an inconvenience

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an inconvenience

by KaleidoKai

Summary

He had always wanted someone to share his thoughts with, and that is exactly who he was given.

Or Jon and Arya meet at a tourney for the first time and find themselves opening up to each other: mind, body, and soul. Not on purpose, of course.

Notes

My very first multi-chapter story! Soulmate tropes have always held a soft spot in my heart, so here we are. To expect: foul language, a broody Jon, and hopefully enough fluff to choke on.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
it starts with one

Jon Targaryen dreamt of ice and wolves, and a winter storm that stretched on for eternity.

He stood at the edge of a cliff, one foot planted firmly in the white snow, the other hovering over an endless pit, black and void and beckoning him with seductive fingers.

His heart stuttered in his chest, and try as he might, he could not move his feet, could not step back from the madness onto the safety of the earth. Jon considered yelling for help, but when he looked up, all he could see were hundreds of wolves. For miles and miles, they dotted the landscape, a myriad of colours yet all silent. All watching.

The air was still and he could taste droplets of snowflakes hanging in the mist, biting his skin and rubbing it raw. He glanced up - anywhere but the abyss before him - and saw the rolling of black clouds inching closer and closer to him, arching out forever, dark with promise, dark with secrets. Wind whistled around him, through him, licking his skin and slicing his cheeks with bitter cold.

He shivered.

"Don't be afraid," a voice whispered in his ear, gentle and soothing. "You are home here."

His head whipped this way and that, trying to find the source of the sound, trying to find -

"Jump!"

He snapped back to void, fear slamming into his chest like a war hammer. It was coming from there, he was sure of it! The velvet blackness seemed to swirl under his hovering foot, twirling around his ankle and reaching for him, reaching...

He recoiled, his body spasming, only to dislodge his other foot and tumble down, down, down into the darkness. Silence enthralled him in an embrace and he could no longer see the grey skies, or the army of wolves. He floated, bodiless in the dark, and so very, very alone.

Not like this! his mind cried as his lips refused to scream for help. His tongue felt heavy in his mouth and his eyes watered at his body's betrayal.

I don't want to be alone! I don't want to be forgotten!

A lone wolf cry pierced through the void.

"You're never alone," the voice whispered in the abyss, lighting a warmth in his chest that spread to the very tips of his fingers.

"You're home, with me."

oOo

Jon rolled out of bed and fell to the floor with a heavy thump.

Groaning, he ran a hand over his face, violently rubbing at his eyes to erase the dreams. Visions of
white snow and howling wolves and black, black, black, invaded his thoughts and he let out a frustrated sigh as he dragged himself to his feet. Pain pierced through his head, rattling his ears and igniting stars behind his closed eyelids. With another irritated groan, he reached blindly for the goblet of white liquid at his bedside, draining it in one swallow. It burned his throat, and he winced slightly before breathing out in relief as the waves of pain ceded like the tide.

Every night, for moons now, Jon had these dreams.

And every morning, Jon would wake up with a raging headache not even his worst hangover could compete with.

He'd once considered the idea that, perhaps, they weren't dreams but visions, such as the Targaryens once had. Visions that found it necessary to pound their way into his skull and sear themselves against the back of his eyelids. It seemed a reasonable explanation. Rhaegar was said to have had prophetic dreams in his youth, though Jon loathed the idea of sharing this with his father.

But he'd made the mistake of once mentioning it to Aegon, who had shrieked with laughter before calling him a witch and pestering him to dream a vision of Barra the kitchen maid in his bed. That had gone on for weeks, and by the end, Jon had learnt his lesson.

"They're just stupid dreams. They're just stupid dreams," he muttered to himself repeatedly as he dressed and left his room. Saying it aloud seemed to help.

Finally, he entered the Queen's Ballroom, where his brother and sister sat conversing over half eaten plates of toast and eggs, places notably absent by their side. There was no sign of the King and Queen, but that was hardly unusual. King Rhaegar often broke his fast alone in his solar, and Queen Elia was either tending to duties or resting, as per the Maester's orders. They rarely all ate together.

The hall was his favourite in Maegor's Holdfast, clad in beaten silver mirrors and richly carved wood. Candles were scattered around the room, dimly dancing in the breeze from the open high-arched windows that sat along the south wall. His steps echoed across the white marble floors as he approached the table; a long decadent slab of grey stone, carved with dragon heads, Valyrian runes and scribbles from the time Aegon held a butter knife in his six-year-old palm and decided to redecorate.

Jon passed by the mirrors of the northern wall and spared a glance at his reflection. He did not consider himself a vain man, but his mouth twisted at the dark circles under his eyes, a patchwork of blues and purples framing twin orbs of silver. His dark brown hair stuck up in tufts around his head, and he ran a quick hand through the wild strands in an effort to resemble half the prince he was supposed to be. There was nothing for the hollowness in his cheeks, and he winced at how pale his skin had become.

"Are you done primping yourself up, Jon? I'm flattered you want to look your best for me, but I'm afraid I'm a betrothed man."

Aegon's airy voice drifted in his ears, and Jon could see his brother's amused face over his shoulder in the mirror. A smatter of jam spotted the corners of the Crown Prince's mouth, the edges quirked up in an insufferable grin plastered on a face Jon would rather walk on coals than admit he'd missed. From his brilliantly-violet eyes the colour of the sky at sunset, to the silver-white threads of his fine hair, to the casual confidence in his shoulders of a man who knew he held the world in his hand: Aegon was every bit the proud heir to their dynasty.

It had been about six moons since Aegon and Rhaenys had moved to Dragonstone to tend to their duties as its Prince and Princess, whilst Jon had remained in King's Landing to help their father, and
three nights since their return to the capital in anticipation for a tourney in honour of their wedding. Though he'd never tell them, Jon had missed his brother and sister fiercely while they were away, and it was this thought that spread a smile on his lips as he turned away from the mirror to join them at the table.

"You caught me, brother," Jon replied with false shame laced in his words, "And here I was counting on seducing you." He took a seat opposite Aegon as the other barked with laughter.

Breakfast was brimming with choice, from the small towers of buttered toast and soft hills of pies and bacon to the baskets of glistening fruit, painting the table with countless colours. Jon felt his stomach lurch like a ship on angry waves and instead opted to grab one of the Dornish apples, his appetite little from his restless night.

A clatter of cutlery from his left drew his attention and he looked over to see Rhaenys, their eldest sibling, smirking with mirth. "After my crown, are you?" she asked with mock anger. "I always knew you wanted to be Queen, Jon."

"Guilty. And I've been jealous of your pretty dresses."

She grinned at him, her dark lips spreading to reveal a row of white teeth. Where Aegon shone as brightly as the sun, Rhaenys glistened like jewels in the night. She was wrapped in gold silks that kissed her bronze skin like a lover, her delicate features aquiline and soft. Her obsidian eyes were lit with humour, and he knew she hid a sharp tongue behind her gracious smile. She tossed her oiled hair over her shoulder and Jon watched the flames of the torches dance on the black ringlets like mad men in a ritual.

The three of them were as different as the elements, yet they were bound by the same blood that coursed through their veins. The blood of Old Valyria, the blood of dragons.

Not that he felt particularly reptilian that morning. His grin faded as he bit into the apple, letting the sweet juices rest on his tongue briefly before swallowing with some difficulty, his stomach still churning unpleasantly.

He felt a hand resting on his arm, and he looked up into his sister's knowing gaze.

"You aren't sleeping properly," she said accusingly, a furrow in her brow. "You've lost weight since we left."

Jon shifted under her intrusive stare, unused to such attention, his mind sifting through excuses. He didn't particularly feel like discussing his nightmares, not when they'd finally been reunited after the most difficult half-year he'd known. He opened his mouth to laugh her concern off when Aegon, as always, beat him to it.

"Quit being a mother hen," his silver brother intruded with a snort, "He's fine, aren't you, Jon?" At his half-sibling's nod, he rubbed his hands with enthusiasm. "Brilliant! Then if you aren't feeling too fragile, perhaps a spar is in order? I've been dying for a decent fight for moons!" He sighed melodramatically, as his sister rolled her eyes at him.

Jon hardly needed a moment to consider before he chucked his half-eaten apple aside and leapt to his feet. "I'll show you just how fragile I'm feeling. Shall we?" he said with a grin.

Aegon blew Rhaenys a quick kiss goodbye before the pair raced to the training yard.
The clanging of steel sang a sweet song that echoed in his bones as Jon danced to its light rhythm.

He twirled away from Aegon's slices on the balls of his feet, swinging back in retaliation in a graceful arc that whistled in the air.

It was here, in the training yard amongst the sweat and dirt and curses that Jon felt the most free. It was in the lightness of his steps and the laughter on his lips, and more than once, he almost believed he was soaring. Above the clouds, as delicate as a feather, the kiss of steel as cold as the breeze on his cheeks, just out of reach of the claws of the palace.

It was, perhaps, the most at home he could ever feel at the Red Keep.

Trickles of sweat raced down his face as Aegon continued his onslaught, the searing sun burning into his skin and radiating a blazing heat that carved into his bones. His chest began to stretch in pain but he refused to relent, meeting every single one of his brother's strokes with his own, harder and faster. It was only when Aegon had ducked under one of his strikes that he faltered, and was rewarded with a sharp sting across his lower back that had him on his knees and gasping for breath.

"Bending the knee for me already?" Aegon jested, his words punctuated by heavy panting as he stood over Jon, a smirk slapped on his face. "I'm not King yet, but I appreciate your enthus-"

The rest of his words were swallowed by dirt as his face slammed against the sandy floor. Jon had kicked his legs out from under him, and he felt great satisfaction at watching the Crown Prince splutter indignantly, his silvery hair smattered with red dust like flecks of paint.

Jon let out a hearty laugh. "Well met, brother. It's been a while since I've had to work that hard," he said as he dragged himself to his feet.

Aegon narrowed his eyes at Jon's offered hand, before grabbing it to yank himself up. "Fragile, indeed," he snorted. "How is your back? I doubt Rhaenys would be pleased if I brutalized our little brother so soon."

Jon reached out and winced when his fingers brushed against his spine. It wasn't the worst hit he'd received, but he was expecting a lovely splatter of bruising in the morning. "I'll live and I'm hardly your little brother," he replied with good humour, as the two princes sauntered over to the weapons depot to hand their swords over to squires for cleaning. "How's your face? I doubt Rhaenys would appreciate it if I ruined your looks, since it really is all you've got going for you."

His brother threw back his head in laughter in response.

They had just entered the Holdfast and were about to separate to their respective rooms when they saw Rhaenys walking briskly down the hall towards them, her skirts flying behind her like wings.

"You see that, Jon," Aegon nudged him on the shoulder as they watched her approach. "So in love with me that one is, couldn't wait for me to bathe first before being all over me. Find yourself a woman like that." He flashed him a grin before turning to his betrothed.

Rhaenys was finally upon them, and glanced in distaste at their dirt-streaked clothes. Aegon leaned in for a kiss, and she held up a hand to stop him, her nose wrinkled in disgust as a waft of their pungent stench drifted in her nose.
"Do not touch me until you have bathed twice. This is a new dress, I'm not having you stain it. I'm here to give you a message," she ordered in a clear voice, ignoring his wounded look. She straightened her shoulders and her dark eyes burned into each of theirs, her face twisted in a grimace. "I thought it best if I were the one to inform you that the King and Queen have arranged for us all to dine together tonight. Viserys and Margaery will be joining us as well. Dress appropriately."

She sighed at her brothers' horrified expressions, and waited for their outbursts.

"I don't want to eat together! Vis puts me off my dinner and I don't want to see him-" Aegon began sullenly, but one look from his sister cut him off.

"This isn't about you, for once," she snapped, her voice hardened with steel. It was the tone of their mother and Jon muffled a chuckle at how quickly Aegon's teeth clanked shut, the look of an admonished child gracing his face. "It's one dinner, Egg. We may not like it, but Mother is insisting we are on our best behavior, and I intend not to disappoint her." Her words left no room for argument, but Jon's thoughts were already far away.

"Who is this about? Is there to be an announcement?" he asked his sister, worry heavy on his tongue as dread settled in his heart. At Rhaenys' look of pity, it turned to lead, and the euphoria of sparring with his brother again burned into ashes in his mouth. He was no longer flying, but sinking deeper and deeper into melting stone, his breaths constricting as his lungs struggled for air.

Aegon noticed the sudden change in mood, and glanced between his two siblings. "Oh come now, it could be anything!" he insisted, hesitation in his voice. "Maybe Margaery's cunt has stopped shriveling up every time Viserys is in the room and we'll have a new hellspawn hatching in a few moons."

Jon howled with laughter as Rhaenys smacked her betrothed on the chest in indignation.

oOo

He was back in the Queen's Ballroom that evening, but instead of open windows and fresh breezes, the curtains were drawn and the room was stifled by countless torches greedily inhaling the air in the room so he could barely breathe. The dark wooden panels he admired so much seemed black in the golden light, the mirrors mockingly reflecting the sombre faces tenfold. His fine doublet felt itchy and he resisted the urge to adjust it, keeping his hands frozen by his sides.

There was nowhere to look, so he simply stared at his plate in sullen silence.

He sat opposite Viserys and Margaery. Rhaenys was beside him, straight backed and prodding her food gently, and next to her, Aegon, seated on the King's right, and as rigid and still as Jon thought him capable. The King and Queen, as per protocol, sat on opposite ends of the table, the distance that engulfed them as endless as worlds apart.

The silence was heavy and thick as dark poison, and Jon would occasionally glance up to observe his family's reactions.

Viserys lounged in his chair as he always would, sipping wine and looking around the room with a mild distaste that was forever carved into his features. Jon briefly wondered if he'd been raised with horseshit in his crib to always look like that. His wife, Margaery, sat in perfect grace by his side, the very image of a dignified princess as she daintily bit into a boiled carrot. But Jon could see the edges
of her mouth tipped ever so slightly into a frown, and the set of her shoulders screamed discomfort. He almost pitied her. He would not wish this life on anyone, but ambition was a double edged sword, and the Tyrells loved to grasp it with both hands.

The seat beside her was noticeably empty, once belonging to his aunt Daenerys. His mouth twisted at that. Dany had been unbelievably lucky when Elia had broken her betrothal to Viserys and handed her to Quentyn Martell as a sign of good faith between the Crown and Dorne, and Viserys to the Tyrells as a reward for their loyalty. Jon winced at the memories of the King and Queen's rows echoing through the palace, but even Rhaegar had relented when Jon Connington had applauded Elia for her decision.

Dorne had not recovered from the slight of Rhaegar's transgressions with the daughter of House Stark, despite their own princess crowned as Queen not even a full moon after the Rebellion. Elia had been disgraced, and Sunspear demanded compensation. Giving them Rhaegar's sister had quelled much of the fires that still burned two decades later, and Jon knew Daenerys' letters laced with happiness had Rhaegar gritting his teeth and relinquishing to his royal wife.

Jon was pleased that his aunt had found adventure and love, but part of him resented her - resented all of them - for leaving him behind.

Aegon had left him six years ago to squire at Sunspear under the brazen eye of Oberyn Martell. He'd returned not two years later, full of bawdy jokes and stories filled with women and exploits that Jon could hardly have dreamt of experiencing. Rhaenys had kept him company in that time, and he'd grown to appreciate her quiet, graceful presence - but it was only a matter of time before she, too, would be burdened by duties as the Crown Princess, residing at Dragonstone and far too busy to devote attention to the spare brother.

The spare. His mouth twisted at that, and he gripped his fork harder for it.

"Aegon." His father's voice rang deep and clear around the hall, and from the corner of his eye, he saw his brother grit his teeth in response.

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"You've been here for three days now," the King continued. "There are matters you must attend to regarding the tourney and the wedding. I thought some time away at Dragonstone would cool your head, but it seems you are just as averse to your duties as ever."

A clanging sound marked the end of the King's remark, and Jon heard Rhaenys suck in a breath as his head whipped around to its source.

Aegon had thrown his knife and fork back on his plate, and sat back to level a glare at their father, his eyes raging black and purple, the promise of summer storms. "Rather rich coming from you," he snapped, "Rumour has it you haven't attended court in two weeks. Find a new prophecy to ruin someone's life over, Your Grace?" The last two words were growled with deep contempt.

"Aegon!" Rhaenys hissed, reaching out to grab his arm. He shook her off.

The King returned his furious stare with a cool look, a dispassionate expression in his eyes that made Jon shudder. It was worse, he thought, than seeing him angry. There was a hollowness to Rhaegar, an abyss that threatened to swallow one whole if they gazed at it enough. It made him seem almost inhuman.

Their father opened his mouth to retort, but it was the Queen's voice that was heard.
"Enough, Aegon," Elia said softly, but with iron. "Control yourself."

The reaction was instantaneous. Aegon's shoulders, rigid with fury, immediately slumped and he hung his head, asking for forgiveness. Rhaenys relaxed as well, and Jon heaved a quiet sigh that a disaster had been averted. There was one every time.

They resumed eating with less enthusiasm, a remarkable feat given the lack of its abundance beforehand, but by the time Jon found enough energy to lift the fork to his mouth, the King was calling his attention.

He felt everyone's eyes swivel to bore into him, and he resisted the urge to shrink. "Yes, Your Grace?"

Rhaegar simply watched him for a few moments, and Jon squirmed in his seat under his intrusive stare. He hated it when his father looked at him, there was always a trace of sadness - and yes, bitterness - that lined his exquisite features. Jon knew what, or who, he saw, and it sent a shot of pain through his body like a lightning bolt every time.

"This tourney isn't just for Aegon and Rhaenys," Rhaegar finally said, "You've seen twenty namedays now, and I need not remind you of your duty as a Targaryen prince. Since there is none for you to marry at home, I expect to find a bride for you amongst the Houses that have received the honour of our invitation." He sat back and waited, almost expecting a rebellion.

His heart stuttered in his chest, and Jon struggled to take deep breaths to calm his flickering nerves.

Marriage. A wife. A family. Duty, do your duty. There is nothing for you but to do your duty.

He felt his hands begin to shake with...fear? Rage? He was not sure. One quick glance around the room told him everyone was staring at him, with green and purple and black eyes, with pity and challenge and even malicious glee from Viserys. It tore at him, and he wanted to scream.

He'd been a fool to think Rhaegar would let him out of his sight. He'd gone on this long without being shackled to a betrothal he did not want, and he'd childishly believed that maybe - just maybe! - Rhaegar may have granted his one wish to travel the Kingdoms and find his own honour. Perhaps establish a name that was not burdened by the blood of thousands and the death of a Rebellion. It was a hope that helped him rise from his bed each morning and trudge through the day, trapped in this gilded red prison where he was a prince, but no better than a bastard. Forced to suffer through the barbs and the glares. The boy whose birth tore the world apart.

But that hope, that delicate bird that fluttered so gently over his heart, had been crushed and butchered and buried in grey stone.

A betrothal meant a marriage before the year was out.

A marriage meant a wife, and children, and a duty.

A duty meant never leaving the Red Keep again.

Hysteria bubbled in his chest, and he hardly heard Aegon protesting for his cause as the world began spinning around him. Just as he thought he might throw up, a sudden sharp pain slammed into his legs, and he doubled over gasping.

"Jon!" Rhaenys exclaimed next to him, a hand resting lightly on his back. He gritted his teeth and grasped his knees, feeling the throbbing fade away as quickly as it had come.
"I'm...I'm fine," he managed to splutter, the haze of pain receding enough for him to notice everyone's shock. Heat enflamed his cheeks, and he avoided their eyes as he swayed to his feet. He felt tears begin to blur his vision. No, no, he could not cry here. Not in front of his father. He could not be seen as so weak.

"May I be excused?" he asked Rhaegar, desperately. It was considered rude to stand while the King remained seated, but at that moment, Jon could not give less of a damn for propriety.

At Rhaegar's nod, Jon whirled on his feet and bolted to the door, ignoring his brother's calls behind him. He ran past Arthur and Jaime at the door, avoiding their questioning looks as his feet pounded the marble floors towards his bedroom.

Once safely inside, he locked the doors and sank to the floor, struggling to control his breathing.

_Stupid, stupid, stupid!_ he thought angrily. _He'll never listen to you now! I cannot be such an emotional wreck every time I see him!_

His shoulders shuddered as he hunched over himself, allowing waves of pity to wash over him, cool against his skin.

In a beat, he recalled the lashing pain on his knees, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared. With a frown, he removed his boots and rolled his breeches higher to see if he'd accidentally scraped anything, though he could not recall any bruises when he'd bathed earlier.

The skin was smooth and untouched. He prodded it gingerly, but nothing happened.

Just a freak moment, he thought absently, as he climbed to his feet and threw himself on the bed, fully clothed.

A flicker of a heartbeat later, he was asleep.
wherever I go, trouble seems to follow

Chapter Summary

A glimpse at the daughter of Winterfell with a penchant for dealmaking.

The delicate, fragrant scent of the godswood hung suspended in the air. It twined and shivered around her ankles like grey smoky snakes, dissipating when Arya violently cut through it to hack at a tree.

Sweat beaded her forehead, despite the chill, and she gritted her teeth as she carried on the onslaught upon her imaginary enemy. A blunt training sword in one hand and fury on her tongue, she thought she could taste the tang of blood in her mouth.

It's not fair! she thought furiously. She cannot make me do this!

Her hair was sticking to her neck, and Arya grimaced in discomfort. She hadn't planned on brutalizing a tree this morning, but her mother's casual remark of Lord Umber arriving later that day - with his son in tow - had her bolting from the room as quick as a fox, without a bite to eat. Her stomach grumbled in protest, but she refused to acknowledge it. If she crawled back to the castle now searching for food, there was sure to be a trap in the kitchen waiting for her. She would not give Lady Stark the satisfaction.

She was alone in the vast expanse of nature, standing amongst the sprawl of summer flowers that swayed in the breeze in a trance. Through the gaps of the great green canopies, she glimpsed a pale blue sky with dotted clouds, the calm seas to the storms of her black thoughts.

So far, no one had come looking for her, and Arya could not decide whether she was pleased to be left alone, or wounded that no one had bothered to see how she was feeling.

Another particularly violent blow lodged her sword in the thick trunk, and with a groan, Arya struggled to pull it out. She tried pushing off the tree while grasping it, and even kicked it a few times. It refused to budge, and she suddenly found herself without a means to vent her anger, which had hardly waned despite her efforts.

With little else to do, she sank to her knees and rested against the trunk.

Leaning her head back, she let her thoughts drift like the rolling clouds above, focusing her breathing in a steady rhythm as she'd seen her father do when he had to control his temper. It worked a little, and the black curling rage slowly receded to a grey haze of bitterness.

She knew she could not escape her fate forever. Sansa had married Willas Tyrell just past her fifteenth nameday and had been betrothed for two years prior to that. Arya had seen six moons since her last nameday, and at fifteen years old, she had yet to even consider a betrothal, let alone be married to one.

Time was slipping through her fingers like wisps of mist, and she clambered to grasp at it desperately. She was at the end of the tether, she knew. Robb was expecting his child any moment now, Sansa was in the South, Bran was squiring at the Karstarks and little Rickon even had plans to
leave for Riverrun soon to learn under the Blackfish.

All had plans and destinies and their life mapped out before them, clear as day, each intricate detail carved into stone. They simply surrendered to the strings of fate as they were yanked along their journey like idle puppets.

Arya did not have that. When she looked ahead, she saw nothing but blackness and uncertainty; a blank canvas before which she stood poised, brush in hand, waiting for a masterpiece that never came.

Winterfell was shrinking, and she anticipated the day when she would wake up and find she could hardly find space to breathe as the walls closed around her. She loved her home, loved it with the ferocity of wildfire, but the murmurs and hard looks at the unruly daughter of Stark were beginning to chip away at her, little by little. Soon she would be full of holes, watching her dreams pour out like wine at a feast.

She shuddered.

Arya knew what she did not want. She did not want a fat lord for a husband, with greedy eyes and grabbing hands. Who fell in love with her name and her blood, without sparing a glance at the face who owned both. Who'd cut the reins of her horse and feed her practice sword to the fire, demanding her to do her duty.

Duty. Her lips curled at that. Duty to him, but never to herself. To always be one step behind him, but never his equal. She would sell her dreams of adventure for a husband she would not care for, for a castle she would not love, for a life she would never want.

She snorted. What a trade!

The snap of twigs drew her out of her musings, and Arya twisted her head to see her father walking carefully towards her. Lord Eddard Stark looked like he belonged in the godswood, with his dark brown hair the colour of the aging trunks and his gentle smile that always reminded her of the Old Gods, in one way or another. His eyes sparkled with mirth as it caught the protruding sword above her head, and he muffled a chuckle.

"It appears the tree was victorious this round."

Before Arya could argue, Ned had yanked the sword out with force, leaving behind splinters and bark to pour onto her head, a crown of wood chips caught in the tangled nest of her hair.

Silently, he handed it back to her and she hesitantly reached out to grab it, tucking it by her side and using her body to hide it out of sight. It was one of her most precious belongings.

With a quiet grunt, Ned lowered himself beside her, and leant against the tree, shoulder to shoulder.

They sat in companionable silence, Arya chewing her lip in deliberation and Ned simply absorbing the musical twitters of the world around them.

Soon, the anticipation grew too heavy and Arya finally bursted with, "I'm not going back. I don't want to see the Umbers, or anyone she invites."

Her father breathed out a weary sigh, and Arya felt a pang of guilt shoot through her. She didn't mean to give him such grief, she loved him more than life itself.

"Arya, dear, what exactly do you want?"
The question took her by her surprise, and Arya found her mouth hanging open wordlessly. Ned looked at her expectantly and she realized with a heartbeat that he wasn't simply asking about the Umbers.

Her mouth snapped shut, and she pondered over her words. They were there on her tongue, light and sweet, and ready to escape into the sunlight - waiting for so long for the opportune moment to finally reveal themselves.

"I don't...want to be forgotten," she said carefully, watching her father's face twist with surprise. "I don't want to be remembered for the man I married, or how many sons I bore him." She shrugged and began playing idly with the strands of grass by her feet. "I want to be Arya Stark, and I want that to mean something. I just want...more."

Her last word was whispered to the air around them like a secret, her cheeks growing warm as her father remained still beside her. She shifted uncomfortably, going over her words again and again to see if she'd said something to upset him, when she felt a warm hand on her head and a gentle finger on her chin turning her to face him.

Ned was smiling at her, and relief flooded her veins. "I know, my pup. You are a wolf in more ways than you know, and wolves are not made to be caged." He kissed her lightly on the forehead, his lips tugging into a small frown. "But you are also a daughter and a lady - Arya, don't look at me like that, it's the truth - and you know you have a duty. We all must face it, one way or another. I did mine as your brothers and sister are doing theirs. You cannot escape it, child."

Arya felt tears prick the edges of her eyes, and she twisted out of Ned's embrace to hastily rub them away. It stung, what he said, but they were laced with the distasteful flavours of truth and the stubborn streak in her heart refused to acquiesce.

A hand on her shoulder urged her to turn back, and she resisted for a moment, before all the fight drained from her body and she slumped against her father. She was far too tired to argue.

Ned rested his head on top of hers and stroked her hair gently. She let the warmth and love wash over her as the first fresh breath of spring after a winter storm, let it blow out the fires of her anger and bathe her thoughts with white.

He paused for a moment, before adding in a whisper, "Shall we make a deal?" His voice was low and secretive, as if afraid to disturb the delicate balance between them.

She perked up, and watched him through narrowed eyes. "I'm listening."

He gave her a soft smile and tapped her on the nose. "I understand why you do not wish to see the Umbers, but they are our bannermen and deserve respect. Your lady mother will not offer your hand to the first lord she meets, so you need not fear a betrothal just yet. But if you return to the castle immediately and get dressed, without making a fuss. And promise to be on your very best behavior for the next few days -"

Arya crinkled her nose, but waited for him to continue.

"-then perhaps I may convince your lady mother to allow you to accompany me to the tourney at King's Landing. I know you've been quite keen to attend."

Her breath caught in her throat, and she gazed wide-eyed at her father, afraid she had misheard. "Truly? You'll let me come with you?"

"As long as you agree to our deal, I don't see why not."
"Can Rickon come too?"

"If Robb stays, then of course he can."

Ned let out a surprised gasp when Arya suddenly threw her arms around his neck and he found himself buried in a thick, tangled mane of brown hair. Laughing, he squeezed her back, and Arya reveled momentarily in his sweet earthy scent.

"Consider it a deal," she said when she finally unwrapped herself. Pecking him on the cheek with a wet kiss, she dragged herself to her feet and sprinted back to the castle; skirt in hand and hope in her heart, leaving behind a Warden staring after her fondly.

oOo

She resisted the urge to fidget.

Arya stood beside Lady Catelyn, with her father, Robb and Rickon on her mother's other side. They waited in the Great Hall, and Arya decided to glance around the room to distract her from boredom.

It was a space she'd seen everyday since she'd first arrived screaming into this world, and Arya was certain that she could build an exact replica of this hall from memory, stone by stone. Rays of sunshine poured in from the high windows, creeping along the grey granite walls like a thief, stealthy and slow. The white banners of House Stark fluttered gently with the soft breezes of the open windows, and Arya marveled at how the eyes of the direwolf followed her every movement like silent ghosts.

She was still staring at her sigil when the giant iron doors at the end of the hall swung open, allowing entry to two bearded men wrapped in furs.

Arya thought the man in front was quite possibly the largest man she'd ever seen. He was heavily muscled, with formidable eyes and a fierce stare as he approached her father. She noticed a greatsword strapped to his back, taller than Robb and wider than her entire body. Arya briefly imagined trying to wield such a weapon, and smothered a laugh at the picture of her small frame tugging at the steel monster.

Her eyes fell on the second man, one step behind, and all laughter died from her lips. Smalljon Umber, she recalled his name, was almost as large as his father and hidden behind a hornet's nest of a beard. She could hardly see his face. His hand was probably the size of her entire head, and Arya balked at the idea of being trapped under such a beast.

She stifled a cringe and pictured the tourney in her head instead to calm her nerves. Father had said she would not be betrothed today, and she desperately wanted to accompany him to the capitol. It had been a long time since such excitement had lifted her spirits, and she was determined not to disappoint him.

With an image of jousting knights and clashing swords in mind, Arya plastered on her sweetest smile as the Umbers stopped a respectable distance away.

"My lord of Stark," the Greatjon boomed, bowing his head. His son followed suit.

"My lord of Umber," her father replied, accepting the gesture with a small nod of his own. They held
their poses long enough to be considered respectful, before Lord Umber's beard ripped open to reveal a boisterous smile.

Lord Stark returned his grin, and met him halfway to thump him on the back. "It's good to see you, friend," Ned said, his hand still on his shoulder. "I was beginning to think you'd never visit."

Greatjon laughed heartily at that. "As if you could keep me away." He turned to her lady mother and bowed deeply as Catelyn graciously inclined her head. "My Lady Stark, always a pleasure," he said as he reached out to kiss her hand.

Arya swallowed deeply as he exchanged words with Robb and Rickon, before finally turning to her. "Why, if it isn't the Lady Arya!" he exclaimed kindly, appraising her with curious eyes. "My lord, I must congratulate you and your lady wife," he continued, turning to her parents with a grin. "You indeed make the most beautiful daughters." He looked back at her and she reddened at his son's intrusive stare over the Greatjon's shoulder.

Remembering her courtesies, Arya gritted her teeth and curtsied with as much grace as she could muster.

"Thank you, my-

The rest of her words were swallowed by a sharp pain lashing across her lower back, and she sank to her knees with a loud gasp. It pierced her bones, and she struggled to inhale a deep breath to alleviate the discomfort.

Then suddenly, it vanished, and Arya was left blinking in confusion.

She realized with shock that her head was resting against...something. She dared to look up and noticed with horror that she had been leaning against the laces of Lord Umber's breeches, and the bannerman in question was staring down at her in bewilderment and shame.

Frozen, Arya could feel her mother's mortified gaze at her, frankly, obscene position burning into the side of her head. For a heartbeat, no one moved - until Robb spurred to life and yanked her to her feet.

Her hands were shaking with humiliation as she realized that every eye was trained on her in a mixture of surprise and distaste, and she furiously squeezed her eyelids shut to avoid meeting their stares.

"Are you alright?" she heard her brother whisper beside her, and she nodded mutely, unable to form words. Catelyn Stark was radiating displeasure from her side and Arya winced as it rolled off her skin and seared into hers. She did not dare look at her father.

Someone cleared their voice, and Ned's voice rang out deep and strong. "I think all pleasantries are in order. Perhaps your son and yourself would care to move our business to my solar, my lord?"

"Oh...yes, yes, that sounds about right," the Greatjon replied, recovering quickly from the scene. He turned to give the family a short bow, his eyes trained on the floor, before briskly following her father out of the room, his son trailing in his wake.

The door had hardly slammed shut when her mother whirled to face her.

"Five minutes. That's all that was required of you to behave, and you could not even manage that much!"
She peeked through her closed eyes at Catelyn's white face, and shrunk away from the fury she saw there.

"It wasn't my fault-" she began helplessly.

"Mother, I think Arya was in pain," Robb interrupted, his hand resting gently on her shoulder. She relished the warmth and comfort from his heavy touch, and it gave her a shred of confidence to stand a little straighter.

Her mother's face softened. "Is this true? Where does it hurt?" Her shoulders were still tensed with anger, but Arya felt relief that her eyes were no longer ablaze with dragon fire.

She shifted on her feet. "I-I felt something across my back," she said reluctantly.

Arya didn't want to create a fuss. It wasn't the first time she'd felt such pain, and certainly would not be the last. Probably just a freak moment. It wasn't worth a scene, and she had to remind herself several times not to argue back and set off her mother's fury again. Nothing was more important in that moment than convincing her father she was still keeping her side of the deal, and Lady Stark's temper was imperative to that.

Catelyn's face twisted with concern. "Your back? What on earth have you been doing, child, to hurt your back?"

"Are you still in pain?" Rickon asked over their mother's shoulder, peering at her curiously.

Arya swallowed as everyone watched her expectantly. "It sort of just...came and went. It doesn't hurt anymore. And I didn't do anything!" she said defensively. She hadn't! Her little excursion with the sword and tree this morning was hardly the most strenuous session she'd done, and she was certain she did not injure herself. Other than her pride, of course.

"You didn't do anything?" Catelyn repeated dryly, and Arya noticed with dread that colour was rising in Lady Stark's cheeks. "So you weren't in the godswood this morning with that infernal sword of yours?"

Her heart fluttered, and she saw her brothers' expressions turn to grimaces as they silently backed away. Rickon was already out the door in a breath, Robb close at his heels. Running to safety, no doubt, she thought bitterly.

"And if I was?" Arya retorted, raising her chin stubbornly. A voice at the back of her mind reprimanded her harshly - remember the tourney! - but she silenced it without thought. "I'm not stupid enough to hurt myself." They were alone in the hall now, and her voice bounced off the walls in shrill echoes.

"Clearly that isn't the case. You embarrassed yourself in front of your father's bannerman!"

"That wasn't my fault-"

"Aye, it most certainly was! You insist on defying me, Arya. If you hadn't been doing Gods-know-what all morning, you wouldn't have hurt your back!"

"I didn't hurt my-"

"Really, I've had quite enough of your wild ways!" Catelyn exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. "You are banned from wielding any sword from this moment. I allowed this foolishness for this long, but you've clearly become a danger to yourself. This ends now."
Arya gaped at her, dread wrapping around her chest in a vice-like grip. No, no, no, this wasn't supposed to happen this way!

Tears pricked the edges of her eyes, and she furiously wiped them away with the back of her sleeve. "Mother, please," she pleaded desperately. It was all going so very very wrong. "Mother, I promise, I didn't do it on purpose-"

"You never do," Catelyn snapped. "Always an excuse, Arya. It matters not what you mean and what you do not, if the outcome is still the same." She turned away from her daughter and walked towards the door, a cold dismissal that cut Arya deeply.

"See Maester Luwin for your back," Lady Stark called over her shoulder. "And once you've been treated, hand your swords to Ser Rodrik and return to your room. Your father will deal with you later."

She did not spare a glance as she left the hall.

oOo

Her feet slammed against the floor as she sprinted towards the godswood, her hair whipping behind her like angry waves in a thunderstorm.

The grass crunched under her furious steps, and she felt a pang of regret as she accidentally trampled through a batch of sunflowers nesting between trees. They tore apart as she barreled through them, so she pulled to a halt to finger their withered petals lightly.

*I ruin everything!* she thought pitifully, as her eyes ran over the wreckage. *Why must it always go so wrong?*

A sob rose in her chest, and she suddenly felt the need to hide somewhere for a while, away from the prying eyes of the world where she would not witness its glare of disappointment.

Glancing up at the closest tree, she noticed the thick cluster of branches and rich canopy of leaves that wrapped around its trunk. No one would find her here.

It was difficult at first, with the layers of her skirt trapped between her legs, but a satisfying rip from the edge to her knees meant she could freely climb the bark and clamber into safety. Arya briefly considered that ruining one of her fine dresses would not earn her a soft spot in her mother's heart, but she was beyond caring as she huddled amongst the twigs and the leaves and relished the silence.

There was little use in pretending to be proper now. No doubt her father had considered their deal void, since her mother would hardly allow her to leave Winterfell now, let alone the North. Her mouth twisted at that. She hadn't even gone a morning without failing Ned Stark, and she desperately wiped her nose on her arm as the tears began to fall freely.

*It wasn't fair!* she fumed. So she'd fallen in front of Lord Umber. There were worse transgressions! So she'd found her face remarkably close to his manhood. It was an accident!

She winced at the memory, her cheeks flaming with humiliation at the horror on Greatjon's face. Her only consolidation was that Sansa was far, far away, or she'd never hear the end of it. Robb would be far too mature to bring it up again, and Rickon would know she'd beat him with a spoon if he so
much as snickered behind her back.

Mostly, she fretted over the loss of her training swords. Arya closed her eyes and rested her forehead against a branch, her chest now hiccuping with every breath. There was freedom in the wielding of a sword, a sense of anticipation as the blade waited for her to prove herself to the world. The greatest of legends were of one who carried a weapon in hand and boldness in heart. Arya always liked to think she had an abundance of the latter, and feeling the heavy weight of a sword in her palm almost had her believing she could be one of the greats. That she was more than her sex, a story that would be told for generations to come.

It was pure fantasy of course, Arya thought bitterly. But it was a lovely one. And now, she couldn't even have that.

Her mother had been waiting for a reason to strip her of her arms and place a needle in her hand instead, this Arya knew for certain. And she cursed herself for giving Catelyn the satisfaction today.

Her heart felt heavy in her chest, and as she nestled deeper into the tree - a cocoon from the Gods - she closed her eyes and prayed desperately.

It was hours later when a crunch of footsteps dragged her out of dreams, and Arya realized with a start that the sky was a midnight velvet, and she could hardly see her own two hands in front of her. Her body ached with being cramped in a tight position for so many hours, though she refused to budge as her visitor paused beneath her.

"Arya?" Ned's voice carried up, soft and gentle as a summer breeze.

She considered not answering, not wanting to give her presence away, but a sharp grumble of her stomach rang out into the clear night and she felt betrayed by her own body.

She relented. "Yes, Father, I'm here."

Peering over a branch, she could just make out the Warden of the North silhouetted by the bright moonlight, his face grave with concern.

"Arya, we've been looking for you all day. You cannot frighten your mother like that," his words were stern, but lacked the iron of true anger. She relaxed at that.

"I didn't realize she cared," she blurted bitterly. Her legs were protesting greatly now, and she shifted in discomfort.

Ned sighed, and ran a hand over his face. He looked so exhausted in the silver light, and Arya felt another pang of guilt bolt through her.

"You aren't even a comfort to your own father, a cruel voice whispered. She shook it off.

"Of course she cares. Why on earth would you think otherwise?" Ned asked curiously.

"She told me I couldn't use my training swords anymore."

"She's been telling you that for years, darling, but it's never stopped you before."

Arya bit her lip. "It was different this time. She's never banned me, she just said she didn't like it." Her legs were screaming now, and her face twisted. Perhaps if she just stretched one leg a little...

She heard Ned chuckle below her. "You did create a little scene today, pup." His voice was light and
pleasant, not dripping with chastisement as she had thought it would.

"It was an accident!" she exclaimed, perhaps for the hundredth time out loud. She'd managed to extend her right leg enough to soothe the discomfort, but even this brief respite was no longer enough.

"I know, Arya. Robb came to Lord Umber and myself later and said you hurt your back. He was quite adamant to assure us nothing untoward had happened. Worry not, love."

"I didn't hurt my-"

Her mouth snapped shut before she finished her sentence. Father was not angry, and Lord Umber was not insulted. There was little point in arguing now. She sent a thousand blessings to her older brother in that moment, and mentally made a note to sneak him his favourite dessert as a thank you.

But there was still one matter to consider.

"Can I still come to the tourney with you?" she asked meekly, daring to hope. She'd been so very upset at the idea of missing out on such a grand affair, and she wasn't sure if she'd ever have the opportunity again to meet someone like the Sword of the Morning, or see his greatsword Dawn.

Ned paused for a moment, but to Arya, it felt like a century.

"If you come down and return to the castle with me immediately, then of course you can, love."

A bubble of happiness bursted in her chest and filled her veins with warmth. But in her rush to climb down, Arya stepped on the hem of the torn fabric of her dress and slipped, sliding down the trunk and landing on her knees painfully.

"Arya!" her father exclaimed, rushing to help her up. She winced at the throbbing of her legs, and rubbed gingerly at the raw marks on her knees. They were sure to decorate her pale skin with a patchwork of bruises in the morning. Ned was looking at her with concern, so she grinned at him to brush his worries off, throwing her arms around his middle and squeezing tightly.

He chuckled deeply, and stroked her tangled hair lovingly. When she finally stepped back, he offered his arm gallantly. "Shall we, my lady?"

Any other time, her nose would have wrinkled at the label, but Arya was feeling as light as a feather in that moment. She laughed and curtsied gracelessly, her knees protesting, before slipping her hand in the crook of his elbow.

Together, they trudged up to the castle as a thousand stars twinkled above them.
with a sense of poise and rationality

Chapter Summary

And the timer begins.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

So I'm aware this chapter is slightly shorter than the last one, but it was originally a massive 6k+, so I've split it into two. Hope you guys enjoy it!

And thank you so much for the lovely reviews last time!

Arya

The sun soared over a sprawling maze of ramshackle buildings fighting each other for space, a network of alleyways winding around their feet like creeping vines. A towering wall encased the city, and patches of settlements scattered just outside its gates, civilians who weren't lucky enough to snatch a piece of the royal city for themselves. At the very top of the highest hill, gazing over the inhabitants like a deity, stood the immense Red Keep, blood-red and formidable. It was larger than Winterfell, but Arya thought her home was far more welcoming than this palace with towers shaped like black spikes angrily piercing the sky. She thought she'd absolutely hate to live there forever. It struck a chord of pity in her for the King and his family.

The radiant light of the afternoon sun bathed the city in deep golden hues, giving it an illusion of a romantic painting. Her nose wrinkled. It certainly didn't smell like a romantic painting should, and she stifled a gag as a particularly repulsive stench smacked her in the face.

"Father says this isn't anything like it used to be. The King's sewage system is almost finished," she heard Rickon say as he spurred his horse to trot by hers. The golden gate of the capitol stood proudly at the bottom of their hill, a mere hour away, and Arya's body thrummed with excitement.

She turned to her brother, his silhouette melding against the sapphire-kissed sky. He could be part of this painting, she mused absently, with hair as red as the stones of the palace and eyes as blue as the heavens above. Unlike her, of course. Arya didn't think she'd look particularly good in this image, with her grey eyes and plain looks. Art was beautiful, after all, and neither word was ever said about her. Those were for her siblings, who carried the summer on their shoulders, where she was winter to the bone.

And King's Landing, she thought, was truly a city of fire.

A retching sound from Rickon pulled her out of her musings, and she chuckled at her brother's miserable face. "Perhaps you ought to have a word with His Grace about his questionable system then," she suggested, and smothered another laugh at his pained expression.
He tied a cloth around his mouth and sighed in relief, before turning back to her with bright eyes. "Do you think Sansa would come? She said she'd try in her letters." Rickon's hopeful voice was light as a breeze, despite being muffled. Sansa used to be the one to tuck him into bed at night with a story and a sweet song, filling his head with dreams of princesses and knights in shining armor. Their considerable age difference meant Sansa often mothered him, quietening his fears of thunderstorms and chastising him for eating dessert before finishing his greens. He had been the most affected when their older sister had moved away, and she knew part of the reason he'd agreed in coming South was the possibility of seeing her again.

Arya gave him a sad smile. "Father said she'd be heavy with child by now. It's not safe for her to be on the road." At his disappointed look, she reached out and grasped his arm in reassurance. "But we can ask to stop by Highgarden on our way back! It's an extra few weeks on the road, but I'm sure Father wouldn't want to miss the opportunity to see her either."

Rickon reached up to remove the cloth covering his face and beamed at her, sitting a little straighter in his saddle. Arya didn't want him to be sad, she wanted him to share her happiness, and if that meant pestering her Father into going West after the tourney until he was wroth, then so be it. These next few weeks had to be absolutely perfect.

As the great gate loomed before them, her mind was soon far away, dreaming of jousts and crowds applauding and in her daydreams, they always cheered for her.

oOo

*Jon*

The sun trailed above him like a blazing comet, its searing rays carving into his bones and boiling his blood. He could feel the heat stroke his neck with slick fingers, slow and seductive.

He grimaced as he wiped the sweat from his forehead, pulling the reins of his horse gently to a stop to reach for the water flask strapped to his hip. Aegon paused beside him on his own steed to chug down his drink, too.

They took a moment to gaze out to the murky waters of the bay, glimpses of deep blue peeking through the strands of brown and grey filth that seeped into the sea. The waves curled and swayed under an endless blue sky, nothing more than a speck of cloud tainting its purity. Jon's eyes latched onto the horizon, and he felt the curdles of longing ache in the pit of his stomach. How easy would it be to steal a fisherman's boat and simply float away with the current? Not a care in the world but for the simple thirst to discover?

He violently shook the thoughts from his head. They were dangerous to even consider.

It had taken him three days after the disastrous dinner to work up the courage to approach the King with the intention of appealing his marriage decision. He had hardly slept in that time - a brief respite from the wolf dreams - but scarcely desired in this state. His head had been pounding, and he'd dreaded meeting his father without having his wits about him.

Jon's mouth twisted at the memory of that morning.
"I'm asking for one year, Your Grace," he had pleaded to an impassive Rhaegar. "I will accept the betrothal, but I ask for permission to see the Kingdoms before I am to be married. Perhaps be your envoy?" He had been so hopeful, thinking that acquiescing to Rhaegar's desire to find a wife during the tourney might grant him some leniency.

He should have known better.

His father had simply regarded him as one would an unruly child in the street, with mild curiosity and a hint of annoyance in twin pitiless pools of amethyst.

"I have my representatives already," he had said quietly, for his gracious King never raised his voice. A dragon did not need to roar to frighten sheep. "I see no reason why you must travel when you have everything you could possibly desire here at home. You are a prince with responsibilities and duties you cannot shackle to another to appease your wanderlust. The answer is no." The last word rang through the solar and pierced his heart like a dagger, its blade poisoning the blood around it.

He'd wanted to argue, to rage, to bitterly question why. Rhaegar had refused to let him squire away from the Red Keep when Aegon was permitted to leave for Sunspear. Aegon, the Crown Prince, when he was but the second son. Dragonstone and Summerhall were the only two places he'd been permitted to see, but one was his ancestral home and the other his birthright, so Jon hardly considered them a fair trade.

Instead, he'd bowed his head, bit his tongue so hard it bled, and turned on his heel. As he'd reached the door, he heard the King's voice call his name out.

"Yes, Your Grace?"

And that blasted hope rose from the ashes once more, only to be desecrated for the last time.

"Never ask me this again."

The sound of seagulls yanked him out of the despairing memory with a start. He blinked slowly and noticed his knuckles had whitened with pressure as he clutched his reins tightly in fury. Sighing deeply, he loosened his hold and dragged his emotions under control, letting it cede like waves on a shore. It had been weeks since that moment, there was little point in upsetting himself now.

He glanced at Aegon who was idly watching the workers mill around on the bay. It was one of their habits, riding by the coastline, an opportunity to clear their heads and grasp a moment of freedom from their responsibilities.

He bit his lip in thought as he considered sharing his exchange with Rhaegar. He hadn't told his siblings of what happened; he didn't think he could bear their twin looks of pity. There was little for them to do, anyway. They were as bound to the laws of their father as much as he was, though he struggled to see why his were so much more severe.

"Aegon," he began uncertainly, staring out to sea, "Why do you think Father doesn't want me to leave the Red Keep? It's peculiar, isn't it? It's almost as if he's afraid of something." One reason crept into his thoughts unbidden, like a cruel, cold morning fog. He forced it away immediately, his stomach churning.

When his brother did not reply for the longest time, he looked over. Aegon seemed to be lost in his own musings so Jon prodded him on the shoulder.

"Careful not to think too hard, Egg," he said with a chuckle. "Wouldn't want you to hurt yourself. Did you hear what I asked?"
Aegon blinked in response, as if just realizing Jon existed. A frown tugged at his lips, doing little to mar his handsome face. "No, sorry, I didn't." He didn't sound particularly apologetic.

Just as Jon opened his mouth to repeat his question, Aegon suddenly blurted, "Do you think I'd be a good King?"

He was taken aback, a little annoyed at the interruption but he shrugged it off. It was a ridiculous notion anyway, to think something so sinister of his own father. For a moment, Jon considered mocking Aegon by saying he'd bankrupt the land in one night, but thought it to be distasteful. His brother looked far more serious than he'd seen him in a while, and he didn't think he'd appreciate his jest.

He furrowed his brow, and chose his words carefully. Jon had his own opinions, of course, but rarely did he voice them. There was little use in quarreling with the few friends he had. "You've been trained for this since birth, and you know your way around the laws of our land. I don't see why you wouldn't be alright."

"Alright?" his brother repeated with surprise. "I don't want to be alright, Jon, I want to be good. I want to be better than good." His voice rose in volume, passion exuding from every word. Jon hadn't seen him in such fervor since they'd discovered their first brothel in the city when he was eleven. "I want to be the best King this blasted world hasn't seen in a long time. Do you know what the people say about me in the streets? Do you, Jon?" he asked desperately.

Jon knew exactly what they said about him in the streets, but he was wise enough to shake his head. "They say I'll never be half the King our father is. Can you believe it?" he exclaimed incredulously. He threw his hands in the air. "They actually think that useless sack of bones is the greatest shit that has ever lived-"

Jon reached over and slapped a hand over his brother's mouth, much to the indignation of the other. He peered around quickly, and only when he saw no one was within earshot, he withdrew. "You idiot!" he hissed at him. "You can't insult the King in public! What's the matter with you? They'll be talking about you planning to usurp him next if you aren't careful. Is that what you want?"

Aegon's sad headshake, he let his anger dissipate. "What's the matter, brother?" he asked instead, concern ringing his voice. "This is not the first rumor you've heard, and it's never bothered you before. What happened?"

Aegon shifted in his saddle, avoiding his eyes. He played with the reins instead. "It's all becoming so real now," he muttered in a quiet voice, so low Jon had to lean in to catch him. "That one day I'll be sitting on the Iron Throne."

Jon narrowed his eyes. "That's just occurred to you? Where have you been for the last two and twenty years?"

"That's not what I meant." Aegon gave him a withering look. "The tourney is in two days, and in a matter of weeks, I'm going to be married, Jon. And then it's off to Dragonstone with a wife and even more expectations. I barely managed the six moons I was there!" He sighed in self-pity, a vulnerability lining his pale face he rarely allowed others to see. "I can't do this," he whispered, his words dripping with misery like candle wax.

Jon regarded his brother thoughtfully, the air filling with hearty chatter as the quayside grew busier in the blistering afternoon. The happy laughs carrying to their ears clashed greatly with Aegon's sombre expression.
"Do you love her? Rhaenys?"

The sadness shifted into alarm. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Answer me."

Aegon scoffed. "Of course I do, you know this," he dismissed Jon with a wave of his hand. "She knows it, too."

"Have you asked her how she feels about all this?"

Aegon stared at him in bemusement. "Why would I? It's Rhaenys," he said slowly as if speaking to a stupid child. "She never worries about anything. And this isn't about her, this is about me ruling. Keep up, brother."

Jon snorted with a roll of his eyes. "And there lies your problem."

He was rewarded with another puzzled look.

Jon suppressed a sigh. He loved his brother with the intensity of the sun, but most of the time, he wished for nothing more than to throttle him. He knew better than to involve himself in the strange dynamics of his siblings' relationship, but Jon owed a great deal to Rhaenys, far more than he owed Aegon.

In the two years Aegon was away squiring, it was Rhaenys that had stepped in the hole he'd left behind, soothing his bitterness with gentle words. Where Aegon was chaos and wildfire, she was the soft breeze and the summer rain. Jon had been enraged beyond belief when Rhaegar had denied his requests to squire in the North with his mother's family, and it had been Rhaenys that pulled him away when he'd stormed towards his father's solar the next day. It was the first of many moments where she'd stopped him from disgracing himself in front of the King.

It had been Rhaenys that had taught him how to channel his anger and control his tongue, saving him from many a disaster. It was Rhaenys who, at the tender age of nine, would chastise the other court ladies when they'd sneer at him and call him a bastard, who'd insisted Elia give a goodnight kiss to all three children, instead of just two.

It was Rhaenys, he knew, who would be the ruler the realm needed. The future of their dynasty.

And it was these thoughts that lead to Jon saying, "You don't appreciate what you have, brother. Rhaenys is more than what you deserve, and you don't pay her half the respect you should. If you want to be a great King, then she will help you become one."

He expected Aegon to be angry then, to lash out against the insult. Instead, the silver prince threw back his head in laughter.

"Careful, Jon," he quipped with humour, "if I was a jealous man I'd say you wanted my betrothed."

In any other situation, Jon would have japed back with a yes and a wink, but he knew Aegon's attempt to divert an unwanted conversation when he saw it.

"You know what I mean, Egg," he warned. "You still take other women to bed and you haven't spared a thought to discuss your own damn wedding with the only other person who'd understand you and your concerns. Don't you think any of that should change sometime soon?"

"Oh, don't try that moral bullshit with me," Aegon snapped suddenly, his smile disappearing and his
eyes flashing with anger like warning bells. "Rhaenys is perfectly aware of who she's marrying. If she's not concerned, then neither should you be. I'm Dornish, Jon. My blood runs hotter than most, don't you know?" In a blink, his mood lifted, the dark clouds of fury dissipating into a bright sun-kissed sky at the flip of a coin. He smirked at his brother with a cocked eyebrow. "Or you would if you let me teach you a thing or two."

Jon rolled his eyes, and refused to reply. There was little point in pushing him now, not with the threat of a full-blown argument hanging over his shoulder. Instead, Jon simply spurred his horse into action and turned towards the Red Keep. Behind him, a silver prince's laughter rang out into the bleeding afternoon sky, as they galloped back to the palace together.
right time, wrong place

Chapter Summary

Arya arrives in King's Landing, Jon has a fangirl moment, and the timer runs out.

Chapter Notes

Hey everyone!

So I know I said I split the last chapter because it was 6k+ but then I tweaked bits of this chapter and now this is 6k+ so I decided to post it entirely. Whoops. Hope you all enjoy it!

And thank you again for the wonderful comments last time!

Arya

It took a long time to finally reach the Red Keep, especially when Arya would often hold up the party to point her father towards a blacksmith with jewel-encrusted swords or a stall that sold animals carved into blocks of cheese.

Her neck ached from whipping this way and that, drinking in the throngs of people and sandstone buildings like a dying man quenching his thirst. She stared at the hordes of richly-dressed men dragged inside rooms by scantily-clad women, and when one elderly man with missing teeth winked at her with a small wave, her father had been quick to stop her from waving back and firmly told her to never trust anyone in the capitol. She had almost laughed at his seriousness.

King's Landing reminded her of the patchwork quilt Old Nan had made her when she was little. It was rather hideous, a jumble of a hundred different squares with a thousand different patterns, stitched together hazardously. Sansa had wrinkled her nose, but Arya had absolutely loved it. It was still thrown over her bed back in Winterfell, frayed at the edges and soaked in the scent of home.

The city was equally chaotic, a miasma of personalities and cultures stitched together delicately by the threads of society. It held a certain charm, seen only by one who thrived on disorder. It was not pretty or particularly clean, but Arya found it fascinating nevertheless.

After an eternity, they were at last standing before the opening gates and Arya hid a gasp behind a cough as she laid her eyes on the Red Keep in its entirety.

It was as red as blood, and she had to crane her head to see the very tip of it. The courtyard they dismounted in was lush with flowers and she counted twelve different types in this one small space alone. Behind the shrubs stood golden arches opening into wide corridors that swept along the edges of the courtyard, white marble spread across the floor like delicate clouds. If she looked up, she could see rows and rows of trellised windows, the patterns intricate and the details grander than anything in Winterfell.
Her wandering eye was interrupted by the approach of a bronze-kissed woman in gold silks which shimmered like water with her every step. She had dark hair piled on the top of her head and framed by a thin crown carved with sparkling rubies. Behind her, a small crowd of servants dutifully marched onwards, hurrying towards their carts of luggage and tending to their horses.

Their father stepped forward and bent the knee, and she followed suit with a deep curtesy. Arya peeked up to observe the woman standing before them, a bright smile spreading on her delicate face.

"My lord of Stark, please rise. We are honoured by your visit," she announced in a regal tone. This must be the Princess Rhaenys, she remembered from her lessons. Arya thought she was quite possibly one of the most beautiful people she'd ever seen in her life, and she felt sudden embarrassment at her dirty riding breeches and chaotic hair. Rising from her curtesy, she ran a surreptitious hand through her locks to smooth them down. It did little to help, so she promptly gave up.

It wasn't like the princess would speak to her anyway after this, so what was the use in impressing her?

"Your Highness, the honour is all ours," Eddard Stark responded dutifully. He gave her a small smile, before turning to his children. "If I may present my youngest son Rickon, and my youngest daughter Arya." He stepped back to allow them forward.

At their respective introductions, Rickon and Arya bowed and curtsied once more, and she felt her cheeks grow warm when she saw her boots were drenched in mud, unlike the dainty sandals the royal woman wore wrapped around her feet. At Princess Rhaenys' nod, they rose again, and Arya was sure to angle herself subtly behind Rickon so her shoes could not be seen.

The clatter of their belongings thrummed in the air around them as Princess Rhaenys beckoned over a tall, thin man with black hair and a gaunt face.

"I apologize for the light reception, my lord. You are one of our most prominent guests, and deserve a grander welcome," the golden woman said with enough regret in her eyes, Arya almost thought her flattery sincere. "I'm afraid my brothers are out riding, and the King and Queen are attending court. Randyl," she indicated to the other man, "will show you to your rooms. There will be a feast tonight, my lord, to welcome the Houses that have honoured us with their presence. You will find escorts ready for you at the time." She flashed them another warm smile, and Arya wondered if she practiced in front of a mirror every morning.

Another respectful farewell later, she found herself trudging behind Randyl through a drawbridge with walls as thick twelve men and as high as the Broken Tower. Two men with glistening armor and white cloaks as blinding as the sun strapped to their shoulders stood on either side, staring ahead as Arya gaped up at them.

"These are the royal apartments," Ned said with a surprise as they walked under an immense golden arch into another grand courtyard.

Randyl bowed briefly before responding. "The Great Houses have been invited to share quarters with His Grace and his family, as a sign of respect and honour, my lord."
That and the rest of the castle is practically overrun by others, she thought with a snort.

Arya didn’t care whether they stayed in a room gilded with precious metals or in a lowly tavern, although the latter would have been far easier. *I wouldn't have to look so proper all the time,* she mused.

Their quarters were indeed gilded with gold and rubies, shimmering in the sunlight streaming through the high windows. She was permitted her own private room where Rickon and her father had to share. The bed was wide enough to fit perhaps ten of her, and she ran her fingers delicately over the covers and marveled at their softness. The headboard and frame were carved with details of dragon heads and runes she did not understand, dark and illustrious and far more luxurious than she’d ever experienced.

The room was larger than her own in Winterfell, and her eyes glazed over the scenes painted on the white walls. A mosaic of flowers and fire-breathing demons, it set her room ablaze in an array of colours, so very different to the calm grey walls of her home. She wasn’t sure how well she’d sleep with an enormous red dragon glaring at her with yellow eyes.

At some point, she grew restless with her kaleidoscope of companions, and yanked open her door. The white hallway echoed ringing sounds of her every step like bells in a sept as she padded towards her family's room across. She wondered how far it would travel, and whether the King would hear her every time she left her bedroom.

Knocking gently on the door, she hissed, "Rickon!"

There was no answer.

She pounded a little harder, and called out a little louder, "Rickon! Open the door, it's me!"

A long moment later, and her bleary-eyed brother appeared, with a ruffled tunic and unruly hair.

"What do you want, Arya?" he yawned, sleepily.

She took in his appearance with a pointed look. "Well, I thought we could explore the castle together, but clearly you have more interesting plans in mind." Her foot tapped impatiently against the floor, her body thrumming with energy that needed a release. They were in the capitol, the home of dragons! There would be plenty of time to waste away in bed later.

Rickon groaned and rubbed his eyes, looking incredibly youthful in the dim light of his darkened room. "Can we do it later? I'm exhausted." He stifled another yawn and a wave of pity washed over her.

She smiled softly, and reached up to muss his auburn hair. Rickon may be the baby of the family, but he towered over her already at only ten years of age, with little sign of slowing down. "Of course. Go rest, little brother."

As the door clicked shut softly, she spun on her heel and practically skipped down the corridor.

It was like a dream, in a way. She avoided the busiest hallways, choosing to stroll down empty passageways bathed in golden hues, the flames of the lanterns dancing along the walls. The pale red stone began looking less like blood with every step, and more like the colour of a sunset, the marble beneath her sparkling softly like stars. Her hand trailed along the walls, letting the roughness of the stone kiss the tips of her fingers as they felt the grooves and cracks of the castle's skin. It was easy to fall into a trance, here amongst the dragon paintings and the silence, the world merely around the corner but somehow, a lifetime away.
Growing a little bored of sightseeing, Arya finally began to turn back to her room. That is, until she saw a great wooden door slightly ajar at the end of the hallway.

Where the rest of the palace had intricate iron doors, it was the first she'd seen look so worn and she could not help but pull it open, and glance inside.

A steep incline of stone steps waited patiently for her, leading to a dimly lit cellar with stone walls lined unevenly on either side. If she bent down a little, she thought she could see a network of tunnels somewhere along the far wall, some submerged in total darkness.

Tunnels with an exit, perhaps? To a secret door with a secret room?

For a moment, she bit her lip and thought of her father. The feast would be starting soon, and a responsible lady would immediately slam the door shut and leave at once, putting all silly notions of adventure behind her.

Fortunately enough, responsible and lady were rarely said of Arya Stark.

A mischievous smirk played on her lips, and before she could think too much on it, Arya was already climbing down the stairs, leaving the door wide open behind her.

It was taller than she'd originally assumed, with a ceiling almost twice that of her bedchamber but half the width of the corridors. It curved in on the edges, bending over her like a sinister tree, threatening to cave in at any moment. There were puddles of water on the floor, the reflection of the lanterns trembling on the surface like a man possessed. Her hand reached out to touch the wall, immediately pulling back when something slimy covered her fingers, like wet scales.

She half considered going back, when a loud hiss near the far-end wall drew her attention. From a distance, she thought she could see twin orbs of flashing green glare at her from a ball of black fur, half chewed up ears sticking out at odd angles.

"Well, aren't you a pretty thing," Arya cooed at the cat, bending slightly and stretching her hand out. "You shouldn't be here, locked away like this!" She approached the animal slowly, whispering soothing words to its tensed state. "Come here, little one, I'll take you back up with me!"

The cat watched her creep closer with unblinking eyes, its hackles raised and quivering. When she was a step away, it suddenly bolted with a howl, darting towards one of the numerous tunnels lining against the wall.

Against her better judgement, Arya followed it, unwilling to leave it behind. It could belong to someone in the palace, who might think it dead instead of hopelessly lost underground! The thought made her sad. If she had her own pet, she'd want someone to wade through vile water for it too.

"I won't hurt you!" she called out to the tiny black blur as she ran after it. "Come back!" She rounded corner after corner, paying little attention to where she was going but for catching the black bastard.

At some point, her chest began to stitch and she was forced to grind to a halt. Panting, she rested her hands on her knees, noting with a pang of regret that the cat was long gone. Perhaps she ought to send word around the palace instead, so the King could send men to look for it. Poor thing was frightened to the bone.

She glanced down and sighed. The edges of her boots were thick with mud and she grimaced at the filthy water stains patterned on her riding breeches. Her hair was frizzy with sweat and humidity and plastered to her drenched forehead. She was hardly in a state to walk the long way back to her quarters now, and she silently prayed she wouldn't run into the princess again. She didn't want her to
think she was a filthy creature, as well as an unkept one.

Exhaling softly, she spun on her heel to return to the cellar door-

-when a sudden gust of strong wind from the end of the tunnel struck her, and she was forced the
shut her eyes to protect them against the flying dust. It licked her hair and sliced her cheeks and when
she felt it die down, she opened her eyes again, and noted that there was very little change in her
vision, her world still overwhelmed in blackness.

A heartbeat later, Arya realized with horror that the lanterns had blown out, and she was lost in the
crushing darkness with little knowledge of how to get back.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no, this couldn't be happening!

A strike of fear pierced her heart and crept through her veins like icy snakes. Her body thrummed
with hysteria and she realized that no one else knew she was down here. The blackness pressed
against her, wrapping her in its bruising grip and swallowing her whole. She could hear the blood
rushing to her head, the sound of its desperate waves crashing against her ears, drowning out the
unbearable silence.

She had never felt more alone.

oOo

Jon

Jon trudged to his room after bidding farewell to Aegon.

They were careful to avoid the bustling corridors on their way back from the stables, not wanting
their father's guests to see the royal princes in sweat-drenched tunics, in total disarray. There was an
image to uphold, after all.

Jon hated how many people roamed around the royal apartments, curious lords and ladies who loved
to gawk and intrude as if his family and their home was their entitlement to enjoy. He grit his teeth,
remembering how he'd once found an audacious lady roaming around Aegon's bedroom when it was
empty and unguarded, one piece of his brother's smallclothes crumpled tightly in her hand.

They openly stared at him, of course, with little shame. Far more than they did at Aegon or Rhaenys,
like he was an exotic animal for their pleasure, and they expected him to shit gold at a moment's
notice. Not to mention, the second he turned his back, the whispers would begin. Those never
stopped.

He despised them all.

Lost in his dark musings, he almost missed his older sister leaning against his door, wearing an
amused face under her perfectly coiled hair.

"Relaxing ride?" she asked with humour twinkling in her eyes. "You look like you want to run
someone through with a sword."

"I'd like to run several people through with a sword," he quipped back, slowing to a halt, "but I fear
it's frowned upon to bring harm to the King's guests."

Rhaenys' laugh tingled through the air like musical chimes. "It would certainly be distasteful," she jested. "Although they're not all bad, Jon."

He snorted. "Yes they are."

"Even the Starks?"

His body froze as his eyes burned into hers. A small smile played on Rhaenys' face as it glowed with soft understanding.

"They arrived just under an hour ago," she said to his still form, his tongue heavy and refusing to reply. "Lord Eddard Stark and two of his children. I thought I'd let you know now, in case you wished to meet them before the feast."

She reached out and grasped his shoulder in support. If the stench and the grimy dirt from his tunic bothered her, she did not show it. He was grateful for her touch, nevertheless. It was warm and safe when he felt he was submerged in ice.

"Thank you," he whispered gratefully, his heart beating wildly in his chest. "I...I'll bathe quickly and introduce myself. Where are they staying?"

"The West Wing. Last two doors of the far right corridor, the rest are their men."

When he was finally alone in his room, Jon spurred into action. Stripping quickly, he ran towards his closet and furiously searched for the outfit gifted to him by his father on his eighteenth nameday. There was a black tunic made from silk delivered from Pentos, the material rippling sensuously in the candlelight and slipping through his fingers like water. The breeches were as dark, lined with blood-red trimmings that glimmered like rubies. It was one of the few outfits he owned that carried no sigil; he didn't feel comfortable meeting his mother's family for the first time by loudly announcing himself as a dragon. He carefully laid it out on his bed before turning towards the bath waiting for him.

As he let the warm water cleanse his skin and soothe his aches, Jon let his mind wander.

Lord Eddard Stark was his mother's older brother, a man he'd heard only rumours of. When he was younger, Jon had pestered anyone under the sun who he thought had information on his Northern blood, and from the scarce replies he'd received, he'd understood that his uncle encouraged deep respect in the South, despite fighting against the Crown for over a year during the Rebellion.

Jon didn't like thinking of the war. He didn't like thinking of all the men that had lost their lives because his father had loved his mother. He didn't like thinking of how much death he carried in his blood, from the murder of a grandfather and uncle he'd never know, to the atrocities carried out by a mad king.

He especially didn't like thinking of how much the Starks must despise him, the boy whose name was forever tied to their greatest defeat.

Eddard Stark lost a brother, a sister, a father, and a best friend to the war. Jon thought of Aegon and Rhaenys then, the two most important people in his life.

*I'd go mad if anything happened to them,* he mused.

It was Arthur Dayne that had told him of how the Quiet Wolf had risen in rebellion at Robert Baratheon's side, but only called for the safe return of his sister. His brother and his father had been
brutally executed but the young Lord had demanded justice, not vengeance. To a ten-year old Jon, it
didn't seem like much of a difference, but the Kingsguard had told him it was a world apart.

He wondered what sort of man Lord Stark must be to be burdened by such loss, and yet, carry such
honour on his shoulders that it impressed one such as the great Sword of the Morning. Even Rhaegar
had stilled his hand from punishing the North where others were put to the sword, choosing instead
to demand a heavy fine and allowing the Lord of Winterfell to return home with his dignity in one
hand and the remains of his family in the other.

A glimmer of pride rose in his chest. He shared blood with a man like that. The thought made him
incredibly happy. He had been surrounded by dragons his entire life, his world bleached by fire and
sun. But he was not just a dragon. He was half-wolf, too. If Aegon and Rhaenys proudly embraced
the wild and viper-like nature of their maternal family, then here was his chance to discover his,
shrouded in night and born of winter storms.

Here was his chance to finally know his mother, a woman he'd learnt next to nothing about.

Eddard Stark might despise him now, but Jon was determined to show him that he had a wolf in him,
yet.

oOo

The night had never been so beautiful; summer skies smeared with streaks of deep violet and
stardust, entwining together in a masterpiece of the sky. They burned like his heart in his chest as Jon
made his way towards the West Wing. He would glimpse outside as he'd pass by a window, taking
courage from the dark, sacred image. A night of such loveliness could not hold such awful tidings,
and he held on to that naive belief with all his might.

He tried imagining his first words to Lord Stark, like he'd done a hundred times already.

"Lord Stark," he would say with a deep bow. "It is an honour to make your acquaintance."

No, no, a prince bowing to a lord? He might think you're mocking him.

"Good evening, Lord Stark. It's a pleasure to meet you. I've looked forward to this my entire life."

Would that be too keen? I've never even sent a letter. Gods, why is this so difficult?

"Uncle Ned!"

Definitely not.

So consumed by his thoughts, Jon almost missed the mention of his name.

"Have you seen Prince Jon? Doesn't look much like a Targaryen-"

"-I hear he takes after his mother, he does. Not a single drop of dragon in him-"

He pulled to a halt, all thoughts of his uncle washing away by the tides of anger that boiled in his
blood. The voices were just around the corner, high-pitched and giggling and soaked with poisonous
"...the Stark whore that birthed him? Did you hear that she was really a witch in disguise? Probably cast a spell on the king, hoping to be his mistress-"

"...they're savages they are, them Northerners. I hear they sacrifice children to their tree gods-"

"...they worship trees? How positively barbaric!"

The waves curdled into a fiery storm, and he gritted his teeth as white-hot rage scorched his skin. They were coming closer, and he was tempted to demonstrate just how dragon he truly was. Jon tolerated many vile words over the nature of his birth, but to insult a dead woman and her land - *his* land - with such sheer disrespect had him biting his tongue until the taste of blood pooled into his mouth.

A particularly loud and sharp laugh from one of the girls cut through his black rage like swords in the dark, giving him a moment of clarity.

He was far too angry to deal with such contemptuous ladies, and he knew he'd say something he'd come to regret later - not to mention word would spread of his temper, and he didn't need another rumour attached to his name.

But they were growing closer and closer, and Jon looked around frantically for a place to hide, lest they see him and he was forced into conversation. The doors to his left were locked shut, but to his right -

There! The cellar door was wide open, curiously, though he spared little thought to ask why. The voices were a mere breath away, so Jon quickly slipped through, dragging the door shut quietly behind him.

He released a breath when he heard the group pass by him, giggling about the size of Ser Jaime Lannister's sword. He resisted the urge to roll his eyes as he slumped on the step.

The raging storm had largely dissipated, but Jon drew in deep shaky breaths to control the rolling clouds, the waves simmering into a calm mirror. He thought of the new move Ser Darry had taught him earlier, of the feel of a powerful new horse beneath him, of the smell of fresh grass and sea currents. Anything and everything.

When he felt nothing but a cool breeze and saw nothing but a still pond in his mind's eye, Jon finally stood up. He was in good shape to meet Lord Stark, and if he hurried now, he could just about catch him before the feast -

An echo of a splash followed by a curse snatched his attention.

Jon cautiously climbed down the stairs and peered around the cellar. The lanterns flickered innocently, undisturbed, and no one was in sight.

"Hello?" he called out uncertainly.

There was no response.

Perhaps he'd imagined it. Frowning, he turned back to the stairs -

Another distant splash, louder this time, followed by an even more explosive curse.
Jon narrowed his eyes. It must be another stupid lord or lady who lost their way while attempting to discover the King's solar, or Aegon's smallclothes' drawer. He was tempted to leave them to their idiocy, but pity ensnared his heart. There were few fates worse than being trapped under the Red Keep, and whoever it was certainly didn't deserve it.

He couldn't place whose voice it was, but he knew where it was coming from. Approaching the far end of the wall, Jon called out again.

"Hello? Is someone in there?"

His voice echoed around the stone walls, ringing into the abyss. There was no reply. Sighing softly, he walked closer to the gaping holes. The tunnels were an oppressive black, and he craned his neck to listen for more noise.

The lack of light did not disturb him. It wasn't uncommon for the tunnels to be this dark: drafts came and went all the time, blowing out the lanterns. Aegon and him would explore the secret passages all the time when they were younger, Rhaenys rarely joining out of disgust for roaming around in sewage. One of the tunnels would come out at the end of Rhaenys' hill, past the gate and the Kingsguard. It had been their first time to see the city properly by themselves, and Jon remembered that day fondly. Even the chastisement and month-long ban from leaving the Holdfast by the Queen had been worth it.

A small smile tugged on his lips at the memory, until a third splash - closer now - snapped his head up. There was no curse this time. Whoever it was knew someone was listening. He tracked the sound to the third tunnel from the left, and with a deep breath, he stepped in. If he minded his steps, perhaps he could avoid ruining his outfit.

Immediately, the darkness wrapped him in its embrace, caressing his skin and whispering into his ear. He ignored its crushing presence on his chest, choosing instead to press forward, shouting into the void over and over again with little response.

He knew the path by heart, of course, but he still kept a steady hand on the tunnel wall, his fingers stroking the cracks like old friends. When he suddenly felt air under his touch, he turned the corner. The network of passages was much like a maze, with random turnings and bends and the occasional dead-end. He prided himself in knowing them all, despite it being well over a year since he'd visited. Aegon simply didn't have the time anymore, and Jon loathed the idea of walking around here without him.

The splashes under his feet grew louder as the pools of water grew deeper, and he wrinkled his noise as his foot was entirely submerged at one point. The noise would ring through the tunnels, loud enough to wake the dead. Just as Jon opened his mouth to call out to the mysterious intruder once more, he heard a slosh right in front of him and a sharp intake of breath about two meters away.

He blinked. "Um, hello?"

There was a heavy pause, before a woman's voice replied breathlessly, "What do you want?"

Jon was taken aback, by her presence and her question. "What do I want? I'm here to help you. Are you lost, my lady?"

"No, I love wandering around underground tunnels in the pitch black. It's a pastime, really," the voice said dryly. "What do you think, stupid?"

The insolence! "Mind your manners. You're speaking to a prince," Jon snapped.
"Oh, how dreadful of me," the woman muttered, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "I'd curtsy, Your Grace, but to my utmost horror, you wouldn't be able to see it. What a travesty that would be."

Jon rolled his eyes. She had a tongue, this one. Her voice sounded strained, however, and he wondered just how long she'd been lost here. He wanted to retort, but it didn't feel right to bicker here and now. Besides, time was passing and he still had to meet Lord Stark - if he didn't already stink of shit, that is.

"You don't have to curtsy," he offered instead. "I can help you out of here, my lady. Give me your hand."

He reached out expectantly, but when she did not move, he cleared his throat pointedly. "Please?" he stressed impatiently.

"If you're here to help, then where's your torch? Seems a little odd to be wandering around in the dark," she said loudly, with a hint of suspicion.

Jon snorted. "I could say the same for you. Where's your torch?"

"I don't have one. Isn't that obvious?" she stated patronizingly. He had a feeling if he could see her, she'd have her hands on her hips, glaring at him.

He resisted the urge to groan.

"I didn't think I'd find anyone stupid enough to be lost in the tunnels, so I didn't bring a light down with me," he bit back, patience wearing thin. "Now, if you'd be so kind as to take my hand, my lady, I'd rather not spend the rest of the evening down here." He reached his hand out again.

Instead of feeling her touch, he heard a small splash as she took a slow step back. Her breaths seemed to quicken, and confusion marred his face.

"My lady-"

"My father told me to never trust anyone in King's Landing. You expect me to believe a prince just happens to be in the tunnels underground, finding a girl alone in the dark, and offering to help her, without carrying a torch of his own so I can't see his face?" her quiet voice whispered harshly at him, fear and anger lacing her words. "How stupid do you think I am?"

He heard her nails scribble against the walls of the tunnel, struggling to find something, anything, to defend herself with. She took a few more steps away from him, and he had no doubt that if he made the slightest of movements, she'd sprint away, possibly getting even more lost than she already was.

Jon gritted his teeth and ran an exasperated hand over his face. Well, she wasn't wrong. He really could be anyone. It was a little suspicious that a son of the King would be down here before a grand feast, but he hardly had the time (or energy) to convince this paranoid woman of his very real intentions.

"Listen," he grunted in a gruff voice, "if I wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't have announced my arrival, now, would I?"

A thought struck him. "If anything, you're the suspicious one, since you never responded when I was calling out earlier! How do I know you aren't some assassin skulking around the palace? Although," he said mockingly, "with all the racket you were making, you're a bloody awful one at that, so maybe you are just lost."
He heard a gasp of indignation. "I think I’d be fantastic, thank you very much. And I’m not an assassin! You’re the creep in the dark!"

"That sounds like something a terrible assassin would say. And I’m not creepy! I take offense to that, my lady."

"Good, I meant it to be offensive. You said I’d be a terrible assassin...and don't call me a lady."

"Would you like me to call you something else?" Jon asked, pleasantly. He was starting to enjoy himself, though he felt a pang of guilt because she was obviously still very suspicious of him, and he certainly wasn’t clearing up matters. Although, she hadn't tried fleeing or fighting just yet, so perhaps she hadn't made up her mind about his devious intentions.

Her silence stretched on, pregnant with deliberation.

If she wouldn't listen to reason, then perhaps he could use her fear against her. "I hear they have rats as large as dogs living in these tunnels," he casually remarked, "They've developed a taste for human flesh, unfortunately, and they're rather hungry."

"You're lying," she squeaked.

"No, honestly," Jon replied with conviction, "We've lost two stableboys and three chambermaids down here. Only found a rotten leg left behind. It was a bloodbath."

"I don't believe you. Giant, flesh-eating rats don't exist," she threw back. "I'm not an idiot."

Says the lost girl refusing help.

He resisted grinding his teeth, suddenly aware of the precious seconds slipping through his fingers until it was too late to meet Lord Stark in private, and he'd be forced to do it in the public eye at the feast. Exactly what he wanted to avoid.

With that in mind, his patience snapped and he finally threw his hands in the air and exclaimed, "You know what? Stay here forever then. I was just trying to be nice, but if you won't trust me, then feel free to disprove the existence of sewer rats all by yourself. Good evening, my lady." With that, he turned his back to her and started moving towards the tunnel exit.

A moment or two later, she sucked in a sharp breath as the reality of her predicament finally slammed into her.

"Wait," he heard her call out behind him. "Wait, please!"

Smirking, he whisked around to smartly comment on her sudden change of heart to trust a supposed creep when he felt a small hand clasp around his wrist, warm and soft. It was innocent enough, until Jon felt the ground shift under his feet and a sharp pain stab him between the eyes.

And his world was suddenly bathed in white.
Arya

The world spun around her, and she spun with it.

She'd only meant to stop him.

She didn't mean for everything to explode.

Her hand wrapped around his wrist, and suddenly, Arya's vision flashed blindingly white. Pain seared behind her eyes, enfolding her in its wings, and her stomach dropped and she was falling, falling...

Her heart swelled twice, thrice its size, pressing against her lungs and bursting from her chest. A high pitched ringing echoed in her ears with punishing persistence, and she wanted to shake her head, to rid herself of the irritation but she could not move, could not breathe. Her body refused to respond, her joints locking in place, frozen. She was completely and utterly helpless as she was barraged by the blankets of snow and the chimes of the bells overwhelming her senses.

She'd tried to fight back, to yell into the bright void but her tongue felt like lead, falling from her mouth and through the gaping hole of her heart. Looking down, Arya held back a scream as she stared at her (lack of) body. It was as if she'd been swallowed whole, nothing but a frightened head left behind.

Fear like nothing she'd ever known gripped her tightly, and she released a helpless sob.

Get me out of here!

Her eyes, her only freedom, roamed frantically around the abyss. Something...anything....

Arya caught it floating just at the edge of her peripheral vision; a golden thread shimmering in the air, a strand of sunlight in a sky of blazing white. It leisurely flicked this way and that, one end within her grasp, the other disappearing into the void.

Gritting her teeth, she forced her hand up with difficulty and tried reaching for it, her fingers nothing
but soft wisps and her touch as fragile as smoke.

She expected her transparent hand to run right through the thread, but to her shock and relief, it wrapped around her, flaring as bright as a star. It suddenly jerked, and Arya experienced a surge of panic before she was dragged further into the white chasm.

Her blinding world began to slowly fade and Arya sucked in a breath, her pounding heart softening as she regained her sight.

The ringing had stopped, thank the Gods, but Arya had a brief moment of respite until she realized she could, in fact, see again.

*I'm not in the tunnel,* she noted with growing trepidation.

No, she was in a...a...crib? White bars rose in front of her, and between the gaps, she peeked at soft maroon walls painted with knights and dragons. The room was dark, and a mobile rotated slowly above her, little stars hanging off the edges and twinkling in the moonlight that streamed through the windows. She was sitting on some sort of pillow, and when Arya reached out to grasp the bars of her prison, she gasped.

Her hands were small and chubby and soft, the fingers stubby and the skin pale and untouched. She glanced down and realized with horror that her body was much the same, tiny and fragile.

Hysteria bubbled in her chest, but before she could react, she heard the door creak open softly. Snapping her head up, she saw a man quietly stumble towards her, his silver hair and ethereal face glowing in the twilight. His violet eyes were glazed and she thought she'd never seen such sadness.

The man stopped at her crib and peered at her with blank eyes. He reached out and slowly caressed her cheek with a finger. Arya wanted to cringe away from the stranger, but she found herself leaning to his touch, a gentle giggle erupting from her lips.

*What am I doing? Who the hell is he? What is going on?*

Feelings of intense adoration swelled in her chest as she gazed up at the silver man, and her arms reached up unbidden, quietly begging him to pick her up.

The man made no move to do so - instead, he simply stared at her with tragedy and wonder battling in his eyes. Arya let out frustrated sigh; whether at him for ignoring her or her bizarre situation, she did not know.

"You look just like her," her visitor whispered in a broken voice, "you have her eyes." He pulled his hand away, and his gaze grew harder. "You stole her beauty as you stole her life. I should hate you. I should send you away. You don't belong here," he hissed, and Arya did not need to force her child-body to cringe away from the sudden poison: it did it anyway.

"But I can't. Gods help me, I can't."

He turned around and walked away, and Arya felt tears that were not her own well in her eyes at his absence.

*No, no, stop!* she wanted to call out. *I'm not a child! I'm Arya Stark! I didn't take anyone's life! Help me!*

She wanted to yell out, to scream, but a bright light flashed and blinded her, and she was forced to squeeze her eyes shut as the world fell away around her.
Everything shifted, and when she peeked through her eyelids, it was no longer night and she was no longer trapped behind white bars. Instead, golden rays of sun poured through an open balcony and pooled into the centre of a white marbled floor, bouncing off the bright yellow walls. It illuminated a tall, graceful woman dressed in silks the colour of the halo that embraced her, dark hair cascading down her back in soft waves. She wore a glittering crown entwined in her locks.

Princess Rhaenys? Arya balked.

No, not her. This woman was taller, with sharper features and far thinner than the other woman had been. She smiled down at two children playing happily by her feet, a young girl with hair as dark as her own and a small boy with silver-white hair falling in front of his eyes, holding small figurines in their hands.

They were a little far away, and Arya felt the sudden desire to join them. She glanced down and groaned when she saw stubby little legs, though slightly longer than before. Determination gripped her, and she rolled off her rump to all fours and started crawling towards the laughing children.

The woman's head snapped towards her immediately, and Arya was forced to pause when she saw the distaste on her face. What on earth had she done? She just wanted to have fun!

She wanted to tell the woman that, but her tongue wouldn't work. It was clumsy and heavy, and all that slipped by was an incoherent babble as she lifted a plump hand and pointed at the children.

Asking for permission, Arya realized with a jolt.

The golden woman's face twisted with uncertainty, and she opened her mouth to say something, when the little girl reached out and tugged on her skirts. Instantly, the woman looked down and her gaze softened.

"Can he come, Mama? Please? We want to play with our brother!" the small dark-haired girl begged pleadingly, large brown eyes widening with innocence. Her silver companion gurgled in agreement, drool sliding down his chin as he grinned toothlessly.

Brother? Was she a boy? Was this woman supposed to be her mother?

The lady looked back at her, this time with pity in her eyes. She sighed deeply, before walking over to her tiny frame and picking her up gently, and setting her down by the other children - her siblings?

A surge of happiness burst through her as she reached out to touch the small figurines scattered on the floor. The little girl beside her clapped her hands with glee, her brother imitating her excitedly.

Arya glanced up to see the golden woman - her mother? - stare at her in confusion.

Wait, no, not my mother! My mother is Catelyn Stark, not this stranger! These aren't my siblings! she wanted to yell. Take me home, please! I want to see my father!

Not a word left her lips as another flash consumed her vision.

The twitter of birds reached her ears, and when the world finally stopped spinning, Arya found herself in a garden of sorts, the taste of roses suspended in the sweet air. Throngs and throngs of lush green bushes surrounded her, leaves glistening with moisture in the blistering heat. She noticed pale cobbled stones beneath her...long legs? And...boy's body?

She was clad in a black tunic with red trimmings, a silver sword grasped tightly in one hand. Strands of dark curly hair swayed at the edge of her sight, and she blew out a frustrated sigh as she pushed them back repeatedly, noting with annoyance that they'd always fall back over her forehead. She
needed to get that cut soon.

*Wait, no, not my hair!* she jerked away from her thoughts, before she was pulled back in.

"Oi! If you're done playing with your hair like a maiden, let's get back to it, yeah?" a voice mockingly called out to her.

A grin spread on her lips, as Arya whipped around to see a boy standing behind her, a twin sword in his hand. He had long silver hair tied back in a ponytail, a playful smirk slapped on his face, and two burning eyes of violet. He cocked an eyebrow and watched her expectantly.

Arya observed his striking resemblance to the older man she'd seen earlier, though there was no trace of sadness on this boy's face, nothing short of pride and cheerfulness glowing from his young good looks.

"Ready to be beaten again?" she chuckled, raising her sword as they both assumed their fighting position. "Try making me work for it this time!"

The silver boy threw his head back in laughter as she darted forward, arching her sword in a graceful arc the other moved to block. They parried back and forth, and whilst Arya would have enjoyed it under any other circumstance, her mind was furiously turning as her body surrendered to this strange magic she could not control.

*I have to get out of here!* she thought frantically. *I can't be stuck like this forever!*

She furiously searched for the cursed golden thread again, the damned thing that dragged her into this nightmare in the first place. It was difficult to keep focus, when whoever she was inhabiting had a string of unwanted feelings and thoughts that consumed her attention. It was like trying to focus in a room full of people shouting at her.

Aha! There it was, that bloody thread!

With an internal cheer, Arya tried to grasp at it again, willing it to take her home.

This time, when the white light came, she felt ready.

*I'm in a bizarre nightmare. I've knocked myself out. I'm in a bizarre nightmare. I've knocked myself out.*

She repeated the mantra over and over again as she felt the ground beneath her feet shift and she tumbled into the void. Arya held onto the thread for dear life, as she twisted and twirled and weaved through the air.

When solid earth collided against her, she let a smile spread on her face-

-before it promptly froze and melted away.

She was standing in front of a pretty young girl with dark hair and blushing cheeks. Arya felt stirs of desire rumbling in her stomach as she frantically wiped her sweaty hands on her trousers. She didn't want to ruin her first kiss -

*No.*

A flash.

She was running through the streets of King's Landing, hot on the heels of her silver brother as their
breathless laughs soared into the air -

Stop.

A flash.

"You're not a real prince," a man sneered down at her, with a pointed face and silver hair brushing his shoulders, "you're my brother's bastard. He just took pity on you. Like the rest of them. You're not one of us."

Please!

The older man from before dominated her vision, his face half-shadowed in darkness as he watched her from behind a desk.

"Never ask me this again."

Her heart shattered in her chest and despair threatened to swallow her whole.

ENOUGH!

She didn't think she could bear another second. With an angry yell, Arya tore herself away from the scene, from the thread, from the nightmarish visions of unending white with the force of a thousand howling wolves.

The backlash was immediate. The images dissolved into black, and she fell hard onto slimy stone, her sight disappearing as her chest spasmed in hysteric. Arya blinked a few times, half-expecting another strange apparition to appear. She couldn't see her hands or her body, but a quick run through her hair and gentle prodding of her face told her she was finally back. She was Arya Stark once again.

She breathed a shaky laugh of relief, pressing her hands to the side of her head to alleviate the throbbing headache beginning to rise. The stench of sewage invaded her nostrils, and Arya didn't think she'd ever been so thankful to smell it.

She was back in the tunnels again.

Her moment of respite was short-lived however, when she heard the deep, unsteady breaths of her companion, a loud splash echoing off the walls as he sunk to the ground. Fury spread through her veins like wildfire, bright and burning.

She jumped to her feet and stalked towards where she thought he'd be sitting. "What the fuck did you do to me?" she yelled in a strained voice. "What in Gods' name was all that about?"

A snort of disbelief rang out from somewhere below her. "You think I did...that? Whatever that was? You grabbed me!"

"Don't blame this on me!" she snapped, throwing her hands in the air. "I only touched you. You were begging me to hold your hand before!"

Her whole body was on fire. As her lapse of relief ebbed away, reality slithered up her skin like flaming snakes, tingling her every pore and causing her to shake violently. Her insides churned with discomfort, as if they'd been yanked out and stuffed back inside her without care. Her head still ached, and she struggled to stop it lolling from side to side. It was unbearably heavy and stifling, a thick smog grasping her senses tightly like vines.
It was... unusually full. Arya thought she could somehow feel some sort of presence at the back of her skull, but she aggressively dismissed the fanciful notion.

She'd never been so vulnerable, so utterly violated! To lose control of her body and her mind so suddenly and so easily struck a bone-shattering fear that shriveled her heart and had her cringe away from the stranger on the ground, pressing against the slimy walls.

Arya heard him scrabble to stand up, struggling to keep as much distance from her as possible in the narrow tunnel. His breaths had largely evened out, though they still came in short, shallow bursts.

"Who are you?" he managed to grit out in a strained voice, unease exuding from every word. "What are you?"

The question sent another pulse of white-hot rage through her quivering form. The audacity! As if she were a witch or some vile creature that had tried to curse him!

"I'm no one," she growled viciously. "And I'm gone." With that, she turned on her heel in the direction the man had come, and began sprinting away.

"Wait!" he called after her. She heard him beginning to chase, until a loud splash and a curse interrupted his footsteps as he slipped to the floor, and she silently thanked the Gods.

"Stay away from me!" Arya yelled over her shoulder.

She didn't know where she was going, but she knew she had to get far, far away from the stranger. Her feet pounded through the pools of water, splashing against her drenched breeches and coating her in more sewage. Arya didn't care. It was all she could think about: getting out.

I have to be close!

She rounded a bend, and almost cried in relief when she saw a glimpse of light at the end. Her chest was beginning to stitch from the strain of running so fast but she ignored it. She was almost there! She was almost free!

Arya burst into the golden light of the cellar, but refused to stop. She pushed onwards, up the stone steps, barreling through the wooden door with so much force, she briefly wondered if it would snap off its hinges.

To her horror, the corridors were thrumming with people: lords and ladies peering at her curiously and with disgust as she stormed through the Holdfast, leaving behind a trail of filthy green water in her wake. It stained the glistening purity of the white marble tiles, a tainted streak of darkness on the floating clouds. She tried to ignore the horrified faces, forcing the tears back as her face flamed with humiliation.

She was running again, desperate to get back to the safety her own room. Arya glanced over her shoulder over and over again to see if anyone was following her, though it mattered little if she didn't even know what face she should look out for. It was one such moment of peering behind her to catch a suspect when a hand reached out and grasped her shoulder tightly, and she was forced into a sudden halt.

Her head whipped around frantically, thinking he'd caught her, when she found twin pools of gentle grey watching her with shock and concern. A quick glance around told her she'd finally made it back to her family's rooms, and she felt her body relax fractionally.

"Arya, what...what on earth happened?" Ned Stark gasped, his eyes roaming over her filthy clothes
and disheveled hair. He leant in and sniffed, swallowing a retch. "And what is that smell? What have you been doing?"

Arya opened her mouth to...what? Tell the truth? That she'd been trapped in the sewers for hours, met a prince, and briefly inhabited the body of a baby boy in that time?

"I was...exploring," she ended lamely, shifting from foot to foot. Her father's face twisted with disbelief, frowning. Arya then noticed his fine doublet and trimmed beard, and almost gasped.

"The feast!" she exclaimed with a slap to her forehead. "I almost forgot! I need to get dressed!"

"You need a bath," Ned said insistently, his nose wrinkled. He didn't seem particularly wroth with her, though Arya could see the wrinkles of deep displeasure carved in his forehead, her heart sinking.

"Beth is waiting for you in your room, Arya. Ask her to help make you a bath. Then dress quickly, and come directly to the feast. I expect you sitting by my side within an hour. Is that clear?" His voice held iron and left no room for arguing.

Arya nodded meekly, rushing to her bedroom without another word. She pointedly ignored the tumbling presence at the back of her mind like a whirlwind of snowflakes, whipping this way and that.

*It's just a headache,* she told herself vehemently. *It will pass.*

oOo

**Jon**

Jon burst through the cellar door and frantically glanced up and down the corridor. A snarl escaped his lips when he found it empty.

Damn that blasted girl!

He ran a shaky hand through his tousled hair, his breaths scratching against his chest like broken glass. He scrunched his eyes shut tightly, a thousand stars erupting from behind his eyelids, though none so bright as the white flash that had dazzled and consumed him.

He could still hear the smoky wisps of the voices, whispering in his ear and fossilizing into his bones as the universe collapsed around him and he was lost in a blazing abyss.

*Don't be afraid,* they had said. *You are home here.*

*No, no, I'm not! Where am I? Take me back!*

He was taken...somewhere. A shadow of a memory, a kaleidoscope of scenes: of an auburn haired woman glaring down at him with disapproval, of her younger image sneering and calling him Horseface, of a man with eyes like glaciers and a smile like a rising sun. He'd twisted and turned and witnessed a life that was not his. He'd been a child and an adult, the world around him changing in ways that were at times drastic, and others as subtle as a whisper.

Only observing, never in control. No matter how hard he fought, how loud he yelled, he'd been a bystander, a thought, a leaf in the wind. And for Jon, that had ignited a fear so overwhelming it
swallowed him whole, and he had violently pushed at everything until he was thrown back into the
darkness of the sewers and into the presence of the damned girl that had imprisoned him in the first
place.

As Jon made his way back to his room slowly, his feet squelching against the tiles, hot anger coursed
through his blood like snakes.

She had tried to accuse him of of whatever that was! The absurdity of it all!

His mind wracked with explanations, though he found it difficult to focus through the murky fog. It
was like his head was stuffed with cotton, and he grimaced as a sharp heaviness seemed to prod him
at the base of his skull, lurking like a shadow.

Was it a drug, perhaps? Did she prick him with something?

He lifted the wrist she had grabbed and inspected it gingerly. It was as smooth as ever.

Frowning, he ignored the stares of passing guests for once, too lost in his musings to care about the
whispers.

A witch? He had accused her of being an assassin, though that was done more in jest. To think a
witch was roaming in the tunnels tonight was a laughable idea, though Jon was growing increasingly
convinced.

*She didn't take any blood*, a small voice whispered. *Remember the stories? There's always a
sacrifice.*

He sighed deeply.

"Oi! There you are! I've been looking for you for ages," someone called out behind him.

Tiredly, Jon turned to see Aegon sauntering towards him, his blood-red doublet shimmering in the
light and his hair glowing like the moon. He wore a bright smile on his face, until he took in Jon's
appearance and it promptly disappeared.

Aghast, he asked, "The fuck happened to you? You look even more hideous than normal." He
leaned in and sniffed cautiously, wrinkling his nose. "And Gods, you smell like shit! Well, more than
you usually do."

Jon snorted. "Thanks, brother."

"Anytime. But really," Aegon's grin slipped and he pointedly looked at Jon's stained breeches, "the
feast is starting. Everyone won't be happy if you're late. All the Houses are here, and it's important
that you're present."

"I know that," Jon snapped, his patience wearing thin. In all honestly, he could not care less about
the feast in that moment, not when his head was threatening to split open and all he wanted to do was
crawl into bed and forget about everything.

Visions of disappointed blue eyes and warm grey ones flashed before him, and he violently pushed
them away.

"Just start the feast without me, I'll be there soon," he muttered dismissively, moving towards his
quarters again. He was stopped by a firm hand on his arm, and he resisted the urge to shake it off.
"Jon," Aegon asked, concern swirling in his violet eyes. "You seem on edge. Did something happen? Where were you?"

For a wild moment, Jon considered telling him everything, from the mysterious girl to the inexplicable visions after. Maybe he'd have answers, maybe he could explain what Jon could not understand. He even opened his mouth and let it hang, no sound erupting from his lips.

*Don't be a fool,* he thought to himself angrily. *Aegon wouldn't understand. He'd mock you for centuries.*

"Nothing," he replied weakly, avoiding his brother's intrusive stare. "Nothing happened."

With that, he turned on his heel and fled, the dark clouds of unsettled thoughts trailing in his wake.
Chapter Summary

The tourney opens with a grand feast, and Jon finally meets the Starks.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

I realize this chapter comes a little later than expected. Work has been rather hectic lately, so I do apologize. Thank you to everyone that commented last chapter! Love hearing what you think.

It’s a long chapter, but I hope you all enjoy it nonetheless!

Its brilliance was breathtaking.

The hall was suspended in climax like frozen music, a snapshot of life and its celebration, uninhibited. Red and black strung from the walls, fluttering delicately as the three-headed dragon roared with pride. Hanging around the room, starry strings of lanterns floated above the undulating sea of hundreds of people, their laughter ringing like chimes into the silent night. A sweet melody threaded through the air and ensnared guests into its rhythmic web, drawing them to the dance floor. Serving girls weaved through the numerous tables, escaping curious hands to fall into others. The smell of food and drink and unreserved cheer hung thick and smothering like a fog, and Jon felt the irresistible urge to swat it away like a bothersome fly.

A grand high table stood at the very head of the hall and overlooked the scene with elegance and subtle command. The Iron Throne glittered above in the golden light like a blacksmith's kiln, fire shimmering on the silver of its thousand swords. It loomed over them like a beast poised in anticipation.

The King sat at the centre of the table, at the feet of his throne, as immobile as the steel monstrosity behind him. His face was stony, and his eyes betrayed no secrets as they roved around the faces of his subjects. Elia was on his left, her shoulders subtly turned away in animated conversation with her daughter. Jon doubted she'd so much spared a word for her husband since the feast had started, not that Rhaegar seemed particularly bothered.

Jon made his way towards Aegon, who was doing his very best impression of stoic crown prince - the spitting image of their father - but where Rhaegar was the daunting dragon, Aegon resembled an angry lizard at most.

He fell into the empty chair beside him and nudged his side. "You look like you haven't shat in a week. Is that supposed to be your royal face?" he teased.

Aegon's face cracked and he threw Jon a sullen glance. "I'd been working on it for days," he
muttered, reaching for his goblet. "Glad you finally made it. Thought you got lost again on your way here. You smell marginally better," he chuckled into his wine.

"Hilarious," Jon said with a roll of his eyes. A server was at his side in seconds, placing slabs of meat and rice on his plate and filling his goblet with Dornish wine. It would have smelled delicious, had his stomach not been reeling like restless waves in a thunderstorm.

His head was still spinning, but he no longer felt as clogged as before, the reverberations of laughter around the room slicing through the fog and dizziness like spears in winter. He'd soaked in the bathtub for ages, and somewhere amongst the gentle waves of warm water and the soft scent of lavender, Jon had convinced himself that he'd simply dreamt up everything.

It was entirely possible that he'd imagined the girl in the tunnel, and the strange white light, and every other bizarre vision that came after it. The tunnels were rather long and it wasn't unreasonable that sounds would carry, often human-like in nature. Not to mention it was filled with water, and it wouldn't have been the first time he'd slipped and banged his head. He'd always had a wild imagination. It wasn't beyond him to envisage another life as a young girl, as peculiar as it was.

Yes, it was all an incredibly vivid dream, Jon told himself repeatedly as he picked at his food. He ignored the tug at the back of his mind saying otherwise.

"Do you think Father's angry I missed the opening speech?" he asked Aegon instead, shaking away his doubts. They snuck a glance at the King and his fine profile, washed in an amber glow. His eyes hadn't so much flickered in Jon's direction.

"Most definitely," Aegon whispered back. Hearing his brother groan, the silver prince winked at him mischievously. "But when hasn't he been angry at one of us at any moment?"

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

Aegon raised his goblet mockingly. "I'm not even ashamed. It's about time it was your turn to be the disappointment. I was getting rather tired."

Jon picked up his own cup, and clanked it against his with a laugh.

Feeling marginally better, he began digging into his food with earnest. The irresistible charm of the festivity was palpable, soaking into skin and warming his chest as he dived into bantering with his brother. Aegon had decided to abandon his attempts at solemnity, openly throwing his head back in laughter that drew curious stares from the nearest tables.

As the sky grew darker outside, the sparkle of eyes and the flash of smiles burned brighter than any star. The high table even seemed to relax, Rhaegar cracking a smile with Jon Connington and the Queen glancing around fondly as the two princes took turns playing their special game, "Daughter or Mistress," on their unsuspecting subjects below.

"You've got to be joking!" Aegon exclaimed in disbelief. "That is not how you touch your daughter! She's his mistress, I'm telling you." His words were beginning to slur together as spots of pink brushed against his pale cheeks. "Ten gold dragons says I'm right!"

Jon snorted. He was feeling impossibly light as well, as if he were drifting on clouds high above the world. "If you're so keen on emptying your pockets, brother, I'll take it. She looks exactly like him, idiot, and not everyone is as perverted as you. Oh look!" Jon pointed at the lady in question, as she reached up to plant a kiss on her lord's cheek. "She's a doting daughter as well!" He scoffed. Turning back to Aegon, he opened his hand triumphantly. "Pay up, Egg."
Aegon looked crushed, until another glance into the crowd had his face break into an insufferable smirk. He glanced at Jon, victory swirling in his violet eyes. "I think not. Check again."

Frowning, Jon looked back to see the lady locked in a furious battle of lips and tongues with her "father."

"Oh, fuck," he muttered.

"You're awful at reading signals, you know that?" Aegon replied with a chuckle. "Honestly, it would take a lady literally stripping down in front of you and begging you to fuck her before you maybe thought she might want a kiss."

Jon responded to the jab with a scowl, reaching out to grab his goblet of wine again. The red liquid sloshed against his lips and slid down his tongue in a sweet embrace and he hummed in satisfaction.

The more the night wore on, the more convinced he was that none of it was real. Here, amongst the twinkling lights and singing merriment, the idea he'd actually found a witch in the tunnel and hallucinated another life was growing more and more hysterical. He suppressed a snigger.

A nudge at his side dragged him back to reality. "The Starks are over there," Aegon whispered to him with a nod towards somewhere over Jon’s shoulder and into the crowd. "Everyone's too far in their cups to pay any attention to you, if you're worried about an audience."

Jon's head whipped to the side to see a small group of Northerners engaged in conversation at the far right of the hall. It was difficult to catch any faces amongst the sea of lords and ladies that thrummed around them, but Jon thought he could catch a head of dark brown hair like his own.

Butterflies fluttering in his stomach, he gave Aegon a quick grateful smile as he slipped out of his seat and made his way towards the Stark table. Every step was a drumbeat that echoed in his heart, a rhythm laced with the rushing of his blood and the sweat of his palms. He ran an anxious hand through his hair, smoothing back the unruly curls and straightening his tunic surreptitiously. Around him, bodies stumbled and swayed like worshippers at a ritual, their eyes glazing over the nervous prince amongst them.

Jon's focus had not wavered from the man sitting at the centre of his tight group, dark hair tied into a bun. He wore a simple grey tunic and was speaking gently with a boy with a shock of red hair beside him. His companions were deep in their cups, laughing merrily, sparing not a glance for the Targaryen prince that approached their table with trepidation.

His mouth went dry as he stared at the back of Lord Eddard Stark's head. He thought he could feel curious eyes swivel to stare at him as he moved closer, but he keenly ignored them, instead reaching out to tap the other man softly on his shoulder.

This is it! he thought excitedly.

His lips spread into a small smile as Lord Stark turned around—only for it to fade as cold water drenched his body and froze him in place.

Jon stared into a solemn face with twin chips of glacier eyes and a dark beard gracing a strong jaw.

Grey eyes that had watched him fondly as he played at his feet. A beard his hands had played with as the man behind it cooed gently at his little frame.

A face he'd called Father once upon a nightmare.
Panic swelled through his veins as an unpleasant prickly sensation swamped his mind and clouded his senses. This wasn't possible! It had all been a dream! He'd never seen Lord Stark in his life, he couldn't have imagined him, it wasn't real, it wasn't real, it wasn't -

"Your Highness? Is everything alright?" Lord Stark asked with surprise, snapping him out of his reverie.

Jon blinked stupidly, and realized with a start that he'd been staring at the Warden with his mouth hanging open. He clanked it shut and swallowed deeply, desperately dragging his emotions under control.

Get it together!

It was only when he felt a shred of calm wash over him did he finally speak.

"Lord Stark," he managed to say in a tight voice. He hoped the other man did not notice. "It is an honour to finally meet you. I've long wished to make your acquaintance." He bowed, out of respect and to avoid looking at his uncle directly.

He felt rather than saw Lord Stark rise from his seat and place a heavy hand on his shoulder. Mustering up the courage, he glanced back up and pointedly chose to focus on Lord Stark's nose than his eyes, the sea of grey threatening to swallow him whole.

The Warden of the North had a kind smile carved into his face, a crack in his icy complexion. His expression was open and bright like a full moon, and Jon felt his spirits rise despite his heart pounding in his chest without abandon.

"Last time I saw you, you were fresh of this world. You've grown much since then," Lord Stark said with a small chuckle. "It's good to see you, my prince. I trust you are well?"

He wanted to reply, but his tongue felt thick and clumsy, so Jon nodded earnestly instead. His uncle seemed to wait for another response, but when none came, he cleared his throat awkwardly.

Jon's insides withered. This was not how he'd imagined this, but for the life of him, he could not soothe his nerves enough to think properly.

What if it had been real, the visions? What if he really had met a lost witch in the tunnels? What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to find her again?

His mind was churning so frantically, Jon almost missed his uncle's words.

"Allow me to introduce my children, my prince. This is my son, Rickon."

The red-haired boy beside them stood up immediately, and bowed deeply. Jon noticed his clear blue eyes and shivered as another pair swam before his vision, stern and disapproving where this boy's were young and earnest.

Jon just about remembered to incline his head in acknowledgement.

"And this - Rickon, get her attention please - this is my youngest daughter, Arya."

A dark head from the opposite side of the table swiveled at her brother's touch, glancing up at him as she did.

Grey met grey, and the world imploded.
He was suspended, hovering precariously in dead space, floating as everything faded around him and he was trapped in a web of silence.

Even his heart refused to murmur and he was struck deaf. It was as if a blanket of snow had covered the universe and sent it to sleep, and he stood at the edge, watching the world lull to silence like a forgotten song waiting to be played again.

The music never came, however.

He was rooted to the spot as Lady Arya Stark's eyes locked onto his, twin winter storms spinning with raging emotion. The edges of his vision crinkled with black like a tunnel caving in and threatening to collapse. In his mind’s eye, a sharp pain rattled against his skull, and a bright golden thread loomed before him, reaching out, reaching towards -

Her.

It wrapped around her slight figure like soft fingers, illuminating her in its ethereal glow. Jon stared at its sunlit vines in shock, desperate to rub his eyes and the illusion away, but he could not move his arms. They hung useless by his side as he frantically struggled against the cage, only pausing when a white flash burst through his vision before fading immediately.

No, no, not again! he panicked.

He glanced at Arya Stark's face, and noticed her paling in horror, her eyes widening with fear.

...what is he doing to me...

Words, not his own, rang in his ears and rattled through his bones.

...make it stop!...

He knew that voice.

Realization swept over him like a tidal wave, throwing him against the jagged rocks of his agitated thoughts.

It was never a dream.

It was real.

It was you!

A crash of fresh alarm coursed through him, and he tried fighting harder this time, the golden thread burning brighter with every passing moment -

"My prince?"

Ned Stark's voice pierced the veil like an arrow, and the white and black and gold receded into
nothing as the world rushed back to his ears.

He lurched back with a gasp, flexing his hands over and over again to allow feeling back into his numb fingers. His breaths scratched against his chest, and he greedily grasped at lungfuls of air to calm his stuttering heart.

His uncle was staring at him in mute suspicion, his eyes narrowing. Jon realized with a jolt that he'd been openly staring at Lord Stark’s daughter brazenly, grabbing the attention of everyone at the table. A hot flush rose to his cheeks under their scrutiny.

"I'm-I'm fine, my lord," he gritted out. "My apologies...it's been a long day."

Lord Stark gave a short nod of understanding, though his eyes roved over Jon’s face. He tried not to fidget, already feeling utterly humiliated in front of the man he most wanted to impress. He hadn’t done much other than struggle to respond whenever his uncle tried speaking to him and then straight-up gaped at his daughter like an unabashed fool.

...what the actual fuck was that about...

Jon suppressed the urge to violently shake his head. The back of his mind felt laden with lead, and he thought he could almost hear the girl’s voice echoing softly around the creeping mist of his thoughts.

...I have to get out of here...

There it was again! The words were muffled and far away, as if spoken underwater. It was her voice, he knew, without the bite and sarcasm that soaked her speech in the tunnels. The knowledge sent a sharp shiver of unease down his spine.

He had the sudden urge to crawl back to the high table and to the safety of his chair where he could be far away from this blasted moment and whatever strange magic was happening here. He needed to escape, to salvage whatever shredded dignity he still had left. Jon opened his mouth to excuse himself, when a small movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention.

Lady Arya Stark was taking advantage of everyone’s diverted attention to subtly remove herself from the table, and Jon knew that so much as one step into the pandemonium of the crowd would mean he’d lose her for the rest of the evening.

She’s running from me again! he thought in irritation.

All thoughts of escaping to safety evaporated as cold determination gripped his bones.

He had to know what was happening to them, and he had to put a stop to it. Before he lost what was left of his sanity, of course.

“Would my lady like to dance?” he blurted out gracelessly. Lady Arya froze, one leg over the bench and the other still trapped under the table. Crimson crept up her face as the Northerners’ heads whipped towards her, bright with interest. She glanced around like a wild animal caught in a trap, and for a moment, Jon thought she’d openly refuse him.

Lord Stark subtly stiffened beside him, enough for him to notice. He seemed to be locked in an unspoken argument with his daughter, and Lady Arya’s face melted immediately from one of deep suspicion to unreserved displeasure. She sighed softly, and stood up, disentangling herself from the bench and rising to face him.

An empty smile plastered on her face. “I’d like that very much, Your Highness,” she said politely,
though her eyes screamed otherwise. Her expression was challenging, and Jon suddenly felt like he was in the midst of a rather bizarre duel.

Swallowing a pang of regret for dragging himself into this, he bowed respectfully, and moved around the table until he was facing her. His fingers twitched uncontrollably by his side. He’d have to touch her. Why didn’t he think of this? Last time had been less than wonderful, to say the least.

Jon muttered a small prayer to any Gods that were listening as he extended a gloved hand for hers. He didn’t think he could tolerate more unpredictable excitement tonight, his nerves were already frayed and stretched thin.

Lady Arya stood proud, back straight as a rod and her eyes leveled in a fierce glare that burned brighter than the lanterns above, utterly unaffected by how audacious she appeared. She threw a suspicious glance at him as he approached, at the brink of rejecting him once more, until she realized her father's stare was boring into her. Biting her lip, she hesitantly placed her hand in his.

Jon waited for a white flash, for a surge of pain - for anything.

He did not miss her relieved breath when it did not come.

They glided together into a clear space far from the table and the Northern men’s wandering eyes, weaving through the chaos like a soft breeze in a forest. Her hand was warm in his, her heat blazing through the glove and scorching his fingers. She was stiff as she followed him, and when he turned back to look at her, doubt and caution were spinning in her eyes like silver coins.

Jon stepped closer, raising one arm to gently touch her waist and the other lifting the same small hand already in his grasp. He moved slowly and carefully, as if approaching a wild animal that could scamper off at the slightest movement. She certainly looked like a cornered beast, her glacier irises flashing as they fell into steady steps. The world swayed and twirled around them, colourful blurs of a kaleidoscope sky to their immovable mountain, rigid and somewhat awkward.

She was silently appraising him, assessing him, judging him. So he did the same.

Arya Stark was a slight thing, barely reaching the bottom of his chin, a modest dark blue dress fitting snugly against her slender figure. But what volume she lacked in stature, she made up for otherwise in spades: a hurricane of dark chestnut hair swept down her back like a tumultuous sea, twin pools of melting silver shone blazingly from a pale, heart-shaped face, and a mouth lined by laughter and scowls, with Jon facing the full blast of the latter. The fierceness of her stare was burning ice, yet her silence simmered like icy embers, and he was growing distinctly uncomfortable under her watchful gaze.

“You weren’t lying,” she blurted abruptly, her eyebrows knitting together. She looked rather irritated at him.


*A lady of Stark,* he thought faintly. What were the odds?

“About being a prince,” Lady Arya insisted impatiently. Her voice was a low whisper to avoid catching attention, and Jon was forced to lean closer to catch her words. “It was you in the tunnels. I can’t believe you were telling the truth.”

“I do that a lot, you know,” Jon responded mildly. His neck was craning so close to her face, he could count every freckle on her nose. “If I recall, I was much more honest than you were.”
Lady Arya spluttered indignantly. “I was not dishonest!” she hissed at him. “I never claimed to be anything. You were the one that was so insistent on titles and labels.”

“Like witch, for example?”

She froze impertinently, her icy eyes narrowing up at him and spinning with growing rage. Jon was aware they were no longer moving as couples twirled around them, their gaiety impervious to the sudden drop in temperature between the young prince and lady standing in the middle.

“What did you do to me?” Lady Arya snapped, unbothered by concealing her volume. “I know you did something back there!” She waved towards her father’s table absently. “Is that why you asked me to dance? To accuse me again? How dare you!” Her words were growing dangerously loud, and Jon noticed a few curious looks thrown their way.

“What I did to you?” Jon exclaimed incredulously, forcing his voice into a heated whisper. “Did it look like something I wanted to happen? Why would I possibly want to do that to myself?” He resisted the urge to throw his hands in the air in frustration.

She wavered then, uncertainty creeping along her face as she bit her lip and regarded him. “You...you felt it, too?”

“Yes, whatever it is,” he muttered apprehensively. He wanted to say more, but the rising attention at the motionless pair had him quickly grasp Lady Arya’s hand once more and pull her into a graceless sway, much to her dismay.

...could he be telling the truth?...

...it can’t happen again...

...stupid thread...

An echo of her voice resonated at the back of his mind, soft and light like a summer breeze. When he looked at her, she was deep in thought, her lips tugging into a thoughtful frown. She didn’t seem aware he was listening to her thoughts.

Yes, that seemed about right, Jon mused. He had to be hearing her - her mind, her consciousness. It was the only reasonable explanation he could think of, other than a rapid descent into madness. The latter did not seem appealing in the slightest.

Gods, did that mean she could hear him, too?

He glanced down at her again in alarm, expecting her to react to his sudden fear, but she seemed utterly oblivious to his turmoil. It did not settle the uncomfortable twitching of his nerves.

He dipped in once again to mumble in her ear, “Look, I don’t think you did it. I certainly didn’t do it. Something else is happening here.”

Lady Arya leant back to scrutinize him curiously. “You...don’t think I’m a witch? You’re not going to accuse me?”

He resisted a snort. “Of course not. I’ve read about witches, and more often than not, they’re not highborn ladies.” Jon shrugged nonchalantly. “You’re a Stark.” He said it pragmatically, as if it were the most justifiable reason that existed.

She cocked her head at him then, confusion lining her face. “And what does being a Stark have to do
“Despite what they say about the North, you’re not savages who practice dark magic. You’re just like anyone else,” Jon stated patiently. He wasn’t sure what the confusion was. Witches were foreigners or poor swamp-dwellers with nothing to live for. Not daughters of Great Houses. He’d heard the stories.

Her frown melted into a striking grin. “The North is so much more. You know nothing, Jon Targaryen,” Lady Arya said, cryptically.

It was strange, somehow, to hear his name drip from her lips. Almost familiar, though not quite right. Like a half-forgotten dream of another life, another story. He shook the feeling away.

“You’re half-Stark, aren’t you?” Lady Arya’s voice dragged him from his reverie, as she peered up at him. “Your mother was my Aunt Lyanna.”

Jon shifted uncomfortably, tearing away from her gaze to stare at the crowds over her head. The mention of his mother always had his stomach in knots. “I suppose that makes us blood,” he mused absently.

He’d never had another family, other than the row of dragons that were seated behind him at that very moment. Rhaenys and Aegon were often visited by their cousins, a slice of sun and spear to pierce through the smog when the weight of their name and their world would bear down on them. Jon was familiar with several of members of the Dornish brood, even engaging in child’s play when he was younger. But it was...different. He was always the outsider. Always the stranger. And they, too, were never quite what he was looking for.

“I suppose it does,” Lady Arya replied, thoughtfully.

The music picked up, and soon the floor was overrun by excited couples swinging about jauntily like wild pendulums, narrowly avoiding trampling the pair. Sensing the imminent danger of losing Lady Arya to the crushing crowd, he grabbed her arm and dragged her to the side, only letting go when they reached a quieter space.

He glanced back around to see if anyone had noticed them slink away, before turning back and leaning down to hiss in her ear. “Something isn’t right. Whatever happened here,” he waved awkwardly between them, “isn’t natural. Now if we’ve established that neither you nor I is responsible for such, there must be another reason.”

Lady Arya’s face scrunched in bewilderment. “Do you really think it’s magic? A curse?” Her eyes widened with innocence, and he thought he could see flickers of excitement twirling in their depths.

He shrugged. “Can’t rule it out. Pissed off any witches lately?” he asked teasingly.

Lady Arya snorted gracelessly and folded her arms across her chest. “I could ask you the same thing. I think out of the two of us, you’re more likely to be cursed than me.”

“That’s rather presumptuous to think.”

“You’re a prince, stupid,” Lady Arya rolled her eyes. “That’s a little more high profile than me, don’t you think?”

Jon leant his shoulder against the wall and mulled it over, ignoring the insult. She certainly wasn’t wrong. A son of a King, and one borne of war and turmoil certainly had many enemies. It was a bizarre way to enact revenge, and for the life of him, he could not see why Lady Arya would be
dragged in if that were the case. He sighed deeply and gazed around their surroundings.

It was a surprisingly quiet part of the room, most of the guests trapped in an elaborate dance, allowing them some breathing space. “It doesn’t matter,” he finally said insistently. “Whatever it is, it has to stop. We don’t know when it will flair up again, but I cannot afford this distraction during the tourney, understand?”

She nodded seriously, mimicking his stance against the wall and peering up at him. “I agree. So what do we do first?”

He frowned. “I guess see if we can find out more about what’s happening, I suppose.” The wheels of his mind ground against each other, fueled by determination. He needed some time to think about who could possibly wish them harm, as well as more information on the bizarre situation they found in. It seemed like a reasonable place to start. “You’re staying at the Holdfast, aren’t you? Meet me at the front courtyard after the morning meal. We might as well start at the library, see what we can dig up.”

Lady Arya opened her mouth to reply, but suddenly snapped it shut with a look of puzzlement. She reached out to press a hand against her forehead, grimacing softly. Her dark hair shimmered around her at the movement, glinting in the lantern light.

“My lady?” Jon asked with concern, “Is everything alright?” He felt dread pool in his bones, feeling he knew exactly what was happening.

He expected her to panic, as he had, but she simply shook her head. “Nothing, I’m just...tired. If we’re done here, I’d like to return to my family.” Her voice was strained, and when she looked up, her eyes seemed to be flying far away, lost in clouds of thought.

“Of course. Good evening, my lady.” He bowed deeply.

She curtsied back, and slipped from view, the edge of her blue dress trailing behind her. Before she stepped back into the madness, she threw a glance over her shoulder, a small smile on her face.

“Your Highness? Don’t call me Lady. It’s Arya. Just Arya.”

He thought he could feel a shift, somewhere in the back of his mind, a flicker of a flame. He returned her smile with a hesitant one of his own. “Arya,” he tested the word. It slid comfortably along his tongue. “Then I insist you call me Jon.”

“Well, since you insisted,” Arya laughed. “Good evening...Jon.” Her lips formed the last word softly, as if whispering a secret. It slithered into the air and carried across the chasm between them, crawling up his skin.

A breath later, she was gone.

He stared after her for a moment, watching her slight frame melt into the dancing crowd like water and disappear from his sight. He wondered briefly what Lord Stark and the Lady Arya - just Arya! he berated himself - thought of him tonight. Nothing he’d planned for, he was sure.

A sigh escaped his lips. For moons now, he’d anticipated the arrival of the Starks, for the opening of the tourney, for everything to fall into place like a puzzle. The pieces had come down, but they did not fit, and Jon was left with a deep sense of anti-climax. Lord Stark surely thought him a fool, and he’d just enlisted his daughter’s help to break an absurd curse, of all things!

He raised a hand and pressed it against his pounding head. Gods, he needed sleep.
Spinning on his heel, Jon caught Aegon dragging Rhaenys to dance, their faces flushed brightly and their heads thrown back in laughter. He watched them fondly, chuckling as Aegon’s erratic moves had guests scurrying for cover as he spun his betrothed with the force of a violent tornado.

He felt rather than saw someone’s stare bore into him, prickling his skin. Frowning, Jon turned back to the high table and tried finding its source. To his surprise, the King’s seat was empty. He didn’t have time to dwell, as his eyes slid from one chair to the next, and froze.

Elia sat rigid in her place, her brown eyes glaring at him angrily with the fire of a thousand burning suns.
losing the feeling of feeling unique

Chapter Summary

When in doubt, head to the library.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

I apologise for how overdue this chapter is. Work was a little intense, so I didn't have as much time to write. So hopefully, this long chapter will make up for it!

Hope you all enjoy it!

Arya

She was lost.

It was the thought that rang through the endless night. With the light around her gone, she had no choice but to look up at the gaping hole above her, where a great dark expanse of sky drifted. A stillness hung suspended in the air, waiting to be filled, terrible and empty and so very lonely.

Her breaths quickened in her chest and the silence was ripped by her voiceless screams as she called for help.

The darkness flickered, untouched and aloof. In the pit, she remained still.

Something cold touched her lips. Blinking in confusion, Arya glanced up towards the shimmering clouds and saw speckles of snowflakes drifting towards her, dancing without abandon in the harsh whistling winds. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf’s howl pierced the void. It spilled into her heart like warm liquor, dripping over her frozen fear and melting into her bones. Serenity wrapped around her like a web and she clung to it desperately. There was something almost familiar about the howl, about the peace it inspired. Familiar like the grey stone walls of Winterfell, or the breathless laughter of its children running through the halls. Like home, Arya realised.

She looked up again, and her eyes latched on a figure standing at the edge of the cliff. They were a shadow, a smudge in her vision, quivering as the winds whipped angrily around them. Arya tried to climb up towards them, but her hands grasped at smooth stone. The figure was shaking, and she felt panic roll off their skin in waves. They were staring directly at her, she noticed. Above them, the clouds darkened with anger, twisting and turning with rage as they reached forward to consume the shadowy figure.

Her heart clenched. She didn’t know what was happening or where she was, but she knew with certainty that she was much safer down here than they were up there.

“Hello?” she tried calling out to the figure. “Can you hear me?”
There was no reaction. The sky warped into black fingers stretching towards the figure, the wind thrashing around them fiercely, threatening to swallow them whole. With an unpleasant jolt, Arya realised that no one could possibly survive the impending storm brewing, and that this shadowy stranger was in the line of danger.

“You have to jump!” Arya yelled desperately at them. “It’s not safe up there! Jump!”

They recoiled in panic, and before Arya could call out to them once more, her vision went black and the howling stopped.

oOo

Arya sprang up suddenly from her bed to the sound of a thud and a curse.

Her chest heaving, she frantically wiped the sweat off her face before peering over the edge to see Rickon sprawled on the floor, warily looking up at her.

“Why are you in my room?” Arya asked suspiciously, watching her brother drag himself up and straighten his tunic.

He ran a hand through his tousled hair first before responding, “Father asked me to fetch you for breakfast. I didn’t think waking you up would be so...violent. Then again, it is you.” He ignored her narrowed eyes. “What were you dreaming about anyway?”

A flash of wolves and storms and darkness spun through her mind, and she shook it away with determination. “Nothing. Can’t remember,” she said shortly. She shifted under his gaze in discomfort. “Well, I’m up now,” Arya insisted, giving him a pointed look. “Your job is done. Now shoo.” She waved him off.

Rickon snorted, rolling his eyes. “Alright Your Grace, I’m going. But be quick about it.” He spun on his heel and started walking towards the door. “The melee’s starting soon and Father said we can’t go until we’ve all eaten, so hurry up!” he called over his shoulder.

A moment later, she was left alone with her simmering thoughts.

Throwing back the covers, Arya stood on her toes and reached for the ceiling, feeling the cracks in her back pop satisfyingly. She closed her eyes and took three deep breaths to settle her thoughts. It was just a dream. Nothing more.

Opening her eyes, her vision was filled with red and fire, the painted dragons around the room glaring down mercilessly at her. It sparked memories of a different sort of dragon staring at her last night, curiosity brewing in his grey eyes. Grey like Father’s, like hers, she realised with a frown.

Jon Targaryen was nothing like she’d expected. If a single drop of Rhaegar’s blood existed in him, it did not show. Why, he looked more Stark than her siblings! A wolf in dragon’s clothing, Arya mused absently.

A ticklish sensation flickered at the back of her head, the golden thread tingling as it reached into the fog in her mind’s eye. She didn’t dare try and follow it, for she knew where it led and didn’t think he’d appreciate the intrusion. She wasn't even entirely sure he wasn't watching her right now either, as disconcerting of a thought that was. Arya grimaced softly, remembering the onslaught of Jon’s thoughts at the feast. It was overwhelming, to say the least, and she’d been quick to excuse herself.
from the prince and her father to rush back to her chambers and climb under the covers. As if the cocoon could protect her from the jarring situation, from the absurdity of it all.

Jon’s thoughts had faded the more distance she’d put between them, but his quiet, brewing presence like soft snowfall still lingered at the back of her mind, a whisper of a shadow. Arya sighed, and hurried to dress in her least restrictive dress, avoiding the eyes of the dragons on the walls. She didn’t think she could bear their ensnaring company a moment longer.

When she finally walked into her father’s quarters, Lord Stark and her brother were already more than halfway through eating. “Good of you to finally join us,” Ned smiled gently at her. “I trust you slept well?”

Arya forced a smile in return, and cleared her throat. “Of course. The room is wonderful,” she lied, reaching for an apple in a bowl of fruit. Her eyes wandered up as she bit into it. “Though the royal family has a peculiar choice in decoration, if I may say so,” she added, observing the dancing golden dragon on the ceiling.

Ned let out a hearty laugh. “That they do. A little unsettling to sleep under.” He picked up his goblet of water to take a sip, Arya mirroring him with her own.

Rickon paused between shovelling piles of eggs in his mouth to grin cheekily at Arya. “Thought you’d love all the dragon stuff, after a taste of it last night. How is the prince?” He winked at her.

The air was filled with the sounds of choking as Ned spluttered into his drink and Arya pounded at her chest, coughing. She whipped around to give Rickon a dirty glare. “And what is that supposed to mean, you little-”

“Arya,” Ned managed to mutter, “we do not curse our brothers at the breakfast table.” He gave her a pointed look, which had her biting her tongue and sitting back in her seat, glaring at Rickon instead. “I believe he simply meant to ask how your dance went with His Grace. You left not too long after.” His eyebrows furrowed on concern. “Was everything alright?”

Did he do anything to you? was unspoken, but very much lingering in her father’s eyes.

Arya stopped mid-chew to hurriedly assure him. “It was fine, honestly!” she said, her mouth full of apple. “I was just, um, tired. It had been a long day, truly.” She managed to swallow and give her father a half-convincing smile.

It was the understatement of the century. Arya could hardly believe it had only been a day since she’d rode in, her mind full of jousts and melees and the chanting of crowds. A day since she’d walked over the threshold of the city and let the sights and the sounds wash over her, letting them fuel her fantasies of glory.

Now, she was stuck with a dragon wandering through her head and the inexplicable need to break something.

This just didn’t seem fair! Why was she stuck with some stupid curse with a prince? This was the sort of thing Sansa would have loved. She’d have simmered and batted her eyelashes and sighed that it was oh so romantic, they were meant to be!

Arya struggled to stop herself from retching.

All she’d wanted to do was enjoy the tourney, and bask in the brief respite from the haggling of her mother. And now, instead of spending her day with everyone else watching the melee, she’d be trapped in some dusty library with -
Jon.

Her eyes widened with shock as her chewing ground to a halt. She had told him she’d meet him after breakfast, and it was almost noon now!

“I have to go,” she said suddenly, interrupting her father and Rickon’s conversation. They turned to look at her in surprise.

“Well, if you’ve finished eating, we can make our way down for the melee now-” Ned began.

“Oh, um, about that,” Arya began uncertainly. Gods, what was she going to say? She couldn’t very well tell them she’d be with Prince Jon at the library without raising some sort of concern from her father. “I...I think I might not go. I’m not, uh, feeling well.” She gave a pitiful moan and rested the back of her hand against her head dramatically. "It must be the weather, I simply cannot handle the heat."

Rickon balked. “But...but it’s the first day of the tourney! You haven’t shut up about it for moons, Arya! Can’t you just suck it up and come?” He gave her a pleading look.

Ned scrutinised her closely, and she resisted the urge to bite her lip and wither under his stare. He’d know immediately she was lying then. "Are you quite certain, dear?” he asked, leaning in. "Would you like me to stay here with you, and give you some company?"

"Oh no!” she exclaimed suddenly, and cursed inwardly when Ned narrowed his eyes suspiciously. Too fast, bring it in, Arya. "I mean, I wouldn't want to ruin the tourney for you, Father. Really, it'll be such a bore to stay here. I'll just be asleep. No, no, you both go on.” She pretended to muster up the strength to give them a feeble smile.

"Weak," Rickon muttered under his breath, and she resisted the urge to kick him.

Her father watched her for a few moments more with a frown, before finally saying, "Very well, dear. Get some rest. If you need anything, Jory won't be too far away and he'll fetch me immediately." He reached over and patted her hand gently.

A swell of guilt rose in her. She absolutely despised lying to her father, but she did give her word to Jon. "Thank you, Father."

oOo

She heard his thoughts before she saw him, the soft snowfall of his presence growing steadily stronger until it sliced through her mind like winter winds.

...been waiting for an hour...

...should have just gone to the melee...

Rounding the corner, Arya caught sight of the dragon prince lounging against a column, staring into the courtyard. His face was still like the pools in a godswood, and he was wrapped in dark silks that gave him a striking profile against the backdrop of the blood-red castle walls. He seemed to be particularly fascinated by a small bush of blue flowers growing near him, glaring at it with such determination she half-wondered if it would burst into flames.
Quietly stepping towards him, she cleared her throat surreptitiously.

He sprang away from the column immediately and whipped around to face her, his surprised expression melting into a guarded blank canvas. "Lady Arya," he muttered, giving her a short bow. "How kind of you to grace me with your presence." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Arya's mouth had opened to draw out a string of apologies, but the tone of his words had her snapping it shut and scoffing instead. After all, he did say to meet after the morning meal. It wasn't her fault the dragons woke up so bloody early.

"Yes, well," she started, folding her arms over her chest, "I'm generous like that. I slept in a little," she confessed.

The irritated twist of his mouth relaxed until he let out a breath. "Understandable. You had a long day, I'm sure. Shall we?" He made a motion towards a corridor on her left, lined with white marble and rich vermilion stone.

They walked in silence mostly, the prince staring straight ahead and Arya falling one step behind his long legs. Growing bored, she entertained herself by observing the artwork painted on the walls around her. It was mostly dragons, unsurprisingly, but occasionally she'd see a mural of the heavens, of the sun riding a chariot across a glimmering blue sky, of a moon locked in an embrace with the stars. She wondered if there were legends behind each piece, if there was a story behind each stroke of the brush, hidden in the colours.

"Gods, do you ever stop thinking so much?" Jon said suddenly, incredulous. "It's exhausting listening to you."

Arya bristled at that. "Well, stop listening then!" she snapped. "I'm not listening to any of your thoughts." And it was true, after their initial interaction earlier, she'd heard hardly a whisper from the prince, just a subtle murmur under the depths as if she was submerged underwater. It was certainly curious.

"Maybe if you quietened down once in a while, you would," he laughed back. "Though I confess, I'd much rather you didn't."

"Have something to hide, do you?" Arya teased with a smirk.

His smile vanished and he turned back to stare ahead. "No one needs to know everything about a person. Some things are best left unsaid," he stated simply.

His words evoked an image of a silver-haired man staring at her from across a desk, disapproval engraved in his violet eyes as they locked onto her.

*Never ask me this again.*

A shiver involuntarily ran down her spine, and she peeked a glance at the boy walking beside her. Neither had mentioned what each had seen in the tunnels, and she had little doubt he saw as much of her life as she saw his. Curiosity burned in her gut to know which part of her had been revealed to him, which memories, which nightmares. But she was almost afraid to ask, not wanting to see the judgement coursing through his eyes as it coursed through everyone else's. Perhaps he felt much the same as her, though Arya preferred not to dwell on what she'd seen. It didn't seem right, somehow. As if she were betraying his secrets just by thinking about it. Maybe she was, if he could see into her mind. She only hoped he'd offer her the same courtesy.

They marched on further, not a whisper of a word uttered aloud, but a thousand whirling in her
The world fell to silence as soon as they stepped over the threshold, and Arya dared not breathe in case she disturbed it.

The library was, in a word, spectacular. It was possibly as large as the Great Hall in Winterfell, lined with shelves and shelves of volumes spanning the walls like painted canvas. Thick as bricks and thin as silk, every colour, every shade glittering like rainbows under the sunlight pouring in from high-arching windows. A maze of bookcases towered before her, the tops hardly visible; lost in the heavens like stars in daylight. The gentle smell of ink and old parchment wafted in her nose, and she breathed it in with a sigh.

Arya always had a special relationship with libraries. Her childhood had been spent hiding in them from her Septa or her mother, or even for a moment of escape if ever the world was too loud. She loved that moment of perfect tranquility when she stepped into its space, that taste in the air of a million hidden stories waiting to be told. Sometimes she even dared imagine having one written about her, one day. Of her victories and her legends and the Noble Arya Stark. The thought brought a smile to her face.

A snort interrupted her musings, and she turned to see Jon biting his lip to contain his laughter.

“Something funny?” she asked suspiciously.

“Oh no,” he said quickly, his lips spreading into an arrogant grin. “Nothing at all. So, um, will you be slaying dragons and saving maidens in this book of your legendary, noble exploits?” He smile grew wider, and Arya felt the sudden urge to smack it off his face.

“The only dragon that needs slaying is you,” she snapped. She felt her face redden and her cheeks engulf themselves in flames as she whipped around and stalked towards a random aisle. She heard him snicker and race to catch up, but she refused to turn around.

Stupid, stupid! She never told anyone about her dreams and now this stupid prince knew because of this stupid magic spell or whatever and oh, Gods, could the ground just swallow her whole?

A hand on her shoulder slowed her to a halt, and she pointedly stared at a book - *The Bizarre Bumblings of Beric Banefort* - pretending to find it more interesting than his ridiculous face.

“Hey, look, I’m sorry I laughed,” Jon said quietly, his voice sombre. “If it’s any consolation, I won’t tell anyone. You have my word, my lady.”

The thread shimmered in her mind’s eye, and Arya felt the honesty emanating off its golden sheen like a heatwave. It was disconcerting to see through him with such clarity, but it did make her feel better.

With a sigh, she turned back to look up at him. “Fine. And don’t call me lady again.”

“As you wish,” Jon replied with a wink, moving in front of her to tread deeper into the throes of a thousand books. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?” His voice drifted in her ears like a whispering wind. He was gazing around the room in wonder. “Apparently the one in the Citadel is even grander. Can you
imagine it?”

She really couldn’t. “Do you spend a lot of time here, then?” she asked instead as she followed him through the narrow aisles, her hand running over the spines of the nearest books delicately.

Jon shrugged. “Sometimes,” he said shortly.

*Would spend more if the damned fool wasn’t in here all the time instead of in court like he should be.*

The thought burst through Arya’s mind before Jon could stop himself, and he ground to a sudden halt to turn towards her in shock.

“Did you hear that?” he whispered, his eyes worried and wide.

Arya shifted from foot to foot. There was no use in lying, since he’d sense that too. “Yes,” she said awkwardly. “But I won’t tell anyone, I promise!” she reassured him.

Jon sighed and ran a hand over his face. “I guess we’re both keeping secrets,” he muttered with a tired smile, more to himself than her, before whipping on his heel and pressing forward. She hurried after him, carefully ignoring the tumultuous waves of his thoughts shimmering in her head. They walked in silence after that, weaving through the aisles like snakes in grass. She wasn’t sure where he was going, but decided not to ask. Jon certainly didn’t seem to be in the mood for more conversation.

He finally slowed down just as they passed a plaque on a wall with ‘MAGIC SPELLS AND CURSES’, engraved in gold. Two bookcases stood tall in the far corner of the library, tucked in the dark away from the glare of the sunlight. Arya ran a finger over part of the shelf and grimaced when it came away with a thick layer of dirt.

“We don’t come here much,” Jon said apologetically, handing her a handkerchief to clean her hand, “Neither do the servants, clearly. But it’s a good place to start.” He moved towards one shelf and grabbed multiple books, chucking them towards a small circular table sitting in front of the bookcases.

Arya gave him back his handkerchief with a grateful smile and leaned over to peer at the titles.

“So You’ve Been Turned Into a Beetle?” she read aloud with a snort. “Are you sure we’ll find what we need here?” she asked him, skeptical.

Jon gave her a pained look over the stack of books in his arms. “Got a better idea?”

“Not really.”

“Then better get cracking on the beetle book, then, huh?”

Rolling her eyes, Arya dropped into a chair, picked up the nearest volume and started reading.

oOo

It was well into the afternoon when Jon finally slammed a book shut (*Clara and Her Cat Gustavus*), and threw his head down on the table. “I can’t do it anymore,” he moaned dejectedly, “I can’t read another word more of some sod somewhere in a swamp trying to find the secret to eternal life and
accidentally turning their cat into a damn frog in the process. It’s too much.”

Arya giggled from behind her own book, *A Witch’s Monologue*, setting it down so she could see him better. His face was entirely hidden, nothing but a spring of brown curls slumped against the dark oak table opposite her. “How do you accidentally turn a cat into a frog?”

“The same way you accidentally meet a lady in an underground tunnel, I imagine,” the response came, muffled by the table.

She bit back a smile. “Fair.”

He dragged in a deep sigh and lifted his head tiredly. “Find anything good?”

Arya hummed and fingered the page absently. “If you don’t count a scandalous recounting of how a witch turned a Lannister Lord’s cock into a snake that bit his ass, then I’ve got nothing.”

Jon raised his eyebrow. “A cock into a snake? Why not just cut it off?”

Arya shrugged. “Poetic justice? He did try to force himself on her.”

“But a snake could bite you as much as him. It’s an awful vengeance.”

“More original than just cutting it off. Use your imagination.”

“Why be creative when you can just be efficient?”

“You’d be a terrible witch.”

Jon threw his head back in laughter, his body shaking with mirth. Arya found herself enjoying the sound of it. It was...musical, in a way. Deep and strong and pleasant to the -

*Shut up!* she hissed at herself. *He can hear you, stupid! What is the matter with you?

Arya surreptitiously cleared her throat, noting in relief that Jon hadn’t made any sign that he’d heard her. Quietly chastising herself, she picked up the next book and absently flicked through the pages, letting her eyes wander blankly over the words. A rustling from the opposite end of the table told her that Jon was doing the same. A companionable silence settled on their shoulders as they read, oddly comfortable like a well-worn blanket, soft and familiar. Once or twice, Arya felt her eyelids droop, until she violently shook herself awake. Rickon and Father must still be at the melee, she mused. Oh, how she envied them. No doubt it was a spectacular event! With swords and hammers and crowds and cheering and -

*Wait.*

Her eyes roved over the words once, twice, thrice, hardly daring to believe it.

“Jon,” she whispered excitedly, reaching out to grab his arm without thinking. “Jon, I think I’ve found something!”

The dragon prince rose immediately and dragged his chair beside her until he was peering over her shoulder to read the passage under her finger:

>`We art did bind in flesh, he and I. We art lock'd in one anoth'r, trapp'd in a prison of our spirits. At which hour that he hath fury, I burneth with rage. At which hour that he hath sadness, I taste his drops of sorrow. He asks me to breaketh these chains, but I cannot. This is beyond mine own control.'`
They finished together, Arya raising her eyes to meet her mirror in Jon’s. “Do you think it’s referring
to what’s happening with us?” she asked in a hushed whisper, as if telling him a secret.

He frowned, his mouth twisting to the side. “I’m not sure. Could just be talking about a shit marriage.
Let’s see what it says next.”

'Is it magic? I doth not knoweth. T'is none that I has't cometh across. The gods has't fashioned us for
chaos and love, but this is something more. I share his dreams, his thoughts, his memories. He hath
undone me for other men, for I seek him amongst those folk and cometh hence disappointed. This
thread that binds us hath becometh a noose around mine neck...'

In her elation, she smacked him on the shoulder. "The thread! She mentioned the thread!" her voice
increasing in volume. "And look! Thoughts and memories. This is it, Jon, I can't - what's the
matter?"

She turned, expecting him to share her enthusiasm, but instead was met with a wary expression.

"That hurt," he complained dramatically, rubbing his shoulder. The corners of his mouth were
struggling not to quirk upwards, ruining the tragic image.

Arya's frown of concern melted into an unladylike snort. "Don't be a baby, I hardly touched you. I
was just trying to get your attention," she insisted.

"That's a very violent way to flirt. I can't tell if I like it or not."

"I wasn't flirting, you absolute-" she spluttered indignantly.

"Wait, look at this." He dragged her attention towards a faded scribble, frantically scrawled at the
bottom of the page. It was haphazard and desperate, as if the words were threatening to escape from
the prison of the page, compared to the neat, elegant strokes of the writing before. Arya narrowed her
eyes and peered closer, scrunching her nose as she tried deciphering it.

The pressing heat on her side did not help. Jon was squished close to her, his arm pressed against
hers as he concentrated on the page before him. Gods, the boy really did have fire in his blood. He
radiated warmth in waves, crashing into her over and over again, more and more intense each time.
She struggled to breathe, like a drowning sailor fighting for her life. With every inhale, a crisp scent
would waft into her nose, salty and fresh, like rolling hills of grass by the seaside, scattered with
flowers and all things sweet. She thought she'd known every flower south of the Neck, stopping
each time to smell a new one on her journey down, but she'd never known this. Oh, but she did like
it. Did he always smell like this?

Jon suddenly cleared his throat, dragging her from her reverie. He ran a hand through his curls,
pushing them away from his eyes before returning to the page.

Arya, you fool, shut up! her rational mind hissed at her. He's most definitely heard you!

She felt her cheeks redden, and she tried moving away subtly without alarming him. To her dismay,
the further she lent away, the closer he seemed to be, the heat and the scent of the sea and flowers
threatening to overwhelm her. At the back of her mind, the thread glowed impossibly bright, and she
could see it twining around them like snakes, subtle and slow, around their wrists and their arms and
their necks. Drawing them closer together.

A noose, indeed.

Jon hadn't seemed to notice, for when he glanced up to say something, he paused to take in her
undignified gape.

"Is...everything alright?" he asked cautiously, quirking an eyebrow.

His voice jarred through her thoughts, until the thread vanished into falling stars and she was left blinking stupidly at him. "Um, yes," she muttered shortly, feeling her cheeks grow even warmer, if that were possible. Gods, she wished the ground would swallow her whole. He must think she'd never been near a boy in her life! How preposterous!

"Well then," he continued, "what do you think?"

She hadn't even read the passage. "Sounds interesting."

"Interesting?" he repeated incredulously. "Arya, whoever wrote this found a way to sever the connection! That's more than interesting!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Listen to this: We didn't. I can no longer heareth him, no longer taste him. He doest not haunt mine dreams as I haunt his. I am alone in mine thoughts, in mine memories. We art no longer one, but two. There's a way of cutting this off!"

Arya frowned in confusion. "It doesn't say why it happened. Why them? Why us? What's so special about us?"

Jon's smile faded, and he sighed in disappointment. "I don't know," he confessed in annoyance. "But if we can get rid of it, frankly, I don't care. Turn the page, let's see if it tells us how."

She flicked the aged paper over, her stomach rumbling with anticipation, when -

"It's...missing," Jon said, slowly.

"I can see that."

The jagged remnants of a ripped page glared up at them mockingly. Arya ran her finger over it softly, wishing for it to grow and reveal its secrets.

"Why is it missing?" Jon's voice was frantic. He grabbed the book from her and turned every page desperately, growing more and more agitated as he realised it was empty. The missing page was the end of the book. He pushed it away in a burst of anger, and Arya watched the reflections of the flames of the lanterns on the wall play over the blank canvases, like dancers in the desert.

She felt him slump in his chair dejectedly, his hands tangled in the dark sea of his hair. "It's all useless. We didn't learn anything."

"That's not true," Arya said delicately. "We know it's not some special curse on us, if it's happened before. And more importantly, we know it can be broken. That's a start, don't you think?"

Jon slowly removed his hands from his face to stare at her in confusion. "I...guess so," he agreed cautiously. "But we've gone through every damn book here, and it would take us years to go through the rest of the library," he complained, moving his hands back over his face and slumping lower in his chair.

The she-wolf sighed in annoyance, and reached up to pull his hands away so he would look at her.

The contact of skin to skin was like a burst of wildfire. It snapped at her fingers and inflamed her blood, the heat wrapping around her like silk, melting into her until she could no longer tell where she began and it ended. She expected a bright flash and an onslaught of Gods-know-what but as
suddenly as it began, it vanished, and she was left with her hands still covering his and twin pools of grey staring at her in shock.

Jon reacted immediately, snatching his hands and pushing himself away until the table stood between them. Their breaths were heavy, sweat beading their foreheads as if they'd run a mile a minute. With shaky fingers, the prince undid the collar of his tunic, sighing in relief as he swallowed deeply.

"That was different," she finally said, breaking the awkward silence.

He gave her a withering look.

"It was!" she insisted, crossing her arms over her chest. "You remember what happened last time. There's nothing normal about this, we have no idea what to expect. And I don't think we're going to find our answer in a book."

Jon jumped up and started pacing, his hands clenching repeatedly as he breathed in deeply. She could feel his agitation rolling over his skin and through the thread, his fearful thoughts ringing through her head like bells.

"Jon, we'll figure this out-" she began.

"How?" He whipped towards her, helpless. "The wedding is in a month, and then you leave King's Landing. What if we can't cut this off by then? What, we spend the rest of our lives just stuck together like this? What about when you get married, and when I get married? Gods, I hadn't thought about the bedding -"

Arya certainly didn't want to think about any sort of bedding, so did the one thing she knew would catch his attention.

She stood up and punched his shoulder. Hard.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, his ramble cut short to grab his shoulder with a wince. "What did you do that for?"

"Flirting, obviously," she replied drily. She put her hands on her hip and stared up at him, challenging. "Now if you'd shut up for a moment, and stop freaking out, we can think through this properly. We know it's happened to people before. We know that it can be broken. And we know that it changes. It's always a little different every time we meet, and I'm confident that as two competent individuals, we can figure this out. But I need you to not be stupid and freak out. Is that too much to ask?"

He gaped at her for a moment, before shaking his head slowly.

She flashed him a brilliant smile, "Good."

He was looking at her properly now, his hazy grey eyes boring into hers. They were so like hers, the same icy shade, but his were somehow more. Unconsciously, she leaned in further, fascinated. They were grey like the clouds before a thunderstorm, grey like the steel fresh off the blacksmith's hammer. They were the seas and the skies and everything in between, trapped in eternal winter.

They were...standing too close, a distinct cough made her realise. Her eyes widening in surprise, she peeked around Jon to find Ser Jaime Lannister standing awkwardly some feet away, his glistening armour shimmering in the afternoon light.

"I hope I am not disturbing anything, my prince," the Kingsguard said lightly with a smirk.
It took an eternity, or a split second, for Jon to clear his throat and reply. "No, no, of course not, Ser Jaime," he waved nonchalantly, stepping around Arya to fiddle with the books sprawled across the table. "Is there something you need?"

The other man looked decidedly unconvinced. "Your armour fitting, my prince, for the joust. Unless of course, my prince is otherwise engaged?" He raised a blonde eyebrow, the corners of his full lips quirking upwards in the hints of a smile.

"Oh shit, is that now?" Jon dropped a book in shock. "I completely forgot! No, no, I'm coming." he flustered, straightening his tunic. He moved past her to take a step towards the Kingsguard, before pausing and turning to her. "Thank you for your time, my lady," he said, with a short formal bow. "I hope you enjoyed the library, and that you find the book you're looking for. Perhaps I shall be graced by your presence soon?"

Tomorrow. Meet me in the courtyard. Same time? Jon's voice whispered in her head.

Noticing the curious stare of the golden man, Arya forced a polite smile on her face and returned a curtsy. "I am grateful for His Grace taking the time to help me," she replied in her most lady-like voice. "And I look forward to the next time we meet."

I'll be there, she whispered back.

With a grin, Jon disappeared into the sea of shelves, the faint scent of salt and flowers lingering in his wake. Arya turned to pick up the book they had been reading, flicking back to the missing page with a sigh.

"Ah, The Diary of Cassandra Reed, I assume," Ser Jaime's voice drifted towards her, saturated in humour. She turned with a jolt, thinking she had been alone.

He pointed at the book in her hands. Arya turned it over to see the words Cassandra Reed engraved in gold on the velvet black cover, thinning with age. She looked back at the Kingsguard in surprise.

"Fascinating read, is it not?" he continued idly, resting his hand on the hilt of his sword. "My sister and I certainly enjoyed it. Very...informative." He smirked at her, like a proud cat with a mouse trapped in its jaws. It crawled up her skin, settling against it like mildew. He bowed curtly to her. "Good evening, my lady."

With that, he turned and followed his dragon prince, Arya staring after him in bemusement.
The rising sun crept through the corridor windows, melting away the lingering darkness and painting his every step with the fiery colours of the morning sky.

“Look at it shine! Isn’t it the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?”

He looked over at Aegon turning over a sword in his hands repeatedly in admiration. It was fresh off the blacksmith’s block, not unlike his own currently sheathed at his waist. In a rare moment of generosity, their father had gifted them new armor and weapons for the tourney: dignified suits of red and black, and blades of Valyrian steel, tempered and hammered by the finest blacksmiths from Essos. Jon had accepted both with grace, but the appreciation rang hollow within. They were just tokens; gilded treats to placate them, or perhaps a shallow symbol of Rhaegar’s affection. But the knowledge of an impending unwanted betrothal by the end of the tourney weighed on Jon, and not even a shiny new toy could lighten the heaviness in his heart.

Aegon, however, was ecstatic. The sword hadn’t so much as left his hand since he’d received it yesterday. Breakfast was spent excruciatingly watching him slice his fruit with his new blade, and Jon had wondered if it had shared his bed last night, too.

“It’s almost as pretty as you,” Jon commented with a grin.

Aegon raised an eyebrow. “I’m going to pretend you think I’m breathtakingly handsome, in which case, I couldn’t agree more, brother,” he laughed. “But truly, I don’t even think Father’s sword is this fine! Can you believe it’s real Valyrian steel?” He lightly swung it in one hand. “We’ll be the envy of all Seven Kingdoms!”

Jon snorted. “Aye, because prancing around like peacocks is just what the realm needs to see,” he grumbled. “Can’t wait.”

He felt his brother’s hand on his elbow, pulling them to a stop. With a resigned sigh, he turned to face him.

Aegon gave him a pointed look. “Jon, with all due respect, quit raining on my parade and lighten
"Easy for you to say," Jon muttered petulantly.

“You aren’t betrothed yet,” his brother stressed. “There’s still time. Rhaenys will try and convince Mother to postpone any betrothal, and I’ll work on Father to let you leave King’s Landing.” He flashed an encouraging smile and clapped him on the back. “Fear not, little brother, everything will work out! And there are far more pressing concerns at hand, you know.”

A rush of appreciation shot through him, and he felt himself relax fractionally. Maybe his siblings could get through to their parents where he could not. Rhaenys was incredibly persuasive when she wished to be, and Aegon was currently the favoured son as the guest of honour, the royal groom, and the Crown Prince dolled up in one. He had a reasonable shot at convincing Rhaegar. Jon felt a small stirring of hope in his gut, glowing dim as an ember.

In a lighter mood, he quirked an eyebrow at his brother and folded his arms. “Pressing concerns, you say?” he asked mockingly. “Enlighten me.”

Raising the sword higher until it was level with his head, Aegon pouted, “The silver clashes horribly with my hair. They’re obviously not the same shade. Do you think I could get it dyed?”

Jon’s mouth dropped open. He considered responding, thought twice, and turned on his heel to stalk away.

“Oi, I’m joking!” Aegon called after him, running to catch up. “Gods, man, you’re as dry as Pycelle,” he snickered. “If you’re not careful, you’ll start smelling like dead cats, too.”

That made Jon smile, and he knocked his brother’s shoulder in good nature. “I should hope I’m a prettier sight.”

Aegon’s laughter rang bright and clear like wind chimes through the corridor. “Only barely, brother.”

Chuckling to themselves, they rounded the corner towards the courtyard. Jon felt a small tug at the back of his head, and the grin died on his lips as a familiar rush blazing brightly as the sun surged through him. “Speaking of pretty sights,” he distantly heard Aegon whistle, drawing to a stop. Jon followed his gaze towards the courtyard centre, where a small figure twirled around with a stick, stabbing at imaginary enemies. Her dark hair was tied loosely back, Jon already knowing the face before it spun into view.

Arya caught his eye just as she slashed through the air, and she pulled to a sudden halt. A small smile tugged at her lips as she reached up to wave him over. She was clad in riding breeches and a dark grey tunic. Innocent enough, except for the fabric stretching fittingly over her hips and thighs, providing a generous view of her lithe figure. Jon heard Aegon release an appreciative hum, and he groaned inwardly. “It would be rude to ignore a lady’s call,” Aegon declared, already moving forward. “Let’s say hello, shall we?”

His mouth twisted as as a charming smile planted itself on Aegon’s lips, white and proud and aware of its beauty. He had no shame. His brother flocked to pretty girls like bees to honey, and not even Jon’s advice two days ago had deterred the Crown Prince from his absurd pursuits. If anything, he’d only hardened Aegon’s resolve to do exactly the opposite. Damned fool. And now, he’d not only have to witness his brother’s blatant disrespect of his betrothed, but tolerate Arya’s simpering as well. No lady had resisted his brother, yet. Jon swallowed a sigh, his mood blackening.
“My lady,” Aegon said silkily, giving an exaggerated bow. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. I’d remember meeting such an exquisite creature such as yourself.” He flashed her his signature smirk while Jon rolled his eyes. Reaching out to gently clasp her hand, he lowered his head to kiss it. “I am Prince Aeg-”

“Yes, I know who you are, Your Grace,” Arya interrupted quickly, slipping her hand from his grasp before his lips could touch her fingers. Her nose wrinkled softly in distaste, before she masked it with an awkward curtsy. “Pleasure. I'm Arya Stark.”

Aegon quirked a surprised eyebrow. “Stark? I should have noticed the similarity.” He placed a hand on Jon’s shoulder and turned back to grin at Arya. “Jon failed to mention how beautiful his cousin was. Clearly it does not run in the family.” He laughed then, but it quickly dissipated when he realized Arya had not joined him. In fact, a frown had carved itself into her face, much to Jon’s interest. His brother cleared his throat, and tried a different avenue. “How is my lady finding the castle? The Red Keep has much to offer, and I’m sure it must be incredibly exciting compared to the North,” he chortled.

A flicker of irritation, light as a spring breeze and not his own, tickled the back of his head. “It’s alright,” Arya replied tightly.

Aegon seemed oblivious to the growing chill in the air, happily gesturing to the long stick in her hand. “I see we’ve caught you in the middle of something. Do ladies in the North often play around when no one is watching?” He winked at her, his tone teasing.

Arya shuffled her feet and hid the piece of wood behind her back. “I wasn’t playing,” she muttered, indignant. “I was practicing. There’s a difference.”

The silver prince chuckled softly as Jon cocked his head to watch her curiously. “Practicing what?” Jon asked.

She deliberated, wavering on whether he’d mock her or not. “Um, swordfighting,” a small voice mumbled finally, crimson creeping up her cheeks. “Mother didn’t let me bring my training swords to the tourney, so I’m improvising,” she shrugged.

Jon’s mouth quirked upwards as an image fluttered into view in his head. It was of Arya, bounding around the woods with a blunt sword in hand, hacking away at trees and imaginary foes. It came with a rush of excitement, unyielding and wild like a wolf’s howl. Like a song sung by steel as it sliced through the air, a melodic chorus chanting just for you. Like every chain of sorrow holding you to the ground shattered and you were free, for a single, stunning moment.

Like everything that set Jon’s blood on fire when he swung his own sword; something just for him, something no one could take away because of its sacred place in his heart. It didn’t matter what the world expected from him, so long as he had this.

It was freedom.

You understand.

He looked up to find her staring at him, something he could not quite name swirling in her eyes like mist. The thread binding them together shimmered softly, and he blinked to find it twining around her hair, crowning her in a halo of golden light. It was mesmerizing.

A short snort broke his attention and he dragged his eyes away towards his brother. The vines faded into nothing, and Arya was left blinking curiously up at him, ignoring the silver prince in front of her.
"You train with a sword?" Aegon asked incredulously. "As in, actual steel? And Lord Stark gives you permission?" He was staring at her in shock.

It took a moment for Arya to realize he was talking to her, but when she did, she was deeply unimpressed. "Is that a problem, Your Grace?" She folded her arms across her chest and glared up at him challengingly.

Egg, you tread on dangerous ground, Jon wanted to say.

Egg, instead, trampled through as gracefully as a rampaging elephant. "No, of course not," he assured patronizingly. "Just odd is all. My cousins in Dorne were trained from a young age, but that has been the case for generations." He shrugged. "I was unaware Lord Stark was as open-minded." He reached out to pick her hand up again, and covered it with his own. "It’s wonderful to see Dorne’s influence has such an impact on your people! Perhaps the next tradition you adopt could be flaunting your women a little more, instead of hiding such beauty away." He waggled his eyebrows at her in jest. "I certainly wouldn’t mind seeing it more frequently in the future."

Jon inhaled sharply when he felt the wave of rage emerge from Arya, a tsunami of fury threatening to slam into him. He took a subtle step away from his brother and out of the line of fire.

Arya’s frown deepened into a scowl as she snatched her hand back aggressively. "The North doesn’t need to adopt any of your traditions. It’s perfectly fine as it is," she snapped, her voice biting.

Jon bit his lip to stop himself from sniggering at Aegon’s stricken face. "I wasn’t implying as such, my lady," he began apologetically, "I was just-"

"-perpetuating the stereotype that Northern traditions are backwards and less advanced than those of the South," she finished angrily. "You should know that Northern women are warriors and leaders and can wield a sword and ride better than any man. They’re far more free than you give them credit for, and they are not made to be ogled at, but respected."

"I never said-"

"No, but that’s what you meant." Arya interrupted, wry contempt painted on her face. "I’m well aware of what the South thinks of my home, Your Grace, but I expect more from someone who shares blood with a son of the North and who will one day be our King as well."

The last part sent a thrill through Jon, warming his heart. Son of the North. He liked the sound of that, indeed.

Beside him, Aegon was gaping openly at Arya, looking less like a silver dragon and more like a stunned lizard. Jon had never actually seen his brother’s advances turned down, and he had a feeling Egg hadn’t either. It was a distinctly uncomfortable sight, he decided, and one he’d rather they not be present for any longer. "If you'll pardon me, my lady," Jon quickly said, grabbing the silver prince’s arm, "My brother and I need to have a word. Good day."

Before she could respond, Jon had dragged Aegon away from the courtyard, down a random corridor, and into a shadowed alcove around the corner.

He spun around to see his brother blinking stupidly at him. Small rays of light filtering from a nearby window illuminated a handsome face marred with confusion. "I think I blanked out. What just happened?" he muttered, slightly dazed.

"You were rejected," Jon stated bluntly, resting against the wall. "And practically called a bigot."
Aegon frowned, growing even more puzzled. "I could have sworn I was complimenting her."

"You certainly have an odd way of going about it," Jon snorted. "Good luck trying to get her into bed after all that." He was lying, of course. Sharing the same headspace as someone bedding his brother was quite possibly one of the worst nightmares Jon could imagine, and he prayed to every God that he never had to experience it.

Aegon’s face melted into one of surprise, looking seemingly younger in the soft sunlight. “Why on earth would you think I’d try and bed her? Is that how little you think of me?” he asked, visibly affronted.

It was Jon’s turn to be confused. “Am I missing something here? I didn’t realize you took my feelings into consideration.”

“She’s your blood,” his brother slowly stressed each word, as if it were the most obvious explanation in the world. “And you’re mine. I wouldn’t disrespect you like that. I was harmlessly flirting but I’d never act on it.” He shrugged nonchalantly.

Jon gaped at him, hardly believing it.

“I know,” Aegon continued, sighing with false modesty. “I’m a wonderful brother, you need not say it. I understand.” Clapping him on the shoulder, he graced him with an insufferable smile.

The physical touch was all that was needed to jolt Jon awake, and he pulled away from the wall to step closer. “You...absolute idiot,” he fumed, pushing his brother’s hand away. “I can’t tell if you’re the world’s worst hypocrite or just a moron.”

Egg’s smile began to fade and he folded his arms across his chest. “Come again?” he asked, his eyes narrowing with annoyance. The sunlight danced on his silvery hair, like an ethereal crown made of moonglow. He was the dragon prince once more, but Jon was unperturbed. Such was said of him, too.

“You dare not touch a cousin I hardly know out of loyalty to me,” Jon snapped, “But you’ll happily bed any other cunt and disrespect your sister and bride-to-be without a second thought! Does that not sound remarkably inconsistent to you?”

The Crown Prince’s stare hardened, violet melting into an endless black. “We’re not having this discussion again. I have to get to the melee,” he said simply, swiveling on his heel to stalk away. Jon didn’t bother trying to stop him. He paused halfway down the corridor to yell over his shoulder.

“Gods, I was trying to be nice! What is it with the Northern blood and being so damn incapable of taking a compliment?”

“Unbelievable,” he thought, a frustrated sigh escaping his lips. Of all the damned fools, his brother was surely already their king. Anger swelled in his chest, brimming like turbulent tides, but under the surface, there was fear.

Yes, Jon was afraid. Once, Aegon’s recklessness had been endearing, but now it held the potential of ruin. Jon dreaded the day a noblewoman showed up on the steps of the palace with a bastard in one hand, and her father in the other. He need not refer to a history book to know of the disaster it could evoke: he was a living example of how disloyalty in a marriage - particularly one of royalty - could tear a realm apart.
It was a sobering thought. His existence had damaged any lingering feelings the King and Queen may have shared once, no matter how often Rhaenys told him there was little love to begin with. Aegon never held it against him, but once or twice, Jon had caught him wistfully watching lords laughing with their wives, or holding hands when they thought no one was watching.

*He could have that,* Jon fumed as he wandered down the corridor, falling deeper in his muses. *He has a betrothed who loves him for everything he is, and he risks losing it for a good fuck.*

He wasn’t sure how Rhaenys truly felt of their brother’s indiscretions. Jon could never read her properly, guarded as she was with her emotions. But she couldn’t tolerate it for much longer, could she? Aegon professed to love her, but if a man truly cared for a woman, he wouldn’t hurt her so. At least, that was what Jon believed happened when one was in love. He’d had no experience of it, however.

*I still wouldn’t,* he thought fiercely. He didn’t know if he’d ever love a woman he never wanted to marry, but he’d never disrespect her. No, he wouldn’t repeat the mistakes of his predecessors. He’d seen first hand how much it still hurt Elia to this day, and he wouldn’t wish such pain on anyone else.

His birth was bred from disloyalty, but his future need not be defined by it. Love could grow from the unlikeliest of places. Though love was something he hadn’t quite considered. It had done nothing for his parents, and little for his siblings, after all.

He sighed in resignation.

He had little time to brood any further, for a split second later, he was suddenly overcome by a vision of a red-haired woman glaring down at him in frustration.

‘*Really, I’ve had quite enough of your wild ways!’* the woman cried, throwing her hands in the air. Jon felt himself inadvertently shrink away from the anger on her face. ‘*You are banned from wielding any sword from this moment. I allowed this foolishness for this long, but you’ve clearly become a danger to yourself. This ends now.*’

It vanished a blink later, replaced by gut-wrenching disappointment that Jon knew was not his own. He looked up to realize he’d returned to the courtyard, where Arya had resumed hacking away at thin air, with a little more aggression behind every swing. He considered giving her privacy for her thoughts, but she seemed so utterly miserable, Jon couldn’t quite bring himself to walk away.

“Imagining someone in particular?” he asked loudly as he sauntered closer. “I hope it’s not my brother you’re stabbing. That could be treasonous,” he joked.

She froze in midair, and turned to narrow her eyes at him. “Then maybe your stupid brother shouldn’t make himself my target,” she snapped, resuming her ministrations and pointedly ignoring him.

Jon leaned against a pillar and surveyed her, ignoring her comment. “You weren’t being entirely truthful with us, were you? It seems the North isn’t as keen on training their women as you’d have us believe.” At her shock, he tapped the side of his head with an apologetic smile. “You can’t lie to me. Not when I can see everything up here.”

Arya wavered, and bit her lip. “I mean, there’s Bear Island, ruled by House Mormont,” she explained eagerly, the stick sword hanging by her side. “Their women are trained in every weapon the moment they can walk, and the line of succession doesn’t care for what’s between your legs. Women have as much influence as men there. It’s incredible.”
“And Winterfell?”

She scruffed her feet against the marble floor, peeking up at him through her thick eyelashes. “Not quite the same,” she admitted ruefully. “Mother hates it. Father tolerates it. They’d much prefer I did something else more fitting of a lady, like needlework.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’m not very good at that.”

"Perhaps it isn’t the right type of needlework, then,” Jon offered, inspiring a bright smile in response. “I see nothing wrong in a lady picking up a sword. Everyone should learn how to fight.” He shrugged. “It’s the world we live in, unfortunately. Women would fare a great deal better, I’m sure.”

Arya sniffed and gave him a dark look. ‘Gods forbid a lady be able to defend herself. Apparently husbands don’t like that in a wife;” she scoffed, picking at the stick in her hands. She avoided his eyes.

"Then those husbands are insipid fools and aren’t worth your time,” Jon responded lightly. Arya perked up and beamed at him, the dark clouds of her thoughts dissipating until the bright light he’d come to associate with her presence shined once more.

“Is that your sword?” she suddenly asked excitedly, pointing at the hilt on his belt. He’d almost forgotten he was carrying it.

“A recent gift from my father,” he replied, unsheathing it so she could see it better. He had to agree with Aegon, it was fine work. His brother’s hilt was entirely encased with red rubies, the pommel carved into a roaring dragon’s head. An ostentatious artwork for a Crown Prince. Their father, however, knew how little Jon cared for sparkling stones, so had requested a simple engraved pattern on darkened silver. The pommel was a dragon’s head much like his brother’s, but with deep blue stones instead of red rubies. In the light, it almost seemed like winter was trapped in the depths of its eyes, a souvenir of the North always held in his hand. Whilst he was dissatisfied with the ways his father showed his affection, Jon had been touched all the same.

Arya bounded up to him, and peered closer with awe etched on her face. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered, eyes widened. “Is it Valyrian steel?”

“It is,” Jon said, surprised. “How did you know?”

She shrugged. “Father lets me sit next to him when he sharpens Ice, our ancestral sword. That’s made of Valyrian steel as well, except it’s too big for me to hold. It’s even bigger than my brothers!” she giggled.

Jon cracked a smile. “Do you want to hold this one instead?” he asked, kindly.

He almost bowled over at the sudden excitement slamming into him with the force of a thousand hurricanes. “Yes please!” Arya exclaimed, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“Alright, settle down,” he laughed, handing her the hilt gently. She grasped it with both hands carefully, thrumming with anticipation. “It might be too heavy for you, so be careful,” he warned, letting go.

With surprising strength, she held it up and stared at it in wonder. Her eyes were lit up impossibly, and he felt a flicker of fear she’d break her face with how wide she was smiling. Through their bond, her happiness shimmered like a sea of stars, and Jon chuckled quietly at the sight. She was contagious, apparently, and he felt his own spirits lift alongside her.

"Gods, I’d love to have one of these,” Arya muttered wistfully, her fingers gently running over the
“Would Lord Stark deny you if you requested it?” Jon asked curiously.

She bit her lip and shrugged. “He already worries I’ll hurt myself. I’ve asked him every year since I was nine. I doubt this year will be any different.” She frowned, and her radiance dimmed until it was no brighter than a lantern, Jon’s mood fading with it. With a resigned sigh, she handed back the sword regretfully and gave him a grateful smile. “So...are we moving on to the next stage of our thread-breaking adventure?” she jested, changing the topic suddenly.

He sheathed it quietly, and leaned back against the pillar once more, staring at the square expanse of sky above. “Gods, I don’t even know what to do next with that.” Their library session yesterday had been lukewarm at best in helping them, and Jon felt at a total loss.

“Neither do I,” Arya agreed, crestfallen. “And I’m not sure I can keep meeting like this.” She moved to rest her shoulder against the neighbor pillar, facing him. “Father and Rickon left for the melee earlier to see the city, and I hate missing out on the fun. That, and I doubt I can convince my father I’m ill for any longer.”

“It’s difficult for me, too,” Jon admitted ruefully. “I excused myself yesterday by saying I was helping you in the library, but the King expects my presence today.”

"Then what will we do? We have to figure something out. I’m not telling my father the truth, it’s far too absurd,” she said, shaking her head.

He pondered for a moment. “We could meet at night?” he offered. “After hours. We’ll have to be quiet, but we’re less likely to rouse suspicion.”

Arya straightened up. “And I can attend the tourney properly!” she exclaimed happily. “Consider it a deal!” She grinned at him, before suddenly breaking into a run towards the south corridor, the stick sword and dragon prince left forgotten in her wake.

“Oi, wait!” Jon called after her, pushing himself off the pillar. She ground to a halt at the edge of the courtyard and swiveled back to him impatiently. “Where are you going?” Jon asked, bemused.

“To the stables,” Arya explained pointedly. “I’m not sticking around here any longer than I have to.”

He began turning away from him, so she called her attention again.

“You can’t go alone,” he exclaimed in shock. “The melee is just outside the city! You have to ride through King’s Landing, and that isn’t safe for a lady by herself.”

“Come on, then! We can go together if you’re so concerned,” Arya huffed, beckoning him. In a flash, she was sprinting again, the echoes of her footsteps and laughter trailing after her like shooting stars.

“I meant with guards!” he yelled, jogging out of the courtyard, but she was already out of reach. He could still feel her, however, weaving through the castle as if hounds from hell were at her feet.

*Will you hurry up?* her voice suddenly filled his head. *You’re slower than my Old Nan, and she’s at least a hundred years old.*

She sent an image of a wizened old woman hunched over and hobbling across a room with a cane. Except her face was replaced with his, which had Jon burst out in laughter.

The thread between them glimmered, her presence glowing brightly as the rising sun once more. Jon
couldn’t help but shine with her, the rays of her excitement filtering into his head and melting the darkness until there was only light.

*We’ll see about that,* he shot back, as he ran after her.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, Jon and Arya ride through King’s Landing. What could possibly go wrong?
like young volcanoes

Chapter Summary

An adventure waits in the city.

Chapter Notes

What’s this, a new update already? Whaaat.

In all seriousness, this was one of the big chapters I’ve been super excited about, so I really hope you enjoy it! Thank you so much for everyone that left reviews, I’m in the process of responding, but please know I really appreciate it all! ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The sun’s rays bloomed across the city, setting it alight with its fiery petals. The golden god itself sat proudly in its chariot as it galloped across the blue sky, trails of clouds whispering in its wake like gentle breaths. Below, King’s Landing relished under its might. From the bellows of blacksmiths to the delighted screams of children, the city was alive and flourishing. Jon took a moment to absorb it all as they paused at the entrance of the Red Keep.

Arya sat saddled beside him, her grey horse whining softly at the frantic crowds bustling before them. Jon had never sympathised so greatly with an animal. He regarded the endless sea of people with trepidation. “Are you sure about this?” he asked her for the millionth time. “It’s not too late to take a litter, you know. It’s a lot busier than it normally is.”

Arya snorted and shot the prince a disdainful look. “Oh please, you aren’t forcing me into that dreadful contraption. It looks rather like a prison cell on wheels,” she protested with a shiver. “You’re welcome to ride in one yourself, Your Grace.” His title dripped sarcastically from her lips and she smirked at him with mirth. “I’ll protect you.”

“A simple no would suffice,” Jon muttered instead, as she laughed. He was about to urge his horse forward, when a clear drawl rang loudly from behind, freezing him in place.

“Going somewhere, Your Grace?”

They both turned around to see Ser Jaime standing at the threshold, his hands resting on his hips. With his golden armour and blonde hair, he seemed to be sculpted from sunlight itself.

And currently, Jon was at the brunt of his searing gaze. “To the melee,” he stated, causing the knight’s eyebrows to rise. “I’m accompanying Lady Arya here.”

Jaime regarded him coolly. “And who is accompanying you, Your Grace? King’s Landing is not a fit for a prince and a lady alone. You should know that by now.” The edges of his mouth quirked upwards. “There are other ways to impress a lady, Your Grace, that do not compromise your safety.”
Gods, he made Jon feel like an admonished child! Through the bond, he could feel the whiplash of
Arya’s irritation at the Lannister’s insolence, mirroring his own. “I did not see the need to trouble the
Kingsguard,” Jon said icily with a frown. “I am more than capable of handling a threat, Ser Jaime, I
assure you.”

The knight sighed in exasperation, and gave Jon’s sword a pointed look. “With all due respect,” he
declared, stepping closer to give the prince a hard stare, “using a sword in a friendly spar with your
brother is distinctly different to swinging at an enemy, and I do not intend for you to discover
that today. Please remain here. I’ll get my horse.” He turned towards Arya then, and raked his eyes
over her mare dubiously. "And a litter. This is not Winterfell, my lady, and these streets are
unfriendly at best." Without waiting for a protest, Jaime swivelled on his heel and stalked towards the
stables.

Jon felt crimson crawl up his face as he watched the knight walk away, his mouth twisting into a
scowl. He knew how to use a sword! He’d been holding one since he could barely walk! He was
hardly a novice, and Aegon, too, would certainly question just how friendly their training sessions
truly were. Simmering in indignant anger, Jon released the reins with a huff, and slouched.

...but hesitation crept in, however, like a slithering fog. Perhaps the Lannister was right. Perhaps
he was being absurdly irresponsible to ride into the city with little in the way of protection,
particularly with a highborn lady at his side. His father would certainly never allow it. Gods, he
hoped Jaime wouldn’t tell him. Rhaegar would probably inform Lord Stark, and the Warden of the
North would be furious that he’d risk his daughter’s safety so casually. He shuddered softly at the
thought with sigh.

The daughter in question, who had been gaping after Jaime, must have heard his thoughts since she
whipped around to give him an astounded look. “Are you seriously agreeing with him? Don’t you
think he’s overreacting a little bit?”

Jon shrugged. "He's sworn to protect. He's just doing what he thinks is right,” he reasoned to her.

Arya scoffed, her nose wrinkling in displeasure. "Well, I don't think he's right. We're not children,
and I'm certainly not riding in any damn litter, thank you very much." With a huff, she grabbed her
reins and spurred her horse into motion, leaving a gaping prince in her wake for the second time that
morning.

"Hey!" he yelled after her. "You can't just - oh, for fuck's sake." Seeing little signs of her slowing
down, Jon propelled his own steed forward with a curse. He'd deal with Jaime Lannister later.

He caught up to her just as they left the limits of the castle, moving onto the path towards the King’s
Gate. "Stop leaving without me," he grumbled to her as he drew level. "We're going to get in trouble
for this, you know."

The Northern girl beamed at him, her eyes dancing with audacious glee. "There's no harm in a little
rule-breaking now and then. It's good for your health, actually."

Jon simply snorted in response, to her amusement.

The crowd immediately parted for them, a few muttering and pointing at him with awe-struck eyes.
Jon tried not to shift around in his saddle, not wanting them to see how uncomfortable he felt. Others
seemed unperturbed, preferring to lose themselves to the madness of the city.

And what a madness it was: from the blacksmith to the alchemist, the cobbled road was swarming
with a patchwork of personalities. Shops and houses and brothels and more, glowing golden in the
morning light embellished either side. The cacophony of noises carried through the air like windpipes, saturated in laughter and endless chatter. Everywhere Jon looked, a face would either be peering curiously at him or enthralled in conversation, but the crowd seemed to be moving like the tide towards one place in particular.

“Where are they all going?” Arya leant over and asked in his ear, her eyes following the bustle to a road somewhere to their left. “To the melee?”

"Fishmonger’s Square, I imagine,” Jon guessed. "It’s popular with everyone in the city.”

“Have you ever been there?” she quizzed, her head cocking to the side. Her hair had fallen out of the loose braid she'd kept it in, tumbling freely down her back in dark waves. “Is it always so busy? Is it true you can buy a dragon’s egg in the city? Can I get one there?” Her voice grew more animated with each syllable, until she was practically vibrating with excitement.

He paused briefly, attempting to process her rapid questions. Gods, she was a curious one. “I don’t know much about it. I doubt it’s that exciting, probably just a marketplace to sell fish and the like,” he confessed with a shrug. “And dragons don’t exist anymore. You can’t just buy a dragon’s egg. What an absurd idea.” He chuckled to himself, shaking his head at her.

The bloom of disappointment that erupted through the bond faded his smile instantly. He looked over to see Arya frowning, looking back at the crowds with lackluster enthusiasm. Accidentally slipping into her thoughts, he caught a glimpse of a black dragon soaring through the skies with a roar before it vanished with a sigh.

“Keen on dragons, are you?” he asked, his voice amicable. Feeling a pang of guilt for ridiculing her, he tried lightening the mood. “They don’t make for very good pets, you know. Fire risk and all that.”

She cracked a smile, and a surge of triumph rose in him. “I think I’d prefer a wolf if I had to choose, but I’ve always wanted to see a dragon,” she said wistfully.

He drew himself up and exaggeratedly held his head high. “You’re looking at one right now. Am I not reptilian enough for you? How dare you!” He gasped in mock indignation.

Arya burst into heaps of laughter, catching the attention of passerbys who curiously observed the pair. “You’re not just a dragon, stupid,” she giggled. “You’re a wolf. Like me,” she beamed at him.

He twisted towards her, bemused. "You really think that?” he inquired, hardly believing it. "I've never even *seen* the North. How exactly am I wolf?"

She shot him an exasperated look, as if he couldn't have asked a more asinine question. "Just because you didn't grow up with your pack doesn't mean you don't have one," she explained patiently, turning back to look ahead.

The words rose a grin unbidden to his lips. *Pack*. He thought he might love that word. It was difficult to imagine ever being lonely again, when one had such a thing. Something of his very own, something no one else in his family had. Except his mother, of course.

“Tell me about the North,” he asked suddenly, almost desperately.

If Arya was surprised, she did not show it. “What do you want to know?”

He deliberated. Anything and everything, he wanted to say. When he thought of the North, it was a blank canvas; a snapshot of silence and darkness in front of which he stood waiting. For what, he
could not say. But alone he stood, reaching out to trace the barrier that stood between him and a world beyond. A masterpiece existed, he could almost feel it under the surface, but he had no way of revealing it. He had the colours, with little idea of what he was supposed to paint. And so, he started with the most basic question he could think of.

"Is it as cold as they say?"

She pondered for a moment, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. It was a stupid question, he realised with annoyance. Of all the things to ask! He sounded as ignorant as Aegon, Gods help him.

Arya offered him a soft smile. "It's not stupid," she reassured him, and he groaned silently that she'd bear witness to his ramblings. "And I don't think so. King's Landing is just unbearably hot." She fanned herself to emphasise, sweat beading her forehead like water droplets.

He had to laugh.

"It isn't the warmest," Arya continued admittedly, "but you can't feel it within the walls of Winterfell. Water runs through the walls, so it's as warm as a summer's day, no matter what it's like outside. You know you're safe from whatever's out there," she finished in an almost melancholic voice. Her eyes had lit up when she'd first started speaking, but the light slowly faded, darkening the grey until they simmered like winter storms.

*I don't want to leave it.*

The thought was a whisper, and Jon almost missed it. Frowning, he regarded her curiously, the question sitting on his tongue.

Just as he was about to ask, Arya pulled her horse to a halt.

"Can we stop for a moment?" she urged at his uncertain expression, "I want to look around. Please? Just for a minute?"

Jon regarded her pleading face and deliberated. It couldn't hurt to spend a few minutes browsing, and the melee had a while before starting. "Fine. But stay close to me. It isn't-"

"Safe, yes, everyone has made that abundantly clear," Arya muttered, rolling her eyes.

They moved their horses to the side, and dismounted. Jon took the reins of Arya's horse as well as his own, and tied it to a nearby post. "We can't go too far," he instructed her, tightening the knot. "We have to stay near the horses. I don't trust anyone not to rob us when we aren't looking." As if to make his point, he narrowed his eyes suspiciously at a pair of men watching them nearby with interest.

The Northern girl shook her head, her hair bouncing with the movement. "Gods, you're paranoid."

"I'm cautious. There's a difference."

She didn't reply, since she was already wandering over to a stall on their left. An assortment of crudely carved animals sat stacked in piles, from mermaids to lions to dragons. At least, that's what Jon assumed them to be. Arya picked up one that looked seemingly like a griffin, and peered at it closely. "My brother Rickon collects these," she informed Jon as he joined her, turning the statue in her hands. "I don't think he has this one, though."

As if on cue, a wizened old woman hunched at the waist suddenly appeared, grinning a toothless smile at the pair. "That'll be seven silver stags, my dear," she croaked.
"What? That's absurd!" Jon exclaimed, stopping Arya from digging for her purse. "It's not that great. It looks like something a child could make!"

Arya nudged him with her elbow. "Don't be rude," she chastised. "She has to make a living somehow."

"Clearly not an honest living," he responded drily, raising an eyebrow. "This is just outright theft."

"I wasn't aware you knew so much about the prices of such commodities. Shop much here, Your Grace?"

"It's just common sense, Arya. Any blind fool could see they were being robbed."

The woman sneered at their exchange. "It seems His Royal Highness is as generous with his words as he is with his purse," she jeered.

Jon bristled at the insult. "I'm far more generous to those I feel aren't trying to steal from an innocent lady," he shot back, folding his arms.

Beady black eyes narrowed at him and she huffed in irritation. "Very well, Your Grace. Special price for our beloved prince. Five silver stags. I won't go lower," she said stubbornly.

Another insult. He sighed tiredly. How he hated shopping.

Just as he was about to respond - five silver stags was still ridiculous - something barrelled into him, almost knocking him to the ground. "What the - careful!" he admonished the small boy standing in front of him. The child looked up with wide, innocent eyes framed by a dirt-smudged face, and nodded frantically before sprinting away.

Scoffing to himself as the boy disappeared into the thickening crowd, he turned back to the saleswoman. "As I was about to say, I still find your price unreasonable, but this isn't for me. Arya, what do you think?" he asked, turning around to -

To thin air. Jon’s mouth fell open. She’d just been right beside him! He frantically whipped this way and that, but she was nowhere to be seen. "Arya!" he called her name, but it was lost amongst the chaos of the streets. "Where did she go?" he swivelled to face the old woman, who was watching him with barely concealed glee. "The lady I was with, where did she go?"

She shrugged nonchalantly, satisfaction swirling in her eyes. "I was speaking to you, Your Grace. I saw no lady." The smirk playing on her lips set Jon's blood on fire.

Grinding his teeth, he snapped, "I know your game, and I'll play it. Three silver stags, you tell me where she went."

"Make it five and I'll help you find her."

With a frustrated groan, he reached into his pocket.

And came away empty-handed.

No. No, no, no.

"Where did it go?" he gasped, patting his breeches. "It was here, I know it was. Where the hell did my money go?"

"Oh, no!" the woman cried in mock sympathy. "Such a pity. Best of luck with your search, Your
Grace.” Her pout melted into a cackle as she left him alone to his agitation and confusion.

How could it have -?

The boy! Jon cursed loudly. Bloody thieves, the whole lot of them.

But he had far greater concerns.

"Arya!" he called out again, moving through the crowd. The air was filled with such volume, he struggled to hear his own voice, let alone her reply. He kept repeating it regardless, desperation creeping into his tone. Passerbys stopped and watched him curiously as he shoved his way through the mayhem, spinning around in a frenzy, hoping to catch a glimpse of a dark head or stormy eyes.

Oh Gods, what if someone had grabbed her and he hadn’t noticed? He’d been so caught up with the damn woman and everything was so ridiculously loud, he might not have heard her scream.

“Arya!” he bellowed once more, to no avail. Almost everyone had paused to stare, yet no one stepped forward to offer help. There was still no sign of her. Hysteria bubbled in his chest. What was he going to do? He could find the City Guard and command them to search for her. But that would raise alarms and Lord Stark would hear of it. How would he ever be able to stand in front of the Warden of the North and tell him he’d lost his daughter? Jon's insides withered at the thought.

And Rhaegar would be ashamed and furious, to say the least. Gods, what if he couldn't find her? Would they blame him? Would he be arrested? Fear sunk its claws into his heart and dragged it down through his stomach until it lay like lead in its pit. No, no, Jon had to look for her, and he had to find her now. He had his sword, what was the worst that could happen? He knew how to fight, damn whatever Jaime said.

He found a wall to lean against, and tried frantically to control his breathing. He wouldn't be arrested, oh no. Lord Stark would have his head, if his father wouldn't hand it to him first. So much for earning the respect he desperately craved from both of them - he couldn’t even look after a petite girl for five bloody minutes!

What if she'd left willingly?

He gritted his teeth, fresh irritation coursing through his veins. Jon couldn't decide which was worse, her being abducted or her wilfully ignoring his specific instructions to stay close. Couldn't she feel how panicked he was?

Wait.

Straightening up, Jon took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Yes, he could feel her presence, the rumbling embers and radiating warmth glowing at the back of his mind. It was distant, but strong enough to almost touch. And just beyond, twisting carelessly and hovering in suspension, the golden thread.

>Show me where she is, he asked it, uncertainly. Please.

It flickered here and there mockingly, a snake writhing lazily in the sun.

*I need to find Arya. Take me to her, for fuck's sake.*

Nothing happened again. Clearly being rude didn't work. Resisting the urge to grind his teeth again, Jon instead tried reaching out in his mind’s eye, hesitantly moving closer to the fog and the thin strand of sunlight. Like shimmering water, the fog began to dissipate, a blurry image coming into
view. Jon’s breaths quickened as the sound of music filled his thoughts, and a young blonde girl with flowers tied in her hair stumbled into view.

“Come on, my lady! Let me show you how it’s done!”

He felt rather than heard Arya’s laugh as she reached out to grab the other girl’s hand.

With a jolt, Jon was thrown back into his own head, and his head snapped back to slam into the wall. It left him dizzy and clogged, as if someone had poured water directly into his skull. A distinct pounding erupted where he’d hit his head, and he reached up to feel the bump with a groan. Blearily opening his eyes, he resisted a yelp of surprise.

Twining above the cobbled floor, around the ankles of civilians, and down an alley across the street was a bright golden thread, sparkling gently like a slice of the stars themselves. He rubbed his eyes a few times. Maybe he had hit his head harder than he thought. When the thread was still there, he hesitantly walked forward, stretching his fingers out to run it through its shimmering surface. His hand passed through thin air, and he waved it around repeatedly to be sure. Odd, but then again, what was normal about any of this?

Taking another breath and squaring his shoulders, he entered the wave of people once more, his eyes locked on the slim strand dancing in the air as if suspended underwater. With every step, it seemingly grew brighter, encouraging him onwards.

This is insane, he thought to himself as he traced the thread down winding narrow streets, past groups of fishermen and playing children that all stopped to gape at the dragon prince in their midst. But I have no other choice. Please let this work. He sent a prayer to every god he knew.

Turning a corner, the thread suddenly erupted into a burst of stars.

Jon looked up, and his mouth dropped open.

He found himself in a massive courtyard, but where he’d expected to see fish markets stood large poles decorated with coloured flags. Above, strung from one end to another, were a series of colourful streamers, fluttering in the wind, caught in the same dance that possessed the crowds below it. In the corner, Jon glimpsed a band of musicians strumming their instruments to a jaunty melody that had the entire square on its feet and whirling in chaos. The atmosphere was soaked in good cheer and merriment, a thousand smiling faces swaying under the sun.

A familiar laugh rang louder than the rest, and Jon's attention snapped towards the centre, where a circle of scantily-clad women spun carelessly. He immediately caught the blonde woman he'd seen earlier, her arms entwined a dark-haired girl with grey eyes. She was dancing with them, Jon realised, swaying their bodies like flames entranced by the wind. The girl who had Arya in her grasp twirled on the balls of her feet, the she-wolf attempting to mirror her but stumbling over instead. She huffed in frustration for a moment, before giggling wildly. A crown of wild flowers sat tangled in her locks, similar to the other girl, a string of nature’s loveliness embedded in the black moonlight of her hair. Spots of red brushed her cheeks and her smile bright as the evening star, Jon was overwhelmed by the burst of joy emanating through their connection like a sunshine made of diamonds. It seared through all his frantic thoughts, warm and welcoming and taking his breath away for a moment.

Sensing his presence, Arya suddenly stopped and turned to catch his eye. Her hair was dishevelled and tangled around her face like a nest. The grey orbs of her eyes brightened impossibly when it landed on him, and she burst through the circle to run towards him.

“You found me! I was wondering where you were,” she gushed, her voice light as a breeze.
“Where I was?” Jon repeated in disbelief. “You’re the one that ditched me. What on earth were you thinking?”

Her smile dimmed, and she gave him a puzzled look. “But I did tell you. I asked if you wanted to come explore with me. It’s not my fault you didn’t listen.”

“I never heard you ask. You didn’t wait for an answer?” he questioned incredulously.

“I did,” Arya huffed. “You were so busy arguing with that woman, you ignored me. So I got bored.”

“Bored?” Jon exclaimed in a strained voice. “My lady, you can’t just abandon your escort because I wasn’t entertaining enough. It isn’t safe, and you shouldn’t be here alone with a bunch of whores.”

He hissed the last part so the women wouldn’t overhear.

Arya’s eyes had narrowed at his use of her proper title, her mouth twisting with distaste. “Don’t call me a lady. And so what if they’re whores? They’ve been perfectly lovely, and we were having fun. That’s hardly sinister, is it?”

Jon fidgeted uncomfortably. “It’s not proper. You’re a highborn lady, you shouldn’t be fraternising with—”

“-with lowborns?” Arya finished with scorn. “By the Gods, Jon, they’re far better company than any noble I’ve met.”

“Your father would be scandalised—”

“My father isn’t here. What are you going to do, tell on me?” she taunted, quirking an eyebrow. The petals of the flower crown shifted softly as she cocked her head at him.

Jon scoffed and folded his arms over his chest. “Maybe I will.”

“Then you can also explain why you left the Red Keep without any guards, and managed to lose me in the crowd so I ended up with a bunch of whores in the first place. I’m sure Father would love that story. Or better yet, the King himself, for surely he’d find out, too.”

Jon opened his mouth, but no sound came out. She had him there. Snapping it shut, he narrowed his eyes at her triumphant expression. She giggled at his irritation, and lightly smacked him on the shoulder.

“Oh, lighten up! It’s just a little fun!”

Without warning, she spun and bounded back towards the group, growing increasingly larger by the second.

Jon called after her in protest. “No, Arya, the melee—”

“-isn’t starting for a while yet,” she yelled back over her shoulder. Turning around to face him, she spread her arms wide as if in offering, laughter pouring from her lips like fine wine. “Gods, Jon, live a little!”

He stood frozen, watching her float in the sea of her jubilation, her hair twirling around her like the night sky. The flower crown fluttered gently like shimmering stars as she shrieked in delight, the sight inspiring the corners of his mouth to flicker upwards.

“Come on, Jon,” Arya paused briefly to grab his elbow and drag him into the circle with her,
ignoring his reluctance. “Can’t you stop being a prince for one minute?”

“They’re not mutually exclusive, you know. I can be a prince and have fun,” he stubbornly muttered, his words lost in the whirling waves of music and chatter. There were more people joining them in their circle, bodies jumping around like puppets on a string, and Jon had to narrowly avoid being crushed.

“Arya!” he called again, shoving his way back to her. “We really have to-“

“Your Grace!” he heard a voice say tentatively. “Won’t you dance with us?”

He turned to see the blonde girl previously dancing with Arya stare at him with wide blue eyes. She stretched her hand towards him, the excitement of their surroundings making her bold, though fear still lingered in the depths of her face.

“What?” he repeated blankly, looking at her curiously.

Arya appeared at his side and gave him a hard punch to his shoulder. “She asked you to dance, stupid.” Amidst his thoughts so the girl wouldn’t hear, she muttered, Don't hurt her feelings! Bessa is incredibly lovely, and she's the one that stopped me getting lost. She leaned back and smiled widely at him, before raising her arms and spinning as fast she could, those in her vicinity ducking to avoid being hit.

It was intoxicating, her happiness. He could somehow taste it as it flooded his mind, sweet like Arbor wine and radiating with the joy of youth and life and its potential. In this infinite moment, under the glory of the sun and immersed in her carefree world; he felt invincible.

A grin rose unbidden to his lips, and he allowed himself to succumb to her blazing presence. Just for a moment.

He’d waited too long, for the girl started withdrawing in shame. The look of disappointment on her face had him reach out and snatch her hand.

“I’d be honoured, my lady,” he said quickly, giving her a short bow. She giggled, blushing madly as she returned a small curtsy. He pulled her towards him and they swayed to the music, his hand resting politely on her waist while she clutched his shoulder in awe. She was donned in the classic dress of the courtesans, sheer and wrapped tightly around her figure, with a slit across one leg to reveal an expanse of smooth skin. The blonde hair was piled on her head per the fashion, but under the coils was a youthful face, far younger than Arya, it seemed. Too young to be a courtesan, Jon noted with a pang.

They’re children, Arya whispered sadly to him. They’re not dangerous, they’re desperate.

Is there anything I can do for them? he replied, unsettled. This isn’t right.

You’re already doing so much. Just look at her!

Glancing down at his partner, he was taken back by the almost worshipful expression on her face. She was smiling so hard at him, he felt mild concern she’d hurt herself.

“Oi, Bessa! Don’t keep ‘im all to yourself!” a voice yelled over his shoulder.

Bessa startled in surprise, and reluctantly let go of him to curtsy clumsily. “Thank you for the dance, Your Grace,” she said shyly, scampering off before he could reply.
Before he could blink, another taller girl had replaced her. She grinned toothily at him and pulled him too close, so he could smell the cheap lavender scent clinging to her skin. Not knowing what else to do, he lightly grasped her waist and gave her a smile.

He lost count of how many girls he’d had to dance with, some only briefly while others made sure to hold onto him as long as possible. Once or twice, he even had his ass pinched and had to cover his shock with a pained smile. Arya had enjoyed it particularly, egging him on in his head. She had stopped dancing a while ago, preferring to stand on the side and watch everyone else with a small smile fluttering on her face. When at last the song came to an end, and he - with some difficulty - disentangled himself from a young brunette girl’s vice-like grip, he strolled over to her.

“Thought you’d never stop,” Arya teased as he drew close. “You’ve danced with every girl in King’s Landing by now. I reckon half are in love with you.”

“I have that effect,” he jested with a smirk, melting into a broad grin at her unimpressed face. “But I haven’t danced with every girl. Come on, it’s your turn.” As if on cue, the musician plucked a slower melody, which had swarms of couples pulling one another to the centre.

Arya frowned at his outstretched hand. “Oh no, I’m an awful dancer. I almost took out Bessa’s eye.” She nodded her head towards the petite blonde he’d first danced with, who sat some feet away, pressing a wet cloth against her right eyelid. She waved enthusiastically when she saw them look her way.

Wincing, Arya turned back. Jon bit his lip to contain his laughter. “I’m sure I’ll be fine,” he reassured her. “You can’t hit me harder than Aegon has in training,” He reached out again and she gave him another petulant look. “Oh, come now,” he pleaded with an exaggerated pout. “You can’t drag me into this and reject me in front of everyone. How will that look? Have a heart.”

Arya snorted, but her chuckle quickly faded. Biting her lip, she gazed warily at his hand. With a pang, he realised what she was worried about, and in his rush, he’d almost forgotten himself. His hand was naked, as was hers, and there was no telling what could happen if they touched.

Arya sensed his hesitation and helped him make a decision. Standing up to brush the dirt off her breeches, she patted him on the arm. “Maybe next time?” she said instead, with a small smile.

Something strangely akin to regret spun through him, but he quickly stifled it to give her a flourished bow. “Next time,” he promised.

Her eyes swirled with humour and Jon marvelled at how similar her grey was to his, and yet, was so utterly different. Her grey shimmered like powdered silver; moonglow trapped in the twin orbs. They shined impossibly bright, lighting her entire face up like soft stardust.

A face that was scrunched up in confusion and waving a hand in front of his. “Hello? Jon? Can you hear me in there?”

He blinked stupidly, a blush rising in his cheeks. “Uh, what?” Oh Gods, he hoped she hadn't heard him. The very thought of it was mortifying, to say the least.

She snorted, but there was no other reaction. Jon sent a quick thank you to the heavens. “You were ignoring me again,” she pointed out. "The melee’s starting soon, so we should head back."

Nodding, he followed her out of the square, the songs and laughter following their footsteps like magic in the wind.

They had just rounded the corner when Arya whipped towards him, a mischievous glimmer in her
eyes Jon was beginning to recognise.

"I'm not going to like what you're about to say, am I?" Jon probed with trepidation.

"Fancy a race? It's a long way back otherwise," she offered with a grin. Her cheeks were brushed with crimson, the excitement of the festivities still simmering in her bones.

The lightness hadn't quite left his heart yet either, and Jon found himself acquiescing. "Fine. But there has to be a prize," he teased.

Arya frowned. "I don't have anything to give." She pondered for a moment, before snapping her fingers cheerfully. "I know!" She reached up and gently touched the crown sitting on her head, fingering the white petals. "You win, you get this. I win, I get to keep it. Deal?"

Jon smirked at her. "Very well. But don't get angry at me when I end up looking better than you in it," he taunted her.

The she-wolf snorted, before turning back to the path. "That's not something new," she mumbled under her breath.

If Jon hadn't been paying attention, he'd certainly have missed it, though he couldn't quite fathom what she said. Frowning, he was about to interject when she suddenly launched herself forward, leaving a pile of dust that smacked him in the face.

He coughed and groaned, "How am I always left behind?" before sprinting after the daughter of the North.

They weaved through the streets, laughing like children as they almost collided with bystanders who were forced to jump out of their way. Jon hadn't done this since he was eleven years old, trailing after Aegon as they explored the capitol together. He'd missed this spark of life and chaos that launched him into a sky of a thousand stars. Here, he soared, boundless and weightless and surrounded by inexplicable magic. This, like his sword, was freedom, he realised. And at the back of his mind, he felt Arya recognise it too.

Just as they rounded their last corner and sprinted down the alleyway, he pulled in front of her. Raising his fist in the air in victory, he pulled to a stop just at the corridor's exit, the main street bustling in front of them. They rested against opposite walls, desperately drawing air back into their tired lungs. Jon was the first to straighten, shooting Arya a triumphant look.

She sighed in conceded defeat, reaching up to disentangle the flowers on her head. "It's a little crushed," she confessed apologetically, handing it to him, "but a prize is a prize. You'll be the prettiest prince in all of King's Landing," she teased.

"Have you seen my brother?" Jon jested. "Unlikely." He turned the crown over in his hand, his eyes raking over the small white blossoms lying delicately amongst his fingers. On closer inspection, there seemed to be streaks of blue painted across the petals, reminding him of moonstones, somehow. He glanced up to see Arya watching him, her face framed by a wild and frantic mane of dark hair. He could still see the soft indenture of where the crown had been sitting, locked in a fierce embrace with the dark tangles. It had suited her, he thought, the speckles of the moon and stars lost amidst a sea of night.

"You know what? Keep it," he found himself saying, stretching to hand it back to her.

She was puzzled. "No, it was a prize," Arya insisted. "You won it fair and square."
"If I wear this riding into the melee, Aegon will never let me hear the end of it," he half-confessed.

She still seemed unconvinced, so Jon reached out and gently placed the crown back on her head instead. It seemed to almost sparkle in the sunlight, like a real crown carved by nature instead of silver. Arya stood motionless as he did, staring at him with bemusement swirling in her eyes. He wasn't sure what to say, so he simply smiled at her, and she tentatively grinned back.

"I hate to ruin such a lovely moment, but it's time to go," an arrogant voice sliced through the air, jolting Jon to take a step back. He hadn't realised they'd ended up so close. He glanced up quickly to see a disgruntled Jaime Lannister glaring down at them from atop a white horse.

Jon opened his mouth to respond, when his eye caught a horde of gold cloaks swarming around his and Arya's horse on the opposite side of the street.

"Ah yes," Jaime continued, following his gaze. "I had to call them when I found two rather familiar horses without their riders. I naturally assumed the worst. I'm glad to see you and my lady are safe, Your Grace." He did not sound particularly glad. The knight, usually so composed, was dishevelled and pale, his voice straining from barely contained anger. A pang of guilt shot through Jon at the sight. He hadn't thought that the Kingsguard would follow him, let alone how he'd react if he'd found his steed abandoned on the side of a busy road.

"Ser Jaime," he began apologetically, "I'm so sorry, I didn't realise you were looking for us. Nothing happened. Lady Arya and I were just-

"There is no reason to explain to me, Your Grace, I am just the man in charge of your protection," the Lannister interrupted with a scowl. "I am relieved you are safe. I ask that you both accompany me to the melee immediately, however." He waved over the guards, who stopped the pedestrian traffic to bring their horses over.

Jon sighed softly as he clambered up, his good mood suddenly dissolving under the gravity of the City Watch's presence. If Ser Jaime had felt the need to alert the gold cloaks, he could be assured word would eventually reach his father, and possibly even Lord Stark. He groaned inwardly at the thought.

He peeked at Arya then, who had wisely decided to stay silent. He could see regret and guilt swimming through her head, and as if sensing he was watching, her eyes turned towards his.

I'm sorry, this is my fault, she sent to him. I didn't mean to cause so much trouble.

On the one hand, Jon agreed wholeheartedly with her. If she hadn't run off on her own, they would probably have already been at the melee by now, Lord Stark and the King none the wiser. It would have been safe and stress-free, and exactly what he should have done.

On the other, it had been a long time since Jon had had such a ridiculous amount of fun, and he struggled to regret any of it, regardless of the consequences. Arya was unharmed, and so was he. There was little to be concerned about, truly.

Don't worry about it, he replied. I'll take care of it.

She smiled gratefully.

"Ser Jaime?" Jon asked out loud. The knight was a few feet ahead, his straightened back facing him, so Jon urged his horse forward until they were level.

"Yes, Your Grace?" Jaime responded, tiredly.
The prince cleared his throat awkwardly. "Do you think this could remain strictly between us? Lady Arya and I are fine. We were just, uh, taking a walk through the city. Nothing to alarm our fathers about, don't you agree?" He flashed him his most charming smile. When that didn't illicit a response, he tried a different tactic. "I mean, it would call your service into question, given you had a team of gold cloaks at hand and still couldn't find us. Rather disappointing, if you ask me."

Ser Jaime shot him a withering look. "You're far too much like your brother, you know that? I'd expect foul play from him, Your Grace, but never you."

Jon grinned at him, aware of his victory. "I suppose you don't have me quite figured out yet."

The knight raised an eyebrow, and glanced towards Arya, who was busying herself by watching the world around them. "I think I have a decent idea," Jaime muttered with a smirk.

oOo

The rest of the journey to the melee was uneventful, and when they finally arrived, Jon noticed that almost all the seats had been filled. He heard a soft gasp from behind, and turned to see Arya gazing around the stands and fighting ring with wonder filling her eyes. They were magnificent grounds, he had to admit, with the Targaryen flag soaring high above it all, the proud three-headed dragon flying in the wind. Beneath the banner sat the King on a gilded throne, his eyes idly running over his realm chattering animatedly below. Beside him, Elia perched on her own seat, looking increasingly bored though she masked it well enough. Aegon had his sword in his hands and was observing it closely, ignoring everyone around him. Rhaenys caught Jon's eye, and enthusiastically waved him over to the empty chair next to her.

"I'll escort the lady to her family," Jaime told him, dismounting his horse. "I believe yours are waiting for you, Your Grace."

Passing the reins of his horse to the approaching squire, Jon climbed the steps up towards the raised platform. Hurrying to his seat, he first spoke to Rhaegar. "I'm sorry I'm late, had a little distraction in the city," he confessed. When his father didn't reply, his eyes fixated on something rather intently, Jon frowned and turned to Rhaenys. "Did I miss anything?"

"Only Aegon discovering something he loves more than himself," Rhaenys laughed. She gave him a once-over, her smile dissolving into titters. "Why do you look so messy, brother?" she criticised, straightening his tunic and ruffling his hair. "It wouldn't hurt to comb that mane of yours once in a while. We're representing our House."

Jon batted away her hands, to her exasperation. "I look fine. I was just, uh, dancing," he muttered hesitantly.

"I'm sorry, did you say you were dancing?"

"Something like that."

Rhaenys glanced at him suspiciously, and Jon had to fight back a grin. He turned towards the crowd, his eyes unconsciously scanning for one face in particular. He found her, sitting amongst her brother and father, the crown still on her head. Her brother seemed to say something amusing, for she broke out in peals of laughter, and Jon could still feel her radiant energy blaze through the bond, despite the distance. The wildflowers looked rather lovely on her, he mused absently, highlighting the blush on
her cheeks. It was strangely difficult to look away, he thought.

'No, don't be absurd. She'll notice you staring, and then it'll be weird.' Tearing his eyes away, Jon instead turned to Rhaenys and let her idle chatter distract him until the melee started.

He hadn't noticed that, just beyond his sister, a King and Queen sat fixated on the exact vision he’d been watching, blood draining from their faces.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, what a ride!

Just to finish off, my university semester has started again so I want to reiterate in case there’s any delay between chapters: I have no intention of abandoning this story. Jonrya is my OTP, and I love this fic too much, so please remember that!

Thank you for reading! ❤
the torture of small talk

Chapter Summary

An insight to the dragon princess and a casual case of eaves-dropping.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

Thank you all for being so patient with this chapter. A little less Jonrya, but an absolutely important one for the narrative. And thank you to everyone that kudos-ed and reviewed last time round! Always so wonderful to hear what you think, and I really appreciate it :)

Hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Did you see how fine Andar Royce was today?” Elinor Tyrell simpered, taking a delicate sip of her tea. “He was the best fighter in the pit, if you ask me.”

“Why, Elinor!” Margaery chastised, “Yesterday you said the very same of Alyn Ambrose! Do make up your mind, cousin.”

A blush spread across the younger lady’s cheeks as the room erupted in giggles. Rhaenys gave a soft smile, and reached for her own cup, her mind wandering away from the idle chatter.

She was expected to host a small group of highborn ladies for most of the tourney, particularly those entertaining close relations with her family. Amongst those rewarded with the honour was Lady Elinor Tyrell, though Rhaenys suspected her presence was mostly to appease Margaery. She had known the girl for some moons now, and Rhaenys found her amicable at best and rather dull at worst.

The other, to her reluctance, was Lady Jeyne Mallister whose family had earned their social standing with the King through their role in decimating the Greyjoy rebellion. It wasn’t that Rhaenys particularly disliked the girl, but the calculating glint in her blue-grey eyes had her wary, nevertheless. She was certainly pretty, with sleek brown hair and laugh lines carved around a fine mouth, but Rhaenys found something akin to disrespect in her subtle stares when she thought the Princess was not looking.

A quiet sigh escaped her lips. She had hoped her Dornish relatives would visit, offering respite from the tediousness of such occasions, but her uncle Doran’s illness had forced Arianne to remain in Sunspear with her brothers to manage affairs, and a royal invitation was not extended to her bastard cousins. It was disappointing, to say the least. Born of sin or born of duty, they were her blood and she ought to be allowed to celebrate with her own family, if she so wished.
I shall invite them all to Dragonstone, Rhaenys decided. Gods know, the place could use a little sun and laughter. As could I.

In particular, it was Arianne's absence that she felt most glaringly. Elia had made sure to forge a relationship when they were hardly out of the crib, and for that, Rhaenys was grateful. She loved her brothers truly, and Daenerys had been a wonderful companion - but none of them understood what Arianne did. One day, they would be ruling from a throne of sun and a throne of fire; submerged in a world held in the hands of men, waiting to see if they would burn. Arianne was the heir to the Dornish title, but her fears of her brothers stealing her birthright simmered beneath the surface. Rhaenys had no fear of losing her crown. No, it was the loss of something far more precious that gripped her heart these days.

“Your Grace, what do you think?”

Pulling her out of her muses, Rhaenys looked to her left to see the eager face of Lady Myrcella Baratheon. She had found herself enjoying the young girl’s company as of late, and had insisted she be seated as close as possible without causing offense to her good-aunt, who sat on her right.

A thing of delicate beauty, she reminded her of some of the more exotic flowers growing in the gardens of the Red Keep. Long, golden hair spun with sunlight and eyes that blazed as bright as wildfire, she bloomed radiantly in the soft lantern light. She had a sweet disposition, the sort of quiet loveliness one would find in a rose amidst a forest of thorns. If not for the classic features of Lannister and the dry humour of her father, Rhaenys would never have believed her to belong to Stannis and Cersei. From what she heard, ‘sweet’ was rarely spoken of them.

Outwardly, she gave her an apologetic smile. “Forgive me, Lady Myrcella, my head was in the clouds. What did you ask?”

The golden girl opened her mouth to speak, but her words were snatched by the wry voice of Lady Jeyne. “She was asking about the joust next week, Your Grace, and who you believe would be crowned champion.” A wistful smile swept her lips, a dreamy sparkle in her eyes, “I think it will be His Grace, Prince Aegon. He seems to be a fine warrior.”

The collective murmurs in agreement spread through the women, and Rhaenys resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She was well aware that the joust was merely a farce: no knight nor lord would dare try and unseat a prince during his own celebratory tourney. Aegon had not thought of this, seeing it as an opportunity to earn his share of glory separate to the crown. He had bothered their father for almost a month to grant him permission to participate. The King had acquiesced, to everyone’s peace of mind, though Rhaenys strongly suspected he had done so knowing Aegon was guaranteed victory. A false one, but a victory nevertheless.

Instead, she nodded graciously and lifted her tea to her lips. “Indeed, my brother is fearless. I wish him the greatest of fortunes,” she said, taking a sip. It was not a lie, after all. Many things could be said of Aegon, but a coward was not one of them.

“What of your other brother, Your Grace?” Myrcella’s gentle voice echoed around the solar, her wide green eyes curious. “Is he jousting, too?”

Rhaenys gently placed her cup on the table. “Naturally, my lady,” she chuckled fondly. “My brothers are inseparable, as I have come to learn. Whatever one does, the other is not far behind.” Margaery hummed in agreement.

The young Baratheon blushed lightly, her eyes dropping shyly to stare at the plates scattered around. “He looks to be quite the warrior himself, if you don’t mind me saying. He might win, too,” she
Rhaenys quirked an eyebrow in amusement. She moved to respond when a derisive snort caught her attention. Holding back a sigh, she turned to regard the Lady of Mallister with a plastered expression of polite interest. “Is something the matter, Lady Jeyne?” she asked sweetly.

“Oh no, Your Grace,” the other lady responded, blinking innocently. “It truly is wonderful to hear that both princes are jousting, though I fear for His Grace Prince Aegon's safety. He is the Crown Prince after all.” She gave a false chuckle, picking up her cup. “Of course, if they were to compete against one another, I'm sure Prince Jon would never let any harm befall his brother.” With a smirk, she took a sip.

Margaery arched a high eyebrow at Jeyne, but wisely remained silent. Rhaenys, however, narrowed her eyes at the Riverlander. The quiet insinuation behind the comment stewed in the air. There had once been rumours amidst the court that Rhaegar would crown the son of the woman he loved. Her father had never made any sort of indication of such and the whispers had generally dwindled, largely in part due to Elia. She had been so young when Jon was brought home, but she remembered the violent arguments between her parents when Rhaegar had legitimised him as a Targaryen. She hadn't understood then what all the bother was about, she had simply been ecstatic she had another playmate. In hindsight however, she was stunned by her father's audacity.

She adored Jon with all her heart and she could not imagine a world without him as her brother, but he had been a threat to Aegon. If Jon ever sought the throne, he would have the might of the North shielding him from Dorne's wrath, and summer and winter would collide to devastate an already broken land. Her mother must have known this, Rhaenys was certain. In the beginning, she had been reluctant to allow Jon in, to accept him as a dragon in truth. Rhaenys had pushed in her stubbornness to play with the one her father told her was her brother, and when Elia had acquiesced, Rhaenys had little doubt it was her victory.

It was a victory, but hardly won by her childish insistence. The three of them had grown up as blood, and there was little doubt that Jon would ever betray his brother now. Sunspear had warmed to the wolf prince when it saw his loyalty, and turbulent tides of a potential war ceded away. Elia had played the games of the heart to her advantage and sealed her son's birthright in stone, without anyone suspecting her of pulling the strings. The very games that had disgraced her in the first place.

Dragons do not fall to the venom of snakes, but all dragons kneel before the sun.

For Jeyne Mallister to think any differently had Rhaenys harden her stare, and clear her throat pointedly. “Whilst I do appreciate your concern on the matter,” she began, icily, “I assure you, Lady Jeyne, that you may rest easy with the knowledge that Prince Aegon is more than capable of holding his own, and should my brothers find themselves as opponents, then I only fear they shall laugh themselves off their horses before a victor can be declared.” She finished with a bright smile, that was reluctantly reciprocated by the other.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Margaery exclaimed with a clap of her hands, moving quickly to defuse the tension. “Well said, Your Grace! I, for one, cannot wait for the joust to begin! Certainly makes for rather excellent entertainment,” she winked cheekily at the table.

“Oh yes,” Elinor perked up with an excited squeal. “All these knights and lords need favours as well, of course. Is it truly so terrible to give more than one?”

Margaery burst out in laughter, and the rest of the room followed suit, albeit hesitantly at first. The conversation moved towards trivial matters, mostly surrounding knights and lords and other scandalised ladies. Rhaenys struggled to join in, growing weary of the company. She was about to
quietly suggest to her good-aunt to move the party elsewhere, when there was a sharp knock on the door. With an inward sigh of relief, Rhaenys called her permission to enter.

Ser Jaime Lannister strolled in, donned in his glistening armour, and stopped to give her and the room a deep bow. Lady Elinor giggled softly as her eyes raked over the Kingsguard with appreciation.


“Your Grace, the queen wishes to see you,” Jaime said. "I am here to escort you, if you are ready." His eyes flickered over the group of women at the table, all who were watching him with a glimmer of interest.

"Yes, of course," Rhaenys replied, smothering her eagerness. She turned towards the rest of the room and forced a pleasant smile. "Forgive me, my ladies, but I must attend to my mother. I leave you in Princess Margaery's capable hands." With a nod towards her good-aunt and the murmurs of farewell, she gathered her skirts, and moved towards the door, the Kingsguard one step behind her.

As soon as they were out of earshot, the straightness of Jaime's shoulders relaxed and he stepped closer until they were almost level, smirking at her. “I hope I wasn’t interrupting a stimulating conversation, Your Grace,” he inquired lightly.

Rhaenys gave an unladylike snort. “Only if you consider a heated debate on the girth of Lord Harry Hardyng’s sword as stimulating,” she muttered with disdain.

Jaime’s blonde eyebrows rose to his hairline. “I imagine the sword in question was not the one made by a blacksmith.”

She shot him a withering look, which had him chuckling under his breath. “I must say, your timing was impeccable, good Ser,” she jested, “I truly appreciate the Kingsguard in such moments.”

“That is what I train for, Your Grace,” Jaime responded drily. “Protecting the King from harm and saving princesses from insufferable teatime conversations. My lord father is incredibly proud.”

Rhaenys threw her head back in laughter. Jaime Lannister had always been her favourite amongst her father’s sworn shields. He had a cutting wit that she found refreshing amidst a sea of blind obedience and bland conversations. She could never understand why her brothers found him disrespectful, chalked it up to their fragile egos incapable of keeping up with the man. Moreover, Jaime had always been the youngest of the Kingsguard, just over a decade older than her. As a child, he was far less frightening than the others, slipping her sweets when no one was looking, and sometimes engaging in her games when the others were too busy. She held fond memories close to heart of him pretending to be Balerion the Black Dread and letting her sit on his shoulders and shriek in delight as he soared around the gardens. He would always pretend she wasn't yanking his hair too hard.

“Does my mother truly wish to see me, or was this all a ruse?” Rhaenys asked with amusement, as they rounded the corner towards nowhere in particular.

He grinned at her. “If she does, I was not made aware of it, Your Grace. But I did notice Lady Mallister had been in your company for over two hours and I thought it to be more than enough. Was I right?”

Rhaenys hummed in agreement. "You have no idea." She glanced around and recognised the
maroon tapestries adorning the walls, the golden threads dancing in the light of a dying summer sun. "Since we seem to already be at Mother's quarters, I suppose I'll drop by anyway. I do miss our afternoon talks," she mused wistfully.

With a bow from Jaime, they turned a corner and headed towards the gilded doors of the Queen's solar. Rhaenys' spirits rose the closer they approached, looking forward to the tongue lashing she knew her mother always had prepared for Lady Mallister's audacity. Standing guard was her great-uncle, Ser Lewyn, his steely composure cracking into a kind smile as she drew near.

"Uncle," she greeted brightly, leaning forward to plant a soft kiss on his dry cheek. "Is Mother awake?"

"My princess," Lewyn began gently, "perhaps now is not the best time." He nodded subtly towards the door with a raise of his eyebrows. Distinctly, she heard her mother's voice raising in volume, soaked in irritation. With a frown, she was about to retreat when something snapped her attention.

"My queen, if I may be so bold to suggest you could be overreacting," Lord Jon Connington sighed in exasperation, "and perhaps are projecting your anger at the King onto his son."

Aegon? Rhaenys thought curiously, leaning in. She ignored her great-uncle's disapproved tittering, though he did little to turn her away.

"Do not be presumptuous with me, my lord, I have little patience for your foolish worship of my husband," Elia snapped. "I am not angry at the boy. I am afraid for him. It is Lyanna and Rhaegar all over again. You think I do not know of the bond they shared?"

She heard the Hand's sharp intake of breath at the Stark daughter's name, as if a hand had reached out and squeezed his heart mercilessly. "That was...unfortunate, my queen," he murmured, almost too quietly for her to hear. "But what does that have to do with the girl and Prince Jon? Lyanna is gone, my queen. Whatever transpired between her and the King does not matter anymore."

Jon, they were discussing Jon. She leaned in further, her curiosity piquing higher, but almost jumped in surprise at the sudden sound of something slamming on a surface. She assumed it was her mother's hands on her desk. "This has everything to do with Jon and the girl," Elia hissed.

What girl?

"You have not been watching them, my lord. You did not see them at the opening feast. There is something between them, and I fear for what it could be. It is Harrenhal all over again. I saw the same look on Jon's face as I saw on Rhaegar's at the feast of that damned tourney. I will never forget it."

"They are blood, Your Grace. Perhaps you mistook a familial look?" Lord Connington tiredly offered.

"That does little to assure me. Blood and family have different connotations to Targaryens. My children are marrying each other, for Gods' sake."

Rhaenys winced at the bitterness in her voice. Her mother had never wholeheartedly approved of her betrothal to Aegon, but it was a matter Rhaegar refused to ever acquiesce. The Queen rarely voiced her disapproval now, so hearing it so blatantly was astounding, to say the least. In her discomfort, she missed Connington's remark, only catching the end of her mother's urging. "Eddard Stark's presence at the tourney is already more than I had ever hoped for. The North is finally at peace with us, we cannot afford to risk this fragile alliance."
"The girl is unbetrothed, is she not?" the Hand said, lightly. "If you fear they are bonded, then we can-"

Elia snorted, unkindly. "Tell me, my lord, how you think Lord Stark shall react to that? My husband's dalliance with Lyanna cost the man his entire family. I doubt very much he'd be willing to give away his youngest daughter to the ones responsible, especially not one with a resemblance to his dead sister," she continued, wryly.

"Lord Stark will do as his King commands. The marriage would be advantageous on all fronts: we could strengthen our ties to Winterfell, secure the Northern loyalty, and Jon is allowed to marry as his heart desires. Your fears of her ruining your House are put to rest."

"Oh please, Rhaegar's never given the boy anything his heart has desired, so that is hardly a reason," Elia dismissed. "You speak of advantageous matches and political gains, but the North is already bound to the crown. Jon is Lord Stark's kin, after all, and we have more pressing alliances we must strengthen. But there are other concerns, my lord, that you have not mentioned."

Her voice grew colder than Rhaenys could ever imagine possible. "Rhaegar does not intend for his son to live anywhere but at the Red Keep, and there is little that can be done to change his mind. Whoever Jon marries will remain here alongside him. Think, my lord, of the implications of such. Lyanna's ghost constantly around the King, the man who started a war for her pretty face. Or if Jon should disobey Rhaegar and take her elsewhere, like his father before him, how the North will rise once more to bring their daughter back. Either way, she must not be involved with any of them. I do not fear for what the girl will do, for it was not Lyanna that tore this realm apart, not truly. I fear for the madness of a Targaryen bonded to the one he cannot have. Whether it is the King or his son remains to be seen."

She heard the scraping of a chair, and imagined Lord Connington pacing on his feet. "His Grace is not some debased lunatic," he exclaimed, anger creeping into his voice. "He'd never lay a hand on the girl! My queen, how could you even think -"

"When he abandoned his pregnant wife to run away with another man's betrothed," her mother responded coolly. "That's how."

There was no response from the Hand, and Rhaenys' heart ached deeply with every beat of silence. Finally, a desperate whisper escaped from the man. "What do you suggest our next course of action be? If the Prince and the Lady have already met, then they may already be aware of their bond."

"Aware of it, but perhaps there is a chance to stop it growing stronger," her mother mused. "I must find a match for Jon immediately, and secure him to another House. You, my lord, must keep Lady Arya away from Jon and Rhaegar." Her tone grew darker. "If the Gods are kind to us, this blasted tourney will be over without incident, and she can return home and live her life free from the taint of dragons."

She heard the rustle of cloth and hesitant steps approach the door slowly, before pausing. "Jon has always done his duty," Lord Connington said, gently. "He is a good boy, my queen. Perhaps you need not fear for him as you do."

The last thing Rhaenys heard before she slipped away into the shadows, Jaime on her heels, was the melancholic mutter of her mother, "Love is the death of duty, my lord, and even the most noble of men have fallen to their hearts."
The solemn night wrapped a blanket of silence around the castle, but for the distant laughter of cold stars sparkling in the darkness. The moon rode across the sky in a chariot of pearls, its luminous blossoms attempting to brighten her heavy heart with little success. She watched it from the windows as she strolled slowly through the empty corridors, listening to the soft stillness of moonlight.

She had dismissed Ser Jaime over an hour ago, wishing to be left alone with her thoughts. The knight had been reluctant, but acquiesced nevertheless, to her relief. She needed time alone with her thoughts.

A pang of guilt crept its way through her heart. She hadn't meant to intrude on her mother's private conversations - although another part of her, buried deep where she allowed her more fanciful self to reside, simmered in frustration.

Jon had only ever expressed one desire in his almost one-and-twenty years of existence: to travel beyond the Red Keep. It was a simple wish, unproblematic and hardly unique. Many princes and kings before him had sailed from east to west, had slept under the stars and lived off the land. Even Aegon had travelled around Dorne with nothing but a sword and a horse, carving his name into the desert sands. Jon was young and unmarried and lacked the weight of a prospective crown. If ever he should follow his dreams, it was now.

What should have been a small obstacle standing in his way, was instead the King himself. Rhaenys had surmised years ago that Rhaegar's reluctance to let Jon out of his sight stemmed from the peculiar fear of losing what he had left of Lyanna. She always caught his wistful expression when Jon was not looking, and the sheen of sadness coating the violet eyes that followed her brother wherever he went. It inspired deep resentment in her heart, and she often was forced to bite her tongue to stop herself from snapping at the King.

Jon must know of it, too, though resisted voicing it aloud. She did not blame him. Who could live with the knowledge their father saw a ghost instead of a person? That he was bound to his side forever, or risked taking away that which Rhaegar held most dear? Rhaenys grew steadily weary of the day their father would push Jon beyond his limits, where he no longer cared for such questions nor of the weight of his existence. If that day came, she had little doubt her brother would board a boat and never return, ironically fulfilling both her father's fears and her own. She could not bear the thought of losing her brother, and Aegon would be devastated, deepening the chasm between himself and the King even more. The fragile threads that bound their disjointed family would crumble like wilted petals, and she dreaded what few pieces would remain to stitch it back together.

But the petals were already beginning to blacken. With her mother's decision to secure a betrothal sooner than later, it seemed Jon's fate was sealed in stone. It was not Lyanna's ghost she saw in Jon, but Rhaegar. But not just the man himself - the part of him that betrayed his duty for love and started a war. The absurdity of it all had her snort without humour. She knew of Lyanna and Rhaegar's story, and to think her pragmatic brother could somehow make the same mistakes of their father was ludicrous to her. What on earth was a bond anyway? To think one even could be bonded to another was a ridiculous notion best left to the fantastical songs of knights and lady loves.

Moreover, Lyanna and Rhaegar had been selfish. Lyanna and Rhaegar had not cared for the consequences. Jon was not like that. Jon could never be like that. To insinuate otherwise was a deep misunderstanding of just who Jon was.
You fear him abandoning you for his heart already. How is this any different? a cruel voice whispered in her head.

It was different. Travelling the Free Cities would not raise the banners of the North against her family. Jon would never risk his House's security, this Rhaenys was certain of. Her mother must be exaggerating. She simply had to.

She ignored the niggling whispers at the back of her skull saying otherwise.

Lost in her muses, she walked by an alcove and almost missed the small figure curled on the window seat. Rhaenys paused in bemusement that another would be around this late in the evening, but a quick look at the side of the girl's face had her swallow her words immediately.

The gods certainly have their japes.

Arya Stark had her forehead pressed against the glass, staring out in wonder at the city below. She was still dressed in the breeches and tunic Rhaenys had seen her in at the melee today, her wild curls falling in tangles down her back. Her eyes were turned away from the princess, and she deliberated at whether to interrupt her or not.

This is the girl my mother fears for so. The burning curiosity was simply too much to bear.

"My lady," she said gently, so as not to startle the other.

The girl whipped around suddenly, and Rhaenys was struck by how large her grey eyes were. "Your Grace!" Lady Arya exclaimed with surprise, stumbling off the ledge to clumsily curtsy.

The princess acknowledged her with a nod, and tried to smother her interest with a cool tone. "It's quite late. Struggling to sleep, my lady?"

Lady Arya shifted from foot to foot, biting her lip. "Not really," she admitted with a shrug. "I like the view from here is all. The city looks pretty at night."

"That it does," Rhaenys agreed. A thought spun in her head. "Perhaps I may join you? We can enjoy it together." She flashed her an encouraging smile.

Bemusement shone on Lady Arya's face, her lack of a mask painfully clear to the princess. "I...uh, alright," she said hesitantly, moving back towards the ledge.

She curled up to the side, allowing Rhaenys to perch delicately beside her, resting against the frame of the window. They sat in silence for a short while, watching the heart of the city beat below them. The Stark daughter had been right - King's Landing was a beauty in the darkness. A thousand lights spotted the landscape like a flurry of fallen stars, illuminating the long streets and pale yellow faces of its buildings, blank expressions flickering in the flames of its lanterns. Behind the window, the city was seemingly silent, a snapshot of heaven on earth filled with a myriad of souls she could not see. In truth, a harmony of voices rose above the landscape, filled with laughter and idle chatter that never ebbed away. King's Landing was a city of life, and sleep was for the dead or dying. It was breathtaking, if one stopped to consider it.

"It's so big," Lady Arya murmured absently next to her. "There's nothing in the North that comes even close to this size."

Rhaenys smiled softly at her wonder. "I suppose that is endearing in its own way. It is easy to be lost in a city this immense. You are one of half a million, after all."
Lady Arya shrugged. "That doesn't seem as bad as it sounds. It means the world's never too small, and that you'll find a place in it, somehow." Her voice was distance, immersed in her thoughts.

The princess used her distraction to observe the girl closely. She was pretty thing with pleasant features and soft curves, though Rhaenys had seen greater beauties. But there was something rather enchanting about her appearance that made it difficult to simply look away - perhaps in the wildness of her hair or the vibrant life thrumming in her stormy eyes. She reminded her of the stories of the forest and river nymphs: maidens crafted by nature by the breath of gods, who carried remnants of another world on their shoulders and in their souls. Creatures that did not belong in silk dresses, but in the wilderness with laughter on their lips instead of court gossip on their tongue.

*Lyanna Stark looked like her.*

For a heartbeat, she thought she understood what drew her father in the first place.

"Your Grace?"

She jolted awake to realise the nymph in question was watching her curiously, head cocked to one side.

"I beg your pardon, my lady, my thoughts were far away," she quickly explained with a chuckle.

Lady Arya's nose wrinkled softly at her words. "You can just call me Arya, Your Grace. There's no need for Lady."

"Arya," Rhaenys tested on her tongue, smiling. "Then you must call me Rhaenys - I insist!" she exclaimed, raising her hand to stop the other's protests. "I'd like us very much to be friends."

The Stark girl's face melted into one of shock, and she blurted out gracelessly, "But why?" Her eyes widened, mortified at the audacious question.

Rhaenys quickly cut in, attempting to smother the awkwardness. "You are kin to my brother, and I'd love to know his family more," she explained, with partial honesty.

*And what has my mother and Lord Connington so afraid for you.*

Arya said nothing in response, frowning gently before turning back to the window. Just as it had before, silence settled and hovered between them, eloquent and oddly comforting. It gave Rhaenys the opportunity to dwell a little longer on the girl sitting beside her. She had not noticed many interactions between Jon and her, but she hadn't been paying close enough attention. Jon hadn't mentioned the girl yet either, though she wondered if he was more likely to confide in Aegon than her. She hoped not. Her eyes roved over the side of Arya's face, tracing the outline of her nose and jaw with burning curiosity.

*The face that tore the realm apart.*

"Have you ever been in the city at night?" Arya mused, gazing at nowhere in particular. "Without a litter, just walking around the streets?"

Rhaenys was startled by the question. "Of course not," she muttered with a frown. "The worst of the city crawls out at this hour. It's hardly safe in the morning as it is."

"It's not that bad," Arya defended, her lips quirking upwards. "I met some incredibly lovely people today, and they weren't dangerous at all."
"You were in the city today?" Rhaenys asked, surprised. "Sightseeing?"

The subtle smile spread into a wide grin, lighting her face up like the lanterns floating outside. "Dancing, more like." Biting her lip to contain a giggle, she looked back out at the city.

The echo of a similar response from earlier that day rang through Rhaenys' head like bells in a citadel, and she narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the other girl. "How wonderful," she muttered, her thoughts flitting about like butterflies in spring. She joined Arya in looking out the window once more, but her eyes remained unfocused on the landscape, the twinkling lights melting into a golden sea. She stared at it absently, letting her mother's words wash over her like icy tides.

*Love is the death of duty, my lord, and even the most noble of men have fallen to their hearts.*

Perhaps it was time to start paying attention.

Chapter End Notes

Just as a side-note, I've been receiving threatening anons on another of my fics that have made me pretty uncomfortable. As a result, there was a small delay in the release of this chapter and I've disabled anonymous commenting on that specific fic. I do apologise since most people don't have accounts, but this is part of the reason why I choose to moderate reviews as well. It remains open on this fic, however.

I've decided that if my writing is what offends this anon so, the best revenge is to keep on doing it. So here I am! Hopefully won't take as long for the next chapter!
children from yesterday

Chapter Summary

Turns out, they have more in common than they thought.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so so much to everyone that reviewed and offered advice last time round. I've been a little busy so I'm a bit slow in responding, but I loved hearing what you all thought and I'm working my through answering each and every comment! <3

(also shout out to BriEva for leaving singlehandedly the most detailed political analysis of a fic I've ever seen, I loved reading it.)

Hope you all enjoy the update!

"I must beg your leave, my la- Arya, I'm afraid it's rather late," the Princess said finally, standing up from the window sill.

Arya bolted up immediately and fell into a quick curtsy. "Of course," she agreed, hoping the relief in her voice was not too evident. "Goodnight, Your Gra- Rhaenys."

The princess peered at her curiously, and she tried not to fidget under her intrusive gaze. "Are you not heading to bed yourself, Arya?" she asked innocuously, though there was suspicion simmering beneath the pleasant tone. "I'd be happy to escort you, your quarters are not too far from mine."

Arya was, in fact, not heading to bed any time soon. Rather, there was a dragon prince waiting for her somewhere in the castle, and she could feel his growing irritation at her tardiness creep inside her head like vines. Or a bothersome fly. The urge to shake her head to rid herself of the discomfort was overwhelming, but she swallowed it to plaster an expression of sincere wonder on her face. "Perhaps later. I think I'd like to sit here and see the city for a little longer," she said.

She found herself rather irritated that she was lying to a woman who, only moments earlier, extended a hand of friendship. It was not often that highborn ladies, let alone princesses, wanted her company, and Arya desperately didn't want to screw it up. She inwardly cursed the stupid bond and her promise to Jon to try breaking it tonight. It was inconvenient, to say the least.

Rhaenys arched a perfect black eyebrow, but seemed far too courteous to question her further. "Very well. I bid you goodnight." With a nod of her head, she gathered her skirts and disappeared around the corner, silks brushing against the marble floor like a whisper of a breath.

The faint scent of elderflower and bluebells lingered in the air, simple yet more delicate than the sweet summer that clung to Jon. Arya idly remembered how, earlier in the day, his fresh fragrance had announced his presence before he did, dancing under her nose like the crowds around them. It followed him around like a shadow, and she wondered if he doused himself in oils every morning to
make it so strong. That certainly explained it.

When a new bout of irritation burst through her head from the object of her muses and startled her, Arya chided herself for thinking of such absurdity. Rolling her eyes at Jon's impatience, she crept quietly out of the alcove and peered around. Once she was assured the coast was clear, she ran lightly down the corridor towards the courtyard, wincing softly at the pattering of her feet echoing around the blood-red walls. She threw a glance over her shoulder to check if any guard was following the commotion, when she was suddenly colliding with something rather solid and incredibly warm.

The force of the impact knocked them both off their feet, and Arya lifted her head with a string of apologies on her lips to catch the exasperated expression of Jon Targaryen glancing down at her.

"Maybe look where you're going next time?" he offered with a raised eyebrow, rubbing the back of his head that smacked the ground with a wince.

"I was looking," she huffed in embarrassment. "I just didn't hear you walk around the corner."

"No wonder," Jon snorted, "you were so loud, the entire castle's probably awake by now."

Arya opened her mouth to retort, when she quickly realised she was still lying on top of him, spread out on the floor. Warmth sank into her cheeks, and she scurried off gracelessly, putting as much distance between them as she could manage. Jon arched another eyebrow at her flustered face in an expression remarkably similar to the Princess, pulling himself up effortlessly and brushing dust off his tunic. A small smirk played on his lips, before disappearing as he asked, "Are you always going to be this late? I've been here for half an hour."

She shrugged. "I was waiting for your sister to leave first."

"My sister?" Jon repeated in surprise. "What on earth were you doing with my sister?"

The genuine shock in his voice rubbed her the wrong way, and Arya found herself growing defensive. Jutting out her chin, she glared up at him, "We were just talking. She wants to be my friend. Is that so hard to believe?"

Jon said nothing for a while, though Arya could sense his thoughts rattling about, debating on whether she was telling the truth or not. "I suppose not," he finally muttered. "She’s always been curious about the Starks."

Arya smiled. "I think she’s nice. I like her."

"So do I," Jon grinned. He glanced around the empty corridor before turning back to her. "We’re too exposed here, anyone can find us. I suggest we find somewhere quiet and relatively isolated from the castle." His mouth quirked upwards in secret laughter, and he winked at her. "I think I know just the place."

oOo

"Very funny," she muttered as they climbed down the steps. The cellar was much as it had been the first night, musky stale smells and flaming red torches casting dancing shadows on the stone walls. The floor was spotted with murky brown water, quivering at their disturbance as if awakened from a
long sleep. At the end, she glanced at the tunnels, black and taunting.

“As much as I know you love wandering around in the pitch darkness,” Jon jested, “I suggest we stay where there’s light.”

With a snort, Arya walked over to a spot near the centre and plonked herself down, little care for the dirty streaks smearing against her breeches. Crossing her legs, she looked over expectantly at Jon. He glanced dubiously at the wet floor, wrinkling his nose at the muddy pools.

"Must we sit?" he asked warily. "I'm pretty sure the water's infested."

She rolled her eyes. "This was your suggestion. You're welcome to stand, if you're so fussed." Under her breath, she muttered something along the lines of pampered princes, loud enough for him to hear.

Visibly affronted, he heaved a dramatic sigh and plopped himself down reluctantly in front of her, his face wrinkled in disgust. "Very well," he declared, straightening his back to assert his dignity as brown water stained his fine breeches. "Shall we begin?"

"We shall," Arya nodded with determination. "What do we know so far about this...um, thing between us?" She waved ambiguously between them. "Cassandra Reed's book mentioned sharing dreams, thoughts, and memories. I'm not sure about the former, but we've definitely experienced the latter. And it seems to come alive whenever we touch." Arya lifted her hand and glared at it accusingly, as if it somehow were betraying her.

Jon tapped a finger thoughtfully against his chin, his eyes locked on the flickering flames throwing the room in amber light. Distinctly, she could hear his gentle murmurs of 'I should tell her' drifting through the back of her mind.

Just as she was about to pester him to elaborate, he suddenly said, "It led me to you." His voice was quiet, almost disbelieving.

"What?"

His icy eyes shifted until they were boring into her own, bright with intensity. "Today, when I couldn't find you. I...I asked it to show me where you were," he continued, hesitantly.

Arya was still confused. "You asked what exactly?"

"The thread!" he exclaimed, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "I was desperate, I had no idea where you were, and I figured if we were somehow connected...it has to be useful for something," Jon explained, his cheeks growing crimson. He was looking anywhere but at her, embarrassment rolling off his skin in waves. 'It was a stupid idea,' came his quiet thoughts.

"It's not stupid," Arya said loudly, causing him to flick his eyes up in surprise. "It worked, didn't it? So it's not stupid." He smiled in appreciation at her - a nice smile, she thought, though it obviously had nothing to do with the sudden heat all over her face and neck. It was warm in the cellar, after all. Clearing her throat to mask her inane musings, she continued, "And it gives us something more to work with. Maybe this thread thing is what we should focus on? It seems to be at the very core of what binds us."

Jon hummed in interest. "It's always around whenever we're together. If we can cut the thread, we cut the connection."

He wasn't exaggerating. Even now, in the midst of conversation, Arya could still somehow sense the
strand of sunlight shimmering at the periphery of her consciousness, glowing soft enough not to draw
attention, but bright enough to remind her of its presence. It grew stronger if she focused, but evaded
her grasp whenever she mentally reached for it, slithering towards Jon lazily but with purpose. No
matter how hard she tried to pull it back, it was drawn towards him like a moth to a flame.

"Always a little different," she mumbled under her breath, transfixed by the sight.

The prince leaned in, confusing marring his face. "What?"

She did not hear him, so focused was she on the dancing thread inching closer and closer to Jon in
her vision.

“Arya, don’t do anything stupid,” Jon warned, staring at her in concern. “Tell me what’s
happening.”

“It wants me to follow it.”

"Follow it?" Jon repeated, bemused. “Follow it where?”

With a sigh, she tore her attention away to look at him properly. “To you, apparently.”

He hesitated, leaning further away from her as if physical distance could somehow deter the
connection. “I don’t like the sound of that. Let’s do something else. Maybe go back to the library.”

She rolled her eyes. “We’ve agreed the thread is the core of it all. Don’t you want to know more
about it?”

"I do, but—"

Arya ignored the rest of his sentence, choosing to turn back to the slithering thread. Something was
going to come out of this, she knew for sure, far more than whatever a book could tell them.
Tentatively, she reached out again, a madman chasing the sun, imagining her hand wrapping around
its gold silk.

Immediately, she was plunged into uncertainty. Caught between the peculiar feeling of both freezing
and burning, Arya opened her eyes to find herself locked in an empty landscape, a vast expanse in
which she stood alone. The world around her glowed snow white, stretching out eternally on either
side; an icy desert holding the entire universe in its grasp.

Looking around, Arya had another rather unpleasant surprise.

Instead of being locked in her own body, she found herself staring at it from the other side. She could
see herself cross legged, eyes closed, frozen in time.

*What are you doing here?* a frantic voice came from...everywhere.

Winding through her sight, the golden thread burned in triumph.

“Jon?” she whispered, glancing about.

*No, Azor Ahai. Who else do you think it is?* the voice snapped. *Would you kindly remove yourself
from my head please? It’s highly unpleasant.*

“Okay, okay, I’m going,” she muttered. She closed her eyes and willed herself back into her body,
opening them to see...
White.

Huffing in frustration, she tried again, this time mentally pushing herself away, much like she did back in the tunnels that very first time. When she felt no different, Arya peeked through her eyelashes about her surroundings, groaning in disappointment as the thread stretched above her tauntingly, bright as a star. “I don’t know how to,” she finally confessed in a small voice.

*I’m sorry, what? You mean you happily burrowed your way in here with no idea how to leave? Are you kidding me?*

”I was just following the thread!” she exclaimed defensively into the abyss. “Like you did!”

*That was entirely different. I was looking for you! You’re just being intrusive. I told you to stop following it. That’s it, I’m getting you out.*

Arya waited patiently as he fell into silence. She didn’t want to be here anymore than he did. All this white, all this emptiness, she felt unbearably alone. Gods, was this really what it was like inside his head? No wonder he was always grumpy.

She was dwelling on what her head would look like when Jon released a defeated groan.

*It’s not working. I think it’s the blasted connection, it’s stopping me.*

”So what, I’m trapped here?” Arya cried, throwing her metaphorical hands in the air. “I don’t want to be stuck here, it’s horrible!”

*My head is not horrible, thank you very much,* came Jon’s affronted voice. *I happen to enjoy spending time here.*

“No wonder you’re a ball of fun,” Arya muttered beneath her breath.

*I heard that.*

She was about to quip in return when her words were swallowed by a blinding burst from the thread above. Arya stared at in mute awe as it spasmed, possessed by unseen demons. It writhed in the air like a snake, flashing with golden light.

*What’s it doing? Make it stop!* Jon anxiously yelled at her.

She couldn’t if she tried. The thread was suddenly around her, inside her, wrapping itself around her body tightly. Embraced by sunlight, Arya could do nothing but struggle feebly in panic, with little success. As hysteria bubbled in her chest, a final burst of light overwhelmed her vision with gold and white.

And just as quickly as it came, everything vanished. From the void, a petulant voice jeered, “You’re not a real dragon!”

Tentatively opening her eyes, Arya muffled a yelp when she found herself suddenly surrounded by a small circle of people. On her one side stood a much younger Prince Aegon, perhaps no older than ten. In front of her, the King’s brother, Prince Viserys, whom she remembered seeing at the opening feast - but she had seen a man, where this was a boy in his teens. He had a sneer carved into his fine features, glaring at her with contempt swimming in his lilac eyes. When she glanced down, she groaned inwardly when she saw the body of a young boy. She was inside one of Jon’s memories again. Oh Gods.
They were standing in the palace gardens, shrubs blooming with a thousand flowers sprinkled around them like shattered fragments of a crystal rainbow. Above, the sky was painted in sapphire blue, streaks of white clouds brushed against the canvas. The sun sat in the middle like a drop of golden paint, the final touch of a masterpiece. It was unbearably warm, and Arya could feel the beads of sweat at the back of her - at the back of Jon’s neck.

“Shut up, Vis,” Aegon snapped in a childish voice next to her, glaring angrily at his uncle. “No one cares what you think.”

Prince Viserys scoffed. “You know I’m right. Rhaegar took pity and legitimized him, but he’s not any better than a bastard.”

“Shut up! I’m not a bastard!” a cry suddenly escaped from Arya’s, no, Jon’s lips. She could feel his resentment bubbling in his chest, burning as endless as the fiery sun above. Under it, however, simmered a fear like an endless ocean, threatening to consume her. She cringed away from it.

“Yes, you are,” Viserys insisted cruelly. “You’re the reason the kingdoms went to war in the first place. Your whore of a mother just couldn’t keep her legs closed-“

The rest of his words were swallowed in a screech as he was knocked to the ground by a fury in the form of an eight-year old prince. Arya watched helplessly as Jon flung his fists at his uncle, hitting him wherever he could. In the background, she distinctly heard Aegon yelling encouragement, throwing in the occasional kick where he saw fit.

The last thing Arya saw before the scene dissipated was a whirl of red silk skirts striding quickly towards them.

She blinked, and found herself in a solar of sorts, a room engulfed in flames. The walls were patterned with blazing orange suns seared into blood-red wood. Arya didn’t like it - she was a child of moons and starry nights, not burning skies and ambitious suns. Jon, she could feel, was distinctly uncomfortable as he shifted from foot to foot. To her left stood Aegon, his face white as he stared stubbornly at a spot on the floor.

“How could you be so stupid?” a regal voice demanded. She followed the sound to a tall, graceful woman with soft dark hair in ringlets falling down her back, sitting behind a large oak desk. Queen Elia looked so much like her daughter, Arya balked for a moment in confusion. But unlike Rhaenys, whose face was kind last time she’d seen it, the Queen was looking at both boys with unreserved anger.

“Attacking your uncle in the middle of the palace gardens,” Elia continued, glancing between them. “What on earth possessed you to act like such savages?”

“He was mocking Jon,” Aegon’s mumbled meekly. “He called him a bastard, and his mother a whore.”

Jon started nodding in agreement, but quickly stopped when Elia exclaimed, “Then you should have come to me immediately. I would have dealt with him accordingly. But engaging in violence means I am forced to punish the both of you as well. I should inform your father of this. Viserys certainly will.”

The princes snapped up in horror, and Arya shuddered at the shot of fear that prickled down her (Jon’s) spine. His heart was pounding against his chest, and she could hear his frantic panicked thoughts whirling around her.
‘He fears the King’s wrath,’ Arya observed with shock. She’d heard Jon criticize his father, but she never thought he was afraid of him. Arya could not imagine fearing one’s father - Ned Stark’s temper was cold and daunting, but she’d never seen it directed at her. Why, she could count on the fingers of one hand the times she’d even seen her father angry in the first place!

There was a small pause, before the silver prince stepped forward and pleaded with his mother, “Viserys will just lie as he always does, and Father will blow it out of proportion. Can’t we keep this from him? Please?” He stared at her imploringly as a swell of desperate hope thrummed through Jon.

Elia sighed deeply and closed her eyes, rubbing her forehead. A pang of guilt shot through Jon, and Arya distantly heard him think of the Queen’s health.

Finally, she drew a deep breath and regarded the princes with a stern gaze. “I won’t inform the King and I’ll keep Viserys away, but remember I grant you this leniency once, and once only. You are hereby confined to your chambers until I say otherwise. I suggest you take this time to dwell on your actions, for I will not be kind a second time. Is that understood?”

Their heads nodded so violently, Arya briefly wondered if they’d snap their necks off. As they turned on their heel, the Queen’s voice rang out one more, stopping them in their tracks. “Jon, remain behind.”


Elia regarded him almost fondly then, the edge of her mouth quirking faintly upwards. “Fear not, child. There’s something else I wish to discuss.”

Arya saw Jon’s hand quickly grab onto his brother’s wrist when the silver prince moved to protest again. “Go,” he whispered, “I’ll tell you about it later.”

With a regretful look, Aegon turned on his heel and stomped out the solar.

Jon’s heart was stuttering in his chest, and Arya felt waves of anxiety roll of his skin. She was confused. Why on earth was he left behind? It wasn’t Jon’s fault! What was there left to say?

“Take a seat, Jon,” the Queen offered, waving her hand towards a chair on the other side of the desk. Once he’d hesitantly lowered himself down, her eyes softened and she watched him for a minute. “Jon,” she chided softly, “I expected better. Engaging in violence is very unlike you.”

Jon had no response, but Arya sensed his turbulent thoughts. He seemed to hate disappointing her. “I’m sorry, Your Grace,” he mumbled, staring at his hands on his lap, but they curled into fists as he angrily remembered his uncle’s remarks. “He insulted my mother.”

“That was unacceptable, and I shall speak to him immediately,” Elia promised, a hint of disgust lining her voice. “That boy lacks manners. But you cannot let him affect you so. You know his words to be false.”

Jon’s mouth twisted, and he stubbornly stared at his hands in contempt. “He’s not the only one,” he sullenly confessed. “I’ve heard other people call me a bastard, too.” Tiny tears pricked the edges of his eyes and he furiously brushed them away.

"Look at me,” Elia’s gentle voice murmured. “Jon.”

Reluctantly, he took a deep breath and raised his head to meet brown eyes watching him sympathetically.
“Children are damaged most by the actions of their parents,” she mused sadly. “We forget how fragile you are, how easily you crack and shatter, until it’s too late and we’re left to pick up the pieces.”

Jon stared at her, bemused and utterly lost. “I don’t understand.”

The Queen reached over and gently clasped his cheek, looking intently into his eyes. “There is only so much I or your father can shield you from, but the world is far crueler to you than they are to your brother or sister. It’s true, I’m afraid,” she added at his protest. “It’s nothing against you personally, Jon, it’s nothing you’ve done. It’s just...” she trailed off hesitantly.

“Because of the war,” Jon finished for her emotionlessly, sounding oddly mature.

“I tell you this not to add weight to your shoulders, but so you may armour yourself with it. You cannot lash out every time. It will inspire far more vicious insults. Hold back and protect yourself with courtesy as your shield. Know your worth, and they can never hurt you,” Elia advised, before granting him a smile that did not reach her eyes. “It is what I do, and I am no stranger to court gossip.”

Jon pondered for a moment, a deep frown setting on his young face. After a moment’s silence, he finally asked, “Will it ever stop? The names and...and all of it?”

Elia regarded him regretfully, her gaze drifting to somewhere beyond. “No,” she said simply, sadness lining her tired face. “No, it never goes away.”

Before Arya could even begin to process the Queen’s words, she was violently yanked away, watching the scene vanish into nothingness like a breathless sigh. The backlash of the motion snapped her head against a very hard wall, and she blearily opened her eyes to see an older Jon glaring angrily at her from across the cellar.

Her head pounded like a thousand war drums, and she grasped at it, groaning.

”You shouldn’t have seen that,” Jon said quietly, his voice thrumming with fury and...shame? Yes, she could feel the buds of embarrassment blooming across his thoughts. His eyes flashed with emotion, spinning like thunderstorms in summer.

“I’m sorry!” Arya offered quickly - for either trespassing, or for the cruelty of men, or perhaps both. She hoped he could sense her sincerity through the connection. “I never meant to intrude like that, really. I won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

It had taken her by surprise, learning that a prince had to suffer through barbs and insults. Especially someone like Jon. Arya hadn’t met many princes in her life before Jon - none, in fact - but she had always imagined they’d be much like the stupid songs Sansa would always sing: gallant, arrogant idiots with more muscle than sense, who looked for damsels in distress to save and fawn over.

But Jon was...different. Like the songs, he gallantly saved helpless ladies from darkened tunnels and dancing crowds, but he wasn’t a complete stupid. At least, not all the time, Arya had to admit. He could be fun, too.

If someone like him could face such viciousness from the world - well, where on earth did that leave someone like her?

Jon’s face was white with annoyance as he responded tightly, “It doesn’t really matter what you meant to do or not, if someone still gets hurt anyway. I asked you to stop following the thread, but you refused. Everything could have been avoided if you’d just listened.”
His words struck a nerve in her heart, one that had been hammered ruthlessly for years by her mother, until it was stretched and fragile to the touch. So she scrambled to her feet and blurted out the first thing that came to mind, “Don’t flip this on me. I said I was sorry. Your idea was to go back to the stupid library so no, I didn’t listen. You’re overreacting.”

Jon snorted unkindly, and dragged himself up to be at her level. “Overreacting?” he repeated in disbelief. “How would you feel if a stranger learnt of your humiliation?”

“It wasn’t that bad-“ she started, hesitantly.

He moved so close, Arya could count the dark speckles floating in his stormy eyes, like crows flying in the wind. “Maybe not for you,” he interrupted, bitterly. “I wouldn’t expect a daughter of Ned Stark to understand what it’s like to be looked down by people in her own family. So spare me your pity, my lady.” With that, he took a step back and Arya found space to breathe once more.

She found her own ire, too. A humourless laugh escaped her lips, drawing Jon to a halt on his way towards the cellar steps. He looked over his shoulder to glance at her in question.

“You’re quick to accuse me of never understanding you, but you have no idea who I am,” she snapped at him.

Jon’s mouth twisted hesitantly, but he stubbornly insisted, “It’s not the same.”

“Fine,” she said simply. “Then let’s make ourselves even, shall we?” Striding towards him with purpose, she conjured up one of the memories she had locked away, a moment that she kept from creeping into her heart, lest it fester in the still-open wound that always lingered.

“What are you doing?” Jon asked in alarm as she approached, backing away. Arya sent a quick prayer that this would work, leaning forward to snatch Jon’s wrist with her bare hand.

Blinding white light washed over them as she forced the memory to surface.

"Horseface, Horseface, Arya has a Horseface!” Jeyne Poole chanted at her from behind a smug Sansa. “No one wants to marry a Horseface, you know.”

Arya scrunched her nose up stubbornly, hoping they couldn’t see her tears. “I don’t care! I won’t marry anyone!”

"You can have Hodor,” Sansa smirked. “He’s ugly and hairy like you are. Besides, he’s probably the only one that’ll take you,” she taunted. “I heard Mother say no respectable lord would ever want someone like you. No one wants a savage as their wife. They’ll just get a dog instead. It’ll bite less.”

“You’re lying!” Arya squeaked, though her heart sank like an anchor, filled with doubt. She didn’t particularly want to get married, but she liked to think the rejection would be on her side, not his.

“I heard it,” the redhead continued, a triumphant smile on her face. “You’re such a burden on Mother and Father, you know. Everything would be easier if you didn’t exist.”

The scene dissolved just as her younger self pushed her sister into a pool of mud with an angry yell.

A whirlwind of crystals shimmered in the air, piecing together to reveal an elegant stone chamber, at the centre of which stood a graceful woman with long, red hair. The spitting image of her sister. Sitting on the edge of the grand bed, his chin resting tiredly on hands, sat the Lord of Winterfell. A crack in their chamber door allowed a small Arya to peek through without notice.
“I can’t do this anymore, Ned,” her mother confessed in exasperation, pacing worriedly in front of her husband. “Arya is the most difficult of trials. I fear the day she comes of age and we must find a betrothal - what man would tolerate such behaviour?”

Her father sighed softly, and a pang of guilt shot through her small frame. “Cat, she’s a child. Let her be, she’ll grow up soon enough.”

“She attacked her sister!” her mother cried, throwing her hands in the air. “She’s hardly a child anymore, Ned. We can’t keep excusing her any longer!” Arya watched as she plopped down in defeat beside Lord Stark, and rested her head on his shoulder. “Why can’t she be more like Sansa?” she moaned. “Gods, I wish she was. Maybe then everything wouldn’t be so difficult.”

Ned patted her hand sympathetically, and Arya bolted from the room to hide somewhere until supper, tears brimming in her eyes and spilling down her cheeks.

Jon snatched his hand back with a gasp and recoiled sharply from her, resting against the opposite wall. Panting, his eyes snapped up at her, wide and clear like crystal dewdrops. He was staring at her openly, and Arya caught snippets of his confused thoughts attempting to process what he’d just seen.

She had the sudden urge to flee, much like she had in the memory. To find somewhere to hide where she didn’t feel so vulnerable anymore, somewhere she could lick her freshly opened wounds. There was something intrusive in Jon’s watchful gaze that had her shifting uncomfortably where she stood.

“It’s late,” she said suddenly, choosing to look at a dripping spot on the ceiling than see any hints of sympathy on the stupid prince’s face. “I guess we’re done here. Good evening, Your Grace,” she muttered stiffly, walking past him to climb the steps. He said nothing as she slipped through the door, his thoughts murky like a fog at the back of her head, turbulent but indistinct.

The golden thread shimmered through the mist, however, painfully bright and unabashed for all the trouble it had caused. She wanted to throw something at it, but given that impossibility, she chose to mentally glare at it instead.

And for a moment, Arya could have sworn it felt triumphant.
The rose afternoon sky melted into an inky black, streaks of red and blue fading into deeper shades of night. The wind rustled Jon's hair with a sigh of exhilaration; a cool breeze against a sore neck that had sat stiff for over two hours. Music blared into the summer evening, weaving through the crowd as they cheered in celebration. The melee had finally drawn to an end, Dickon Tarly gaining a narrow victory over Harry Hardyng, to the delight of many ladies in the audience.

Sitting in the shrouded privacy of the royal stands, Jon watched the champion strut through the makeshift grounds, head held comically high as he winked and waved at fawning fans. At one point, he even leaned down to plant a kiss on the forehead of an offered baby. Jon rolled his eyes as Aegon groaned derisively beside him. "Gods, have you ever seen a bigger wanker?" his brother muttered to him under his breath, shaking his head. He stopped when he caught Jon's pointed look and nudged him with his shoulder. "Shut up, I'm not that bad," he protested.

Jon snorted, a smile playing on his lips. "Oh no, you're a million times worse. Admit it, you're just irritated Tarly's getting more attention than you today. Your betrothed seems to be enjoying the sight."

The brothers leaned forward to look across the dais at their sister. Rhaenys eyes were fixed unblinkingly on Dickon Tarly, raking over his figure in appreciation.

Aegon huffed in disbelief and threw himself back in his seat dramatically. "The melee isn't that
"difficult," he grumbled. "Any sod with a sword and a pinch of skill could win. The joust is what people are actually here for, you know."

"Well, in that case," Jon responded with a playful knock on his shoulder, "you may as well grow used to watching the victor from the shadows, brother, since you're never going to win the joust. Not while I'm in it, anyway."

The silver prince shot him a feral smirk, amusement dancing in the violets of his eyes. "Is that a bet, I hear? Twenty gold dragons say I sweep the floor with everyone."

"Fifty that you won't even make it to the final round."

"One hundred that you won't even make it past the first round."

"Two hundred if you knock me off my horse. Take it or leave it."

Aegon's eyes widened. "You're mad." He pondered for a moment, before sticking his hand out. "But who am I to get in the way of a man so desperate to empty his pockets? Consider it a deal."

Jon beamed, soaking in the image of his best friend grinning wildly at him, excitement and cheer hanging around him like dew drops. He'd shorn off most of his hair before the tourney started, leaving silvery strands barely brushing the nape of his neck and his forehead. It made him look impossibly younger. For a moment, Jon could imagine he was three-and-ten, freshly discovering the world and all its possibilities, instead of two-and-twenty with an impending family of his own.

Sometimes he wondered how alarmingly calm Rhaenys and Aegon seemed to be about their wedding, but he'd never dare voice it aloud. He had no intention of tickling a sleeping dragon. Or two, in this case.

Ignoring his dawdling thoughts, Jon's smile grew into a short burst of laughter. "I'll be a rich man by the end of this tourney, at your courtesy."

Aegon stuck his tongue out childishly at him as they stood to follow the rest of their family down the dais, quickly schooling his face when the Queen shot a disapproving look at his antics. Jon chuckled under his breath again. Two hundred gold dragons would easily buy him the sword he'd been eyeing at Tobho Mott's shop some moons ago, but had been unwilling to spend the money for. It would be, by far, the easiest bet he'd ever win against his brother. Jon knew there was no possibility he could beat the Crown Prince in a joust, not with the whole world watching. It was never a question of skill, but appearance. The crowds were here to watch Aegon win, not the spare prince they had no love for. At least he'd get another new sword out of it, with change to spare.

They were the last pair to descend the steps of the dais. Aegon shoved his hands deep in his pockets as he sauntered to the ground. "You know, Jon, it's been forever since we've had a little wicked fun," he said over his shoulder. "What do you say we celebrate today properly? You, me, the other lads, and the finest institute the city has to offer!" At the foot of the steps, he whipped around and opened his arms theatrically, as if offering the world.

Jon paused, still at the top of the steps, and narrowed his eyes at the smiling man below. "Are we speaking of your definition of a fine institute, or something appealing to anyone with an ounce of self-respect?"

His brother shot him an exasperated look. "Well, given your preferred form of entertainment is sulking in a corner and pouting about the tragedy of your existence, my definition won't bore everyone to tears."
Jon remained standing on the dais, narrowing his eyes at the prince. The 'fine institute' in question was Chataya's, the upscale brothel that sat proudly on Rhaenys' Hill: a rose that flaunted in the sunlight, but with roots entrenched in shadow and mystery. Popular with the wealthy and the wanton, Jon had only ever visited once when he'd slipped into the city through the sewers with Aegon. That had been almost seven years ago, and the wide-eyed and naive child he'd been had assumed it was a fancy inn run by pretty girls.

It had been a shock when he'd learned otherwise.

"Egg, we're not going to a brothel."

The smile slipped from Aegon's face suddenly. "Why not?" he whined petulantly.

Jon sighed. "Because I'm not spending our first proper evening out in over six moons with you abandoning me for a whore," he proclaimed fiercely, crossing his arms over his chest. "You know that's what will happen."

His brother pouted at him, before shrugging in acquiescence. "If you insist. We'll head towards our old spot on Rhaenys' Hill with some bottles of wine."

Jon blinked in surprise. He hadn't expected him to relent so easily.

"And then we'll visit the brothel!"

There it was.

Aegon grinned up at Jon before turning on his heel. "Meet me at the King's Gate in fifteen minutes! And bring anyone you find!" he called back, whistling as he strolled away. Two Kingsguards trailed in his wake, the wave of lords and ladies shuffling back to the city parting at the seams to let him through.

He considered excusing himself, but it was a half-hearted thought at best. Aegon was right - it had been too long since they'd properly spent time as brothers. As loathed as he was to share his company with courtesans and other lords, it was better than not seeing him at all. At the very least, part of the evening would be spent in good company and fine wine. Gods knew he needed a good break, particularly after recent events.

The reminder of his still incredibly-present problem throbbed like a thorn at his side. He lifted his head to peer around the crowd, searching for the source of his troubles. It had been three days since Arya had stormed away, leaving him alone in the basement gaping after her. Immediately after their disastrous encounter, Jon had felt like an absolute idiot. He knew, deep down, it hadn't been her fault that she'd seen one of his most private memories. He had been stupidly defensive, still so unsettled about their connection and needing a reason to lash out. After the sensitive scene she had shown him, Jon had felt even worse.

It had never occurred to him that Arya would have had any issues fitting in, least not with her own family. There was a magnetism about her, in her raw honesty of who she was, that captured the attention of anyone standing near her. Jon had imagined she formed friendships as easily as breathing, something he'd never quite managed himself. He remembered the day they'd danced in the square, when she'd been surrounded by all the different patchworks of society: belonging, as if she were simply the missing thread binding them together. It was enviable but admirable, and he'd never spared a consideration that anyone would see any differently.

It was stupidly naive of him to assume anything about her. Arya was anything but predictable. He'd
wanted to apologise the following morning, but she had seen fit to ignore him at every turn. It was obvious she was avoiding him, and with the final days of the melee, his attention was diverted towards his family and other duties. There hadn't been many opportunities to seek her out and fix his mistake. He had even tried reaching through the connection, as ridiculous as that felt, muttering apologies to the whispering presence with no idea if she could hear him or not.

What he received from his efforts was complete silence, albeit a flicker of consciousness shimmering incessantly at the back of his skull.

But after three days, Jon was growing tense. They had learned next to nothing about how to solve their predicament, and with the joust beginning in a couple days, their time together was running out. He didn't want to think about what would happen if she left King's Landing without breaking the bond.

Idly, he glanced over the moving crowds, letting his eyes wander. Almost immediately, he found himself drawn to a lithe figure wrapped in grey breeches walking along the edge of the arena, a familiar sweep of dark hair brushing down her shoulders. Arya's long face was lit with humour as she chattered eagerly with her red-haired brother. Jon couldn't help but let his attention linger. She laughed easily, carelessly, utterly ignorant - or uncaring - of how inelegant it may appear. And she certainly attracted several disdainful looks as she bent over, breathlessly giggling and clutching at the other Stark. Jon didn't know many ladies who were so generous with their emotions. Elia and Rhaenys were perfectly restrained in public, and graceful and controlled in private, much like most of the women he'd known growing up.

It made Arya a rather intriguing sight, like a sunset sky: a blaze of colour and warmth, a thousand different strokes waiting to be discovered, if one only looked long enough.

"Your Grace?"

With a jolt, Jon tore his eyes away from the Stark girl to see Jaime Lannister watching him from the bottom step. One blonde eyebrow was cocked knowingly, a smirk playing on his lips. "I hope I wasn't disturbing you, Your Grace, but Prince Aegon sent me to ensure you were escorted promptly to the King's Gate."

A blush rose in his cheeks, and Jon hoped the other man hadn't seen him gawking at Arya so blatantly. Jaime was already far too perceptive for his own good, always acting as if he knew something that no one else had quite figured out yet. It annoyed Jon more than it should.

"I'm fine," he quickly said, descending down the steps, "just...surveying the crowds." He cleared his throat, gathered himself up and plastered a smile to hide his awkwardness. "I suppose my brother is worried I'll abandon him this evening. Wouldn't want to leave him fretting for too long." Turning on his heel, he started walking briskly away, his face in flames.

King's Landing stretched out below them like an endless sea of mosaics and stars. On the surface, it rippled with life, a sea of colours and stories under one's fingertips. An alluring facade that cloaked its blackened heart and dying embers, enticing the world around it with temptations of glory. Some, it simply swallowed whole; others it drowned slowly and agonisingly; a few it favoured and rode them high on its waves of fortune - until they, too, were taken under its inky darkness.
Jon idly wondered which fate had befallen him, whether he was sinking deeper into its depth, or still somehow floating above in a deteriorating lifeboat. Either way, he ended up at the bottom of the sea. It was a morbid idea, more than he was normally accustomed to. He frowned into his goblet. Perhaps the wine was stronger than he thought.

He leaned back to rest on his elbows and stretch his legs on the grass. A small fire sat blazing in the centre of their little gathering, throwing shadows across the faces of the lords lounging around it. It was one of Jon's favourite spots - along the slope of Rhaenys' Hill with a cloister of trees and rocks at their back hiding them from the main path. With the stars above and the city below, it was easy to imagine yourself lost in another world, suspended between planes. He'd discovered it years ago with Aegon during one of their trips, and it had become their spot ever since, though Aegon slowly stopped coming, long before his move to Dragonstone. Jon still came, however: his own personal refuge when he needed a break from the Red Keep.

"Oh, come off it, Harry. Quit being a sore loser. It was a fair fight and you know it!" came the boisterous voice of Dickon Tarly, catching Jon's attention. He glanced over to his right to see the heir to Horn Hill flaunting his feathers at the sour-faced Hardyng sitting beside him.

Harry glared daggers at Dickon's dimpled smile. "You kicked me in the nuts, you wanker," he hissed back. "That's an illegal move!"

"I did no such thing. Your nuts got in the way of my foot. That's hardly my fault."

"Your face is about to get in the way of my foot, you cheating son of a-"

"That's quite enough, lads," Aegon cut in loudly from his sprawled position on the grass, one hand wrapped around an entire bottle of wine, the other propping his head up. He arched a pale silvery eyebrow at Dickon and Harry. "I have no desire to hear you two bicker for the rest of the night. Settle it on the jousting grounds if you must, but you're boring me at the moment so do shut up."

The jaws of both lords snapped shut with an audible click.

"Damn, I was hoping Harry would sock Dickon's face off," Edric whispered in disappointment beside him, taking a swing from his glass. "The pompous prick has been irritating me all night."

Jon snickered.

Out of all the lords whose company Jon could tolerate, it was Edric Dayne who came close enough to call friend. The nephew of the esteemed Ser Arthur Dayne, he looked almost identical to his famous relative: brilliant smiles under a thick mane of almost Targaryen-white hair, with more honour in their little finger than half of the royal court put together. Aegon found him as stimulating as a plank of wood but endured him for the sake of the King's friendship with his uncle.

Jon, however, rather enjoyed his presence. He was far more fastidious than other lords, finding more pleasure with a sword in his hand than a woman in his bed, and it was because of such that their own friendship was born. There was an authenticity to the Dornishman that Jon appreciated, a kind heart that hid no malice for others. Too simple for his brother, but a welcome change from the snakes at court for Jon.

Edric's neat blonde hair was tousled over his forehead, spots of red painted across his cheeks as he finished off his glass in one chug. Reaching for more alcohol, his white tunic slipped upwards from his breeches, crumpling as he lounged back against a rock. A far cry from the poised knight he often strived to emulate.
The group sat in companionable silence, draining the Dornish wine as they watched the glittering lights in the distance. Jon had considered getting roaring drunk at the start, but Arya's presence fluttering about in his head had reluctantly changed his mind. Drinking always loosened his tongue and his thoughts, and having someone privy to the latter took the appeal right out of it. So he'd sipped at the same glass of wine for the last hour, while everyone sought to drown themselves in drink.

"I say, how long has it been anyway? Since we've all been together?" Edric suddenly asked aloud in a slurred voice, drawing their attention. "Feels like bloody years."

Harry idly scratched his cheek as he pondered. "Probably. Dickon's finally grown into his ears so you know it's been a long time." He smirked cheekily at the other man.

"I've grown into more than that," Dickon responded, ignoring the barb and grinning around the fire. "Got married about three moons ago. She's already with child."

Aegon spluttered into his cup and rolled until he was sitting on his haunches, gaping unabashedly at the Tarly boy. "You're going to be a father? Aren't you absolutely shitting yourself?" he blurted in horror.

"Not really," Dickon rebuffed with a blush. "I feel...ready, in a way. Because of her. I want to start a family with her." A dreamy smile graced his pale face. "I miss her when she isn't around. She's really the only one that knows me better than anyone. It's - well, it's rather nice to have an other half."

There was a collective groan around the group. "If you break into song, I will kick you in the nuts," muttered Harry with disdain. Dickon shoved his shoulder.

Aegon peered at Tarly with an almost detached curiosity dancing in his eyes. Jon would have asked him more about it had he not been lost in his own thoughts.

The news of Dickon's recent nuptials nor impending fatherhood hadn't really fazed him. If anything, it inspired an uncomfortable lump in his stomach at the thought.

He hadn't forgotten his father's promise to find him a bride by the end of the tourney. With all the drama with the bond and the melee, Jon could almost have ignored it - but the panic raised its ugly head in his chest again.

An other half. Someone who would know him better than anyone else. It seemed so far-fetched an idea, Jon was tempted to laugh if it wasn't so tragic. For surely, if this other half knew him so well, she'd know just how intensely repelled he was at the very notion of being trapped. In the Red Keep, in a marriage he wasn't ready for, in a life he did not want. And if she knew, well then, would she simply tolerate it? Would she still try to love him anyway, knowing a part of him would always begrudge her for being his chain? Would she resent him as much as he'd resent her?

Jon hoped it would never come to the latter. He'd never admitted it to anyone, but he'd always maintained a sliver of hope that he could have a loving marriage. He'd always known he'd have to marry one day, and when he was younger, he'd dreamed that she'd be beautiful and highborn and her eyes would be filled with laughter. It was a stupid dream, but he still remembered it from time to time.

A glimmer of life from the back of his head reminded him he wasn't alone. His rambling thoughts quickly dissipated, smoothing into a blank canvas. The reminder that she quite possibly had heard all his musings had him cringing into his cup. So much for not getting drunk and embarrassing himself.
"What about you, Your Grace?" Edric voice dragged him from his reverie, and he glanced over to see the Dornishman watching Aegon curiously.

His brother paused, bottle almost at his lips, and narrowed his eyes. "What about me?" he asked, his voice lined with irritation.

Edric shifted uncomfortably under the prince's intense gaze. "I-I just wanted to ask how you feel about your wedding?" he stammered. "Nervous?"

Aegon threw back his head and finished the rest of the wine in one swig. With a grimace, he shrugged nonchalantly. "It's a formality," he muttered, his eyes trained on the dancing flames. "Rhaenys is hardly a stranger, and we already live together. There are no surprises. I doubt a wedding will change very much." He moved to lie on his back and stare at the sky.

Jon frowned at his words. He opened his mouth to suggest otherwise when he found himself the centre of everyone's attention.

"What?" he asked, bemused.

Edric grinned at him, his lithe Dornish accent stronger in his intoxication. "You're the ladies' last chance at being a princess, mate. I'm surprised you haven't already been tackled by a Frey yet. Everyone knows how desperate they are for a little royal attention."

"Bet you like that sort of thing," Harry winked at Jon, who responded with an eye-roll. "It's always the quiet ones that are the strangest in bed. Jon probably has the wildest stories out of all of us."

"Please. He's never met a girl he likes better than his own hair," Aegon snorted, reaching for the next bottle. "If my darling brother loses his maidenhood before his wedding night, I'll throw a celebration across all seven kingdoms."

Jon narrowed his eyes at the chuckling men. "I'm glad my sex life provides you with such entertainment," he grumbled, filling his glass. If he had to tolerate these wankers, he needed more wine, bond be damned.

"Non-existent," his brother corrected lightly. Jon lobbed a wine corker at his smiling face.

The light mood lingered around the five men, threading through their idle conversations and bright laughter. Their cheeks were flushed, their hair was tousled, and the deep blues of the evening sky stole into the inky darkness of night. It was an easy distraction, a momentary relief from the world that Jon had missed. But it wasn't enough.

That lump in his stomach from the all the marriage talk had grown into a stifling weight that he felt in his bones. He was sinking into one of his 'Jon-moods' as Rhaenys had named it, where he'd wander off in his own head for sometimes hours at a time. It usually culminated in Aegon bursting into his room and throwing pillows at him until he told him he felt better, or Rhaenys strolling in calmly with a plate of his favourite desserts. While they were at Dragonstone, however, Jon tended to either take his frustrations out on the training dummy with his sword or by falling asleep until he forgot what it was he was supposed to be fretting about. The latter seemed most appealing at the moment.

"By the Gods, have we been here this long?" Harry exclaimed, looking up at the darkened sky. "Do we open another bottle? Or shall we start heading towards Chataya's? All that talk of weddings and marriage does increase a man's appetite for debauchery."

Well, he supposed that was his cue.
"I think this it for me," Jon announced quietly, setting his goblet down and moving to his feet. "I'll just head back to the palace."

Aegon looked up sharply and stared at Jon's face intently. He shifted under the attention. "It's still early," his brother protested. "We can stay here as long as you want, and forget about Chataya's."

His eyes were scrutinising him, reading his thoughts. There was an unspoken question of are you alright? Jon was touched he'd sacrifice whoring on his behalf, but he didn't want to drag the entire party down because of his own moods. They already thought he was the boring prince, anyway.

He shook his head, giving Aegon a tight smile. "I'm just tired," he half-lied, rubbing a hand over his face for emphasis. "I'll hardly be any fun in this state. Enjoy the rest of your evening." He walked away, their murmurs of goodnight a shadow in his step.

Jon had almost reached his horse when his arm was grabbed in a firm grip, turning to see Aegon's concerned face. In the darkness, the violets of his eyes slipped into twin pools of black, making his face even more pale under the moonlight.

"You're not happy," he said. It wasn't a question.

Jon's mouth twisted, and he shrugged. "I'm fine, Egg. Just want to crawl into bed. Nothing to worry about. Go on, have fun with the others."

Aegon rocked back on his heels and regarded him suspiciously. "Aren't you supposed to lecture me? Encouraging me to enjoy my whoring is very unlike you, brother mine."

"Then I hope you get your cock trapped in your breeches and disappoint everyone with your lacklustre performance."

"There it is," the silver prince grinned. A beat later, his smiled disappeared and concern graced his elegant features once more. "I don't mind going home with you, if there's something on your mind. We'll sneak some dessert from the kitchens and hide away on the roof. Like the good old times."

Tendrils of affection unfurled in Jon's chest at his words, warming his heart. He was painfully reminded of how much he was going to miss his older brother and best friend when he was gone.

He shot a genuine smile at Aegon, and shook his head. As much as he'd love to revisit their glory days, the exhaustion from the day was settling in. "And have you mother hen me all night?" he jested. "Perish the thought. I'll see you in the morning. Do be sure to remember all your drunken idiocies and tell me about it later."

Aegon frowned briefly, before acquiescing with a nod and a grin. "As if I could keep anything hidden from you, brother."

oOo

Jon had barely registered he'd reached his chambers until he'd half-haphazardly discarded all his clothes and thrown himself on the bed. With a sigh, he rolled on his back and stared at the ceiling.

He'd always loved his room. It was his space, his refuge. He found solace in its sparsity, an immediate relief from the chaos of the rest of the palace. Instead of angry maroon and snarling dragons, his bedroom enraptured a quieter spirit, something straight from the heart of winter. The
walls were a soft charcoal grey, the shade of thunderstorms and ashes: light, ready to be blown towards a salty sea. The furnishings were pale marble and white silks, like clouds drifting through a darkening sky. It was the North captured in colours, ice and wolves howling in every stroke.

It reminded him that he was part of something else, something wilder and untamed and so very far from the Red Keep. His eyes traced idly over the blank walls, finding patterns in the paint that shifted with every blink. Rhaenys and Aegon found the barrenness oppressive, their own chambers dazzled in reds and suns and dragons. How they slept under such mayhem was beyond him.

His thoughts shifted fondly towards his brother. For all their arguments, Aegon had always helped him through his 'Jon-moods,' ever since they were children. He hadn't forgotten the first time he'd found himself trapped in despairing thoughts at the tender age of seven, locked in his room and panicking about one thing or another. Aegon had stormed in like a whirlwind of stubbornness and barely-contained energy, dragging him off to the training grounds to whack at a post with sticks. After that, they'd crept into the kitchens and stolen entire plates of strawberry tarts prepared for the Tyrell visiting party later that evening. As he recalled, they'd never ended up attending, spending hours guzzling down the desserts and hiding away at the top of the palace. The Queen had sent three Kingsguards to look for them and had been out of her mind with worry when no one could find them. They'd only been discovered when Aegon threw up over the side of the roof from all the tarts he'd eaten, hitting Mace Tyrell squarely on the head as he walked out the gates. They were both banned from desserts for an entire moon.

Jon laughed quietly to himself at the memory, remembering Lord Tyrell's horrified face at the red-tinged mess caking his head. It lightened the pit in his stomach indefinitely.

'Is that Mace Tyrell? He looks like a sack of potatoes.'

Her voice was so loud and clear in his head, Jon jolted up to stare around his room in shock. Realising he was alone, he sighed softly.

'Arya,' he sent to her, 'shouldn't you be asleep? It's late.'

He could practically hear the snort vibrating through the connection.

'I would, if you were quieter,' she threw back. 'It's so hard trying to ignore you.'

Jon grimaced. He'd been so engrossed in his own thoughts, he'd forgotten she was there. A flash of horror shot through him.

Bollocks, how long had she been listening?

There was a dead silence from the other side, and Jon could feel her hesitating before confessing, 'All evening.' Her voice quickly turned defensive. 'But I didn't mean to, I swear! You were just so loud and I tried not to think either so I wouldn't disturb you and -'

'Arya.'

'- honestly, it's absolute murder trying to be quiet in your own head. I mean, how do you even -'

'Arya!'

She trailed off sheepishly at his yell, or, well, as much of a yell as a mental voice could get, really. Jon hadn't quite figured out the logistics of this method of communication yet, so he treated it much as he would if she were standing before him. It seemed to work so far.

'I'm not mad,' he told her quietly, realising it was true. He wasn't. It was his mistake to let his mind roam so freely, not hers. She couldn't control how much passed through the connection as much he
could. There was little point dwelling on the embarrassment of it all.

'I...really?' she asked incredulously, unsure.

'Yes, really. Just...forget what you heard. I'll shut up now, I promise.' With that, he threw back the covers of his bed and crawled in, cocooning himself in its warmth. Exhaustion weighed in his bones like lead, and he wanted nothing more than to throw the duvet over his head and forget the world for a few blissful hours.

Arya, it seemed, had other plans. Her presence still flickered in his skull, agitated and bright like flames. She was thinking hard, he could feel it, and it was niggling at her as incessantly as it was him.

With a suffering sigh, he took the bait. 'What's wrong now?'

'I never considered that boys would be afraid of being married as well,' she said bluntly with a hint of embarrassment. 'I thought...I thought it was just girls that had to give up everything.'

His mouth twisted, and he opened his eyes to stare at the ceiling. There was genuine surprise radiating from her, as if the whole concept simply baffled her.

'Yes, well, now you know,' he replied shortly. When she didn't respond immediately, he took that to mean she'd finished the conversation. Jon rolled over and pressed his face against the pillow, trying incredibly hard to avoid falling down the empty pit tearing his insides open.

Seconds or minutes or hours seem to tick by before Arya shattered the silence. Her deliberations had been quiet but unrelenting, as if she were waging an internal battle to say something or not. Jon could just about grasp what it was she was fretting about, until she finally whispered, 'I don't want to be married, either. I'm...terrified of it, actually.'

Jon was lost, his mind blank as snow. Arya's words threw him off-balance by the sincere honesty behind them, and he wasn't sure how she wanted him to respond. It was a matter of trust, and she was testing the waters. Somehow, he really did not wish to disappoint her, so he edged carefully forward with, 'Why?'

She gave a humourless laugh. 'For the same reasons as you. I don't want a cage. I don't want to sit at home and birth a thousand children and just do my duty. It's a horrible way to live.'

'A thousand children does seem a little excessive. That's your own personal army right there.'

Arya giggled, and it bloomed across the connection like doves in spring. 'When you put it that way, it doesn't seem so bad. Having my own army would mean I could do whatever I want.'

'Should I be alerting the King that we have a possible insurgent on our hands?' he teased. 'Arya Stark and her thousand wolf pups, threatening our centuries-old dynasty. You did want to be remembered for slaying a dragon, as I recall, though there are worse ways to go than being smothered by a thousand children aiming for your nuts.'

Jon grinned into the darkness as her soft giggles melted into unreserved laughter. The lump in his stomach seemed to shrink with every moment swept in her mirth, and he felt he could breathe a little more freely, the weight no longer pressing down on him so relentlessly.

Their chuckles faded slowly, until a comforting quietness stretched out between them. For the first time, Jon didn't mind not being alone in his head. It was easier to jest with her and distract himself from his black thoughts than it usually was with Rhaenys or Aegon. Perhaps it was the night sky
spilling through his window, weaving an intimate web that felt unbreakable under the moonlight. In the darkness, it was difficult to raise his barriers, particularly when she could see right through them anyway. Maybe this was why the vice of men was so prominent at night. It was a time for secrets, and the lack thereof.

He was seized by a moment of madness, lulled into security by the comfort of his bed and in the stillness of the world, blurring out, 'Would you ever run away? Just...leave everything behind and go on all the adventures you've dreamed about?'

Arya was quiet - too quiet, her thoughts shifting too quickly for him to make out - so Jon waited with bated breath. With every heartbeat, the weight of her answer grew heavier, saturating the air between them. He was on the cusp of apologising for asking such a ridiculous question when she finally responded, 'No.'

He released a sigh, surprised by the disappointment spreading in his chest. A part of him was hoping she'd validate his quietest, darkest dream - that he wasn't terrible for thinking it.

Apparently I am, he thought morosely.

'I mean...I couldn't just walk away like that,' she hurriedly explained, sensing his chagrin. He could feel her floundering, her thoughts jumbled in flashes of her family's faces and an overwhelming fear of failing them. Lord Stark's face was the most prominent, his kind grey eyes appraising her with a warm smile. A moment later, the noble face of the Warden shrivelled in pain, regret sinking into his silver eyes until it was almost unbearable to look at. 'I couldn't do that to him,' Arya added finally, with a touch of ferocity. The lone wolf dies, but the pack survives. I can't just abandon everyone and everything.'

'You'd sacrifice your dreams for your family? For duty?'

'I'd find a way to make them see, to make them understand,' she threw back, passion filling her voice. There was doubt there, too, lining her words with a touch of fear. They're my family, my pack. They...they'd want me to be happy. Right?'

She ended on a question, for which Jon had no clear answer. He fell silent, staring at abstract shapes in the blank paint of his ceiling.

'You're not terrible for thinking about it,' Arya whispered to him, comfortably. 'I...I've sometimes thought about it, too.'

'Then maybe we're both just terrible people,' he lamented, prompting a burst of laughter from her. He waited until she'd stopped before finally saying the words he'd been waiting to tell her for over three days. 'Arya, I'm sorry I was angry at you before. I was embarrassed and I lashed out-'

'-No, I was the idiot. I shouldn't have just barged my way into your head like that-

'-Really, it was an accident. Neither of us could have realised-

'-And then I shoved my own memories down your throat and Gods, I'm so sorry, Jon -'

'Alright, let's just say we were both wrong, and we're both sorry,' Jon interrupted with a grin, which he felt her mirror. 'Truce?'

'Truce,' she agreed.

He could feel her drift through the thread, her consciousness flickering in and out of sleep.
Suppressing a yawn himself, he let his own thoughts dwindle and sweep the spiderwebs away, the blissful wave of dreams threatening to steal him under.

'Jon?'

He gave her an undignified grunt, already half-gone.

'We're friends, aren't we?' Arya asked quietly, almost afraid of shattering the fragility taut between them.

He struggled back to lucidity, taken by surprise for the second time that night. 'Are we?' he questioned, bemused.

'Well, I figured when two people find themselves trapped in a connection that shares their every thought and emotion, it's at the very least a grounds for some sort of friendship. Wouldn't you agree?' It was a jest, but under it all lay the echoes of insecurity, as if she were expecting him to rebuff her any moment now.

As if he ever could. Her presence filtered unobstructed all through his head, illuminating the lingering shadows and flooding his thoughts with warmth. A smile unknowingly fluttered across his face. 'I'd say I do. Friends it is.'

He imagined her beaming at him, the happy twist of her consciousness weaving their way through the thread to fill his bones. It was his last thought when sleep claimed him fully at last.

Chapter End Notes

also pssssst, I'm active on tumblr again, and you can find me over at https://aegon.tumblr.com/

I've changed my name since last time I posted it here, so here's me sneakily advertising myself again whoops.
heaven's grief brings hell's rain

Chapter Summary

Heavy is the heart that wears the crown.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

So the bi-weekly thing didn't quite work out, but it took me less than half a year to update so that's an improvement!

I had previously planned on another Jonrya-centric chapter for this update, but I think this is far more important in the narrative. Hope y'all still enjoy it regardless! Time-wise, this chapter takes place almost immediately, if not at the same time, as the last one.

And once again, thank you so so much for all the lovely reviews and kudos. Every single one of you is my motivation for this story, and I appreciate the support so much! <3

Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lyanna.

There was a time when pure love struck his heart at the name, a bolt of lightening with a force of a thousand suns. It would sear his skin, blazing through his blood, setting everything aflame. It had been destructive and overwhelming but soft and beautiful and entirely for her.

Gods, had he burned for her. It was as if all the bright colours had become one, and he'd been lost in its spectrum, endlessly spinning in her eternal light until she was all he could feel. One touch, one word, one look, and everything had melted away. He remembered the lines blurring, of where he had begun and she had ended, until they disappeared altogether. She'd been a part of him, as vital as the heart that still beat tiredly in his chest when hers had stopped long ago.

She had been his and he had been hers, tied together by an infinite bond.

But everything can be broken.

Now the name was an empty husk, a mockery of the masterpiece. It was just a word, without the bold and utterly captivating spirit that brought it to life. She'd left him alone in a world devoid of colour with a hole that deepened every day, until it had consumed all he had to offer. He sometimes touched his chest absently, mildly curious that he'd feel an abyss where his heart should be. It was always a surprise - and a little disappointment - that he was very much here, and very much alive.

It was incomparable to the overpowering loneliness he felt in his own head, however. That was a
pain that never receded.

Rhaegar dragged in a shuddering breath and ran his hands through his hair. He could feel the grief surround him, a daunting maze in which he'd forgotten how to escape; it grew tighter, smaller, with every mistaken turn until it was all he could see, all he could feel. It was stifling and paralysing and utterly terrifying.

It hadn't been this crippling in years. He'd grown quite good at pushing everything down, at locking it away in a tower in Dorne, only to be visited in the most desperate of moments. It had numbed him, stripping away the sorrow. There was no isolating the pain - no, like Lyanna, it had pervaded every drop of blood in his body. If he shut out the pain, he shut out everything else. He'd had to, for the good of the realm, for the sake of his family. A King trapped in his own past was no true King of the present. History had taught him that much.

But his walls were crumbling, and that age-old mourning was threatening to flare up again. Rhaegar gritted his teeth and braced his hands against his desk, drawing in deep breaths through his nose. He could control it. He wouldn't - he couldn't - fall apart again. It had taken him a year after Lyanna's death to pull himself together enough to start rebuilding the realm after the war. He could not afford to lose a single day now, however.

A knock on his door pulled him out of his thoughts for a blissful moment. He raised his head from where it rested against the table, briefly wondering if he could ignore it. Another insistent knock told him who exactly stood outside his solar, and there was little he could do to turn her away.

"Enter!" he called out.

Elia glided in quietly, closing the door behind her. A slice of sunlight, golden silks enveloped her thin frame, trailing after her like a whisper as she slowly walked further into the room. Her head was held regally high as she cast a critical eye around her.

Rhaegar spared an idle glance around the room as well. The walls were painted in deep red, bare save for the bookcases of his own private collection. The shelves were stacked with old scrolls and scribbles from an idealistic time when he'd filled his head with prophecies and dreams. It was all for nought, of course, but since Lyanna had found it utterly absurd and hilarious, he'd never quite brought himself to throw any of it away. The furniture was simple and black, fine quality but hardly decorative. He'd never had much of a taste for the overbearing work of the Red Keep, preferring a blank canvas where he could properly hide from the world.

"I never much liked this room," Elia casually said aloud, as a way of greeting. "I remember thinking on our wedding night that it was awfully dull. I had hoped then, that the same would not be said of our marriage."

Rhaegar gave a tired, humourless smile. "And now?" he asked, a tinge of sarcasm lining his voice.

She paused, turning towards him at last. "I think I'd have been rather happy if it was dull," she admitted, with a sad smile.

He had no response to that.

The Queen moved towards the empty chair in front of his desk, folding herself into it gracefully. It was an odd sight, seeing his wife under the moonlight in his solar. Not that he really saw her in the morning, but this was almost intimate. It was reminiscent of the early years of their marriage, when he'd been one instead of two. But that was a lifetime ago.
"I assume you aren't here to tell me to decorate," he commented, raising an eyebrow.

Elia's jaw clenched, staring intently at the corner of his desk. A moment passed in silence before she finally asked in a low voice, "Did you forget something this evening?"

He frowned, trying to decipher her blank expression. "...No? Was there a speech I was supposed to give? Oh." His eyebrows raised to his hairline. "Lord Tarly."

His wife sighed heavily, as if he were a particularly difficult child. "You were supposed to congratulate him on his son's victory. Fortunately, Lord Connington had the foresight to send him to me before the man thought something was amiss."

"Then I fail to see what the issue is. He's not threatening war over it, is he?" He cracked a smile.

"Your humour is not appreciated in this moment, Your Grace," Elia informed him, icily. "You're forgetting another obligation you had this evening. One, I believe, that was far more pressing."

He blinked at her in confusion, before realisation rushed through him. With a groan, Rhaegar dropped his head into hands. "Rhaenys," he muttered in resignation. "Is she wroth with me? Why did she not come find me?"

Elia's eyes softened, as they always did when they spoke of their children. "She thought you'd forgotten amidst your work, and did not wish to interrupt. She did not appear to be upset, but I know her far too well. Rhaenys holds her heart closer than most." She glanced up, her gaze hardening. "Six moons you have not properly spoken to your daughter, Rhaegar. Soon, she will be gone for even longer. One dinner was all that was required of you as a father. I can excuse your absence in matters of court, but I will not tolerate your shortcomings for our children. They deserve your attention."

He closed his eyes, regret washing over him like ice water in winter. He'd been looking forward to their private dinner for days. It had been a tradition of sorts, a monthly ritual when his daughter still lived at the palace. One evening when he'd clear his schedule and command that no one would bother him while Rhaenys was in his company. She'd pretend to be exasperated at all the fuss, but he knew she secretly enjoyed feeling special.

Rhaegar never professed to be the most expressive of fathers, but a jolt of pride shot through him when he thought of his daughter. His sons had always been difficult, always resistant - but Rhaenys, oh, she had always been precious. She reminded him of his own mother in her quiet strength, and Rhaegar adored her fiercely for it. He often fondly remembered those moments when she'd hardly been more than a wisp of a girl, toddling to his desk to fuss over his tired eyes and sad smiles.

It was her face that had weighed on his mind in those months with Lyanna, the guilt at abandoning his firstborn tainting the blissful days. It still chipped away at him at times when she was the only one of his three children that sought his company and advice. He'd felt her absence keenly in those months she'd been away, particularly when Jon saw fit to avoid him as much as possible.

With a heavy sigh, he lifted his face from his hands. "I'll make it up to her," he promised. "I'll cancel my meetings for tomorrow. We'll spend the day together."

Elia nodded, seemingly reassured though her eyes darted around his face in disturbance. His fingers twitched as she smoothed her silks repeatedly, agitation plain in every action.

Something akin to dread pooled in the pit of his stomach. Elia never sought him out if she could help it, not unless it was urgent. He waited for her to speak, his foot tapping restlessly against the floor.
"It's come back, hasn't it?" she asked quietly, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

Rhaegar inhaled deeply, and ran a hand through his hair quickly. "I...don't know what you mean," he responded lamely, avoiding her eyes.

A snort drew his attention. "Oh please, Rhaegar," she rebuffed disdainfully. "It's been twenty years. I know when you're sinking into your grief, and I know what has triggered it. You've seen the girl."

He had, indeed. It had been a fleeting moment, a single glance at the crowd that ground everything around him to a halt. At first, he'd dismissed it as a delusion, a piece of his past clawing its way to the surface. It wouldn't have been the first time Rhaegar had seen Lyanna in the world she no longer inhabited. In those months after she'd left him, he'd seen her in every face, around every corner, within every shadow. It had been years since he'd seen her whole under the sunlight, however.

At least, that was what he'd believed - that he'd gone mad again. But then the ghost of his love had turned and laughed with another boy - *impossible, her smiles had always been just for him* - and affectionately grasped at the arm of Ned Stark. Rhaegar blinked, and the apparition had melted into a living, breathing girl with dancing grey eyes and a wild mane of hair. It was as if Lyanna had returned, but a shadow had been sent in her place; one that wore her face and smile, but nothing of the soul that had enraptured him.

"Arya Stark," Elia continued, watching his expression with narrowed eyes. "Youngest daughter of Lord Eddard and Lady Catelyn." Her lips quirked in a sardonic smile. "Remarkable resemblance, wouldn't you agree?"

Rhaegar frowned, exhaling heavily through his nose. "She's not Lyanna," he said simply. "I'd know her anywhere. I'd recognise her in death, in life, at the end of this world. This girl just wears her face." He dismissed her with a wave of his hand.

"Then why has it upset you so, Your Grace? One would draw rather unsavoury conclusions from your reaction."

The insulting insinuation simmered in the air between them, raising the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck.

The very notion Lyanna was replaceable set his teeth on edge. Elia couldn't understand - no one could. There could never be anyone else. They'd been crafted from the same star, the final piece in the other's jagged puzzle of a soul. Bitterness rose in his throat like bile and he resisted the urge to snap at her viciously. "I knew you thought little of me, wife, but this is a new low. Even for you. I did not care for Lyanna because of her beauty. It was more than that, it has always been more than that. This child is pretty, but she is *not Lyanna.*" He almost spat his last words.

Rhaegar half-expected Elia to rebuff him, to argue, to throw his betrayal back at his face as she'd done so many times before. He waited for her face to twist in contempt and resentment as it always did when he spoke of his heart.

He waited for an outburst that never came.

Instead, something akin to regret flashed across her face, her shoulders sagging under the weight of unspoken grief. "What is it like?" Her brown eyes flicked upwards, surprising Rhaegar from his anger with the intensity in its dark depths.

Minutes dragged on, the abyss in his chest widening. He knew what she spoke of. "Why do you ask?" he managed to respond, struggling to keep his voice light. "You've never cared before."
She watched him while she deliberated her words, before finally releasing a deep sigh. She tipped her head towards the wine and two cups sitting idly on his desk. "May I?" she asked.

Bemused, he nodded.

She poured them both a heavy amount, pushing one towards him while grabbing her own. Swirling the cup idly between her thin fingers, she studied him under her thick eyelashes. There was sadness dwelling in the black sea of her irises, life ceasing to exist in its sorrow. "In Dorne, we do not believe the dead are truly gone. They carry on as ghosts within us. As long as you are remembered, you live on endlessly." The corner of her lips twitched upwards in a faint wishful smile. "I used to love that idea, you know. I thought it all terribly romantic."

"Used to?" Rhaegar quietly echoed.

Elia drew in a small breath, gazing down at her cup. "Then you did what you did, and I was trapped with the memory of a dead girl I wanted nothing more than to forget. So I tried. I thought if I never so much as whispered her name in the dark, then she'd simply fade away. I was foolish, of course. For all my efforts, I have immortalised her. We create the ghosts that haunt us, and mine have not left me yet. As she has not left you. Arya Stark has not inspired our grief from dust, Rhaegar. She has revealed it in its entirety."

It was a statement more than an accusation, as if she were simply remarking on the weather.

There was little point in denying it, so clearly she could see through him. "Yes," whispered Rhaegar. "Yes, she has."

They took a moment to drain their cups, wincing at the burn at the back of their throats. A dull throb emerged in his head, pounding against his tired eyelids. Elia's face seemed thinner in the dim candles and pale moonlight, her skin an ethereal amber. There was a heaviness in the air that pressed against his chest, his breaths oddly loud in the stillness.

Elia shattered the silence with a humourless laugh, closing her eyes warily. "What is it like? To love and be loved so infinitely?" she asked again in a hoarse voice.

Rhaegar let out a sigh he hadn't realised he'd been holding. His bones were made of lead, and he felt as if he hadn't slept in a thousand years. He fiddled with his empty cup, words elusive on his tongue but screaming in his mind and heart.

What is it like to be bonded with another?

*It is everything and nothing and all the worlds in between.*

"No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear, or that fear was so like love," Rhaegar began, staring at a space beyond her head. "It feels so similar: the dread in your stomach, the weight on your chest - and the torturous nightmare of that which lies beyond your reach: be it peace, or safety, or your heart's desire. It was bliss for a moment, but now it is...unforgiving. I can never escape her, not her presence, nor her absence."

"Is it something you'd wish for your children?" She fixed her eyes on him closely.

He looked at the woman sat in front of him - really, truly, looked at her - for the first time in what seemed like years. Rhaegar could never pinpoint when exactly they'd grown older, when the edges of their hairlines speckled with grey and the bones in their body started to creak. The lines had deepened into her skin, but Elia's eyes were lit aflame as they had done in her youth. For a moment, her face burned with an intensity he had not witnessed in a long time.
It took an eternity for him to find his answer.

"No," he said simply, to her surprise.

He thought of Aegon, with his easy smiles and breathless laughter. Of Jon and his quiet humour and gentle heart. Of Rhaenys and the ferocity of her love for her family. His hands curled around the arms of his chair. *It would change them irrevocably, as it changed me.*

"If we were ordinary people, then perhaps," he continued. "There is no greater joy than to be with the one you were made for. It is happiness in its truest form." He glanced up at her, his gaze hardening. "But my children are not ordinary, Elia. They are dragons, the leaders of a new world, the future of House Targaryen. Love is the death of duty, and they have a duty to the realm. It must be their first priority, now and always. I-I chose one over the other and the world suffered. It was a...struggle for me to deal with the fallout. Lyanna was gone and Seven Kingdoms could not fill the hole she left behind. Not the throne, not three children, *nothing.*"

Elia shuddered softly at the last word, looking away quickly. "Would you do it again?" she asked. There was a trace of hope in her voice which Rhaegar had believed had burned away long ago. "You abandoned your duty for love once. What would you choose, if you had the chance?"

This time, he only needed a heartbeat.

"Her," he said regretfully in a soft voice. "I'd choose her every time. Once you know what it means to have a soulmate, Elia, there is never another choice to make. It is my greatest glory, and my greatest tragedy. So long as my children never know the former, they shall be spared from the latter. Gods willing."

She winced, as if his words sliced at her heart. A pang of remorse shot through him, and he stifled it. She had asked, after all, though Rhaegar was still at a loss for why. "I fear it is too late for that."

It was a slap in the face, and his heart stuttered to a stop. Rhaegar gaped at her in horror. "No," he whispered in disbelief. "Who?"

Elia took a soft breath. "Jon."

He blinked, the wheels in his head turning furiously. Jon, Jon - quiet, pensive Jon, lost in his daydreams of glory and honour, who always preferred his own company, was *bonded to another -*

"Who is it?" he asked quickly, apprehension crawling in his stomach. He thought he already knew, but he prayed he was wrong. It was impossible. It had to be. *The gods would not make such cruel of a jape.*

"You know who, Rhaegar," the Queen murmured, reaching for more wine and pouring the rest of its contents into her cup. "It seems he is more your son than he cares to admit." She snorted into her cup.

A strangled noise erupted from his lips. "How do you know of this?" he demanded, his eyes widening. "By the Gods, he hasn't dishonoured her already, has he?"

"Relax, Your Grace," Elia drawled, wine staining the edges of her mouth. "Jon has far more restraint than you, thank the Gods. As it were, Lord Stark has not stormed in and the North has yet to declare war on us, so I assume the children are being careful." She took another deep swig of her cup.
He ignored the barb and waited for her to continue.

"As to how I know - I've made it my business to know what happens within the walls of this palace. Someone has to. I had a feeling Jon and the Lady Arya had discovered their...connection at the opening feast, but it had yet to be confirmed. There is little doubt in my mind now, however. Here's your proof."

From within her silks, she produced a small, aged journal with a velvet black cover. Throwing it on his desk, Rhaegar made out a name carved in faded gold letters across the front. The Diary of Cassandra Reed.

His heart dropped.

"Jaime Lannister found them in the library with this book, amongst others. He also tells me they've been spending an inordinate amount of time together. Lord Connington has dismissed it as familial affection, but the man is a fool when it comes to affairs of the heart."

Rhaegar turned the book in his hand absently, glancing up sharply at her words. "Connington knows?"

Elia cocked an eyebrow. "Of course. I needed someone to keep an eye on you and the girl. How else do you think you haven't run into her yet?"

"I don't need to be looked after, Elia," he scoffed. "I can handle myself perfectly fine around her."

"Wonderful," she cooed sarcastically, placing her cup on his desk. She folded her arms across her chest and levelled a hard stare at him. "Which leads me onto my next question. What exactly do you plan on doing about this?"

Rhaegar groaned and tossed the book back on his desk, dropping his face into his hands again. "What choice do I have?" he lamented. Rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palms, he continued, "If they're aware of what their bond means and he takes her to bed - then there's nothing more to be done. They'll have to be married and the girl will reside here at the palace. Lord Stark will not accept anything less."

He did not have to look up to see Elia's troubled expression. He felt it cross his own face. If only it were so simple. Had it been anyone but a Stark, there would have been little doubt in Rhaegar's mind on their next course of action. Had it been anyone but a girl with the face that had torn the realm in half, then there would never have been a question of why but why not.

It had taken years for the whispers of Lyanna's name and the hard stares to dwindle in court whenever he was present. Rhaegar had been a fool once, but he knew the unsettled tides of discontent that stewed beneath the surface across his kingdoms. Unfaithful. Irresponsible. The Mad King's son. Deny his heart's desire and watch the realm burn.

It was only a glimpse at what was said of him behind closed doors. Lyanna's memory had fared worse. Whore. Opportunist. The wolf bitch. A sea of corpses in payment for what lay between her thighs.

The consequences had been disastrous, to say the least. Half the lords of the Great Houses had all been put to sword for their rebellion. Dorne had barely stayed their hand in a declaration of war. The mother of his child, his heart and soul, had vanished beyond the veil. Rhaegar had swapped his honour and duty for the golden touch of love, and had been left with a handful of dust and blood and sorrow. And the realm had never truly forgiven him for it. Oh, he'd stitched the world back together
as best as he could. Filled the necessary coffers with coin and grain, appeased the people that needed to be appeased - but he was always a single mistake away from unravelling it all. It was as if he were stood at the edge of the plank, one foot hovering in the air over an unforgiving ocean. The slightest push, and he'd fall into the endless depths of chaos and disgrace.

If Arya Stark were to remain in the Red Keep, if the ghost of Lyanna roamed the halls of the palace untethered, the court would be aflame with scandal. It would only be a matter of time before the rumours would spread, of the weakness of a king or the loose morals of a young girl. Lord Stark would be outraged and Jon - Gods, he did not wish to think of what that would do to his son.

No, it could not come to pass.

"I see we've come to the same conclusion," Elia's lithe voice drew him from his reverie. He looked up to see a wry expression written across her face, her mouth twisted. "She cannot stay here, Rhaegar," she said bluntly. "There is only so much this family can take."

"What do you suggest then?" Rhaegar whipped back, agitation threaded through his words. He ran a hand through his silver hair, breathing heavily. "This is serious, Elia. These bonds they...they rob a man of his senses. Jon has always been more sensible than most, but even he will not resist its call if he listens long enough. If that happens," he warned. "I fear what he will do next. He does not have the security of a crown that Aegon or Rhaenys do. The world watches him far more closely and his transgressions will not be so easily overlooked."

"Then there are only two options left," she responded vehemently, leaning forward. "If they have not consolidated this bond yet, as you say, there is still time. They may be not be aware of what this bond truly means, and they'll be separated before they're given a chance to find out. Arya Stark leaves King's Landing, goes back North, and Jon is spared. We find him a wife and he forgets the whole thing."

Rhaegar pondered, uncertain. "And the other option?"

Elia drew in a deep breath. She leaned back in her chair to regard him carefully. "You let Jon go, and he takes her far away from the Red Keep."

"No." The answer was automatic; short, blunt and unyielding.

"Rhaegar, he is twenty years old. You cannot keep him by your side forever-"

"You know why, Elia," he snapped, clutched at his desk in sudden irritation. "As I recall, you supported my decision to keep him from squiring at Winterfell-"

"That was different!" she countered, bristling. "He was a child! We could not afford to send him deep in the North at such a young age. Gods know, they could have used him against my son, and I would never let that happen, Rhaegar. But he is a man grown now, and a brother to my children. You risk pushing him away with your own stupidity!" She threw her hands in the air in exasperation.

"Do not tell me how to handle my son, Elia," Rhaegar said coldly, his voice low. "He is not yours to say or do with as you wish. You cannot decide he is a threat to Aegon in one breath, and a brother in the next. I let you play your games to ease your mind of this supposed danger to Aegon's crown, but when it comes to Jon's safety, there is no question of what must be done."

Her jaw clenched at his words, her eyes narrowing until they became twin pitiless pools of black. "You are not protecting him by keeping him here," Elia bit back. "You think the court has been so
forgiving? You think the boy has been spared from the consequences of his birth because his father is here and is the King? You cannot be so ignorant."

"Better barbs and insults than a vengeful sword in his heart," he retorted simply. "He will always be safe here, Elia, and that is my only priority. How he feels about the matter is not my concern."

Rhaegar waved his hands absentmindedly in the air. "He is a child. He thinks he'll find glory and honour out there, but all that's left is a barely-healed wound that always rips at the edges if I so much as look away for a moment. Nothing good comes from a Targaryen leaving his home, Elia. My father proved that at Duskendale. There are far too many men out there that would want to hurt him, to hurt me. I can't let that happen. I won't let that happen."

"Your stubbornness is pushing him away as it is, Rhaegar," Elia argued, her voice raising in insistence. "There may come a day when Jon leaves with or without your blessing. What will you do then? What if he takes the girl with him? That would destroy this family. We cannot afford another Northern insurgency! They won't see it as love or him as Lyanna's boy, they'll see it as another kidnapping by your son! No one will believe they're soulmates. That magic was thought to have died out a long time ago. There are still many who believe you took Lyanna against her will."

"Then what are you proposing?" Rhaegar demanded angrily, his hands slamming against the desk as he pulled himself to his feet. "We let them elope? To give Jon my blessing to play at knights and heroes in a darkened world until he's run through with a sword the moment he turns his back? That's what you've wanted all along, isn't it?" he hissed unkindly. "You're afraid he's still a threat to Aegon and want him gone from under your roof!"

Elia released a frustrated sigh and rose to her feet as well, raising her chin defiantly. "Don't you dare, Rhaegar!" she snapped at him with ire. "You know - you know how I feel about Jon. You gave me a motherless child, a trophy of your betrayal, and you locked yourself in these rooms and left us both alone to deal with a world carved by your mistakes. And I raised that boy alongside my own children. I sang him lullabies to sleep and nursed him to health when he was ill. You say I have no right in how to deal with him, but where you were given that right by the Gods, I have earned it!"

They fell into silence then, both breathless from the passion and fury in their speeches. Staring impassively at one another, it struck Rhaegar that it was the first time since his sister Daenerys had left for Dorne that they'd fought. His anger began ebbing away, leaving a throbbing headache in its wake. Once, perhaps, they both had the energy to push and pull at each other until dawn, but they were older now. He glanced at Elia and saw her brush a hand against her forehead in exhaustion.

He took three deep breaths to calm himself, before pleading quietly but firmly, "Elia, I am not letting Jon go. I'm sorry, but that is my decision." His eyes stared at a mark on his desk, and he could feel her narrowed glare on him like the kiss of steel. "I swore to Lyanna that I would keep him safe, and so long as he is with me, I won't fail her. So I now ask of you - what do we do about Jon and Lady Arya?" He raised his head to look at her.

Her face was twisted in disapproval, but she saw the resigned set of his jaw and sighed in acquiescence. "If she cannot stay here, and he cannot take her elsewhere, what other choice do we have? I think we both know the answer."

Rhaegar nodded tiredly. "We'll secure a betrothal within the next three days. That should, at the very least, remind him of his duty."

"Are you sure about this, Rhaegar?" Elia asked dubiously, fidgeting with the edges of her sleeves. "You said it yourself: when one knows what it means to have a soulmate, there is never another choice to make."
"And I have lived with the consequences of my decision everyday," he replied softly. He looked at her pointedly, letting his unspoken words sink in.

Elia inhaled a shuddering breath, and turned on her heel towards the door. With one hand on the knob, she glanced back over her shoulder to look at him one last time. "Jon will never forgive us, if he finds out. We'd lose him forever."

The King’s mouth twisted and he felt his heart crumble into dust in his chest. "I know."

oOo

On the other side of the door, a figure moved away into the shadows.

Chapter End Notes

Well, I wasn't going to make it easy for anyone, was I?
dizzy on dreams

Chapter Summary

Gardens prove fruitful in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

Thank you so so much to everyone that reviewed last chapter! It's so interesting to hear your reflections on it and I absolutely live for everyone's amazing opinions! So thank you so much <3

Also to everyone that left kudos/bookmarks - y'all are my jam, too.

For being so patient with me, here's a lovely dosage of Jon/Arya feels. Hope you enjoy it!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"For the last bloody time, can you please pass the oranges?"

Arya blinked, realising Rickon was staring at her in exasperation. He tilted his head pointedly at the fruit sitting beside her.

"Oh," she murmured distractedly, giving him the plate over the breakfast table. "Sorry."

She ignored his taunting remark, sliding back into mulling over her own thoughts. She'd awoken that morning to gentle skies: soft blues brushed by the occasional cloud, pink as a flamingo feather. It was tranquil and peaceful and a completely wrong backdrop to the chaotic whirlwind inside her. The conversation with Jon last night came rushing back the moment she'd gained her bearings, and she wasn't sure if she was pleased that she'd made a new friend or aghast at what she'd confessed to him.

Arya had never fully disclosed her fears over marriage to anyone but her father, and there she'd been, blathering endlessly to a prince. It was, well, it was -

So very easy.

And that was what surprised her so.

There was a serenity to Jon, in his quiet composure and his comfort in silence, that reminded her of the godswood back in Winterfell. His very presence at the back of her head was calm like still water. It radiated tranquillity, a cool breeze against the wildfire of her constantly churning thoughts. She supposed that was it: Arya, for all her inability to remain silent, often sought it as a solace. Wrapped in silence, she could be herself, by herself. There was no need to think of anybody or anything else when everything fell quiet. The world would shrink until it was just her and the stillness. It was freedom to be whoever she was and never be judged for it.
Jon was a little like that, she realised. For all his jests and his irritations, he was as solemn and poised as a weirwood tree. Arya didn't feel as if he judged her, especially not last night. When she spoke, he'd simply...listened.

She thought she liked that very much.

Something wet smacked her nose and she recoiled with disgust.

"Rickon!" she chastised, wiping away the orange juice with a grimace.

"You're ignoring me," her brother complained sullenly, a red curl drooping in front of his eyes. "What on earth are you thinking about?"

"Nothing! It's none of your business." She hoped the warmth in her cheeks wasn't showing.

Unfortunately, the youngest Stark was far more perceptive than most gave him credit for. His Tully-blue eyes widened in bewilderment as his nose wrinkled in distaste. "Gods, I've seen that look on Sansa before. You're not thinking of a boy, are you?"

Arya didn't know which was more mortifying, the fact Rickon had compared her to her lovesick sister or had actually read her thoughts. But before she could properly voice her indignation, their father joined them at the table.

Smiling at the both of them, Ned Stark took his place at the head. "How are we today?" he asked pleasantly, reaching for the eggs.

She opened her mouth to answer when Rickon beat her to it.

"Arya's in loooove!" he practically sang, glee dancing on his face. The grin quickly disappeared when he bent over to rub at his knee, throwing a baleful eye at Arya and her foot.

"I am not," Arya hissed back. "Shut up, stupid!"

"No fighting over breakfast," Ned said automatically. He took a bite of his eggs and munched in silence for a moment before pausing and blinking at her. It seemed his brain had just worked its way through what he'd heard. "In love?" he repeated, surprised. Swallowing, he turned towards her and attempted a humorous smile. "Is this something I should be worried about?" he tried teasing, though Arya could see the flicker of horror behind his grey eyes. Pity swelled in her. Affairs of the heart were rarely something Ned Stark willingly involved himself in, especially when it came to his own children.

She reached out and patted his hand sympathetically. "Oh, Father, Rickon was just being a little -"

"It's the prince, isn't it?" Rickon chirped up, muffled with his mouth full of breakfast. He waggled his eyebrows at her. "The one you danced with at the feast!"

"I said, shut up, Rickon."

Ned cleared his throat suddenly, frowning at them. "No fighting over breakfast," he stressed again, before turning to Arya. He blinked at her twice before hesitantly adding, "Prince Jon?" An unreadable shadow passed across his face.

It occurred to Arya that she'd rather be taken by the Night King than endure another moment of this conversation. "Father, please," she protested in exasperation. "There's absolutely nothing going on between -"
"Have you been *dreaming* about him, sister? With his pretty hair and his pretty eyes and -"

Her brother ducked dramatically as Arya lobbed a handful of large peeled oranges at his head. They smashed against a tapestry hanging on the back wall, smearing its ancient colours with pulp and juice. The roaring dragon's face was reduced to a messy blob of fruit, the brilliant white of its carnivorous smile stained brown. Arya thought it was an improvement.

There was a pause while Ned turned an icy stare towards his children. They offered him wide, innocent smiles back.

A few tense heartbeats passed, before he sighed tiredly and spooned some more eggs in his mouth without a word. Arya glanced back at Rickon who mimicked a kissing face at her.

Impassively, she ran a thumb across her neck and pointed at him. His grin faded quickly after that.

oOo

"I cannot believe Father made us wash that stupid tapestry ourselves," Arya exclaimed, stomping through the Red Keep. "I mean, it's not like anyone would *notice* the stain. They'd be too busy marvelling over how utterly hideous it was to begin with." She threw her hands in the air with an exasperated groan as Rickon jogged to catch up with her relentless speed. "It's sunset already!"

"Well, we'd have finished a lot faster if you hadn't tried drowning me in the bucket," her brother casually added, running a hand through his damp curls.

She snorted as they rounded the corner towards the gardens. "As if you didn't deserve it."

They both carried a large stick in their hands, carved to look like a crude sword. With the melee over and the joust officially starting in two days, everyone was granted a brief respite from the celebrations to discover the palace and the city. Arya had immediately roped Rickon into sharing a sparring session with her that evening. At Winterfell, she often had to bribe her brothers with promises of sneaking their favourite desserts if she wanted them to gamble with Lady Stark's wrath at discovering her sons whacking away at her little girl. She was given a modicum of freedom here at King's Landing, and Arya had every intention of exploiting the opportunity.

The gardens were a maze of enclosed courtyards arranged around a silver dragon fountain breathing water through its snout. Small groups of lords and ladies strolled around the flowers, conversing quietly as they marvelled at nature's loveliness. Arya and Rickon ducked into a quiet secluded corner, far away from wandering eyes. The courtyard was small, but bursting with colour: roses of red and white bloomed from the foliage, the final touches of the setting sun painting the petals in amber and gold.

There was a veil of sweetness hanging in the air, dangling lightly under their noses. Above, the sky melted into deep hues of violet, a sprinkle of stars emerging from the mist like dewdrops. Arya breathed it all in with a pleased sigh. There was something about gardens that always lifted her spirits, surrounding herself with the gentle touch of the wild.

"Are you done drooling over the flowers?" Rickon asked, breaking her little bubble. He smirked at her mischievously, "Or are you dreaming about the pretty prince giving you some?"

"Why, you little-"
He jumped away from her frustrated swing with a burst of laughter and stuck his tongue out at her. She made a face back at him and spun on one foot to slash at him again, cutting through air as he dodged under it. They kept at it for almost half an hour, hacking at each other and dancing about with a smile on their lips. At some point, the stick swords lay discarded on the grass as Arya chased her youngest brother around the courtyard, her hair pulling free from her braid.

"Arya and Jon, sitting in a tree," sang Rickon with glee, "K-I-S-S-I-N-oof!"

The rest of the lyrics were swallowed in a gasp for air as Arya tackled him by wrapping her arms around his stomach and dragging him to the ground. They struggled on the grass, pulling on hairs and whacking at each other, until it ended with Arya sitting victoriously on his chest, prodding his nose with a finger.

"Say you're sorry," she demanded.

"I'm sorry," Rickon wheezed, trying to push her off un成功fully.

"Who's a big stupid?"

"Arya," he grunted through gritted teeth.

"Wrong answer," she grinned, pressing down on him. "Try again."

"I am! I'm a big stupid!" Rickon cried, his legs flailing about as he tried shoving her again.

With a laugh, she rolled off of him and he sat up, glaring at her. His red hair stuck up in tufts around his face, blades of grass trapped in his curls. Brilliant blue eyes appraised her. "You know, sister," he started conversationally, brushing his tunic. "I don't think princes like ladies that beat up their little brothers."

Arya snorted as she pushed herself to her feet. "Why on earth would I care about what princes like?" She walked over to her makeshift sword and picked it up.

"You tell me," Rickon mumbled under his breath, crossing his legs.

She turned around and narrowed her eyes at him. "There's nothing going on between Prince Jon and me," she declared hotly. "I've already told you. Quit being stupid."

"Is that why you've been spending time with him?" her brother asked her innocuously.

At her face, he sighed and continued, "That first day of the melee, you lied to Father about being ill. Prince Jon wasn't at the melee either. Then the next day, you arrived together. And then I also saw both of you walk out of the cellars later that night." He peered at her suspiciously. "What were you doing alone with him in there?"

Arya gaped, warmth flooding her cheeks. "What were you doing wandering around the palace at night?" she deflected.

"I couldn't sleep so I went to your room and you were missing," Rickon defended, standing up. "You're lucky I didn't tell Father or call a guard!"

"And why didn't you?" Arya demanded.

He glanced away quickly, seeming incredibly young in the early moonlight. "I didn't want you to get in trouble, so I went looking for you instead to make sure you were okay."
Arya softened immediately, biting her lip. She moved closer to him and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Rickon, it's...it's not like that," she began hesitantly. "We're not having some sordid love affair, I swear."

"Then what were you doing in the cellar?" he asked insistently. "You walked out pretty upset."

Getting trapped in his head, witnessing some of his most upsetting memories, showing him my own, and then yelling at each other about it.

"Chasing his cat. I almost had the stupid thing and it tried scratching me. It was incredibly frustrating."

Rickon narrowed his eyes. She smiled back.

"Mother said I had to look after you," her brother said fiercely, his eyes blazing as bright as summer skies. "If the prince tries anything with you, I'll make him regret it."

His young face was scrunched up threateningly, like a snarling wolf cub. She bit back a grin, reaching over to ruffle his hair affectionately. "I promise you, brother," she said gently. "Jon isn't like that at all. Besides, he's not interested in me like that."

He relaxed a little, and gave a relieved smile. "Good. Because I really don't want to fight a prince just yet."

"Just yet?" Arya repeated with a raised brow.

Rickon shrugged. "Give it another year with Ser Rodrik and I could take him."

Arya threw her head back in laughter, enveloping him in a hug. He squeezed her back, resting his chin on her shoulder. "You'd tell me, wouldn't you? If something was going on between you and him?" he asked quietly, his voice muffled in her hair.

She swallowed. "Of course. Like I said, nothing happened," she lied.

Rickon pulled back and shot her a wide smile. She returned it with less enthusiasm, guilt gnawing at her gut.

Part of her was desperate to blurt out the truth, to share the burden with someone else. Another part - loud and rational - stilled her tongue. This wasn't just her secret to share, and Rickon could hardly help her anyway. It would ruin the tourney for him and he'd inadvertently give her away to their father. She wasn't sure how Ned Stark would react to the news, but she couldn't imagine any good arising from it other than spectacular chaos - that is, if they believed her.

She swallowed a sigh. It was best to deal with it quickly and quietly and move on, her family none the wiser.

"I'm going to go see if I can grab a snack from the kitchens before supper," Rickon said, walking towards the edge of the courtyard. "Want to come?"

"I think I'll stay out here a little longer," Arya replied, gripping her sword. "I'm not quite done with practice."

Her brother nodded and turned away, when she suddenly called his name out. He glanced over his shoulder, bemused.
"Don't tell Father," she said, looking at him imploringly. "That Jon and I are...friends. He'll read too much into it, or he'll tell Mother and she'll overreact. You know how it is." She offered a half-smile.

Rickon narrowed his eyes, a frown setting on his lips. "I thought you said there's nothing to hide."

"There isn't!" Arya said too quickly. She cleared her throat. "I just want to enjoy the tourney without Father fretting over my virtue like an old crone."

Her brother watched her closely, suspicion growing in his eyes.

She heaved a sigh. "And I'll sneak you strawberry tarts for a month."

Rickon grinned. "Make it two, and you've got yourself a deal."

He pranced away before she could argue.

With a roll of her eyes, she raised her sword once more. Taking a deep breath, her thoughts curling like breaking waves, she exhaled slowly. The background chatter of the gardens around her shifted until it fell quiet, and she was left standing on the precipice, swaying to the rhythm of her heart. Her moments alone with a sword in her hand and the world at her fingertips were some of her favourite. She revelled in the stillness, in the harmony of movement that almost felt like a dance. She spun with the wind, twirling on her toes as she struck at ghostly enemies and dodged their invisible blows, losing herself to her imagination.

"You should bend your knees."

Arya froze but did not turn around. She was already aware of who stood behind her, sensing his presence in her head the moment he stepped foot in the gardens. "I don't know what you mean," she muttered, pointedly staring at the rose bushes.

She watched Jon stroll closer from the edge of her vision and swallowed the urge to fold into herself. Last night's conversation came rushing back like a wave, and she suddenly found herself unable to look at him properly. It had been so much easier opening up to him in her head, when he was far away and she was wrapped in darkness in the safety of her bed. It was almost as if she'd been talking to herself.

But having him physically near - and very real - inspired a swell of shyness she'd never experienced coursing through her.

He stopped when he was standing in front of her, clearing his throat awkwardly. "Your stance," he elaborated, waving a hand towards her. "It's too rigid. You'll be easily knocked over. Try bending your knees a little."

Frowning, she followed his instruction, still not quite looking at him.

"Wait, no," Jon interjected, taking another step forward. "You need to widen your feet first so you centre your weight. Not that wide!" he laughed when she pushed her legs further apart. "You're not riding a dragon. I, uh...may I?"

Arya finally glanced up at him in surprise, noticing his hands outstretched towards her. He pointed towards her feet and looked back at her. Biting her lip, she nodded hesitantly.

Jon moved in front of her, gently wrapping his hands around her shoulders. She hoped he didn't feel her body jolt as if lightening spread from his fingers.
“Sparring is more than just dancing around with your sword,” Jon explained, his breath warm against her forehead. “It’s as much about footwork as it is about actual skill. The idea is to have control over your balance so you’re light on your feet but your opponent can’t knock you down easily either. See, with your feet so wide apart, you can’t shift your stance fast enough and you’re stuck in the same position for a moment too long.” He suddenly poked her on the side with a finger, causing her to flinch away with a giggle. “Stab, you’re dead,” he teased.

“No fair,” Arya protested, turning her head towards him. “I wasn’t looking!”

“The enemy isn’t just going to wait for you to see him,” Jon pointed out, raising an eyebrow. “Or her,” he added thoughtfully. “Women are just as capable of murder.”

“And in far more creative ways,” Arya laughed in response, and he grinned back at her. His hands had resumed their position, resting on her upper arms now, though her tunic still separated their touch. With one foot, Jon nudged her legs together, pressing a little closer to do so. She found herself blindingly distracted by the sudden warmth radiating against her front, his presence seeping into her skin and knitting stars into her bones. There was a tingle down her spine, a strange sensation of almost but not quite dancing in the small space between them. The golden thread loomed in her consciousness, burning brightly as it wrapped them closer together, mesmerising in its gentle movement.

Arya was lost in the abyss of her head, tangled in the cool tranquillity of Jon’s thoughts: currently filled with wordless admiration.

She looked up at him in confusion and felt her breath hitch in her chest. His grey eyes were as dark as the skies above and she found herself transfixed by their infinity. The black was consuming, flooded with a rich warmth that had her frozen where she stood. Around them weaved their string of sunlight, illuminating the world in a soft golden glow. She leaned closer to count the myriad of colours she imagined were trapped in his gaze, her mind uncharacteristically blank.

Across the connection, a single thought pierced the pleasant buzz: What a lovely sight.

She wasn’t sure whose it was.

The fragile moment was shattered, however. Crimson flooded Jon’s face and he leapt away from her as if she’d just caught fire. Arya felt heat rise in her own cheeks, suddenly aware of how close they had been standing. Mortified, she surreptitiously cleared her throat and feigned nonchalance.

Jon mimicked her, scuffing his feet on the ground and pointedly looking anywhere but at her. Even from a distance, she marvelled at the deep shade of red painted across his face and neck. His thoughts were too chaotic to properly discern, but she caught the occasional, ‘Oh Gods,’ and, ‘Say something you fool or it’ll only get worse.’

A few minutes dragged on painfully until Arya finally interrupted the silence, taking pity on him. "Well, um, thank you for showing me the right posture for fighting." She offered an awkward lopsided smile.

Jon groaned and hid his face in his hands. "I hate this stupid connection," he mumbled through his fingers.

He looked so horrified, Arya bit her lip and wondered if this meant he didn’t want to be friends with her anymore. A bubble of disappointment rose in her chest. She didn't have many friends that were
boys and weren't one of her brothers. When she had flowered a few years ago, her father had put an end to her associations with the stable and kitchen boys, calling it indecent. Later on, the boys her parents did permit her to meet were entirely too interested in wedding her name instead of seeking her friendship, which wasn't very fun at all.

So she'd been rather pleased when Jon had said they were friends, and now, he didn't even want to stand near her. Arya tried not the sting hurt her too much.

"That's not true," Jon protested, making her look up. His hands had lowered from his face and he was watching her with a furrowed brow. There was still a fierce blush across his cheeks, but he now stood looking utterly bemused.

Arya blinked at him. "What's not true?"

He tapped the side of his head and raised a brow. Her eyes widened and she groaned, realising he'd heard everything.

*Stupid connection.*

"Why would you think I wouldn't want to be friends anymore? That's ridiculous. I just thought that, well..." he hesitated, running a hand through his hair, "...perhaps I was a little too forward earlier. I'm sorry if I was indecent or...or something." He trailed off, his expression pained.

A wave of relief - and something else - flooded Arya, and she cracked a wide smile. Leaning down, she grabbed the stick Rickon left behind and strolled over to the prince. "Well," she began as she drew closer, "if I'm not bothered then you shouldn't be either. Spar with me instead?" She pushed the makeshift sword into his hand.

Jon glanced down in alarm. "I don't want to fight you."

"Why?" teased Arya with a smirk. "Afraid to lose to a girl?"

He shot her an incredulous look. "Please, I've known my way around a sword since I was three years old. Truth is," he winked, "I was taught princes shouldn't humiliate little ladies."

His laughter was cut short when he was forced to duck Arya's swing. Her lips spread in a feral grin. "Good thing I'm not a lady," she said, raising her sword at him.

She saw the remnants of Jon's doubt dissipate in his eyes as he shifted into a sparring stance. "Well, if you insist," he shrugged with a smile. "Watch a true master at work."

"Oh, is your brother joining us?" Arya asked innocently.

Jon gave an exaggerated gasp in indignation, clutching his chest. She bit back a giggle.

And they began. Jon parried every strike she tried landing on him, remaining purely on the defensive no matter how much she goaded him into attacking her first. He was all elegance and lean muscle, spinning on the balls of his feet as he dodged her increasingly chaotic swings. It reminded her oddly of their day in the city, when she'd stood at the fringes of the laughing crowd, watching him dance. Jon had moved as if he walked on water, not unlike the way he fought. There was grace and poise in his every step, a deadly performance of beauty that had her unable to look away.

Arya wondered if she'd ever be able to move like he did. Elegant and dangerous weren't words often used to describe her, but she rather liked the sound of it.
"If that's what you want, then you should try water dancing," Jon said as he side-stepped her thrust. She froze, and turned to glare at him. "Stop listening to my thoughts. That's cheating!"

"It's not something I can turn off," he argued, straightening. The sword hung idly at his side.

Arya lowered her own wooden stick as well, struggling to catch her breath. To her annoyance, Jon had barely broken a sweat.

He smirked at her. "Told you I'd win."

She rolled her eyes, refusing to entertain him with a response. Instead, she asked curiously, "What's water dancing?"

"A special style of sword fighting in Braavos," Jon explained. "Legend has it that true masters of the art can fight and kill on a pool of water without so much as disturbing the surface."

Arya scoffed, folding her arms over her chest. "That's impossible."

Jon played with the stick sword in his hands, shrugging lightly at her. "I wouldn't say that. My father had a master brought from the Free Cities to train Aegon and myself for a year when we were younger. I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen that man fight up close."

In her mind's eye, Arya caught a glimpse of a slender bald man with a pointed face twirling across the training ground as if he were crafted from the wind itself. Jon's memories stretched out in front of her like an old dream, visions of himself and another young silver-haired boy balancing on beams and spinning with blindfolds as they giggled mercilessly.

A wave of wistfulness washed over her as she watched them, and she released a small sigh. Oh, what she'd give to train like they had. Arya hadn't realised she'd shut her eyes until she'd opened them to see a contemplative prince looking at her.

"You know," he began hesitantly, "if you're keen to learn, my old teacher visits the Red Keep from time to time. He's due for another visit next month. I could ask him to stay at Winterfell and teach you, if you'd like."

She gasped softly, her eyes widening. "Really?" she breathed. "You'd do that? He wouldn't mind teaching a girl?"

Jon lifted a shoulder and rubbed the back of his head nonchalantly. "Sure, I mean, it's no big deal." He glanced at her and reddened softly. "And Syrio isn't like any master at Westeros. He doesn't care for the conventional, only who you are with a sword in your hand."

An unbidden grin rose to her face, stretching widely across her lips. Clasping her hands together, she jumped on the balls of her feet. "That sounds amazing! You're the best, Jon!" she exclaimed, beaming up at him.

He flushed even darker and smiled softly at her.

A water dancing master! At Winterfell!

Just for her!

For once, she wouldn't have to hide behind a pillar and eavesdrop on her brothers' training sessions. Or sneak away after dinner to steal one of their weapons and hack away at a dummy. She would be
able to learn out in the open, with a true swordsman who wouldn't care for what's between her legs.

Arya let out a thrilled squeal and spun around the gardens, her barely contained excitement stopping her from standing still for too long. "Do you think he'd teach me how to fight on water?" she gushed at Jon as she raised her sword in the air as if ready to strike. "Would I get my own sword? Would it be Braavosi? What do Braavosi swords even look like?"

Jon laughed heartily, strolling over to where she was attempting to balance on one foot as she'd seen him do in his memories with his master. "I don't know if Syrio would give you your own sword," he admitted, "but I think Lord Stark wouldn't mind crafting something for you."

At the mention of her father, Arya lost her balance and dropped her other foot with a sigh. In the haze of her enthusiasm, she'd almost forgotten about what her parents would say. "Think again," she muttered, her mood faltering. "Father doesn't mind me playing with toys so long as I don't hurt myself, but my mother would never allow him to give me real steel." Her heart dropped. "I'm not even sure she'd let me have a water dancing master, either."

Suddenly, that bubble of light that had filled her to her fingertips burst inwards, and she felt her joy fade along with it. The memory of her mother - this ends now! - fluttered behind her eyelids, and she resisted the urge to curl into herself. With a sniff, Arya dropped her makeshift sword and plopped down on the grass, wrapping her arms around her knees.

She heard Jon hesitate briefly before sinking down beside her, rubbing a hand at the back of his head as he appraised her. "I'm...sorry to hear that," he offered uncertainly. "Would talking to her about it honestly make any difference?"

Arya shook her head and buried her face into the crook of her arms, letting a wave of pity wash over her.

"I could always get my father or brother to issue a royal order," the prince mused absently. Arya glanced up in alarm to see him gaze off in the distance thoughtfully, the corner of his mouth quirking upwards. "In the name of the king, she'd have to let you train."

She snorted. "Isn't that an abuse of your power?"

"I like to think of it as me fulfilling my duties according to the songs."

Arya raised an eyebrow.

"You know," Jon continued with a wave of his hand, "the pretty lady is in trouble and held against her will. Handsome prince swoops in and frees her. Or in this case, advocates for the pretty lady to learn how to murder someone, but semantics. I'm sure a song exists about it somewhere."

He grinned cheekily at her, leaning back on his hands. Arya found herself blushing under his gaze and she quickly looked away.

Did he just call me pretty?

Ridiculous. Only her father called her pretty and meant it, and he had to because that's what fathers did.

That didn't stop her biting back a smile that crept on her face.

"I think I've heard of this song," she teased, masking her reaction. She tapped a finger against her chin and pretended to think. "Doesn't the handsome prince get himself captured by an evil witch and
the lady has to defeat a dozen enemies to save him?"

Jon frowned. "That's not like any song I've heard."

"Then you haven't heard the right one yet," Arya said lightly, turning to look at the glittering stars above.

She missed his soft response. "I've just started listening."

Chapter End Notes

That slow burn is starting to see some embers, ayyy.

Also, bit of a self-promotion but if any of you are fans of Avatar: The Last Airbender, I’ve just started a new Zutara fic and I’d love to see some of you join me over there if you’re interested! :)
Jaime Lannister leaned against the column and watched the bustle of the Red Keep with a bored expression.

He rolled his eyes as a gaggle of ladies swarmed past him, huddled together like a pack of hyenas as they appraised him, approval dancing on their snooty faces. He sneered as their vapid giggles wafted towards him from the end of the corridor.

Shifting uncomfortably, irritation simmered underneath as summer beat relentlessly against his thick, golden armour. The afternoon heat had soaked through the castle walls and burrowed its way deep within his skin. Sweat spotted the edges of his hairline and he was repeatedly forced to run a hand over his face to stop it dripping into his eyes. A disgruntled sigh escaped his lips as he pulled another strand of plastered blonde hair off his forehead.

"You know, Your Grace," he began conversationally with a grimace, "your father ought to invest in armour for his Kingsguard that doesn't bake us alive. Consider it in his best interest, as I'd find it a lot easier to protect you all if I wasn't on fire."

Rhaenys raised an eyebrow. "It's not that bad. I can hardly feel the heat!"

He turned to throw a pointed look at her thin silk dress hanging precariously off her shoulders, leaving her arms bare. "Perhaps we should swap. I'll wear the dress and you the armour," he remarked drily.

"Absolutely not. What would people say if they knew my guards looked better in my clothes than I did?"
Jaime smirked and gave her a wink, prompting a burst of laughter.

They waited at the entrance to the royal gardens, the Princess perching on the stone balustrade as he kept watch beside her. Her elegant form was framed by a periwinkle blue sky, powdered with soft sunlight. The air smelled of flowers and mildew, the satin-green grass rippling gently in the light summer breeze. A tinkle of laughter from the roaming lords and ladies rang through the air like chimes, and Rhaenys glanced towards them almost wistfully.

Seeing the flickers of disappointment play across her face, Jaime moved to sit beside her. "The King will be here soon, Your Grace," he assured. "I'm sure he's just been held up for a moment."

Her lips twisted and she looked at him, sceptically. "He forgot about our dinner last night. He's probably forgotten me again."

"Last night was an exception," Jaime said quickly. "When I saw him this morning, he seemed rather keen on seeing you later. I would not worry just yet, Your Grace."

Rhaenys sighed, her fingers twisting through her burgundy silks. "You must think me so childish," she muttered, her eyes downcast. "Still seeking my father's attention as if I were not four-and-twenty. Women my age are long-married and have left their father's home for years, and here I am, whining because mine is a few minutes late!" She shook her head with a disbelieving laugh.

Jaime reached over and patted her arm gently. "You're never too old to look for your father," he said quietly. "He misses you dearly when you're not here. If I know my King, he is as impatient to see you as you are him."

The Princess beamed at him, giving his hand a quick squeeze. He smiled at her in return.

They sat quietly for a moment, enjoying the soothing silence of companionship, before she broke it by turning towards him again. "I hope you don't mind me asking, but...where is Lord Tywin? Did he not receive our invitation?"

"Oh, he received it alright."

"I see," Rhaenys frowned. "I wasn't aware he responded. Was there an issue at Casterley Rock he had to attend to?"

"Oh, he received it alright."

"I see," Rhaenys frowned. "I wasn't aware he responded. Was there an issue at Casterley Rock he had to attend to?"

Jaime's eyes narrowed and he bit back a scowl. "Something like that."

The issue, of course, were Tywin's sons: the dwarf forbidden from gaining authority over their castle, and the heir that turned his back on the Lannister name. When word of the impending tourney first spread, Jaime had been hopeful that he'd see his father or brother again. Other than a brief stay by Tyron nearly a decade ago, Jaime had not laid eyes on his family in almost twenty years. Indeed, the last he'd seen of Lord Tywin was at the end of a heated argument years ago. Rhaegar had offered him a chance to be released from his vows after the Rebellion, as a token of good faith for the Lannister support, and Jaime had turned it down immediately - to Tywin's everlasting dismay.

There were few memories Jaime kept close to heart, knowing them to be those that he wanted to see before he finally left this world, and his father's face when he'd told him his decision was one of them. He'd promised his life to the Kingsguard, and he had every intention of seeing it through. Jaime Lannister was now Ser Jaime, amongst the likes of the honourable Ser Arthur Dayne, the beginnings of a legend tracing his footsteps. It was all he'd ever dreamed of, instead of the shackles of becoming another lord with another castle.

Tywin had called him a fool, a disgrace to their noble House and a shame upon the ghost of his
mother. It was nothing he hadn't said before.

But it had not been the anger nor the disappointment on the Great Lion's face that had carved a piece out of Jaime, for he'd seen it a dozen times. Oh, it had been the anguish. That had been the first, and the very last. There was a weakness on Tywin's face, a moment of fragility that Jaime had thought erased a long time ago, and it had stunned him to witness it.

_I did not think he cared so much_, a wistful voice whispered.

_It was not you he cared for, but the legacy of his name_, a crueler one whispered back.

Tywin had stormed out of the Red Keep, Cersei on his heels, wildfire burning in their twin pools of emerald for the boy that had abandoned them for the final time.

The memory sent a hollow pang through his chest, as it always did.

Rhaenys was watching him impassively, as if glimpsing into his thoughts. When she caught his eye, she smiled sympathetically, reaching out to grasp his hand. He'd never disclosed the truth of his estrangement from his family, but he imagined the Princess had noticed enough through his stilted conversations and the glaring absence of visiting relatives.

"Fathers are strange, aren't they?" Rhaenys mused, releasing his hand to absently fix her skirts.

"They're these infallible heroes one day, but unbearably human in the next. I can't say when it happens, but it's always rather jarring to witness."

She did not offer empty words of comfort nor assurances of _he loves you_, and for that, he was impossibly grateful.

The edges of his lips quirked upwards and he regarded her with a hint of sadness. "And once they've fallen from grace, they're never quite the same hero you remember," he added softly.

"No, I suppose you're right. It seems the change is a little more permanent each time," the Princess murmured, an unreadable expression flickering in her dark eyes like a flame. She cocked her head at him, choosing a different approach. "At least your niece is here," she offered, attempting a smile.

"Myrcella is a sweet darling. Have you spoken to her yet?"

Jaime shrugged lightly, leaning back against the column to face her. "Once or twice," he admitted. "I should like to get to know her more, however."

Myrcella had sought him out almost immediately upon her arrival. He'd been stunned at the sight of her at first and thought he'd been hallucinating - _blonde hair like my own, like hers, and oh, the eyes, she's come back to haunt me_- but a voice had excitedly called, "Uncle Jaime!" and the illusion had crumbled.

She had all her mother's beauty and none of her nature, and for that Jaime was thankful. The thought of Cersei's ghost haunting him for weeks during the tourney was unbearable.

At least, not again. He'd managed to erase her from his soul almost twenty years ago, when he'd made his final decision and destroyed their delicate bond. Erasing her from his heart and mind had taken a little longer.

"Oh, she is a delight!" Rhaenys exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "Although I very much wish I could have met her mother. I confess I have always wondered about the Lady Cersei. Her reputation precedes her." She raised her eyebrows at him, and Jaime looked away immediately. "I was a little disappointed that she'd chosen not to attend the tourney."
An image of a radiant girl with sun-kissed hair flashed across his eyes and Jaime lost his breath.

For a moment, he forgot the sweltering heat and the layers of armour and fabric that separated his skin from the air. For a moment, he felt almost transparent as he surrendered to the hurricane of memories battering within him, blazing and bare to the elements.

It reminded him of another kind of burning, born of green eyes and black rage. Cersei had bore witness to every crack of his heart, every fragment of his soul. She'd been there when he'd first opened his eyes and drawn his first breath, her presence raging across his mind like an unyielding storm. She had always been a whirlwind, and for years, Jaime had been thrown with the current, lost in the chaos of the one the Gods had pledged his life to. He could not remember ever knowing silence as a child, his quietest moments filled with the near-constant turmoil of everything that Cersei was made of.

After he'd freed his soul from hers however, Jaime had learnt that silence still had a sound - and it was deafening and sweet all at once.

"Are you alright?" a soft voice drifted through the haze. "Was it something I said?"

Jaime turned and his rake over Rhaenys' face: at her inquisitive expression, at the youthful life thrumming in her eyes, at the heart that only beat for one instead of two. A pang of envy shot through him.

"Nothing like that," he replied in a low voice, avoiding her stare. "My family is...complicated, I'm afraid."

Rhaenys was frowning, her obsidian eyes flickering with undecipherable emotion. He tried not to shift under her stare, but there was something terribly sad about the way she was regarding him.

"May I ask you something, Ser Jaime? And you must promise to answer honestly. Not as my guard, but as my friend."

Jaime glanced up in alarm. "Of course, my princess."

She turned away then, idly looking over the myriad of flowers peppering the gardens like water droplets. "Mother always said that love is the death of duty," she said quietly, her words a melodic whisper threading between them. Jaime dared not breathe in case he disturbed the delicate strands. "For so long, I thought it to be the words of a cynic. I have always done my duty, and I have always done it gladly. Out of love for those I do it for. Mother had it all wrong, I thought." Her mouth twisted. "I'm not so sure anymore."

The Lannister regarded her carefully, narrowing his eyes at her as he deliberated his response. "What troubles you, Your Grace?" he tentatively asked.

A flicker of life danced across her face, and she suddenly whipped towards him. Her eyes simmered like a dark storm and Jaime found himself unconsciously leaning away from their intensity. "Do you regret the choices you made?"

"My what?"

"Your decision to stay with the Kingsguard," she pressed insistently. "To go against the desires of your family. Do you regret it?"

Jaime blinked at her in mute shock. An automatic response of denial danced on his tongue, but he pulled it back before it leapt into the air.
Did he regret it?

He thought of his father, with his arrogant smiles and pride shining through his eyes as he gazed at his eldest son. It was a look that had only ever been for him.

It always had to be you to carry the weight of our good name. You are a Lannister before you are Jaime. A lion before a man.

He thought of Cersei, with her gold-spun hair and her radiant smiles. He thought of her laughing with him, at him, always just him.

He thought of her rage, of the tendrils of madness enthralling her as she shrieked, Jaime Jaime Jaime, we belong together, don't you see? You are nothing without me. We are two parts of a whole. You are mine, now and forever. Mine mine mine. What is your life if I am not in it?

Not yours. It is mine. To do with as I please, however I wish. I am Jaime Lannister, and I will choose what that means.

"No," he said aloud, more ferociously than he'd planned. "I don't. I found freedom in my vows that I'd never had before. I could never give that up."

Rhaenys furrowed her brow at him, visibly confused. "But you chose this over love. You are bound by duty, whether you like it or not. Where is the freedom in that?"

He shrugged. "One man's freedom is another man's prison. You simplify it too much, Your Grace." The corner of his mouth quirked up as he looked at the open naivety painted across her face. "You see family and you think of love, not duty. It is admirable, but you are an exception. Family is a duty, Your Grace. To think otherwise is a luxury not afforded to many. I did not choose duty over love. I made a decision between the duty I wanted and the duty I did not. That is the difference: I chose."

"And what of love? You've lost your family and they have lost you," Rhaenys said softly, eyes averted. "Does that not bother you? To lose the ones who loved you?"

Jaime's jaw clenched as he stared at a spot on the floor. The silence beat on mercilessly against his chest, every pang shooting a spasm of pain through his body. He licked his dry lips and inhaled deeply.

Father loved the Heir to Casterley Rock, the future of House Lannister.

Cersei loved her other half, the fragment of her soul.

Neither wanted the boy underneath. Not truly.

"Of course it bothers me," he said in sudden irritation. Later, he'd be aghast at the tone he'd used before his princess, but in that moment, Jaime did not care. She had ripped open a carefully placed bandage over his heart, its wounds exposed to the air.

"They are the blood of my blood. My House, my home." He lifted his eyes towards her, through her, at the faces of his father and his sister, twisted as they were on their last day together. "But with them, I was always a part of something else, but never my own man. It was not a life I was satisfied with."

"I don't understand. You joined the Kingsguard. You're still part of a whole. How is it any different?" Rhaenys countered with a frown.
Jaime smiled sadly at her. “We are our choices, Your Grace. I chose to be here, and in that, I am complete.”

She regarded him thoughtfully for a moment, her face closed off. There was an odd sheen in her eyes, and Rhaenys turned away suddenly, swallowing. “But the ones you left behind are not,” she said simply, almost too quiet for him to hear.

The Lannister knight was still staring blankly at her when the echoes of two pairs of feet rang sharply in the air. He glanced up, hurriedly rushing to his feet when he caught sight of the King strolling down the corridor towards them, Arthur Dayne in his step.

He hid his unsettled face with a deep bow, schooling his expression into something more neutral before looking up. Rhaegar shot him a nod of acknowledgement before turning to his daughter, who smiled at him prettily with a curtsy. Jaime almost snorted at the ease with which she slipped into her role.

"My dear, forgive an old man for his tardiness," Rhaegar began, reaching out to grasp Rhaenys’ hand. "I had a matter to discuss with Lord Connington and the time slipped past me. I hope you were not waiting for too long." He kissed her hand gently.

Rhaenys nodded sympathetically and patted his arm. "No, no, Father," she lied smoothly, "I only just arrived myself. Duty comes first, I know. Shall we?"

The King’s face wrinkled into a soft smile as he looped her hand through his arm. Behind him, Arthur nodded at Jaime, who found himself standing a little straighter for it. Together, father and daughter stepped into the dying sunlight, their white cloaked shadows trailing behind them.

oOo

The alcove they dined in was a small but richly decorated room tucked into the outskirts of the garden. The circular walls were a deep blue that looked almost green in the sunset, as if one had dipped their brush in the ocean and painted the canvas with its droplets. Golden dragons swam delicately on the ceiling, sunlight shining off their eyes, filling them with fire. A small table stood in the centre, laden with an assortment of desserts and treats, splashed with a rainbow of colours and filling the air with the sweet smell of baking.

Rhaegar and Rhaenys sat together, their plates haphazardly stacked with a dozen different tarts with a single bite. Upon entering the room, the King, with a twinkle in his eye, had challenged his daughter to find the strangest combination of flavours she could. The results had been entertaining to watch, and even Arthur had cracked a smile over the course of the evening.

The Princess let out a satisfied moan as she chewed, a blueberry tart in one hand and a ginger biscuit topped with cranberry sauce in the other. "It shouldn't work, but it does," she mumbled through a mouthful of food. Jaime grimaced subtly standing in the shadows beside her.

Rhaegar frowned as she handed him both foods. Tentatively, he took a bite from both and spit it out immediately. "Clearly you didn't inherit good taste from me," he complained, washing his mouth out with wine with a wince. "Hand me some chocolate before I lose my appetite."

His daughter passed the plate of éclairs, triumphantly. "Does that mean I win?"
The King pretended to deliberate, hiding a smile. "Very well. I crown you the Queen of Tarts - oh."
He winced. "Don't tell your mother I called you that."

Rhaenys suddenly released an undignified snort, throwing her head back to howl with laughter. Her
hair came loose from the intricate braids piled on her head, and she accidentally smeared some
whipped cream on her elbow when she rested it on a plate without looking.

Jaime smiled softly at the small snapshot of Rhaenys unreserved and blissfully imperfect. In these
rare glimpses of vulnerability, he thought he could almost see the precocious child that once followed
him around, begging to be carried on his shoulders.

The King seemed to think the same, as his own mirth faded as he watched her wistfully. When her
laughter winded down, he reached over and grasped her hand resting on the table. "I have missed
you," he said quietly.

Dark eyes softened and Rhaenys covered his hand with her own, her face spread in a beaming smile.
"I missed you, too, Father."

Rhaegar opened his mouth to say something, but decided otherwise. Clearing his throat, he picked
up his wine goblet and sat back in his seat, looking around the room idly. "Rhaenys, there is a special
favour I must ask of you," he said instead.

The Princess froze, a wide smile still on her lips. "A favour?" she repeated, giggling hesitatingly. She
mimicked his motion and leaned back in her chair to survey him carefully.

"You understand that I am looking for a bride for Jon, and I need some help."

It was as if a candle had been blown out, the light from her amusement fading immediately as her
face fell. In its place, the mask Jaime had watched her refine for years settled into place. "I am aware,
yes," she said steadily. "Why would you come to me?"

"I know that you and Aegon disapprove of my intentions to provide Jon with a betrothal as soon as
possible. Aegon, in particular, has made himself rather vocally clear of what he thinks."

Jaime resisted the urge to snort. The young prince had stormed his Father's solar while he had been
stationed outside, demanding to know why the King sought to torment his children. It had all been
rather dramatic, and it had taken Jaime the good part of an hour to wrestle Aegon back to his room
and lecture him on the perks of knocking.

"Oh...well, I...we..." the Princess released his hand with a start, glancing downwards as a blush
spread across her cheeks, "I...I have my concerns, it's true. It all seems, well...rather sudden." She
tucked a wayward strand behind her ear slowly, visibly uncomfortable. "I know you want what's
best for Jon, but he isn't ready for marriage yet. He dreams of finding his way in the world, and it
wouldn't hurt anyone to let him go for a little while. Won't you reconsider?"

The King's amethyst eyes swung to regard her. Jaime could see a glimpse of hollowness in his gaze
and he swallowed a shiver. "Tell me, my darling, what are the words of House Tully?"

Rhaenys blanched. "Why is that relevant?"

"Humour me."


Rhaegar spun the goblet in his hand, pretending to observe the gold detail along its rim. "Fascinating,
isn’t it? The creed of one’s House speaks so much of what one values most. I must admit,” he mused, "I have always rather envied House Tully’s. It seems they understand that which many have not."

"And what's that?" Rhaenys asked curiously.

His eyes flickered up and caught hers with a breath. "Family must always come first. Without it, a House crumbles from within. Duty and honour lead us on a straight path - a path promising strength and unity. Without either, we lose our way of life and we lose ourselves. Do you understand?"

Rhaenys seemed to have forgotten to breathe. Her chest hitched and she swallowed hastily. "I do, but-"

"We all have our duty. You, my darling," he reached over and ran a finger down her cheek, "will be Queen one day. You and your brothers will lead House Targaryen into a new golden age, and you will do it together. A marriage is not an ending, but the beginning of the next step of your lives. It shall prepare all of you for what comes after."

"But Jon-"

"Jon is young, and young men are often ruled by their hearts. History has shown us the perils of dragons wandering too far from their den. Our House is built on family, Rhaenys, not on the whims of our heart’s desires. Without each other, we cease to exist."

An uncomfortable pit swelled in Jaime’s gut, and he struggled to ignore its pressing weight. He could not decide if it was sympathy, or guilt, or a strange mixture of both.

"He’d come back,” Rhaenys whispered fervently, shaking her head in disbelief. "Jon...he'd-he'd come back. I know it. I-I believe it. He knows his duty to our House. He’d never abandon it."

"Unless he finds another he prefers. What then?"

Rhaenys suddenly glanced at Jaime, her dark eyes burning bright. The Kingsguard found himself trapped in her stare, the world around them falling to obscurity.

You did not choose duty over love. You made a decision between the duty you wanted and the duty you did not.

But your family paid for your choice. You left them behind.

Her face hardened.

And that is too high a price I am willing to pay.

"Myrcella Baratheon," she said finally, her voice breathless.

Rhaegar’s eyebrows shot up and he frowned at her. "Lord Stannis and Lady Cersei’s daughter?"

"I’ve always enjoyed her," the Princess murmured, looking down to stare at her plate. "She is sweet and intelligent, and she already holds a candle for Jon from what I’ve seen. I think they might like one another."

The King pondered for a moment, nodding. “A union between a Targaryen and a Baratheon would send the right message after the Rebellion. It’s a good match.” He turned towards the Dornish guard. "Arthur, Lord Stannis is here at the tourney, is he not?"

“Yes, Your Grace.”
“Excellent. Remind me to set a meeting with him on the morrow. I should think he'd be rather
honoured by the suggestion.” With a smile, he reached for another lemon tart, oblivious that his
daughter remained frozen in her seat. Chewing thoughtfully, he turned to the Lannister. "Lady
Myrcella is your niece, Ser Jaime?"

It took a heartbeat for Jaime to register that he was being spoken to, tearing his eyes from the
dejected princess. “My sister’s daughter, yes, Your Grace,” he replied shortly.

“T...
tied together with a smile

Chapter Summary

Relationships are built on trust.

But if you're short on time: a good story, a legislative proposal, and one angry cat should do the trick, as Jon and Arya find out together.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

HAPPY NEW YEAR! (I'm a month late, but it still counts!)

I hope 2019 is good to all of you and brings nothing but good vibes ayy.

This chapter comes a little late as it was originally 10k+ and I was rushing to finish it, before I decided to just split it up and post one earlier so I don't keep you all waiting for much longer! Especially after the last chapter, yeesh, sorry about that. Good news is that the next one should be along shortly!

Once again, to everyone that reviewed/left kudos last time, you all are amazing and so supportive and I love all of you so very much.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The dream exploded around him like firecrackers; everything was ablaze, too bright, too burning.

He spun again and again, the abyss yawning underneath like the jaws of a wolf as the storm stretched out above him. This time, as so many times before, fear curled inside his stomach, knotting through his veins as he balanced precariously on the precipice.

You're not alone.

Flash.

White light blinded him.

You're home, a familiar voice whispered from below, with me-

Where are you? I can't see you!

Whichever way he turned, however hard his mind raged, all he saw was black, black, black. Searing pain shattered through his head, imprinting itself in his skull, and he was lost under the turbulent clouds. They reached out, talons at the ready to tear at him. A single wild thought: I'm not alone, Arya, Arya, she -
The night howled and he was powerless as it raced towards him, unrelenting, unforgiving-

Jon woke from the nightmare with a half-stifled cry and found himself in a bright room, his mind clouded and agitated. His chambers, he was home, he was safe. With every breath of sunlight pouring in through the windows, reality flooded back. Jon bent his head between his knees and drew deep breaths though his nose. There was no headache, for once, but his heart pounded in his chest as if he'd run endlessly through the night.

'Are you alright?' a telepathic voice jolted him, shocking as a spark.

Instinctively, his head snapped up to glance around the room. When he realised where it was coming from, he released a soft sigh. 'Did I wake you?'

'No, I've been up for hours,' she lied too quickly, and he threw himself back amongst the pillows with a groan.

'Sorry,' he mumbled at her, rubbing his eyes tiredly. 'It was...just a bad dream.'

Part of him knew that. Logic told him that it was nothing to worry about. His heart whispered something might be.

'I know, I could feel it.' A pause. 'Do you want to talk about it? That can help sometimes.'

The darkness, the storm, the fear. The loneliness crushing down on him - and a voice, the voice, her voice, threading through the black with its brilliance, keeping the abyss at bay -

'Tell me a story?' he asked suddenly. 'Anything at all.'

When Jon was a child and had the occasional nightmare about some demon trying to eat him, he'd often gone running to Rhaenys' room to crawl in her bed. There had always been something comforting about being with his older sister, as if she'd give those demons a stern glare and they'd leave him alone forever. She never complained and would always tell him a story to distract him: tales of krakens in the sea or the noblewoman running away with the blacksmith or monsters made of ice hiding beneath the snow. Fantastical or otherwise, they were a comfort.

It had been years since Jon had hid in anyone's bed, but he still missed the stories.

He felt Arya's understanding thrum through the connection and Jon felt a swell of appreciation that he did not need to explain.

'Have I told you about the time my brother Robb hid in the crypts, and pretended to be a ghost to frighten all of us?'

'No, but I'd like you to.'

Arya launched into the tale, filling his head with visions of children with curling red hair, running through a crypt while a tall boy covered head to toe in flour chased after them. Jon stared at the ceiling as she spoke, his mind uncharacteristically blank as the roiling in his stomach ceded like the tide.

She switched to another story, one of snowball fights with a sister as they sped around the Winterfell grounds, leaving footsteps in the snow as they laughed without reservation. Jon closed his eyes and behind his lids, he caught a scene of winter dreams, of snowflakes kissing his lips as a castle of stone and ice loomed above. Giggles drifted towards him, and he turned to glimpse a dark girl sprinting past him, her wild hair flying behind her as another red-headed girl chased her. Pure, unadulterated
joy filled the air with sweetness, and lying in his bed a thousand miles away, Jon could almost taste it.

Taste her. Like the tides below the palace, Arya's presence crashed into him over and over again, and he rose and fell with every crest. He let himself soar with her currents, the sound of her voice trembling in his ears, washing away the cobwebs and shadows that infested his nightmares.

There was something about not being alone, not having to think so much to fill that unbearable silence in his head. It was a relief to simply surrender for a moment, and be carried away with Arya and her memories.

She was warm and dazzling with light, and like a moth, he was drawn to her. Her voice spilled into the hollow crevices, pouring over the fear like fine wine until all he could sense was everything she was made of.

_I heard you in my dreams_, he mused quietly, unnoticed by Arya as she babbled on happily. In the midst of the storm, the darkness at his feet - once so frightening - felt so safe, felt like home. The abyss had been speaking to him for months, calling his name, never giving its own.

And now, he finally had it.

_You were there. I couldn't see you, but you were there. Perhaps as you always have been._

But it was just a dream.

Wasn't it?

oOo

_'That's impossible,' Jon snorted as he laced his boots._

_'I'm telling the truth!' Arya laughed. 'Old Nan says an ice dragon sleeps beneath Winterfell. Open your mind to the possibilities! When you visit, we should try and find it together! Maybe you'll have some strange magical Targaryen sense or something. The blood of the dragon and all that.'_

_'That's not how it works-'_

Jon's hands and thoughts froze while he buttoned his tunic, his breaths beating low and rhythmically in his ears. A slow smile spread on his lips and he resumed his ministrations, hope erupting in his chest in a dozen pinpricks of exploding stars.

_'Is...is that something you'd like to do?' Arya asked hesitantly, misreading his reaction. 'I mean, it's a stupid idea, if you'd rather do something else-'_

He thought of Winterfell, as he'd seen through her eyes, of its jagged stone walls clawing through the snow like the hand of a drowning man. Its brutal beauty wrapped in a pale icy mist, a delicate blanket that bathed the castle in soft blues and whites, like something carved straight from the heart of winter.

He thought of standing at its threshold, alone and unsure, not knowing if he truly belonged or if he was a stranger like any other. As he always did when he imagined what his first visit would be like.
And of Arya, running past him with breathless laughter in her wake. She would glance over her shoulder and chide him for being too slow, beckoning him with a taunting remark.

*What are you waiting for? We have a dragon to find!*

He thought of grinning at her, at the thrill of the chase, as he took a step forward.

Jon blinked and he was standing in his room again, Arya hovering in his head, filled with doubt.

*I think it sounds perfect,*' he said.

oOo

*When I was five, I thought I could fly. Father kept calling all of us dragons, so Egg and I assumed he meant literally and we leapt off one of the balconies, thinking we’d finally grow wings.*'

He showed her a picture of that moment, so many years ago. Jon stood perched on top of the banister, peering hesitantly at the green foliage below. Beside him, a small and wiry Aegon scrunched his face in contemplation.

"It's awfully far..." Jon mumbled softly, fear seizing him suddenly. Maybe he should step down and find Rhaenys and ask her for a story. That wasn't frightening in the least.

"If we fall, we'll land on the bushes. It won't hurt," his brother reasoned with all his seven-year-old wisdom.

Jon chewed his lip, faltering. "Do you think it'll work?"

"Of course it will! We're dragons. Father said so and dragons are supposed to fly, so we're supposed to fly." Aegon spread his arms wide dramatically, as if he'd already spouted wings. The move brought him tethering dangerously close to the edge.

Jon grinned at him, trusting his older brother implicitly. The logic made perfect sense, of course. With an assured nod, the two princes took a deep breath, and jumped.

Arya gasped, as if she'd taken the fall herself. *How did you both survive?*

Jon, twenty-years old and very much alive, calmly spooned porridge into his mouth.

*Jaime Lannister caught us from below. Then chained us to our beds until supper. He never told the King and Queen. I think he wanted to spare them both a heart attack.*'

*Of course. No parent wants to know the fruit of their loins are two idiots with a death wish.*'

Jon choked on his food. His eyes watered as he coughed, Aegon pounding on his back until he spat out chewed up oats. Grabbing the offered glass of orange juice from his sister, he hid his laughter as he sipped it slowly, ignoring the curious glances of his siblings.

*To this day, I don't think Aegon and I are over our heartbreak that we were just two simple children after all.*

Across their mind-link, something bloomed: soft and pure and fleeting.
'There's nothing simple about you, Jon Targaryen,' she said.

oOo

When Jon returned to his chambers after breakfast, he felt a stab of disappointment at the silence waiting for him.

The room was empty, of course, as was expected. But that wasn't it.

No, it was entirely what was happening - or rather, what was *not* happening - in his head.

Arya had been called away to breakfast with her family, which demanded more attention than she could give whilst chatting away with him. Jon found himself feeling surprisingly disgruntled that their conversation had drawn to an end, and the blazing halo of her presence had dwindled to a soft candle the moment she'd turned away.

He supposed he should think that a good thing, that their strange bond could be controlled in some manner.

He *should* be considering how they could use it to break the connection - something they hadn't really focused on in a few days, admittedly.

Instead, Jon was less than pleased. He really was enjoying that conversation, and her happy ramblings that morning had lifted his spirits higher than he could imagine was possible after a night terror.

You're being a child, he chastised himself. *This can't last. None of this is normal and you shouldn't get used to it.*

His mouth twisted and he ignored the swell of *something* in his chest at the thought.

Jon shook his head firmly: such thoughts were dangerous to imagine. Turning towards the door, perhaps to seek his brother out for a friendly spar on the training grounds, his eye caught a piece of parchment tucked away in a corner of his desk. Frowning, he moved to pick it up.

Aegon, it read.

*The tourney and your wedding is no excuse to neglect your responsibilities as Crown Prince.*

*Uncle Aemon has written to me once again about the state of the Night’s Watch. The wildling attacks have increased in frequency and the Watch is ill-prepared. I have sent more resources and food, but our cells are empty. He asks for more men, better men, men that I cannot give.*

*The Night’s Watch will be one of your most important responsibilities as King. You must never neglect their requests. They are our shield from dangers we are blessed to never see, and should be treated with respect.*

*We need to provide them with more recruits. I have written to the Great Houses requesting the transfer of their prisoners to the Wall, but I am concerned it will not be enough.*

*I entrust this task to you as it will be one of many that will be presented to you once you are King. Draft a viable new solution for our increasing lack of recruits. Sending those rotting away in their*
cells is no longer sufficient, and we must look for new and more inspiring avenues.

No later than two weeks.

Signed,

King Rhaegar I

Jon dropped the paper with a snort. Aegon had clearly left it behind when he’d stormed in complaining loudly about their father giving him work to do during the celebrations, and promptly forgot about it.

That had been two weeks ago.

Which meant the King expected it today.

With a sudden rush of irritation, Jon thumped a fist against the top of his desk. *Irresponsible fool,* he thought angrily. For all their heartache over their father, Jon always believed that Rhaegar was exactly the sort of ruler that Aegon should aspire to be. Their father always put the realm first, and while that had deepened the chasm between his heart and his family, Jon could not deny that it was what made him a great King. And here he was, practically holding his idiot of a son's hand through it all - and yet still, his brother could not deliver.

With a long-suffering sigh, Jon dropped down in his chair and reached for some fresh parchment and ink. If the King expected a plan today, he would have one.

*You owe me for this, Egg. I’m saving your ass once again.*

It always sent a shot of worry through Jon whenever Aegon stumbled, for it reminded him how much his brother would always need someone in the shadows to catch him.

For fifteen years, that someone had always been Jon.

He wondered if it would be for fifteen more, and the fifteen after that.

*Is this to be the rest of my life?*

Jon pinched the bridge of his nose tiredly. There was little time for another crisis of existence. He had to focus. The plan would hardly be worthy of any sort of approval, given Jon now had a handful of hours instead of two weeks. But it may be enough that his brother would be spared from the King's anger.

Even after seeing over twenty years of life, Rhaegar's displeasure still sent a sliver of fear down the princes' spines. Not that they would ever admit it out loud, of course.

He wracked his brain to remember what he knew of the Night’s Watch and its vows from his lessons. The supposed 'sword in the darkness' or 'the light that brings the dawn' or some other rubbish.

*More like a bunch of thieves and murderers standing around on a block of ice freezing their pricks off,* Jon chuckled to himself.

‘That's not true,’ a voice snapped in indignation. ‘*My uncle Benjen is a ranger in the Watch and he happens to be brilliant, thank you very much.*’

He barely reacted to Arya’s lithe presence boldly shimmering through the thread, save for a small flip
of his stomach.

‘And my great-great-uncle is a maester. So they have a couple good eggs, I'm glad to hear it. But that doesn’t stop them being mostly made up of the worst society has to offer,’ Jon argued. ‘Honestly, what does the King expect? What madman would forsake everything to join? And willingly, at that?’

‘My uncle says there’s honour to be found in protecting the realm,’ Arya countered stubbornly. ‘It’s only become a haven of criminals because people only send criminals. The Starks have been part of the Watch for thousands of years, and it’s never been this bad before. Uncle Benjen says people used to clamour to join once, but now it’s become the choice marginally better than being executed.’

Jon imagined that if she were in front of him, she’d be glaring at him with her hands on her hips.

‘They’re vows for life, Arya. In the coldest part of the world with little in the way of comfort and luxury. Can you blame men for realising that they have better alternatives than shivering balls for the rest of their days?’

‘Like what?’ she retorted hotly. ‘Tell me, Jon, how is life any better in the slums of King’s Landing? Are they not suffering as well?’

She sent him a memory of their dalliance in the city, dancing amongst the whores and the butchers and the rest of the unseen class Jon had little opportunity to ever meet. Except, instead of the ringing laughter that he remembered, Arya showed him those he had not noticed that day. Little boys scurrying about gathering scraps of food from the rubbish strewn across the streets. Girls no older than ten dressed as women grown, slipping away from the claws of old men clutching at their skirts. Despair naked in the eyes as the air filled with music and cheer, the rotten corpse of society's forgotten beneath the too-sweet scent of prosperity.

He caught a sight of Bessa, the young courtesan he'd first danced with.

"Desperate, not dangerous," Arya had told him. Children seeking to survive in a world not made for childhood.

'The Night's Watch is an ancient organisation. You find your brothers in black and a sense of purpose, instead of wasting away on some street corner somewhere,' Arya's words drifted over the scene, growing increasingly passionate. 'Uncle Benjen says they train all the young recruits. If you send them as boys now, they could grow to be great rangers someday. The Night's Watch would be great again, too.'

The picture of Bessa's smiling face burned into the back of Jon's eyes. 'It's only for men. It won't help people like her,' he pointed out, a rush of disappointment coursing through him. He'd liked the dynamic girl, brave enough to ask a prince to dance. It stung that he felt so helpless, despite supposedly having the world's resources at his disposal.

Arya deflated immediately when she saw where - or who - his thoughts dwelled on. 'I hate that rule,' she proclaimed fiercely. 'Women are more than capable of defending the realm, and can fight as well as any man if given the opportunity.'

Jon smiled at the volatility of her fury, like a volcanic sea brimming with barely-contained energy. 'I don't doubt it,' he agreed, almost affectionately. 'They just need fifty northern ladies who challenge grown men to sword fights and races through the city. The wildings and whatever ice monsters out there would never know what hit them.'
He felt her laughter through their connection, vibrating deep in his bones like the thrumming of an old instrument. 'Or a Targaryen prince who saves northern ladies from dark tunnels and dancing crowds,' she teased. 'I bet they'd make you Lord Commander for being such an honourable hero.'

Lord Commander of the Night's Watch certainly had a ring to it, Jon mused, and felt almost fitting. Perhaps if the world had been a little different, it might have come to pass.

Pushing his fanciful thoughts away, he turned his attention back to the blank parchment and the northern lady hovering in his head. 'We can't force innocents to join the Watch,' he told her. 'You might hate it, but the people see them as little more than a brotherhood of criminals. Many will not wish to be associated with them. That won't change overnight.'

'They need an incentive,' Arya began. He could almost see the wheels turning as she pondered. 'No one does anything for the good of others unless there's something in it for themselves.'

Jon tapped his quill against the parchment thoughtfully. 'Every man looks to secure two things in his life: bread and gold. For him or for his family: it's always the primary concern. Promise a man lavish shares of both, and he'll do anything you ask of him.'

They froze.

When the pin dropped, both of them rushed to speak at once.

'If you promise them compensation or a reward for their service -'

'- an assurance that their families will be taken care of in their absence -'

'-the children wouldn't have to work to support themselves -'

'-we could get them off the streets. We could build their lives and the Night's Watch at the same time!'

'Jon, you're fantastic,' Arya breathed excitedly, admiration flooding from her presence like a river of gold.

The prince's face grew warm and he sent a silent prayer of thanks that she could not see him flush. 'I couldn't have done it without you,' he said simply. 'You're brilliant as well, you know.'

Like the awakening of spring, the golden thread bloomed in a spectrum of colour, dazzling like a thousand flowers in blossom. As if he'd walked into half a dream, Arya's delight moved across his consciousness in a slow grace that swallowed his attention until everything fell into shadow. Until his senses extended no further than her feather-light touch and he was lost in this moment of wonder.

I dreamed of you last night.

And every night before that.

Has it always been you?

'Arya, I -'

Jon wasn't sure what he was about to say - and he was spared from saying it - when Arya's focus was immediately turned away. Curious, and a little annoyed, he prodded deeper to see who had stolen her attention.

"Rickon!" Arya hissed at a tall red-headed boy standing in the doorway of her chambers. "Don't you
"I've been knocking for ages!" her brother whined with a stomp of his foot. "Why didn't you answer? And what are you doing all cooped up in here?" He glanced around suspiciously, as if looking for some nefarious lover stashed under the bed. Jon chuckled to himself.

"None of your business!" came the strained reply, her voice unusually high. "Rickon, what do you want? I'm...I'm, uh, resting."

Rickon shot her an incredulous look. "You're never resting," he replied, puzzled. "Are you ill? Does this mean you don't want to explore the Red Keep with me today?" His face fell and he looked incredibly young in his disappointment.

At the thought of sneaking around the palace with her little brother, Arya half-tumbled out of bed in her enthusiasm. "Oh, would you look at that?" she exclaimed, jumping unstably to her feet. "I'm all rested! Come on, then!" Haphazardly grabbing her boots by the dresser, Arya sent Jon an apology, 'I-well, we're sort of on a mission to see the entire Red Keep, and Rickon and I - but I can still try and help if you need me to-

'You've helped me enough,' he interrupted with a smile. 'I just need to write it up. Go on, but try not to accidentally damage something priceless again.'

'Again?'

'Interesting new addition to the dragon tapestry in the east wing. The orange juice really brings out its eyes.'

Arya huffed, pulling on her shoes with a sharp tug. 'Your ancestors have terrible taste in decorating. I did you all a favour.'

Jon almost spilled ink across his desk when he erupted in laughter.

oOo

He rose from his desk almost two hours later, parchment in hand, feeling rather pleased with himself.

The plan he’d drafted for the King was far from perfect, but it was his first legislative proposal and one he found himself hoping would come to pass. Arya had implanted all sorts of ideas in his head - quite literally - that seemed to burst with potential the more he considered it.

He didn’t think anyone could be so passionate about the bloody Night’s Watch, yet there Arya was. She cares so much, he pondered idly as he strolled towards his door, stuffing the parchment in his pocket. She cares for so much. If the lords carried but half of her heart or her passion, how different would our world be?

Better. The world would be better with more people like her in it. Of that, Jon was certain.

He was contemplating, as Jon often did, the fate of the realm’s future when he stepped out of his chambers - and stopped short.
Jaime Lannister turned from his position by the door to look at him. "Something wrong, Your Grace?" he asked innocently.

"Why are you outside my door?" Jon blurted out without thinking. "I never have Kingsguard outside my door. The King's orders. And where is Ser Oswell?" he asked suspiciously, looking around. "He's usually my guard. Why aren't you with my sister?"

Ser Jaime did not blink at the onslaught of questions, a wry expression on his face as if dealing with a particularly petulant child. "As I recall, Your Grace. You were rather insistent about guards at your door," he replied patiently. "Ser Oswell is not well at the moment, and I have replaced his duties while Ser Lewyn takes my place by the Princess Rhaenys." He levelled a hard stare at the prince. "As I am your guard for the day, I have little care for hiding from you around corners because you dislike the terrible burden of our protection. My sympathies, Your Grace. It must be difficult for you."

Jon narrowed his eyes. Jaime Lannister had always been his least favourite member of the Kingsguard. The insolent prick. Aegon and he could never understood what it was that the King or Queen - and their sister, especially - saw in the Lannister. He chalked it up to blind favouritism and Jaime holding his snark in check when he was around them. They adored his humour, unfortunately. Jon wrinkled his nose.

Perhaps he is still wroth with me about abandoning him at the palace gates before the melee.

"You know, I think I'd prefer to deal with an assassin than have you around all day," Jon said casually, turning to walk down the corridor.

He'd always hated being shadowed by guards wherever he went. Jon understood why, of course, but it reminded him a little too much of being a prisoner. Always being escorted, always being watched: he'd finally had enough almost a year ago and demanded some privacy. Thankfully, the King acquiesced, perhaps understanding the need for young men to have their space.

Jaime Lannister seemed to have missed the message. Or simply didn't care. The latter was more likely.

His guard fell into step behind him. "I'm just as ecstatic about this as you, Your Grace. Your presence brings such joy to my world, being the cheerful type you are."

Jon shot him a look of pure venom and opened his mouth to retort -

- when a wave of silent rage crashed into him with a sudden thrust. Impossibly vivid and immeasurably cold, he was momentarily frozen as it whirled above him, around him, through him.

And just as quickly as it came, it was gone.

Arya.

Ignoring Jaime's inquisitive look, Jon turned automatically down another corridor on his left. Pressing forward, he thought little of where he was going or how he knew where to go: simply that there was somewhere he needed to be.

'Arya? he hesitatingly prodded. 'Arya, what's happened?'

She did not answer, but he could feel the curling tendrils of anger roiling off her presence like heat. It was a fury of a different sort, one not made of agitated seas but simmering embers: dark and sinuous, slinking across the connection like a starless night. Something old and steadfast, sinking deeper into
every crack and crevice.

'Arya, I know something's wrong.'

There was still no answer. Frustrated, Jon picked up his pace, Jaime at his heels.

He almost pushed his way through the bond to see what was happening for himself - when a sudden screech filled the air, bringing the two men to a halt.

"Oh, you wretched thing! Get away from me!" a hysterical voice screamed.

There was a sharp yowl.

"Stop it! You're going to hurt him!" yelled Arya, fear saturating her words.

The sheer emotion in her voice set Jon in motion again.

_Gods, is someone hurting Rickon?_ he thought frantically.

'Arya, what in the bloody hell is-'

He rounded a corner and stopped to stare blankly.

"I don't know what I expected," Jaime said, bewildered.

It was utter chaos.

A lady was running in circles in the middle of the corridor, shrieking loudly as she desperately tried kicking at something clutching the edge of her skirts. Jon peered closer to see something large and black ripping viciously at the fabric. On her hands and knees, crawling behind the screaming woman, was Arya. She was making desperate attempts to grab the animal and avoid getting hit, her hands reaching through empty air as she pleaded not to hurt it. Jon looked to the side to see Rickon and another lady standing dumbfounded away from the commotion, their mouths hanging open.

Not unlike the prince and the Kingsguard watching.

Jaime spurred to life before Jon did, striding forward to pull Arya to her feet. She started struggling immediately, still shouting, "I didn't mean for him to attack her! Let me go! She's going to hurt him!"

The yowling had evolved into a scathing hiss, and the lady cursed in pain as her ankle was caught by the black beast's claws. "Gods, I'm going to _murder_ you!" she shrilled, resuming her stomping with more fervour, to Arya's outrage.

"It's not his fault, you cow!" she yelled back. "He's scared and you're making it worse!"

"I don't _care!_ Get this stupid creature off me!"

"Enough!"

Men, women, and animal turned in shock towards the prince.

Jon glared at all of them for a heartbeat, before storming ahead and hauling the black beast away. With a loud rip, its claws ripped clean of the expensive dress, and Jon managed to take a proper look at the eye of the madness.

"Balerion?" he exclaimed incredulously, holding the cat up. "Bloody hell, you're still alive?"
The cat immediately began purring. With a grin, Jon drew him close against his chest and scratched him behind the ears. The purring grew louder. "You little bastard, running away like that. Where have you been?" he cooed softly with a chuckle.

"That-that thing tried to kill me!" seethed the lady, her breath in pants. She pointed at Arya. "And she set it on me, the miserable girl!"

The smile on Jon's face vanished.

"Lady Mallister," Jaime began calmly, in that patronising tone he'd used earlier. Jon didn't think he'd ever enjoy seeing it used on another so much. "Forgive me, but I don't believe domesticated cats are capable of murder."

"That's not a cat, it's some sort of hell-demon sent by the Gods."

"Perhaps, but he still looks like a cat, my lady."

Mallister?

Ah, the infamous Jeyne Mallister that inspired many heated rants in his sister. Jon was beginning to understand why.

"I didn't set him on you!" Arya snapped, stepping forward to stand beside Jon. "You scared him and he attacked. You ought to apologise for frightening him so."

Lady Jeyne glared at the Northern girl. Her face held such distaste that it wasn't pretty at all, with her large eyes scrunched in ire and her mouth puckered. "I will do no such thing! You ought to have better control over your filthy animals! My prince," her voice dripped with sickening sweetness, "forgive our disturbance. I was simply engaging in conversation with the Lady Roslin, when Lady Stark set her beast on us. Completely unprovoked! It was most distressing."

"Unprovoked?" Rickon interjected scathingly, popping around. "You insulted her!"

"She insulted me first! I will not tolerate such savagery from a child," Lady Jeyne bit back with a sneer.

Perhaps it was the way the words fell from her lips like drops of poison, or the distasteful contempt in her eyes as she regarded the boy, but Jon was suddenly very keen to see Lady Mallister somewhere far, far away from him. Balerion released a low, threatening growl as he eyed her.

"Lady Jeyne," he declared in his most authoritative voice, hoping he looked regal with a fat cat nestled against his chest, "you would do well to remember that you are speaking to the blood of your liege lord. Lady Arya and Lord Rickon demand your respect. I care not for the manner in which this absurdity began, but it ends now. I will see to it that you and Lady Roslin are escorted to your quarters, where you may rest after your...ordeal." He shot her a pained smile, which she reciprocated with even less enthusiasm. "Ser Jaime." He turned to the Kingsguard, his grin growing genuine. "Would you be so kind as to walk with these, uh, lovely women? I'm afraid I must return Balerion to my sister."
"Your sister?" Lady Jeyne repeated, surprised.

"Oh, yes," Jon said cheerfully. "Balerion is Princess Rhaenys' cat. She was most heartbroken when he disappeared. I suspect you'll see far more of him now that they're to be reunited."

Satisfaction rippled through him when he watched her face fall.

"Your Grace," Jaime grumbled, failing to keep his tone light. "I am your guard. I cannot abandon you for Lady Mallister." His voice dropped low in his ear. "I don't want to be abandoned with Lady Mallister."

"It'll only take a few minutes. And it's a direct order," Jon whispered back insistently, smirking. 

*Two birds with one stone.*

Jaime glared at him fiercely. "You're my least favourite prince," he said bluntly.

Jon gave a mock gasp. "Even less than Viserys?"

A pause. "You're my second least favourite prince."

"Two out of three? I can live with that."

The Kingsguard released a disgruntled snort, turning to bow at the two ladies watching him from a distance. "Shall we, my ladies?" he said, offering his arms for each of them to grasp. The lines around his cheerful smile were strained. Jon had a feeling he'd make him pay for this soon, somehow.

When the trio rounded the corner out of sight, he released a breath of relief. Balerion resumed his purring.

"Where's Arya?"

Jon whipped around to see Rickon standing alone, looking about him in confusion. Arya was nowhere to be seen. Startled, Jon reached out.

'Arya? Where are you? Are you alright?'

'I want to be alone. Please don't let Rickon follow me,' came the monotonous reply.

He frowned. He could feel the connection seething like hot tar, an anguish that seeped into the air and hung there.

Had Lady Jeyne bothered her that much?

"Rickon," Jon said suddenly, forgetting formalities in the moment, "see if she's in her chambers. If not, then I suggest waiting for her there. She'll turn up, soon."

The redhead paused in deliberation, before nodding. There was a suspicious glint in his eyes as he appraised him, but Jon did not care to dwell on it.

There was somewhere he needed to be.

Chapter End Notes
Wow, am I at 1000 kudos? That's incredible! I'm so blown away, thank you all so SO much!! It's my first long fic I've actually committed myself to, and you guy make it so worth the effort! <3 <3 Hope you continue to enjoy it, my dudes!
Chapter Summary

After the incident with Jeyne Mallister, Jon looks for Arya.

Chapter Notes

Hello, my loves!

First off, I'm absolutely stunned by the response in the last chapter! I know I've been terrible at responding and I'm so sorry about that, but do know that I read every single review and some of your questions are absolutely amazing (and I'm still figuring out how to reply without spoiling the story!) So thank you, thank you, you're all so wonderful omg.

So last chapter I said I split up an originally 10k+ chapter. After some re-touching...it ended up at almost 20k. So I cut it off at a natural point and am now posting the first part while I add some final bits. I'm so excited about what's happening next, so I hope you enjoy this chapter (and the next one will be up this weekend!) :)

Happy reading, folks!

The cellar door was illuminated in golden light. In his mind's eye, the thread tugged at him, pulling almost urgently.

*Closer, closer,* it seemed to whisper, *she needs you, she needs you.*

Drawn forward like a moth to a distant moon, without stopping to question, Jon pulled the door open and peered into the darkness.

"Arya?" he called out.

*Closer...closer...*

Somewhere down the steps, he heard a snuffle. "I told you I wanted to be left alone."

"You can't lie to me, remember?" he said softly.

She inhaled a shuddering breath and did not reply.

Jon closed the door behind him and descended the stone steps. All but a single torch had blown out, the lone flame twitching to unseen winds. The cellar stretched out before him, cold and still. A thin, curling evening mist poured from the tunnels, twirling around his legs and dampening his breeches. In his arms, Balerion growled unhappily and nuzzled deeper into his neck to escape the chill.

His eyes wandered through the dim light, catching a small hunched form against the wall.
Carefully, Jon picked his way through the muddy pools of water, holding Balerion away from droplets of water falling from the ceiling. Arya did not react when he dropped down beside her. He shifted the cat to snuggle in his lap and started stroking its spine the way he remembered as a child. The silence of the cellar was soon filled with purring, the old cat closing its eyes in contentment.

They sat together quietly. For how long, Jon could not say. Her thoughts were a miasma of memories: a torrent of hurricanes and chaotic seas crashing against each other, over and over again. He watched from the periphery, a spectator of nature revealing its fierce and wild beauty. The skies stretched on, spinning endlessly like coins: anger and sorrow and pain and fear and -

He lost track, and rode through the storm.

When, at last, a patch of unmarred blue shimmered through the murky grey clouds, Jon finally spoke.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Arya buried her head in her arms. A muffled voice emerged, "Not really."

"Did she say something to you?" he insisted.

She responded with more sniffles.

Jon decided not to press her further, but irritation coursed through his veins suddenly. He wasn't sure what had happened between them, but he should have forced the stupid lady to apologise, instead of simply sending her away. Then perhaps, Arya wouldn't be so upset.

'That's not it,' a small voice whispered telepathically. 'I'll be alright. I'm being an idiot. You don't need to be here. Please just go.'

'It's not stupid if you're this upset,' he shot back. 'I want to help.'

'Why?'

It was a scathing question, but without any sort of malice. She was looking at him with curious intensity, as if at any moment, the mask would slip. Instead, Jon shrugged. 'Is that not what friends are for?'

It was odd, speaking to her without words but with thoughts as they sat together, side by side. But words seemed almost crude, as if speaking out loud would shatter the fragility of the moment. Jon could not help but find it all rather fitting.

For without their connection, he'd never have seen how his words shifted Arya off her axis as she stared at him in bewilderment. Her eyes were swimming with tears, the grey glinting silver in the fading light of the torch. Twin spots of red dotted her flushed cheeks, and her lips were swollen from biting. It was a sight Jon had so rarely witnessed - to see another so exposed and unravelled. In a pristine world of false courtesies and veiled sincerity, a vision so undeniably raw caught his breath.

A single thought ran through his head: she's lovely.

A thousand emotions danced through hers, singing: he cares.

Something warm bloomed in his chest, unfolding like gardens in season and filling him with sweetness.

'Of course, I care,' he told her, almost shyly. 'We're friends.'
Arya blinked at him, her mouth quirking upwards in a small smile. Looking away, she stretched out from her hunched position, her hands falling loosely in her lap.

"You did the right thing, not forcing her to apologise. I don't think she'd have taken it very well. Her father is one of my uncle's strongest bannermen. I don't want to cause any trouble for him."

Jon snorted. 'Perhaps Lord Mallister ought to teach his children better manners before we consider his feelings on the matter,' he thought to her angrily. 'My sister is constantly complaining about her lack of respect.'

"I hate her! I hate all of them!" Arya suddenly exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. Jon winced as the silence shattered like brittle glass and woke the startled cat snoozing on his lap. He grabbed onto Balerion firmly, whispering soothingly to calm him down. Arya sent him an apologetic look, reaching out to scratch the cat behind the ears.

"What do you mean?" Jon said in alarm. "What did she say? Who are you talking about?"

'It doesn't matter. It's stupid, anyway. Please just go.'

"Arya. Look at me."

She stubbornly stared at a puddle.

"Please?"

Drawing in a deep breath, she raised her head. And let out a surprised 'oh!' when she found herself with a handful of fur. Balerion nuzzled against her cheek, bumping his head against her jaw as his purrs echoed around the cellar walls. Arya's face broke into a bright grin as she snuggled closer to the black beast, holding him to her chest.

"I didn't know he was yours," she breathed in delight, running a finger along his nose. Balerion's eyes closed immediately.

"He isn't. He belongs to my sister, but he went missing years ago and we assumed he was dead. How did you find him?"

Arya's smile grew impossibly wider. "He's been living in the cellars!" she chirped happily, her black mood lifting. "Rickon and I found him hiding behind the door and grabbed him before he could make a run for it. Actually," her brow furrowed and looked at the cat in contemplation, "I was chasing him the night of the feast, when you found me in the tunnels. I was trying to save him from being lost."

"So my sister's demon cat is the one to blame for this mess we've found ourselves in," Jon said drily, peering at the demon in question with an exaggerated frown. "I always knew he was trouble."

"Hush, he's no demon. Don't be mean," chided Arya, pulling the cat away from him. She planted a kiss on his forehead and stroked his spine.

Jon grinned as she lavished affection on Balerion, the stormy clouds wrapped around her slowly dissipating until her warmth radiated through their bond. He felt his own spirits lift alongside hers, darkened as they had become trapped in her sorrow.

'I know what you're doing,' she sent him, her voice tinged with good humour. 'You're trying to distract me with something cute.'
'It's working, isn't it?'

She smiled softly. His stomach flipped at the sight. 'Perhaps.'

Feeling oddly proud of himself, Jon leaned back against the wall and watched her.

Arya had untied the ribbon from her braid and was holding it over the cat, laughing as he jumped up to catch it. She glanced at him, her eyes swollen but glittering, and Jon could see his reflection framed in their depths like a promise. At the edge of his consciousness, the golden thread blossomed, bathing them in a dozen kisses of light.

Time was suspended, a snapshot of a moment stretching on for eternity. As he stared at her, his mind uncommonly serene, Jon was content to construct this memory as nothing more than a girl and a boy sat together, playing with a cat. There was something natural about this, something uncomplicated and exhilarating.

Like the first sip of water after long, hot day. Or the feel of clean silk after a long bath. Or the first touch of spring after a cold and bitter winter.

It felt right.

'We really are friends, aren't we?' a softened voice broke his musings.

Arya was looking at him again, but this time, her eyes will filled with wonder.

'I wouldn't be here if we weren't.'

The smile was instantaneous, blinding in its radiance. Jon felt warm all over again, and he smiled back.

And just like that, it was gone again. 'Do you really want to know what happened?'

'Yes,' he said quickly, sitting up straighter.

She bit her lip and glanced down again, her dark eyelashes brushing her cheeks. 'I don't want you to be hurt, either.'

Jon blinked in surprise. He inched closer to her, until their elbows almost touched, and bent his head until he drew level with her. 'I won't be,' he promised.

'Maybe I should just forget the whole thing-'

'Arya.' He was so close now he could count every eyelash, every shadow of a star in her eyes. 'Lady Mallister will tell everyone her side of the story. I don't care about that. I want to hear yours, because I know you're honest.'

'And how could you possibly know that?'

'I'm in your head, Arya. What better way is there to get to know someone?' he said drily. 'So show me what happened...please.'

With a breathless chuckle, she sniffed once more and shut her eyes.

Through their link, he felt her reach for him, a memory shimmering into view behind her. Jon caught sight of the corridor and the blurry face of Rickon Stark -
"Do you think Father will let us keep it?"

"You want to take that thing back to Winterfell?" Rickon turned to her incredulously. "Are you mad?"

"It needs a home!" Arya protested, clutching the cat to her chest as they walked down the corridor. It had fought her initially, but after a few good scratches behind the ear, it languished in her arms in contentment. Arya was already in love. She placed a loud kiss between its eyes and hummed in delight. "You can sleep with me tonight," she cooed sweetly. "We're going to have so much fun together! Aren't we, Nymeria?"

Her brother wrinkled his nose. "I can't believe you've already named it. And isn't Nymeria a girl's name? What if it's a boy?"

Arya rolled her eyes at him. "It's a cat, stupid. I doubt it'll be offended," she pointed out. "Nymeria suits her perfectly! She was a warrior queen, you know, and a survivor - just like this little one!"

"Trust you to name your first pet after some legendary witch queen," Rickon jested affectionately.

She stuck her tongue out at him, making him laugh.

Together, they strolled towards their quarters, chattering happily away about all sorts of things they could train the new pet of House Stark, when a condescending voice drifted from the adjacent corridor.

"Can you believe they're giving the bastard prince the right to compete in the tourney? It's a disgrace, I tell you. It seems our royal family has grown a little too Dornish over time. They never had much shame."

"Hush, Jeyne," another hissed frantically. "Someone might hear you!"

"There's no one around, Roslin," the first woman sighed. "Must you be so nervous all the time?"

Skidding to a halt, Arya whipped her head to the source of the sound, her breath catching.

Rickon looked back at her in puzzlement. "What's wrong?"

"She's talking about Jon," Arya whispered heatedly. "She called him a bastard!"

"So?"

Arya gave him a hard look. "So, it's horrible to say such things. He deserves her respect."

"Where are you going?" Rickon hissed, grabbing her wrist. "You can't start a fight with strangers!"

"Jon is my friend," she proclaimed fiercely, tearing her arm away in irritation. "I'm not just going to stand here while they insult him."

Before he could say otherwise, Arya stormed around the corner, her blood aflame.
Her eyes latched onto two women walking idly towards her, arm in arm. She seized the brief moment to scrutinise them. The smaller of the two stood timidly as she cast worried glances around her surroundings. Her companion was tall and graceful. Bearing the classic pale face of a Riverland highborn, with slanting high cheekbones and bladed eyes, her sullen pout only added to her appeal.

Pretty, and all too aware of it, Arya decided.

Summoning her courage - and her fury - she drew a deep breath, hugged the cat once, and walked right up to them.

Be nice, she reminded herself, Mother says courtesy can be as cutting as a blade. And that I should be kind to strangers.

"Truly," the woman continued, oblivious to the irate she-wolf some feet away, "I fear for the Crown Prince! Could you imagine if some sort of accident should befall him in the joust? Why, we'd have a bastard as our King one day! There would be riots on the streets, I tell you."

Well, Mother wasn't around, was she?

"He's not a bastard!" Arya suddenly snapped, her voice echoing around the empty courtyard. "Stop spreading lies about him!"

Silence droned on perilously as the women turned towards her. The shy lady shot her a look of surprise while the other - Jeyne, she thought her name was - cast a disapproving look at her wrinkled breeches and tunic. "Careful, servant girl. You ought to show better manners to your superiors," she demanded in irritation.

"I'm not a servant," Arya rebuked with a frown. "I'm Arya Stark of Winterfell." She raised her chin and returned her stare with determination.

Jeyne raised a perfect eyebrow, curiosity dancing on her pretty face. "Lady Stark, a pleasure to meet you," she said with a smile, her voice sweetening like soiled honey. "I've heard so much about you. You've earned quite a reputation this tourney."

Roslin coughed to mask a giggle and the two shared a knowing look.

Arya maintained her glower, but a small part of her withered. There was something in Jeyne’s dismissive eyes that reminded her so much of her older sister, so much of all the ladies in Winterfell, that the age-old insecurities raised their ugly heads and she had to force them down to prevent them lodging in her throat.

In her arms, the cat growled unhappily, staring at the two girls without blinking. Arya took a deep breath and drew her strength. They were just stupid ladies, after all. She was a wolf and wolves don't cower.

"I don't care about that," she said fiercely. "I care that you're insulting the prince. You're being terrible to him by spreading such baseless lies. Jon's actually rather wonderful if you get to know him."

She didn't mean for the last part to slip out - but slip out it did, and she wished the ground would swallow her whole. Behind her, she could feel Rickon's eyes digging into the back of her head.

Jeyne's eyes glinted like a sword in sunlight. "Jon?" she latched on, her smile curving like a scythe. "Quite informal of you, Lady Stark. Has His Grace granted you permission to be so?"
"That's none of your business," Arya shot back too quickly, reddening. "He's my friend, if you must know. So enough with your gossip. It's - it's not right. And if you don't stop, I'll—I'll..." she faltered, floundering for something dramatic, "I'll tell the King."

She winced immediately. *Tell the King?* she chastised herself. *Now I sound like Sansa, Gods help me.*

"How frightening," Jeyne replied drily. "Very well, my lady, since it upsets you so very much and I fear the King’s wrath bearing down on poor old me, I shall sing nought but praises for our darling prince. The truest Targaryen to ever Targaryen. The noblest man in all our lands...or whatever." She waved a hand disdainfully with a roll of her eyes. "May Lady Roslin and I return to our private conversation, please?"

"Come on," Rickon whispered urgently in her ear, grabbing her elbow. "You've said what you needed to say. Don't make a scene."

Reluctantly, Arya nodded, throwing a dirty look at the two ladies as she turned to follow her brother. Even the cat released a low thrum of discontent, hissing quietly against her chest.

They had barely moved ten feet when a quiet voice whispered, "Is that the girl they're calling Lyanna Stark reborn? I thought she was supposed to be bewitchingly beautiful! She’s rather ordinary, isn’t she?"

The other woman snorted. "Exaggerated tales, I’m sure. There's no accounting for taste, clearly, for a Targaryen whore. I thought she was a servant at first.” Her voice dropped low conspiringly, though still loud enough to overhear. “The prince must be spectacular in bed to earn that sort of loyalty. I heard that bastards are especially sinful in the dark. I’m almost envious!"

An uncomfortable prickling sensation stirred in her heart, as if a dozen pins had been stabbed into it. Rickon froze next to her, his breath hitching. Her ears filled with the sound of rushing blood, the light twitters of the world around them receding until it was all she could hear.

She turned back towards the two ladies laughing quietly with their heads bent together, rage brewing beneath the surface like hot lava.

"Arya, please don't," Rickon pleaded and pulled at her elbow desperately. "They're not worth it. Father told us not to get in trouble."

"To hell with that," Arya hissed, snatching her arm back so aggressively, she almost dislodged the cat. "And to hell with her, too."

Loudly, she announced, "You're an absolute bitch, you know that?"

Roslin's head snapped towards her, her jaw dropping in horror. One hand rested delicately on her heart, and she glanced quickly at her companion.

Lady Jeyne stood perfectly still, a smile frozen on her pale face. "I beg your pardon?" she whispered.

"I'm not anyone's whore and neither was Lyanna," Arya continued viciously. “But you - you're a vapid, horrid woman...and a liar."

"Arya-" her brother interjected in warning. She ignored him, anger driving her tongue forward and dissolving any sense of control.

She barely noticed the thread twisting at the edge of her consciousness, burning brighter with every
lash of rage.

"That’s all people like you care about. Gossiping and lying and making others feel awful about themselves, because you think it makes up for having no real personality. It’s pathetic."

"No real personality?" Jeyne repeated incredulously, her composure cracking. "And I suppose you believe interrupting a stranger’s conversation and insulting them before even asking their name makes for an interesting character?"

“Only if you consider slander a conversation,” Arya pointed out with a humourless smile.

"Passionate about bastards, are we?"

“He isn’t a bastard," she repeated for the thousandth time. "And he deserves better than to have people like you speaking ill of him. Jon has ten times the personality you do."

A heartbeat, and she cursed herself for her carelessness again.

The older woman took a step forward, her pretty face scrunching into something ruthless and twisted. “Oh, Jon does, does he? You’re awfully familiar with the prince for someone who claims not to be his whore.”

“I told you, we’re friends,” Arya shot back scathingly.

“Friends?” she repeated, incredulous. "Is that what Northerners call shacking up with a prince to gain royal favour? You're an ambitious lot, I'll give you that."

Fresh irritation coursed her veins, and to her horror, Arya found her eyes beginning to prickle. “That's not who I am,” she snapped.

But Jeyne had seen that flash of vulnerability, and her smile was predatory. “Come now, darling,” she cooed patronisingly, “you cannot possibly be this dense. We all know what happened the last time a Stark decided to be...friends with a prince." She looked at her with false pity, eyeing her smudged breeches and the tangles in her hair. "Perhaps you hope he'll marry you but...well, you're rather lacking, aren't you? He expects a princess, not a wild dog, no matter how willing it is to spread its legs."

Arya opened her mouth to respond but the pins had grown into daggers and her heart felt hollow.

Jeyne took another step forward, and bent down until their faces were close. The proximity frightened the animal against Arya’s chest, and it writhed as the older woman sneered down at the two of them.

“Your loyalty is admirable but misplaced. Consider this advice in good faith: men like him do not want girls like you as wives or the mothers of their children, but for a good fuck and a story to tell his friends around a fire. You may see me as shallow or vapid, but at least I understand the rules. Think about that before you throw your insults, Lady Stark. It may save you a great deal of trouble.”

The world fell into shadow, as if all the light had been stolen from the air. For a moment or a century, no one knew what to say. Arya stood frozen, silent and unseeing, not quite sure what to think or say as doubt shredded her from the inside.

Then, a sharp yowling, followed by a scream.

The cat had jumped from Arya’s arms when her grip had slackened and latched on to the fine blue
silk of Lady Jeyne’s dress. Its claws sunk into her leg and she lurched back violently, attempting to kick the animal with her other foot.

The sight spurred Arya into motion. With widened eyes, she lunged to grab at the cat and missed, landing on her hands and knees. Jeyne was spinning wildly, a buzz of black fur trailing after the ruined silk behind her, narrowly avoiding her stomps. Desperately, Arya tried grabbing the cat again, following the pair in a bizarre dance.

“Stop it!” she cried, “You’re going to hurt him!”

Moments later, she was suddenly dragged to her feet by a golden Kingsguard, glimpsing at Jon’s startled face in the background.

The scene vanished into darkness, like a candle blown in the wind, Jeyne Mallister’s screeches echoing into the distance.
Chapter Summary

Jon and Arya find themselves lost in uncharted territory, in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone!

I’ve held out on this chapter until I was absolutely happy with everything. It’s one I’ve been excited about posting since I first started this story, as a lot of what happens was my original inspiration to even write this fic. So it’s a special chapter, full of everything I hope you’re all here to read!

Once again, I’ve fallen behind on responding to comments (and will catch-up!!) but please do know that I’ve read and loved every single one. I always, always appreciate and look forward to hearing your thoughts, so thank you everyone that took time to do so! Enjoy!

When Arya opened her eyes, it was not the cracking cellar walls nor the murky puddles she expected - but brushed blue skies and twisted trees of lavish greenery stretching into the distance. Blades of grass swayed softly by her feet, bright flowers peppering around her like drops of paint. A deep, earthy scent danced under her nose, tinged with something sweet and old. Through the trunks, she glimpsed a large pool, a fragile mist hanging delicately above the surface.

The scene was so familiar, it was carved into her soul.

Is this a memory? she asked herself. It rang through her head like chimes and she winced. And why are my thoughts so bloody loud?

She glanced down and saw her own body, dressed in the tunic and breeches she was wearing that day. Lifting her hands up, she prodded her face gingerly. She was herself and in control, a welcome relief.

Arya looked over her shoulder to see Jon some feet away. He was standing with his back turned towards her, staring at a giant stone castle emerging from the horizon. It loomed over them, still and silent as a ghost, bathed in sunlight.

"Winterfell?" she muttered, stepping forward.

Jon glanced back to look at her in mild panic. “Did you mean to bring us here?”

Shaking her head, she replied helplessly, “I-I don’t think so. At least, not on purpose."

"I don't understand," Jon frowned, kneeling down to touch the ground. "Is this a dream?"
Arya bent down to pick a small flower, sniffing it gently as she turned around. The smell felt crisp, like the first day of spring. *It’s all so real,* she marvelled, *I can almost taste it.* A light wind rustled through her hair, picking at her brown strands. "Or something else. I was thinking about how much I missed the godswood, before you showed up. About how much I’d give anything to be here right now.”

"It is beautiful," Jon said honestly, standing up as his eyes roved over the landscape in awed wonder.

“It is, isn’t it? Sometimes, whenever things become too much, or if I’m angry or upset, I come here and hide for a little while. It makes me feel better, like I belong. Everything just fades away. Like nothing else matters but where I am.” She peeked at him through her eyelashes, shyly. "It's where I feel safest.”

Jon's eyebrows furrowed. "Maybe that's why we're here."

She looked to her side and reached out, her hand brushing the rough bark. Closing her eyes, she could feel every groove, every bump along the skin of her fingertips. The woods felt alive, thrumming with an energy that rang through her bones, washing away the bitter taste of resentment left by Jeyne Mallister. The echoes of her sneers faded away, replaced by nature’s sweet melody, filling her heart with warmth. The trees were ancient, beyond time and comprehension. It seemed futile to think of such trivial matters, here in the presence of history, rooted deep in the earth.

“I didn’t mean to drag you here,” she said apologetically, opening her eyes to look at him.

"It’s not your fault," Jon shrugged, squinting at the sky. "That, on the other hand, is a different story."

A thin golden thread spanned across the blue haze, sparkling golden. It flared up at the acknowledgement, as if in laughter. Arya could feel a barrier form around her, invisible chains holding them to this imaginary place. No matter which way she turned, how hard she fought back, they were locked in.

She narrowed her eyes. "It won't let us wake up."

"That’s not deeply unsettling at all," came the dry response. "We need to get back."

Arya considered, casting a look around the meadow. Wildflowers danced amongst the green, dappled in shadow. Coils of mist lazily wrapped around the trees like snakes, a whisper in the piercing silence of the godswood. She looked up at the clear blue sky spanning endlessly, and if she listened hard enough, she thought she could hear the distant rumbles of a storm brewing. There were no painted faces leering down at her, no blood-red walls or coy smiles dripping with gossip. This was home: a piece of her heart crafted from bark and petals and a forest song.

"Not yet. I want to stay here a little longer."

Jon blanched. "What do you mean? Arya, this isn't real."

"I don't care!" she cried, turning towards him. "It's a hell of a lot better than seeing people out there." She waved her hand indistinctly at the sky, hoping he couldn't hear her voice cracking.

He inhaled sharply, realising what she meant. Not wanting to see the pity on his face, Arya dropped her eyes to spin the flower between her fingers.

“I’m sorry,” the prince whispered. “I’m so sorry.” His voice grew darker. "I’m going to deal with
Arya didn’t know what he meant, but it sent a chill down her spine nonetheless. She wondered if she ought to ask when a loud crack caught her attention.

She whipped around to see Jon hitting a tree with a branch furiously. With every thwack, little pieces of bark crumbled and went flying.

“I. Hate. Them. I hope they all burn!”

The taste of his rage hung in the air like burnt embers. Arya felt it brush roughly against her skin, scorching to the touch. But beneath the flames, a grief spread ceaselessly like an icy sea, frozen to stillness. It stole her breath from her lungs, its anguish seeping into her blood like black poison.

*Oh*, she thought, as she stared into the abyss. *How long have you carried this?*

"Jon."

He didn't hear her. The tree groaned in protest after another damaging blow.

"Jon, please."

He paused mid-swing and turned. His eyes were wide, making him look impossibly younger. There was a vulnerability lining his face, contradicted by the bludgeoning branch he wielded as a weapon in his hands. It could take a mountain or a murmur to blow him over in this moment.

Arya considered neither, struck as she was by his frenzy. He’d always seemed so calm to her, as unchangeable as the godswood trees and the stone castles.

But here, he looked lost and exhausted, and it tugged at her.

“We've done everything expected of us, haven't we?” he lamented, breaking the silence. “You've never brought shame to your family and I...I stand by my brother when everyone thinks I’ll steal his birthright. We do our bloody duty every day and it’s not good enough. We’re never good enough. They’ve decided who or what we are, and they’ve decided whatever it is, isn’t right.”

Arya’s breath hitched and her eyes began to prickle. Around her, the godswood began to whisper; its voices eerily similar to those at Winterfell when they thought she was out of earshot: *wolf-blood, wild child, such never bodes well for ladies like her, Lord Stark cannot allow this for much longer.*

“They don’t know us,” she reasoned, silencing the chorus forcefully. “It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks.”

“It always matters,” Jon growled hoarsely, running an agitated hand through his hair. “This is the way it’s always been. People only care that you follow their rules, and when you don’t - you’re not wanted. You mean nothing: not who you are, not what you could be - to them, you’ve failed.” He shook his head sadly. “And then that’s it, isn’t it? And one day, you start believing it, too. That there’s something terribly wrong with you, but there’s nothing you can do about it, so you become everything they say that you are.”

His thoughts, his presence, *him*: it was all laid bare in a snapshot, a whirlpool in a calm blue sea, drawing everything around it deeper to be lost in its depths. Arya felt it pull at her with a whisper: *closer, closer. He needs you. He needs you.*

Without pause, she walked over and pulled him into a hug.
Jon froze as soon as she wrapped her arms around his neck. When he did not move, she started to worry. Was this too forward? Did he want to be left alone? Should she pull away?

A heartbeat later, he dropped the branch and clutched at her desperately, like a child seeking comfort. His grip was tight around her back as he pulled her in and buried his face in her shoulder. He was burning, burning, and Arya wondered if it was just her imagination - but oh, it was warm, as if he were stitched from sunlight and summer.

She wasn’t sure how long they stood together, before Jon finally heaved a sigh and let go of her slowly. His cheeks were pink and he ran a quick hand over his face. “I-uh, thanks,” he muttered, avoiding her eye, “I’m sorry about-about everything I said. I didn’t want to make you feel worse.”

They were standing so close, she could lose herself in the storms of his eyes. “The truth is,” she said quietly, “I hated what Jeyne said because part of me believes her - that I’m not good enough, like you said. That girls like me aren’t worth being loved or respected because I’m not...what most people want and I don’t know how to follow the rules so I can be.” She reddened at her confession, her words rolling off her tongue uninhibited. There was something about this dream world, something about being lost in each other’s heads that tore down her barriers, and she found little resistance in fighting it. “It’s stupid, I know, and I pretend it doesn’t matter to me but I’m always a little afraid that they’re right.”

Jon made an incredulous noise.

“But you know what?” she pressed when he tried protesting. “The rules are wrong. I’m starting to realise that. And if the rules are wrong, then the game needs to change, and the ones who know that are remembered for it.” Arya grinned at him. “Go ahead, name me a woman that changed the world.”

He contemplated, frowning in confusion. “Rhaenys or Visenya Targaryen, for a start.”

“And a bastard?”

Jon’s face cleared and the edges of his mouth lifted as he saw where she was going. “Orys Baratheon was said to be Aegon’s bastard half-brother, and he captured Storm’s End from the Storm King. Brynden Rivers was one of the best Hands of the King in our history.”

Arya leaned forward eagerly. “They became their own people, by their own right, and now they’re remembered for challenging their lot in life and rising above it. We can always change the rules and no one can stop us.” She beamed up at him. “That’s going to be me someday. It could be you, too - if you want it to be. Who cares if they think you’re a bastard? It doesn’t need to define you, Jon. You’re so much more than you think.”

He was staring at her in quiet astonishment, breaths shallow. His blistering anger had faded into something sweet, delicately waltzing along her skin like spring kisses. Slowly - had time frozen or had she? - he raised a hand and tucked a wayward strand behind her ear. “Stay like this,” he whispered softly. “Promise me that you will.”

“Like what?” Was it always so difficult to breathe?

“Like you. Everything that you are, Arya Stark, is something special. Someone special.”

His eyes dropped to her lips and Arya thought she would remember this moment forever. Here, at the threshold of illusion and reality, surrounded by something belonging to another world: an unspoken promise hung like invisible light, unspent and bright and everywhere at once. Her ears
filled with stillness and breathing and the rhythmic thump of her heart and she leaned closer, closer, closing her eyes and -

A sharp inhale shattered the magic, and when Arya opened her eyes, she saw Jon stumbling away. His thoughts were a jumble as he moved to drop down by a tree. When he caught her eye, he flushed, his chest heaving. “I, um, I - this place, it’s not - we’re not -“

“Oh, right, of course,” Arya said quickly, masking her disappointment. “Not real, I know.” She cleared her throat pointedly, hoping her face wasn’t as red as it felt.

_Stupid_, she chastised herself. _Stupid, stupid, stupid._

Unsure of what else to do, she tentatively joined him on the forest floor, keeping a short distance between them. The silence wasn’t as comfortable as she’d hoped, so she chimed, “Are you feeling better?”

Jon quirked an eyebrow, still a little pink. “Are you?”

She shrugged, playing with the wildflowers beside her. “It is what it is. I know Jeyne Mallister was out of line and that she was wrong. I’ll pay her back, somehow.” She shot him a sly smile, to which he laughed.

“I’d like to see that, so be sure to tell me when and where. I’d wager there’s an audience that would like to see it, too.”

They chuckled together, the awkwardness evaporating into the warm summer’s day. The conversation shifted to idle matters, of Arya telling him stories of her adventures in the godswood, of Jon recounting the delightful time he almost set fire to one of the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting, by accident, of course - though Arya had her doubts. Time was endless, caught as they were in this limbo, and there was an entire lifetime of stories and memories to share.

It didn’t feel like enough.

“How long do you reckon it’ll keep us here for?” Jon asked, peering up at the thread still shimmering in the sky. “It feels like it’s been hours. Maybe we’re supposed to do something about it?”

Arya considered, and then yelled, “Oi! Can we wake up now, please?”

Nothing happened.

“Did you really think that would work?”

She shrugged. “Asking politely seemed worth a shot. Guess we’re here for a little longer.”

He snorted, eyeing the thread in trepidation. His face grew thoughtful as he stared, the space between his eyebrows scrunching the way it did when he was concentrating. “Arya?” he suddenly asked. “What does your family think about my mother?”

Arya blinked, taken aback. “Why do you ask?”

“You told Jeyne Mallister that she wasn’t a whore,” Jon continued, his eyes piercing. “That’s all I’ve ever heard everyone call her. My father never talks about her,” his voice grew bitter. “For once, I’d like to hear that she was something more than just a girl that ran off with a married prince. Someone I might love, if I’d known her.”
Arya felt a hand squeeze around her heart and she nodded. “I can’t speak for everyone,” she confessed, “but my father loved her. He still loves her. He doesn’t talk about her much either, but when he does, it’s only ever about a girl who was beautiful and wilful and kind. She’s buried in the crypts with the Lords of Winterfell and the Kings of Winter, and Father visits her every week.” She leaned closer, her voice dropping low as if telling a secret, “That sounds like someone worth remembering.”

He looked away then, rubbing at his eyes furiously. “Good,” Jon said simply, attempting a smile, “that’s...that’s good to hear.” He licked his lips, and Arya forced herself not to follow his tongue. “I’ve never told anyone this but,” he paused, looking down, “I can never stop part of me hating her for leaving me behind. It’s because she chose to run away with my father that I was born a bastard, and treated as my brother’s usurper, and why his mother is so blatantly disrespected by her own court. It always comes back to her.” He violently tore at the grass in anger.

Jon’s voice was thick and he was blinking furiously. Arya felt her own chest hitch in shallow breaths, the dark grieving sea simmering beneath his skin rising to the surface and bleeding into her.

"Stop," she ordered, drawing closer. “Jon - this is not her fault. All this awfulness is not because a girl fell in love, for goodness’ sake. She was hardly the first and she won’t be the last, and I won’t hear her own son think so little of her."

"You think what she did was right?" he threw back scathingly. "You think running away with a married prince was a wise decision?"

"Don't be ridiculous, I didn’t say that.” Arya's voice softened. "But reason is rarely exercised in matters of the heart. You shouldn't hate her for thinking an ostracised life with your father was better than being unhappy without him. I don’t believe either ever imagined the consequences, in the end.”

He deliberated. "Would you do it?" he asked, his eyes burning into hers. "Elope with someone you weren't supposed to be with, damning the consequences?"

Arya frowned. She knew her response somehow mattered to him, somehow held this conversation at a precipice.

Would she? Her immediate reaction was to laugh him off, to say it was absurd and selfish and she’d never be so daft for a man. No one could be worth so much grief nor heartache to her family.

_The lone wolf dies but the pack survives._

But of course, save for her father, Arya had never held another man in such a high regard. If she was honest, Arya could hardly see herself in such a situation in the first place, and struggled to imagine it when her hypothetical lover was simply a shifting shadow with no face. It seemed so easy to brush off his question when there was no one to lose, no heart to be broken.

It took only a moment for her to find her answer, then.

"Ask me again when I'm in love," she said, to Jon’s surprise, "and I'll know what to say."

He watched her mutely for a little while, his thoughts spinning like whirlwinds - but the black sorrow had receded like the tide, the vice-grip around her heart fading with it. A small flush rose up his neck, and he turned to gaze unblinkingly off into the distance. “You know, if-if what they said was true and you are like Lyanna. I think,” he cleared his throat, “I think I understand what my father saw in her.”

She blinked at him, realisation dawning on her of what he was saying, “O-oh,” she stammered,
tucking a hair behind her ear. “I, um, Lyanna was beautiful. That’s not - I’m not - “

"You really can’t see yourself, can you?" Jon quietly remarked, with a look that sent a shiver through her bones.

Arya was then incredibly aware of the dwindling space between them, aware of the warmth radiating from his body, of the taste of sweetness hovering in their midst. Her stomach churned like a ship on a stormy sea, and she wondered if she’d always felt this weightless.

His eyes dropped to her lips again, and he leaned forward.

Remembering the last time he’d pulled away, Arya quickly lowered her head and loudly exclaimed, “Look, a winter rose!” She pointed at the blue flower between them.

Jon paused, his breaths heavy as he gathered his bearings. “A what?”

She picked it and shoved it in front of his face, "It grows in the glass gardens at Winterfell, but they only bloom for a week once a year and one time, when I was six, I picked all the flowers because I thought they were pretty and they died a few days later so when I went back to pick some more, they were all gone and my mother told me I had to wait another year to see them again and I cried so hard I threw up,” she babbled.

The silence was piercing.

*Gods, what is wrong with me?*

"I see," Jon nodded hesitantly, brows furrowed. He’d moved away from her to allow a foot of distance between them. Arya was grateful - his warmth made her head fuzzy. The only explanation, of course. He peered closely at the flower she was still awkwardly holding out to him. "And this was the flower you loved so much, you vomited because you couldn't have it?"

She wanted to die. “Something like that.”

"Naturally," he chuckled. He cast an eye over the pale blue rose. It was a glorious sight: the colours of winter painted its petals, glittering like stars. Its sweet scent wrapped around them, a delicate fragrance that threaded beneath their noses, light and sweet. "It really is beautiful," Jon said, fingerling the flower gently. “This whole place is. I can’t imagine what it must be like in reality. It’s almost too magical to exist.”

“Doesn’t King’s Landing have a godswood too?”

Jon waved his hand dismissively. “It’s a patch of grass compared to here. Beauty doesn’t survive very long in the capital.”

She nudged him with her shoulder. “It’s not *that* bad,” she reasoned. “The city itself has its own charm.”

He shot her an incredulous look. “You think sweat and shit is charming?”

“Oh come now, it’s more than that and we both know it. All the different buildings and people - I think there’s something rather pretty about it.”

“You should raise your standards.” He laughed at her ruffled expression. “Pretty? Absolutely not. It’s a city of lies and masked faces. That’s not what you come to King’s Landing for. Summerhall, on the other hand,” he declared, “that’s something else.”
“Summerhall?” Arya cocked her head curiously. “I thought it was in ruins.”

Jon chuckled without mirth. “Oh, it is. My birthright is a bunch of broken rocks and a graveyard. Fitting, don’t you think?” He shrugged. “But there’s something special about it. Something old and magical, like your godswood.” He nodded pointedly at the ancient trees surrounding them like silent spectators.

“It sounds wonderful. I’d like to see it,” Arya said wistfully.

“I’ll take you someday,” he promised, nudging her with his elbow. “I think you’d enjoy it.”

She beamed at him, excitement bubbling in her chest. But just as Arya planned to pester him for more details, a golden flash drew their eyes upwards.

Scrambling to their feet, they looked up in horror as the pastel blue sky darkened immeasurably, stormy clouds of black blotting out the light. The wind whistled around them, piercing them with cold spears as the trees swayed manically to and fro. In the blink of an eye, the luscious green meadow was disintegrating, dwindling into smoke screens of murky grey.

"What's happening?" she distantly heard Jon yell. "Are we waking up?"

She turned as the smoke grew thicker around her, wrapping her in black tendrils that obscured her vision. She willed herself to stay calm - this was her head, wasn't it? How frightening could it be?

The world fell to darkness.

oOo

Arya opened her eyes and gasped in astonishment.

The sun was high in the sky, highlighting a jagged corpse of a burnt palace like rotten teeth. The forest around had consumed the crumbling walls, the castle remains clawing its way through foliage and rock like the hand of a drowning man. There was a brutal beauty to it; a tapestry woven with the threads of life and decay.

"Summerhall?" Jon’s jaw dropped open.

“Oh, it’s gorgeous,” she breathed, half in wonder, half in love.

"You think so?" The prince of the ruined castle turned towards her in pleased surprise.

Arya nodded distractedly, drawn forward. She paused beside what she thought were the front doors, now a collapsed marble arch stained with age. The walls beyond must have been the entrance hall: broken columns reached for the skies, smothered in vines and dirt. It had almost entirely disintegrated, save for the occasional skeleton that stood proud in its survival, towering over her with its immensity.

The ground was littered with debris, and if she looked closer, Arya could just about make out an engraved panel from a destroyed rib vault. Curious, she traced a finger along the tarnished surface, wondering idly at its lost splendor.

Behind her, she heard Jon walk towards a piece of wayward stone, covered in moss. He touched it
hesitantly and let his hand rest on its wet surface. “I haven’t been here in years,” he murmured, pulling his fingers away to look at them closely. “But all these details - I don’t understand how it’s all been recreated so perfectly. There’s no way I’d remember this, so it can’t be built from my memories as the godswood was from yours.” He peered up into the blinding daylight, and sure enough, a thin streak of gold wound lazily through the cloudless blue. "Unless...unless this isn’t really Summerhall as it is, but as I imagine it to be. It’s not building this world so much as giving us a canvas we know already to fill ourselves. Does that make sense?" Jon turned to her.

“You mean, because this is all in our heads, we’re unconsciously controlling what we see? So, in theory, we could consciously control it as well?” At his contemplative nod, Arya glanced down. She still held the blue winter rose from the godswood in her hand. Touching each petal lightly, she marveled at its softness, at the smooth texture brushing each fingertip.

We’re in control.

She closed her eyes and imagined.

“Arya,” she heard Jon’s gasp. “Look!”

With a deep breath, she opened her eyes and grinned.

Spiralling outwards from where she stood lay dozens of blue roses in full bloom. Clinging on to the decaying walls and twirling around the warped vines, they spouted like fireworks, filling the air with its divine fragrance. The greens of the foliage were soon overrun with a rich blue, pieces of the sky and seas scattered around the woodland floor.

“How did you do that?” Jon whispered in awe, watching as more flowers grew from the cracks of the ruined palace.

Arya shrugged, kneeling down to run a light hand over the bed of roses at her feet. “I just pictured it in my thoughts. I didn’t think it would work.” She smiled widely as she picked a bouquet and saw the stems regrow into a new flower.

Drawing in a deep whiff, she sighed in satisfaction, before carefully stepping her way through to the bemused prince still looking around him in wonder.

“Here,” she said, showing him the flowers. “You try. Just think of anything, and focus on it.”

Jon hesitantly looked at the bouquet and blinked at her in confusion. It was distractingly endearing, and Arya fiercely shoved the thoughts away.

He sniffed the roses once and breathed a sigh. “Here goes,” he muttered, shutting his eyes.

A deafening roar filled the air, rattling her bones.

Arya’s head snapped up and the vision had her cover her mouth with her hand.

Soaring across the sky, black scales dripping with midnight, was a dragon.

It almost blocked out the sunlight with its monstrous size. Its jaws were open in a piercing scream, and from the ground, Arya glimpsed a row of long and sharp teeth. Spikes adorned its spine, trailing down to a thick tail that whipped back and forth, gleaming red under the light.

“You said you wanted to see a dragon,” Jon reminded in her ear. “I can’t give you the real thing, but it’s close. That one’s on a tapestry outside my room.”
Her hand slowly lowered from her face, heart hammering in her chest. “I love it,” she whispered, eyes fixed on the great creature until it disappeared into the distance. She smiled at him, and he flushed happily.

“Your turn,” Jon said with a nod. “Bet you can’t beat a dragon.”

“Bet I can,” Arya teased back. She put the flowers down and looked around, hoping for inspiration. It had to be something remarkable, of course, something Jon could not see in the waking world.

Her eyes caught on a broken statue lying some feet away, its face too disfigured by decay to describe any details, but it gave her an idea. Oh, Jon was going to love this, she knew.

Arya spun on her heel and looked back at the desolated entrance hall. Keeping her eyes open, she stared at the debris and frowned in concentration.

At first, the statue rattled. Then, it lunged across the ground to stand proud by the archway, its shattered face smoothing into a blank slate. Pieces of marble clambered together to build an immense entrance, a perfect arch sitting above a giant iron door. The walls around them bled higher, fingers of granite reaching for the sky. It was as if an invisible brush moved through the air, but instead of paint and pastels, its masterpiece was made of stone and slab.

The garden of blue roses melted into a sparkling lake of black marble, a galaxy of stars beneath their feet. Above, the sun was stolen away by an arching ceiling, framed by ribbed vaults. A dozen dancing dragons carved into the wood, their eyes gleaming with fire and rubies. Light poured in from high-arching windows and immersed the space in golden radiance. Banners and tapestries weaved themselves down the walls: silk three-headed dragons and wolves howling in a field of white, fluttering proudly in the unseen breeze.

Stealthy and slow, stone by stone, they watched the broken transform into the magnificent.

Jon stared, mouth agape. Arya grinned with pride.

The Great Hall of Winterfell stretched out before them, every stone in the right place, every moment in her thousand memories stitched together in perfection. The ceiling, however, was the glory of the Throne Room in the Red Keep - Arya had loved it at first sight, and spent the good part of the welcoming feast staring at it in wonder. She thought she rather enjoyed the blend of ostentatious Targaryen glamour with the unyielding simplicity of her Stark home.

"I'm enjoying it, too,” Jon murmured, listening. His eyes flickered towards the Targaryen and Stark sigils gracing the walls. “This is just how I’d want it to be, if I had the chance.” He walked towards a wall and ran a hand over the stone, his face filled with admiration.

"Why don’t you rebuild Summerhall then? You wouldn’t have to live at court anymore.”

Jon’s arm fell with a sigh. “Summerhall is sacred to my father. He still grieves for the tragedy. I don’t think he’d be particularly fond of me asking to build on its ashes.” He shot her a rueful smile.

Arya deflated, and quietly stood back as he explored the hall of the castle he could not keep, a ghost of the one she called home.

For now, she thought woefully. Arya folded her arms across her chest and glared at the floor. Jon could no more build Summerhall than she could remain at Winterfell forever. Like the seasons, the worlds they wanted were stolen by time itself, by its abundance and its deficiency: he was bound as long as the King should rule and her days unbound to another grew short.
If only their reality was this, built on dreams and where time felt endless and no one was there to say otherwise.

It wasn’t fair.

"The rules are wrong," Jon’s voice interrupted her. She turned to see him holding out a bouquet of blue winter roses at her. "And we’re in control, remember?"

She smiled softly, taking the flowers in her hands and inhaling deeply. It smelt of something new, something old, and a promise of everything in-between.

“I know,” Arya said simply, holding his silver gaze.

He stared at her for a moment in silence, seeming to hesitate. Her stomach fluttered as he opened his mouth to say something, something, something -

“We should go back,” he finally said. “Your brother was looking for you. I wouldn’t want him to worry.”

“Oh,” Arya replied (she wasn’t disappointed, no, not at all). “Right, yes. Let’s.”

His mouth lifted in a half-smirk, and he looked to want to say something else. But whatever it was, she’d never know, because the walls around them began collapsing into smoke. The thread above spasmed in flashes of blinding light, the sky crumbling into the abyss.

Arya ignored it all, watching as Jon’s face fell into shifting shadows, until it altogether disappeared.

oOo

A half-second later, Arya groggily gained consciousness to see a ball of black fur pawing at her face incessantly.

Balerion mewed as she sat up and rubbed at her eyes with a groan.

“Bloody hell,” Jon cursed beside her, “this feels worse than a hangover.” He swayed to his feet and clutched the wall, holding his head. He looked ready to keel over.

Arya did not fare any better. Balerion was still whining at the audacity of being abandoned, and she desperately tried hushing him before her head imploded. The dim candle lights in the cellar were too bright against her sensitive eyes, the stone floor too hard, too wet. Had the world always felt so...much?

She struggled to stand, carrying the cat in her arms. Her eyes lifted to find Jon’s, a silent message passing between them.

What just happened?

Arya could still feel the touch of the godswood trees beneath her fingertips, still hear the distant roars of a dragon, or the warmth of a summer sun bearing down on a meadow. It was impossible - none of it was real.

Wasn’t it?
“Thinking about this makes my head hurt,” Jon confessed, rubbing his forehead. “This bond...everytime I think I understand it, I’m blindsided by something else beyond anything I can imagine.” His hand dropped from his head and he exhaled. “It’s terrifying and strangely exhilarating, and altogether a pain in my ass.”

“We know something,” Arya offered, leaning against the wall for support. “We know we have some measure of control. That’s good, isn’t it?”

“I’d be more pleased if I didn’t feel like passing out right now.”

“A bed does sound lovely,” Arya announced in a moan. “I’m exhausted.”

“I’ll walk you back - oof!” Jon took a step forward before his legs gave way, muscles excruciatingly numb from sitting in one position for so long. He swore again under his breath.

“Maybe some other time,” she jested, grabbing his elbow and pulling him up. “You need rest. The joust starts tomorrow, and we can’t have you falling off your horse.”

“Oh, please,” came the disgruntled response, “I’ve been jousting since I was a child. No one’s better than I am.”

Arya raised an eyebrow. “Your humility is inspiring.”

He winked at her, reaching out to scratch Balerion behind his ears. “You’ll see tomorrow. Try not to fall in love with me when you do. Many have before and it’s always ended in heartbreak.” Jon sighed dramatically. “T’is a curse.”

“I’ll try my hardest, but I make no promises,” Arya said drily, rolling her eyes, a smile tugging her lips. “Speaking of which, the Jousting God can have his steed back before I steal him forever.” She nuzzled the cat, who closed its eyes in contentment. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? I’ll take you far away north forever and ever. Wouldn’t that be an adventure?”

Balerion purred in agreement.

The Jousting God in question snorted. “I’m not cruel enough to separate you two just yet. Keep him for the night. I’m sure my sister won’t mind waiting another day.”

Arya beamed at him. “Yes, please!” she chirped happily, snuggling the cat close. Jon smiled at her, and she felt her cheeks grow warm and her heart beginning to flutter.

It was excitement, of course, over keeping her new friend for the night, but Arya thought it wise to leave before she did something truly ridiculous.

“I should - I should go,” she managed to stammer, burning red. Arya scampered around him before he could see. “Good luck for the joust tomorrow, if I don’t see you. And do get some rest. If you lose to a Frey, I’ll be furious,” she called over her shoulder.

“If I lose to a Frey, Aegon will disown me forever,” Jon said simply, which had her giggling.

She almost at the top of the steps when she realized he was not following. “Aren’t you going to your chambers?” she asked, cocking her head.

Jon, still standing against the wall, shrugged. “Perhaps we shouldn’t be seen leaving the cellar together. I’d rather not inspire any more gossip at your expense. You go ahead first.”
At the thought of this being their point of departure, a frenzied idea seized Arya immediately. She couldn’t leave with just a good night, not after all that. Balerion was purring in her arms, and she held him tighter, hoping her courage wouldn’t leave her.

“Is something wrong?” Jon asked, perplexed at seeing her paralyzed by the door.

Before she could doubt herself any longer, Arya skipped down the steps and towards him. Balancing on her toes, she reached up and planted a soft kiss on Jon’s cheek.

Her lips tingled where they met his skin, and when she pulled away, she could swear she tasted lightening. Jon gazed at her with wide eyes, frozen.

“Thank you,” Arya said meaningfully with a half-smile, “for coming after me.”

With that, she turned on her heel and jolted through the door, her heart racing with her, leaving a dragon prince to stare after her in wonder.

End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! As always, I’d love to hear your thoughts!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!