauty to ensnare my grandson but I see now that I was wrong.”

Features barely twitching at the hated term, Lyarra nodded thankfully. ‘They may now dismiss Loras’-’

“It’s my fault for not curtailing Willas’ interest in the beginning, of course.”

‘-What?!’ The dark-haired girl’s thoughts came to a screeching halt. Her eyes moved to the sheepish Margaery and she inwardly blanched. She outwardly blanched too. ‘Did everyone see it before me?!’

“You’re undoubtedly Rickard’s get,” the old woman continued, not unkindly. “But you’re not practiced to these arts as my grandson is.”

The heat of anger, intermingled with a rising bout of nerves and an unsettling confusions, pooled in her stomach. “I don’t understand, my Lady.”

“Willas means to wed you to Loras and then share your bed himself.”

The blunt words are delivered without attention to how her heart stilled, ice running through her veins. A murky veil of wetness revealed the brunette lady looking away while the sunshine-streaked one mouthed ‘Willas’ silently. It’s not Lady Alerie’s disbelief that cuts her to the core or Lady Olenna’s pity or Lady Margaery’s guilt. Lyarra’s cut by the simple understanding that she doesn’t believe her.

“It’s not a bad plan,” Lady Olenna was saying through the rushing in her ears. “You’re a bastard but we can secure a legitimacy quickly enough and a daughter of a Great House would suit well for a third son. Willas would have managed well for himself hadn’t he been so indiscreet and reckless over the matter. He requested an extension in the negotiations to keep you here, you know. It’s evident that he can’t be trusted to think clearly for himself where you’re concerned and should he sire any children on you, he may favor-”
“I need to go,” Lyarra interrupted. It’s rude. It’s mannerless. It’s defiant of the massive societal gulf between the two. It’s everything Septa Mordane would have taken her to task for had she been present. But the Septa wasn’t here and her words held little sway over the child that clad herself in chainmail and rode a joust.

She rose to her feet, errant hands smoothing down the folds of her grey dress, an action mirrored by Margaery. She shook her head and the brunette had the grace to appear shamefaced. Lyarra wondered to its honesty as she let a blatantly wide and fake smile cross her lips. “Please forgive me but I am not feeling well. I beg your leave.”

A shellshocked Lady Alerie had hardly uttered her sympathies before Lyarra turned on one heel and headed for the doors. The guards were not so well-trained that she could not see the bemusement in their own faces when they let her through. It took her a moment to orient her direction and then she headed towards the Heir’s solar.

Her Father thought her best-matched with a man who was perceptive, quick-witted and patient. Lord Willas Tyrell had all of those qualities and had devoted enough time to studying her to observe basic truths. Lady Olenna, for all of her wily ways, wouldn’t yet discern that a Stark, bastard or not, would never wed one brother, only to bed the other. She hadn’t discerned that Lyarra Snow refused to carry a bastard of her own. She would never condemn her child to the prejudice that she grew up with.

‘The steepest costs are the ones we can’t see,’ Uncle Benjen had said once.

He spoke of the Watch but it was a truth applicable here. The Heir to Highgarden, future Lord Paramount of the Reach and one-day Warden to the South loving a Northern bastard was a fairytale. Now what price did Willas expect her to pay for it?
They were almost done planning when a sharp knock is heard from the door. Since there are mere
details to be finalized and his chest is already filled with anticipation, the Heir to Highgarden decides
that Tyman could complete the remainder in his own time. It’s strange to feel himself a boy awaiting
a nameday present again.

“Do give my compliments to Lady Durwell,” Willas said, as his right hand man’s features softened
notably at the mention of the other bastard.

“Of course.” Tyman rolled the parchment up and placed it securely inside his inner coat pocket. “By
your leave, Lord Willas.”

The honey-haired lord errantly waved his hand to release the younger man from his presence. There
was approval in tawny eyes for the spring to Tyman’s step. He had chosen the Flower’s service for
multiple reasons, chief amongst them his ready ear and silent tongue, but his secret kinship with one
of Margaery’s handmaidens had not gone amiss. While both Tyman and his half-sister were bastards,
House Tyrell’s freedom to forge a highborn identity for the early-born Sera had meant neither could
publicly acknowledge it. This hadn’t kept the two from becoming close though, as the sole support
the other had in the world or from Tyman desiring a dowry for his sister so that she might marry
well.

As a fellow older brother, Willas had approved of such ambitions. As a man in need of competent
and trustworthy support, Willas had rejoiced in Tyman. Men with the ambition and drive to rise
above their circumstances were rare and those with such an obvious and integral weakness as their
sister’s true birth, rarer still. Tyman served him as faithfully as one could, when one knew the other
capable of destroying his life and in turn, Willas assisted in his ambitions. A significant amount of
gold had been conferred, an equal chest to join it once Tyman returned from the Citadel with his
documents. Gold that would go a long way when Lady Sera started looking for a highborn husband
in earnest.

Hopefully Samwell would become a useful assistant as Willas had no doubt that Tyman would find a
good position in his sister’s household once she wed.

There was time still for that to occur, so Tyman, nobody’s fool, bowed gallantly to his Master’s not
yet bride when he opened the door. Lyarra’s response is strained yet unsurprised when she sweeps
in. Her dove grey dress is simple, plainly decorated and evidently old. Willas judged that not merely
from the drab color but from how the Northern wool clung tightly around the bodice and flared hips. It wasn’t quite the wonder of trousers but he appreciated the sight nonetheless.

“Lady Lyarra,” Willas says first. The red spots on her cheeks move him to establish cordiality. “I trust your tea with my family went well?”

It was evident that it had not, which disappointed him. One would think Margaery more competent than this.

He receives one arched brow for his attempt. “Lord Willas. Moving past your utter disregard for my privacy.” Lyarra speaks quickly, not allowing him to protest that it was an inquisitiveness applied to all with perhaps her own movements drawing more of his interest. “There are some matters I would like to discuss with you.”

The honey-haired lord gestures to the seat before the desk. The dark-haired girl sits on the edge, hands folded in front of her and shoulders stiff. It’s not the most inviting stance. “Should I call for some wine to be sent?”

“No, thank you,” Lyarra demurred. She regards him from under dark lashes. Willas flashes a charming smile and is gratified when her cheeks deepen to fireplum red. It’s a delightful tendency of the North that their pale skin hides nothing from his eyes as the flush spreads down her throat, collarbone and below the neckline. By now the Snow appears more embarrassed by his obvious interest in her blush then the impetus of it.

“I- I would like to thank you.” He waits patiently for the words to stumble out of her mouth. “For what you did for Samwell. It made him very happy.”

Willas cocked his head to the side. “Did it make you happy?”

If anything, those words only deepened the crimson to her face. He’s not entirely certain why.

Lyarra Snow meets his eyes evenly. “You care for me?”

Willas doesn’t know where this means to head but it seems encouraging. “I do.”
The words make her close her eyes. “Lady Olenna thinks you intend to wed me to Loras, so that you may keep me as a mistress for yourself.”

‘Gods dammit, Grandmother.’ “Do you believe that I would?”

“I don’t know.” Her lips quirked up but there’s no amusement to those Targaryen eyes. “Have you taken a blow to your head recently? Anything I should know that would rob you of your senses?”

“Well, there was that breathtakingly beautiful maiden dancing in my brother’s arms last night,” he teased. “But I am sufficiently recovered from having my head spun.”

Her aster eyes dim. “Lord Willas, what are your intentions for me?”

This is occurring all the more quickly than he had thought it would but Willas refuses to be daunted. All of the pieces weren’t yet in play, he hadn’t gathered the evidence or made the necessary arrangement but the Tyrell can accept that. He fully intends to take her for a wife and a short yet secret betrothal would be enough to handle other considerations.

Putting two hands on his desk, he lifts himself, the most minor of pain to his limp from the movement. The brace around his leg is effective support, though Lyarra’s eyes soften in sympathy. It doesn’t irritate him as much as he thought it would, not when she is already aware of where his talents lie. Willas also wasn’t ashamed to admit that Lyarra Snow vastly exceeded him in swordsmanship and riding, even those skills he had before his injury. His trusty goldenheart cane, burnished sun-gold from the Summer Isles and carved with ivy-twined rose, brings him to the front of the desk.

Lyarra had stood up now, head tilted up so that aster eyes were focused unerringly on him. The Silver Prince’s bewitchment upon bow-shaped lips and high cheekbones, Willas is briefly grateful that Ned Stark is an honorable man. Bastard or not, her beauty would have had her stolen by first moon’s blood had her Uncle not denied those suitors unworthy of her.

*He was worthy of her. There could be no better match for a dragon princess, exiled from her name and throne as she was. “Marry me.”*

Her reply is just as simple. “No.”
Willas does not stagger back, even when it feels like the breath has been stolen from his lungs. She is a reasonable woman, she should understand… “Why?”

Lyarra Snow gazes at him solemnly. She steps closer, not even a handbreadth away from him. “Do not think that I do this because I care not for you. I’ve never fallen in love before, and I haven’t yet fallen now but there was no man that pulled me closer to the edge of my heart than you did.”

“Pretty words that I should have spoken,” Willas said fiercely. “I’m offering you a future.”

“The greatest honor that has ever been offered to me,” she spoke honestly. “That is precisely why I cannot marry you.”

“Do you intend to refuse me with riddles? Tell me plainly why you refuse to marry me!” His hurt is quickly being eclipsed by anger. Willas had never offered for any woman before, never been rejected before and never concerned himself with the possibility for why would a woman refuse him? Why would a bastard, born of dragonlords or not, refuse him?

Why would the first woman he ever cared enough to offer for reject him?

“Because princes don’t marry paupers for nothing, my Lord, and I will not have me and mine suffer for a price I know naught to pay.”

With an explanation that is utterly maddening for the words it lacks- she’s the daughter of two royal lines, he’s the crippled son of a lord- Lyarra Snow closes the distance. Willas has been kissed before but never by one so plainly a novice. Their noses bump and her lips touch the edge of his frown first but it is soon pressed gently against his. She holds it for a moment, drawing back only for him to follow. The second is better and he tastes mint and lemon and peach on her lips.

When she draws back again, it’s with a defiant guilt to her face. It is cruel, he means to say, to refuse a man’s hand and then gift him a kiss but Willas does not regret it. Lyarra Snow is so rarely a selfish creature. If she was, she would have accepted his suite.

“I may be a fool, Willas,” Lyarra whispers, heartbreakingly certain. There is all the beauty of the stars in her eyes and they are distant, far from his grasp, the Ice Dragon pointing unerringly northwards. To snow and stone and her Uncle’s hearth where he cannot follow. “But I’ll not be yours.”
For a heartbeat she remains in his arms, close enough that he could hold her and refuse to let go, when she detaches himself. Without a look back, Lyarra Snow leaves him and Willas Tyrell, lips still tingling from the kiss she pressed on him, lets her. Aemon had fought but Willas is no Dragonknight.

‘Dragons conquered, lions mauled and wolves tore, but roses seduced. Mayhaps a change in strategy is needed.’

They call them fireberries, though it’s the leaves that contain most of the heat,” Loras explained, handing over a clay pot with bloodrust cuttings. “Boil them in water, tea, mulled wine or any drink really and then swallow it down to warm you from the inside.”

“Thank you. This gift is much appreciated,” her father says. Lyarra simply accepts with a polite smile, ignoring the amused and expectant looks on most of the Northern contingent. The negotiations were over, the Tourney had ended and it was time to return to Winterfell. As their party was set to leave, a host of Tyrells appeared to wish them safe journeys onward.

They had brought gifts too. A selection of canned fruits and pickled vegetables for the trip, tomes for the libraries of each of the Houses present and, for House Stark, a selection of plant cuttings. The centerpiece were five pots of two cuttings each of a rare berry imported from exotic Asshai and painstakingly grown in the Tyrell’s glass garden. Comments on how useful it would be for trips to the Watch, as well as Loras passing them over to her directly, made the generosity suspect.

‘They jape for the wrong man then.’ Her eyes move involuntarily to Lord Willas, leaning on his cane near the back of the party.

The honey-haired lord had been everything proper when he kissed her hand and bade her farewell. Had it not been for the intensity of those tawny eyes and his selection of plants, all on the expensive end of practical, she would have thought him aloof. Would have been pleased if he were, considering her… improper actions of late.

Lyarra struggled to fight against the blush, well-aware of Ser Wylis chuckling quietly to himself, as she recalled the kiss. It wasn’t anything so sinful, was it? A summertime kiss between unpromised youth. Never known, never shared, never to place either reputation at-risk, her own far more fragile than his. Yet whomever she would eventually wed would have their rightful first kiss lost to a rose lord.
'Unless I had accepted his offer to be wed.’ A decision made for sense shouldn’t hurt as much as it did. Willas Tyrell was nosy, infuriating, sly, ambitious, deceitful… who would wed a man one couldn’t trust? Lyarra refused to put House Stark in danger for whatever schemes the wily lord had in mind.

Margaery stepped up next, clasping both of their hands together, a gesture meant to hold her still rather than convey any depth of emotion. The beautiful young woman flashed her a radiant smile, dimming slightly when she didn’t return it. ‘Would you allow me to send you letters?’

Lyarra’s eyes moved to her eldest brother, likely the cause of this. ‘He could be a snow shrew for how persistently he pecks at unyielding Ironwood.’

“It would be a pleasure to receive letters from you.” She was a bastard; how else was she supposed to reply to that? Had it been allowed, the other three Tyrells would have secured promises themselves.

Though still upset at the assumptions made by them, Lyarra kissed Margaery on the cheek. She returned Garlan and Loras’ heartfelt goodbyes and refused to roll her eyes when Mace Tyrell, who was obviously unaccustomed to rising at such an early hour, eyed her as one did a feral wolf. For Samwell, she broke custom and hugged him, whispering in his ear of letters sent to her brother, Robb. The Tyrells hadn’t much of an opinion on her regardless, so what did lowering it by this matter?

Garlan interpreted that as an invitation to hug her himself. “I’ll see you soon, Sister.”


“Keep complaining and I’ll add a kiss to your cheek,” the Knight of Flowers threatened. Not willing to find what Ser Wylis would think of that, she submitted to the loose embrace with ill grace.

Her father brought it back up when they were on the road. Unlike most highborn ladies, Lyarra insisted, and was allowed by an indulgent Lord Stark, to ride outside of the wheelhouse. “A crown of roses and now, fireberries from Asshai. Is there anything else I should know about?”

“He has a bluebell cloak with actual fresh flowers, Father,” Lyarra shook her head. “The expense.”
“Bluebells, you say?” Eddard Stark’s stoic Northman face should not have been able to convey as much amusement as it did.

The dark-haired girl blinked at him for a moment and then- “Father!”

“You’re worse than Robb!” A few of the men looked back in confusion as their liege lord shook with laughter and his bastard daughter halfheartedly tried to push him off his horse.

“I love you too, Lyaa-bell.” Once his amusement had died out, he looked over at her with tender concern. “I cannot leave Winterfell but should you choose, I can request that House Tyrell accept you as a handmaiden for Lady Margaery. You could spend more time knowing Ser Loras.”

The dark-haired girl shuddered at the very proposition. Years in the Tyrell court, at the mercy of Lord Willas, whose words were persuasive enough when she was still held in the grip of anger from his family. She knew her constancy would crumble should desperation ever drive him to genuine despair. Lyarra hated to see the people she cared for unhappy. She would have been wed within a sennight.

Not that she could ever explain such to her father. Instead, she gave the only answer she could, an answer that had the added advantage of being true. “I just want to go home, Father.”

x

A few thoughts on the last chapter…

Lady Olenna made a reasonable assumption about Willas’ plan based on the information she had, which happened to be untrue due to Lyarra’s Stark honor. It was written to hint towards the future that could have occurred had she been selfish enough to become his paramour, which would have mirrored the Targaryen civil war between Alicent Hightower’s son, Aegon II, and his half-sister, Queen Rhaenyra. Lady Olenna was worried that had Lyarra any children, they would have had trueborn names, been favored by their ‘uncle’ and possibly rose up to challenge Willas’ other children for the lordship. Now Lyarra’s too noble to do anything of the like but her children would inherit Stark honor, Targaryen drive and Tyrell ambition, and with the latter two, possibility succumbed to the lure of power. Not going to happen in this story but it’s interesting to consider what-might-have-been’s.
Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

Samwell had been his assistant for a mere three days before Willas started wondering how he had ever functioned without him. Oh, the man wasn’t as loyal or as perceptive as Tyman. He stumbled over his words, particularly to women, and he cowered whenever the honey-haired lord even frowned in his direction. He couldn’t ride or hunt or wield a sword to save anyone’s life, sadly necessitating a guardsman whenever Willas ventured outside but damn, if he wasn’t born a scholar.

“I finished reading Maester Yeoman’s treatise on agricultural yields and the smallfolk’s plight during King Maeker’s reign,” Samwell reported. The rotund boy put the heavy tome and parchments of notes down above it. “The summary is over here and I added it to my dates of the seasons. I’m almost done with the book on the sun phases as well and I think my calculations for its turn are correct. With your permission, I’d like to send them to the Citadel and have them looked over.”

“Well done.” Willas took the top sheet and skimmed it briefly. “Five years? Isn’t that too generous?”

Nervously, the boy shook his head. “It would make it the warmest summer in record, my lord.”

“Indeed,” he murmured softly. “Very well. Have the numbers checked by Maester Timmons. I don’t want the Citadel to review this. Afterward I would like you to read up on the mountain clans of the North and find a reasonable estimate to their number. Add it to our running population count.”

His assistant was pleased to receive his next task, though still lingered at the door with an inquisitive look to his face. Willas patiently waited, inwardly smirking when the Tarly shuffled out, shoulders down. He knew the boy would muster the courage to confront him eventually, due to his insatiable curiosity and concern for Lady Lyarra. But that day hadn’t yet arrived and so, Samwell Tarly continued into his various areas of research on the North, compiling summaries, data and accounts for him to peruse at his leisure. The craven boy went through books even faster than Father did cups of wine.

Speaking of Lord Mace Tyrell, Willas was rarely as mortified as when called to his father’s solar to discuss lady loves. After Mace had wrung his assurances that Willas hadn’t done anything foolish like promised betrothals (technically he had not) or put a Flower in her belly, he had tried to console the boy. ‘The lotus flower blooms twice’, ‘Unplucked fruit withers on the vine’ and ‘You will bloom where you are planted’ were just a few of the horrifying platitudes he was subjected to. By the time, the red-faced Lord Tyrell had started muttering about bringing Loras in to advise him on courting a proper maiden, Willas had fled the room.
The honey-haired lord was tempted to reveal Lyarra Snow’s true identity but he didn’t want his father to bodily throw him at her either.

At least his siblings had taken to the knowledge with a measure of aplomb. Loras had been the first to learn, notified shortly after crowning her Queen of Love and Beauty at his request. There hadn’t been any reason for it other than Willas’ desire to see her in a wreath of yellow roses. Garlan had learned the next day and expressed his amusement that he would argue on behalf of the Dragonknight, while she championed Ser Arthur. His sister had been the last to learn and most wroth that it hadn’t been done before Willas’ abject failure of a proposal.

“Brother, may I come in?” Margaery’s voice inquired from the open door. As she was precariously holding a tray of tea and fruit slices in her arms, he was inclined to allow this. “Are you busy?”

“No more than I ever am.” Willas selected a fireplum slice and nibbled on it. His appetite had never been the healthiest but fresh fruit could generally compel him to try. “Have you need of me?”

“No.” His only sister’s doe eyes flit over the room, straying on his desk as she reclines on the chair. “Northern glasshouses, Brother?”

“It’s an interesting topic.” He finishes the fireplum slice and moves to the peach ones. She had tasted of this when they last kissed. One would think it would make him melancholy but the rose lord finds his resolve only strengthened by the memory. “How is Mother?”

“Still torn over whether position should allow one to marry for happiness or prohibit them from risking such. You may expect a lavish gift or two coming your way soon to ‘soothe your broken heart’.” Margaery took a slice of peach for herself and rolled her eyes when Willas pointedly moved the plate away. “We served peach tarts on the day of the tea, you know.”

“I am aware,” the honey-haired nobleman replied stiffly. “Lady Lyarra kissed me.”

This elicits a surprised gasp from the brunette, followed quickly by excitement and then guilt. “And-and then the proposal…?”

“She refused.” Willas took another slice. “On the grounds that I am a conniving, ruthless, manipulative liar that will put herself and her family at-risk in my Southron pursuit of power and influence.”
Margaery is oddly fascinated by this. “Did she really say that to your face?”

“It was rather implied,” he stated dryly. “Her exact words were that I pulled her close to the edge of her heart and that my proposal was the greatest honor ever offered to her. This was followed by a kiss and then she refused to wed me.”

His sister appeared more impressed by the bastard’s nerve than Willas thought warranted. Her sympathy was supposed to be reserved for him after all.

“The girl is half in love with you already,” she told him. “How much closer need she be to wed you?”

“Three and a half kingdoms should help.” Willas looks down at his tea, rich and sweet. Like many aspects of his life, it was a reflection of his upbringing as a Southron, a Tyrell, an Heir. “Neither personal gain nor personal felicity will have her wed me. She must know why I chose her first.”

“I doubt her mother’s identity will be accepted well,” Margaery mused aloud. He nodded unhappily; the threat of political intrigue and warfare with her blood as impetus would horrify Lady Lyarra. “Tell her another truth then. It was the trousers.”

“It was not the trousers.” Margaery grinned at him knowingly and he stole her favorite strawberries in response. “I hate you.”

This sobered her. “Do you really?”

Willas raised an eyebrow. It was unlike his sister to take such words to heart. “Why do you say so?”

“Even with honor held above her, she was tempted to accept you,” Margaery trailed off. She looked away, remorse tinging her practiced smile. “Mayhaps she would have, had I spoken in your defense?”

Willas leaned closer and placed a light kiss on her brow. “Of all the mistakes made that day, none were by you. Our Grandmother made the claim and you did not contradict her, as is only right. To those outside our family, the roses must always stand together.”
“She will not be outside of our family for very long, will she?”

“No,” Willas thought to the letter penned halfway through on his desk, the research he had done. “No, she will not.”

“Good. I like her,” Margaery smiled. “I would have liked to be the Queen as well but alas! The Gods are not always so kind to us. You shall make a fine King, Willas, or mine nephew after you.”

His sister declared this with the same self-proud empathy of their kinder years, when she would share his own stolen sweets with him and think herself generous for it. Willas had been amused by the presumption then and it still amuses him now, to accept her words. They finish the remainder of their meal in silence and he sends her away, a warning echoed in her ear to keep any observations silent.

This part of the game would require even more discretion than the last and, as much as Willas loves his Grandmother, he would rather hide this from her. Lady Olenna was wily, pragmatic and careful. She was not Garlan, Loras or Margaery, who would accept his plans without further question. She was a gamble; one who could accept the dangerous strategy he chose or select one to remove the dragon from the field. However kindly it may be done- he thinks a peaceful death for a girl Grandmother knows he cares for- Willas fears the possibility.

He wants Lyarra Snow. Even should she not come with a crown, he wants her by his side.

‘The one whose daughter can make an otherwise clever boy lose his senses.’ Willas almost laughs when he realizes how sympathetic he feels for the Silver Prince. ‘But ours will be a happy ending.’

x

Short chapter but I finished most of my midterms and can promise a longer one soon.
Chapter Twelve

The ride home had few mentions of rose lords or tourney crowns, though Lyarra was aware that the men, proud Northern warriors all, gossiped about it behind her back. Her father, bless him, had stopped teasing her of Ser Loras after the first day and had looked foreboding enough on the mention of suitors, that none other would speak of House Tyrell to her. One boy that had no intention of doing so was Torrhen Karstark, who grew progressively more cheerful and more attentive to her as the air frosted white. The dark-haired girl gently tried to dissuade him. While she had found his attempts sweet if exasperating before, she felt almost guilty to accept them now.

Torrhen would have made a good husband for her. He was brave and honorable; hardly a mummer’s bone in his body. He was of the North and shared her family’s values. There wouldn’t be any question or scandal should he offer for her. Had they any children, they would be born dark of hair and grey of eyes and, in the absence of the Stark name, she would have gained the closest alternative.

It was a simple and sweet solution spurred for two reasons. The first was that there existed a few ambitious families that Lyarra was careful to disassociate herself from, considering the precarious single line of inheritance for House Stark. Her marriage must never be a threat to her brother’s rule.

The second had honey-brown hair, tawny-gold eyes and a kiss that tasted of rose petals. He was ambitious as well and all the more dangerous for it, for Lyarra could not discern his motives. Clever and proud, the prize must have been great indeed for Willas Tyrell to gamble on a bastard’s hand. The she-wolf was painfully curious to the answer, if only so she could know the treasure that House Stark unintentionally held in their grasp.

’And if it was a price that I could afford to pay.’

Somehow she suspected that it would not be. The cost of a bastard to be Lady Paramount was high.

Lyarra Snow wasn’t one to linger on subjects that invited misery, so she did her best to banish any thought of Lord Willas on the path home. There were enough natural delights to occupy her attention on the road. Her world was so small before they left to Highgarden. Now it had grown significantly bigger yet still had plenty of sights and experiences to marvel over. She hovered at Lord Stark’s shoulder when he haggled for inn rooms, watched with curious eyes as fishermen towed in nets of trout and mackerel from the rivers, tried (and failed) not to giggle when her father glared a Frey bridgekeeper into compliance and essentially absorbed as much knowledge as she could. To her
silent laments, Lord Stark chose a longer path that avoided the Westerlands and rode past King’s Landing entirely. It was a shame. Lyarra had hoped to view the Capitol with her own eyes.

For all those wonders though, there was nothing that could compare to seeing her family after a six moons journey. The party had winnowed to Father, herself and the Stark guards by then and they were greeted by all of Winterfell. Lyarra had scarcely swung down from her horse when the poor beast was startled by three loud hellions tackling her into a hug.

‘Lord Willas’ steeds would be too well-trained to startle,’ she had thought briefly, trying to fit her arms around Arya, Bran and Rickon at once. When she extracted herself, it was to a proper kiss on the cheek from Sansa, that broke into its own whine when Lyarra hugged her instead. Robb was the next one to receive his embrace and even Theon, who was standing aloofly by, as though he had merely been passing by at the time, received a tight hug. He made his own complaints on the matter, only they were about the unmanliness of the gesture compared to Sansa’s distress on it being unladylike. Robb and she exchanged their customary eye roll over the two image-conscious nobles.

While Lyarra had come to appreciate the beauty of Highgarden, there was nothing quite like the grim and ancient Winterfell. It held a history and splendor all its own; the somber stone walls lightened by the effusions of delight from her siblings. Presents were distributed with alacrity. Robb and Theon both received a chainmail shirt. Four yards of sky blue muslin and sketches of gowns for Sansa, a set of painted knights and war machines for Arya, a miniature Kingsguard cloak for Bran, children playbooks and treats for Rickon and a steel quill knife for Maester Luwin. She had made enough gold to be generous in her gifts and her industry was well-known throughout Winterfell to explain for such.

Lyarra had hoped to avoid any mention of her brief career as a squire but alas…

“You did what?!” Arya and Sansa had shrieked in completely different tones after Lord Stark had decreed her punishment before bed. No riding, sword practice or playing the harp for two moons and any reading for pleasure was to be limited to two hours a day, though that punishment would only be set for a fortnight. The Quiet Wolf had receded soon after, mindful of his eldest daughter’s baleful look, as she was left to suffer her sisters alone.

“I can’t believe you rode in a joust,” Sansa had exclaimed before the door even closed.

“Did you win?” Arya followed soon after.

“All of my matches.” Lyarra couldn’t suppress her smile when Arya whooped in excitement. “Shall we have a sleepover tonight?”
For once, her younger sisters were in complete agreement as they hurried out to bring their bedrolls, blankets and pillows to her room. Lyarra pulled her own down to the floor, requested treats and drinks be brought up and set up a basin of warm water by the wall. The last time they had done this, Sansa had wanted to experiment with face powders and skin stains and they needed to clean themselves before sleeping. Everything else she left alone, knowing that the red-haired girl would bring enough oils, creams, dyes, powders and polish for all of them to share.

Once they had settled down, the two younger girls turned to the eldest one in the room with an expectant gaze. Lyarra was of the opinion that anyone who saw Sansa’s flame-streaked hair and river blue eyes and thought her not a Stark hadn’t yet seen how predatory those eyes could be.

“What do you want to know?” The bastard girl asked, gallows humor infused in her tone.


“Alright then. It’s a castle straight out of your dreams, Sansa. A citadel of white walls and greenery with three circled walls and towers connected by arches that look down on an inner orchard. The streets are cobbled with cream colored stone and painted with roses. The castle’s surrounded by a maze, an actual honest-to-goodness maze, of hedgerows with discrete inlets turned into gardens. There was a fountain with a settee for tea in one, a pond filled with lily flowers and chirping frogs in another, a swing on a massive oak in a third and so many more. I’ve never taken the same journey twice when I entered there though they have green and yellow flags to take visitors back to the main path. They place their sigil absolutely everywhere. One would think they’d forget it without the constant reminders!”

Thus did Lyarra Snow give her sisters a detailed description of the castle that had somehow carved a place into her heart. It wasn’t exactly conventional praise- the glowing praise of the glass gardens was as a ready source of sustenance when the castle was under siege- but the enthusiasm was evident to the two listeners. Sansa in particular, noted that her sister rarely spoke so kindly for any castle outside of their own home.

When she was done, Lyarra moved to the people there. She had already mentioned Samwell in her letters and they learn about the Tarly boy with good humor. She touched on her friendship with Lady Margaery, briefly describing the sailing and stargazing parties with careful editing of Lord Willas and received her first questions there.

“What could they mean by the invite?” Arya looked puzzled. “They didn’t mock you, did they, Lyaa?”
“Arya,” Sansa admonished, starry-eyed. “Margaery Tyrell is a true Lady. She wouldn’t do anything so unkind as mocking our sister for- uh…”

“Being a bastard,” Lyarra supplied airily. The red-haired girl grimaced and nodded. “No, she did not. The others were kind enough not to mention it as well.”

“Others?” Bright blue eyes gleamed. “I had heard that Lord Tyrell had three sons…?”

“Yes and they are all more handsome than the last. The Knight of Flowers must be the most beautiful man I had ever seen and as gallant, skilled and brave as a knight should be.”

The two dark-haired girls in the room promptly placed their hands over their ears as Sansa squealed.

“His brother, Ser Garlan, is even more skilled with a blade than he is,” Lyarra added. “He took me on as a squire for his brother’s nameday and there, I rode four jousts to avenge Samwell’s honor.”

The Snow didn’t exaggerate too much about the details of the tourney, as the mummer’s show and joust rounds were sensational enough. Even Sansa, who ostensibly disapproved of this very unladylike activity, was caught up in the excitement of it all. They gasped, laughed and cheered in all of the right places, particularly when she spoke of her near-miss with Edric Dayne.

“There must be something in the water there.” Lyarra shook her head, “He had sunlight pale hair, aster blue eyes and was far prettier than any boy should have the right to be. Jabbered even faster than Bran but he was an absolutely wonderful dancer.”

“Did you dance with anyone else there? You haven’t mentioned Lord Willas yet and I wanted to know if he was as handsome as his brother. Was he?”

“Er… did I tell you of how Ser Loras crowned me Queen of Love and Beauty?”

This distracted Sansa well enough and she had to spend the next twenty minutes describing the crown and scene in full. By the end of it, the dreamer amongst them was in raptures, utterly convinced that the Knight of Flowers was soon to be her good-brother. Arya was a little more skeptical of the matter but admitted that a crown of flowers was as good a declaration of love as any.
If Lyarra’s features had changed at those words, she did not know but Arya abruptly stilled.

“Did Ser Loras declare anything to you, Lyaa?” There was curiosity and interest there but it was covered by a layer of concern, for her eldest sister had returned home as unpledged as she had left.

“He did not. It was merely the gesture of a friend.”

Sansa cocked her head to the side. “Did anyone else declare anything to you?”

The dark-haired girl smiled awkwardly.

Decades from this day, Lyarra Snow would blame sisterly affection for how quickly the two pounced on her. As in quite literally toppling her backwards onto her pillow, her right held down by Sansa and her left by Arya, to keep her from fleeing. They didn’t ask her any questions eithers; the younger Stark merely poked her cheekbone consideringly.

“I think she has an admirer. Do you think she has an admirer, Sansa?”

“I do, Arya. And I think that admirer may be the mysterious Tyrell son that she refuses to speak of!”

Lyarra groaned. “If you two ever decided to conquer together, Westeros would fall in a year.”

“I would make you the Queen’s Hand,” Arya declared loyally. “Now tell us of Willas Tyrell.”

The dark-haired girl mentally debated on whether or not to do so. On the one hand, the last thing she wanted to do was bring up the ghost of his offer, one that Lyarra Snow knew she could not accept but was pained to refuse. Everything that involved Willas Tyrell made her confused, dizzied and oftentimes angry. And the betrothal that wouldn’t be was left a still-open wound that she had no desire to prod.

On the other hand, if anyone were to believe her fanciful tale of the Heir to Highgarden offering for a Northern bastard, it would be her sisters. They would also be the first to comfort her and keep her
secrets, without engaging in any overt stupidity like Robb would by riding south to challenge the rose lord. Sansa and Arya may even have insight to the situation that she herself couldn’t find.

And finally, though this was a selfish reason that the dark-haired girl would never admit to, she wanted someone to know of her unintended conquest. To know that she, Lyarra Snow, the Bastard of Winterfell had been proposed to by Willas Tyrell, the man to one-day be Lord Paramount of the Reach.

“You may never speak of this to anyone else. Even, no, especially Robb,” Lyarra warned.

“Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in a Bolton’s eye,” Sansa reported cheerfully.

“The same.” Arya rolled off her body and sat up, wiggling on her knees. “Now tell us!”

“Lord Willas asked me to marry him.”

The message could not have been any more shocking than if Lyarra had reported that she hatched a dragon, burned down King’s Landing and declared herself Queen of all of Westeros.

“I refused him.”

And to that dragon, she had gathered a guard of giants, commanded an army of wildlings and waged war against the Great Other itself.

Sansa made a sound halfway between a dying animal’s cry and a baby’s newborn wail. “Why?”

“Did he offer for me? I have absolutely no idea why.” Lyarra offered a weak smile to her sisters. Her middle sister’s cheeks were turning a crimson matched solely by her hair while her youngest had gone as pale as freshly fallen snow. The young she-wolf looked homicidal a moment later.

“Have you ever…?” Arya began awkwardly, looking oddly embarrassed yet still murderous as her grey eyes cut sharply to Lyarra’s stomach. Under the white shift, it was as flat as it had always been. “He didn’t try to…?”
“What? No! No, no, no. Lord Willas is far too honorable to force himself on any women and I wouldn’t ever lay with one outside of marriage.” Her cheeks flushed at the very thought of it. Lord Willas was handsome but they had only… “I kissed him.”

“You kissed him?” Arya asked pointedly. When Lyarra nodded, the tension left her shoulders and bewilderment came to the fore. “You kissed him?!”


“After he proposed. In his office. Because I wanted to. And you know how, don’t you?”

“Not the details!” The red-haired girl clapped her hands together. “This is valuable, sisterly knowledge! Don’t roll your eyes at me, Arya. In a few years, you’d wish Lyaa had told us too.”

“Try to move slowly and kiss softly. Remember to tilt your head, lest your noses interfere. Eat something sweet beforehand, they may taste it on your lips. You’ll need to do something with your hands; it’s odd to just keep them by your sides. I put mine on his shoulders and his were at the small of my back. It may be unexpected to feel chapped lips against yours but try not to startle.”

Lyarra considered her advice and added quickly. “Also don’t do it. Kissing a man you don’t mean to wed is inappropriate and I shouldn’t have done it.”

‘Somehow I don’t think my warning will be followed,’ the dark-haired girl thought resigned. Her youngest sister was still bemused but Sansa looked tempted to start taking notes.

“Did you like kissing him?” Arya questioned mischievously. Her other sister appeared equally invested in the answer. Unable to meet their eyes, Lyarra nodded and muttered something about rose tea. Sansa decided this was worth a hug all on its own.

“That’s so romantic!” The red-haired girl declared vigorously. Then her face fell, “Oh, I hope Lord Willas and Ser Loras won’t fight over you.”

“They will not. Ser Loras only considers me a friend and crowned me Queen of Love and Beauty at his brother’s request.”
Lyarra’s assurances only brought more questions to the fore and between Sansa’s starry-eyed wonder (“I knew it! I knew the blue gown would catch a suitor’s eye!”) and Arya’s innate curiosity and concern (“He was spying on you?!”), all of her meetings with Lord Willas spilled out. She didn’t mention Lady Olenna’s insulting conclusions—on reflection, they did make a distressing amount of sense and with her luck, one of her sisters would be in slapping distance of the old woman one day—but she didn’t hold anything else back. When she was done, Arya flopped back on her own bedroll and declared, in her lackadaisical style, that ‘fine, whatever, Willas Tyrell would make an okay goodbrother, I suppose’.

Sansa, on the other hand, was frowning. “Sister, I respect your decision to refuse him, I do, but why would you? Lord Willas appears to be everything you would desire in a husband and he obviously cares enough to propose to you. The marriage is to your advantage. Why would you refuse him?”

“As you said, the marriage is to my advantage.” Lyarra attempted to smile. Neither girl missed that it had a distinct bitterness to it. “Entirely so and one wonders why a man of Willas’ stature would offer for me. He’s too sensible to risk his family’s reputation for mere affection, so there must be some scheme of considerable value involved. I’m a bastard and any value I have is related to House Stark. So any reason he has to wed me must involve House Stark in some way and it can’t be to our benefit, as he refused to speak truthfully when proposing. I can’t- I won’t - have my family pay the price for my marriage.”

“You did it to protect us?” The middle she-wolf looked heartbroken. “Oh, Lyaa!”

Sansa Stark was a girl prone to dramatics and waterworks but for once, Arya didn’t tease her when she tearfully tried to distract the eldest from her heartbreak by way of acute rib pain. Lyarra endured the crushing arms as gracefully as she could, tentatively patting her on the back in response. It was a true shame that Sansa refused to learn archery; she had the height and upper body strength to actually wield those massive warbows Lyarra had seen in the armory.

“It’s alright, Sansa.” It wasn’t really.

“It’s not as though I love him.” Even if she thought she could have.

“There will be other men just like him.” That was actually a scary thought.

“Maybe it was all a misunderstanding?” Sansa sniffled, hopeful. “Maybe he’s fallen in love with you?”
“Maybe.” She hummed noncommittally, still rubbing her sister’s back. Poor Sansa. She always tried to find kindness and whimsy in the world and Lyarra misliked being the one to shatter those hopes.

“I’m going to tell Robb. It’s not right for Lord Willas to play with your affections!”

“No. Absolutely not. Don’t you dare. You crossed your heart, remember?”

“I’ll stick a needle in the Tyrell’s eye,” Arya scowled. The eldest girl shook her head, so utterly exasperated and yet happy to have sisters like this.

“I want to leave all of this behind me. Promise me that neither of you will tell anyone or do anything about the matter.” Once those promises were reluctantly given, she continued. “Now I have learned a few new hairstyles from observing the ladies of the Reach. There’s this loose-curled updo braid that would look lovely with your red hair, Sansa. Let me see if I can recreate it. And Arya, you never did tell me if you bullied Theon into giving you tips with the bow yet.”

Slowly the tension from Lyarra’s confession drained from the air as the three girls busied themselves with experimenting with cosmetics, sharing stories and draining cups of piping hot blood-blossom tea. They grew faster than weeds around the castle and Lyarra could remember more than one fond afternoon picking bulbs to trade for sweetmeats from the Head Cook. Sansa ended up with her updo, Arya a dozen tiny braids tied into a crown and Lyarra a half-up, half-down style with locks of hair arranged to frame her face. The face powders were less successful, at least for the two sisters that took it seriously, while Arya found her intentional raccoon look with streaks of charcoal for cat whiskers to be delightful. Somehow they even managed to lock the youngest down long enough to stain her fingernails cherry red.

The oil in the wicker lantern was dangerously close to done when they were finally done.

‘I’ll need half a dozen more cups of tea to make it through Maester Luwin’s lessons tomorrow.’

Lyarra drowsily climbed into her bedroll at the leftmost side of the room, Sansa to her right, then Arya. They were three wolf-pups all in a row, blankets arranged around them despite the frost-bitten breeze from the open window adding a comfortable nip to the air. The hot springs underneath the castle warmed them well enough and had near-nudged her to sleep when she felt arms encircle her.

“Lyarra,” Sansa whispered to her back. “May I ask you something?”
The dark-haired girl made a vague noise of assent. Her mind was already wandered to darkness but it took little effort to draw it back for a time.

“How did you gain Lord Willas’ interest?”

“I don’t know, Sansa. That’s the reason why I refused him, remember?”

“No, I’m not asking why he proposed to you. Only Lord Willas can answer that. I mean that there must be a reason for you to have caught his eye in the first place and I want to know how.”

“It may have been the novelty of a daughter of House Stark trying to seduce a nobleman.”

“How did you keep his eye then?”

Lyarra turned around to see intense river blues focused on her. Sansa was frowning as she thought aloud. “The ladies in your letters all sound so elegant and beautiful and accomplished. They must all be vying for men like Lord Willas or Ser Loras to notice them… how can I compare to that Lyarra?”

“Are you worried about making a good marriage, Sansa? You needn’t be. You’re the eldest daughter-”

“You’re the eldest daughter.”

“Trueborn then. You’re the eldest, trueborn daughter of Lord Eddard Stark. You’re beautiful and kind-hearted and you’ll have your pick of any man in the realm. Father will arrange a good match with a lord who’s worthy of you.”

Sansa was unimpressed. “I want a suitor that vies for my approval, not Father’s.”

“And you will have that,” Lyarra assured. “It’s too early for you to be wed anyway. Think not of it.”
“I know. I just want what you had. A man won by my own charms and talents.” At her dubious look, the red-haired girl added. “Oh, you know that it’s true, Lyarra. Mayhaps he chose to wed you for deceitful reasons but if even one of your stories were true, he was attracted to you.”

“In fact, I think it started when you sang that song at the sailing party,” Sansa mused. “You sing, you dance, you play the harp and you speak Valyrian. All of these are court accomplishments, yes? Didn’t they impress Lord Willas?”

Lyarra admitted that they might have. “I also joust and spar, Sansa, and I doubt many noblemen will be impressed by that.”

“Some men are strange,” her sister dismissed. “And I’ll leave them to the likes of you and Arya. I don’t want to learn to fight but I do want a talent of my own.”

“You’re the finest seamstress amongst us three and you dance as well.”

“Everyone can dance, even Arya and she despises everything a proper lady should do. And I will not be showcasing samples of my embroidery to any of the men I know.” Sansa arched a brow. “Does Lady Margaery have any accomplishments?”

The dark-haired girl eyed her younger sister contemplatively. Sansa’s arguments for gaining court accomplishments were not without merit. Many of the ladies of the Reach did have a skill or two to their credit and should Sansa wed southwards, as Lady Catelyn hoped, she would be expected the same. It was twice as important for her, considering the southron impression of northern savagery.

And her sister did have excellent upper body strength…

“Lady Margaery prefers outdoor activities, such as gardening, riding, sailing, falconry and archery.”

Margaery had a fair hand for a sketch too but Lyarra had hoped to settle on the last. Sansa hadn’t the heart for falconry or the means to practice gardening and sailing. Riding was an option but she cared little for it, unlike Arya. Her sister had the same process of thought for she quickly groaned.

“I need to practice the skill myself,” Lyarra cajoled. “Mayhaps we could do it together, all three of us, in the morn? Afterward I can help you practice an instrument or learn a few phrases of High Valyrian.”
“If I have to practice archery than Arya has to study Valyrian too,” Sansa grumbled.

“Yes, of course,” Lyarra agreed. For the chance to strike at targets with arrows, Arya would do far more than memorize a few phrases. “Get some sleep, Sansa. We practice on the morrow.”

x

I didn’t get to Willas’ letter in this chapter but it’ll show up in the next one. This one is the butterfly wing chapter.
“We need to have a family meeting.”

Had her thoughts not been scattered hundreds of leagues away on tawny eyes and snow shrews, Lyarra Snow would have been wary of the look in her brother’s eyes. As it was, Maester Luwin had brought two letters from the ravenry to the breakfast table. One, from her Uncle Benjen, was titled to all of his nieces and nephews and given to Robb as the eldest. The other was from Margaery Tyrell, triggered curious glances from most of the table and concerned ones from her sisters and was tucked into the pocket of her dress. It was burning a hole there as Lyarra fretted over the pain to be wrought.

To not be dissuaded from her course, Lyarra should have burned the letter at once and prayed for no more to be sent. Unfortunately her history with Willas Tyrell had never been of the sensible sort.

Her wits focused on the matter of House Tyrell, Lyarra merely offered a distracted nod. “As you wish.”

Her first clue that this was not be the typical family meeting was when Rickon didn’t join them. While not verbose to each child specifically, Uncle Benjen did include particular well-wishes for every one of his brother’s children. The second was that Theon did join them, despite ostensibly never having any relation to the Watch at all. Third, Robb sat on the edge of the bed closest to his door and read the letter aloud without any of his customary cheer.

The final nail in the coffin had to be the second-to-last paragraph by an Uncle who clearly did not understand how doomed romances were to work.

‘...the frost hasn’t been quite as hard on my bones lately, thanks to these fireberries. They taste peculiar enough mixed in ale but the burn could get you through a night’s patrol without shaving years off your life. Half of my stores have already been depleted by brothers begging for this miracle berry from Asshai. Everyone seems to have my name on their tongue these days and they all want to know when my family will send another care package. I do think that I am the most popular man in the Wall now. Even the old dragon loyalists are lobbying the old bear to put me in their teams. A special thanks to Lyarra for Ser Loras’ most considerate courting gifts. Ned wrote to me of how the Tyrell boy was smitten by you- of course, I wasn’t surprised. None of these nobles would have seen true beauty until one of our she-wolves ventured south. Really, I encourage all of my nieces to go and bewitch these foppish knights if these are the results…’
The last paragraph reiterated his hopes that they were all healthy and hale and promised to visit in a few moons for another recruitment mission. Lyarra didn’t quite hear all of that as she was too busy trying to glare a snickering Theon into submission while avoiding Robb’s ‘disappointed Father’ face.

“Lyarra, do you have anything to tell me?” Robb had managed to get Ned Stark’s tone down well too.

“Yes,” she said with quiet dignity. “Ser Loras is a kind friend and I have no suitors to speak of.”

He scrutinized her face carefully. “Did anyone tell you that your cheeks look hollow when you lie?”

The dark-haired girl immediately stopped biting the inside of her cheek. It was tragically too late to keep Bran from figuring out that Ser Loras referred to the Knight of Flowers.

“You met the Knight of Flowers, Lyaa?!” Her middle brother, all floppy dark auburn hair and wide crystal blue eyes, was bouncing over to look directly up at her. His white Kingsguard cloak fluttered behind him. He had yet to take his adored gift off. “How was he? Did you see him fight? Did he win?”

“Ser Loras is very skilled. There was a joust on his nameday and he was the winner.”

“And who did the crown his Queen of Love and Beauty?” Theon baited with a grin. He let out a shock of startled laughter when Lyarra failed to hide her reaction. “You? Oh, those southron fops must have been shocked. I wish I had been there to see it.”

“Why would they have been shocked?” Sansa demanded archly. “My sister is as beautiful as any of them, is she not?”

“Well not that I’ve seen any of them…” Theon smirked, “But sure, Lyarra’s pretty enough. When can we expect the wedding?”

“Wedding?!” Robb blanched. “Absolutely not. All of us- and you especially, Sansa!- are too young.”
“There’s not going to be a wedding,” Lyarra chided. She glared at the Greyjoy again. Idiot just loved to wind everyone up. “He knew it was my first tourney and gifted me with a crown. Nothing romantic.”

“Then his family gifted you expensive plants and his sister sent you a letter,” the dark-haired boy added agreeably. Robb looked suitably horrified.

“Lyarra,” Arya spoke up hesitantly. She looked around the room once before focusing on her eldest sister. “If you think they plan to abuse us…”

“Abuse?!” The Stark Heir’s gaze moved unerringly towards the midcenter of her dress, making Lyarra flush again. She aimed a kick in his direction and he instinctively dodged it, though thankfully no longer boring holes in her stomach with his eyes alone. “Okay, nothing with a child then. Blackmail?”

“Lyarra’s way too boring for any good blackmail,” Theon disagreed. “My gold’s on a nobleman doing something stupid and her calling him out on it. House Tyrell’s probably holding a grudge.”

“Will both of you stop talking about me as if I’m not in the room?!”

The sharp rebuke brought some moments of peace, as Lyarra considered the options before her. She could keep silent and refuse to answer any of her brother’s questions but that would simply lead to Robb taking his concerns to their father. Likewise should there be a danger present, Lyarra would be misfit not have warned her siblings beforehand. Robb was more sensible than Father in some of these matters. While Ned Stark would react to injustice towards her by public retaliation, her older brother held a greater pragmatism within him. He knew there were some slights that simply had to be let go.

“I should like to keep it in this room,” Lyarra finally said. “Lady Stark…”

It was enough to secure her sibling’s agreements, though Robb and Bran both flinched at the mention of their mother and her dislike of her husband’s bastard. She left the actual explanation to Sansa, whose soft explanations were occasionally interjected with bouts of blunt Arya honesty, as she withdrew the letter. The vellum was as thick and rich as any in Lord Stark’s solar, expensive and sealed with a forest green wax. Imprinted on it was the elaborate rose of House Tyrell. She had to take a deep breath to steady her nerves before she slid one fingernail beneath it.
When the letter was opened, it was evident that it contained two pages. The first was…

“A list of seasonal dates and star formations,” Sansa said flatly. “Does he intend to wed you or not?”

Turning it over only revealed mathematical equations and a list of books as source recommendations.

“It’s their estimate for when winter will come and how long they expect it to last.”

“How do you know that?”

Theon smirked. “I’m a genius.”

“And it’s written at the bottom of the page.” Bran pointed to the underlined words. “They think winter will come in five years… and last for ten.”

“A whole generation,” the Snow murmured. She exchanged a shocked look with her elder brother. The North was aware of a more severe winter approaching after the long summer they had but a decade? “If their estimates are correct…”

“We’ve not prepared for that. We’ve not prepared for that at all,” Robb breathed. “Even if every House increases food production by a third, we’ll have to empty our coffers to buy from the south or Essos.”

“More than that should the Crown increase taxes on Northern ships again,” she added darkly.

There were benefits to being the closest confidante of the Heir. Whenever these issues were discussed with Robb—albeit rarely, since Father seemed determined to raise them as carefree summer children—Lyarra was informed soon after. They could often solicit the merchants of Wintertown or Maester Luwin for more information and she had not been remiss in question Samwell at her earliest chance. He told her of Petyr Baelish, a Valeman as Master of Coin, and she had informed Robb in turn. He hadn’t been pleased to learn his uncle’s bannerman responsible for the increased rate.
“What did she mean by sending us this?” Robb had moved to sit beside her now. His tone had shifted from protective older brother to the Heir of House Stark, signaling that this was no longer solely about her romantic woes. It filled her with pride to see him like this; her ever-dutiful and precocious brother would make a great lord one day.

“He,” Lyarra corrected softly. She had received notes enough to know. “This is by Lord Willas’ hand.”

Theon had drifted closer to read from above her. Sansa at her other side, Arya and Bran craning their necks behind them. The dark-haired girl turned to the second letter. There was another list of titles—most of them foreign to her and related to Dornish history or customs—and a brief summary of a concept called the ‘bride price’. Alien to her but the concept was easy enough to understand. It was essentially a dowry split between the woman’s House and herself, as a measure of protection should she become a widow.

Underneath that was a list of items and finally, a request to continue correspondence. The final line was writ by a different hand and contained a flowery signature of Lady Margaery Tyrell.

“It was the trousers,” Arya read aloud. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know. I’m more interested in the list here,” Lyarra said. She felt the dual sensations of her heart soaring and her stomach plummeting at once. A bride price? Did he still intend to marry her? After her refusal, did Willas truly still consider her a match? “A quarter million bushels of wheat. A hundred thousand bushels of barley, wheat and rye each. Ten thousand wagons of dried fruit—fire plums, apples, peaches, apricots, oranges and cherries. 10,000 heads of cattle, 20,000 of sheep…”

By the time the Snow had finished reading them aloud, an absolute silence had suffused the room.

“Well,” Theon finally said, “He either intends to wed her or he thinks House Stark is holding a king hostage and desires to pay the ransom. Anyone hear anything odd from the crypts?”

“Must everything be a jape to you?” Sansa asked sharply. Her eyes were nearly shining as she looked at her sister. “This is a fortune. Enough to feed Winterfell throughout the whole winter, even should Wintertown be filled to capacity. He must care about you, Lyaa. No one could spend that much gold without loving the other person even a little.”

“There was no doubt of affection on his part,” she replied. An strange fluttering took precedence in
her chest. This was… this was a Gods be damned king’s ransom for her hand. “It was a question of whether House Stark could afford the hidden costs of an alliance.”

“And now it is a question of whether we can afford to forego the evident benefits of one.” Her eldest brother’s keen blue eyes studied the document, fingers twitching for quill and parchment. “The Reach would be more likely to offer help if the next Lady Tyrell was of the North as well… Discarding whatever schemes this Lord Willas has in mind, do you think there would be any issues to a union?”

“There would be great scandal to it, I think. He’s the Heir to a Lord Paramount and I’m a bastard.”

“What does it matter?” Bran’s soft voice belied a look in his eyes that was almost sly. She knew there to be a mischief-maker in her brother’s heart but it was startling to see calculation on his sweet face. “Let them speak. You would be the Lady Tyrell. They wouldn’t dare name the Lady Tyrell a bastard. Not if they should like to visit Highgarden again.”

“His family would not approve of me.”

“Whom would that be? The brother that took you to squire or the one that crowned you with roses? The sister that sends you such letters in her brother’s stead?” Sansa asked. “That’s half the family right there and the others shouldn’t be too difficult to charm when you put the effort into it.”

“You have yet to meet Lady Olenna Tyrell.”

“You can’t win over everybody,” Arya shot back. “And you don’t need to. You have the good opinion of the one man that matters most in this situation.”

The two trueborn daughters of Ned Stark exchanged surprised glances at supporting one another. With a grin, Arya raised her hand and Sansa high-fived her.

“I don’t know how to be the Lady of a Great House.”

“Now you’re just fishing for excuses, Snow. You’re smart, you can learn.”
“Do you not want to marry him?” Robb inquired.

She blinked back at him, somewhat dazed by all of this. Did Lyarra think she could be happy as Lord Willas’ wife? Yes, surprising enough. He was intelligent, considerate, patient and perceptive. All of the qualities that Father had espoused for her ideal husband and quite handsome besides. He challenged and confused her, made her head spin and heart flutter but also drew out reluctant smiles with his words. Did she think it was worth the risk?

“I- I wouldn’t mind it,” she confessed. “I don’t know.”

“If you should refuse him, know that it will be done with my full-hearted support.”

The dark-haired girl nodded, pleased but not surprised. Robb wanted happiness for all of his siblings and would allow them to marry for love, within reason of course. Neither he nor Father wanted to sell them to secure advantages for House Stark. Even with that said, she knew some offers had to be considered against the greater well-being of the North. As an Heir and a brother, the eldest Stark carried affection in one hand and duty in the other.

“I hate to ask this of you.” Lyarra believed him. The grimace on Robb’s face was nothing short of truly pained and remorseful. “But if Lord Willas is honorable, give his proposal due consideration. Correspond with him, if you should like, and determine what his expectations for House Stark are. I won’t send you off as a lamb to slaughter but we can’t reject this opportunity out of hand either. And… and if you think there is a decent chance for felicity, try to accept him.”

‘My big brother, so adamant against his sisters being wed, advocating that I share illicit letters with a southron lordling,’ Lyarra marveled. ‘Willas Tyrell is a very persuasive man.’

“Shouldn’t we share this letter with Father?” Bran inquired.

Robb looked even guiltier now. “No. I don’t know why the Tyrells chose this method to correspond with her rather than asking for a public courtship like normal people but we’ll respect it for now. Don’t tell anyone. And ask him why he isn’t forwarding those letters to Father instead of us, Lyaa.”

“I will,” the dark-haired girl looked down at the fluid script with a bemused expression. ‘Just an hour ago, I had been building up the courage to set this letter aflame. And now I’m writing to him instead.’
‘Willas Tyrell, why can’t anything about you ever be simple?’

I know that GRRM based Westeros on medieval Europe and the concept of bride price didn’t really exist there but I couldn't help but add it in. Willas is a well-read man whose likely been exposed to Dornish traditions byway of his friendship with Oberyn and GRRM also said that Dorne was influenced by Spain, particularly its Muslim Moorish history. Bride prices were an important part of early Islamic law and, theoretically at least, a way for women to establish some financial independence in the marriage and afterward, should she become a widow.

Willas is providing a bride price primarily in the form of wheat, barley, etc. knowing that Lyarra would rather have her family benefit than herself from her marriage. Yes, he is bribing her into still considering his suite but it’s also to show that he understands her position and respects her love of the Starks. Lyarra thinks marrying him would put her family at-risk; Willas wants to show that it’ll benefit the North and eventually, will understand that honesty and communication are necessary to win her over. Also a look into more pragmatic Starks; no matter how much you love a sister, you wouldn’t deny a marriage entirely when it has the potential to feed thousands of people through winter.

Speaking of winter, in the books, it happened in 300 A.C. Canon! Jon Snow was born in 283 A.C., which made him 17 namedays old when winter began. Here, I intend to use the show ages (thus, 17 rather than 14), so the Maesters will officially release the white ravens in 303 A.C. It is now 297 A.C., Jon Arryn will die in 299 A.C., and King Robert by 300 A.C. Summary:

276 A.C. - Willas Tyrell is born
281 A.C. - Tourney of Harrenhal
282 A.C. - Rhaegar Targaryen and Lyanna Stark elope and Robert’s Rebellion begins
283 A.C. - Visenya Targaryen is born and claimed by Ned as Lyarra Snow
297 A.C. - Willas Tyrell and Lyarra Snow are wed
298 A.C. - Son is born - I like Gawain Tyrell, from Knights of the Round Table
299 A.C. - Jon Arryn dies and Ned Stark becomes King’s Hand
300 A.C. - War of the Five Kings begins
303 A.C. - Long Night and War of the Dawn begins
“You are aware that this must never be spoken of outside of this room?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Tyman’s eyes continued to flicker between the oilskin-covered vellum on the desk and himself with a respectful, near-awed gaze. The honey-haired lord could practically read the thoughts writ on his assistant’s face. The conclusions had drawn him a brilliance unearned for the Flowers believed this merely support of his existing knowledge. Willas allowed the man his wonderment though it had been as great a surprise for the Tyrell Heir to learn this.

Lyarra Snow. Visenya Targaryen. The youngest trueborn daughter of the Silver Prince and the last red-scaled dragon in Westeros. The secondary heir to the Iron Throne, excepting one mere beggar uncle wandering the East. The unintentional coupe of House Tyrell that had just become an even more valuable political piece and conveniently enough, was the girl that he desired to marry anyway.

“Your position will have to be reallocated.” Willas ran the possibilities through his head. A home under which he had significant influence, afar from his grandmother’s eye, without any reason for an expanded ravenry… “My Aunt Janna is married to Lord Jon Fossoway. He is a genial man and there will be a good position in New Barrel awaiting you.”

“I- I understand.” Tyman didn’t look surprised. The second those documents had passed under his eye, he must have known that his position became simultaneously more vulnerable and yet still more valuable. Had Willas not cultivated a reputation as a reasonable employer, he likely would have taken these secrets and ran, else betrayed them for gold. “Will you require future reports?”

“Every fortnight, lest anything important arises.” The honey-haired lord tapped his fingers briskly on the desk. “Keep an eye on Lady Leonette. I would like to take measure of her.”

“Yes, my lord.” The Flowers looked at him hopefully. “My sister…?”

“I think Lady Sera should benefit most from staying in Highgarden,” was Willas’ light response. ‘Where she should serve as hostage to ensure good behavior.’
“Yes, my lord. May I still write to her?”

The Heir to House Tyrell allowed this, for Tyman’s loyalty and service had earned him such. It would have been more logical to remove the bastard altogether but Willas abhorred discarding good talent. They concluded on the details of Tyman’s removal- the extra hundred dragons garnering more than its fair share of goodwill- and the man left soonafter. He jotted down a reminder to have Margaery keep a closer eye on Sera and the stable hands to refuse any of the ladies-in-waiting steeds unless ordered to by his sister’s hand.

‘Had I known such an important secret was kept at the Citadel, I would have sent Garlan,’ Willas inwardly sighed. The act was done, the mummer's show kept and Tyman relatively trustworthy. He had nothing more to complain of, particularly since his brothers and sister had other assigned duties. ‘Life would be so much easier if I had a few more siblings to delegate to.’

Garlan was vital to carrying out his plans for the next few moons. The two would soothe Willas’ broken heart in the sunny beaches and refreshing waters of Bandallon, complete with pre-written letters sent every fortnight to Margaery describing the eldest Tyrell’s recovery. He had taken special attention to crafting those letters; they had to strike the right balance between depressed and hopeful. If it veered towards the former, Mother would make a surprise visit to fret over her little boy in person. If the latter, Grandmother would demand him home to stop acting like a child and retake his responsibilities.

In truth that time recuperating would be spent in the Crossroads Inn at Riverdale. It was the closest he could get to Lyarra without actually venturing into her Uncle’s lands and taking residence in one of the few inns in the North. This would more than halve the time for their letters to reach one another and drastically shorten his courting, for he suspected many letters would be needed. He also estimated that he had three moons at best before his parents decided he had mourned enough.

Willas was willing to take as many moons as necessary to win Lyarra over though. For once in his life, he decided to take a page out of his friend, Oberyn’s, book. He wouldn’t let the Northern shewolf who was too remarkable for her own good simply walk away. He would be spontaneous. He would be reckless. He would drop everything and follow her.

Mostly. He still had to make arrangements for his travels, set up a system to review ongoing business investments, teach Samwell to organize his correspondence and forward time-sensitive letters by messenger, write up a list of purchase caps for the steward, set up a timetable for crop rotation in the eastern sector and notify Uncle Gareth that he wouldn’t be able to listen to smallfolk petitions for the next few week. But after that, Willas would drop everything and follow her.
'Following Oberyn’s example in anything…’ Willas reflected, an exasperated chuckle leaving him. ‘This must be love.’

Lyarra held her breath and closed her eyes tightly as soft, thumping noises made their way closer. One, two, three… The dark-haired girl counted up till twenty, as the footsteps grew distant and the her ears strained for any further interruptions. There was only the whisper of wind across the heavy curtains hiding her from view. When she was certain that she could not be found, the young girl unclasped her arms, allowing Insights of Dragonlords to peek out between her knees and her chest.

Father had decreed that Lyarra could only read two hours for pleasure a day. That time had rather swiftly dwindled though this book, being written in a dialect of Valyrian she had yet to fully grasp, was truly for her studies. She had even to bring a Volantene dictionary so that she may find the words that she did not know! It wasn’t as though she was disobeying Father; not at all! This book was a vital part of her education!

Lyarra was confident in this. So confident that she had decided to read the book on the windowseat of the third floor, an arch carved into the walls with plenty of sunlight and a curtain to hide her. Because discretion was necessary to one’s focus when one intended to study Volantenese.

‘A modicum of comfort would be nice too.’ She grimaced, adjusting her body. While gowns were superior to trousers in one respect- the padding- they weren’t ideal for hours of roughly-carved stone. ‘Maybe I could check the ravenry to see if Wil—Margaery sent me another letter.’

Her reply to the first one had been as brisk and businesslike as she could fashion it to be. Despite Sansa’s complaints of the two behaving in a manner unacceptable for the songs, Lyarra had chosen to adopt a distance for these negotiations. And they were negotiations, no matter that Arya had scoffed at the silly grin she wore for most of the day. The stumble-skip of her heartbeat aside, she had sent back a polite expression of gratitude for the offer and inquired on why he had done so. Willas Tyrell would also have to answer for why the letter was sent to her and not, as would be proper, Lord Stark.

‘It should still be a fortnight before the raven reaches Highgarden though.’ Despite the geographical improbability of a reply, the dark-haired girl sidled into the ravenry anyway. Maester Luwin informed her that nothing had arrived and laughed when his most devoted student blushed fireplum red. Lyarra didn’t know how but most of the senior members of the Stark household seemed to think that she was smitten with a Southron boy… namely, Loras Tyrell.
‘Thankfully Lady Stark saw fit to dismiss the rumors…’ While the auburn-haired woman had looked askance at her once or twice during meals, she had yet to bring up the subject. Father had also been content to forget any mention of rose lords, betrothals, dances and daughters flowered to wed.

‘Lady Stark’s reaction might be reason enough to wed Willas and damn the consequences.’

She hadn’t anywhere in particular to go and so, found herself in her nearest place of comfort. Lyarra’s room was a mid-sized circular affair in the family wing of the castle. It was plain compared to the southron decorated style of her trueborn siblings but filled with signs of its occupant. The table beside her bed was overflowing with books borrowed from the library. An oak-carved desk, commissioned on her two-and-tenth nameday by Father, had a stack of parchment and neatly arrayed inkwells and quills. The curtains and bedspread were originally a pale grey painted over in scenes of nature and battle by herself, Bran and Sansa. The wall hangings were likewise old tablecloths redone by the three. Her harp held place of honor on the other dresser, clothes haphazardly thrown inside, while a padlocked chest held all of her accumulated gold. Under the bed were crates of bottled tinctures, herbs and flowers, a tourney sword and practice armor and finally, the letter from Lord Willas Tyrell.

There was a new addition to the private enclosure today and that would be a letter sealed by forest green wax.

Lyarra promptly opened it to a decidedly familiar, male hand. It wasn’t a reply to her letter, as that had been sent only two days past but it had foreseen her concerns. After a good two paragraphs referencing her stay in Highgarden and how pleased ‘Margaery’ had been to spend time with her, it turned to the main issue.

‘…as you know, the circumstances between us are such that my father would not necessarily be pleased with a correspondence. He may even seek to end it should Lord Stark inform him of our continued acquaintance. Mayhaps it would be more prudent to forget you altogether but such acts are easier spoken of than done. It cannot be helped that I am very much determined to befriend you regardless. It is the consequence of bewitchment, you see. The time that we have spent together, all too brief as it was, has piqued my interest and I hope, has done the same to you. While I accept that I do not hold your confidence and affection yet, I refuse to accept that this state of affairs cannot change. Correspond with me. Give me a chance to assuage your concerns. Let me ensnare you as you have done me. Visit Highgarden again and this time, do not leave…’

‘Lord Willas fears that Father’s honor would end this unconventional courtship before it could even begin.’ Lyarra bit her lip sharply. ‘Is there a plot? How much of this is born of a man’s infatuation?’

There had to be a plot involved, didn’t there? The letter spoke such kind words… but she couldn’t
allow herself to accept them. Honeyed words were the simplest and least costly form of manipulation there could be. And the letter was written by a Tyrell. Lyarra refused to believe them even when the words drew such a pretty picture for her.

‘...I should confess envy when my brothers danced with the most enchanting daylight star in the hall. You were a wonder in blue and silver and had I dared, I would have stolen you as those wildlings do spearwives beyond the wall. At the least, I would have liked to hold you in my arms for every dance...’

The letter was signed, once again, by the hand of Margaery Tyrell. Thank the Gods no one else had found this before her sort-of romance with Willas was attributed to yet another one of his siblings.

‘Still. ’ The dark-haired girl had no doubts that she was blushing now. Her stomach was certainly doing that fell-swoop motion that occurred just as one was falling from a great height. ‘ That was so sw- wait, how did that damn nosy southron get a letter inside my bedroom ?!’

x

Loras pasted a smile, bright and brittle, on his face and refused to let it go, even as Lord Stannis Baratheon glowered over at him. He stood by Renly’s shoulder, a hands width closer than he typically did, in confidence of two pieces of knowledge. The first was that Renly’s older brother was more than well-aware of his ‘unnatural inclinations’ and adamant in not acknowledging them whatsoever. The second was that his lover needed the comfort of his proximity when dealing with one of the morons that he was unfortunately saddled with as brothers. The Knight of Flowers wouldn’t even be here if his own brother hadn’t demanded it.

“You want a hunk of stone,” the Lord of Dragonstone said flatly.

“A fossilized dragon egg,” the brunette knight corrected. “My eldest brother has a taste for rare historical artifacts and his nameday will soon arrive. I would like to purchase a fossilized dragon egg from you. I’m told that there are a few hidden in the caverns of the castle?”

‘As far as bridal gifts to a Targaryen goes, one couldn’t find better than a dragon egg.’ It wasn’t possible to hatch them anymore but that was hardly the point. Willas wanted Lyarra to have a piece of her heritage to hold onto and so, she would. Somehow becoming a besotted, lovestruck fool had made his eldest brother even more bossy. ‘ Maybe he’ll relax once Lyarra starts regularly gracing his bed?’
It was possible. Loras Tyrell was an optimist.

“A knight from my household will follow you everywhere,” Stannis was talking. He should probably be listening at this point. “He shall lead you down to the crypts to find your dragon egg and then you shall directly make your way to my solar to discuss price. I won’t accept any deviations on the path and the Gods help you, if this is a ploy to spy on my household, Loras Tyrell…”

A few more minutes of warnings and recriminations later and a silver-haired, violet-eyed Dragonstone born knight was leading them down. He had sneered at Loras twice now, not that the brunette minded all that much. The Knight of Flowers wondered how quickly his attitude would change should he know that the last trueborn Targaryen in Westeros was being courted by his brother.

“Thank you for this,” Loras whispered, low enough that only his lover could hear. “I know you hate visiting Dragonstone.”

“If it makes you happy,” Renly sighed. He shot an exasperated glare back at the disdainful Crownsland knight. “We aren’t actually here to spy on Stannis, are we?”

“I’m no one’s first choice for a spy,” was the reply. As they walked down, he took mental notes of the pathway, defenses, servants and most everything else anyway. Just because he was here for the dragon egg didn’t mean he had to be lazy.

x

The story’s pace should pick up in the next chapter. As for now, one of my readers- thank you, Addison- found this wonderful picture of how a child between Willas Tyrell and Lyarra Snow would look. I had planned for Gawain to be born with golden eyes but they’re changed to grey now, because of how simply perfect this picture is.

The One True King: https://i.pinimg.com/736x/03/bd/709833566552aa7a205f7cf35532--haircuts-for-little-boys-toddler-boy-haircuts.jpg
‘Skoriot ūuhor ārilla issa?’ Arya mouthed the words soundlessly to herself, making certain to allow not even a whisper to escape her hiding spot. ‘Where is my beer?’

Her eldest sister had insisted on at least a few phrases memorized everyday in exchange for archery lessons and Arya had agreed to that. She had never specified which phrases though, which was why the youngest she-wolf took it upon herself to find the most amusing if still acceptable sentences. It was surprising that Lyarra hadn’t gone and written up a list herself but she supposed Willas Tyrell was to blame for that.

For one, his letters distracted Lyarra terribly, though Arya only minded when Sansa squealed in her ear about how romantic the Tyrell was. It was nice to see Lyarra so happy, even if her dreamy-eyed look was kind-of stupid and this whole love business kept her head in the clouds half the time. Arya would even swear that she walked into a wall once reading the letters except that it wouldn’t be true. Lyarra had far too much situational awareness to do that. She almost walked into a wall though.

The bigger reason that Willas Tyrell was at fault was because Robb and Lyarra spent every possible free minute holed up in the library. Arya had visited them with cups of tea before this and the two were feverishly working out mathematical equations and her brother swearing under his breath for every correct estimate the rose lord sent. Robb had impressive lungs because he managed a whole two minutes of swearing without taking a second breath when the final tally proved right. There were a few mistakes here and there but the Starks would indeed be facing a decade of winter.

Arya privately hoped that Willas Tyrell was everything Sansa declared he must be because at this rate, a marriage between him and Lyarra was almost assured for anything short of outright war. The only definite thing that she knew about the man was that he was a pretty southron with trust issues.

This was why she was here today, silently practicing Braavosi Valyrian while crouched behind raven food crates. There was a spy in Winterfell, everyone agreed but while the others were too busy with research and planning, Arya was not. She (and Bran) would be the ones to camp out at the ravenry, the likeliest place for the spy to dispatch his messages and catch him!

‘Catching a spy is so boring.’ She flipped to another page and started doodling on the margins. There was a knife and a hand mirror by her side but even with her confidence, Arya knew only one would be used. ‘Zokia vale paeri iprattis. The wolves will eat the man slowly. Urgh… I’m so hungry.’
Another hour passed before Arya called it a day and walked back down for lunch. Day Two of Catch the Spy wasn’t any more fruitful than Day One, nor Day Three. By Day Four, it was merely Bran’s insistence on the roof above the ravenry being his ideal reading spot that kept them there. Day Five had a scare with a rat that resulted in her grabbing it by the tail and tossing it out the window because no one made Arya Stark scream like that. Day Six had her memorize six ways to insult one’s mother in Braavosi. Day Seven bore fruit just after she had decided to pre-write a speech for Willas Tyrell.

‘Odris haedri renīs se nykēla avy ossēninna. Hurt my sister and I’ll kill you myself.’

Arya froze when she heard a pitter-patter by the stairs. Stone wasn’t made to muffle sound and gave her plenty of warning to adjust her position. Her eye peeked directly between the thin opening of two crates, nose wrinkling at the scent of the slimy innards. She didn’t know who would appear—likely Maester Luwin on normal business—but a woman stepped through the doorway. Neither slim nor fat, tall nor short, plain brown of hair and dressed as a lady’s handmaiden.

‘Karen? Kayla? Oh, Corian!’ Arya narrowed her eyes. ‘Willas Tyrell’s influence is impressive if one of Mother’s personal Riverland servants answer to him.’

The youngest she-wolf wasn’t sure how the rose lord managed to win the loyalty of a servant working here since before she was even born but the details could be found later. Arya certainly didn’t think Corian had any reason to be here. Even if she wasn’t spying, Winterfell’s ravens were for the personal use of the family or Maester Luwin.

‘Courting Lyarra or not, House Stark isn’t going to tolerate spies in our castle,’ Arya inwardly huffed. Her shins were hurting a bit from having to crouch on the stone. ‘Come on. Come on. Send your letter already, so I can move out of this blasted position.’

One Winterfell, two Winterfell, three Winterfell, four Winterfell… thirty-six Winterfell’s later, the raven was flying out of the tower and the servant had left. The footsteps had barely faded before the small, dark-haired girl jumped out with an exaggerated gasp—the air! Oh, sweet fresh air, at last!—and ran to the window. She leaned out, peered up and was met with astonished river blue eyes.

“Did you see which direction it flew in?”

“Southwest.” Bran reached down and grabbed the mirror she tossed him. Luckily his grasp was sure, for spy or not, Sansa would undoubtedly murder them both had her hand mirror broke. “Did you see
“Corian!” Arya had another step of her plan to put into process but she watched with awed eyes as Bran scaled to the highest point of the ravenry tower, then slid down to the other edge. He jumped off to the nearby wall for the Hunter’s Gate and balanced across the narrow ledge, past Kennel and Guest House, to the nearby Courtyards. There, she knew he would use the mirror’s reflecting light to signal Theon and it was only a matter of time from there before the Greyjoy shot the raven down.

‘Now to go and get Robb.’ The little girl inwardly cackled to herself. ‘He’s going to be so mad.’

Arya turned swiftly on her heel and ran down the stairs, taking the bottom three steps at once, in her rush. It was a shame that the raven would get hurt, though Theon had promised to make it a light wound. The important part was that her mission was a success! Lyarra was going to be so proud!

‘It’ll be funny to read Willas Tyrell’s explanation for this too.’ So lost in her head was she that Arya pace abruptly stopped by the unyielding force of Lady Catelyn Stark’s legs.

“Oomph.” Arya pinwheeled her arms, caught her balance and looked up to amused blue eyes.

“And where are you in a rush to be, sweetling?”

She scowled at her a little for the term of endearment. Only Rickon was young enough for that!

“I’m sorry for running into you, Mother but I need to speak to Robb. I found a spy in Winterfell!”

“There is no harm done but do try to walk there.” Catelyn Stark said indulgently. “The spy will still be waiting for you when you reach him.”

“Yes, Mother,” the dark-haired Stark said agreeably.

Once Lady Stark had turned the hallway, she commenced running. Robb and Lyarra had finished most of their research by now, so they would be in what Arya mentally called the ‘War Room’ and that most everyone else agreed to be the old nursery playroom. Winterfell was a big castle meant for multiple branches of the Stark family but it had been whittled down to just them in recent years and...
many areas were thus abandoned. It was a shame. Arya would have liked a playmate that was less of a bookworm than Bran.

The War Room was paneled with wooden floors and walls, the expense written off for the safety of the children and the relative ease of logging in the North. Yellow sunshine poured in from the wide windows on the third floor keeping the entire room warm even in the winter frost. Half of the floor was covered in carpets but one could still find etches of paint and scuff marks from Lyarra’s many projects. There were plenty of pillows and blankets inside, a wide paneled desk surrounded by mismatched chairs dragged in years past and even a direwolf banner on the walls. There were high shelves where books or anything important were kept but absolutely zero weaponry, considering Rickon’s curiosity. One hallow part of the wall, designed ages ago to hold quick-acting poisons for the family in-case of invasion, and colder than the rest of the room was now used as a makeshift ice box.

Robb and Theon liked to use it to store bottles of Arbor Gold. Lyarra liked to use it to store various animal body parts used in her medical tinctures. There was nothing funnier than having the former open it to find owl eyeballs or rat spleens floating in pickled jars next to their spirits.

“I drink from those bottles!” Robb had bellowed, gesturing to the slime stain on a wine bottle.

Lyarra raised an eyebrow. “You drank pulped swallow’s liver too when you had a cold last sennight.”

Arya hadn’t ever seen anyone progress from snowy pale to greyish green quite that quickly before.

When she burst in, two heads of brown and auburn respectively, were bent over a detailed map of the North, discussing a matter in intense whispers. Arya’s entrance had them look up, Lyarra breaking into a small, welcoming smile and Robb into a larger one. It was wiped away a second later.

“I found a spy!” Under their half-disbelieving expressions, she jumped into a quick explanation about her last few days and how Corian the Maidservant was taking Tyrell gold. When it was done, she took a deep breath, relaxed and waited impatiently for her praise.

Arya received a cuff behind the ear. “Arya Stark. What were you thinking tracking down a spy by yourself? You could have been hurt!”
“Lyaa…” She made a hurt face. “I brought a knife with me! And Bran was there!”

“Neither you nor Bran know how to use a knife.”

“Well yes, that’s true… but I didn’t face her either! I waited until Corian left before telling Bran.”

Lyarra paused and considered this. “That was good thinking on your part,” she reluctantly admitted.

Arya preened. “It probably wasn’t necessary. I mean, Lord Willas’ spies aren’t going to try and hurt me, right? Not if he wants you to marry him.”

Her sister blushed, as she often did when Willas Tyrell and marriage were used in any conversation. “No, I suppose not. But I admire your caution anyway.”

“It’ll give me a chance to confront the spy too.” Robb ruffled her hair, causing the messy black strands to spike up further. “Well done, Arya.”

To Lyarra, he added. “Your suitor and I need to have some words. I understand this is a common precaution for southrons and I doubt he means us any harm but this is still a Stark castle.”

“I’ll take him to task in our next letter,” the eldest girl promised.

This proved to be unnecessary when Theon appeared a little later with a still closed letter in hand. Bran brought the raven with him. They would have to nurse him back themselves, lest word spread in the castle and alert the spy. At least it was a flesh wound that barely clipped the edge of the wing.

“One spy’s account of Winterfell for the Lady’s pleasure,” Theon said grandly, presenting the letter to Lyarra with a flourish. Her eyes skimmed over it quickly and then the girl’s expression froze.

“Er, Robb,” Lyarra finally said. “I don’t think Corian’s a Tyrell spy.”

“What makes you say that?”
“Well, for one, I doubt him the kind of man to own brothels in King’s Landing…”

Sansa Stark was on a mission. None of her other siblings had considered it but that was due to their relative inexperience on such matters. It wasn’t anything dangerous or glorious but it was necessary nonetheless. It was, in fact, of the utmost importance to House Stark. This self-assigned job was none other than to prepare Lyarra Snow for a highborn southron marriage.

Despite Sansa's optimism on the matter- and she really, truly did think that her older sister would find her happily ever after in the Tyrell Heir- the Stark did worry. Lyarra's baseborn status would inflict difficulties on her married life. Lord Willas didn't seem to care, at least not enough to retract his proposal but that didn't mean others wouldn't. There were better than even odds that they would lash out at her sister even if she wasn't a bastard, simply due to her choice of husband. If so, Lyarra needed to establish herself at the earliest chance as someone worthy of one-day being Lady Tyrell. She had to be elegant. She had to be poised. She had to show that a Great House stood behind her every step of the way.

Lyarra had to be magnificent. And Sansa would help her be so, as soon as she figured out exactly what that meant.

‘What did Septa Mordane say that a Lady needed to know?’ Sansa impatiently drummed her fingers on the wooden desk of her appointed library space. The red-haired girl had years of lessons on the subject, so she really should know the requirements by now. ‘…Needlepoint?’

There was also etiquette, the Seven and the importance of obeying one’s husband. Lyarra didn’t need help on the first, had probably already read up on the second and for the third? Well, she wished Willas Tyrell the best of luck if he thought to tame her sister. Reason and duty worked wonders on the dark-haired girl but unquestioned obedience was a challenge for all of the Stark children, even herself.

‘My lessons are so useless.’ Sansa scowled, more irritated than distressed. She had a few more years to educate herself, if not track down a more useful teacher but Lyarra was to be married soon. ‘Hmm, alright then. What have I learned that they haven’t taught me?’

If the red-haired she-wolf went about this logically, than the goal was to prepare Lyarra for marriage. She would be an inexperienced bride in a faraway land with customs that were alien to her. Since
there wasn’t a guarantee that a Northern party could be assembled for her, the preference would be to ready her as much as possible now. Father always said that the best knowledge came from those experienced in the subject. Who did Sansa know that had knowledge of being a foreign bride?

‘Mother!’ She clapped her hands in delight. Robb had given explicit orders not to share any news of the courtship with their parents but he hadn’t forbidden her from discussing the general subjects! ‘Mother knows that I love stories. I’ll simply have to ask her about the early days of her marriage during our next needlepoint session.’

Sansa wasn’t so quite so optimistic as to think Mother would be overjoyed for Lyarra’s advantageous marriage. While the Lady might begrudgingly admit to the benefits, both for House Stark and the North, Lyarra’s involvement would turn the success sour. Nonetheless Mother doted on her and was happy to share tales of betrothal and marriage to her inquisitive little girl. Sansa listened eagerly, asked an insightful question or two and inwardly rejoiced when the subject distracted Septa Mordane from reading aloud from the Seven Pointed Star.

It’s not that Sansa wasn’t faithful but one could only listen to sermons of repentance so many times before they slipped into one ear and out the other.

From her observations, Sansa had decided on a few simple things to be done.

First, Lyarra needed a dowry.

“I’m running through the numbers now,” Robb informed her grimly. “Father set aside monetary amounts for each of you but he left the furs, silver and lumber unaccounted til you wed. It’ll be tight but we can cover the first from the Mountain Clan’s taxes this year and there should be enough silverwork in White Harbor to buy an advance. We’ll send it south after he’s taken her for wife.”

“Maybe you could replace the lumber with plant clippings native to the North?”

“I thought about that and it would be nice if Lyaa had a reminder of home. The Tyrell’s wouldn’t lack the common ones. Though there are some rare flowers past the Wall… Uncle Benjen mentioned frostfires in the Lands of Always Winter. He could harvest some of those and lungwort leaves too…”

Sansa left him to his mumblings, content that at least one necessary task was filled.
Second, Lyarra needed knowledge.

“But Sansa, Arya’s already making me stake out the ravenry with her.”

“I don’t care.” The red-haired girl refused to consider why those two were staking out the ravenry of all places. “Just draw up a family tree for House Tyrell and then make a chart of the bannermen. Mainline names, castles, mottos, sigils and historical friendships and/or grudges. If there’s anything interesting about their history then add that too.”

“Why aren’t you doing it?”

“I am. I’m doing all of the Houses from Ambrose to Lyberr and you’re doing the rest.”

“Chin up, Bran.” She ruffled the younger boy’s hair, just a few shades darker than her own. “I know it’s a lot of work but we have to help Lyaa get ready for her marriage. And just think about how many tourneys we’ll see when we go south to visit her!”

Third, Lyarra needed a trousseau.

It took a great deal of haggling and tears (on Lyarra’s side, not hers) before the older girl admitted to the need of an updated wardrobe. Even if House Tyrell planned to commission more gowns for her after she was wed, and Sansa thought it likely so, the Snow still needed to ready clothes of her own. Clothes meant fabric, which meant gold, which meant the dark-haired girl needed to sacrifice her life’s earnings. Robb had contributed his own coffers to the project but since this was all to be done on the sly, they had to scrape together funds separate from Lord Stark’s pocketbook.

“It’ll be fine,” the red-haired girl cajoled, patting her consolingly on the back. “It’s for a good cause.”

“Years of hard work down the drain.” Lyarra wept piteously as though she wasn’t to marry into the second wealthiest House in Westeros. Her fingers still clung tightly to the chest of gold, Sansa having to pry each clenched-white digit off one by one. “My moneeeyy …”

“Gods damn it, Lyarra, give me the gold!”
On the bright side, the local merchants were very accommodating to one that had as many dragons, stags and crowns as Sansa did. Silver bought their silence and gold had them send messengers to business partners up in White Harbor to send down their finer wares. Soon the girl had accumulated a respectable quantity of Pentoshi linen, Myrish silk, Braavosi cotton, Valeman wool and many more fabrics dyed a variety of bright and vivid colors. Sansa sighed happily over her hoard, briefly envious that they were not for her own use. Ah well, eldest born, first wed, she supposed.

‘Now that I think about it, all those years of sewing lessons may just pay off.’ River blue eyes gleamed as her fingers carded through the lustrous sky blue cotton in front of her. Lying wasn’t part of Sansa’s nature but she would fall sick to fully appreciate this bounty. ‘Let’s start with the wedding dress.’

Robb rubbed his forehead to combat the abating headache building up. He blinked his eyes as well, unsurprised by how dry they had gotten from staring at sheet after sheet of inked parchment. Looking up, he found that there was still one stack left to go through for the day, though it was blessedly short compared to his morning work.

“Tea?” Arya piped up, gesturing to the teakettle in an offer to pour. The air was still rich with the scent of blood blossoms from all of the cups they had drunk so far.

“Yes, please.” The auburn haired boy found it strange how quickly this little corner of the nursery got turned into a makeshift office. They had had to drag in two more desks, each set for a single person and hammer on a few shelves for all of the references books they needed. The amount of candles, parchment and inkwells they ran through was ridiculous. “Where is everyone?”

“Bran’s doing his Reach project at the library. Sansa and Lyarra are working on the trousseau and I think Theon got begged into taking Rickon out for a ride,” the youngest Stark daughter rattled off. “He promised to check up on the flower cache while he’s out there.”

“Right. Anymore spy letters?”

There weren’t enough words available to describe the depth of Robb’s anger when he discovered a spy in his castle. Lord Willas had admitted that the letter was placed there by an unknown servant bribed by one of his business partner’s workers but until that admission had come, the Starks were quietly combing Winterfell for any possible leaks. They had found three additional informants, alongside the brothel spy and her yet unknown master, and Robb thought there to be more. Two informants could be traced back to Lords Bolton and Manderly respectively, though neither seemed
to do more than send messages on the daily workings of the castle. The last was a child in the kitchens that Theon had followed once into Wintertown. The boy left a scrap of paper under a rock and an unidentified man had come by to pick it up. They hadn’t any guarantees to either’s lord but even in the North, the Master of Whispers was well-known for his little birds.

The auburn haired boy’s first instinct had been to toss all of them out of Winterfell. Luckily more level heads had prevailed and Lyarra recommended discussing the issue with Lord Willas. Robb wasn’t exactly eager to talk spies in his castle with a man who absolutely would put a spy there had he the chance but his sister insisted. The Tyrell was more studied on the subject than either of them, Lyarra argued. If they were to be family one day, they should learn to trust each other.

Personally, Robb neither trusted nor wanted to trust Willas Tyrell. A marriage between him and Lyarra may be near inevitable at this point but that didn’t mean he liked the man who would be stealing one of his best friends from him. As Lyarra’s brother, it was practically his duty to mislike the older man.

The honey-haired lord’s advice had been useful though. His future good brother recommended leaving the spies alone (as danger known was danger halved), occasionally intervening to ensure pertinent knowledge wasn’t shared and finding their own informants amongst the help. Robb hadn’t started on the third yet but the others parts were easy enough to implement. Theon would clip their wings with arrows and Arya would chase the fallen birds around with makeshift pillow case nets and then extract the messages tied in their claws. After the first few times, the smarter ravens had even learnt to circle around and land in the Godswood if anyone other than Maester Luwin used them.

“Nothing for now.” Arya had been assigned the all-important task of taking whichever reports they could get their hands on and editing them to ensure that certain details were left out. Her budding talent in forgery would be a skill Robb would have to leave out of future marriage negotiations.

“Can you go to the kitchens and arrange snacks for everyone then? Nothing messy since Lyarra and Sansa will need clean fingers to sew.”

The dark-haired girl made a sharp salute- apparently still in the throes of her sellsword persona- and then marched off. Robb returned to nursing his tea.

‘Duty is the bane of all pleasure.’ He briefly fantasized about a life where he needn’t be the Stark Heir, running off to become a knight in the Kingsguard or some other fantastical adventure. ‘No, I have too many responsibilities to pick such a foolhardy path. It may be a nice dream but it’s impossible to truly deny one’s duty to House and kin.’
Robb’s days were filled with one responsibility after another. He had his usual lessons with Maester Luwin and Ser Rodrik of course but afterward he was writing up dowry estimates, bartering fabrics with the merchants, reviewing spy reports, organizing an ever-growing nursery of plants and quizzing Lyarra on Reach subjects from Bran’s research. Those were all side details from the main bulk of his (and Lyarra’s) work though. The two of them had invested countless hours into- and likely would countless hours more- an action plan for surviving winter.

The first sennight was spent double-checking Willas Tyrell’s estimates. It was a good initial effort but Robb had to tweak a few sums here and there for results that were simultaneously more depressing and more optimistic. The Tyrell’s population count was off by a couple tens of thousands of people (honestly, why did the south think that the North was a barren wasteland?) but they also didn’t know how much food could be scrounged from the land. The two eldest members of House Stark had researched, debated, calculated, paced and thrown the occasional book at the other but eventually, conservative estimates had been reached. Estimates on population count, land yield, accumulated gold, future expenses, glasshouse and seed, trade ships, travel time and more. They had a tentative plan on how to survive the next winter by planting, trading and building glasshouses to maximum capacity now and how much gold they should store for future costs. It was more than a little messy and he would have rewrite it into a semblance of order later but it was something.

‘Presenting it to Father can wait a few moons till Lyarra’s wed,’ Robb decided. ‘Should Willas Tyrell come through with his bride price, we’ll have enough of a cushion to invest into ships rather than buy from the Riverlands directly. It may be time for the North to regain some naval power of its own.’

x

*The letters between Willas and Lyarra will be in the next chapter.*
As the days passed, Winterfell buzzed with the energies of its heirs hiding away in deserted rooms and implementing their many secret plots. Had the servants anything to say on this, it likely would be fantastical, fascinating and false for the little wolves (and one odd kraken) were keeping their mouths shut. The one man that could order them true, Eddard Stark, had decided to allow them this mischief.

None of the gossip Ned overheard was malicious after all. Robb and Theon spent an afternoon setting up locks in all of the children’s rooms. Lyarra and Bran cleared out entire shelves of the library. Sansa ordered more sewing thread from the market and Arya loitered around the ravenry for hours. Strange behavior but nothing that would put them at risk or that they were forbidden to do. Ned didn’t want to stifle his children or press them for answers they weren’t ready to give. No, it would be best for everyone by allowing them some harmless mischief.

Besides how much trouble could his children get into anyway?

The answer was a great deal of trouble, not that Ned Stark knew. His eldest daughter and bloodborne niece was mostly focused on the letters arriving every few days. Robb had begrudgingly acceded to secrecy and selected a maidservant that fetched fresh water every morn to receive them. It was a copper penny a letter though the girl quickly made a stag’s worth. Apparently Willas Tyrell was a very prolific writer.

They discussed a great variety of subjects. Their current tasks…

‘You’ll have to forgive the speed and length of my correspondence. There’s been more time scheduled for my relaxation in the last sennight alone than the preceding year and my experience with such- as you may be aware, my schedule at home is quite demanding- is minimal. I’d think to compare it to my recuperation from the ill-fated tourney all those years ago but alas, the Crossroads Inn, while lacking in no such amenities as favored by the masses of Riverland nobles, has a prodigious dearth of reading material. I’ve chosen to dedicate my copious amounts of free time to tutoring Garlan in the manifold duties of a lord, to his vocal displeasure. I do believe he may choose to purposefully replicate our grandfather’s death any day now…’

...everyday habits…
While I haven’t the experience of a lordling, Robb is kind enough to take me to task in a manner not dissimilar to yourself and Garlan. I haven’t been tempted to ride off a cliffside yet- and truly, a morbid example by your hand, Lord Willas- but there’s no shortage of snipes offered when my temper’s engaged. The two of us dispel such miasma through sparring, yet I suspect that if select the same option with a man I chose to wed, there will suspicions raised from even my end. Perhaps we may ride together instead for I have a great fondness for the sport. Apple Cider remains my favorite steed…’

…hobbies and secret pleasures…

‘ Three teaspoons of grinded sandstone from the shores of Whispering Sound and a lit match, and you’ll have the most spectacular sputtering sparks. The fire burns crimson for the first day, then orange to yellow to white, in four days succession and needs merely damp moss to feed it. I’ve kept several in mason jars around my office and while Mother frets dearly, the alchemy is harmless…’

…books that each had loved…

‘ How could you not have read The Wanderer’s Tale? It is second to none for a Maester’s journey in the art of healing and a requirement amongst the novices of the Citadel. While a few theories themselves may be suspect, others are downright brilliant- the Valeman’s theory on inoculation* chief amongst them. I’ve spent more time in Winterfell’s library with this book in hand than any other. You simply must read it and share your thoughts with me…’

…the friends they made…

‘ Oberyn Nymeros Martell. How can one possibly describe him? He is impetuous, changeful, careless, maddening, underhanded, deceptive and by far, one of the most fascinating men I’ve ever had the fortune to meet. He has a decided grasp of the classics and an eversharp, ever-ready tongue that, when combined with his pleasure in spreading chaos everywhere he goes, spurns friend and foe alike. I don’t think one can decide on a position of neutrality for him. We share the same thirst for knowledge, though I haven’t his independence (or frankly, reckless disregard for my own life) to pursue it as he has. I’m certain that he’ll be delighted with my course of action and desire to meet the woman that inspired it at once. I should warn you that Oberyn is well-known for his appetites. He may rather forwardly paint his designs on you… and on myself…’

…families and fears…

‘ We are six children, three brothers and three sisters, and as close as any siblings could be when there are none other to foster with us, except for Theon, whose circumstances are rather atypical. I
hadn’t realized how strange that was until I saw the many foster children in Highgarden and in many of the other castles that Father visited along the way. There is a concern that this may burden Robb’s leadership years from now but I shall not worry you with these anxieties today. Instead I will describe to you each of my siblings, for you seem insistent on making them your own one day…”

...the values they held…

‘You needn’t fear any weakness on my part when it should come to shouldering your burdens. As you have said, I am insistent on calling Robb Stark ‘brother’- mayhaps one day, he will begrudgingly return such a favor- and I consider it my foremost duty to attend to the concerns of my family. The institution is as dear to my heart as it is to yours. As you have done me the kindness of warning me of your siblings- and to Lady Arya, she is free to kick me as much as she would like, should I hurt you- I shall do the same. First, if any should share a story of childhood mischief with you, concerning myself, they’ve spoken falsehood. I’ve never done anything of the sort…”

...their once-plans for the future…

‘The knowledge is of a distinctly theoretical nature, I admit, but I have gained exposure from my role as Maester Luwin’s erstwhile and secret assistant. While he hasn’t allowed me to attend to a stitching or a bone setting or anything remotely interesting, I have been allowed full recourse of his medical cabinets. Many of the tinctures and potions in Winterfell are of my own make and one gains a depth of experience in cleaning and dressing cuts and bruises when one has younger siblings for practice. My desire had been to apply those skills and see more than my own little corner of the world…”

...and Willas’ inexplicable affection for massive winged beasts that could set entire cities ablaze.

‘They’re absolutely magnificent beasts, Lady Lyarra. While I should not ignore their obvious capacity for destruction- the Field of Fire had occurred in Reach lands, after all- I think others do them great disservice to paint them solely as agents of the Stranger. Had not one of the lost wonders of the world, the marvelous streets of Old Valyria, been carved under the beast’s touch? The dragonriders had been able to carry tons of well-cut stone to remote areas of the land, melt sand and gravel by tongues of fire in unmet heat today, and build massive constructs to promote trade and the exchange of ideas. To think of how further we could progress with such roads now!- and yet dragons are lost…

Lyarra slowly found herself growing ever more impatient for his next letter. The rose lord had a sharp and clever wit, a breadth and depth of knowledge that astounded her and a ready willingness to solicit her own opinion. He challenged those thoughts, forcing her to defend them with logic and facts, and readily admitted her own expertise in subjects unknown to him. When she offered suggestions, he replied honestly. When she asked questions, he answered earnestly. The Tyrell didn’t
seem to care that she was a woman and maybe that shouldn’t have surprised her (for Lady Olenna remained a distinct memory) but it did.

Willas Tyrell was handsome, titled and wealthy but it was the letter of an aqueduct on the Mander that won her over. She had suggested it as an easier way to move goods from one end of Highgarden to another and draw some extra coin as a pleasure boat otherwise. His reply had brutally and efficiently cut that idea down, citing openings in defense, damage to natural beauty and possible overflow to the fields. It was the sincerity of the response, the knowledge that most other men would have pat her on the head and sent her along for such words, that drew her. The southron took her suggestion seriously and responded as such. The dark-haired girl might even say that he respected her.

‘Gods above, I want to marry Willas Tyrell.’ Lyarra reclined on her bed, holding the parchment up to the air as dawn lit the distinctive inked hand. ‘I want to wear gowns of green and gold, throw all the windows open in the summer heat, speak those silly southron words in their silly, southron court…’

The Snow wasn’t so naive that she didn’t consider what marriage would bring her. Fine gowns, exquisite jewelry and a trueborn name, yes, but also praying in a Sept, deflecting cutting words and ever looking over her shoulder for the next lady to displant her. Lyarra would lose so much freedom in being wed, to all men truly but Willas more than most, and yet, she still desired it.

‘How often shall I find a man who respects me?’ An auburn-haired wolf and a dark-haired kraken immediately came to mind and she shuddered. ‘One that I’m not disgusted to bed anyway.’

Willas Tyrell had to be the least difficult marital duty in Westeros. He was so very pretty.

There still remained concern though and that was the question Willas had never properly answered before. Why did he want to marry her?

x

Garlan mumbled recriminations under his breath as he struggled to pull the damn wheelchair through the door. The ungainly size of the seat, coupled with those gleaming copper knobs and iron dials that did nothing but looked good, only added to the difficulty. The weight was nothing to dismiss either.

Willas leaned leisurely back on their room’s settee, making swift work of his papers. It was the tilt of his smile, a smirk in all but name, that hinted at his amusement. Of course his older brother wouldn’t
mind the mockery of the chair, seeing as he had tossed it together in his workshop. It had been necessary to the disguise, as had shedding all of their clothes for shades of blue and brown, common most to Riverland Houses. He was Gaven Piper of Pinkmaiden, a House bordering the Westerlands and an excuse for their heavier southron accent. He had come here on business with his brother, Warren, who didn't seem to have any issues with his descent into full infirmity. Naturally he would not, if it meant he could write letters all hours of the day, as Garlan dragged his stupid chair around.

“Brother, I had thought we could discuss my six requirements for an investment pitch today,” Willas said, as though he wasn’t fully aware of the pain and suffering he caused those around him, including Garlan. No, especially Garlan. “There are a few examples I can act out for you and then you could-”

“Why don’t I check the stables for another letter?” Garlan interrupted desperately. Gods, not another business lesson. “It’s been two days, hasn’t it?”

His brother’s composure remained intact but there was a certain brightness to his genial smile as he nodded. Garlan had only ever seen such a quietly lovestruck expression on Loras before and now his older brother- reserved, dutiful, detached Willas- had a more sedate companion to it. Since Willas was the last person he imagined to have such, Garlan presupposed that Margaery and himself were not long for any sense in the world. He was mayhaps partial to Lady Leonette but he shuddered in acute sympathy for whatever poor sod would win Margaery’s heart.

The brief respite from lessons offered, Garlan made swift course to the stables. A ravenry would have been the more common location for those letters but the Tyrells had arranged for local merchant partners to carry the messages instead. There was a boy at the stables whose father travelled to Wintertown every sennight to sell claywork and he’d been doubling his trips since Willas’ letter-based courting began. They’d gotten some decent gossip from the man as well; apparently Lady Sansa Stark had been ordering more fine linen and thin cotton of late. His brother had been unbearably smug when he ordered a selection himself from Riverdale’s local market and sent it north to be resold. In customary Willas fashion, the fabrics were resold to profit as apparently even his wife’s trousseau couldn’t be given a discount.

“They’ll be suspicious of the fabrics are too cheap, won’t they?” Willas had protested to his rolled eyes. “Honestly Garlan, you don’t understand business.”

This had led those dreaded business lessons to help him understand such, a set of circumstances that had the middle Tyrell brother quickly regretting his decision. He had forgotten how petty Willas could be. As a child, the merest slight could lead to a revenge campaign oft-disguised by brotherly affection and familial devotion. Their mother still thought Willas had sat Margaery down and ‘helped’ her memorize the full Tyrell family tree to the fifth generation out of the goodness of his heart.
The brunette knight expected mild upset, to be taken out on him in the form of more convoluted sums, when he returned without a letter but was pleasantly surprised. The boy had parchment in hand, thinner than the small pamphlets Lady Lyarra preferred to write, but still enough to distract Willas. Garlan tossed a whole silver stag to the child- freedom!- and then returned back.

“Your lady love awaits a reply.” Willas caught the throw easily, briefly shooting him a genuine smile. “I’ll be off riding if you need me. Don’t need me.”

“One moment please.” A letter knife was close at hand and the honey-haired lord defly broke the seal with it. “This one’s thinner than usual…”

Garlan waited impatiently, bouncing on the soles of his feet, as Willas scanned through the letter. When he was done, his brother looked up, a strange look crossed between apprehension and giddiness on his face.

“Is it an acceptance?” If so, Margaery would have to be alerted to hurry up with those ceremony preparations. “Willas?”

“No.” The negation didn’t seem to dim his brother’s pleasure at the news. “She wants to speak to be personally but… I do think that her answer would be yes.”

Garlan grinned back. Even with his prickled nerves, it was hard not to be pleased for a brother’s happiness. “Excellent! Let’s ready preparations for the greatest scandal ever engaged by House Tyrell, shall we?”

x

A short chapter but it mostly covers the months of correspondence between Willas and Lyarra. I didn’t want to focus too much on the letters but I hope these passages show that the two did learn a lot about each other. Now we’re not moving straight to the kidnapping (it’s coming up, I promise!) but I can promise a great surprise for the next chapter. :) 

*This is a reference to a fantastic fem!Jon x Oberyn story called Bequeathed from Pale Estates by Author376. It’s only posted on Archive of Our Own but I’d encourage everyone to check it out. It’s a great story that balances romance and humor with an insightful look into politics and plenty of worldbuilding. And if you didn’t love Oberyn Martell before, you absolutely will at the end of… let’s
say, four chapters.
Chapter 17

Chapter Seventeen

“You know that if you get caught, you’ll be wedding him?”

“I don’t think I’d mind,” Lyarra confessed, a small smile playing at her lips. Tugging the thick wolf cloak tighter around her, she placed a slippered foot on her brother’s cupped hands and let him boost her up against the stone. Leaning over the edge, it was then Robb’s turn to grab her forearms and be hoisted to the top of the narrow wall separating the Godswood from the rest of the castle.

The auburn-haired Stark turned to look at her, the light snowfall pulling the same dashes of crimson against his cheeks, as he nudged her shoulder. “Is this it then?”

“I don’t think it can be,” Lyarra clasped their hands together, more for settling nerves than seeking warmth. “It’ll be the start of even more chaos, this time impossible to hide from Father.”

“He’ll be satisfied when Lord Willas proves his daughter well-settled,” Robb assured. “As will I.”

“He does make me happy, Robb.” She wouldn’t have married him if he had not, considering the extent of change to occur in her life.

“I know, Lyaa.” Her older brother squeezed her hands gently. “I simply wish that it had been a man closer to home to do so.”

“So do I,” she acknowledged quietly. Looking over to the striking display of ash-burned stone against grim gray sky, the dark-haired girl considered the brightness and splendor of Highgarden. It was an elegant castle, of light and airy corridors, gilt-edged, gauze-spun, and spilling over in green-gold life, but it was not Winterfell. “How does Bran scale such heights with regularity?”

“I don’t know but I certainly think highly of him for doing so.” Robb winced at the unintentional pun, warily eyeing the half-frozen mud far, far beneath them. “Don’t slip Lyarra.”

It was easier said than done as the two eldest children of Lord Eddard Stark carefully and slowly slid
themselves across the stone. Neither had Bran’s courage to stand but then, neither shared his slim, youthful figure either. They went past the iron wolf’s head marking the connection to the gate, slid down to an empty guard’s post (the single man in this storm lured away by Arya’s hysterical loss of her sister’s hand mirror), and slipped out into the woods.

Lyarra didn’t expect the snowfall to abate any time soon but then, Sansa had more optimism than herself. Convinced that this was the moment of the proposal, and with a blushing sister offering little resistance that she would accept such an offer, the red-haired girl had insisted that she dress appropriately. In this case, it had been a well-fitted gown of forest green, bodice a dazzling array of gold and silver thread, long sleeves touched by a delicate ivy design and dove grey slippers. One of the earlier works meant for a public ball, it would now become her ‘betrothal dress’. The exquisite gown was covered by Robb’s thick grey cloak. Her own had been of fox pelt, immediately refused by Sansa for not conforming to her decided coloring scheme.

‘I should have fought harder for my own,’ the Snow thought wistfully, nearly tripping over the hem. Robb was a full head taller than herself. ‘It’ll be so very romantic when I trip into an oak or stain my cheek with tree bark.’

Sansa Stark had allowed a concession with her hair at least. The dark brown hair was folded into a simple low bun, a few curls teased into ringlets around her face. Rarely one to find delight in a looking glass, Lyarra had still been pleased by the overall picture and embraced her sister in thanks. It wasn’t practical, not in the least, but she looked lovely. And mayhaps a small part of her desired a certain rose lord to think the same.

Lord Willas had sworn to meet her at the eastern edge of the Wolfswood, twenty meters from the castle’s gates. How he intended to do so, he did not say, though Robb, for one, was eager to know. The man courting her lacked one trait alone in the eyes of society, a hale body and if an admitted cripple could sneak onto Stark lands, one wondered how easily others might do the same.

Despite her apprehension- Lyarra had snuck away for a planned tryst! Even with her elder brother at her shoulder, this was the most daring and romantic action she had ever taken!- Lyarra could appreciate the scenery around her. The sentinels in the Wolfswood were ancient and boasted lengthy canopies to blot out the weak sunlight of the North. There was barely any underbrush as a result but the few openings where branches did not cross left pools of light in the darkened, hushed landscape. They varied in size from the smallest, at little more than her handbreadth, to the largest, spring-sized pools where the Stark children had once spun each other around.

There was one approaching now and in her giddy apprehension, the dark-haired girl indulged a whimsy she hadn’t considered in years. Reaching out, she tugged at her brother’s hand, taking his surprised glance as approval to pull him closer to the light. Turning to face him, she noted that time truly had passed. Robb possessed the same auburn hair and river blue eyes but Lyarra had now to tip her head up when she grabbed both of his hands and directly copied his stance.
“Remember this?” It didn’t take more than a quarter’s step to the left before her brother mirrored her, laughter on both lips as they spun around. Faster, faster, faster and Lyarra’s bun came undone, dark hair spilling forth and errant strands kissing her lips, as their heads grew progressively more dizzy. Eventually Robb had to let her go, his sister drunk on movement alone as she moved giddily across the forest. The lightheaded girl saw flashes of color—frosted pine, swaying auburn, dusted yellow—and then solid, dark grey.

She looked up to intense tawny eyes. “Hello,” Lord Willas said quietly.

’Sansa will be so upset that my hair is ruined,’ Lyarra thought. “Hello.”

A crooked smile tipped the handsome face across from her and for a heartbeat, she wondered if he had been moving closer… “Hello?”

Robb’s loud, bemused welcome from several trees away had her swiftly pushed back.

‘Brothers,’ Lyarra groused inwardly. Robb hadn’t even done so purposefully, though she presumed he would have been quite pleased with himself if he had. Head starting to regain sense, she looked to the last individual in the clearing. “Hello.”

“Hello,” Garlan greeted back, a wide grin on his face. “Interesting dance there. We haven’t anything like it in the south.”

Her cheeks burning crimson, she tipped her chin back up. “Yes, well I’d be pleased to tutor you on the subject, if you should like, Ser Garlan.”

For some reason, those words caused the older man to blanche. Not so quiet that she could not hear him, he muttered. “Oh dear Gods, not another one.”

Puzzled, for she had meant it as a gentle tease, Lyarra looked questioningly at the older Tyrell. Lord Willas though, had his gaze focused solely on her brother—rather unfair, she felt, considering the effort Sansa had gone to on her behalf—and a pleasant smile visible.

“Lord Robb,” the man angled his walking stick until it was prominently between himself and the
Stark Heir. “A pleasure to meet you.”

It took her brother a few seconds to regain his senses and then the rose lord was returned a bow every bit proper and gallant. “Lord Willas. Welcome to the North. I’d offer our finest amenities to a man of your standing but alas, the Starks haven’t arranged courtships in the woods for centuries.”

“You needn’t extend yourself,” the Tyrell demurred. “The atmosphere alone overtakes any pleasure found in common refinements.”

That the honey-haired lord’s eyes were turned all too visibly in her own direction, and Lyarra despaired for the mess her hair had become, was lost on no one. Robb bristled, despite the fact that securing a betrothal was presumably the end goal for her House, complimented the man’s appearance, particularly the finely-carved cane. Lord Willas accepted it gracefully and then lamented that his knee prevented him from enjoying the capers that so many children sought glee from. This was returned with a sally on the rose lordling’s visit; Highgarden must be an oasis of efficiency and productivity for such time to be drawn.

“I told him to charm his future good family,” Garlan commented, making her jump. Lyarra had been watching the back-and-forth volley with fascination and hadn’t noticed the knight sidling up to her.

“He took you at your word then, Ser.” The dark-haired girl could read Robb’s moods as well as an experienced sailor could wind and clouds and her brother’s shoulders eased with each quip. “May I ask how you travelled here?”

“You may.” There was a moment of silence afterward and Lyarra made a soft tsk at Garlan’s grin.

“Oh, very well. How did you travel here?”

The brunette knight offered a concise summary of the two riding in from the Barrowlands, under the guise of minor sons from Pinkmaiden, complete with the obligatory gripe about the Twins. Lyarra commiserated; her own experience with the weasels- and it was cruel, but oh! If any House embodied the creature in flesh and spirit, it was the Freys- had been unpleasant. Garlan mused on how there could be so many of them alive, lamenting it the whim of the Gods that those who had been given so little be so numerous in number.

“That does explain why there are only four of you.” An inquiring glance prompted, “Humility aside, your family is rather attractive.”
Garlan looked pleased. “And yours as well,” he complimented. “If your sisters are in any measure as beautiful as yourself, Lord Robb will have no trouble in making them brides.”

“He isn’t in the habit of finding his sisters groomsmen.”

“Shame. The boy has a talent for it.” Garlan nodded towards where the conversation had fallen to a close. Robb hadn’t been eased into happiness yet but there was a polite smile on his face, as he nodded to Lord Willas. When the two walked back, her tall brother took shorter strides than the norm for the Tyrell to more comfortably step across the uneven ground.

“Garlan, Lord Robb has kindly offered a brief tour of the Wolfswood for you,” Willas announced. “Lady Lyarra and I shall wait here.”

“Will the lady be armed?” Garlan looked worriedly into the shadowy depths of the forest. “I have heard that wild animals, wolves and bears and the like, hunt these grounds.”

“They’re found more deeply in the woods, Ser.” Despite his words, her brother unclipped a dagger from his side and passed it to her. Lyarra accepted it, trying not to beam when Garlan took that as assurance enough to leave his brother in her hands. It was hard not to love the Tyrell family then.

Willas waited until their brothers were well out of hearing range before breaking the silence. “Hello.”

“Hello.” It was a greeting already exchanged but it seemed heavier somehow, when they were alone in the hush of the woods. Lord Willas wore a dark grey doublet with white trimming the sleeves and black pants. He was unsurprisingly as attractive in Stark colors as he was in his own.

‘How should I speak to him?’ Lyarra’s eyes sketched his form rapidly in her mind, entirely of their own violation. ‘He looks so handsome. I haven’t even prepared anything to say. But surely we have broken past the awkwardness of our last meeting. We are friends now. I should speak honestly.’

“I’m glad you’re here.” A heartbeat later. ‘Less honestly. I should speak less honestly.’

A raised eyebrow, a flash of gentle humor. “As am I. You were breathtaking in the sunlight.”
“My hair came loose,” she babbled, blushingly tucking one stray curl back. “Sansa pulled it into a bun for me. She’ll be so displeased. She wanted my appearance to be perfect when- if- ah…”

“Sansa is… your middle sister?” Willas cast his mind back to the letters, written in her own careful, practiced hand. “The one with the talent for embroidery then. I admit, I’m curious to view her work.”

“We should move in deeper than,” Lyarra murmured. “There are hot springs underneath the ground and we needn’t move far within the forest, for the snowfall to be caught by the canopy.”

The heavier snowstorms could turn a patch of ground into solid ice for weeks on end but this one was light and the flakes that did fall through melted before they reached the ground. Lord Willas allowed her to take lead, an admiration to his eyes that Lyarra attributed to the beautiful landscape, rather than her own flushed cheeks and wild curls. They came by beds of winter heather by fallen boulders, pale lavender scenting the warm air and strands of misty vapor escaping the ground. She gestured towards one of the biggest rocks, stream-brushed into smoothness, and unclasped her cloak.

“The hot springs are key to the Stark’s dominion of the North,” Lyarra told him. “When true winter comes and the lands fall under ice and snow, it’s to these lands that the people recede. Hundreds of houses lie empty even now in Wintertown, awaiting the day when the smallfolk retreat to the warmth that only House Stark can offer.”

“A more decided advantage than the power bargained in the Reach,” Willas murmured. She couldn’t place the look in his eyes when the green and gold was uncovered but he did lean closer to admire it. The Snow blushed, expecting his eyes to focus on one area alone, but despite the darkening of his cheeks, he didn’t give any notice of the slit around her neck. Instead they brightened at the delicately embroidered gold roses and silver leaves on the bodice and trailed down to dust motes of gold at the skirt, meant to be fireflies amongst silver reeds.

“Your sister has a remarkable talent,” he praised warmly. Lyarra made a note to share this with Sansa later on. This would make her little sister’s day. “And you wear those colors well, my lady.”

“As do you,” Lyarra gestured to the Stark-inspired ensemble. “Though I think you’ve mistaken them. A bastard’s banners are black and white.”

The words had scarcely escaped her mouth when the dark-haired girl was inwardly wringing her own neck. Oh Gods, how did she manage to insert her foot into her mouth so badly? Was Theon’s drunken nature contagious? “I meant no offense by that, Lord Willas. The words escaped me.”
“You should use my given name,” the honey-haired lord said. “It’s not improper for a wife to refer to her husband by his given name in public.”

The rapid shift in temperature stole her breath away, Lyarra thought firmly. Her heart certainly wasn’t seeking to jump out of her own chest. “Then you intend to…”

“I would,” Willas Tyrell said, in a most deliberate manner, “Be honored to call you my wife.”

‘He doesn’t mince around with words, does he?’ It wasn’t the poetry-laden, flowery proposal that Sansa would have wanted but Lyarra Snow didn’t need it to be. It was succinct. It was genuine. It was perfect. Or perhaps it was the man asking that decided it so. ‘Focus, Lyarra. You can’t accept yet.’

“Willas.” She wanted to pleasure of the intimacy at least once. “I have to know. Why did you ask for my hand?”

Anything short of murder would do for an answer. Lyarra did want to marry him.

“That’s a complicated question,” Willas began. “It’s strongly related, I suppose, to why you caught my eye at Highgarden. You were this strange Northern maiden that spoke High Valyrian, studied healing, sparred with a sword and brought people to tears with your harp. I was captivated by your beauty. Intrigued by your intellect, charmed by your kindness. You were a fascination and despite the impropriety of my actions, I desired that same interest drawn to me.”

A half-smile was directed towards her. “You have a talent for cyvasse, my lady.”

A foreboding feeling crept up her spine. None of his words were dangerous by themselves but neither did he attest them for his choice. “My brothers and sister had come to admire you as well. While I don’t deny that I would have sought a mistress position had you been amenable, or even remotely obliging of the offer, it wouldn’t have been enough. I hadn’t met any woman quite like yourself in my life. I doubt I ever will. When you rode away from me, I knew that I couldn’t simply let you go. At least not without a fighting chance of persuading you to marry me.”

“I…” Lyarra didn’t think her face could grow any more crimson with those words, even as her mind fastened on one lingering detail. “You offered for me before that. When I was still in Highgarden.”
“Yes, my very first marriage proposal,” Willas acknowledged. “You refused it.”

“I did. There wasn’t any reason for a lord’s heir to claim the hand of a bastard.”

“Do you still think so? That one should not marry another of a different social standing, even should…” The reddening of his cheeks was more visible now, met by a nervous grin. “Even should both of their hearts be engaged?”

“No, I don’t.” There was a buoyancy in her heart, everything felt light and free, and she knew that if she stood up, she would positively dance back to the castle. Lord Willas claimed to love her! Sort-of.

“Then would you accept a marriage between a hidden princess and a crippled lord?”

Lady Lyarra’s violet eyes were expressive enough that Willas could pinpoint the exact moment when elation gave way to confusion. The dark-haired girl merely cocked her head to the side, brow furrowed, lips pursed, and questioned, in an utterly bemused tone. “What?”

Willas kindly repeated the question.

“I don’t understand. I’m not… you’re not secretly royalty, are you, Willas?”

He took a moment to savor the unintentional lapse of decorum- for a young woman willing to attend a tryst in her father’s woods, Lady Lyarra was surprisingly adherent of social mores- and then pressed on. “I understand that Lord Stark had never spoken of your mother, my lady?”

This led to a surprised widening of eyes, and then a set of rapid shifts in expression. Confusion, consideration, realization and then those delicate features settled on joy. “I had thought it to be a Dornishwoman,” Lyarra spoke wonderingly. “A cousin of House Martell was more than I had expected but to finally know…”

She bit her lip, the words spilling out even faster. “Is my mother alive? Does she know about me, where I am, where I’m going? Does she care?”
“I’m sorry, Lady Lyarra.” The words were emotive enough that her expression fell, hands twisting the dark green fabric of her dress. Regret shook him as she folded deeper into herself, features still and deceptively calm, and not yet knowing that Willas would steal a father from her as well.

‘Mayhaps I should not have spoken?’ The wistfulness was cast away. He had already begun and Lyarra would never forgive him, should she walk into marriage without this knowledge.

“I have never had a mother before,” she informed him, eyes down. “So I don’t understand why it should hurt to learn that I never will.”

Willas grasped around for the proper words. For all his intellect and wit, he hadn’t experienced any such loss as she unknowingly had. “This is of little comfort but my mother would be your own. She’s a kind woman. I think you would like her.”

“I do. She was everything charming when we had met last.” Lyarra managed a small smile. “I don’t understand why this would worry you. My mother may be a Martell but I’m still a bastard.”

“It is not your mother’s blood that the world would judge you by.” The Tyrell yearned for a more considerate way to approach this. “Your mother was Princess Lyanna Stark, late wife of Prince Rhaegar Targaryen. They were wed in secret by a Maester Maynard in Dorne. They had a daughter named Visenya, that would be four-and-ten today. Lyarra, you’re a trueborn princess.”

“You’re lying.” Lyarra slipped off the boulder. He tried to follow her, she kicked his cane away. Her face pale, her hands clenched in anger. “You’re lying to me.”

“There are documents. A marriage certificate in the prince’s own hand. An annulment written up by the Maester. Your mother named you Visenya.”

“My name is Lyarra Snow!” The words cracked through the air, a whip shaking in inexperienced hands. “My father is Lord Eddard Stark of Winterfell. I am of the North, I am of House Stark, I am-”

“A Stark byway your mother,” Willas concurred. “And a Targaryen byway your father.”

“Rhaegar Targaryen raped my aunt to death!”
'He didn’t. Oh Lyarra, he didn’t. Why can’t you believe me?’ His cane wasn’t within reach but Willas could still travel short distances without it. The tears in her eyes moved him to do so, despite the lightning-fast rivulets of pain striking up his limb when he ungainly landed on it. The dark-haired girl paused, briefly stricken, as she saw the visible discomfort.

Lyarra didn’t step away when he leaned towards her. The pale snow-kissed skin he had so admired was clammy and trembling. ‘I don’t know how they’ve spoken of the Silver Prince here but I had met him once, as a child. At the Tourney of Harrenhal, he sung a melody so sweet that all the women in the room were moved to tears.’

She shook her head, escaping the obvious comparisons to her own gift. ‘Why are you lying to me?’

“He was a good man, gentle and well-read. We spoke only once when I saw him at the Whent’s library. He helped me select a book on dragons from the higher shelves.” Willas looked at her pleadingly. “My family loved him. So many people loved him. He was a good man, Lyarra.”

“He was a rapist.” The dark-haired girl looked forlorn. “He kidnapped my aunt and raped her.”

“Ser Arthur Dayne, was he a good man?” At her tentative nod, almost childlike in its search for reassurance, he continued. “He was Prince Rhaegar’s best friend. They say he died guarding the tower where Princess Lyanna was kept. Would a good man abscond with an innocent and allow her rape?”

“No?” Plaintively, she looked at him. When he leaned back for more support to his leg, she followed and he smiled at her. “No.”

“Why would father claim be as his own bastard?” Her mind provided an answer quickly, the intellect being spurned for once, as she closed her eyes. “Gods, the King will want to kill me.”

“Neither Lord Stark nor I will ever allow that to happen,” Willas answered. “Would you allow me to protect you?”

“You want to marry me because I’m a princess.”
The words lacked all inflection but felt accusatory nonetheless. “I want to marry you for many reasons, Lyarra, not least because you have stolen my heart.”

“How can I trust that? How can I trust anything around me?” Lyarra pulled herself away again, looking blankly at their surroundings. “I haven’t a father, I haven’t a mother. Robb will come back soon, and Gods, I haven’t even a brother, do I? My entire life is a lie.”

Eyes of haunted violet met earnest gold and neither would yield. “A lie painted to protect my family, Willas. I’m a living danger to House Stark and you would invite me to Highgarden… why? To bare you dragonspawn? To have a contender for the throne? To drag mine blood into war?”

‘Somehow, her intelligence remains attractive, even when it’s turned against me,’ the rose lord thought distantly.

She drew her own conclusions from the silence, face twisting into a bitter caricature of a smile. “Of course. House Tyrell wants a breeder.”

“House Tyrell doesn’t know anything of you, and should they learn, they would desire instead to trade you to the Crown,” Willas rebuked sharply. “I don’t desire war, Lyarra. No sane man ever has. I desire you, irrespective of whether I may claim myself a princess, and I would wed you regardless of blood.”

“Southrons speak lies.” The dark-haired girl reached for her cloak and this time, it was his turn to snatch it away. He looked pointedly towards his walking stick, still out of reach, when she glared.

“I spoke truthfully when I told you of your heritage. I needn’t have done that. A prettily given lie and you would have accepted my hand and I would have gained the breeder, you accuse me of.”

That drew her up. Lyarra looked contemplative for a moment, evidently trying to work through this logic, till her glare returned. “If you had a chance, would you make a bid for the throne?”

“Yes,” Willas answered honestly. “If I was reasonably certain that I could take the throne, without risk to yourself or any children we had, I would make a claim.”

“You confess that and you expect me to wed you?!” Lyarra spoke incredulously.
“I certainly don’t expect you to wed me after lying to you.”

“Think reasonably of this, Willas! King Robert is my father’s best friend. He won’t accept a rebellion to throw the stags off their throne!”

“He accepted one for his sister’s sake and I think, could be persuaded for his great-nephew. Even then, I wouldn’t start a rebellion when the Usurper still holds the throne. I would wait until his foolish madman of a son rises to it and then strike before another Mad King could bring us to ruin.”

He saw, at the tip of her tongue, questions about the nature of the prince. Her curiosity was suppressed though, and violently so, for her sharp reply. “I refuse to bring my family into your southron games.”

“We are all players in the Great Game, Lyarra. Even the Starks. Wouldn’t you rather they have an ally to start than be dragged in by others?” He countered. A sinking in his stomach, a ripple of desperation, as her eyes practically shuttered close, had him nearly shout. “I won’t play.”

“Willas?” She still looked at him with disbelief. There was understanding, she knew where this would head but… “Willas?”

“I love you, Lyarra Snow.” He stepped closer, he took her hands, he looked imploringly into her eyes. “I would wed you and gladly, and if the price for a lifetime of happiness is to never make a claim for the throne than I’ll accept it. I won’t make the first move. Should the others draw us in, then I’ll play and I’ll do my damned hardest to protect you and House Stark, but I swear that I’ll never start a war.”

“Willas.” Her eyes were wide. They flickered strangely between his own and the trees behind them.

“Marry me,” the Tyrell pressed. He didn’t know how many times he had asked thus far, but damn the Gods, for she hadn’t yet said ‘yes’.

“Yes.” Elation rose in him but it didn’t get far before she squeezed his hands and looked past his shoulders. “Willas, there’s a direwolf behind you.”
'Why must I die before having stolen another kiss from him?' Lyarra mourned. ‘Of all the regrets to appear in hand now.’

At least she was no longer in horrified denial over her own lineage. There was something about a man-sized, dusky gray direwolf with gleaming silver orbs and a sharp snarl of teeth that fled such considerations from mind. Bastard or trueborn, the thick rich soil would drink her blood the same.

Still holding her, Willas made a soft, shocked sound of distress, making an abortive movement to cover her with his own body. A distant part of Lyarra appreciated the gesture—it was terribly sweet—even if Bran would have been a more useful fighting partner than her now betrothed. The rose lord was unable to complete it regardless, as the direwolf gave a low, reverberating growl at the movement, sinking slowly on its hind legs.

‘Not that she has that far to go,’ Lyarra noted absently. Her eyes focused to the miniscule space between the direwolf and the soil and… ‘Oh dear.’

“She’s about to pup,” the dark-haired girl spoke. The she-wolves’ stomach was bloated with a litter soon to come, its expansiveness at odds with the sinewy muscle, even thinness around its ribs. Lyarra’s aster-toned eyes looked into the silver of the wolves’, the slight sheen reminding her of the moon’s glow, as an unexpected sympathy bloomed in her stomach. “She needs our help.”

“Lyarra,” Willas held tightly onto her shoulders, body still frozen in movement. “This is a direwolf.”

“I don’t think there are many differences between a direwolf pupping and a regular hound. Have you ever delivered pups before?”

“Well, yes… but Lyarra, this is a direwolf.”

“I am aware.” She slowly moves from the honey-haired man’s shadow. The direwolf bristles slightly when she does so but does not growl. Lyarra doesn’t know how but some aspect of her is certain that this beast means her no harm. ‘I wear your crest on my banner and you, my soul in your eyes.’

“Hello there,” Lyarra’s tone is soft and sweet, a mellow plea brought by a lifetime of coaxing little brothers and sisters to bed. “My name’s Lyarra. I live in the castle over there. My family rules these
woods you’re in. We have a fair number of beasts here but you’re the first direwolf I’ve ever seen. You’re rather far from home, aren’t you?”

Had Lyarra been able to see the rose lord’s expression at the moment, she would have known the exact moment when Willas Tyrell realized he was hopelessly enamored with a madwoman. Then she would have seen the man’s despair shift to resignation, followed by the Tyrell Heir leaning down to grab his cane. The dark-haired girl did hear the rumbles in the beast’s chests though.

She looked back over her shoulders, eyes filled with surprised delight at the mixed disapproval and determination on him. No, it couldn’t have been the aqueduct letter. This had to be the moment when Lyarra Snow truly fell in love with Willas Tyrell. ‘Now this is gallantry.’

“It’s alright. He doesn’t mean you any harm now.” Lyarra took a small step closer, then another and a third when the direwolf didn’t react. She knelt down, a gentle hum in her throat and eyes carefully trained on those silver orbs. Often had the Stark children been told not to approach dangerous animals in the woods, particularly to avoid looking into their eyes in direct challenge but she was compelled to do it now. “This is Willas. He’ll be helping you.”

The direwolf didn’t growl but she did bare her teeth warningly as the begrieved southron appeared. Willas glowered back. “I’m hardly any more pleased by this than you are, I assure you.”

A second later, the man groaned. “I am arguing with a direwolf.”

Lyarra patted his knee consolingly. “What should we do?”

“We’ll need to find an enclosure of some sort to keep the drafts from reaching the pups. Warm water, linens or fresh leaves if necessary, something to wrap them in,” Willas listed off, “Lyarra?”

She unclasped her cloak, deftly drawing the dagger from beneath it, so not to spook the direwolf, and cutting through the fur. “My dress has an inner skirt. I can-”

Willas blanched and immediately reached for the ties on his vest. “We may have flaunted propriety throughout this courtship but the only man to see my wife in smallclothes will be me.”

Her lips twitched. “Of course, Willas.”
Childhood memories procured a burrow by the river soon enough, wind nipping at two pairs of bared arms as sleeves were ripped to be soaked in water. Willas proved a steady and experienced hand soon thereafter, Lyarra flitting around under his introductions, gathering supplies and humming a simple Northern lullaby, as the direwolf was settled. She didn’t appear to like the Tyrell overmuch, snarling and once even snapping warningly with her jaws when he came close, but Lyarra sat beside her and soothingly ran her fingers above her head. Animals hadn’t ever been unkind to her truly but this was a permissiveness that startled and delighted her at once.

The Snow had no dragons to prove her betrothed true but a direwolf… ‘I am a Stark.’

“You truly are remarkable,” Willas said, looking over to her in wonder, “You’re delivering a direwolf.”

Lyarra smiled at him brightly. “As are you.”

“I know.” The man looked genuinely puzzled. “I still can’t believe it.”

Even if the rose lord couldn’t understand his own actions, he responded with the calm, level-head that the dark-haired girl had come to admire in him. The birth hadn’t any complications, though the deadly nature of the beast certainly quickened her pulse, and Willas was soon bundling off one pup to another towards her. Lyarra would place them carefully out of the way, still within the mother’s sight but hidden from stray gusts of icy wind. Eldest born, a male of grey and white fur, second born, a gentle female of husky grey fur, third born, dark grey and squirming, fourth a tawny brown with gray streaks and fifth, one of purest black. The lastborn one stole her heart.

Still slick with birthing fluid, it was plain that her fur was as pure white as the Northern snow and her eyes a hauntingly bright ruby. Unlike the others, this one was born with eyes open. And also unlike the others, the mother wolf receded when Lyarra tried to bring the pup closer to her.

“The runt of the litter,” Willas remarked clinically, “And an albino at that. He wouldn’t have survived long out in the wild.”

“*She,*” Lyarra stressed softly, still caught in that ruby gaze. “Will be coming to Highgarden with me.”

“...She will?” The tone in Willas Tyrell’s voice was as enthused as Rickon’s when additional lessons
were offered.

“Five pups.” There was a bevy of emotions within her and Lyarra couldn’t quite center herself to them, or explain how they had arrived. “Five pups. One for each of my Stark children. And this pup, different yet alike to the others and without a mother to care for her. I would like to be the one to do so.”

To the silent pup in her arms, she added. “Her name will be Ghost.”

“I don’t suppose Lord Stark could be any more furious should I steal another she-wolf from his lands.” The honey-haired lord artfully arranged the bundled pups near their mother and then gently receded back to where Lyarra moved. “We should have some time before they need to nurse. Do you think your brother can find us here?”

“I have no doubt of it.” Her thoughts hadn’t flitted to the auburn-haired Stark, though he would undoubtedly be searching for them now. Instead, Lyarra remembered her concern from before and, upon impulse, reached up to kiss Willas. It was one part gratefulness for survival, another part thanks for his support and all the more, a deep well of affection for the man.

When she moved her head back, it was to be met with a dazzling smile from the rose lord.

“The first one I would forgive,” Willas teased. “But you have besmirched my innocence twice now, Lady Lyarra. I believe that you are now honor-bound to marry me.”

“Let it not be said that a Stark denies their duty, my lord.” A smile on her lips, she daringly reached up to press them against his once more. “ Particularly one that brings such pleasure.”

Ghost stayed silently bundled in the warmth of her human’s chest, Lyarra careful to assure her ease of movement, as she turned her head and kissed Willas. The two lost themselves as lovers are wont to do, sharing kisses and mingled promises and wondrous joy, while outside of the little burrow, two brothers wandered around trying to figure out exactly where they’d gone.
Chapter 18

Chapter Eighteen

If there was one advantage to be found with a litter of direwolf cubs between them, it was that not even Robb’s mislike could descend to accusations. Or at least that’s what Lyarra assumed when her older brother delightedly cuddled with each of the newborn direwolves, showing a distinct fondness for the silvery-grey coloured firstborn, with nary a glare in Willas’ direction. Ser Garlan looked torn between amusement and worry at how the Starklings treated such dangerous beasts, though nothing could compare to his open-mouthed disbelief when Lyarra praised her betrothed for delivering them.

The brunette knight had been delighted to hear of her acceptance though and embraced her warmly to the family. Lyarra still felt pleased when she recalled that. Bastards were a shame to anyone’s family, so even if she had persuaded another man to marry her, she would’ve worried of his kin’s reaction. Knowing that Willas’ closest brother regarded her well was a balm to her soul, even if she knew the truth of her birth.

They stayed an hour longer to be persuaded to a plan that walked the line between madness and brilliance and a half hour more, to allow the siblings time to ride away. Robb hadn’t been pleased at the revelation of her birth- Lyarra decided to tell him alone, for now- but strangely, he accepted the Tyrell’s plans with more aplomb than she did. Knowing that they had a motive to assure her safety gave him more peace of mind than it did her, as he didn’t share her faith in Willas’ affection. He was even more pleased to receive reassurance that neither planned to act without Lyarra’s acceptance. It wouldn’t be forthcoming as the dark-haired girl couldn’t conceive of a situation where she would advocate war.

Of course, with direwolf pups in their arms and the mother wolf, dubbed Sage by the eldest Stark, trailing silently behind them, secrecy wasn’t probable. The guards had been shell-shocked when the two eldest Starks appeared and certainly quite frightened by the war horse sized direwolf. Their father hadn’t been impressed, though she thought there may have been a glimmer of wonder in Ned Stark’s eyes when he saw Sage and the pups, and thoroughly scolded them in the Great Hall. Arya escaped punishment, despite the suspicion of her hysteria around the time when Robb and Lyarra disappeared, but the eldest two had not. They were confined to the castle and their lessons for the next moon, though Lyarra doubted she would fulfill even a quarter of her punishment.

The dark-haired girl accepted it meekly nonetheless and swore to the most well-behaved, obedient daughter any father- or uncle- could ask for, during her remaining time as a Snow. Fortunately they had been allowed to keep the direwolf pups, interred in a separate pen from the hounds, despite Lady Stark’s protests. Each of the siblings had felt drawn to one of their own and while Lyarra couldn’t speak for their own reactions, she had spent hours smuggling her work to the stables where she could sit on the hay, complete her writings and be near to Ghost.
She may have also fled to the stables to escape Sansa’s maddening grin when she confirmed the wedding. Her sister had started spouting about ladies-in-waiting and Highgarden and trousseau’s with such enthusiasm that every other Starkling, and Theon, had decided to carefully run away.

It was now though, shortly before her ‘kidnapping’, that Lyarra resolved to speak to another she-wolf that had also run away to be wed.

“It’s not the same though, is it Ghost?” The dark-haired girl decided that emotional support would be necessary for such a talk but hadn’t quite the confidence to bring Robb into this. “Neither of us are promised to others as they were.”

The hand-sized wolf merely paused in her helpless gnawing- as her teeth hadn’t yet grown in- of the weirwood amulet to lick her wrist. There was a space between where her gloves met her sleeve that left a strip of pale skin free and Ghost rubbed her wet nose into it comfortingly. Lyarra made a small squeal of surprise and moved it away, yet still smiled at the adorable offering. She allowed Ghost to continue her efforts on the simple circular amulet carved off of a weirwood branch that would be the Snow’s offering to her mother today.

‘Winter roses brought her happiness and tragedy both but neither are mine to give.’ She hadn’t ever seen a picture of the Silver Prince before but Lyarra imagined a tall, fair man with silver-honed hair and violet eyes much like her own. ‘I cannot claim any flowers that you may have loved, Mother, so I bring you a talisman of the Old Gods that any Northerner could be proud of.’

The Old Tongue was lost to the Northern keeps today but a precious few words survived. Lyarra had painstakingly carved ‘sorrow’, ‘remembrance’, ‘love’, ‘joy’ and ‘sunlight’ into this one; her lack of skill shown in the rough etches and unbalanced lettering. The last one was the most common. While the Septons may chide their followers into proper behavior with fear of flames, the Northerners embraced the dream of an afterlife filled with warmth and plenty.

‘Heaven looks a lot like Highgarden.’ The dark-haired girl fiddled with the wistful thoughts of bringing a few of her siblings southwards with her. Sansa and Arya could be a part of her retinue; the former would blossom in the courts, while the latter rejoiced in tourneys far and wide. Bran too, would find delight traversing the library or the sparring yards. ‘Mayhaps I can speak to Willas about it later.’

The next they spoke, she would be reciting wedding vows. They wouldn’t be the simple ones she longed to speak before a weirwood tree but Lyarra had accepted that. Her children were to be born into the cradle of the Faith and the she-wolf refused to risk their inheritance with a marriage the southrons would refuse to recognize. A hybrid ceremony incorporating both traditions, as her parents
had followed, would be better but she wasn’t in such a position to take that risk.

Lyarra’s musings on weddings, marriage and future children were interrupted when she reached the floor holding Lords Rickard and Brandon Stark and Lady Lyanna Stark. The flame in her torch wavered when she drew it higher, casting a tall man’s face in bright relief, and smothering the spike of fear that chilled down her back.

“Father!” Ned Stark blinked the light away, stepping back and nodding towards the curved iron bands that held the torches up on the walls.

“Lyarra, what are you doing here?” He looked at her arms and, not finding the customary book that would suggest more illicit reading, focused on the amulet. “Are you here to visit someone?”

“Aunt Lyanna.” Strangely enough, she felt shy in speaking those words. Lyanna Stark was her mother. She was here to visit her mother. “I… I brought an amulet from the Old Gods.”

“May I see it?” There was no understanding the emotion on Ned Stark’s face. There was sadness, yes, but something else inexplicable and worrying. Lyarra silently handed her amulet over.

Her father- or uncle but he would always be a father to her- read them aloud. “Your words are fitting.”

“I had thought she would like them.” Lyarra hugged Ghost closer to herself self-consciously. The little pup bit her wrist in displeasure and she weakened the grasp. “Are you here to visit her too?”

“I am.” The Stark lord stepped aside and allowed her to stand next to him. In the light of two torches, Lyanna’s face was easy to perceive. She was no great beauty, as Lady Ashara or Queen Cersei were purported to be, but her slightly rounded face radiated vivacity and kindness. This stone worker had done a remarkable job, as the Lady Lyanna looked frozen in merriment, a heartbeat away from stepping down and drawing one into a dance within the pools of light within the Wolfswood.

Her father spoke of his dead sister rarely but something stirred a few words from him today. “I visit her as often as I can, so that she knows she’s not alone or forgotten. More than anything else, Lyanna hated to be alone.”

‘Different from I then, for I crave my silence each day and would be disheartened without it.’
“She would be glad that you were to visit her then.”

“Aye, and for you, as well.” A shadow of a smile crossed Ned Stark’s face. “It was a jape amongst us brothers that Lyanna would grow an old maid with her wildness. She would always rejoin that it wasn’t a future so fraught, as she would have many nieces and nephews to console her.”

“Uncle Benjen would have been a great disappointment then.”

“Mayhaps not. She would have an excuse to visit the Wall then. Father forbid her from doing so, when she was alive, as it was not a ladylike place to be. He sent her to Riverrun for a year instead.”

“Did she enjoy it?” If her mother had been like Arya, than a year in the company of her future goodsister, the most proper Lady Catelyn, wouldn’t have pleased Lyanna Stark.

“More when she discovered how many hiding spots there were to jump out and scare the other ladies from.”

Lyarra tried not to laugh as Ned Stark affected a most disapproving cast. Her mother had indeed been like Arya. It made it easier to picture the woman she was kin to, and to desire her to be alive. “I wanted to visit the crypts since… I don’t think I would have many chances to in the future.”

“And why would that be? You’re always welcome in Winterfell, Lyaa-bell, you know this.”

“I know.” She contemplated a proper reply to this that wouldn’t reveal the kidnapping to occur. “It takes a moon’s time to travel to Highgarden by road and I wouldn’t be able to make such a trip often.”

This led her father to turn directly towards her. “Ser Loras?”

Lyarra’s cheeks reddened but she refused to elaborate. “Would you mind if I were to live there?”

“While unhappy to lose you, I would be pleased if you were to find a husband even half deserving for you,” Ned Stark confirmed. He placed his arm around her shoulders, drawing her into a comfortable embrace. “I will encourage as many visits as possible though.”
“I know.” Lyarra hesitated. “Do you think I’m worthy for it? A marriage to… House Tyrell?”

The arm tightened. “You’re worthy of any match in the world, Lyaa-bell. Always remember that.”

Samwell Tarly ducked his head down as one of the Highgarden guards walked by, holding the scroll in his hands with such practiced nonchalance, that it worked against its intended purpose. The Tarly had been ordered by Lord Willas to place this in the Queen of Thorns’ hands. He hadn’t been brave enough to protest at the time but had somehow mustered the courage to accomplish it now. Though he was still torn on whether it was courage or elation that compelled him forth.

‘By the next moon, I’ll be running laps in the courtyard again.’ He chuckled. It wasn’t that he relished in physical exertion but Sam was gleeful at the prospect of seeing his best friend again. And not as a bastard but as the wife of a future Lord Paramount! ‘We can read through the spring catalogue.’

House Tyrell ordered books directly from the Citadel thrice a year. Family and senior servants would read through the catalogue and mark their preferences, compiling a list that Lord Willas would review, approve and authorize the gold for. Sam had been surprised when he was offered a chance to join the servants this year, as his employment had only spanned three moons thus far, but when the man admitted to his choice of bride, the Tarly understood.

‘After I finished accusing him of toying with her emotions anyway.’

The plump boy cringed at his memory of the event. Willas Tyrell far exceeded him, socially, politically and financially, and it was likely only his erstwhile friendship with the bastard girl that caught the rose lord’s eye, that Sam hadn’t been punished for his harsh words. Not that he could have helped it. He may be craven but Lyarra had been his first friend; they were of like mind and interest and Sam wouldn’t have tolerated her dishonor any more than he would his sisters. The Tyrell had eventually waylaid his concerns, with short remarks on letters, bride prices and kidnappings.

‘For your sake, my lord, I hope these kidnappings are of a willing nature, for Lady Lyarra’s talent in swordsmanship far exceeds her skill in joust.’

Sam had been slapping his hand against his mouth and muttering apologies furiously, when his
The future liege lord broke into laughter over his words. To his surprise, the man fully agreed with him. To his further surprise, Lord Willas Tyrell sounded almost admiring when he commented favorably on Lyaa’s talent. The plump boy had known of his involvement in the tourney of course, but it seemed a jape amongst the Tyrell siblings then. Now it seemed to foretell a husband all but encouraging Lyaa’s high-spirited behavior… even as a wife and not a maiden to be courted.

With anyone else, Sam would have doubted Willas’ motivations. Yet he had been involved in the compilation of sums to calculate the bride price; he knew how tenuous the situation in the North would be. He also knew that Lord Willas wasn’t so foolish as to disregard his responsibilities to that realm should he marry a Lord Paramount’s daughter, bastard or otherwise. If he was willing to undertake those responsibilities regardless… well, Lady Lyarra would wed him for home, if nothing else. And after Sam dispelled his brief fear that he would be forgotten as his friend ascended the ranks of nobility- Lyarra simply wasn’t like that- he was ecstatic. He would see his best friend every day!

‘Now to ensure that it should occur…’ Lord Willas was a braver man than he. Sam didn’t think he could muster the courage to defy Lady Olenna quite like this.

“Master Samwell?” The formidable man clan in grey chainmail and a forest green cloak inquired. There were two such men, standing each on the side of the door, and they were the ones most often to accompany the Queen of Thorns. “Lady Olenna is currently having tea.”

“I understand but Lord Willas requested that this be turned to Lady Olenna’s hand personally.” Sam lifted the scroll with its specialized green rose wax seal. Lord Mace used a gold version of the same.

“Can you not do it at a later time?” The same guard asked.

“It would be preferable to do so now. My belongings have been packed for a brief trip to survey one of the Tyrell businesses.”

“I’ll ask the Lady if she’s able to see you now.” One man stepped to the side to partially disfigure his glimpse inside, as the other slipped into the room. He heard a creaky voice loudly demand the reason for the guard’s presence, followed by some indistinct grumbling and then a voice that made him jump.

“Well, are you planning to wait till I turn to dust?! Come in, boy!”
Sam obediently followed the second guard through. The room he entered was quite beautiful. Walls were painted a peach color, touched off by blue and gold silk banners against the wall, and a deep, burgundy-stained wooden floor. A portrait of a handsome woman surrounded by three children and a golden-haired man took the center of the mantle. Around them were many others, of grandchildren, the full Redwyne fleet at sea, Highgarden at sunrise and a bed of flowers with newborn foals. There were a bevy of fresh-cut flowers placed in white-wave painted blue vases and a bar to the side of the room, loaded high with bottles of wine. Comfortable chairs and sofas surrounded a table laid heavy with buttery-warm cakes and delicate sugar-spun confectionaries. An elegantly dressed old woman looking at the cusp of the Stranger's door took the highest chair.

She squinted at him with eyes that he was fairly certain worked fine. “Who the seven hells are you? No, wait, don’t tell me. You’re the new assistant that my grandson took pity on, aren’t you? Hobber or Dickon or Desmond or some such thing.”

“Samwell, my lady.” He raised the scroll. “Lord Willas wanted me to bring-”

“Yes, yes, I heard you from the door.” Lady Olenna gestured to the remainder of the room, occupied by many tittering young ladies that Sam ignored from great experience. “A scroll important enough for a specific messenger but not so important that he couldn’t give it to me before he left? Somehow I suspect that you’re taking the fall for a spot of trouble that my grandson’s gotten himself into.”

“Lord Willas hadn’t remembered to give you the scroll before he left, Lady Olenna. He sent a raven requesting that I pass it on myself.”

“I’m nine-and-sixty, Samwell, and I have a mind sharp enough to remember such little tasks. My grandson takes after me, so any claims he has of faulty memory are a weak deflection at best.” The woman snorted and then held her hand out imperiously. “Go on then. Give me my grandson’s scroll.”

The Tarly handed it over and watched as Lady Olenna flicked it open and then read through the scroll in one glance. “Book pages, how delightful,” she stated boredly. “Tell me, Samwell, do we have this text in our library?”

“We should have a copy of any text written after 270 A.C., my lady, and many from before those years,” Sam reported. “Would you like me to bring you the book?”

“I’ll find someone else to get it.” She waved it off. “You’re leaving soon to look into Willas’ business?”
“Yes, my lady. There are some conflicting reports from Harvest Hall that Lord Willas ordered me to look into.”

“He’s not having much of a vacation, is he?” Olenna observed dryly. “I pray for a swift journey then.”

As the assistant hastily responded to the dismissal, he didn’t notice the woman making a sharp gesture to her personal guard. When Samwell Tarly left westward rather than northwards the next day, a discrete rider followed behind.

x

“The arch should be of yellow and white roses but I’d like a darker stain to hold them. Bring me oak!”

“Add ten more chairs to the arrangement and change the white carpet to a dark green one. I want it to trail straight to the dias.”

“Why haven’t the handfasting bands been anointed in oil yet? I ordered those done weeks ago!”

Margaery Tyrell was simply in her element as she strode across the courtyard of one of her brother’s secondary castles in Greenshield. Leaf Guard was a small, tidy keep, purchased by Willas’ concern over the strong fleet situated at the Shield Islands and fortified to the Stranger’s teeth by loyal men. They were of a younger sort, those that hadn’t yet learnt of Grandmother’s power, and were beholden to the Tyrell Heir for their livelihoods. Her brother had chosen the men with assiduous care, authorized a generous budget and even brought Garlan’s friend, Heir Mariban Chester, into the marriage conspiracy, if not the Targaryen one. The identity of the lucky bride hadn’t been shared nor, for many, that a wedding would even occur, but as the Sept shaped up, people drew their own conclusions.

The brunette had been amused by the few rumors to reach her ear. The bride- or groom, on the occasions where Margaery was considered the to-be-wed Tyrell- was anyone from a Lysini whore to a Red Priestess to a bastard daughter of Prince Oberyn. One guard was even insisting that Princess Myrcella Baratheon had fallen madly in love with Ser Loras and had run away to marry him in defiance of their family’s enmity. Margaery was impressed by that one; the man lacked true names alone.
It wasn’t the gossip, the finery or the plots that enthused Margaery though, so much as that she was the one in charge. Her brother had left everything in her most willing hands and while planning an intimate yet appropriately decadent wedding in secrecy was a challenge, she was most certainly capable of the task. She exulted in it even, as everyone from the dockworkers bringing in the specially ordered goods to the ladies-in-waiting burning candlelight to sew a Tyrell cloak, answered to her. The thrill of power was addictive. Gods, no wonder Willas loved bossing everyone around.

‘And no wonder he is constant complaint of subpar subordinates.’ Margaery sighed. “If they refuse to part for the silk ones without names, than purchase them in plain linen. We’ll embroider them ourselves if we should have to.”

The elderly Steward turned pallid at the borderline heretical talk. “But m’lady, a Septa—”

The brunette mentally flicked through a list of her female cousins. “Order Tyana to my solar and ready her trunk for Oldtown. It doesn’t take too long to recite the vows for an Analect, does it?”

“No, m’lady, it does not.”

“Then she’ll stray after the handfastings are embroidered. Ready a small pouch of alms, in case we need to smooth matters along at the Starry Sept.”

“As m’lady wishes. From the crab pots, we have readied a few recipes for m’lady’s tasting. Will m’lady be free this evening?”

Margaery confirmed that she would be and then internally wilted over a dinner spent on seafood. She had never cared for the taste of crustacean. ‘Truly the sacrifices I make for Willas’ sake.’

“Will he be the one to wed then?” Mira Forrester inquired softly from behind her. The dark-haired Northerner had been the one selected to take notes on her behalf, as she was less given to guile and gossip than most of her handmaidens. She was also one of the few not smitten with Loras. This was an advantage when the others were trailing hopelessly after the brunette, begging to know that her most comely brother was to be spared marriage.

“I had thought you did not care either way.”
“I am interested,” Mira admitted, “As we all are. But I ask to spare Leonette further heartbreak.”

Margaery blinked wide, luminous, doe-shaped eyes at the other girl. They were her best feature, in her own opinion, as they lacked the intensity Willas’ held and the amusements that Garlan’s fell to. Loras’ appeared sly, though he was least given to their games. Tragically, Mira maintained the frank innocence of her people and merely blinked back. Yet another day that the Forrester girl would not follow her to bed then.

“Garlan will not be wed today,” Margaery answered. She hadn’t thought Leonette so invested in her brother, though the dainty lady would make a good match. There had been some note in Willas’ letters to keep an eye on her, had there not? “We shall have to hasten preparations. It will take little over a fortnight ‘fore Willas brings his bride here.”

Mira had a knack for geography and it did not take her long to work out the first hint. “Lord Willas is marrying a lady outside of the Reach?”

A second later and, “Lord Willas is marrying ?!”

Margaery tapped a finger playfully against her lips and they fell to silence. Mira contemplated the hint further as Margaery surveyed the glass gardens and ordered the flowers, then hurried to the outer bailey to ensure the Tyrell banners furled and ready to drop. They were at the wine cellar and the brunette was ensuring the quality and quantity of the drinks at hand, when Mira spoke.

“Lord Willas is wedding outside of the Reach.”

Margaery hummed distractedly, deciding to order another two casks of mulled beer.

“His bride wouldn’t be approved of by Lord and Lady Tyrell, so he does so in secret.”

Margaery wiped down a tin cup with a clean rag and then poured herself a sip of the Arbor vintage.

“They travel by ship to the Shield Islands. A fortnight is too far for the Westerlands.”

‘This one shall do. I wonder if I can find import some of their Northern spirits before the wedding.’
“The bride is from a House in the Riverlands, the North or Dorne.”

Margaery nodded in satisfaction. This vintage would do fine. “We can have casks of Northern ale travel down by the Crossings in a fortnight, can’t we?”

“Lord Willas is marrying a lady of the North?” Mira stated in disbelief. “Wait, the only Northern lady to visit Highgarden in the last year was…”

Ignoring the blatant astonishment on the other lady’s face, Margaery patted her cheek fondly. “We’ll make a schemer of you yet, Mira.”

“Lady Lyarra Snow? Lord Willas will wed Lady Lyarra Snow?”

“After the effort I’ve gone to in preparing this, he better,” Margaery sniffed. Softening the arrogance in her tone, she offered a ladylike splay of hands in hapless wonder. “He’s in love with her.”

If she had declared Lady Lyarra’s true heritage, she would not have received a look of such surprise as this did. She pulled at Mira’s cheek in protest, her brother was distant and aloof, not heartless.

“I do hope it’s not catching,” Margaery added, batting her eyelashes. “There was something rather fetching about her Northern charm…”

“I had only seen Lady Lyarra a handful of times but she truly is a beauty,” the Forrester agreed in surprised sweetness. “I hope she and Lord Willas will have many happy years together.”

Sadly, not even Margaery’s optimism could parlay that into a bedding.

Instead of cutting the kidnapping in half, I’m putting the extra scenes into this filler and then having one long chapter cover the kidnapping and wedding ceremony. Sorry for the delay everyone. Real life got in the way of my update schedule.
Chapter Nineteen

Chapter 19

On the seventh day of the seventh month, approximately 297 years since Aegon’s Conquest, the last trueborn princess of House Targaryen was pushed off of the bed. Lyarra tumbled off with a most unladylike grunt, her curls snarling around her head in messy knots, as she folded her arms to brace against the chill of even the rug-covered floor. The culprit of this heinous crime sniffed haughtily in response and then fixed icy blue orbs on her.

“Up. Now.” Sansa waved a brush threateningly in the air, nudging her older sister with her toe as the dark-haired girl fruitlessly tried to roll away. “We have to get you ready.”

“For my kidnapping?” Lyarra snarked, pushing herself into a sitting position and looking forlornly at her bed. Ghost had poked her head up from the pillows, drowsily looking around the room with blood ruby eyes, before sticking her snout back under the blanket. Lucky pup. “Is this really necessary?”

“A kidnapping is no excuse not to look your best,” Sansa chastised.

‘It frightens me that my sister isn’t japing,’ Lyarra thought. She allowed the red-haired girl to pull her up to her feet, violet eyes tracking the room to find that Sansa had already laid out her clothes. The blue gown was of the Northern fashion, with a square neckline, long sleeves and a pleated skirt. The skirt was split up the back to enable astride rising. The bodice was embroidered with pale pink roses, scrolling downwards to the hem of her skirt, and matched by the sturdy, pink-dyed leather shoes they had bought earlier.

“You would make a wonderful lady-in-waiting,” she murmured, as her sister pulled out a full bodice instead of her customary chemise from the drawers. “Lord Willas mentioned that it was customary for a bride to bring a few ladies of her own to court. When this settles, if you’re not opposed—”

“To see the splendor of Highgarden with my own eyes,” Sansa sighed happily, her own eyes shining. “Don’t be silly, Sister. How could I ever oppose that?”

“When you’re there, you can have someone else bring up the water instead.” A third voice, snappish, broke in, as the door opened. Two direwolf pups trotted in before Arya could lug the full bucket through. “We couldn’t heat enough water for the bath—”
“A cold wash is fine.” Lyarra grinned over from where she stood, against the wall as Sansa expertly untied the strings of her dress. “Thank you for bringing it up here, Arya.”

Her little sister shrugged unconcernedly. “You only get kidnapped once.”

“I should hope,” Lyarra whispered back, lips quirking upwards. “Sansa and I were speaking of the southron tradition to bring ladies-in-waiting to court. You’re still young but perhaps you can foster for a year or two in Highgarden?”

“Will I have to wear a dress?”

“Sometimes. You’ll have to dance, attend balls and behave mannerly around the court too.”

Arya considered the offer in all seriousness. “It sounds terrible but I love you too much to say ‘no’.”

‘I’ll have to see if I can arrange a swordsmanship lesson for her as well.’ It would have to be more discrete then when she was a mere bastard visiting Highgarden but even as a lady, her practice sessions would continue. Willas had merely asked that she do so less publicly as, even when known that the Lady of Highgarden was a swordswoman, most courtiers would prefer to avoid reminders.

Lyarra felt that perplexing medley of anticipation, fear and delight as her mind skittered towards her future role. She was leaving Winterfell. She was going to be married!

The dark-haired girl bit her lip sharply, trying not to break into breathless giggles over the fact. Her composure was broken when she saw the expression on Sansa’s face, a wide smile as she read her own, and then the air was filled with two mutual rings of laughter. Arya merely shook her head in silent grief over the insanity that her sisters had so tragically fallen to.

“If this is a sign of love, then I wish to never be married,” the youngest Stark in the room declared.

“I’m certain that there’s some handsome man out there that will change your mind,” Sansa teased.
Leagues away and in the Dornish sands, Edric Dayne sneezed.

“And I’m certain that there is not.” Arya shot back.

Edric Dayne sneezed thrice more in quick succession as the Stark sisters wondered aloud whether he would be honorable and gentle, if he had the courage to court Arya, and, from the girl in question, the basis of his existence. He rubbed his nose and waved away Lord Beric’s concern that he was coming down with a cold.

With two hands to help her, even a pair as unenthused and inexperienced as Arya’s, the dark-haired girl was soon dressed for the day. She eschewed the customary fur cloak for a thinner wool coat of an undistinguished grey that rode down past her hips. Her thick curls were pulled into a loose updo, a few strands falling free to be pushed away from light violet eyes. Around her wrist was clasped the silver bracelet, at her ears, Sansa’s plain silver studs. Lyarra put her foot down when it came to painting her face but allowed the middle Stark sister to massage a pine-scented cream on her sweetmilk skin.

“You look lovely, Lyaa,” Arya said admiringly. “I’m certain that Robb and Theon will be pleased.”

“It does seem overmuch when Lord Willas won’t even be present,” Lyarra admitted. The rose lord hadn’t wanted his disability to slow their escape, thus arranging for his brothers to ‘kidnap’ her in his stead. Not that it would be all that scandalous an account when Robb and Theon were similarly brought along by the Tyrells.

“No excuses,” Sansa insisted. “Arya, did you finish the letters last night?”

“Signed, folded and sealed. They’re all hidden under Robb’s bed. Bran can get them later.”

“Alright.” The red-haired girl clapped her hands together, regarding the Snow with misty eyes. “This is it then. You’re to be wed.”

“I am,” Lyarra leaned down and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Thank you, Sister. I’ll write you as soon as I am able.”

“We’ll reply.” Arya was careful of her dress as she leaned in for her own gentle embrace. “You can tell us all of married life and we’ll tell you of the punishments Father will give us when he finds out.”
While the words were teasing, Lyarra still offered an apologetic smile. “I’ll send gifts.”

“You’ll need to. If Rickon learns that he gave up his favorite storyteller without at least a half dozen more toys, he’ll be most vexed.” Sansa smirked.

“Can’t have that, now can we?” Arya tugged at her loose curl. “Be happy, Lyaa. Father will be furious for anything less.”

“He’ll be angry regardless,” Lyarra winced. “We’re acting behind his back and faking a kidnapping. After what happened with Aunt Lyanna…”

The dark-haired girl’s words trailed off. She knew the truth of the incident, unlike her sisters, after the almost disastrous second proposal from the honey-haired Tyrell. Lyarra had informed Robb of it alone and still believed her decision to be the sensible one, but now desired a sister to speak to. Someone to reassure her that fleeing to a southron lord’s arms wasn’t as impetuous and dangerous a path as when her mother traversed it.

“This isn’t anything like Aunt Lyanna,” Sansa scolded hotly. “You’re leaving willingly to marry a man you love!”

‘As she did…’ Lyarra mused. Her youngest sister piped up then with more reassuring words.

“I doubt the Fat Flower has the stomach to set either Father or Robb aflame,” Arya added. “Nor will any spurned man declare war for your hand. Even Torrhen Karstark could not be so enamored of you.”

“The poor man,” Sansa sighed with a rather insincere regret. In her mind, anguished suitors merely added to the romance of Lyarra’s marriage. Within the rules of song and story, it was only right that a maiden as beautiful as her sister would leave a trail of broken hearts behind her.

“Oh, stop acting like you care.” Arya rolled her eyes. “You should be more worried that Lyarra’s ‘kidnapping’ will keep you from getting a suitor.”

Concern suddenly swept across high cheekbones and river blue eyes. Sansa Stark was lovely.
Moreso, she knew of her beauty and expected suitors of her own to vye for her hand, when Ned Stark allowed them to. She accepted that her older sister would be first to wed but expected that, once everything was said and done, her chance would come. The thought that the implicit promise given to all trueborn noble daughters, of splendid balls and intricate gowns and gallant husbands, would be taken from her was worrisome.

“When Father finds out,” Arya said gleefully. “He will lock us in a tower, guarded by a pack of direwolves, for all time, to keep a second daughter from running away.”

Sansa stared at her sister, mouth agape. Lyarra took one look at that expression and suddenly burst into a coughing fit. Arya maintained her smirk, unknowingly mimicking her deceased uncle, all until the red-haired Stark swatted her across the head.

“You’re impossible!” The blue-eyed girl declared. She took one look at the mirth on the eldest girl’s face and broke into a smile of her own. “I hope the man you’ll marry is good at climbing towers then!”

Back in Starfall, Edric Dayne sneezed again.

x

Theon Greyjoy had staged his own rebellion. It wasn’t the grand affair that his father’s had been, with an armada of kracken-sailed ships cutting through sea and salt, but neither did it splinter and burn in a black-and-gold blaze of royal fury. It was a small thing, eight years ago, ripped from his sister’s arms after losing brothers and uncles and nearly his own life to Euron Greyjoy’s matte black blade, to accept Robb Stark’s hand. It was a defiance of his role as hostage, as helpless to his own fate as any of the thralls in the Iron Islands had been, to befriend his captor. Not that the auburn-haired boy with his silent, violet-eyed shadow evoked the image of the man to slit Theon’s throat should his father rebel, but it appealed to his sense of the dramatic. Theon had cried. Theon had raged. Theon had fell to a mute stupor at the loss but in the end, Theon took the only means of resistance available to him. He made a friend.

Well, he made two friends. Theon hadn’t thought all that highly of Lyarra Snow at the beginning but where Robb went, his bastard half-sister would follow. The two had been as thick as thieves from, according to the servants’ gossip, the day Lord Stark rode into Winterfell with a swaddled babe in the following wheelhouse. She had been put into the child’s playroom, playing quietly with her straw doll, when the blue-eyed boy had toddled in. Supposedly, the Stark Heir had lit up at the presence of a new playmate, glomped on and refused to let go. Eventually Lyarra had stopped crawling away from him and the two shared an enclosed friendship that hadn’t been breached until Theon arrived. The squid hadn’t understood the exceptional nature of his friendship until years after the fact.
Still, Theon felt a perverse glee knowing that befriending the Stark children and enjoying his time at Winterfell ran counter to the suffocating life of a hostage that the Lannister Lord wanted. It was petty revenge but he was pleased nonetheless. He was even more pleased that Lyarra was to wed the Tyrell Heir now. Not just because it would make his friend happy- and Theon was pleased for her! Truly! Even it meant having to deal with Robb’s bellyaching for the next few moons- but because it was a marriage of Great Houses.

Theon’s education in politics was limited but he wasn’t an idiot. The last dynasty fell because the dragons had been stupid enough to allow the Riverlands, the North and the Stormlands to be wed in alliance, all overlooked by a fostering of Ned Stark and Robert Baratheon at the Eyrie. It was a coalition powerful enough to bring down the royal family and this one, tying the Reach and the North together, could prove equally dangerous. Theon didn’t actually think that would happen, of course. Ned Stark was too loyal a man to betray the crown and besides, there were no viable replacements for the Stag King. No, it wouldn’t come to anything at all. But even the possibility would keep Tywin Lannister up at night and the thought of the blasted Lion Lord getting worry-born ulcers made Theon feel all warm and mushy inside.

(Theon didn’t miss Rodrik or even Maron but he couldn’t forget the kick a man in Lannister red aimed at Asha, nor the lion lord’s cold eyes as he advocated for the permanent death of House Greyjoy).

And there would be sailing involved. Theon was always pleased when there was sailing involved.

“Here, let me take this,” Robb offered, already stepping up to grab the leather satchel from his sister’s hand. The dark-haired girl softly shushed him and placed it over her chest, the strap caught between her pert breasts and briefly highlighting the sight, before a cloak covered it. It was a thin bag, meant for two or three dresses alone, with the remainder of her trousseau brought south after the marriage.

‘With any luck, they’ll have to be sailed down and I can join again,’ Theon mused. “Ready then?”

“Of course.” Lyarra hadn’t the look of a bride-to-be in her simple cloak but those eerie silver-violet eyes were bright in expectation. Years of friendship hadn’t soothed his unease with the unnatural shade, nor was it to be soothed by the blood-eyed pup trotting at her feet. He hadn’t been the least bit surprised when Robb told him of his sister’s suicidal coaxing of a mother direwolf.

‘I don’t know what Robb is so worried for. Now Lyaa’ll have a husband as mad as she is.’
Lord Stark had taken a day’s trip out to Castle Cerwyn for the biannual meeting of the woodsmen and they’d decided that none other occasion would prove more fortuitous for the greatest marriage scandal of their lifetimes. Excuses had been made for an early morning ride, provisions secreted away by the surprisingly talented pickpocket Arya Underfoot, and steeds chosen for their endurance and speed. Even Theon, who hadn’t any affection for the beasts, could admire his own. A tall destrier of black hair and fleet foot, it was the sort of mount that any southron knight could be proud of.

Unexpectedly, Robb offered to lift his equally talented sister up to the saddle. Even more rare, Lyarra allowed this gallantry, nervously smiling over to the castle doors where the other Starklings awaited. Her white-furred pup, aptly named Ghost, was bundled up amongst silken scraps and rawhide bones in the saddlebag, more than content once a milk-drenched rag was put within jaw’s reach. Theon casually brought up the state of trapping last sennight, exasperated to find that the guards were attuning to the strange melancholy in the air. The Starks had no talent for deception. It was meant to be a simple morning ride, nothing more, and yet Rickon was already sniffling into Sansa’s quickly dampening skirts.

‘Liking your siblings so much,’ Theon decided, ‘Cannot be healthy.’

They rode out of the big gates of Winterfell and down familiar, well-trodden paths before the castle became a visible but indistinct smudge in the horizon. Once there, Robb made an abrupt turn to the west, alongside the trees of the Wolfswood, over towards Torrhen’s Lake and past that, the unnamed rivers that would lead down to the Saltspear. It would be over Barrowland and straddling the line to the Rills, Theon knew, to reach the western shore before nightfall.

It was a point of pride and pain that Theon could ride so well. They hadn’t many horses in the Iron Islands, as the land wouldn’t suffice for extensive grazing. As the son of Balon Greyjoy, he’d partaken in a few lessons as a child but the hardy ponies favored there hadn’t held a candle to the ones in Winterfell. Unlike most Ironborn, Theon could ride well. He could shoot too; while not outright derided in the islands, longbows were considered the bent of less courageous men. And in all the years he’d spent here, it would be strange if he hadn’t drawn some affection for the land. If so, Theon wouldn’t speak of heavy mists, hilly scrabland or ancient pines to the people he was to one-day rule.

‘It’s a hard, proud land, full of hard, proud people.’ A trickle of amusement ran down his spine as he saw the instinctive, unmindful competition between his friends. Every now and then, Robb’s horse would move ahead to lead the party, soon to be supplanted by a, to all evidence incognizant, Lyarra. Robb wouldn’t allow his sister to hold point for long and the cycle would begin all over again.

Tempted as he was to join them, Theon allowed the two siblings a last bit of fun before Lyarra wed.
'Wonder how pretty those southron ladies could get. ’ Theon intended to bed one, if the opportunity presented itself. ‘ Lyarra’s bookish lord’s supposed to have a beauty for a sister, isn’t he?’

Comeliness tended to run in families, of course, and Lord Willas Tyrell was supposed to be rather fair himself. Theon wasn’t sure if he should credit such rumors. Love had clearly driven the wolf maiden to madness, so any accounts she gave were suspect and Robb preferred looking tragically over maps of Westeros to discussing his faraway goodbrother.

‘Then again, Lyarra’s not one to lie.’ Theon’s eyes widened to uncomfortable proportions when he saw the two dark blue clad riders awaiting them a mile away. His eyes were as sharp as an archer’s needed to be but it wasn’t as though the two put any effort into hiding, out there in the open like that. ‘ The second knight’s prettier than my sister.’

The golden-curled, blue-eyed ponce had to be prettier than Lyarra too, though Theon wasn’t quite reckless enough to voice the comment. He had kissed a boy before- the novelty attracted him, the cheap wine and hoots from the whores spurred him on- but Theon had eventually settled that he found little physical attraction in men. ‘ I may have to reconsider for this one. ’

The less attractive knight was speaking now, so Theon abandoned his brief side-eyed fantasy to focus.

“...will be leading you to the ship,” Lord Garlan, and that must be his name from the similarity to both the startlingly attractive male and the descriptions Theon had heard of Lord Willas, said. “My cousins, Horas and Hobber, have sailed it north and shall take us down to Greenshield.”

“Are they aware of the wedding?” Robb inquired.

“They were informed after landing,” Garlan Tyrell smirked. “Suffice it to say, they are most eager to meet the Lady Lyarra.”

Those words didn’t seem to assure Lyarra any, as the she-wolf’s already pale skin turned the chalky white of river agates. Theon would have interfered with a jape but the blonde knight moved his horse forward, distracting the dark-haired girl with a plea to meet the infamous Ghost. Summoned by her name, the blood-eyed beast poked her head out, yawning widely to reveal a row of sharp little teeth that hounds wouldn’t yet have grown and a pink tongue. For this, she was rewarded with many praises by the knight and an affectionate ear rub by Lyarra.
“By the Warrior, Garlan spoke true!” The knight was delighted. “You’ll have to be careful with this one, Lady Lyarra. My brother will spoil her senseless if you don’t keep a firm hand on him.”

“To my knowledge, it is the husband that is traditionally the disciplinarian,” Lyarra replied, lips curved.

“My grandmother would disagree. She would claim it a woman’s duty to raise children properly before a man could seed any foolish notions to their heads.”

“Lady Olenna has done an utterly splendid job with her own son, of course.”

“To that, she would reply that my father is his own father’s son,” the knight chuckled. “As his wife, the management of my brother’s foolish notions will fall to you.”

“Does Lord Willas have any such problems that I should be aware of now?”

“Hmm, let’s see… Willas won’t tell you, but he is absolutely horrid when it comes to increasing his stock. The stables at Highgarden are ever-expanding but when it comes to mayfairs and tourneys and such, one must distract my brother before they can sneak away merchandise to sell.”

Lyarra smiled at him impishly, evidently channeling anxiety into daring. “However will I distract him?”

The knight’s responding grin was everything rakish and Theon was eager to see how much further the two could take this. “Well, I have heard excellent things on the matter of trousers—”

“Loras!” Garlan intervened, shooting one look at his amused brother, a second at his sheepish but oddly proud soon-to-be sister, and a third at a dismayed Robb Stark. “We’re now to leave. Lady Lyarra, if you would lend me your ear? I have wedding details to discuss with you.”

The formation was arranged to allow the dark-haired girl and the second eldest Tyrell to fall back. Briefly observing them assured Theon that his friend felt comfortable with her future goodbrother, speaking softly and intently about the southron ceremony arranged. The riders continued forward, past massive trees and small villages, woodcutters, farmers, and the occasional craftsmen, until noon
fell. The midday meal was eaten briefly, Theon having a chance to inquire somewhat about seapower in the Reach. This was a subject on which Ser Loras was surprisingly well-informed as his uncle was none other than Lord Paxter Redwyne, one of the finest naval commanders in Westeros.

‘They’ll have the means to bring the bride price north then.’

They made better time than by Robb’s conservative estimate, none too surprising considering how cautious Winter had made the North. The ship had cast anchor well away from the harbor, a boy with reddish brown hair having rowed a smaller boat near land. Theon saw a gorgeous, clinker-built, oaken cog with a single sail, steep sides and, if he squinted his sides, a squatter than average keel, bobbing a quarter of a meter away. There wasn’t any emblem of House Redwyne but for the purplish-red, almost wine coloured, dye of the sail. Not that this wasn’t impressive in and of itself, as cloth dyed purple and glossed to withstand the storms, as this undoubtedly was, could run hundreds of dragons deep. Theon’s heartbeat ran wildly; he might quite possibly be in love.

“Must we travel by ship?” Robb asked, pale, Northern skin tinged faintly green. Beside him, Lyarra looked no less apprehensive, though she had the common sense to keep her mouth shut when her husband was the grandson of so famed a naval House. At least her goodmother’s surname wouldn’t harry her thusly. “We’ve made good time on the horses.”

“And it’ll be even better by sea,” Ser Garlan rejoined. “Haven’t you learnt to swim?”

“In the heated pools of a Godswood, yes,” Lyarra mumbled.

Theon thought of brisk winds, the white foam, navigating by sky … “You needn’t fear. What could possibly go wrong?”

x

‘It could be worse.’

Robb Stark doubted he would ever love the sea as his friend did. Theon, currently leaning from the crow’s nest like a two-copper witless fool, had adjusted quickly to a sailor’s gait. Despite that it had been a day and a half out, the auburn-haired boy had yet to accept the lurch of the floor beneath his boots, the tangy salt breeze burning his throat or sleeping directly under a starlit canopy, without trees or any such cover present. The only cabin on the ship had been afforded to Lyarra, as was only proper, so the other men, less than twenty years all, had taken pallets on deck.
Two of those men were sons of House Redwyne and while he had maintained the stoicness his House was famous for before them, Robb was quite vexed.

Neither of them had been overtly rude. In fact, their actions could be considered downright solicitous, if not for how they looked at his little sister with expressions of downright perplexion and curiosity. It wasn’t an unexpected reaction and, in fact, Robb had felt it a better one for a presumed bastard marrying so highly, than scorn. There hadn’t been any implications of seduction present, despite the act common to women marrying upwards, possibly because House Stark was widely considered amongst the most prudish House in Westeros. Even then, Robb grated at their treatment of Lyarra as a roadside mummer’s show.

‘She handles it with far more grace than I would.’ Lyarra, who so often spent her life shrinking into the shadows, maintained her poise and cheer around these men now. Robb would have liked to think that it was for his silent support but he wasn’t so foolish. The spectre of Willas Tyrell was the one she was drawing strength from now.

‘As,’ Robb admitted sourly, ‘Is fitting for her future husband.’

It was a dark sally in the North that wolves shouldn’t venture south of the Neck. Robb discarded the words, as one only could when a betrothal was arranged between one’s sister and the archetype of a southron lordling but these boys made him reconsider. They were a mere sign of the future awaiting Lyarra. Disdain, jealousy and rumors would follow his sister around for possibly the remainder of life for daring to marry above herself.

‘Even though she’s a princess…’ Robb liked those thoughts even less than these ones. He considered ordering the ship back to shore. The Stark Heir was definitely getting cold feet for this marriage business. Then a low yip caught his attention. He looked down. “Ghost?”

The white-furred pup didn’t make another sound but she did rub her head against his leg. He leaned down to pet her fur, enjoying the soft touch against his palm. Ruby eyes looked up at him reproachfully when he stopped. “You don’t want your mistress to be married, do you?”

Ghost licked his palm. Robb took this as support.

He leapt to his feet. “Lyaa’ll be mad but I’m sure if I talked to her first-”
And then Theon spotted something out in the horizon. “Pirates!”

“Better than a bridegroom,” Robb muttered, withdrawing his sword and looking around for Lyarra. The dark-haired girl was swiftly divesting herself of her skirt, and dear Gods, Sansa had allowed for trousers underneath them and retrieving her own sword. The auburn-haired boy scooped up the white direwolf pup and hurriedly made for his foolish sister. “Absolutely not!”

“I’m not letting you fight alone,” Lyarra snapped back, nonetheless accepting the pup and opening the cabin door to shush her in. The pup looked as displeased about it as her mistress.

“I forbid it.” Robb kept one ear open to another announcement, in sheer relief, that they were petty pirates and not Ironborn raiders from Theon.

“How are you two still fighting?!” Theon shouted down, notching his bow and taking aim. The pirate’s ship was a sleeker, faster one, skimming through water and pulling up next to them. While the numbers were greater on the other side, the quality was revealed inferior when Theon took first kill. “Attack the goddamn pirates!”

“At least they’re not dirty, stinking, no-good Ironborn raiders,” Hobbar Redwyne spit out. Several of the men had jumped aboard, only to face the whirlwind that was simply Ser Garlan Tyrell with a sword. Ser Hobbar hadn’t quite that talent but he respectably engaged another man further away.

“How are you two still fighting?!” Theon shouted back, before shooting an arrow through another man’s eye.

‘Letters, kidnappings and now, pirates?’ Robb took out his frustration by sidestepping one man and then slicing another, throat through sternum, in his next pass. There was acute surprise present before eyes rolled back and the man crumpled. This was the first man he’d killed but the auburn-haired boy hadn’t more than a moment to absorb that, until the next man stepped up and he was back to fighting.
‘That settles it. Sansa and Arya are never to be wed.’

“Ain’t you a pretty lass- agh!” Lyarra’s blade made swift work of that particular fool. Robb stepped on his wrist for good measure.

Between Ser Garlan Tyrell and- well, mostly Ser Garlan, though they’d all assisted to some measure, the pirates were felled. Blood soaked the deck and Lyarra’s beaded bodice but at least the Redwyne twins now looked at her in horrified awe rather than perplexed consideration. Robb took the only good news he could, even as he grabbed his sister by the wrist and handily dragged her to the cabin. He had heard Ser Loras’ jest. No sister of his was meeting a Tyrell in trousers ever again.

Work in progress. This is so frustrating.
Chapter Twenty

Desmera Redwyne had a talent. Any grandchild of Olenna Tyrell cultivated at least one, and if her own was not as impressive as her cousins, well, Desmera had never the need for such qualities. Willas was interminably clever, Garlan fierce and gallant, Margaery gifted a silver tongue and Loras utterly charming, but they had all need of those skills as the main branch of House Tyrell. Desmera had no such expectations. She was the youngest child and only daughter of a wealthy House, with a warmly mannered mother and a doting, if strict, father. There had been no great role cultivated for her, beyond the essential etiquette necessary for life as a Reach noblewoman. The one skill that Desmera did have though, that could exceed any one of her cousins, was a card face that could drive Lord Varys green with envy.

Simply put, Lord Paxter Redwyne and his wife, Lady Mina Tyrell, had both inherited the silver-sharp tongue of House Redwyne that Lady Olenna perfected. Most of their courting had proceeded with each’s pleasure at the others witticisms and this trend continued into marriage. As the baby of her family, Desmera was often required to sit beside her parents in feasts and other social gatherings. It was inevitable that her parents would fall into sharing quibs and barbs with one another. Likewise, one would not be surprised that Desmera learnt early on the importance of hiding her own humors past a disaffected and pleasant smile. This was the measure by which she greeted Lady Lyarra Snow today.

‘She has such a natural beauty about her,’ Desmera marvelled, falling into a practiced curtsy. Her keen eyes caught the unpolished nature of the one returned to her. ‘Margaery shall have to straighten that pose. More creams and pastes for her skin. It’s so delightfully moonlight pale but she hasn’t felt the Reach sun yet.’

Desmera felt a pang of jealousy at that unblemished, sweetmilk skin. Her own freckles were a recurring upset for her.

“Sister, it’s a joy to have you here,” Margaery expressed warmly, drawing the younger, dark-haired bastard into an embrace. It seemed genuine too, none of that pert sweetness that her cousin offered to ladies-in-waiting that her position saddled her with. “Willas is already on the island but I’ve banished him to his rooms. It’s bad luck for the groom to see his bride before the wedding.”

“I hadn’t a chance to thank you for everything you’ve done, Margaery.” Desmera gave her credit. Her earnestness wasn’t feigned in the least.
“Nonsense. It was my pleasure,” Margaery assured. “The ceremony shall begin in a few hours. I’ve set aside a few ladies to assist you into a dress— you needn’t worry, I corresponded with Lady Sansa and had it completed foretime— but there are still some details to be addressed. I leave you in Cousin Desmera’s most capable hands.”

Her sweet tone was dropped a second later, as she turned a sickly smile on Hobber. “Cousin. You and I must speak of the crab shipment.”

Hobber had the good sense to look afraid— as he should, Margaery had not been pleased by his bartering skill— as the brunette harried him away. Desmera stepped up to fill her place, offering a placating smile to the nervous but exceptionally pretty bastard standing in front of her.

Married! Willas! Desmera was still agog by it all and she had spent the last sennight preparing the secret ceremony. She had been one of the few to risk her coin on Garlan rather than Loras, as despite any public acclaim, practically everyone in the family was aware of Loras’ deep ‘friendship’ with Lord Renly, but Willas had been a dark horse. Her cousin could be a second Ser Blackfish with how he avoided the prospect (the Ser Blackfish being a recurring figure of ridicule in House Redwyne for his former rejection of Aunt Bethany). If nothing else, the bastard’s conquest of her eldest cousin— and it couldn’t have been seduction, Willas was simply too ruthless and too smart to be ensnared by that— won some respect from Desmera.

Having already made a general curtsy to the party, Desmera turned to offer smaller ones in quick succession to the girl’s brother, a handsome boy with auburn hair a few shades darker than her own, and another figure, wearing noble’s clothes. The Stark Heir returned it with a gallant if distracted bow but the other one… Desmera shivered slightly as her hand was taken, lightly kissed and then returned to her as the young lord straightened. Those dark eyes bespoke only one word as they lazily made her own acquaintance.

“Theon Greyjoy, Heir of Pike.” This one was rakishly handsome, unlike the clear-cut beauty of his friend. A thrill ran down her spine as he offered a sly smile. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“And you, Lord Theon,” Desmera maintained, drawing her hand up slowly along the beaded line of her corset to pull a strand of hair back. The boy’s eyes gratifyingly followed the movement. “Desmera Redwyne of the Arbor.”

He was rather attractive. Shame he was an Ironborn.

Offering one more lustful smile, her nose pricked as the faint scent that memory identified as blood (Desmera had been dragged fishing by her father before) rose from the party. She gave no mind to it
as pirates had been the hastily offered reason for the delay. Horas had wisely fed the dead men to their cousin’s wrath. “Lady Lyarra, if you should follow me?”

“Of course.” The dark-haired girl stepped forward, revealing a small, white-furred form sitting patiently behind her. Desmera’s infamously mask nearly slipped at her sudden desire to coo at the beast. What a lovely creature! A gift from Cousin Willas perhaps? “Stay here with Robb, Ghost.”

“My lady, is that a wolf cub?” Mira Forrester asked in all evident astonishment. At those words, Desmera’s mask cracked for her own surprise. It was adorable enough as an obedient hound but wolf?

“A direwolf cub,” Lady Lyarra corrected, with a self-conscious smile. “My siblings and I each have one. Ghost is my companion.”

“Will he be coming to Highgarden with you?” Desmera asked hopefully. She had never seen a direwolf before but she wanted to cuddle that one at once!

“Yes, she will,” the bastard confirmed. The red-haired beauty mentally added another notch of respect for that, as well as decided that many qualities must have drawn her cousins to Lyarra Snow.

One mark of Margaery’s affection for the bastard was the selection of ladies-in-waiting. She had chosen three girls alone, no small thing when they included Cousin Elinor and herself, to limit Lady Lyarra’s exposure to the catty comments of a court displeased with Cousin Willas’ marriage. Desmera didn’t necessarily agree with such. Testing the bastard girl now would ready them to decide if she was worth the binding. Of course, as Cousin Willas seemed determined to go through this regardless- and dear Gods, if a besotted Willas hadn’t been the most terrifying thing Desmera encountered yet- than she supposed it unnecessary.

The last member of their intimate party was Margaery’s erstwhile attempt at a pillow friend. A fellow Northerner, Mira had broken into a pleasant chat of all the glories Highgarden could offer. Certainly more so than the dreary North, though there would remain a certain charm to one’s childhood abode.

Elinor threw open the doors of the lady’s room with unnecessary grandeur. Sweeping in with a flourish of skirts and silken brown tresses, her cousin made headway to the straw-stuffed still figure they had worked tirelessly on. Draped over the mannequin was swaths of pale blue fabric, lighter even than the dawnlit sky, more white silk than any notable hue, and as pure as any bride could wish for. They had folded it into a wedding gown exuding simplicity and grace- neither qualities in fashion at the moment but Elinor’s masterpiece was such that it would be a great trend. At least it would have been had the ceremony not been private and the dress resigned to a fateful end at the
hands of foolish greenboys.

The gasp of shock and delight from Lady Lyarra led the girls to preen anyway.

It truly was Elinor Tyrell’s finest work. A shoulderless tube of pale white-blue silk meant to cling to the bride’s body leant down to the floor. Over that the ladies had cheerfully drained Cousin Willas’ pocketbook by importing Myrish lace by the yard. The entire dress, from the chest and collarbone, conservatively stitched over in white lace, to the trim, was endowed in lace. A recurring rose, leaf and ivy design of overlapping flowers took a keen eye or a close look to fully appreciate. The full-length sleeves, attached by thin cords of white satin, were done in the same design and made entirely of lace. The train was short and the veil held by a silver circlet studded in tiny white sapphires. Margaery had shamelessly borrowed the set from her mother’s jewelry box, including a delicate necklace, matching set of earrings and twinned bracelets. White satin slippers completed the look and the Redwyne was proud to state that she had stitched the golden rose design on herself.

“It’s beautiful,” Lyarra Snow whispered.

“I know,” Elinor responded proudly. Remembering that a compliment was to be returned, she belatedly added. “You are beautiful enough to do my work justice.”

Desmera could have slapped her own face for that remark. Still, the Snow girl returned it with a quirky, slightly less nervous grin. “My sister, Sansa, generously allows me to model her work as well.”

“Good,” her cousin said brightly. “You have practice.”

With those words, the girls dragged her to the other end of the room, where a tub of heated water scented in rose petals awaited. Once the admittedly well-made gown of mint green had been stripped of her, Lyarra was unceremoniously pushed into the water and oils, brushes and soaps were fetched. Desmera took a moment to admire the sight- Elinor took two- of limber skin, full breasts, elfin features and luminous silver-violet eyes. Well, if Cousin Willas had to lose his mind, at least he hadn’t lost his taste.

“Lady Lyarra, I hadn’t the pleasure of being in Highgarden at your last visit,” Desmera began, gently massaging the oil- rose scented again, did Willas truly have no shame?- into those springy curls. “But Lady Leonette could not sing your praises highly enough and I would dearly like to test her claims. Would you promise me a song when I next visit my fair cousins?”
“While I’m pleased to do so, I fear my voice doesn’t boast any great talent.”

“Nonsense,” Mira rebuked. “Ser Garlan was brought to tears by your tribute to the Dragonknight.”

“He was merely dismayed that my hero surpassed his own.” Lyarra Snow laughed. It was a husky sound but mirthful and one that fled straight to the loins. “He is a follower of the Hedge Knight’s exploits, you see.”

“And you would disagree with him on that?”

“I welcome him to his own favorites,” Lady Lyarra maintained diplomatically. “In past, I have most avidly followed the Knight of the Morning.”

“None better standard for gallantry would exist.” Elinor nodded. “Pray do not mention this to Lady Olenna. She hasn’t any fondness for the Dornish.”

“For one Dornishman in particular,” Desmera corrected. The two shared a laugh. “Ah, forgive me our jape, Lady Lyarra. It is a small thing.”

She received a timid smile in return. “Lord Willas had mentioned Prince Oberyn as a great friend.”

“Much to Grandmother’s distress,” Desmera maintained. A burst of surprise ran down her spine. “You are aware of the particulars?”

“Lord Willas and I have discussed the subject but briefly.”

“It surprises me, as Cousin Willas is ever so private with his affairs.” Elinor flitted away for a fresh blanket as the other two help Lyarra up. “Tell us how many little secrets you charmed from him!”

“And what shall my coin be for such a service?” Lyarra teased back.

“I shall love you forever,” Elinor offered. “No, better yet, I shall tell you of all the little rooms that you may tease more secrets from my cousin from.”
This led to another startled burst of laughter. Mira’s pale skin was flushed a deep red by now but Lady Lyarra admirably held her composure. “You shall take all the fun out of discovering them for myself, Lady Elinor!”

“You shall call me either ‘Cousin’ or ‘Elinor’, if you’re to do us all the great favor of wedding Willas.”

“Than I insist on the same intimacy for myself. As for secrets, I’ll disappoint with the knowledge that your cousin is a rather dull soul.”

“Dull? Cousin Margaery spoke of love letters! Trysts in the woods! He’s even sent my brothers to kidnap you.”

“Only as by necessity and with mine own brother acting chaperone,” Lyarra explained. Her luminous eyes gleamed and she added. “Has Margaery spoken of her brother’s efforts to birth direwolf cubs?”

Desmera mentally noted that the Lady Lyarra had a gift for storytelling as she narrated the fantastical and whimsical tale. This took most of the time necessary to dress the bride, followed by more light exchanged wherein she adequately deflected any attention from herself. The Redwyne did learn of her closeness with her siblings and that the Stark Heir that had taught her to fight but neither bit of information was particularly titillating. As with most of House Stark, Lyarra Snow presented a picture that was regimented, honorable and inconceivably dull.

Desmera was impressed. ‘Her wits are unpolished but ready. Grandmother shall train her to reveal nothing in pretty words and aimless charm soon enough.’

After the dress had been fitted, and Desmera properly kicked her cousin when Elinor’s hand lingered a mite too long on the curve of the lady’s hip, they addressed the hair. As enticing as those curls would be in bed, it was the work of those soothing oils that it could be wrestled into a proper bun. A light silver powder was applied to draw attention to those uncommonly pretty eyes, as was thick paint to her lashes. Pink rouge to her cheeks and white powder along the bare neck and strip of collarbone still present. Each piece of jewelry was properly fitted, than the slippers carefully placed on. Last was the veil, made of lace so fine that it appeared spun out of strands of a spider’s web.

When it was done, they all stepped back and admired the blushing bride-to-be.
“You look,” Desmera announced, with the tone of a lady that had completed her task to the utmost satisfaction, “Absolutely stunning.”

In her mind, the Redwyne lamented that she would be unable to taste the beauty for herself. ‘It’s truly a shame that Cousin Willas is such a selfish brat.’

Nine months from now, she would reiterate the complaint against her eldest cousin. If Willas wasn’t so damn possessive, Desmera wouldn’t have lamented the loss of such a beauty. If Willas hadn’t dared to wed a bastard, Desmera wouldn’t have risked a short dalliance with a handsome Ironborn. And if Willas needn’t the privacy to wed on so remote an island, she needn’t have waited two whole days to get her hands on moon tea leaves, lowering their effectiveness to a mere eight-tenths. Damn Willas.

x

“It’s not too late to back out now,” Robb whispered, once Lyarra had been escorted to a side chamber with only her brother for company.

The dark-haired girl laughed softly to herself. “I think it is. We’re here. I’m dressed. Willas awaits.”

“Not to mention that your future goodsister will make us all take long walks off a short pier, if we do anything to ruin her wedding,” Robb added, inviting more laughter. “Scared?”

There was a pause and then a soft breath. “Yes.”

“Enough to run away?” There was a gentle smile on Robb’s face, one that gave her the strength to stick out her tongue.

“You wish,” Lyarra answered.

“I do,” the auburn-haired boy freely admitted. “Sansa and Arya were always to be wed away… but you, I had hoped to keep close.”
“I had wished for the same, but I really do love him.” Lyarra looked down at the fresh bouquet of white and blue roses, dotted with forget-me-nots, holly flowers and sprigs of lavender, made for her. “I’m sorry for bringing us into the Great Game.”

There was silence, then an answer spoken in consideration. “For seven-and-twenty years we had been playing. House Stark entered the Game, the moment that Grandfather sent Father to foster at the Vale. He hadn’t prepared his children for it, and admittedly, Father has not done the same for us, but your husband is, if nothing else, a knowledgeable player.”

“He lacks experience,” Lyarra said lowly.

“Experience is a pleasure that only time can afford. And knowledge is the currency to buy time.”

“He will gain nothing if he should broker for war.”

“He desired a future for his House, you needn’t fault him that,” Robb chided. “It was a mistake, but when the time came for him to choose, he chose you.”

‘He chose you.’ A flutter appeared, light and low, in her belly. “You speak so kindly of my husband.”

Her elder brother, cousin by blood and twin by most any other measure, huffed. “Don’t remind me.”

The two fell into a peaceful silence that only they shared, waiting moments before the first three of the bells rang, to summon the Maiden, the Mother and the Crone. It was the signal for the bride to step forward, so Lyarra kept her bouquet in her right hand, and pushed the other through the sword arm of her brother, to keep the ‘father’ from attacking the bridegroom. With Robb stepping forward first, the curtains parted and her tiny, dim corner of the world was alit.

Margaery Tyrell had done an absolutely remarkable job. She’d had most of the room wallpapered to a muted gold with sketched roses rising from the floor. The narrow wall at the end of the procession of interspersed poplar and larch chairs, was painted to a mural. In rich paints was a white wolf slept nestled in winter roses as a golden-eyed owl stood guard. A dozen iron chandeliers hung from the ceiling with long-tapered scented candles releasing a light wildflower scent. Tapestries and brocades proudly proclaimed the Tyrell House colors but hints of red and black, as with the black piping for the brocade, stood for her own blood. A small dias stood for a handful of musicians to play and the foremost, left-center seat was reserved for a delineator to sketch the ceremony. Lyarra was gratified
to find statues of sitting direwolves holding a rose between their paws on each corner of the room.

For a private ceremony, the small hall was filled to the brim. Margaery had invited everyone within the castle, from the lowest scullery maid to the highest chatelain, and while the nobility skewed to youth, it was no less representative of the great Houses of the Reach. Samwell beamed at her from his first row seat next to his brother and Theon. This comprised of her family situation as the rightmost side was taken by a bevy of attractive brunettes, with the occasional blonde or redhead thrown in.

Woe betide her, Lyarra considered with humor, if her child was born with the dark tresses of House Stark.

Alas, as marvelous as hergoodsister’s work was, Lyarra was focused solely on the brilliance that Mace and Alerie Tyrell had brought into the world. Willas stood there, in dark velvet and gold thread, his cane amiss but a polished oaken brace keeping him upright. There was a smile on his face, a promise in his eyes that robbed her of all her fear for stepping forward. ‘And to think it all started with a ride.’

A gentle melody began to play, the tune unfamiliar to her, though it certainly held the strains of promise inherent to a ceremony of new beginnings. Robb led her forward gently; as often in her life, Lyarra followed. The tawny gold of her rose lord’s eyes unravelled her, breaking a smile that would have others speak of radiance and joy in the bride. The Stark Heir released her when they arrived to the stage, leaving her to Willas and a Septon, as he took his own seat beside Theon. Dickon Tarly unexpectedly whipped out a handkerchief, soon put to good use by a misty-eyed wolf.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today…”

Lyarra allowed the drone of words to fall by her ear, trusting Willas’ movements to guide her to the trestle. He clasped both hands over hers, her own faintly nicked and calloused hands, covered by larger ones slightly less so and of a faintly golden tan from the sun. Strips of fabric dipped in tiny bowls of oil were wrapped around their entwined wrists, one each for the Seven Gods, from a vibrant crimson for the Warrior to a sedate brown for the Crone. An assistant Septon, in the yellow-striped robe of a novice, hurried forward to move the trestle away as they patiently waited.

“Who stands for the kin’s blessing?” The Septon called aloud. Robb and Garlan both stepped forward and each were given a goblet of spiced mead. The brunette knight came over to her, a welcoming grin present, as he raised the cup to her lips. Lyarra closed her eyes and drank it all down, a sweet, burning taste falling down her throat. Then the Septon turned to the honey-haired lord.
“In the name of the Father, I ask you, will you treat your wife justly from this day till your last?”

“I will,” Willas answered softly.

“In the name of the Warrior, I ask you, will you defend her against all ills from this day till your last?”

“I will.”

“In the name of the Smith, I ask you, will you provide hearth and home for her, to your own ability, from this day till your last?”

“I will.”

The man then turned to her, still looking a bit shell-shocked that he was selected for a ceremony between the Heir to Highgarden and a Northern bastard.

““In the name of the Mother, I ask you, will you obey your husband faithfully from this day till your last?”

“I will.” Lyarra wasn’t all too keen on this part of the ceremony but the Reach’s association with the Seven made it a political necessity.

“In the name of the Maiden, I ask you, will you love him loyally, forsaking all others, from this day till your last?”

“I will.”

“In the name of the Crone, I ask you, will you comfort him in sickness and ill from this day till your last?”

“I will.”
“Then I evoke the Stranger to forbear his Judgement for many years to come. May you have good fortunes, blessed health and peace and plenty under the mercy of the Seven. I will now tie the final binding of man’s notice to the holy matrimony of Willas of House Tyrell and Lyarra of House Stark. If any should protest, speak now or forever hold—”

**Wumph!**

The doors slammed open. Everyone turned to find an old lady hobbling in, a formidable guard at either end. People froze, unable to speak, as the Queen of Thorns made her way down the aisle. Robb nearly half-rose himself from his seat before Theon wisely pulled him down. In the front row, Margaery, Garlan and Loras all turned spectacular shades of pallid grey. Willas in return was remarkably calm.

“Grandmother,” he greeted pleasantly. Still in bindings, the rose lord’s hands discretely squeezed her own. Lyarra’s heart having beaten erratically two paces ahead settled its rhythm.

“I see that you didn’t reserve a seat for me,” Lady Olenna Tyrell sniffed. She used her cane to poke Garlan. “Get up. You’re young. You can afford to stand.”

Garlan stood.

Olenna took a seat.

There was a silence for a minute before she sniffed disdainfully. The sound practically echoed in the chamber. “Well? Get on with it! I’m not getting any younger!”

Nobody’s fool, Willas Tyrell promptly stepped on the Septon’s foot to draw him out of his stupor. The man hurriedly complied.

“As the Gods have binded, let no man tear asunder!” The Septon declared.

And Lyarra Tyrell leaned in to kiss her husband.
Thank you to Author376! She single-handedly destroyed my writer’s block and returned some passion for this story. This is the second to last chapter. I’m almost done!
Chapter Twenty-One

Olenna Tyrell had declared that there would be no bedding ceremony. All of the guests, even a most disappointed Elinor, had thus agreed.

‘Idiots,’ was the Queen of Thorns concise summary of them, as she put forth the effort to stand on her feet. Her old bones creaked in protest, as they always did, but her mind dismissed the complaints to be irate instead at the folly of youth. What consequences were they cowering from? Olenna could only hit so many shins with her walking stick after all. ‘Childhood trauma should be forgotten by now. If they cannot handle their sweet grandmother, how will they face the likes of Lord Tywin or Lord Arryn?’

She despaired of how anything was to be done when she passed on. Her grandchildren were all bright and clever in their own ways but it would be for nought, if they needed someone to direct their every move. The Gods knew her fool of a son wouldn’t be able to do so, however fond she was of the boy.

‘Of course, courage brings along its own set of problems.’

She was a hard woman, she could freely admit that but even Olenna’s heart warmed as Willas leaned in to press a kiss on his bride’s head. The girl’s cousin couldn’t wait patiently for the honey-haired lord to release the woman, instead pulling her away for a tight embrace of his own. It was fiercely returned with an affection that Olenna was not unaccustomed to but was altogether unseemly in public.

‘Maybe it’s time that the loyalists stop blaming Lyanna Stark for stealing away Rhaegar’s heart. The she-wolf fell, as my own grandson did, to the baffling charm of the dragons.’

The scroll Samwell had brought her revealed the identity of Willas’ bride and it hadn’t made her any more pleased with her grandson’s choice. The Queen of Thorns had hopes, many hopes, of putting a grandchild of hers on the throne one day. She had expected it to be by Margaery’s marriage to the Crown Prince, a union she could at least stomach, even if the boy was of Tywin’s get. The lions and stags held the throne now and they were a formidable pair, even if Robb Stark’s presence meant the wolves and trouts could be swayed away. Regardless, those allies stirred far from their borders and the scorpions, loyalists all, would balk at the daughter of a she-wolf and the son of a steward.
‘A generation lost to Elenei’s gamble,’ Olenna lamented. ‘I’ll be dead before their son is a man
grown and the Tyrells can mount an offense for a crown. Who knows where we’ll be two decades
from now?’

The melancholy squeezed her heart for a moment longer before the old woman snorted. Two
decades from now, she would be dead. As would Tywin, Doran, Hoster, Jon and all of the nosy
busy-bodies keeping the realm together now. The decisions they made may still influence the
kingdoms, for better or for worse, but they wouldn’t be there to face the consequences of them.

Gods willing, her children and grandchildren and mayhaps even great-grandchildren would be
living. They would chart the course of Tyrell ambition. Willas would be the one to take the reigns of
their House, with a red-scaled dragon by his side and a direwolf of all particulars (the white-furred
pup had even made Olenna stop and stare briefly) in his home. A reckless, absurd, short-sighted
gamble this may be but if her grandson chose to roll the dice, then how could she stop him?

‘That is,’ she amended briefly, ‘How can I do so without breaking the stupid boy’s heart?’

Olenna had come prepared. In her trunks remained two packets of mixed herbs. One, she knew,
would be the more prudent path to take.

Not yet certain of her decision, the old lady hobbled forward. Willas looked up at the soft tip-tap of
the cane, the earnest smile of a boy present on a lord’s face. ‘I’m glad you’re here, Grandmother.’

“It was a trial, I assure you.” Olenna permitted a swift kiss to her cheek. “You did a wonderful job
on the ceremony, Margaery.”

Her granddaughter practically beamed. Margie looked as lovely as she always did in her sky blue
dress and cinnamon hair pulled into a plaited bun but it was the satisfaction of a plot pulled off that
added the glow to her skin. “Thank you, Grandmother.”

“I trust your brothers made themselves useful?”

Margaery nodded piously. “I couldn’t have done this without Willas’ checkbook, Grandmother.”

“Good, good,” Olenna eyed the crowd of nobles and smallfolk ambling around the room. The joyful
atmosphere of the wedding and the arrival of a buffet appeared to have dispelled much of the
awkward air existing between the classes. “Oysters. Never did like them.”

By now, the newly named Lady Lyarra Tyrell had disentangled herself from her cousin’s arms. The dark-haired bastard with simultaneously the most deadly and the most valuable bloodline in Westeros, brought the auburn-haired Stark along with her. A polite if nervous smile was offered to her.

The Queen of Thorns took a moment to study the girl. She had been lovely before, the bastard of Ned Stark and an unknown woman that most presumed to be Ashara Dayne. It was now, with her bloodline in mind, that the hints of the inhuman beauty the Targaryens possessed came to the fore. Those violet-speckled silver eyes, the bow-shaped lips curved knowingly by nature, the sweetmilk skin that wouldn’t bend to any force of light. The Silver Prince had worn those once. They were brought to even greater advantage by her granddaughters, the alone-rare beauty that the Gods alone would grant. Lyanna Stark had been a pretty enough girl but if she’d had her daughter’s beauty, the minstrels wouldn’t need to aggrandize their songs.

“Lady Olenna. Welcome.”

“Have I thanked you for anything?”

“You have not but I shall forgive you the lapse.” The smile was all Rhaella, the little of her company that Olenna had enjoyed before Aerys snuffed that spirit out. “I’ve been informed by no less than three roses that my husband fears the marriage band and that I have done a great service to House Tyrell by charming him into one.”

“None more so than the service we grant you, I’m told,” Olenna answered dryly. “A bride price?”

“The North appreciates House Tyrell’s generosity.” Robb Stark spoke up, “Lady Olenna, you look quite lovely this evening.”

“I fear for the future of your House, boy, if an old harridan attracts you.” Olenna ignored the resulting splutter, as she turned to Margaery. “Take my new granddaughter and mingle with the guests, dear. Willas and I must talk.”

“Yes, Grandmother.” Margaery dutifully grabbed her goodsister, and had even the kindness to take Lord Robb, sweet-natured girl that she was, and escort them away. Olenna made a mental note to discourage any aspirations in that direction. Now that Willas brought a bastard to Highgarden,
Margaery would have to wed within the Reach.

Willas offered her a hand, Olenna took it. She waited until they had moved down the hallway and into a prepared room, where her own trunks had been placed, gratifyingly enough. Margaery was such a talented girl. “I do hope you know that your selfishness ruined your sister’s marriage prospects.”

“I’ve spoken to Margaery on the subject and she has agreed that suitable matches may be found closer to home.” Her grandson offered a sheepish smile. The last time she had seen this, Olenna learnt of his budding friendship with that licentious, irresponsible ass that cost him a working leg. “You may be upset with me, Grandmother.”

“A fortune in foodstuffs, a bastard wife, a secret wedding,” Olenna listed off. “I cannot imagine why I shouldn’t be bursting in pride for you.”

“I was following family tradition.”

“Keep in mind that I ran Prince Dareon away from my bed, Grandson.”

“My wife remains a maiden, thank you,” Willas paused. “I mean to relieve her of the title when our discussion is done. Let us not tarry. Lyanna Stark left willingly.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Monford would be pleased to know his words true then. As pleased as he can be, with the loss of his beloved dynasty.”

“They wed in a private ceremony. Lyarra is a red dragon, not a black one. There are papers in my possession to corroborate this and Ned Stark likely has more. Robb Stark is aware as well. To the best of my knowledge, no one else in the family is.”

For this, Olenna had to sit down. Her darling granddaughter had left a carafe of watered down wine and two goblets on the bedside table for her. It took her a few moments to offer an answer. “Then I will be upset with you because…?”

Yes, that was certainly a sheepish expression on her grandson’s face. As well, as averted eyes and a dusting of pink. “I promised Lyarra not to start a war.”
“...Of course, you did.” Olenna was resigned. Loras was bad enough but Luthor’s sentimentality was supposed to have skipped Willas! “Let your wife have the peace she will then. I’ll draw up a loan for the Crown to legitimize her as a Tyrell instead of a Stark. With any luck, the Stag’ll drink the gold down at his favorite tavern.”

“More wine and pheasant can only bring the King pleasure,” Willas said agreeably. “By your leave then, Grandmother?”

She waved her hand in permission. “Ravish your dragon then. You’ll be the first person to do so for well over a decade.”

Once her firstborn and, though she would never say it, favorite grandson left, Olenna stood up on cracked knees. She poured another cup full of dark red wine. Then she made her way to her trunk to fetch the powders. Willas was a man grown but occasionally a grandmother was needed to push matters along their proper way.

x

Lord Eddard Stark expected over half a dozen children and their pet direwolves to happily greet him as he rode through the gates. He would hug all of his daughters, swing Rickon into the air, muss Bran’s hair and ask after Robb’s and Theon’s lessons. Cat would be there with a proper kiss on the cheek and an account of all that had occurred in his brief absence. It was the happy sort of reunion that Ned had accustomed himself to after all these years and was now wondering if he took for granted. Nothing against Maester Luwin but he did feel some grumpiness over being welcomed by the wizened, learned man instead of his family.

The worried look on Luwin’s face did nothing to assure him either. “Maester? Where is my family?”

“Inside, my lord,” the old man answered swiftly, as he stepped down. “Lady Catelyn is questioning them now. It appears that Young Lords Robb and Theon, as well as Lady Lyarra, left the castle early this morn. They’d taken provisions for a long journey. The children insist that they left willingly but would not reveal where they’d gone.”

Ned stared at him in blank astonishment. “What?”

The Maester began to repeat himself but the Stark made a cutting gesture to silence him. “No, I’ve
heard your words. My children left the castle? Why?"

“We’re not certain, my lord,” the Maester coughed. “Lady Sansa insists that it is for a necessary trip. The others refuse to talk at all.”

“Of course, they do.” Ned offered a dour look in response. “Have men been sent out to scour the fields? Yes? Then please excuse me, Maester. I must speak to my children.”

Leaving his bridle in a pale-faced guard’s hand, Ned turned and took long strides towards his home. It was past nightfall now. Worry niggled him at where his children could be, and whatever ills may prey on them in the darkness. Nonetheless the knowledge that they’d gone willingly, and more importantly, together, gave him some comfort. He hadn’t stepped into the Great Hall for a moment before seeing that same comfort lacking on his wife’s face.

The torches of the Great Hall cast her dark red hair into a fiery glow. Her lovely face was cast into sharpened lines of worry as she regarded the four little figures sitting in a duckling row, three with bowed heads and the last, Rickon, nodding off on the bench. Tin plates had been set before them with simple bread and stew, most of it finished. Cat looked up when he came in, managing a thin, strained smile as he walked up to her.

“My brood is half-missing tonight,” Ned commented, getting down to one knee and smiling slightly. “Hello, children.”

He received a few sheepish welcomes in return. Rickon put forth the greatest effort to open his eyelids and smile at his father.

“Do you know where your brothers and sister are?” Ned inquired softly.

Bran, who had apparently been elected the spokesman, answered. “We’re not certain.”

“Do you have an idea?” This one didn’t evoke a reply but Bran did guiltedly look away. Arya shuffled a little in her seat. He turned to his most obedient, docile daughter. “Sansa?”

It shouldn’t have made him as proud as it did when those river-blue Tully eyes turned to him with all of the stone-cold iciness of a Stark. “Father?”
“Is there anything that you would like to say?”

“No, Father.”

Ned stood back up and studied his children again. Then he exchanged a brief look with his life.

“Rickon, sweetling, you must be tired,” Cat stepped forward. “Why don’t we get you prepared for bed? Come, Bran. You shall help me.”

“Arya, you’ve spilled soup onto your frock,” Ned added measuredly. “Please go and clean yourself.”

The children exchanged panicked looks, no doubt questioning if any of the others would crack under this divide and conquer strategy. Arya briefly glared at her sister, receiving an equally frustrated look in response. Still, without any good reason to refuse, Bran and Arya sullenly stood to follow their orders. Rickon happily raised his hands up to his mother. Ready for bed meant bath time!

The Quiet Wolf took a seat beside Sansa. “Your mother and I are very worried, Sansa. You know that, don’t you?”

Sansa stayed silent.

“Your siblings are gifted warriors but none have lengthy experience in the wilderness. There are many dangers there- wild animals, lawless bandits, even the land itself. Are they prepared for that?”

Sansa stayed silent.

“Has anyone asked you to keep silent? We won’t be upset if you answer ‘yes’.”

Sansa fidgeted a little. Ned pressed on. “Your mother and I only want the best for you all. If Robb or Lyarra are in any trouble, than we want to help.”
At her uncertain look, he coaxed. “They prepared provisions for a journey?”

He received an unsure nod, the knowledge already well-known. “Do you know when they’ll be back?”

A half-shrug now. “Maybe a sennight?”

‘By horse alone that doesn’t take you far,’ Ned concluded. It could take them up to the Wall perhaps but why would they sneak around to visit their Uncle Benjen? Unless Robb or Theon meant to join the Watch, ascribing the latter at least to a life of celibacy he couldn’t possibly handle. “They will all come back, won’t they, Sansa?”

A twist of her fingers and a icy hand skittered across his spine. His children… they weren’t running away, surely. Robb was proud to be the Heir to Winterfell. He was dedicated to learning of his duties. He wouldn’t have fled the position and he certainly wouldn’t have allowed Lyarra to run away either. “Is Theon trying to escape?”

A startled glance. “What do you mean, Father?”

“Theon,” Ned spoke quietly, urgently, “Is he trying to flee? He must stay with a Stark, Sansa. The King demands it, else Theon’ll suffer a harsher punishment than to be a hostage.”

“No!” Sansa’s blue eyes were wide now in fright. “It’s not Theon, Father!”

The next likely alternative presented itself and Ned’s heart grew heavy. His eldest daughter running from home? Why would she do so? She had been raised here, loved, protected… what could push her to leave? And Robb to help her? “Why would your sister leave Winterfell?”

“It’s for the best, Father!” Sansa’s blue eyes were earnest. “Even Robb agrees and you know he would never suffer her absence, if it truly wouldn’t make her happy!”

The Quiet Wolf’s silent litany of self-rebribations was broken by these heartfelt words. They stirred his concern instead in an entirely different direction. His eldest two children shared a closeness that had often been attributed by the servants to Brandon and Lyanna. He would have ascribed Robb instead to Benjen, the level-headed, purely Northern wolf that shared a faith in his sister as a person instead of a woman. Benjen had encouraged Lyanna to leave once upon a time too, to flee straight
into a gods be damned moron’s arms. But Lyanna had been free-spirited and blithe; Lyarra was the most circumspect child he had.

“Sansa, please tell me that your sister hasn’t ridden south to wed Loras Tyrell.”

He received a wide-eyed look of disbelief for that comment. It would have reassured him, except a moment later, “Lyarra rode south with Ser Loras… to marry his brother, Lord Willas.”

“Willas Tyrell?” It took a moment to recall the polite, intelligent, well-spoken young man he had met at Highgarden. Of all the people he would have suspected to lure his eldest into a spurious betrothal, Willas Tyrell would have been last on the list. The man hadn’t shown any partiality to his daughter at all. Even Rhaegar had given Lyanna that blasted flower crown.

His daughter nodded eagerly. He was tempted to press her for answers—truly, Willas Tyrell?- but Ned moved on. It didn’t matter which dishonorable lordling had stolen a daughter from him. The point was that House Stark had lost a daughter again. “Sansa Stark, you will reveal everything you know about this matter to me right now.”

His gentle, obedient, well-behaved daughter considered the fatherly edict for a moment and then gracefully shrugged. “The ship likely left with them by now anyway.”

After this, she narrated a courtship that was equal parts maddening and impressive. Willas Tyrell was one frustratingly clever man, managing to orchestrate this entire courtship and alliance negotiation under his nose for the better part of seven moons. He had surpassed the Silver Prince on nerve alone. Not even Rhaegar had the audacity to visit his sister in the Wolfswood or hold the North hostage to Winter for a marriage proposal. That it was dishonorable was evident. That it was effective no less so.

“And your brother went along to give her away?” Ned asked, to Sansa’s cheerful nod. “Show me the letter, Sansa.”

The father in Ned Stark was so furious right now that it wanted nothing more than to grab Ice and pay the rose lordling a visit. The Stark Lord in him temporarily blunted that notion, reminding him that when he arrived south, punishing Willas Tyrell properly would fall under the banner of kinslaying. Instead the icy reproach of his forefathers maintained that the North had been mistakenly dragged into one war already and lest he want Robert provoked by the echo of another she-wolf taken from her father’s home for a marriage cloak, he’d best clear the account. It galled him to lend support to Willas Tyrell’s despicable actions but even Ned would allow that the honorable approach was foolish.
Ned would meet the Tyrell Heir again, one day, though and there was a lot that drew the line before kinslaying.

x

In the south, lords and ladies were afforded their own set of rooms. It was not a practice Lyarra was all too familiar with but drew some comfort from, as she waited for her wedding night. Willas had offered his own bedroom for the deed, allowing her as much time as necessary to prepare. It hadn’t been all that much truly. The bath was prepared and the ladies stripped her (carefully) of her bridal gown, offering half-jest advice that she attentively absorbed nonetheless. The silken dressing gown left behind by a winking Elinor had brought a blush to her cheeks but despite her nerves, she hadn’t any plans to avoid the bedding. Her curiosity was to her benefit here and while she’d heard of pain initially, her husband had been most attentive and gentle in his other ministrations.

Had Lyarra been a more honest woman, she would admit that she was looking forward to the task.

The she-wolf would have headed out to experience it now, had it not been for the goblet before her. It had been left behind by a servant bringing in her nightgown. Filled with Arbor Red wine, there was an evident viscosity to the liquid that the healer in her recognized from herbal lessons. The scent of red raspberry leaf was overwhelming.

It had come with a placard. *You play in the Great Game now.*

Lyarra closed her eyes and pictured her family. Her Father, honorable, dutiful and ever-there to guard and guide her. Uncle Benjen, too clever by half but a steadfast keeper of childhood foibles. Ever sibling from Robb, her reliable eldest brother, to Rickon, her wild youngest one. Her unblooded brother, Theon, who dared too much and feared too little. Even Lady Stark, a constant presence of mute disapproval in her childhood, played a role. They determined her decision for her.

Lyarra leant forward, picked the goblet up and determinedly tipped it over. Purplish red wine poured out, staining her snowlit skin blotchy pink but abstaining permanently from her lips. Honestly, her new good family’s relentless march to ever more power and influence could not be healthy. If the Gods wanted her to have children, than she would but Lyarra certainly refused to be *tricked* into it.

‘To speak those silly, southron words in their silly, southron court.’ Lyarra’s lips quirked. House Stark endured. She may have a dragon’s blood and a rose’s banner but it was the wolves that nursed her from childhood. The Starks were survivors and whatever challenges that awaited her at
Highgarden, she had chosen to accept them. To accept Willas. ‘I made my bed and now I desire to lie in it.’

x

Not the reactions that I promised but I wanted to add this small aside about Lyarra still being Lyarra even with her Tyrell surname. I’ll have the reactions coming in shortly.
Oberyn Martell woke up wet. And not in the fun way either.

He was halfway out of his bed and swiping a knife from underneath his pillow when his muddled mind registered the attacker. It was his darling niece, glaring at him through eyes of streaked kohl, and with an expression suggesting that he would not be soon forgiven for whatever slight he had done her.

“I hope you’re happy, Uncle!” Arianne looked an avenging harpy ready to throw a hapless sailor, or himself, off the nearest cliff.

“I often am,” Oberyn agreed. “What for now, Niece?”

“For derailing my wedding!” As that incident had passed a good three years past, the Viper merely responded with a bemused look. Arianne threw a crumpled parchment at his head. His quick reflexes caught it and one look showed that the correspondence was ragged. “He’s married now!”

The Viper maintained his look of polite confusion. Arianne growled in frustration, threw her hands up and then stormed off. Once she was gone, and a check of the open door showed that Dorea and Loreza weren’t peeking in, he unravelled the ball. The parchment was thick and fine and the script, elegant and familiar. Had Willas finally bowed to prudence and took a wife?

‘If so, why haven’t I heard of a wedding? ’ Mace Tyrell wouldn’t settle for anything more than the most lavish ceremony for his son and such took time. ‘ Alas, that our friendship brings no invitation. ’

Oberyn looked woefully towards the bed. Would this now be when his beloved paramour rose to comfort and support him through his time of hardship? His answer came a moment later. Ellaria merely snuggled deeper into her- very much dry, he noted- pillow with an overdone sigh.

She would be more attentive a moment later, after Oberyn read the letter that almost every significant House in Westeros received in the last two days.
To my fellow lords and ladies of Westeros,

There is a confession that I, Willas of Highgarden, Heir to House Tyrell, must offer. In the last moon, I, with the support of my brothers, Ser Garlan Tyrell and Ser Loras Tyrell, and my sister, Lady Margaery Tyrell, entered a conspiracy most foul to kidnap and wed a noble daughter of the North. The maiden, Lyarra, natural-born Daughter of House Stark, was taken from Winterfell without the knowledge, permission or approval of Lord Eddard Stark. She was stolen with all of the gentility afforded to her station as a noblewoman by my brothers and brought to a private ceremony arranged by my sister in the Shield Islands. In order to maintain her reputation throughout the journey, her elder brother, Robb of House Stark, was also kidnapped to fill the role of chaperone. On the eleventh day of the seventh moon of this year, we were wed by Septon Vance of Greenshield. Lord Robb escorted his sister down the aisle and took the role of kinship for the bride. My brother, Ser Garlan, performed the same duty for myself.

My purpose in this admission is not to invalidate the ceremony. Indeed, by all legal means, the marriage has been consummated and my wife is now to be addressed as Lady Lyarra Tyrell of Highgarden. This is to seek absolution from the Father for my sins. I have erred greatly in the matter of my courtship and have done House Stark a most grave transgression. My sole justification is that I had been enchanted by her beauty and grace and sought a marriage when none would be offered by either her House or mine.

To the Father, I offer my repentance and accept all that his judgement may be of me. To House Stark and Lord Eddard Stark in particular, I offer my most sincere regrets for the loss of a daughter. Lady Lyarra is a treasure and I pray you understand that love often brings one to foolish deeds. Trust that she will be no less esteemed by myself and my House than she was by yours. To Lord Robb, I offer an apology for the kidnapping and my thanks to your understanding of the matter. To Lady Lyarra herself, I offer my unreserved contrition for the manner of our union. You are deserving of no less a courtship than the minstrel’s songs and while I could not have offered one to you now, it will be my foremost duty to amend that oversight hereinafter.

May this also serve as a notice of the marriage between Lord Willas of Highgarden, Heir to House Tyrell and Lady Lyarra of Winterfell, Daughter of House Stark.

Sincerely,

Willas Tyrell

Heir to House Tyrell

Witness: Robb of Winterfell, Heir to House Stark
Willas kidnapped himself a bride?

Willas kidnapped himself a bride?

Willas kidnapped himself a bride?

“Ellaria? Ellaria, wake up, darling. I need someone to tell me whether I’ve gone mad.”

“You have,” his loved managed through a yawn, “Let me read the letter then.”

Ellaria swiftly made her way through the letter, eyebrows rising with every sentence until she was less a sleepy-eyed ewe in the grasslands than a wide-eyed owl in the marshes. “Your friend ran away with a she-wolf and wed her in an island ceremony.”

“Yes, I thought that might have been it.”

A maelstrom of the passions Oberyn often endured whipped into a sandstorm inside of him. As often before, the Viper merely closed his eyes and tried to make sense of the winds. There was fury there, and old hurt, for the reminder of another she-wolf stolen all those years ago. It was eclipsed by curiosity as the truth behind his sensible friend’s madness and a dash of amusement, thinking of how others would treat this. A bastard to be wed to a future Lord Paramount; oh, that would ruffle no shortage of feathers! Over it all was the sly calculation that won him his sobriquet far more than a poisoned spear did.

There had been that anomalous letter all those moons ago regarding Lady Ashara’s bastard. Oberyn had spoken truthfully; the sickly babe died shortly after birth and was buried in a small, marked grave in Starfall. The Viper had been off to war and hadn’t attended but he had seen the grave afterward when visiting his good friend, Lord Daric Dayne. That child was often confused for Ned Stark’s live bastard, though a simple calculation of sums would prove it an impossibility. Lady Ashara Dayne’s child, had she lived, would have been older than the trueborn Stark Heir. Presuming the letter was correct to have named Robb Stark the elder, the Daynes hadn’t falsified the funeral and this Lyarra Tyrell wasn’t born of Ashara’s womb.
Of course, there was another means by which to confirm this but Oberyn Martell was no graverobber.

Holding the presumption that Lady Lyarra Tyrell wasn’t Ned Stark’s bastard by Ashara Dayne, who would her mother be? An unknown washer woman or camp follower was the simple answer but it left Oberyn unsatisfied. Why would Willas wed the daughter of such a woman? He evidently hadn’t married the she-wolf for her father’s blood, else he would have waited the few years it took for a trueborn daughter to flower. Yet Willas had not done that. He risked a certainty of public ridicule and noble scorn and the possibility of his loss of position and the Usurper’s wrath, to wed Lyarra Snow.

‘Doran said there had been Tyrell men in plain clothes sniffing around Dayne land.’ Oberyn had no doubt to his brother’s intelligence. Doran’s spy network was the most extensive one in Dorne. ‘Were they trying to ascertain the history of Ashara’s bastard?’

This didn’t make all that much sense either. House Dayne was an old and noble House from the Age of Heroes, true, but in recent years, its influence had declined. Certainly it was nothing that a bastard of that House would make an acceptable match for the Heir to a Great House.

Ned Stark hadn’t sired a bastard on another noblewoman, had he? Oberyn didn’t think so. The man was a stick-in-the-mud who dullness had miraculously managed to catch Ashara’s eye. He wouldn’t have the luck to strike gold twice. In fact, the last time he had visited… had been when he was… fetching his sister…

“I think I should like to speak to my brother,” Oberyn decided, to a distracted nod from his lover. Her attention was keenly focused on the letter. ‘And afterward, I would like to pay Willas a visit.’

x

“How are we to gain produce for Winter?” Was Kevan’s first question after Tywin had read the letter aloud. He had finished it once in the privacy of his solar where none could see him slam his fist against the desk at yet another fool risking the realm’s stability for a good bedding. Now he had brought his most trusted advisors in to discuss the latest problem facing his daughter’s reign.

“We will have to offer additional gold or import it from Essos.” Tywin pressed his lips so thinly that they near disappeared. “The expenses will be higher either way.”

The Westerlands could afford the cost but with his goodson’s spendthrift ways, Tywin was loathe to
do so. He was having to put aside more in the treasury for the approaching Winter as is. The Maesters had predicted it to be a long one, though estimates varied from four years to a full dozen and the incompetent rats hadn’t narrowed it any further. The upcoming snows had likely been the reason for Robb Stark’s ‘understanding of the matter’.

“Could the marriage be annulled?” Genna asked. “The boy admitted it was against Lord Stark’s wishes and, if he should seek a beautiful wife, we could offer any number of daughters.”

“We and every other House in Westeros,” Kevan answered wryly. “I admit, I desire to view the bastard girl myself, if she could turn Willas Tyrell’s eye. That is not a family unknown to beauty and now that she is wed, it would quench my sons’ curiosities without tempting anything so foolish.”

“If she-wolves truly tempt such madness, we should introduce Jaime to any daughters that remain.”

“A quicker death would be to slather him in steak juices and put him outside to their Wolfswood.”

Genna laughed. “I’d imagine House Stark no more pleased with this daughter’s loss than the last!”

“Enough,” Tywin said curtly, shooting a swift, admonishing look at the two to end their japes. He was well aware of his eldest son’s propensity to bachelorhood, thank you. He did not need his brother or sister reminding him of the matter. “It’s highly unlikely the wedding can be annulled. The boy has made it public to all and sundry. House Tyrell cannot hide the affair and House Stark will not accept a daughter that has been so dishonored.”

Tywin savored briefly a taste of satisfaction for the troubles soon to befall the Queen of Thorns. And though he rebuked Kevan for it, he shared a mild interest in seeing the bride. The bastard must have been a beautiful creature indeed to fetch so valued an alliance as the Reach before Winter.

“This,” the Old Lion noted with reluctant admiration. “Is not Lyanna Stark’s kidnapping.”

“Are you referring to the consequences of it?” Kevan frowned. “A bastard and a trueborn daughter are of different worths and there is no scorned betrothed here, at least not on Willas Tyrell’s part.”

“Or,” Genna said shrewdly, eyeing the letter, “Are you referring to Robb Stark’s signature?”
“The latter.” Tywin nodded to her. “The former was a true kidnapping, to unite the alliance that Rickard Stark and Jon Arryn so carefully built. Robert Baratheon was furious at the loss of his bride and all of his allies rallied around him to attack the dragons and bring the lady back. Her loss was as much their banner as the stag was.”

“You think this… a ploy? That Ned Stark allowed his child to wed south?”

“Ned Stark allowed nothing.” Tywin dismissed, putting the letter down. “He is too honorable to engage in such schemes.”

His son, however, was not. Robb Stark apparently took enough after his grandfather, either Hoster or Rickard, to take advantage of a rare moment of lustful stupidity on the part of a Tyrell. In one fell swoop, he had rid himself of a bastard sister to support and gained a goodbrother of a wealthy, southron House. Tywin could appreciate this. He didn’t necessarily like it but he could appreciate it.

‘If only Jaime showed half that prudence,’ Tywin lamented silently.

“Could House Tyrell use this to turn the wolves against the King?” Genna fretted.

“Ned Stark is too honorable and loyal a man to weaken his support,” Kevan said slowly. “Whether Robb Stark is, is a different matter. It could be that he simply found an easy way to gain provisions for Winter and took it. There mayn’t be any bearings to the royal family at all.”

“We can’t be certain of that.” The Head of House Lannister shook his head. “One stroke does not a player make. Lady Olenna may be displeased by the opportunity but she’d take it nonetheless to strengthen her House.”

“It may be that Lady Olenna shortly removes the problem for us altogether.”

“If only,” Tywin stated drily. “We were so lucky.”

“The indignity! The shame! The humiliation! This is not to be borne!”
“Father, please sit down,” Edmure pleaded. “Think of your heart.”

“Damn my heart!” The old man waved the letter in the air, ignoring the convulsing pains in his bowels as he strode back and forth with all the fury of a man scorned. “What was the boy thinking? Marrying the bastard to Willas Tyrell instead of my sweet Sansa or little Arya? To lose such a match!”

The auburn-haired Tully Heir scrambled to catch the letter before his father could throw it into the hearth. Hoster then threw himself into the nearest settee, face convulsed into a rictus of anger. “He has shamed his sisters!”

“Well, not all of them.” The words slipped out. Edmure promptly regretted them when his father turned blue eyes darkened with reprimands on him. “Father, please, I’m sure that Robb made the best decision that he could in the available time. He was kidnapped—”

Hoster Tully snorted. “Hell he was! I’ve corresponded with Cat’s boy enough to know that he’d fight claw and nail before putting any signature down to a forced marriage. No, he did almost everything right. He negotiated a good match. He escorted the girl to the ceremony. He even got the Tyrell to take the lion’s share of blame. The only problem is the identity of the bride!”

The old man folded his arms together and fumed. “That should have been Sansa’s match.”

“The letter did say that the Lord Willas was smitten with the girl,” Edmure ventured, hesitantly. His father appeared unimpressed but wasn’t arguing either, so he continued. “Mayhaps Robb suggested Sansa but Lord Willas had a preference in another direction?”

Hoster levelled an infuriated glance over at the implication that Sansa Stark, who most shared her mother’s Tully looks, was in any way inferior to a bastard’s beauty. As to preferences…

“Robb could have offered Arya then. She looks Stark enough.”

“Father, Arya is nine years old.”

Hoster stubbornly maintained his point.
“You had hopes for the Crown Prince, didn’t you, Father?” Edmure coaxed. “The King and Ned Stark are good friends. A match could made in that quarter.”

A grunt of acknowledgement.

Viewing an opening, his son continued. “The bastard’s marriage should only help, should it not? It shall add more esteem to Sansa and Arya and other Houses would be tempted to offer.”

Another grunt, somehow warmer than the last.

“The bastard shall only be a Lady Paramount but Sansa, I’m certain, shall be Queen,” Edmure added, finally drawing out a smile from his father. “Now, Father, please take your medicine. And no more walking around. You have inflamed your joints more than enough today.”

x

‘Oh, how the mighty have fallen.’ Cersei nearly brought herself to a second laughing fit as she imagined House Tyrell’s distaste for welcoming a bastard to their home. ‘This will set the Queen of Thorns’ tongue wagging to keep all of the hunters at bay.’

Hunters like the lions of House Lannister, no doubt, as they encircled the weakened roses. It wasn’t anything quite yet to bring the power-hungry, grasping, jumped-up descendants of stewards down, of course, but their ambitions would be dashed for no short while. How it must burn Olenna Tyrell to have the crippled boy she put so many hopes on make such a foolish mistake.

‘Nothing like mine own son,’ the Queen added proudly. Her Joffrey knew his worth. He would never consort with the likes of bastards or loose women, as Lyarra Snow undoubtedly was. ‘Though this fool of a king might have him consort with a Northern savage nonetheless.’

She sent a scathing look to her drunken husband that Robert was predictably ignorant of. Instead the fat pig of a man was ranting to Lord Arryn of the letter he received. Pycelle had brought it to Cersei first, allowing a few minutes to regain her composure after cackling through most of it, but had made himself quickly scarce after handing it to the king. A wise decision as Robert had swiftly decided to send a letter condemning the ‘kidnapping’ of his One True Northern Love’s daughter. As if Ned Stark’s bastard hadn’t spread her legs to gain the position as she had. Thus, it was the Hand’s turn to take up the lowly duty of listening to Robert’s ravings and translating them into legible correspondence.
“Fuckin’ unforgivable what they did to Ned!” The King shouted, “Goin’ to his home, takin’ his daughter, his daughter, the bastard? His bastard daughter and ‘en stealing her maidenhood. An’ he took the boy too, didn’ ‘ey? Tell ‘em to give back the boy- and the girl too- give back Ned’s girl. Don’ like this all…”

Jon Arryn dutifully wrote this all down, amending as necessary to remain polite and diplomatic.

While Cersei nominally disapproved of Robert’s correspondence, as she did of Robert himself, this time she was inclined to pleasure. A letter expressing the King’s displeasure couldn’t annul the wedding itself but it could, and would, embarrass House Tyrell severely. Particularly as Robert lacked any sense of tact and decorum and she had already found more than one servant listening closely as they swept the throne room.

Cersei hadn’t any love for the roses. They all thought far too much of themselves and the Queen of Thorns, in particular, had no proper respect for her. The others were not quite so vocal in their dislike but she had her suspicions that Alerie Tyrell nee Hightower, whose colouring was a pale shadow of the dragons, disapproved of her ‘unkindly’ behavior. Well, perhaps she would be pleased with a bastard for a gooddaughter, if the girl had that vaunted ‘kindness’ that Lady Alerie so espoused.

‘This,’ the Queen decided gleefully, ‘Is a good day for House Lannister.’

x

‘Trust a Stark,’ Bethany Dustin thought wryly. ‘To make a wealthy southron marriage.’

While she hadn’t any love for the House in particular, the Lady of Barrowtown couldn’t fault Robb Stark’s decision. A bastard daughter of a Lord Paramount may have had prospects but nothing quite so good as the Heir to House Tyrell. The dowry would be an expense that House Stark didn’t need, not with Winter on the fore, but if the letter spoke true of a quaint Dornish tradition, the North would come out ahead. It was even admirable that the son had the practicality that Ned Stark undoubtedly lacked when it came to giving his daughters away.

The letter to the Northern Houses had been written in a feminine hand but the bold signature at the bottom and the direwolf-encircled-once mark belonged to the Heir of House Stark.

To the lords and ladies of the North,
When this letter reaches your hand, my sister will likely have been wed to Lord Willas, Heir to House Tyrell, in a private ceremony in the Greenshield Islands. To explain the previous sentence, I would have to draw back several moons ago, when a Northern contingent travelled to Highgarden to negotiate a trade deal between the North and the Reach. While there, my natural-born sister, Lyarra Snow, made the acquaintance of several southron nobles. She acquitted herself well and even won the admiration of the man later to become her husband. Many of you have likely spoken of a Tyrell son being enamored with Lyarra; if so, it’s the identity alone that was mistaken, as it was Lord Willas initiating a covert courtship. His brother, Ser Loras, was meant to draw eyes away as the two spoke to one another. This courtship continued by correspondence when Lyarra returned to Winterfell, with my, though not mine father’s, full knowledge and support…

The story unfolded quite like a fairytale. Bethany had seen the Bastard of Winterfell for herself before and would admit her a beauty worthy of one. A beauty worthy of such a fortune, she was less certain of, but if a southron ponce was enamored enough to offer, why not accept? The roses had gold enough to spare.

A postscript at the bottom, by the Quiet Wolf’s hand no less, reiterated the main points and stated that House Stark would not seek martial address. It advocated caution and promised to notify all of the bannermen as the matter unfolded, though admitted that the union was likely permanent. It also affirmed that Robb Stark remained the Heir to the North and that Ned himself would be travelling south to complete the negotiations.

Bethany could only imagine how much dismay was on the Stark’s face when he wrote this.

‘No less,’ she was certain, ‘Than that Tully bitch’s face when her husband’s bastard caught herself the Tyrell Heir.’

That alone made the entire affair worth it.

x

Turns out that I have a lot of reactions I want to adress. This will be the first half and I’ll try to get the second half to you shortly.
Benjen had been methodically brushing the snow off of his black wolf’s coat before leaving it on the rack to dry when Jeor found him. The Lord Commander of the Night’s Watch had a strange expression on his face, puzzled, if not yet displeased, when he presented him with a letter.

“Near a hundred men from the cells, two years’ worth of food rations, three years worth of back taxes and a bushel of those fireberries of yours.” Jeor narrated. “I didn’t even think the southrons knew they had Night’s Watch taxes.”

“Why would they? The last King to enforce them was Aegon V.” The old wheeze of Maester Aemon spoke up. “Which House?”

“House Tyrell, if you’d believe it.” Jeor eyed Benjen curiously. “Heard there’s been an uproar in the taverns this morning ‘bout a southron lordling. Know anything about it?”

The Black Wolf of House Stark thought back to the two letters secured in his bedroom, one from his nephew, another from the man his niece had married. Then he contemplated the likelihood of walking away without an explanation. “Willas Tyrell kidnapped my eldest niece for marriage. It turns out that all of their siblings were involved in the matter and the two were wed secretly in a ceremony in the Reach. Lord Willas promised a generous bride price for Lyarra’s hand, and Robb negotiated the details of one for House Stark.”

Allowing a moment for that to sink in, Benjen added. “Willas Tyrell sent me a letter asking for a late blessing to their union.”

Jeor’s reaction to his nonchalant tone was utter disbelief. “Must be some lass than.”

Benjen recalled his eldest niece. Melancholy and reclusive, often like her father, but with a generosity of spirit and an unyielding loyalty that had been purely Lyanna. He smiled softly. “She is.”

The two were broken of the peaceful silence of the moment with Maester Aemon’s frank, “So your brother hasn’t given his blessings to any of this?”
“Nope.”

“Lord Willas means to secure your support by bribing the Watch then?”

“Probably.”

“Can you string him along for more of such donations?”

Benjen considered the question. Then he nodded. “I can do that.”

“Good man,” Jeor said, approvingly, clapping the Stark’s shoulder. “Have you any other nieces to be married off?”

x

Alys Karstark was startled when silence fell upon their table. It was not that theirs was a rowdy home but their father did take breaking their fasts as an opportunity to share his wisdom with his children. And Lord Rickard Karstark did appreciate the sound of his own voice.

The dark-haired noblewoman was not the only one broken out of an early morné stupor by the sudden lack of sound. She was, however, seated to the left-hand of her father today, and the closest of the four siblings, to obtain for herself the letter he held. Wiggling it out of the lord’s hand, she brought it close to her eyes, blurry as the words were from a distance, and swiftly read it through.

’Tourney… kidnap… bride price… south… House Tyrell… Heir… Robb Stark… marriage… negotiation…’

Harrion was next to reach out and pluck the parchment from her slackened fingers.

Alys was furiously trying to understand what she had just read through. Lyarra Snow. She had met the eldest daughter of Lord Stark a mere handful of times but while not as visibly affected as her brothers, even Alys had noted the rare beauty the bastard held. Lyarra had been soft-spoken and
quite polite, often shuffled to the back by either a Lady Stark diligently aware of her presence or a Lord Robb diligently aware of Aly’s brothers. The woman was a gifted rider, she knew, often said to resemble her late Aunt Lyanna and a shared favorite amongst all of her younger siblings. Lyarra Snow had also borne the darker coloring of the North, though Aly, who did quite resemble a traditional Northern beauty, did not think so. Lady Lyarra was a *beauty*, undoubtedly so, but she was not a *Northern* one.

In truth, Aly hadn’t more than an acquaintance with the Bastard of Winterfell, though she expected that to change in a handful of years. Torrhen had been apprenticing under a talented silversmith in White Harbor and, soon to complete his training and acquire a home of his own, would have pressed his suite for the lady. He had been besotted with her, a feat Aly credited more to eye than heart, as he had rarely spoken to Lady Lyarra of his own nervousness. Aly assumed that the suite would be accepted—Torrhen was a good catch, truly, and would be even better, once he learned to gather his wits around the girl—and looked forward to gaining a goodsister of her own.

Aly loved her brothers, she did, but *Gods*, did the Karhold need some good, female company.

‘**Well, Torrhen won’t be pressing a suite now,**’ Aly thought sympathetically. The third-eldest son of Lord Karstark was a good catch but compared to the *Heir of Highgarden*? ‘**Beauty alone would be lacking. The Lady Lyarra must be rather clever.**’

And sly. Torrhen had irritably related mention of the poncy, southron prick with the feminine golden locks and excessively lavish cloak of bluebells, to have crowned her. Aly had been impressed then. Who knew that her fellow Northern maiden was aiming all that higher for her wedding cloak?

‘**Or,**’ the noblewoman added admiringly, ‘**That Lord Robb would so ably advantage the rose lord’s infatuation into food reserves for the Winter?**’

Robb Stark had always been a catch as the Heir to Winterfell. To that, most ladies were aware of his amiable nature, swordsmanship skills and handsome mein. Adding wit on top of that all was simply making Aly cross her knees before the heat in her loins could stir any further.

‘**Risking himself to a negotiation for the North was quite dutiful too.**’ Ladies of the North had always appreciated a dutiful man.

Pleased with the letter, Aly looked up to other reactions. Her father was still held in shock, though a rictus grin of pleasure was slowly spitting across his face. Harrion was altogether unfoundedly smug by the letter. Eddard was still pursuing the parchment, quickly growing excitement in his eyes, while Torrhen waited impatiently for his turn-
Alys’ view stopped. ‘Oh dear, Torrhen…’

When her second brother had finished and the third was just reaching for his turn, Alys felt a moment of sudden panic. She grabbed at the first platter she could reach—bruised beet stew from the dinner last night, in fact—and threw it at him. The violently purple liquid soaked through and promptly ruined the parchment, even as Torrhen spluttered over bits of beef staining his face and eyes. Fortunately the soup was lukewarm by now, so he hadn’t gotten hurt.

Alys, though, had gotten all eyes turned to her. She chuckled nervously. “Oops?”

x

“Willas Tyrell kidnapped a Northern bastard?”

The servant nodded obediently. “Yes, sir.”

“Practical, bookish, sensible Willas Tyrell?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The crippled boy that walks around with a cane? My nephew who fears the blessed binds?”

“Yes, sir.”

The lord furrowed his brows in mild uncertainty. “Are you certain that it is our Willas Tyrell?”

“Yes, sir. I do believe that there’s only one Willas Tyrell and he did indeed kidnap the baseborn daughter of Lord Stark.”

Tyman Flowers regretted his wry words shortly after having spoken them but Lord Jon Fossoway, a more amiable employer than most, merely waved them away. He still stared down at his desk, where
the infamous Tyrell letter rested on brightly varnished apple wood. Then he looked up, hazel eyes brimming in confusion. “Why?”

“To have the strongest claim to the throne,” was Tyman’s suspicion. However, the baseborn servant was too wily to share the knowledge that had him effectively banished, hopefully temporarily, to New Barrel. Instead he offered an enigmatic smile. “Should I compose a response to Lord Willas requesting further clarification of his actions?”

The Lord of New Barrel considered that for a moment and then shuddered. “I should think not. Family they may be but if there’s to be internal divisions between Lord Willas and his father— or Gods forbid, Lord Willas and Lady Olenna— then I want no part of it. Draft a letter of congratulations and have it brought to my desk. I’ll have Janna inquire amongst the other cousins of how to approach this and should the marriage appear true, we’ll send it.”

“As you wish.” Tyman fell into a practiced bow with just the necessary amount of flourish and was waved away by a distracted Lord Fossoway. In truth, the man’s lack of airs and disinterest in intrigue made him a breath of fresh air to the servant. He enjoyed worked for the minor Reach lord though he desired still to return to Lord Willas’ employ. Tyman had previously settled his goals on mere stewardship of his beloved sister’s eventual estate but now… Lord Willas was ascendant.

And, as Tyman well knew, those lords that were rising in the Game, were always in need of good help.

x

“It is a jest, dear heart, isn’t it?” Mace looked hopefully over to his wife, sitting stunned in her seat after she had read aloud the missive hurriedly brought by the servants. “What is it that the children are doing these days— a lark? It is a lark, surely!”

He laughed weakly into the silence. “Our children have played such a delightful lark on us, to pretend to wed a bastard to Willas—”

“I don’t think this a lark,” Alerie interrupted. The silver-haired woman gracefully withdrew herself from her position, taking dainty, ladylike steps with perhaps more haste and less composure than typical, to her husband. She brought the letter up to Mace’s eyes, pointed to a final line at the bottom.

“At least she has good child-birthing hips,” Mace read aloud. All of his hopes for this to be nothing
more than a decidedly tasteless jape crumbled at the Queen of Thorn’s words. “How could they?!”

Alerie rubbed his back soothingly. “I’m certain Mother had her reasons.”

‘And Willas, his own,’ the noblewoman paused. ‘She is young and well-mannered and dearly loved by my eldest son. I can accept this, if I must.’

“I’m certain she does!” Mace cried out, jabbing a finger roughly to the bottom of the page. “That’s not my concern now! Look at this! All of our children were involved in the Plot and Mother too!”

“Indeed,” Alerie looked puzzled. “Why does this distress you?”

“They didn’t invite us to our own son’s wedding!”

x

“You’ll be dancing with the Knight of Flowers and drinking tea with all of the ladies of Highgarden? Oh, Sansa, you’re so lucky!”

The red-haired girl beamed at Jeyne Poole’s jealousy-tinted words. “I know! I was ever-so happy when Lyarra offered to foster Arya and I. She’ll be the lady of this grand and beautiful castle and while there’s a great deal for her to learn, we will have such fun exploring Highgarden together!”

“With your beauty, you will fit right in at the rose’s courts,” Jeyne sighed. She threw an irritable glance towards Arya, who was scowling unkindly at her tumbled strings as she tried to set them to order. “It will be entirely wasted on Arya, of course.”

Rather than agree, as would be her typical wont, an anxious frown crossed Sansa’s face. “It wouldn’t be. Lyarra said that she would allow Arya to join in her sparring lessons with Ser Garlan.”

The brunette girl’s face twisted into a moue of confused distaste, at the mention of the act. “Lyarra doesn’t still spar, does she?! It was bad enough as a bastard here but she’s a Southron Lady now!”
Sansa opened her mouth to reply but Catelyn Stark had finally reached the end of her patience with this conversation. “Girls,” she rebuked sharply, “Kindly return to your work. And Sansa, I will have no more of this talk of Highgarden. You’re under your father’s punishment now.”

Her eldest daughter meekly nodded. It was a surprise when Arya merely glanced over, not offering her own acerbic commentary to Sansa’s reprimand.

It would have been pleasant if the truce hadn’t been born of shared solidarity over sending a bastard down to marry a Lord Paramount’s Heir.

‘Return to your sewing,’ Catelyn reminded herself briskly, when her hands began to shake. ‘You are Lady Catelyn Stark of Winterfell and you will finish embroidering this tunic for your son’s nameday.’

Rickon would reach four years of age before the two moons that Ned had settled on each of his children as punishment expired. They were disallowed sweets and desserts, curtailed in playtime and assigned additional lessons every day. Despite this, the mood in Winterfell was merry as the bride price had leaked amongst the servants and everyone was in high spirits over one of their own marrying so highly. Catelyn could not finish scolding one servant for sneaking a child a treat before another was attempting to do the same.

‘When it ends, Sansa’s demands to be fostered in Highgarden will continue.’

The opportunity for her daughter to blossom in one of the finest southeren courts in Westeros, if not the finest court outside of King’s Landing, was once all Catelyn had hoped for. It still was, even if the chance given was at the generosity of a girl-child that she loathed as much as she feared.

That Lady Catelyn Stark nee Tully would loathe the bastard her husband brought home from war was of little question. How could she not despise the symbol of her husband’s infidelity? Though the child herself was innocent, how could she not be pained by every mention of her beauty, her grace, her reclusive personality so alike to Ned? How could she not be worried when every comparison drew her to a Stark, when her very existence proved some loss for her own trueborn children?

‘Mine own daughter looks more a Stark than Lyarra Snow does.’

No matter how the servants looked at it, Catelyn hadn’t found the same Stark cast on the bastard’s face. There were Stark features present certainly, the dark hair and the slightly long slant to her face,
but there were so many- a heavy lidded gaze, those unnatural eyes, her plush lips- that were born elsewhere. And sometimes, when she heard those comparisons, Catelyn just wanted to scream.

‘No, she doesn’t! She’s not the spitting image of her late aunt, she never was! Why do you not see those features that had not come from House Stark in her, as easily as you do mine own children?’

Catelyn didn’t know if it would have been harder or easier if those words had been true. If Lyarra Snow did look exactly a Stark and had no trace of that foreign blood that chilled her heart. The Tully had spent more hours than she cared to think for, tracing river blue eyes over that face, tormenting her heart and mind both in trying to reconstruct the child’s mother. Lyarra Snow was a beauty. Was the woman Ned betrayed her for, also a beauty? Ned wouldn’t share a name with her- Ashara Dayne, her hopeful heart whispered, let it be Ashara, dead and gone and no longer able to tempt him - so Catelyn did not even know if the bastard’s mother lived. It was the main reason she feared her, a recurring nightmare that Lyarra would draw her mother back to Winterfell and then Ned would betray her all over again.

‘Bastards are sinful, lustful creatures and this one didn’t even wait to steal her sister’s husband from him,’ Catelyn thought viciously, and then bit her lip sharply. No, she would not maintain a lie for her daughter’s sake, not when Sansa so adamantly disposed it. ‘My darling daughter is meant for the Prince. He will make a far better groom for her than the Cripple of Highgarden.’

Catelyn had thought to comfort her daughter about the bastard’s selfish actions. Instead, she had been faced with a child overjoyed to have been part of his romantic caper, without any concern at all for the potential husband lost to her. Instead her daughter had briefly stepped down from where she walking on the clouds to reassure her.

‘Willas Tyrell sounds everything a proper lord should be- kind and handsome and intelligent- but I think he would make a better goodbrother for me, than a husband.’ Sansa laughed, undoing her braids and letting Tully red hair hang loosely. ‘Lyarra and he are well-suited for one another. She loves to read as he does, meddle with strange substances and canter through the countryside. Neither love balls overmuch, nor I think, tourneys, and I would not want a husband who was not also a knight.’

‘A man does not need spurs to be honorable and gallant, Sansa.’

‘Oh, I know. Father is amongst the best of men and he hasn’t any spurs.’ Sansa leaned over to press a kiss to her mother’s cheek. ‘But I would want a man with spurs nonetheless. Lyarra has her bookish lord and is happy with him but while I do love my sister, in truth, she can be rather boring. When she’s not fighting pirates during a kidnapping, of course!’
The Tully left the conversation simultaneously proud and saddened that her daughter seemed to have grown slightly. As it was, she chose to focus on the positive sides of this arrangement. Lyarra Snow was gone. Winterfell had a surplus of food for the coming storms. Sansa would be fostered in Highgarden where she would become an even better marriage prospect for the Crown.

‘And a Queen outranks a Lady Paramount every time.’

x

‘The roses have their own stake to the Throne.’

Varys was too well-composed to sigh irritably, though he naturally had the desire to do so. Not for the first time, he lamented his own decision to waylay Rhaegar’s plot, thinking it to set a dangerous precedent for the Crown. In his mind, King Aerys’ madness could have been controlled for a brief few years and then the succession peacefully ensured for his kind-hearted, if untested, eldest son. He had offered intelligence on the Silver Prince’s plot to derail the work of lords meddling too deeply into royal business, knowing that Rhaegar Targaryen was too beloved to be cast away as Heir. Of course, then an untested young man chose to think with his lesser head on the matter and everything went, as the smallfolk in Fleabottom were prone to say, ‘tits up’ as a result.

The Master of Whispers should have just kept his trap shut. One could only waste so much coin in playing the harp and better a King that walked amongst the commons than a lush in the brothels. Either were security risks that brought him headaches to protect but at least the former didn’t invite potential assassins to his bed.

‘Not including the one he wed, of course.’ Varys hid his twitter of amusement by practice, glancing through long lashes at the cuckolding lioness the King was bound to. ‘Shame Prince Rhaegar isn’t alive today to have his own actions turned against him. His beloved Visenya, stolen willingly from her home by another lovestruck southron.’

This she-wolf had three brothers too but rather than inopportune the youngest, Willas Tyrell had the sense to obtain the support of the eldest. By all accounts, the Young Wolf had even walked his ‘sister’ down the aisle and held up the kinship goblet for the groom to drink from. ‘This opens opportunities.’

Varys wanted peace and prosperity for the realm. Any monarch could bring that to Westeros with a modicum of human decency, above-average intelligence- or the common sense to hire good advisors- and the ability to beget male children. These were not such vaunted qualities that his task need be so difficult, though somehow, it always felt that way. He didn’t even mind which House
controlled the Crown, though he would naturally prefer that the blood sit of the dragons on the Iron Throne. In the end, Varys was a simple man of simple expectations that everyone else made far more complex than necessary.

His chief complaints were Cersei Lannister and her incest-born monstrosity, Prince Joffrey, but Willas Tyrell had impressively made the short list. Preceding this, Varys had set aside the youngest of the Silver Prince’s children and focused on other options, including Viserys, Daenerys and Illyrio’s son as a substitute for Aegon. It was a shame, of course it was, to lose Rhaegar’s progeny; whatever his other faults, the Silver Prince had been just and kind and true. But what could he do? No one would accept a woman on the throne and, as a bastard, Lyarra Snow could not beget a trueborn King. Moreover, her main base of support would be a kingdom that had allied with the stags once before.

Though perhaps not once again. Robb Stark had attended the wedding. He hadn’t the same ties to the King that his father did, nor the same hidebound honor, if he was willing to negotiate a marriage in secret for his cousin. Willas Tyrell will put the key to the Kingdom in her womb soon enough.

The Master of Whispers hadn’t as many little birds in the North as he’d like but he’d collected a few useful bits of knowledge. Lyarra Snow was an intelligent, if melancholy child, much like her own father had been. She hadn’t shown any signs of madness yet, possibly having stamped it out with her Stark bloodline. If her son followed suit, he would not be an unattractive option for the throne, with the roses, wolves and possibly trouts supporting him. Varys would have to quietly insert a few forgeries to remove the child’s mother of the taint of bastardry but that wouldn’t be past his abilities.

The child would have the advantage of being raised in Westeros as well.

Decisions, decisions. Plots and plans encircled around a babe even conceived yet. Truly the Game of Thrones demanded too much from her Players.

One thing is certain. Everything has changed.

x

Done! Finally my first completed fic! This is the end of Arc One of Winter Thorns. I’ll post an update to this story when the second arc is posted, though I would warn that to be in the distant future. While I adore Willas and Lyarra, I’ve been focused on their story for nearly eight months now.
End Notes

Amazing Fanart by Joy of the Harpy!


I know it's odd but my favorite part has to be the rustling leaves adding a jaunty hint to the winter roses at the border. Her lips parted slightly at the beginning of a shy smile is a close second though!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!